

CHAPTER 3

The Fourth Challenge

Learning that Things Aren't Always What They Seem

Cosmos Tells the Tale of the Wild Boars, the Little Poodle and the Lettuce Patch

Making Friends with an Uppity Poodle

After that crazy night of the Pizza Party, nothing much happened that was unusual – animal-wise I mean. I think the animals were sort of starting to trust us again and to tell the truth. It took us a long time to trust them again.

My sister and I spent the rest of our summer holiday being sort of normal. Totally fun. I was so so glad there weren't any new lessons from Karma or Madame Aligot. It meant we did stuff like regular kids – swimming in the pond, collecting flowers for Mum and herbs for Madame Aligot, going to loads and loads of markets, riding our bikes, cooking heaps of weird recipes from the journal, eating picnic lunches by the river, playing games with Karma, shooting baskets into the net Dad had set up for us, going on hikes with Mum and Dad to look for fossils, making campfires at night, practising mind's-eye listening, doing lots of reading and drawing and making sure we had time to sit around doing nothing at all.

We did talk about the animals, though. I mean who could help it? Dad kept working on *The Great Book*. But whatever we were doing, it was weird because we could just begin to hear little bits of animal conversations. That was amazing! I figured out that the animals were really a lot like humans. They laughed and told jokes and got upset and were jealous and got angry and then got nice to each other again. They had heaps of different moods.

They were not happy that our family could understand them and some of them tried to hide away when they had important things to say to each other so we wouldn't

hear. I couldn't really blame them. If someone tried to listen in on everything I said to Verbena, I wouldn't like it very much either.

The bottom line was that they still didn't trust us 100%. Some of the animals liked us, though. I know the mice, and the frogs did, and of course Toad did. And the badgers. And I really think Owl was happy with the chocolate we had given him, so that was good too. But Fox seemed to be up to his nasty tricks because I was sure that he was telling different animals not to ever be friends with us. That made me mad. I didn't realise at the time, just how dangerous he was. But ever since that night in the snow when that weird thing happened and I was able to almost catch him, I noticed that he had kept away from us. Like he was afraid of me or something. I wonder what really happened that night. Verbena says I was on fire. Well, not really. Just acting incredibly weird she insisted. Like I was a cat or something. OK. Double weird since it's all really a blur in my mind.

Karma told me my mind's eye power was getting stronger. Maybe she was right. I think it was that summer I knew deep down that I have the potential to be magic. But I know it doesn't just happen like you read about in books. *Boom. Pow. Shazam.* It is a super slow thing and you have to earn it. I know I will. Earn it I mean.

I can't wait to be magic and do things the animals do and read minds and fly around and make things happen and change the way the world is. But my sister – that is another story. She is too busy trying to impress everyone to really feel things the way I do. But she does have the crystal ball in her head so maybe she'll be magic as well. Only not as much as me.

Anyway, before I could say 'wait-a-minute,' those summer days were over and autumn blew in. The butterflies disappeared and the yellow-green leaves on the ancient trees danced sideways in the wind, like thousands of miniature pennants.

We had started school again and had plenty of homework. Our French was still iffy, and that made it even harder. Still, on this one particular Sunday we were working on our *other* homework for Madame Aligot. We were hunting for mushrooms that wouldn't poison us and wild salad greens.

It was a perfect autumn football day. I was trying out for the local team later on in the week. I wished I was already on the team, because the air that morning was as crisp as the first bite of a good apple and it would have been a great day to play.

Our garden was no longer blooming, and the tall summer flowers Mum had planted in April had dried up and toppled. The garden was all soft and wet with last

night's rain and covered with a brown carpet of soggy leaves. The September sun was blasting out the last of its heat before winter crept over the hill.

Most of the animals were sensibly settling down to a long, cosy sleep. Even the rackety crickets had quieted down, and were tucked away in some tree somewhere. The flies and wasps had given up for the year and not a sound was to be heard except for Tutu, who barked even when there wasn't anything to bark about.

