

Riding the Wheel

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Riding the Wheel

First Book of the Trilogy
Closed Circuits, Cluttered Minds

by

Roz Colyer



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The Trilogy

Closed Circuits, Cluttered Minds

Book One
Riding the Wheel

Book Two
Wheels and Circles

Book Three
Full Circle
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PART ONE

1985

1. August 1985 - Suffolk

"I've just discovered," Sebastian casually remarks, setting his empty cup back in its saucer, "that over your head are a couple of pornographic pictures."

Gemma says nothing. Her cup remains untouched. She had agreed to Sebastian's suggestion of a coffee stop purely as a delaying tactic and now her throat has closed up and refuses to swallow. She had spotted the two small landscapes as soon as they had sat down, but too late to prevent Sebastian seating himself opposite.

And of course he won't leave it alone. "They look innocent enough," he continues, "but there's definitely something kinky going on in that field. And as for the churchyard..."

She gazes fixedly ahead, aware of the amiable surveillance of plump Ma Bussell who presides over the enormous chrome cappuccino machine with knitting needles clacking. She's probably wondering what the pair of them - obviously sophisticated, intelligent types - are doing in her chintzy tearooms, and racking her brains to remember who the bad-tempered girl reminds her of.

"Let's get on," she says abruptly, rising too quickly and throwing her chair off-balance. It crashes to the ground.

Sebastian raises an eyebrow. "Impatient now, are we? Thought you weren't in a hurry to see your dear old Mum."

She walks out of The Singing Kettle without looking back. While he rights the chair and settles the bill (no doubt treating Ma Bussell to the full onslaught of Montfort charm) she glances quickly up and down the high street. Melcham looks exactly the same as when she'd left, two years ago. Well, the hairdresser's is boarded up, and Davey's Hardware is now an estate agents, but it is recognisably the same small dull market town she remembers. Nothing changes in this part of Suffolk, she thinks, while she herself has changed so much. The red Porsche looks out of place beside a battered Land Rover, its tyres covered in mud. The Porsche belongs in Berkshire, and so does Sebastian, for that matter.

"How much longer?" He unlocks the door and slides himself

into the driver's seat with an easy grace, holding the passenger door open for her.

"About twenty minutes."

"I thought you said this was the nearest town."

"It is."

Evidently her tone quashes further comment, for he revs up and shoots away from the kerb without another word. She is aware she sounds, and is, truculent. But what does he expect? It is his fault, after all, that they're negotiating rutted country lanes in some benighted corner of East Anglia when they could be lunching graciously on the lawn at Roothings. Why does he always have to antagonise his father and upset his poor mother? They have been kindness itself to her, on the vacations she has spent with them.

And the day had begun so perfectly. She had awoken in her own bed but with memories of Sebastian's still fresh in her mind (He never came to hers; it was an unspoken agreement that she should tiptoe down the long corridor just after midnight and back again an hour or so later.) She'd had her usual bath in perfumed oils, wrapping herself afterwards in fat warm towels while she decided what to wear. Then a leisurely breakfast with Lady Montfort in the morning room...

...then the slamming doors, raised voices in the hall, Sir Denis bullish and angry: "It's that Bassett fellow, he's put you up to this! Throwing away everything you've worked for on some pie in the sky!"

And Sebastian, equally angry: "It's nothing to do with you, is it? It's my life..." and he'd thrown open the door and burst in, his father hot on his heels.

"Well, I won't have it!" Sir Denis roared, while Sebastian calmly took a plate and helped himself from the buffet. "D'you hear me, lad? So long as you remain under this roof you'll do as you're damn well told..."

"That suits me." Sebastian had slammed down his plate and turned to Gemma. "Come on. Let's get out from under his bloody roof."

"Where are we going?" she'd ventured to ask as he flung their bags into the back of the Porsche. And he had looked at her and

shrugged.

“How about your mother’s?”

To him this suggestion must be eminently sensible. She hadn’t seen her mother since starting university - they’d spent every vacation at Roothings, apart from last Christmas ski-ing in the French Alps. She must surely want to go home after two years away.

She’d tried her best to dissuade him as they skidded off down the drive. Her mother was something of a recluse, not used to company. She wasn’t even on the phone...

“She phoned your college, didn’t she?”

“From Uncle Adrian’s.”

“Well, ring him then.”

“He’s not really an uncle. He’s the vicar.”

