

DO

FIND YOUR

YOU

PEOPLE

KNOW

FIND

ME?

YOURSELF





LIBBY SCOTT & REBECCA WESTCOTT

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To my dear and very loved Charlie, thank you for being the best dog in the world and the inspiration for Rupert. Since I was a baby you were by my side, loving and protecting me. I don't know what I would have done without you. Although you couldn't talk you could listen, and just having you there for all those years was the best feeling in the world. I will never stop missing you, but your soul will stay in my heart forever and I know I will meet you one day at the rainbow bridge. Please wait there for me. This book is dedicated to your memory.

XOXO Libby

To Zachary, Georgia and Reuben. Three fierce kids who always stand up for what is right, no matter how hard that may be.

Rebecca XXX



CHAPTER 1

Can you see her? No? Then you're going to have to peer a little closer. You're going to have to try a little harder. Not that she's difficult to find. She's right there in front of you – you just have to look. It'll probably help if you listen too. Stop talking for a moment and put all the things that you *think* you know to one side.

Tally Olivia Adams is one hundred per cent unique. And if you want to get to know her then you're going to have to try seeing things from her perspective, which is only fair, really. She's spent the last eleven (almost twelve) years trying to fit in and see things from other people's points of view.

Take a few steps forward and put your hands on the side of the ladder. If you climb carefully, remembering not to step on the rotten third rung, then you can scale

your way to the top of the garden shed. That's where you'll find Tally, bent over her notebook with the early summer sun shining down on her head. It's getting pretty warm up here but Tally has work to do, and when she has her mind set on a task, nothing can get in her way. She's tenacious like that – which is probably another word that describes you, since you've taken the time to clamber up here and perch on the roof next to her.

She writes something down on the page and then looks up, chewing on the end of her pencil. The notebook is filled with words and sentences and diagrams, and after spending the last ninety minutes since she got home from school considering the situation and completing her assessments, Tally is fairly sure that she has got it figured out. The only thing left to do is to tell him, and she isn't relishing this task, not one little bit. There's no way to know how he's going to react and Tally dislikes surprises.

But she really wants to understand him better, and in her opinion it is always better to *know*. So she tucks the notebook under her arm, slides down from the ridge of the shed and climbs down the ladder to where he is waiting. He always waits for Tally, no matter where she is or what she's doing.

Tally pats his head and they make their way up the

garden and into the house. This kind of conversation is always better with a biscuit. Actually, Tally knows that most conversations are better with a biscuit.

“I’ve noticed you struggling with a few things,” Tally begins, offering him a treat and then sinking down next to him on the sofa. “So I’ve been trying to come up with a way to help you. I’ll talk you through it because it’s important that you understand how I came to this conclusion. When this happened to me I really, really wanted to know *everything*.”

He stares at her but remains silent, which she takes as permission to continue. Flipping open her notebook, Tally reads from the first page.

“Firstly, I looked at the way you communicate with others. You’re very good at letting *me* know how you’re feeling but honestly, I don’t think that anyone else has a clue about what’s going on with you and that’s mostly because you don’t show them.”

She glances across at him and gives him a big smile. “I’m not saying this to be unkind, OK? It’s all right if you don’t want to share what’s in your head. That’s not a rule or anything.”

She returns to the notebook, turning the page to the second point.

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“You hate any change in your routine, don’t you? Even if I’ve warned you that it’s going to happen, you still get all shaky and scared and that makes you act in a bit of a silly way, sometimes.”

He shifts on the sofa so that he’s pressed right up against her leg. Tally is his safe place, just like he is hers, and he doesn’t mind what she says as long as she always comes back to him.

“And lastly, there’s the whole issue around your food.” This time Tally lowers the notebook and stares him sternly in the eye. “I understand, I really do. But refusing to eat just because your breakfast is in a different bowl really isn’t OK.”