Tutu is the uppity miniature black poodle owned by Monsieur and Madame Truffle. They have lived at Perdiguier for a long time and Madame Truffle was even born here. I thought that was cool, growing up and then getting old in the same place where you born. I figured that meant she had seen the same tree every day for almost 100 years. It must have been a sapling when she first saw it. I guess she had seen the same mountains as well and lots of things and that they had all seen her, too! Because here in Perdiguier, things really do see you! And not just animals.

We first met Tutu the day after we arrived, but for some reason she always kept her distance from us.

We came to learn that Tutu had definite opinions about everything and never hesitated to express what she thought. She was downright impolite. For example, if we were cooking a French dinner from a recipe in the ancient family journal, Tutu would pop her nose in the kitchen door, give a little uninvited yip, turn around in a huff and defiantly relieve herself at the doorway when she knew *everyone* was watching before trotting off home, wagging her tail and displaying a superior attitude. This really annoyed my mother and Verbena.

I knew why, though, and explained Tutu's viewpoint.

"We have two strikes against us," I said. "One thing is that we aren't really French and Tutu doesn't think we have any right to even try to cook French dishes. Second, she doesn't like it that our whole family can understand her private conversations."

They had to agree with me.

One day Tutu spelled it out even more plainly for Verbena and me as we were taking the smelly kitchen trash bags out to the big bin at the front of the house. Like all of the other animals, Tutu refused to acknowledge us – ever.

Ignoring us, she trots over and starts to talk about us with the big green gecko named Quasimodo, who lives in that disgusting bin. I had named him that because he reminded me of the funny looking character who secretly lived in this huge Paris

cathedral in the book I had read called *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

I couldn't believe that she could be that rude. I mean, we were standing right there, right next to her practically.

"I'm only saying this, Gecko," yips Tutu. "The humans will spell disaster for us here. Fox said that once they can hear us, they will turn against us like they did before and Perdiguier will lose its magic and we'll lose everything. *They'll probably kill us all!* And Fox says they're planning to betray us again and get rid of us later. So in my opinion and Fox's, the humans should be run off so we can go back to you-know-when.

"Well, Tutu – doncha never believe everyting dat Fox tells ya. Youse jest remember, Tutu tootsie, Fox is on da side of Fox – if ya gets my meaning."

"I don't have a clue what you're talking about, Gecko."

"What I means, Babe, an' it's Quasimodo to you, is jest dis – Fox wants one ting..." Quasimodo nods to Tutu to come closer to the bin and whispers: "He wants ta be da *main animal...da king!*"

Tutu is confused. She doesn't have a clue what Quasimodo is talking about. No one is going to kill her.

"Man-o-man! Don't be such a dumb naïve dog," exclaims Quasimodo as he turns away and tucks into a plastic tub of green mouldy yogurt. "Doncha get it? Fox wants us all ta help him kick out dem humans so den he can kick out Owl. Because he wants ta be da king. So he's maken us all scared of da humans cause da humans and Owl is gonna get us back to da time when tings was great and den Owl will be da king foreber and Fox won't get no chance to be king. Doncha hab da picture yet?"

And with that, Quasimodo leans back on the top of the can and makes a point of distinctly ignoring Tutu. He has obviously decided that meddlesome little poodles are not worthy of his time,

"Get lost, Toots, I'm busy here."

Quasimodo turns his attention to the five-day-old spaghetti, lifts it to his mouth with his long, prehensile tail (as my father calls it) and devours it greedily, strand by long, sticky, smelly strand.

Tutu turns away, mortified, and with her tail tucked between her legs heads back home to the Truffles as fast as she can. She is shocked. It doesn't make sense. It can't be true. Fox could never do anything like that. She can't bear the idea of *falling off the perch*. (A phrase she had heard from Madame Hoopoe) Owl has always been

stopped gossiping about our family.

The truth was that Tutu was bored most of the time. She liked to complain to anyone who would listen about how she hated being a housedog. The other animals held her in low regard and thought she was a stuck-up wimp of a dog.

That hurt her feelings plenty.

It was also a source of embarrassment having everyone know that she slept on a purple velvet pillow right next to Madame Truffle.

