

Innocent Little Crimes

A novel by Susanne Lakin

Prologue

Mac Dobson gingerly steered the boat through the clammy fog, stretching his neck to spot jutting rocks before they punched holes in his hull. Even though he'd maneuvered through this maze of islands for over thirty years, he knew to keep his confidence in check. *Just get a little cocky and you're down in Davy Jones's locker with the rest of them poor souls*, he reminded himself.

Tenacious waves slapped the bow, splashing salt water into his beard. Tree branches tumbled and bobbed in the churning water, debris from the weekend storm littering the narrow channel. Sherpa whined, pressing against Mac's legs.

"We'll be there soon, ol' boy. Then a bowl of hot soup for the both of us." Mac pulled the yellow rain slicker tighter to stave off the wind and slowed the motor to a crawl. "Folks must be crazy to be recreatin' this time of year."

Through the drifts of gray, he could just make out the island. As in a dream, the pier and moorings began to materialize, then the flag pole jutting from the sand.

Mac startled.

The signal flag was raised, flapping steadily in the wind. The pulley clanged against metal, tolling somberly like a bell in a churchyard. As the boat nosed to shore, Mac could make out a small group on the beach standing solemn and still, a curious contrast from when he dropped them off two days ago.

But, dream turned nightmare when his gaze followed theirs to the ground. A bulky shape lay at their feet, wrapped in a canvas tarp. Mac tossed the rope over the post at the dock and whistled under his breath as the prow gently nudged the pilings. He didn't need to take a mental count to know someone was missing, and just where that someone happened to be.

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Chapter One

January 1st

Bel Air, California

Lila Carmichael's massive face, frozen in living Technicolor, bore down on them from the eight-foot-wide plasma screen mounted on the wall.

"Ugh—I've got a voice that grates cheese."

Lila tossed sandwich crusts into her mouth as she half-heartedly trotted on the treadmill. "I'm not that funny, you know. People think a fat broad with a big mouth is an easy target."

She stared intently at the screen. Her short, thick, carrot-red hair flared out around her face—a pretty face overpowered by bulging cheeks and a double chin. Her beady brown eyes looked like raisins pushed into a blob of dough.

She cocked her head and turned to Peter. "They laugh at me because no matter how rotten their life is, they can look in the mirror and say, 'I may be a loser, but thank God I don't look like Lila Carmichael.' She looked up again at her imposing image. "Sheesh, what an ugly mug."

"A face the whole world loves, sweets." Her lithe assistant helped her climb off the treadmill. "And pays plenty to watch."

Lila grunted, stepping onto the scale and squinting at numbers that announced her weight in both pounds and kilos. Neither number flattered her. Disgusted, she pasted a piece of lettuce over the digital readout.

Her head throbbed from last night's New Year's bash, an event she barely remembered attending. She surveyed the room she liked to call her "fat farm." Walls garish-green with massive mirrors reflected back her hefty body from the ceilings and domed archways. More like a fun house sideshow than a fancy French chateau sequestered in Beverly Hills. Just who was she fooling with all this exercise equipment and indoor lap-pool? She was never going to get in shape, unless that shape was round.

Her sixteen million-dollar-estate—her little "tear-down"—boasted spacious rose gardens, close-circuit security cameras, and privet hedges galore. All designed to induce

peace of mind. But Lila felt constrained, like a restless lion in a tight cage. She fell back into an overstuffed chair with a sigh and wiggled a finger at the screen.

“Run the tape again.”

“Darling, it’s great. You’ve watched it a thousand times! Why torture yourself? You got rave reviews. You always do.”

“Shut up, darling, please, and run the tape.” Lila shot Peter a saccharine-sweet smile. He was right, she *did* torture herself. She *did* get rave reviews. This time. This week. You could never be sure when your little kingdom would topple and the crown would be yanked out of your greedy hands. There were plenty of wolves clawing their way to the top, with the bodies of half-chewed has-beens littered along the wayside.

