



Mr Darrow was building a world.

He was building it in his bedroom, which was the biggest in the boarding house. The room was as cold and bare as a cellar, with high ceilings and uncarpeted floors. Mr Darrow had asked to be moved somewhere better, but the headmaster had always refused. After all, the headmaster would say . . . you're just a janitor.

Mr Darrow wasn't *just* anything. He was a genius. Unfortunately nobody knew it but him.

After tonight, *that* was all going to change.

Mr Darrow gazed at the miniature world on his desk. It was a little tray of sand, no bigger than a book. Inside were hundreds of tiny palm trees, each one made by hand and the size of a matchstick. They'd been planted in a ring around a green lagoon. It glimmered in the lamplight like an emerald dropped on the sand.

There was no doubt about it – this was Mr Darrow’s masterpiece. The greatest model he had ever made.

Other models filled the shelves above his desk. There were hundreds of them, piled on top of each other from floor to ceiling. Model boats, model planes, model palaces, monuments, dinosaurs, skyscrapers – each one smaller and more perfect than the last.

But they were *nothing* compared to his latest creation. It was paradise . . . and it was almost complete.

There was just one thing left to do.

Mr Darrow opened a drawer beside him and took out a pair of metal goggles. They had two thick lenses and were covered in switches and wires. He pulled them on and pressed a button on the side. The lenses shot out like telescopes.

Mr Darrow was proud of his microscope goggles – after all, he had built them himself. They were priceless.

Just like the serum.

Mr Darrow picked up the tiny bottle beside him and held it up to the light. Less than a thimbleful of liquid lay inside, but the colours shifted and clouded in a pattern of millions. Mr Darrow carefully swirled the bottle, merging red, then green, then blue, before the colours separated again.

It had taken him twenty years to find the serum. He’d never expected to get his hands on so much, and of such

*perfect* quality . . . but even so, he had only one chance to use it.

He tilted the lamp over the sandbox. The lagoon shimmered.

‘Light and water,’ he whispered. ‘That’s all it needs.’

Mr Darrow swallowed. Five years of construction, twenty years of planning – it had all come down to this one moment. He tried not to think about what would happen if he used too much serum, or too little, or – and it didn’t even bear thinking about – he dropped the bottle.

Mr Darrow unscrewed the lid, took a deep breath, and leaned over his greatest work.

‘Oh well,’ he said. ‘Here goes nothing.’

# 2

The headmaster cleared his throat.

‘Good morning, children.’

‘Good morning, Mr Pitt,’ replied five hundred voices.

Mr Pitt smiled. The whole school was completely in his hands. He could tell them to stand on their heads and sing in French if he wanted to, and they’d do it. It was his favourite part of being a headmaster. That, and the speeches.

‘Today,’ he announced, ‘is the last day of school. It is also the end of my first year as your new headmaster! While I’ve only been running St. Goliath’s Boarding School for a short time, I feel like I’ve already gotten to know each one of you personally.’

This was a lie. Mr Pitt had spent the whole year in his office and still knew hardly any of the children’s names, unless by coincidence they were all called Oi You.

‘In an hour’s time, the summer holidays will begin. While you will all return home, I will be staying behind to oversee the next exciting stage in St. Goliath’s history: the Pitt Building!’

He swept a hand towards what used to be the football pitch. It was now a building site, cordoned off with red tape. Five hundred children watched mournfully as a gang of builders tore out the goalposts.

‘We will all miss the football pitch,’ said Mr Pitt. ‘But as your headmaster it is my duty to bring this school into the *future*.’

Some children asked if that meant there’d be cyborg teachers. Mr Pitt gave them detention.

‘It doesn’t mean cyborg teachers,’ he said. ‘It means cutting-edge technology. State-of-the-art facilities. A brand-new school building to replace the old one.’

He pointed to the school behind him and grimaced. St. Goliath’s had been falling apart when he’d first arrived, and now it looked even worse. It was just one of the many things Mr Pitt had assured the school governors he would change – along with abolishing free lunches, dismantling the library . . .

And, of course, getting rid of Mr Darrow.

Mr Pitt smiled. That was *one* thing off his list already – and he hadn’t had to lift a finger.

