

# Prologue

## The Plan Revealed

**PLACE:** An ancient graveyard on a small hill hidden in a dense forest of green oaks, maritime pines and cypress trees, and facing some crooked mountains. It is in a hamlet called Perdiguier, in a part of the south of France known long ago as the Land of Oc.

**TIME:** Midnight. There is a violent thunderstorm. It is some time early this century as the earth travels its natural course with its moon in tow while in galactic space at every moment new stars are born and others die.

**CHARACTERS:** Owl, the King of Perdiguier, and his Council: Dog, White Horse, and Hawk.

### OWL

Listen! *Ecoutez!* Let there be no mistake. The grave risks we face are now far beyond our power to control. It falls thus to this esteemed body to carry out what was written so long ago by the Ancients. Council members! The prophecy is coming to pass. The planet is in pain. Daily the air grows darker, the great seas grow warmer and the earth threatens to tumble back into the waters. Where there was plenty, now there is scarcity. Many of our kind are vanishing. We have little time before all is destroyed. Therefore, I decree that we must embark on the path as it has been written. It is time to summon the chosen family of humans and deliver to them *The Great Book*. For they, and they alone, have the power to reverse the prophecy. We must bring back the days of *The Great Before*.

### COUNCIL MEMBER 1( HAWK)

But Owl, how is this possible? Whereas I agree with you, surely there are none of that species whom we can trust. And surely it is sheer folly to consider such an action. After all who, but the humans in their ignorance and greed, have created this chaos?

## COUNCIL MEMBER 2 (WHITE HORSE)

No! You do not see things clearly. Owl is correct. And although what you say about that species is only too true, still it is known that there does exist one human family who can change this dire course of events. And it is this family who are descended from the original loyal ones and who have been chosen by the Ancients in their great and far seeing wisdom.

## COUNCIL MEMBER 3 (DOG)

I, for one, see the truth in what you say. And yet, I cannot help but wonder if this family will be accepted by the others. After all, why should any of our numerous species trust their kind, especially in these troubled days?

## OWL

Ah! Good council members. The Ancients have also written that there are to be nine tests through which the family must prove their worth and goodwill. And if they successfully pass these tests, such an accomplishment will doubtless give the animals great relief. That being said, I am not at all sure the humans will be up to the task at hand. However, what choice do we have? If this plan is accepted by yourselves, I shall endeavour to create the nine challenges for the humans who will arrive here knowing nothing. Nothing at all.

## COUNCIL MEMBER 1 (HAWK)

All well and good, great King, but even if I agreed with your plan I cannot imagine how we are to recognise them. How are we to summon them here? And how are we to administer the tests you speak of? Even if we accomplish all that, who is to say that the *Wrong Ones* would ever allow such a thing to come to pass? They would never accept the humans here. No! I propose we rid the hill of the *Wrong Ones* immediately. They have grown too skilled in the power of the mind's eye and are a threat to our way of life. I would address our energies in that direction.

## COUNCIL MEMBER 2 (WHITE HORSE)

That is not how it should be. Hear me! The *Wrong Ones* shall be dealt with by the humans at the right time and in the correct manner of battle. But first, we must follow Owl in this matter and proceed with finding the chosen family. I stand with Owl!

## COUNCIL MEMBER 3 (DOG)

I too find that I must put my faith in Owl. Who better to truly understand the words of the Ancients? Who better to penetrate the secret meanings of what has been written? And if I can be of help with the humans then, Great King, I offer my services with all my heart.

## OWL

Thank you, Dog. I shall indeed call upon you. And now, Members! Wise and loyal Council! I have listened to your thoughtful words. This discussion is finished! The deed shall be done with the help of '*She Who Becomes Us*' and Dog. *Ecoutez!* I have identified the family. They are on their way here even as we speak. Let this be resolved my friends, according to the rites and rituals established by the Ancients in their wisdom. For in truth, we can do nothing else. Remember, the magic of the mind's eye is great and is eternally felt and shall be great once again. Come, we have much to do. With all of the power that resides on this hill, we shall be successful. We must be. There can be no other outcome.

# CHAPTER 1

## Verbena's Story

My remarkable and true destiny begins on that foot-soaking Saturday night in spring. Our kitchen window in London is blurry with tiny raging rivers. Outside, a street full of shadowy umbrellas sprout like black mushrooms. There is a deafening crash. And another one.

It is the angry *Sky King*! He claps his giant cloud cymbals together again and again and again, and the night fractures into endless rounds of ear piercing thunder. He is talking to me! And I know something important and life altering is about to happen. I just know it.

I am 11 years old –nearly 12 – and have a crystal ball inside my head. Pictures and ideas pop right into my brain whenever they feel like it! And I don't just mean when I'm dreaming. It happens when my eyes are wide open and it's the middle of the day. That's when I see things sort of differently. Lots of things. And they see me differently.

Especially animals. They trust me. All kinds of animals. I mean last week this tiny sparrow flies into the lounge and Mum and Dad go crazy trying to get him out. And he goes crazy too flying all over the place. But I just breathe quietly, stand there like I was a tree or something and hold out my hand. I picture him hopping on board my index finger and after half a second he does exactly that. He lands right on me. The same finger and everything. He looks up and our eyes say hello at each other. It's weird but true. And, walking super slowly, I take him outside and he flies off into the air and is gone.

And that's not the only time. Stuff like that happens a lot! Dad calls me his *precocious* Verbena. It's one of my brilliant talents. Naturally, that makes me incredibly special, special sort of verging on magical and it is clear I am destined to do things totally out of the ordinary, totally brave, and totally amazing.

Of course my brother, who is 19 months and 6 days younger than me, thinks he can see things like I can, but it is obvious that he is not as gifted as me in that

regard. Nor is Dad. Definitely not. He's too scientific and logical for unexplained stuff. Mum is more like me.

That Saturday after dinner I am curled up in my favourite old armchair listening to what the *Sky King* is saying and writing significant thoughts in my diary. My brother is watching a bunch of red and yellow players run around on TV. Mum puts down this big travel book with glossy pictures and asks where we want to go for our summer holiday.

