

UNDER THE CRYSTAL TREE

A Dream Scouts Adventure

By

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Chapter One

Lucy's Dreams

The annoying sound that first woke her had been her brother's sharp rap on the bedroom door. "Wake up, Lucyloo." Trickster knew how she hated to be waked up. He never came into the room, learning long ago that he was likely to be hit with a book, a pillow, or any other thing that came to hand. She could hear him now, down at the end of the hall, tennis shoes squeaking against the polished pine floor. She listened to his thumping descent to the living room—always two steps at a time.

She did not want to wake up. Lucy McNair threw her queen-size, goose down pillow with an overhead lob into the middle of the room. It landed with a plop, rather than the crash she would have liked, followed by an outraged, "Yow!"

"Oh, uggh, yech," Lucy moaned, still lying, eyes closed, with her face in the sheet, "Come here, Merlin." The small, gray cat who jumped onto the bed rubbed his cheek against hers, then curled himself into a ball, half sitting on her head. The steady, rumbling purr that tickled her ears lulled her back to the edge of sleep.

She was supposed to go to the skateboard park in Falls Church this morning with Trickster and his friend, Danny, while Mom went to teach at the University and Dad drove to his office in Alexandria, after dropping them off at the park.

Lucy breathed into Merlin's belly fur, playing for time. She tried to stir up some resentment toward having to spend the day with her brother. At twelve, she felt like she was old enough to be left in the house alone. But it was just too hard to get mad. She liked watching Trickster and his friends leap and soar on the wood and concrete slopes of the skateboard park. Trickster was the name Lucy had given to her now fifteen-year-old brother, Charles, the first time he'd ever used a skateboard, long before he began winning local championships. She had watched him balance on that skinny board, over four little wheels, and said to herself, "He's good at this." He'd been shorter then, only ten, but already the muscles in his calves had stood out like ropes under tanned skin, and his grin had been huge. He never even looked down as he pushed off with one foot, arms outstretched, one hand holding the helmet he hated to wear.

She did not want to wake up. Settling her shoulder into the mattress, Lucy let her mind drift back toward the dream she'd been dreaming. She had just gotten to the best part when Trickster woke her.

As usual in the dream, when morning was near, she'd found herself in the meadow, sitting in the moonlit grass, under the crystal tree. There were stars tonight. They shone like twinkling lights through the crystals, which hung down like leaves, lighting the split-rail fence standing at the edge of the meadow.

Usually Lucy was ready. She would willingly cross the fence, swinging one leg over. And then she would awaken in her own room.

But today—tonight?—one of the other girls in the group, the one they called Wen or Wind, had been racing toward her across the meadow, a huge smile on her face,

calling out something Lucy could no longer remember, followed by the most beautiful dog Lucy had ever seen.

The dog was small, but not too small, not one of those dust mop dogs with a high, yapping bark. This dog came as high as Wen's knees, which were bare and thin under ragged, khaki shorts. Wen's feet were bare too. The dog had run, smiling, beside her. Its coat was black and silvery gray, except for four tawny boots of fur.

The moment before she woke, Lucy had seen the dog, as if it were a balloon, or kite, or feather, leap from beside Wen and flow like a gentle smoke toward Lucy, brushing the tree's crystal leaves into musical chimes with fluid motion.

Now she would never know what might have happened.

From down the hall, Lucy heard the groan of pipes, as her mother turned on the shower in the bathroom. She listened to the humming noise her mother made that she called "singing in the shower."

Lucy sighed. More like moaning in the shower, hooting in the shower. She stifled a laugh. Despite her best efforts, her eyes popped open. She saw the underside of her pink, yellow and blue flowered sheet, pulled as usual over her head. Sunlight filtered bright cotton flower patterns over her hands and arms.

She might as well get up. Pulling back the sheet, dislodging Merlin as she did, Lucy put her legs over the side of the bed, feeling around with her feet for her flip flops. The morning was already humid; a hot dampness that crept under the cooled air from the air conditioner tightening Lucy's copper curls, making her nose itch. She slumped on the side of the bed, elbows against her knees, head in her hands. Her eyes threatened to close.

Down the hall, her mother broke into a tuneless rendition of the Beatles song, “Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I’m sixty four?”

