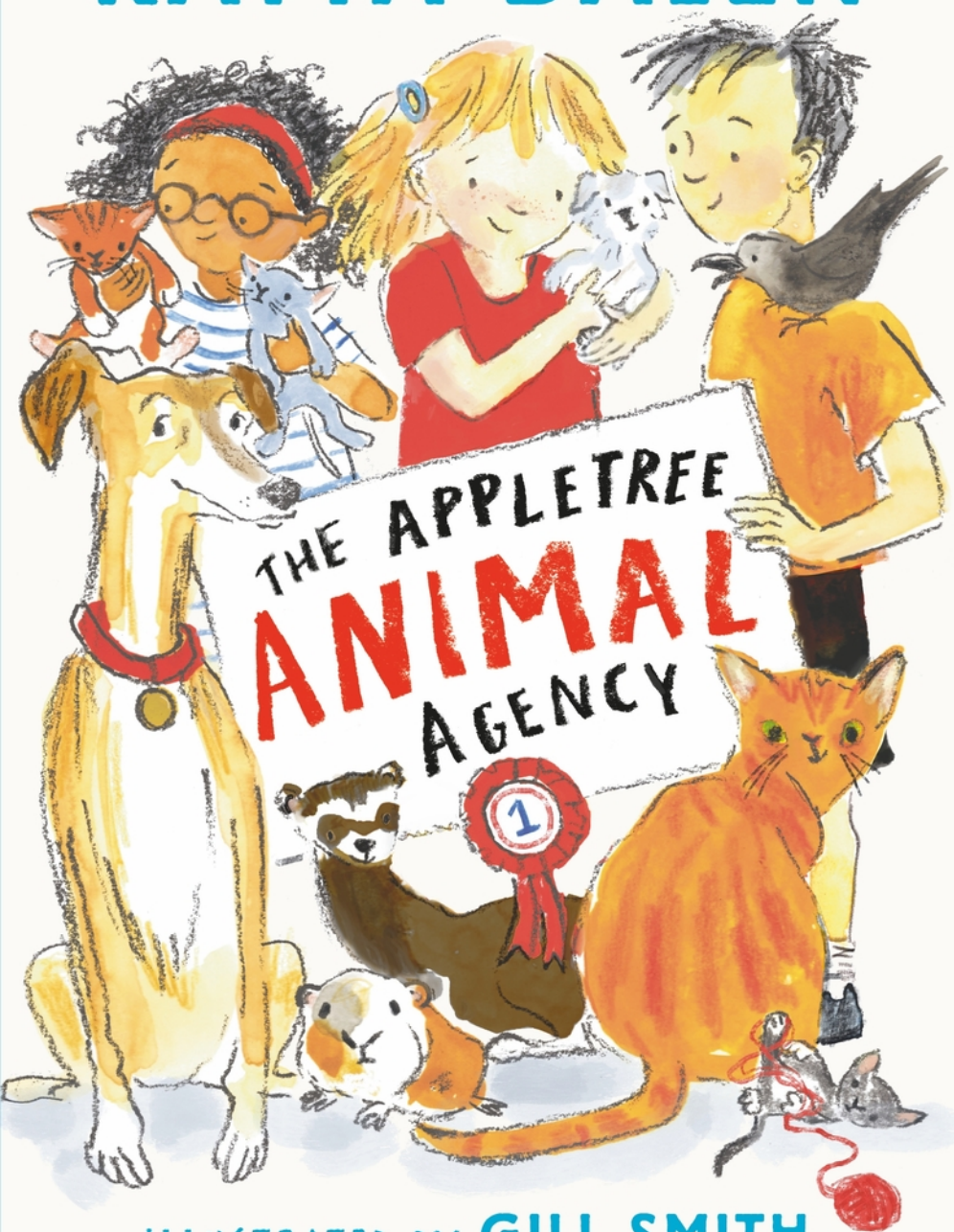


"A huge heap of fun!" ROSS MONTGOMERY

# KATYA BALEN



ILLUSTRATED BY GILL SMITH



**FOR RAFFI, WHO WAS THE VERY BEST  
OF DOGS K.B.**

**FOR MY FRIEND ROB WHO RESCUES BIRDS G.S.**

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# THE APPLETREE ANIMAL AGENCY



**KATYA BALEN**

ILLUSTRATED BY **GILL SMITH**



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## Prologue

Mattie Robins knelt on her beanbag and looked out of the tree-house window at the star-bright sky. It was nearly her bedtime. But night-time was when all the secret animals came out to play.