Sebastian had exploded into laughter, and stopped in the next lay-by beside a telephone booth for her to relay the message.

And now the bend will be coming up soon. She can’t leave it unsaid any longer. She says suddenly, not giving herself time to think, “She did them.”

“Who did what?”

“My mother. Those pictures.” She dares not look at him, but knows a slow grin is spreading over his face.

“So she’s an artist.”

“She paints portraits, mostly.”

“Pornography a sideline, then.”

“It must have been a commission. That’s the sort of place she would find horribly twee, so she would have to make a joke of it.”

“They were very well done. It takes a trained eye...”

“Oh, stop it.”

He suddenly snarls, “Bloody country lanes!” and slams the steering wheel to the left. The Porsche comes to rest in the hedge while a tractor chugs slowly past pulling a trailer of bales.

The driver sits on high. Gazing upward, Gemma sees an old gnarled fellow and breathes a sigh of relief. Perhaps Nick is still in Australia. Please God, let him be safely fourteen thousand miles away.

Negotiating the car out of the hedge, Sebastian says, “So what do I call her, then? Mrs Belling? Mother? Mummy?”

“Drusilla.” Gemma stares rigidly out of the side window.
“Is that her real name,” he laughs, “or an arty-farty one?”
“Her real name’s Deirdre, but she’s been Drusilla Belling since
- well, she decided to be a painter, I suppose.”
“So what made her call you Gemma?”
“What do you mean?”
“It just seems a bit - well - twee...”
“Thanks.”

He sighs. “I don’t mean *you* are. I just thought it sounds - she sounds - oh, forget it.”

Oh forget, forget! She thought she had forgotten, or at least had put the past behind her, but now here she is hurtling back towards it. The bend is coming up - the long slow curve she had first seen as a child, sitting still as a mouse beside Uncle Pete in the Land Rover in the grainy rain-lashed dawn. And now here is the house as it always was, its roof baldly thatched, its walls sagging and buried in creeper, the garden a jungle of weeds, the gate still unmended - a ghost house, a house at the end of the world. And her mother in the back is bending over her, saying in that too-jolly tone of voice that means the opposite of what she says, “Here we are, Gem! Our nice new home!”

“My God,” Sebastian says, drawing alongside the gate. “What a dump.”

Inside the house, Drusilla Belling is trying to finish painting the kitchen.

Adrian’s knock had caught her unawares. She had been up to her elbows in oils, putting the finishing touches to Simon Potter’s green coxcomb. It is an experiment: great blocks of colour put on with fingers and palette knife, then overlaid with detail. Nose stud, dagger-shaped earring, adolescent acne... oh, the endearing awfulness of youth! Simon had sat disconsolately picking his nose, slanging off about Nick: “Bleedin’ slave driver he is, bleedin’ knackers me he does, nothing left over for me girl...”

But Adrian’s message had put an end to the portrait. She’d shooed Simon off and whirled round the place, setting it straight - cleared space in the sitting room, piled junk in the scullery which still spilled out and stuffed itself into odd corners. There

was no time to lug anything up to the attic, and besides she's not been up there for years. There are things up there she'd rather not disturb. Instead, she'd gone into the meadow to pick wildflowers, harebells, bladder campion, to stuff into jam jars for the window sills. She'd dragged Gemma's mattress off the bed to air, wondering if two could squash on to it, or whether she'd have to give up the luxury of her double bed. This posh boyfriend - what would he be expecting? He's the younger son of minor aristocracy. His parents own a country mansion. Oh hell! Why are they coming now, when she is in the middle of painting the kitchen?

Bloody Nick. He'd been right, as usual. She should have waited until after the harvest. The kitchen looks like a war zone. The contents of cupboards are stacked up on the floor; she flings them back, smearing green on the still tacky red gloss. The windowsills are the only things left unpainted - if she's quick, she can get them finished before they arrive.

Pulling on her old painting smock and tying a scarf round her head like a turban, she is reaching up to the shelf for the tin of paint when a car door slams. Her hand knocks the tin which totters and topples; she catches it, but not before the lid is off and the paint is falling in a red stream all down the front of her smock. She stands aghast, but it is too late now to do anything but go out and welcome them in.

She stands on the threshold, arms held wide. "Here you are at last!" The boyfriend - oh, Gem, he's blond, bronzed and gorgeous - looks stunned, then amused. Gemma, in long lemon dress, dark hair plaited into a fat pigtail, looking slim and elegant and oh-so-Home Counties, is appalled.

