

myself. This book is also dedicated to every girl that feels like she doesn't fit in – stand out and be brave! – Libby XOXO

For Adam, who from the very first, glorious day has encouraged me to look up at the sky instead of down at my feet. – Rebecca

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CHAPTER 1

Look up. Go on, do it now. Stretch back your neck and stare up, as far as you can. And then a little bit more. That's where you're going to have to look if you want to find Tally Olivia Adams. Up where the sky begins. Up where the only rule is gravity. Up where the world seems small and not so important. Up where the possibilities are endless.

It is a final-days-of-summer kind of afternoon. Fluffy white clouds are scudding across the pale blue sky and the air has a hint of something fresh, something new. A normal day on a normal street in the back garden of a normal house belonging to a completely normal family. Read that last sentence again, out loud to yourself. It's funny how if you say it enough times, the word normal sounds anything but.

So, a normal day. But the girl standing on the roof of the garden shed is not normal in the slightest. She is a warrior, fierce and brave, surveying the land before her. She's a mountain climber, pausing for breath after scaling the heady heights of Everest. She is a trapeze artist, about to step out on to the wire and dazzle the crowds beneath her.

Her right foot rises in the air, shaking slightly as she contemplates the drop. One wrong move and it will all be over.

"Hey! Get down!"

The shout makes Tally wobble and for a split second it seems as if she will tumble to earth. But then her foot makes contact with the roof and she lowers herself to the ridge, sitting with her legs dangling out in front of her.

"You nearly made me fall." Tally glares at Nell accusingly. "Are you trying to kill me?"

Nell puts her hands on her hips. "You seem to be doing a good enough job of that by yourself. What are you doing? You know Mum and Dad said that you aren't allowed to go up there any more. Not after last time."

Tally shrugs. "It's my place. I'm practising the things I learnt in circus school last week. And I can't think anywhere else."

"It's the holidays." Nell taps her foot impatiently. "There isn't anything to think about, so just get down."

Tally wonders if her sister has always been this unimaginative or if it's something that happens when you start high school. If that's the case then she's even less keen for this week to be over and September to begin.

"Is it true that people flush your head down the toilet when you're in year seven?" she asks Nell. "Because if it is then I won't be able to drink anything all day in case it makes me need to use the bathroom, which means that I will be seriously dehydrated and my brain won't work very effectively and I'm probably going to fail every single test. And it won't even be my fault because all I'll be trying to do is stay as far away from the school toilets as humanly possible."

Nell snorts. "Only the mouthy kids that don't know when to shut up."

A warm breeze flutters through the garden, picking up the leaves that have fallen on to the lawn. They weren't there last week and their russet-red shine against the long, green grass is a reminder that the summer can't last for ever. Her days at home are numbered.

"What happens if I get lost?" Tally's voice is quiet.

Nell pushes her hair out of her eyes and squints up at the roof.

"Then the two-headed monster that lives in the caretaker's cupboard will find you," she says, as menacingly as she possibly can. "And it will drag you in and keep you hostage amongst the brooms and mops and buckets. And you will have to stay at school for the rest of your life."

Tally doesn't even blink. She isn't afraid of made-up monsters. There are far scarier things roaming the school corridors than two-headed beasts, she's quite sure of that.

"Come on, Tally," Nell is impatient now. "Get down from there. I'm totally not in the mood for Mum and Dad giving me another lecture about how I should be keeping an eye on you. Like you're some kind of baby or something."

"I'm not a baby. And I didn't ask you to come out here." Tally glares down at Nell. "Just go away and pretend that you didn't see me."

"Well, you're lucky it was me that caught you and not them." Nell frowns, imagining the argument that would have followed if her parents had spotted their youngest daughter on top of the shed.

Tally shakes her head. She doesn't feel very lucky to have moaning, nagging, boring Nell ruining her thinking time.

"You'll be grounded for a week if they see you up there," warns Nell. "They won't even let you into the garden if they think they can't trust you."

Tally looks away from her big sister and across the garden fence towards the street. She knows that if she stands up, she can see between the houses and as far as the park. She can see further than Nell can. Up here she is weightless and free. The opposite of grounded.

"Where are they?" she asks Nell. "Mum and Dad."

Nell glances back towards the house, which is almost hidden by the old apple tree, sagging under the weight of all the unpicked fruit. The entire garden has turned into a jungle this summer.

"They're out by the front gate, talking to Mrs Jessop and her gross dog," she tells Tally. "I don't know how she can take it for walks when it looks like that. It's embarrassing."

"It's not Rupert's fault that he's got three legs." Tally is unimpressed with Nell's attitude. "Don't be so horrible. Think about how you'd feel if you had three legs. You wouldn't like it if people thought you looked

gross, would you?"

Nell rolls her eyes. "Whatever. But I wouldn't go outside either. I wouldn't force other people to look at my freakiness. Now get down before they come out here and see you."

She waits for a response but Tally isn't listening. Instead, she is clambering to her feet and balancing on the roof, shading her eyes with one hand as she peers into the distance.

"I think there's a fair going up in the park. There's a load of people and caravans and I can see a big truck that looks like it has dodgem cars on the back."

"What?" Nell squints up at Tally. "That can't be right. The fair isn't coming for months yet. And will you please get down before you fall off and I get the blame?"

"I'm not going to fall off. And I *can* see the fair, actually."

"Are you sure?" Nell strains to stand on her tiptoes and look in the direction of the park, but she can't see a thing.

The fair is one of the few things that they both agree is a *good thing*. It doesn't matter that Nell is fourteen and Tally is only eleven – when the fair is in town they are both as excited as each other.

