

Full Circle

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CM7 3XY

liberato@talktalk.net

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Full Circle

Third book of the Trilogy *Closed Circuits, Cluttered Minds*

Roz Colyer

Petan Publishing

The Trilogy

Closed Circuits, Cluttered Minds

Book One
Riding the Wheel

Book Two
Wheels and Circles

Book Three
Full Circle

To Richard and Anna

and to June,
for the use of her lovely room...

PART ONE

Sex and Death

1. November 1985

Sunday, 7.30am – Cirencester

There is someone lying beside him.

Although of course he could still be in the dream. He's again been staring into dark depths of black water terrified of what is underneath and has woken up with the usual jolt, heart pounding, mouth dry. But no, he's not hallucinating. There is someone beside him.

Okay. Count to ten. Think of possibilities.

Cassie? Vague recollection of her whispering something at some point in the evening. But their affair had wound up – or down – over three years ago. She is newly married, for God's sake. He can't have taken up with her again – can he?

Gina. Remembers seeing her on the edge of his vision as he greeted Beverley, the hostess. Kept out of her way after that. Fairly plastered when he arrived and must have downed a good few bebies after... *Bev?* – ah God, surely not. No, no, she is ancient, at least sixty-five, and he is surely in his own bed. The broken spring is pressing against his third rib. Whoever it is is on the side he usually sleeps, so at least he's been considerate in that respect.

Last thing he remembers? Greeting Bev; shaking hands with Stu, her toy boy husband; spotting Gina and lurching in the opposite direction; fetching up against – who? Who? Cassie? Okay, Cassie, who had whispered – what? – and yes, sinking into one of Bev's squashy sofas beside... Nigella? Antonia? Harriet? *Alex?*

Oh no. No, no, not Alex. After all the trouble – and money – it has taken to offload her, he can't have allowed... no, she won't have allowed... he can't remember seeing her and anyway surely Bev wouldn't have invited her knowing he would be there unless out of spite (has he fallen out of favour with Bev recently?) – but if Alex had been there, and if she'd been as hammered as him, as totally wiped out, wasted, paralytic, leg-tremblingly brain-numbingly gut-wrenchingly bladdered, anything might be possible...

Turn head. Open eyes. Okay, just open eyes for the moment. Yes, it's his ceiling, that damp patch he must do something about is directly above his head although it must be coming from the flat upstairs and surely that's their problem, not his, because he's not here most of the time...

Right. Process of elimination. Definitely not Nigella or Bev. Probably not Antonia or Harriet. Possibly not Gina or Cassie. Hideously possible, Alex.

The someone is turning towards him; breath fans his face. He can't pretend to be asleep. A voice murmurs, "Peter...?", fingertips are being lightly trailed across his chest.

American? His name sounds as if it's in italics, with a *d* instead of a *t*, a rolled *r* on a rising inflection. Does he know any American women?

"Um," he says, stalling for time.

"Do you feel up to it now?"

"Ummm," – ending on a downward note.

"Alex did warn me," she says, "so I'm not disappointed." Definitely American. East coast, not west. "And it's not surprising given the amount of alcohol you poured down your neck last night."

Christ. Brain beginning to work. Memory coming back. "Um?"

His head lowering as the pillow sinks. Her head rising, propped up on one elbow. Blonde. Long obviously peroxidized white-blonde hair tickling the side of his face. Wide almond-shaped blue-green eyes framed by long brown lashes. Now he remembers. Not last night, no, that is still a blank, but maybe six months ago...

"So I figure you may need some assistance." The hair and eyes disappear. The bed grows choppy her side.

He lies still, merely raising his hands and plaiting his fingers behind his head. She is burrowing like a mole, making her way down the underside of the duvet. He draws in a breath as her mouth finds his groin. Busy mouth, busy fingers – these American chicks certainly know the business. He should relax, enjoy it. But somehow...

"Hey, loosen up." The duvet rises as her head lifts like Aphrodite from the waves. "You're too tense, bud."

He grins. The irony strikes him as funny now, but later... oh hell. He pushes the duvet sideways, looks fondly down at his limp John Doe nestling like a hopeful orphan between her thumb and index finger. "Sorry, sugar," he says. "I need a pee."

"Alex's shrink," he says later, in the kitchen, while she fixes coffee and something called French toast. "Is that ethical?"

"Alex's *former* psychoanalyst and life counsellor."

"Ah."

"She told me all about you, obviously. And I figured maybe you were more in need of therapy than her."

“Is that what you call it?”

“That,” she says, efficiently dipping slices of bread into a gloopy mixture of milk and beaten egg, “was sex. The therapy comes after.” She throws the slices into the frying pan where a knob of butter has melted. They sizzle and smoke.

“Do you offer all your clients the same deal?”

She smiles. She is attractive, yes – well, beautiful – but he’s never fallen for perfectly-groomed women. His first two wives had endearing flaws – Mel’s crooked teeth, Isobel’s lumpy thighs. Alex – well, Alex is physically near-perfect but inside a bundle of neuroses. The only woman who is both beautiful and uncomplicated he has let slip through his fingers.

“Ditch that thought, buster,” she says. “My clients are always female. Until now.”

“So you’re willing to take me on?”

“If you’re willing to pay.”

“How much do you charge?”

She flips the slices over in the pan as expertly as she can with a bent fork. (“You have no spatula?” she had marvelled, surveying his meagre selection of utensils with disbelief.) Which she now prods at the flies of his jeans. “Give me sex like that before every session,” she says, “and you have yourself a deal.”

