

THE LUCY WILSON MYSTERIES

THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS



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EIGHT MAIDS A MILKING

Lucy sat in a large red and gold chair. The seat was a thick plush velvet, the frame solid gold.

The air smelt of sweets, like strawberry shoelaces. As she looked around, everything seemed so grand.

On one wall, a variety of clocks showed the time around the world. In London it was 8:30pm, Paris 9:30pm, New York 3:30pm and so forth. Each clock was different in style and age. The London one was shaped like Big Ben, New York was a skyscraper made of mirror. Further down the wall, Australia was a bright red and white surfboard.

Lucy slipped off the chair and felt the soft carpet under her feet. She looked down and realised she wasn't in her normal clothes. Instead of jeans, she wore stripy leggings, with no shoes, only bright green socks. The red, white and green stripes reminded her of something, but she couldn't work

out what it was. Her top was pure red with green trim, and miniature bells adorned the bottom hem.

Ahead of her was a huge desk. It was piled high with paper and books, and there was a beautiful snow globe on it acting as a paperweight. She rubbed the edge of the desktop. It felt smooth. Just by touching it, she instantly smelt the scent of fir trees.

A large Christmas tree was standing in the farthest corner, decorated with cookies. It looked amazing, with biscuits of all shapes and sizes. Some were decorated, others were plain, and the majority had chocolate chips. She leaned in and sniffed a cinnamon cookie, but before she could do anything else, she heard footsteps approaching the double doors. She crouched behind the tree, hiding within the branches and decorations.

A big man burst through the doors, followed by some shorter people. Well, compared to him they were shorter but, in reality, they were almost the same size as Lucy. She watched as the man sat in his huge chair.

'You know, I find this a tad ridiculous,' the big man said, his voice stern yet friendly.

'Open wide,' one of the others said. Lucy didn't want to move too much in case the rustling in the tree gave her away. The shorter folk were bustling around the big man, but Lucy couldn't quite see

what they were doing. There was one thing for certain, they all looked like elves.

‘Surely not,’ Lucy mumbled to herself.

After a few more moments, the elves rushed out of the room, revealing the big man. His large black boots were trimmed with white fur, his trousers were bright red and he had a wonderful grey beard. He may have been dressed as Santa, but there was no doubt to whom that face belonged. Grandad.

‘My grandad is Santa,’ Lucy said under her breath.

Santa picked up the papers on his desk and checked for something. He skimmed through the majority of the top ones, before concentrating on the last few pages.

‘I’m glad to see you made it onto the good list, Lucy,’ Santa said, smiling in the direction of the tree.

Curiously and cautiously, Lucy stepped out from behind the tree.

‘Could you see me?’

‘That’s the one thing about this job, you see everyone. It makes any game of hide and seek rather dull I’m afraid. But come, sit up here,’ Santa said, patting the side of his huge chair.

‘But you’re my grandad, not Santa,’ Lucy said, still taking the opportunity to sit next to him.

‘Of all the things you’ve seen, this is the one you claim to be impossible?’ Santa laughed. ‘How is

your father, and your brothers?’

‘They’re all okay. Dad is moaning because he fell from a ladder earlier.’

‘Is he all right?’

‘It was only the first step. Anyone would have thought he was auditioning for *Britain’s Got Talent* the way he danced about,’ Lucy said, smiling. ‘What were those elves doing?’

‘Oh, them. They were just completing my health check. I’m told there’s an issue with my diet.’ Santa frowned. ‘Milk may be one of the healthiest things you can drink, but these guys have issues with what I eat.’

‘Cookies?’

‘Oh no, I gave them up a long time ago. I disagreed with the Tooth Fairy and, ever since, I’ve resented eating anything that keeps the fool in business.’

Lucy giggled.

‘No, it’s the sausages, bacon, fried eggs, fried bread, gammon, hash browns, beans, fried mushrooms, coffee and burgers I eat.’

‘That sounds like a big breakfast.’

‘Breakfast, no, no, no. For breakfast, I have a bowl of cereal. No, that’s just a snack.’

‘Really? Well, they might have a point,’ Lucy said.

