



two sides of one truth

LITTLE LIAR

Lisa Ballantyne

Angela

Fight, fight, fight.

Angela looked down at her knuckles and saw they were red. It wasn't her blood. The crowd had formed so fast, pupils from her year – twelve- and thirteen-year-olds – being elbowed out of the way by lads of fifteen. The ring of people around her pulsed as one. The eye of the fight, where she stood, was only three or four feet wide. Kids pressed as close as they could to get a look, climbing on shoulders and pulling on school bags, but they also stayed back, gave room for the violence, so the circle where Angela stood contracted and dilated like an iris. She didn't know how many people surrounded her. Everyone wanted to watch a fight and a girl fight was even better, so long as it was a real one.

This was a real one. She hadn't started it, but she was going to finish it. She was going to teach Jasmine a lesson.

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Blood was running from Jasmine's nostrils and her eyes were streaming, although it didn't look as if she was actually crying. Angela would sort that out. She took her by the hair and forced her down onto the ground. Jasmine's hair was easy to get a hold of because it was so big and bushy. As soon as she was on the ground Angela began to kick her. Jasmine rolled up into a ball and covered her face with her elbows and hands and so Angela kicked her hard on her thighs. She kicked her so hard it jarred her hip, but it wasn't enough. She wanted to really show her.

Angela heard deep male voices and knew the teachers had arrived to break up the fight. She didn't have much time. She grabbed another fistful of Jasmine's hair and at the same time put one foot on the girl's waist, pinning her body to the ground. Angela gritted her teeth and pulled as hard as she could, just as the eye of the crowd ruptured and separated.

She was pulled away by one teacher, while another knelt to tend to Jasmine, who was now screaming and writhing on the ground. Angela felt dizzy, happy, high. She didn't recognise the teacher that was marching her by the elbow to the main building. All her limbs felt heavy and she allowed herself to be led, a smile of achievement on her lips.

'Sit down,' the teacher ordered, when they reached the corridor where the head's office was. It was only her second year of high school, but Angela knew this corridor well.

She did as she was told and sat down. It didn't matter. She shrugged to show that she didn't care. In her fist, she held a large clump of Jasmine's light brown frizzy hair. Angela

hunched over to inspect it and saw that there was blood on the ends of it. She'd ripped it right out.

If only her dad had come to get her, but of course it was her mum.

An hour later, she and her mother were sat side by side at the head teacher's desk. The head was called Mr Pickering and Angela noticed that he had a food stain on his pale blue shirt. Angela had been at Croydon Academy for just over a year and this was the second time she had been in Mr Pickering's office. She slumped in her seat as she half-listened to them going on and on.

'Angela is a bully,' said Mr Pickering, his thin lips pressed together, 'and we do not tolerate bullying at Croydon Academy. This is the third incident of unacceptable bullying behaviour towards other pupils and the level of violence today was really quite shocking. The pupil that Angela attacked needed medical attention and would be within her rights to press criminal charges. It could have been much *more* serious if staff hadn't intervened when they did.'

Angela's mum smelled of cigarettes. She would have had one on the way here, walking from the bus stop to the school. She always stank more when she'd had a fag outside.

'What do you have to say, Angela?' her mum asked, turning to her. Her voice was always different when she talked in front of the teachers, as if she was putting on a big act.

Angela shrugged and turned away. She heard her mother sigh lightly.

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There was the sound of Mr Pickering shuffling papers on his desk. 'I note Angela's behaviour and academic performance in primary were almost exemplary.'

'Yeah, she was top of her class. I suppose the work's easier at primary . . .'

That was typical for Donna. If Angela did well it was because the work was too easy; if she did poorly it was Angela's fault.

'It still doesn't explain this extreme change in performance and behaviour.'

They were talking about her as if she wasn't there.

'Do you have an explanation for this, Angela?' Mr Pickering raised his eyebrows as he waited for an answer. His hair was grey but his eyebrows were still black, so they looked fake, stuck-on.