Yes. To lie back and let someone guide him through the wreckage of his life, a non-judgmental confessor for the psyche if not for the spirit – he can see now why Alex had been so enthusiastic a convert. And if they can get through the basics before the wonderful sex becomes stale and commonplace – before he starts drifting off in the middle of it...

“You’re on,” he says, stuffing himself with the beautifully crisp golden toast she’s holding out, tasting the delicate flavours that melt in his mouth as he reaches the crust and then questing on, licking her fingers, each perfectly manicured glossy-tipped greasy finger dripping with warm butter and runny cheese until her mouth has replaced the fingers and oh God it starts all over again...

“Wrap it up nice and safe,” she says like a good Girl Guide, whisking another condom out of her purse.

Sunday, 7.30am – Cheltenham

Francine Napier has taken to getting up early on Sundays, even on wintry mornings like this when the bed is so inviting she could easily snuggle up against Jon’s warm flannelled back while he sleeps his deep, almost noiseless sleep beside her. Sometimes she raises herself on one elbow and watches him, wondering why, when he is so good and kind and perfect in almost all respects, she doesn’t love him. She’s fond of him, of course; more than fond, but it stops short of love. Well, thank goodness.

The house lies quiet around her. The twins are sleeping better now; up to the age of five they’d been a nightmare. And now this latest one, lying heavy inside her. So she really hasn’t had a complete night’s sleep for years; she’s forgotten what it feels like to wake up refreshed after seven or eight hours.

So it’s really no loss to rise from her warm nest and the comfort of her pyjama-ed husband, and pull on a dressing-gown and roll downstairs to her dark silent kitchen and make herself her first cup of coffee of the day. (She used to drink tea first thing in the morning, but she hasn’t drunk tea for years. Hot, strong tea to scorch your throat. She can’t even stand the smell of it now.)

Sitting in the armchair in the den, surrounded by the twins’ toys, she sips her coffee and revels in the peace. The knowing it won’t last makes it all the more precious. And of course she wouldn’t be without them. No, not even this latest one, who’d been a surprise. She should have gone on the pill. She should have been sterilised. Jon, of course, would never have submitted to the unkindest cut of all.

And it’s his fault, after all. She already had Rachel and Nicky and he’d got a son by his first marriage. They should have been satisfied. But no, he wanted a child of their own. Well, now they’ll soon have three.

Noises are coming from the kitchen. Somebody’s up. It will be Nicky, of course. Football match somewhere in the next county. Good boy, getting his own breakfast. She can’t get up easily without block and tackle these days.

“Morning, ma.” He drops a kiss on the top of her head. He’s dressed in football kit, dazzling white shorts and bright red strip with the number 11 on the back. He’s hopping on one foot trying to tie the laces of his boots with one hand and balancing a ball on the tips of his fingers with the other.

Nicky. The light of her life, her favourite, and yet there’s a knife in her heart every time she looks at him. The older he gets, the sharper the blade. His hair is not as dark and his eyes are a lighter brown, but the resemblance is unmistakable. He’s tall like his grandfather, with a natural grace and self-confidence of his own. What has she bequeathed him? – well, perhaps her nature, easygoing and sometimes indecisive. But he’s also hardworking, intelligent, fit, athletic, oh God don’t go there...

“You’re not going out like that? It’s too cold...”

“I’m being picked up. Luke’s ma’s got a brand new people carrier. You must get one.”

“Nicky...”

“Renault Espace. Fucking great.”

“*Nicky...!*”

“There they are now. Back after lunch, probs.”

“We’re going to grandma’s...”

“Okay, I’ve got my key. And don’t worry, ma, got a change of gear in the bag. See you.” And he’s gone.

She sits smiling while the tears prick her eyes. It doesn’t get better. After fifteen years, it’s getting worse. She’s glad when she hears Daniel calling from the bedroom, soon joined by Damian. The day has begun.

10am – Cirencester

Thank God she’s gone. The sex has been great, but she’s American; he’s been analysed to within an inch of his life. And they haven’t even started on the real therapy.

“Alex said you had dreams,” she’d remarked, lighting two post-coital cigarettes with an elegant silver lighter and passing one to him.

“Don’t we all?”

“Bad dreams. You woke with a yell this morning.”

“I did?”

She nodded.

“Oh well. Yeah, I have bad dreams. Not all the time.”

“At times of stress.”

“Probably.”

“So you’re stressed now, Pederr.” It was a statement.

He said irritably, “Not particularly. No, I wouldn’t say so.”

She had merely lifted her eyebrows and shot a long spiral of smoke at the ceiling.

Bloody women! Why do they always think they can change you? All his women, especially his three wives, have tried and failed. Why can’t they take him as he is, good old laid-back Pete, instead of trying to find complications that don’t exist? He likes his job, earns good money, has a two-bed flat in Camden and this one-bed flat in Cirencester (which Alex doesn’t know about – or didn’t, oh God, this must be a female conspiracy, she’s sent her spy and he’s fallen for it) - and she has the house in Wandsworth, being a South London girl; he owns a BMW and a racing Harley (she took the Fiat which was a present, after all) – his life is okay, thanks very much. So what if he has the odd bad dream? You don’t get to the age of forty-three (*forty-three!!*) without carrying a bit of baggage. All right, a lot of baggage. But he can handle it. It’s okay.

“You should try to eliminate all stress from your life. It’s a negative vibe. Live as if each day is your first. Welcome each awakening as a rebirth.”

“That’s all bullshit.”

“That’s a very negative statement, Pederr.”

