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Opening extract from

Lolly Luck

Written by

Ellie Daines

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ELLIE DAINES

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For Melanie

Chapter 1

I'd never seen my dad cry before. It certainly wasn't what I was expecting when I got home from school. It was a horrible end to what had started off as the perfect birthday. My morning had begun with a special birthday breakfast of French toast with crispy bacon, and a fruit salad topped off with strawberry yoghurt. My favourite. Mum had put all my birthday cards into a neat little pile next to my presents and had tied a *Happy Birthday* balloon to my chair. But straightaway I could tell that one present was missing; the present I'd been looking forward to the most – my brilliant new bike. I knew my parents had bought me a bike. They'd been

whispering to each other for weeks and 'bike' was the word I always picked up. I'd wanted one for ages; a proper grown-up bike with gears, which hadn't been handed down from my sister, Zola, and wasn't covered in Barbie stickers.

Zola was already at the table having her breakfast, a yucky concoction of scrambled egg mashed up with baked beans. Even though I like baked beans and I absolutely adore scrambled egg, they *so* do not go together.

'Happy birthday, Lollipop,' said Mum, giving me a hug. 'I can't believe you're eleven today! You're growing up so fast. You excited?'

'Yeah, totally,' I replied. 'And today's going to be fantastic.'

'Oh, it will be, don't you worry. Your dad and I have got you a wonderful present. Dad's been called into work a bit early today, so we'll give it to you this evening. I hope that's OK?'

I smiled at Mum. 'Of course.' But, no, it *wasn't* OK. I wanted my bike at that precise minute and wasn't looking forward to waiting twelve torturous hours before I finally got to see it.

'Right then, I've got to scoot off myself. Enjoy your breakfast, birthday girl – and, Zola, no dawdling on the way to the bus stop,' said Mum, grabbing

her handbag and looking pointedly at my sister. 'Make sure you and Lolly get to school on time.'

'Yes, Zola, no flirting with boys and making us late,' I mumbled, picking up a slice of French toast.

'Omigod that is such a lie,' said Zola, glaring at me. 'Just because it's your birthday, Lolly, it doesn't mean you can start showing off.'

'Girls!' Mum snapped. 'Can't the two of you get through a day without arguing?'

We sighed and nodded obediently, but as soon as Mum had left the room Zola was poking her tongue out, pieces of her vomit-looking breakfast falling onto her plate.

'Oh, grow up, Zola,' I hissed.

My sister is fourteen but sometimes it's like she's only four. I know Mum thinks we argue too much, but really we do get on and, to be honest, I don't think there's anyone else I'd want as my big sister. I can talk to Zola about anything, and ever since I was really little she's been there for me. When Zola was still at my primary school I could always count on her to back me up whenever my arch-enemy, Mariella Sneddon, tried to upset me with some snidy remark. All Zola needed to do was threaten Mariella with a wallop, which was enough to have her running scared.

'By the way, happy birthday, Lolly Loser,' said Zola, hurling a card and a little parcel at me.

Lolly Loser is Zola's horrid pet name for me, even though she knows I'm no loser. I'm Lolly Luck by name, lucky by nature. I'm the luckiest person I know, and the luckiest person everyone else knows. When I was eight I won a short-story competition at school and got fifteen pounds in book tokens. That same year I also won a magazine competition. The prize was actually something Zola wanted, but seeing how I'm the lucky one she entered my name instead of hers and won a make-up set, which she had to hide from Mum as she doesn't like us wearing make-up. And, of course, there have been all the birthday parties where I've beaten everyone else to the last seat in musical chairs and unwrapped the last parcel in pass the parcel. And for the past two years in a row it's been me who's scooped the top raffle prize at my school's Christmas fête. The first year I won *Ice Age* and *Ice Age 2* on DVD, and then just this Christmas I won a digital camera, which *so* got up Mariella's nose. She really couldn't handle the fact that I'd won again and she tried to say the whole thing was a fix and that I must have bribed one of the teachers to make sure it was my raffle ticket that got pulled out. The horrible cow even got

her dad to talk to the head teacher, Mr Kingsley, so he could conduct an investigation into whether I'd cheated. Unfortunately for Mariella and her dad, Mr Kingsley took my side and told them I was simply lucky, just like my surname, and asked could they stop wasting his time with their 'wild accusations'. Mariella's spiteful thinks-she's-so-special face was a picture.

So, back to my luck. Well, another thing I'm lucky with is finding money – and I'm not just talking about coins, but actual notes. It's like they appear by magic right in front of me wherever I am: five-pound notes *and* ten-pound notes. And that's not all. I also have a very special ability – I dream about the winning lottery numbers, yes, really. It's happened twice, and each time three numbers out of the six actually came up. In the dreams I'm watching the lottery show on the telly when the balls with my numbers on suddenly tumble out of the machine. Luckily after both dreams I've remembered the numbers. I wrote them down and gave them to my mum and dad, Auntie Louise and Granny Doreen, and all of them won ten pounds both times. I also helped my auntie win money on a scratchcard. One day we were in the sweet shop and she told me to pick one of the

containers with the cards in. I chose container number five and when she scratched off the card she got three lucky stars in a row and won a hundred pounds. She gave me twenty pounds from it to say thank you, which I popped straight into my piggy bank. Granny Doreen reckons I've got a gift. She says I'm psychic, although I'm not sure that I want to be as I've heard psychic people can see ghosts, and I never, ever want to see a ghost.