He returns her look and she relents, giving him a quick grin. “Yes, I know that I have a special plate and bowl and cup, but it’s not like I’m going to let myself starve if I can’t have them, is it? And I agree that food doesn’t taste right if it’s in the wrong bowl, but we still have to eat. That’s a non-negotiable and if you want to stay here then you’re going to have to cope with it, no matter how wobbly it makes you feel inside.”

Tally closes the notebook. “So. After all that, what I’m trying to say is that you and I seem to struggle with the same things, which means there’s a chance that you’re autistic.”

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She pauses, waiting for his reaction. She really hopes he isn't unhappy about it – she can't stand it when people talk about autism like it's a disease or something *bad*.

Rupert stares up at her and then nudges his nose into her hand, which is what he always does when he's happy. Tally laughs and throws her arm around him.

“Yes! You're just like me! And now we can make things a bit easier for you. Like, I can tell Mum to buy two bowls for you so that if one gets broken then we've got a spare. And I'll make sure that I tell you at the start of every day if something different is going to be happening.”

Nell walks into the kitchen just as Tally finishes speaking. Her thumbs are speeding across her phone screen, but when she sees Tally she stops tapping and shoves the phone into her back pocket.

“Who are you talking to?” she asks, heading across to the freezer. “And do you want an ice lolly? It's scorching hot today.”

“Yes, please.” Tally gives her sister a smile. Nell is nearly fifteen and she acts like she knows everything in the entire universe. But Tally knows that when they're at school, Nell is watching out for her. “Can I have strawberry? And I was just telling Rupert what I've worked out about him.”

“Oh yeah?” Nell pulls two lollies from the freezer and

hands one to Tally. “And are we now the proud owners of the only special needs dog in town?”

Tally glares at her. “That’s a bit mean,” she tells her sister. “It’s not very clever either. Rupert *is* a very special dog, but he doesn’t have any more needs than you do, actually. His needs are just different.”

Nell’s face wrinkles. “Sorry. I wasn’t trying to be unkind. Rupert is totally special, aren’t you, boy? He’s the best dog ever.”

Tally can remember a time when Nell thought that Rupert, with his three legs and scruffy hair, was a huge embarrassment, and she opens her mouth to remind her, but then she closes it again. Mum says that people change all the time and that if someone is trying to be better then it isn’t very fair to keep bringing up their past mistakes. It doesn’t mean that Tally can’t log it in her memory though, just in case Nell gets super-annoying at another time and needs bringing down a peg or two.

“Rupert is autistic,” Tally tells her. “I’ve considered the evidence.”

Nell frowns. “Can dogs even *be* autistic?” she asks. “How can you tell?”

“Well no, not *really*,” Tally admits. “Only people can be autistic. But being autistic means seeing the world in a

different way – and I *know* that Rupert doesn't see things in the same way as other dogs."

Nell nods slowly. "That's true. Rupert isn't like any other dog that I've ever met."

Tally grins triumphantly. "I told you. He's autistic. And now he knows, so he doesn't have to feel worried about being different or not fitting in. Now he can find his tribe."

Nell laughs, but it isn't a nasty laugh so Tally lets it go. "And who are his tribe?" she asks. "Where is he supposed to find them?"

Tally stands up and Rupert instantly leaps to the floor on his strong three legs to join her.

"He's already found them," she says. "I'm his tribe."

Nell smiles and crouches to pull Rupert into a hug.

"I like the sound of having your own tribe," she says, looking up at Tally. "I wish I had one."

Tally frowns. "You have," she tells Nell. "You've got loads of people who understand you and get how you're feeling. You've got a *massive* tribe. Me and Rupert have only got each other."

Nell looks concerned. "You told Mum and Dad that things were getting better at school this term. And you're good friends with Aleksandra, aren't you?"

It's true. Aleksandra is an excellent friend and when

they're together they always have a good time. Aleksandra loves drama lessons as much as Tally does and she's always got a smile on her face. Plus, she's got the best laugh that Tally has ever heard and it's completely infectious – once she gets going it's almost impossible not to find yourself laughing along with her.

But not everything about school is better. She still has to see Layla, Lucy and Ayesha every day, and each time it's a reminder of what happened last year when her so-called best friends betrayed her. Even though she's worked really hard to get over it, it still hurts. And school is still school.

