

# **The Sound**

**By Sarah Alderson**

**For all you fabulous book bloggers out there, who read and review and generally inspire people to pick up books.**

## Prologue

I'm running, running blind. Into the dark. Into the woods. Ricocheting off branches, tripping over tangled tree roots, gripping my arm as I stumble on, sobbing. Are those his footsteps coming after me or is it the wind? A bird? An animal?

I come to a flying halt and crouch down in the dirt, trying to listen. Is he following me? But my breathing is so loud and laboured it's all I can hear. That and the wild drumming of blood in my ears. My heart is no longer a caged bird but a dozen bats trying to burst free. I close my eyes and try to sink down into the dark.

My fingers burrow through sandy soil, damp leaves. I want to claw my way deep into the earth, roll beneath the leaves and bury myself. I want to sob and scream and melt and turn to smoke and vanish. When I open my eyes the world spins, recedes then rushes back in.

'Ren!'

His voice yells my name. Over and over. Filling my head with the sound of it and tearing apart the night.

I need to stand up. I need to run. But I'm frozen. My back is slammed against a tree. My lungs are beginning to close down. I try to suck in a breath but it gets stuck and all of a sudden the sky looms darker and larger overhead, the stars fuzzing out of focus and dissolving into the blanket sky.

A crunch.

I shrink back as far as I can, feeling the bark of the tree scratch a bloody trail across my shoulder. I bite my lip, choking off the scream that is fighting to burst out.

He is out there, holding his breath as I hold mine. Ears pricked, eyes scouring the

darkness. I can sense him there waiting, just a few feet away, his head tilted as he listens, and I can no longer balance my weight on the balls of my feet. My knees are going to give, my arms are shaking.

Tears are slipping noiselessly down my cheeks as my eyes dart left and right strafing the darkness. I can't see anything. It's pitch black out here. In the distance the roar of the ocean seems to be calling to me, whispering my name, urging me to make a run towards it.

A twig snaps to my right.

I haul myself to standing in that same second and then I am running, ignoring the shooting pain in my arm and the sting of branches slashing at my face. All I can hear now is a roaring in my ears.

And behind me, coming closer, *his* breath, *his* footsteps and the heat of him rising like a mist. My feet hit something soft. I'm on the beach. The trees have given way to sand dunes. The ocean sounds wild and close. If I can only make it there... because where else is there to run to? And then suddenly my foot hits something sharp, a rock buried in the sand, and I'm flying, falling fast, and I land hard, my ankle twisting, and I let out a yell that I try to smother with my other hand. I roll onto my back, kicking at invisible hands. I try to draw my legs up to my body, to curl into a ball but my ankle explodes in pain and I can't move it. And I whimper, not because of the pain but because fear floods my tongue and it's as foul as earth and it's fear which is closing up my throat as surely as his hands sliding around my neck and squeezing.

I want my mum. And I sob her name out loud into the darkness and over the sound of the ocean roaring I hear his breathing, loud and heavy and excited, coming close.

But the thought of my mum is enough to push back the fear and let the rage in. And I've never felt such rage before. It almost cancels out the fear, roaring inside me now as deep as the ocean.

I start scrabbling desperately for something – anything - to use as a weapon.

My hand sinks into the dune, trying to find the object I tripped on, and my fingers close around a rock, heavy with jagged, sharp edges. I draw it into my lap and sit there clutching it as the tears stream down my cheeks.

My breathing is coming in little gasps now. I'm struggling to force air down into my lungs – they're on fire from the inside, smoke-filled and layered with ash. My fingers are starting to tingle. My lips are going numb.

And then he appears, a dark shape against the sky, and the rock slides out of my hand and falls with a muted thud to the sand. I open my mouth to scream but I can't because my throat has squeezed shut and there's no air left in my lungs.

And the last thing I see, before the darkness drowns me completely, is him.

## Chapter 1

I've never held a baby so when he hands me this squalling red thing I just stare at it.

'Can you take Braiden?' he says.

The baby has a name. This doesn't make holding it any less terrifying. But I reach out and say 'sure' and next thing I know I'm holding a baby. And mother of all surprises, the baby - Braiden - stops crying. He not only stops crying, he reaches for my hair with fat little fists, tugs on a loose strand and gurgles happily at me.

