

ONE GOLDEN DAY

Ele Nash

© ELE NASH 2018

REPRESENTED BY THE VINEY SHAW AGENCY

CHAPTER ONE

Della persuades her bike along the riverbank as slowly as the river's current. The chain chikka-chikkas.

'You want to grease that, Della,' George says with a wide grin. The low sun shines on his face and makes his eyes especially blue. 'Or get a new bike.'

Della grits her teeth. She doesn't want to argue with George. They've been doing that a lot lately, arguing about silly things. Like whether spacemen would beat cavemen in a battle to the death. Even now, days since this row, the annoyance prickles her palms. *As if a spaceman could outwit a caveman's instinct for survival.* Della sighs. She's been sighing a lot too.

With a mind of their own, the wheels twist. The bike is her brother's hand-me-down, of course. Everything of Della's is a Harland hand-me-down. Sometimes it feels to Della like her life is second-hand; for Harland everything is new, gleaming.

'It isn't fair,' she snaps, wrenching the bike back toward her. 'Harland gets the new bike. Harland gets the last slice of pizza. Harland's allowed to do anything he wants.'

George rolls his eyes. 'He is three years older. Is this about him going to London?'

Della tugs the bike again. 'I just don't see why I couldn't go too. I am thirteen. I'm a teenager – which is practically an adult.'

George reaches over and grabs a handlebar. The bike miraculously steadies and glides forward.

'Why do you want to go to London anyway? As far as I can see, they spend New Year's crushed together outside Big Ben, freezing cold.'

Della shrugs, trying to keep a promise she made to herself this morning: to not argue with George. Because New Year's in London is clearly about more than being outside freezing cold. She'd seen the excitement in Harland's eyes; he knew something special, something secret and

grown-up, that she did not. His going to London was something she couldn't share in. For all her bad feelings lately – targeted at George, at Mum, at Dad, at old Mrs Thomas in the flat next door – Della found these growing feelings melted away around Harland. He just had to pull a face, tell her some embarrassing thing that had happened to him at school, and her mood lifted until she felt as light as air.

'I just – I wanted to go,' Della says. 'That's all. He'll be getting the train about now.'

'Yeah. A heaving, loud, delayed train. You'd hate it. And anyway,' George lets go of the handlebar and wraps his arm around Della's shoulders. Della has to tighten her grip to stop the bike toppling over. 'We're going to have a brilliant New Year. Here. In our lovely home town.'

For the first time in what feels like months, Della bursts out laughing. Their home town holds about as much excitement as a grey Monday morning. But at least she'll be with George.

'You're right. It's going to be good.'

Harland may well get to do anything he wants but Della is learning how to get her own way too. Earlier today she'd smiled her best smile at Mum and said she liked her top. 'Peacock blue,' Della had said. 'The colour of June.' Mum had smiled. Mum loves hearing Della's coloured ways of thinking, of describing.

Compliment made, Della had then said: 'So I can go to George's tonight then to play Command Lead Five?'

Mum had sighed – the game's rated a sixteen. But then Mum said 'OK,' and she eyed Dad dreamily as she said to him: 'House to ourselves tonight.'

George lets go of Della and makes the sound of a machine gun. 'We've got to beat them this time,' referring to the game.

'Course,' Della says, feeling increasingly happy. 'We're going to thrash that squad,' but as she says it, she recognises a figure walking toward them and the burgeoning positivity shrivels.

‘Hey, Afrin,’ George says, slackening his mouth like he’s chewing invisible gum.

‘Hello there, George,’ Afrin says, dark eyes twinkling, despite the fact that the low sun hangs in the sky behind him. ‘And – Harland’s little sister. Right?’

‘I’m hardly little; I’m thirteen,’ Della spits then immediately regrets saying such a lame thing. ‘I mean, my name’s Della.’

Afrin looks at her for seconds longer than is necessary – or comfortable. *I don’t like you*, Della stares back at him. *You creep me out*.

Della starts to force the bike forward but it doesn’t budge. She looks to George but he’s oblivious to the tension.

‘You going out for New Year then?’ George asks.

‘No,’ Afrin says, tearing his focus away from Della. Della tries to push the bike again. Again, it stays stuck. ‘I don’t like crowds.’

