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FRIEND ME



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< CHAPTER 1 >

I'm beyond hangry by the time I make it upstairs to the weird apartment and its little kitchen. The high school lets out before we do, so my brother's already there, wolfing down cereal, hairy legs stretched out so I can't get by.

I drop my phone on the table and pick up the box of Honey-Crunch Hoops. Empty.

“Michael. MICHAEL.”

He pulls away one ear of his headphones. “You talking to me?”

“I just opened this!” My voice is a screech, which isn't me, but I'm feeling less like me every second.

Michael shrugs, like this is beyond his control, and keeps munching. He's never not eating. I swear he's

grown taller since we got to America, and it's only been a month. I hurl the box to the floor and stomp it for the recycling. The smiling Honey-Crunch frog crumples and the cardboard pops. I imagine it's Zara Tucci's face.

"*O-kay*. I'm sensing some strong feelings about this." Michael pulls off his headphones and calls over his shoulder. "Jeeves, put Honey-Crunch Hoops on my shopping list."

A disc glows blue on the windowsill. "*Sure!*" chimes a robotic voice. "*I've added Honey-Crunch Hoops to your shopping list.*"

Michael picks up the battered box and drops it into the recycling. "Middle school problems, perchance?"

He's being nice. But I hate the world. I fling open the monster fridge, oversized like everything else in this country, and glare at the shelves of strange food. My eyes hunt for something I know from home: some batch bread or Irish cheddar. I would kill for a proper cheese toastie but have to settle for applesauce.

"Chill, Roisin, seriously. Is this about the cereal? I could sick some up for you, like a penguin." Michael gurgles retching noises, and I can't help smiling. He flashes me a grin, and his freckles wrinkle. Michael can

wasn't the only one to mock my accent and clothes, but she was first. It's still bizarre to me that no one wears uniforms and that school clothes are a thing. Mum's taking me shopping in Boston as soon as she can get a Saturday off from her new job. Until then, I'm surviving on a couple of emergency outfits from Target, which I wear a lot. Like, a lot.

Zara loves this. Every lunchtime she sends me a DM on TokTalk: a picture she's taken of me, circling my hoodie or leggings, question marks drawn all over it. Is this the SAME thing u wore Monday? maybe in ireland people don't change their clothes, but here, it's gross.

Today, though, Zara changed things up. Instead of a DM, she mocked me in front of everyone, and I sort of snapped. Thirty-five days straight of her rubbish. Am I supposed to take that and say nothing?

Michael's waiting for me to tell him who Zara is; he keeps saying I can make friends if I try harder. But I'm not him. My brother is like a log fire everyone wants to be near. I'm more smoke and ash—at least, that's how it seems here.

“Zara Tucci.” I push away the rest of the applesauce. “An idiot.”

Michael nods and grips the headphones at his neck, ready to disappear back to his tunes and homework. “Anything I can do?” He calls to the windowsill, putting on an epic movie-trailer voice. “Jeeves, destroy Zara Tucci.”

Jeeves apologizes that he doesn’t know how to do that yet. I laugh, like Michael knew I would. He smiles and heads down the hall, nearly crashing into one of the sloped ceilings. Our flat is the top floor of a Victorian mansion: Some of the ceilings are slanted nearly to the floor, and there’s a mothball smell everywhere, though Mum thinks it could be mouse poison. Brilliant. If I had to brainstorm the least homey home, this would be it. But Michael loves the American weirdness; from day one, he was messing with the ice maker and throwing eggshells and banana skins into the garbage disposal, just to hear it scream. He calls back to me from down the hall. “Mum texted to say don’t forget Whole Foods!”

“Why can’t you do it?” I yell. But I know why. Studying for SATs: his excuse for everything. He says it like *essay-tees* now. They were *sats* till we left Ireland, but he’s adapting.

I change my clothes and grab Mum's Whole Foods card. She keeps hassling me to bring creepy Jeeves along, too: Apparently, if I put him onto my phone, he'll guide me right to the lasagna in the shop. He's like an Alexa but turbo—Mum invented him. But no way is Jeeves going onto my phone. I can imagine him piping up with random comments at school, like he does here sometimes. That's just what I need.

Outside, the heat is like a wall, crazy-hot for May, though Mum says anything's possible with Massachusetts weather. I traipse down our hill toward Eastborough's one shopping street, and before I'm even halfway, sweat pricks under my arms. The soapy smell of lilacs makes me want to gag. I blow out a breath.

