

LITTLE CRUELTIES

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Chapter 1

1994

My daughter, Daisy, had just been born, and Susan was feeling the strain of new motherhood. I was twenty-five and trying to get a production company off the ground to make short films with my college buddy Gerald, who wanted to direct, but there were money problems, and I sensed that Filmbase would take some persuasion to fund a new company. Mum had lent me some seed money, and Gerald had a generous uncle who helped out financially too. I had rented an office in a city attic and ordered some letterhead on which I was making desperate pleas to the Arts Council, Dublin Corporation, the National Lottery, and any organizations I could think of with money. I was working hard, and then up at night with the baby a lot of the time, and maybe I was more irritable than I should have been, but when I came home in the evenings after a long slog in the office, the last thing I wanted to see was my rock star little brother, sprawled across my sofa, while my wife, still sore from breastfeeding, perched uncomfortably on the dining chair, baby-sick stains on each shoulder, unkempt and exhausted.

In the beginning, I joked with him and pretended to be pleased to see him, because if I couldn't get finance from anywhere else, I was going to have to ask him, though that would be my last resort.

“Luke! Shouldn't you be out somewhere snorting cocaine off a super model's ass?”

Luke was twenty-three. His second album was a massive success. He had toured constantly for three years but was now on a hiatus of sorts. He lived in a big Georgian terrace house on Waterloo Road, bought for cash two years after he dropped out of college to sing in a band. We, on the other hand, were renting a one-bedroom studio apartment nearby with no central heating and unreliable plumbing.

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We were mystified by Luke's stardom. Luke looked waifish with his big eyes and long hair and a thin reedy voice that would have traveled nowhere without amplification. Brian and I were jealous. We were older, and we had worked to pay our way through college, earning respectable enough arts degrees. Luke had surprised us all by getting the results to study engineering but then spent his two years smoking hash by the pond, reading poetry, and rehearsing with the Wombstones. At one point, he attached a collar to a hen and walked it through the campus. All for effect. We never knew where he got the hen or where it ended up afterward.

For some unquantifiable reason, he could attract women. I don't understand how. Women are weird. He could take or leave them and never seemed to be particularly attached to any of them. It got to the stage where I didn't bother trying to remember their names anymore because there'd be a new one along any minute.

When he got famous as a solo act, Luke, he was generous, bringing us all out to join him on tour in London and Lisbon, splashing cash around like it was nothing to him. His name had opened doors for me in the arts scene, but that spring, there had been no tour invites, no lavish awards ceremonies, no rock 'n' roll parties. He'd just turn up at our house in time for dinner, at least twice a week.

That was always the thing about Luke. He couldn't take a hint. He'd sit on our sofa staring at the television, though not appearing to take in whatever program was on. He'd eat the dinner that Susan or I prepared, ignore our baby, and as soon as he was fed, leave without much of a thank-you. Eventually, I brought up the subject of finance and my funding difficulties, but he only nodded and grunted. No offer was forthcoming. I was forced to ask.

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It wouldn't be a loan as such, I said, it would be an investment, and we'd be asking him to compose the music for our film (even though Luke still couldn't read music, and we didn't actually have a film yet, because we had no funding). "It's not really my thing," he said. "Did you ask Brian?"

Brian at this stage was living in Paris. Mum would get an occasional letter from him written on a page torn out of a copybook. If Brian couldn't afford writing paper, he certainly couldn't afford to lend me money.

"Brian? What are you talking about? You know what he's like with money, and I don't think he's even earning that much." I tried to contain my frustration. It was so typical of Luke to be completely unaware and unconcerned. He shrugged and picked up the remote control and changed the TV channel without making eye contact. Susan got up and left the table in disgust.

It took a few weeks after that for me to tell him he was no longer welcome. If I'd done it straightaway, he'd have thought it was about the money, and it was about the money, but it was everything else too. He didn't appear to be showering too often. He brought, literally, nothing to our table, and he sucked the energy out of our home as soon as he entered it.

