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Opening extract from

Big Wish

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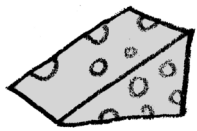
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CHAPTER ONE

People often talk about having butterflies in their stomachs. Butterflies? With me it was . . . bees! Bats! Birds! Lobsters, snapping their claws!

It was a bright morning in early September and I was all kitted out in my brand-new school uniform: dark-grey trousers and blazer, white shirt, tie with diagonal red, black and white stripes. New black shoes without a scuff on them. Two-day-old haircut. My Adidas shoulder bag had a new calculator in it, along with a collection of pens, a geometry set and my packed lunch, which consisted of a cheese-and-

coleslaw sandwich, an orange and a fruit-and-nut cereal bar.

I was sitting in the kitchen, trying to eat my toast. The sun was streaming through the window, the radio was on and the DJ sounded insanely cheerful. 'Happy Monday, everyone!' and all that. It was all right for him. All *he* had to do was lounge about in a studio, play records, burble on and get paid shed-loads of money for it. He didn't have to go to a great big massive new school with a thousand kids in it.

All bigger than him.

'Are you all right?' my mum said. She always knows when I've got something on my mind. It's like she's telepathic. 'Not too worried?'

'He should be!' said Maeve. 'They'll eat him alive!'

Ben was so shocked he stopped scratching his head. 'Eat him alive? They'll go to prison if they eat him alive!'

'It's just an expression,' Mum said. 'Don't worry, Sam. They won't eat you alive.'

'You don't know the place like I do, Mum,' said Maeve. She finished there last year and she's about to start sixth-form college. 'There are some real psychos.'

'Be quiet!' said Mum. 'Don't be so mean! Don't you worry about those psychos, Sam. Just keep out of their way.'

'Oh, yeah, that's a really good idea, Mum,' I said. Touch of sarcasm there, you know.

'Oh, come here!' Mum said, and she got up and hugged me, pressing me to her like I was a really little kid again. Only in those days my head only came up to her waist and now it was almost level with hers. And for a moment I wished I *was* a little boy again, with nothing to do except swing on swings and dig in sandpits and play with my toys and eat sweets and watch CBeebies . . .

There was a rap at the door.

'That'll be Evan,' I said.

He was standing there on the doorstep in his Mary Seacole Comprehensive School uniform. It was his big brother's cast-off uniform – the trousers ended way above his ankles, the sleeves of the jacket ended way above his wrists, and it wouldn't do up at the front. Evan's a bit overweight. Not actually *fat*. Just . . . well, he's in shape, and the shape is round, as my dad would say.

'What are you staring at?' Evan said. 'Do I look

really stupid?'

'No, no, no,' I said quickly. 'You look fine. Uber-cool.'

'No need to be sarcastic.' He sounded a bit huffy.

I wished I'd kept my mouth shut. Except – a funny thing – now Evan looked so worried, I felt a lot less worried myself. I'd handed on the worry-baton, like in a relay.

Mum came out into the hall. 'Hello Evan. Good luck, you two!'

Maeve appeared behind her. 'They'll need it!'

'*You* survived it there, didn't you?' said Mum.

'Yeah, just about!' said Maeve.

Anyway, we set off up the road, me and Evan. Mum stood at the gate and called out, 'Make some wise choices!' She's always said that, ever since I started primary school. She thinks it's funny. But it's just annoying.

Parents don't always know the difference.

Mary Seacole Comprehensive is a massive new building. Mostly yellow, with steel girders on the outside, and between the yellow walls there are sheets of glass you can see the staircases through.

'Weird, isn't it,' I said to Evan, as we stood outside. Hundreds of kids streamed past, jostling us as they went by. 'We've gone from being the biggest kids to being the smallest kids.'

'Yeah,' said Evan. 'Like in *Gulliver's Travels*. When he goes from Lilliput, where everyone's tiny and he's the giant, to Brobdingnag, where everyone's a giant and he's the tiny one.'

