

LUCY & DEE

THE CAVES OF WONDER



Kirsten Marion

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Common Deer Press

Published by Common Deer Press Incorporated.

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Published in 2023 by Common Deer Press
1745 Rockland Ave.
Victoria, BC
V8S 1W6

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Lucy & Dee : the silk road / Kirsten Marion.

Other titles: Lucy and Dee

Names: Marion, Kirsten, author.

Identifiers: Canadiana 20210370599 |

ISBN 9781988761664 (hardcover)

Classification: LCC PS8626.A75358 L83 2022 | DDC jC813/.6—dc23

Cover Image: Shannon O'Toole

Book Design: David Moratto

Printed in Canada

www.commondeerpress.com



CHAPTER ONE

Jhe crowds swirled around Lucy as she stood on the cobbles of the main square of the village of Yangxi. The square was thronged with market stalls and tents and the crowd flowed between and around them, buying, selling, and catching up on the local news. Great waves of sound washed over her.

Lucy's stomach fluttered. Finally, she was out and with other people again! She, Dee, and Yidi had been lying low at Zixing's farm for over a month expecting Queen Xixi and her imperial guard to descend on them at any moment as Zixing and his granddaughter Mai prepared to leave their farm and accompany Lucy and her friends to Rephar and the Caves of Wonder.

All had been quiet for so long, Zixing had told Lucy, that it should be safe for her and her friends to come to the market today as he and Mai bought the last supplies needed for their journey.

The square was a shifting kaleidoscope of noise, color, and smells. On one side was a temple to the goddess of the harvest. The heavy scent of incense drifted from it to mingle with the smells of the market stalls and overexcited animals in a complex quilt of aromas. Carts, now emptied of the goods and food they'd carried in, lined the other three sides.

There were stalls filled with enticing curiosities that Lucy longed to investigate. But she was mindful that she couldn't draw any attention to herself, and Zixing had made a point of telling her and the others to stay close to him. She pulled the hood of her cloak farther forward to ensure her blonde hair was completely covered.

↳ Lucy scanned the crowd. Ah, there he was, Lucy thought as she moved to a stall three over on her right where the old man was purchasing paper and ink. Dee stood just behind him shifting nervously as he was jostled by the crowd. Yidi examined a stand laden with breads and pastries.

“I think Mai is almost finished making her purchases and we can leave soon,” Dee said, coming to her side. “I’ll be glad when we’re finally on our way to find the White Tiger!”

Bertie crawled out of Dee’s pocket and squeaked as Zixing approached. Dee smiled and held the little hedgehog-like creature on the palm of his hand. Bertie crawled from Dee’s hand onto Zixing’s open palm. Zixing fished in a pocket with his other hand and pulled out a treat. The little creature sat on his haunches, his belly hanging over his hind paws. Holding the tidbit in his front paws, he nibbled at it furiously.

“I don’t think Bertie needs quite so many treats,” Dee said, poking him softly in the tummy.

Zixing just smiled as he ran a forefinger gently down Bertie’s back.

Lucy nodded, distracted by a sudden commotion on the far side of the square. She inhaled sharply.

A large group of imperial guards moved purposefully into the crowd. Lucy went cold as she slipped closer to Zixing. The guards fanned out, showing posters and questioning people. Lucy saw each person shake their head and pull out a small booklet. The guards examined each booklet closely and returned it before moving on to the next person to repeat the process.

“What are they doing?” Lucy whispered to Zixing as Mai joined them. Mai already had a small booklet in her hand.

“Checking identity papers,” he said shortly. “Stay close together and stay behind me. And for goodness’ sake, pull your hood up.” This last remark was snapped at Yidi who sheepishly complied. Absent-mindedly, Zixing put Bertie in his pocket and the little creature hurriedly burrowed down.

Identity papers! Lucy looked at Dee wildly. They didn’t have any

and she'd bet Yidi didn't have any either. Zixing knew who the three of them were, and he would know they wouldn't have any papers, but Mai didn't.

Beside her, Dee stood frozen with his fists clenched so tightly the skin across his knuckles was a shiny white.

One of the guards was upon them now. Lucy felt her face go rigid with terror as the crowd pressed in around her. *What are we going to do? There's nowhere to run! This is it. We'll be arrested for sure.*

The guard spoke to Mai first. She held out her booklet and the guard examined it before handing it back and asking, "Have you seen these three escaped outlaws?" He shoved a poster at Mai. She glanced down at it before wrinkling her forehead in honest confusion.

Lucy held her breath. She didn't know how good the likenesses were, but she knew the queen was saying that she, Dee, and Yidi were escaped outlaws and had to be recaptured at all costs.

In her head, Lucy quickly ran through what they'd told Mai. She and Dee had claimed they were travelers looking for Dee's missing parents with Yidi as their guide. She knew that Lucy had begun to show magical talents and needed training—that was why they were looking for the White Tiger. Mai *didn't* know that Yidi was the young emperor, and that Lucy and Dee came through a portal from another world. This was to keep Mai safe if she was questioned. It made sense. Especially after what she'd just seen.

