Helping your children choose books they will love

I ♥ reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

The Savages

Written by

Matt Whyman

Published by

Hot Key Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Hot Key Books
Northburgh House, 10 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0AT

Copyright © Matt Whyman 2013

The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-0038-4

1

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
This book is set in 10.5pt Berling LT Std

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc



Hot Key Books supports the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation, and is committed to printing only on Greenpeace-approved FSC-certified paper.

www.hotkeybooks.com

Hot Key Books is part of the Bonnier Publishing Group
www.bonnierpublishing.com

APERITIF

At the table, Titus Savage spotted his son pick at his teeth with one finger.

'Manners,' he reminded the boy quietly. 'We're not animals.'

As he spoke, the rest of the family continued with their dessert. Everyone seemed subdued and even exhausted, which was in complete contrast to when they sat down to eat. It was the boy, Ivan, who had been first to finish. Like any twelve-year-old with nothing left on his plate, he began to fidget and sigh to himself.

'Can I get down now?' he asked hopefully. 'My computer's waiting for me to make the next move at chess. I *will* beat it this time.'

His father responded by inviting him to look around.

'When everyone is ready,' he said, and gestured at the other family members at the table. 'This is a special occasion, after all.'

At the opposite end from Titus sat an angel. At least that's how Titus viewed his wife, Angelica. Without her, family life would fall apart. She kept the house immaculate, and her cooking today had been simply divine. Titus caught her eye as she spooned the last of the dessert into her

mouth. It was a trifle she had prepared, using a homemade recipe for the jelly. Like every course of the meal they had enjoyed, the taste was unusual but compelling. For a moment, Angelica looked embarrassed. It was as if she felt she should not have been caught losing herself to the taste quite so openly. Still, Titus seemed to relish her expression. He sat back, clasped his hands across a surprisingly lean stomach given the amount of food he'd just consumed, and considered his children. While Ivan had already finished, his sister continued to take small, almost reluctant mouthfuls. Titus recognised that the family had put away a feast. Even so, he was surprised to see her looking quite so indifferent to clearing her plate.

'Something on your mind, Sasha?' Titus reached for his water glass to freshen his palate. 'This is your favourite, no?'

'I'm good,' she said, without looking up.

Both kids had inherited his crow-black hair. Sasha kept her locks pinned neatly with a series of clips, while Ivan's high hair line suggested it would one day whiten, thin and recede just as Titus had experienced as a younger man. Nowadays, he shaved his dome on a daily basis. Titus found it commanded respect, especially in the workplace. Right now, however, his attention was locked on his eldest child. Sasha ran her spoon around the inside of the bowl but it was clear she was just toying with it. He glanced at his wife, seeking some explanation for their daughter's behaviour. Angelica just shrugged as if to suggest that she was none the wiser.

'Are you feeling poorly, honey?' Angelica had spent much of the day preparing this meal. As ever, it had all been

planned meticulously, from sourcing the ingredients to the cooking and the ceremonial serving. For Titus to see their first born show such a lack of enthusiasm was frankly a little insulting. 'There's nothing wrong with it, is there?'

Sasha set her spoon down in the bowl.

'I'm fine. The food is great. I'm just not that hungry right now.'

For a moment, Titus and Angelica shared the same puzzled and concerned expression. It was an awkward moment that was also felt by Ivan.

'Hey, I have a joke,' he announced, and waited until everyone was looking at him. 'OK, why didn't the chicken make it across the road?'

Titus turned to his son.

'Go on. Why not?'

'Because it was crushed under the wheels of a bus!'

The silence that greeted the punch line seemed to come as a surprise to the boy.

'That's really terrible,' said Sasha, shaking her head. 'Quite sick, actually.'

'So, now you're an expert in comedy?' Ivan glared at his sister, stung by the criticism. 'There's not one funny bone in your body.'

'Nobody is laughing,' she said, and gestured at the others.

'But it's a great joke!'

'More like a cry for help.'

