

THE LUCY WILSON MYSTERIES

THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS



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THREE FRENCH HENS

‘Wow, Mum, look at that!’ Lucy exclaimed. Tamara had just finished Christmas dinner. The table looked amazing with bowls of vegetables, sauces and all types of stuffing. In the centre was an array of meat (and meat substitutes), but the crowning glory was the three roasted chickens.

Tamara was still quite busy making sure everything was fine. It was a big family get-together that she’d been planning for weeks. All of her children were coming home, plus her granddaughter.

‘Get the crackers, Lucy!’ Tamara ordered, still fussing around with the layout. Lucy did as she was told and placed a cracker on each plate.

‘These came in the post. I don’t know who sent them but they look expensive.’ Tamara held up a box with three red candles, each etched with robins and holly. ‘Probably from Anne. She has the money to splash out on things like this.’

Tamara inserted the candles into a candelabra she'd bought at a car boot sale. It felt like the cherry on top of the cake as she positioned it on the table. She then searched around in drawers for a box of matches.

'Hang on, what about Dad's long lighter thing for the barbeque? Let me grab that,' Lucy suggested, before heading into the kitchen.

Upon her return, the crackers had all moved around again.

'Here we go, Mum!'

Tamara took the lighter, smiled, and clicked a few times to make sure it worked. A small flame flickered.

She lit the nearest candle, which crackled and fizzed. A blinding red light enveloped them. When they opened their eyes, they couldn't believe what they were seeing.

'Are we...?' Tamara spluttered.

'Yes, Mum, I'm afraid we are...'

Tamara gasped. She was no bigger than the salt and pepper shakers.

'What's going on?' Tamara asked, looking at her daughter.

'Mum, I think those candles shrank us.'

'What do we do?'

'I suppose we have to get back to them and light another one.'

‘What?’

‘Just follow me... and stop asking so many questions.’

From her brief look at the table, Lucy remembered the candelabra being in the centre of the table, next to the large platters of roasted meat. As they were near a tablespoon, she could only assume they were on the outer edges of the table.

‘All we have to do is find the centre of the table,’ Lucy said. As she spoke, she had the strange suspicion someone was watching her. She glanced around but failed to see anything more than a plate of Brussels sprouts and a large bottle of wine.

‘If we don’t get back to full size soon, then the others will be down. You know them, they won’t wait for us. They’ll scoff every last bit on the table.’ Mum looked panicked. ‘Including us!’

‘Mum, come on. I’m sure they’d realise that the food on their fork looked like their relatives.’

‘Do you really think they’ll look at their forks?’

Mum had a point.

‘Well, not to worry, at least we don’t own a dog.’ Lucy’s joke didn’t go down well with her mum.

They were just about to set off again when a lonely pea dropped from its bowl and rolled up against Lucy’s leg.

‘Hello?’ she called out.

‘Come on, let’s just get to the candles,’ Mum urged, ‘it’s just a pea.’

With that, another pea launched itself up into the air. It was aiming straight for them. Lucy threw herself to the floor, narrowly avoiding the cannonball vegetable.

Mum was not as lucky. Lucy suppressed a giggle when she noticed that her mum was face down in a large pool of mashed potato.

‘Hang on, I’m coming,’ Lucy called out. She got to her feet, but before she could get to her mum, she was hit by a barrage of peas. At the best of times she hated peas, but when they were almost the size of her head, Lucy hated them even more.

She managed to take cover behind the bowl of Brussels, but was shocked when one poked out over the rim.

‘Halt!’ it shouted. ‘Who goes there?’

‘Erm... Lucy.’

‘Friend or Foe?’

‘Friend! Definitely friend!’

There were a few mumbles before two green hands threw over a rope ladder. The peas were falling fast, so she took the opportunity and climbed it.

When she arrived in the bowl, she was surprised to find the Brussels all lined up in a military drill. Each one wore an Army uniform and was listening

to the sergeant standing on top of a matchbox.

‘Well that explains where that went,’ Lucy mumbled. ‘Excuse me, but where am I?’

‘That’s classified information,’ the Brussel sprout shouted. ‘You’ll be taken to the commander. He’ll decide what is best for you.’

Lucy followed the green leaves to a small bunker. The Brussel pulled back some large cabbage leaves that acted as a door and she was ordered inside.

