

## Chapter One

“You’re doing what?” I asked, with a mixture of horror and disbelief, staring at my mother as if she’d lost her mind. Which she so obviously had.

Mum sat back on her haunches and blew some stray hair off her forehead. She looked tired and irritated, the kind of mood I would usually avoid. Not today though.

“We’re leaving Jodi in charge,” she said.

This confirmed the news I’d heard on the grapevine. (Meaning my mother told my brother Nathan, who told me.) I had to hear it from the horse’s mouth, though I should’ve known it was true. Nathan had said about five words to me in the past year; he wouldn’t waste any lying.

‘I can’t believe this,’ I said. ‘Are you out of your mind?’ Mum gave me one of those looks telling me I was pushing it by questioning her mental state. I plunged on, regardless. ‘Leaving Jodi in charge? She’ll sell us to human traffickers and use the money to buy new mascara.’

My sister Jodi is eighteen and has one interest in life – herself.

‘Jodi has grown up a lot lately,’ Mum said defensively. ‘Besides, it’s only for a few days until Aunty Jean comes.’

To think I’d been dreading the arrival of Aunty Jean. Now I would welcome her with open arms.

‘Does this mean I’ll have to do what Jodi says?’ I asked.

‘Well, yes. That’s the whole deal with someone being in charge.’

‘I thought you’d delay your trip.’ I stuck out my bottom lip.

Mum sighed. ‘We considered that but the penalties were too high. Besides Aunty Jean has only twisted her ankle. It should come right in a day or two. And Mrs Kelly promised she’d keep an eye on you.’

I knew my parents didn’t want to postpone their trip: they’d been planning it for more than a year. Every weekend, brochures and guidebooks had littered the lounge floor as

they planned where they were going. Dad had a conference to go to in Berlin and then some business people to see in Prague. My parents had decided to combine this with a whirlwind dash around Europe.

“Combining business with pleasure,” I’d heard Mum say, countless times.

I shook my head, attempting to get the thoughts rattling around to make sense. “What is something goes wrong?” I tried to play the parental fear game. Mum was already a good player: No, you can’t rollerblade – what if you fall over and break your arm? No, you can’t stay at Amy’s house when her parents aren’t there – what if something happens?

However, today Mum didn’t seem concerned about anything happening to her precious offspring while she was gallivanting around the other side of the world.

“Mrs Kelly is right next door. Besides, Jodi or Aaron should be able to handle most things.”

Aaron was Jodi’s boyfriend. One of the reasons Mum and Dad believed that Jodi had changed was because of him. I’d tried to point out that just because the Deputy Head Boy was kissing Jodi, it didn’t mean he was transferring any of his finer qualities to her. All it meant was he had questionable taste in girls. As usual, no one had listened.

I made one last stab. “I’ll stay at Bec’s,” I suggested. “Just until Aunty Jean comes.”

“No you won’t. It’s about time you three learnt to get along.”

And Mum thought leaving Jodi in charge was the best way to achieve that? Her common sense must have caught an earlier flight to Europe. Besides, it was not my fault we didn’t get along. Maybe it would be different if they were normal. It was amazing that two normal parents had only managed to produce one normal child (me), a narcissist (we learnt that word in English and I loved it; we were supposed to write a definition and I just wrote ‘Jodi’) and one, well to be honest, I don’t know how to even begin describing Nathan. All I knew is that I had really lucked out when it came to siblings.

The next afternoon I watched glumly as my parents prepared to leave.

“Just because she’s the eldest doesn’t mean she’s the best person to be left in charge,” I said, in a last ditch effort to get them to see sense. “That’s ageist. I think you should leave me in charge. I may be the youngest, but you know I’m the most responsible.”

Jodi started snickered at that. Mum was more direct. “Be quiet, Bianca,” she told me, “I don’t have time for this today. Now... where are our tickets?”

I had a brief spasm of hope that the tickets were lost and therefore my parents would have to stay.

“Did you get them from the drawer,” Jodi asked.

“Yes, I think I put them down on the bench...” Mum bustled off into the kitchen.

The tickets were sitting on a bench that was so clean you could sue it as a mirror. The whole house was immaculate. You’d think the queen was coming to look after us. We had promised on the threat of disinheritance, that we’d keep the house in the same state until Auntie Jean arrived.

“Right.” Mum came back, placing the tickets in her handbag. She glanced at her watch. “It’s almost time to hit the road.”

I helped Dad load the luggage into Mum’s station wagon. They were going to leave Mum’s car in the airport car park but Dad’s car was still in our garage. He’d made a big deal of putting the car keys into his suitcase. Apparently, Jodi was responsible enough to look after the lives of her younger siblings but not to drive Dad’s car.

“Thanks, Bianca,” Dad said, pushing the last suitcase into a small gap. He surveyed the packed car with an unreadable expression. I knew how much he and Mum were looking forward to this trip. They’d been planning to do their OE before they had kids, they even got round to booking it, but then Mum had discovered she was pregnant with Jodi. Typical of Jodi to ruin everything.

“All ready?” Mum came outside with Jodi. She must have been giving last-minute instructions because Jodi had a superior look on her face.

“Yep, ready to rock.” Sometimes my father forgot he was over forty. It was embarrassing.

“Nathan!” Mum called. “Time to go.”

Nathan got in the car without saying a word. I was in the middle, with Jodi and Nathan on either side. It was not fair; I always had to sit in the middle since I was the youngest and supposedly the smallest. I decided right there and then I was going on a chocolate and ice-cream diet until I weighed more than Jodi, then she’d have to sit in the middle.

Dad drove, even though it was Mum’s car. Mum’s parental worry seemed to have kicked in at the last minute and she prattled on about what we should do in all kinds of

different situations. She was just telling us what to do if lightning struck the house when we pulled into the car park.

The three of us were quiet as Mum and Dad checked in. Nathan stood there scuffing his shoe and Jodi examined her nails. I did my normal people-watching thing that I do at airports – but with a difference. This time I was evaluating people to see if I'd prefer to go and stay at their houses rather than go back to mine with Jodi in charge. That elderly lady with the blue perm – definitely. No contest. Even if she did look like the type who'd force feed you weak-tasting cordial and stale chocolate cake. That man there with tattoos and eyebrow piercing. Yep. Although it looked like there was a good possibility he was into ritual satanic worship, I'd take my chances.

My daydreaming was interrupted by my parents' last flurry of goodbyes. Mum smushed me against her. "Be good for Jodi and Aunty Jean," she said.

"I'm always good," I replied.

My mother has this expression where she raised both her eyebrows so they tilt in towards each other. It makes her look like a quizzical cow. She did it to me then.

Before she could say anything else, I was engulfed in a bone-crushing hug from Dad.

“be good,” he whispered. I was offended that my parents felt the need to tell me that.

The embraces were completed. I noticed that even Nathan consented to being hugged. Mum looked like she was about to cry. Dad seemed to sense this, and quickly herded her towards the duty free shops. Just before they went through the gate to the departure lounge they turned and waved back at the three of us, each lost in our own thoughts.

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