Lucy shook her head and smiled wryly. For all she knew, her mother could be singing to her. Clearly Mrs. McNair (Doctor McNair to her students) thought her daughter was socially retarded, and was going to be a complete failure if she didn’t develop an interest in boys and more grown up things soon.

Lucy thought about the conversation she’d had with her mother last night, lying stretched on her stomach across the blue satin quilted comforter on her parent’s bed, watching as her mother applied mascara with a tiny brush, in preparation for going to the reception for new faculty. Her mother looked slim, fresh and gorgeous in a polished cotton sundress with spaghetti straps ending in tiny bows.

“What you need to do,” Trudy McNair had turned toward her daughter, mascara brush in one hand, bottle in the other, mascara darkening the lashes over her startlingly green eyes, “is get your head out of the clouds.”

She’d handed the mascara bottle out to Lucy with a smile. “Want to try it?”

Lucy shook her head, turning her eyes away from her mother’s frown. Makeup made her skin feel gooky. Like putting dirt on her face. She didn’t understand why anyone would want to use it.

It had been her mother who’d brought up the dreams, Lucy remembered, asking like she always did about the kids Lucy met up with in dream state, as if hoping they’d just disappeared since the last time she’d asked.

But, Lucy thought, rubbing her hand over Merlin’s sleek head where he lay stretched out on top of the sheet, she’d fallen for it, just like she always did, wanting

someone to share her excitement, telling Mom how she always saw the same kids in her dreams, telling Mom they were her friends.

“What that gang sounds like,” Mom had said, laughing lightly as she picked out a lipstick from among the many tubes that littered the top of her dressing table, “is more like a Scout troop than anything else. Maybe you should join a Scout troop, Lucia. Not such a bad idea. Of course, I hated the Scouts when I was growing up. All that hiking and camping, ugh. When I was a kid though, I would have much rather been a Dream Scout than a Girl Scout. At least Dream Scouts get to fly.” She snickered a little over her own joke, rubbing a pale lip gloss into her lips.

Mom was making fun, like she always did, of the dreams that had increasingly filled Lucy’s life over the past two years since they’d moved from California to Washington D.C. when Dad was called here for his new job at the Drug Enforcement Administration’s main office. Her mother wanted to pretend that the dreams weren’t real, or that there was something wrong with Lucy for having them. But Lucy knew better. At least she thought she did. She always knew she was dreaming while the dreams were going on, for one thing. She knew this kind of dreaming was called lucid dreaming, almost like it was named for her. She’d read that in a book on dreams she’d taken out of the library. But even more than that, she could *feel* those other kids were as real as she was. She hoped she’d get a chance to meet them sometime.

As for her mother, well Lucy knew that her mother loved her. But her mother had always, for as long as Lucy could remember, been impatient and cross at the mention of her only daughter’s dreams. Lucy shook her head. She had not just been imagining the wistfulness in her mother’s voice last night either. There was something hiding inside

her mother, probably a little girl herself, who would have really loved to become a Dream Scout, and fly with Lucy back to California.

Lucy remembered the first time she had ever told a dream to anyone; because that was when she first realized that maybe her own dreams were different. She'd been little, barely more than four. They'd been visiting her grandparents' house in San Diego: Lucy, her mother, Trickster, and the man who was going to be their new dad, Christopher McNair. Lucy's own dad had left them way back when Lucy was so little she didn't remember him, though Trickster did, and he sometimes talked about him then, but not so much now.

Lucy liked it when they went to Grandma's house. It was so much bigger than the town house her mother rented on the other side of town, while she finished her graduate work at the university and worked part time at the bank. At Grandma's house there was a garage to play in, and a back yard with a chain link fence.

Before breakfast, Lucy sat on the bottom step of the stairway to the upstairs, holding her bear and her blanket, trying not to suck her thumb. This was her favorite place, where the stairs turned, making a little corner almost big enough to hide in.

But now, with everyone sitting around the table finishing cups of breakfast coffee, she wanted to talk. She had listened to all the grown ups talking. She wanted to tell people about what happened last night.

"I flew down the stairs last night, Grandpa," Lucy had piped from atop two telephone books stacked on a kitchen chair, which was drawn up to the table next to where her grandfather sat. She felt pleased that all conversation at the table stopped and

her grandpa's eyes turn toward her, peering out nearsightedly from behind his round, wire rimmed glasses.

