

# LITTLE WHITE LIES

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First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Orion Books,  
an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd  
Orion House, 5 Upper Saint Martin's Lane  
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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

ISBN (Hardback) 978 1 4091 4247 8  
ISBN (Trade Paperback) 978 1 4091 4248 5  
ISBN (Ebook) 978 1 4091 4249 2

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## **Godmothers**

*'Always a godmother, never a mother. That sucks.'*

Courtney Cox

## PROLOGUE

✧ 2013 ✧

Martha's Vineyard, Cape Cod, USA

She lay on the ground with her cheek pressed flat against the Persian rug, her mouth stirring sporadically, as if she were about to speak. Her hands were tightly balled fists at her sides and her breathing was laboured and shallow. Outside, amidst the muffled noise of running feet and barking dogs, a child cried out, one of the boys – David, perhaps, or Joshua? She couldn't tell. Whoever it was, he was hurriedly picked up and hushed. It was nearly six p.m. and the hard, high ball of fire that was the sun had started slipping towards the horizon. It was only May but already the days were long and hot. A week ago, just before her guests arrived, she'd ordered the covers off the swimming pool. Every morning, the servants unfurled the large white patio umbrellas and plumped up the blue-and-white striped cushions, making the shimmering turquoise pool the centre of the day's activities. Every day, including today. *Today*. Her skin began to crawl.

For the hundredth time, her mind skittered over the hours that had passed since that morning, trying to make sense of it all. The day had begun like every other day. She'd gone out early, just as dawn was breaking, drink in hand – orange juice, with the barest splash of vodka – just enough to get the day going. She'd dipped her feet in the heated water at the shallow end, enjoying the early morning quiet. Toys, the debris of games begun and abandoned, lay scattered around the grey birch decking that ran all the way around the house. *Toys. Children's toys*. At the thought of the toys, her lips began to tremble all over again. She moved her head a fraction and the rich, dense colours of the carpet rose up to meet her half-closed eyes. Yellow: *pomegranate, chamomile, egg-yolk*. Red: *blood, wine, burgundy, ruby*. Black: *walnut, bark, night*. It was a beautiful carpet. Large and soft, it stretched from one end of the study to the other. Expensive, too. She'd lied to Adam about the price, of course, knocking off a few thousand dollars, though she'd no reason to – it was *her* money, after all. But Adam was so unpredictable these days, especially where money was concerned. Her stomach gave a horrible, twisting lurch. Oh, God, Adam. He would be back from New York any minute now. What would Adam say? He would blame her, of course. Everyone blamed her and why the hell shouldn't they? It was her fault. She was to blame, no one else.

Her mind began to wander uncontrollably again, darting back and forth over the day's events but without any sense of order. *When* did it happen? Before or after breakfast? After she'd come in from the pool? Had she *really* told Clea to take a break? 'No, no, *you* have an afternoon off, Clea. I'll look after them. Come *on*, five kids . . . it's not rocket science!'

She'd grinned at her. Clea. Lovely Clea, the cousin of one of the girls who worked for the Lowensteins, her neighbours. Betty Lowenstein introduced them soon after Tash arrived; she'd hired her on the spot. She seemed so nice. And so capable. It was *she*, Tash, who wasn't capable.

*You've got to get up.* Her own voice. She tried to lift her head. It felt wobbly, as though it wasn't properly attached. Footsteps approached suddenly; someone was coming up the stairs. Heavy. A man's tread. It must be the inspector. No, not inspector, detective. Wasn't that what they called inspectors over here? Detectives? Officers? Sergeants? No idea. The steps slowed and he came to a stop. She could hear his breathing through the door. She held her own breath. *Please don't come in. Not yet.* A minute spooled slowly by, then another, and another. She waited. Just when she thought she might scream at him to go away, she heard him turn away. She exhaled very slowly, the breath leaving her body in short, sharp gasps. He was wary of her; she'd sensed it straightaway. Something in the way he couldn't quite hold her gaze, despite the seriousness of the occasion. His eyes kept slipping away from her, to the cars parked in the driveway, the enormous house, the works of art, the furniture and the Persian rugs and the servants who kept flitting in and out like lost bees. She knew exactly what he was thinking. *Rich bitch.* Rich, foreign bitch. The line dividing the residents of the luxurious holiday homes along the water's edge from the working class who lived in Edgartown was clear. *Them and us. Rich and poor. The idle and working classes.* But he knew nothing. He knew nothing about her, where she'd come from, what she'd done. He had no idea. And, idle or not, rich or not, the absolute worst had come to pass. Tragedies can happen anywhere, to anyone. She, of all people, should have known that.

