

## **Luna Wunderwald**

### **A Key in an Owl's Beak**

#### **1**

#### **A breakfast time visit from squirrels**

'Hoo hooo!'

Luna sat up with a start and blinked sleepily.

'Hoo hooo!'

She look around her in confusion. Where was she?

One window pane was standing open. Outside it was pitch dark.

'Luna? Is everything all right? I'm here. Go back to sleep for a little while. It's the middle of the night,' whispered her mother, drowsily.

Luna gave a sigh of relief and listened to the silence. Of course! She was in Summerwood, the forester's house, her new home. The next day her father would join them with the last of the removal boxes.

'Hoo hooooo!'

Suddenly Luna was quite sure:

Someone was calling her!

While her mother just turned over on to her other side, Luna jumped up from her mattress and ran to the window.

Outside on the tall fir tree, whose thick twigs were almost touching the walls of the old forester's house, sat a barn owl staring straight into Luna's eyes.

'Hello! Who are you then?' breathed Luna.

The owl tilted its head to one side a little and briefly closed its eyes. It almost looked as if it was winking at Luna. Then it spread its wings and flew away into the dark wood.

Luna snuggled down happily under the bedclothes again. She had the feeling she was exactly in the right place here in Summerwood, the forester's house. Just before she fell

asleep again she heard the most beautiful flute music coming from somewhere. But perhaps this was already part of the dream she began to have a little later:

*The barn owl flew deep into the wood. In a small clearing it landed on a big, moss-covered boulder. Shortly afterwards a fox trotted over. A little later a forest cat with bushy fur jumped up on to the stone. ‘So? Has she arrived?’ asked the fox. ‘Valentino, why must you always be so impatient?’ said the cat, and began to wash herself. The owl cleared its throat. ‘Yes, Luna’s here’ it croaked. ‘And it’s high time too. We need her help urgently!’*

The next morning Luna had a rude awakening when something hit her on the ear.

‘Ouch!’

A fir cone landed beside her head. Then another one.

Luna took refuge under the bedcover and carefully peeped out from underneath the edge. On the window sill sat a red squirrel, watching her movements with its beady eyes. Then it threw a third fir cone.

‘Stop that, you little rascal!’ Luna cried. She jumped out of bed and ran over to the squirrel. As she approached the creature hopped on to a wide fir twig and ran away. Luna leaned out of the window and discovered even more squirrels, hopping from branch to branch, racing up and down the tree trunk and nibbling greedily at the fir cones.

The owl which had woken her during the night was nowhere to be seen. Luna shook her head. Had the animals in her dream really spoken to one another? And where had the beautiful flute music been coming from?

On the spur of the moment Luna ran down the creaky wooden staircase and into the kitchen. She absolutely had to ask her mother something. ‘Mama, what did you tell me recently about the dreams you have on your first night in a new home?’

Daisy and Drago rushed up to Luna, barking and happily wagging their tails. After Luna had given them loads of cuddles she hugged her mother.

Mrs Murrelstein put a mysterious face on. ‘People say that whatever you dream on the first night after you move house comes true. What did you dream then?’

Luna was about to answer when suddenly three squirrels jumped in at the open kitchen window and snatched the slices of apple which Luna’s mother had put ready on a plate.

Mrs Murrelstein put her hands on her hips indignantly: ‘Hey! They were actually meant for our breakfast!’ She pointed to the bowls on the kitchen table. ‘We don’t have any milk unfortunately. But we can fetch some later from the farmer. Just mix some yoghurt in with your muesli today. Sadly there isn’t any fruit now either.’ Luna laughed and shook her head. ‘I’d prefer juice.’ She poured a little orange juice into her bowl and ate her muesli greedily. She couldn’t help thinking that the squirrels with their little theft had achieved exactly what they had wanted: Luna’s dream was to remain a secret.

‘When’s Papa coming?’ asked Luna quickly, to distract her mother from the dream. ‘This afternoon, I hope’ replied her mother. ‘He still has things to do in the forestry office and then he’ll set off straight away. I’ve got some phone calls to make now. Take the dogs out for a little look around. If you like, we’ll get milk together later.’

Luna gave an enthusiastic nod. She jumped up from the table, ran back to her parents’ bedroom where she had spent the night just this once and put her clothes on.

Then she clattered back downstairs. ‘Daisy, Drago! Off we go! Time for a run!’ she cried joyfully and opened the big door into the great outdoors.