I am holding a baby. I grin. The whole way here on the plane I have been preparing for this moment. The moment where my summer plan of nannying falls apart like a stage set collapsing as the people I'm nannying for discover that my only experience of children is having been one once (and technically, legally, I suppose, still being one).

But now I'm holding the baby and it's not screaming and I haven't dropped it on its head yet and I'm thinking as I bounce him up and down that maybe, just maybe, I can get away with it so they don't throw me out and send me back to England on the next flight.

'See, he loves you,' the dad says. 'I'll be back in just one second.' And he disappears.

I stare after him in a state of mild panic. It's one thing to hold a baby and another thing entirely to be left holding the baby.

'OK, OK, Braiden,' I start to say in a sing-song voice that I've never in my life used before. 'I can do this, I can do this.' I drop my voice back to its normal range. The baby's face is now scrunching up and going bright red and he's looking kind of startled. Probably, I think, because his dad has just handed him to a complete stranger and walked off.

'He's doing a number two.'

I turn around. 'Hey,' I say to the little girl with red hair who's just appeared in the doorway. 'You must be--'

'Brodie,' she finishes, then points at her brother, 'He's doing a number two.'

I glance back at Braiden who is now fist pumping wildly and thrashing his legs against my stomach. 'Oh,' I say, as the stench hits my nostrils.

Nice. I think of how I am going to describe this moment later to Megan. Pooed on by a baby within minutes of arriving. She'd tell me with a wryly arched eyebrow that one way or another I always get shat on.

'You need a diaper,' Brodie informs me, crossing her hands over her chest and squinting up at me.

'You want to show me where they are?' I ask, thinking that maybe I can also get her to show me how to change it. Because I don't a clue. I should have YouTubed all these things before I left but for one reason or another I didn't.

Brodie leads me into a bedroom – belonging to her parents, I assume, because there's a double bed on top of which are a couple of half-unpacked suitcases, a laptop case, a newspaper and a stack of folders.

Brodie reaches a freckled arm into a changing bag on the floor and pulls out a stash of diapers, a tub of something that looks alarmingly medical and some baby wipes. She puts them on the bed and stares at me expectantly.

I clear space, pushing the laptop far, far out of the way and wondering silently if the bed is the right place to do this. The duvet cover is white. It feels like I'm testing fate.

I lay the baby down carefully on top of a plastic mat thing which Brodie has

helpfully laid out for me. Braiden blows a bubble out of the side of his mouth. It's kind of cute. And then I catch another waft and my eyes water. I do a quick study of his outfit, locate the handily placed poppers and peel it back. There is poo. There is a lot of poo, oozing like mud out of the sides of his nappy (let's not call it a diaper) and who knew poo could ever be that consistency? Or that colour? I'm stunned. Too stunned to move.

'Do you even know what you're doing?' Brodie asks, her eyes narrowing at me in a disturbing display of suspicion coming from a four-year-old.

I weigh my answer. 'No,' I finally say, glancing quickly at the open door. 'But if you help me out on this one I will do my very best to make it up to you.'

She studies me like a lawyer and then bounces over to me, grinning. 'Deal.'

She unsticks the nappy and opens it and we both stagger backwards.

'You're cleaning the poop though,' she says handing me the wipes.

I wipe and smear and then I wipe some more. Babies' thighs have all sorts of crevices, I discover. And the instinct I had over not doing this on a white duvet turns out to have been correct, so I end up trying to wipe up the smears on that too.

When I'm done, Brodie hands me a clean nappy and shows me how to do it up. I reseal the poppers on the baby-grow feeling more proud of myself than when I passed my driving test.

'Oh my goodness.'

I spin around. There's a woman in the doorway and I am guessing from the red hair that she is the mother of the pooing baby and the precocious four-year-old, and therefore my new boss.

'Did Mike leave you to change Braiden's diaper?' she says. 'I am so sorry. And

I'm sorry I wasn't here to welcome you when you arrived. I just had to run to the store. We only just got here ourselves.'

'That's fine,' I say. 'Don't worry. Brodie here helped me out.' I wink at Brodie and she grins back at me.