Peter rewound the VCR. Garrett came in, three poodles trailing like coifed models on a runway.

“Meeting’s all set. Three tomorrow. Oh, and by the way, they’re sweating over at NBC. They’re afraid you might go to one of the other networks.”

“Make them sweat. Now, call them back and cancel the meeting. Tell them something’s come up and change it to Monday.”

“They’ll be furious,” Garrett warned.

Lila shrugged. “What do I care? It’s just an act. They know they’ll have to meet my price in the end.”

“Are you really thinking about breaking from Cable?” Peter asked. “The nets will demand you clean up your act.”

“When they clean up theirs, I’ll clean up mine. They should talk.” Lila turned back to Garrett. “Besides, it’s only money. Garrett, ring my manicurist, and tell the cook to go easy on the garlic. My stomach’s been a mess all day.” Garrett nodded and left the room, poodles’ toenails clicking on the pristine marble floor.

Peter pressed “play” on the remote and stood off to the side. Lila distractedly watched herself on the screen, and then sat up abruptly. “Hey now, what about those invitations?”

“Sent them all out this morning.”

Lila clapped her hands in delight. “Ah, the game’s afoot!”

Peter smirked. “Wait till they open their mail. The look on their faces. Ooh . . . think they’ll all come?”

Lila scowled. “They wouldn’t dare turn me down! Not a frigging chance they’d miss a weekend with the rich and famous Lila Carmichael.”

“I’d give my right testicle to be a fly on the wall that weekend.”

“I’ll do you one better. You can be my ‘escort.’ ”

Peter blushed. “Oh, Lila.”

“Cut the crap, Peter. We have a lot of work to do to get ready. This is not one of your run-of-the-mill everyone sit around and gleefully reminisce about the good ol’ days—because they weren’t any. They’re going to wish they never came.”

Lila grew pensive, and then a smile inched up her face. “They just don’t know it yet.”

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Chapter Two

Brooklyn, New York

Snow pelted the window of Della Roman's minuscule room in the brownstone apartment on Montague Street. It was three in the morning. Della looked out into the bleak neighborhood where snow piled in drifts and wind whipped the clouds in a frenzy. The street lamps cast an eerie glow onto the blanketed sidewalks.

Her white cat lay curled in her lap as Della read and re-read the same page over and over. She methodically brushed her cat's fur with a small comb and lit another menthol cigarette.

It was no use—she couldn't concentrate.

She threw down the book, "Meditating With Purpose," and stumbled into the bathroom, squinting under the glaring light. Why did she persist in reading herself to sleep when it never worked?

She opened the mirrored cabinet to a dozen bottles of prescription medication, most of them empty. She popped open the Valium cap and shook out a tablet, then two. As she quickly washed them down, she caught her gaze in the mirror.

Della forced herself to look at her reflection. Her face was deathly pale, with dark circles under her eyes from repeated bouts of insomnia. Her skin was taut and dry, her dark brown, stringy hair greasy and unkempt. Mascara was smeared on her eyelids. Her looks reflected her life—a total mess.

She wondered how at age thirty-six she ended up like this. Living with her condescending brother and his bitchy wife in the hoity-toity section of Brooklyn. Barbie and Ken, she called them behind their backs. Ever so right, ever so plastic. They lived by "the rules," they liked to say. Della snorted. *Let them drop dead with their rules.* What joy did they get out of their absolutely eat-off-the-floor spotless house? They hardly dared sit on a chair for fear of mussing it.

And her niece and nephew. Sweet kids, but so spoiled. She was sure they'd grow up exactly like their parents, and just as dull. They all treated her like a slave. "Della, be a honey, fix the lunches, pick up the kids, vacuum the rug." Her brother, Edward,

encouraged her when she went on auditions, but she knew he pitied her. He and his patronizing support—he never believed for a minute she had talent. Nothing Della did was good enough. She was tolerated because she was cheap labor.