"I flew right down from the top to the bottom and never got hurt." Lucy hoped her grandpa would share her excitement.

The silence lasted only a moment, and then people began to laugh. "It was only a dream," Lucy heard her mother say, and she knew that meant what she'd done wasn't real—or important. And she knew they were laughing at her. Her grandfather's laugh was low in his throat, like he was trying to swallow it, but Trickster laughed out loud.

Christopher McNair, the man who would be her new daddy, looked uncomfortable even though he was smiling. He sat across the table from her, beside Trickster. Her brother was shaking his head with that, "Now you've done it," look in his eyes. Chris McNair cleared his throat, looked at her kindly. "I had a dream like that once...."

"Oh, Chris," her mother had laughed shrilly. "You know what an imagination this child's got."

"I think I'd like some more coffee," her grandfather said, attempting to change the subject.

"Can I be excused?" Lucy asked in a small voice, sliding off the phone books, fleeing the kitchen.

She hadn't wanted to make anybody mad. She hadn't wanted anybody to laugh at her.

If it had not been for her grandmother that day, Lucy might never have dreamed again. Her grandmother had followed her onto the back deck, sitting down beside her on the redwood porch swing and pulling Lucy onto her lap.

Lucy had leaned into the curve where her grandmother's neck met her shoulder, feeling safe and comforted. Her grandmother smelled faintly of perfume, more strongly of the cigarettes Grandpa kept trying to get her to stop smoking.

"Well, little girl." That was what Grandma always called her then. "Looks like you really wound your mother up, doesn't it?"

Grandma held Lucy lightly. "You know, when your mother was a little girl just about your age, she used to have some awfully bad dreams. That was before I met your grandpa. We'd been living up in San Francisco, your mother and I, in a whole house full of hippie types. Well, you don't want to know about that. But I knew I needed to get her out of there.

"So she's got some trouble with dreams. But that doesn't mean you need to." Grandma rocked Lucy a little, both of them relaxing into the gentle squeaking of the swing. A blue jay screeched from the fence post. "No, there are good dreams too, and all sorts of things and places in this world we don't even know about. Maybe you weren't just dreaming of flying. Maybe you **were** flying. Who knows?"

They sat like that until Lucy almost drifted off to sleep again.

With her chin still resting on her cupped hands, Lucy scanned her bedroom. It was full of gifts from her grandmother, from the painting of bright Shasta daisies on the pale yellow wall to the oval, braided rug that covered the space between bed and dresser. How she missed her grandmother. Still, Lucy was finally feeling more at home here in

Washington, in the old brick house her parents rented in Woodley Park, even with the city noises and what her mother called the “godawful pollution held down by wet air.”

She loved this house, an aged, smoky red brick with tall windows and white trim. It felt like something from another time. Lucy’s room was the smallest of the three bedrooms on the second floor. There was barely room for a single bed, squeezed between two sheer-curtained windows, a clothes press against the far wall, with the brightly braided rug in between. But from here Lucy could go up to the attic.

Lucy looked now at the closed white door, shut tight to keep Merlin from going up there. She knew she should not even think about going there now. She could smell the waffles her father was making in the kitchen. He wanted the family to eat together on the weekends. She could hear her mother finishing up in the bathroom, heading toward her bedroom to dress. Still, the pull was almost irresistible.

Lucy grabbed her shorts off the back of the desk chair pushed into the narrow study desk built against the far wall, slipped into them and pulled a fresh tee shirt from her drawer. Maybe for just a moment. Her hand rested on the doorknob.

Out the window between door and desk, a flash of movement caught her eye. She pulled the sheer curtain away from the window to peek out. The morning sun hit the corner of the house next door, leaving the front yard, a mass of dusty ivy sweeping down to the sidewalk from a slight rise, in deep shadow. On the sidewalk, partially obscured by the wrought iron fence that framed the yard, a dog walked, head down, sniffing.

The dog’s long fur was silvery gray. Its tail curled in a graceful plume over its back. Lucy watched as it bounded around the corner and out of sight on paws topped by tawny boots of fur.

She shook her head. Now her mother would **really** think she was losing it. Dislodged by her headshake, a tangle of red curls flopped into her face. By the time she'd brushed them back with a practiced twist, the dog had gone. The yard was empty.

Lucy grinned. It was one thing to see the same people in dreams for two years, but what if the dream people started showing up when she was awake? Oh, wouldn't that make her mom crazy?

