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Cuckoo

Written by Julia Crouch

Published by Headline

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Cuckoo

Julia Crouch

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First published in Great Britain in 2010 by
HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 0 7553 7797 8
Trade paperback ISBN 978 0 7553 7798 5

Typeset in Sabon by Avon DataSet Ltd,
Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and
recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform
to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

An Hachette UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

Aftermath

It could be the scene of a crime, but the real crime happened somewhere else. Nothing is what it had been: everything is cut, or torn, or ripped. Great globs of flesh-coloured paint blight the surfaces; shards of paper curl over edges.

Propped up against the walls are painted repetitions of the same, naked, skeletal form. She is arched, ecstatic, beautiful. And her eyes have been gouged out, stabbed with scissors, sliced with a blade.

It is, in short, a total mess.

One

WHEN ROSE HEARD THAT CHRISTOS HAD BEEN KILLED, SHE didn't think twice: Polly and the boys must come and stay. She and Gareth had the space now, and Polly had been her best friend since primary school. There was no doubt about it: they must come, stay, and let Rose look after them.

The phone call came on the last day of February. Anna and baby Flossie were asleep, and Rose and Gareth had just lit a candle and opened a bottle of wine at the kitchen table. The image of such a nightly routine had been held in their minds throughout the two and a half years they had spent renovating this house in the Wiltshire hills. Now, just one month after they had finally moved in, the vision had been established as firm fact.

The phone echoed across the flagstone floor, breaking into the rural silence they still found a little unnerving. Gareth had wanted a proper, resounding phone bell just like the one he had grown up

with in rural upstate New York. One you could hear wherever you were. He said it signified, for him, a conscious intent, a state of being here by design, rather than by accident. Rose couldn't see how he took it to that conclusion, but a loud bell was practical because they couldn't get any sort of mobile phone reception out where they were, out in the sticks.

Taking her glass of wine with her, Rose went to answer the phone.

'Christos is dead,' was the first thing Polly said.

Rose had to sit down at the window seat, the cold stone freezing into her legs.

'What?' She didn't believe it, of course.

'He's been killed. In a car crash. He was drunk.'

'What's the matter?' Gareth drew his chair over and sat by Rose, holding her hand as she took it all in and fought for air.

Rose thought of Christos, the big bear. Christos was, of everyone she knew – except Gareth and the girls – the last person she could ever imagine not living. He was all about life. Once, knowing she craved scallops when she was pregnant with Anna, he had cooked her a full twelve. 'You must follow your body, because it knows you better than you do,' he had said with his infallible Greek logic. She and Gareth had his paintings all over their house. Bursts of colour, life, sex and food, they lit up the cool interior they had made, clashing beautifully with the restraint and symmetry of Gareth's own, more cerebral, work. They even had one of the most erotic paintings Christos had ever made – of Polly, as it happened – hanging in their dressing room.

'When?' Rose asked. She needed facts to help her take it in.

'Two weeks ago.'

Rose thought she could hear the sound of the sea at the end of the line, crashing onto the stone of the shore. She imagined Polly sitting on the terrace of the house in Karpathos, the one that led

straight onto the beach. She would probably have a large glass of Metaxa in her hand. But then it was February, so she probably wasn't outside. Was it cold in Greece in February? Rose didn't know – she had only visited in the summer, and the last time she had done that had been two and a half years ago. She and Polly hadn't spoken at all for six months, she realised.

But, however long they spent apart, they always seemed to be able to pick up where they left off. Rose and Polly were entwined. They had grown up together; they lived together in their late teens and twenties. They had both married artists, and had surprised each other by both rather unfashionably moulding themselves around their men and their children.

'He always drives too fast on the roads round here,' Polly was going on. 'Thinks he knows them because he was born here. But he doesn't. It's all bollocks.'

'Poor you.' Rose didn't know what else to say.

There was silence. Just the sound of the sea: crash, pull; crash, pull.

Rose put her hand over the mouthpiece and told Gareth the news. Gareth gasped, closed his eyes and collapsed his face into his palms, pressing his fingertips into his brow. He and Christos had been friends once, before Polly. In fact, it was through Christos that Rose and Gareth had met.

Rose went back to Polly. 'How are you?' She tried to hold her own shock and upset back for the sake of her friend. She wasn't as entitled to grieve for Christos as much as Polly.

'We've buried him and I've been wished an abundant life a thousand times by all the aunts and cousins and his bloody mother. We're waiting for the memorial service, then I'm out of here.'

'And the boys? How are they?' Rose had difficulty finding a voice for this. Nico and Yannis were Polly and Christos's two sons. Rose and Anna had spent a fortnight snorkelling and sunbathing with

them, that summer they'd visited, just before the house project had kicked off. Rose remembered Nico, aged seven, surfacing in front of her with a perfect sea urchin shell, his smile as wide as the sandy sweep of bay behind him. Christos's whooping for his son's find reached them across the sparkling sea. Rose thought with a shudder that she should have visited more often. Now there would be no chance of return.