'That's enough.' Titus showed them both his palms. 'This is no place for an argument. Ivan, perhaps you should keep your jokes to yourself. Sasha, it's unlike you to be so harsh. What's the matter?'

'Dad, really. Just leave it.'

Ivan narrowed his gaze at his sister. A thin smile crossed his lips.

'Sasha's got a boyfriend,' he said, and sat back to watch her squirm. 'She's in love. It's killed her appetite.'

'He's not really a boyfriend as such,' Sasha said quickly, before scowling at her brother. 'Jack and I are just good friends.'

'Friends who hold hands at break time! And he's in the year above, which is basically cradle-snatching.'

'Ivan, maybe you shouldn't keep your computer waiting.'

The way their father said this, so calmly and measured, left Sasha thinking she might be in for an interrogation. Her parents weren't overly strict, but they were very, very protective.

'Could you look in on Grandpa on the way?' Angelica placed a hand on Ivan's wrist as he rose to leave. 'I put his main course through the blender, so he shouldn't have had a problem with it. Just go quietly. The baby is sleeping.'

Ivan sighed to himself, nodded once and then shot a victorious look at his sister. Sasha chose not to clash with him again. Their mother might have just tried to diffuse the situation by changing the subject, but it was clear that wasn't going to work with her dad. Even a mention of the youngest family member had failed to draw his attention. Titus adored his little daughter, Kat, who at fifteen months wasn't exactly a baby any more, but that was just how they liked to treat her. Kat looked totally different to her siblings, with blonde ringlets and an expression of pure innocence. If Sasha was about to disappoint her father, as she feared

might be the case, no doubt Kat would live up to his expectations in due course.

'Jack is really nice,' she said eventually. 'It's nothing serious.'

'Well, that's good to hear,' said Angelica. 'Isn't it, Titus?'

The prompt served to soften his frown. To hear that Sasha had a boyfriend was a new experience for Titus. It only seemed like yesterday that she was dressing up as a fairy princess just as so many little girls liked to do. This was a whole new challenge to him as a parent, but then it wouldn't defeat him. Family came first, no matter what.

'Maybe you'd like to invite . . .' Titus trailed off and looked to his wife for a prompt.

'Jack,' Angelica reminded him. 'She said his name was Jack.'

Titus nodded, clearly struggling with it all.

'It would be great if Jack could join us for supper one day.'

'Dad!' Sasha looked aghast. 'Too soon?'

'She's right,' said Angelica. 'I'm sure we'll meet him in good time.'

'Maybe,' Sasha mumbled, staring at the napkin in her lap.

Angelica glanced at Titus, and then switched her gaze right back to their daughter.

'But, you know, when you're ready,' she told her, 'Jack would be welcome to come for a bite to eat.'

Sasha began to wring her napkin through her fingers.

'Is that too much as well?' her father enquired. 'Help us out here, honey?'

A moment passed before Sasha replied. When she did, knowing what kind of response would follow, it clearly took her a great deal of courage.

'You might as well know now. Jack is . . . well, not like us.'

'In what way?' asked Titus.

Sasha faced each parent in turn.

'He's vegetarian.'

For a second, it looked as if both Titus and Angelica Savage had frozen in time. Sasha reminded herself to breathe, and then decided it might be best for everyone if she too left the table.

1

When bad things come to light about someone, it's easy to overlook what was good about them.

For Sasha Savage, only her close friends can remember what she was really like. They could tell you everything from the name of her first crush (some carefully constructed, badly vetted boy band bassist currently serving jail time for sex with a minor), to what she told them was her guiltiest secret (the fact that she still dreamed her first time would be with him). She could laugh at herself, looked out for others, and was even ranked as 'trustworthy' in the last online quiz they ever took together, entitled *Fake or Mate*?

Before the story broke, Sasha was all set to turn sixteen with only her exams standing in the way of the best summer of her life. Then the truth emerged. Overnight, as if a spell had been cast from above, she and her family became monsters.

