
Best Friends for Never

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For Wren, for Desmond, and for Jeff

chapter one

In the shocked hush after it happens, I wonder if Zooey Dutchman Zervos had any idea when she sat down with her two yes-girls, Teagan and Tess, that she was about to get socially annihilated. Or maybe she thought she was just going to tear into some lunchtime cheese crackers while making side eyes at everyone in their general vicinity, per her usual. For some reason, the cheese crackers made the whole thing so much more awful to watch: She was eating them (with gusto!) when it happened. Just, like, totally chomping away, so when the bomb dropped and her mouth fell open in shock, you could see the mutilated nuclear orange sludge of chewed-up cheese crackers in her mouth.

I bet she's never able to eat cheese crackers again. I bet the sense memory will be too much for her and just the sound of the crinkly cellophane wrapper will lay her out flat and someone will have to get whatever the modern-day equivalent of smelling salts is. Rotten tuna fish? Poopy

diapers? The smell of someone else's belly-button gunk? How *do* you revive someone whose heart is most likely a lump of coal?

"Oh my gosh." My best friend, Piper, stretches her small frame up to whisper in my ear. "That was *horrible!*"

I nod numbly in agreement as our friends Celeste and Fee, clueless about the noonday slaughter the rest of us sixth graders just witnessed, set down their lunch bags and slide onto the bench on the other side of our cafeteria table, completing our usual foursome.

Fee tips her head forward, so her thick curtain of black bangs edges over her big gray eyes. She lowers her voice to a theatrical purr and says to Piper, "Hiya, Pipes." Then nods at me and says in a tough-girl growl, "Brooklyn."

"Are you new here?" Celeste asks me, just like she has every day since she met me this summer. She asks with a grin that I can't help but return, despite the dire circumstances.

She slips off the thin barrette that keeps her springy brown curls from flopping over her face and prepares to slip it back in, but when I don't answer, she looks back and forth from me to Piper in confusion, still holding her clip. "What's going on?"

"Get OUT!" Fee practically yells, slamming her palm on the table and upsetting the handmade ALLERGY ALERT: THE ONLY NUT ALLOWED AT THIS TABLE IS PIPER sign we

put out every day when we sit down. “Did I miss it?! Did something just go down between Zooney and the Ts?!”

Zooney and the Ts is what everyone calls Zooney and Teagan and Tess. They are, without question, the barbed point at the tippy-top of the sixth-grade popularity pyramid, gliding down the halls of Trepan’s Grove Middle School in migrating-bird formation, with shiny, pop-star hair, their slender feet in ballet flats. They are what you expect popular sixth-grade girls in a wealthy small town to be like, at least if you’ve ever read a book or watched a PG-13 movie about middle school. They are the three kinds of pretty: pretty-looking, pretty rich, and pretty mean. I much prefer my friends’ kind of pretty: pretty funny, pretty smart, and pretty-pretty when they laugh so hard they show all their teeth. Rae, my best friend in Brooklyn, was the same, except different.

Zooney and the Ts are what’s known as Totally Popular, as opposed to me and my friends, who are more like Lower Medium Popular. Those are both actual classifications that people use here, according to Fee, who keeps track of things like that because she is *really* serious about Popularity and How to Attain It. She’s so serious that she offers me information about popularity when I don’t even ask for it and actually don’t really want it because all of her information can be summed up in three words and one contraction: *We’re not very popular*. Which is kind of a

depressing thought even if you don't care about that sort of thing. Which I don't. Not really. I mean, I definitely didn't care about it when I went to a huge school in Brooklyn, and Rae and I were in our own happy little clique that consisted of the two of us and every single character in Tilde's Realm, which is otherwise known as the best fantasy series ever written. It is also unfortunately known as a Nerd Identifier. Fee taught me that, too, and thank goodness she did, because people in this picket-fenced apple town have a zero-tolerance policy for nerd behavior. Even if the rest of the world is starting to realize that nerds will inherit the earth (which, by the way, is printed on my favorite T-shirt, one that I will never wear again because that would expose my secret identity), I don't think Trepan's Grove ever got the memo. Their philosophy is more like Preppy=Popular, Nerds Need Not Apply. This worried Rae and me when we were doing online reconnaissance before I moved. "They're like . . . cyborgs," she said, leaning closer to the screen of her laptop to study a picture of a middle school picnic on the town website. "Everyone's so . . . sporty. And preppy. But not, like, ironically preppy. Just . . . preppy." She looked at me then, her face serious. "Don't let them change you, Hattie. Don't let them turn you into a cyborg." I assured her there was no way that would ever happen. Then I moved here. I wouldn't say I'm, like, one hundred percent cyborg at this point,

but there are definitely some Hattie parts that have been replaced. It's the reason I don't text Rae goofy pictures of myself anymore. I'm kind of afraid of what she'll say when she sees that I actually have kind of changed.

"Tess and Teagan just, like . . ." I start to explain to Fee and Celeste, trying to find a way to put into words how their simple movement of abruptly standing up and leaving Zooey sitting alone in the middle of the cafeteria, her mouth full of orange cracker goo, was one of the most heartless things I'd ever seen. "They just, like, *abandoned* her."