‘They’ve put me on a diet of carrot juice, avocado

and kale. I wouldn't have minded but they mixed them all together.' He looked grumpy. 'Elves are some of the best toy makers in the universe, but ask them to cook and you'd be better to starve.'

Before Lucy could ask any more questions, a large golden bell rang out.

'Ooh, there's my ten-minute warning.' Santa stood up.

'For what?'

'Oh, Lucy, think about it. I don't dress like this every day. No, tonight's the night. It's Christmas Eve,' he declared. 'You know, there's room for one more...'

In the stables, the reindeer were being led into position. The elves were busy checking their lists and making sure everything was in place.

Santa climbed up onto the sleigh, before reaching out a gloved hand to Lucy. She took it with a smile and found herself being pulled aboard.

On a wooden gantry, a stern-looking elf held her hand out. Santa shrugged his shoulders.

'Empty your pockets please, Santa!' the elf said firmly.

With a huff, Santa emptied a McDonald's bag from his pocket, followed by a KFC bucket and a Domino's pizza box.

The elf raised an eyebrow, making Santa

sheepishly pull out a Whopper Meal too. The elf pointed at Santa's hat. Santa removed a small cream cake from under it.

'Thank you.' The elf descended from the sleigh, clapped her hands and removed the steps. While her attention was elsewhere, Santa pulled a hotdog from his sleeve.

'Here, hide this,' Santa said to Lucy.

The roof doors started to open, and some snow drifted in, but nothing major.

Santa took the reins.

'On Prancer, Dancer, Benton, and Vixen. On Cupid, Jo, and Bell. On Bessie, on Master, on Blitzen!'

The sleigh started to rise, with stardust emanating from the back. Lucy leaned over the side as they flew up into the star-filled sky. With a 'HO, HO, HO' they were on the move.

As they soared across the night sky, the moon looked so big as they glided past it. Lucy clung onto Santa's arm, the night air blowing through her hair.

'There's a blanket in there if you're cold,' Santa said, nodding to the glove compartment. 'You can put the radio on as well if you like?'

Lucy opened the glove compartment, reached in and pulled out a large tartan blanket. She decided it would be polite to ignore the multitude of chocolate bars that dropped to the floor. She leaned forward and turned on the radio.

Cliff Richard's 'Mistletoe and Wine' came on.

'Oh goodness, not him, anything but him!' Santa huffed.

Lucy changed the radio station to Michael Bublé.

'It gets worse.'

Station 103 = Mariah Carey's 'All I Want for Christmas is You'.

Station 552 = Slade's 'Merry Christmas Everybody'.

Stations 302, 222, 909, 432, 664, 728, 999, 107, 206, 440 = Michael Bublé.

'Maybe we should just turn off the radio. We're at the first house anyway.' Lucy did as she was told.

The roof was slanted, but the legs of the sleigh extended to sit nicely on top. Like so many modern houses, there was no chimney. Santa rubbed his nose with his top lip, before tugging on his hat.

In front of them, everything began to re-arrange. Not just on that house, but on all the chimney-less houses in the area.

'Now, watch this.' Santa took Lucy by the hand and walked over to the newly formed chimney. It glistened in the moonlight.

Santa rolled up his sleeve to reveal a device strapped to his wrist.

'Floor one, menswear!' he joked as Lucy and Santa descended in the chimney like a lift. The living room was scarcely decorated aside from a tree.

‘Conall and Dean would hate this,’ Lucy said.

‘Ah, but they get their Christmas joy from decorating their home. The people who live here get their joy from having the whole family around for Christmas. Come tomorrow’s dinner, this room will have almost twenty chairs around the table. You won’t be able to move, so the fewer decorations around the better,’ Santa explained.

The next few houses were similar in size, and Lucy and Santa completed the whole area in what like felt a minute.

Santa hopped back onto the sleigh with Lucy, offered her half of his Twix and away they went.

After completing a vast majority of houses, Santa pulled up to a tall building that looked more like an office than a house.

‘Who lives here?’ Lucy asked, confused.

‘Lucy, this is an orphanage. Mercifully, many of the children spend Christmas with foster carers, but some get left behind.’ Santa pulled out the same old sack he had used for every house.

