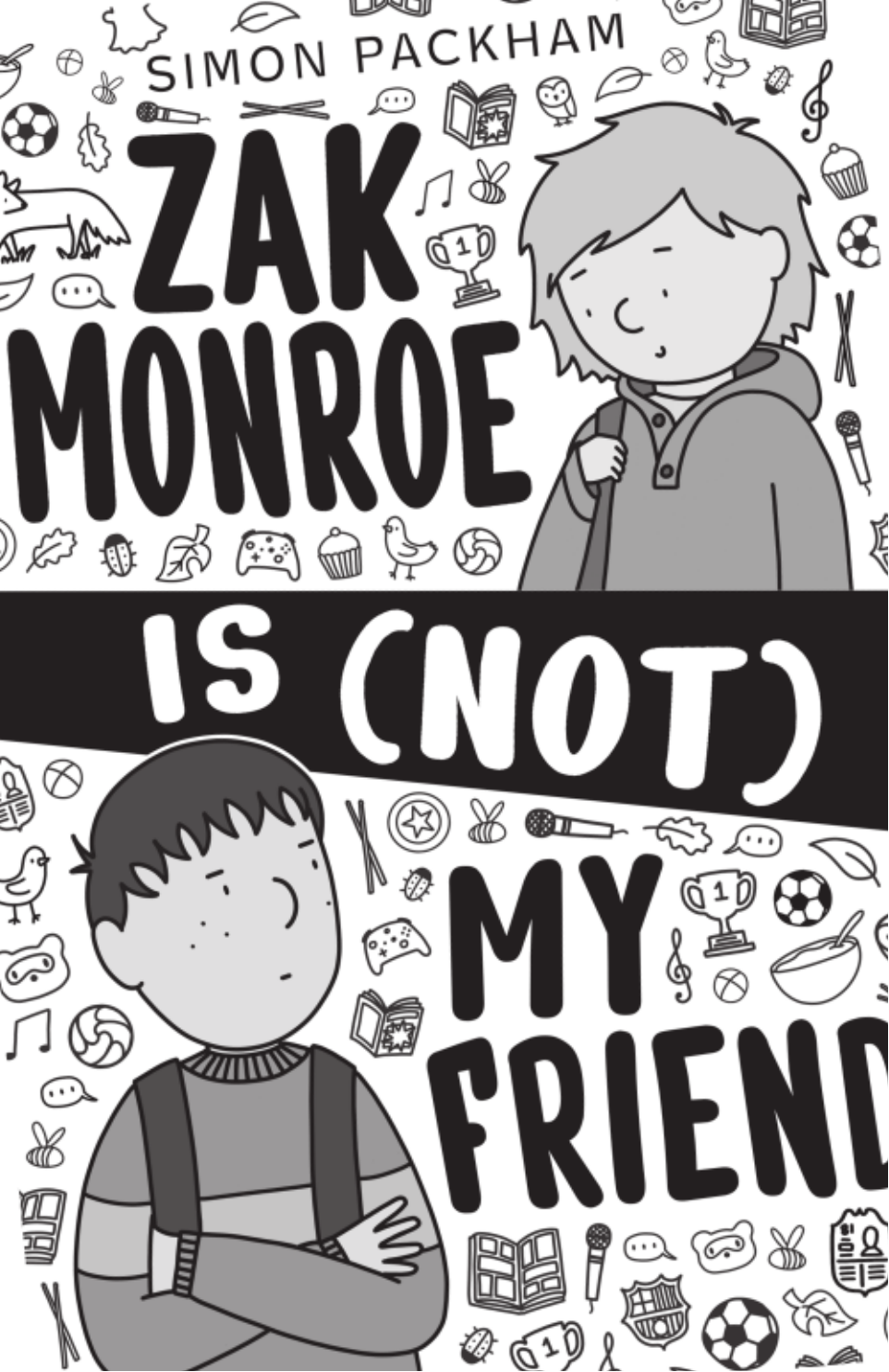
SIMON PACKHAM

ZAK MONROE IS (NOT) MY FRIEND



For Aidan

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So this is it.

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH.

I stare at the blank piece of paper, take a deep, deep breath and try not to panic. But my heart is pounding as I reach shakily for my pen, scribble my signature and jot down three names.

And that's the easy part. Tsunamis of sweat start racing down my forehead as I look round the classroom and try to read their minds.

