

# *From The Coin*

## *Cuckoo*

*The cuckoo watches and waits, hidden from sight, for the perfect moment.  
The surrounding trees sway and whisper of the impending betrayal.*

*The cuckoo wouldn't, they say. It's not how a mother behaves.*

*She doesn't listen. She continues to observe a smaller brown bird, which  
flits on its nest buried deep in the hedgerow. A mother's instincts sensing unease.  
Bright blue and glossy eggs nestle side by side beneath it. Precious.*

*The cuckoo's timing must be precise or her plan will fail, leaving her young  
with no home. She is not shirking her duty as a mother, but is fulfilling it the  
only way she knows – by handing over responsibility to a better mother. One who  
will meet her child's every need and answer every cry.*

*A sudden sound, a wail, comes from the edge of the wood.*

*'Please, stop crying,' demands a woman's voice. 'SHUT UP.'*

*Two contrasting pitches – the wail, the woman's voice – wind around the  
tree trunks and along their branches, drowning out the smaller brown bird's  
unhurried, sweet warble.*

*Twigs snap under the woman's feet and tears fall from her eyes as she stum-  
bles into the clearing, holding a bundle of yellow close by her heart.*

*The woman wouldn't, the trees whisper in alarm. It's not what a mother  
does.*

*'Stop. Now. Please. I don't know what you want. I can't do this,' the  
woman pleads to the bundle.*

*The cuckoo watches both the woman and the smaller brown bird from her  
hiding place among the leaves.*

*It is time.*

*The smaller brown bird, agitated by the woman's cries, flies from the nest.*

*They mustn't, whisper the trees. A baby should be with its mother.*

*The cuckoo flies down to the smaller brown bird's nest, and with her beak expels a blue egg, swiftly replacing it with one of her own.*

*And as the cuckoo flies away, leaving her young in an unfamiliar environment that is now its home, the woman puts the bundle of yellow down, and leaves.*

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## *Megan*

Megan found herself carrying Constance deeper into the woods once more. They both knew the routine. Each of Constance's cries came louder and reverberated around the trees as Megan's abused ears searched for other sources of noise. Sounds of leaves dancing in the breeze and of creaking trunks and swaying branches. Noises of animals scuffling, owls hooting, birds singing and the stream hurrying over rocks.

The world was too loud for Megan. Car doors banged. Toddlers cried. People shouted. And her second child, Constance, was the loudest of them all. Her screams had consumed Megan's days and nights since her birth. Then, one evening, she'd wrapped the newly born Constance in layers of yellow blankets and stumbled through the woodland behind their house until they'd reached a clearing. She'd lain Constance down on a dry patch of grass, and walked away.

That initial time, a few weeks ago, had only been for a few minutes, but Constance had screamed louder. Screams sent like missiles to explode in only Megan's ears. Locked on. Finding their target no matter how quickly she tore through the darkness beneath the trees.

The second time was better. Constance lay calmed when Megan crunched back through the leaves. The wood had soothed them both that day, and had continued to do so from then on. No soul disturbed them. No one interrupted their little arrangement.

Tonight was different. Clouds dotted the greying sky and when they

reached the clearing they were not alone. A fox sniffed around the patch of grass where Constance usually lay. It stopped and looked at them and they found themselves in a stand-off. The fox, Megan, and Constance. No one moved, eyes locked, until there was a rustle from the bush ahead and the fox ran away.

Constance's patch of grass was dappled in the last of the day's sunlight and Megan laid her down. She would have to be there for a while today, fox or no fox. There was somewhere Megan had to go. Her best friend Rachel had given birth to a second son, Noah, and it would be rude not to pay them a visit. She lived round the corner and although they usually made the effort to see each other weekly, Megan hadn't seen Rachel for over two weeks.

They'd fallen out and had argued at Rachel's baby shower. Then they'd argued at toddler group, before resorting to arguing by text message, in private messages on Facebook, and direct messages on Twitter. And then they had simply reduced the amount of time they spent together instead of fighting. Rachel still hadn't admitted she was wrong, which infuriated Megan.

Retracing her steps through the trees Megan picked up her bag from inside their garden gate and locked it. Visiting Rachel wouldn't take long, but anxiety had already crept in.

*Constance will be safe in the woods, she told herself. You can't take her with you. She'll let people see that she doesn't like you and that you can't comfort her. She'll be asleep now and calm. She always is. It's okay.*

The trees behind Megan conferred, threatening to expose her. She'd be quicker today. Not as long as planned. Back before the darkness fell.

Megan checked the gate was locked and walked around the corner to Rachel's.

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She was the picture of perfection.

Having only given birth three days before, Rachel was on her sofa looking like she was taking part in a magazine photo shoot. She was made up and in her designer clothes like a footballer's wife about to invite *Hello!*

magazine into her home. Megan's skirt was creased. A stain ran along the buttons on her blouse, making her feel drab.