'Go on, open it,' said Zola as I added her card to the pile. 'I've put something special in there for you.'

I glanced at my sister suspiciously before picking up the card. But really I should've just given it straight back to her because as soon as I opened it a loud burp went off in my face. Then, in a drunk voice, the card wished me a happy birthday. Trust Zola!

'And the present, go on, open it,' she said, laughing loudly.

I narrowed my eyes at her as I unwrapped the present carefully in case it contained something gross too, but to my surprise her present was actually lovely. She'd bought me a silver bangle embossed with little flowers.

'Thanks, Zola!' I went round the table to give her a hug.

'Watch my hair.' She pretended to fuss over her cornrows that Mum had plaited the previous night. 'So do you think you'll wear it this evening?'

'Definitely,' I smiled.

We were planning to celebrate my birthday with a special dinner at a restaurant in the centre of town. It's called the Royal Tandoori, and I was really excited about going and trying their chilli sea bass, which Dad said tasted 'tremendous'. He'd had to book our table ages ago as the Royal Tandoori is always packed with customers. It's also very popular with celebrities, including my favourite singer Corey T. I had my fingers crossed that he'd be there later when we went.

'Do you reckon we'll see anyone famous tonight?' I asked Zola.

'You mean Corey T?' she replied, sniggering. 'You're obsessed with him, Lolly! I can't understand why. I mean, it's not as if the boy can actually sing, plus he's ugly.'

'No he's not, he's gorgeous,' I said. 'And he's the best singer out of all the singers in the world. And if he is at the restaurant tonight I'm going to get his autograph.'

*

After I'd finished eating my breakfast I opened my other cards and presents. Some of them had *Lollyanna* written on the front while the rest just said *Lolly*.

Lollyanna is my proper name, but everyone who knows me calls me Lolly. My name is made up, partly by Zola, of all people. My sister decided to give me half my name when she came to the hospital on a snowy January day to see me for the first time. I was all wrapped up in my snugly yellow blanket, my eyes squinting at her as she stared back saying 'lolly' again and again. Zola can't remember if it's true that she wanted me to be called Lolly or actually wanted me to have a lick of the lollipop she was holding at the time. Mum and Dad had planned to name me Anna after Mum's favourite auntie who died before Zola and I were born, but when Mum tried to explain this to my sister, Zola started screaming her head off, causing me and all the other newborns on the ward to burst out crying. So to get Zola to shut up, my parents promised her they'd combine both names to make a new one. And that's the short story of how I got to be called Lollyanna.

My card from Auntie Louise and her little girl Mariah had written *Lolly* on the envelope and my auntie had coloured in two yellow circles over the

two 'l's to look like lollipops. Inside the card was a thirty-pound gift card for New Look, which made me very happy as I wanted some new clothes. Even though Mariah's only three months old and can't talk yet, she's my favourite cousin. She's such a cutie and always giggles when you tickle her feet. They lived with us for a bit when Auntie Louise split up with Uncle Clive. It was brilliant having a baby around, although I don't think it was much fun for Auntie Louise. She cried more than Mariah, all because Uncle Clive had dumped her for another woman.

I opened Granny Doreen's present next. She'd bought me the same present she gets me every birthday – a pack of knickers. Unfortunately my gran isn't very imaginative when it comes to presents and always buys knickers for the women and girls in my family. My present from Uncle Finn, Auntie Trish and my twin cousins Calvin and Curtis was much better. They'd got me a Corey T photo book with lots of stunning pictures of him inside, along with a Corey T calendar. The last card in the pile was from Great-Uncle Ernest and was in a large silver envelope. As I opened it, I couldn't believe my eyes – loads of twenty-pound notes scattered over my plate.

Zola was just as shocked. 'Has Great-Uncle Ernest robbed a bank, or something?' she gasped.

We counted the money slowly and couldn't believe it. *Three hundred pounds!* Then we counted it again. Yes, it was three hundred pounds. Great-Uncle Ernest was always very generous, but this was crazy. Usually he'd slot in a fifty-pound note, so I guess he must have been in a pretty good mood to have given me all this. I wish I could've said thank you, but I've never actually met Great-Uncle Ernest, or even spoken to him. Neither has Dad or Zola. He lives in an old people's home in Southend but nobody ever sees him because he doesn't like having visitors. One thing I do know, though, is that Great-Uncle Ernest never forgets my birthday, and I get money at Christmas too.

'Why does Great-Uncle Ernest give you money and never me? He treats me like I'm invisible, it's so unfair!' huffed Zola.