## 2

### **Freckled Feet in the Rabbit Run**

Daisy and Drago trotted outside, ears flying. Every corner, no matter how small, was sniffed and thoroughly inspected. Beneath the tall fir tree sweet woodruff was in bloom. Thrilled, Daisy rushed into the flowers and began digging for mice. Drago was more interested in rabbit holes. Unfortunately there weren’t many of those right beside the house. However beside the tool shed he discovered a large kennel. This was where the old forester’s dog had lived. Proudly the dachshund pulled out a chewed football and an enormous, well-gnawed bone. Luna giggled. ‘Oh, it seems there are dinosaurs around in this wood. Forget the rabbits, Drago!’

Summerwood, the forester’s house, had been empty for six months because the old forester had moved to stay with his sister in the Swiss mountains. Until now Georg Murrelstein, Luna’s father, had worked in the forestry office in the town but had wanted a new post for a long time. When he was offered the chance to look after this magical forest, therefore, he had said yes immediately.

As soon as Luna arrived, she had taken a good look round the inside of the house. Downstairs were the living room, a large kitchen, the bathroom and a pantry. Here there were still jam jars and honey, and a large piece of ham hanging on a meat hook from the ceiling. A wooden staircase with worn treads and curved banisters led up to the first storey. Here was the bedroom which her parents had moved into. Next to it was an office with two desks. There was also a guestroom with a rocking chair and a tiny guest bathroom with a shower.

A smaller, very steep flight of stairs led up to the attic which had been made into an enormous room. This was to be Luna’s domain. Through the new skylight, which had no

glass in it yet, you could look straight up at the sky. At the moment it had plastic sheeting stuck over it so that rain didn't come in if the weather was bad.

Georg Murmelstein planned to bring shelves and make a wardrobe to fit under the sloping roof. Luna was also going to get a new bed but she was in no hurry. A mattress on the floor was just fine by her.

Luna ran round behind the house. That was where the vegetable garden was. It was completely neglected. Peas and beans had run wild. In between them grew mauve weeds and white stinging nettles. The red gooseberries were already ripe and some of the fruit had split open. Luna tried one, being careful not to prick herself on the spines. Yummy! There was a rustling in the bushes. Daisy growled and rushed forward, barking.

'Out, Daisy!' Mrs Murmelstein had followed Luna into the garden and called the dachshund back. 'There are two wrens' nests in the bushes. The young haven't hatched yet,' she said, swinging a milk can. 'Shall we go? It's not far, we can walk.' Luna nodded.

Mrs Murmelstein took the dog leads with her but to begin with let the dogs walk to heel. 'Papa and I have been to the Schmidts' once before' she told Daisy. 'Nice people. The farm belongs to Mrs Schmidt and her husband works as an accountant in the town. The milk is really tasty!'

They walked along a narrow woodland path. There were metre-high brambles growing on both sides. Behind them stood dense firs and spruces.

'It's really dark,' said Luna. 'Hardly any sun gets in.' And indeed even the dachshunds stayed beside them, apparently having no desire to rummage in the undergrowth.

'Papa will have to look carefully at this with the lumberjacks,' her mother replied. 'Nothing has been done here for a long time. It looks as if everything is growing higgledy-piggledy, all over the place.'

Luna nodded. 'Like in the fairy tale. It's all completely overgrown. You can't get through anywhere. Do you think any creatures live in this wood?' She peered through the bushes. There was a rustling sound and Luna pictured something with a red bushy tail scurrying past, but already it was quiet again.

Luna got goose pimples. All of a sudden the dark wood felt sinister. 'When will we be there?' Fortunately a moment later she saw the farm.

The path led through a gate which opened easily straight into a meadow with little calves.

'They're so sweet!' Luna was off. 'Look, Mama, they let you stroke them!'

When she continued on her way, the calves followed her inquisitively.

On a separate piece of land pigs were wallowing in an enormous pool of water. Quacking ducks waddled around them. In the garden, hens were pecking in the ground and a rooster crowed cock-a-doodle-doo as the farm cat dozed on top of the kennel.

Luna was relieved to find that here everything was friendly, warm and sunny.

In the farmhouse there was a smell of freshly baked cakes. Mrs Schmidt greeted Mrs Murrelstein and Luna warmly. 'I'll just make us some nice coffee first. Cocoa for you, Luna?'

