
"Cat Gray's storytelling proves that magic really does exist."
Helena Duggan, author of A Place Called Perfect
USBORNE
SPELLSTOPPERS
CAT GRAY

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USBORNE

1

Max had a problem. A big problem – the sort that ruins your life. Over time, Max had learned to expect the worst, because in his experience, the worst nearly always happened. But it was hard to feel like that today. The summer holidays had just begun, the sun was shining, and Max rushed downstairs, two at a time.

He went through his usual routine to make breakfast. He got his wooden spoon, and used it to turn the kettle on. Then he dropped two slices of bread into the toaster, using the edge of the spoon to press down the lever. The fridge was harder to manage without touching it, but Max had got pretty good with the wooden spoon. He'd had years of practice. Avoiding anything that used electricity was almost second nature to him, but he always needed to be on his guard. If he ever relaxed, disaster inevitably followed.

Max took out the milk and butter, careful not to let his hand brush against the inside of the fridge. It had only been six months since he had broken the last one. He could feel his mother's eyes on him as he prodded the door closed. She was always watching him, as if she was waiting for him to break something else.

Today, she seemed even more anxious than usual. She kept glancing out of the window, into the street, and was twisting a set of keys round and round her finger.

"I've got something to tell you," she said, as she watched Max butter his toast, then smother it in peanut butter. "You might not like it."

Max was immediately suspicious.

"We're not going on holiday again, are we?"

"No! Not after the last one."

She was referring to the time she had tried to take Max on an aeroplane, before either of them realized how bad his problem was. After he had broken three ticket scanners in a row, the security guards had refused to let Max go any further. Max suspected that was actually a good thing. It had been painful enough getting shocked by the ticket scanners. He'd have probably died if he'd touched something as big as an aeroplane.

"What is it, then?" he asked, through a mouthful of toast.

"Remember that competition I entered? The one where you had to come up with a slogan for that energy company?"

Max nodded. His mother had spent days trying to think of a catchy one-liner. She had literally come up with hundreds of ideas. He couldn't blame her – the first prize had been forty thousand pounds.

"Well, I won," she said.

"That's brilliant!" cried Max, leaping to his feet. "We're rich!"

But his mother was shaking her head.

"I won second prize. A new car. It arrived this morning."

"What's wrong with that?" asked Max. "We've never been able to afford a car before!"

"It's electric," she said. "An electric car. I'm so sorry, Max."

Max felt the excitement that had bubbled up inside him fade away, and a feeling of despair crept into its place. He rarely travelled in cars of any sort, but a brand-new electric car sounded particularly dangerous.

"But if I touch anything electric, it breaks."

"It'll be okay," said his mother, reaching forwards and taking his hand. "I've worked out a way around it.

You just need to put on your wellies and your special gloves."

"But it's boiling!"

"Please, Max. Just give it a try. We could go off on a trip somewhere – wouldn't that be fun?"

Max sighed, then went over to the coat rack in the hall. He shoved his bare feet into his black rubber boots, which already felt hot and sticky. Then he picked up his 'special gloves' and felt even worse. They weren't special at all. They were just ordinary rubber washing-up gloves. He hated them more than anything, but he often had to wear them in public, especially if they went on a train or a bus. That was dreadful. No one wore wellington boots in London, especially when it wasn't even raining, and rubber gloves just made you look strange. It might have been bearable if they had been black, like his boots, but the only ones in the supermarket that were small enough for Max were bright yellow, just to make it extra-obvious that he was wearing washing-up gloves. He hated the powdery feel of them and their horrible, sweet smell. They reminded him of how weird he was.

It hadn't always been like this. Up until Max was eight, he had been completely ordinary. He could change the channels of the television without breaking it and he

was able to touch household appliances without using a wooden spoon. Then, soon after his eighth birthday, he had been at his friend Sami's house playing a video game, when suddenly he felt a sharp stab of pain in his fingers and the games console had died. No one could revive it. Sami's father had suggested that they use his old one instead, but as soon as it was Max's turn, the same thing happened. Both Sami and his parents had gone a bit silent after that, and the next day in class Sami ignored him completely.