A hopeful sun struggles through the branches of the plum tree outside the window as Gemma stretches and yawns, and snuggles into the warm hollowed-out place that Sebastian has just left. She remembers another time she had done this, in another bed, but the memory no longer makes her flush with shame. She'd been young then, younger than her fourteen years; now she feels older than her twenty. Older, even, than her own mother, who still looks a teenager - from a distance. Still acts like

one, anyway. But who cares? After a bad start, everything had gone off all right. Sebastian - darling Baz - had risen magnificently to the occasion, treating Drusilla with exactly the right combination of gallantry and humour guaranteed to get him in her mother's good books. He had obviously sized her up accurately from the start: an ageing ex-hippie, still attractive but old enough to be grateful for flattery, especially from a good-looking, charming young man.

Drusilla had hurried to bring a tray of tea from the kitchen, brushing aside Sebastian's offer of help: "No, it's okay, it's a bit of a mess in there" - leaving them alone for a while in the sitting room. This room, too, was exactly as she remembered: black beamed, low-ceilinged, the one mullioned window grimy and cobwebbed, the tatty bead curtain leading into the kitchen from where came the sounds of rattling bottles, running water and muttered curses.

Sebastian had strolled round the room, examining the sketches pinned up on the beams. "She's not bad, is she? Is she famous?"

"No. She's never wanted to be."

"Is this you?" He was looking at the drawing of her as a small child of two, the prim and proper one done in London, wearing a dress, her hair in two shiny ribboned bunches. Next to it, the one done a year later - in dirty dungarees, her hair cropped short. "What happened?"

"We moved to Wales."

"Ah. Enough said."

"Yes," said Drusilla, pushing through the beads, "our circumstances changed."

Sebastian sprang to her assistance, untangling the beads from the untamed mass of hair that Drusilla had shaken free of the turban. Gemma, with satisfaction, had noted a few grey streaks among the black. She lowered herself into the old wicker chair while her mother gave out the mugs (chipped round the rim, with red fingerprints), and Sebastian perched himself on the high three-legged stool beside the easel. There was a canvas on the easel, covered by a cloth.

"This is what I'm working on at the moment," Drusilla said, uncovering it. "Remember him, Gem?"

Gemma hardly glanced at the portrait, but caught a brief

impression of Cubist blocks and a bright green quiff.

Sebastian laughed. "I thought punks went out in the Seventies."

"It's Simon Potter," Drusilla went on, "you know, you went to school with him. You had a crush on him..."

"I did not!"

Her mother pulled a face and winked at Sebastian. "Only joking! I see university hasn't improved your sense of humour, Gem."

Gemma had sipped her tea while her mother and Sebastian made small talk, trying to fit her new self into her old surroundings. This place had been her home since she was five. They had left Wales on her fifth birthday, Uncle Pete had driven them here from the commune. Before that, her memory was blurred, and played tricks; she'd had nights when she'd awoken from terrible dreams, and she'd never forget the months afterwards, when she'd been alone with Drusilla in this rickety cottage, waiting in vain for Uncle Nicky...

She had pulled herself into the present to hear her mother say, "So why did you come, after all this time?"

Sebastian flashed one of his disarmingly boyish grins. "I thought it about time we paid a visit to poor old neglected mother."

"Old *and* neglected."

"Well" - again that flashing grin - "perhaps not so old."

"But," said Drusilla, with a glance towards Gemma, "definitely neglected."

And Gemma had pushed herself out of the wicker chair and gone upstairs. Her old bedroom, too, was exactly the same: ramshackle bed, walnut wardrobe, the shelf of dolls she'd never played with, the thin sheet of plasterboard separating this room from her mother's. As a child she had huddled in this bed trying to ignore the terrifying sounds on the other side of the wall. The grunts, the groans, the triumphant shouts that sounded more like cries of despair. And then, when Uncle Nicky had at last come back, the whispering, giggling, joyous whoops of laughter, at least for a few weeks. The child Gemma, listening with the ears of the betrayed, had preferred the groans.