The Truffles didn't pay too much attention to Tutu. Madame had other things to do than amuse a dog and Monsieur Truffle had always been too busy to bother with dogs anyway, being out in the fields every day of his life. He grew grapes and had spent thousands and thousands of hours digging the rocky land with a horse and old metal plough, although these days he drove a modern tractor with an engine. He planted the crooked little baby vines one at a time, keeping out the weeds, cutting the grapes by hand just when they were perfectly ripe, bringing them up to his barn in a cart, crushing them in an ancient round press, and then storing the juice in big wooden vats until it fermented and became wine. I didn't like the smell at all.

Monsieur Truffle was 83 years old. He had soft blue eyes, a halo of white hair, and tiny lines all over his face, which Mum said mapped out a life time of seasons.

Like I said, Madame had been born in Perdiguier and had never slept anywhere else in her life – except for her three night honeymoon in Marseille. She told me all about it one day when I was helping her pull out weeds in her vegetable garden. She said that the wedding celebration, which still qualified for local gossip, had taken place in our big barn sixty years before. It was secret because it was during World War II, that terrible time in history when France was occupied by the enemy. No one wanted to attract the notice of the soldiers who were stationed at the bottom of the hill.

Madame Aligot had told Verbena and me that she had gone to the Truffles' wedding with her family. On the afternoon of the great event guests had brought precious food that they had been hoarding for months out of the sight of the soldiers.

People thought up ingenious methods to bring the food, Madame Aligot reminisced.

“Ah, *mes amis*, humans were so clever back then. And of course there was very little to eat during the great war. Families were poorer than poor and lucky to even have wooden shoes to wear and chestnuts to eat. So you can understand how

special this food was. One woman wrapped the butter she had secretly made in pieces of cloth and squeezed them into the handlebars of her husband's bicycle. A grandmother, who raised a cute little skinny goat named Biscuit, made goat cheese called *pelardon* from her milk and stashed the little flat circles under her straw hat.

Olive oil was more valuable than gold and people carried it, along with their weak, sour wine, hidden in hay carts. Several of the men even had their wives stitch some highly sought after sausages into their jacket linings. One of them had traded with someone in the mountains –an ancient brass candlestick for a string of sausages.

The children brought the little green olives called *picholines* hidden inside knitted dolls and toys. Which is of course what I did.”

It was really strange because I couldn't imagine Madame as a little girl. I thought it was cool to picture the adults I knew as children. I guess it sort of made me think of them in a different way. But somehow I couldn't get my head around imagining Madame Aligot that way. But I guess she had to have been a child at some time. I didn't realize then just how long ago that was.

Madame Truffle still liked to talk about the wedding and about the changes in Perdiguier during their lifetime. “*Mon Dieu,*” she would say, “now we have running water and electricity and telephones and tractors with motors. We are rich!” Electricity and running water hadn't come to Perdiguier till 1975.

I thought it was really good to know these things about our neighbours because I really liked the Truffles a lot and M. Truffle let me ride on his tractor whenever I asked.

A Mess of a Game – A Mess of a Garden

That Sunday everything stopped promptly for lunch at 12 o'clock, like it does every day in France. We were about to sit down for a nice meal with the Truffles and Madame Aligot. Verbena had thought it would be good to start out with a big bowl of Salade Niçoise – Recipe No. 4,035 – made with Mum's prize garden lettuces plus the *pissee-en-lits*, which is the weird name for dandelion greens. Madame Aligot had taught my sister and me how to collect them. That morning Dad and I had made a *Crème Caramel* for dessert– Recipe No. 901.

Mum was sure that eight lettuces that would do nicely for the big salad, and I offer to go pick them in the *run-out-of-steam* vegetable garden. But just as my sister and Mum turn to start slicing the prickly green cucumbers, washing the dirt off the wild salad greens and boiling the fresh eggs from Madame Aligot's hen house, we all hear a rumble – no, a roar – no, a cacophony of snorting, squealing sounds.

I am nearly at the vegetable garden and rush over to see what is happening, which is when I see them. They are making no effort to be discreet. I rush back all out of breath and start pointing wildly towards the lettuce patch. No one has ever seen me lost for the right word before and everybody runs over to see what in the world is going on.

Tutu barks about a thousand non-stop barks. There – running around in the muddy garden earth – are eight wild and crazy wild boars, the famous *sangliers*. There are six dark-brown hairy ones with tiny pointed ears and huge, solid-looking muddy bodies and two smaller striped, roly-poly ones. One of the larger boars is, for some odd reason, wearing an orange baseball cap.