'It's Ren, isn't it?' she asks, putting her handbag down on the bed and shaking my hand. 'It's so lovely to meet you. I'm Carrie Tripp.'

'Hi,' I say, shaking her hand. 'Nice to meet you too.'

'Did my husband at least show you to your room?' she asks.

I shake my head.

'Mike!' Mrs Tripp yells at the top of her voice. She turns back to the bed and picks up Braiden. Mr Tripp walks into the room at that point. 'Hey honey,' he says seeing his wife. 'You met Ren, then? I was just taking a quick call.'

Carrie raises an eyebrow. He gives her an innocent look as if to say, *what?* And then his wife shakes her head and laughs and I think to myself that I'm going to like these people. I'm going to like being part of their family for the summer. Even if poo-filled nappies are the trade off.

'Brodie, can you show Ren to her room, please?' Carrie says.

'Sure,' Brodie says and she slips her hand into mine.

## Chapter 2

The house is amazing. Or, if I'm going to start being American about it, it's *totally awesome*. It's like something from that old TV show Dawson's Creek. Crossed with Anne of Green Gables. It's wooden and painted dove grey and it has this beautiful white veranda running around it. They call it a deck. And to complete the whole olde-worlde effect it also has shutters, painted an egg-white colour.

Right now, at this second, I could be at home in South London, trying to figure out a way to get through the summer without seeing either Will or Bex. But the fates, and my mother, intervened and bam, I'm not in the delightful suburb of Bromley staring at my Facebook friend list and deleting slash untagging photographs while waiting for my A level results to blast through the letterbox like the four horsemen of the Apocalypse.

No. I'm in Nantucket. Thirty miles off the coast of Massachusetts. Nantucket island. The far away land. Home of Moby Dick. Or at least some of the whalers who chased him all over the Atlantic. Now home to a lot of wealthy Americans who summer here and who require nannies to do their dirty diaper work for them.

I didn't need much persuading. I would have taken a job herding yaks in Outer Mongolia if it would have got me out of London for the summer but this seemed too good to be true and now, even taking into account the nappy episode, I'm still reeling from just how good and how true the situation is.

My bedroom is gorgeous. I have a double bed, layered with quilts. There's an antique writing desk topped with a three-way mirror, a chest of drawers and a little armchair beside the picture window. Brodie leads me to it and climbs on the arm. 'Those are salt flats,' she says, pointing at the marshy low land that stretches almost as far as the eye can see. 'And that,' she says, still pointing, 'is the Sound.'

'The what?' I ask.

'The ocean,' Brodie says, still pointing. I squint at the thin strip of blue that I can see glimmering invitingly just beyond the flats. 'It's called the Sound,' Brodie repeats, and then turning to me she adds solemnly, 'People die there all the time.'

I blink. 'O-Kay,' I say slowly. 'Good to know.' I am assuming she means that maybe people have drowned in that stretch of water or boats have been shipwrecked and I make a mental note to neither step foot in the water nor onto a boat while I'm here. (And also to Google shark attacks, though I'm fairly certain that this far north it's too cold for sharks.) Brodie, done with showing me the view, jumps off the chair. I turn back to admire the room and let out a long and happy sigh.

I want to live here forever. That is how it feels at this moment in time. I want this to be my house. I even wouldn't mind having Brodie for a little sister.

'Ren.'

I turn. Mr Tripp is standing in the door. 'We're heading out to the club for lunch, you're welcome to join us.' He sees my suitcase, still unpacked, standing by the bed, 'Unless you want some time to settle in?'

I glance around the room. I would like time to unpack my books and my clothes, listen to some music and maybe send a few emails to my mum and Megan, but I think it might be rude to turn him down so, 'Yeah, OK,' I say, 'that sound's good.'

'Great,' Mr Tripp says and then heads for the stairs.

I follow after him and climb beside Brodie into the back seat of their enormous, space-age style car. Carrie straps Braiden into his car seat beside me.

'Do you have your licence?' she asks me.

For a moment I think she's asking me if I have some kind of childcare licence and then I realise she's talking about driving. 'Um, yes,' I answer. I only just got it,

after failing the first time (for not using my mirrors – Megan laughed at the irony) and I'm still wrangling with my mum over use of the car so I haven't driven a whole lot. But, on the upside, I did learn on the streets of south London and there can be no finer training ground.