Similar things started happening at school, too – there was an incident with the lights at the Christmas concert, a full-on disaster in the computer room, and within six months Max had gone from having lots of friends to having no one at all. Now people seemed to sense that there was something wrong with Max just by looking at him. Although it had only been four years since his problem started, it felt like an eternity. He had never heard of anybody else reacting to electricity in the same way. Even the doctor couldn't explain it. It was as if he was cursed.

"Come on!" cried his mother, hurrying past him, carrying a large, bulging plastic bag.

Max followed her down the front steps and out onto

the street. The new car was parked right in front of their house. It was black and shiny, and his mother stroked it gently, as if it was a horse or a cat.

"Don't look so worried," she said. "You've been in cars before and it's been fine."

"Yes, but there wasn't a giant battery sitting underneath those cars, was there?"

"I've thought it all through," said his mother, firmly. She opened the door on the passenger side, then pulled a large rubbery sheet out of the plastic bag. "I'll just spread this over the seat and then you'll be completely safe."

Max stared at the sheet in horror. It was the kind of thing that you put on beds to stop people weeing on them.

"I can't sit on that," he croaked. "People will think I wet myself."

"Don't be silly," she said. "It's the most practical solution."

She went around the car and got into the driver's seat.

"Get in!" she called, leaning over towards him with an encouraging smile.

Max climbed into the car. He sank down into the rubber-covered seat, which made a gentle farting noise as he lowered himself into it. The sheet smelled just like the

washing-up gloves and it stuck to the bare skin of his arms, below the short sleeves of his T-shirt.

"See?" said his mother, beaming at him. "It's all fine. So, where do you want to go? You choose."

"The beach," said Max, at once. He loved the sea, but as they lived in London, he hardly ever got a chance to see it.

"It's a bit far," said his mother, looking doubtful, but then she caught sight of Max's eager face.

"All right," she said. "Let's do it."

Max felt his spirits soar. The new car was actually quite nice. Everything looked expensive and shiny, and there were lots of screens everywhere, which lit up as soon as the motor was switched on.

Max settled back into his rubbery cocoon, wishing that it wasn't so hot. He was sweating already and it was only nine o'clock in the morning.

"Can we turn the air conditioning on?" he asked. His mother frowned at the dashboard, looking confused.

"I don't know how," she said. "Why don't you have a look at the instruction manual? It's in the glove compartment, just in front of you."

Max reached forwards to open it. He was wearing his rubber gloves so he knew he'd be okay. But he wasn't

quite careful enough. His elbow grazed the side of the door and brushed against the controls for opening and shutting the window. The moment his bare skin touched the control panel there was a loud bang. Pain seared through Max's body, shooting up his arm and into his chest. He had just enough time to register what had happened before he blacked out.

2

"Max?" He heard his mother's voice, close to his ear. She sounded scared. "Max?"

He wasn't sure exactly how long he'd been unconscious. It might have only been a couple of seconds, or it could have been a few minutes. He opened his eyes and saw he was still in the car, with his mother leaning over him. She let out a sigh of relief when she saw he was awake.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Max nodded.

"Thank heavens for that."

She slumped back against her seat and started crying.

Max watched her, and felt a lump rise in his own throat.

"Is the car all right?" he asked, hoping that somehow he hadn't broken it.

His mother tried to start it up. Nothing happened. She tried again and again, but the car was completely dead. Max was expecting her to be angry, but she just looked upset and frightened, and that was even worse. Her whole body seemed to sag with unhappiness, as if the situation had crumpled her up. Max had never seen his mother look so defeated. He didn't know what to say to comfort her, so they both sat there in an awkward, uncomfortable silence that seemed to grow bigger the longer it lasted.

"Let's go back inside," she said, eventually. "Will you be able to walk? Are you sure you're not hurt?"

"I'm fine," he insisted, even though he still felt sick from the electric shock. "Honestly."

Max trudged back into the house, and tore off his boots and gloves, resisting his mother's attempts to help him. His arms and legs felt prickly and weak, and he was so dizzy that the hallway seemed to rock gently, as if he was on a boat. But that was nothing compared to the fact that he'd destroyed his mother's brand-new car. She was calling the garage now, but still watching him anxiously, as if she was afraid he'd faint again.

