

LYNDA LaPLANTE

'A SUPERB STORYTELLER' EXPRESS

SLEEPING CRUELTY



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PAN BOOKS



First published 2000 by Macmillan

This edition published 2001 by Pan Books
an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Ltd
25 Eccleston Place, London SW1W 9NF
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.macmillan.com

ISBN 0 330 37027 8

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3 5 7 9 8 6 4

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Typeset by SetSystems Ltd, Saffron Walden, Essex
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

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SLEEPING CRUELTY

LYNDA LA PLANTE was born in Liverpool. She trained for the stage at RADA, and work with the National Theatre and RSC led to a career as a television actress. She turned to writing – and made her breakthrough with the phenomenally successful TV series *Widows*.

Her six subsequent novels, *The Legacy*, *Bella Mafia*, *Entwined*, *Cold Shoulder*, *Cold Blood* and *Cold Heart*, were all international bestsellers and her original script for the much acclaimed *Prime Suspect* won a BAFTA award, British Broadcasting award, Royal Television Society Writers award and the 1993 Edgar Allan Poe Writers award.

Lynda La Plante also received the Contribution to the Media award by Women in Film, a BAFTA award and Emmy for the drama serial *Prime Suspect 3*, and most recently she has been made an honorary fellow of the British Film Institute.

Also by Lynda La Plante

THE LEGACY

THE TALISMAN

BELLA MAFIA

ENTWINED

COLD SHOULDER

COLD BLOOD

COLD HEART

PRIME SUSPECT

SEEKERS

SHE'S OUT

THE GOVERNOR

THE GOVERNOR II

TRIAL AND RETRIBUTION

TRIAL AND RETRIBUTION II

TRIAL AND RETRIBUTION III

TRIAL AND RETRIBUTION IV

To my mother, sweet Flossie

Acknowledgements

MY SINCERE THANKS to Suzanne Baboneau at Macmillan for her constant support and enthusiasm for my work, a friendship I value greatly. Many thanks also go to Hazel Orme, Philippa McEwan, Esther Newberg and Peter Benedek. Thanks also to my agent Gill Coleridge, who steers my career and reins in some of my more erotic writing.

I'd also like to thank the team at La Plante Productions. The rough draft of *Sleeping Cruelty* bounced around the office until it fell into the capable hands of Alice Asquith, head of research, Kate Fletcher, Nikki Smith, Kerry Appleyard and George Weatherill. After testing some of the sequences out on random passers-by, the team found some of my more steamy scenes too hot to handle, so these scenes will be forever left to the imagination! A big thanks to Liz Thorburn, MD of La Plante Productions, 'mother' to us all.

Further thanks to my financial advisor Stephen Ross, who was disappointed not to have been allowed access to the censored sections!

Special thanks to the following for their generous contribution: Juliet Battersby, Bulgari, Hugo Waring for his wine expertise, Professor John Henry at the

Poisons Unit at St Mary's Paddington, the Ritz, the West Indies Tourist Office, British Virgin Islands Tourist Office, French Antilles Tourist Office, the Necker Island Office.

All characters and events in this book are fictional. Any resemblance between them and any real character or event is coincidental; it is not intended and should not be inferred.

PROLOGUE

Summer 1977

THE VILLA was nestled in a hollow cut into the side of a cliff, overlooking the sea. A strange, low, sprawling building, it was shaded by the massive fir trees that surrounded it, almost encroaching on to the small paved patio at the front. The grounds of the house curved upwards steeply so that you could look in through the windows on the top floor. The nanny could tell that the villa must have had another storey at one time, a third floor, high enough to overlook the forest and give panoramic views of the sea and maybe even a glimpse of the beach below.

Though highly experienced, and with tip-top references, she was surprised when she received a call in answer to the advert she had placed in the *Lady* magazine, asking if she could start work immediately before she had met either parents or children. The wages were almost double what she had anticipated, and a first-class ticket and travel expenses were sent from a reputable firm of solicitors in Paris. She was told that her duties would be outlined to her on her arrival. It seemed a wonderful opportunity, and she felt fortunate.

The children's father, a handsome man in his late

forties, had shown her in. He was aloof and rather condescending, especially when she had questioned the weight of the household duties he was expecting her to take on. He spoke slowly, not looking into her face but staring over her head. 'I checked your references. Previously you have been paid a standard rate. I am offering substantially more. Surely it is not asking too much of you to run the household. There will be no interference. I will not be here. I have business commitments in Paris.' He went on to say that he would spend only the odd weekend at the villa but would always give her warning if there were to be any guests and then, if necessary, he would bring staff from his Paris home to cook and assist with the cleaning.

The interview was brief. She felt guilty about even mentioning the household tasks, especially when she saw her luxurious quarters: a huge bedroom with vast wardrobe space and *en-suite* bathroom. What a change from her London bedsit! She looked forward to spending days on the beach with the children and perhaps going for rambles and picnics.