'Well maybe he'll remember your birthday next year,' I replied, feeling sorry for my sister. But deep down, we both knew Great-Uncle Ernest probably wouldn't remember. He's never sent Zola cards or money for her birthday or Christmas even though my mum's written to him heaps of times to remind

him she has two daughters not one. But for some reason Great-Uncle Ernest just keeps forgetting. Mum reckons it's because he's old. Great-Uncle Ernest is in his eighties. Still, I'm always pleased to receive a card from him and to show my appreciation I like to make Great-Uncle Ernest a paper fan every Christmas, which my mum posts to him. And with the fan, she also includes a recent photo of me.

I collect fans too, from all over the world. I buy them when we go on holiday, and so far I have fans from St Lucia, Disney World, Spain and Cyprus. My favourite is the one from Spain, it has a picture of a man and a woman dancing on it. In the picture the woman is wearing a long red dress and her black hair is slicked back into a bun. The man is wearing a brown suit and is gazing into the woman's eyes. It's such a romantic picture, and sometimes I like to imagine that I'm the woman and the man is Corey T.

Just like every birthday since I was five, I arrived at school armed with chocolates. Mum had bought me a tin of Quality Street to share with my class and as usual it was the yellow ones that went first, my absolute favourite.

At break time my best friend, Nancy, gave me a card and present. She'd bought me a lovely tiny teddy bear that was wearing a yellow bow tie. Nancy's been my best friend ever since I fell out with my former best friend, Mariella, in Year Three. We used to really get on, Mariella and me, and would share each other's clothes and go to each other's houses for sleepovers. But all of that ended when she accused me of stealing her sparkly butterfly clip; a clip she said had real diamonds in it and had once belonged to some dead film star who was friends with her gran. She went round telling everyone I was a thief – and it was all because Mr Kingsley chose me to read my poem at the Christmas concert and not her and she was jealous. I've never stolen anything in my life, but Mariella had me feeling like a right criminal, plus she threatened to get her dad to call the police on me. For weeks she went on and on about the clip, so much so that other kids in our class started to hide their pens and pencils whenever I came near. I lost so many mates because of her. So after that, as far as I was concerned, Mariella Sneddon was no longer my friend.

The only person who didn't hide their things from me was Nancy. In fact, she was more than

happy to share her stuff, and for a while was the only person who'd hang out with me at break and lunch time. I'm glad Nancy's my best friend. I just wish I'd made the effort to get to know her way back in Reception. The problem was, she was always so quiet and didn't seem to want to talk to anybody. At first I thought she was being stuck up. But the reason she was like that was because she had a lot on her mind. Her parents were going through a divorce and poor Nancy was playing piggy in the middle as they fought over her custody. She wasn't being stuck up at all. Nancy's actually the least stuck-up person I know. She's very kind, very thoughtful and has never ever accused me of being a thief.

We have a lot in common, Nancy and me. We both love Corey T, the colour yellow and our favourite films are *The Princess and the Frog*, *Night at the Museum* and *Back to the Future*, the first and second film (but not the third film). We have the same 'sister twist' hairstyles and both play in the school netball team. I play goal attack, Nancy plays centre. And our sleepovers are way better than any of the sleepovers I had with Mariella. I prefer going to Nancy's house, though, as she has these two sweet bunny rabbits called Cheese and

Pickle who'll hop into your arms like little acrobats, chomping away on the carrots and lettuce you feed them. Nancy lives with her mum, Diane, who's really nice and lets us stay up really late when our sleepovers are on a Friday or Saturday night. It's great because we get to eat midnight snacks and sing songs Nancy's written herself. Nancy wants to be a singer/songwriter when she grows up and I think she'll be very successful as her voice is amazing.

When I grow up I think I'll be an events manager like my mum. Her job is *soooo* cool, especially when she gets to organise these really glamorous parties, which are held in swish hotels and art galleries. Plus, all the party guests get to drink champagne and eat canapés. Sometimes, if there are any canapés left over, Mum will bring them home, which is always awesome because they'll be miniature versions of my favourite foods, like fish and chips and toad-in-the-hole. One time Mum even brought home these crisps that had been made out of pigs' ears, but I didn't like them. Zola did, though.

'Thanks for the present,' I said to Nancy, stroking the belly of my new teddy bear.

'That's OK. So, did you get your bike?'

I shook my head. 'No, I'm getting it tonight.

My mum and dad still think I don't know, but I'm going to pretend to be totally surprised.'

I made Nancy laugh as I showed her the astonished face I was planning to pull, my mouth open as wide as the *Titanic* and my eyes literally popping out of my head.

All day I couldn't stop thinking about my bike, imagining myself riding it down my road and all the way up to the park on Crofton Lane. When the final bell went my heart was beating so fast I thought I might actually faint from all the excitement.

But when Zola and I got home, Mum was on the sofa with Dad sitting opposite, his hands cupped together and his head bowed. At first I was surprised to see him home so early as he's never normally in until about seven. But when he looked up at me, his eyes puffy and red, I knew something terrible had happened.

'What is it, Dad?' I asked worriedly.

'I'm sorry, girls, but I've got some bad news,' he said, wiping his eyes with a tissue. 'It's my boss – he's had to let me go. I've lost my job.'

And there it was – my eleventh birthday, a birthday which I thought was going to be my best ever, had turned into my worst.