

LUCY and DEE

— THE SILK ROAD —



Kirsten Marion



COMMON DEER PRESS

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CHAPTER ONE



An explosion shattered the morning air, startling Lucy Banks so she made a mess of the big red X she was putting on the Yangtze River. She glared at it. The only wall space she had left for her map of China was above her headboard. The rest of the walls were thickly plastered with brightly colored maps liberally covered with red Xs and blue arrows marking the spots where Lucy planned to travel.

She capped her marker and jumped down from her bed to investigate. The open window was only a few steps away, and a moment later, leaning out precariously, she saw what had caused the commotion.

Pink smoke billowed from the windows atop the tower jutting up from the old mansion at the end of the street. Dee was experimenting again, and it looked like this one had “not gone according to plan,” as he would say.

She wanted to make sure he was okay, even though he’d escaped any harm so far and she didn’t expect this time to be any different, and to help him with the inevitable cleanup. But there were a few things she had to do before she could safely escape the house.

Lucy headed for her bedroom door. On the way, she kicked two T-shirts, a pair of shorts, and one sandal under the bed and pulled the duvet up over a messy sheet. She picked up three issues of *National Geographic* and tried to squeeze them into her bookcase alongside the previous five years of issues. Giving up, she put them on top, underneath her grandfather’s globe. It was one of her most-prized possessions, with its countries all different colors that blurred together when

she gave it a twirl. She longed to visit every country—at least she could dream about the travel adventures she would have some day. Although, it was annoying that so many names and borders had changed since her grandfather was a young man.

She hummed a little tune to herself. Next year at school she would start taking a proper geography class.

Her glance around the room fell on the diorama of a strange and exotic country, the product of her vivid imagination. She had spent the spring building it on an old card table wedged into the corner between the foot of her bed and the wall. It was her pride and joy, but it did seem to collect dust and cat hair. She pulled one of the T-shirts out from under the bed. She used it to give the three-dimensional model a quick flick and called it dusting.

Lucy looked back at the room from the doorway and nodded to herself. Now she could say that she had tidied her room.

Clattering down the stairs, she hit the bottom step with a thump. To her right, the TV in the family room blared the football game.

“Where are you off to, pet?” her father called over the ruckus of a crowd gone wild over a goal.

Lucy crossed the hall. Her dad was in his customary Saturday afternoon position, slouching in his cracked leather armchair, his stockinged feet on the coffee table. His big toe poked out of a hole in his left sock and a large bowl of chips rested on his tummy. Lucy’s cat, Peebles, nestled into what was left of his lap.

Lucy sighed as she looked around the shabby room. There wouldn’t be any trips to new places any time soon.

“I’m off to see Dee, Dad.” He clearly hadn’t heard the explosion over the roar of the television so there was no point in mentioning it.

Lucy’s mother came out of the kitchen. “You need to clean up your room before you go out.”

Parents were so totally predictable. Lucy rolled her eyes and then, catching her mother’s stern gaze, said, “I’ve already done it.”

She had her hand on the doorknob and was almost out the front door when her mother said, “Stop right there, missy, the laundry needs to be hung on the line. The dryer is on the blink again.”

Lucy huffed a heavy sigh. The dryer had been on the blink since, like, 2013. “Why?” she moaned. “That’s such a drag. Didn’t you hear that explosion? There was pink smoke, Mom.”

“I did.” Her mother’s mouth set in a thin line. “I suppose that boy is up to his silly experiments again.”

It drove Lucy crazy that her mother refused to call Dee by his name. He’d moved in with his aunt four years ago, and ever since, her mom had only ever called him “that boy.” But Lucy didn’t care what her mom thought. She and Dee had been best friends ever since the first day Dee was in her class. Lucy had flubbed a science experiment spectacularly and Dee stayed to help her clean up the mess so she wouldn’t get a detention.

“I have to go and see if Dee needs some help.” Lucy made sure she put some extra emphasis on Dee’s name. “And find out what this latest excitement is all about.”