No sooner had she unpacked, showered and changed ready to meet her charges than she heard a car departing. He had not even introduced her to his children. There was a sound at her door, a child's knock. It opened and there they were. The children stood together, sweet and shy. They shook her hand, welcomed her with downcast eyes and, as if rehearsed, said they hoped she would enjoy working at the villa. They looked so vulnerable that she was fired with enthusiasm to make the most of this job.

As she got to know them over the next few days, however, they began to make her feel uneasy, some-

times downright scared. Both children were astonishingly beautiful, but their faces were chillingly devoid of emotion and their wide, clear blue eyes oddly expressionless. Both had ash blond hair, bleached white by the sun. Their slender bodies had a golden tan, and for two such young children they were remarkably clean and poised. She soon realized they were both neurotically fastidious about their clothes. Though she was only eight, the girl changed numerous times during the day. The nanny also noticed that she washed her hands and face repeatedly. The boy, at ten, was just as meticulous about his appearance. But there was nothing feminine about him. He had an unusually mature masculinity, giving the nanny sidelong glances when he thought she wasn't looking. If she caught his eye, he would give a slow adult smile.

The nursery was always tidy, the toys lined up with military precision. They made their beds without having to be told, and asked for fresh sheets and pillow-slips every two days. The amount of washing and ironing ensured that the nanny's working day stretched well into the evening. When she questioned them, it soon became clear that they had not been forced into this disciplined lifestyle. It was how they liked it, they said in unison. They were always whispering and giggling together but fell silent when she approached. They ate sparingly, simple food with lots of salads and vegetables. She presumed the menus had been established by their previous nanny. But when she asked, they changed the subject. Once they spoke briefly of their mother, who had died two years before, they said, in the villa, in a fire. They didn't seem distressed, just stated the fact, then asked if she would like to come swimming. She

agreed to meet them in the garden as soon as she had put on her swimsuit.

They were waiting for her, but not in their swimsuits. They were still dressed. The boy strolled ahead, the girl took her hand and led her towards the pool. 'Dive in,' she piped.

The nanny was puzzled that the pool should be in such a shaded area, and from where she stood the water appeared murky. But the children told her again to dive in.

'Go on, close your eyes,' said the little girl. 'I'll guide you right to the edge.'

The nanny's toes were gripping the edge of the pool when she looked, *really* looked, at the water. It was infested with wasps and bugs, a seething, green, moving carpet. She was so shocked that she almost lost her balance as the children ran away, laughing.

Later she served them supper and watched them get into their beds before returning to her own room to read. The heat was oppressive and when she opened a shutter to let in some air, she was taken aback to see the children in a dark corner of the garden. The little girl, wearing a white nightdress, dragged a large doll with curly blonde hair, behind her. The boy pointed at the ground with a spade. In silence, she watched the children until they came back inside. Then she went out to see what they had been doing. Handmade crosses marked what appeared to be a row of graves. One cross, made from rough twigs and bound with string, had a piece of pink writing-paper pinned to it, with the word 'Papa'.

The following morning as she served them breakfast, she mentioned that she had seen them playing. The boy

pushed his plate to one side. 'You must have been dreaming. We were in bed.'

'Yes,' said the girl. 'We always do as we're told. We weren't outside.'

The nanny didn't want to make an issue of it, but after breakfast was cleared away, she went in search of the garden graves and discovered they had gone.

She was frightened. She knew she hadn't imagined it.

She tried to be cheery and inject some fun into their strict lives, but they weren't interested. They didn't want to go to the beach, or for walks. They preferred to sit together, reading or whispering. Their routine remained the same day after day, and she felt like an intruder in their world. She hoped their father would return one weekend.

No one ever came to the villa. There were no calls, there was no mail. The groceries were delivered on Friday, so she had no need to go to the nearest village. She was pleased when she saw the deliveryman roar up the drive. But he seemed in a great hurry to get the receipt signed and leave. He didn't even turn off the van's engine. 'Did you know the children's mother?' she asked, as he laid the carbon paper between the receipt and copy.

He shook his head. 'She burned alive, up there.' He used his chewed ballpoint pen to point to the flat roof of the villa. 'It used to have another storey – that's why the roof is flat.' His face glistened with sweat as he then leaned close. 'No one stays there now, not for more than a few days anyway. He stays away for months at a time, the father. He hates it here.'

'But what about the children?'

The deliveryman gave her a strange look. 'They're the reason no one stays. It was them that started the fire they reckon. They're . . . not normal.'

Later when she entered the nursery she found them lying side by side, their arms entwined around each other, whispering. They parted quickly and fell silent, as if annoyed by her intrusion.

'This afternoon we're going on a picnic,' she said. 'Which would you prefer, the beach or the heath? You choose.'

