

OTOLI

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For George, Kimberly, Michaela and Charles.

*This book is also dedicated to the many in the world
who have known a time and place such as OTOLI.*

Courage is Fire, Bullying is Smoke.

Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881)

1

ALICE - Thursday 3rd May

Never before had the girl felt so pitiful and pathetic, as she scabbled around on the pavement.

Those who were passing by the confectionery shop in Stowton saw several large pieces of chocolate laid out like a jigsaw in front of the teenager. Those with the inclination to care would have seen a dislocated message being realigned: “Happy Fiftieth Birthday Dad”. Those who chose to walk past did so not out of a lack of compassion but more from a fear of the gaggle of girls huddled around the unfortunate wretch, like Komodo Dragons waiting for the moment of death.

A pair of eyes watched from a hidden vantage point. Behind those gloating eyes, a smirk was forming. The on-looker sensed another lure; another victim in need of her help, another pawn to help her right the wrongs of her own shattered life.

As Alice Turner pieced together the present, she bit hard into her bottom lip until she tasted blood. Only then could she numb the voices that barraged against her. Only then could she blame the flow of tears and embarrassment on something other than humility. She fought hard to keep the tears inside; she did not want to give them another excuse to torment her. But it was so hard.

She knew that she should be breathing steadily and focussing her thoughts on something totally different; something like fluffy kittens or cute puppies. As if... Alice often wondered how many textbooks her counsellor had swallowed before their sessions. A taste of real life would help so much more. Instead, a badly misquoted quote floated around her head: “Humiliation, thy name is Alice Turner.”

“Hey! Geek! You dropped your chocolate!” yelled Natalie Butcher.

“What a loser! She can’t even walk right!” tutted Samantha Elliott.

“Oh my God! Is your Dad fifty?” screeched Ailish Smith.

“My Granddad isn’t even fifty!” said Jasmine Williams.

“Maybe her Dad is her Granddad,” commented Ailish Smith. And so the insults continued to flow.

Five minutes previously, Alice had stopped by the confectioners in the parade of shops on her way home from school. She had realised too late that the 'Populars' were walking the same way as her, only a few metres in front. She had tried slowing down; she had even contemplated walking past them but knew that would place her well and truly in the firing line of abuse.

So she dawdled behind, intently studying the ground as she went. In her haste to get into the shop, Alice made some noise that had alerted the Populars. They waited for her, sitting on the bench, and Alice knew that she had no choice but to buy the present and leave through her guard of honour. Instead of the confetti and compliments, Alice was thrown jibes and taunts:

“You stalking us?”, “Loser”, “You been listening to us?”, “Geek!” They didn’t touch her – they never did. But whoever said that old line about ‘sticks and stones’ had never been up against the Populars.

The Populars formed a circle, with their victim as its centrepiece. As Alice twisted between the five girls, desperately trying to say something that might stop them, she lost her footing and fell over. The chocolate dropped to the ground and broke into six pieces.

Thus followed the torments from all except Ellie Mitchell, who stepped back when the Populars were not looking. Ellie did not really want to be there, but she had been in Alice’s position not too long ago. She had no intention of being the loser on the outside ever again. So she watched, making token gestures of involvement. Then the Populars left, triumphant in yet another fantastic victory against the losers of the social standing stakes.

No one came to help Alice, though many had enjoyed watching her agony: plenty of fuel to add to the ‘youth of today’ argument. Even the woman in the confectioner’s briefly thought about intervening but got no further. Being on the main thoroughfare of the pedestrian school run, she had seen so many incidents of bullying and fighting that she became immune. In her first few weeks at the shop, she had phoned the police on several occasions, but soon earned the reputation of a troublemaker. Best to watch, comment, sympathise and move on. Nearby pupils had also kept their distance. If other people were being picked on, then they were

safe. So, like the woman in the sweet shop, they watched, commented, sympathised then moved on with averted faces.

As Alice picked herself up from the pavement, a sign bearing the word 'OTOLI' crept into her line of vision. It was strange that she had not noticed it before. She walked through this parade of shops twice a day and always diverted her eyes away from people towards the shop fronts. Alice wondered if it was new, but the bold, dark letters showed slight scuff marks. The sign was just above an open doorway with stairs leading upwards, and Alice was facing the foot of the stairs.