We are amazed. Everyone knows boars live around Perdiguier, but humans rarely catch sight of one – let alone eight! The hunters would have gone crazy had they known.

Madame Aligot is as surprised as we are, since the boars never show themselves to our species if they can possibly help it. “Oh, *mes amis*,” she exclaims, “such an honour that they have come *in broad daylight* to your little garden.”

Well, Mum doesn't think it is an honour at all, because these audacious creatures (as my father calls them) are tossing her lettuces – her lunch time lettuces – up and down on their long snouts, passing them to each other, catching them on their sharp tusks, shaking them as hard as they can and then running up and down the garden like bucking broncos in an unbelievable madcap frenzy.

But it's not just a frenzy! It's a game, and I know exactly what is going on.

“It's a football match! An honest-to-goodness football match! The boars are playing *le foot* in our garden!”

“Over here! No here!” “Throw that thing, stupid,” they roar away in their most boorish rude voices as they fire super mean insults at each other.

“Catch, you idiot!” “You catch, moron!” “It's mine, nincompoop!” “No, smelly birdbrain, mine!” “Give that back, nitwit!” “Not on your life, meatball!” “Hey! Stop eating the balls, fatso!”

They call even more atrocious things to each other as they hoof their way over every inch of the soggy earth, only stopping to kick each other in the shins or trip each other or bite the ears of anyone close.

Verbena is less than enthusiastic. “I’m sorry, Cosmos, but what kind of football is this? Where are their team colours? Who is the goalie? What about the rules? You can’t play football without rules!”

Frankly, I agree with my sister for once and shout, “Don’t you hooligans realise that you’re only supposed to use one ball? A regulation ball of a particular size and nicely stitched? You can’t play football with *eight balls*, and you absolutely can’t play football with Mum’s lettuces. Put those down immediately!”

Verbena emphatically agrees with me as well.

The boars pay no attention to either of us. They would never have answered a human, anyway, even if I’d offered them a thousand delicious earthworms to eat. It just wasn’t done.

Mum is upset. She watches helplessly as her beautiful, shiny, lettuces are transformed into bedraggled, dirty, green missiles flying endlessly back and forth in the air.

That isn’t all, though, for *then* the boars deliberately fall down, roll around in oozy mud, and howl with glee as each covers itself and the others with wet, squelchy, dirt – something many adults consider disgusting.

Every so often they stop, as the boar referee, who was the one wearing the little orange baseball cap (which he must have picked up after some hunter had had dropped it), calls ‘*time-out*’ with the most chilling, indescribable sound ever. At that, every boar stands to attention and, launching into a chorus of raucous boar voices, sing a raspy, throaty, grinding, off-pitch, and out-of-key team song – obviously the boar anthem.

WE ARE MIGHTY

WE ARE BOARS

WE ONLY GO ON ALL FURRY FOURS

WE LOVE TO RANT, WE LOVE TO RAVE

WE LOVE TO NEVER EVER BEHAVE

**WE LOVE TO BE WILD
WE LOVE TO BE FREE
AND THE ONLY THING
WE EVER, EVER CALL
IS “OUI! EVERYONE,
LET’S PLAY ...
... FOOTBALL!”**

**HIP HIP FOR THE KINGS!
HIP HIP FOR *BULLIES!*
HIP HIP FOR US!**

With that, they jump on each other’s backs, whoop and holler, call each other some more horrible names, then start all over again.

It goes on and on. Dad says that he hopes their game, if you could call it that – there definitely are *no* rules whatsoever – will stay behind the old iron fence, which is the only thing that separates the uproarious brutish boars and us humans.

Everyone should have left, but we all feel weirdly rooted to the spot. Even Mum and Dad admit it is thrilling. I’ve never seen anything like it, and I play football every day after school.

Karma confesses this match is a shocker. She’s never witnessed a boar football game before.

Tutu and M. and Mme Truffle are totally surprised. Monsieur even comments that the boars have *never* shown themselves so close to his house in all of his 83 years. They have certainly *never* come to *his* vegetable garden. Madame whispers that it is just as well, since he would have taken out his shotgun and that would have been that.

