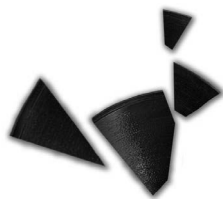


CAT
CLARKE



WE ARE
YOUNG

Quercus

QUERCUS CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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AUTHOR NOTE

If you are affected by any of the issues in this book, you can turn to page 357 for links to advice and support.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cat' with a stylized flourish underneath.

This book is for anyone who has ever felt
voiceless and hopeless.

‘Ambulance service. What’s the emergency?’

‘Fuck . . . Oh my God. I can’t— There’s been an accident.’

‘Sir, I’m going to need you to calm down. Are you hurt?’

‘No, but the people in the car . . .’

‘Sir, can you tell me your name?’

‘Vincent. Vince.’

‘OK, Vince, can you tell me your location?’

‘Fairfax Road – the school car park. There’s a girl on the ground. She’s . . . oh, Christ . . .’

‘Tell me what you see, Vince.’

‘She’s . . . *broken*.’

‘Vince, I need you to listen to me. An ambulance is on its way. Can you look at the girl? Is she conscious? Vince? Can you hear me?’

‘She’s dead.’

‘Are you sure she’s not breathing?’

‘Her head isn’t . . . yeah, I’m sure. I . . . think I’m going to be sick.’

‘Take a deep breath, Vince. Are there other people inside the vehicle?’

‘Two . . . no, wait, three. I can’t get the door open. If I can just . . . OK, there’s a boy.’

‘You’re doing really well, Vince. The ambulance is a couple of minutes away. Is the boy conscious and breathing?’

‘There’s blood . . .’

‘Where’s the blood coming from?’

‘I can’t fucking see! His arm . . . oh, Christ, his arm . . . Come on! Just breathe, will you? Fucking *breathe!*’

‘Talk to me, Vince. What’s happening? What’s wrong with his arm? Vince? Are you there? Vince? *Vince!*’

ONE

Trying to make sure you're drunk enough to get through your mother's wedding day but not so drunk that she notices is not an easy task. It doesn't help that one of the waiters happens to be a boy from school; he keeps sneaking me top-ups of wine at every opportunity. I've never talked to Marcus Bloom before in my life – unless you count the apology I uttered when *he* bumped into *me* in the cafeteria that one time. Boys who look like him don't tend to bother with girls who look like me.

Mum catches my eye during the speeches and I know I'm busted. A few minutes later, she corners me before I can escape to the loos. I pull her into a hug, hoping to distract her.

'Tim's speech was so good!' The truth is, it was a little over the top. He mentioned Mum's 'beautiful, beautiful soul' so many times it started to get weird.

‘Are you drunk?’ Mum whispers in my ear.

I accidentally sway a little. ‘Are *you* drunk?’

She pulls back and looks at me closely. ‘How much have you had?’

I lean in close, peering back at her. On a day-to-day basis my mum is kind of pretty in a dainty way – blonde and pixieish – but today she looks stunning. ‘Your make-up is flawless, you know. Nikki is a fucking wizard. I wish I’d got her to do mine. And your hair! I didn’t even know hair could *be* that shiny. It’s like . . . it’s like . . . molten gold.’

Mum rolls her perfectly lined eyes. ‘Soft drinks from now on, OK?’

I stand up straight and salute her. ‘Aye, aye, Bridezilla.’

‘If I really *was* Bridezilla, I wouldn’t have let you wear Doc Martens to my wedding.’ She laughs, then surprises me with another hug. ‘I know this hasn’t been easy for you, but I want you to know that I appreciate the effort you’ve been making – with Tim. And he appreciates it too.’

I shrug as we hug again. I haven’t done anything special, unless you count trying not to be a total dick about the wedding. And I’m not sure I’ve been completely successful at that.

I look over to find Tim deep in conversation with my aunt. She seems to be doing most of the talking,

but he's listening like she's the most interesting person in the world. (And my aunt is absolutely not in contention for that title.) It's one of the things that surprises me most about Tim – that he doesn't yabber on all the time. On his radio show, he's all non-stop chatter and enthusiasm for anything and everything. Breakfast Tim is exhausting, but it turns out he's nowhere near as annoying in real life.

I've just about come to terms with the idea of Mum and him being together, but that doesn't mean I'm delighted about the wedding. It's far too quick – seven months isn't long enough to know you're ready to spend the rest of your life with someone. Mum said she knew (she absolutely, positively *knew*) she wanted to marry him the day she asked him to buy tampons. He didn't even blink, just asked if her flow was light, regular or heavy. Seems a pretty low bar to me, thinking someone's worth marrying because they're not embarrassed to talk about periods, but Mum's easily impressed.