‘Yes, yes, yes. What is it? By Jove,’ said the commander, his monocle dropping to his desk when he caught sight of Lucy. ‘And what may I ask are you?’

‘I’m Lucy. Sorry to barge in, but I need to get to the candlestick. My mum’s out there and—’

‘Out there?’ interrupted the commander. ‘In no man’s land. Well, my dear, I would say that she’s a goner. No, you must stay here until we know what to do with you. The carrots are known to have spies.’

‘I’m not a spy, especially not a spy for a carrot,’ Lucy protested, not expecting to ever say that sentence.

‘Well, of course, you would say that. I wasn’t grown yesterday, you know!’

‘Can I just be on my way? I’m grateful for your guys saving me from the peas, but I just want to find my mum and go,’ Lucy said.

'Tell me, what kind of vegetable are you?' asked the commander.

Lucy had to think fast and hard. If she said the wrong thing, then she could be thrown in jail or something.

'I'm not a vegetable. I'm a fruit. You know, one of those wonky bananas you buy at the supermarket?'

'A fruit, eh?' The commander circled Lucy. 'Well, you're not a carrot, that's for sure. Yes, okay. One of my men will take you to the edge of our barracks. I have no wish to draw civilians into this war.'

'War?'

'The Christmas war! Every year our people get to charge into the great darkness. Only a few are chosen. Those who get left behind are reduced to the rank of leftovers or worse... compost,' the commander explained. 'Our mission is to make the other vegetables look awful, and then the great gods won't touch them. That way, more of us will fulfil our destiny.'

Lucy hated that this made sense to her. And one thing was for certain, the Brussels were already in danger of becoming compost because only her dad touched them.

Lucy was escorted back to the edge of the bowl. She

climbed back down the ladder and hid behind it for a moment before running back over to the plate of mashed potatoes.

Her mum was still there.

‘Mum!’ Lucy called out. ‘Are you okay?’

There was a muffled noise that sounded like a naughty word, but Lucy chose to think her mum had said she was face down in ‘sludgy bits’. She grabbed her mum’s ankles and started to pull her out of the mashed potato.

When free, Mum had a lot of naughty words to say. None of which were very Christmassy.

‘You took your time. I could have drowned in mashed potato.’

‘Come on, Mum. Your mashed potato is nice and thick. There’s no way you could have drowned.’ Lucy licked some of the food from her hand. ‘Oh wow, Mum, this mashed potato tastes amazing!’

Before Mum could reply, something pointy poked her in the back. They both turned around to see roasted parsnips pointing asparagus at them.

‘They eat the mash. They no good. They prevent destiny of mash,’ one of the parsnips said, sounding like a caveman in a bad cartoon.

‘Please don’t tell me we’re being held hostage by a talking parsnip in a loin cloth,’ Mum said, raising her hands in the air.

Lucy remained quiet.

'Lucy?'

'What? You told me not to tell you...'

'We take to stuffing monster. They punish mash eaters.'

With that, Lucy and Mum were marched to a large Pyrex dish. The parsnips pushed them up the side of the bowl and made them stand on the edge.

'Oh, glorious cranberry and orange stuffing monster. We offer you a great sacrifice.'

There was a gurgle from within the stuffing.

'All I will say is, no one eats the stuffing. If everyone would just let me cook what I want, rather than what's expected, we wouldn't be in this mess,' Mum whispered to Lucy.

'Mum, you wanted to make cranberry sauce. How would that be any different?'

'At least we both like cranberry sauce!'

A large hand crept up the side of the bowl. It pushed Lucy and Mum inside. The stuffing felt like quicksand, pulling them underneath and wrapping itself around them.

'Lucy, you need to eat it!' Mum shouted.

'But, Mum!'

'Lucy Wilson, you will eat your dinner. I haven't been slaving away in the kitchen all day...'

Lucy switched off for a second. She knew what was coming next.

'... and there are people in the world who have

nothing to eat—'

'Okay, Mum,' Lucy interrupted. Preparing herself mentally and physically, she tore off huge bits of the stuffing monster, and one by one she rammed them into her mouth.

The pain of being eaten was too great for the beast. Soon it released Lucy and Mum and they quickly scrambled to the edge. The parsnips, after witnessing the whole thing, ran off in another direction.

'Mum, don't turn around,' Lucy said, dropping down from the bowl. Mum instantly turned around and let out a scream.