He walked down the stairs, his heels clipping out a sharp, crisp rhythm that slowly faded to silence. Somewhere on the ground floor a door opened; there was an exchange of voices but she couldn't hear what was said. There was the short, staccato burst of a walkie-talkie or a radio. A car swept into the driveway, scattering gravel; the dogs barked wildly. More voices. The house was beginning to fill up with people. More police. She struggled upright. Her knees and hands were shaking; her mouth was bone dry. It was time to call Rebecca.

# PART ONE

## **Teenagers**

*'Adolescence: a stage between infancy and adultery.'*

Ambrose Bierce

**Tatiana Bryce-Brudenell**

Chelsea, London

Looking at herself in the tiny bathroom mirror with the sort of anxious concentration that only teenagers can muster, seventeen year-old Tash Bryce-Brudenell carefully examined herself. Things weren't looking good. Mousy brown hair pulled back into a ponytail (a style she'd sported since the age of six); pale blue eyes (set much too far apart); short, barely-there eyelashes (blonde, not brown, highlighting their sense of absence even further). At least her skin was reasonably clear – a few spots, a few freckles – not as bad as some of the girls in her class. Not Annick, though. Or Rebecca. She sighed. What kind of malicious deity had made *her* so goddamn plain and her two best friends so goddamn pretty? She had no answer.

She soldiered grimly on, baring her teeth in an approximation of a smile. She grimaced. Her teeth were dreadful – too many, too long, too crowded, too crooked. Smile *only* when absolutely necessary. Chin? Weak, but at least it wasn't receding. She'd been lucky there, she supposed. She'd never met her father but in the few photographs her mother had shown her, he had an unmistakably receding chin. She turned slowly sideways. Her nose now came into its problematic own. It was large and long with an uncomfortably high bridge that made it difficult to keep her glasses on. Another typical Bryce-Brudenell feature (or so her mother said).

'Tatiana?' Her mother's voice came barrelling through the door. '*Chto ty tam delaesh?* What you doing in there?' As ever, Lyudmila said everything twice, once in Russian and then (as if Tash didn't understand) in English.

'Nothing,' Tash yelled back unconvincingly. 'I'll be out in a second.' She hurriedly turned on the taps.

*'My sobiraemysya byt' pozdno. We gonna be late.'*

We're going to be late, not we gonna be late, Tash automatically mouthed the correction to herself. Not that Lyudmila would take any notice. She'd lived in England for almost twenty years but her voice, syntax and grammar had lost none of their throaty Russianness.

'What you *doing* in there?' Lyudmila asked again, exasperated. Hers was a voice that could penetrate lead.

'I'm *coming*,' Tash hissed. She rinsed her hands and yanked open the door. 'What's the bloody rush?' Her eyes narrowed suspiciously as she surveyed her mother. Lyudmila was dressed as though ready to go out – a long, floor-sweeping fur coat, that, although it had clearly seen better days, was still impressive; black high-heeled boots and a soft black beret

over her blonde, waist-length hair. Almost every penny of the meagre allowance that came through every month from the Bryce-Brudenell family solicitors in Edinburgh was spent on clothes – Lyudmila’s, not Tash’s. Lyudmila spent *more* than enough on Tash’s school fees, she lamented. Daily. ‘Why you not ready, *milyí?*’ she asked, impatiently tugging on her gloves.

