

UNCOVERING SADIE'S SECRETS



A BIANCA BALDUCCI MYSTERY

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Baltimore, MD

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T*o Hannah, my faithful helper, critical editor,
and “favorite” daughter*

CHAPTER ~ ONE

 NOW BEFORE you rush to judgment and say I should have handled it differently, ask yourself what would you have done had you been in my shoes? I mean, here I was trying to hook up with a guy who was my major crush, staying on top of my schoolwork, being a good daughter, *and* having to deal with what looked to be a major, possibly life-threatening problem involving a strange new friend.

They don't cover this stuff in the "Healthy Living" classes I snooze through. Trust me, I've read the syllabus.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, which is something my sophomore English teacher, Mrs. Bernardino, says is a major problem for me. She's always circling the beginning of my reports with a fat red marker (one of these days, I'm going to buy her a slim-point gel pen in a nice muted purple), and writing things like, "Isn't this more appropriate at the end?" or "Why are you starting here?"

So, pardon me for my impatience with beginnings. I'm still learning.

The whole mess started one Saturday morning in October.

Kerrie called me at seven that morning—yes, Saturdays have a seven in the morning, too—to tell me Doug was going to meet us at the mall. (Doesn't every good story start with a trip to the mall?) With that news, I sat bolt upright in bed with no prompting from

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my annoying alarm clock. In fact, my heart started pounding out its own alarm and my palms got sweaty.

Kerrie is my best friend. She knows me, and she knows that deep down I think that Doug is my match, that we were destined to be together, that our paths must have crossed in some other lifetime, but to come out and admit all that will somehow make the whole thing burst like a fragile bubble.

So all I said to Kerrie was: "You woke me up to tell me *this*?"

After a little conversation in which Kerrie explained how Nicole had Instant Messaged her late last night with the Doug news, I padded downstairs, thinking of what I would wear now that my afternoon worldview had shifted. Passing our hall mirror, I caught sight of myself and nearly had to be taken back up on a stretcher. My shoulder-length brown hair was hanging in clumpy strings, and my face was as white as Elmer's Glue, with enchanting circles under my eyes to boot, making me look ghoulish and grumpy all at once. Heck, I *was* grumpy.

I decided to deal with the grumpy part first, by heading to the kitchen for a bowl of Frosted Flakes.

"You should eat something healthier than that!" my sister Connie said, grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge as I got out the milk. "You're fifteen, for goodness sake!" My sister is in her twenties, a slightly taller, curvier version of me, and she's a private investigator.

"For your information, that granola you scarf down by the truckload is nothing but sugar-infused cardboard. Read the label," I pointed out to her. But my gentle observation wasn't what she was in the mood to hear, so she grabbed her purse and sunglasses and headed out with a shrug of her shoulders that I interpreted as "sez who?"

In the Balducci household, we often communicate through body language. It saves a lot of time.

As I looked at the picture of Tony the Tiger grinning at me from the big box and shoveled in the crunchy sweet cereal, my grumpy mood started to lift. Almost time to get a new box, I thought as I tilted this one to pour more into my bowl. After I was done, I added it to the shopping list stuck on our refrigerator door. My mom usually does the shopping on Saturday mornings, but today she was at her boss's office downtown doing some extra work on a big case. My mom is a legal assistant in the district attorney's office. She wishes she had gone to law school and become a lawyer herself, but she's done okay for herself anyway.

Breakfast was over and I couldn't put off the other problems that faced me. First, the hair. Then, what to wear.

The best hairstyle I can manage is a casual, didn't-do-a-thing-with-it look accomplished by washing my hair before I go to bed, sleeping with the damp mess mashed into my pillow, and brushing it out in the morning so it has a sort of "wind-swept" appearance. This rarely fails me. It communicates a kind of cavalier disregard for my personal appearance while at the same time making me look like a younger version of Cindy Crawford who just hasn't been discovered yet.

Okay, okay. Maybe not quite.

Today, I jumped in the shower and gave it the old lather-rinse-repeat. Ten minutes later, I was sitting in my bedroom with a towel around my head swami-style while I tackled my next problem—what to wear. As I worked through these challenges, I realized it was a good thing Kerrie had awakened me so early. Looking like you don't care about how you look takes a lot of prep time.

Jeans and a t-shirt are my usual choices. But with Doug in the

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picture, I considered other options. It was early fall but still warm in Baltimore, so a tank top, though acceptable, was maybe too obvious. Besides, I didn't like my tank tops.