But before a sound can pop out of my mouth, a picture pops into my head like an uninvited grasshopper. It lands in the middle of my brain and sits there on a long stem of tiny purple flowers. Zooming out, I see umpteen rows of the same flowers. It's lavender! It smells like nothing else in the world. And there are some sunflowers and crooked mountains in the background and a *too-blue-to-be-true* sky. That's when I know a million per cent where we have to go.

"France!" I blurt out. More sky rattling explosions outside. The *Sky King* agrees with me! "That's where we have to go. We just have to!"

My brother Cosmos, who usually says and does the opposite of everything I say or do, nods his head without ever looking up.

Thinking about holidays is totally cool and, even though that horrible night there isn't one quiet spot over London, or even a thimbleful of moonlight, I begin to think sunny thoughts about beaches, picnics, and my fantastic new bathing costume. And faster than a gazillion demented raindrops go bouncing off the pavement, the question is settled.

The thing is I like France a lot, I mean a lot a lot and have spent lots of great summers there – camping out, swimming in rivers, and wandering along these ancient cobbled streets eating an endless variety of squishy pastries with funny names and more ice cream flavours than I can remember.

Then out of nowhere Zinnia, my Mum, gets this dreamy *I'm visiting another planet look* in her eyes. Springing up from the sofa like the first crocus in spring, she bursts out,

"I have a fabulous idea! Wouldn't it be an incredible adventure to camp out under the stars wherever we end up at the end of the day? Just think of it. We'll go wherever fate takes us!" Coriander, my father, is horrified and shakes his head in that disapproving way he has, but Mum just laughs and informs him that this trip will be a family escapade.

“After all,” she continues as it flashes outside as if the *Sky King* is now laughing like a mad man and turning these humungous neon skylights on and off, “why not be explorers – no adventurers – for a few weeks? You never can tell what might happen. Or where we might wind up! It all depends on what the universe has in store for us!”

“The universe! Adventurers! How great is that, Mum.” My brother’s game has finished and he gets that same far away look in his eye. “It would sort of be like going for a bare back ride on this cosmic merry-go-round, and who knows when you might be able to reach out and grab the golden ring!”

“Exactly, Dear! That’s what I mean absolutely! You and your sister *would* understand!”

Dad grunts unhappily and shakes his head a bit as yet another blast pounds, shakes and rolls across the black sky that is drenching the city. He mumbles something a bit mean about Mum I think and finally, and very reluctantly, he agrees.

Well, he has to agree. He is out-numbered.

You see Mum has always been a bit of a dreamer, as Dad is fond of pointing out, and it’s definitely a trait Cosmos and I have inherited a little bit. No, make that especially me.

Well that spring went on longer than an earthworm stretching to the moon and I thought our holiday would never come.

But finally July arrives. We finish school and one ‘*every-bird-in-the-sky*’ chirping morning, we pack up our summer gear and set out on the journey southwards in our trusty blue car, the same one Dad had bought the year I was born. As we roll onto the enormous ferry that will carry us across the English Channel we are all beaming like some friendly giant has just given us the hugest box of chocolates in the known universe. Even Dad.

Of course, I take it all super seriously and have spent the past few months reading these amazing French fashion and gossip magazines. Well, looking at the cool pictures really and wondering if I could be a model one day for French Vogue like my older friend Erica who was ‘discovered’ as she was coming out of the dentist’s office. So Cool! And now she is learning how to do that funny pony model walk and is going to real live photo shoots *plus* she gets to wear make-up and these awesome clothes, which she shares with me sometimes. She’s the one who gave me my first blueberry flavoured lip gloss!

Plus I have been studying French really hard from Dad's old grammar book.

Cosmos has learned the names of all the players of the French soccer team and can recite the statistics about each one, which he does more than once. He has also looked up the animals native to France and has put pictures of as many of them as he could find on his wall at home.

I am so, so happy to be finished with school and off and out of dreary, boring, old London.

From the wind-sloshed deck, I strain to see the first pale crease of land that will unfold into France when we dock on the other side. I have made this crossing before, of course, but this time I am no longer a run-of-the-mill tourist. I am an adventurer! I am following my fate! I am a *Jolicoing!*

In fact I am practically French. Our name is French anyway because Dad told us that our family had come from France a long, long time ago.

We are all - well all except Dad - wearing what Mum calls our rose tinted glasses.

"Those are the spectacles you wear, metaphorically speaking," Mum whispers, "when you see things in their best and rosiest light."

And with that, she pulls out our crisp new French map and I get to be the one to close my eyes and put my finger on it.

"AND THAT," Mum confides, "is where we will be heading."

Awesome! I close my eyes and, waving my finger around as though it's a homeless spirit hovering over a Ouija board, it finally touches down right where sections E and 13 meet, pretty far in the southern part of France and near some mountains.

"Fantastic!" Mum squeals, clapping her hands like she has just seen a cute fairy flying about in a little pink tutu. "That's precisely where we shall go! Oh Darling, this is too too exciting!"

And *that* is just how it happened, when, without any of us having a clue, our lives flip-flopped from normal to unbelievable. We had set out on an adventure, but one like nothing we could have possibly imagined in the known galaxy or beyond. Not even *moi!*

## Cosmos's Story

My Dad, who is this super scientist, had grumbled for months about us just going off to France, willy-nilly.

“You *have* to have plans, Zinnia,” he insisted all the time “You cannot just wander off with the children to a foreign country with no itinerary! That is daft!”

But Mum was determined that this year our holidays were going to be a fun adventure. End of discussion.

I guess Dad knew when he was beaten and had decided that he might as well try to be cheerful about the whole thing. And so, by the time the big ferry docked in France, he was the picture of *Jolly Holiday Dad*. Plus I think he loved to put on his favourite *summer-go-away-with-the-kids* get-up. He always wore the same pair of too loose, too long, red cargo shorts with leaping too orange salmon all over them, plus his khaki fishing vest with 8 little pockets on it; not that he even liked to fish. And he never forgot his vacation baseball cap that read *Science Scores*. Grandma had sent it to him from America for his birthday a long time ago when he and Mum were first dating.

