

Number 7 Blackbird Lane

“Archiiiiiiiie! Ar-chi-baald!” Lilly took a deep breath. “Archie, give that shoe back right now! I’m telling Uncle Clemens and you know what’s going to happen to you then!”

She spotted the rainbow-coloured tip of Archie’s tail on the top shelf. The impertinent little dragon seemed to think that Lilly couldn’t see him if he hid his head between the shoes on the overflowing storage rack.

Annoyed, Lilly stamped her foot. “This is your last warning!”

The dragon knew very well that he wasn’t allowed to touch the shoes Clemens Wunder was working on. But as soon as Lilly’s uncle left, Archibald had stolen the most colourful shoe and absconded with it. Now, Lilly’s patience was running out. She ran into the store room and dragged out the big wooden ladder.

“Just watch out when I get my hands on you, beast!” she shouted. She leaned the ladder against the shelf and bravely climbed up the small rungs. “Give it back, you thief!” she commanded and snatched the stolen shoe out of the dragon’s mouth.

“Be careful”, Archibald reprimanded her. “My teeth are very precious.” His fake French accent was very prominent. “Made from pure diamonds and very expensive. More respect please, Mademoiselle! *Moi*, I am of noble birth, as you know. My grandfather was the teacher of His Highness the Sun King. More respect,

Mademoiselle! You're just a little girl and you still have a lot to learn." He bared his sparkly teeth.

"Oh stop all that French nonsense, you blabbermouth! Every time you want to lecture me, you're driving me crazy with your fake accent. That beautiful shoe! It's sticky all over from your spittle. How am I supposed to fix this", Lilly complained.

The shoe really did look elegant and very special. It shimmered in all the colours of the sea, from arctic green to south sea blue. Finally free, the shoe laces squealed with relief and formed a pretty bow. "Nonsense!" Archibald protested, dropping his accent effortlessly. "I just wanted to polish this shoe. You're so bad at cleaning shoes, I felt I needed to help you out. Did I teach you so poorly? Look here, that's how it's done!"

And before Lilly could prevent it, the dragon grabbed the next shoe, a purple stiletto. He started to rub it eagerly with the tip of his tail. Highly alarmed, the stiletto shoe buckled and smartly smacked the dragon with its heel. Archibald hissed and let go. The shoe dropped onto the floor from where it escaped, snorting, underneath the shelf.

"You see!" Lilly said triumphantly, hands on her hips. "Nobody wants your help! You're far too rough. I doubt you're a real teacher. Maybe your grandpa was a tutor at the French court. But you're just an impostor!"

At that, Archibald started sulking in earnest. He angrily thrashed around with the tip of his tail, stirring up a lot of dust. Many more shoes tumbled down, racing across the wooden floor and complaining vociferously.

“Stop it! Stop it right now”, Lilly screamed.

She sneezed five times in a row.

“Bless you!” came a snarling voice from above. “Those who sneeze a lot won’t need a doctor!” Lilly sneezed three more times.

“You urgently need to do some sweeping in here”, the dragon recommended. “I think I even got bitten by a flea. That’s very unhealthy for my sensitive scales.” He slapped himself on the back with the tip of his tail.

“Well what else am I supposed to do?” Lilly defended herself. “My uncle is merrily travelling around the world, leaving me to watch his jittery shoes, keep the shop spotlessly clean and at the same time make sure I keep you on a short leash. That’s just too much!” She pouted.

“Pardon, chérie!“, the dragon said, subdued.

“*Moi*, I woke up far too early today. I had bad dreams during the last few nights. That is not good. I’d better take a little nap now.” He curled up like a kitten and closed his eyes.

“The early bird catches the worm!” the creaky voice joined in again.

“Oh shut up Sir Mildew Head!” Lilly grumbled up at him. “You’re not exactly the sharpest tool in the box here.” Now she was really getting fed up.

The cardboard crocodile hanging from the ceiling kept its silence. Lilly hadn’t yet discovered the mysterious mechanism that made the crocodile utter a few irritating catchphrases now and then, like an old parrot. But the rickety thing was an heirloom from her great-grandfather. He used to be a sailor and brought back the strangest things from his travels, among them Sir Mildew Head. And since then, the crocodile had been part of the family. It even had its own special travelling trunk.