'All I want to do is to touch him,' Polly said. 'And that shocks me. I didn't want to so much before, when I could – but now it's all I can think of. It's like a fire has burned everything.'

'And the boys?' Rose asked again.

'They're too young really to know what it means. They'll realise soon enough, but for now they have no idea of the permanence of it. Fuck.' There was the sound of a glass crashing onto stone.

'I'll come out tomorrow,' Rose offered, catching the warning look Gareth darted at her through tear-rimmed eyes. She knew the minute she said it that the whole idea of dropping everything and taking the baby out to the eastern lip of Europe was ridiculous. Gareth was supposed to be getting back to his work; she was needed to run everything else.

'No,' Gareth mouthed. Despite the painting in the dressing room – which he put up with partly for Rose's sake, and partly because it was an example of Christos's best work – he had never liked Polly. He once said that she gave him the creeps, which was pretty strong for Gareth.

'No. You stay put. Me and the boys are coming back. We're out of here,' Polly said.

'Well then, you must come and stay here,' Rose said, looking directly at Gareth. 'Stay as long as you like.'

Gareth went over to pour himself another glass of wine, his back to Rose.

But what can he say? Rose thought. He'll just have to like it.

Two

IT WAS A LONG PHONE CALL. AFTER SHE PUT THE RECEIVER down, Rose realised that Gareth wasn't in the kitchen any more. She searched the house, but she couldn't find him. Pulling on her Barbour, and slipping her feet into boots, she took a torch and the baby alarm and, still reeling from the news about Christos, still unable to absorb it, she headed off into the moonlight to where she knew he would be.

A slow, deep river ran at the bottom of the field, and beside it stood a big old willow with a flat, smooth stone at its base. Rose had first discovered the spot fifteen months ago, after she had told Gareth she was pregnant.

It had been an accident, the pregnancy – the result of a rather messy topping-out night, when they had farmed Anna out to a friend's house and invited the neighbours round to help them consume a lot of awful local cider. They had hauled a Christmas tree

up onto the rooftop, there was a lot of whooping and dancing, and then everyone staggered home. Andy – Gareth’s brother, who had come over from France and was helping out and camping in the Annexe with them – collapsed in a drunken heap on the floor of the main house. Rose and Gareth covered him with blankets and tiptoed on their own up to the Annexe, where, after a nearly chaste eighteen months of sharing their bedroom with their small daughter, they let all caution fly to the wind.

So it was that, a few weeks later, when Rose did the test and it came out positive, it came as something of a blow. The plan had been that when the house was finished, Rose would find teaching work for the hours Anna was at school. This would take the financial pressure off Gareth, allowing him to pursue the more creative possibilities of his work. While he had enjoyed the practical satisfactions of putting doors up and knocking walls through, he had begun to feel stunted. In order to reboot his work, he needed uninterrupted, unpressured days in his studio – once he had built it.

Rose had known that this new baby would put paid to all that. She also knew that, for many reasons, Gareth had only wanted one child. So, with a chill in her heart, she had gone out to tell him. He was out in the rain, repointing an old stone wall that had been consumed by ivy. When she gave him the news, he jolted as if she had hit him with a stun gun. Then he dropped his trowel, stood up and just walked off.

She had spent ages trying to find him that time. She ran through the fields for a whole wet afternoon, calling out like a madwoman, growing increasingly desperate at how easily their happiness could be punctured. Eventually she found him sheltering under the willow, smoking and staring at the brown swirl of the water.

‘I suppose an abortion’s out of the question, then?’ he had asked, looking up at her.

It was, absolutely. Rose wanted that baby, and despite Gareth

taking to his bed for three days, her pregnancy began to take shape.

‘We can make this work,’ she coaxed, offering him tea on the first day of his retreat, as the perpetual rain battered through the windowless ground floor of their unfinished home. ‘We’ve still got a bit of money, and I’ll give you all the practical support you need.’

Rose knew, from the almost weekly contact that Gareth was getting from the gallery, that there was a demand for his work that his absence had only made stronger.

‘And if you have the right conditions you can really work prolifically,’ she said on the second day, after she and Andy had worked side by side weatherproofing the house by battening blue plastic sheeting from lintel to sill on every gaping window hole.

By ‘right conditions’ Rose meant the light, airy studio that they were making from one of the outhouses. By ‘work prolifically’ she meant churn out more of the same old same old. Gareth didn’t have a leg to stand on with the financial argument. But he had planned a return to his more conceptual roots, and there he was being forced back to the commercial concerns he had tried to escape.

‘It could be perfect, Gareth. Just think, a baby,’ was her offer on the third day, when the first hard frost of what had been up till then a mild, wet winter finally set in.

