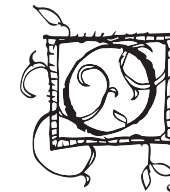




Lucy Newton at Christmas

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h no!' cried Mum.

Lucy looked up from where she was sitting on the floor in front of the fire. She had been trying to knit Vassilisa, her doll, a scarf, but it was slow going with holes where there shouldn't be.

It didn't help that Thomas, the cat from next door who was staying with them while Old Mrs Bramblehedge went on a cruise, kept batting at the loose strands of wool. Still, Lucy was rather proud of her efforts. She had another secret knitting project hidden under her bed. She was hoping to finish it to give Mum for Christmas.

'What's wrong Mum?' she asked.

'It's Aunt Sylvia. She says she can't host Christmas dinner this year and that it is well and truly our turn to do it.'

'And is that a problem?'

'A very big problem!' said Mum. 'We'll have to clean the house from top to bottom, get out the best china and polish the silver.'

'But we can clean the house with magic,' suggested Lucy, 'and can't you cook with it too?'

Mum smiled at Lucy and shook her head.

'It's not that simple Lucy. I've got five hundred essays to mark on the uses of mandrake root in love potions. And, even magic cooking requires some expertise. I've never got the hang of recipe magic. Sylvia is just getting back at me for failing her husband's niece's vanishing magic exam.' Mum sighed. 'I wonder if any restaurants would do home delivery on Christmas Day.'

Lucy tried to resume her knitting but the excitement bubbling up inside her made her drop three stitches in a row. They were going to host the family Christmas! She'd help to clean up, bake cakes and biscuits, mince pies; they could make coconut ice and chocolate fudge. Lucy's tummy rumbled, it was dinner time and she realised she was starving.

As if he'd heard her thoughts about food, Thomas stood up, stretched and waved his tail in the air.



‘Oh Thomas,’ she said, ‘you can help us make a Christmas feast for the family!’ Mum didn’t say anything, lifted one of her long, elegant eyebrows, gave another sigh and got up to make her specialty: baked bean and cheese jaffles.

The next day Lucy and Thomas got to work tidying up the house. As always, Lucy promised her mother she wouldn’t use magic. ‘But you could Thomas,’ she said as she lugged a pile of books up the stairs and pushed open the study door.

‘No way,’ said Thomas, sitting on the landing as Lucy backed her way through the door.

‘But it took you two minutes after the slug incident,’ grumbled Lucy plopping the books onto the corner of the already overloaded desk.

‘That was an emergency,’ said Thomas licking a stray hair off his chest. ‘We have plenty of time to tidy up the usual way.’ Lucy scowled, she really thought Thomas was enjoying watch her do all the hard work. She suddenly wondered what the book would say, perhaps she could sneak a look, she had promised to not leave the book locked up all the time after all.

‘No!’ said Thomas, ‘Don’t even think about it, that book is trouble. Come on, let’s scrub the downstairs toilet.’

The day before Christmas the house looked fabulous. Hopefully no one would go looking under the beds, or in Mum’s study, or the closet in the hall, which were all bursting with things she couldn’t find a home for. She’d scrubbed both the downstairs and the upstairs toilets. Lucy and Thomas had decorated the Christmas tree, they’d even put tinsel around the toilet roll holder and hung mistletoe on the bedroom doors. Lucy felt very proud of all their hard work.

Now all they had to do was go shopping for the food and Mum had promised to take her today.

But Mum had rushed off at first light to the university with some emergency and wasn’t due home until after bedtime. Thomas was asleep on Lucy’s bed, his favourite spot apart from in front of the fire. Lucy thought it wasn’t quite as fun as she’d thought it would be with Thomas around, all he wanted to do was sleep. ‘It’s the cold weather,’ he said apologetically and curled up on Lucy’s pillow.

Lucy was left to worry about the feast. The guests were coming at eleven thirty! She looked in the pantry and the fridge hoping that Mum had done the shopping before she left. Alas, she only found some stale bread rolls, cheese, two tins of baked beans, dried prunes — at least she hoped they were prunes and not dried goblin ears like last time — jelly powder and some very old garlic.



She decided to do a last check of the house. Even if they didn’t have anything to eat other than cheese on toast, their house would be clean. As she got to the landing a funny feeling came over her and she paused outside the study.

It was the book! The book was calling to her, silently inside her. She felt guilty about not giving it an outing. And it was Christmas after all. Perhaps she should go in and say hello...