‘Which brings me to a sad piece of news.’ He gave

a carefully rehearsed sigh. 'I'm sorry to announce that yesterday our much-beloved school janitor, Mr Darrow . . .'

Mr Pitt trailed off. His eyes had been scanning the front row to measure the effect of his dramatic sigh, but now they stopped on a single chair. This one was different from the others. It said SPECIAL SEAT on the back in big red letters – so everyone could see – and it was empty.

Mr Pitt looked up.

'Where's Max?'

## 3

Max was hiding in a cupboard.

He usually hid in the toilets, but they'd all exploded that morning – again – and Mr Darrow still hadn't fixed them. St. Goliath's Boarding School was *filled* with things Mr Darrow hadn't fixed.

Max was hiding for two reasons. First, because he didn't want to be at Mr Pitt's speech. They'd make him sit in the SPECIAL SEAT again, like they did every assembly. Max didn't want to be the centre of attention – he just wanted to be left alone so he could work on his models.

Which was the *second* reason he was hiding.

His castle was almost complete. It was small – no bigger than a jam jar – but there were more than a hundred rooms inside. It had towers with turrets and lockable doors and spiral staircases. Max had built them all himself.

'Here's where King Max will address his loyal subjects

each morning,' he muttered, carving the final flourishes on the tallest tower. 'And *here's* where he'll gather his knights each evening to share tales of battles past . . .'

He took another scalpel from the kit in his lap and carved three tiny letters into the tower's base.

M-A-X.

He smiled – the castle had taken him all term, but it was worth it. He couldn't *wait* to see the look on Mr Darrow's face when he showed it to him and . . .

The cupboard opened.

'Max?'

Max looked up. There was a boy standing in front of him. He was the same age as Max, and wearing the same uniform, but that was where the similarities ended. This boy was taller, and cooler, and had a better haircut. Max hid the castle.

'Sasha! What are you doing here?'

'Looking for you!' said Sasha. 'I thought the dorm was empty, but then I heard you in here talking to yourself. Oh – and I saw your headlamp.'

Sasha pointed to Max's headlamp, which was a torch tucked into a pair of underpants worn over his head. Max switched off the light.

'It was dark,' he mumbled.

Max clambered out of the cupboard and into the dorm he shared with Sasha. It was split perfectly down the

middle. On Max's side were shelves of sci-fi and fantasy books, neatly arranged in alphabetical order. On Sasha's side were posters of a baseball team Max had never heard of, and hundreds of photos of Sasha with all his friends back in America.

'So why are you still here?' asked Sasha. 'Everyone's listening to Mr Pitt's speech! Didn't you hear the announcement?'

Max fumbled. 'Oh! The speech! Er . . .'

'Wait!' said Sasha. 'I get it – your ears, right?'

Max blinked. 'My ears?'

'Your hearing aids.'

Sasha pointed to the plastic tubes around Max's ears. Max bristled.

'No, actually, my hearing aids didn't have *anything* to do with . . .'

Max stopped. He hated being the only deaf child at St. Goliath's. He hated the way he was made to sit in the SPECIAL SEAT at the front of assemblies, and he hated the way everyone spoke to him in A BIG LOUD VOICE even though that made it harder for him to follow what they were saying . . . but he realised that this was one of the times when being severely deaf could be severely useful.

'I mean . . . yes, you're right,' said Max. 'I didn't hear the announcement. My hearing aids must have stopped working.'

Sasha beamed. 'Hey! That reminds me!'

He held out his index fingers and crossed them over each other, like they were hugging.

'I looked it up on the internet! Cool, huh?'

Max was confused. 'What is it?'

'It's sign language!' said Sasha. 'It means "friend" – right? Am I doing it wrong?' He paused. 'Wait – I must have looked up *American Sign Language*! You use *British Sign Language* over here, right?'

Max blushed. 'Er ... I don't know. I don't use sign language.'

Sasha's face fell. 'You don't?'

'I never learned.'

Sasha let his fingers fall apart. There was an awkward pause.

'Well ... better get going!' he said. 'Don't want to miss the end of the speech!'