She went back to her small single bed and climbed in under the patchwork quilt. The ignominy of having to live in the “maid’s room” littered with the detritus of former Puerto-Rican hired help: plaster crucifixes, half-empty purple nail polish, hairbrushes knotted with hair. She pulled her cat up to her face and hugged her tightly.

“Oh, Princess,” she cooed in a singsong voice, stroking the cat’s fur, “when am I going to get out of this prison? You’re my only friend, you know.” She lit another cigarette, dropping ashes on the bed. “You hate this place too, I know. But tomorrow’s the day. We finally have our ticket out. I’m going to go into Manhattan real early for a try-out. This time I know I’ll get it. Jack Rolands is casting his soap and I’m sure he’ll remember me. Well, maybe not with my clothes on.” She giggled and the giggle became a hiccup.

“Anyway, even if I don’t get the part, I’m signing up for that class at Actor’s Studio. I mean it this time. Edward said he’d pay all the expenses. So, let him. He can afford it.”

Della rocked the cat in her arms and lit another cigarette off the one she was finishing. “I can’t take care of his snotty kids forever. Besides, he’ll do anything to get rid of me. I’m not a good ‘role model’ for his brats. Do you believe he said that to me? Damn, these pills don’t work. They must be diluted.”

She reached down beside her bed and opened the bottle of wine. She looked around for a clean glass and, finding none, drank out of the bottle. After finishing off the wine, she went back to the bathroom and shook out two more pills. Back in bed, she switched off her lamp and put the headphones on. Soft, atonal music filtered into her head and the calm, soothing voice of her psychologist set her mind adrift.

“Imagine yourself lying on a fluffy white cloud. You are weightless.”

Della closed her eyes and listened. The timbre of Daniel’s voice began to arouse her. Throughout the night she waited anxiously for the sleep that eluded her. After

rearranging pillows and untangling blankets for the hundredth time she reached over and dialed a phone number. Daniel's voice on his machine informed her of what it always did. He was not available and to please leave a message.

"Daniel. It's me again. I still can't fall asleep. Call me. I need you and why the hell aren't you ever in?!" She slammed the receiver down in frustration.

She started seeing her therapist two years ago. Nothing helped until that night he finally told her she needed the ultimate therapy. She knew it was against the rules, but she had wanted him from day one, anyway. For awhile they had their weekly "therapy session," but lately he was seeing her less and less. She needed his "therapy" to get herself to sleep.

Della finally started to doze as the sun lit up the apartment building across the street. The door to her room swung open and startled her awake. Her sister-in-law looked at Della, groggy in bed, the empty bottle of wine on the floor, the headphones still hanging from one ear, the ashtray full of cigarette butts. The room smelled stale and fetid. Margaret could hardly contain her disgust.

"Della! I've got a doctor's appointment this afternoon after work. I'll expect you to be home to take care of the kids." Della barely moved her head in response.

"Do you hear me? I'll be back by six. Feed them supper at five. I'm defrosting some ground beef."

Della attempted to sit up. Princess stretched and jumped off the bed.

"And clean that disgusting cat box already. It's stinking up the house."

Later Della heard the front door slam. She squinted up at the clock. Ten-thirty. She had already slept through breakfast and the kids getting off to school. And she had missed Jack Roland's casting session.

Screw the audition. It was a lousy under-five, so big deal. A couple of lines in a lousy soap amounted to zilch. She looked like garbage anyway. She hadn't been eating much lately and her clothes hung on her. She'd read that juice fasting would give her more energy, but that that was a joke.

After boiling some eggs, she tried to reach Daniel again, this time getting his service. She left a message for him to call, saying it was urgent.

After picking at the eggs, Della searched the closet for something to wear. The closet was a mess. Dirty clothes lay strewn on the floor. She couldn't tell what was clean. She picked up a dress and smelled the armpits, then threw it back down.

Snow continued to pile up in drifts below her window. What did she want to go outside for? The house was empty, her brother was at the office, the kids were at school, her sister-in-law at her beauty shop. She shut the closet door and went into the bathroom for some more Valium. This time she'd take four. If only she could get some sleep, she'd be fine; then she could deal with her imprisonment.