My sister always made fun of him, but she was not one to talk. Not with what she put on every day, which was 100 per cent completely stupid looking.

Dad was funny. As we were driving along, he tried to get us to sing some songs. Eventually he gave up because it always wound up to be just him and Mum singing away. Verbena and I were too busy laughing hysterically in the back seat, like two wind up toys stuck on fast speed, to even hum one little note. Then he would begin to tell us some jokes from his *Fathers' Collection of Super Boring and Bad Jokes*, which of course we had listened to at least 100 times. But we pretended that we had never heard them, really glad that he was being such a good sport.

Making our way slowly southward along every crooked, windy, out-of-the-way road, we were as happy as three kites let off their strings. I think Daddy really was too, but of course he would never admit it out loud.

After driving for a couple of days we found ourselves travelling along some teeny, bumpy single lanes. Checking our map, Mum announced that we had just reached the corner of section E and 13. It was official! Looking out of the dusty window I thought it was all really pretty with these special trees, which Mum said

were cypresses and maritime pines. Plus there were a gazillion purple and yellow lavender and sunflower fields like you see on postcards. There weren't any towns or even little villages close by; just some crooked mountains in the distance.

Then I notice something totally weird. Heaps of fat brown birds are flying all around us. They are following our car! Ignoring them, Dad slows down to search, like he does every night, for the perfect campsite. But before we can catch our breath and everyone tell him where he should turn, a whole group of these birds land right on the car bonnet.

They look at us through the windscreen as though they are seeing an 8 eyed Martian with 16 wiggly arms and legs for the first time. Then ignoring our jabbering, they walk around in circles like they are looking for the best spot on a crowded beach. Finally, they chirp urgently to each other and fly around our car some more! Double weird.

“Good Grief!” Dad exclaims, and stops with a big jerk. “What in the world?”  
And that's when we see it! Right in front of us is a weather-beaten old sign.

**“Perdiguier! Ancient Farm!  
For sale! Low Low Price!  
Final Offer! Chance of a Lifetime!  
Owner Must Sell!”**

“Awesome!” screams Verbena. “Isn't that amazing! The birds are telling us something! And I know what it is!” She jumps out of the car and rushes up to get a closer look at the old sign that is half falling down.

“That's it! That's it!”

And just as she is shouting her head off. one of the birds flies down and lands right on her shoulder! She smiles and giggles squeakily like she always does, and then it flies away, but not before it loop de loops around her a few more times. Mum and Dad don't see it happen at all.

“Birds love me!” she squawks. “All birds do, Cosmos. Even French birds. But really, this is what they want to show us!”

“What in the world are you talking about?” I rush over to read the sign. It doesn't occur to me how weird it is that some bird has landed on my sister and that this sign is written in English. “We're not about to buy an ancient farm? Are we

Mum? Are we?”

“The birds made us stop here for a reason. I know it. I just know it,” my silly sister continues. “And Cosmos, that’s it! Can’t you tell? Can we go look at the house, Mum? Just for fun?”

“Please, Mum,” I urge. “I know we aren’t going to buy it. Everyone does. But it would be so cool to see an old farm! Please!”

“But if we saw this house and liked it, we *could* buy it! Couldn’t we?”

Verbena continues with sparkly eyes and this dreamy voice. “And then we could live there and we wouldn’t have to go home. We’d be French. And sooo chic. And someone would discover me. I’d be famous. It would be Incredible! We’d be the French Jolicoings. How awesome would that be!”

“Well, Darling,” Mum smiles, “Maybe so, but don’t you think you’re getting a little carried away? We are the English Jolicoings who live and work and go to school in London, and that’s that.”

Yet a part of me has the feeling that maybe my sister is right. I think things become a little dangerous then because I feel my crazy dream-self rising inside me like the bread dough Mum likes to make.

How brilliant to live in France! I picture myself playing football with French kids and wearing a shirt with my French team’s name written on it. And I’d be really good. And fast. With amazing footwork. I’d be the one who takes the extra kicks and scores the winning points! And they would wonder how I got to be so good. And I would tell them I was just born that way; that I was English and was really good at lots of other stuff as well.

And Dad could work there. He worked a lot from home. Why not? So could Mum. The dream dough was expanding fast. I think Mum felt the same way but she wouldn’t say. But I know she was thinking the same thing. I just know it.

## CHAPTER 2

### Zinnia's Story

**No! We are not buying a house!**

**Ha!**

I don't dare utter a peep as the children continue chattering on about this old farm. Instead, I adopt a different strategy. Like the sun quietly drifting from behind a cloud without any fuss, I get out of the car and casually look around.

"What a funny little road," I mutter innocently. "I suppose it leads to the ancient farm that's for sale cheap."

"Now that's quite enough nonsense!" my husband says rather irritably. Of course he understands my game. "Back in the car, if you don't mind. And very well, we'll turn off here and see if we can find a nice spot for lunch. But we are NOT buying a house. What an absurd concept." He gives me this serious '*get control of yourself*' look, which I totally ignore.

But just as Coriander tells us yet again to get back inside, a great wave of the same birds, even more now, whom I had identified as partridges, hover around the car like flies circling a bowl of delicious honey. As my husband starts up the engine, they continue to accompany us. It is extraordinary. Some are walking with quick, cartoon-like tiny steps in front of the tires. Some are flying low just beside the windows. And some boldly perch on the bonnet like feathered mascots.

I've landed in the middle of an Alfred Hitchcock thriller!

The partridges make funny, sharp, raspy sounds as we slowly bump our way over the rocks and holes towards some rusty iron gates that are half off their hinges.

"It's a fairy tale!" shouts Verbena over the sounds of the birds, grinning from ear to ear. "The birds love all of us! Even you, Cosmos. They're taking us somewhere! How amazing is that!"

I smile broadly as I listen to my daughter chatter on and open the window wide to feel the air and peer out: a bit like a family dog if we had one.

As our trail-worn car rolls in through the entrance, Verbena and Cosmos jump

out before we even stop. By now the birds seem to have evaporated into thin air. I can't see them at all. Or hear them for that matter.

In the meantime, the children stand in the courtyard rubble without knowing where to look first. We join them.