‘Ready? What for?’ Tash frowned. ‘Are we going somewhere?’

Lyudmila rolled her eyes. ‘*Milyí*, I *told* you. We have invite. Lady Soames invite us. You and me. We must to go *now*.’

Tash groaned. ‘Oh, God, Ma, no! Not Lady Soames! Why do *I* have to come? No one’ll even notice if I’m not there. Why don’t you go by yourself?’

Lyudmila shook her head firmly. ‘*Nyet*. I promise her you coming. Hurry up, *milyí*. You know she doesn’t like it when we late.’

‘When we *are* late,’ Tash corrected her sulkily.

Lyudmila shrugged. ‘Is. Are. No difference. Come. Where is coat?’

‘Where I left it.’ Tash sighed. She followed her mother reluctantly down the corridor. Lyudmila was up to something; she could tell by her excited, distracted air.

‘*Milyí*, why you always so *nepriyatno?*’ Lyudmila paused to view her reflection in the mirror before opening the front door. *Nepriyatno*. Disagreeable. It was her favourite word, especially when dealing with her daughter.

‘Because that’s the way you made me,’ Tash said, tightening her ponytail defiantly.

‘Not true,’ Lyudmila said calmly. ‘I try everything make you nice girl.’ She opened the cupboard door and pulled out Tash’s coat, a sensible black woollen schoolgirl number. ‘Okay, here is coat. Come. We late.’ She marched ahead.

*We are late*, Tash mouthed silently, crossly. She followed her mother disconsolately out the door.

‘Taxi!’ Only in Lyudmila’s mouth could the word come out as ‘*texy*’. A black cab on the opposite side of the road, spotting the long blonde hair and fur coat, turned immediately and screeched to an abrupt halt.

‘Where to, love?’ The driver looked Lyudmila appreciatively up and down. Tash hung back instinctively.

Lyudmila grasped the door handle and climbed in. ‘Christchurch Street. You know where is it?’

‘Christchurch Street? What . . . the one round the corner?’ The driver sounded disbelieving. Tash’s face began to burn.

‘Yes.’

‘You’d be quicker walking, love.’

‘I like drive.’ Lyudmila pulled out her compact and started powdering her nose. For a second, Tash caught and held the driver’s incredulous gaze. She looked away. He pulled out into the traffic without a word.

‘*Milyí*, be nice today, hmm?’ Lyudmila turned her attention away from her own face just briefly. She reached across and tucked a stray lock of lank hair behind Tash’s ear. Tash only just resisted the temptation to smack her hand away.

‘Why?’

‘Because.’ Lyudmila answered cryptically.

Tash turned her face back to the window. Yes, her mother was definitely up to something. She caught a glimpse of her own reflection. She looked down at her hands. It wasn’t easy being Lyudmila’s daughter, especially not her *ugly* daughter.

‘Lyudmila! How *lovely* to see you, my darling! What a surprise! Do come in! Come in. It’s absolutely *perishing* outside! And here’s the lovely little Tatiana. How *splendid* of you to come! You know the way, of course you do!’ Lady Pamela Soames stood in the hallway, practically (and inexplicably) rubbing her hands in glee. She looked like a cross between a sumo wrestler and a poodle, Tash thought to herself uncharitably. How on earth could it be a *surprise* when she was clearly expecting them? And who in the world would ever call her ‘lovely’ – or, even more ludicrous, ‘*little*’? Her height was the only thing she’d inherited from her mother. At seventeen she was nearly six feet tall. ‘How *are* you, darling?’ Lady Soames looked up at her indulgently.

‘Who? Me?’ Tash scowled down at her and was rewarded by a sharp prod from Lyudmila.

‘Teenager,’ Lyudmila said helplessly, making it sound like a terminal illness. ‘What I can do?’

‘Oh, don’t I know it,’ Lady Soames said conspiratorially, tucking her arm into Lyudmila’s as she led them towards the conservatory. ‘It’s a dreadful time, absolutely dreadful. For *all* concerned.’ She lowered her voice. ‘Now, listen, darling. I’ve asked Rupert to come downstairs but he’s a bit reluctant, I’m afraid. You know what they’re like at his age.’