Now, stretching luxuriously in the bed, she forgives all the old wounds. She even forgives the doll with the orange wool hair whose dirty rag face stares down at her. She pokes her tongue out at it. I have a lover of my own, she tells it. So there. And the lover is mounting the creaky stairs, and pushing open the door, ducking his head to miss the lintel, and presenting a breakfast tray with the air of a magician. And he *has* performed magic: there is a cup of tea complete with unmatching saucer, a napkin only slightly grubby, two slices of toast and a rosebud in a jam jar.

“Oh Baz! This is lovely!”

“Risked life and limb for the rose. And there’s paint on the saucer.”

“There’s paint on everything in this house.”

“Except the kitchen cupboards.” He sits down beside her. “Hasn’t anyone taught her the rudiments of decorating? She didn’t bother with undercoat, so what she’d done is already peeling off. Could do with sponging down, too.” He pulls a comical face. “The paintwork, I mean, not your mother.”

“She’s hopeless,” Gemma says contentedly. “She thinks she’s such a feminist but she gets into so many messes that someone - usually male - has to bail her out. It’s pathetic.”

“Ah. Well,” says Sebastian, looking away, “we’ve struck a deal. I’ll help her with the kitchen, and she’ll immortalise me in oils.”

“What?” The cup halfway to her mouth, Gemma freezes.

“I’ll paint the kitchen and she’ll paint me.” He turns back and grins. “Bright red, probably.”

“How long will it take?”

Now he turns on the full force of his smile that still makes her bones turn to jelly. “It depends on whether she wants just the face, or the entire magnificence.”

She says quickly, “Oh, just the face. She loves doing portraits. And she paints very fast.”

“Pity. I was looking forward to being draped *au naturel* round the bead curtain.”

She tries to keep the desperation out of her voice. “You promised, Baz - only a few days, you said. We’ve got to be back at Roothings by the weekend.”

“We haven’t *got* to.”

“I want to.”

He shrugs. “Okay.” Then bounds off the bed, making the windows rattle. “I’ve stoked up the boiler. There might be enough hot water for a bath, if you’re lucky.” And he’s off down the stairs, taking them two at a time it sounds like. An overgrown schoolboy.

Gemma munches her way through the toast, which is dry and brittle. She thinks of breakfast at Roothings: fresh croissants, butter curls, coarse cut marmalade. Kippers. Sometimes kedgeree, served on warmed white plates.

But everything is all right. Even last night had gone well - more than well - apart from that one incident. Drusilla had served a quiche and salad, looking challengingly at Sebastian who had eaten his without demur. Afterwards Gemma had gone into the kitchen to wash up, leaving Sebastian and her mother finishing the sloe gin. She had felt almost light-headed with relief that her homecoming had not been the disaster she’d feared. Her mother had obviously mellowed; grown older, wiser, during these two years on her own. Nick’s doing, of course. She found she could even think of Nick dispassionately, imagine him and Drusilla together without that wrenching pain she now knows was juvenile jealousy. She could almost feel sorry for her mother, who had blown all her chances of happiness. What must she be feeling now, seeing herself and Sebastian together? Surely she couldn’t fail to see how happy they were; everyone remarked what a good couple they made, she so dark and intense, he so fair and loose-limbed. She’d gone back into the sitting room prepared to be nicer to her poor unhappy mother and found them sitting side by side on the floor, sharing a joint.

“Mother!” Hot anger surged from her stomach into her throat. “You promised!”

“Oh bugger.” Drusilla took the joint from between Sebastian’s fingers and crushed it into the ashtray. “Sorry love.”

Sebastian squinted up at her, amused. “It’s only grass.”

“That’s not the point.” She ignored him and spoke to Drusilla, who was trying to stagger up from the floor. “He’s a Cambridge First, mother. He’s doing post-graduate research. He does not want his brain messed up, thank you very much.”

“No love. Sorry.”

“It’s my brain...” Sebastian murmured.

“It belongs to the world!” She held the tea cloth taut between her hands, still encased in pink Marigolds.

“You sound like my father.” Sebastian’s voice held a warning note, but Gemma was too fired up to care.

“I knew it! I knew we should never have come!”

Having staggered to her feet, her mother tried to put an arm round her shoulders, but Gemma shook it off. Sebastian heaved himself up from the floor. He also laid an arm round her shoulders, but this time she allowed it to stay.

“Loosen up, love,” he said into her neck. “We’re on holiday.” When she said nothing, he went on, “All right, I’m on holiday. I hate Roothings. I had to get away. But we’ll go back in a couple of weeks, eh? Until then - give me a break, eh? Give my brain a break?”