Through her super-special binoculars, Mattie could see batwings brushing the dark clouds, and when she looked down there was a little fox cub tumbling over and over like an orange clown. A snuffling sound at the bottom of the apple tree was definitely a hedgehog.

Mattie pulled a duvet around her shoulders like a big cosy cloak and sighed happily. Watching animals was her second-best thing ever. Playing with animals was her very best.

In her class at Mossdale Primary School, nearly everyone had a pet. George Gibbons had a hundred! Ninety-eight of them were fish, but still. He also had a fat ginger cat called Mr Tangerine and a little hamster called Fiddlesticks.



Mattie didn't have any pets. It was just her and her dad in their little brick house. Mattie did have lots of other lovely things, such as this big tree house right up in the top branches of the apple tree. It had real windows with bright yellow frames. It had a little wooden balcony that ran all the way round it. It had a rope ladder to climb up and a whirly twirly slide to come down. It had jars filled with super-sour apple sweets and it had shelves stuffed with comics and books. It had squashy beanbags and an actual kitchen table and chairs. Mattie's dad had built it for her birthday last year, and it was almost as brilliant as getting a puppy or a kitten or a rabbit.

Almost. Mattie sighed.

So instead, Mattie pretended all the night animals in her garden were her pets.

"Goodnight, Quilla," she whispered to the hedgehog.





“Fly carefully, Bertie,” she said to the swooping bat.

“Nice acrobatics, Marmalade,” she told the tumbling fox cub.

Mattie loved the night animals, but pretending they were hers just wasn’t the same as having a real pet.

She desperately wanted a puppy. She asked for one every Christmas and birthday and every weekend and weekday too. She drew pictures of her perfect puppy all the time as well. It was a scruff ball with floppy ears and fur the colour of the moon.

But Mattie’s dad always said no.

There wasn’t enough time to look after Mattie and go to work and walk a puppy or play with a puppy or train a puppy or groom a puppy or feed a puppy. And Mattie wasn’t old enough or sensible enough for that kind of responsibility.



Mattie always said the same thing.

She would walk the puppy and play with the puppy and train the puppy and groom the puppy and feed the puppy. And couldn't her dad see that she got older and more sensible every single day?

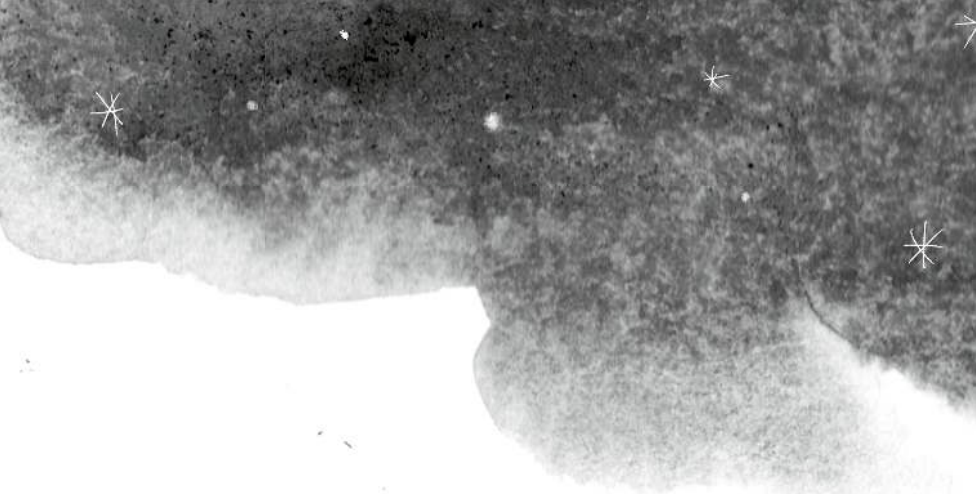
She knew all about animals. She loved them. The village vet, Dr Joseph, had always let her and her best friend, Zoe, help out at the surgery. They would clean out the rabbits or help to give kittens their eye drops. Dr Joseph told them lots of interesting things about all the animals in his care.

Mattie knew she could look after a puppy.