Because not knowing what anyone else has written is complete torture. And what makes it about a gazillion times worse is that six weeks ago, I had no idea that this was going to happen.

Six weeks ago, the SATS were over, the sun was shining, Mum wanted me to sing a solo in her latest charity fundraiser, I'd just taught myself to make farting noises with my armpit and I was living my best life.

WHERE DID IT ALL GO WRONG?



Chapter 1

There's nothing better than spending first break with your three best friends. That's us, the boys on the picnic table at the bottom of the school field who can't seem to stop laughing – which is probably why Mrs Jenkins never lets us sit together in class any more! We've been best mates since Baby Bears' Nursery when our mums started going for coffee together and formed the Mummy Bears' Book Club. We're more like brothers than friends. It feels like we've known each other for ever.

'Hey, guys,' says Jay, still smiling about my elephants in the fridge joke. 'Do you know what?'

But before we hear from Jay, maybe I should introduce you to my friends.

The tall one, wearing cool glasses, is Callum Hudson. He's the only person I know who likes roast potatoes on his pizza, his dad's a legend and his dog's name is Rocky. Fintan West is the quiet one sitting next to him. He's really good at drawing *Star Wars* spacecraft and he doesn't like cheese.

Jay Puri's favourite superhero is Iron Man. He's the third best footballer in Year Six and has the loudest voice.

And I'm Sam Taylor. The kid who's so happy right now that he can't help breaking into the chorus of his mum's favourite Beatles' song. (*With a Little Help From My Friends.*)

'Stop singing!' says Jay. 'I'm trying to tell you something.'

'Like what?' says Cal.

Jay waits until we're all listening. 'Did you know we've only got ten weeks left?'

'Ten weeks?' I say, worried that I might have forgotten something. 'What are you talking about?'

'Ten more weeks at Patchdean Primary. Ten more weeks of Jenkiwobbles and her stupid learning ladder.'

'What's wrong with Patchdean Primary?' says Fin. 'Mrs Jenkins is OK. And the Swanage trip was well good.'

I was a bit homesick for the first two days, especially after I got sunburnt. But I loved talent night and making sand sculptures on the beach.

'Don't forget marble crunch and chocolate sauce,' says Cal. 'That's like, the best pudding ever.'

Jay shakes his head. 'You get a choice of puddings at St Thomas's. *And* there's a fingerprint machine in the canteen.'

I'm kind of looking forward to starting secondary school; they've got a really cool recording studio and my older brother Charlie reckons St Thomas's Academy is the best thing since Mum started putting chilli flakes on our pasta. But I still get a bit nervous when I think about my first day, so I don't like talking about it.

'What do you reckon, Sam?' says Jay. 'I can't wait to get away from here. How about you?'

'Not really, no.'

I don't want them to think I'm scared. But they're sure to understand when I tell them why.

'So what's so great about Patchdean Primary?' says Jay.

'That's easy,' I say. 'All my friends are here.'

Jay shrugs and reaches for his water bottle. 'You'll probably make some new friends when you get to St Thomas's.'

'I don't need any new friends,' I say, making a real effort not to bite my nails. 'You guys are the best.'

Everyone goes quiet for a bit. Cal crunches thoughtfully on his crisps, Fin lobs his apple core into the new composting bin, Jay throws his water bottle in the air and *almost* manages catch it on the back of his neck, and I sit on my hands and try not to think about St Thomas's.

'Talking of St Thomas's,' says Cal. 'Have any of

you lot heard about the friends list?'

Even Jay hasn't a clue. 'Friends list? What's that?'

'Well, you know we've got that teacher coming, to talk to us about Year Seven?'

'That's not for weeks,' says Fin.

My heart is already picking up speed. But I try to sound like I couldn't care less. 'What is it, Cal? What's the . . . boring friends list?'

'My sister told me about it. You have to make a list of three people that you'd like to be in your Year Seven tutor group.'

'And then what happens?' says Fin.

'The teachers at St Thomas's check the lists and try to match people up.'

Fin looks a tiny bit spooked. 'What if no one writes your name down?'

A wicked smile spreads like runny honey across Jay's freckly face. 'You probably end up in a tutor group with Satchel Boy!'

Everyone laughs.