Our hearts skip a collective beat as we cast our first gaze on Perdiguier. Even Coriander.

Everything is built of stones, stones, and more stones. Some of the stones are arranged in the shape of a barn topped with ochre roof tiles, some in the shape of a massive old house, and some are just stones, lying around in big piles doing nothing. They look as if they had been there forever (which I suppose they more or less have been) in the middle of luxurious weeds, tall spiky brambles, fig trees, and scores of sweet-scented wild rose bushes. Tangles of thick ivy – untamed and unstoppable – wind around tree trunks, twisted metal fencing and empty window frames.

Wagon-wheel spokes, odd-shaped coloured glass bottles, rusty horseshoes, huge round flat stones used for grinding wheat once-upon-a-time, wooden clogs, antique lace-up boots, a few broken bicycle bits, colourful shards of kitchen crockery, corroded iron cooking pots, and even an old stone sink are half buried between the rocks on the ground.

Fluttering clouds of psychedelic-winged butterflies and honey bees preside over this museum of bygone farm life, rapturously circling and humming around the hundreds of vivid wildflowers which grow in the most unlikely places, including in between the stones themselves.

It looks old, seriously abandoned, and feels full of colour and promise. I like it enormously. So much so, that I want to bring this beautiful place back to civilised life. Smiling to myself, I begin the dangerous dream of imagining our family living here full time. After all it is for sale! And like all dreams, it has no logic to it – or at any rate, no logic that I can understand. And yet, here it is! So perfect! And the birds HAD led us here. Verbena was correct but of course I couldn't say this out loud.

Shivering a little in the dry hot air, I know there is something special about the place that I can't exactly put my finger on. It feels like the wind has blown us here for a reason and that all we can do is bend, like tall wheat in a field, to its will.

The old farm is on a little hill and overlooks the craggy Cévennes mountain range in front, and a rolling valley filled with sunflowers, grape vines, and lavender at the back.

Walking around we note that Perdiguier is in fact the name of a tiny, old hamlet of five stone houses scattered higgledy-piggledy on the top of the hill, each one having common walls with the others. Even Coriander seems quite taken with the place and says that, judging from the arched constructions, he believes that parts of it must have first been built over 800 years ago during the Middle Ages.

“However,” he adds as he carefully runs his hands over the satiny chiselled stones surrounding the entrances, “it might well have been even longer since there are generally not many written records which would indicate any precise construction date. It is well known that the ancient Celts inhabited this whole area of France, and then the Romans after them, so, who knows, this place could have originally been built on a Roman ruin.”

“Do you really think so, Dad?” shouts Cosmos. “That’s incredible! Do you mean some Roman Gladiator might have been standing just where I am? And touching the same exact stones? And ...”

“And maybe even some medieval Lords and Ladies lived here and touched those stones too, after the gladiators,” interrupts Verbena. “And then lots of other medieval people with long dresses and pointy hats. And then people after them from a different age. All kinds of people.”

“And animals, too! There must have been horses here. And dogs and cats and pigs and sheep and goats and donkeys and chickens and lots more. I wonder what they all did every day? It’s all so amazing. It’s like from a whole other time in history.”

Both children grow quieter as the concept of a history so much older than themselves trails its snail-like way into their thoughts.

The part of Perdiguier that is for sale consists of several buildings surrounding a large courtyard. The largest structure is a big barn with three high stone arches inside.

The children run over to the barn to have a look. Its splintered wooden door is half open. Pushing it, Cosmos scampers inside like a puppy. “Look! This must be where the sheep used to live.”

“How do you know Cosmos? You’re just making that up. You don’t really know diddlysquat. Maybe it’s where the pigs lived. Or the goats. Or the chickens.”

“Well, you wouldn’t know the difference between a sheep and a goat anyway,” Cosmos shoots back. He is used to this second-class treatment by his elder

sister.

Verbena, who is always offering up a challenge of some sort to Cosmos, dismisses what she considers an ignoble insult and runs into another stone room. This one has a wooden trough along one whole side and a dozen or so beaten up leather harnesses and horseshoes hanging on rusty iron bars on the cobweb festooned stone walls.

“Awesome! This is where the horses were. I’m sure of that.” She races up a battered stone staircase. “This top part must have been for the doves and the silkworms.”

Peering out of the window, across from the barn, we see the old stone house with half-rotted grey shutters. I wonder about the people who had lived there over the years and why it had been abandoned for what appears like a very long time.

“Wow,” exclaims Cosmos! “That’s where the family lived. Isn’t it, Mum?”

“Of course it is, Darling.” And here, I don’t know what gets the better of me. A devilish imp jumps right onto the tip of my tongue and I hear myself saying, to my husband’s horror, “Do you think it might be OK for us to live here?”

“OK?” squeals Verbena. “It would be more than OK. It would be amazing! Can we do it, Mum? Could we afford it? You wouldn’t have to give me my allowance.”

“You could use my allowance, too!” pipes in Cosmos. “It would be like living in a place from a whole other time. We could go to school here, Dad. Honest. It would be so so cool. And I could play football and meet lots of animals and learn French and...”

“Good Heavens!” My husband can take it no longer. “Where did you all get such ridiculous ideas in your heads? We are NOT just upping and moving to southern France to some place we know nothing about. I insist this sort of thinking stops right now.” He takes me aside, admonishing me like a child. “And you too, Zinnia! Really! Such shenanigans! And at your age! We are NOT, I repeat NOT moving here!”

I smile sweetly and keep my mouth shut.

Now the children run over to the house on the other side of the courtyard. We follow. The front door is locked but Coriander spots an outsized metal key ring lying in a basket by the front door as though someone has been expecting us. He shoots me a strange look, adjusts his faded denim baseball cap backwards, puts his big black glasses on and off a few times like he always does when he is perplexed, and fiddles

around trying to find the right metal key for the door.

In the meantime I notice, just in front of the house, two giant micocoulier trees, which must be at least a 100 years old. I had read that those trees exist only in this part of France and were considered sacred by the ancient Celts, and that their roots go down through the earth more than TWICE as far as the height of the tree! These two regal specimens, covered in a flurry of soft green , are clearly a leafy King and Queen guarding the entrance.