The investigation closed some time ago. The media feeding frenzy has moved on, while the controversial movie was just too soon, uncomfortably sensational and went straight to DVD. Despite everything, it is perhaps a measure of Sasha's character that her friends still claim that they

would like to carry on where they left off. Should she ever resurface, which is considered close to unthinkable, they wouldn't shut the door on her. Nor would they contact the Detective Inspector on the number he told them to call if there was ever a development. Not straight away, at least. They might keep their distance from her, of course, which is understandable under the circumstances. More strikingly, nobody would push her for any kind of explanation. Sasha never breathed a word to them in all those years they'd known her, so why would she offer one now? Instead, they'd try to see through the portrait that'd been painted to find the girl who had shared so much of their lives. Besides, with every last scrap of evidence out in the open, from phone records to witness statements and even the grisly report from the drainage experts, It only takes a little imagination to get under the skin of the Savage family, and come close to the truth about what really happened.

Take her mother, Angelica. She took herself into the garden the morning after Sasha overshadowed the family meal with news that she was dating. At times of stress, she always reached for her secateurs in a bid to keep a sense of control.

'I know,' she said, with her cell phone propped between her shoulder and ear. Angelica paused to pinch another rose by the stem before snipping through it with the blades. 'Titus isn't happy at all about the situation. First she drops a grade in Spanish, and now this. A boyfriend.'

As ever, Angelica Savage looked as immaculate as her surroundings. She was an elegant woman with fine features and a dark bob tapered at the neck. A smile, which was

rare, would shatter her cut-glass air, though she could be thoroughly charming where necessary. As a dinner hostess, for example, she was much admired by friends and neighbours. Her dishes were always adventurous, but cooked to perfection and served with fine wine and easy conversation. Things were different if you chose to just drop round unannounced. Then, just for a fleeting moment, Angelica would summon a look so cold it left you feeling as if you had invaded her time and space.

'I doubt very much this little love affair will last,' she continued. 'From what Sasha has told us he doesn't sound as if the young man has much backbone. I should imagine it'll be over before the next booking.'

The moment her phone had begun to ring, Angelica knew that it would be the agency. She had set up a ring tone for that number so she could choose whether or not to answer. This depended on her mood as much as her credit card bill, which was why Angelica had reluctantly signed up some years before in a bid to pay it off. The agency specialised in hiring out domestic locations for commercial shoots. It wasn't something she relished, but opening up the doors to their home every now and then kept her bank at bay.

For all the wrong reasons, everyone remembers the advertisement for the furniture polish. It was running when the family dominated the news. Not that it'll ever be aired again. Even so, despite the reason it was pulled, nobody can deny that the Savages had good taste. They lived on the hill overlooking the park and the city beyond, in an elegant Georgian house with tall sashed windows and a

gravel drive. The place is boarded up now. It's destined for demolition because no buyer can be found, and a far cry from how it used to be. Were you to pay a visit before the former owners made headlines, perhaps to guess what kind of family might live there, you'd be forgiven for thinking it had been professionally styled. Everything from the careful lighting to the antique wallpaper worked perfectly together. The large and airy living room was a highlight, while the equally splendid kitchen-diner suggested a household with a passion for good food. From the table in front of the French windows, you could look out across the garden, always heady with the scent of culinary herbs, and admire the colour and life. In particular, the roses were a treat. They always bloomed like no other, even out of season, which Angelica Savage modestly linked to the home-cooked compost she used to nourish the soil.

'Very well,' she told Marsha from the agency, the woman who had called to check the house was available that Friday. 'Just be sure this time the client signs the breakage clause *before* filming begins.'

Despite her tone, Angelica got on well with Marsha. She admired the agent's steel grip on arrangements from start to finish. Angelica always chose not to be present during a shoot. She and any family members would take themselves upstairs for the duration and stay out of the way. It was an upheaval, but she knew they were in safe hands. By the time her husband returned from work, the crew would be gone and everything back in place as if nobody had been there at all. Even if redecoration was needed, the agency wouldn't sign off the job until everything appeared as it

had been found. Angelica couldn't afford to let such standards slip because Titus loathed the whole arrangement. He could've paid off her debt straight away. That's if he wasn't married to such a fiercely independent woman. Just one more year, she had promised him the last time they clashed over the issue, and then the front door would be closed for good. As it turned out, Angelica was true to her word. It just wasn't in a way that anyone could've believed at the time.