Angela glanced at her chipped nail polish. With her thumb-nail, she tried to scrape a little more off. Her hands were still dirty from the fight.

'It's just teenagers, isn't it?' her mother offered in the silence.

'But you're not thirteen yet, are you Angela?' said Mr Pickering, raising his voice a little, as if she had hearing problems.

Why did he keep saying her name all the time? *Angela, Angela, Angela*, as if she didn't know who she was?

'She's thirteen soon enough, but it all starts earlier now, doesn't it?' her mother answered for her.

'And there are no problems at home?' Mr Pickering looked over his glasses at them both. Angela wasn't sure who he was

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talking to this time so kept her mouth shut, glancing at her mother.

‘The normal ups and downs, y’know. I separated from her father recently, but it’s been fairly amicable.’

She still had that stupid voice on but it was getting even more high-pitched. Her mother liked to pretend everything was fine, even though it had been a year since her dad had left home.

They started talking about her again and Angela looked down at her feet. *A safe environment for pupils and staff. Zero tolerance. Penalties. Blah, fucking blah.*

She wanted to die. She just wanted to die.

‘So,’ Mr Pickering said with such finality Angela looked up at him. ‘I have spoken to my senior colleagues and the decision is that we are suspending Angela for two days. The reasons for exclusion are abusive and bullying behaviour, and violence towards another pupil.’

Blah, blah, blah.

On the bus home, her mother was more upset about having to leave work early than about the violence and the suspension. It was raining outside and the bus smelled of damp clothes.

‘I just get a promotion and then you start acting up. This is the third time in almost as many months I’ve had to leave work and go to the school.’

She made out that she was some kind of high-flyer instead of a college finance officer. Her mother’s job sounded stupid and boring.

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Angela rooted in her school bag and found a half-eaten packet of Haribo. She hunched down in her seat and began to chew. The intense sweetness and the rubbery texture soothed her.

‘Where did you get those?’

‘Bought them, *Donna*.’

‘I told you before, don’t call me that. With what?’

‘Dad gave me money on Saturday.’

Her mother exhaled down her nose. Angela smiled and put another two sweets into her mouth at once.

‘Well you shouldn’t be buying sweets, that’s for sure. You have to be careful, young lady. You’re getting heavy. It’s not very attractive.’

Angela put three sweets in her mouth, and faced her mother for a few seconds as she chewed with her mouth open, but her mood had darkened and she no longer felt the same comfort from the sugar rush. As if *Donna* was the hottest chick in town, with her fat thighs and her charity-shop clothes and her home-dyed hair. No wonder her father left. *You don’t make an effort*, she’d heard him say to her mother once, when Angela had been listening from upstairs.

She looked out of the bus window at shops passing on the Portland Road: The Star Café Sandwich Bar, Diva Cuts, Morley’s Chicken Burgers and Ribs, Portland Wines. The bus moved slowly around the green curve of Ashburton Park.

‘Well, you’re grounded anyway,’ her mother continued. ‘No tablet, no phone and no sweets till the end of the week.’

Who gives?

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They got off the bus and tramped in the rain to the house. Angela hated home since her father had gone. It felt empty. It smelled different.

She let her school bag fall to the floor and brought her hands up to her face. They smelled of blood and Haribo, salt and sweet.

She wanted to die. She just wanted to die.

‘Why are you standing there like that? Hang your coat up, put your stuff away. What’s wrong with you?’

‘You’re what’s wrong with me,’ Angela screamed suddenly, so loud that it seemed to come from her belly. The scream scratched her throat and brought tears to her eyes as it left her.

She felt as if she had a monster inside her. She felt like two parts, the inside and an outer shell. The shell was thinner than an eggshell; it offered little protection. Every so often the inside reached out, and people saw who she was for real, and everyone hated her just as much as she hated herself.

Her mother, who had been too tired for anger until now, was shocked at first, but then her face set itself for combat – low brows and white pinched lips. Angela stood waiting, needing something from Donna and hoping that it would be strong, that it could match the rage that was welling up inside her.