‘How do you fit all the presents in that sack?’ Lucy asked.

‘Oh, it’s bigger on the inside. Are you coming?’

Lucy grabbed his hand and they dropped down to the dining hall. Set up like a canteen, the room was barely decorated. The children had made

pictures from handprints; they had added eyes and a red nose to make them look like Rudolph. The tree was plain, nothing more than a set of lights, old tinsel and baubles.

‘It’s not that cheerful in here,’ Lucy stated.

‘They’ve tried their hardest, but sometimes they need an extra bit of help.’ Santa winked at Lucy and removed his hat. Just like his sack, he stuck his arm deep into his hat and pulled out things that couldn’t possibly have fitted. He used, what only Lucy could describe as magic, to attach sparkling new decorations around the hall. By the end, it rivalled Conall and Dean’s place. Under the tree, Santa carefully placed a bundle of gifts, all wrapped in a large bow.

‘Just think of their eyes tomorrow when they see this,’ Santa said with a wink.

After a while, it was time for something to eat. Santa parked his sleigh on top of Buckingham Palace and pressed a button on the dashboard. From the rear of the craft, a large table poked out, complete with two chairs and a banquet.

Lucy and Santa grabbed a handful of snacks and walked over to the edge of the roof.

Santa sat down, with his legs dangling over the edge. Lucy joined him.

‘Can you see those people down there?’ Santa

asked.

‘The palace guards?’ Lucy replied.

‘That’s them. There they are, standing on guard on Christmas Eve. There are no royals even staying at Buckingham Palace tonight, but they still do their duty. No one would know if they bunked off. There are no tourists around. I’d wager that even their superior officers are elsewhere.’ Santa took a bite out of his sandwich. ‘And think, Lucy. Police officers are out there solving crimes. Doctors, nurses and firefighters are saving lives. Security guards and the Army are protecting us from danger. Maybe even the odd brigadier.’

Lucy smiled. If she ignored the fact that he was Santa, she was spending one more night with Grandad.

‘There are some jobs that never allow for family time. Take mine for example,’ Santa continued, ‘I can’t spend Christmas morning with my family or friends and neither can the nurses, firefighters and all the rest. It’s weird, but no matter your beliefs, everyone is slightly nicer at Christmas. It brings everyone together in a way that should happen every day. You should cherish this time, Lucy.’

Lucy looked up at her grandad. She nestled into his arms and watched the quiet streets of London.

‘Oh, I am,’ she said.

*

Ten minutes later, they were back in flight, with every family house they visited being slightly different. Some were huge, with grand Christmas trees that greeted you in every room. Others were small. And some were so small that the present left by Santa was bigger than the tree.

Together Lucy and Santa travelled across the world, tasting different cookies and marvelling at decorations. Some of the children were still awake, but Santa had his ways.

‘Santa, is that you?’ one little girl called out.

‘No, it isn’t, Emily, now go back to bed,’ Santa replied, but not in his voice.

Lucy looked at him confused. ‘That was her mum’s voice, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes, I have my tricks.’

The sun was rising and there were almost no houses left to visit. Lucy yawned. Below, she could see the waves of the ocean, up ahead a familiar sight.

‘Is that Tusker Rock?’

‘We have one more place to visit,’ Santa said.

‘Ogmore-by-Sea?’

The rounds were almost complete.

‘There’s only one house left now,’ advised Santa.

‘I know. It’s my house,’ Lucy was saddened about the prospect of going home. She joined her grandad for one last trip down a chimney.

Inside, everything was just how it was. From the tall and thin Christmas tree, the stockings on the fireplace, the tinsel around the pictures, the candles on the bookcase, the gonk on the sofa, and the little angel Lucy had made of paper.

‘What?! No milk and cookies for Santa. Lucy, you are in danger of going on the naughty list.’

‘Why do people give you milk and cookies?’ Lucy asked.