With roses for the table grasped in one hand, Angelica headed back inside. Titus wouldn't be pleased about the booking, but he needed to know. Every now and then a little extra housework was required before they allowed any strangers into the home. Having arranged the roses in a vase, Angelica rang her husband. Eventually, when the call went to voice message, she figured he was busy in a meeting.

Titus Savage cursed silently when the phone in his pocket began to ring. He had meant to put it on mute, and simply forgotten. There wasn't much he could do about it at the time. He was lying back with his hands clasped across his chest and his mouth wide open.

'Do you want to answer that?' asked the dental hygienist. At the same time she teased a sickle-shaped scaling instrument between his back molars, which made it impossible for Titus to reply. By the time she removed the scaler from his mouth, the hook impaled with a fine shred of meat, his mobile had stopped ringing. The hygienist appeared not to notice. Instead, she held the instrument under the lamp for

inspection. Her mouth and nose were covered by a mask, but the gleam in her eyes made it clear she was elated by her catch. 'You're a red meat fan, Mr Savage, am I right?'

Titus plucked a tissue from the box on the steel-topped trolley beside him.

'I eat well,' he said, dabbing at his mouth. 'Better than most, in fact.'

The hygienist wiped the scaler on the back of her glove. Titus eyed the shred, which had probably been there for no more than twenty-four hours, and wished he had flossed that morning. He had a meeting to attend in the next ten minutes, only now he risked having to endure a lecture.

'Can I ask about your brushing routine, Mr Savage?

'Trust me,' he said, and balled the tissue in his fist. 'I appreciate how important it is to do a thorough job.'

Titus Savage enjoyed a formidable reputation in the City. The investment company he founded many years earlier sought to assist struggling businesses by restructuring them. It was only recently, following the investigation, that the true nature of the operation became clear. Back then, had anyone accused him of 'predatory working practices', chances are they would've been sued. Titus was a familiar figure in the Square Mile, with his bald dome, penetrating blue eyes and the signature silk scarf which he folded around his neck on leaving the dental surgery. He glanced at his watch next. Satisfied that he was still in time for his meeting, Titus began to walk briskly in the direction of the office, buttoning his coat as he went.

* * *

It was a bright morning, but with so many towering buildings the sun rarely made it to ground level. Unusually, for a man of Russian stock, Titus always felt the chill. He sometimes joked that this was down to the fact he'd never visited the motherland. He certainly looked on the Slavic side, but had been born and raised in England. London was his home, and the city his stalking ground. Titus Savage knew every restaurant, coffee shop and cut through, which at first explained why he ducked unexpectedly into a back street within yards of the office doors.

Instead of heading for a side entrance to the building, however, Titus took to the gloom under a fire escape. There, he stood with his back to the wall and explored his freshly cleaned teeth with his tongue.

Three minutes later, a man in a suit hurried off the main street. He looked nervous, as if far from his natural environment. Seeing Titus Savage step out of the shadows did little for his manner.

'You're late,' said Titus. 'And I'm busy.'

'I'm sorry.' The man raised his palms. Perspiration needled his forehead. He wore rounded glasses that began to steam now he had stopped. 'This isn't easy for me, Mr Savage. I'm toast if anyone from the firm knows I'm talking to you.'

'Your firm is toast if you *don't* talk to me.' Titus produced an envelope from the inside pocket of his coat. He offered it to the man, and then tipped it away from his grasp when he reached for it. 'The memory stick?' he said, as if to remind him why they had arranged to meet.

Hurriedly, the man found the stick in his pocket and completed the exchange.

'It's all there,' he assured Titus. 'The balance sheet for the last quarter and the minutes from this week's meeting with the bank.'