'Great, we'll get you insured on this car so you can drive the kids around.'

She slams the car door and I stare after her. This vehicle makes the car I learnt on in England look like a dinky toy. There's a whole dashboard of blinking lights. It's the equivalent of being asked to fly a plane. To complicate things further, when we get going I realise that we're driving on the right side of the road – that is to say – the wrong side. I sink back in my seat and think about whether I should come clean with them that letting me behind the wheel of their car, carrying their children as precious cargo, might not be the wisest decision on their part.

I don't recall driving being a pre-requisite for the job but there wasn't really a job description at all. My mum's friend from university lives in Boston and knew someone who needed a nanny for the summer. A flurry of emails and a brief introduction later, the flight was booked and now I'm standing here realising that never once were qualifications mentioned.

'So Ren,' Carrie says, leaning back to look over her shoulder as Mike backs out the driveway. 'Is this your first visit to the US?' she asks.

'Yes,' I say.

'How are you liking it so far?' she asks. Her voice is clipped – her eyes are penetratingly blue and I remember as she fires questions at me like machine gun fire (What am I studying? What are my grades? Do I have a boyfriend – nix to that one) that she's a lawyer. Buried in the information about flights, arrival times and the children's ages was this little morsel of information. I think she's an entertainment lawyer – which sounds like a total oxymoron to me. And he - I glance at Mr Tripp who is busy driving - is something to do with newspapers.

I tell Carrie that I want to study English at University and that I'm hoping to be a writer.

'What kind of writer?' Mr Tripp pipes up.

'Um,' I say, self-conscious all of a sudden, 'a music journalist.'

'Wow,' he says, catching my eye in the rear view mirror, 'that's interesting. You like music, then?'

'I love music,' I say, grinning automatically.

'What kind of music?' he asks.

'A mixture,' I reply, wondering if this will be like one of those chats I've had with Megan's dad where she rolls her eyes and digs her elbow into my ribs and dies a slow death while I try to explain to him who Lady Gaga is.

'Mike, don't,' Carrie says, laying a gentle hand on his arm.

'What?' he asks her, 'I'm totally down with the kids.'

'No, really you are not,' Carrie says.

'No, dad,' Brodie pipes up beside me, 'you really aren't down with the kids.'

'Put in my place by a four-year-old!' He shakes his head, laughing, then says to me, 'Well, maybe I can get you a press pass to a few gigs in Boston when we get back.'

'Ren isn't coming back with us, she's just with us for the summer, remember?' Carrie reminds him.

'Oh, right,' Mr Tripp says, frowning as he overtakes a cyclist.

Carrie shrugs at me. 'We go through a lot of au pairs,' she says. 'It's almost impossible to hold onto a good nanny in the city. Our last one ran off with our

neighbour's husband.'

Braiden hiccups at that point and spits up some white gloop. I mop it up with a square of muslin, while wondering where to look or what to say. Was that a warning shot across the bows? Because, while Mr Tripp is attractive in an American newscaster type of way, he's kind of old. And that would be totally gross. As well as just wrong.

'Anyway,' Carrie says, settling back into her seat, 'We're so glad you're here. Mike and I are both buried with work. Mike works on news deadlines so he's up late most nights and I'm working on a big contract at the moment, so we need you to wake up with the kids, get them ready, take Brodie to camp, drop Braiden at day care, pick them both up, feed them and put them to bed,' she takes a breath but I'm still holding mine.

Two things she's just said strike me as odd: they are on holiday but they are working, and the kids are both in day care yet they still require a nanny. I decide to keep my mouth shut though because a) it's none of my business and maybe Americans are all just workaholics and b) hiring a nanny and putting the kids into daycare sounds like a very sensible and advantageous plan to me because I am *not* a workaholic.

'But,' Carrie continues, with a dazzling smile, 'the rest of the day is yours. And the weekends. We might need you to do some babysitting in the evenings if that's OK, but that's all.'