Gareth eventually managed to get up and back to work on the house, but he wasn’t himself. His reaction had heralded a long and difficult period for them, from which they had now only recently emerged.

Rose had a nagging worry that this news about Christos – and, more specifically, the bit about Polly coming to stay – might kick everything off again. She knew that quick action was needed, so, drawing her Barbour around her, she hurried across the silvery-blue field towards the river. The picture of a laughing, sun-shot Christos hung in her mind so vividly that she reached out for him in the night

air. And that's when it jolted into her that she would never again hear his voice, never touch his skin again. She stopped and held her breath, as the awful fact of his death struck her fully for the first time. For a moment she felt lost, marooned in the middle of the field. If she didn't hold on to herself, she thought she might disappear altogether.

Then she looked up and saw Gareth's willow. Outlined by the moonlight, it looked like a drooping troll in the night. Rose could smell Drum tobacco, and she knew her husband was there. Her bearings recovered, she moved on towards the tree and crept into the tented circle made by what remained of the leaves.

She sat down next to him, joining him in silence.

'Christos. I can't believe it,' he said, his eyes shut.

'No,' she said. 'It's too horrible.'

'He was so . . . ' Gareth looked up at the river with red eyes, searching for words.

'He was your friend.'

'She's had the funeral, I take it?'

'Yes. I'm afraid she has.'

'I would have liked to have been there to bury him.'

'Me too.'

'That woman stole him and kept him to herself.'

'I know, but—'

'She should have told us sooner.'

'Yes.' She put her arm around him. The river flowed on at their feet, filling their silence with the sound of its journey from hill to ocean.

'It's the wrong time for this to happen,' he said finally, digging his boot into some mud at the water's edge.

'I know,' she said, taking his hand.

'We've had the most difficult two years of our lives, and now, just as we're beginning to settle in and start really living this life we

have worked so hard for, we've got to open our doors to that friend of yours and her kids.'

'It's bad timing,' she said.

'Why should we risk it all for her?' he asked, looking straight at her.

'Risk?' she said. 'That's a bit strong, isn't it?'

'It's an invasion.' He threw his dog end in the river.

'Don't be like that.'

'How do you want me to be?'

A breeze ruffled the willow, and they both listened to the rustle and scratch that encircled them.

'But look,' she said. 'We've got the space. We've got the whole big house to ourselves, and Polly and the boys can stay in the Annexe. They'll be entirely separate. They can even cook their own meals. We'll hardly notice they're there.'

The Annexe stood at the front of the property, just off the lane. It had been a glorified chicken coop for decades, and the first job had been to convert it into a comfortable, if basic, bed-sitting room for Rose, Gareth and Anna, with a tiny antechamber for Andy when he came. There was a fairly well-equipped kitchen area – Rose had to be able to provide good fuel for the workers – and a shower room. She had missed soaking in a bath, though.

'And besides, who else do we know with this amount of space to offer?' Rose went on.

It was true. All their other friends lived in London in tiny flats. Or, if they had children, they were in small terraced houses that were bursting at the seams. No one else they or Polly knew had the money for this sort of property. Even from Polly's music business days nobody was left who ticked all three boxes of unwasted, wealthy enough and still living in the UK.

If it hadn't been for the death of Rose's parents, Rose and Gareth wouldn't have been able to afford a big house either. Her father and

mother had gone, one after the other, from, respectively, liver cancer and bowel cancer. Their legacy – the proceeds of the sale of their house in Scotland and a hoard of savings amassed through a result of clever house-buying in the days when that sort of thing had been possible – had been enough to allow Rose, their only child and their great disappointment, to dream a bit. The fact that they had thought to acknowledge her in this way had surprised her. She had expected the money to go to their church, or to a dogs' home, or to distressed gentlefolk. Anywhere other than her.

This old house, The Lodge, which Rose and Gareth had first seen as a ruin with Buddleia growing where the roof should have been, had seemed to be just the stuff of a good dream. They decided to do almost all of the work on the house themselves, partly to stretch the money, and partly for the experience. Gareth had declared that he wanted to do it so that they could truly connect with their home. His enthusiasm was infectious. Once Gareth got something – good or bad – into his mind, there was no holding him back. He liked to see things through. And that was why Rose was determined to nip his objections to Polly coming to stay before they even came into bud.

The moonlight wove into the wind-rippled river and Gareth tugged at a strand of willow.

'It's not possible not to notice Polly,' he said. 'She doesn't exactly blend in.'

'That's why I love her,' Rose said. She looked at Gareth as he stared at the water. A nerve was flickering in his cheek, and his jaw was tense.

'Are you OK?' she asked.

'I'm just tired,' he said.

She sighed. This was his way of telling her to leave him alone. But she wasn't going to do that this time. If she left it, there would be a disaster.

