

WHO IS STEALING THE 12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS?



MARTHA FREEMAN

Chapter One



A goose was the first to go.

My cat was the first to notice.

It was Friday morning before winter vacation. I was looking out my window to see if maybe it had snowed overnight. One good thing about Pennsylvania winters—sometimes you get lucky and get a snow day, no school.

But I didn't see a single flake. Only blue sky and the Christmas display in the Lees' yard next door. The Lees are six geese a-laying. On the other side are the Popps, eight maids a-milking.

My family is seven swans a-swimming.

This might not necessarily make sense. So I

will explain. Every December, the people on our street decorate their yards from the carol “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” At one end there’re the Ryans: partridge in a pear tree. At the other are the Jensens: twelve lords a-leaping.

Really, the partridge is a big rubber ducky painted gold. Glued over the flat ducky beak is a pointy construction-paper beak. The pear tree is a dogwood.

Then there’re the lords. They are flat and jig-sawed out of plywood.

The five golden rings are Hula Hoops.

That’s reality. But starting that same Friday night, reality wouldn’t matter. That night almost everybody in the neighborhood would get together at the Jensens’ house. Then Professor Jensen would throw a switch to turn on lights and music. Suddenly, the plywood, the paint, the Hula Hoops—they would all become *Christmas*.

We live in College Springs. It’s pretty small. So the Twelve-Day display is a big deal. It’s up through New Year’s, and practically everybody comes to see it. It’s such a tradition that when somebody sells one of the Twelve-Day houses, the

decorations go with it. It doesn't even matter if the new people celebrate Christmas.

Since there was no snow that morning, I went ahead and pulled on a T-shirt and sweater. Then I saw the T-shirt stripes were in the back and the tag in the front, so I had to start over. I was twisting the sweater over my head for the second time when Luau jumped onto the windowsill.

Luau is my cat. The windowsill is where I keep my Super Macho Military Mice.

Luau swiped his paw to knock down the Mice. Then he swished his tail and blurted a morning meow.

I thought he meant "Greetings, Alex. I don't believe you've petted me today." But when I petted him, he didn't purr. Instead, he butted his pink nose against the cold window, and he swished his tail some more.

What was he looking at?

Luau has checked out all the Christmas displays. His favorites are ours and the Lees' because they have big, fat birds. Sometimes Luau curls up in a sunny spot by the window and watches them. I know what he is thinking when he watches: "Go



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