'I hear they're playing hardball.'

'We're being hammered,' the man said. 'On their terms, we just can't meet the interest payment.'

'As I predicted several months ago,' said Titus. 'You've allowed yourself to become too bloated as a business. It needs carving up if you're going to survive.'

'Which is why I want to help you,' the man cut in. He looked around one more time. 'I know in your hands the firm is finished in its current form, and I'm grateful for the cash you've just paid for the stick. But what I need more than anything, Titus, is a promise that I'll still have a job once you've cut out all the fat. I have a family that relies on my income. Without it, we're finished.'

Titus Savage smiled and clapped the man on the shoulder.

'How are the kids?' he asked.

The man seemed uncomfortable about answering the question for a moment.

'Good,' he said eventually. 'Yours?'

'The same,' Titus answered. 'Sasha has some issues which I plan to work on, but my boy is really beginning to shine.'

For the second time that week, Ivan Savage took a seat in the office of the school's deputy head teacher. She sat across from him with both hands flat on the table, one on top of the other, and her mouth pressed tight. She had said nothing beyond summoning him into her office. Ivan looked up at her, well aware that she was awaiting some explanation.

'It was meant to be funny,' he reasoned. 'Those girls just have no sense of humour.'

The deputy head teacher was a fair-skinned woman with shoulder-length red hair she tied back in a band. At home and weekends, when she let it fall in corkscrews, she was known as Gemma. In school, to staff and pupils, Ms Turner was not someone who thrived on having her patience tested.

'What is funny,' she asked eventually, 'in finding thumb tacks in your school meal?'

The boy shrugged, like she just didn't get it.

'I wanted to liven up lunch break. That's all.'

'Ivan, you could've seriously harmed three of my students. There's nothing amusing about pain and suffering. You should consider yourself very lucky that one of the dinner ladies saw what you were doing.'

Ivan sat on his hands and stared at the floor. With his skewed tie and one shirt tail hanging free, he didn't look like a pupil capable of getting full marks in the sciences and mathematics. Still, that's what he was achieving. So long as the subject contained logic at its core, the boy would thrive. At the same time, Ivan was seriously struggling with the arts. Ms Turner had his pupil report in front of her, in fact. It concluded that while Ivan was an enthusiastic student, his critical, creative and interpretive skills were often deemed inappropriate. Ms Turner had an example right in front of her. It was taken from a short story Ivan had written about the day in the life of an animal. While most of his classmates picked playful pets, the boy had opted to write five hundred words from the point of view of a mouse being swallowed alive by an Anaconda. The

piece was capably written, but had left his English teacher so disturbed that she reported it to Ivan's head of year.

'Are you going to tell my dad?' Ivan looked up. He seemed troubled at the thought. It was something Ms Turner spotted straight away.

'What do you think might happen if I did inform your father, Ivan? What would he do?'

'To me?' Ivan said with some surprise. 'Oh, nothing. I was worried about you.'

Ms Turner blinked and tipped her head to one side. She drew breath to question just what the boy had meant by that, but then thought better of it. The kid was just weird.

'Ivan, I've consulted with your head of year. We've agreed that it would be good for you to have a session with Mrs Risbie,'

'But she's the school counsellor,' complained Ivan. 'I don't need to see a shrink. Everyone will make fun of me and I'll just get cross with them.'

'Then what would happen?' asked Ms Turner.

'Nothing.' Ivan shrugged and looked to the table. 'Not straight away,' he added under his breath.

'The session with Mrs Risbie would be an informal arrangement,' Ms Turner stressed. 'A one-off.'

'Why?'

Ms Turner closed the report in front of her.

'School is an opportunity, Ivan. A chance for you to make the most of what we can offer in order to bring out the best in yourself. If you want any incentive, just look at what your sister has achieved.'