As Max suspected, the people from the garage were not able to fix the car. They had never seen anything

like it, apparently. They kept questioning Max's mother, and although she was careful not to mention anything about Max, he could tell that they were suspicious.

"You must have done something," they kept saying. "Everything's short-circuited, and the battery looks like it's melted. It's impossible."

When they finally left, Max looked at his mother, who seemed even more defeated than she had done before.

"I'm really sorry about the car."

"It doesn't matter," she said heavily. "As long as you're all right."

"I told you – I'm fine," he said, trying to sound like he meant it.

"We can't go on like this though, Max. At some point, you're going to get seriously hurt."

"I know!" cried Max, frustration welling up inside him. "But it keeps happening – I can't stop it!"

"And it's getting worse," said his mother. Her voice cracked, as if she was about to burst into tears again. She closed her eyes for a minute, as if she was trying hard to pull herself back together.

"Could you go upstairs to your room for a bit?" she said, at last. "I need to think about what we can do to fix this problem. Something we haven't tried…"

"I'll be more careful…" he began, but she cut him off, her voice still wobbly and upset.

"Please, Max."

He went up to his room, still feeling awful. It seemed impossible that just two hours ago they had been planning to go to the beach. Everything felt wrong and horrible. He could hear his mother pacing up and down the sitting room, directly below him, for what seemed like hours, and he was sure he heard her weeping again. Then he heard her speaking to somebody on the phone. He pressed his ear to the floorboards, and although he couldn't make out what she was saying, he could tell from her tone of voice that it didn't bode well.

Much later, she came upstairs and knocked on his door. She wasn't crying any more, which was good, but her face was still blotchy and she looked exhausted.

"Your grandfather's coming over soon," she said. "He's driving up from Yowling."

"Why?" asked Max. He knew practically nothing about his grandfather beyond the fact that he existed and lived somewhere in the countryside. He'd never even met him. Max had always wanted to be part of a

bigger family, but it had only ever really been him and his mother.

"Because…" His mother stopped and took a deep breath. "Because I've been speaking to him and we both agreed it would be a good idea if you went and stayed with him for a while."

"What?" Max leaped up from his bed in horror. "You're getting rid of me?"

"Of course not! It's just for the summer holidays. But you've got to learn how to control this problem you have with electricity – you can't go on like this. And your grandfather is the only person who'll be able to help."

At that moment, the doorbell buzzed.

"That'll be him now," she said, and went to answer it.

"I don't get it," said Max, as he followed her down the stairs. "He doesn't even know me – how's he going to be able to help?"

But his mother had already tugged open the front door and Max saw his grandfather standing on the doorstep.

You could tell just by looking at him that he didn't belong in London – he was too wild and messy. He was tall with wispy grey hair, thick grey eyebrows and an unruly grey beard. His clothes were particularly odd –

his shirt was singed and torn badly at the cuffs, his trousers were patched at the knees, while his brown leather boots were blackened with scorch marks. It looked as if he'd been caught up in some sort of explosion, or fight, or possibly both. He grinned when he saw Max peering nervously at him from the hall.

"Another chip off the old block," he said, striding inside and clapping Max so hard on the back that he almost fell over.

"Max, this is your grandad," announced his mother.

"Hello," said Max, not sure what to make of him.

"First off, you're not calling me Grandad," said his grandfather. "My name's Bram."

"Okay," said Max uncertainly.

His mother sighed, but Bram didn't seem to notice. He carried on talking to Max as if Max knew exactly what was going on.

"You packed yet? We need to get back. Got a long drive ahead."

"No," said Max, and he turned to his mother.

"Do I have to go?" he pleaded desperately. He wasn't at all sure about going off with someone he didn't know, even if it was his grandfather.

"Yes," said his mother, more firmly now. "You get

your things together, and Bram and I will have a little chat."

Max did as she said. He didn't feel at all happy about the situation, but there didn't seem to be any alternative. If Bram really could help him, it was worth a shot.