The two boys made their way through the boarding house in silence. All their conversations ended like this. They might have shared a dorm – all students at St. Goliath's had to – but as far as Max was concerned, that was the only thing he and Sasha had in common.

Sasha had arrived from America at the beginning of the year, and in less than a week *everyone* knew who he was. The reasons were obvious: he was friendly and outgoing, with expensive clothes and a slick accent. You'd

always see him walking around school in the middle of a big group, chatting away confidently. He did everything with confidence – he could probably juggle pineapples in a dressing gown with confidence, and he'd still look cool while doing it.

Max, on the other hand, was *not* cool. He knew he wasn't, and he didn't need to be reminded about it, thank you very much. He could never be like Sasha, chatting away to five people at once – Max had to lip-read to make out what people were saying, and no one at St. Goliath's understood how hard that was. They'd talk quickly, or turn away midsentence, or cover their mouth while they were speaking. Loud classrooms and playgrounds made his hearing aids squeal with feedback, too – after a few minutes, Max would be so exhausted that he had to retreat to his quiet room with a good book to recover.

Max didn't mind spending time on his own. When he was alone, he could focus on what he was good at: reading voraciously, losing himself in his imagination, designing beautiful models. At school, he always felt like an outsider – like no matter how much everyone tried to include him, he'd never fit in. But on his own, with his latest creation in front of him ... Max felt like a king.

*Then* the school paired had him up with Sasha, and Max lost the one place he could escape. It wasn't that Sasha was mean or unpleasant – quite the opposite, in fact.

Sasha was super friendly, always asking Max questions and trying to chat – but that was the exact problem. No matter how nice he was, Sasha still didn't understand that Max found talking to people difficult. Being around Sasha was a constant reminder of everything Max struggled to do.

So Max tried to avoid his new roommate as much as possible, ducking out of sight whenever he saw him in the corridors and making sure they were rarely alone. He kept his model-making a secret, too – he suspected that if Sasha found out about it, he'd tell all his cool friends, and then the whole school would have another reason to treat Max like a complete weirdo.

Sure, it was a bit of a nightmare . . . but it wasn't all bad. Max still had *one* friend at St. Goliath's – Mr Darrow, the school janitor. If it weren't for their chats and model-making lessons, Max had no idea how he would cope at St. Goliath's. Speaking of which, where *was* . . .

Max stopped. Sasha was leaning in front of his face, waving. Max had explained to Sasha several times that he could just tap him on the shoulder when he wanted Max's attention, but Sasha usually forgot and waved at him like he was flagging down a bus.

'Hey! Did you hear me? I *said*, are you doing anything for the holidays?'

Max cringed – he'd been hoping no one would ask him that. He was going to spend eight weeks with his great-aunt

Meredith in a retirement community on the other side of the country. She was the only member of his family who was still alive. She was ten times Max's age and could barely remember who he was. She spent most of their time together shouting questions at him until she fell asleep.

'Er . . . nothing much,' said Max. 'You?'

Sasha grinned. 'I'm flying back to the States tonight with my little sister, Joy. First-class all the way! Then Mom and Dad are taking us on a road trip round the country: New York, Texas, San Francisco . . . they said we might even fly to Hawaii for Joy's birthday! Cool, huh?'

Max sighed. Of *course* Sasha had a nice family, too.

They stepped out into the summer sun. The rest of the students were in the distance, watching the headmaster finish his speech. Sasha tapped Max on the shoulder.

'I almost forgot to tell you – Mr Pitt was talking about the new building! It's going to be amazing – there'll be an Olympic-sized swimming pool, and a new sports hall . . .'

Max nodded, but he wasn't really paying attention – he was trying to spot Mr Darrow. If he didn't find the janitor soon, then he wouldn't get a chance to show him the model castle before the holidays. He glanced back at Sasha, who was still talking.

' . . . and a rooftop planetarium and a sushi kitchen and an augmented-reality science lab . . .'

Max kept one eye on Sasha while searching the

playing fields with the other. Maybe Mr Darrow was in his vegetable patch. That was where he usually went when things at St. Goliath's needed fixing. Max could sneak over there when the speech was over. Then maybe, *finally*, Mr Darrow would tell him about the secret project, and . . .