I moved from the closet to the floor, where I started to paw through a pile of clothes. Jeans and a peasant blouse? Hmmm . . . that sounded good, especially since the blouse had a hot design on it and I had worn it only once. What was it doing in this pile anyway? I pulled it out and put it aside for further consideration.

A half hour later, I had narrowed it down to the jeans and blouse versus the black t-shirt and khaki pants, but I was leaning toward the latter because that outfit would look neat but not like I was trying too hard. Besides, the black tee would look good with my new gold stud earrings, which would get lost next to the embroidery in the peasant blouse.

These hard decisions made, I went about the business of the rest of my morning, which consisted of some cleaning chores, a few phone calls to friends, a little web surfing, and a glance at my homework assignment book just to remind myself that I was okay putting off that book report because it wasn't due until early next month.

My mother came home around noon and called up to me to make sure I was alive. My 18-year-old brother Tony came in shortly after that from his morning shift at the Burger Boy. Before his car keys even hit the half-table by the wall in the entrance hall, I yelled down to him.

"Don't forget, you're taking me and my friends to the mall today!"

I heard what sounded like a swear coming from his mouth, which was confirmed a second later when my mom barked from the kitchen, "Tony, watch that mouth!"

My poor mom has a lot of patience. She's been alone for a lot of years—my Dad, who was a cop, died just after I was born. She's got a lot of spunk too, which is why she moved us back to the "old country"—from a rented house in the 'burbs to an old townhouse in a section of the city where she was raised. Which is one of the reasons Tony is taking my friends and me to the mall—so I can sort of ease into the city scene. Mom told him the night before that he had chauffeur duty.

In a few minutes, I was downstairs. Running past the mirror didn't make me panic this time. I was pretty much where I wanted to be—not too neat, not too curled, not too dressy, not too anything.

"Let's go, Tone," I called out to my brother. And we were on our way.



THE MALL is just north of town. It took us a good forty-five minutes to get there because first we had to pick up Kerrie in Fells Point and Nicole in Towson.

At least my family's move hadn't split up my friendships. We went to St. John's, a parochial school in the city, and people came from all over the place to attend. One of the things I like about my school (and there are very few) is the fact that you make friends with someone first, and find out where they are from and what their circumstances are later. That's because we all have to wear dorky uniforms—navy blue pants and white shirts, or a blue plaid jumper and white shirts. Wearing the same thing cuts down on a lot of clothes-envy even if it makes us feel like prison inmates most of the time.

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Anyway, my friend Nicole is solid middle class. She lives in a split-level in an older neighborhood. Her father is a buyer for the county and her mother works part-time for an insurance company.

Kerrie, on the other hand, is the only child of two professionals (her father is a lawyer and her mother is a doctor) who had moved into the city as part of an urban pioneer thing. To me, her house always feels like a cross between an antiques store and a page out of an architectural magazine.

I'm not quite sure where Doug lives except I know it is somewhere north of the city. The home neighborhood of his friend Adam—who was also meeting us at the mall—is a mystery to me, too.

After Tony dropped us off with a fond “go get ‘em, mall-rats,” to which I thoughtfully responded by narrowing my eyes, we headed straight for the food court. We managed to work in our quota of giggling during the escalator ride and stair climb until we reached the food mecca, so I felt reasonably safe that we wouldn't make fools of ourselves when we came across the boys.

“Bianca!”

When I heard Doug's voice calling mine, you could have pulled out the defibrillators right then and there. He was standing by the Boardwalk Fries looking hot in an American Eagle t-shirt, olive cargo shorts, and backwards baseball cap.

Okay, so I wished he would lose the cap, but otherwise, he looked pretty cool to me. He was six feet tall, lean and muscular, with really short blondish hair, brown eyes, and a shy smile. And, from quite a distance, he had called out my name to get our attention, my name from the three that he could have chosen.

But my high spirits came crashing down when I noticed there was someone else with him and Adam. And the someone else was

a girl.

Her name was Sadie, a strange name for an equally strange person. She was skinny as a rat and usually looked like she spent too much time hanging with the wrong crowd. Seriously, I'd even checked her arms for needle marks. But they were always clean. Today she wore a red tie-dye halter top and bell-bottom jeans that looked spray painted on her thighs and rear. Her blonde-in-a-bottle hair was crushed under a blue bandana and she had a gold post in her nose and about five other earrings arranged asymmetrically in each ear. Sadie had just started attending St. John's this year and hadn't made many friends.

