

MAX & the MILLIONS

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To Fred:

One small thing can save the world – no pressure.



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.