Directly behind is a low, lopsided, cracked stone wall that borders a weed-and-wildflower garden. Beyond that are acres of dense woods filled with green oaks and even more micocoulier trees. Looming over everything, are the irregular peaks of the Cevennes mountains.

“I’ve got it,” exclaims Coriander softly. We stand back. He opens the door and steps onto the pitted stone floor of this abandoned old house. I follow. Verbena and Cosmos rush inside, laughing like they are being chased by a flock of sheep turning somersaults.

The house has a not unpleasant smell of old but clean socks, and the musty air feels cool to the skin after the baking June heat outside. Looking around, what first meets our eyes are the vaulted stone walls of the kitchen that come together in an arch overhead. It feels like we have entered a cave and dominating it is a huge fireplace. A cave within a cave. I take a deep breath.

Having taken in the kitchen, we all go off in different directions to explore, trying to discover as much as we can as quickly as possible.

But how can I have possibly anticipated the extraordinary drama poised to unfold right under our noses?

## **Who in the World IS this Woman?**

As we make our way past piles of aged domestic items, gingerly opening splintered shutters and peering into moth filled closets, we hear the sound of an old-fashioned yet smooth-as-silk engine approaching. Rushing outside, we see an odd-looking woman careening down the road on a 1950s vintage Harley Davidson motorbike.

A red beret perched on one side of her head partially covers her spiky, fashionably cut, snow-white hair. As she gets closer, her face strikes me as ageless, impeccably made up with magazine-perfect makeup. An enormous pair of designer sunglasses accents her mesmerising appearance. She could have been anywhere from 20 to 80 years old. She wears a multi-patterned, short summer sun dress (I am sure it had come straight from a Paris fashion house), chic little strappy shoes, at least fifteen strands of multi-coloured crystal necklaces, and enormous earrings that look like two bluish cat's-eye marbles. Behind her saddle, in a basket decorated with a multitude of colourful flowers, rests an unfashionable scuffed black handbag like a doctor might carry. Unusual.

Trotting alongside and barking away is an adorable brown and white fluffy sheepdog; quite sweet and waif-like in a rather French way. A fringe of curly light brown hair flops over its enormous brown eyes, its long furry ears waggle this way and that, and its pink, wet tongue lolls out of one corner of its mouth. The dog has an eager, panting, and willing-to-please look about it.

As we gape in bemusement at this extraordinary sight, the gleaming motorcycle skids through our front gate and comes to a lurching halt.

“*Bonjour, mes amis* – and welcome,” the woman calls as she neatly jumps off the bike and walks towards us. “I am Madame Aligot, and this delightful dog is Karma. We have been waiting for you for a very, very long time, haven't we, my little Karma?” As I am about to ask her if her agency had been engaged to sell the property, the little dog lets out some joyous squeals, wags its tail in endless swishes, and bounds over to graciously accept the pets and cuddles we are obviously anxious to give it.

Madame takes off her gold and rhinestone studded sunglasses and proceeds to give each of us a big hug and to land a multitude of well-aimed kisses on our unsuspecting cheeks. She offers us a wicker basket of vegetables and eggs, at the same time as she directs her wide, strangely cat-like, blue eyes towards Verbena and Cosmos. I begin to feel worried.

“*Mes petits,*” she whispers, “please, allow me to look carefully at the two of you. *Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!* You look so much like your ancestors. Don't you think so, Karma? Yes, I can sense it. I feel it. It is *them.*”

She proceeds to walk slowly around the children, as if she were judging two ponies at a state fair. Neither Verbena nor Cosmos like being the object of such an

unmasked-for inspection by a total stranger, but this whole activity seems so ridiculous that all they can do is stand still and giggle non-stop. They can't imagine anyone else in the world ever looking like them, since they are sure that they are absolutely unique and have every intention of remaining so. Besides, how could this woman possibly know what their ancestors looked like? What kind of game is she playing?

My thoughts go back to the children. Verbena has curly, dark, longish hair that always goes in directions completely independent of what she intended in the morning. To deal with this issue, she has accumulated a larger collection of coloured hair barrettes, combs, clips, and elastic bands than any one of her friends. She also has very definite ideas about fashion and takes an "opposite" approach to her attire. She prefers to dress up in everything she can find in her wardrobe that doesn't match (a bit like her father). She hates to look like anyone else or to look like what anyone *thinks* a girl her age should look like. That day she wears a pair of purple shorts with splashy, retro striped beach balls and guitars printed on them, an old orange-and-yellow tie-dyed T-shirt that had been mine many years ago, red rubber shoes, and green striped socks. Her hair is done up in two curly ponytails tied with multi-coloured polka dotted ribbons. No, Verbena simply cannot imagine anyone else, living or dead, with the same looks as her.

Cosmos, on the other hand, is probably more careless in his dressing than any other 9<sup>1/2</sup> year-old English boy could possibly aspire to be. He is the picture of frayed, old, torn, and tattered, and intends to remain so as long as he can. He is an object of envy amongst his friends, who would have loved to emulate him, if only their parents had not exerted a firmer hand vis-à-vis personal presentation than Coriander or I ever attempted. He has big blue eyes and wavy hair, which is blonder than Verbena's, but equally unruly. People always commented that he looked and dressed a lot like me.

"*Mes amis*, enough of this giggle business! Now do listen," exclaims Madame Aligot as Karma leaps into her arms. "We must get to know each other. First, my dears, you shall hear all about me."

And with that Verbena and Cosmos stop laughing. We wait politely to hear what Madame has to say for herself. Perhaps there is nothing worrisome about this woman after all. I can't help but notice the discreet wink Coriander gives both kids.

"To make a long story shorter, *je m'appelle* Madame Aligot. I live by myself at the next farm over. You can see it, *mes amis*, just across the hill there."

"So, you're not the estate agent?" my husband asks politely.

*Mais non! Mais non!* She answers with a ‘*how can you be so ridiculous*’ look, as she lowers Karma to the ground. “But should you wish to stay here in the short term, it is quite all right since I am the current owner. *Pas de problème, mes chers.* Indeed, I invite you to stay here. *Non! J’insiste!* The place is a bit dusty, but could be most agreeably fixed up in a day or two.” We are too stunned to say anything. Madame continues, “*D’accord!* It is settled then.”