‘Well, it’s about time!’ the book said in way of greeting when she pulled it from the bottom drawer. ‘You haven’t come to see me in ages!’

‘I’m sorry Book,’ Lucy said gently stroking its yellowed pages which fluttered as she touched them, almost as if it were purring. ‘I’ve just been so busy getting the house ready for Christmas and there’s no—’

‘CHRISTMAS!’ roared the book interrupting her. ‘It’s Christmas already? Oh, I love Christmas, I’ve got lots of carols and present ideas all inside me!’

‘But Book, there isn’t going to be a proper Christmas!’ Lucy cried, holding down its pages which were now flapping excitedly. ‘There’s no food and I don’t even know how to make jelly!’ One of those irritating tears — the kind that comes when you’re frustrated — balanced on the tip on her nose. ‘And I haven’t finished Mum’s present!’ The tear splashed onto the book.

‘Not again! I told you last time, water will ruin me! When will you learn?’ the book said grumpily. Lucy was very close to slamming it shut and putting it back into the drawer. ‘Did you say that you have no food? Well, I have HEAPS of recipes! To the kitchen!’ the book ordered, before pausing. ‘There aren’t any slugs this time, are there?’

A half laugh, half sob escaped her. ‘No, there aren’t any slugs this time.’

After making sure that Thomas was still asleep on her bed and closing the door so he couldn’t get out — she hoped he wouldn’t cough up another hairball while he was stuck in there — Lucy took the book down to the kitchen.

‘Right, now, get out that silver mixing bowl, the big one,’ the book said.



‘But that’s the one we use for spells!’ Lucy said. ‘I thought we were cooking?’

‘I thought you didn’t have any food?’ the book replied smartly. ‘Of course we’re doing a spell, silly girl! How else do you expect to make a three course meal out of cheese, bread and jelly? Logic! Never will they learn logic. Back in my day—’

Lucy hurriedly got the bowl down. ‘Here it is, what next?’

For the next half hour, the book had Lucy collect a whole range of things. Grass, ‘because you need your greens, you know’, baked beans ‘for fibre’, vanilla, blind-worm essence, a very shrivelled garlic head and the dried prunes all went into the bowl.

‘Now, give it a mix,’ the book said. ‘But not too rough. You don’t want to overmix or it will be tough and chewy.’

Lucy did as she was told, holding her breath because the mixture in the bowl was anything but appetising.

‘Right, now, say these words—’

‘Don’t I need my wand?’ Lucy asked. She wasn’t sure where it was because Mum had hidden it again.

‘For cooking? Of course not! Use the wooden spoon. Now, you say:

Crumbled apple and dried up prune

I mixed you with this wooden spoon.

Food I want, to fill my belly

Don’t forget the bouncy jelly!’

Hesitantly Lucy repeated the rhyme and tapped the bowl three times.

It wasn’t like the last time when nothing happened. The bowl began to wriggle and jump. Smoke started to fill the room.

Grabbing the book Lucy crawled to the door, making sure to slam it shut so the smoke didn’t escape.

This time the book didn’t grizzle about her tears as they rolled down her face.

‘I have a spell to put out fire,’ it offered quietly.

‘Thank you,’ sniffed Lucy. ‘But I think I’ll do it myself.’

Putting a wet cloth over her head Lucy went back to the kitchen. The smoke was gone, but so was the spell! In its place was a large recipe book.

Lucy couldn’t help it. She started to laugh. From upstairs she heard a terrible yowl.

‘What’s going on? What’s that smell?’ It was Thomas. He’d woken up and he wasn’t happy.

He slunk past her, quicker than lightning, to the kitchen table where he stopped abruptly.



Lucy, who was right behind him and full of explanations, had to stop herself from treading on him.

‘I thought I smelled smoke,’ he said accusingly. Lucy opened her eyes very wide and tried to look innocent. ‘What’s that book? I hope it’s not the spell book.’

‘No,’ Lucy replied honestly. ‘It’s just a cookbook.’

With that she started to laugh again.

‘What’s so funny?’ Thomas demanded. Lucy took a deep breath.

‘It’s what the spell book would like to eat most in all the world!’ she choked out, the laughter — which was slightly hysterical now — bubbling up again. ‘Words that are all about food!’

When Lucy had calmed down enough to talk properly she told Thomas the whole story. She braced herself for his lecture, but surprisingly it didn’t come.