Lilly sighed. “I really don’t know how to keep the shop going all by myself, if you stab me in the back like that, Archie. I hope Uncle Clemens comes back soon. He’s been on that ship for two weeks now and I’m starting to get worried. And also I have a feeling that we’re going to get a new customer soon!” She took the blue-green shoe and climbed down the ladder. Then she opened the glass cabinet that contained many different little flasks and grabbed a cloth. She took out one of the flasks and studied the instructions carefully.

The shoe care products for Wonder Shoes, the name of her uncle’s brand, were very specific and Lilly had to pay close attention to avoid ending up with the wrong liquid.

Sounds of the Sea, it said on the blue-edged label. Yes, that was right.

When she pulled the plug out of the jar, the liquid inside the flask started to bubble up and a blue-green mist billowed out, immediately followed by silvery glitter bubbles rising from the opening. They floated through the room. Some of them burst on the window panes with a small plop.

“Stop! Stay!” Lilly commanded sternly, snapping her fingers.

The glittery bubbles formed a chain, snaking back to Lilly. They lowered themselves onto the cloth that she stretched out towards them. She started to polish the blue-green shoe carefully. When she had finished, it gave off an alluring sparkle, like a sun-kissed ocean.

Lilly nodded, content, and fetched the second shoe. “Just perfect!” she praised herself, placing the shoes onto another shelf. Now many more shoes came pattering in from all the corners of the house and formed an orderly queue in front of Lilly.

“Well done! Have you come to your senses after all? You have to work with me on this, or I won’t be able to manage.”

“Red stilettos, please come to the front”, she said and fetched the little flask with the label *Purple Moon* from the cabinet.

Suddenly she heard a knock on the door. It couldn’t be Uncle Clemens, but she did have an idea who was asking to be let in. She eagerly threw the door open. “Mrs Wu!”, she exclaimed, delighted.

“You’ve been away for so long this time. I think I’ll take a break now while you tell me all the news.”

The turtle sitting in front of her door nodded in agreement. “With pleasure, dear child. And I wouldn’t say no to a juicy lettuce leaf and a few sips of water either.” With astonishing agility, Mrs Wu slid across the doorstep and followed Lilly into the kitchen.

Florentine Fox

Florentine was sulking. She was sitting at her new desk in her new room and wrote her new address on the front of her school notebooks. *Florentine Fox, 10 Blackbird Lane*. Her fountain pen released a blot onto the cover of her maths book. Florentine put the pen down, opened one of the drawers and looked for a piece of blotting paper. But in vain. So she took a paper tissue and pressed it onto the blot. But that only smeared the ink all over the cover. Crap! She threw the notebook angrily into the corner and snapped the drawer shut.

The desk wasn’t really new, only new to Florentine. All the furniture in the room she lived in since moving to Great-Aunt Amanda’s house with her parents was probably twice as old as the good Great-Aunt herself. Although Florence was sleeping in her old bed and her toys occupied the room all around her, the rest of her stuff was

still stored in the shed. Florence thought that was really stupid. Great-Aunt Amanda, it seemed, still had to get used to the idea of emptying out the room for Florence.

In her old room, Florence even had a jungle wall paper, the envy of every child in her class. But here the walls were covered in faded violet flower pattern. Florentine had hung up a few animal pictures but she couldn't really plaster all four walls with posters!

The issue wasn't that Florentine didn't like Great-Aunt Amanda. She was the twin of Grandma Fox who had died three years earlier. And since then, Amanda always came to visit for Christmas. Last Christmas, she had baked many mega-delicious cookies with Florentine.

Two months later, however, the ad agency owned by Florentine's parents had gone bust. To her surprise, Great-Aunt Amanda had turned up again, although it wasn't even Christmas yet. Florentine's parents had retreated to the living room with Amanda, drinking many pots of tea, stuffing themselves with the rest of the Christmas cookies and endlessly blathering on. At bed time, they'd called in Florentine and announced that they would all move in with Great-Aunt Amanda because they could no longer make ends meet. "You like Great-Aunt Amanda's cute house, don't you? We'll make your room really nice", Rieke Fox comforted Florentine when she started to cry inconsolably, just out of sheer shock. "And I'm sure you'll manage at the new school. Look, Carolin is moving away soon, too. Then you can write to each other about

what it's like in your new schools." And then Rieke and Sebastian Fox laughed, embraced Great-Aunt Amanda, and shouted: "Amanda, you saved us! Come, Florentine, say thank you to Great-Aunt Amanda!"

But Florentine didn't feel like being nice. She ran into her room, slammed the door and punched her pillow until she fell asleep from exhaustion. Carolin and Florentine had been friends since nursery school. Carolin's father had just started to work for a big car company in the south. Her family had bought a house with a huge garden there and Carolin might even get her own dog.