"No, I haven't. Why? Do you think they're here? Are we quite safe?" Mai's voice quavered.

Lucy let out her breath.

"They're outlaws, miss. Not nice people. I doubt they'd stop at anything. Keep your doors and windows locked."

Mai nodded fervently.

Lucy kept her head down as the guard addressed Zixing next. "Papers, please."

"How dare you ask me for papers," Zixing exploded, claspings his hands behind his back. "Don't you know who I am? You can't just come muscling in here asking honest citizens to show their papers."

"I believe I can, sir." The guard was adamant. "Your papers, please."

Lucy saw Zixing motioning behind his back for her, Dee, and Yidi to move away.

“I will not!” Zixing shouted and Mai pulled at his sleeve trying urgently to reason with him. He shoved her away.

“Oe Ve! How can you behave in such a barbarous fashion?” he screamed at the guard. “Mai, remember the temple!” Lucy could barely hear him hiss the last sentence. Zixing then struck the guard and ran.

Several more guards came running. They grasped Zixing and hauled him away as Zixing kept screaming “Oe Ve” repeatedly until a guard backhanded him across the mouth and Zixing subsided in a gurgle.

“The man’s crazy!” someone in the crowd shouted, and people moved away as if his craziness and detainment were contagious.

Yidi took Mai by the arm and started to pull her away.

Mai, white-faced with shock, dug her heels in. “Wait!” she called after the guards and tried to run after them, but Yidi held her fast. “I have to go,” she shouted at him, pummeling him on the arm. “I have to help Grandfather.”

Shaking his head, Yidi gently guided her away from the crowd.

Lucy bit her lip. Now the crowd was looking at Yidi. Someone shouted, “Let her go!” and rushed toward him.

Yidi ducked under the man’s outstretched arm, his own arm encircling Mai’s waist now as he continued to hustle her away. “It’s okay! She’s just had a shock. I’m taking her to a place where she can recover.”

Lucy and Dee followed. When they reached Mai’s cart, Yidi stepped away from Mai who now looked blank. He looked at Lucy and Dee and shrugged. “Now what?” he mouthed.

“Give her something to do?” Dee suggested.

“Mai, can you hitch up the pony?” Yidi said as he took her purchases from her unresisting fingers and heaved them into the back of the cart to join the other bags. “Mai!”

Mai just stood there.

“Here, let me,” Lucy took Mai by the shoulders and gently shook her. “Mai, snap out of it. It’s dangerous to stay here. We have to go now.”

Mai gave a shuddering sigh and then visibly pulled herself

together. “Right,” she said. She took the hobble off the pony standing patiently nearby and hitched it to the cart.

“I don’t know what got into him,” Mai shook her head in confusion. “I’ve never seen Grandfather like that. He never shouts. Not at anyone.”

They piled in. Mai sat on the driver’s bench and the rest of them made themselves as comfortable as possible among the bags, dust, and wisps of straw.

“Oe Ve?” Dee said once they were out of the village and on the road back to the farm.

“That’s the monastery of the fighting monks by the Caves of Wonder,” Yidi said. “That’s where Zixing said we needed to go so we could free the White Tiger.”

Mai turned to look at them and nodded. “I think he was trying to tell me that we’re supposed to go there without him.” Her voice caught. “But how can I do that? How can I leave him in the hands of the guards? What’s going to happen to him?” Tears hovered on her lower lashes.

“He probably feels he can take care of himself,” Lucy said. “He must feel it’s more important that you—that we all—leave.”

But how? She wondered. *We can’t be seen along the roads with the cart and horse.*

The Xami, thought Lucy with relief. Two of those mythical horse-like creatures with their glittery horns and shimmering scales, Ai and Zi, had come to help them on the Silk Road.

“Dee, do you think the Xami would help us like they did before?”

Dee shrugged. “I can try. But they didn’t come the last time we called.” He sang the song of the Xami, the same notes the Xami were singing when they found Lucy and Dee on the Silk Road.

Mai looked at him in disbelief. “What are you doing? And more importantly, how have you met the Xami?” Her eyes narrowed. “I thought you were tourists.”

“I am—We are,” Lucy and Dee said together.

“It’s a long story,” said Lucy. “Right now, we have to do as your grandfather said. We will get back to the farm, pack up, and leave.”

➤ Once at the farmhouse, Mai took the pony to her neighbor's farm. The farmer had promised to look after all their animals while they were away. Lucy and Dee walked around the house putting heavy outdoor shutters up on all the windows as Mai had instructed. Yidi disappeared into the house.

"Lucy," Dee wheezed as he lifted a heavy shutter into position. "What if they interrogate Zixing? What if he tells them who we are?"

Lucy huffed with the effort of bolting the shutters at the adjoining window. When she was finished, she stepped back and dusted her hands as she admired the job she'd done. "He won't do that," she said confidently.

Dee chewed his lower lip and didn't look convinced.

They unloaded the cart and dragged it into the barn before locking the barn door.

By this time, Mai had returned. She stood and upended the bags of supplies on the kitchen table. "Lucy, help me sort these. Dee, there are four packs in the hallway. Thank goodness I bought those first. Yidi—Where did he go!" She put her hands on her hips.