Luna nodded eagerly.

'Why don't you go over to the rabbits? Jonas is in the middle of feeding them. I think you're the same age. I'll call you when the cocoa's ready. Diagonally across the yard, past the hen coop.'

Rabbits! Luna had wanted a rabbit of her own ever since nursery school. But who was Jonas? Hopefully he wasn't as silly as the boys in her old class.

At the school Luna had attended until now the only thing she had really enjoyed was her favourite subject, sports. She could climb the ropes all the way up to the ceiling like a little monkey and turn cartwheels right across the gym.

But since her best friend had moved to a different town during the previous school year, Luna had often felt lonely at school.

So she was not sad at all that she would be going into a new class after the summer holidays. Perhaps this Jonas was really nice. Perhaps they would even be in the same class. Luna slowly walked across the farmyard.

At first all she saw was Jonas's dirty feet. The rest of him was hidden in the big rabbit enclosure. The wooden house where the animals slept had toppled over and he was trying to set it upright again. It just wasn't working though. The rabbits were watching him peacefully, and nibbling cabbage leaves.

'Hello! Can I help you?' called Luna. Jonas gave a start and bumped his head on the netting. With difficulty, he crawled out of the pen.

'I'm sorry,' said Luna. 'I really didn't mean to give you a fright.' She held out her hand. 'I'm Luna and yesterday I moved into the forester's house. What are you doing?' Luna thought Jonas looked fun. His face was covered in freckles and he had bright blue eyes. Loads of straw and seeds had got caught in his brown hair.

'The house – probably the plump black one at the back tipped it over. But I can't get it the right way up again.'

Luna nodded. 'Shall I?' Without waiting for him to answer she wriggled into the enclosure. The rabbits were interested, hopping up to her and some of them even rubbed their little noses against her arms.

In next to no time Luna succeeded in moving the wooden house into place again. 'Is that better?' she asked, crawling back out of the enclosure.

Jonas was impressed. 'Perfect!' he said, admiringly.

'Usually they all scatter with fright when someone new comes so close to them. It looks as if they've taken to you straight away.' He grinned. 'Would you like to hold the babies?' He pointed to a smaller pen.

Luna beamed. 'I'd love to!'

Jonas carefully placed a fluffy bundle in her hand.

'Oh, it's so sweet!'

Luna laid her cheek against the warm fur. The rabbit twitched its nose excitedly. Luna laughed. 'Aaah, you're tickling me.' She put the baby back in the pen and looked around. 'Are they all yours? There's so many.'

Jonas nodded. 'They are now. They really belong to my grandpa. He sells them, you know, to people who want to eat roast rabbit. Luckily he's promised me he's giving that up, because I think it's mega stupid. But only if I look after them and take over cleaning out the pen and all that stuff.'

Luna nodded eagerly. 'I don't eat rabbits either. I like them far too much for that.'

'You can have one if you'd like,' said Jonas. Luna beamed at him. 'Really? That's so nice of you. I'll have to ask first though. We've got two dachshunds and Drago goes absolutely bananas when he smells rabbit.'

There was a buzzing noise behind them. Luna turned round. An elderly man in an electric wheelchair came up to them. 'So, young lady? Choose yourself a pretty rabbit. We have so many that we really ought to eat them. But my dear grandson is dead against it. He's in love with the rabbits!' Jonas looked embarrassed. 'Rubbish, Grandpa!'

'Thank you very much,' said Luna. 'But unfortunately one of our dachshunds always chases rabbits.' Grandpa Schmidt clapped his hands in delight. 'That's how it should be. Hunting dogs hunt rabbits. They don't cuddle them.'

Just then Frau Schmidt stuck her head out of the kitchen window. 'Coffee, cocoa, cake!' Jonas's grandpa skilfully turned his wheelchair round. 'Go, go, feeding time for the wild animals!' He led the way.

'Bye bye, rabbits. See you soon,' Luna whispered longingly and quickly stroked the little ones again. Then she set off running after Grandpa Schmidt's wheelchair.

### Welcomed with a Red Riding Hood Basket

Luna carried the milk can on the walk home because her mother was carrying the heavy rucksack full of vegetables the Schmidts had given them from their garden.