But Dad never listened. He said Mattie was a whirlwind and had too many madcap ideas. She'd have to wait until she was bigger and more responsible.

Mattie stared up at the pale full moon and the twinkling stars dotted above her. As she





watched, one of the stars fizzed and flickered and then curved across the sky. It left an icy trail of bright light behind it.

A shooting star! Mattie couldn't believe it. A real shooting star.

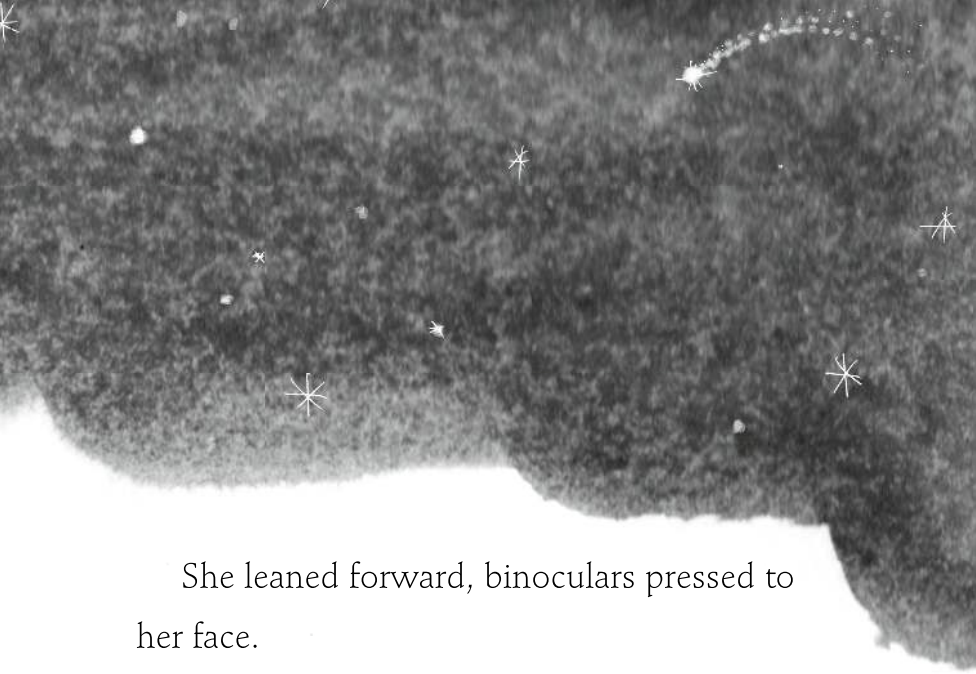
She had to make a wish.

Mattie lowered her head and closed her eyes very tightly and wished and wished and wished.

Mattie wished for a puppy.

When she opened her eyes, she saw a streak of something wiry and wild. She blinked. Moonlight brushed the grass and the shape shifted in the shadows. It couldn't be. Could it?





She leaned forward, binoculars pressed to her face.

A puppy.

A scruffy, wiry, snuffly puppy with fur the colour of the moon.

Mattie's perfect puppy.

The puppy she had wished for on a shooting star.

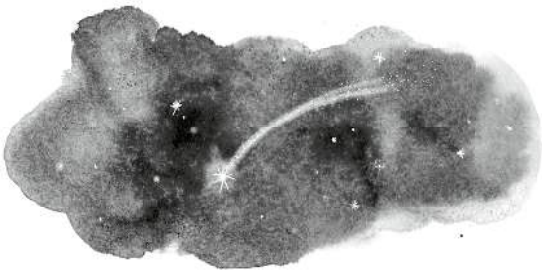
It was moving strangely, lolloping through the grass instead of bounding or leaping easily on its four legs, like the fox cub. Mattie twiddled the zoom on her binoculars. She thought the puppy was holding its paw up high

as though it was hurt. Mattie's heart squeezed. Poor puppy. She had to see if she could help it.

Mattie scrambled to pull on her shoes. She whizzed down the whirly twirly slide to the soft grass below. But as she tumbled onto her knees and looked around, the puppy was gone. She peered into the star-speckled bushes and across the moon-washed lawn. But there was no sign of a puppy. No rustling, no woofing, no streak of fur.

It must have been another fox cub or a curious badger, or just starlit shadows, thought Mattie. Not her perfect puppy at all.

Wishes didn't come true like that.