Not that Nell would understand about that. She can't. She doesn't know what it's like to walk down the corridors feeling awkward and self-conscious and like everyone is looking at you, even when you know that they probably aren't. Nell has got lots of friends to hang out with, not just one person. Aleksandra is Tally's one friend, but Tally isn't Aleksandra's only friend, she knows that. And it's hard to feel OK about your one, single friend when she's got a whole load of other people to talk to and have fun with, no matter how much of a great friend she might be to Tally.

But it's all going to be OK because she's got Rupert

and even though he's a dog, he gets it. He *knows* her and as long as she's got him then she'll never be on her own.

Date: Wednesday 3rd June.

Situation: Just hanging out after school.

Anxiety rating: 4. There's nothing big to worry about but there's still two days of school to go and anything could happen – I know that from experience.

Dear Diary,

Well, here we are, you've made it back for more of my thoughts. Congrats. Now let's get on with the diary.

It's great to be here again, writing in my journal, lying with my feet up against the headboard of my bed, which is my favourite writing position. Sorry I've not written in a while but I've been soooooo busy. Mum finally let me get a mobile phone but then seemed to instantly regret it as she thinks I spend far too much time on there. To be honest, I know I do, but the lure of a notification is just too much to resist. It's like it's calling me and won't let me rest until I've seen what is being posted in the group chat. I can easily spend an entire evening getting involved in some kind of "pointless conversation" as Mum calls it. Mum insists I can only keep my phone if she checks through it each night when I'm in bed – and I hate that she does that. It feels like I'm not just talking to my friends but to my mum at the same time. I hate grown ups' rules.

My mum won't let me read *her* messages so I don't see why she gets to read mine. To be honest, I think it's just nosiness on her part. Maybe she doesn't get interesting enough messages from her friends.

So, talking of friends, it's been a jumbled start to the summer term at Kingswood Academy. Things at school have definitely settled a bit since the Horrendous Tiger Mask Incident of the autumn term. Luke is still annoying but not nearly as nasty as he was before. We just tend to keep our distance from each other. Same with Lucy and Ayesha – I've shuffled away from them. It's not that I hate them, I just don't think they are perfect friends for me, and I do like things to be perfect. You are probably wondering about Layla. Layla, who was my best friend all through primary, but somehow just wasn't brave enough to stick up for me when others were making my life a misery. Yes, that really hurt at the time, but to be honest, *I'm* wondering about her too. I sometimes wonder if I was a bit hard on her, as although she let me down when I needed her the most, she'd still been a good friend over the years. I'm just not 100% sure if I can trust her again. But I guess not everyone is perfect 24/7, every second, every day. Well, except me of course. JOKING!

Yeah – so Layla and me, who knows what will occur

there? The person who is actually now the closest to me is Aleksandra. She's really kind and chilled and I think she understands me. Though let's not jump in there too soon. Nell (my annoying big sister) once said I could wind up the Dalai Lama if he caught me on an anxious day. (This joke only works if you know who the Dalai Lama is and I didn't and I bet you don't either and think we are talking about shaggy animals.) Anyway, Aleksandra seems to like me and she laughs at my jokes, which is a huge point in her favour.

I bet you are wondering what happened to the tiger mask I used to hide behind whenever things felt like they were too much for me to face? That mask was also a great friend to me. It offered me safety and a sense of calm whenever I put it on. But I took a real knock when the others at school got hold of it one day and used it to mock me. My heart immediately starts racing whenever I think back to that awful day, when I went into full-on melt-down in front of the whole class. I suppose I've kind of managed to cope without it, though it's still on my mind and I do sometimes wear it in my darkest times. Sometimes when I'm in a difficult situation I get an urge too strong to resist. And then I wear it again. Just for a short while, in my bedroom. It still gives me a good feeling. But

most of the time it remains in the same place on top of the wardrobe in my room. Like a friend waiting for you to message them for support when you need them.