Dee brought the four packs in and then started banging around in the kitchen cupboards.

Lucy and Mai began sorting supplies into four more-or-less equal piles.

"What on earth . . ." Lucy said as Dee emerged clutching a handful of bottles, which he crammed into his assigned pack.

"I have a feeling we're going to need these," he said, slipping on the remains of his lab coat. He'd ripped off the arms to bind Lucy's wounds when she'd been attacked by some river eels. "This has far too many valuable chemicals and tools in it to leave behind and the cloak will hide it."

Lucy hastily assessed the supplies. Mai had done a good job with her purchases. There were bedrolls, water skins for each of them, and food parcels. Lucy wondered what the best order was to pack her share and then she started to just shove them in. She could organize it later.

Yidi reappeared with an armful of books and scrolls just as Lucy

was fastening her pack. His ornamental sword lay on top of the pile. It was looking a little shabby now as he'd already had to gouge out several of the precious jewels in the hilt to fund their travels.

"We'll need these. Don't worry," he said to Mai who had opened her mouth to protest about the reading materials. "I'll make sure your grandfather gets them back. Is my pack ready?" He strapped the sword around his waist.

"Is your pack ready?" Lucy stared at him open-mouthed and then just shook her head. "Unbelievable. We're not your servants. Pack it yourself."

Mai stopped what she was doing, planted both palms on the table, and let her head sink between her shoulders. "I can't do this. I can't go and leave Grandfather." Tears rolled down her cheeks. "He's all I have left. And what will he do if he comes back here and I'm gone?"

"Mai"—Lucy put a gentle arm around Mai's shoulder while casting a worried look at Dee—"he expects you to be gone. He's told you to go. What if he's planning to go to Oe Ve when he's released?" *If he's released.* "He'd be very upset if he got to the temple and you weren't there." Her head whipped around. "*What* are you doing Dee?"

Dee was turning out all his pockets and becoming more and more frantic. "Bertie! I didn't get Bertie back from Zixing."

"Well, that's alright then," Lucy said in a hearty voice that didn't quite dispel the worry twisting her insides. "Zixing can use Bertie to call a dragon and join us at any time! He can certainly use a dragon to find us in Rephar. I'm sure of it."

Mai bit her lip, hiccupped, and said in a small voice, "Makes sense." Her eyes widened. "Oh, I didn't see you put your identity papers in your packs. Are you carrying them? We're almost certain to be stopped along the way. They're stopping everyone."

"Papers?" Dee choked out the word.

"Yes!" Mai said impatiently. "You do have identity papers, don't you? You must have! Everyone has them."

How will we get them? Lucy wondered. Her pulse quickened. If they were stopped by imperial guards, they'd be toast.

Yidi stepped in. "Uh, Mai, there is a problem. When we were

traveling, we lost a few things in . . . in a storm. Our identity papers were among them. I'd forgotten about them until we were in the market and the guards were asking to see them. We'll have to get some new ones. Any ideas?"

"What?" Mai passed a distracted hand over her forehead. "Oh, yes, there are many good-sized towns on our way to Rephar."

"Are there people who can, you know, do them quickly and quietly?" Yidi said.

Mai gave Yidi a suspicious look. "I suppose, but why?"

He waved an airy hand. "Oh, I just thought it would be the most inconspicuous way to go about it. If we go to the mayor's office to get them, it might just slow us down. We're in a hurry, yes?" He gave her a disarming smile.

"You know"—Mai narrowed her eyes at him—"if Grandfather didn't trust you so much, I might be tempted to think you were the outlaws."

She looked him up and down.

"But if you are the outlaws, the pictures on the posters don't look like you at all. Anyhow, you seem pretty harmless, so I really don't know what the fuss is all about," she added severely.

Lucy held back a gurgle of laughter at the affronted look on Yidi's face.

Dee had everything carefully packed. "I'll keep my penknife handy," he said, sliding it into the pocket of his pants.

"Dee, any sign of the Xami?" Lucy asked urgently.

Dee went to the back door. "Nope. But there's a cloud of dust in the distance and it's heading this way."

It was the guards. They knew they were here! The thoughts screamed in Lucy's head.

"Could be trouble," Yidi agreed, joining Dee at the door.

"What's the best way out of here, Mai?" Dee turned to her. "Do we have any chance of not being seen?"

Mai drew her brows together. "We'll have to go through the fallow field, it'll be pretty mucky after that last big rain, but at least it's not flooded like it would be if there was a crop in it."

Lucy sighed and looked down at her shiny new boots. Mai had outfitted them all in nondescript clothing—pants and tunics—that would wear well on their journey.

“Once we get to the other side there’s a forest that will provide good cover.” Mai went on. “From there we can figure out where to go next.”

“We will have to stay off the road,” Yidi said. “Until we get new papers, we can’t risk being stopped.”

He was still struggling with his straps, so Lucy untangled them before fastening them so Yidi could slip the pack over his shoulders. “I’m only doing this because we have the need for speed,” she warned him. “Now move it.”