‘You could come round to mine if you like.’

Della elbows George and he leaps back, surprised. ‘What?’

Afrin, flickering a smile from Della back to George, says: ‘No. I’ll stay at mine. Remember that, yes?’ Afrin breaks into a smile that Della’s annoyed to see is really quite handsome. Unhinged, of course, but handsome. ‘You’ll find me at my house most days.’

‘OK,’ George says kindly after a pause. ‘Have a good one.’

‘You too.’ He pauses, then to George he says: ‘I’ll just walk along this path. I’m just here.’

‘O-*kay*.’

‘Just up here.’ And with one final strange stare at Della, Afrin walks slowly away.

He isn’t even out of earshot when Della blasts: ‘Why did you invite him? He’s a regular nut job. Did you see the way he just stares at me? Like I’m a difficult yet fascinating Maths problem.’

George widens his eyes. ‘Della, he’s only just moved here. I find *him* kind of fascinating.’

‘Fascinating?’ Della shoves aside her promise to not argue with George. ‘Are you mad? Don’t answer that. I know you are. Spacemen! You think spacemen would win the fight.’

‘Are you back on that?’

Della bites her tongue. ‘I won’t mention it again if you help me push this stupid bike. It’s stuck!’

George clacks his tongue loudly and grabs the handlebar. The bike moves more easily than either of them anticipate and George stumbles forward. ‘Funny kind of stuck. A space *baby* would beat you in a fight.’

Della scowls and as they start to walk, a path appears before her. It’s not a real path but it’s as familiar to Della as the cracked paving to the entrance to their block of flats. It’s how she sees time, like a coloured, three-dimensional calendar. In her mind, the path moves toward her, a series of numbers the colour of tarnished gold sliding away beneath her feet. She mentally forces it to stick on number thirty-one, today’s date. Unlike the rest of the gold month, the thirty-first is blistered, the colour of an infected scab.

‘Are you listening to me at all, Della?’

‘What?’ She blinks the path away to focus on George. But although she can make out the hard shine of his blue eyes, her picture calendar remains. It’s never worked like this before. The way Della sees time has never stopped her seeing real life. ‘George, sorry. I...’

‘You’re white as a ghost,’ she hears George say.

Della winces, pain shooting across her temples. Her hands tense on the peeling handlebars. A surge of energy, of heat, of something large and distant suddenly small and near rushes through her body, blasting through her from front to back. She buckles in two. Pain sears through her skeleton, toes to head, fingertip to fingertip. It crushes her organs, presses on her bladder, forces every last drop of oxygen from her lungs, from her blood. Her heart stops. It doesn’t flutter or pause or skip a beat: it stops.



She's aware of the bike toppling, hearing it clang and bounce on the riverbank. She feels herself topple after it, a flat out fall, no hands out to protect her. She lands beside the bike, shoulder, head, hip, knee collide with the ground once, twice, then settle.

She hears George scream: 'Della!' And then: 'Oh my God.' And: 'Afrin!'

Heart still without beat, lungs still empty, blood frozen. The sun is bright in her eyes. White and cold, swallowing her in its light. *Yes*, she thinks, as all the thoughts in her head simplify to this one. *Time to rest*. The light filters through cracks in her skull, bleaching out even this thought. There's a release, like a taught rubber band snapping. Della tries to remember something – something really important – but it swims away. She is swimming away.

Then

She is not.

Then

Her heart squeezes. Releases. Squeezes, releases. Beats.

Then

Her lungs unstick, the bronchia and bronchioles fill. Breath. Breathing.

Then

Her veins swell, the blood flows.

The light grows orange and hot.

Panicked voices drag her thoughts back into her head.

Her eyes open.

Della lays for a minute, trying to make sense of the sideways world. The peeling handlebars. The grey ground at eye-level. The river swimming slowly up to the sky. The sky icy blue, the sun low and fat and cold.

And George saying: 'I'm calling an ambulance.'

'She'll be OK now.' Was that Afrin? 'I got her back.'

'I'll call her mum then. Della? Della? Are her eyes open? Della?'

As George presses buttons on his mobile, and another hand – Afrin's – strokes her hair away from her sticky forehead, the world is silent.

Except for one thought in Della's head.

One screaming, roaring thought.

Harland.