

DO YOU KNOW ME?

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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 percent 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 sides 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 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 homework, Tally is fairly sure that she has 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

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

“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 in the corner of the kitchen. “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, okay? 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.

“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 okay.”

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 nonnegotiable 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.” 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 Mom to buy two bowls for you so that if one gets broken, then we have 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 a Popsicle? 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 figured out about him.”

“Oh yeah?” Nell pulls two Popsicles 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 smart 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. Mom 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 people.”

Nell laughs, but it isn’t a nasty laugh, so Tally lets it go. “And who are his people?” 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 people.”

Nell smiles and crouches to pull Rupert into a hug.

“I like the sound of having your own people,” she says, looking up at Tally. “I wish I had a community.”

Tally frowns. “You do,” she tells Nell. “You have tons of people who understand you and get how you’re feeling. You have a *massive* community. Me and Rupert only have each other.”

Nell looks concerned. “You told Mom 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 class as much as Tally does and she's always got a smile on her face. Plus, she has 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 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 okay 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 okay 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.