He trudged upstairs and stood in the middle of his bedroom, wondering what he should take. His tiny room was crammed with books – mainly thick, dull volumes about history and science and geography. There was even a set of fat encyclopaedias, with muddy brown covers. It wasn't that Max liked reading these sorts of books, it was because he couldn't just look things up on the internet like a normal person, which often made homework difficult.

A half-made model of a ship lay on his desk beside his school things, but Max knew that he couldn't fit it inside his rucksack without breaking it. Instead, he just grabbed a random selection of clothes, a pair of pyjamas and his toothbrush, then went downstairs to retrieve his wooden spoon from the kitchen. He'd definitely need that. His grandfather raised his bushy eyebrows when he saw Max shoving a spoon into his rucksack, but he said nothing.

"That reminds me," said his mother, getting to her feet. "Don't forget your special gloves." She picked up

the washing-up gloves from where Max had thrown them down earlier and held them out.

"He won't need those," said Bram, glaring at the gloves as if they had offended him. "You can keep them."

"I have to wear them," said Max, gearing himself up to explain. But his grandfather drank the last of his tea and stood up, seizing Max's rucksack and slinging it over his own shoulder.

"Right, we'll be off," he said. "Don't worry, Emily, he'll be fine."

But Max's mother was looking as if she'd had a change of heart. She held Max by the shoulders and looked very intently at her father, as if she was trying to read his mind.

"You have stopped working for the Keeper, haven't you?" she asked. "There's no chance that Max will get mixed up in any of that?"

"Course not," he said. "He'll be as safe as can be."

"Who's the Keeper?" asked Max, looking from Bram to his mother. "And can someone tell me what's happening?"

His mother looked helplessly at Bram.

"You'll have to explain," she said. "I've never told him anything. I don't know how to begin."

"I'll start on the drive down," said Bram. "No point hitting him with it all at once. He won't believe me anyway. Not until he sees it for himself."

Max was more confused than ever. He glanced down at the peculiar scorch marks on Bram's boots then frowned suspiciously up at his grandfather, who grinned back at him, showing a mouthful of crooked brown teeth.

Max was not entirely sure where Yowling was, but it seemed to be a long way away. They had rattled through London in his grandfather's ancient van, which spluttered and wheezed so loudly you had to shout if you wanted to make yourself heard. The only good thing was that it was so low-tech, Max felt like there was less chance that he'd accidentally break it. The van would probably break down all on its own, especially given how fast his grandfather was driving. Now they were on the motorway, they were speeding along so quickly that the landscape was blurring and the engine was emitting a piercing, rusty scream.

"I heard what happened," yelled Bram, above the noise. "With the new car."

"I can't help breaking things!" Max shouted back. "I didn't mean to wreck it."

"I know!" replied Bram. "I'm the same. If I touch anything electric, I frazzle it. Always been like that. That's why Emily rang me. She knew I'd be able to help."

"You have it too?" Max turned to look at him in surprise.

"Yep," said Bram. "Runs in the family."

Max was stunned. "I thought it was just me. Why didn't anyone tell me before?"

"To begin with, your mother was hoping you wouldn't have it," said Bram. "And when it became clear you did, she knew I'd get involved, and she doesn't really approve of me."

"But why doesn't she have it too? If it runs in the family?"

"It often skips a generation," said Bram. "Bit unfortunate, really. My parents didn't have it either, but my grandmother did. Makes it tricky when it comes to handing down the family business."

"What sort of business—" he began, but Bram cut him off.

"Plenty of time to talk about all that later," he said. "First off, let's get back to Yowling. You need to be there to understand."

Bram started to whistle tunelessly, but Max's head

was bursting with about a million questions. Something odd was going on and he wanted to know what it was. He wasn't sure whether he was feeling apprehensive or excited. Either way, he wished that they'd get to Yowling a bit sooner so he could finally find out.

"Nearly there," announced Bram at last, and Max jerked awake.

He'd fallen asleep with his face pressed uncomfortably against the window, and his neck was stiff and sore. The van had slowed now, and was making an exhausted gurgling sound as they trundled along a narrow bumpy road that sloped steeply downwards. Max leaned forwards as he caught a glimpse of the sea, far below him, and realized that they had come as far as the coast. The evening sun made the water shimmer with a warm yellow glow, and cast long strange shadows.