Rage – that was it – *that’s* what was possessing her; *that* was why she had beaten skinny, stupid Jasmine, made her bleed, ripped out her hair. *The rage* – that was why she refused to get A grades any longer. It wasn’t that high school was too hard or her hormones were surging, it was because she was *seething*.

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As they faced off, whatever anger Donna had mustered began to evaporate and her eyes shone with tears. 'Why are you like this? Why do you have to be like this? I'm left to do everything and I don't get any thanks. You love your dad but what do I get?'

'He loves me,' Angela screamed again, the scratchy, scaly, clawed fist of her voice punching into the hallway.

Real tears now. Donna was crying real tears. Angela hated when her mother cried – the awful shape of her mouth, as if it had been torn.

'Yes, you love him. With him you're all sweetness and shite, but what do I get? Just the shite.'

'I hate you,' Angela cried. The rage was in her fingertips now, tingle and itch, and she wanted to fight again, wanted to rip out hair and bloody lips and noses, wanted to kick and punch and scream.

'I hate you, too. You're a freaking monster. Go to your room and stay there.'

It was enough.

It was the strength that Angela had needed, but not what she had wanted. She had wanted something physical, a shake or a slap. She had wanted toughness, grounding physicality. But what she had been given was enough. Donna hated her. She had never actually heard that before, although she had suspected it. It was calming. It set her mind.

She wanted to die.

She. Just. Wanted. To. Die.

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She went upstairs and slammed her bedroom door, then went to the far corner of the room and sat down, hugging her knees. She pushed her kneecaps right into the sockets of her eyes. She liked the bright lights that came and the pain in the middle of her head. After a few moments she had to uncurl herself and take a breath. She had done this since she was little, but now her belly was so fat it cut off her breathing. She had put on a lot of weight recently. It was true, but she didn't care. She wanted to be massive. She wanted people to turn away when they saw her. She wanted everyone to see the monster that she was on the inside.

She looked up at her bedroom walls, decorated with her drawings and paintings. She had won a national prize when she was in primary for her drawing of a flamingo. The certificate was framed on her wall, alongside a huge poster-sized painting of Katy Perry's face that Angela had done in art class on her first week at Croydon Academy. It wasn't perfect, the teacher had said, but all the other kids in her class had crowded round her when it was finished and said it was amazing. Whenever Angela looked at the painting she remembered that feeling, of having created something to be admired. It had felt like love – or how she had expected love to feel.

On all fours, she crawled to the bed and pulled out her old music box that she had hidden underneath. The music box no longer made a sound, but it still had the tiny ballerina on a spring – although she, too, no longer danced. Inside the box was a diamond ring on a chain.

As she had done many times before, Angela slid the ring onto her finger and admired it, tilting her fingers up at the

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end as she flashed the ring from side to side. Even though her fingers had got fatter, the ring was still too big for her. She unhooked the chain and fastened it around her neck, closing her fist over the diamond and holding it against her heart. Diamond was the most expensive jewel. The ring meant that she was beloved. She had wanted to be loved more than anything, but it didn't feel as she had expected. Love was such a shock. It felt like being held under water.

Also inside the music box was a packet of thirty aspirin tablets that she had taken from the kitchen earlier in the week. She had been keeping them for a moment just like this. She popped the tablets out of the packet onto the bedspread. When all of the tablets had been punched out, Angela scooped them up into her fist. She glanced up at her drawings on the wall, wondering if she could really do it, but then remembered that her mother hated her.

With the same absent compulsion that she had eaten the jelly sweets on the bus, Angela put one tablet after another into her mouth and washed them down with flat Coke that had been sitting opened on her dresser since the day before. She didn't have enough Coke for the last few pills and two got stuck in her throat, so she had to rush to the bathroom and drink straight out of the tap to wash them down.

She went back to her room, put the light out and curled up in bed, her clothes still on, pressing the diamond ring against her chest.

She had left no note.

That was all right.

You are born and then, you die.