'That's fine,' I say and it is. It's not exactly like I know anyone on the island anyway. And I've already planned on spending my free time here writing, listening to music and reading. If, as I suspect, my A level grades aren't of the AAA variety but more of the Famine, Pestilence and Death variety, I'm going to have to find another way to make my music journalist dream happen. My blog is good but it needs to ratchet up a gear if I'm going to make a name for myself.

I glance at Mr Tripp. I wish I was going back to Boston with them. Free backstage

passes to gigs? It's like I've been shown the gates of heaven and then had them slammed and bolted in my face.

I'm so busy thinking about what bands I would have the potential to see if I stayed here and worked for the Tripps for say, the rest of my life, that I'm not paying much attention and suddenly we've pulled into a parking lot. Up ahead is a two storey white shingle building with giant decks upstairs and down overlooking the harbour. Sails blot the horizon and sea gulls whirl and swoop overhead. The place is heaving with people – the noise of laughter and clinking glasses carries across the parking lot.

As we walk towards the door I glance down at my scruffy Converse and the short and exceedingly creased Topshop sundress I'm wearing. I threw a ratty old Clash t-shirt over the top of it and now I skulk a few steps behind the others and tear the t-shirt off over my head and stuff it in my bag. This is not the kind of establishment that looks like it allows entry to anyone unless they're wearing black-tie evening wear, even for breakfast, and I have the sense that a Clash t-shirt, no matter how vintagely authentic, might be the equivalent of wearing hot pants to a Royal Wedding.

Carrie and Mike are both wearing tan trousers – I didn't think they were the type of couple to go in for matching, but they're American and what do I know about how Americans dress? Mike has on a button-down shirt and a jacket just like one my granddad used to wear and Carrie is wearing a white, short sleeved blouse and a soft grey cashmere cardigan. Even the children are pristine and groomed – as though they've sprung off the page of a catalogue. Brodie, holding my hand, is wearing polka dot leggings and a spotless white tunic. While Braiden, who Mike is carrying, is wearing a baby-grow with a little polo player adorning it.

I feel even more self-conscious. And this isn't in any way mitigated by the woman who meets us at the door with a clipboard, hair severely drawn up into a ponytail, whose nose wrinkles in distaste at the sight of my shoes and then simply at the sight of all of me. Carrie brushes her to one side with her best lawyer snark face

and walks towards a table in the far corner, waving at the occupants.

Mike steps aside to let me pass the clipboard Nazi, winking conspiratorially at me. 'Ignore her,' he whispers, 'it's the prerogative of waitresses in this town to make you feel small.'

I smile gratefully at him and then follow, still holding - actually clutching - Brodie's hand.

Carrie has stopped by a large table in the corner where several seats sit vacant. I do a quick scan of the other diners. A woman is on her feet, hugging Carrie, exchanging quick-fire banter about something called a realty market and I'm sure I catch mention of Google and Robert de Niro in the same sentence... I don't even attempt to decipher any of it. A tall man in a jacket and tie is tousling Brodie's hair while she glowers up at him like an angry leprechaun. The man looks at me and seems a little taken aback, before squaring his facial expression and offering me his hand.

'Joe Thorne,' he says. 'Family friend.'

I take it and he gives my hand a firm, meaty shake. He's in his forties and big in that way I imagine only American men can be, with a tanned face, thick greying hair and teeth so white they shine like headlights.

'Ren Kingston,' I answer. 'The nanny.'

He nods thoughtfully. 'It's a pleasure to meet you, Ren, please have a seat.' He indicates the bench running along the wall and then he turns to greet Carrie and Mike with hearty back slaps and comments about the Red Sox (baseball – I know that one) and how great Carrie is looking.

I sit, make sure that Brodie is comfortable on the bench beside me and then turn to my other side.

A boy is sitting there. 'Whassup?' he asks, tipping his chin up at me in greeting.

'Um, not much?' I answer, uncertain if this is the correct response or not.

Someone reaches across him and offers me their hand to shake. I lean forwards to see better who it belongs to. It's another boy. He's about the same age as the first boy. I'm guessing they're both about eighteen – same as me (roughly – I'm eighteen in just over a month). They've both got light brown hair, thick and side-parted, and pale blue eyes. They're dressed identically, as though they've just been let out of some insanely posh boarding school and haven't had time to go home and get changed. They're wearing dark trousers, white shirts (tucked in) and navy blazers over the top. A pair of Oakley sunglasses pokes out of the closest one's top pocket.