“Over there, as I said, is my home. I raise chickens, goats, turkeys, rabbits, and geese. I also grow the best vegetables in this region, and – now listen closely – I always come to Perdiguier to gather my wild herbs and plants, since this is a special place. People from all over France come to me whenever they need special curing. I am a skilled confectioner of potions.”

And with that, Madame Aligot stretches out her arms, takes us collectively by the shoulders, and silently lassoes our eyes and thoughts like four hapless ponies at a rodeo. Are we to be branded? I cannot move or even blink for a few moments.

And then we are loose. And all is back as it was.

How kind of her to let us stay here, I think, not quite sure what has just happened. What a glorious idea! The children will love it. But I must say that in my opinion she looks like anything but a countrywoman. I wonder if she wears her make-up and designer clothes while she plants the radishes, feeds the chickens, and makes her mixtures. Not that there would have been anything wrong with that, of course. I look over at Coriander and Cosmos, but they seem to be thinking no such thing. In fact they seem to be completely carried away.

“*Bonjour, Madame,*” exclaims Verbena, who breaks our unthinking rude silence. She too is impressed. She clearly loves Madame’s make-up and clothes, and she has never met anyone who makes potions – or at least said in public that they did so. She is obviously anxious to show off her worldliness and French to this elegant new neighbour.

“*Merci pour l’invitation et pour les légumes et les oeufs,*” says Verbena as she quickly adjusts one of her pony tails, which has started to work its way loose. “*Comment allez-vous?*” she continues proudly. “*Je m’appelle Verbena and celle-ci est ma famille.*”

As she readjusts her temperamental hair, Verbena whispers to us that she can’t remember meeting anyone, except various aunts and uncles, who kiss so much and without any reason.

“*Bonjour! Bonjour,*” answers a delighted Madame. “We shall do this all over again. *Je m’appelle Madame Aligot et j’habite* just over the hill in the direction of the most recent sunset and, *mes amis*, let me inform you before we go any further, that every sunset here is a *vrai* original. In fact, in all of the history of sunsets here in Perdiguier, not one has looked like the one the night before. Now think, how many sunsets could that be?”

We puzzle over this cosmic question, since we aren’t used to anyone talking about what we think of as ordinary events in such an extraordinary way – and besides, we think we are still at the introductions-and-hello stage. Nonetheless, as the presiding adults, Coriander and I decide to ignore the sunset topic and to make the normal kind of English greeting one learns to say when meeting someone new. I am about to shake hands, thank her for allowing us to stay and engage in the polite art of conversation, when Cosmos, with his usual excitement, interrupts.

“*Bonjour*, Madame. If every sunset has been original and never the same, does that mean that no sunrise has ever been the same, either?”

At that point, Verbena, not wanting to lose the upper hand she recently achieved with her superior knowledge of French, asks:

“And what about the stars? Are they different every night? And the clouds – are they different every day, Madame Aligot? *Qu’est-ce que vous pensez?*”

Cosmos, unconsciously tucking his shirt in, answers.

“Of course they’re different,” he confidently proclaims. “Everything’s different every day, isn’t it, Madame Aligot? I’d say, then, that every day’s an original. I know that’s true since I’ve always been interested in science – like my father.

“*Mon dieu!* Science! I love science. The earth needs more science. The heavens need more science. We all need more science,” exclaims Madame, smiling broadly at Coriander.

Cosmos keeps going.

“That’s great, Madame Aligot. Me too! I love science too! And my father is a geologist. He looks for rocks a lot and studies all kinds of things in the earth like fossils and volcanoes and he also studies words – but that’s not his official job and I know a lot of really big words, the biggest is floccinaucinihilipilification and I’ll tell what that means later, I promise. My mother is a painter and that is her official job. She’s going to paint here in France and she’s brought all of her colours and brushes

and things with her. And by the way,” Cosmos continues, getting short of breath as he leans down to pet Karma again, “so cool to meet you. Can we really stay here? How awesome is that! I love your Harley Davidson. Can I ride on it some time? Dad said he used to have one. Why are you selling this house? Who used to live here? Were there Romans here? I’m so-so-so glad you speak English. You look very pretty. I like your necklaces. How old is Karma? Do you have any other dogs? Do you know any of the other animals that live here? Y’know, I’ve learned heaps about the animals here. We are the English Jolicoings. My name is Cosmos and my sister is Verbena, who you already met, and my mother is Zinnia and this is my father, Coriander. We usually live in England – in London, and ...”

With that, Madame Aligot smiles, hugs us again, and sits down with neat crossed legs on the stone wall across from the front door and starts rummaging around in her big black handbag. She motions for all of us to come over and sit down next to her – and, without giving it a thought, we do.

“My dear new friends, first things first.” She takes a deep breath. “You must realise, this is a ...”, her voice becomes hushed, “... special place, as I have said. A place, which has been waiting for you for a long time. I know Perdiguier well. My family has been guarding its secrets for centuries. Indeed,” and here she leans closer to us, “there has been much history – many kinds of history – that has happened on this land. You must be aware and treat this property and all those who reside here respectfully.”

“But no one lives here now, Madame,” I venture, as I self-consciously straighten my unfashionable beat up old jeans and grubby blue T-shirt with the smiling monkey on it. “And are you really selling it? Can I ask how much?” I pretend not to notice the sharp look my husband hurls in my direction.

“*Bien sûr*, my dear. We will talk about such things later. But as to the many residents here, you just have to open your eyes and ears to meet them all,” Madame replies, with a cunning glint in her voice.

“But how do we do that?” asks Cosmos.

“First, close your eyes to hear me better. Such silly questions, *mes amis* – no offence. It is what one does every day, as simple as breathing. In fact, it is breathing. *Ecoutez* – listen. Simply breathe deep and then open your eyes and really look around ... and then look around some more ... only this time through your mind’s eye ... sense where you are ... listen ... breathe ... smell ... feel it here ... in your hearts ...

and that is how you shall come to learn and understand. You each must open your mind's eye – remember, this will be important.”