“Listen,” he said, stubbing his cigarette out inches from her nose, “I’ve been there. I’ve spouted all that crap. I believed in it twenty years ago for Chrissake, when you were in nap – diapers.”

“I’m thirty-four, but thanks.”

“It’s bullshit, believe me. It ain’t real life, babe.”

“Alex said you’d been to California in the Sixties.”

“Yeah, been there, done that. And *not* bought the tee-shirt.”

“You’ve got a problem here, Pederr. I sense a deep well of anger. We’ll work on it.”

He should have nipped it in the bud there. Told her to scram, he had no need of her bloody pyschobabble. He is perfectly okay.

But boy, what a hot body. That pert little ass winking at him as she sashayed to the bathroom. These high-class American females sure have a sheen about them, a high-gloss Ivy League finish like cellophaned candy... Now he’s even thinking like a Yank, pedal back there Pete, you’re getting carried away. It sure ain’t befitting a fully qualified, highly respected, megabuck-earning computer whizz-kid to be talking, let alone thinking, like a second-rate cowboy.

And she’s right in one respect. There is a deep well of something inside him. Anger? Possibly. Though what about, and who it’s directed at, he can’t say. Himself, probably. Oh God, now he’s analysing himself. He needs a drink.

10am – Cheltenham

Breakfast is over. Jon has taken Daniel and Damian to the garage to get petrol and check the tyres of the car. He likes making sure everything's safe before they go to see her parents in Prestbury, just outside Cheltenham, a ten-minute drive at most. He's a thoughtful, conscientious man – Francine had considered this an asset when she'd met him, it was one of the reasons she'd married him – but now what she sees as a stultifying caution is beginning to grate. Oh, it's only her hormones no doubt; once this baby's born and her tubes are tied she'll feel ashamed. And at least she's now got another half hour of solitude.

And what does she do with it? Sits at the kitchen table staring at the dirty plates that will have to be washed. Stacked in the dishwasher, at least. Modern conveniences don't save time, she has realised; they merely make the housewife redundant. A mere machine loader. Microwaves, dishwashers, washing machines, tumble driers – her kitchen gleams with them. All the gadgets that still need to be kept sparkling – sandwich toaster, food mixer, griddle – no labour saving there. She is a slave to appliances.

She can't move, even when she hears a key in the lock. Have they come back already? Or has Nicky forgotten his bag? She has managed to rise halfway up from her chair when Rachel slams into the kitchen.

"Darling!" Francine lowers herself down again. She can tell by her eldest child's face that she's in for a ten-minute tirade.

"I can't stay here, mother."

"I thought you were staying at Gaby's..."

"I mean *here*. In the sticks. They're all so small-minded! There's no conversation! We just sat all night talking about *men*, for God's sake! Mother, I've got to go to London. Tell Grampy I need that deposit *right now*..."

"You can tell him yourself, we're going..."

"Oh, I'm not going there with you! I can't stand another three hours of who's done what and who with and did you hear about so-and-so and who's now expecting bloody babies..." ...she at least has the grace to colour a little and start fiddling with the contents of her bag while she rants on... "...though of course at Grampy's it'll be who's changed their curtains and what Mrs Thingy said to the milkman and what the hell does this bloody government think it's doing with our pensions..."

"Oh, Rachel..."

"Well, you know what I mean. I can't stand it any more, mother. If I get this job in London I've got to get a flat and I was twenty-one three months ago and Grampy did promise..."

"I still think you're too young to leave home. Especially to live in London."

"*You* did! *You* left home at *nineteen*! *You* went to London!"

"Yes, and look what happened."

"Well, you were pregnant, weren't you. I won't get pregnant, I hate bloody babies. That's why I can't stay here, it'll be all poo and puke, I can't stand it, I'm sorry mother but if Grampy won't pay that deposit I shall go anyway, I'll get any old job and rent somewhere, it might be somewhere really grungy but I don't care, but if Grampy really loves me he'll want me to have somewhere nice won't he, and he did promise, didn't he, will you tell him..."

Francine considers her eldest child while the words wash over her. Does only a generation separate them? A mere twenty years? No wonder Rachel never wants to revisit her childhood, never talks about the past. Those carefree, footloose years so wonderful in Francine's memory are hideous in Rachel's. What horrors we inflict on the young without knowing it!

"...so will you?"

She sighs. She knows she will have to capitulate, will have to talk her father into paying the deposit on a flat for his favourite grandchild, will have to make a show of persuading Jon to agree although they both know he's never taken to Rachel nor she to him, he'll be secretly relieved to be rid of her although he'll remonstrate and put up arguments...

...and here's Jon and the boys back again, and the kitchen's still wrecked and she's still not dressed and the day stretches before her in all its boring cautious stepping-on-eggshells tedium...

11am – Cirencester

The lager has worked its magic. Hair of the dog, although he'd been drinking shorts last night – exactly what he can't remember. So Miss America had been at Bev's party (and he'll have to ring Bev to get her name – he'd forgotten to ask). So had Alex been there also? What is going on here?

And Alex had told her about his dreams. Or dream – they are variations of one theme, but always ending with him staring down into flat black depths terrified of what is beneath. He wakes with a yell. Well, okay. But they're not the problem. He can deal with the dreams. He's not going to let her in there, there's a whole can of worms

there that she's not prising open. Not on your life. It ain't me, babe.