There was a loud cawing cry, and something swooped through the air across the cliffs and glided for a moment beside the car. It was a huge bird, its wings easily five feet across, its feathers dark and gleaming.

"Look," called Max, pointing at the shape silhouetted against the sky. "It's an eagle!"

Bram glanced at it, then set his jaw and tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

"That's not an eagle," he said. "That's an owl."

Max watched as it flew off across the waves, towards a large, turreted building that seemed to be sitting in the middle of the bay, completely surrounded by the sea. All the dark pointed towers made it look jagged and sharp against the fat golden clouds.

"What's that?" he said, pointing.

"Yowling Castle," said Bram curtly. "Horrible place. Full of owls – and worse."

"I thought owls lived in woods," said Max, feeling a prickle of unease as he stared at the huge dark castle. "Do they even like the sea?"

"These ones do," said Bram. "We're coming into Yowling now," he added, abruptly changing the subject.

A little village was ranged around the edge of the beach. White-washed buildings huddled into the steep cliffs around a small sandy cove. But before they got any closer, Bram turned the van sharply to the right, chugged up a narrow lane, then pulled into what looked like a very ramshackle farmyard. A couple of chickens squawked in alarm and rushed into the darkness of a nearby barn.

"Here we are," said Bram, as the van screeched to a halt in the middle of the yard. "Home at last."

Although Bram seemed pleased that the long journey was over, Max felt distinctly apprehensive as he looked around at his unfamiliar new surroundings. He was about as far from home as he'd ever been in his life.

3

The first thing that Max noticed as he stepped out of the van was a painted wooden sign on the weathered brick wall. *Harrow and Co*. it said. *Spellstopping and Non-Magical Repairs.* Harrow was his family's surname, but it was the second part that really interested him. He reread the sign, because it sounded so peculiar, then turned around to ask Bram about it. But his grandfather had vanished.

Max scanned the farmyard, which was surrounded by a set of low stone buildings that all faced each other. Bits of old machinery were piled up haphazardly in the corner next to a barn, and grass grew in the cracks between the worn paving stones. There was a light on in one of the outbuildings, which shone through the dusty, cobwebbed windows. Then Max spotted Bram, who had marched off in the opposite direction and was pulling

open the farmhouse door. Three large black dogs spilled out of it, barking loudly.

"Come on!" yelled Bram over the noise.

Max hurried after him into the house, and was immediately swamped by the dogs. They all jumped up at him at once, putting their paws on his chest and trying to lick his face as he struggled his way inside.

"Down!" said Bram, and they reluctantly backed off and sat by Max's feet instead.

"I don't mind," said Max, as he patted each one of them in turn.

"That one's Treacle," said Bram, pointing to a dog who was greying around its muzzle. "She's the mother of the other two. The one whose tongue is always hanging out is called Sardine and the one with a white spot on his back is Banana."

"Banana?"

"I named them after their favourite foods," said Bram, matter-of-factly. "Although I obviously didn't set out to give Treacle any treacle. She discovered that by herself."

He let out a sudden snort of laughter, clearly remembering some treacle-related incident, but Max was distracted by the kitchen. It wasn't like any other kitchen he'd ever seen. There was no cooker, or kettle, or

toaster, just a big cast-iron range that stood in the corner, radiating heat, with a huge basket of logs beside it. An old oak table took up most of the middle of the room, and a wooden dresser was crammed with mismatched plates and mugs. The remaining floor space was mostly given over to dog beds. Max went over to the range and examined it.

"It doesn't use electricity," he said, pleased with his discovery.

"I do my best to avoid it," said Bram. "There's electric light, a washing machine and a telephone, but that's about it. No sense in going mad with electricity if you're a spellstopper. Best to save your energy for more important things."

"What's a spellstopper?" asked Max, intrigued by the unfamiliar word. "And why was it on that sign?"

"I'll tell you about spellstopping once you've unpacked," said Bram, ignoring Max's eager expression. "First off, I need to make dinner."