Fee does a little gasp. "Really?" She cranes her neck to see Zooey stuffing her uneaten cheese crackers back into her lunch bag. "They just left her there? They didn't, like, say anything or anything?"

"She's like a polar bear adrift on a teeny-tiny chunk of ice," Piper says in disbelief.

"Yeah, an evil polar bear who pretty much deserves it," Fee adds.

Piper wrinkles her nose for a split second, making all of her freckles smooch together into the shape of a stepped-on blueberry. "That was mean, Fee."

Fee huffs, still watching Zooey. "*I'm* mean? Zooey Dutchman Zervos made you cry every day of second grade, and *I'm* mean? Your mom still calls the school every summer to make sure you guys aren't in the same homeroom!"

"Fee!" Celeste scolds. "Stop staring!"

“I’m not staring,” Fee says quickly, wrenching her gaze away from Zooley and dropping her excited look in favor of her usual studied, bored one. She gets her sandwich out of her bag and then glances back over to see which table Teagan and Tess have moved to. They’re sitting with Jonah and Rico and a couple of other boys from the soccer team. Fee says Sitting with Boys at Lunch is a new development this year at Trepan’s Grove Middle School, one that’s only spread down as far as the Medium Popular kids. Piper and I agree this is a good thing, because who wants to see boys eat?

“I know Zooley’s mean,” Piper says quietly. “Especially with that new silent, evil glare thing she’s doing this year, where she just, like, stares at you, letting you imagine the worst possible things about yourself.” She shudders. “That’s just some evil mind magic right there. Anyway, even with the evil mind tricks, she didn’t deserve being dropped like that, in front of everyone.”

Fee looks at us and says conspiratorially, “It just sucks it happened right before the Harvest Festival.”

Ugh, I’d forgotten about the Harvest Festival!

“That *does* make it worse!” I whisper.

Fee nods at me in grave agreement.

Here is why even a newbie like me knows that the timing of what just happened is so awful: This entire town is one hundred percent bananas about two things: apples and the phrase “Remember that time at Harvest Festival . . .”

Piper has a whole wall in her attic bedroom covered top to bottom in photo-booth pictures and thumbtacked trinkets and other random stuff from every festival she's ever been to. There's a photograph of her second-grade class standing on a little outdoor stage on the town common, a teeny Piper in the front row, arms flung wide as she sings. "You'll be in these pictures this year," Piper told me, pointing to a messy row of photo-booth pictures, at least four of them starring Piper, Fee, and Celeste. My heart did a happy flip-flop when she said that, because goofy photo-booth pictures are a permanent record of a friendship. And even though I have a few things from the months since we became friends (Popsicle sticks from the snack shop at the town pond, movie ticket stubs), I desperately want something from the Harvest Festival.

Fee clucks her tongue. "Anyway, Zoey should have seen it coming."

"How could she have seen it coming?!" Piper objects, a little too loudly, scrambling up so she's sitting on the heels of her high-tops like a little kid, poking me in the side with a bony elbow in the process. "That was a total ambush!"

"Because," Fee says so quietly we have to lean in to hear her, "it was all over everywhere last night that Tess and Teagan were going to drop her."

"All over *where*?" Piper asks, exasperated, before glaring at the nut-free granola bar in her lunch, obviously

debating if it was worth the little pieces that would get stuck in her braces.

“It was all over everything,” Fee says knowingly. “On the *Internet*.”

“Oh.” Piper sighs so hard it’s like she deflates. She passes the granola bar over to Celeste, who slides a ginger cookie across in return. “I was at my dad’s last night and left my laptop at home. I couldn’t do *anything* all night except kick his butt at Parcheesi.”

“*You* saw, though, right?” Fee asks, looking at Celeste.

Celeste scoffs. “I was at the rink ’til late.” She adjusts the zipper on the sleek black Ice Masters team sweat-shirt, her name embroidered in crisp white cursive on the upper part of her right sleeve. Ice-skating is the reason I didn’t meet Celeste until the very end of summer. She’d spent seven weeks studying with professional skaters at a rink in California. “And you know I don’t participate in that kind of pollution of the spirit.”

“Yeah, me either!” Piper says. “Celeste is right. That’s spirit pollution, plain and simple.” Sometimes I’m afraid that Piper is going to become best-best friends with Celeste instead of with me.

“Hattie?” Fee asks hopefully.

I shake my head. “I seriously doubt I have access to whatever site you’re talking about.” My mom and dad are super serious about keeping me from anything remotely

resembling bullying or naked people online. *The Internet is full of turkeys. Remember that, Hattie, my dad says. And turkeys are stupid, stupid creatures.*

Fee huffs, “Your parents know you’re not seven, right?”

Piper gives my arm a squeeze, the sort of thing she always does when the barbs poke out of Fee’s tongue.

“Ugh! I can’t even show you guys because it’s all deleted already!” Fee says in frustration.