He knows why the dreams have come back more frequently, after lying mostly quiescent in his subconscious for years. He's had them nearly every night now for a couple of months, since the discovery of the bones. And it's strange, because they have nothing to do with him. He can state that categorically. Nothing to do with me, gov'nor. Not that the law has been to see him, the whole thing seems to have blown over. And the bones could have been there before they arrived at Llancarreg, they could even be Stone Age bones – but no, they'd been in the ground between ten and fifteen years, that's what he'd read. Well, after they left, then. He'd only been at the Welsh commune for a couple of years, they all had. Between 1968 and 1970. The last of his hippie years.

He pours himself another lager. Another hair of the dog, to steady his nerves. And then he'll get dressed and go to the supermarket to stock up the fridge and find something to fling together for lunch and live through a nice boring middle-class Sunday. Oh yes, and he'll buy the *News of the World* – a small act of defiance.

4pm - Cheltenham

They leave her parents with hugs and kisses and promises to ring, even though they'll be seeing them again in a fortnight or so. It has been as tedious as Rachel had described. Even the baby had lain quietly, but then it has done that for a few days. Francine knows enough by now to realise that means it's preparing to get itself born, although a bit early. She'd always been early, though. Even Rachel, the first, had come early. Only Nicky had gone full-term; lovely sunny Nicky, who she thought she'd have trouble with, had slid into the world with no fuss or bother.

And has been no bother since, except to her heart.

"All right, darling?" Jon pats a hand on her knee after he's changed gear. "You've been very quiet."

She smiles. "I'm fine." His profile is strong and square, unfashionably handsome. He has wings of grey at his temples. Even in his casual cords and pullover he looks every inch the financial consultant. He's a good man. A good husband. She's been very lucky.

The twins are belted up in the back, playing a game in their own private world. They too are no trouble. They amuse themselves. They're getting easier. She'll be able to cope, of course she will.

"I'm fine," she repeats. If she says it often enough she might convince herself.

"Not long now." She wonders if he means the drive or the birth. "You always get apprehensive."

She's apprehensive, yes, but not really about the birth. Birth is easy. It's the long grind afterwards, the years of unremitting toil... But even that's not the whole truth. She's been apprehensive for a couple of months. Since September. Since the discovery of the bones. Why? Why? They have nothing to do with her. Nothing to do with any of them. And yet – something must have happened. She's always been convinced there was something Nick was covering up, and it wasn't what he'd pleaded guilty to. He'd been sentenced to three years for possession of offensive weapons and she'd stood up in the Carnaervon court, seven months pregnant, and protested his innocence, and he had shot her that look of anger and warning...

...and afterwards, sitting opposite her in that horrible room with the bars at the window, he'd told her she mustn't wait for him, it was over, she must forget him, forget everything, tell nobody anything, it was nothing to do with her. He told her to get married.

And she had obeyed him, as usual. But she had waited first.

"Darling," Jon says, "don't cry. It'll be over soon."

No. It will never be over. The wounds are exposed all over again.

And now they have arrived home and she's clambering out of the Audi with the elegance of a rhinoceros, clasping her stomach, feeling wet between the legs. She is about to tell Jon, who's round the back of the car unfastening the twins, that she thinks they must go to the hospital when Rachel opens the front door, waving the *Sunday Telegraph*.

"Mother," she says, her face chalk white, "those bones they found." She swallows, then says quietly, "It's Uncle Steve."

2. December 1985

Suffolk

“But I did it,” she says to this nice man who is smiling at her across the table in the interview room. “I did it, and I must be punished for it.”

“And you have been,” he smiles. “Don’t you think a couple of days behind bars is punishment enough?” No, of course she doesn’t. “Or do you really want to do the full fourteen?”

“Yes.” Even two weeks is better than nothing.

The man’s smile doesn’t waver. “Young lady, I don’t think you realise how lucky you are. Attempting to break into a military air base is a serious offence.”

“And I did,” she says, “even though it cost the taxpayer millions to put up that so-called security barrier.” She will ignore the ‘young lady’ – he’s the type of man who thinks he’s being kind, when he knows she’s pushing thirty-six. It’s there, with everything else about her, in the file in front of him. “And I would have sloshed paint all over the silos if it hadn’t been for that bloody dog...”

“If it hadn’t been for the dog, it would have been a much stiffer sentence.”

It’s no use arguing. He’s a man. Most men don’t listen to what they’re being told.

“If I were you,” he goes on, “I’d get off home and be grateful that the magistrates, in their wisdom, ordered a psychiatric report. My report will recommend immediate release due to your disordered state of mind. You are not, I believe, responsible for your recent actions.”

“Why not?”

“You’re in a state of shock. You’ve probably had a trauma which has unbalanced your perception of reality. You see I’m right...” he says, pushing over the box of tissues at his elbow, “...you dissolve into tears at the drop of a hat. Go home and consult a doctor, that’s my advice. I shall be recommending a referral to local psychiatric facilities.”

She bunches up a fistful of tissues and tries to stem the flood of water streaming from her eyes. Stupid! Stupid! She’s not a crybaby, she hasn’t cried for years, and now, when she wants to be strong and forceful and invincible, she’s bawling like a baby.

“By the way,” he says, when she’s halfway through the door, “what name do you want me to put on my report? There seem to be a few to choose from.”

“I’ve told you,” she sniffs. “Dee.”

“D what?”

“Just Dee. D double E. I shall be Dee from now on.”