“I’ll give you plenty of excitement if you don’t do as your mother asked right this minute,” her father barked from the doorway of the family room.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m going.” Lucy’s shoulders slumped as she followed the jagged crack in the linoleum that snaked toward the dim corner of the kitchen where the washer and dryer lurked. The faint smell of mildew assailed her nostrils as she pried open the door to the washing machine.

“Ugh,” she groaned, wrinkling her nose as she pulled out a wad of soggy clothes. Why couldn’t her parents get their act together and get the dryer fixed? She loved them, at least she was pretty sure she did, but there were times, like right now, when she wished she’d drawn a better set of parents—one where at least one of them could hold down a job. She would do pretty much anything to live in a nice house where everything worked.

Resentment filled her chest as she pegged out the clothes as quickly as she could. Her parents never even tried to make things any better. They just sailed along, telling each other stories about how the next job would be the one to make them all rich. All the while their house quietly collapsed around them.

At least it wasn't a big load of washing today, and she soon had everything on the line and snapping in a fresh breeze. But doing laundry was hardly the adventure that she craved. She made her escape, grabbing a chocolate bar from her mother's not-so-secret stash at the back of a kitchen drawer, before she was given another dreary chore.

As she walked down the street peeling the wrapper off the chocolate, Lucy heard another blast, and this time, purple smoke billowed from the tower windows. "Oh man," she murmured, "What is it this time?" She finished the chocolate bar and broke into a sprint.

Gravel crunched under the soles of her sneakers as Lucy rushed up the circular driveway to the old mansion. She loved this house. She knew that Dee often had to go home to an empty house because his Aunt Delia was an emergency room physician, but Lucy didn't see that as necessarily a bad thing. She wished that sometimes she could do the same. It would be lovely to have a house to herself, especially a house like this. The flower beds were mounded with early summer flowers and lined with pretty stones. The smell of fresh earth rose around her. In the distance, coming from behind the mansion, she could hear a power mower.

She bounded up the three freshly painted steps to the porch and approached the double front doors of the mansion. They were bracketed with yellowing marble columns on either side supporting the roof above the wide veranda. A bird's nest perched on the ledge that ran above the front doors.

She had to use both hands to lift the brass door knocker in the shape of a lion's head. When she dropped it back against the wood, a boom sounded behind the door followed shortly by the click of high heels on a hard surface. The door slowly swung open to reveal a tall, slim woman wearing a slightly harassed expression. Her hair was swept up in a messy bun that released strands of hair around her face, and there was a smudge of what looked like cocoa powder on her left cheek. Warm baking smells wafted toward Lucy, and she inhaled appreciatively.

"Hi, Aunt Delia." Lucy loved Aunt Delia. Dee's aunt had never

seemed the least bit fazed that Lucy lived in the most ramshackle house on the street.

Delia Ringrose smiled as she wiped her hands on the apron covering her black skirt and pretty blouse and pushed her wire-rimmed glasses up to the bridge of her nose. “Come on in, Lucy,” she said as she swung the door wide. She opened her arms wide and Lucy stepped into the hug, delighting in the softness and warmth of the embrace, and the faint scent of Aunt Delia’s delicate perfume.

“Dee’s in his tower,” said Aunt Delia as she released Lucy. “But I’m sure you’ve already figured that out. He’s fine—I went and checked—but he’s made another unholy mess.”

“Well, I’m here to help.” Lucy smiled as she scooted past the older woman. Lucy stepped into a broad foyer with dark wood paneling and a diamond pattern of white and black marble tiles on the floor. A sparkly chandelier swinging gently overhead scattered prisms of light across the walls and floor.

“I’m not sure what experiment ‘has not gone according to plan’ today, but can you go up and take it from here? I have something in the oven . . .” Her voice trailed off and she looked anxiously back down the hall toward the kitchen. A faint smell of a cake scorching drifted toward them. “Hopefully, Dee’s already started cleaning up,” Aunt Delia said. “And there will be a piece of chocolate cake ready for you when you’re done.”

“Sure . . . and great!” said Lucy. There was no such thing as too much chocolate. She paused, one hand on the banister. “Are we celebrating something?”

Aunt Delia nodded. “It’s Litha, the summer solstice.”

“What’s so special about that?” Lucy wondered.