Tash stopped dead in her tracks. Rupert? Rupert was Lady Soames’ eldest son. So *that* was why she’d been dragged along. Oh, Christ. Lyudmila was playing matchmaker. A wave of embarrassment washed over her. She could have *killed* her! Wasn’t it enough that she had to endure the pitying glances of all Lyudmila’s friends? Did she have to endure their sons’ sniggers as well? She glared daggers at her mother’s rapidly disappearing back. Not that Lyudmila would notice. Or care.

‘So what’s he like?’ Annick was eager to hear all the details. It was half-past ten and the most embarrassing day of Tash’s life was finally drawing to a close. ‘Is he good-looking?’

Tash snorted derisively. ‘God, no! He’s about half my size.’ She wedged the phone between her chin and neck, attempting to talk and paint her toenails at the same time. ‘And he’s got ginger hair. He’s repulsive, actually. Besides, I don’t *want* a boyfriend, and even if I *did*, I’m hardly going to ask my *mother* for help. I’m perfectly capable of getting one on my own. *If* I wanted one. Which I *don’t*.’ She enunciated her words clearly, keen for Annick to get the point.

‘Darling, if we wait for you to sort yourself out in that department, we’ll be waiting forever. You’re so bloody picky.’

‘I am not. Besides, I’d rather be picky than a slut.’ She grimaced. ‘Sorry. Didn’t mean that.’

‘Yes, you did. Anyhow, we’re not talking about me. Can we get back to the subject, please?’

‘There *is* no subject. He came downstairs, took one look at me and fled.’

‘Oh, Tash! He did *not*! You’re making it up.’

‘I’m *not*. You should’ve seen his face. I’d just stuffed a scone in my gob and a bit of cream oozed out, so I scooped it up with my finger and licked it off in front of him. He nearly *died*. His mother looked at me as though I’d gone mad. It *was* funny, though. You should’ve seen Ma’s face. Anyway, I’d better go. I’ve still got that history essay to finish. Have you done yours yet?’

‘Nope.’

‘Er, it’s due tomorrow.’

‘Yeah, I know.’

‘You hassle me about boyfriends and I hassle you about homework. How does that *not* make you a slut?’

‘Yeah, all right, point taken.’

‘I’d better get on with it, then. You’d be advised to do the same.’

‘I might. I’ll see how I feel.’

‘Fine, you’ll get an ‘F’. See you tomorrow.’

‘Mmm.’ Annick sounded about as interested in her essay as Tash had been in Rupert Soames. ‘Meet you outside the gates at nine.’

Tash put down the phone and lay back against the pillows and held out her hand. She looked at the tattoo nestling in the fold between her thumb and first finger. It was almost healed. A week earlier, she, Annick and Rebecca had walked past a tattoo parlour on the

way home from school. Without saying a word, they'd all stopped in front of it. They looked at each other.

'Should we?' Tash, always the ringleader, spoke first.

'God, my mum'll *kill* me.' That was Rebecca, of course.

'Scaredy-cat.' Tash looked at Annick slyly.

'I'm not scared. Anyhow, you have to be eighteen.'

'Nothing that a tenner won't solve. Come on. Let's do it.'

And that was it. Tash was right. The money miraculously solved the minor issue of being under age. The bloke wielding the tattoo gun was too busy staring at Annick to care, in any case. They exited the shop half an hour later, each looking a little paler than before, holding a little wad of cotton wool over their bleeding hands. They'd chosen the design together – a thin blue triangle, enclosed in a circle. 'Best friends forever, huh?' The tattoo artist grinned approvingly at his handiwork on Annick's hand.