She is escorted to the prison gates and ejected back into the world. Under her arm she carries a little bundle – change of underwear, toothbrush, comb, sketchbook. Exactly what she had brought with her on the bus to Molesworth, apart from the pair of wire cutters and the tin of paint which had been confiscated. Nobody had been at the perimeter fence, the fence that had cost millions of taxpayers’ money. The band of peaceful protestors against the Cruise missiles, unlikely now to be deployed, had been evicted months earlier. This had been her own private demo, staged for her own private ends. At least she’d had enough time to write a letter on prison notepaper and given it in to be posted to Nick in Australia. *Now we are two old lags together*, she’d written, and *I miss you, my darling, hurry back to me*. And of course he will, even though she’d also written: *The cistern’s sprung a leak. I’ll probably need a machete to get up the path... Nothing lies buried forever, does it.*

She is aware, as she boards the bus back to Melcham, of the glances thrown in her direction. She meets some with a wide reassuring smile, but others have already been deflected out the window, or down at laps. The English have a horror of public intimacy. Any old crone muttering to herself, or crying, or smiling inappropriately, is left to her own devices. I’m not mad, she wants to say, just trying to get my thoughts in order. I’ve had a recent trauma, you see. My perception of reality is unbalanced.

And here she is, home again, after only five days. The path is still fairly negotiable and the cistern won’t yet have sprung a leak. But the wheels of justice are already turning. Slowly, as always, but there’s no stopping them now.

“I did try to be punished,” she says out loud, shrugging out of her coat and unwinding her scarf. She doesn’t look towards the sofa where the portrait is still propped against the cushions. “It’s not my fault they won’t take me seriously. And don’t you laugh at me. I’ll turn your face to the wall if that’s what you’re going to be like.”

She swishes through the bead curtain into the kitchen. It’s nice to be back in her own little home, she has to admit. Prison would have been awful, even fourteen days. The two she’d spent there were bad enough, that one night when she’d been left in that poky little room with the older woman who’d told her she was coming to the

end of a seven-year stretch for having carved her initials into the bum of her husband's floozy - before setting fire to his car with him in it. (He'd escaped - just.) "So what you in here for, love?" she'd asked, and Dee had had to reply that she'd tried and failed to throw red paint over the silos at RAF Molesworth. "Oh," the woman had sniffed, "one of them New Age layabouts, bloody useless do-gooders," and hadn't spoken another word to her.

But Nick will come back and be punished. How long do you get for unlawfully burying a body? Not just burying, but chopping up into pieces. But he hadn't just done that, had he.

"We're not only two old lags," she calls through to the sitting room, "we're two murderers. He killed Steve and I killed you..." There's another, more recent, death hovering on the edges of her consciousness but she won't think about that one yet. She can't allow herself to think of anything else, yet.

She stirs a teabag in hot water, adds a dash of milk. It's while she's doing this that her eyes alight on a couple of envelopes leaning against the jar of honesty twigs on the windowsill. The postman has instructions to leave any mail at the vicarage and she's forgotten she'd given Adrian the back door key to the cottage, thinking she'd be away a few months. Damn, and she'd left the portrait sitting on the sofa. But perhaps he wouldn't have gone into the front room. The back door leads straight into the kitchen. And Adrian's a vicar, a man of the cloth, he won't go snooping round other people's houses.

"If he had seen you," she says, swishing through the beads with mug in one hand and envelopes in the other, "you'd have given him a real fright, wouldn't you? He'd probably have had to perform an exorcism. And you're still here, so he didn't. No wonder you look so smug"

She sits down next to the portrait, balances the mug on the arm of the sofa and opens the first of the letters. No, it's a card in its own envelope with 'Dee' written on it in a hand she doesn't recognise, that's been sealed in another envelope written in a hand she does. It's a pink card with a stork dressed up like a postman and *Announcing a New Arrival* on the front, a handwritten page torn out of a jotter folded up inside.

Dear Dee, she reads, I expect I've given you a surprise by getting in touch but on second thoughts probably not. As you can see, I've just had a daughter, Roxanne. She makes five. Pete's told me he's kept you up to date so I won't rattle on. Just to say - Dee, I think we should meet. You know what about. It came as such a shock. Is it anything to do with me? Pete doesn't think so but he's holding something back, I know him too well. My phone number's on the card. Please get in touch. Your friend, Francey.

"Poor Francey," she says. "Well, you did say she was weak and silly... five bloody kids! She must be pushing forty by now."

The letter is from Pete. She hesitates before she opens it. So he and Francey have met up, have spoken about the discovery of the bones. And now they know whose. Yes, it would have been a shock for them, as it was a shock for her. A shock that is turning to revenge. *Hurry back to me.*

"Because it wasn't you," she says to the portrait. "You'd already been dragged out of the Thames at Greenwich and buried God knows where. And I didn't know. For fifteen years Nick let me believe he'd buried you in the woods. Not what you wanted, but I hoped it was near enough." She studies the face that regards her with that black malevolent grin. "And you didn't mind being hidden up in the attic, did you? I know the bats made a bit of a mess but I tried to clean you up. I moved you to the back of the stack to keep you safe. But you wouldn't let me forget you. You'll never do that."

And here's Pete's scrawl that she always has trouble deciphering. Isn't he supposed to be a computer wizard? Why the hell can't he type the damn things?

Fuck me, she reads, what's all this? Steve??? Do you know about this, Dee? I couldn't believe my eyes, it was in the NotW but I bought an Observer just to make sure. SHIT!!! I haven't written before as I wanted to speak to Fran first and she's just dropped a sprog so's been a bit busy recently, as you can guess she's really freaked out, she thinks it's because of her but I can't believe that, it's not the full story, do you know what it's all about?? Can't speak to Nick as he's in Australia, does he know about this?? Can you get in touch?? Will he be back soon?? Can make Ipswich probably within the next week or Newmarket if that's easier but we've got to get this sorted before the pigs start sniffing round...