' . . . Mr Darrow's disappeared, too. No one knows where he is!'

Max slammed to a halt. Sasha kept on walking.

'Can you believe it? He didn't turn up for work this morning, and when they went to his room, it was empty! He left everything behind – his clothes, his money . . . and you know what else they found? *Models!* Hundreds of them! Turns out he was a complete genius at building things, and no one had any idea!' Sasha shook his head. 'Weird, right? I mean, everyone knew he was *odd*, what with all the shouting and swearing, and the fact that he never actually fixed anything, but to disappear without telling anyone? It doesn't make any sense, right?'

There was silence. Sasha turned around.

'I said, it doesn't make any . . .'

Sasha was alone. Max had left some time ago.

## 4

Max stood in the staff corridor. The door in front of him was scuffed and dirty, just like the nameplate.

MR DARROW

Children weren't supposed to go anywhere near staff bedrooms. It was one of the most important rules at St. Goliath's. You got detention just for setting foot on the top floor of the boardinghouse. Who *knew* what punishment you'd get for breaking into one of the rooms.

But Mr Darrow had made Max promise.

*If one day I suddenly disappear – no warning, no message, no nothing – go straight to my room. Make sure no one sees you . . . especially not Mr Pitt.*

*Why?*

*You'll know when you get there.*

Max didn't like breaking rules. It made you stand out – and Max stood out enough already. People were always



pointing at his hearing aids, treating him like he was stupid instead of deaf. Mr Pitt showed him off like a performing seal every time a visitor came to the school.

‘This is Max, who, as you can see, has hearing problems. ISN’T THAT RIGHT, MAX? Here at St. Goliath’s, we make sure children with disabilities feel just like normal ones. ISN’T THAT RIGHT, MAX?’

Then he’d pat Max on the head, shove him into the wrong classroom, and take the visitors to see the swimming pool.

Max had lost his hearing when he was four years old. He couldn’t remember what it was like to *not* be deaf . . . but he could remember his last school. Max had loved it – a little brick building with small classrooms and nice teachers. Max had found it easy making friends there. If he didn’t understand something, the teachers would repeat it until he did.

Then, two years ago, Great-Aunt Meredith had sent him to St. Goliath’s. Suddenly Max was surrounded by hundreds of children in huge classrooms, and teachers who didn’t care whether or not Max understood. The only help he ever got was an hour-long visit every now and then from a teacher of the deaf who would ask if his hearing aids still worked, barely answer his questions, and then leave. Max never saw the same teacher twice.

But Mr Darrow was different. He never talked down

to Max or treated him like he was a special case – in fact, he was just as rude to Max as he was to everyone else. He might be grumpy, but he was kind too; he took the time to listen. He would explain things as many times as he had to until Max understood.

Why would he have *left*?

Max turned to the framed picture beside the door. It was a watercolour painting of a welcome mat. He carefully reached behind the painting and found the key taped to the wall – just where Mr Darrow had told him it would be. Max gave one final glance down the corridor, unlocked the door, and stepped inside.

The bedroom was pitch dark. Max reached for the light switch and turned it on. A spray of sparks shot out and scorched his fingers.

‘Ow!’ said Max.

A bulb flickered weakly. None of the electrics in St. Goliath’s worked properly. Boarders had gotten used to the fact that pressing a light switch usually made the bulb explode, or set off all the fire alarms, or resulted in a far-off scream from down a corridor. This was because Mr Darrow was the worst janitor in history. Instead of doing his job, he was always focused on some unnecessary task, like sorting ten thousand screws into different sizes while the school fell down around him. It was no secret that he and Mr Pitt despised each other.

Max looked around the bedroom. It was huge, grim and empty. Beside the door was a desk with a heap of old clothes next to it. The floor was covered with hundreds of bits of wire and screws and splinters of wood. On one side of the room was an overturned bin full of old food; on the other side was an unmade bed. There was one window covered in old dusty curtains and a broken ceiling fan . . . and that was it. It was pretty depressing, to be honest.

But then, of course, there were the models.

Max's eyes sparkled. He had never seen them all together like this. Mr Darrow always brought one or two to show him during their model-making lessons, but here . . . there were so many of them. Hundreds. *Thousands*, maybe. And each one was so beautiful, so perfectly constructed, that you would never guess it had been made by human hands.