# Chapter 1

## A Dog Called Heinz



The day was bright. It was definitely going to be hot. Mattie could smell sunshine in the air as she cycled through the village with her best friend, Zoe, and Zoe's little dog, Heinz.

"And then, it just disappeared!" said Mattie. "Totally vanished! It was my absolutely perfect puppy. I think I must have imagined it. I wished so hard that my mind played a trick!"

"Or maybe you wished so hard it came true?" said Zoe, tucking behind her ear a curly strand of hair that had escaped from her helmet. Zoe always looked neat and tidy. Mattie definitely didn't.

"But then where is the puppy?" said Mattie. "That's not proper wishing, if the star makes it



come true but then takes the wish away again! It should be against the rules.”

Zoe nodded seriously. Heinz had stopped to sniff a lamp post but now raced after them on his little legs. He stopped at an overturned food-waste bin.

“Leave!” commanded Zoe.

Heinz wagged his tail and obediently followed her bike.

Zoe had trained Heinz perfectly. When he’d been a puppy, she’d had a special notebook with all the tricks she wanted to train him to do, and every single one was ticked now. He would do anything for a liver treat.

His ears streamed behind him as he ran, and his tail went round and round like a helicopter. Then his ears pricked up and he stopped again and sniffed at a bush. Its leaves were rustling.

Heinz barked at the bush, and Nate – Zoe and Mattie’s friend – emerged from between its





spiky leaves, holding a football. “Hello, Heinz!” he called. Nate loved Heinz. “Let me know if you’d like me to walk him, Zoe! If I can’t have a pet in the house, maybe I can have one out of the house.” He grinned. Nate’s sister was allergic to fur, and it wasn’t possible for Nate to have a dog.

“Of course!” Zoe beamed and Heinz woofed his approval.

Mattie and Zoe whooshed along with the sunlight streaming around them like golden



ribbons. They were heading towards Ria's ice cream hut in the middle of the village green. Mattie was already thinking about the double scoop she'd order. But what flavour? Chocolate and strawberry with sprinkles? Caramel and cookie with fudge sauce? Her mouth watered. Then after ice cream, she and Zoe were going to spend the day birdwatching. Mattie had her binoculars and her *Big Book of British Birds*. She had ticked off seventeen so far. She loved picking out the bright, feathered shapes perched high in the trees. Maybe today was the day she'd finally see a lesser spotted woodpecker.

"Come on, Heinz," Zoe called. She looked behind her and whistled.

But Heinz had disappeared.



## Chapter 2

# He Went That Way!



Mattie squeezed her brake levers. Her feet hung either side of her bike, toes pointing to the ground. She looked back and waited for Heinz to appear.

Zoe had put her bike down and was calling Heinz's name. She ran back to the bush they'd cycled past a few minutes ago and then to the overturned bin, but he wasn't there.

She whistled Heinz's special whistle.

She rattled Heinz's tin of treats.

But there was no sudden scampering of paws. No wet pink nose hoping for snacks.

Nothing at all except the gentle whistle of birdsong and the low hum of the village waking up.

Nate walked back down his garden path.  
He'd heard all the shouting.

"I wonder if he chased something," said  
Zoe, pointing at the bush Heinz had barked at.  
Her curls were springing loose and she hadn't  
tucked them back. She was obviously worried.

"I didn't see anything in there except my  
football," he said. "But maybe there was a  
hedgehog hiding!"

Zoe pushed her head inside the bush to call  
Heinz's name again. Mattie climbed off her  
bike and placed it down to hurry back to her  
best friend.

"I'll see if I can find him," Zoe said. She  
scrambled through the bush's thick scratchy  
branches. Inside it was dark and cool and it  
smelled like leaves and earth. Earthworms  
wriggled pinkly in the soil and a shiny beetle  
scuttled to safety.

But there was no dog.





“Where is he?” said Zoe with a wobble in her voice when Mattie reappeared. Mattie felt something on her cheek and wiped it away. When she looked down at her hand, it was mud. Zoe was somehow perfectly clean.

“He won’t have gone far,” said Mattie. “I think we should open his treat tin so he can smell all the nice things inside. His nose is so good, he’ll be able to sniff them out from anywhere. And then we should go and check all the places where he might have managed to get himself stuck!”



Zoe still looked worried, but she nodded. Zoe was very organized and always liked a plan. She sniffed and straightened her shoulders.