Piper’s groan speaks for us all as we notice Zooey walking toward the exit—right by Tess and Teagan and the Boys Who Play Soccer at their table. The silence around Zooey grows with each step, until the only sound in the whole crowded cafeteria is the *pat pat pat* of her ballet flats on the linoleum. I wonder suddenly if she’ll have to stop wearing ballet flats. If she has to turn them in at the Popularity Dismissal Counter, like when you hand in your bowling shoes to get your own shoes back. I wonder what they’d give her in return?

I mean, would I have to stop wearing high-tops with rainbow laces, corduroys that drive me crazy with their endless *zip zip zip* sounds, and my “stripy” if my friends suddenly dropped me? Would I go back to wearing T-shirts of cats doing funny things, and colorful leggings? Would I have to stop playing field hockey with Piper and Fee? Not that I would really *mind* having to stop playing field hockey. That sport is the worst.

As I watch Zooney, I think she's going to hurry by Teagan and Tess. If I were her, if that ever happened to me, I would run like the wind all the way back to Brooklyn. But Zooney comes to a stop right in front of them. ON PURPOSE. I gasp at her bravery and total lack of survival instinct.

"Oh my gosh," Piper whisper-squeaks, pulling the cuff of my sweatshirt so hard my hand falls off the table and onto her bent knees, where she grabs my fingers in a vise grip. "This is terrible! Make it stop!"

But I can't make it stop; none of us can. Celeste doesn't watch. She makes a point of taking out her hummus sandwich, but the rest of us can't look away.

Zooney is the first to speak, her strangled voice carrying across the hushed cafeteria. "Why?" she asks.

Her two as-of-four-minutes-ago best friends both raise their chins. The boys at the table look one hundred percent uncomfortable. A couple of them get up and move to another table. "Well," Tess says, with a glance at Teagan, like she's looking for approval, "you kind of turned into a total dork." Her voice breaks on the word *dork*, and she swallows so hard I can see her throat move.

"Why?" Zooney asks again.

Teagan snorts with impatience, rolls her eyes, and leans back in her chair before focusing her glare on Zooney.

Her voice doesn't crack at all. "Fine, if you want the details, *I'll* give them to you. You've become a total dork . . ."

"I said that already," Tess murmurs, looking put out.

Teagan gives Tess a sideways glare and continues. "You're a total dork, but *not* like adorkable, not like in a quirky way. You're just, like, *bizarre* in a bad way, you know . . . It makes people totally uncomfortable." Tess purses her lips and nods in serious, silent agreement. Teagan goes on, "And even though you *kind of* still wear the same clothes we do, they just look weird on you now for some reason, like your body is just, like"—she pauses, flicking her eyes up and down Zooley's frame, moving her hands as if to pat Zooley's shape—"weirdly built *wrong*, you know? Like you're, you know, *developing* in the wrong places or something."

Tess giggles a theatrical "*Oh my God!*" at this, and Teagan, acting like she's trying to stifle a laugh for Zooley's sake, says, "So that's it. You act weird, you look weird. Oh! And you smell weird. Like maybe you don't wash your—" We can't hear what she says because Tess lets out a delighted screamy laugh, but from the reaction of the people closer to the table, the rest of the sentence is pretty awful.

I exchange a horrified look with Celeste and Piper. Piper asks, "Should we do something?"

Celeste is already starting to get up. Piper is, too,

like maybe they're going to march over there and say something.

Fee quickly reaches across the table and grabs both of their wrists, keeping them still. She doesn't grab me but somehow holds me with a glare that's worthy of Zooey herself. "Don't move a muscle," she growls to all of us, her eyes bugging out in a not entirely appealing way. "You want them to turn on us next?"

I'm glad she says it, because that is *exactly* what I was thinking. Piper seems to consider this, but Celeste yanks her hand free from Fee's grip and steps over the bench, grabbing her lunch bag.

"It's too late," Fee says, with something like relief. I look over and see Ms. Eurki is walking quickly over to the battlefield. She says something quietly to Zooey, and Zooey leaves the cafeteria. Then Ms. Eurki says something even quieter to the Ts and they roll their eyes but put their lunch stuff away, get up, and follow Ms. Eurki out of the cafeteria.

Celeste sighs and gives Fee a look as she sits back down.

"What?" Fee asks indignantly. "I don't want them to ice us out. Is that so wrong?"

"Ice us out?" Celeste asks. "Ice us out of *what*?"

Fee gives an annoyed flip of her hair. "Forget it."

But Celeste won't forget about it. "And since when do you care about that sort of thing?"

I want to say *It's all she cares about!* But I hold my tongue as they stare each other down.

“Fiona,” Celeste finally says.

“Celestia,” Fee responds.

“I don’t want to fight with you,” Celeste tells Fee. “I love you more than peanut butter on crackers.”

I poke Piper and whisper “*Ffftttt*,” the sound of an EpiPen, which is what I always do when someone mentions a peanut product around us. She nods her thanks.

“And I love you more than popping bubble wrap,” Fee responds.

“So can we stop fighting?”

Fee shrugs. “I’m not fighting. I’m just looking out for us.”