But the pigs won't be sniffing round, because it's already been sorted to their satisfaction. She'd already told them, when they came here after the bones had been dug up, that the body was that of an anonymous overdosed heroin addict and they'd buried him - she and Nick, together - because they didn't want any trouble. And even when, only last month, the body had been identified as Steve's - ("It wasn't you," she says, "you'd been dragged out of the river...") and realises she's already said that, he knows that already, he's looking at her with that Mona Lisa expression he takes on when she's being particularly obtuse) - yes, even when she knew whose body it was, she'd still stuck to her original story. Why? If she wants revenge - and she does - for those fifteen years she was kept in ignorance, she should go to the police and tell them the truth.

"But I can't," she says sadly. "I just can't. He'd be put away for years and I can't live without him." *I miss you, my darling.* "And don't look at me like that. I can't live without you either. You know that. We're joined in the blood."

But the face in the portrait is studying her with an amused yet cynical look that tells her he's not letting her off

the hook. She'd disobeyed his instructions about his death and burial; he'd wanted his blood to be drained and his body buried beneath the stone in the woods at Llancarreg. That had been her worst betrayal, but there had been others. So he's still making her pay. One night in the choky is definitely not nearly enough for what she's done.

There's someone at the front door. A shadow has fallen over the dirty pane of glass. It doesn't knock. It's now moved to the window, is peering in.

She opens the door and catches him bending over the scraggy rose bushes, hands making a tunnel for his eyes.

"Hello, Adrian."

He straightens, unhooking a few thorns from his tweed jacket. "Drusilla! I didn't expect – I thought squatters might have moved in, I was just making sure..."

"No, it's me. I wasn't away for as long as I thought."

"Ah. Well, just thought I'd check. Ned told me he'd seen a light on..."

"What would we do without Ned? Probably all be murdered in our beds." She holds the door open wider. "Do you want to come in?"

Too late. She realises too late, as the vicar steps straight into the sitting room, that the portrait is still propped on the sofa. She hasn't anything to hand to drape over it. And he's seen it, she can tell by the sudden squinching of those usually anodyne features, the way a hand has flown to his chest where he keeps his crucifix.

"Coffee?"

"That would be excellent, thank you." He's taken his eyes off the canvas, is looking everywhere but the sofa.

"Sit down, make yourself comfortable." There is only the wicker chair and the stool, apart from the sofa. He eases himself down into the chair, directly opposite the portrait. Then gets up hastily, moves the stool over to the wall in line with the sofa, and perches. "Milk and sugar?"

"Please." He doesn't say another word until she swishes back through the beads and hands him a mug. "Well now, Drusilla. And how are you keeping?"

"Very well, thank you."

"I can't help noticing – your pictures have all vanished."

"All except one."

"Ah yes." He clears his throat. "You told me you were having a grand clear-out. I trust they've been stored somewhere safe?"

"They've all gone up in smoke."

"You're joking, I hope."

"No, I'm deadly serious."

"You've burned them? Why?"

She shrugs. "They were all old things I'd got tired of. Why does everyone think I've done something shocking? They were only old paintings."

He sips his coffee slowly. Poor Adrian, she thinks, he doesn't know how to handle me. He never has. His wife is the conventional curate's wife, pleasant and faded, keeping busy with good works. "And how is Gemma?" he says eventually. "Getting over the shock of her young man's death, I hope. Dreadful business. Such a waste. The demon drink..." He shakes his head sadly. "Are she and Nicholas still in Australia?"

"Yes."

"They've been gone quite a while."

"They'll be back very soon now."

"Good. Life must go on."

"It does, whether it must or not."

Another long silence. He finishes his coffee, balances the mug on his knee. "Drusilla..."

"Yes?"

"Christmas. What are you doing for Christmas?"

"Nothing. I don't celebrate it, you know that."

"But you can't be alone in the festive season."

"I'm alone in all other seasons."

"Jane asked me to tell you – you're very welcome – we'd be very honoured to have you join us on the day. It's an open invitation. Just drop in when you want."

Damn, here are the tears again, and no tissues. Poor Adrian has to search his pockets for a none-too-clean hanky. "Thank you," she sniffs. "It's very kind of you. Thank Jane very much. Very kind..."

"She's very fond of you, you know."

She hiccups and blows her nose hard.

“So I’ll tell her to expect you, shall I?” He gets to his feet. She mops her eyes, moves quickly to stand in front of the portrait. “Keep the hanky.” He smiles down at her from his lofty height. “Any time you feel the need for company, Drusilla – you know where to find us.”

As he moves to the door, she clears her throat and says, “Can I have the key?”

“What?”

“My key.”

“Ah.” He delves into a jacket pocket and draws it out. Puts it into her open palm, closes her fingers round it, places his two hands round her fist and squeezes. Then is off, quickly, down the path.

Closing the door, she catches sight of the Mona Lisa smile. “What are you laughing at?” she says gruffly. “If you don’t behave, I’ll put you back in the attic.”

London

“Bev,” Pete says into the phone, “the American chick. Blonde. Long legs. Nice butt. Know her name?”

Bev’s girlish laugh trills in his ear. No one would think she’s sixty-five even if they could see her. Face-lifts, obviously. Figure like an anorexic teenager. Well, she’s got to hold on to Stu. “Pete, darling, she left with you! Didn’t she stay the night? And you don’t even know her *name*?”

“Forgot to ask. Mind on other things.”

“*Mind!*” That trill again. (Has to wear scarves, though, to hide the neck.) “Oh, I do hope not. You’re slipping, Petey love.”