As she gazed at the tantalising darkness, Alice felt a strange sensation seep through her skin. Along with the waves of hypnotic calmness, she found herself desperate to explore. She heard a speechless voice calling to her to come up and reached for the touch-less hand tugging at her arm. In an act of wholly uncharacteristic bravery, Alice climbed the stairs.

Two thirds of the way up she stopped. The stairway opened into a light, welcoming café. Alice could see small pine tables with two chairs at each of them and a large yellow sofa in the corner with flowery yellow cushions.

There were flowers on the tables, and music lingered on the scented air, which was full of indiscernible, yet tantalising, tastes. Alice could not make out what music was played but she felt that it was by one of her favourite bands. As she looked away from that inviting sofa a movement caught her eye. Leaning over a table scrubbing away at a stain was an older teen-aged girl wearing the black, traditional uniform of a waitress complete with a white frilly apron. Suddenly, the girl turned and faced her. Alice stood transfixed, feeling the redness spread across her whole body, wanting to cry. But the girl just smiled at her then returned to removing the spot. The spell was broken. Alice raced back down the stairs, and ran the rest of the way home.

2

ALICE - Friday 4th May

All day long at school, Alice had been in turmoil.

Number one: she knew that she had to return to the confectionery shop to replace her father's present – it had become a bit of a tradition between them. Every year at birthdays and Christmas, father and daughter would give each other chocolate that they would insist on sharing. Even now, Alice enjoyed that brief moment of togetherness when she and her Dad sat and ate. Mum kept away out of appreciation, and Sophie left them alone as soon as she had tutted about her big sister being such a baby.

Number two: she knew that to go to the confectioners at the end of school meant another unavoidable encounter with the Populars. Why couldn't they just leave her alone? She had never done anything to them; in fact, she always avoided them. Alice had judged them on first glance as those to avoid. They were so obviously the popular girls: fashionable, confident, wearing heavy make-up that no-one dared to call tarty, pushing the boundaries of the uniform code by wearing skirts that were slightly too short yet never being reprimanded. They were the rulers of year eight. Other pupils, and even weaker members of staff, allowed the girls to determine the social standing in school. If they decided to talk to you, then you became socially acceptable. If you were not worthy of their attention, you were a definite social failure. If however, like Alice, you resided in the social depths of friendlessness, you were fair game for whatever the Populars felt like playing.

Number three: she could not get the image of the smiling waitress out of her mind. It had been a smile of acceptance without the usual sneer, a smile that was alien to her. But it seemed to be saying more. It was the 'more' that had grabbed Alice's imagination. She pictured herself going into the café, seeing the smile again and making a friend. They would share fun, watch movies together, go shopping, discuss which boys were hot or not,

and swap secrets. A lovely dream, but Alice had spent too long on her own to dare to hope for a dream come true.

The previous evening, Alice's upset state caused yet another session of interrogation led by her mum and dad.

"What's happened this time? You must tell us so we can do something. Bottling it up only makes it worse." They always knew: how did parents always know? They always wanted proper answers too; measurable, analysable answers that could suggest resolutions. "Nothing. Everything's okay," was never enough for them. Why couldn't they accept that she did not want to talk about the same old things over and over again?

But Alice used her trusted migraines as an excuse - that and the excesses of year eight homework had provided some form of an answer to all the questions.

Alice even got into trouble at school that day. Mr Sherbet had yelled at her for day-dreaming (no, that was not his real name; his true identity dwelled deep in the archives of personnel files). Needless to say, that caused much sniggering from some of the Populars, who threw in comments about chocolate. Mr Sherbet tried to have a fatherly chat with her at the end of the lesson, but Alice called on the power of the migraine again to escape the pending questioning.

Three-thirty finally deigned to arrive, and Alice rushed out of school. She had been spotted, but foolhardy or otherwise, she did not care. Alice reached the parade in a record time of ten minutes. Unfortunately, so did the Populars. As Alice stood in the queue, waiting for the chocolate to be iced, Natalie, Samantha, Ailish, Jasmine and Ellie commandeered the bench again.

To attain their perch, they had been forced to point out to a few year six girls that higher status in the social standing table meant bench privileges. Those girls took their dismissal with good grace, taking note of the technique so they could use it in the future.

There was no guard of honour to greet her this time, although the quiet welcoming committee on the bench was worse. Alice felt their eyes looking her up and down, she felt the whispers smothering the last embers of her self-confidence, and she felt the extra loud 'tut' as if it was a knife poking her in the sides.