I didn't see him for most of the rest of that year, though I read in the papers that he was back in the studio recording another album and was then going on tour. I saw this in the Sunday gossip column. I wasn't about to pick up the phone.

Susan wanted that Christmas to be special, but she felt guiltier about Luke than I did. She suggested I invite everyone over for Christmas dinner, and then it would look like he was naturally included. Besides, we wanted to avoid going to Mum's house in Glenageary because she was always much louder and overbearing in her own home than in ours. Brian was home from Paris for a few days and was going to stay with Mum. It was Daisy's first Christmas. We

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had finally won a small Filmbase grant, and things were looking good for us. We were going into production in January for our first short film, *Fear of Life*, and I was planning to announce it over our festive lunch. I rang Luke and left a message on his answering machine. When he hadn't rung back after a few days, Susan dropped a note in his letter box.

He never showed up. We didn't think much of it. It had happened before, that he would drop off the radar for a month or two. We knew from Brian that the tour was on hiatus and that Luke was home in Dublin. Mum was put out that he hadn't called her. She sulked about it, but it was obvious that she hadn't tried to contact him either.

The family was impressed by my news, at first. Mum raised her glass and toasted me. "My son, the next Steven Spielberg!" But then when Brian heard it was a short film, and that it wasn't going to get a cinema release, he was dismissive. "What's the point in making a film that nobody is going to see?" he asked me. He ridiculed the whole project because the actors were friends from my college drama society. Mum argued in my defense that everyone had to start somewhere, and pointedly asked Brian what his career plan was. He responded defensively that he was working in an exclusive school, but Mum dismissed his boasting. "Yes, as a teacher, Brian. It's a little different from being a film producer. Show business is in our blood. You must take after your father."

Brian bristled. "Being a teacher is a very important job."

Still, I felt the need to explain myself, that I had to start small and work my way up, that nobody was going to give a bunch of unknowns ten million pounds to make a feature film. Mum said, "Well, not yet, darling. I'm so proud of you."

Brian said, "Why don't you put Luke in the film?"

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Mum laughed. “Sure, if you want to make a film for teenage girls.” She was sneery about Luke’s success and his teenage fan base. We all were. Mum had always belittled our youngest brother, and we usually joined in. It was a joke to us, that little Luke could be a teenage idol. I was all about making my own name, and I wasn’t going to use my sap of a brother to do so, particularly when he wouldn’t put up any money for it.

Brian helped Susan with the washing-up and played with Daisy. Mum got drunk early, singing aloud to *The Sound of Music* on television. The giant teddy bear that Mum had bought for Daisy sat out on the stairs, as there was no room for it in the living room. But Daisy was fascinated by it and sat at the bottom of the stairs gazing up at it. After my brother and mother left, Susan and I drained the end of the wine and went to bed.

We were awakened at three in the morning by thunderous knocking on the door. Susan sat bolt upright in bed, but Daisy, thankfully, didn’t stir. I threw on my robe, initially worried that it might be bad news but prepared to be furious and to berate whoever had knocked on the door so aggressively.

Luke was standing at the door almost hidden behind a huge doll’s house. “Sorry, I only just finished it, the paint is dry, but it’s still a little sticky. It’s for . . . your little girl.” He placed it in the hallway behind me and then left. It was obvious that he couldn’t remember Daisy’s name. I let him wander off into the dark, because at that hour of the morning I was not prepared to entertain his drunkenness.

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Daisy's eyes shone when she saw it the next day. Susan opened the hinged front of the house, but it came loose in her hand. The roof listed badly on one side, and the windows had rough edges. Daisy picked up a tiny bed and put it in her mouth. There were splinters in the wood, and it reeked of paint fumes. That night, with little effort, we broke it up into kindling and fed it into the fireplace.

A week later, Luke turned up at dinnertime as if the previous six months had never happened. He never inquired about the doll's house, and we chose not to mention it. I asked him how the new album was coming along, but he shrugged and changed the TV channel. We were too old then for me to punch him, but my fists itched.