Florentine had never expected that the same thing that happened to her friend would happen to her, too. With one awful difference. Mum and dad were out of work, they were all living with Great-Aunt Amanda, her furniture was still in the shed and Florentine was definitely not getting a dog although she had wanted one forever.

Florentine gave a deep sigh.

Carolin had moved away four weeks ago. And unlike Florentine, things seemed to be going very well for her. Florentine got up and pulled out the letter that Carolin had sent her a few days ago from under her pillow. She'd read it ten times already and now it was all crumpled up. She'd cried when she read the letter the first three times which meant that some of the words were completely smudged. But Florentine knew the text by heart anyway.

Hi sweetie!

I hope you survived your move. Here, everything's totally crazy! My new room is awesome and I'm allowed to furnish it any way I want. Your eyes are going to pop out of your head when you come to visit me. Dad's building a fence so that Rocky can run around by himself in the garden without escaping into the forest.

Rocky, you ask? Well, who could that be? Our newest family member of course.

We went to visit him and his dog mum yesterday because he's still nursing. I can't wait for him to finally move in with us. He looks so funny, like a pirate, because he has a black and white spot above his right eye.

I'm so lucky!

My first day at school last week was also ok. Even the boys are just about bearable because they've sussed out that dad is building race cars.

Pretty fab, right? I'm sitting next to Fiona who let me copy her math test although we don't even know each other that well yet. Really cool, isn't it?

How are you doing? I suppose your great-aunt is baking cookies and cakes all day and you're stuffing your face non-stop. Good for you! Mum can work here at the nursery school and I've signed Rocky and myself up for dog obedience class. I've got to finish now, Fiona is downstairs. We're going for a ride on our bikes.

xxx

Your Caro and Rocky (although you haven't met yet). PS: Please write back soon!

PPS: Have you asked your parents when you can come see me? Fiona would like to meet you too.

PPPS: Send me a picture of you, for her! Bye-bye for real now!

Florentine wiped her eyes because she was crying again. Carolin really was lucky. Or at least her letter sounded like it.

Florentine's first school day hadn't gone so well. The teacher just introduced her briefly and then dumped her next to Laura who was sitting by herself in the last row. Laura had very quickly made it clear to Florentine that she had no interest in her, drawing a border line on their shared desk with a permanent marker. In the break, not one child from her new class had talked to her and Florentine wasn't brave enough to approach anyone herself. A very sad and silent start to her new school. Florentine was hoping that the next few days would be better. She'd read on the notice board that her year was taking part in a football tournament and was already training for it. Florentine loved football and had always wanted to play in a football club. Maybe she could at least score a few points in PE with the boys, showing off her perfect dribbling skills. They had certainly impressed people at her old school.

She put Carolin's letter back underneath the pillow and rummaged around for her small polaroid.

Carolin had given it to her as a farewell present. She briefly considered going downstairs and taking a picture from the front garden. But she didn't want to run

across anyone else. So she just opened the two window panes, sat on the wide window sill and took a selfie. The camera whirred and the picture slid out of the slit. Florence stared at the trigger. That was always the most exciting moment, she thought, when the picture slowly became visible.

Little by little, details appeared in her selfie. The framing wasn't bad at all. The background looked much nicer than in reality, Florence felt. The house across the road, overgrown with bushes and vines, looked mysterious, almost like something out of a horror movie. Carolin would like that. The sun must have been reflected in one of the windows because Florentine discovered a flash of light there that almost looked like the flickering of a light bulb. If you looked more closely you could even imagine someone was spitting fire in there. Quite funny. Florentine was pleased. Exactly the right kind of picture for Carolin and her friend Fiona.

The only thing Fiona didn't like was her own face. She looked far too serious and she had bags under her eyes from crying so much, as if she'd spent the whole night reading. Her chin length hair needed a good cut or a treatment with mum's hair straighteners. Florentine really didn't like the brown curls that always popped out. Particularly that one cheeky strand, usually tamed with a hair clip, now coiling pertly across her forehead.

Lillys magische Schuhe, Band 1: Die geheime Werkstatt

Lilly's Magical Shoes (Vol. 1): The Secret Workshop

by Usch Luhn

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Florentine squeezed her eyes and looked more closely at the picture. What on earth was sitting on the doorstep in front of the garden gate of number 7? That couldn't possibly be a turtle, could it?