Back in London, when he was like this, he would throw himself into his work. He'd disappear to his studio, only to emerge a couple of days later with two or three pieces which went straight to the gallery.

This approach worked for him, but for Rose, stuck at home alone with Anna, it was less satisfactory. She wished sometimes that they could work things out together, that they could sit and talk about things until dawn, like she imagined other people did. Perhaps if they had done that, the whole pregnancy thing wouldn't have made their lives so difficult. She also wished she didn't have to be the gatekeeper, fending off Gareth's behaviour around Anna, who wondered why she didn't see her daddy.

'But he's at work, love,' Rose would say, and they would go off and bake a cake.

This had been easy in Hackney, where the studio was far away, on the other side of Victoria Park. But in this new house, especially during the build, the work was all tied up with the life. There was nowhere for him to go, and he could infect them all with his downturn. It had happened once already, and she didn't want it to happen again.

'Look, Gareth. Christos, your friend, your old, old friend, is dead. For Christos, can't you see a way?'

'I'm not going to get a say in this, am I?' he said, ripping a Rizla out of the packet and rolling another cigarette.

'We're talking about it now, aren't we?'

'But you're decided. I can see that.'

'If you like, I can phone Polly right back up and tell her not to come,' Rose said. Part of her wanted to do that. She knew that Gareth had a point, that it was indeed the wrong time. But she couldn't fully admit it, not now.

'I just wish we could have discussed it before you said she could stay,' he said.

‘But what else could I do? Polly and I practically grew up together. She’s like a sister to me,’ Rose said, counting the points off on her fingers. ‘We shared everything until we met you and Christos. And now Christos is gone, she’s widowed with two kids, she wants to come back and there’s no one else for them to stay with. I don’t even know if she’s got any money.’

They sat in silence. It was a cold night if you were still. Despite her sensible waxed coat, and the protection of the willow, Rose shivered.

‘Man,’ Gareth said. ‘Christos dead. I can’t believe it. Shit.’

‘I’ll miss him so much,’ Rose murmured.

‘Me too.’

Rose leaned her head on his shoulder.

‘Look. I want us to be together on this,’ she said, after a while.

She didn’t want it to be like her pregnancy, when she had felt as if she were carrying both Anna and the baby on her own. It had been frightening, feeling so alone. The endless work on the house, and the blustery, wet, psychotic English weather seemed to grind Gareth down. He was tall, with big hands, thick hair, and solid legs. But, over that period, he seemed to get smaller and smaller. Rose’s belly had swelled in counterpoint to Gareth’s decline, but she had been determined to pull her not inconsiderable weight on the building work. She remembered aching everywhere. Her tenacious optimism, which usually saw her through anything, had started to desert her.

Everything had begun to seem hopeless, when, unannounced and two weeks early, the baby arrived.

The labour was an unseemly two hours, far too short to get to the hospital. So Andy and Gareth – who had been wrenched from his slough by the pressing nature of the event – delivered her with telephone support from the emergency services.

The minute the baby slipped into his hands, Gareth was smitten.

He declared her to be Flossie – not the prearranged Olivia that Rose had whittled out from all the possibilities. Rose was so relieved at Gareth’s instant transformation that she would have agreed to Weasel or Troutface if that was what he had wanted.

This new joy had taken them through the last stages of the build – the final fixings, the colour schemes and the flooring decisions – into the completed house, where life was ready to begin as an ordered, organised existence. There was a cupboard for everything; shelves displayed only books or the useful and beautiful. They had space, at last. It was so different from cramming their lives into a one-bedroom flat with no garage and no attic as they had done back in Hackney. And this space was special: they had punched and pulled and sweated to create it. Spring was on the way, and the sun would soon begin to warm their bones again. The forecast was for a great summer.

Rose knew that her instinctive reaction to Polly’s situation had posed a threat to all this balance, but she also knew that neither she, nor Gareth, had any real choice now. And she was pretty sure he saw it like that, too.

‘Look,’ she said to him. ‘They’re not staying for ever, and if it doesn’t feel right, we can always ask them to move. It’s only till they get their feet on the ground here, really it is.’

The air shifted slightly in their willow shelter. Very, very slowly, he began to smile, and she knew in that moment that it was going to be all right.

‘Oh yeah, I can really see you asking her to move on,’ Gareth said. ‘You’re too softhearted, Rose. You’re a pushover, always looking out for something to look after.’

‘That’s why I chose you,’ she said, and he drew her in close.

‘But I’m serious, Rose. If it goes tits up, then I’m going to be the one to send her on her way, and I won’t take any sort of opposition from you, OK?’

‘OK,’ she said, curving into him. ‘Besides, we’re rock solid now, aren’t we?’

‘Too right,’ he said, and he threw a stone into the river, skimming it so that it bounced four times.