On that note Karma jumps onto Cosmos's lap, and then Verbena's, licking their faces and ears.

It seems to me, as Verbena and Cosmos both instinctively reach over to stroke Karma, that this dog wants to say something to us. But what in the world does Madame mean about seeing with our mind's eye? Perhaps we *should* call the whole thing off and just get out of this place.

By now, I am feeling less and less comfortable. But for some reason I am physically and mentally unable to walk away. I simply cannot summon up the will to drive out of the front gate with my family.

## **It's All About 'The Mind's Eye'**

I don't have time to think too long about anything because now Madame proceeds to pull a long shiny contraption out of her bag. It looks like a disjointed set of bicycle handlebars attached to a straight stick. What it is, in fact, is a silver divining rod, the kind normally used to find water, but Madame has other things in mind.

“*D'accord.* And now for the inspection. You may accompany me if you wish, my friends.”

And with that she begins to walk around the property in her high-heeled sandals, which don't seem to slow her down at all. Karma runs along next to her. Madame pokes around the house and the big barn, puts her ear to the ground, whispers to the trees, and then talks out loud for several long minutes, all the while holding her divining rod in front of her. We follow. Coriander is as bemused as me. There seems to be nothing else we can do but stare incredulously. Madame Aligot appears to be listening and conversing with someone or something, or maybe with the wind or something crazy like that. She keeps nodding her head and muttering in a language we cannot understand. My husband whispers that perhaps it is ancient Occitan, which the people here have spoken for generations. “After all,” he explains as we rush along rather ridiculously after Madame, “this whole area was called the Land of Oc, which literally means the *Land of Yes*, many many years ago!”

The land of Oc! The land of Oc! I can't help repeating it to myself. It is all more than odd by now. I begin to feel those little alarm bells that ring inside my head when I know something is not what it's supposed to be. They have gotten louder. Are we dealing with a mad woman here? Perhaps she has escaped from somewhere I do not want to know about. And why has she offered to let us stay here? She doesn't know us from the man in the moon. And why have I mentally accepted her offer without thinking twice?

No, we need to leave this place.

Madame must have heard my thoughts because she comes back to the stone wall. She quietly turns to me with a cockeyed smile.

"My dear Zinnia. Do not worry. Things are just as they should be. I am as I should be. You shall stay here and then buy this house and discover for yourselves the secrets of Perdiguier. You have been selected. Remember that!"

She turns to the rest of the family. "Karma will stay with you. She will be your guide and teacher, and I shall give *les enfants* lessons in the science of herbs and concocting starting tomorrow. They will need it later. That is our plan."

Again, we are mute. All of us! Madame then confides, before we even have a chance to gulp at what she has just said, that there is something seriously different about Perdiguier.

Well, I could have told her that.

"What I tell you now is important. You have come here for a reason. Whatever shall follow from this day forth is the responsibility of your family only and, *écoutez bien*, you shall find a hidden treasure.

"Treasure! I love treasures! Cosmos, if you find the treasure first I get half," whispers Verbena anxiously.

Cosmos, being used to this and determined not to let his big sister get the better of him counters, "You do not! You get one quarter, since you're clearly one quarter of this family – but I get the rest since I found it."

But just as Cosmos is getting ready to race off to go treasure hunting, he quietly turns to Verbena.

"What kind of treasure do you think she meant? Do you think she is a bit kind of...well, you know?"

"I'm not sure", Verbena replied. "And what was she talking about, listening with our mind's eye?"

“I’m not sure either. It sounds weird in my opinion. Maybe it’s a French thing. Maybe it’ll help us find the treasure!”

With that, Verbena and Cosmos decide to close their eyes and breathe deeply to get into their mind’s eye, just as Madame Aligot had said. When they open their eyes again and look up into the reassuring blue of the summer sky, they see many different birds gliding back and forth over their heads, each with an independent song or cry. They shout to us that they hadn’t noticed them all before.

They do not notice, however, the huge grey-and-white owl with sharp, orange eyes that has perched on a branch of the large tree, just above where we are sitting with Madame Aligot. But I do. He stares right at us. I overlook at the time what I know about owls, which is that they normally only come out at night.

Then all of us look far into the green hued woods that lie beyond the stone wall and I see how the sun plays games with the shadows, making them fall and ripple in long, wavy lines and criss-crosses over the leaves and moss. We can’t help but note a continual rustling of branches. I begin to drift further into Madame Aligot’s special world and I picture all manner of creatures watching us.

“I think you’re both right,” I whisper. Coriander nods his head slowly and stares as far into the woods as he can with the binoculars, which he usually wears around his neck. “Yes, definitely. I would say undoubtedly there are many creatures in the woods. And no doubt they are aware of us. Why shouldn’t they be? It’s completely normal. And Madame,” Coriander continues with as much resistance to this strange force as he can, “if I were to examine an X-ray picture of the forest at this minute, showing every animal in the thickets and every bird in the sky and every insect in the ground, do you think...”

Madame interrupts him neatly. “Ah, my dear Monsieur, I can tell you are a scientist. What a questioning mind. Always looking for empirical evidence. Always searching for the true facts. Bravo *mon cher!* It must be clear to you that I will not take no for an answer. You are to stay here and that is that.”

On that note, Madame throws her arms around my baffled husband, rendering him completely speechless, and kisses him three times on alternate cheeks until poor Coriander begins to genuinely blush. He is certainly not used to such spontaneous outbursts of this nature. It is not how things are done in committee meetings at the old fashioned university in London where he works. And with that, my husband turns a corner. I know he has changed his mind and we shall stay here. Madame has neatly

grabbed him as well. Obvious.

As for me, I am lost. Utterly, ridiculously, and unaccountably lost. I am under some kind of spell. And against everything I ever thought was proper or correct or rational, I must follow the thread of this strange enchantment.

The sight of Coriander lost for words and hugged and kissed by Madame makes Verbena and Cosmos rock with laughter. Suddenly they race off to be the first to find the treasure.