“I’ve got her phone number,” – he hasn’t, but he’s not going to let Bev know this yet - “but it’s a bit embarrassing if I don’t know her name. And was Alex there that night? Did they come together?”

“Oh,” titter, “I don’t think theirs is that sort of relationship.”

“Stop it, this is serious. I’m being serious.”

“You’re never serious, my sweetheart. No, Alex wasn’t there. I wouldn’t have invited you *and* her, would I? Even I’m not that deliciously malicious.”

“Have you seen her recently? Alex?”

“Ah, that would be telling.”

“Well, go on then. Tell.” He finds he’s grinding his teeth. He’s holding the receiver as if it’s her scrawny neck he’s throttling.

“Wouldn’t you like to know, honeybee.”

“Yes, I would, actually. That’s why I asked.”

“Oh Petey! I love you to bits but I promised. Alexandra doesn’t want anything more to do with you, dear heart. My lips are sealed.” And the phone goes dead.

It’s a conspiracy. A bloody female conspiracy. Well, okay. Move on. Forget it. He’s used to moving on and forgetting.

But the dream is back with a vengeance. And not only the dream, but memories. Memories he’s tried his best not to think about for fifteen years. He’s put those years at Llancarreg at the back of his mind. On his meetings with Francey and Dee – and Nick – the subject has been studiously ignored. But now those years at the farm in Wales loom large in his mind, and he’s been forced to delve back in his memory and try to piece the pieces together.

Nick had hated Steve, everyone knew that. Steve had been lazy, morose and disruptive, but that was no motive for murder. But the police had found guns in the back room Steve had used as a workshop. Guns and ammunition thought to be destined for the IRA. Nobody else had known anything about them, least of all Nick, who never set foot in the house if he could help it – but could he have found out? Would that have been a motive for murder? Yes, possibly. And of course Nick would have had to plead guilty to possession of offensive weapons, to cover up what he’d actually done. It all makes sense now.

But even that knowledge doesn’t help solve the dilemma of what Pete should do now. Because he too has a secret that he can’t tell to anyone. If he owns up to having been at the commune, to having known Stephen Prescott, he will also have to own up to knowing what actually happened to Patrick King.

His meeting with Fran, just before he left Cirencester for London, hadn’t provided any resolution. Again, he’d had to hold back, guard his tongue. They met at their usual place, the restaurant in a Cheltenham department store. They were always given a table by the far window, as private as possible. He’d been afraid she might bring the sprog, but she was alone. She looked gorgeous, as usual.

“Nobody would think you’d just had a baby.” Well, actually they would. Her boobs, as she pressed against him to kiss his cheek, were over-generously filled (he had a brief but ghastly image of udders) and her hips had a wider, rounded curve to them. She looked like a milkmaid, all golden and creamy. “What have you done with it?”

“She’s at my parents’. And her name’s Roxanne, Roxy for short.” She sat down, her cleavage rippling out of a demure silk blouse. “You should have had kids, Pete. You’d have made a wonderful father.”

“Perish the thought. Thank God none of the wives wanted them.”

“So you’ve just offloaded the third.”

“Yeah, along with a vast amount of cash.”

“Let’s hope you’ve learned your lesson, my boy.” Then the waitress had come up and they ordered (she always picks up the tab, or rather that husband of hers - does he know he pays for an ex-boyfriend’s lunches?).

He said, “I should have held on to you, Fran. Shouldn’t have let you slip through my fingers.” And she had said nothing, just squeezed his hand. Now the time had come, it seemed almost impossible to find the right words.

In the end it was Fran who said, “So what do we do? Do we go to the police?”

“And tell them what?”

“That we were there. That we knew Steve.”

“We don’t know what happened to him.”

“Don’t we?” Those wide cornflower-blue eyes were fastened on his.

“Fran, it was as much a shock to me as to you.”

“But you were still there, weren’t you?” She’d left Llanccarreg a month before him. He’d driven her and Rachel to the station himself and seen them on the train to Gloucester.

He passed a hand over his face. “I wasn’t there when it must have happened. I only got back just before midnight, and then had to drive all the way back where I’d come from.” He had to stop there and cover his silence by eating some of the chicken with wild rice he didn’t really want. Eventually he said, “I never saw him. Steve. He wasn’t there. There was just Dee and Gemma. And Nick.”

Just a small dilation of her pupils, the faint sound of a swallow. Then she said evenly, “But Steve was still at the farm, wasn’t he? He must have been, all those things were in his workshop. It was him, wasn’t it, hiding the guns? None of the rest of us knew anything about them.”

“Nick might have found out. Lost his temper, socked him on the jaw...”

“And Steve fell and hit his head. I’ve seen those films, Pete. It never happens like that.” She had gone on with that set of the head and brave tone of voice she always uses when talking about Nick, “No, it was me. About that time I wrote to him and told him about the baby. He didn’t believe it was his. He thought I was still – carrying on with Steve. He more or less told me so, when I saw him in Caernarvon after the sentencing.” She gave an odd, downward smile. “That’s why I gave you the photos to give to him. You’ve only to look at Nicky to see the resemblance.” Then, about to lift the fork to her mouth, she put it down again and fiddled with her napkin, her eyes averted.

“I know. He knows, too. He does, Fran, believe me.” He let her regain her composure by stuffing his mouth with more rice, then said, “So you’re saying you think Nick killed Steve deliberately? Because of you? Sorry, but I don’t think so. It’s much more likely he found out about the guns. He was clearing the place out when I got back, he’d more or less emptied it, there was a bonfire of rubbish in the yard... and Steve’s workshop was still locked. I was trying to open it, but he said he’d see to it later. He just wanted to get Dee and Gem out of the place, I had to drive them all the way back to Suffolk...”