'Yup.' They all spoke at once. The triangle had been Tash's idea, the circle enclosing it, Rebecca's. Annick was concentrating fiercely on not crying. Amazing how something barely the size of a ten pence piece could hurt so much, she said weakly. Lyudmila nearly fainted when she saw it, as did Aunt Mimí, Rebecca's mother. Annick's mother hadn't seen it yet and probably wouldn't notice it anyway. Poor Annick. Her parents were barely there, and when they were, their attention was always claimed by someone else, someone more important.

She smiled, tracing the still-puckered flesh with her other hand. She rolled over onto her stomach, burying her face in her pillow. She didn't like lying to anyone, least of all Annick. The afternoon hadn't been quite as funny or as entertaining as she'd made out. Lyudmila and Lady Soames disappeared as soon as Rupert finally came down, leaving the two teenagers locked together in an agony of sullen resentment. Every so often, a tinkling laugh could be heard down the corridor, making the silence in the drawing room even more acute. Rupert looked at his shoes. Tash looked down at her hands. The silver tray of scones and tea lay untouched in front of them. Tash racked her brains for something to say.

'So what's Eton like?' she asked finally.

He looked up. His expression hovered somewhere between boredom and disgust. 'S'alright,' he muttered.

Tash felt a rush of feeling at the tip of her nose; any second now it'd turn red and shiny and she'd burst into tears. She forced herself to look away. 'D'you want some tea?' she asked after a moment.

'No.' There was another monumentally awkward silence. Then he jumped to his feet as if he'd been bitten – or possibly shot. 'Look, I'd better go. I've forgotten something—' He practically ran from the room. Tash opened her mouth to say something – *anything* – then snapped it firmly shut. The drawing room was quiet. She looked around her slowly and poured herself a cup of tea. In a sudden flash of inspiration, she poured a second cup and drank that as well. Then she polished off the scones, every last one. When the adults returned half an hour later, two empty cups sat side by side on the tray. Not even a dollop of cream remained.

‘Did you enjoy yourselves?’ Lady Soames said, beaming. ‘Where’s Rupert?’

‘Oh, what a shame! You just missed him. He’d forgotten something. Some homework he hadn’t done or something.’ It was half true. She saw Lyudmila glance at the teacups and give a small, self-satisfied smile. Two empty cups. Job done. She beamed at Tash. Tash blinked slowly and looked away.

**Annick Betancourt**

Mayfair, London

Several miles and a entire world away from Tash's cramped little basement flat, in her own enormous, empty apartment overlooking Hyde Park, Annick Betancourt sat down and opened the history book she'd been half-heartedly thumbing through before the phone call. She struggled to concentrate. *How far was Henry VII's government threatened by rebellions in the years 1485 to 1509?* The problem with the question – as with most history questions – was that she didn't actually care. She found it hard to summon up any kind of enthusiasm for things she had absolutely no interest in . . . and therein lay the problem. Although she wasn't the *only* girl at St Benedict's Sixth Form College who wasn't academically inclined, she was certainly one of its most high profile. In a school filled with the offspring of rock stars and royalty, Annick Betancourt was both. Her father, the handsome, charismatic Sylvan Betancourt, was the president of Togo (not that anyone knew where Togo was). Her mother, the gorgeous, glamorous Anouschka Malaquais, was a *bona fide* film star. Rarely a day went by in her native France without some mention of her in the press. She was perhaps lesser known in Britain for her roles than her robes, but Annick had long got used to the sight of her mother's face staring back at her from the cover of *Hello!* With two such illustrious parents it was inconceivable that their only child should turn out to be a dunce. But that was exactly what had happened. When it became known that Annick Betancourt would, in all likelihood, fail her A-levels, the school suggested (perfectly nicely) that she might perhaps be better off somewhere less, er, *stringent* in its pursuit of academic excellence. Anouschka immediately flew from Lomé to London (via Paris and the haute couture shows, of course), to protest. In person. As the excited girls whispered to each other afterwards, the headmaster was so overcome at the sight of Anouschka Malaquais-Betancourt, all high heels, flowing blonde hair and the unmistakable whiff of power and wealth that clung to her like perfume, that he immediately capitulated. Annick stayed on. Annick herself wasn't sure whether to be pleased or annoyed. She was relieved *not* to have to leave – that would have meant leaving Tash and Rebecca behind – in itself an *unthinkable* prospect. Between St Benedict's and the Hyde Park apartment, she had little else to call 'home'. Her father spent most of his time in Lomé, the Togolese capital, where she holidayed once a year – twice, if she were lucky. Her mother flitted back and forth between Lomé and Paris with the occasional stopover in London if the fashion shows were on. Annick very occasionally joined her at the beautiful Left Bank apartment in Paris for Christmas but it had been several years since she'd spent Christmas anywhere other than at Rebecca's – which was daft because Rebecca was Jewish and didn't celebrate it. Still, Aunt

