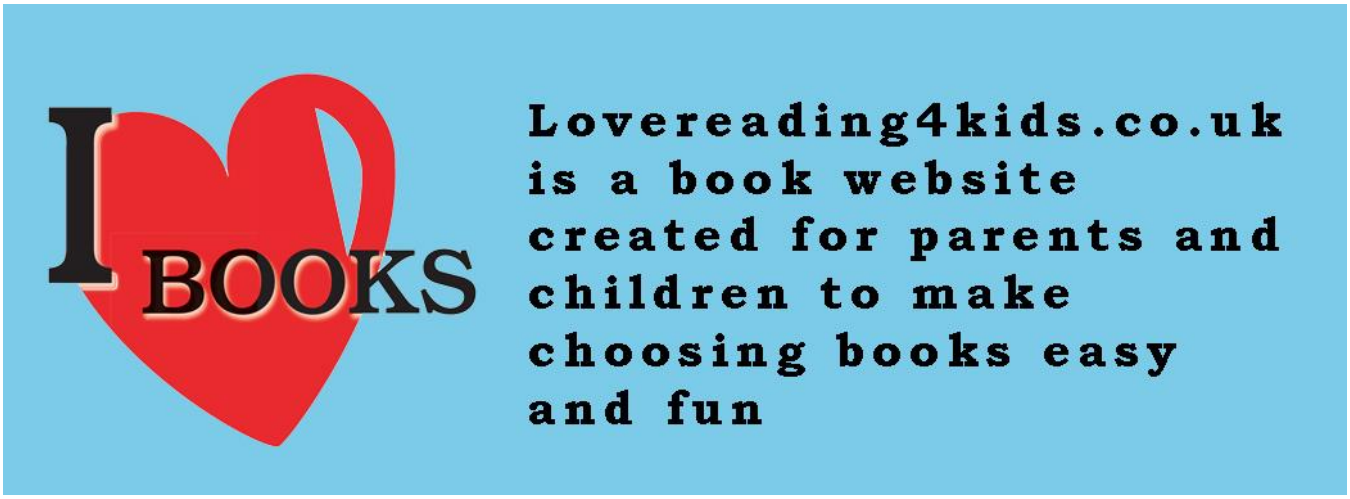


Opening extract from

White Lies, Black Dare

Written by

Joanna Nadin

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Truth or Dare?

I thought it was an easy question. Obvious. Like asking, "Would you rather win the final of *The X Factor* or lick the bin outside Maccy D's?" Or, "Do you want fries with that?" Like, duh.

'Cause the truth's dull. It's school uniform and scuffed shoes and the smell of cheap sausages. It's no-label, own-brand, knock-off. Truth's your mum got sick and you had to move in with your not-even-grandpa and you don't go to private school no

more. Who wants that? It's stories that glitter. The stuff on telly and in magazines and books: *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games* and *School for Stars*. That's why I chose what I did – why I hung round with Angel and Kelly in the first place. Because they had stories and adventure in them, so strong I could see it. Because they knew how to tell tall tales, and how to dream big. Real big. Because you never knew what was going to happen next. Being with them – even just in that Blu-Tack-covered bedroom on Ephraim Street, or on the wall outside Crackerjack – was like a free pass at Peckham Fair. Like all-you-can-eat candyfloss and doughnuts then getting spun on the waltzers until you don't know if you're going to scream or puke and you don't even care which.

Until you do.

It's only now I see it. That dares are dangerous. But telling the truth, that's the biggest risk of all. 'Cause truth is the blade of a knife. Truth is the red circle of shame.

Dares can damage deeper than you imagined. And telling lies can ruin lives. But take it from me, telling the truth's no easy ride. And that first term at the Academy, I did all three.

One

Everyone's got something to say about it. About why moving from Essex to Peckham's going to be a good thing. Otis says we're back where we belong – me and Mum – back where we come from. My friend Joe, he's dead happy because I'm only a few miles away now, so we can see each other more often. More than just the odd Sunday, he says. Even Mrs Joyful King from downstairs has got an opinion. She seen it in Otis's horoscope, she reckons good times are coming. And you got to believe horoscopes. Last

month mine told me I was going to reap financial rewards from a canny investment and I ended up winning a pound in a bet over how long Charlie Bardwell could kiss Jonno Everett for, which was only four minutes twenty-three seconds, which is way shorter than Casey Collins and Luke Patmore's brother, which is what I said.