She climbed back into bed and lit a cigarette, smoking five before she finally closed her eyes and buried her head under the covers.

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There was little daylight left when Stacy and Mark, bundled in coats and scarves and hats, stomped up the steps and rang the bell.

"Hurry up," Stacy whined. "I'm freezing."

"Maybe the bell's not working. The door's locked."

"Ring again. Aunt Della's s'posed to be home."

Mark banged with his fist. "Aunt Della!"

They waited, shivering. Mark looked at his sister, unsure. "Maybe she forgot and went out."

"Don't say that! What're we going to do?" Stacy started to cry. "I want momma."

"Cut it out, Stace. Crying won't get us in. Maybe I could try the window."

Mark climbed the wrought-iron railing in front of the window, but his legs were too short to get over. He scratched his knees getting back down.

"Mark, don't! You'll fall!"

"Stacy, shut up. You want to stay out here and freeze to death? You could, you know." He pounded on the door.

Stacy cried harder. “Maybe we should call the police or something.”

“With what phone, dumbbell?” Mark attempted the railing again with renewed determination. He managed to grab the ledge with his gloved hand and lean over to push at the window.

“It’s unlocked. Maybe I can shove it. Then we can get in.”

His gloves kept slipping on the slick surface of the window, so he threw them down to the sidewalk. Stacy kept crying and pounding on the door.

“Della, Della, where are you!” she whimpered in between gasps. Just then she heard a crash and looked over to see Mark’s arm going through the window pane. The shards had penetrated through his thick coat, and blood dripped down his fingertips and onto the snow.

“Oh no!” Stacy cried. “Mark, get down!”

Startled by the sight of his blood, Mark fell from the railing and onto the sidewalk. The door to the adjoining brownstone opened and a gray-haired woman peered out, the chain still latched across her door.

“What in God’s name are you two kids up to?”

“Mrs. Peabody, Mark’s hurt!” Stacy yelled, running down the stairs toward her. “Momma’s not home and we tried to get in, but the door’s locked.”

Mrs. Peabody unlatched her door and ushered in the children. “How can your mother leave you like that—to catch your death of cold? Let’s wrap that arm. I’ll take you to the hospital and then try to find your mother. Come on children, hurry now.”

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Della turned over in bed and hit her wrist against the night table. She abruptly sat up, disoriented in the dark room. Her head felt like straw. She strained to read the clock, realizing it was hours past the time her niece and nephew were supposed to be home from school. For a moment she listened to the ominous silence in the house, then, still groggy, stumbled out of bed and turned on the light. The room spun. As she threw on her jeans, she reached for the phone and dialed the school.

“Come on, come on,” she muttered impatiently, listening to the interminable ringing. “Answer, damn you!” She slammed down the receiver, ran into the hall, then the kitchen, turning on lights.

“Mark, Stacy, are you here? Dammit, where are you? Don’t you play games with me or I’ll tan you!” She went out onto the front stoop and looked up and down the street. The temperature was below freezing, and lightly snowing. She searched in vain for footprints, then something sticking out of the snow on the sidewalk caught her attention. She recognized Mark’s glove and suppressed a cry. And then she looked back up to the apartment and she saw the broken window, and blood streaking the glass.

Della, nearly hysterical, raced inside and dialed the police.

“Please, please help me. I need some help.”

“One moment please,” the dispatcher said. The wait was unbearable.

“Damn you, my niece and nephew have been kidnapped. Something’s happened. Please help me!”

“Calm down, lady. I can’t help you if you’re gonna bite my ear off. Let’s start with some names and addresses here, all right?”

After giving the dispatcher an earful, she hung up the phone and fell back onto the couch. The reality of the situation began to sink in. The grogginess in her head dissipated and left her with clear terror. She had done this—this terrible thing. And whatever happened to her brother’s kids would be all her fault. The police assured her they would be right over, that she should stay put.

