

No One Needed to Know by D. G. Driver
Excerpt, first two chapters

1

It's Always "No"

"I see the mad bomber off the port bow!"

I cupped my hands around my eyes as if they were binoculars to see my brother Donald, who stood gingerly in the creaky crow's nest. I called out to him, "Can you get an angle on him?"

"I think so," Donald shouted back. "Is he close?"

"Getting closer every second. Looks like he's going to ram us. Shoot him quick or brace for impact!"

Donald raised his arms to imitate holding an automatic rifle and fired off half a dozen shots. "Zhoo, zhoo, zhoo, zhoo, zhoo, zhoo!" He lowered his hands to get his balance again. "Did I get him, Heidi?"

"No," I answered. It was always no. I can't explain why my impulse was always to turn him down. His ideas never seemed good to me. Mine were always better. "You missed. Hold on tight."

Donald gripped the wood around him as tightly as he could. I ducked behind the rail of the ship and covered my head. "BAM!" I screamed as loud as I could. I jumped backwards and rolled over. Donald shook the crow's nest to make it look like the boat was breaking apart. He wasn't daring enough to try a stunt. Even if he did get the guts, he probably would have hurt himself. I guess he knew that.

"He got us good," I said, wheezing as though I were in a lot of pain. "I think we're going to sink."

"Climb up here," Donald suggested.

"No. You come down. Help me repair the hole." I limped back to the ship's railing. Donald slowly climbed down the ladder to the main deck. "Hurry up. Water's leaking."

"I'm going as fast as I can."

There were few things as awkward looking as Donald trying to walk across the deck as though it were a foot deep in water. I thought his long legs made him look like

an ostrich. It was hard not to laugh at him, but I sucked it in. This wasn't the time. Instead, I wiped my forehead with the back of my arm like I'd seen my favorite action heroes do in the movies when they were working really hard. I could almost feel the seawater and grease dirtying my face. I imagined that I looked good, like a real action star with my bright blond, shoulder-length hair tied back in a ponytail and a red bandanna knotted around my neck. For the thousandth time I wished my parents hadn't named me Heidi. That was a name for a girl in braids and bonnets. Why couldn't they have named me Storm or Raven or Natasha or even Scarlett?

"I can't fix it," I sighed as dramatically as possible. "We're going to have to swim for it."

I lurched myself over the side of the boat and jumped into the sand surrounding it. Though on my feet, I stroked my arms to show that I was swimming away from the boat. After a short distance I stopped, faced the boat, and changed my hand movements to make it look as though I were treading water. My feet dug back and forth in the crunchy sand. "Come on, Donald! Jump!"

Donald climbed up on the railing of the ship. It was only a four-foot drop. It could hardly hurt him, especially since he was already five-foot-six. Still, he hesitated.

"Come on," I hollered. "You're going to drown!"

Donald looked back toward the stepladder on the side of the boat behind him that led to the sand. He inclined toward it.

"Don't take the ladder. That's for wimps. No time. Just jump!"

"I . . ." Donald looked at me and adjusted his glasses. He grinned in that funny way of his where his forehead stayed wrinkled as though he might cry. It was always strange for me to see Donald's face take on two expressions at the same time like that. I knew that it meant I was pushing him too hard. He would break down if I didn't let up. Not cry or blubber or anything like that. He'd just stop functioning. All the decision-making parts of his brain would fizzle out. I'd have to lead him around like a pet dog.

But, my goodness, I thought. It's only four feet.

"Just jump already," I whined at him.

Donald lifted one of his skinny legs over the railing so that he was straddling it. Sitting on top of the railing made the fall seem higher. I knew that from experience, and I could see it all over his face. Only recently had I mastered the art of jumping off fences and short walls. It had been a long-time goal of mine. None of my other girlfriends could do it, but all the boys at school could. Now I could play tag the cool way, with a little danger—and with all the boys. Looking at my brother stuck up on that ship railing, I could tell he was majorly chickening out. Poor Donald. He'd never be able to play tag the cool way.

Donald crept his other leg over the railing and balanced on his stomach, his face leaning into the boat, his bottom jutting out toward me. He gripped the edge with his hands and slid his body down the side of the boat until his sneakers touched the sand. It

was agonizing to watch him do this. Each movement took an eternity as he tried to figure out the process. Anyone else would have been down before Donald even got started.

At last, he let go of the boat, staggered backwards a step or two, and then turned around and pretended to swim toward me as though he had played the game without a hitch.