Embarrassment coursed through her body as she tried to balance school bag, purse and chocolate without dropping anything. It didn't

work. The bag fell depositing books, a pencil case, keys and a toiletry bag on the pavement. There were stifled giggles as Alice scooped up her belongings and stood up. Pleased with yet another victory, the Populars vacated their throne, and formed up in their usual manner:

Natalie and Samantha, the most popular, beautiful, well dressed and socially successful in front linking arms; followed by Ailish in between Jasmine and Ellie, still popular, still beautiful, still well dressed and nearly as socially successful but with more than a hint of ‘wannabe’.

Natalie brushed against Alice as she swayed past.

“Oh, I am so sorry, Alice. How clumsy of silly me. Wouldn’t want you dropping that lovely choccy for Daddy again would we now?”

The Populars burst into giggles and shimmied off towards their respective kennels. Alice turned to face home, determined to ‘chin up’ against the stares from the confectioner’s window, and then it happened again.

The sub-conscious tugging at the corner of her eye telling her to turn around; the need to twist her body to face the right direction; the stairs seeming to say ‘climb me’ while above them a sign in navy blue capital letters read ‘OTOLI’. Again, Alice climbed the stairs, this time with excitement. She had no idea why she felt the bubble of happiness building up. It was as though half way up, someone had waved a magic wand over her and said, “Welcome to happiness.” She did not want to dwell on the unreality of her feelings; she was enjoying them too much.

Then the café came into view. There were the pine tables with two matching chairs – no more than five of them – and sweet peas in small glass vases in the middle of each. There was the yellow sofa with the flowery yellow cushions. In front of that was a low coffee table arranged with newspapers and magazines.

There was the smell again, but this time it was clearer – apple crumble and custard. Delicious! And she could make out the music. It was McFly; her favourite band of the moment. And they were playing ‘POV’; her favourite song of theirs. There was the girl again, scrubbing at the same table. She turned to Alice and smiled.

“Take a seat. I’ll be with you in just a minute.”

As the girl went back to scrubbing, Alice looked at the tables and sofa. There was no-one else there so she would not be in anyone's way but still she chose carefully: a place where she could see the door, where she could leave quickly, where she was not too close to the cleaning waitress.

Alice found the ideal place and sat, taking care to lift the chair rather than drag it – she did not want to make too much noise. Alice reached for the latest Stephenie Meyer in her bag and read. At least, she went through the motions of reading but nothing penetrated. She felt exposed, vulnerable and alone. After three unread pages, Alice bent down to put the book away, meaning to leave.

“Going already? You haven't had a drink yet. First one is free. My way of getting the customers in. What will it be? Coke? Lemonade? Milkshake? Hot chocolate? Perhaps not in this weather. Orange juice?”

Alice reddened as the waitress stood smiling next to her. She felt as though she had been caught in the act of some dreadful deed; that she had messed up yet again.

“It's not a trick. Bit of a gimmick maybe, but I can't really do loyalty cards in this café, can I? What will it be?”

“Um, water please,” replied Alice knowing that she had to reply to the question.

“Healthy choice, but then I can see you are a healthy eater. Still or fizzy?” The waitress seemed to be scrutinising her, but not in the same way as the Populars. Although she hated to be looked at, she did not feel that negative comments were going to be the end result of the staring.

“Fizzy, please.”

The waitress disappeared into the small kitchen area behind the over scrubbed table, stopping to reach up for a glass in the pine dresser. Alice watched her, hoping, no praying, not to be caught staring. The waitress was about two inches taller than Alice so she must have been about five foot five, and she was not thin, but not fat; a bit like Alice herself. As Alice was wondering which social group the waitress belonged to, she returned. Instantly Alice blushed and averted her eyes to intently study a spot on the table. The waitress placed the glass directly over the spot, and made for the kitchen.

“Enjoy your drink. I'll be in here – I've got masses of washing up to do, and no dishwasher to do it for me! So just leave your glass

when you're done. Help yourself to a magazine. Goodbye – I know I'll see you again!"

Alice did not reply – she was not given the chance to reply, but that was fine by her. Once the waitress was out of the way, Alice walked across to the coffee table and looked at the magazines. They were all old, dated from four years ago, yet they were in pristine condition. Alice opted for a newspaper instead, but that too was from four years previously. She returned to her table, finished her drink, then she left an empty café.