Madame is partial to all living things and doesn’t like to think about guns, hunting, or how she gets the ingredients for her famous boar stew.

Of course I know from the book that the Truffles, who have been in Perdiguier far, far longer than our family, will forget everything about this boar game as soon as they walk back through their front door. Still, how does Owl have the power to make

the Truffles forget everything to do with talking animals today? Does he brew up some forgetting potion like the kind Madame Aligot makes? Or is there some other power that we knew nothing about. If that is true, I wonder if we will ever find out what that secret power is. And if we do find out, could I have it, too? But like I said, I am sure I already have some of it. I KNOW I do! Still, I have to forget about all of that because there are no clear answers right now parachuting into my brain.

Then Tutu starts acting really weird. She can't resist the match and keeps creeping closer and closer to the old fence, like a commando dog. She loves playing any kind of ball game and goes around the Truffles' house with an old tennis ball in her mouth, hoping that someone plays with her. But no one bothers with her except me.

Naturally, she loves football. She's watched loads of games on television over the years sitting on M. Truffle's lap in the evenings. She even knows the names of the great human stars— Ronaldinho, Beckham, Rooney, Maradona, Zidane, and on and on. She loves the players and the game; she just loves *le foot*! And even though she thinks boars are over-sized, overcharged, and overrated, she is nonetheless intrigued.

She is also scared to death of wild boars. Well, who isn't? Anything that has the word *wild* as part of its name is worth worrying about. Boars have a reputation for being fierce and dangerous creatures. The truth is that nobody in their right mind wants to get within a mile of a wild boar, especially a pint-sized poodle.

Big Bad Bullies, How Everyone Loves to Gossip, Strange Friendships

By now Tutu is deliriously excited at the wonderful spectacle. *And* since she loves mud, *and* since she loves football —she can't help herself. She races over to the rusted iron garden gate, pushes until it creaks open, and, charging into the lettuce patch, barks, howls, yips, and yowls, insisting — no, *demanding* to be let into the game.

“Take me boys,” she yips. “I want to play, too. Can I be on someone's team? I can catch. I can run. I'm a good passer. I can bend it like Beckham! I can snort!” (That's her little joke; she can't really snort.) “I can play lettuce football!”

With that, and to emphasise her enthusiasm and prowess, she turns around and

around in circles so fast that she slides deeper and deeper into the mud until she is totally covered in shlrupy, oozing, leaf-covered slop from the tip of her nose to the puffy end of her tail.

How ridiculous and upsetting! The poochette is in considerable danger and she doesn't even know it! Madame Truffle is, of course, weeping with worry.

All action stops and the big bad Boars freeze in their places. Silence hangs over the field of ruffled greens like a threatening cloud. No one moves a muscle. Tutu is too scared to bark. We humans stand behind the fence transfixed, frightened for the poor dog.

Then the oldest, most enormous, most shaggy, dirty, matted boar leader starts to laugh. Others join in. The air is thick with ridicule. Tutu gazes at the snarling, hostile faces and 16 mean-looking, squinty eyes, unsure of herself and shaken, but not running away. She stares back at the boars, but no one gives her the time of day. They make a show of trying to frighten that little dog.

The head honcho Boar rears up on his enormous hind legs,

“Buzz off, pip-squeak! This is our patch. You're just a common, everyday, run-of-the-mill dog – spelled D-G-O. And you don't even live outside in the wild like everyone else does! *And* you wear a stupid, sissy-looking yellow coat! Just remember Toots, we're the bosses here! We are the Boars – spelled B-R-O-A-S. Got it?”

The two baby boars bare their baby teeth, stomp the ground with their baby hooves, and, embarrassingly for Tutu, shout in squeaky baby voices,

“Yeah, little House-Doggie, got it? We're the kings of the countryside! This is reserved for us! And we don't wear no stupid coats! We're the kings! We're the kings! Spelled K-N-G-I-S! Ain't that right Mama?”

The little boar's mother is bursting with pride about how quickly the cubs are growing up and even learning to spell. She nods her massive head towards the babies as though to congratulate them for their admirable and true boar-like behaviour.