“He loves Mr Clarke at the bakery, and Ria always gives him a free Pup Cup at the ice cream hut,” she said, listing places on her fingers. “He could have run off and got stuck in one of the sheds on the village green. They’re being opened and closed a lot at the moment because of all the setting up for the fête. He was just here, though. He always stays right



beside me. Maybe something scared him? But what? We need a plan to find him. We need to search everywhere!” Zoe got out her notebook, but Mattie was too impatient. The quickest way to find Heinz was to start searching – now!

“Let’s go!” said Mattie. “We’ll find him, I promise.”

Zoe reluctantly put away her notebook and the girls grabbed their bikes to wheel them towards the green and the ice cream hut.

Mattie’s heart was thumping. Heinz was missing. It was scary and horrible. He was the

best little dog, and she just couldn't believe he'd run off. She waved the tin of treats so the scent caught on the summer breeze. She also knew how good dogs' hearing was, so she and



Zoe carried on calling and whistling.

“Have you lost Heinz?” asked their teacher, Miss Cohen, as they reached the edge of the green. She was spearing bright crisp packets with a litter picker. “I saw him dart out of a bush a few minutes ago. He stopped to sniff these holes – they appeared overnight, you know! But he was too quick for me to grab him, I’m so sorry. He went that way.” She pointed across the village green. It was indeed covered in small holes, with earth scattered around each one.

“Thank you, Miss!” gasped Mattie, and she and Zoe jumped on their bikes.

But when they got to the village green, it was empty except for Mr Quentin, who was weeding the bowling green. Mr Quentin was in charge of all the sports here. It kept him very busy. He flagged them down with a huge yellow handkerchief and then used it to mop



his forehead. Next to him was a bin bag half full of crisp packets and takeaway boxes.

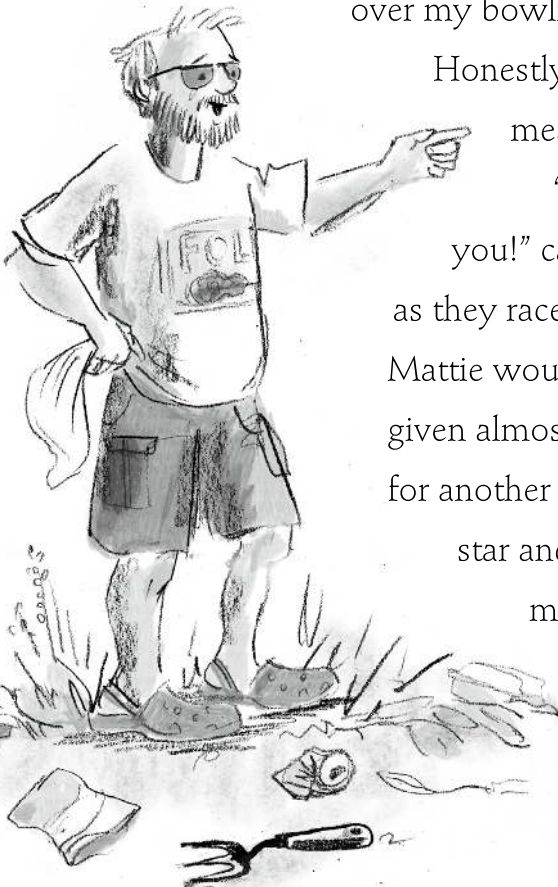
“He went that way!” said Mr Quentin, pointing towards a neat clump of bushes.

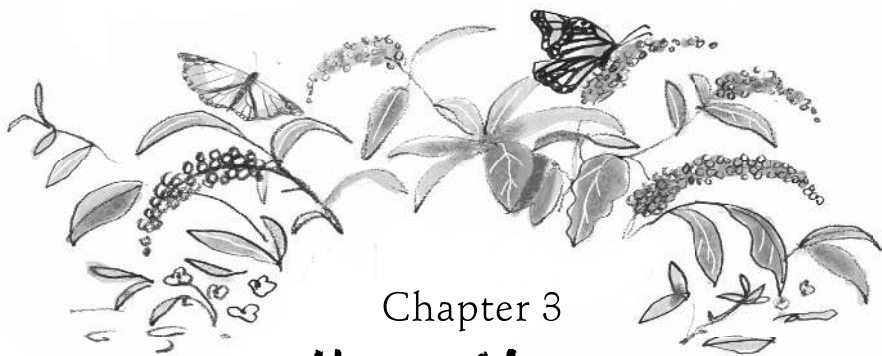
“He’d caught a scent, I’m sure. Maybe it’s whatever animal has been leaving rubbish all

over my bowling lawns.