'Mum, why did you turn around?'

Surrounding them was a battalion of carrots.

'That's her. She was with the Brussels,' a smaller carrot said, pointing at Lucy.

'Mum, run!'

The two of them dashed across the dining table, jumping over forks and dodging sprigs of holly. More peas rained down on them while Lucy and Mum zigged and zagged across the table. It was like a war movie.

Up ahead, Lucy could see the candelabra. Before she could point it out, a large bottle of wine fell in front of them. It poured across the table and swept them away like a tidal wave. Mini potatoes danced on top of the fallen bottle, proud of their

achievement.

Lucy grabbed hold of the edge of a dinner plate with one hand and her mother with the other. As the river of wine kept flowing, Lucy found it difficult to cling on. She could also feel Mum's hand slipping away from hers.

'Hold on!'

'I can't.'

Suddenly, the waves of wine pushed Mum up against the plate, and both of them managed to climb to safety.

They took a moment to breathe, watching the devastation around them.

'I'll never get the stains out of the tablecloth,' Mum said.

'Come on, Mum, I think we have more pressing matters,' Lucy said. She pointed at the candles. 'How are we going to get over there?'

The flow of the wine was now a dribble, but this had left them exposed to the vegetable platoons. Lucy looked around for something to help them. A cracker caught her eye.

'If we move the cracker to the edge of the plate, we can use it as a bridge to get to the nut roast dish,' Lucy suggested.

'I won't be able to climb along that. I'm drenched. I'll slip!' declared Mum.

'Okay, well, let's pull it open. We can use it as a

tunnel instead.'

With that, Lucy and Mum forced open the end of the cracker. It took a while but soon they were past the first obstruction. Lucy climbed inside. It was bright red, just like the inside of a tent. With Mum at the entrance, Lucy handed out the contents of the cracker to her. First a small set of playing cards.

'Oh, these are nice.'

'Focus!'

Then the joke.

'What do you get when you cross a vampire with a snowman?' Mum asked.

'Please concentrate.'

'Frostbite!'

Rolling her eyes, Lucy decided to flatten the hat down rather than hand it to her mum. She got out and then pushed the cracker to the edge of the plate, guiding it across to the dish containing the nut roast.

By this time, the Brussels were attempting to mount the plate. The carrots were not too far behind. And the roast potatoes were just joyfully knocking things over.

Lucy edged her way through the makeshift tunnel. Mum followed close behind. They both winced when it shifted slightly.

As she got to the other end, Lucy kicked her legs

out, trying to puncture the paper wall with her foot. As she did so, something knocked on the outside.

'It's the parsnips. They're trying to push us off the plate,' cried Mum. Scrambling across the paper hat, she looked through the gap Lucy had made.

'We need to go faster. Help me!' Lucy ordered. They both hurriedly hacked away at the cracker, trying to get out. When the gap was large enough, Lucy slipped through. Before Mum could follow, Lucy poked her head back inside.

'Mum, quick, pass me the Christmas hat!'

'The hat! Why do you need that?'

'Just trust me, I've got an idea,' Lucy said.

Mum stood, trying to keep her balance inside the wobbly cracker and heaved the hat up into her arms. The parsnips pushed once more, sending Mum and the hat flying towards the gap. Lucy grabbed the hat, and pulled as her mum pushed. With a lot of force, the hat finally came free. Mum attempted to follow, but somehow caught her foot in one of the folds.

'Lucy, I'm stuck,' she said, pulling hard to free herself. Lucy grabbed her mum's leg and heaved as hard as she could.

Meanwhile, the parsnips successfully pushed the cracker off the plate, inadvertently freeing Lucy's mum. They cheered as the cracker fell into the river of wine and began floating away, looking

a bit soggy and sad.

Lucy and her mum balanced on the edge of the nut roast dish, the Christmas hat beside them. Lucy poked the nut roast, it was stickier than it looked.

‘Good thing we’ve got this hat!’ Lucy declared, as she unfolded the hat and stuck it to the nut roast.

Realising that Lucy and her mum had escaped, the parsnips and carrots cried out. Lucy ducked to avoid a barrage of peas, while Mum continued laying out the hat. Further down the table, the Brussels were now riding broccoli like horses across the wine river.