It's only Mum who's got nothing but bad words about it. She says Otis's flat's going to be too small for all of us. That the school's going to be shameful compared to Queen Mary's. That I'll end up with a bunch of no-hopers for friends.

She's doing it now, sat in the back of the taxi parked outside Lyndhurst Villas. Not with words this time, but I can tell by the way her eyes narrow when she sees the grass not mown and the bins not emptied and the world not all rosy like it was before.

Beggars can't be choosers, I want to say, but I don't. 'Cause having to beg is what she's angry about. 'Cause she's the one that's gone and got cancer. She's the one whose boyfriend left her. She's the one who

said income insurance was a scam, only then she got no money to pay the rent and no Ellis to pick up the pieces or clear up the puke from chemo and so here we are, moving back in with her step-dad in the flat she was brought up in. Because, yeah, it's not like we was made in Chelsea or anything like that. I went to primary down Bellenden Road round the corner. It was only when Mum got made a barrister that she decided we were too good for round here and dragged me to Epping, where dogs don't poo on the doorstep and no one swears and unicorns play on streets paved with gold. Yeah, right.

She opens her purse, pulls out two twenties – the last of this week's sick benefit, only she don't call it that, 'cause benefits are for other people. Just like cancer was supposed to be and all.

The driver opens the door for her, offers her his arm. She ignores it. "I'm all right," she says. "I'm fine."

He flicks a look at me but I got no answer, I can't speak for her. She's got all the fine words, the truth.

All I got is stories from books and films and stuff out of magazines; the same stuff she's always telling me's going to get me nowhere. "You got to focus, Asha," she says. "Focus on facts. That's what matters. That's what makes you money. Facts not fiction."

Money, that's what matters. To her anyway. The way she talks about it like it's magic beans that build you a giant beanstalk to get up and out of your sorry little life. Only look where that got her. No ogre, maybe, but no gold either and we're back down the bottom of the stalk on our backsides. Look where it got Joe and all back when I met him. He's living with his mum now, up in a new flat, and he goes to a new school and all. But it was money his mum was chasing when she left him on his own for two weeks – a thirteen-year-old kid who can't barely use the cooker – before he ended up in care for months. It was money the Dooleys were chasing when they started banging on his door at night. Money Perry Fletcher was chasing when he beat Joe up so bad he couldn't hardly see.

Money's not everything, I want to say. *Nor's facts.*

But I don't, do I? I just drag our bags out and go and ring the bell and wait for Otis, like he's the fairy godfather who can fix everything.

He can't fix school, though. Can't magic up Mallory Towers in the middle of the market. Can't even find me a place at Haberdashers' down New Cross, the only school for miles that gets grades that don't turn Mum's lips into nothing or make your bank balance disappear. So it's the Academy, with the rest of the kids off the estates.

Anyway, like I say, beggars can't be choosers, so no point complaining my skirt's too tight and my shoes are the wrong colour and I don't like the cheese in my sandwiches that much, I'd rather have chips from the canteen. Better to concentrate on the good stuff. I read that in a magazine. You got to see the good in every situation. Like, if you're on a diet, like Casey Collins was for two weeks in Year Seven until she got into fake nails instead, not being allowed to have

a Mars bar is rubbish. But then one little square of chocolate is a treat, innit. That's the pearl in the oyster.

And I got a pearl. Patience Williams. She may be a happy-clapper down her dad's church, and she may shop in Plus 14 down Lewisham market instead of up West, but she can dance like Beyoncé when her mum's not looking and she's read every Jacqueline Wilson, in order. Besides, she's the only one who bothered to message back when I said I was moving. So she's all I got. At least that's what I thought at lunchtime when I sat down next to her that first day.

I used to think the playground was where the important stuff got decided – not like who's top of the class, but who's king, or queen, who's their court, and who's just nobody. But once you've passed hopscotch and handstand wonderland, the canteen's what counts, that's where rules get decided and places divided, and this one's no exception.

