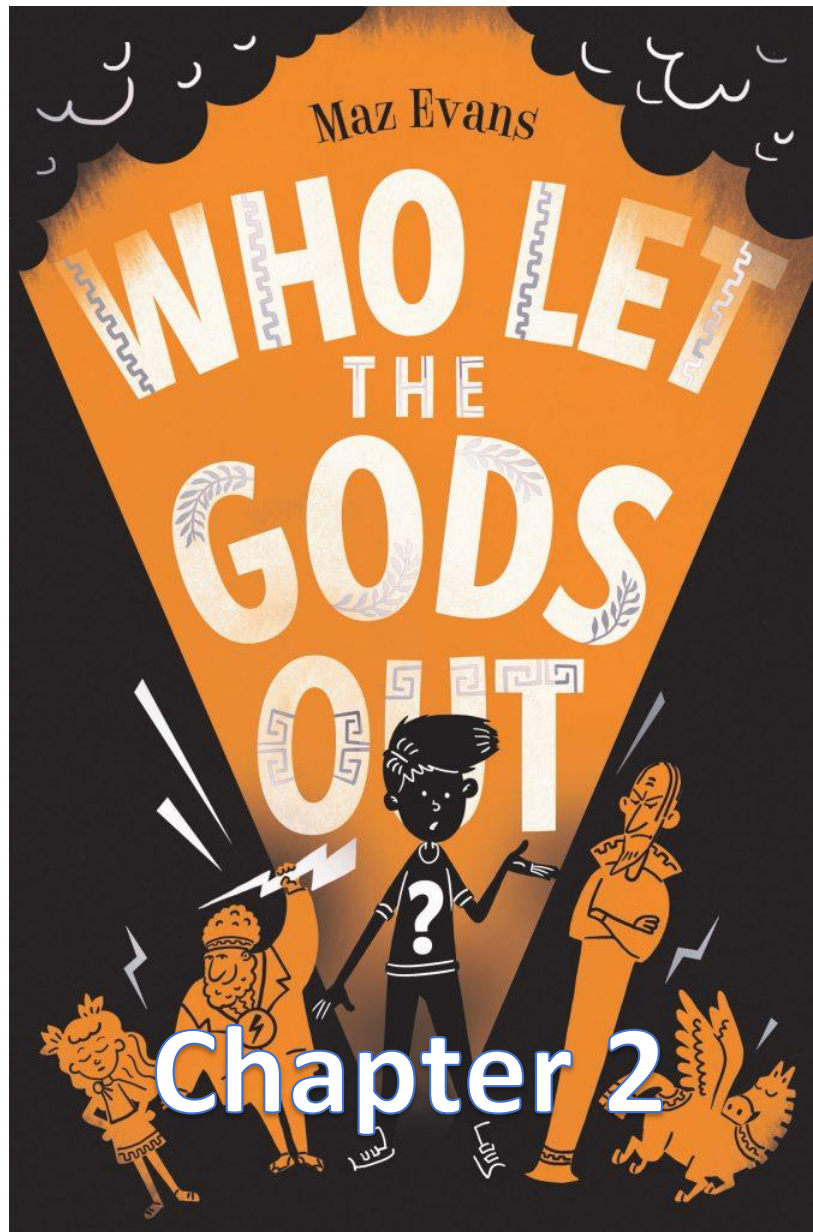




2. Home is Where the Farm is

At 4.30 p.m., when Elliot had arranged all the books in the history department into alphabetical order for Boil's detention, he finally made it outside into the darkening but still very welcome evening air. The crowds of proud parents eager to drive their children home had long since left, but no one had been there for Elliot earlier and no one was there for him now. No one ever was. With a quick backward glance, Elliot dived off the driveway, hopped over the school fence into the fields beyond and started the long walk home.

The stroll back to Home Farm was Elliot's

favourite part of his day. Or it was on dry days – when it was pouring with rain he didn't feel the love for the mile-long hike. But today was one of those mild early-winter evenings that made him content simply to wander through the fields as the stars assembled above.

He raised his head to feel the fresh air on his face, but his peace was interrupted by a gaggle of Brysmore girls walking in the opposite direction, pointing and staring at Elliot before retreating behind their hands in giggling fits.

Had Elliot listened to these, or any of the other silly girls at school, he would have known that he was considered one of the better-looking boys at Brysmore. But he didn't listen to what anyone said and he didn't care what anyone thought. He went through his school life – most of his life, in fact – on his own. There was a time when he'd enjoyed hanging out with his mates and might have been considered quite popular. But things had changed. Right now he didn't have time for friends. And besides, friends had parents. And parents asked too many questions.