They're fairly good-looking - in a preppy prepster kind of way – the kind of boys who look like they spend their free time playing polo and learning secret handshakes. I like my boys Indie boy band slash James Dean so there's no piquing of interest on my part. But nor is there disappointment. I'm not looking. If Megan were here she would be in full-on quiver mode but I'm not even allowing myself to go there.

'Jeremy Thorne,' the one shaking my hand says, introducing himself. 'And this is my brother Matt.'

'Hi,' I say, 'Ren. Ren Kingston.'

'You're English?' Jeremy asks.

'Yep.'

'Cool,' he says and he gives me a smile that makes me feel for the very first time in my life that being English may possibly create a veneer of attractiveness and not immediately destroy any chance of being thought sexy. I thought you had to be Brazilian or Swedish for that effect.

'You're nannying for the Tripps?'

I glance up. Sitting diagonally across from me is a girl. She too has light brown hair, long and held in place with an Alice band, and startling blue eyes. Though she has a more angular face than the boys I can tell she's their sister. She's wearing a pale green dress, belted at the waist, and she's eyeing me with interest, though her expression is clearly meant to imply BOREDOM.

'Yes,' I say.

'Ren's changing my brother's diapers,' announces Brodie.

Thanks for that, I think to myself, as Brodie smirks proudly beside me.

'That's Eliza,' Jeremy says, giving me an apologetic eye-roll. 'Our charming sister.'

'Hi,' I say, offering her a smile.

She doesn't answer or smile back. Instead she turns to Carrie, who is fastening Braiden into a high chair by my side, and starts cooing over Carrie's cardigan. Or perhaps over Braiden's baby-grow. I can't tell.

'So you're here for the whole summer?' Jeremy asks and I can tell he's trying to make an effort, to make up for the blatant rudeness of his two siblings.

'Yeah, six weeks,' I answer, feeling strangely grateful for his intervention.

I see the look Matt shoots Jeremy but Jeremy ignores it. 'Cool,' he says, 'you should hang out with us some time. Don't you think, Eliza?'

'Sure,' Eliza smiles at me and an ice cap somewhere in the Arctic Circle refreezes. 'Unless, of course, you have too many diapers to change?'

I force myself to laugh. While simultaneously imagining throwing one of Braiden's stinkiest nappies at her head.

Carrie is suddenly right there interrupting my daydream. She thrusts Braiden's

changing bag at me. 'If you could keep an eye on the kids for me that would be great,' she says, already walking away. 'And order whatever you'd like. Don't worry, we've got the check.'

I feel my cheeks burning as Eliza stifles a snort across the table. In my head a Beastie Boys song starts playing. It comes complete with lots of graphic swear words.

'OK, thanks,' I murmur to Carrie.

A waitress has given Brodie some colouring pens and a picture of a whale to colour in, so she's entertained with that and Braiden is busy marvelling at his own digits, which means that I have no choice but to turn back to the three people my own age at the table and attempt conversation.

Jeremy, the one furthest away from me, is talking to his sister, while Matt, the *Whassup* one next to me, lounges back along the bench seat and listens.

'Tyler's coming back tomorrow. Paige told me,' Eliza announces.

'Awesome. How's he doing? Did she say?' asks Jeremy.

'He can't play anymore.'

Matt sucks in a breath through his teeth and reaches for a bread roll. 'There goes his scholarship to Vanderbilt.'

'Man that blows.' This from Jeremy.

'It's not like he needs a scholarship,' Eliza says, lowering her voice and darting a glance towards the grown-ups, 'And anyway, can't Mr Reed pull strings at Harvard? Who wants to go to Tennessee anyway?'

That's when Jeremy turns to me. 'What about you, Ren – are you going to college?'

'You mean university?' I ask.

They laugh. 'Yes, university,' Matt says in a faux English accent that makes Eliza snort and me think once again about whipping the nappy right off Braiden's bum and chucking it in their direction.

'I hope so,' I say with a polite smile. 'It depends on my grades.'