‘They’re so much fun, that farmer’s family and their animals,’ said Luna. ‘And the Grandpa is really funny. He zooms around in his wheelchair as if it were a racing car. Jonas says he can still walk, but it’s difficult for him.’ She gave a sigh. ‘I would really reeeeeeally like a rabbit. Preferably the white angora one. It was so trusting and looked at me in such a particular way somehow.’

Frau Murmelstein smiled. ‘We have to settle into the forester’s house ourselves first. The dogs too, of course. After that, we’ll see.’ She had the dachshunds on their leads

There was thunder in the distance. Luna frowned and looked upwards. She couldn’t bear storms. The clouds were scudding across the sky and Luna hoped that the storm would pass them by.

Daisy could obviously smell mice again, and began frantically turning up moss.

‘What do you bet one of Daisy’s ancestors was a mole? She just loves digging. Out you come, my sweet, come to heel!’

The girl dachshund gave a rather cross growl but then carried on walking.

Luna giggled. ‘Sometimes I think the dachshunds can understand me. Look, Daisy’s making a really offended face!’

Mrs Murmelstein laughed. ‘Mmm, I’m not sure a dog can be offended, but they can understand us. Your father taught them to do that.’

Luna shook her head. ‘No, not like ‘down’ or ‘out’ or ‘basket.’ I mean, everything I say. Even that Daisy had a mole for an ancestor.’

Her mother laughed again. ‘It’s lucky they can’t do that. Otherwise we’d have to be very careful what we say when they’re about.’

Luna thought quietly to herself. She had often had the feeling that animals could understand exactly what she was saying. And maybe last night’s dream had some significance. It was so stupid that she had no one she could talk to about it! She decided to ask the squirrels if she could tell Jonas about it. It was worth a try.

Although it was only early afternoon, it was already getting dark in the wood. The wind was rising and the tops of the tall trees were rustling.

‘I hope I’ll be in the same class as Jonas,’ Luna said to her mother. ‘He’s nice.’ Frau Murrelstein nodded. ‘Yes he is.’ Then she pointed up ahead. ‘Look, you can already see the forester’s house chimney!’

Luna gave a shriek. ‘Papa! Papa’s here!’ She put the milk can on the ground and ran off. The forester’s green Landrover was indeed parked behind the fir trees. Now the dachshunds began barking at the tops of their voices as well. Mrs Murrelstein let them off the lead and so ten legs raced each other towards Georg Murrelstein, who was just coming out of the house. Luna got there first and leapt happily into her father’s arms.

The dogs jumped up at their master, making little whining sounds of delight.

‘Hello, my little wood maiden,’ beamed Mr Murrelstein, hugging Luna close.

The dachshunds were still barking.

‘Drago, Daisy, down!’ the forester ordered. ‘Down, immediately!’

The well-trained dogs made a big effort and looked expectantly at Mr Murrelstein. ‘Woof,’ breathed Drago softly. Setting Luna down on her feet, the forester scratched the dachshunds behind the ears.

‘It’s just one big cuddle here!’ called Sophia Murrelstein. She put the milk can and rucksack on the bench outside the house and greeted her husband with a kiss. ‘That was quick,’ she said happily.

Mr Murrelstein nodded. ‘I’ve already unloaded everything. A glass of milk and something to eat would be great.’

Shortly afterwards the three Murrelsteins were sitting round the kitchen table as cosily as if they had been living in the forester’s house for ages. Luna was nibbling one of Mrs Schmidt’s carrots while her father drank a big gulp of the fresh milk with a bite of his cheese roll. ‘Have you looked round the house already?’ he asked her eagerly. ‘How do you like your room?’

Luna beamed. ‘It’s super! Much bigger than my old one. Can I sleep up there tonight?’

Mrs Murrelstein hesitated. ‘But the window’s not in yet and your bed hasn’t been delivered and we still have to put the lights in.’

Luna put on her best pleading look. ‘That doesn’t matter....Please, please, please. Papa, we can take my mattress upstairs and I have that great head torch Aunt Doris gave me for evening hikes.’

Mr and Mrs Murrelstein exchanged looks. ‘All right,’ Luna’s father nodded. ‘It’s a bit like camping. It is the holidays, after all.’

‘Yippee!’ cried Luna. She threw what was left of her carrot into the air and tried to catch it in her mouth.