Elliot arrived at Home Farm just as the stars started to rule the night sky. They were especially bright tonight and cast their dreamy glow over the ancient stone circle of Stonehenge, which was

just visible from his front gate. The mysterious stones looked magical in the glistening light and Elliot drank in his favourite view. He lifted the rope that held the rotting gate in place and dragged his tired feet up the path. He and Mum had laid those stones together and every wonky step reminded Elliot of them flinging mud at each other in fits of giggles as they worked.

The farm had been his family's home for generations. He could see the holes where fallen tiles made the roof look like a mouth missing some teeth, the dirty windows that blocked more light than they let in and the peeling red paint on a door that could barely keep out a draught, let alone a burglar. And Elliot loved every crumbling brick.

He put his key in the lock – a pointless exercise for a door that could be knocked in by a strong cough – but before he could push it open, a terrible screech erupted behind him.

'Coo-ee! Have you got a mo, poppet?'

There were so many irritating words in that sentence, but none as irritating as their speaker. Elliot slapped on a fake grin and turned around.

'Hello, Mrs Porshley-Plum,' he called in his least sincere voice.

'Hello, pickle!' Patricia Porshley-Plum shrieked



in return, using one of the countless stupid nicknames she used in place of anyone's real name. 'Have you got a seccy?'

'I'll have to be quick – I need to—'

'Gre-eat!' squealed Patricia as she approached the house, tottering slightly as the heels on her shoes struggled with both the uneven path and the ample backside they were supporting. 'Shall we go in for a cuppa?'

'I'd love to,' Elliot lied as he shut the door behind him, 'but Mum's got another stomach bug.'

'Oh no, sugarplum!' Mrs Porshley-Plum pouted dramatically, her dark-pink lipstick making her mouth look like a monkey's bottom. 'Perhaps I should come in and see her?'

'It's catching,' said Elliot quickly, running out of imaginary illnesses to keep his mother safe from this annoying neighbour. 'And squishy. And smelly. Seriously. Stay away.'

'I see,' said Patricia, her narrow eyes scanning every millimetre of her young neighbour, as if she could spot the lie on his shirt. Patricia's mouth always smiled, but her eyes never did. She straightened her tweed jacket over her generous hips. 'Well, when she's feeling better, we must have That Chat,' she added with a ridiculous wink.

Patricia had been trying to have That Chat with Elliot's mum, Josie, for a while. At Nan's funeral the previous year, she had whispered to Josie at the graveside about her new property-development business and how the farm was sitting on a valuable piece of land.

When the doctor came to Grandad's bedside six months later, Mrs Porshley-Plum popped round the next day and made an offer for the farm to 'get him into a decent nursing home'.

The morning that Elliot and Josie laid Grandad to rest, Patricia Porshley-Plum called to say that if they fancied moving on, now the two of them were completely alone in the world, she'd happily take the farm off their hands for a quick sale.

'Patricia Horse's-Bum will never get her hands on this family's home!' Josie had raged that night. 'She can keep her plastic houses for her plastic people! This is a real family home for a real family and if she thinks she can flash her cash and move us out then she can stick her cheque book right up her ...'

Elliot smiled at the memory of his mum's rude suggestion. But she was right. This was their home and Elliot needed to protect it. He just didn't have a clue how.

'I'd better go and see to Mum – lovely to see



you, Mrs Horse's ... Mrs Porshley-Plum,' he said.

'And you, sweet-cheeks,' trilled Patricia. 'Get Mumsy to call me – aaargh!'

Maybe it was the wonky paving stones, the ridiculous heels or because her nose was stuck so far in the air she couldn't see where she was going, but Patricia Porshley-Plum crashed down on the path like a newborn foal on roller skates, spilling herself and the contents of her handbag all over it.

'Let me help you,' Elliot offered. 'I'll get these for you.' He picked up the mysterious items that fill a lady's handbag and replaced nearly all of them. 'Here you go,' he said, giving the overflowing bag back to the world's most irritating neighbour.

'Thank you. I'll see you soon,' said Patricia, her eyes smiling even less than usual as she turned and staggered down the rest of the path, finally leaving Elliot to make it into his house.

Once his front door had closed on the world, Elliot took a moment to rest against it. Home. At last.

He dropped his school bag next to the pile of post on the mat, and picked up the letters. All were reminders about unpaid bills. As if he needed reminding.

'Mum?' he called softly in case she was enjoy-

ing a nap. 'I'm home.'

He peered round the door into the cosy lounge, but Mum wasn't in her usual battered armchair by the fireplace. Elliot checked the kitchen, Mum's bedroom and tentatively knocked on all the bathroom doors, but there was no reply to his gentle calls.

With a dark fear rising through his veins, Elliot started to look more frantically, flinging open doors and running through rooms.

'Mum!' he shouted. 'Mum – where are you?'

He desperately searched every corner of the farmhouse, even looking under the beds. Racing past the kitchen for a third time, Elliot's stomach tightened into a familiar knot. The back door was ajar. His heart plummeted.

It had happened again. Mum had disappeared.