* * *

Two minutes after the lunch break bell sounded, Sasha Savage had still to peel off from an intense and passionate kiss with her new boyfriend. Jack Greenway had a lot to offer. To celebrate passing his driving test, and the beginning of his new life as a sixth former, the young man's father had gifted him a second-hand hybrid car. The vehicle ran on a combination of diesel and battery. Its low carbon emissions were in tune with Jack's commitment to the environment. When parked behind the sixth form, it also proved to be the perfect place to make out with someone as fit as Sasha.

'You're so beautiful,' murmured Jack, who took a breath before going in again.

'I really should be going.' Sasha placed two fingers on his lips. 'It's Chemistry next.'

She watched his mouth stretch into a lazy smile and then moved her fingers away.

'*This* is chemistry,' he told her, before finding her lips once more.

Nobody was surprised when Jack and Sasha started dating. If anything, it should've been something that happened earlier. Instead, Jack went out with a string of older girls, most of whom had now left for university, while in her year Sasha was just one of those types that tended to intimidate boys. She didn't do so on purpose. In a way, her striking looks could work against her. Sasha was willow-tall with long, slender limbs and carried herself like a ghost in human form. You could tell she had Russian blood in her by that heart-shaped face, delicate nose and high cheek-bones. Complete with the clearest blue eyes in school, she

was out of this world in every way. Not that she recognised this in herself. Sasha wasn't shy. Just cautious. Unfortunately all those lads who gave it a shot found the power of speech failed them. That is until everyone returned for the start of the new school year and Jack looked around to see what was on offer.

Unlike Sasha, Jack knew that he had been blessed with good looks. Every girl in school placed him at the top of their list. Even from behind, his broad shoulders and tight hips told you this one was worth checking out when he turned. But it wasn't so much Jack's dramatically shaggy cut and easy smile that charmed as much as his manner. It was something he hoped Sasha was about to discover for herself, by climbing into her orbit with such passion that anything else of importance in her life just fell away. In such a spin, her world would surely come to revolve around him. For now, however, Sasha was officially late for lessons.

'OK. Time out. I don't want to get into trouble.'

'Another minute, eh?' Jack breathed out with a faint moan and dipped down to nuzzle her throat.

'Oh, this isn't fair!' Sasha protested weakly. She half closed her eyes for a moment, only to snap them wide open on feeling his teeth find her neck. 'Er, what are you doing?'

'Tasting you,' he said, before drawing her skin between his lips.

'Jack!' This time Sasha pulled away. She pressed a hand to her neck, looking both shocked and surprised. 'A love bite? Really?'

'Just a little gesture.' Jack grinned and pushed a hand through his hair. 'I'm happy for everyone to know you're mine.'

'What are you, like twelve years old? Nobody does love bites any more.' Sasha examined her fingertips as if to check he hadn't drawn blood. Then she glanced back at Jack, and grinned despite herself. 'Promise me you'll never do that again,' she said. 'It wouldn't go down well at home.'

Jack stretched an arm across the back of Sasha's seat.

'Relax. We've been dating for what? Three weeks?'

'Four,' said Sasha, and flipped the visor down so she could check her reflection in the mirror. She lifted her head, just to be sure Jack hadn't left a mark, and then examined her lips. As she did so, Jack leaned across to kiss her on the cheek.

'Then we should celebrate our one-month anniversary,' he suggested. 'How about I cook for you on Saturday night? My parents are away. We'd have the house to ourselves and I can do you my signature dish. A pinto bean chili with courgettes and red pepper.'

By now, Sasha was beginning to feel deeply anxious about being late. Her Chemistry tutor would only ask her where she'd been, and *everyone* would know before she'd even summoned an excuse.

'Supper sounds great,' she said, and reached for the car door handle.

'I'll pick you up at seven thirty.'

'Don't worry. I'll walk round.' Sasha grabbed her school bag and pushed open the door. 'I have legs.'

'It's no problem,' insisted Jack. 'I'm beginning to think you're ashamed of introducing me to the folks!'

Standing now, Sasha hoisted her bag strap onto her shoulder. 'Had I let you get away with that love bite,' she warned him, smiling warmly at the same time, 'my dad would eat you alive.'