

No Small Change

A Teapot Cottage Novel (#1)

By

Annie Cook

Chapter 1

The trouble with sat-navs, Adie fumed, is that they all-too-often lied. This one, the wretched stupid thing, was doing exactly that right now. It was lying through its teeth, or at least it would be if it actually *had* any teeth.

Somehow, through no mistake of her own - unless you counted blind obedience to a monotone-talking box attached with spit and a prayer to her windscreen as a 'mistake' - she'd managed to end up half a mile down an impossibly narrow, pothole-pitted dirt track. It looked like a road as far as the sat-nav was concerned, but it seemed to be leading precisely nowhere. As annoying and embarrassing as it was to have to admit it Adrienne Elizabeth Bostock, menopausal mess and newly disowned wife and mother (and pilloried social pariah to boot) really did seem to have got herself well and truly lost.

With her teeth clenched and her mouth compressed in a grim line, Adie stopped the car and contemplated the massive, spiky, paint-gouging brambles that flanked the ever-tightening track before her. It had dwindled to little more than the width of a cycle trail already. How much further could she realistically go? And, of course, there was nowhere to turn around. So that meant reversing. Around stupid blind bends and bushes. All the way back to the stupid main road. Adie glanced at her watch, tried to ignore yet another surging, suffocating hot flush, and gritted her teeth even harder.

With a frustrated sigh, and swearing like a slaughterhouse worker under her breath, she graunched the gear stick into reverse and started inching backwards. *And God alone knows how long this is going to take!*

Adie had a simple but important goal; to get to her first-ever house-sitting job at a place called Teapot Cottage in a town called Torley before the owners left for the other side of the world. She forced down her rising panic and wracked her brains to figure out where she'd gone wrong with the satnav's directions, but drew a blank. Instead, she took a couple of deep breaths and tried to listen to the inner voice of reason – the one that told her nobody would die if she was an hour or two late. In fact, the voice of reason insisted, if she was an hour or two late, nobody might notice what time she turned up at all, except maybe the dog, who was no doubt desperate to be fed, and poo'd-n-wee'd-n-walked, before what was left of the daylight finally faded.

She checked her watch again. It was twenty to four. She promised herself that if she hadn't made sense of the directions in another twenty minutes, and assuming she had mobile phone reception in this God-forsaken place, she'd simply call her hosts, admit defeat, and ask for guidance.

She didn't think that would upset them greatly. They'd seemed very relaxed overall, about the house-sitting arrangement. They'd happily given precise instructions on where to find the key to their cottage and, by default, access to all their worldly goods, in case they *had* already absconded to the other side of the world by the time she arrived. But Adie thought it would've been nice if she could have made an entrance while they were still around. They could then perhaps bumble off to Australia for Christmas with a bit of peace of mind, having left everything they held dear - quite bizarrely, in her opinion - in the hands of someone they'd actually managed to meet.

The house-sit had all seemed perfectly doable and reasonable earlier in the week, when the plans were being made over the phone. But now, thanks to her apparent inability to find the place, even with the help of technology, she was beginning to wonder if she'd made a disastrous decision in plunging headlong into an arrangement she was only halfway confident she could even pull off.

It doesn't say much about my capabilities if I can't even find the bloody house, does it?

Adie was a very reluctant free agent, this Christmas. Since the family home had been put up for sale, her now ex-husband Bryan had gone off in whatever direction he'd decided on (Adie tried to tell herself she didn't give a monkey's), and all three of her children were doing their own thing too. Not a single one of them was even vaguely interested her plans, or including her in theirs. As much as she hated the idea, and had done everything she could to avoid it, she'd ended up facing Christmas alone.

Her first-born daughter Ruth, who was barely speaking to her anyway, was in Italy with her gorgeous Italian wife, the well-known dress designer Gina Giordano, and their little daughter Chiara. They normally did the big Italian family Christmas every second year, but various events that including a recent pandemic, had derailed their plans more than once. Nobody could argue that it was well and truly time for Gina to go and reconnect with her people, and take her wife and daughter with her. Adie hadn't

wanted to infuriate Ruth and Gina, or a noisy bunch of excitable Italian in-laws, by asking them to change their arrangements for her, so she didn't. After all, she was hardly in a position to ask for favours, especially over something as important as that. Knowing what the answer would have been, she'd decided that suffering in silence was infinitely preferable to being sworn at in Italian by the truly terrifying Gina.