'I'm going to Yale,' Eliza says, as though I've actually asked the question and care even slightly about the answer. 'Jeremy's going to Harvard. And Matt's going to MIT.'

I glance at Jeremy and he shrugs. He reaches for the bread basket and offers it to me as though it's filled with apology.

I take a shell-shaped apology roll for Brodie and another for myself. Eliza stares at it sitting on my plate and I realise that I must have committed some monumental carb faux pas. I reach for the butter and start to slather the bread with it, thinking *bite me*.

'Congratulations,' I say to Jeremy.

'That's my three over-achievers.'

I'm glad somebody said it.

It's Mr Thorne, their father. He has his arm slung across the back of Eliza's chair and is grinning maniacally at all three of them. That's when I do the maths. All three of them are going to university at the same time which is odd, unless - I stare between them - they're triplets?

'We're triplets,' Jeremy says, bang on cue. 'We're very competitive.'

'The apple doesn't fall far from the tree,' Mike interjects, and everyone laughs politely, almost musically.

I tear the bread roll in half for Brodie and concentrate on helping her colour the whale's blow-hole, wishing whole-heartedly that I had a similar evolutionary perk for letting off steam. This lunch is lasting a very long time and it's only just started. I'm beginning to wish I had stayed home unpacking. My fingers itch for my iPod. I slip my hand into my pocket and smooth my fingers over its glossy face, tugging at the earbuds. If only Apple could hurry up and find a way of hard-wiring the contents of music libraries straight into the brain.

The waitress comes and takes our order. I choose a Caesar salad, hyper aware, even though I don't want to be, of the carb police on the other side of the table scrutinising me and the empty bread plate beside me, and also, it must be said, of my thighs squishing on the seat beside Matt.

We're half-way through lunch and I'm trying to spoon something green and mushy into Braiden's mouth and cut up Brodie's club sandwich so she can fit it into hers, when Jeremy on his way back from the bathroom asks if he can help. Before I can even process the request, he takes the pot of green stuff out of my hand, pulls up a chair and starts feeding Braiden as though he works as a manny in his spare time. Which I highly doubt he does.

'Thanks,' I say, staring at him as he pulls a funny face at Braiden.

'You should get to eat too,' he says, nodding at my wilting, slightly unappealing looking salad.

'Right,' I answer and pull it towards me.

Preppy prepster just went up a notch in my estimation. His brother and sister not so much. Matt is tearing up bits of bread and chucking them across the table at Eliza who is glaring at him while trying to join in the conversation her parents are having about real estate.

'There's a party tomorrow night at 40th,' Jeremy says to me under his breath, as he spoons gloop into Braiden's sticky mouth. He darts a glance in my direction,

'You should come.'

'Um, OK,' I say, wondering what on earth fortieth is – a club? 'I'll think about it. I might have to babysit.'

'Oh yes, right,' he says, frowning at a splodge of green that's landed on his sleeve. 'Sorry.'

'No,' I say quickly, 'I mean, thanks for asking me.' I hesitate. The truth is, I wouldn't mind hanging out with Jeremy. He seems sweet. I just don't really want to hang out with his siblings. I weigh it up. I can't spend six weeks with just two under-fives for company – and the Tripps, however nice they seem, are old. 'If I don't have to work, I'd love to come,' I say.

Jeremy's face instantly brightens. 'You're on Facebook, right?' he asks.

I nod.

'OK, I'll find you and shoot you my number. Call me if you need a ride.'

I'm about to say something else, murmur some kind of agreement, when Braiden makes a funny gurgling noise beside me. I turn, alarmed, and see that his eyes are bugging out of his head. I feel utter terror that something is happening to him – that he is choking on a pea or stray crouton - and I'm leaping into action, jumping up from the bench, my hands reaching for him, when suddenly a projectile stream of vomit comes shooting out of his mouth Exorcist-style and covers me almost head to toe.

I stand there speechless and frozen as the warm beads of vomit start to drip from the ends of my hair onto the ground. The entire restaurant falls so silent you could hear a pureed pea drop, and everyone turns to stare. And then the endless moment is broken by Eliza's high-pitched squealing laughter.