"Look who we ran into," Adam said, smiling from ear to ear. Adam was a prankster and it was quite possible he had asked Sadie to join us just to make us all uncomfortable.

Sadie smiled a little and looked away, as if she were searching for someone. We all murmured shy hello's and then Kerrie, the social manager of our crowd, chirped up with a "plan." Kerrie always had plans. I think it comes from being an only child.

"Let's check out Hot Topic first. And then the Gap and then Strawberries and then maybe we can come back and have an ice cream . . ." Kerrie said.

Doug smiled at me, and I swooned.

Well, not really. I smiled back.

". . . you're welcome to join us," Kerrie was saying to Sadie.

It looked as if Sadie was about to say no when she caught sight of something, or someone, and suddenly changed attitude and answer. She shook her head vigorously and said, "Okay, let's get going! I'm kind of in a hurry!" And then she linked her arm in Doug's and started to speed out of the food court so fast I thought she was kidnapping him and I'd have to call the police.

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This was not a good start to the afternoon.



TWO HOURS later, we all sat around a table back in the food court. I sat next to Doug, who was eating a huge hot dog from Nathan's while I nibbled on a yogurt with granola sprinkled on top.

Eating in front of boys is tricky business. I've decided this is what had happened to my sister Connie. She had spent so many years pretending to like all this rabbit food stuff so that boys would think she was health-conscious and good-hearted that she had grown to like it. Heck, it could happen to me. I was open to possibilities. I took another spoonful.

Sadie sat between Kerrie and Adam, and Nicole sat on the other side of me. After our first foray into the wilds of the upper reaches of the mall, Sadie had released her grip on Doug and he had maneuvered back to walk next to me. Sadie didn't seem to mind. In fact, her urging us to get going was about the most she said during the whole time we were together. The rest of the time, she was distracted and worried, continually scanning the stores and corridors as if she were looking for someone.

"Oh, let me see what you got!" Nicole said to Kerrie, who was flipping through the pages of a bunch of paperbacks she had bought at Barnes and Noble. Kerrie pushed them over to her. "Oooh, mysteries. I love mysteries."

"I've read all of Sherlock Holmes," Kerrie said, "and a bunch of Agathie Christie."

"*Murder on the Orient Express*," Nicole read out loud. "That's a

famous one, right?"

"Isn't that the one where . . ." I began but Kerrie reached over Doug and clapped her hand over my mouth.

"Don't tell me! I want to read it!" she screeched.

"Hey, Kerrie, take it easy," Doug said, and I immediately swooned again.

Well, not really. Instead, I picked up the book and started reading the back cover blurbs.

"My sister says all these detective books are a bunch of hooey," I said with sophistication dripping from my voice. "She says most of the time detectives just get boring stuff, like insurance fraud, or divorce cases, where they've got to secretly gather evidence."

"How does *she* know?" Adam asked, sipping at his Jumbo Cola.

"Her sister's a private detective," Kerrie said. Kerrie really thought this was cool and she asked about Connie all the time. "She's just getting started. She's got an office and everything, right, Bianca?"

I nodded. "Yeah. She just set up. She studied criminal justice in college, and worked with the police force in Hagerstown. My mom isn't too happy about her career choice."

"She's afraid she'll get hurt," Kerrie explained.

But that wasn't the only reason. My mother thought Connie should have gone on to study law or something like that. But Connie was something of a maverick and really wanted to strike out on her own. She told mom that she would give the private eye stuff four years and if it didn't work out, she'd go back and apply to law school.

Tony, on the other hand, was a freshman at the University of Maryland's Baltimore County campus, studying economics, and planning on being some big financial guru when he got out.

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Nothing would deter that kid from his appointed course to be a multi-millionaire before he was twenty-five. It was like he was on a mission from God. He even lived at home and commuted to college in order to save money for his eventual rich destiny.

I noticed something had changed. Sadie wasn't looking around anymore. She was leaning into the table and paying attention. "Where's her office?" she asked so quietly that no one noticed at first.

"Potomac Street. Balducci and Associates," I said. "Except there aren't really any associates."

"Does she only handle those things you said—insurance . . . ?"

"No, she'll handle anything. Murder. Mayhem. Maltese Falcons," I said, proud of my ability to use alliteration in a joke. I looked at Doug. He smiled. I sighed. (Really.)

Sadie's eyes widened. "What about, uh, attempted murder?"

"You mean someone who's charged with trying to kill someone?" I asked.

"No, um, like someone being framed for killing someone."