It's kind of good that since Layla told everyone about my autism, following the terrible tiger mask day, I no longer have to pretend not to be autistic. I don't mean I used to go up to people and say, "Hi, I'm Tally and I'm not autistic," but I definitely hid it from people. Now I talk about it a bit more and the other kids ask me quite a bit about it. I always tell them that this is just how it is for me – I don't speak for all autistic people because just like snowflakes we are all different, but we have some similarities too.

I mainly explain to them that for me, autism means I FEEL things in a different way to others. Everything feels more intense for me than it seems to for other people who I know. Noises, lights, pain. But most especially emotions. All this means I get anxious more quickly than others might. It's just how it is. And that anxiety usually comes out as anger, especially at home. At school I used to mask all that completely. Now I'm learning to be myself and let it out a bit more. The only thing is, people tell you to be yourself, but really they mean "just be yourself when you are feeling happy or excited". When you're feeling

scared or angry or worried or miserable they're not so keen. It's a debate I am always having with myself. My favourite slogan at the moment is "Be yourself, but not too much!" If I ever get to be a famous author I shall sign that inside all the copies of my book along with my name. Lol, Tally Adams, maker of motivational mottoes. I could do Christmas crackers too, and fortune cookies. And posters for school corridors. Urgh, school.

Talking of school, Mrs Jarman is still the teacher at school who understands me best. She's created a Safe Space for me, next to the library. It's somewhere I can go when I get overwhelmed and just need to get away from it all and Mrs Jarman let me write a list of the things I wanted in there:

Music – the sort I listen to when I go to bed – kind of soothing, or sound effects like rain or the sea.

Lights – fairy lights, the yellow, warm kind.

Cushions – especially furry ones or those two-way sequins that you can brush up one way or another. They feel amazing. Unless they are those cheap, stiff ones.

Tent – I like to be able to lie with my head in the tent.

YouTube clips – of waves or a forest in the rain being projected on to a screen, so I can imagine I’m somewhere calm.

Sensory toys – Fidget spinners, squishies, slime, anything that feels good.

Books and magazines – to flick through.

Neutral tones – schools seem to think all kids love bright colours. Well guess what? You’re wrong. Bright colours sometimes make my head hurt. Unless they are sweets like Haribos, of course.

Candles – Mrs Jarman said I couldn’t have real ones but she got some battery-operated flickering ones, which are great because they are voice activated and go on or off when I shout at them (the librarian next door must have a great time listening to me attempting to get the candles on).

She asked me if I wanted some plants in there as well but I said no in case they had insects on them. And even if they

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didn't, I couldn't relax with them there because I would be worrying about it.

I've also found another space where I feel really relaxed and safe and that is the school library. The smell of the books is comforting and as good as a new car/new shoe kind of smell.

I like flicking through the pages of books although I'm still waiting to find a book with a character like me in it. Maybe one day any autistic girl will be able to walk into a library and see herself in a book. I can picture it now – the main character will be just like me and when she reads the book she will suddenly feel like she's not alone. That would be brilliant.

Anyway, Miss Clementine, (pronounced "Clem-en-teen" which is obviously wrong, but I let it go and haven't corrected her) the school librarian, seems to have taken me under her wing. She loves books so much that she is making me love them too. She is very clever in how she does it: she doesn't encourage me too much, or *tell* me to read something (like my dad does). She just says, "It's completely your choice, but I loved this book," and leaves it on the counter and says, "If you don't want to take it now you could try it another time." So the library is another safe space for me and Miss Clementine helps me

with my homework sometimes too. Homework is just the worst and it puts me under so much stress. If I can't sleep at school then why should I do work at home? Homework is an unnecessary evil. Honestly, how does doing a word-search in French make me better at speaking French? And if you want me to learn facts about plant colonization then just tell me them, instead of giving me a complicated webpage where I have to find the facts myself. My brain doesn't work well at picking that stuff out.

Anyway, don't get me started on that – let's think about good things.

Rupert. The best thing ever – he's waiting for me to take him for a walk right now so gotta dash. Catch you later.