“According to my Irish grandmother, the summer solstice was one of the three Spirit Nights of the year,” Aunt Delia said, “the other two being Beltane and Samhain. It’s when the veil between the worlds appears exceptionally thin.” She turned and rushed back down the hallway toward the kitchen. “It’s also one of the eight Sabbats, according to the Pagans.”

“Cool,” said Lucy as she mounted the main staircase up to the

first landing. She loved it when Aunt Delia, normally a no-nonsense doctor, got all mystical. Lucy thought the world needed more magic and mystery. She turned left, walked to the end of the hall and then up the spiral staircase that went to the tower room.

The spiral staircase was steep, and Lucy's knees began to shake from climbing. Soon she was outside a half-open door on the landing at the top of the tower. The first thing she saw was the lab bench covered in a complicated arrangement of glass containers and tubes and jars of all kinds of strange-looking ingredients. A burner, still lit, was surrounded by shards of broken beaker, and a thick wet paste dripped onto the floor. Beside the lab bench stood Dee. His back was to her and he stared out the window, his clenched fists digging into his hips.



CHAPTER TWO



She pushed the door fully open.

It creaked and Dee spun around, his white lab coat swinging open with a rattle. Curiously, the inside was lined with loops holding vials of chemical powders in jewel tones like yellow, crimson, blue, and white and some other substances in liquid form. Lucy always thought the coat was to protect against the same powders and liquids, but Dee assured her he knew what he was doing. Three small instruments and an omnipresent notebook poked out of the pockets on the outside of the coat. The black leather-bound notebook was identical to the ones he had already filled that were now lined up on the windowsill, each carefully dated.

Dee sighed with relief. “Hey, Lucy. Glad you’re here.”

“Another fine mess, Dee,” she observed as she crossed the room to a small bureau and pulled a cleaning cloth and a pair of rubber gloves from the top drawer. She wrinkled her nose as she snapped on the gloves. The room smelled of rotten eggs. The open window would sort that out soon enough.

He nodded, and his clenched fists slowly unfurled.

“What is going on up here? Your aunt said you were working on an experiment, and I heard the bangs and saw the smoke.”

Dee pushed his hand through his hair until it looked like a hedgehog sitting on his head. “I got some new equipment today.” He gestured toward a lab bench. A copper pot sat on a gas ring. In it a

thick yellow substance blurped. A tangle of glass tubing and copper rings captured the rising steam. Lucy joined him to watch the steam progress until it coalesced into a green liquid that dripped into a beaker.

"I'm working on a very important old alchemical experiment, the green lion. It promises to change lead into gold." He pointed to a pile of rocks. Some were a silvery blue while others were a dull gray. "So I tried it."

"Does alchemy actually work? I heard it was just what people practicing magic said they were doing, centuries ago, to avoid being tried for witchcraft."

"Alchemy was the way early scientists described their work. It showed the early development of the experimental method. There was certainly no magic in it," Dee said a little stiffly. "I don't know how many times I have to tell you there is no such thing as magic."

Lucy decided to move on. Dee could lecture on science and scientists until she was bored to sobs. "What made the smoke?" She fingered one of the cool lumps of stone.

"I'm using this"—he pointed to the green liquid—"to liquify the lead. From that, I could've extracted the gold. But something seems to have gone wrong." He looked out the window again before picking up a cloth and crouching to wipe up the spilled matter.

"No kidding." She began wiping up the splotches of Dee's failed experiment from the work surface.

"Who's this lady?" Lucy pointed to the statue of a head and shoulders at the end of Dee's lab bench.

Dee looked up, saw where she was pointing, and looked horrified. "That's no lady! That's Sir Isaac Newton! Really, Lucy. Don't you recognize him?" He stood up abruptly.

"Sure, I do." Lucy took a step back from the statue, giving it a sideways look as she did so. "It was the long hair that fooled me . . ." Her voice trailed off. She knew that was a weak excuse—plenty of boys had long hair—but it was the best she could come up with to save face. "I know Sir Isaac was the scientist who invented gravity."

"Discovered gravity!"

“Okay, discovered gravity,” Lucy repeated. “When an apple bopped him on the head.”