“No Darlings, it's K-G-N-I-S,” she calls to her offspring.

She bellows at Tutu. “Look here – just get off the field! This isn't a game for wimps or sissy, dressed-up housedogs!”

Little Tutu refuses to budge, even though her feelings have been hurt. She isn't a wimp, and there is nothing wrong with her pretty coat.

The oldest Boar adds, in a final magnificent booming bass voice: “Clear off! Get lost! Vamoose! Adios! Au Revoir! Hasta La Vista! Arrivederci! Or you'll be

sorry, little housedog. Very, very sorry. Sorry you was ever born spelled O-R-N-B-!"

"Really sorry," echo the little boars, "R-O-Y-R-S! Right this time Mama?"

The old Boar snarls, his yellow, pointy teeth gleaming in the afternoon sun. It is the largest, scariest, most threatening snarl Tutu has ever experienced and all eight of the boars snarl their own particular snarls again and again until I think they might either lose their voices or run out of snarls.

"That is terrible behaviour," barks Karma. "You're all big bullies!"

"Yep. Sure are, Karma," the oldest Boar answers with a glint in his eye.

"An' we're glad to take credit for it. It's a great life bein' bullies, 'cause we sure ain't no pussycats – an' we sure ain't no little, all dressed up, fancy-pants housedogs, neither. Is we, gang?"

By that time all the boars are cracking up, rolling on their sides with hooves kicking wildly in the air. Their hilarious snorts are going full throttle. And whenever they can catch their breath, they shout, "No, we ain't – we ain't – we ain't no sissy poodles!"

The eldest Boar continues. "An if ya ain't got it by now, Karma, we love being bullies – spelled B-L-L-S-Y-U. Bullies is our middle name."

And with that, the entire team burst into even louder and more obnoxious raspy chortles and squeals of delight.

I'm super angry. "They have no right to talk to you like that, Karma."

"Don't worry," counsels Madame Aligot. "Boars always like a bit of rough and tumble. That's their nature. But they are clever creatures and have great dignity."

Well, I don't see any dignity in their behaviour no matter what Madame says.

Monsieur Truffle puts his arm around Madame Truffle, who can't stop crying. "*Mon Dieu! – Mon Dieu!* My poor little Tutu!"

In truth, it is a standoff. I consider these boars rude and obnoxiously selfish. Why shouldn't Tutu have been invited to play? It is only a game, after all. The boars are brutes.

Even though little Tutu is holding her own and being totally brave, she is, after all, out-classed, out-numbered, and – it looks like – out-of-luck. If she stands up to the boar bullies, she could wind up in less than great shape, and if she gives up, puts her tail between her legs and slinks off she'll be humiliated and feel terrible forever. This is a no-win situation for her.

A loud bang cracks the tension. This is followed by hundreds of barking and

braying sounds. Then another bang and more barking and braying. It's some hunters in bright-orange baseball caps and camouflage vests carrying shotguns. I can just see them. They are accompanied by their yapping, howling, braying, hunting dogs. They are making their way up the hill toward Perdiguier. Towards us!

Hunters! In an instant the big, bad boars are paralysed with fright. They don't seem so big any more. They stop their snarls. Hunters are their confirmed enemies. The boars are in a vulnerable and exposed position. They have no place to run to and hide quickly, and absolutely no way to defend themselves against hunters. Boars don't carry guns.

Tutu has followed the hunting dogs for years, and she immediately knows what she had to do. "Don't worry, fellas," she yips to the Boars. "I'll handle this!"

She shakes off the caked mud, opens the gate, stops to lick Madame Truffle on the ear, and runs down the hill as fast as her little legs can carry her. Is Tutu going to help those boars who have just been so mean to her?

She is heading right up to the hunters, all of whose names she knows: Jacques, Michel, Noël, Guy, Simon and Philippe. Tutu has known them and their dogs for years. She notices that Philippe seems to have lost his orange cap.

At that point Monsieur Truffle tells us a bit more gossip. Gossip is not only tolerated in small villages in France, it is considered standard and acceptable behaviour – a key part of life.