It's like a test, what you pick to eat, then where you pick to eat it. 'Cause you're a fool if you think you can just sit anywhere. Some seats got no-go signs on them 'cause they're hot, they're wanted; some 'cause no one would sit there even if the prize was a trip up Westfield with a no-limit credit card. I know where I want to sit, one day. But for now, I settle for five tables down to the left, away from the boys chucking chips like they're scoring baskets, away from the girls bragging and braying like they're the stars they want to be. I settle for a plastic chair that's been bagsied already with an outsize blazer and a two-seasons-ago lunchbox. The seat next to Patience. I slip in like it's made me for me, just waiting. And there we are again, like we used to be down primary. Her with her plastic tub of pasta salad and her Jaffa Cakes and juice, and me with my cheese sandwich and my banana and my bottle of water. Misfits, both of us. The fat Christian and the new girl.

"How was Spanish?" she asks.

"*Bueno*," I answer. "Totally *bueno*. 'Cept the only

place left is next to some kid whose fingernails are bleeding, which, like, what is that about? Plus he don't smell good."

"Darryl Benson," Patience says through a mouthful of pasta. She don't eat pretty and I reckon I can teach her about that. I read it in a magazine: talking with your mouth full is one of the Top Ten Turn-Offs For Boys, after bad breath and hairy armpits.

I swallow my sandwich. "Maybe," I say. "I reckon he's a vampire, only he's too kind to bite other people so he just sucks blood from the tips of his fingers. And he can't take a shower because vampires are allergic to water, innit."

But Patience won't play the game.

"*Holy* water," she says. "They're only allergic if it's holy and I don't think they pump that out of the tap. Anyway, vampires aren't real. He just bites his nails, that's all."

"Whatever. He so needs some Lynx."

Then I remember what we used to do.

"Want to swap?" I offer, holding out my brown banana.

"If you like," she says.

I almost choke on her kindness. "Seriously? You'd swap this for a Jaffa Cake?"

"Two." She smiles. "I don't mind, really."

Fool girl, I think, but I do the swap before she changes her mind. And I'm so busy licking chocolate off the top of the orangey bit and thinking I've totally won the lunch-swap lottery, I don't notice the girl who's turned up at our table with her hands on her hips and her hair gelled into zigzags and her ginger sidekick staring green-eyed daggers at Patience. They look like trouble with a capital T. And I feel my heart start banging like I'm climbing on the roller coaster. But I know better than to let them see that.

"I know who you are," says the gelled girl.

"I doubt it," I reply, still licking the biscuit.

"Yeah, I do. You went off to Hogwarts or somewhere. That fancy school."

I see heads turn on next-door tables and eyes fix on me, feel the cheese sandwich in my stomach start to swirl. "Maybe."

"Asha, innit. Asha Wright. You don't know who I am?" She says it like she's a film star, or planning to be one.

I look at her up close now. I do sort of recognise her: the way her mouth half smiles, half sneers; the only-just uniform she's wearing; those massive eyes, ringed by falsies, even though they're banned. Not off the telly, though. From before. And then I see her, queening it in the playground, jumping elastics with her blonde hair down to her backside and her skinny legs flying way higher than any of us, and don't she know it.

"Angel Jones," I say.

"Don't wear it out," she says. But she's not mad at me. She's known. She's somebody. And that's what counts. All that counts, maybe. "So why're you back? Failed your dragon-taming class or summink?"

Her sidekick laughs and I can see she's got a black

tooth and I'm wondering if it's because she drinks too much Coke or if she had a fight, over a boy, and now it's a dead tooth, only she keeps it as a sign to enemies that she's hard, that you don't mess with her.

Patience nudges me and I realise Angel's waiting for an answer and she's not going to take "no comment".

"Something like that," I reply. And then it just comes out. I don't even have to think that hard. And I don't know why I do it except that who wants to hear some sob story about cancer and Mum getting sacked so she can't pay the school fees and even with a scholarship it's two hours on the bus and tube. So instead what comes out is: "There was this boy, total Prince Harry type, you know. Only not ginger, blond; so blond his hair's almost see-through. And rich; his dad is Lord Something. Anyway, we're in detention, just me and him, in the library which is all paintings and the smell of books. And there's just this feeling. It's electric, you know?" I glance at Angel and she nods, like yeah, she knows. "Anyway, the

teacher gets called out – Mr Griffin, that's his name – and then we're all over each other. And this goes on for, like, weeks. We get detention deliberately so we can be together. But then his dad finds out and tells my mum and they go all Montague and Capulet on us and ban us from seeing each other because his dad's got him set to marry someone from Chelsea. And now he's in Scotland and I'm back here, innit."

I wait for my audience to react. Because that's what it's about – being somebody, being seen. No point doing anything if there's no one there to watch you do it. I saw that on a film.