Dee smacked his forehead. “That old apple thing again. That’s a—what-do-you-call-it? When something is a figure of speech?” He snapped his fingers as if that would produce the word.

“A metaphor?” Lucy supplied helpfully.

“That’s it! The apple falling on his head is a metaphor for being struck by inspiration. What are they teaching in schools these days?” He cast his eyes skyward.

“Enough that I knew the word ‘metaphor’ when you didn’t,” Lucy retorted. “So, what else was so fabulous about Newton?”

“He was only the greatest scientist, the greatest genius, who ever lived.” Dee waved his hands around energetically.

“Fascinating,” Lucy said.

Dee had what Lucy privately called his Hero of the Month, a scientist from history he’d focus all his attention on for a period of time. Lucy had been trying to steer him toward some influential women in science, like the alchemist Mary the Jewess or the chemist Alice August Ball, but so far she’d had no luck. Still, she lived in hope. Dee always moved on to a new hero and surely he would pick a woman eventually. Though it looked like Sir Isaac might last longer than his past obsessions. Lucy wondered where he’d found a bust.

“He founded modern science and revolutionized the world! I want to be just like him,” Dee said.

“And we both know that I’m going to be a great explorer and world traveler, like Nellie Bly,” Lucy replied. “That’s where all the excitement is.”

“Science rules,” Dee insisted.

“You’re such a nerd.” Lucy flashed him a generous smile to take any sting out of her words.

“Yep, true fact,” he grinned back. “Hey, do you want to hear a fun fact?” Without waiting for her response, he rushed on. “It was Dr. Seuss who made up the word ‘nerd.’”

“Even more fascinating,” said Lucy as she examined a series of items on a table.

“And,” said Dee, a little louder, refusing to let the conversation move on, “Isaac Newton was working on a formula to turn lead into gold. He started with sophic mercury.”

“What’s that?” Lucy cocked an eyebrow.

“I’m not sure,” Dee admitted. “His notes said to combine one-part fiery dragon, some doves of Diana, and at least seven eagles of mercury . . . but I think those names have to be code words. They had some strange words for things in the seventeenth century.”

Lucy nodded. “So you’re not giving up on your search for your parents?”

“No.” Dee frowned. “That’s why I need gold. You know I need money to go and find them.”

Lucy nodded. Dee had been waiting for his parents to return for as long as she had known him. Both archaeologists, they had left on an important dig when he was nine. According to Dee, they were super excited. He said they had stumbled across a new and amazing place that they couldn’t wait to investigate.

“Have you found out where they went yet?”

Dee shook his head. “It’s still all very hush hush, and the foundation they were working for doesn’t seem to know—or want to tell. But I’m sure I could find them, if only I had the money.” He stooped again to continue cleaning up the mess on the floor but not before Lucy saw his lower lip wobble. “I just wish they’d send me a postcard or something.”

“I know you don’t want to think about this, but could they have had an accident . . . or something?” Lucy swiped at a few more blobs with her cloth. *Man, this stuff went everywhere.*

Dee turned on her fiercely. “Of course not, I’d know if they had.”

Lucy took a step back before asking as gently as possible, “How, Dee? How would you know?”

“I’d know.” He thumped his chest with his fist. “I’d feel it here.”

Dee was steadfast in his belief his parents were still alive, and there was nothing to prove they weren’t. Except this continued silence. But would she burst his bubble? No, she would stand by him in his quest to find them. Lucy decided to retreat to safer ground and

eyed the rocks again. “So, how much gold will you be able to extract from this piece of lead?”

“Not much,” Dee admitted in a muffled voice. “Just a few flakes, in fact. That’s progress but it’s not nearly enough. What I really need is to discover the formula to transmute all the lead into gold.”

Lucy continued cleaning and examined some of the strange and interesting objects on the lab bench for damage from the splattered liquid. There were glass cucurbits—round containers Dee used to hold the substances he was distilling from one thing into another, and there were several beak-shaped alembics used to catch the condensation from the distillation process. But one device looked new and different. She didn’t remember seeing it before.

“Hey!” Dee’s head appeared over the other side of the lab bench again when Lucy picked up the triangular device and turned it over in her hands.

