

THE LUCY WILSON MYSTERIES

THE CHILDREN OF JANUARY



TIM GAMBRELL

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MYSTERIES**

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(Excerpt)

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THE OLD MILL

It was only when the doors hissed open and the drivers stood up that Lucy realised they'd arrived. The coach had been moving slowly and carefully for a time, and now it had seemingly pulled up in the middle of nowhere. Everyone stood and stretched, grabbed their bags and tottered down the steps into the freezing atmosphere of Dartmoor. There were no lights, beyond the coach. The night sky was a panoply of stars, and anything closer to them was visible only as a silhouette picked out against the stellar backdrop.

Having assisted the girl in the wheelchair from the rear of the coach, the two drivers were keen to set off again with almost unceremonious haste.

Lucy's senses tingled. Something was definitely up.

'There's no one here,' she protested.

'There will be,' Ray said.

'You can't just leave us!' complained one of the others.

But that was it, the coach was gone. They all watched as its rear lights trailed off down the lane, like the eyes of a retreating animal, and became lost over a ridge.

'What now?' said one of the others, a boy. Lucy couldn't make much of him out in the dark.

'The survival starts, I guess,' quipped Hobo.

Lucy was certain she heard one of the girls whisper, 'This has got *trap* written all over it,' but, again, it was too dark to see who.

'Anyone got any phone signal?' Lucy suggested.

'Phones!' yelled a few of them, jubilantly. Phone torches were activated.

As if in response to this, arc lamps suddenly clicked on around them, indicating they were standing on a shingle forecourt. A sign saying Old Mill lit up on a building they hadn't even noticed they'd been standing in front of. The doors to the Old Mill opened and, one by one, the eight children filed in, attracted like moths to the light and the hope of warmth within.

Inside, they found no one again, but there were comfortable seats, a smoke-free fire, a large wall-mounted TV at the far end and a sort of reception desk opposite the entrance doors. The children looked about, conscious that not only could they

now see everybody else properly, but they themselves could also be seen.

The doors slammed shut behind them, causing them all to jump.

'Took you ages to produce any torches. Looks like you've failed the first test, then, boys and girls,' said a voice Lucy was sure she recognised.

She turned expecting to see her headteacher, Mr Slant. Instead, there was a young man she didn't recognise, wearing NTSA-branded sweatshirt and joggers. He stood before the closed doors, blocking the exit.

'Pleasant journey, everyone?' the man asked, wiping his fringe from his eyes and then rubbing his palms together.

There were muttered responses from everyone as they put down their luggage and unfastened their coats. Hobo looked at Lucy, who looked back at him and shrugged.

'I'm Ashley, I'm officially here to welcome you on behalf of National Teen Support and Awareness.'

As he said this, Lucy thought she saw the logo on his sweatshirt ripple and glow, briefly.

One of the boys, the solid-looking one with very short ginger hair, stepped forward.

'Are you in charge?' he asked. There was a noticeable edge of aggression to his tone.

Ashley smiled. 'I'm from the volunteer welcoming committee.'

'Then you should have made a better job of it. That was a pretty low gimmick, leaving us all stranded outside in the cold and dark like that, but particularly for her,' he gestured at the girl in the wheelchair, 'when none of us know each other.'

'Excuse me?' The girl in the wheelchair approached. 'Thank you, but I can fight my own battles.'

The ginger boy looked suddenly very awkward. 'Yeah, I know, but I just thought—'

'Well, please don't. I'm not helpless and I don't need people to make assumptions on my behalf. Or allowances for me either. Okay?'

The ginger boy drifted away to the side, looking scolded.

Go you, girl, thought Lucy.

Ashley ignored the awkwardness and continued to address the group.

'None of you know each other, you say. But you've just spent several hours on a coach together. Did nobody speak during that time?'

They all shook their heads.

He sucked his teeth. 'You're going to have to do better than that if you're going to work together as an effective team this weekend, boys and girls.'

Lucy piped up. 'We're just one team?'

'That's correct, yes.'

'Nobody told us.'

Ashley raised his brows. 'And, what? Were you concerned about getting to know children from other teams? Giving away an advantage?'

Hobo shrugged. 'We just... didn't know, that's all.'

'Where are the other teams?' asked the girl in the wheelchair.

Ashley paused momentarily. 'You all have your own separate basecamps.'

An internal door opened, and a middle-aged lady walked in, wearing a thick roll neck jumper over a hooded top, along with utility trousers and walking boots.

'Ahh,' Ashley beamed. 'Here you go, everyone. This is your station warden, MS...?' He paused. 'Sorry, I didn't catch your name before.'

'Just call me "warden", it's easier to remember. And easier to yell if you get lost on the moors.'

There was much-needed laughter among the group at this. The tension eased, somewhat.

'All right, then, you lot,' the warden continued, 'welcome to the Old Mill. First, I need to make sure we've got who we think we've got,' she turned to Ashley. 'Unless you've already done that?'

'He was too busy playing stupid tricks on us in the dark, miss,' said the ginger boy, clearly still sore

from before.

Ashley looked unfazed by the accusation. 'No,' he confirmed. 'That was next on my list when you arrived.'

The warden picked up a sheet of paper from the reception desk and scanned her eyes down it.

'Fine. Please answer when I call your name. Reisha Travers we know.'

Lucy found herself blurting out a challenging, 'Do we?' and felt momentarily exposed.

'Present and correct.'

The voice came from behind. As one, the group turned to find another girl, about their age, smiling with a twinkle in her eye. She was leaning over the back of the easy chair in which she'd presumably been hiding. The girl – Reisha – had long dark hair and soft features. Something about Reisha's demeanour told Lucy that she was the person most like herself among the group. Reisha joined the others as the warden continued.

'Lara Chesterton.'

'Here,' said the girl in the wheelchair.

The warden glanced up, then back at her list. She appeared to have photographs as well as names.

'Eva and Christie Verney?'

'Yes.' The two of them spoke quietly and simultaneously. Lucy took a moment to wonder how she hadn't spotted that two of them were identical

up until that moment.

'Joshua Benton?'

The ginger-haired lad who'd removed himself to one side grunted an acknowledgment.

Another Benton, thought Lucy, almost missing her own name.

'Lucy Wilson?' the warden repeated.

'Sorry, that's me,' she said, holding up her hands in surrender.

'Herbie Kostinen.'

Hobo pulled a face. Lucy tried hard to contain a chuckle.

'Yeah,' he replied with a resigned voice. 'It's Hobo, actually, not Herbie.'

'Sorry,' the warden said, making an adjustment with a pen. 'Charlie Sullivan?'

Charlie answered by nodding, saying yes, sniffing and rubbing a finger against the corner of his mouth. It was quite a display.

'And Sophia Jackson.'

'Hi,' said the girl who Hobo had been eyeing up when she boarded the coach at the services. She beamed a glistening smile at everyone gathered around. 'This is gonna be *so* much fun, yeah? Who's up for an Insta group selfie?'

Lucy grimaced but managed to turn it into a grin as Sophia corralled everyone around Lara's chair.

'Isn't it great,' said Sophia with a 'squee' noise.

'Now we know who everyone is.'

No, thought Lucy. *We know what everyone's called.
But we don't yet know who everyone is.*