By this time I had stopped pretending to tread water. I crossed my arms and stood with my legs open so that most of my weight was on one foot.

"I can't believe how lame you are," I said to him.

Donald stopped "swimming." His hands fluttered about him as though he needed someone to tell him what to do with them. After a moment, he let his thumbs drift to the front pockets of his jeans. He never responded to me. I didn't expect him to. He had that typical look on his face that made people wonder whether he'd heard them or just didn't understand what they'd said. I figured Donald didn't know what he'd done to prompt me calling him lame.

"I don't feel like playing anymore," I said.

"Do you want to go to another park?" Donald asked. He turned his head and squinted into the sun.

"No," I replied. Since he wasn't looking, I turned my back to him. The guilt was less intense if I didn't see his face. "I want to go home. This is boring."

And it was boring. Not nearly as much fun as it used to be. Even though this was the only interesting playground left in our city in Southern California, it just didn't seem interesting enough anymore. For the past two years all the parks had been going through reconstruction. A bunch of mothers in the community felt the parks weren't safe enough. All cement castles, wooden forts, tall winding slides, teeter-totters, and merry-go-rounds had been trashed, replaced with bright orange and blue staircases and plastic slides.

This park, the only one of its kind left, had a life-sized boat stuck in a sandbox to look like a shipwreck. It was full of places to hide and climb—and probably spiders. I tried not to think about that too much when I played on it. Right next to it was this bizarre cement structure with tunnels to creep through. It looked like a flying saucer. Both were great for playing make-believe. The orange and blue "big toys" were not good at all for that kind of playing. Occasionally they might have a steering wheel randomly hitched to a protective railing, but what fun was that? Were we kids supposed to think we were driving a funky jungle gym through space? Driving it through the ocean?

Because this was the only park worth my time, I planned my weekends around playing there. It was a long bike ride from home. We had to take this bike path that connected three different subdivisions, pass by two different elementary schools, and cross a bridge that went over the train tracks to get there. So a considerable chunk of a Saturday afternoon had to be spent just getting there and back again. For a while I gave

up Saturday morning cartoons so Donald and I could get going earlier. It was better to get to the park before the babies showed up.

When the park got too crowded, the two of us would head to the shopping center to get hamburgers before going home. Our house was in a subdivision set off the main road in town. Basically, it was a few blocks from our house to get to that street. We only had to cross through one light to get to the shopping center, so all the kids in my neighborhood biked or walked there. My mom was always telling me how our town kept growing bigger and bigger on the outside, but this little part in the middle stayed the same. That's why my parents bought a house there, not far from the house where my mom grew up. She liked the safety and convenience of it all.

I always liked having everything so close, too, because we had a lot more freedom in our neighborhood than kids in other areas. My mom felt pretty secure about letting us wander around without her, as long as we checked in regularly by phone. But going to the park didn't excite me like it used to. I found myself dreading the outing with Donald instead of looking forward to it. Cartoons were back in my life, and I often skipped the hamburger so I could get back home as soon as possible.

The problem was that I was starting to feel too old for pretending. I was in sixth grade, and none of the other girls at school were playing games where they became pirates, superheroes, or monsters. No one wanted to go through spaceship tunnels and convince each other that when they came out on the other end they would be on Mars. No one even wanted to play house or dolls anymore. Now it was all about who liked who and who was going to the mall to buy lipstick.

I mostly went on these park trips to entertain Donald. Unlike me, he wasn't outgrowing make-believe games. He was sixteen, but he seemed more like nine or ten. Maybe eight. True, he was starting to look his age. He was growing fast and had little wiry hairs on his chin. He had more pimples than the entire high school student body put together. But it was the way his dark hair always had that greasy look, even though he washed it every day, and how the thick glasses he wore over his too-small eyes were always covered with film. The way his top lip never quite closed completely and his fingers never stopped moving. Those were the things that kept Donald from ever seeming like a teenager.

"Do you want to play handball? I brought a ball." Donald ran a hand nervously through the hair on the back of his head and then chirped slightly.

"No," I said, walking toward my bike. "Let's just go home." Without argument, Donald headed toward his own bike.

I hadn't bothered to lock mine up, so I got on quickly and started riding away before Donald even started fiddling with the combination on his lock. He had trouble memorizing the numbers, so he kept them written down on a card in his wallet. He was fishing for the card when two big boys rode past me on racing bikes. The wind from their

passing and the whirl of their tires forced me to turn to watch them. At the speed the boys were going, there was no way they could avoid hitting Donald.