The tradition is that when you meet someone in the road, or in town, or at the market, you are obliged to stop whatever you are in the middle of doing and have a little gossip moment – no matter how old you are. People expect this. If you don't want to chew the fat or shoot the breeze in this way you could become an object for gossip yourself. The French take gossip seriously.

According to M. Truffle's sources, it seems that Jacques, the leader of the hunters, is completely *fou*, which means crazy, when it comes to wild boars. Totally obsessed! He knows each of them individually and is able to track their comings and goings every day during the hunting season. He wakes up early each morning and walks silently around stalking the boars. He can tell from the little pats of dung and the hoof prints exactly where each boar is and what it is doing. Amazing.

I remind myself to try to meet Jacques and ask him if I can go out boar tracking with him sometimes – but just to track them, I could never in a zillion years hunt them.

M. Truffle confides in us that Jacques keeps a boar record book, which he writes in every night during the hunting season. It is called *Alertes des Sangliers*.

So these hunters are sharp. They knew what they're doing. The boars are right to be scared.

Tutu doesn't, of course, know any of this. She approaches the dogs first. She doesn't know their names, as dogs never exchange first names with each other. They don't even have first names. Only humans make up names for dogs.

"Hey there! What's up fellas? How yah doin'?" It seems that Tutu is friends with all these dogs.

"Hey! How are you, dog?" says one.

"We've missed you, dog" barks another.

"Been up to anything interesting, dog?" yips a third.

"Nah," Tutu says, as cool and casual as can be, "nothing interesting – same-ol' same-ol' – but say, dog buddies, I've just seen a herd of the biggest, fiercest, most ornery wild boars you can imagine!"

"No kidding?" exclaims the lead dog, who pricks up his floppy spaniel ears, wags his tail excitedly, and signals to the other dogs to gather around.

"You bet, dog– right over there!" yips Tutu as she points her clever wet poodle nose right towards the *opposite* side of the hill from where the boars are.

"Hey, that's great!" calls out the leader. "Thanks a lot, dog. By the way, nice coat. Wouldn't mind one myself. Catch you later."

And with that, the whole group of dogs, barking to beat the band, tails wagging in every direction, circle the hunters and try leading Jacques, Michel, Noël, Guy, Simon and Philippe down the hill again in the completely wrong direction from where we all are.

The hunters are not convinced.

Verbena and I just can't stand still any more. We race down the hill to where the hunters are. We know Philippe, whose last name is Soufflé. He is Amandine's father and we both start talking to him in French.

"*Bonjour, Monsieur Soufflé,*" says Verbena breathlessly. "*Nous avons vu huit sangliers! Huit!*"

"*Bonjour, Verbena et Cosmos. Huit sangliers? Vraiment? Où?*"

"*Juste à côté,*" I say, pointing in the same wrong direction as the hunting dogs had indicated. "*Et les sangliers sont tellement énormes!*"

“Merci, mes petits, et au revoir. Allez!”

With that the whole crowd of hunters finally leave and head in the completely opposite direction to where the boars are. Incredible! The hunters follow the dogs. Tutu and Verbena and I have misled them!

Monsieur Truffle has never seen anything like it before. “All of this for *le foot!*” he exclaims. Personally, he is a Manchester United fan, as am I, but of course he would never have admitted this to anyone else in the village. It’s our little secret.

Tutu wags her tail and eagerly trots back to the Truffles, who give her an enormous hug, telling each other how proud they are of her heroism.

Madame Aligot is delighted with what she calls the ingenuity and goodwill my sister and I have shown towards the *sangliers* despite their terrible behaviour earlier. She takes us aside. “You have done well. Owl shall definitely hear about what happened here. You have gone up in the estimation of all of the creatures. Yes, you are definitely learning.”

“But learning what, Madame?” Verbena questions anxiously.

“Patience. You shall see in due course – and remember, what you do is more important than what anyone says. *Au revoir, mes chers.*” She rushes out of the front gate, jumps onto her motorbike like a sleek cat, revs the engine, and takes off in a flash before anyone has a chance to say goodbye.

Verbena and I don’t know what to make of today’s events, but since it is getting late it is definitely time to have something to eat. The Truffles say they are going to head home and have a little nap, since they are tired from the day’s thrilling activities and not used to such goings-on.