Nuzzling into her throat, just under her ear, he’d brought his face upwards, found her mouth with his, forced his lips on hers. And Gemma, bones turned to jelly, had returned the kiss fiercely, aware of her mother’s eyes upon them. Under her breath she muttered into his ear, “A couple of *days*. You promised.”

Drusilla, waking in the early hours alone in her double bed, had thought about the same scene. The sight of Gemma in Sebastian’s arms had given her an unpleasant jolt, reminding her of time passing, changing, inexorable, unstoppable. Her prim little Gem, always the prude, regarding her with those dark child’s eyes full of scorn and disgust, had turned into this slim beauty with blond god in tow, had become just one more silly female taken in by charm and good looks.... but oh, if Sebastian had nibbled her neck like that, had enfolded her in those long, loose arms, had laid his mouth on hers...! She couldn’t stay and watch; she’d opened the front door and stepped out into the warm, balmy evening.

Walking across the fields, hugging herself, climbing stiles and skirting nettles, she kept her mind blank, deliberately hummed to herself keeping thoughts at bay. Approaching the barn she saw a movement at the entrance, a shadow that flitted inside and melted to nothing. He’d gone under the truck, of course, was

banging away at some hidden pipe or sump or whatever as if he'd been at it all day.

She waited. He'd have to emerge sooner or later, and sooner he did, wiping his hands on a rag.

"So," he said, when she remained silent, "what's he like?"

"Who?" All innocence. Then, as if the penny had only just dropped, "Oh, you mean Sebastian. He's absolutely gorgeous, actually." He went on wiping his fingers, one by one, with concentration. She added airily, "And an absolute shit."

He looked up then, into her eyes. "Does Gem know?"

"That he's a shit? Probably not. We don't have many critical faculties at twenty, you know." When he flinched, she added, "Anyway, it won't last."

"So it's not serious."

"Oh," she said, unwilling to let him off the hook, "it's serious on her part. When he ditches her, she'll be heartbroken. And he will, of course. The aristocracy don't marry the peasants if they can help it."

He didn't reply, but she knew what he was thinking: it works the other way round, too. But all he said was, "Shall I come round?"

"Please yourself."

"How long are they staying?"

"A couple of days, at first. But I've talked him into having his portrait painted. He's got such marvellous bone structure. Oh - and he's helping me with the kitchen, seeing as how you're much too busy to be bothered."

She'd turned away then and left him. She didn't look back, but she knew what would happen. He would stand there in the entrance, watching her disappear over the fields; then he would pick up a tool - a hammer or spanner or something - hurl it against the wall, then aim a swift, savage kick at a tyre, before once again vanishing beneath the truck.

Coming downstairs after her bath, dressed in a pink boilersuit and hair wrapped in a towel (not fat and perfumed like Roothings towels, but a threadbare board), Gemma finds a note

pinned to the bead curtain. *Gone shopping. Back soon.* She glances out of the window - the red Porsche has gone. She quickly stifles a feeling of irritation. They have gone to buy undercoat, probably. They must have called up to her but the noise of running water had drowned them. And it is nice of Sebastian to help her mother out, though she'd never thought home decorating to be one of his talents. Maybe it's just a ploy to keep in her good books; the novelty will wear off very soon, and they will return to Roothings...

The house is quiet. When Drusilla is not in it, the house becomes merely a cluttered, untidy shell, stuffed with her mother's things: canvases, modelling clay, palette knives, sketchpads, tubes of paint, brushes stuck in jars of foul-smelling liquid. No wonder, Gemma thinks, she has always felt an interloper here.

She looks at the drawings again. Next to the one done in Wales, here is another one of her, aged seven, sketched in this house and sitting primly on the high stool that Sebastian had sat on only last night - hair tied back in a ponytail, hands neatly folded, knees together, solemn as a judge. "For heaven's sake, Gem, crack a smile!" her mother said, pencil flying over the paper. "Your face won't fall apart!" But what was there to smile about? She had been a good girl, had waited for Uncle Nicky, had waited two whole years, and she knew then he wasn't coming back. He had lied to her. He had promised he'd never leave her, and he had lied.