Whilst they are rummaging around piles of stones, I come back to earth a bit and take the opportunity to question Madame some more and ask her mundane questions about payment and so forth. Half smiling with another '*please don't be so boringly normal*' look, she throws her arms in the air and shakes her head as if to say that mere money has nothing at all to do with things. Refusing to utter another word, she promptly gets back on her bike and takes off down the road shouting in a high-pitched, honeyed voice:

"I know you will come to the right decision, *mes amis. A bientôt!*"! Karma barks several times and howls as though she has something critical to tell us. It looks like we have inherited a dog for a few weeks as well.

"What ridiculous, absolute mumbo jumbo," mutters Coriander after Madame has left. I agree and yet neither of us can stop thinking about this woman. She has certainly wedged herself into my head and is now well and truly stuck there.

She certainly doesn't conform to any type of individual we have ever known. What a character! What *type* of character, I cannot fathom. My personal alarm bells are growing louder.

At Coriander's suggestion, we continue with our house-and-grounds exploration.

Finally, after many hours, hungry from having missed lunch entirely, red faced from the sun, covered with centuries of dust and tattooed with a crayon box of stains on our arms and legs, we put all of the strange occurrences out of our minds and devour some leftover sandwiches.

We decide to camp out that night on the little terrace beside the stone wall. Clearly, my husband has emotionally capitulated to Madame and will doubtless agree to stay here for our holidays. I have won the first round. Or had Madame won the first round?

It is as clear to me as a crystal waterfall that something significant has

happened-is happening.

My immediate plan is to give the house a good clean and move our few things inside the next day and stay put for the rest of our vacation. I am sure that over the next few weeks the mystery of this ancient house, the scent of the lavender fields, the acres of woods, and the splendid stones and fossils will work their magic on my husband.

As the sun set that day in a victorious sweep of pink and purple, we finally settle down in our sleeping bags. Gazing up at the star-studded sky, surrounded by lemony-smelling herbs and wild thyme, any concerns I may have had earlier vanish as effortlessly as the last of the day's puffy clouds.

Coriander takes my hand. I know what he is thinking, but say nothing.

And when the full moon finally rose over my weary family like a hopeful silver beacon, we each silently knew this was a must-have kind of place and that we were about to have a must-have kind of adventure. Karma, who had snuggled down in between Verbena and Cosmos, gave an end of the day yip and plopped her head down on someone's feet. The last things we heard that night were a hooting owl, the non-stop crickets, and a croaking frog chorus in the distance. With those satisfying country sounds wafting around our exhausted heads, my worries about Madame floated into far-off space, and we all finally fell asleep.

## **Definitely Under the Spell**

The sun was up and about for several hours ahead of us the next day as we slept the dreamless sleep of the innocent. Finally, our new octogenarian Perdiguier neighbours, Monsieur and Madame Truffle, came around with their scrawny little poodle, Tutu. They introduced themselves, and cheerfully offered our sleepy family big bowls of steaming coffee, hot chocolate, a basket of croissants, and Madame's special fig jam.

Tutu and Karma went off to play in the big field in front of the hamlet. The two dogs seemed to know each other well. In fact it looked like they were having some kind of canine conference, since they definitely weren't running around like dogs usually do, but I didn't pay too much attention to them at the time. The children raced over to join them.

Taking a quiet walk around the property, my husband and I were surprised to discover a graveyard. We stood by the iron fence for a few moments staring at the crumbling lichen-covered tombstones.

Not a single word is uttered.

Tiny goose bumps come upon my arms. I am convinced there are a gaggle of ghosts buried deep in the earth trying to tell us something. A spiky looking white cat with enormous blue eyes appears out of nowhere and, leaping onto one of the graves, stares at me with an imperious grin on its face, challenging me to a great mouse hunt. My goose bumps are now the size of small grapes as I struggle to banish these ridiculous thoughts from my mind.

Silently, we continue our exploration through the forest of green oaks and pines that surround the house. I sense we are being followed and keep turning around. After a while I ignore this anxiety and put it down to being brought up in a city and not used to the sights and sounds of country life. Looking back later, I realize that my instincts that day were exactly right. Instincts always are.

Gazing distractedly through the woods to the mountains I feel an invisible silken cord drawing me closer and closer to this place and I can tell that Coriander knows exactly what is on my mind. And in my heart.

We discuss all of the pertinent questions for a long time later that day and well into the next and the next.

In fact, we speak of nothing else.

We don't sleep very well.

Finally, we succumb. Fate laughs, takes us by the scruff of the neck and firmly shakes every rational thought out of our heads.

We speak to Madame and agree. We shall buy Perdiguier! There is no choice. Something powerful is pushing us to do what even I, the dreamer and romantic of the family, find altogether odd, not to say unaccountably bizarre.

Admittedly, my husband's eventual agreement to take this enormous new life direction surprises me but I don't question his motives for a moment. I doubt that even he, the man of science and logic that he is, knows what they are. No. It is clear. We have all been neatly drawn into this rural picture. But by whom? Madame? Anyone else?

We have many long talks with Verbena and Cosmos and naturally caution them that it will not be at all easy in a new country with a new language and with new

friends to be made. But they are adamant. The children both really want to give it a go and try life out in a French school. They are sure they can get to grips with the language. It is brave of them, and both Coriander and I are sure they will benefit from a wider cultural experience.

We investigate the local school and find it to be one of the best in the region. How perfect. It feels like this was all meant to be, that we have indeed caught the golden ring!

It is only then, after we had made the decision, that Madame informs us of something even more astonishing.

The ancient family who had lived here on this hill for generations were the family *Jolicoing!* *But that is our name!*

Could they have been my husband's long lost French relations? We are speechless. I don't believe I have ever seen Coriander lost for words before.

More than ever I am convinced that such bizarre circumstances do not happen out of the blue. We *have* been led here. Or blown here. There is absolutely no doubt any more in my mind.

And that was that. We sold our London flat and bought Perdiguier. The truth is that this little hill where E and 13 intersected on the map had brought us under its spell. We didn't think twice about what our disbelieving friends and family said when we explained our new plans. We are Jolicoings after all!

And now we are French Jolicoings. The winds of fortune have ushered us here to begin an adventure beyond anything we could have imagined, in this world or any other.