Bram unhooked a large metal pot, which had been hanging on the wall, and banged it down on the stove. Then he started hunting about the kitchen. He seized a turnip which was sitting in a fruit bowl on the table, a couple of limp carrots which were lying on the dresser,

and a handful of potatoes which had been left in the sink. He dropped all of the vegetables into the pot and poured water on them, then carried on wandering about the kitchen, as if searching for more ingredients.

"What are you making?" asked Max, eyeing the pot with suspicion. His mother normally gave him pasta for dinner, because she knew that he liked it. She was a good cook, and usually went out of her way to make dishes that Max would enjoy. He had a feeling that Bram's approach to mealtimes was somewhat different.

"Stew," replied Bram. "Stick anything into a pot and boil it for long enough and it'll turn into a stew eventually. Aha!"

He snatched a small plastic bag from the windowsill, ripped it open, and tipped some chunks of greenish meat into the bubbling mixture. Max wanted to ask how long the meat had been sitting there, but stayed quiet. He wondered if his mother knew what she'd let him in for.

Suddenly, there was a very loud bang. The windows rattled, and a plate fell off the dresser and smashed on the stone floor. Max jumped, but Bram didn't look surprised. He ambled across the room and bent down to pick up the pieces.

"Sounds like Kit's having a bad time out there," he

said, putting the shards of china on the table. "I'll see if I can glue that back together tomorrow."

"Who's Kit?" asked Max, peering out of the window and across the yard. The explosion seemed to have come from the building opposite the house – the one with the light in the window.

"You'll meet her soon enough," said Bram.

Max could see wisps of smoke coming out from underneath the door. Whoever Kit was, Max was not entirely sure if she was still alive.

"I'll go out and see what's happened," he said, keen to know the reason behind the explosion.

"Don't bother," said Bram. "She'll be finished before long – no point in disturbing her. Go upstairs, get settled, unpack your things. That bag of yours is getting in the way."

For a moment, Max considered rushing outside anyway. He wanted to find out what was going on. But he wasn't sure how his grandfather would react. The last thing he wanted was to annoy Bram before he'd even got to know him, especially if he was supposed to stay with him all summer.

With a sigh, he picked up his rucksack and went out of the kitchen into the passage beyond.

"Up the stairs and the second door to the left," Bram yelled after him. "It's the room with the pink wallpaper."

The hallway was very dark, with big wooden beams and a low ceiling. The stairs creaked loudly with each step Max took. Upstairs, he counted the doors in the narrow corridor and pushed open the second one on the left.

His first thought was that the room smelled musty, as if nobody had stayed in it for a very long time. His second impression was that it was extremely pink and tidy – not at all like the rest of the dark, cluttered house. The wallpaper was rose pink, and so were the bedsheets, the curtains, and even the carpet. Posters of pop stars were stuck up on the walls, yellowed with age, and a dressing table with an oval mirror stood next to the window. For a moment, Max frowned at the sea of pink that surrounded him, unable to find a reason for it, then realized, with a sudden shock, that this must have been his mother's old bedroom. It was an odd feeling, coming across a version of her that he had never known about, and Max realized that she had never told him a single thing about her childhood, except for the fact that she was an only child, just like him.

Max plonked his bag down and pulled open the

wardrobe. There was a glittery pair of shoes in it, but aside from that it was empty. Max couldn't be bothered with coat hangers so he just stuffed all his things onto the shelves instead. The wooden spoon went on his bedside table – he'd need it for the light switch later.

The room was stuffy and hot, so Max opened the small casement window, pushing at the glass until it juddered open with a rusty squeak. He could see over the rooftops of the houses in the nearby village and across the bay, to where the spiky outline of the castle dominated the horizon. The more he stared at it, the stranger it seemed. Wreaths of green mist clouded about the base of its dark stone walls, so the castle looked as if it was hovering above the water. Tiny silhouettes of birds flitted around the turrets in the fading light and Max wondered again if they really could be owls. It was odd, seeing so many of them gathered together in one place.