Lucy and Mum started to climb up the nut roast, on top of the paper hat. When they were halfway up, the parsnips turned their attention to Mum, shooting asparagus arrows at her and making climbing difficult.

The Brussels climbed off their broccoli horses and threw themselves at the dish. As they climbed, the paper was thin and kept tearing, but eventually they made it to the top. As the first battalion of Brussels climbed behind, the hat disintegrated, leaving the rest of the vegetables stranded.

Looking around, Lucy pointed at the roast bird on the next plate. They were almost there.

‘I can’t jump that far, Lucy!’

‘But, Mum. It’s the only way.’

The tribal parsnips surrounded the nut roast. Each one poked and jabbed with their asparagus. Mum grew frustrated and snatched one from a persistent parsnip. She was about to snap it in half when Lucy had an idea. After a few attempts, she managed to grab one for herself.

‘How good are you at pole vaulting?’ Lucy asked.

‘Zero!’

‘What?’

‘Zero, I can’t do it,’ Mum was adamant.

‘Okay, well you’re going to have to learn.’ Lucy held Mum’s hands, before giving her a crash course in pole vaulting. ‘Watch how I do it.’

Lucy took a run and jumped off the edge of the roast. The hard flat bottom of the asparagus hit the table and she swung across like Tarzan.

Mum took a deep breath. She said a little prayer to anyone who was listening. ‘By the guidance of God, Jesus, RuPaul or Oprah, please let me make it.’ She took the leap.

‘Open your eyes!’ Lucy called out.

Mum shook her head.

‘Mum!’

Mum cautiously opened her eyes. She had only made it halfway across.

The asparagus had been rather thick at the base and now stood like a flagpole, Mum being the flag.

‘It’s okay, I’m happy here. The rent is cheap and

the view is amazing.’ A pea hit the side of her head. ‘The neighbours are a bit rough, but I’ve had worse.’

The force of the pea tilted the pole just enough to fall onto the roast turkey. Lucy grabbed her mum, pulling her to a more stable, flatter part of the bird.

‘Right, just the last stretch to do,’ Lucy said, pointing to the candelabra towering above them.

‘The only thing is, how are we going to light it?’ Lucy asked.

‘With this!’ Mum pulled out Dad’s barbeque lighter from her pocket and gave it to Lucy.

‘Dad will go mental if he finds out you didn’t put it back in its place!’

‘Let him, I will soon put him back in his place!’

One of the candlestick arms hung over the far end of the turkey. It meant that they could jump up and edge their way across.

Despite being a simple plan, it was made much more difficult by the grease dripping down from the turkey. Lucy and Mum struggled to keep hold, slipping a few times as they edged across.

It was a long crossing, with the vegetable soldiers still firing at them. Some were also climbing the turkey, while others aimed for the candlestick.

‘Is this all because I ate a bit of stuffing?’ Lucy asked. ‘No good can come of eating the icky stuff.’

Soon they reached the base of the candle. It was twice the height of either of them.

‘Okay, I need to get on your back,’ Lucy suggested.

Mum looked perturbed for a second ‘Okay, fine. Jump on!’ Mum said, giving in. She crouched down. Lucy climbed up onto her Mum’s back, but the flying bits of cauliflower proved too dangerous.

‘Don’t worry, Mum, I’ve got this.’

Mum was just about to give a lecture on candle safety, only stopping when Lucy was almost splattered by a stray piece of cauliflower.

‘Are you okay, Lucy?’

‘Yes, fine. It’s no good, Mum, I can’t get close enough. And why do you cook your cauliflower so hard?’ Lucy asked, grumpily.

‘Cauliflower is meant to be hard. I steam *all* my veg. It keeps the favour in.’

‘Hold on,’ Lucy said. She started to climb the candle, using the etched picture as a foothold. Slowly she pulled herself up.

Meanwhile, Mum was using a small bit of cauliflower like a cricket bat. She was whacking bits of vegetables everywhere.

Lucy sighed with relief when she reached the tip of the candlestick. She pulled the lighter from her back pocket. It slipped slightly, although she just managed to catch it before it fell to the tabletop.

She took a deep breath and composed herself.
She lit the candle.

The blinding light returned, but the warmth of the Wilson's house had disappeared. The frosty air made Lucy's eyes sting. She shouted out for her mum but received no reply.

She was alone once again.

To be continued in Two Turtle Doves...

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