Except me. Zak Monroe (or 'Satchel Boy' as they call him) is that weird kid in the other class who only started at Patchdean Primary last September. I know he did that super-strange talk about collecting owl pellets and how to identify otter poo at the talent night in Swanage, but I still feel a *little* bit sorry

for him. It can't be very nice when the whole of Year Six laughs at you. And imagine being in a tutor group without any friends. Just thinking about it makes me go all shivery.

But then I have a brilliant idea.

'It's all right,' I say, so relieved I even manage a smile. 'Here's what we have to do.'

'What are you talking about?' says Fin.

'It's obvious, isn't it?' I say. 'If the four of us only write down each other, we'll all end up in the same tutor group.'

Everyone goes quiet for a bit. 'I told you it was genius, didn't I?'

'Good idea,' says Cal. 'But what if . . . ?'

THUD, BOUNCE, THWACK!

A ball from the game in the playground knocks Jay's water bottle flying and hits Cal on the arm. He's not hurt, but I recognise that look in his eyes. That's the look Cal gets just before he explodes.

'It's not funny, you know!' he screams. 'Who kicked it? Come on, I want to—'

And then he sees who's running towards us to get his ball back.

'Sorry about that,' says the sweaty kid with blonde curly hair. 'Rubbish shot, wasn't it, Cal? I was aiming for your head!'

Everyone laughs.

Except me. Harrison Summers *never* makes me laugh.

According to Jay, he's really funny and Cal says he's actually better than him at FIFA. But I've never really liked him since he made fun of my pyjamas on the Swanage trip.

'Nice one, Harrison,' says Jay. 'Did you see what happened to my water bottle? Whoosh!'

Harrison nods and does some keepie-uppies. 'You guys should come and play football. It's 9-7 to Year Five.'

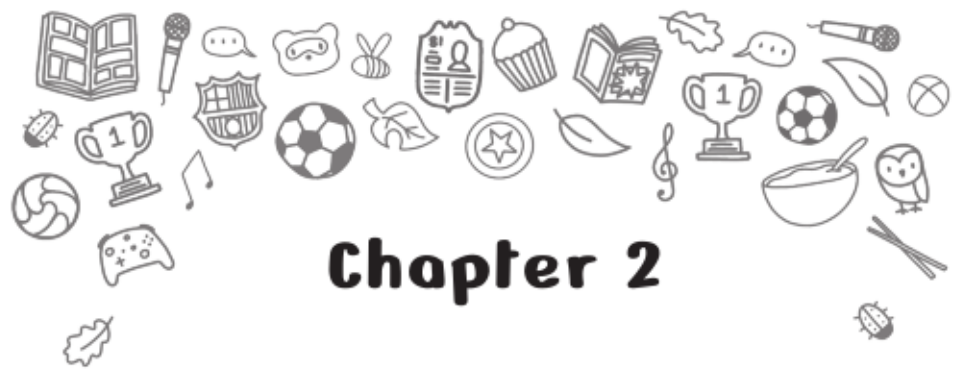
'No, thanks,' I say. 'It's too hot.'

'Oh yes, I forgot,' says Harrison, flicking the ball up on his head. 'You go all red when the sun comes out, don't you, Sammy?'

'No, I—'

'Come on, you lot,' says Cal, grabbing the ball from Harrison and dribbling it towards the playground. 'We can't let the Year Fives win again, can we?'

And I drop my banana skin into the new composting bin and run after them.



Chapter 2

Cal, Fin and Jay shoot off down the corridor as soon as the bell goes. But old Jenkiwobbles wants to talk to me about something, so I can't join our usual race for the lunch queue.

'I've got some good news for your mum, Sam. I've had a word with Mr Welch and he's very happy for Dream-Green to use the school hall for the charity fundraiser on July the 3rd.'

It's cheese and tomato pizza with chips on Fridays. All I really want to do is get to the hall. 'Great, thanks . . . I'll tell her.'

'Good,' says Mrs Jenkins. 'And maybe she'd like to come in and talk to the whole of Year Six about sustainability.'

'Yes, probably,' I say, taking a couple of steps towards the door. 'I'll ask her.'

'I hope you'll be singing, Sam. You've got such a lovely voice.'

'Mum wants me to do a Beatles song.'

'I'll look forward to it. Ask your mum to email

me with all the details.'

I race down the corridor, my stomach rumbling, until I come to the hall.