Tally plants her feet more firmly and leans forward, trying to identify the different lorries and vans. "I think I can see the Twirler. And there's something that could be part of the carousel – it looks like one of the horses, anyway!"

There's the sound of scrambling beneath her and suddenly Nell's head pops up from the top of the ladder. "Where? Are you sure it's actually setting up in our park?" Her voice is eager with an added tinge of apprehension. This wouldn't be the first time that Tally has got things wrong.

"See for yourself." Tally waves her hand towards the distance. "If you don't believe me."

There's a moment of hesitation and then Nell climbs the last few rungs and crawls her way up the roof to where Tally is standing.

"I still can't see anything."

"I can see the haunted house!" Tally looks down at Nell, a huge beaming smile spreading across her face. "I really can!"

It's too much for Nell. She pulls herself to her feet and balances alongside Tally on the ridge of the shed, her hand reaching out and gripping Tally's so tightly that the blood throbs and hums in her fingers.

"You're right! It is the fair!"

"I told you." Tally doesn't mind her sister's lack of faith. She knew that she was right all along.

Together, they watch as the lorries are opened and machinery is pulled out and assembled. It's almost magic, the way that the ordinary, clunky bits of metal fit together to create something brilliant.

"I'm sorry that I was being stupid about you starting in year seven," murmurs Nell. "You don't need to worry, Tally. I'll be right there if you need me, and it's not that scary. Nobody is going to flush your head down the toilet, I promise. You'll be fine - school is way less frightening than the haunted house and you can handle that!"

Tally doesn't reply because this is a very ignorant thing for Nell to have said and, sometimes, ignorant comments are best ignored. You can't compare the haunted house to Kingswood Academy. It just doesn't work.

The haunted house is Tally and Nell's thing and they always go together. Tally loves the delicious thrill of the spooky music and weird sound effects and the way that, no matter how many times she's been on the ride, she always jumps in her seat when the sinister, rattling

skeleton lurches out at them towards the end. But most of all, she loves the rules that are written down on the board at the entrance.

Do not get out of the carriage.

Keep your hands inside the carriage.

Do not eat or drink on the ride.

Tally doesn't usually like rules, especially if they've come from other people, but these rules are different. They feel helpful and they keep her safe. And anyway, the haunted house is just pretend.

But Kingswood Academy is real. And she knows that while there are plenty of rules, the ones that really matter aren't written down anywhere.

"We have to persuade Mum and Dad to let us go to the fair," says Nell, squeezing Tally's hand. "We have to. Which means that we can't let them find us up here."

And because Tally wants to go to the fair just as much as Nell does, she lets her sister pull her towards the ladder and back to solid ground.

Date: Friday 29th August.

Situation: the summer holidays.

How I feel: relaxed but a bit nervous – the summer can't last for ever, can it?

Anxiety rating: A nice, chilled-out 3 with a hint of 4 creeping in if I think about starting in year seven next week.

Dear Diary,

Tally here. Well, I'm actually Natalia but my friends call me Tally, and so do my family. Let me tell you about my family! I live with my mum, Jennifer, my dad, Kevin, and my annoying big sister, Nell. She thinks she's always right, and even when she is I pretend that she isn't.

Mum's given me this diary so that I can write down how I'm feeling. She says that it might help me to understand how I cope (or don't cope) in different situations, particularly when I get anxious or scared (which happens a lot, by the way).

One thing that you should probably know about me early on is that I'm autistic. I have autism.

Although autism can sometimes hold me up a little in life, my parents say it's a superpower, and I like to believe that. The rest of the world hasn't caught up

with us yet, though, and some people seem to think that being autistic is like being a different species. Some people treat me like an alien when all I want is to be treated like any other eleven-year-old. I'll admit that what also sometimes makes people treat me differently is the fact that I wear a tiger mask a lot of the time. I just feel secure and safe in it. When I'm wearing my mask, I don't have to make eye contact (why are people SO obsessed with this anyway?), or pretend to smile at people. I can't catch germs in it and people tend to leave me alone when I'm wearing it. What's not to love? Though, Nell doesn't love it. She finds it excruciatingly embarrassing when I wear it in public. She even tried to hide it once. The mask is Nell's arch enemy. And I like that. *evil laugh*.

There are some things I think people should know about my autism. Let's call them autism pros and cons. I'm going to write them down in my diary as I think of them. (One day I'm going to share these with the world so they can see autism from another perspective.)

Tally's autism facts: Sensory stuff

Pro: I have better memory, sense of smell, eyesight,

sense of touch, hearing and sometimes taste than others might. (I told you that autism is a superpower!) I can hear a piece of music and play it instantly on my keyboard or ukulele, I can mimic voices (which I sometimes get into trouble for), and I can remember where and when we bought every one of my soft toys (and I have over a hundred of them). I usually remember to celebrate all of their birthdays, too, except that time I forgot Billy's (I was devastated).

Con: I can feel even the tiniest of things and it annoys the hell out of me. Seams in socks, a crumb in my shoe, labels in clothes. If we go on holiday and the mattress isn't exactly like my one at home, I can't sleep for feeling the lumps. Mum says I'm just like the Princess in the Princess and the Pea story. Having excellent hearing isn't always so great. It makes it impossible to block out other people's conversations even when I'm all the way upstairs in my bedroom. And when that conversation is Mum and Dad having an argument about me then it's even worse (yet also intriguing I have to admit). But when I let on that I've heard, I get accused of eavesdropping, which is disgraceful really, considering I can't help it.