



# PLOTS AND PLANS

Joe's parents were arguing.

This was not unusual. Joe's father travelled on business for a large part of the year and Joe missed him terribly. But whenever he was home, his mum and dad would start arguments that sometimes lasted right up until the point when his dad left on business again.

Today's argument was about the surprise holiday his dad had arranged for half-term. Joe sat at the kitchen table with his head down, pretending to do his homework, but he was listening carefully as his dad explained the plan.

'I've already told you, Penny,' said his dad.

'It's a castle. A *real* castle. One of my clients bought it as an investment and he's part way through renovating it. He says we can use it at half-term and he's given me the keys. It's got battlements and big fireplaces and even a moat.' He moved closer to his wife and slipped an arm around her shoulder. 'Come on, it'll just be the three of us. Imagine what a wonderful time we'll have.'

Joe was already imagining what sort of fun



he could have in a castle. He pictured himself in a large banqueting hall, throwing leftover bones to the dogs, or standing guard on the drawbridge with a sword in his hand. He wondered if the castle had suits of armour and swords and stuff like that. If it did, he was sure nobody would mind too much if he borrowed one for a bit of sword practice.

Unfortunately, Penelope Carter was not a castle sort of person. She did not much care for history, or places that were cold or damp, nor did she much enjoy spending time with 'just the three of them'. What Penelope Carter did like was sunshine and beaches and cocktails and glamorous people with impossibly deep suntans who wore designer clothes. She greeted her husband's plans with folded arms and a face like stone.

'Well, this is *typical* of you, Mike,' she said. 'You arrive home with some half-baked plan about going to a castle that you imagine we'll think is wonderful.'

As it happened, Joe did think the plan sounded pretty wonderful but he knew that now was probably not the best time to say it.

'Did you stop to think about whether it was something *I* might want to do?' she asked. 'Did you even bother to ask if *I* had anything planned for the holidays?'

Mike Carter stared blankly at his wife. 'Well, do you have anything planned for the holidays?'

'As a matter of fact, yes,' said Penelope. 'Maria Santorini called while you were away and invited us to spend the week on their yacht in the Mediterranean. Apparently, everyone who's anyone in fashion will be there. I accepted, of course.'

Joe groaned inwardly at the thought of a week spent on a yacht with people he didn't know who talked about fashion the entire time.

His father wasn't quite ready to give up just yet. 'But, Penny,' he pleaded. 'Couldn't we just—'

'No, we could not,' said Penelope Carter firmly.

‘You seem to forget that I had a career in fashion once, Mike. And if you think for one minute that I am going to miss the chance of catching up with my old friends to go and stay in a draughty old *castle*’ – she spat out the word as though it tasted bad – ‘then you don’t know me very well.’

Mike Carter’s shoulders drooped in defeat and Joe could see the castle holiday slipping away. He decided that now was the time to intervene. ‘But, Mum,’ he pleaded, ‘staying in a castle would be brilliant. And it’s totally educational. Besides, I really don’t want to spend a week on a yacht.’

‘Well, that’s very fortunate, Joseph,’ said his mother. ‘Because you are not invited.’

Joe frowned. ‘What?’

‘That’s right, it’s adults only, I’m afraid,’ said his mother. Joe’s mouth dropped open. ‘Now don’t pout, darling. You said yourself you wouldn’t enjoy it for one minute. I called your grandmother and I’ve arranged for her to come and look after you for the week. She’ll be here on

Saturday. I'm sure you'll both have a lovely time.'

'But Mum—' began Joe.

Penelope Carter held up a solitary finger. 'Sorry, but I'm not going to hear another word on the subject of castles. Your father and I are going to stay on a yacht, and you, Joe, are staying here with your grandmother and that's all there is to it. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to pack.'

Before either of them could say another word, Penelope swished out of the room, leaving Joe and his father to stare at each other helplessly.

'Sorry, Joe,' said his dad. 'I thought the castle would be a good idea.'

'It is a good idea, Dad,' said Joe. 'Couldn't you persuade her to—'

'I don't think so,' said his father. 'Your mother means to have her way on this one. I'd best go and help her pack.'

After his dad left the room, Joe threw down his pen and let out a huge sigh. *A week at home with Nana*, he thought to himself. *Some half-term*

*this is going to be. I bet nothing exciting happens at all.*

Joe spent the rest of the morning in his room, sulking and imagining how thoroughly boring his half-term holiday was going to be with just him and Nana. The house was filled with the sounds of banging from the attic as his dad pulled down the suitcases and there was a medium-sized row when his mum couldn't remember what she'd done with her passport.

'Well, what do you expect, Mike,' she shouted as she went through the drawers in the study for the third time. 'It's been so long since I've been anywhere, it's hardly surprising I can't find it.'

Eventually, the packing was finished, the passport was found and the house became calm again. Joe's dad appeared in his bedroom doorway, looking tired. 'We're just going to the shops,' he said. 'Your mum needs a few last-minute things for the holiday. We shouldn't be more than an hour...or maybe two.'

Soon after his parents had gone out, the phone in the hallway began to ring. And, as there was only one person who ever rang them on the house phone, that meant Joe instantly knew who was calling.

He picked up the receiver. 'Hello, Nana,' he said.

'Joseph, is that you?' said a voice on the other end of the phone. 'Can you hear me? It's Nana here. Speak up, boy!'

'Yes, I know it's you, Nana,' said Joe. His grandmother was quite hard of hearing and her telephone voice always sounded like she was trying to communicate with someone at the bottom of a very deep well. He held the phone a little further from his ear. 'How are you?'

'Who am I? I've already told you who I am, you stupid boy. It's Nana,' she snapped.

'Yes, Nana,' said Joe, wishing he could start the conversation again. 'I hear you're coming to look after me for the week.'

'I'm meant to be coming to look after you for



the week,' said Nana. 'But I completely forgot that I'd agreed to go to Littlehampton with Doris Flatley to visit her sister. I'll never hear the last of it if I don't go. Tell Penny that I can't come to you after all.'

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that,' said Joe. He was genuinely sorry because he could imagine how badly his mother was going to take this news. 'Mum and Dad are out shopping for some last-minute things,' he said. 'They were meant to be flying to Italy tonight.'

'Well, I can't help that,' snapped Nana. 'Besides, Littlehampton is a far nicer place than Italy. There's too many flies and they eat octopus, can you imagine that?'

Joe was confused. 'They eat octopus in Littlehampton?'

'No, in Italy, you stupid boy,' said his grandmother. 'Tell Penny I'm very sorry but if I let Doris Flatley down she'll spread unpleasant gossip about me at the bridge club.'

‘Shall I get Mum to call you?’

‘Certainly not,’ said Nana haughtily. ‘I’m going to bed early and I don’t want to be disturbed. Now run along and don’t forget to pass on my message. Goodbye.’

The line had gone dead before Joe could answer. He replaced the receiver and rubbed his ear, which had become hot. Talking to Nana was like talking to an old lady version of his mother and just as tiring.

He really wasn’t looking forward to passing on Nana’s message. Either his mum would have to cancel her plans, or worse still, she might make him go with them. Either way, it was bound to make her furious and one way or another, she would find a way to blame it on him. If only he didn’t have to tell them about Nana’s phone call.

Then he paused. What if he didn’t tell them? What if his parents just went to Italy and never got Nana’s message? That wouldn’t be so bad, would it?