At that moment a big cry goes up from the direction of what had been the lettuce patch.

“LITTLE-DOG-LITTLE-DOG-LITTLE-DOG-LITTLE-DOG! COME DOWN HERE! WE WANT LITTLE-DOG!”

The boars are chanting for Tutu!

Tutu pricks up her ears and shyly looks at us. She is embarrassed and doesn’t know what to do. Then, with trepidation, and not knowing if the boars really want to play or if they are just teasing her, she bravely opens the gate once more and walks slowly into the middle of the impromptu playing field.

The boars, snorting wildly, gather around Tutu, pressing tighter and tighter, finally shouting, “*Hip Hip Hooray!*” Then, *wonder of wonders*, they hoist that

amazing poodle up up up onto their mighty shoulders and run all around the length and breadth of the garden, cheering wildly! She has saved their lives and they are eternally grateful.

Tutu barks and howls and yips and yowls with happiness. The boars carefully lower her to the ground and let out a huge shout:

“LET’S PLAY FOOTBALL!”

Tutu and the boars race around the garden without stopping for the whole afternoon, laughing and calling each other all sorts of terrible names. They throw around what is left of the lettuces and deliberately push each other into the mud as much and as often as they can.

We sit on the sidelines and cheer them on. The Truffles decide to stay, saying they can’t miss a minute of such an historic event. Madame even slips off for a few minutes, raids her pantry, and brings over some crisps and caramel popcorn, which they’d heard *les anglais* like to munch on during matches.

The game goes on all afternoon and well past sunset.

As everyone watches and claps and laughs, Verbena remarks, “You know, Karma, if this counts as a football match, then I think anything can be a game.”

Karma thinks hard for a moment. “Well, that’s kind of true, but what matters is that you have friends to play it with.”

Monsieur and Madame Truffle announce that they hope there will be another game next year. They shyly suggest that perhaps the boars might choose *their* vegetable patch, as they are definitely planning to grow some lovely, big, white cauliflowers, which would do very well for *le foot!*

So on that triple weird Sunday, our family forgets all about lunch and goes straight to a big pitcher of steaming-hot apple cider – Recipe No.38 – accompanied by some delicious crème caramel as the game comes to a close and the darkness sets in.

Karma tells us the boars will never forget what Verbena and I have done for them. Much later we learn that what happened that chilly autumn afternoon becomes one of the stories that the animals pass on to their children.

Verbena and I are convinced that our human reputations are beginning to look up. Maybe Madame Aligot is right. Maybe what we do as humans matters more than all of Fox’s terrible accusations and gossip.

“But when will the animals ever decide to talk back to us, Karma?” I ask before we all go inside for bed.

“Congratulations,” Karma woofs, ignoring my question totally. “You have now passed the third test. You have learned that things and creatures are not always what they seem. And you have learnt to help others when there is no gain for yourselves. In helping the boars, you also helped little Tutu, who can now hold her head high as she has clearly shown her courage. No one can laugh at her any more. And as for you, you are ready for the next stage. Bravo, I am proud of you.”

Wow. Karma has never been proud of us before – not that we know of, anyhow.

And, for just a moment, my sister and I don’t have anything to say.

I sit on the wall, sip the last drop of the sweet, warm apple juice and stare up at the sky. I imagine that every star in every shimmering constellation came out to watch the end of the big match.

I look into Mum’s messed up vegetable garden and wonder what will happen to all of us, and when Owl and the rest of the animals will stop playing games with us and tell us the truth about why we are here and what we are supposed to do. Is my being magic part of it all? No matter how hard I try to picture the future in my mind, I just can’t figure it out.

Mum calls me inside.

Slowly walking back to the house, I think maybe it doesn’t matter whether I can figure it all out right now, anyway. I do know one thing, though. I know that I will never think of football in the same way ever again. I guess I will never think of many things the same way again, and that is OK with me. It really is.

In fact, looking up at the sky one last time, I know it is a gazillion times OK. And I know that the animals *WILL* be our true friends. And that really soon they *WILL* talk to us and we *WILL* figure everything out together, the way good friends do.

END OF CHAPTER 3

BOOK 2