When he went back downstairs, there was a horrible smell of rotten vegetables wafting through the passageway and the kitchen was enveloped in steam. Bram was stirring the stew and a girl with long auburn hair was sitting at the kitchen table.

"Max, meet Kit," said Bram. "Kit's my assistant. She can mend pretty much anything."

Max stared at the girl, who stared back at him, looking equally curious. She was about the same age as him, and had a friendly sort of face, which was partly covered in freckles, and partly streaked with soot. She was wearing a pair of even sootier overalls, which looked as if they might have been blue originally. One of the sleeves had a large hole in it.

"Go and sit down," instructed Bram. "Dinner's nearly ready."

Max made his way around the dogs, who were grouped about Bram, staring hopefully up at the stew, and sat down at the table next to Kit.

"What happened out there?" he asked eagerly. "I saw the smoke."

But Kit just looked across at Bram, as if she wasn't sure whether or not to answer.

"You can tell Max!" called Bram, still stirring the pot. "He's going to learn the trade. I reckon he'll make a first-rate spellstopper. You should hear about some of the things he's done – he broke an electric car earlier, just by brushing it with his elbow!"

Bram looked at Max proudly. It was an odd feeling, having someone view his problem as a good thing. But Kit still seemed reluctant to talk.

"Does it happen to you too?" asked Max, trying again. "The electrical thing?"

"No," said Kit. "Bram's the one who does all the spellstopping. I do the non-magical repairs."

"But surely everything's non-magical?" asked Max, who was beginning to feel that nothing made sense any more. "I don't understand. What's spellstopping? And what's it got to do with me?"

"It's the family business," announced Bram, swelling with pride. "We fix magical items. And if they need repairing in the regular way, we do that too. You can't just go and get something mended at any old place if it's magic, can you?"

Max glanced from Bram to Kit, to see if they were joking. They both looked completely earnest.

"But magic doesn't exist," he said, trying to cling on to some semblance of logic.

"Course it does," said Bram firmly. "It's just that most people don't know about it."

Max was beginning to wonder what on earth was going on. He could see now why his mother had kept him away from his grandfather – he was clearly eccentric, to put it mildly.

"So spellstopping literally means stopping spells?"

he asked warily, half-expecting Bram and Kit to laugh at how absurd it sounded. But Bram clapped his hands together and beamed, as if Max had just said something extremely clever.

"Got it in one!" cried Bram. "Almost everything we work with was enchanted originally. But sometimes the magic starts going a bit off-kilter, especially if the object's old. I rebalance the magic, so it goes back to working properly. It's a bit like being a doctor, but for magical items. Sometimes I'll remove the magic entirely if it's too dangerous to fix safely – that's where the word spellstopping comes from. Although, in practice, I don't fully spellstop things very often. Customers wouldn't like it, would they? If you're lucky enough to own something magical, why would you want to destroy it? Most of the time, I just fix stuff, so it works like it was supposed to."

Max had absolutely no idea what his grandfather was on about. Kit was nodding along, as if she agreed with everything Bram was saying, but Max was completely mystified.

"So you're telling me that you can do magic?" he croaked.

"Course not!" replied Bram. "Weren't you listening?

I'm a spellstopper – that means I can rebalance or eliminate existing magic. Completely different thing. Rare too – I'm the only one in existence. Until you popped up, that is. Can't tell you how pleased I was when Emily rang me. It was the first time she'd ever told me you'd inherited the gift."

Bram gazed at Max fondly. Kit was also watching him, but more cautiously, as if she wasn't quite sure about him yet. The three dogs were staring at him too, their mouths open, their tongues hanging out, as if Max was the most exciting thing they had ever seen. Max rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, half expecting to wake up from a particularly vivid dream. When he opened his eyes again, he found that they were all still looking at him. It was very disconcerting.

"You're going to be a spellstopper, Max," announced Bram triumphantly. "I'm sure of it."

Max tried and failed to reply. He was so baffled that he didn't know what to say. It all sounded so far-fetched and peculiar that he wasn't sure if his grandfather was telling the truth or not. Over on the range, the bubbling pot of stew began to make a loud sizzling noise, and Bram sprang up to rescue it.

"It's fine," he said, giving it a hasty stir. "The black bits

add flavour."