And then it was him who couldn’t go on, and Fran who had to wait patiently as he had a choking fit, spraying rice into his napkin and almost emptying the water jug. But she hadn’t asked what was the matter; she probably knew she wouldn’t get an answer. He can’t even unburden himself to Fran, the most forgiving of beings. And she hadn’t even mentioned the other person still at the farm. Or she might have read the papers later, and thought King had already left.

She hadn’t touched much of her lunch. When they parted, nothing resolved except an unspoken agreement not to go to the police, she had given him a card to send to Dee. Not a good idea, he’d thought, but had promised to forward it, along with a note of his own.

Good old Pete, the amiable go-between. Getting snarled up in something even more tangled than he’d originally been involved in.

Conspiracies. But this is one he can’t move on from or forget.

Cheltenham

And now it's Christmas. The twins are just at the right age to get over-excited and of course they've been spoilt rotten by the two sets of grandparents (Jon's parents having flown in from their retirement home on the Algarve the day before Christmas Eve). Thank heavens her own parents are here only for the lunch, and they're all decamping to Prestbury for Boxing Day. But the decamping brings its own difficulties, what with all the baby paraphernalia, and Francine has wondered more than once if it's worth the effort. Can she suggest they go without her, while she puts her feet up in front of the telly?

She's over-wrought, of course, as Jon has told her. And they've all pitched in with the preparations, she's hardly had to lift a finger. And perhaps it's a good thing she hasn't had time to think, to brood...

She should never have written that card. After all these years. Should have left well alone. Should never have talked Pete into sending it. He'd advised caution, hadn't he? What will she do if Dee phones and suggests a meeting? But she won't do that. Pete says she won't, she's become something of a recluse, just spends her days painting.

But - Steve's bones. Steve had been dismembered and buried in the woods at Llanccarreg. It must have been Nick who'd done it, for whatever reason. (And she still thinks she's right. A jealous argument, a fight probably. Nick had a vicious temper, she'd always known that. Sometimes he didn't know his own strength. So it had probably been an accident ending in tragedy, and one which she was responsible for in the first place.)

She won't think about the cold-blooded dismemberment and burial. It was horrible, but necessary. Who would believe it to be an accident, when there were witnesses to the fact that Nick and Steve had hated each other? And of course there was also Nick's previous record of violence, which would have gone against him. No, better to plead guilty to the lesser charge of possession of weapons, that's what he'd obviously thought.

And in a strange way, she's glad it's out in the open. At least now she knows the worst. It wasn't her Nick had rejected, when he'd gone back to Dee after serving his sentence. He'd had to, hadn't he? He didn't want to implicate her, Francey, if ever the bones were discovered. He'd been protecting her, keeping her out of any involvement. And hasn't he kept in touch, through Pete? He hasn't forgotten her. Pete says he always asks after her, whenever they meet.

She kisses the soft warm velvet of the baby's head. Breastfeeding has always been the best thing about giving birth. Not only the sweet sensation – a sensual sensation, if she's honest – the feeling of something being sucked out of the deepest core of her being – but the legitimate privacy it bestows on her. Jon is squeamish about her feeding in public. Not from prudishness, she's sure – he's as proud of her breasts as she is – but from a sense of male inadequacy faced with the sanctity of motherhood. So she's sitting up in the nursery in blessed solitude while mayhem rules downstairs.

And she can let her mind wander back over the past. Whenever she thinks of those days – whenever she's allowed herself to dwell on what has always brought an exquisite pain to her heart – it's always the same scene she rewinds in her memory, one she realises has been invested over the years with the weight of mystery and magic. It didn't happen as imagination dictates. It was evening, for one thing, when in her memory it's always sunrise blazing behind him (how would that have been possible, with the long wall of the barn facing west?). She sees herself lifting the latch and pushing open the huge wooden doors when, even back then, the doors were long gone, the barn exposed to the weather, his only concession to winter being to barricade the entrance with a few decomposing hay bales. But it wasn't winter, she's sure, it was spring; and nothing would have barred her way - anyone could have entered, he hadn't been bothered about that. He probably thought she was Pete.

So she's lifting the latch and pushing open the doors, and opposite her the sun is rising in all its fiery glory, and he's rising too out of the bath (the old cattle trough) with the silver pitcher (a rusty milk churn) raised over his head to douse himself in clean water, which action has caused the muscles on the right side of his torso to tighten, the sinews in his right forearm to stand proud, his neat, pale buttocks to clench (his back is towards her, she knows her memory is correct on this point). And water is cascading down the tanned surface of his skin that glows like copper, and golden droplets are spinning from his hair as he lifts his face and shakes his head under the molten stream, his left hand raised now to rake his fingers through the tangled mass of dark curls that are sleek and gleaming in the first rays of the glorious sun. And he's flinging the pitcher away and turning to face her, although his hands are still squeezing the water from his hair and his eyes are down turned as he steps from the trough.

And she stands in the doorway mesmerised at the beauty of him, of his healthy, toned body, its neatness and functionality, everything somehow fitting into place and yet – oh yes, there's a mythical quality to him, he's Daniel about to step into the den of lions, the young David about to slay Goliath...

"What the fuck," he had said and then, not turning a hair, "throw me that towel, will you?", and she had obeyed, staying only to watch him fasten it round his waist, and then fleeing the barn down to the woods to

stand, back to a tree, face turned to the sky, gulping in air to quiet her racing heart.