Max picked up the nearest model. It was a blue whale, no bigger than a goldfish. Its surface was mottled with tiny die-cast barnacles. Each eye was an individually carved piece of glass. It was *faultless*. No matter how many times Max studied the model, he always expected it to start breathing.

He remembered the very first time he had seen the whale – the day he met Mr Darrow. Max could remember that meeting like it was yesterday. It was hard to forget being beaten over the head with a butternut squash.

*'Get out of my shed!'*

Mr Darrow had chased Max out of the shed, whacking him with the squash.

'I'm sick of you stupid kids! Breaking into my vegetable patch, stealing all my carrots . . . !'

Max wasn't trying to steal Mr Darrow's carrots. He'd gone wandering round the school to find somewhere quiet to work on his models and stumbled upon Mr Darrow's potting shed. It was perfect – peaceful and secluded, on the other side of school, where no one would find him. Or so he thought.

'I wasn't stealing anything, I swear!' Max cried. 'I was making this!'

Max held up his latest work. It was a model of himself as a brave warrior king, complete with crown and sword, carved into the end of a pencil. Mr Darrow stopped.

*'You made that?'*

Max was surprised – he'd expected another whack with the squash, or at the very least to be laughed at . . . but Mr Darrow was transfixed. He took the model and studied it carefully.

'Mmm – not bad,' said Mr Darrow. 'Nice symmetry, both arms kept a uniform length, good texturing grooves on the robes . . . face is a mess, though. What are you carving with?'

Max held up his old maths compass. Mr Darrow snorted.

‘Well, that’s your problem right there! Might as well be carving with a brick.’ He handed the pencil back to Max. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Max.’

Mr Darrow reached into his pocket.

‘Here, Max – tell me what you think of this one. Finished it yesterday. Like to know your opinion . . . from one model-maker to another.’

Mr Darrow placed the whale in the centre of Max’s upturned palm. Max stared at the model for some time, almost in shock. He had never seen anything so perfect before.

‘I know,’ said Mr Darrow, shaking his head. ‘It’s a mess. The inside’s even worse.’

Max blinked. ‘There’s an inside?’

Mr Darrow took a set of tweezers from his pocket and opened the whale’s mouth. Max was floored. Inside were two precise rows of perfectly sculpted teeth, lined with krill, and a wide speckled tongue draped with seaweed. A bent snorkel no thicker than a human hair stuck out of the roof of the whale’s mouth. You could see all the way down its glistening throat. Mr Darrow pointed with the tweezers.

‘See there? Linked the blowhole to the stomach so I could carve the epiglottis. Don’t know what I was thinking – they’re two completely different organ systems! Ah well.’

Max was amazed. ‘But . . . this is the best model I’ve ever seen! I’d give *anything* to make something as good as this!’

Mr Darrow shrugged. ‘I’ve been practising my whole life, Max. Maybe one day – if you never get married or have any children and hate your job – you’ll be as good as—’

‘Will you teach me?’

The second Max said it, Mr Darrow’s face changed. Max could remember the exact look in the janitor’s eyes when it happened. It was like he’d stumbled over the piece of a puzzle he’d lost years ago and then forgotten about.

‘Teach you?’ Mr Darrow said, almost to himself.

‘I’ll practise every day,’ said Max. ‘I’m a hard worker.’

Mr Darrow was silent for some time. He chewed thoughtfully on what was left of the squash.

‘You know, Max, you may be in luck. I could do with an extra pair of hands. An *apprentice*, if you will. Someone to help me with a big project I’ve been working on.’

‘Another model?’ said Max.

For the first time, Mr Darrow had laughed.

‘Sort of . . . and sort of not. To tell you the truth, it’s more than just a model. It’s going to change the world.’

Max’s eyes widened. ‘What is it?’

Mr Darrow shook his head. ‘I can’t tell you – not yet, anyway. First we have to work on that shoddy carving of

yours, get you some decent tools. Then, when you're finally good enough, I'll let you in on it. It'll be hard work, you know – don't think I'm going to go easy on you!