As if on cue there was a clap of thunder and heavy raindrops began to fall. The children giggled.

'Ah, well,' said the nanny, 'maybe tomorrow. These storms never last long. Let's see what's on the television.'

She turned on the set, but it was crackly and unwatchable, so she offered to play a game with them, but none of her suggestions drew so much as a flicker of interest. The two children sat, hand in hand, dead-eyed, until she became angry with her own inability to cajole them into animation.

'Why don't you want to play?' She couldn't stop her voice rising. 'Have you ever played like normal children? What on earth is the matter with you both? Stop looking at each other and look at me. *Look at me!* Now, tell me what's the matter. You behave as if you hate me.'

The boy kicked at a chair leg. 'We don't hate you,' he said. But he had a strange smile on his face.

'No, we don't hate you,' piped up his sister.

The nanny took a deep breath. 'Are you like this because of your mother? Because of what happened to her?'

The children held each other's gaze for a long time, as if having a silent conversation. Then the boy eased away from his chair and crossed to her. Reaching for her hand, he began to stroke it. His skin felt almost silky. He pressed his body closer and closer to her as if wanting to slip his arms around her waist. She found it moving, as if he was trying to comfort her.

Apparently encouraged by her brother, the girl crossed and hugged the nanny's knees, so tightly that she could feel the child's hot breath against her thighs. Suddenly her joy turned to panic as she realized that this was no show of juvenile affection.

The boy was easing up her skirt, his small hands rhythmically stroking her thigh, as his sister's hot breath centred at her crotch. Just as the boy's hand reached for her breast she pulled away. 'Stop this,' cried the nanny, standing and smoothing her skirt. '*Stop this right now.*'

They looked up at her, puzzled.

'But you said you wanted to play with us,' said the boy petulantly. Then he punched her in the stomach while his sister sank her teeth into her hand. The nanny let out a yelp of pain. The children responded with high-pitched shrieks of delight.

'Get away from me,' screamed the nanny. '*Stop this.*'

She ran to her room. She put a call through to Paris, to their father. He was curt, dismissive, and did not question her reason for wanting to leave. He asked if she would please remain at the villa for that evening until he had made alternative arrangements. The nanny stayed in her room, packing her suitcases, not wanting to face either child again. She was ashamed that she couldn't deal with them but she knew that someone far

more experienced than her would have to unravel their psyches.

As dusk drew in she went into the kitchen and made up a tray of cold chicken and salad for herself, leaving the children's food laid out on the table. She could hear no sounds from the nursery, and was unsure if they were inside the villa or not. Then she returned to her room and locked the door. The rain lashed down: the storm had returned.

Later that night she awoke to a loud bang. The thunderclaps seemed to be centred on the villa itself. She moved around the house, checking doors and windows. A light was showing beneath the nursery door. She paused to listen, then bent down to peer through a crack in the door. An eye peered back at her and she straightened up fast as a high-pitched laugh echoed across the corridor.

She made her way to the master bedroom suite. The room was in darkness. The furniture was oak, as oppressive as the night itself, and a wardrobe door hung open. She looked inside. Rows of shirts, suits, trousers, racks of ties and handmade shoes, bottles of cologne with silver-backed hairbrushes were neatly lined up in open drawers.

She jumped in fright as a loud bang came from the bathroom. The shutters had come loose. Standing in a puddle on the blue and white tiled floor, she reached out to close them. At that moment the lights went out. She groped around for the switch. It must be a power cut. She found a hand towel and knelt to mop up the water – she didn't care that she was using a pristine white towel to dry the floor. Whoever had the misfor-

tune to work here after her could deal with it. She was glad to be leaving. She wrung out the towel into the bath. Then she froze.

A sound came from above her, from the flat roof. It was as if something was being dragged across it, like a heavy, unwieldy sack. Frightened, she listened and, still carrying the sodden towel, she left the bedroom. On the landing outside she listened again, looking upwards. She wondered if perhaps an animal had jumped on to the roof. But as she could hear nothing, she hurried along the corridor to her own room, went in and closed the door behind her.

Then she heard the sound again, coming from directly above her room. She stepped out into the corridor again. Looking up, she inched towards the old staircase that once led up to the third floor, but now terminated at a bolted wooden trap-door.

A sudden flash of lightning momentarily flooded the corridor with a bluish light, but the staircase to nowhere remained dark and shadowy.

‘What’s happening?’

The voice came from behind her and she spun round. Both children stood there hand in hand.

‘There’s something on the roof,’ she screamed. ‘There’s something *up there on the roof.*’

At that moment the lights flickered on. She felt foolish, standing barefoot in just her bra and slip. ‘Didn’t you hear it?’ she asked lamely. ‘It sounded as if someone, or something, was trapped up there.’ She looked into their impassive faces. ‘I’m sorry if I frightened you, but I was scared.’

The two children stared in silence.