Evan says stuff like that all the time. And he hadn't just seen the film, either. He'd read the book, you could be sure about that.

'Yeah,' I said. 'I guess.'

'But it's going to be OK,' Evan said. 'Remember what Mrs Protheroe said – about the school's strict anti-bullying policy?'

'That's right,' I said. 'There's nothing to worry about.'

We looked at each other. 'Well,' Evan said, 'we'd better get in there.'

We knew where to go. They'd shown us on the Induction Day. We were in Mrs Protheroe's class in Room G11 on the ground floor. But there'd only been year sevens there then. It was all nice and quiet. Today it was like entering a giant beehive.

'You sure this uniform looks OK?' Evan said.

'Well, er, yeah,' I said. 'Totally.'

'Your hair's sticking up.'

'I know,' I said. 'I like it like that.'

So we went in and found our way through the noisy, crowded corridors to Mrs Protheroe's room, and went off to our first class, which was English with Mr Swaledale, and do you know what? Nothing bad or scary happened at all.

Until break time.

Me and Evan were kind of ambling along the side of this tarmacked area where some of the big kids were playing football. We were talking about who was the best ever Captain in *Captain Invincible*.

'Matt Lukovitz is good,' I said. 'He's funny. But I think I gotta say Garrett Butcher, on the whole, 'cause—'

'My dad says Sidney Kronk was the best.'

This put me in a bit of a dilemma. I'd seen an old *Captain Invincible* episode with Sidney Kronk in it and I wasn't that impressed. But I didn't want to sound as if I was contradicting Evan's dad, who's really ill. He's been in and out of hospital for the last

two years having all sorts of treatments and operations, and he can't work any more. So I felt like it would be bad manners, if you know what I mean, to start saying that Evan's dad was all wrong about Sidney Kronk. Before I had a chance to work out what to say, a football came whizzing towards us at about a hundred-and-fifty miles an hour and smashed Evan right in the face, knocking his glasses off.

'Oi!' shouted a really horrible voice. 'Give us our ball back, you muppet!'

A tall kid with a pale face, black hair and cold, hard eyes was glaring at us.

Evan was on his hands and knees looking for his glasses. Blood trickled from his nose. I picked up the glasses and gave them to him.

'The ball! Kick it here, you little jerk!'

'Aren't you even going to say sorry?' I said. 'You just whacked him in the face.'

'He should keep his ugly face out of the way then!'

His mates were all laughing. But the boy himself didn't look like he thought it was funny at all. He started walking towards us. I threw the ball back, but he ignored it.

'What's your problem?' he said.

'You are.' It just sprang to my lips. I knew it was suicidal, but it was *true*.

He opened his eyes wide. He was right close-up in front of us now.

'You what? You *what*?'

He made a sudden movement with his hand like he was going to hit me. I jumped to one side, but then he casually moved his hand up and smoothed back his hair. His mates burst out laughing.

'Who are they letting in to this school these days? Look at this pair of doughnuts. *This* one' – he poked Evan really hard in the stomach, you could see his finger push right in – 'is so fat he couldn't get a uniform to fit him! And *this* one' – he poked me in the ribs and it really hurt – 'has hair like a bogbrush. A ginger bogbrush!'

His mates laughed even more and came closer, crowding around us. I gave Evan a kind of helpless look at the exact moment he turned and did the exact same look to me.

'What's your name?' said the tall boy.

'Evan Carter,' muttered Evan.

'What? Evan Farter?'

Cue gales of laughter from his mates. Evan went red.

'And you?' He turned on me. 'What's your stupid name?'

'Why? What's yours?'

I don't know why I was acting like I had a death wish. I have this idea that life should be *fair*, you know? If he could ask me my name, why couldn't I ask him his? I know life *isn't* fair – grown-ups are always coming out with that one – but it *should* be.