Mr Darrow had looked at him – and said something no one had said to Max in a very, very, long time.

'Did you understand me, Max?'

Max looked around Mr Darrow's bedroom. He'd *thought* he understood – but he was wrong. He had spent a whole year working with Mr Darrow, spending every break and lunchtime at his vegetable patch and learning new modelling skills. He'd carved and scraped and sanded until his hands had almost bled. He'd thought they were friends . . . but now Mr Darrow was gone.

He hadn't even said goodbye.

Max picked up the goggles from the desk beside him. Mr Darrow had left them, too, just like he'd left everything else. It didn't make any sense. The goggles were his most prized possession – he'd let Max wear them only once or twice, and under strict supervision. After all, they were the only ones of their kind in the world.

Just like the models.

That's when Max realised. He looked at the shelves of models, his heart soaring.

'He can't have left! He'd *never* leave the models behind!'

Suddenly it all made sense. Mr Darrow hadn't disappeared – it was something to do with the secret

project. *That* was why he'd told Max to come up here – so he would see the models. So he would understand that Mr Darrow hadn't abandoned him. He was coming back.

Max looked round the room frantically. He was about to leave for eight whole weeks – he *had* to leave a message for Mr Darrow, something that showed Max understood. But there wasn't a single pencil or sheet of paper in sight.

Max took the model castle out of his pocket and grabbed a scalpel from the desk. He quickly carved a series of tiny letters in the base, just above his name:

MR DARROW  
I UNDERSTAND  
MAX

Then he walked to the middle of the room and placed the castle on the floor. If Mr Darrow came back – no, *when* he came back – it would be the first thing he'd see. He'd know straightaway that Max had come up here, just like he'd asked, and . . .

Max stopped. There was something on the floor in front of him, nestled among the screws and splinters and wires. Something so small it was easy to overlook. Max was good at noticing small things – when you've lost your hearing, you rely on your other senses more than most people. People often forgot to get Max's attention

first before talking to him, so he had learned to keep his eyes peeled at all times. He'd see tiny movements, small changes, minute differences . . .

He'd notice unusual things.

Max picked up Mr Darrow's microscope goggles and pulled them over his head. The room immediately warped and shifted around him. Max could see every speck of dust. Looking at the back of his hand was like looking at the surface of the moon. He turned to the floor, focused the lenses . . . and frowned.

'What the . . .?'

Max felt a sudden *bang* through his feet. Most people wouldn't have noticed it – but Max did. A door had been slammed on the floor below. There was another bang, and another.

The speech had finished – everyone was coming back. In less than a minute, the staff corridor was going to be filled with teachers.

Max tore off the goggles and flew out the door. He fumbled for the light switch as he went.

*Click.*

The light stayed on. Max panicked.

'Come on!'

*Click click click.*

It was no good – the light wasn't switching off. Max could feel the noises getting stronger and stronger

through his feet. He was going to have to leave the room as it was.

Max took one final look at Mr Darrow's bedroom. There were lots of things he didn't understand – where Mr Darrow had gone, why he had left . . .

But the thing on the floor made the least sense of all.

Why was there sand in Mr Darrow's bedroom?

And why was it covered in tiny *palm trees*?

'Weird,' said Max.

He closed the door.

# 5

Max's footsteps faded down the corridor. The bedroom fell into silence once more.

The light stayed on. It filled the empty room, casting shadows on the models, their glass eyes sparkling.

Of course, the room wasn't *really* empty. There's no such thing as an empty room. There's life wherever you go – mice under the floorboards, moths in the curtains, dust mites in the air . . . there's a whole universe living alongside us and we barely even notice it.

Take the handful of sand on the floor. If Max had studied it for a little longer, he might have seen that it was covered in more than just tiny palm trees. He might have seen that its surface was also flecked with spots of red, green and blue.

He might have seen that the spots were moving.

But Max didn't see the spots tremble and then

disappear. He didn't see the sand grow and spread across the floor all by itself. No one did. The world is filled with millions of miracles that no one sees.

No one saw what emerged from the sand, either. It was almost too small to make out . . . and even if someone *had* seen it, they probably wouldn't have believed their eyes.

It was a tiny wooden hut.