Her eyes are drawn back to the other two sketches, of her in the dress and the dungarees. The dress, flounced and frilly - was it white? - but it couldn't have been the dress in her dream, because then she was five, and the white dress with the wide blue sash was the one Auntie Francey had made for her fourth birthday... and suddenly the scene shifts and she is in the dream again, with the clanking noise and the unseen faces on the other side of the wall, and she is running along a tunnel of trees, and the dress is snagging and tearing on twigs - and that clanking noise is all around her, and there's a scream from somewhere far away, though it could have come from deep within herself, and her chest is thumping, thumping..

A loud knock on the door makes her jump round, a hand on

her beating heart. Outside, a shadow moves over the latticed pane, then bends nearer. "Are you there, Dee?"

Relief washes through her. And joy - a hot, blinding joy that chokes her throat and brings tears to her eyes. He's come back. Uncle Nicky's come back.

Sebastian lounges against the counter of the general store, hardly bothering to suppress his yawns. Drusilla is chatting to the woman on the till, yet to pay for the two tins of undercoat. He knows she's spinning this out, enjoying flaunting her companion to the world - or a backwoods village in the sticks, anyway. She had exited from the Porsche like a queen, in slow motion, making sure everyone could see her. Everyone comprising Ned Frobisher, the pub landlord, taking the air at the door of the Lamb and Plough (Drusilla had introduced them; Ned had looked him up and down, sniffed, and turned away, ignoring Sebastian's outstretched hand), and now this dumpy woman who's hardly glanced in his direction.

At last Drusilla gathers up the tins, hands them to him and sweeps out of the shop, and he follows like the lackey she's making of him. Not that he minds; he's amused by her, is prepared to indulge her moment of celebrity. He'd wondered, driving here from Roothings, what on earth he would find at the end of the lane - a barmy old crone covered in cobwebs, from Gemma's brief description. Drusilla has been a revelation. She can't be more than mid-thirty, which would make her a mere child when Gemma was born. Smaller than Gem, with wilder hair, bigger breasted, slim hipped, she could still be taken for a girl from a distance. And although her face is still relatively unlined, there is something in those green eyes, an indefinable something that hints at deeper, darker secrets kept at bay. But animated, as now, she is fun and lively, and he can't help thinking how different she is from Gem.

As they reach the car he is annoyed to find it surrounded by punks, three yobs and a girl. One, leaning back on his elbows against the roof with a Doc Marten's boot slammed against the door panel, Sebastian recognises from the portrait.

Drusilla smiles at them. "Well, what do you think, Simon?"

His eyes travel up from Sebastian's feet to his hair. "Ponce's

motor, innit.”

The girl, wearing a fringed leather jacket with buckles and short shiny skirt, her hair in tight plaited corkscrews, swaggers forward and stands in front of Sebastian, hands on hips, jiggling from one foot to the other. “What’s your name, then?”

Before he can reply Drusilla bats her aside with one sweep of her arm. “This is Sebastian, Gemma’s - um - fella. This is Susie Pratchett, an old school friend of Gem’s. Now out of the way, Susie, we have work to do.”

Susie stands her ground. “Gemma’s fella.” She cocks her head and peers up at him from under thick black spider’s-leg lashes. “What’s that supposed to mean? You engaged?”

But this time Drusilla doesn’t come to his rescue, and he feels five pairs of eyes on him, awaiting a reply. “No,” he says, in what he hopes is a throwaway tone, “we’re just good friends.”

On the far side of the car the other two punks suddenly begin a wrestling match. “He don’t fuck her then,” one whoops, and the other, in a mincing parody of Sebastian’s accent, “Oh no old chap just good friends don’t yer know.”

Standing there with a paint tin in each hand, Sebastian feels a cold fist of anger clench at his stomach. He isn’t used to feeling out of his depth or at a disadvantage, and Drusilla seems to be enjoying the pathetic joke, which makes him even more angry.

Susie thrusts her left hand under his nose and wiggles her fingers. “Me and Sime’ve just got engaged.” She swivels round to flash the ring at Drusilla, who inspects the cluster of cheap quartz at close quarters and is seemingly thrilled.

“Must have cost you a bit, Simon.” She smiles at the parrot-crested yob. “Job must be going all right.”

Simon shrugs. “I’m off sick. Got a doctor’s note. Knackered, I am. Old Guts-Ache’s got it in for me, ain’t he, babe?”