Cal, Fin and Jay are on our usual table under the 'SAY NO TO BULLYING' poster. They're too busy laughing and stuffing their faces with cheese and tomato pizza to notice me grab a tray and join the back of the queue.

The queue always takes longer on pizza day. But as I head slowly towards the dinner grannies, Jay's voice cuts above the babble of bad jokes and banter:

'So, what do you reckon about that friends list thing?'

'Sam's right, isn't he?' says Fin. 'If we all write down each other, we'll end up in the same tutor group.'

It's not like I'm spying on them or anything. But it's good to hear your friends saying nice things about you. So instead of turning round and joining in, I keep my back to them and tune into the conversation.

Cal sounds a bit doubtful. 'Yes, but—'

'But what?' says Fintan.

'Are you guys thinking what I'm thinking?'

Cal never thinks very much about anything. That's what's so great about him. I lean slowly backwards so I can hear them better.

'I'm not being funny,' he says, 'but if you're only

allowed three people, who would you pick?'

I thought I'd explained it to them. Maybe I should have another try.

'Like Sam said,' says Fin, 'if we only get to write three names, all we have to do is pick each other.'

At least someone gets it!

'I know,' says Cal, his voice dropping a bit so that I have to lean back even further. 'I mean, I'd definitely pick you two. But would either of you pick Sam?'

Maybe I didn't hear properly. Or maybe he's seen me in the queue and it's just one of Cal's jokes.

'Probably,' says Fin. 'We *have* all been friends since Nursery.'

'Yes, but have we really, though?' says Jay. 'If our mums hadn't started that book club thing, maybe we wouldn't have played with him at all.'

What? No, that's not right.

'I mean, we haven't got much in common, have we?' says Cal.

YES, WE HAVE!

'He hardly ever plays football any more. And I'm pretty sure he doesn't support anyone.'

'That's true,' says Fin. 'He doesn't even like FIFA.'

'And he still goes to his nan's after school every night,' says Jay. 'What is he, like, five years old or something?'

'You know what he told me the other day?' says Cal. 'He said when he gets to St Thomas's he's going to join the choir!'

'Have you noticed how he just bursts out singing all the time?' says Fin. 'He doesn't even know he's doing it.'

'My dad says singing's well girly,' says Cal. 'And what about that stupid thing he does with his armpit? I can't believe he thinks it's funny.'

My heart practically stops beating. Surely one of them is going to say something nice about me?

'He's changed too,' says Jay. 'What was he *like* on the Swanage trip?

'Dad reckons he's scared of Rocky,' says Cal. 'You watch his face when Rocky barks at him!'

'He needs to man up a bit,' says Jay.

'Exactly,' says Cal. 'He should try and be a bit more like Bella Rigsby!'

And they all laugh.

I shuffle sideways towards the dinner grannies, wishing I could delete the last two minutes and respawn again. But the worst is yet to come.

'So, who *would* you choose then?' says Jay.

'Well, you two, of course,' says Cal.

'Yeah, course,' say Fin and Jay.

'And then probably . . .' He stops to think for a moment.

I hold my breath and squeeze hard on the tray.

'. . . Probably Harrison,' says Cal. 'He was so funny in Swanage.'

'And he's really good at FIFA,' adds Fin.

'Did you hear what he said about Bella Rigsby?' says Jay. 'That was hilarious.'

And they all laugh.

I'm not crying. I wasn't crying in Swanage either, whatever Harrison Summers says.

'Chips, please,' I mumble, even though I don't feel like eating any more. Grabbing back my plate, I sneak across to the drinks table and try to decide what to do next.

They all go quiet as soon as they see me.

'Hi, guys,' I say, a fake smile tugging at the corners of my mouth. 'What are you . . . talking about?'

'Not much,' says Cal. 'I was just saying the pizza would be way better with potato on it.'

'And talking about the new composting bin,' adds Fin.

'Right,' I say, wiping my face on my sleeve and trying to force down a couple of chips.

Cal takes a last bite of fruity flapjack and jumps to his feet. 'Sorry, Sam, got to go, haven't we, guys?'

'Oh . . . yes, that's right,' says Fin. 'We're . . .'

'Playing football,' says Jay. 'Can't let the Year

Fives win *again*, can we? See you later, Sam.'

'Wait a minute. Can't I just finish my . . .'

My fake smile makes a run for it too, as Cal, Fin and Jay skip past Mrs Collett the lunchtime supervisor and race each other to the door.