The sidekick's first. "Liar," she says.

"You reckon?" I say. "There's loads I could tell you about that place. It's proper stuck-up. I'm glad to be rid."

"Is that true?" asks Patience.

"What, about Parker – that's his name, Parker, did I say that? – or that I'm glad to be back?"

"Both," she says.

"Course," I say. And it's only half a lie.

Then I look up at Angel, who still hasn't spoken. Right then her name suits her. Her hair's a halo in the strip lights of the canteen and she's so above us all she almost flies.

She pushes her tongue into the wad of gum that's her lunch and blows a fat bubble that snaps and disappears behind her Rimmel-glossed lips. Then she looks at me, like she's drinking me in, testing me out for flavour, seeing if I'm sweet or poison. And though all she says is, "See you around, Ash," I know I've passed. I'm in. And then it's like fairground lights start to flash and a bell rings and I hear the clatter of wheels on a wooden track. Because I can feel it beginning. Feel it lurch out of the gate and down the first steep swoop. I'm on a roller coaster. I'm on the ride of my life and I don't want to get off, even if I could.

Two

"Who was that other girl?" I ask.

Me and Patience are idling down Rye Lane, drinking cans of fake Coke she got us with her tuck money in Crackerjack, taking turns to kick an empty fag packet.

"The ginger one?"

"Yeah, her with the tooth."

"That's Kelly. They're always in trouble, her and Angel. Mr Goater – he's the Deputy Head, only everyone calls him Bloater – had them in detention

for a whole week once because they pierced this Year Seven girl's ear in the toilets. She said she wanted them to, but I think they just told her to say that. You want to stay well away."

"All right, Mum," I say.

"I didn't mean it like that," she says quickly, even though I'm smiling. "Mr Goater's all right really. You just got to know what kind of mood he's in."

"Kelly what?" I ask.

"Huh?"

"You know, her surname. Like Williams or Wright or, I don't know, Chumley-flipping-Warner."

"Oh, that. It's nothing double-barrelled. As if. It's Dooley," Patience says. "She's a Dooley."

And when she says it – Dooley – I feel something inside me flip and flounder. Because, even though I've not lived here for three years, I know what that name means. And more than that, what it means to Joe. All right, so it was his mum's boyfriend Dean he was scared of, and Dean who still gives him

nightmares now – getting early release and turning up at the new flat, persuading his mum he's a new man after all. But the Dooleys are the ones Dean ran with. The Dooleys chasing a debt is the reason Joe got left on his own when his mum ran off with Dean. And Joe's the reason one of the Dooleys is inside now.

But Kelly might not be one of his kids, I think – the one Joe grassed, I mean. Or maybe just a distant cousin. Though she got the hair. And that look that's like she's up to something, or thinking about it. Maybe I just won't tell Joe I met her. Not yet anyway. Not 'til I know who she really is and what that means. Besides, if she finds out who I am she might not want to know me anyway. Not that I could tell her, 'cause I don't know who I am to Joe, not really. Friend, sure. Girlfriend? Once upon a time I thought so, or thought that's what I wanted. But I reckon he's more like a brother now. A lanky, white, weird brother. And I laugh when I think that, but in a good way, 'cause *he's* good.

"You want to come in?" Patience asks. We're outside her house now – the vicarage, though it's nothing like the ones in books, you know, all grey and ivy-covered with headless ghosts in the attic. This one's red-brick with plastic windows and a *Jesus Loves You* rainbow sticker on the door. No ghosts in there I reckon. Just God and cats and the smell of saltfish.

"Nah, you're all right. I got to get back, innit."

I don't. 'Cause what is there to get back to? Only I don't want to hang round Patience too much, 'cause it might put Angel off, like she'll know if I've been in there 'cause the smell of Jesus will stick to me.

"See you tomorrow, then?" she asks. "At school."

"Course," I say. "Where else would I go?"

Patience shrugs. "I don't know." She pauses, then adds, "I'm glad you're back."

"Yeah," I say. "Me too."

And I am. Right up until I get to our flats, walk up the stairs past Mrs Joyful King, and the Patels, and

the Polish men who change every month, and in our front door. Where the truth hits me almost as hard as the sorry silence, but for the tick-tock of my almost-grandfather's clock, counting down the minutes until the next pill.

Welcome home, Asha.