'How's Tim doing?' I ask. 'Is he upset about Lewis?'

Mum follows my gaze, and it's as if Tim senses her looking, as if their vows have forged some super-sensory connection between them. He smiles and Mum beams back at him.

'He's . . . disappointed. I'd be devastated if you

and Billy weren't here. This is supposed to be about our families coming together. Yeah, yeah, I know you think it's sentimental old bollocks, but if I can't be sentimental on my wedding day, when can I be?'

'Are you sure *you're* not the one who's had too much to drink?' I say with a sly smile. Her smile falters, if only for a second. Mum never has more than a couple of drinks these days. She's always a bit touchy about me drinking, even though she's resigned herself to the fact that she can't stop me.

'Everyone keeps asking about Lewis. Maybe it would have been better if we'd just told people the truth?'

Gastroenteritis is the official explanation for my new stepbrother's absence; his flat-out refusal to leave his room is the actual truth. *I'd* never have got away with it, but he's nineteen years old and apparently those two extra years mean he gets to do whatever the hell he likes.

I shake my head. 'People wouldn't understand. Now stop worrying about Lewis and focus on enjoying yourself. This is *your* day.'

She leans in close. 'You do like him, don't you? Tim, I mean.'

'Yes! How many times do I have to tell you? He makes you happy, and that makes *me* happy.' Plus there's the fact that he isn't a total drunken mess. That's a definite bonus.

There are tears in Mum's eyes. She squeezes my arm and whispers, 'You're my best girl.'

I roll my eyes. 'You'll ruin your make-up if you're not careful. Now go, mingle. Your public awaits.' I gesture to a couple of Mum's colleagues hovering nearby.

She fixes her bridal smile back in place and straightens her shoulders. 'Promise me you're on soft drinks for the rest of the night?'

'I promise.'

'And you and Billy have to come up and dance for at least one song . . .'

I gently push my mother in the direction of her friends, who immediately envelop her in hugs and kisses and don't-you-look-beautifuls.

I don't exactly *break* my promise; I stretch it and mould it to my purposes. I do have a soft drink – several, in fact. It's just that Marcus adds a couple of generous splashes of vodka to my glass each time. He keeps looking at me and smiling. I wasn't sure how to feel about that, at first. But I decide that I like it.

'You're thirsty tonight, aren't you?' he says with a grin.

It sounds sexual, the way he says it. I'm fully aware of that, but I don't mind one little bit.

A little later – three drinks later to be precise – Marcus sidles over to where I'm sitting with my brother.

‘I’m on my break now.’

I blink twice; my vision isn’t exactly blurry, but it’s not crystal clear either. ‘And you’re telling me this *why?*’

He likes that – his eyes flash with delight. He shrugs. ‘I thought you might want to join me.’ There’s no doubt in my mind about his intentions.

I’m about to say no when my drunken gaze lands on Tim with his arms around my mother. It will never not be weird, seeing her with a man who isn’t my father. I turn to Billy. ‘You OK on your own for a bit, Bill?’ My brother doesn’t look up from his phone, mumbling something about trying to beat his best score.

Marcus holds out his hand and pulls me to my feet. He doesn’t let go, even when I stumble. The stumble is a warning sign, which I ignore: I’m too drunk to cope with walking, so why exactly am I letting this boy lead me out of the marquee?

Next thing I know I’m sitting on a pile of fruit boxes with my dress hitched up round my waist while Marcus Bloom kisses my neck and fumbles with my underwear.

He smells of sweat and cigarettes. His stubble scratches my face when he kisses me; I turn my head away and notice the caterer’s van parked a few metres away. It’s not even dark yet. Anyone could see us.

Someone unbuckles Marcus's belt. Surely that someone can't be me.

But it is.

This is me. Evan Page. Little Miss Know Your Limits. Little Miss Responsible. Having frantic, uncomfortable sex with Marcus Bloom.

I'm vaguely aware of the extenuating circumstances, even while we're doing it. It's been a tough day – in so many ways – but I've had to keep smiling the whole time. I've kept it together even when I wanted to fall apart. And it's not just today; for years I've been playing the dutiful daughter role and maybe I'm finally sick of it. Add into the mix that I also happen to be drunker than I've ever been in my life.

Circumstances, reasons, excuses.

But what is exactly is my excuse for having frantic, uncomfortable, *unprotected* sex with Marcus Bloom?