### Chapter 3

I stare at my Facebook page. I have set my status to single. The little red heart has vanished. I glare at the screen. At least I got there first, before Will could do it, I tell myself, imagining the little red heart now glowing (fickle betraying emoticon) on Bex's page. I have only had the nerve to scan the first few messages from friends who've posted on my wall – most of them commiserating and calling Will all manner of things ending in -er. A couple though are kindly informing me of how they saw him last night with his tongue wedged down Bex's throat and his hand stuck up her top. Not for the first time I consider deleting my Facebook account.

My fingers hover over the status box instead.

*Nantucket. Kind of like Gossip Girl: The Summer Months.* I write. Then I hit delete.

*Puked on by an eight-month-old child yesterday in full view of an entire restaurant.* Delete. As if my public humiliation courtesy of Will and Bex was not complete enough without me adding to it.

*Today I almost killed myself and two small children driving on the right-hand side of the road.* Delete.

In the end I add a link to a playlist I put together on the plane to mark my first day in America. I made sure there were no songs about breaking up or broken hearts because I'm not lame like that. At least, not publicly.

And then a message pings on the screen from Megan.

*Boooooo*

*Hey,* I write back instantly.

*WU?*

*Oh seriously, you would not believe how frequently that word is used here.*

*That good, huh?*

*No, it's OK. It's good in fact. It's great.*

*Hot boys?*

*If Nate from Gossip Girl is your thing.*

*W8. I'm jst booking my flight. Megan uses so many abbreviations, emoticons and acronyms in each sentence that by the end of every email conversation with her I'm reaching for my inhaler and a paper bag. My anal retentiveness over grammar is not just because I want to be a journalist and therefore have a thing for spelling words correctly and using grammar rules to formulate sentences, but also because for me words are like music and you can't just butcher them with no consequences.*

*No, seriously. I write *This place is wealthy in the way that you and I most definitely are not.**

*How's the fam?*

*Cute kids. Nice parents. Amazing house.*

*Did the dad hit on you yet?*

*One-track mind.*

*Did he?*

*No. He's nice. They both are. They took me for lunch yesterday at this posh yacht club and they're even letting me drive their car. But the most exciting thing is that he works for the Boston Globe!*

*Which is?...They let U drive their car? R they INSANE?*

*A newspaper dumbass. And, yes, they are insane. I almost crashed it. I think I have to hire a bike.*

*And you're excited about this why?*

*If I lived in Boston I could get free backstage passes.*

*You don't live in Boston. and dn't even think of moving there for good. I MU. It sucks without you here. And dn't ride a bike. Do you even know how to ride a bike? WTF?*

Just then a little red exclamation mark shows up on the top left of the screen and I click on it. It's a friend request from Jeremy Thorne.

I hit accept. Then I wonder if he might construe that as over-eager, like I was just sitting by my open computer waiting for the moment he found me on Facebook.

Megan's flashing at me: *AYT?*

*Yep. Here.* I tap out, simultaneously clicking through to Jeremy's profile page.

*What are you doing?*

*Getting ready for bed. Accepting friend requests from cute boys.*

*Seriously? W8*

I watch the ticking dots. In half a minute she is back.

*Holy mother of hotness. Who is HE?*

*Some guy I met today.*

*Does he have a brother?*

*He's a triplet.*

*RU serious????!!!!*

I laugh under my breath. Megan thinks anything with a Y chromosome is hot. She's perpetually in heat. Even she admits as much (with a tongue-lolling emoticon for emphasis).

A message pings up on the screen alongside Megan. It's Jeremy.

*Hey*, he says.

I'm busy scanning through the photos on his profile page – him in every picture with his arms around someone – and I have a sudden stab of stalker shame. I click off his page just in case he has some spyware that can tell I'm looking. Megan says that spyware is just an urban myth but until that's proven otherwise to me I think it's best not to cyber stalk anyone of the opposite sex. Actually, of any sex.

*Megan: AYT?*

*He's just messaged me* I write.

*What's he saying?*

*Do I want a ride?*

*A ride? A ride? A ride where?? Answer him. Have you answered him?*

Yes, I reply, first to Jeremy and then to Megan, realising as I do that I haven't even checked first with Carrie and Mike.

*Awesome, I'll pick you up at 8*, Jeremy replies.

*A RIDE WHR?*