They sat in the lounge, which looked far too neat and tidy for Megan's liking. Not like her own house where you could always guarantee there'd be Lego on the floor waiting to cause unsuspecting people untold pain. Stepping on Lego was one of the few things that made Megan swear out loud, in front of her children, and not care that she was being a less than perfect mother.

'This is a little something for Noah,' Megan said. 'I know you have stuff from Jimmy, but every baby needs something new.'

The parcel, containing an unused Babygro from Sam, was wrapped in a piece of green tissue paper she'd found lurking in one of her kitchen drawers. Shopping was such an effort these days. She only went in an absolute emergency. Like when she'd run out of chocolate. Or wine.

'Thanks sweetie,' Rachel said and chucked the parcel next to her on the sofa as though it were unimportant. 'Where's Connie?'

'With my mum,' Megan said, and wished she hadn't.

'Your mum?' Rachel tilted her head. 'That's great. I thought she refused to look after the children?'

'Yes. Can't stay long, you know what she's like.'

*Constance is fine, Megan reassured herself. The trees will protect her and soothe her. It's okay. The fox is gone.*

Rachel and Megan had been friends ever since they'd found each other on their first day at secondary school. They were so similar all those years ago, alone and nervous in a new situation, and as teenagers they'd always been on the same page. Yet since their first children had been born things had changed. Maybe it stretched further back than that and the ties that bound them had been eroding for some time, the wear and tear too subtle for them to notice. The falling out they'd had when Megan found a pile of Rachel's credit card bills, all maxed out and overdue, had been messy.

'How are you?' Megan said. 'Getting any sleep?' She could do this, act normal.

'Oh he's been an angel,' Rachel said. 'Sleeping well.' She kissed him on his head, which was resting on her shoulder, his cheek scrunched up and his lips pursed. She had a lot of makeup on, as always, but Megan could see

a tinge more grey under her eyes. She doubted Noah was sleeping well, but knew Rachel would never admit it.

‘Would you like Michael to make you a cup of tea?’

‘No, it’s okay thanks. I really can’t stay long.’ Megan’s heart pounded louder than usual. Was it the fox?

*Constance has always been okay. She will be today. The wood knows what to do.*

Rachel called to Michael to make her some tea and he grunted something about having made a million cups in the last few days. Tea was always expected to quell the anxiety that came with being thrown into the overwhelming world of parenting.

‘And how’s Jimmy?’ Megan said. ‘Does he like his new brother?’

Jimmy was Rachel’s first child. He was five and at school at the moment and had been very unhappy about the thought of another baby coming to live in his house. Megan recalled how he used to say he hated ‘Mummy’s bump’, and hit Rachel’s stomach. It had unnerved her when Rachel laughed it off.

Megan had hit her own stomach when she’d been six months pregnant with Constance. Even then the baby inside her had felt like someone else’s. Shifting position inside Megan like it couldn’t get comfortable. Hands and feet pushing out everywhere like it was trying to claw her way out from inside her womb, as though buried alive.

‘He’s fine,’ Rachel said.

The awkward silences were beginning to infuse Megan’s skin and make her itch to leave.

‘And the labour, okay again this time?’

Rachel’s birth with Jimmy had been textbook, and Megan resented her for it. Her own labours had been traumatic. Sam had got stuck after thirty-six hours of labour and she’d needed a caesarean. Then she’d wanted to do it properly with Constance and push her out like nature intended, but nature had other ideas. Another C-section. A deeper scar. An ingrained sense of being a failure.

‘Megan, why are you here?’ Rachel said, and moved Noah so he rested on her lap. His breathing shuddered in the way it often did in newborns.

Megan’s mouth was dry. ‘What do you mean?’

‘The last time we spoke ...’ She paused and leant forward. She whispered, hissing the words out between her teeth, ‘You said you *knew* about the debt.’ She looked at the lounge door. ‘And that you couldn’t be friends with someone who ...’ She stopped and sat back as Michael came in with her tea.

‘There you are, love,’ he said.

The leaves outside brushed against the window. The wind had picked up. Lucky the clearing was sheltered.

*She’s warm. The trees will hold back the breeze.*

‘Noah is gorgeous, congratulations,’ Megan said.

‘Ah he’s a little dude isn’t he?’ said Michael. ‘Rach wanted a girl this time though, didn’t you, love?’ He walked over and rubbed her shoulder.

She shook her head. ‘You know that’s not true Michael. I was happy either way and Noah is beautiful.’ She kissed the baby again as though this proved her point, then wiped her lipstick from his three-day old forehead with a muslin. She looked in control. Like she had everything sorted and had hit mothering gold.

Megan wanted to vomit. This perfect family picture was wrong. A dog barked outside and the urge to leave gripped the pit of her stomach. She needed out. She’d been gone too long.

It was time to reclaim Constance.