Honestly, what a mess!”

“Thank you!” called Zoe as they raced on, and Mattie would have given almost anything for another shooting star and one more wish.





Chapter 3  
**Heinz Makes  
a Discovery**

Zoe shoved her head into the first bush she saw. Mattie ran to the next one. She was breathing very hard, and she was hoping even harder.

And then she heard it.

It was faint at first. Mattie thought her ears must be tricking her.

Then it came again.

A funny little sound.

A cross between a squeal and a whine.

And a scuffling noise.

Mattie cocked her head.





“Do you hear that?” asked Zoe, emerging from another bush with leaves tangled in her hair.

But now there was silence.

Then, with a great whoosh, Heinz launched himself out of the bushes and into Zoe’s lap. He barked and barked and barked, filling the air with woofs that made Mattie’s ears hurt but she didn’t care one bit.

Heinz was safe!

But he wouldn't stay still. He woofed and woofed and woofed. He spun in circles and pawed at their legs.

"Maybe he wants a treat?" suggested Zoe, so Mattie gave him a liver treat from his tin. Heinz took it gently from her hand, and then shot back into the bushes!

"Heinz, no!" cried Zoe. "Come back!"

She and Mattie plunged through the criss-cross of scratchy leaves. Then both girls stopped.

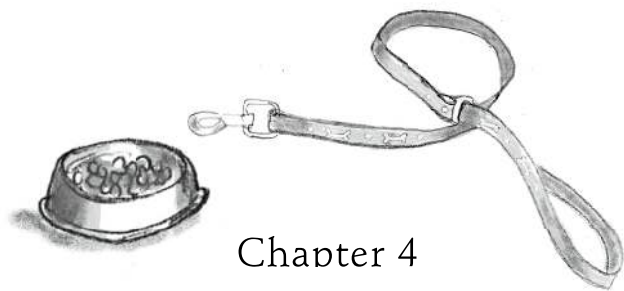
"Oh!" said Zoe in surprise.

Trembling and hiding underneath the great green hedge, nibbling on a milk bone, was the tiny scruffy puppy Mattie had seen last night.

Mattie felt like her whole heart would burst. The puppy was so sweet and so small. She stretched out her hand towards it. She didn't even think first. All she wanted to do was scoop that adorable creature up in her arms and give it a big cuddle!

The puppy startled and with a squeal and a tangle of long legs, bolted out of the hedge.





## Chapter 4

# A Perfect Puppy

Mattie leaped after the puppy as it darted into a bigger clump of hedges. Her heart was beating wildly, and she was fizzing with energy and excitement. But every time she moved, the puppy scrambled a little bit further away.

Mattie needed to stay still, but it was very hard to do. Her brain was whirring and fizzing.

She had to try to keep calm. She knew a lot about all sorts of different animals. She read books and watched TV shows and made notes in her pawprint notebook. But the thing she knew the most about was dogs. Her dad said she was the biggest dog expert in Mossdale Village.





You shouldn't chase after a frightened dog, she reminded herself. They'll just keep running.

"Stop!" she called to Zoe softly. Then Mattie sat down quietly and calmly, and scattered Heinz's liver treats all around her. She put a handful in her lap. They smelled horrible.

Then, she waited.

Zoe sat down too.

Heinz curled into a little ball, tucked his tail over his nose, and fell asleep.

Mr Quentin came over to see what was going on.

“How curious,” he said when they explained about the puppy. “I bet that’s what’s been rummaging through the bins and digging up the lawns and spreading rubbish everywhere! Little tyke. Well, I’ll pop to Mrs Chester’s shop to get something to help you get the pup out and I’ll phone the vet and...” He wandered off, still talking.

A few minutes later, he came back with a bag of cooked sausages. Mattie scattered those around her and Zoe too. Heinz got a sausage for being such a good boy.



The puppy poked its nose out of the hedge and sniffed.

Then it disappeared back into the leaves.

Mattie carried on waiting. She felt very wriggly. But she pretended she was playing musical statues.

