

# Big Wish



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*Chicken House*

SCHOLASTIC INC. / NEW YORK

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First published in the United Kingdom in 2015 as *The Big Wish* by Chicken House, 2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS.

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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Robshaw, Brandon, author.

Title: Big wish / Brandon Robshaw.

Description: First [American] edition. | New York : Chicken House/Scholastic Inc., 2016. | "First published in the United Kingdom in 2015 as *The Big Wish* by Chicken House." | Summary: When a shooting star grants Sam a million wishes (as long as they are logically possible) he thinks that he will be able to make his life better at his new school—but he soon learns that you have to be very careful, because wishes can have unexpected consequences.

| Description based on print version record and CIP data provided by publisher; resource not viewed.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015051396 (print) | ISBN 9780545904100  
(hardcover : alk. paper) |

Subjects: LCSH: Wishes—Juvenile fiction. | Meteors—Juvenile fiction. | Conduct of life—Juvenile fiction. | Schools—Juvenile fiction. | Families—Juvenile fiction. | CYAC: Wishes—Fiction. | Meteors—Fiction. | Conduct of life—Fiction. | Schools—Fiction. | Family life—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.R56996 (print) | DDC  
823.92—dc23

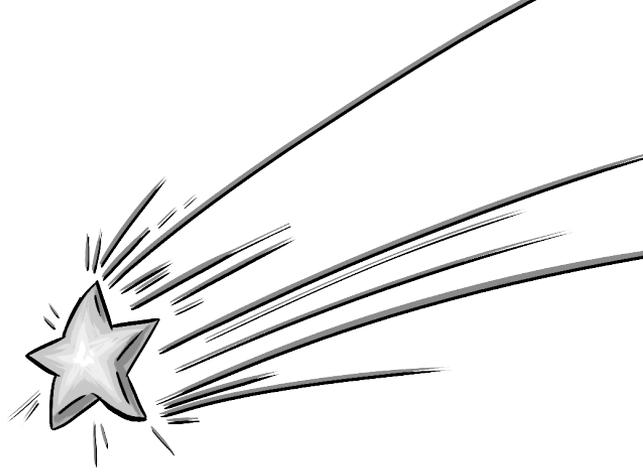
LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015051396>

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1      16 17 18 19 20

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First printing 2016

Book design by Mary Claire Cruz



# Chapter One

**P**eople 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 decked out in my brand-new school uniform: dark gray 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 lunch, which consisted of a ham salad sandwich, an orange, and a fruit-and-nut granola 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 okay for him. All *he* had to do was lounge around in a studio, play records, blabber on, and get paid buckets 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 mom 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,” Mom said. “Don’t worry, Sam. They won’t eat you alive.”

“You don’t know the place like I do, Mom,” said Maeve. She finished there last year and she’s about to start high school. “There are some real psychos.”

“Be quiet!” said Mom. “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, Mom,” I said. Touch of sarcasm there, you know.

“Oh, come here!” Mom 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 sandboxes and play with my toys and eat candy and watch cartoons . . .

There was a knock on the door.

“That’s Evan,” I said.

He was standing there on the doorstep in his Mary Seacole Comprehensive School uniform. It was his big brother’s old uniform—the trousers ended way above his ankles, the sleeves of the jacket ended way above his wrists, and the jacket buttons didn’t meet the buttonholes. Evan’s a little 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 little 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 off the worry baton, like in a relay.

Mom 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 Mom.

“Yeah, just about!” said Maeve.

Anyway, we set off up the street, me and Evan. Mom stood at the gate and called out, “Make some wise choices!” She’s always said that, ever since I started elementary school. She thinks it’s funny. But it’s just annoying.

Parents don’t always know the difference.



Mary Seacole Comprehensive is a humongous 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 movie, either. He’d read the book, you could be sure about that.

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess.”

“But it’s going to be okay,” 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 Orientation Day. We were in Mrs. Protheroe’s homeroom in Room 111 on the first floor. But there’d only been sixth-graders there then. It was all nice and quiet. Today it was like entering a giant beehive.

“You sure this uniform looks okay?” 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 halls to Mrs. Protheroe's room, then 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 recess.



Me and Evan were kind of ambling along the side of the blacktop, where some of the big kids were playing soccer. 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 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 sick. He's been in and out of the hospital for the last two years, having all sorts of treatments and operations, and he can't work anymore. 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 figure out what to say, a soccer ball came whizzing toward us at about a hundred and fifty miles an hour and smashed Evan right in the face, knocking his glasses off.

“Hey!” shouted a really horrible voice. “Give us our ball back, you twerp!”

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 friends were all laughing. But the boy himself didn’t look like he thought it was funny at all. He started walking toward 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 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 friends burst out laughing.

“Who are they letting in to this school these days? Look at these two 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 toilet brush. An orange toilet brush!”

His friends laughed even more and came closer, crowding around us. I gave Evan a kind of helpless look at the exact moment he turned and gave 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 friends. 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 friends. “You better teach him a lesson, Scopus.”

Scopus gave a sneering grin—like a piece of string was pulling his upper lip up on one side. “Yeah, 'cause that's what school's for, ain't it? 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 superpowers, like in Marvel comics. If I was Spider-Man, 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 a *tax*,” Scopus said. “For being a wise guy. Give us your money.”

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

Hurricane of laughter.

Scopus held his hand out in front of me. “Lunch money.”

“I haven't got any. I brought my lunch.”

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

“Oh, what we got here?” Scopus 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’ve we got here? Ham salad? I hate ham salad.” He dropped the sandwich and ground it under his heel, and all the salad 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 if I’d been the Incredible Hulk. Finally, he took the granola bar, looked at it, and slipped it into his other pocket. It was a chocolate-coated one.

“That’s the end of the lesson,” Scorpis said. “The lesson is, show some *respect*. You get me?”

All I had to do was say okay, 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 Scopus's friends. "Let's play the game, the bell's gonna ring soon." He was a black kid with a shaved head, and even though he looked seriously tough, something in his voice gave me the idea he'd started to feel a little sorry for me.

Scopus 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.

Scopus swore. "Okay, let's play soccer. You two"—he fixed us each 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 *cap-eesh* 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 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 around 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 Scopus right in the poop.

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