"That's really murder. Not attempted murder," I explained, but then regretted my school-marmish tone. "But I guess, yeah, she would probably handle that. Except usually it would be a lawyer who would hire her, for the person who was being framed." Hanging around Connie had taught me a little about the business. In fact, I wouldn't mind following in her footsteps, so I was secretly hoping her venture would be such a huge success that I'd become the first of the "Associates" and Mom would be proud for me to work with my sister instead of insisting I go pre-law or pre-millionaire after I graduated from high school.

"Oh," Sadie said, and sat back, looking disappointed.

"Why? Do you know someone who's been framed?" I asked.

Sadie looked confused, then brightened. "Yes, a friend of mine. And nobody will believe her—I mean him."

I reached into my purse and pulled out a card for Balducci and Associates. "Here, give this to her, I mean him. Have him call any-time. She's got voice mail and everything and she checks it all the time." What Connie didn't know is I checked it too. I knew her password because she had written it on the telephone instructions when she set the thing up.

Sadie took the card and looked at it, then slipped it into her jeans pocket. "Thanks," she said. She was the only one among us who had had nothing to eat or drink, *and* she hadn't purchased anything all day. I wondered if she had any money.

"Look, I was going to get a milkshake," I said standing up and abandoning my pretense of eating healthy. "My treat. Anybody want anything? How about you, Sadie?" She looked surprised, then one side of her mouth twisted up into a lopsided smile.

"No, thanks. I have to get going anyway. Getting late." She stood up. "Thanks. It's been fun. See ya." As she walked toward the door, I noticed her reaching into her pocket and fingering Connie's business card.



TONY WAS to pick us up at four-thirty, so it wasn't much longer before we were heading for the parking lot. Doug was still walking next to me and I wondered just what kind of touching farewell gesture he would make. An embrace, perhaps? A romantic back-bending kiss? A long look into my eyes that would be drenched with meaning? A . . .

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"Well, we'll be seeing you," Doug said when we reached the floor with Hecht's department store on it. "Adam's dad is picking us up." He looked at me and shrugged his shoulders as if apologizing for the abruptness of the parting. Then he lifted his hand and it seemed to glide in slow motion as I imagined all the possibilities that this promised and how his arm would feel around my shoulders.

"Take care!" he said, gently punching me in the arm.

"Yeah, you too," I managed to squeak out.

The two boys lumbered off, and Nicole and Kerrie and I let out an afternoon's worth of giggles and gossip in the few minutes it took us to walk to the designated pick-up spot.

"He likes you!" Kerrie squealed and I looked behind us to make sure the boys were out of earshot. Of course, with Kerrie's penetrating voice, they'd have to be in Kentucky not to overhear, but at least I didn't see them.

"Do you think he'll ask you to the Mistletoe Dance?" Nicole asked, leaning into us as we walked. "If he doesn't, you should ask him!"

"It's a junior dance, Nicky," Kerrie said. "She can't ask him. But he can ask her. I think he'll ask you, Bianca. He might even have his driver's license by then."

"Oh, I don't know," I said, trying to sound disinterested. "Maybe he'll ask Sadie."

Nicole and Kerrie both burst out laughing simultaneously, then got a case of the guilts and stopped just as abruptly. "That was weird running into her," Nicole said.

"Yeah. I didn't quite picture her as the mall type," Kerrie added.

"Neither did I. She seems more the downtown type if you know what I mean," I said. They all nodded and we all imagined Sadie

wandering into incense-laden bookstores and little boutiques that sold tie-dye shirts and Indian skirts.

"Where's she live anyway?" Nicole asked.

"Don't know. She kind of hangs by herself," Kerrie said.

"Maybe we should try to get to know her better," I said as we walked through the doors of the mall to the dark parking lot. I looked around. No Tony. He was late, as usual. "She looks like she could use a friend."

"Or a probation officer," Nicole said.

"Nicky!" Kerrie cried and rapped her on the arm.

"Just kidding."

In the distance, I saw Tony's blue Civic wending its way through the rows of cars. In a few seconds, he was at the curb, and we all piled in. He said nothing to us and we chatted among ourselves throughout the ride back to our homes.

After we dropped off Nicole and Kerrie, the silent treatment continued. The radio was broken in his car, so we couldn't even listen to that. As we headed east toward home, I stared out the window at the gray landscape. The sky was overcast and the air was beginning to cool.

Doug had called my name and punched me in the arm. Not bad for an afternoon's work.