Mimí always put on the most fabulous lunch for the thirty-odd friends and relatives who always came to Harburg Hall on the day itself – and it sure as hell beat sitting in her own living room, alone or having Christmas dinner with Mrs Price, which was worse.

A sharp tap at the door interrupted her thoughts. She looked up and sighed. It could only be Mrs Price, the housekeeper.

‘Come in,’ she muttered.

‘Everything alright, Annick?’ Mrs Price asked, her eyes quickly sweeping the room. Like a lighthouse, Annick thought to herself irritably.

‘Everything’s fine, Mrs Price,’ she murmured. ‘Just doing my homework.’

‘It’s just . . . I thought I heard you on the phone earlier and I know you’ve got a lot of homework on.’

‘Yeah.’ They both hesitated. Mrs Price was clearly waiting for Annick to elaborate further and Annick was determined not to. Annick always found it difficult. Although the palace in Lomé was stuffed full of servants, Mrs Price unnerved her. She didn’t quite fit the category of servant, at least not in the way the servants back in Togo did, and yet she was definitely *not* a family member. Still, there were times when Annick came home from a particularly bad day at school or she’d been waiting a week for one or other of her parents to call and the only person in the world she had to talk to was Mrs Price. On days like those, instead of going straight to her room, she hung around the kitchen, watching Mrs Price expertly slice onions or roll out a sheet of pastry for a pie and for a few minutes she could pretend she was like all her other friends with a mother to talk to, a father somewhere in the house . . . people who *cared*. Not that her parents didn’t care, she always reminded herself quickly. They lived six thousand miles away and each had a job to do. They were busy people.

‘Well, don’t stay up too late, then,’ Mrs Price said finally, acknowledging defeat.

‘I won’t.’

‘Goodnight.’

‘Goodnight, Mrs Price.’

The door closed behind her. Annick blew out her cheeks and began to tidy her desk. She didn’t like thinking about her parents, especially not before going to bed. At night, without the distraction of traffic outside or the occasional sound of the neighbours, the flat was at its most silent. It was the silence she dreaded. When she went home in the holidays to Lomé or to Paris, the house was always full of noise and laughter, people talking, arguing, debating, shouting. Life flowed around them; it was everywhere, in every visitor, every car that swept up the impressively long driveway; in the noisy, excited chatter of the many servants who lived in the quarters to the rear of the palace . . . noise, *noise* everywhere. In Lomé it was impossible to feel alone. London was the opposite. There were nights she felt as though she were the loneliest person alive.

She shut her eyes tightly, trying to picture them – Maman, Papa and her – sitting in the sunny, spacious *salon de thé* in the apartment on Rue Matignon. As always, she could see herself quite clearly but whenever she tried to focus on her mother or father, the image slipped, becoming fuzzy and unclear. She could picture certain things – the colour of her

mother's hair, especially after a visit to the hairdresser, or the small gold necklace with the three diamond circles that she always wore; her father's dark tweed suits, smelling faintly of cigar smoke and aftershave and the way his beard always showed up dark and bruised under his skin. But not the whole picture. Not the three of them, together, complete. That image stubbornly refused to come. She closed her eyes tightly and tried to think of something else. Anything. No point in ruining another weekend by feeling homesick. Although how could you be homesick when you didn't really have a home?