Della ran to the bathroom and rummaged through the medicine cabinet, this time emptying an entire bottle of pills into her hand. She didn’t even bother to look at the label. Whatever she was taking, it wasn’t going to be potent enough to help her face what lay ahead.

An hour later, her brother and sister-in-law arrived; the police had long gone. They had returned from the hospital with Mark and Stacy—Mark’s arm stitched and wrapped—only to find Della nearly passed-out on the couch.

Della barely made out the words as both her brother and his wife screamed at her. “Bitch, how dare you, you ungrateful, lazy tramp!” More curses, words accompanied with spittle. She saw and heard them in a haze. The accusations floated past her. Della found it amusing to see their polished manners fall by the wayside. They were giants looming over her, pelting her with anger. Their anger took grotesque shapes, gigantic fur-balls, which rolled off her and onto the floor.

She started to laugh.

Her sister-in-law suddenly stopped yelling and stared.

“Edward, she’s flipped,” his wife whispered. “Look at her eyes. She’s on those damn drugs again! God help us!”

“Fur balls,” Della muttered, then laughed again.

“Edward, why is she talking about her cat!?” Margaret screeched.

Edward noticed his children standing in the hall, watching and listening. He reined in his anger. “Get ready for dinner, kids. Go into the kitchen. I’ll be right there.” He waited until the children left the room, then turned to his sister, who was still sprawled on the couch. Della kept chuckling, tears running down her face. Edward spoke with quiet restraint.

“This is the last straw, Della. You hear me? I’ve put up with your . . . lifestyle for too long. I’ve tried to be patient—God knows I’ve tried. But this is it. Tomorrow, you’re out. You’re on your own.”

Margaret pulled at his sleeve. “Edward, look at her. Shouldn’t we get her to a doctor?”

Edward blew up. “If she wants to kill herself, it’s fine with me! I’m through with this! I’m goddamn tired of being responsible for her. Jesus, she’s thirty-three and I have a family to take care of here. I don’t need this!” He stormed out of the room and his wife followed.

Della lay for what felt like an eternity, floating in the dark. She became aware of the quiet in the house, realizing she had fallen asleep again. By now everyone had gone

to bed. Quietly, groping for furniture, she edged her way back to her room and found the phone.

“Daniel,” she spoke softly. “It’s me, Della. I need to see you.”

“Jesus, Della,” he whispered. “I thought I told you not to call my home number unless it was life or death.”

“I know. It is. I screwed up today. I really blew it . . .”

“Can’t this wait until tomorrow? Don’t we have a session at ten?”

“Yes,” Della whined. “But can’t I meet you tonight? I need you.”

“Della.” The voice on the line hesitated. “I thought we discussed this. I thought we decided to keep to the schedule.”

“Oh, Daniel, don’t do this to me. I’m a mess. I’ve taken pills. Too many pills. Please!” She knew she was begging but couldn’t help herself.

“You always take pills. Until you get a handle on the drugs, Della, I just can’t see you outside the office. Have you been listening to the tapes? They should help you relax.”

“Dammit, I don’t need the damn tapes, I need you. I need to feel you touch me and kiss me. Hold me . . .”

“Della. Enough. Go to sleep, it’s two o’clock. Just sleep and you’ll feel better in the morning. Trust me.”

“But—”

“Good night, Della.”

Della held the receiver for a moment, the dial tone penetrating the stillness of the late night. She then slammed it down and wobbled into the bathroom, turning on the water to fill the tub. Slowly, she undressed, watching herself in the mirror with detachment, then eased into the steaming, hot water.

She was surprised at how soothing such a simple thing like a bath could be. Submerging herself deeper, she felt the joy of that warmth penetrate her weary bones as she gently ran the edge of the razor blade across the crease line of first one wrist and then the other. As the bath water turned from pink to red, the last thing she saw was the white

and gold envelope she had taped to the medicine cabinet become unglued from the curls of steam and flutter down gracefully like a dove from heaven into her placid, wet hands.

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