He carried the vast pot of stew over to the table, his hands encased in a pair of flowery oven gloves.

"Don't worry," he added kindly, seeing Max's baffled expression. "It's a lot to take in all at once."

"Is that why Mum sent me down here?" asked Max slowly, still trying to make sense of everything. "To become a spellstopper like you?"

"Course not," replied Bram patiently. "To be honest, she wants nothing to do with it. That's why she kept you in the dark about it all. But she's finally realized that you'll have to learn a bit of spellstopping just for your own good. Otherwise you'll keep knocking yourself out every time you go near an electric current. Untrained spellstoppers never last long. There'd come a time when you'd do yourself a real injury. Or you'd get struck by lightning."

Max remembered how his mother would make him stay inside and wear his rubber boots during a thunderstorm.

"That's why there's so few of us around," continued Bram. "Even before electricity came along, the ones who hadn't learned how to control themselves kept dying out. Anyway, enough of all that for now. Have

some stew."

He pushed the pot towards Max, who was still struggling with the extraordinary things he had just been told. He scooped up a ladleful absentmindedly. An assortment of soggy vegetables and a few chunks of pale meat splattered onto his plate.

"You got the turnip," said Bram, peering at Max's dish. "Good for you – that's the best bit."

He took the pot and began to help himself to a large quantity of stew.

"Sure I can't tempt you?" he asked, waving the ladle at Kit, but Kit shook her head.

"I'll go home for dinner," she said. "They'll be waiting for me."

"Kit never eats anything I cook," said Bram. "Can't think why."

Max inspected the stew. It looked and smelled like the contents of a compost bin if you poured boiling water over it. He glanced at Kit, who grinned at him.

"Eat up!" cried Bram, picking up his own knife and fork. He speared a steaming potato and took a bite out of it.

Max tried a mouthful of the watery stew and instantly choked. It tasted even worse than it looked. The

combination of hard, uncooked potato and slimy, rotten carrot was unbelievably awful. He wanted desperately to spit it out, but couldn't quite face doing so in front of Bram. He caught Kit's eye again and saw that she was trying hard not to laugh.

Luckily for Max, there was a knock at the kitchen door. The dogs sprang up and started barking, and Bram got stiffly to his feet and went to see who it was. Max used the opportunity to spit the stew back onto his plate, then realized that Kit was watching him.

"Don't worry, I won't tell him," she said.

"Thanks," replied Max, in relief. He had been unsure what to make of Kit, but he was beginning to feel that she was the sort of person he'd like to be friends with. Then he caught sight of the peculiar man standing just outside the door, speaking in a low voice to Bram.

He wore a black silk top hat, pulled down low over his brow. A scarf was wound across the lower half of his face, even though it was the end of July. He was clutching a box to his chest, and with a sudden jolt of surprise, Max saw that his hands were completely wrapped up in dust-coloured bandages. Max stood up to get a better look at the stranger. He wasn't wearing any shoes, and his feet, too, were completely encased in old cloth bandages.

"Sounds pretty straightforward," Bram was saying. "Come back for it tomorrow evening – it should be done by then."

The man said something else – Max strained to hear him, but he was speaking in a very faint, hollow voice, barely more than a whisper – then he handed the cardboard box over to Bram and hurried off.

"Who was that?" asked Max.

"A customer," replied Kit. "They're supposed to stick to opening hours, but they're always showing up at odd times."

"But the bandages…"

"You get all sorts bringing stuff to us," said Bram with a shrug. "Best not to ask customers too many questions – they don't like it. You should be more concerned by what's in here."

He shook the cardboard box and to Max's surprise it started rattling violently, as if it contained something alive. Bram beamed at Max and Kit as he plonked the box down in the middle of the table.

"Well, Max, you're in luck," he said. "Instead of telling you what spellstopping is, we're going to show you. Right now."

He rolled up the sleeves of his shirt and rocked

backwards and forwards on his heels, as if getting ready for a fight. Kit frowned at the box, which was still rattling angrily.

"You should move that out of the way," she said, nodding at Max's dinner. "Things might get a bit messy."