There was a gasp from his mates. 'You better teach him a lesson, Scorpus.'

Scorpus gave a sneering grin – like a bit of string was pulling his lip up on one side. 'Yeah, 'cause that's what school's for, innit? Learning lessons.' He pushed me right back against the wall. I could feel the bricks scraping against my vertebrae. And I wished, more strongly than I'd ever wished for anything in my life, that I had super-powers, like in Marvel comics. If I was Spiderman, I could punch him to the ground using all my spider-strength, and then tie him up in a web. Or if I was the Incredible Hulk, I could hurl him right across the playground and he'd go splat against the far wall. Or if I was the Mighty Thor, I'd

get out my hammer and—

'You gotta pay *tax*,' Scorpus said. 'For being cheeky. Give us your money.'

'Leave him alone!' said Evan. 'This school has an anti-bullying policy—'

Hurricane of laughter.

Scorpus held his hand out in front of me. 'Dinner money.'

'I haven't got any, I brought a packed lunch.'

One of his mates – a thickset boy with a dyed-blond streak in his hair and a piercing in his eyebrow, even though that was against the rules – upended my Adidas bag. The calculator, geometry set and pens tumbled out, plus the lunch box.

'Oh, what we got here?' Scorpus picked up the calculator and geometry set. 'He's got all his little instruments, sweet or what?' He slipped them into his jacket pocket.

'Give those back!'

'Er, how can I put this? No.' Then he opened the lunch box. 'What we got here? Cheese? I hate cheese.' He dropped the sandwich on the floor and ground it under his heel, and all the coleslaw came splurting out the sides. He threw the orange up and

down a couple of times, then pulled back his arm and sent it whizzing right across the playground. It splatted on the wall on the far side, just like he'd have done if I'd been the Incredible Hulk. Finally he took the cereal bar, looked at it, and slipped it into his other pocket. It was a chocolate-coated one.

'That's the end of the lesson,' Scorpus said. 'The lesson is, show some *respect.* You get me?'

All I had to do was say OK, or even just nod. But somehow . . . I just couldn't. I was scared of him. But I didn't respect him. So I just stared back dumbly.

'I *said*, d'you *get* me?'

'Oh, come on,' said one of Scorpus' mates. 'Let's get on with the game, the bell's gonna go soon.' He was a black kid with a shaved head, and even though he looked seriously hard, something in his voice gave me the idea he'd started to feel a bit sorry for me.

Scorpus turned to look at him. 'I'll "come on" when I'm ready, all right?'

'Look – a teacher's coming!' Evan said.

I felt a surge of relief as I saw a bald teacher with glasses and a brown corduroy jacket walking our way.

Scorpus swore. 'OK, let's play football. You two' –

he fixed us each in turn with a laser beam-stare – 'if you say anything, you're *dead*.' He drew his finger across his throat. 'Capeesh?'

'What?' I said. 'I don't know what *capeesh* means.'

Scorpus took half a step forward and for a second I thought he was going to start on me again. But the teacher was close now. Shaved-Head pulled Scorpus's arm, and Scorpus finally slouched away.

'Whew!' Evan said shakily. 'That was horrible!'

'What are we going to do?'

'Well . . . you can share my packed lunch.'

'Thanks. But I meant, we'll have to tell, won't we?'

'Will we?'

'Yeah, Mrs Protheroe said—'

'Yeah, but *he* said—'

'Yeah, but Mrs Protheroe said—'

'Yeah, but he'll kill us!'

'He won't,' I said. 'They won't let him.'

'How'd you know?'

'Look, they've got an anti-bullying policy. They have to, like, enforce it. Anyway, why should we let him get away with pushing us about like that and stealing my things? It's not fair!'

'Life's not fair,' said Evan.

‘Well, we’ll have to try and make it fair, then,’ I said.

So we went to Mrs Protheroe and dropped Scorpus right in the poo.

And dropped ourselves in it too, as it turned out.