Without even noticing, Lucy opened the attic door and yanked the pull chain hanging down from a lamp high on the stairwell wall.

She couldn't help smiling, as she always did, when she saw what awaited her in the attic. Covering the entire length and width of the old, brick house, the attic ran in unfinished beams into cobwebs and dark corners. Most of the space was piled high with boxes left over from their move. But here, to the left of the stairs, framed on one side by the stair rails, her stepfather had laid out plywood flooring. This boxed off a play area that he called the second story of her bedroom. He had built cupboards into the sloping eaves to hold board games, books and toys. The best thing though, in Lucy's eyes, was the last thing he had built. Up against the long wall of the house, he had constructed a working puppet theater stage, with pink satin curtains operated by a pull rod and grooves in the floor to hold backdrops and props.

Dad had bought Lucy her first puppets when they arrived in Washington, a hand puppet cow named Flossie, and a string puppet clown with big wooden feet. Mom said, with a shake of her head, that he was just trying to buy Lucy's affection, take her mind off the move, but Lucy didn't care. She loved him all the more for it, though sometimes

she felt a little guilty that she was closer to Christopher McNair, who wasn't even her real father, than to her real flesh and blood mother.

The first day he brought the puppets home, she could tell he was enjoying himself by the way he stopped talking to her as he straightened out the puppet strings, muttering to himself, "Yes, this one goes here...." He'd showed her how to hold the bars to manipulate the strings, making the clown dance while he sang in an off-key voice. His round face had creased in a goofy grin, making him look like a kid himself, even though he still wore the dark suit and white shirt he'd worn when he came in the house. He had, as was his habit, pushed his dark-rimmed glasses to the top of his head. The lenses magnified the balding spot in his frizzy brown hair that he tried so hard to hide.

Lucy had loved the marionettes at once, demanding to be shown again and again how to move the arms and legs of the clown and Arabella, the ballerina who followed, studying how to make them walk, dance, bow, until Dad had laughingly told her she'd learned everything he knew and enrolled her in a class down at the Smithsonian.

That class had been her salvation, Lucy knew. Saturday mornings every week for a year she inhaled the smells of wood, paint and glue as, under the watchful eyes of Madam Miriam, twenty ten year olds learned the age-old art of puppetry.

Lucy was too quiet, too shy to make friends easily, a shyness that only increased as she began to grow taller, with legs that suddenly seemed too long, feet too big, elbows and knees always in the wrong place. She didn't much like the girls at her new school, who seemed to be always talking loudly, comparing notes on who was "fast", even though they were only little kids. Lucy didn't know whether to laugh at the brassy, smug

looks she got from the other girls, at the low, half-whispered hiss, “geek,” followed by a well-placed elbow punch, or to fall into self-contempt at her desire to be accepted.

All that changed though once she began puppet class. She called it that, even though there were other crafts involved. She was still too shy to talk with anyone much, and as often as not she would knock over a glue pot or a jar of paint if she forgot where her elbows were. But from the first day, puppet making enchanted her. Creating puppet shows became her passion.

Lucy sat down on the wide window ledge to the left of the attic puppet stage. There was no need to turn the lights on this morning, though she had requested and gotten not only “house lights” but stage lights as well, tiny, brilliant spot lights, both in back and in front of the stage.

The attic room was filled with what looked like confusion, but Lucy knew exactly where everything was, right down to the last blade and screw. On a long table at the far end of the room, a sewing machine was covered with the dark green tulle she was using to dress her latest creation. More fabric spilled in rainbow piles from cardboard boxes stacked by the wall. Next to the table, on the wooden chest she used for carving and clay work, sat the head of the boy puppet she was making now. The face had a high-bridged nose and high cheekbones. She reached for it, feeling the soft, smooth curve of the rounded balsa wood, so soft it could be carved with ease, light enough to not make the puppet body too heavy. She ran her thumbs over the softly rounded cheeks.

Looking at the exaggerated features, a must if the audience was going to see any character at a distance from the stage, she sighed. “I wish I knew how to carve you better,” she said looking into the staring eyes. “I wish I could make you look right.”

From the beginning, Lucy had made puppets of the people she met in her dreams. The puppet plays she wrote and performed told the story of what happened there under the crystal tree.