‘Well, the cookies might be a thank you, I’m not sure. But the milk definitely is.’ Santa sat on one of the armchairs. Lucy perched on the arm of the chair. It almost reminded her of when she was little and she would sit on her grandad’s lap for stories. ‘Years ago, possibly two hundred, maybe three hundred years, Christmas wasn’t celebrated as it is now. People often worked and treated it as another day. Yes, they celebrated the birth of Jesus, but it was done in a fashion similar to Pancake Day. As time went on, things started to change, for most anyway. Near to where I come from was a farm where eight milkmaids lived. The farmer was an awful man and never allowed any time off for the young girls. I watched this over and over again until one year I decided to do something about it.’

Santa helped himself to the tub of Celebrations. There were only Bountys left so he returned it to the floor. ‘I told the farmer how unfair I thought it was,

but he didn't care. So I decided to buy each of those maids a little gift. Nothing much. Just little tokens. It was something I repeated every year. Of course, they still had to work but they had something to look forward to. And to say thank you, they gave me free bottles of fresh milk.'

'Is that how it all started?'

'Maybe, although I am so old now, I can't really remember.'

'You're not that old,' Lucy retorted.

'Do you know why I'm telling you all of this?' Santa asked.

Lucy shook her head.

'I ruined my chances with my family. I could have enjoyed so many Christmases with them, but my job took me away from that.' Santa looked less like Santa and more like Grandad now. 'I want you to understand that if you continue what you're doing, then you may miss out. I know it may not be easy, but you need to cherish these moments. Aliens don't care if they invade at Christmas or the third Tuesday in June.'

Lucy looked up at him. He was deadly serious.

It was weird having Grandad in her living room again. She couldn't remember the last time he'd been there, but right now was all that mattered.

'Do I have to stay here?' asked Lucy.

Santa smiled. 'No, I think we can have one last trip.'

Excitedly, Lucy reached into one of the curled-up throws next to the fireplace and pulled out a small box of After Eight Mints.

‘A light snack for the journey,’ said Lucy.
Santa smiled, his cheeks reddening.

It had been a magical night, but something was now playing on Lucy’s mind. As the sleigh pulled up on the North Pole runway, Lucy couldn’t help but look at her grandad’s face. His beard was just how she remembered it, grey hair poked from the sides of his red hat and his eyes continued to twinkle.

‘What’s wrong?’ he asked.

Lucy thought for a moment. She knew that as soon as she told him what was on her mind this would all be over.

‘You’re not really him, are you? You’re not my grandad.’

‘I’m afraid not.’ Santa looked down at his gloves. He was still holding the reigns. Lucy took them from him and rested them on the dashboard.

‘I’ve wanted to see you, my grandad, for such a long time and here you are, sat next to me dressed as Father Christmas.’ Lucy looked at his face. ‘I want to tell you about everything I’ve been through. The Clowns, Bandrils, Yeti, Spiders. You’d be so proud.’

‘Did people get hurt?’

That wasn’t the response Lucy expected.

‘Some did...’ Lucy wasn’t proud of that, but she had never intentionally hurt someone. ‘What about you? Did anyone get hurt when you were saving the world?’

‘I’ve never saved the world. I’m not him, remember!’

‘I wish you were...’

‘Then stay. Stay with me, we can live these lives. Lucy Wilson and Brigadier Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart together. You’ve seen the world out there. They all need saving and we can do it,’ he said.

It was true. Yes, it had been a sleigh ride with Santa Claus, but ultimately it was a night with her granddad.

‘But my family...’

‘Am *I* not family?’

Lucy looked at the man. Everything seemed so real. He even smelled the same. He had those bags under his eyes and the same skin texture from when they last met. His eyes even turned down at the edges, making him seem so sad but happy at the same time.

She held his hand. It was warm and just how she remembered. His smile was infectious, but once again his joy turned to sadness.

From within his Santa coat, he pulled out a golden bauble.

‘I may not be him, but I am based on him. My

actions and thoughts are based on his. He would want to be with you. He would want to continue his relationship with you. But he was also a man who had a strong sense of right and wrong. He knew what was right and this isn't it.' He held up the bauble. 'You need to go home. This has been fun, little Quark, but you have work to do.'

He squeezed her hand and guided it to the bauble. The last thing she saw was his loving face before all was golden.

When the blinding light faded away, Lucy was no longer at the North Pole.

To be continued in Seven Swans Are Swimming...

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