She sat in front of the fire, stroking Thomas and looked longingly at the pictures of delicious Christmas food in the recipe book. However, she couldn’t make head nor tail of them.

‘How much is a pint?’ she asked Thomas. ‘Is a tablespoon the same as two dessert spoons? What’s castor sugar? Oh, Thomas! What are we going to do? We don’t have any of these ingredients!’

‘Put the Book back — both of them — and go to bed,’ he said wearily. ‘We’ll work it out in the morning.’

Lucy did as she was told. She waited for Thomas to come and join her — she liked feeling him purr while she slept and he was warmer than a hot water bottle — but he never did.

‘He must be so cross with me,’ she said to Vassilisa.

Vassilisa said nothing, not even when she heard noises downstairs and the bedroom door open. She simply smiled and watched her sad little girl sleep.

Lucy slept late on Christmas morning. So late that Mum came in to wake her up.

‘Merry Christmas, Darling,’ she said, sitting on Lucy’s bed.

‘Merry Christmas, Mum,’ said Lucy trying to smile. What kind of Christmas would this be without a feast? She hadn’t even finished the present for Mum.

‘I’m so proud of you!’ Mum was saying. ‘I knew you would be able to get everything ready.’

Lucy didn’t know what she was talking about, but put on her slippers and followed her downstairs. Under the tree were lots of brightly coloured presents and from the kitchen came a wonderful smell.

‘I put the chicken on to roast, just as your note said to,’ Mum said. ‘Thank you for leaving it all ready to go.’

Lucy ran to the kitchen.



The table was covered with tea towels, under each one was a delicious Christmas dish. Pudding and custard, apple crumble for Lucy who didn't like pudding, pans of veggies ready to be put in the oven for roasting, fresh bread rolls, butter, a cheese platter, and more! In the middle of the table, in pride of place was the conjured cookbook.

And curled up on the counter, under the window, fast asleep, was Thomas. He woke up when Lucy started to pat him.

'Merry Christmas Lucy,' he said.

'But how?' she asked before hurriedly adding, 'Merry Christmas to you too, Thomas!'

'The Book and I were up very late trying to decipher the spells — I mean recipes — in that cookbook you magicked up yesterday. In the middle of the night I heard—'

'Me,' a croaky voice came from the kitchen door. It was Mrs Bramblehedge. 'I came home early from my cruise because the boat just rocked so and I was dreadfully ill. I saw Thomas and he explained what a good time you'd given him and that he was trying to make you Christmas dinner to say thank you. And I had to help.'

'Thank you, it's wonderful,' said Lucy, remembering her manners and adding, 'You will join us, I hope.'

With cups of coffee (for the grown-ups) and milk (for Thomas and Lucy) they sat down to open the presents.

'This one says: To Mum, Love Lucy,' read Mrs Bramblehedge. Lucy couldn't remember putting anything out for Mum, but she'd been so busy that she couldn't be sure.

Mum pulled out a long, skinny knitted sack.

'Perfect!' she said. 'I've been needing a new wand holder. And this one is for you. I think you're ready now.'

Lucy took the package. It was a thin rectangular box. Lifting the lid, she saw... a wand! Not her old practice one, but a shiny, new one made of rosewood.

Mum and Mrs Bramblehedge suggested she get the spell book out and try a few simple spells before the visitors arrived. Needing no further prompting, she ran up the stairs with Thomas right behind her.

'Thank you,' she said to them both, once the book was open on the table. 'I don't know how you finished the wand carrier for Mum, but thank you.'

'What did you think I was doing with that wool as you knitted?' said Thomas. 'Playing?'

'Forget about that!' cried the book. 'Let's make some Christmas magic!'

The smell of roasting chicken wafted up the stairs as Lucy lifted her wand.

She read the words on the page that the book had opened to.



'A loyal friend you've been to me
The perfect present I seek for thee.
With shiny ribbons and a pretty bow,
What it is, I do not know!'

She waved her wand and pointed at Thomas, who disappeared in a poof of black smoke.

A box sat in his place, with a red ribbon and bow.

Lucy almost cried in disappointment.

'Open it,' said the book.

Inside, all curled up, was Thomas. Lucy placed the ribbon beside him so that he could play with it when he woke up.

Then, with the book and the box (which was quite heavy with Thomas still inside it!) she took them downstairs to join the feast.