The problem's not the weather. The problem is me.

My phone feels like an unexploded bomb in my pocket. What happened at school replays like a stuttery nightmare in my brain. Getting paired with Zara in Art. Sketching her pinched rat face for an hour. And that wasn't even the worst. The teacher made us take a photo of each other to draw from. Thank you, Mr. Morrison, for loading a bullet into Zara's gun. She shot it straight onto TokTalk for everyone to enjoy.

She'd drawn wavy stink lines around my hoodie and added a poll: **vote if u think @roisinkdoyle should change her clothes.**

There were thirty-nine votes, all *YES*, by the time I got onto the bus. And the comments. I sat there reading, wanting to vanish:

Omg yes, she wears the same clothes all the time

maybe its an irish thing. like potatoes

She eats a tuna baked potato every day and it STINKS, like that outfit she never washes.

That one from Zara. I wanted to kick something. I wash and dry my stuff **EVERY DAY**; the gallon of liquid Tide is almost gone.

My hands were shaking so hard, I nearly dropped my phone as I climbed our hill home, typing a reply. **YOU WON'T SMELL ANYTHING AFTER I RIP YOUR HEAD OFF.**

A few people shot back straightaway: **omg fighting irish . . . What r u, a SYCO?** That one, with the idiot spelling, is hard to forget. There'll be dozens more by now. Which is why I'm not going to look.

A crowd stands outside the 7-Eleven, and I stop short. But when I'm closer, I see it's not seventh graders; it's nine-year-olds. My heart's still running like a rabbit as I pass them and the Goodwill—which is like a charity shop, but without the fun. Mum and I love charity shops; we went straight into Goodwill when we arrived. Never again. The looks people give you. Two ladies stared at us as we left, like we were ready to beg for change. I glared right back—I wanted to tell them Mum works at MIT. Mum was relaxed about it; she's like Michael.

A sudden wave of missing Dad surges in my chest. My eyes fog with tears as I head into Whole Foods. Something bangs into me.

“Ow!” a voice whines. “Watch it!”

Oh, brilliant. It's the girl who whispers with Zara: blonde hair, straight as a blade. My arm throbs where I crashed into her. “Sorry.” I bend to pick up my bag and swipe at my eyes.

“What did she do, Mara?” someone asks behind her.

That voice. The plague rat herself. Zara steps out from behind Mara, and my heart starts skipping again, I can't help it. She's a head shorter than me, with black eyes and an Italian tan I'd give anything for. It's a marvel of nature, how so much mean was stuffed into that tiny package. Zara glares up at me. "Did you *hit* her?" She rests a hand on Mara. "Are you okay?"

Mara rubs her shoulder, like I dislocated it. I guess it is possible I hurt her. Swimming's given me strong arms, and she's mostly bone. "I had something in my eye and didn't see her. I said sorry."

Zara opens her mouth, like she's going to make a thing of this, but just hooks her arm through Mara's, like she's tugging her close for protection. "I saw what you said on my post, you *psycho*," she hisses. "Who knew you were so violent?"

I walk off to find Mum's lasagna, leaving them by the gallons of apple juice stacked to the ceiling. "The post was a *joke*," Zara calls, loud enough for everyone in the place to hear. "That's a thing we have in America!"

My jaw clenches so hard, my teeth ache. I will the tower of juice to topple on her, but nothing happens. I grab a container of stew—not what Mum wanted, but I

don't care. My eyes sting and there's a weight in my throat. I'm not going to cry. I just want to get out of here, but at the self-checkouts, the stupid till won't read Mum's card.

"You all set?"

A plump guy in a long apron and Whole Foods cap has appeared beside me. His name tag says DION, ASSISTANT MANAGER. He's barely older than Michael, maybe eighteen, with a hopeful fluff of mustache. He boops his card and tries again—and now I look like I've stolen the stew, because I have to haul it out of the bag. My neck burns as a blush creeps up my chin. I become a huge, flaming freckle when I'm embarrassed.

"Register's not working so good today, sorry!" Dion looks at the error message. "Oh, card declined. You got another one?"

"I don't. Sorry." I feel the pathetic urge to tell Dion everything. I think he clocks that I'm holding back tears. Heads turn from the other checkouts, looking at the girl who can't pay. I will utterly die if the devil twins are watching all this. But they've vanished, thankfully.

"Hey, are you Irish?" Dion's round face breaks into a grin. "Man, I love Ireland! I wanna go! You know what? Beef stew's on the house."