The piece accidentally landed on the floor. Drago raced over, snatched it and swallowed it in one go. ‘Wow! Drago’s turned vegetarian like Papa!’ Luna giggled. She offered Drago a radish. ‘Here, try this, little one.’ Drago went off into the dogs’ corner, sniffing and wagging his tail

‘Can we take the mattress up there right away?’ wheedled Luna. ‘I need to make myself nice and snug before it gets completely dark.’ She looked anxiously out of the window. By now thick grey clouds had gathered overhead.

Mr Murrelstein emptied his glass of milk and stood up. Just then there came a knock and the door was pushed open cautiously.

‘Hello! Anybody there?’ called a very high voice. It sounded almost like a bird chirping. A small woman appeared in the kitchen. She was elderly, and her face had quite a few wrinkles. Her short cropped hair somehow suited her voice, as it made Luna think of the soft down on a bird. The woman was wearing bright yellow trousers and a waistcoat with lots of pockets. She gave them a friendly smile. ‘I’m Rosie Reich, the old forester’s housekeeper. I’d like to introduce myself and hand over a little something to greet you.’ She conjured up a Little Red Riding Hood basket from outside, covered with a red and white tea towel. When she pulled the tea towel off, a fragrant Bundt cake, sweet woodruff syrup and a little bottle of elderberry lemonade with a real cork in it were revealed.

‘That’s very kind!’ cried Luna’s mother.

They shook hands with Mrs Reich in turn. ‘We’re the Murrelsteins - Georg, Sophia and our daughter Luna. Do sit down,’ the forester said. ‘Would you like a glass of milk or would you prefer coffee?’

Rosie Reich put her head on one side, like a sparrow which has just landed on a window sill. ‘Schmidt milk?’ she asked, pointing to the milk can. ‘Yes please.’

The dachshunds came over and snuffled cautiously at Mrs Reich’s walking boots. ‘Who are you then?’ she trilled. ‘What handsome boys. I have something for you as well.’ She reached into a waistcoat pocket, pulled out some dog treats and threw them into the air.

Skilfully the dachshunds caught the treats and chewed them happily.

‘This is Daisy and Drago. One girl and one boy,’ Luna corrected her, eyeing the Bundt cake greedily.

‘Oh I’m sorry,’ cried Mrs Reich in delight. She took a big gulp of milk and then licked the milky moustache from her top lip. ‘Delicious!’ Then she put the glass down on the table and fixed Luna’s parents with her beady eyes. ‘I’m sure you could do with a little assistance until you’ve settled in. I’ll be happy to help at any time.’

Mr Murmelstein looked a little embarrassed. ‘That’s enormously kind of you, Mrs Reich. Unfortunately, though, we can’t afford that at the moment, even if I’m already envying my colleague, the old forester, over you. Our move cost more than we expected.’

Rosie Reich cooed like a turtle dove. ‘Dear Mr Murmelstein, don’t worry. I’m not looking for a new job. I have a small inheritance and get by easily. I’d gladly help you out as a neighbour, if that’s all right. I worked here in the forester’s house for twenty years and know every inch of it. I also know what’s what in the wood.’

Mrs Murmelstein beamed. ‘Oh how kind. We’re very happy to accept that offer. I’m just beginning to find my way around. Everything’s still very new and strange.’

Rosie Reich nodded vehemently. ‘I can well imagine that. You can count on me.’ She looked inquisitively at Luna. ‘And you’re going in the attic? How lovely. You’ll be able to count the stars as you fall asleep.’

That was exactly what Luna planned to do that night. ‘Papa’s made the window bigger,’ she answered. ‘Now you can see up into the sky and a long way into the wood.’

Rosie Reich shrieked with delight. ‘Splendid! Then you won’t miss anything. I hope you’ll be able to sleep – things go on in the wood at night. It’s high time someone put things in order. Have you already discovered the bat-tree with the tiny little dwarf noses?’

Luna shook her head. ‘Tonight will be my first time sleeping up there. Last night I was in with Mama.’

Rosie Reich laughed. ‘Well, have fun in your new room!’

Mr Murmelstein looked worried. ‘What do you mean, ‘put things in order’? I’ve already noticed that the wood has been left to itself for too long. It can’t have been easy to find someone to succeed the old forester.’

Rosie Reich shrugged her shoulders. ‘I can’t explain it. It’s just a feeling. There are some around who are damaging the wood. People and animals.’ As she spoke she looked Luna straight in the eye.

Nothing more could be got out of Rosie Reich. She drank a second glass of milk and said goodbye, promising to look in past again very soon.