Cancer's not like it is in magazines or on *Holby*. On telly you can't smell the sick or the staleness from lying in bed too long. You can't feel the sadness that seeps into the sofa and the curtains so that as you walk by it brushes off on you even if you're singing at the time. Telly's a lie, a beautiful one. In here, cancer's only ugly.

Seeing her lying there, on a made-up bed in front of the telly at four in the afternoon, it's like seeing The Wicked Witch of the West taking up bingo or something. Or maybe not a witch, but some bigwig, innit. She used to be invincible, nothing could stop her. Not the crappy ex who run off to Birmingham before his daughter was even born. Not the dad who

said she was wasting her time with law school and what she really wanted was a job down Shaniqua's doing weaves and manicures. Not the criminals who would stare poison at her across the courtroom, or their families who would spit at her patent shoes outside. Only now look at her. She's pathetic. Like a sick tiger, and I don't know what to do around it. How to be. If it needs petting or if it'll bite.

"How was it?" she asks.

"All right," I say. "Where's Otis?"

"At work. He'll be back to make tea." She sighs, like even talking is too much to bear, shifts her weight on the bed. "Tell me about the teachers."

"They're fine."

She raises an eyebrow that used to be plucked and now's just drawn on.

"Honest," I say. "This guy we had for history – Robinson – he did this rhyme for all the kings and queens so we could remember them. It was great."

"*Mr* Robinson. And you already know all the kings and queens. So should the rest of the class."

"I know, but—"

"It's not for ever, anyway," she says. "As soon as a place opens at Haberdashers' you can transfer."

"I don't see what's so wrong with the Academy," I say.

"You want a list, chile?" she asks, lapsing into her old person voice. The voice of her mum, of Otis.

"You did all right," I point out.

"I took the long way, the hard way. You don't want that, believe me."

I look at her, lying there. Look where the long, hard way got her. Right back where she started. That's why she's so angry. Because she escaped and now she's been dragged back. "No shame in coming home," says Otis. But there is, for her. She don't belong here with the nylon carpet all psychedelic swirls, the fake-gold picture frames, the reggae on the radio. She belongs somewhere else, with wooden floors and white sheets and white man's music on a thousand-pound stereo. She thinks she was born to the wrong family, innit. I used to think that too,

about me. Used to imagine I was adopted and that my real mum and dad were famous actors and one day they'd roll up in a sports car and take me to Hollywood and I'd be a child star and live in hotels and eat corn dogs and drink root beer. That my life would be diamond instead of the dull chip of mica it is.

I'm still waiting.

"You make any friends?" she asks when the silence gets too hard to bear.

"Remember Patience?" I say. And I tell Mum about her. That she's in my tutor group and in my English and maths classes. That we sat next to each other at lunch and walked home together. And that she's got two cats called Matthew and Mark, which are really dumb names for cats, if you think about it, even if they are from the gospel.

"So her father's still the preacher?"

I nod, taking a peanut out of the bowl that's sat untouched in front of her since Otis left it this morning.

"That's good."

"I s'pose."

"Anyone else?" she asks.

I throw the peanut in the air and catch it in my mouth, and the crowd in my head goes wild. I shake my head as I chew. "Nah. Not yet."

Because that list she talked about, about what's wrong with the Academy? Angel Jones would be the cherry on top of it.

Joe's full of questions too. He calls after dinner, all, "Is Miss Burton still there?" and, "Have you got Bloater for geography?" and, "Did you see Perry Fletcher?"

"I don't know," I answer to the first question. Then, "No, someone called Watson." And, "He's in Fourways now, Patience says. 'Cause of what he done to you and also 'cause he put some midget kid called Franco in the bins, you know, the food ones, right over his head."

I don't tell him about Angel, either. Nor Kelly

Dooley. Like I say, I know what he'd think and I don't think I want to hear it. Not 'til I have to.

"I can't wait to see you," he says then. "Sunday, yeah?"

I wonder what Angel's doing Sunday. Patience'll be in church. All day, maybe. But Angel doesn't look like she prays down St John's or Latter Rain or any other chapel. She looks like she worships somewhere else entirely.

"Yeah, Sunday," I say. "Can't wait."

But for the first time since we met, a tiny part of me – so tiny it's smaller even than an amoeba on a flea, but real all the same – thinks I can wait. Not 'cause I don't want to see him, I do. But 'cause I want to see her more. Because she'll sparkle. She's diamond. And if I'm with her, maybe my life will turn out to be too.