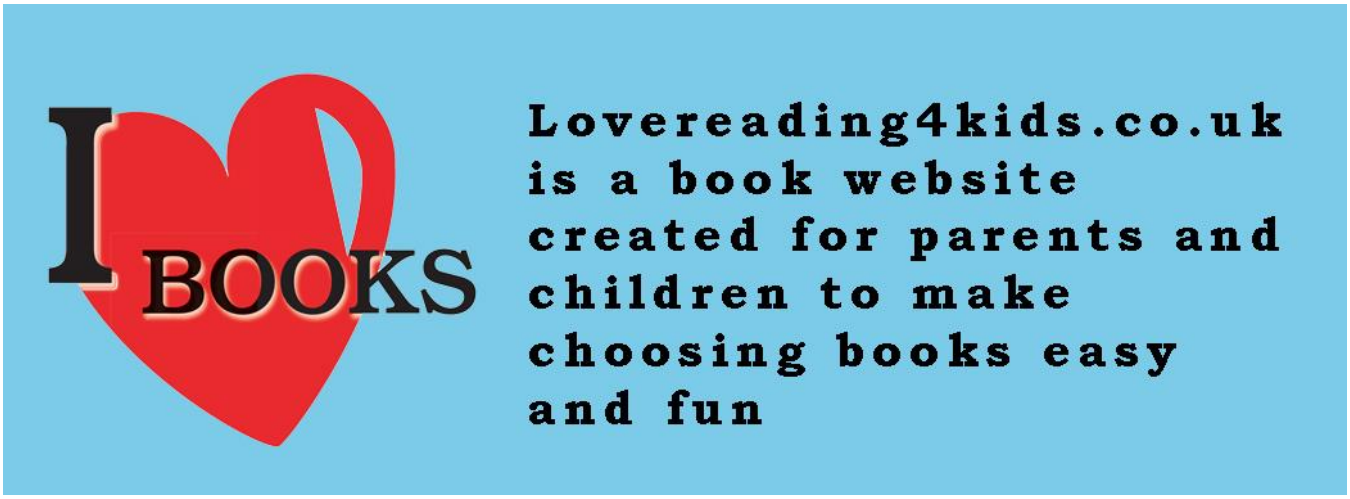


Opening extract from

Truth or Dare

Written by

Non Pratt

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For Denise J-B, who challenged me
to write something different

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CHAPTER 1

It's freezing in the school hall and Rich's shirt is so tight you can see his nipples. Disturbing as this is, I can't seem to look anywhere else – it's like they've hypnotized me.

"Is this assembly ever going to end?" Seren slumps sideways onto my shoulder as Mr Chung, the head, stands up from his chair at the back of the stage to walk towards the lectern.

"Apparently not," I murmur in reply.

Rich leans across to whisper, "If it's this or Maths…"

On stage, Mr Chung clears his throat before addressing us.

"Some of you will already know what happened over the summer when Kamran Malik fell into the Lay river."

We've all heard about it one way or another, but that doesn't make it any less awful and there's a collective burst of gasps and horrified murmurs. There's also an indiscreet "Fall or jump?" from one of the sixth-formers behind us. West Bridge has an unofficial and entirely stupid tradition of people tombstoning off the viaduct after their exams. There's rumours that Sef Malik – Kam's younger (gorgeous) brother – did it at the start of summer, but it's not something I'd ever imagine Kam doing.

"Kamran – or Kam as most of us knew him – was taken

straight to hospital with a suspected brain injury. Having been in a coma for over two weeks, he regained consciousness yesterday." Someone does an uncertain sort of cheer, but you can see from Mr Chung's face that this is not the right time. "Once Kam has recovered sufficiently, he will move to a local rehabilitation unit. The injuries he has sustained as a result of his fall mean he will have to relearn a lot of the skills we all take for granted. Such lessons take a long time and require medical support. His family, too, will require support."

Like everyone else, I'm glancing round the hall looking for the Malik brothers – or at least the one I would recognize. His friends are here, towards the end of the row of Year 12s – tall, quiet Finn Gardner and the infamous Matthew Lund – but no Sef.

"Yousef and Amir will be coming in next week and we ask that you treat them with the respect befitting of West Bridge students. Those who count yourself friends, be watchful and patient, and those of you who are nothing more than a face in the corridor, make sure that face is friendly. No staring, no whispers, no rumours.

"As one of last year's head boys, I know Kam is well liked." Our murmur of agreement is even louder than our distress. "And I know you all wish him the very best. If you would like to send Kam a more personal message of support, you have until next Friday to sign the card outside my office, where there's an envelope for donations to the Recreare Hospital for Neurodisability."

I sit up in my seat at hearing the name of the place where I'm volunteering as part of my Bronze Duke of Edinburgh.

I've got training there next Friday.

Mr Chung nods once and row by row, we're guided out of the hall, the teachers furiously shushing the rising tide of voices.

"God, that's *awful*," Rich says, like he can't quite process it.

"And he was going to Cambridge…" Seren shuts up at the sharp look Rich gives her, but it's too late. They're off.

"Would it have been better if he was heading to Hull or art college or –" Rich slaps a sarcastic hand to his face – "worse still, *he wasn't going to university*?"

"Oh, shut up, Denver Richards – that's not what I'm saying at all!"

"Then what are you saying?"

"I don't even know, all right? I suppose I mean that it can happen to anyone. That studying hard and being head boy and all those things that make you good don't protect you from … *this*."