Susie cuddles up against him, her gaze still fastened on Sebastian. “You can say that again, babe. I feel really neglected sometimes, on me own for hours on end. Get ever so lonely.” She adds, Sebastian feels for his benefit, “I’m in the pub most lunchtimes.”

“Well, this won’t get the kitchen painted.” Drusilla takes a determined step forward and the punks drop back to let Sebastian unlock the door and climb inside. He adjusts the rear

view mirror as he pulls away, and sees Simon give a mid-finger salute to the retreating car.

They don't speak until they are drawing up outside the cottage. Then, "By the way," Drusilla says, "what are you a Cambridge First in?"

"Physics. Nuclear fusion."

Getting out, she slams the passenger door too hard and makes him wince. He is left to follow her with the paint tins up the overgrown path, waits while she unlocks the door, then is flattened against the wall as she turns abruptly to him, finger on lips. "Sssh!" Voices are coming from beyond the bead curtain. "Ah," she whispers, "it's Old Guts-Ache himself." Her tone is neutral, but she is suddenly as tense as a stalking cat.

Then she walks brightly into the kitchen, leaving the curtain swinging in his face. "So you two have met up again!"

Sebastian shoulders his way through the beads and sees Gemma and a man sitting at opposite ends of the kitchen table, drinking coffee. The table is small, and they are leaning over it so that their heads almost touch. The guy's hair is dark brown and curly; it is obviously natural, not permed, which would immediately have aroused Sebastian's antipathy. He has the feeling that their entrance has not pleased either party.

Gemma draws away and glares at her mother. "You never told me he was back."

"And you didn't tell me," Drusilla replies smartly, "that your wonderful boyfriend is a monster! A mad scientist who'll blow us all up to kingdom come!" She flings an arm round the man's neck, lays her cheek next to his. "We'd have hung him from the rafters at Llancarreg, wouldn't we, Nick?" Then, as if as an afterthought, "Oh - this is Sebastian, Gemma's fella, and this is Nick. My oldest friend. In time, that is, not age, sod it."

The man lifts his head and looks steadily at Sebastian, who feels as if he's something smeared on glass under a powerful microscope. Two deep brown eyes in a tanned, lined face scrutinise him intently, before the guy slowly pushes back his chair and stands. He's shorter than Sebastian but has a body like a gymnast, broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped. There's a packed, dense quality about him that makes Sebastian nervous. Decanting his load on the work surface, he offers his hand and

Nick takes it briefly, then steps back and leans against the sink.

“Llancarreg was the commune we ran in Wales,” Drusilla chatters on, but there is something hectic in her tone, and again Sebastian feels disorientated. First Ned Frobisher, then the punks, then this glowering presence - he feels unwelcome, almost an irrelevance, another feeling he’s not used to.

“I might have known you were the Greenham Common type,” he says jokily. “Anyway, I’m into energy, not bombs.”

“Nuclear power stations are nuclear bombs.”

“Rot,” he says, “they’re safe as houses.”

“Ha!” She gestures theatrically round the kitchen. “That’s not saying much! I sometimes think it’s only the cobwebs holding this place together.” Then, going up to Nick, asks sweetly, “Staying for lunch, my love?”

“Sorry, Dee. Duty calls.”

“Oh,” she says, in a different, poisonous tone, “we mustn’t keep you from your duties.”

“I only called round to see Gem.”

“Of course. I didn’t presume you’d called round to see me.”

Gemma suddenly breaks the almost palpable tension by getting up, glaring at her mother and taking Nick’s hand. They walk off into the sitting room, and Sebastian hears the door open and two pairs of feet going down the path.

“You must excuse him,” Drusilla murmurs, her eyes on the swaying curtain, “if he seemed a bit rude. He just has to get used to people.”

Sebastian shrugs. He has a feeling he’s failed some kind of test, but so what? He’s a scientist; soon, he hopes, to make his mark in the media. He doesn’t need to live up to the expectations of ignorant country oiks.

At the gate, Gemma says furiously, “I hate it when she treats you like that.”

“Like what?”

“Making snide remarks.”

“Maybe I deserve it.” Nick says it lightly, making a joke of it, but she isn’t fooled. She is about to say that he deserves only the best when he beats her to it. “Take care, Gem. Only the best is

good enough for you.” He deftly side steps the sagging gate, raises his hand and sets off down the lane.

Gemma watches him go, a familiar ache in her stomach. Dear Nick. Doesn't he know she already has the best? She has Sebastian.