“Ten points for the 'tard'!” one screamed out.

“Easy shot!” the other replied. They picked up speed.

That's when I realized they were aiming for Donald on purpose!

Bullies

Donald didn't see them coming.

Even though the boys shouted horrible names at him, my brother remained completely oblivious to it all, concerned only with his combination lock.

"Lame brain!"

"Dork head!"

The noise around him made it hard for him to concentrate on the numbers. He turned the card over and over, brought his hands to his ears, pushed his glasses tightly against his nose. I knew this behavior. He was more worried about not getting the combination right than what was going on around him. He was worried to death about it.

But he couldn't afford to be right then.

"Donald! Watch out!" I screamed.

Donald looked up, but it was too late to get away. His bike blocked any exit. All he could do was cringe.

Inches in front of my brother, the boys skidded to a stop, leaving long black marks on the sidewalk. Even though they were probably only fourteen or fifteen years old, up on their bikes the boys towered over crouching Donald. They laughed at their joke. Donald gave them that nervous smile. What could he say? What could he do? Donald didn't know how to fight back. Even if he did, these guys would clobber him.

"Get away from him!" I shouted. I ditched my bike and ran up behind the bullies. They swung around toward me. Like my brother, I felt pretty helpless with these guys. I was only eleven, so they were older and stronger. If I had to fight, I would. I was ready. I had teeth and nails. I might not have won, but I could do some damage. "Leave him alone. He's not doing anything to you."

"Are you his babysitter?" the taller boy asked, his chuckles sounding like he was choking on milk.

"Are you a retard like him?" the one wearing his cap backwards snickered.

Nothing grated on my nerves more than that word. Donald was not a "retard."

"Get away," I seethed.

The boys snickered at me. "Ooh, tough girl." They tugged their scratched-up bikes around so the front wheels aimed right at me. The taller boy faked as though he would run me over. I made the mistake of flinching.

"Better get yourself another bodyguard," he shouted to Donald, never taking his mean eyes off of me.

Donald stood up behind them. "That's my sister," he informed them. "Not my bodyguard."

"Your sister," they both commented.

"Are you a retard too?" one asked. "How do you spell dumb-head?"

"Leave us alone," I said quietly.

"Or what?"

"Or I'll pop your tires." I raised a hand to the stick-pin on my shirt shaped like a soccer ball. I won that pin in a tournament a month ago and always wore it. Quickly, I unfastened it and pointed the sharp end at the front tires of the bikes.

"Ooh, we're scared," they both teased. The taller boy reached out and grabbed the pin from my hand. It had to have stabbed his palm, but he didn't show any sign of it hurting. He threw the pin far into the grass. With an evil grin to me, he nodded to his friend, and they rode away. Over their shoulders they called out, "Next time we won't stop!"

I unlocked Donald's bike lock with shaky fingers while Donald poked around the grass looking for the pin.

"Do you know them?" I asked.

"Matt Tonkovich and Daryl Peck. Daryl Peck is the bigger one. He lives on Sego Street. Near our house."

I held the bike for Donald to get on. He ignored me and kept looking through the grass. I asked him, "Are they always so mean to you?"

"Not always." He said that about everyone. "No," he denied.

"When are they nice?" I pushed.

"Sometimes," he answered, but Donald was already thinking about something else. "Do you want to go for a shake today? I'd like a chocolate shake."

“No.” It was always no. “Not today. I just want to go home.”

I didn’t tell my brother that I didn’t want to be seen with him any longer that day. It was bad enough that Donald was picked on all the time. I didn’t like it happening to me too.

“Get on your bike already,” I ordered.

Donald stood up and walked toward the bike as if he wasn’t sure that was what he wanted to do.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Don’t you want your pin?”

I did want my pin. Earning it had taken a lot of work. Now it was doomed to be a surprise prick in the foot to some barefooted two-year-old.

“We’ll never find it,” I told him halfheartedly, and I figured that was half true. Donald certainly wouldn’t be able to find it, and I didn’t have the patience to help him look. Besides, what if Matt and Daryl came back?

I fetched my bike from where I’d left it lying in the middle of the sidewalk and led the way home. Everything Donald saw sparked an observation he had to make out loud, but I didn’t say a word in response to him. Donald never clued in that I just wanted him to shut up.