I leave them to it, lost in my own head, trying to work out the implications of Kam moving to the Recreare the same time that I'll be there. It's not like we knew each other – the only time we spoke was when I thanked him for stopping the Year 8 hockey team from pushing ahead of me into the lunch queue – but still…

Behind me, a familiar hyena laugh rises out of the voices in the corridor and my blood chills. I managed to dodge the Cave Boys during registration, but the press of bodies by the stairs has slowed me down and there's nowhere for me to go.

This will be the first time I've seen them since it happened.

It was one of the hottest days of the year and me and Rich and Seren had squashed onto a single blanket in a three-gradient paint chart: me at one end, the luminous white of someone who has lived in a cave their whole life, and Seren, with her blessed-by-a-Turkish-father brown, at the other. Rich sat between us with his top off, exposing an almost-tanned chest.

"Six," I said.

"It doesn't count if it's the same one twice," Seren said.

We'd been counting how many people checked Rich out on their way past.

"I'm feeling objectified by the female gaze," Rich grumbled.

"That one was male." I didn't need to see her to know that would make Seren smile.

"If you're so worried about objectification, put your top on," she said.

"Victim blamer."

"I'll be honest, Rich – my heart's not in this one. I'm on your side. Wear what you want. It's a scrawny naked torso, not an invitation."

Rich was too busy taking affront to notice Chloe King and Gemma Brogan until they were close enough to cast shadows across our blanket. The pair of them were drenched, Gemma's skin goose-pimpled and glittering, Chloe's white dress turned translucent over a two-piece that could have been stylish underwear or sporty swimwear.

"The Cave Boys have conquered the fountain and we came to ask if you'd help us take it back?" Chloe might have

been the one asking, but I didn't miss the way Gemma cast a glance over Rich and I silently added her to his tally.

Rich and I were happy to sign up. Seren was not. Leaving her to guard our stuff, we joined the others.

It was carnage – everyone within splashing distance of the fountain was soaked. The spray and the screaming made it impossible to know what was going on until Vijay Dinn caught me round the middle – and because I'd always had a soft spot for Vijay, I let myself enjoy the attention, scream-laughing as I tried to wriggle free, my skin slippery against his.

When I broke free to spin round, ready to retaliate, the horrified delight that blossomed across his face caught me off guard. Tracking his gaze down, I saw that the string of my halterneck bikini had come undone, releasing my bare boobs for the whole park to see…

They draw level with me on the stairs and James Blaithe – the biggest and most brutish of the three troglodytes – stares without shame at my chest before miming taking a photo. His slight underbite gives a predatory edge to his grin and runtish little Isaac sniggers into his fist as I draw further into my school jumper.

We all know that there's no need for James to even joke about taking a picture. Not when he filmed the whole thing on his phone before posting it onto an anonymous gossip site with the tag: *#MilkTits*.

My whole existence boiled down to a Ctrl+Z moment that can never be undone – a moment that has been shared over a thousand times in twenty-two days.

* * *

After lunch Madame Cotterill asks James to hand out the worksheets in French and I pretend not to notice him lumbering between the desks towards where I sit with Seren. But he stops just short of my desk, holding the paper so that I have to reach for it.

"One for Milk Tits…"

A hand lashes out to snatch the sheets from him.

"Her name is *Claire*!" Seren hisses fiercely. I whisper at her to leave it, but afterwards I can tell by the way she's stony about the past participle that she's annoyed with me.

"You should report it," she bursts out at the end of the lesson, firing a glance down the corridor to where James and Isaac are making fart noises with their armpits as if competing to see who is the biggest cliché. "It's sexual harassment. He can't get away with it."

She doesn't understand that he already has. They can take the link down, but they can't wipe people's memories. Any time I've caught someone's eye today, I've wondered whether they've watched the video or commented… Udder alert! Check out her mammaries! Bit NIPPY, was it??? ((@))((@)) They follow you wherever you go…

We're still arguing about it when we reach the lockers, where Rich has been waiting.

"… can you just leave it? I'm not going to."

"What's Claire not going to do?" he asks.

"Report James about the video," I say at the same time as Seren says, "The right thing."

Rich gives me a sympathetic look.

"If Claire's said that's not what she wants—"

"You mean, it's not what *you* want?" Seren rounds on him, her smooth black bob swishing like it's been CGI-ed into existence by someone who used shampoo ads for reference.

"Hey!" Rich raises his hands in surrender.

"Now you're captain of the football team, it's important to keep James onside, right?"

"What's football got to do with it? I'm listening to what my best friend wants instead of assuming I'm the only person capable of deciding what's right."

"This isn't about *deciding*!" Seren's staring at us both, brows lowered. "If you don't report him for this, then he'll do it again."

"He's going to keep calling me Milk Tits whatever I do…"

"It's not just *you* – next time it might be someone else. James Blaithe is a giant toddler, and if someone doesn't set the boundaries, then he'll carry on like there aren't any."

I wish Seren wouldn't get so angry with me – and I wish she could understand that ratting on James will make things worse. I'd rather be the joke than have everyone think I can't take one.

"I get where you're coming from. I just don't want that someone to be me."

"I'll do it, then—"

"Seren. Please." Her will is the kind that mine usually bends to, but not on this. "The only people in this school who haven't seen my boobs are the teachers. I'd like to keep it that way."

Seren flares her nostrils the way she always does when she's holding something back.

"Fine." She yanks her locker open and swaps her French books for English ones, marching off down the corridor, too annoyed to walk at a normal pace.

As we follow her, Rich slings an arm round my shoulders and gives me a squeeze.

"Just to be clear, *I've* not seen your boobs."

"Not even the live show?" I stare at the floor as we walk.

"Looking the other way, wasn't I?"

And I half turn to give him a flimsy smile. "Hashtag not all men, Rich?"

"Hashtag not this one."