“Don’t touch that. It’s an old and delicate instrument!” Dee scrambled to his feet with his hand out to reclaim the device, but Lucy hastened to the window without acknowledging him.

The big oak tree sitting squarely in the middle of the forest glowed with an eerie light as if something illuminated it from within. Her heart lifted. Could this be part of the magical nature of the summer solstice? Aunt Delia thought it was a very special day, but Dee wouldn’t think it was different from any other. He’d just laugh at her if she mentioned it, so instead all she said was “Look, over there.”

She pointed into the forest behind the house. “Is that tree on fire?”

“We’d better check.” Dee grabbed a small fire extinguisher from under his lab bench and ran toward the door. “Come on, then! It hasn’t rained in weeks. The whole forest could go up in flames.”

They took the stairs two at a time and bolted through the hallway, the kitchen, and finally the back door, which slammed behind them. Brambles caught at Lucy’s legs as they ran through the underbrush. She almost ran into Dee’s back when he stopped without warning. “That’s no fire, Lucy. Look!” His voice cracked with excitement as he pointed to the middle branch of the tree.

On it perched a red bird, its head cocked as it gazed down at the children. Flames encased the creature but didn't seem to be burning either the bird or the tree.

"Wow, that's bigger than a wandering albatross," Dee breathed.

"That's all you get from a bird that's totally on fire but not on fire?" Lucy stood on tiptoe to examine it more closely. "This isn't another one of your experiments, is it Dee?" she craned her neck to look up into the golden eyes of the creature. They were the most intelligent she had ever seen in an animal.

Dee shook his head and, holding his finger to his lips, motioned to her to walk forward. They were only a few feet away when the bird spread its wings and swooped.

"Did you see that?" Dee turned to Lucy. The bird had disappeared into a rock under the tree. "I wonder where it went. And how . . ."

They looked on all sides of the boulder, which stood as high as Lucy.

"Shh," Lucy said. "It sounds like music and it's coming from . . . here." She put her ear to the rock. "Can you hear it?"

"Music." Dee agreed, his ear pressed to the rock. "Sounds like my woodwind class."

"Why would there be woodwinds playing inside a boulder?"

"There has to be someone behind this lump of rock." Dee leaned his shoulder against it. "Or something," he added cheerfully. He put his shoulder to the stone and started to push. "Come on, if you give it a good shove too, then maybe we can move it."

Lucy shoved until she thought her eyes were going to pop. Gasping, she finally stepped back and said, "It's no good, we can't budge it."

Dee, red-faced, nodded his agreement. "There must be a better way." He thought for a moment. "Do you want to hear another fun fact about Sir Isaac?"

Lucy wasn't sure that she did right now, but before she could voice her opinion, Dee continued.

"His second law of motion states that acceleration is produced

when a force acts on a mass. The bigger the mass, the more force is needed. We don't have enough force . . ."

"No kidding!" Lucy massaged her shoulder.

"Yet . . ." continued Dee as he turned to Lucy. He had a gleam in his eye. "I'll be right back."

Lucy sat with her back to the boulder listening to the music within it while she waited. The sun was warm on her skin, and she was just thinking that this had turned into a pretty interesting day when she saw Dee racing back carrying a large and shiny container.

"Duck behind that tree." He put the container in front of the rock, joined Lucy behind the tree, and handed her a pair of goggles. "Here, put these on. Safety first."

She secured the elastic strap over her curls and settled the goggles on her nose as Dee pressed a small device in his hand. There was a violent flash of light, a boom, and shards of boulder whizzed by the two of them.

"I've always wanted to do that." Dee wore a pleased smile. He tore off his goggles and stuffed them in the pocket of his lab coat. He held out his hand and Lucy handed him hers.

"Was that a pressure cooker?" Lucy said in amazement, watching the cloud of dust now hanging in the air.

"Used to be, yep," agreed Dee.

"Your aunt is going to be wild." Lucy surveyed the few remaining shiny shards.

A shadow crossed Dee's face. "Well, yes. There's that," he agreed and then he stopped, his mouth hanging slightly open.

The dust cleared, revealing the mouth of a cave.