If Ruth herself had suggested that they stick around to enable her abandoned, menopausally deranged mother to feel like someone cared enough to see her through her first Christmas alone, it would have been a different matter. But nothing was said, and Adie understood completely because plans are plans and her unfortunate position of 'persona non grata' within her family was, after all, her own stupid fault. But the timing really couldn't have been any worse.

Adie's younger daughter Teresa was also away, backpacking around the Sunshine Coast of Australia with a group of good friends she'd known since her school days. The date of their return home was open-ended. Teresa appeared to be in no rush to give up her freedom and join the workforce yet.

It was all fair enough, Adie knew. Ruth, Gina and Chiara needed time with their extended family, and Teresa deserved a chance to let her hair down before getting down to the business of deciding on her first career move. Adie's now settled but once wayward (and some might have said morally bankrupt) son Matty was a little closer to home, in Epsom, having his first family Christmas with his new wife and even newer baby, but his plans hadn't included her either.

"You do understand, don't you, Mum? We're just wanting to 'nest' this year on our own, for our first-ever Christmas in the new house. How about we think about getting together for a family do next year, when Teresa, Ruth and Gina will all be here? We could even invite Dad, if things have settled down?"

Over my dead body, Adie had seethed at the time, as she'd struggled not to choke on her raspberry gin and tonic. Even now, the very thought of Bryan's condescending presence inflicting an indelible memory-stain across *any* future family Christmas made her furious; so much so that she jammed her foot on the accelerator, shot abruptly backwards much faster than intended, and promptly smacked into a tree.

"Oh, dammit! This is all I bloody need!" She wailed angrily, banging the heel of her hand on the steering wheel. She took a deep breath, counted to ten, then flung the door open and got out of the car, at the same time as losing the battle to ignore the raging hot flush that was now doing its best to burn her alive.

And damn these stupid 'power surges'! When I wished for a 'hot body', this is NOT what I had in mind!

Fighting back her fury, she stomped to the back of the car to survey the damage. Luckily, it wasn't as bad as expected. A smooth, orange-sized dent stared defiantly back at her from the metalwork just below the back window, but thankfully the bent elbow of the renegade branch hadn't gone through the glass. The offending tree had been a small one. And the car was still perfectly driveable, thank goodness, with its bumper still intact. She could carry on with her journey, although there was still a long way to go back before she could expect to go properly forward again.

What an appropriate metaphor for my messed-up, train-wreck of a life, she muttered under her breath, as she stalked belligerently back to the driver's seat.

Adie had decided that house-sitting for three weeks in a quiet corner of the Lakes District was a far better alternative to ending up at her much older brother Raymond's house for Christmas, with his horrible judging wife who she'd never got along with. Listening to (and pretending not to be hurt by) a barrage of sarcastic jibes about how thoroughly and permanently Adie had lost the trust of her family, and having to endure the terrible woman's spiteful remarks about how disgusting her 'tom-cat' son was, all just felt like more than she could stomach. Ditto the hours of mean-spirited gossip that would inevitably follow, about people she didn't even know or care about.

Chomping her way through her sister-in-law's overcooked turkey and lumpy gravy, and then being saddled with the washing up while her brother snored his head off in front of the millionth rerun of *The Wizard of Oz*, with an avalanche of gravy stains congealing down the front of his hideous Christmas jumper? No thanks. Adie and Raymond had never been close, and forced jollity at Christmas, spent with someone you shared absolutely nothing but a bloodline with, was just too grim a prospect – especially when part of the deal was having to suffer an insufferable spouse. And staying in her poky rented flat all alone seemed monumentally pathetic, especially as she didn't even have Creole for company. The ageing German Shepherd had stayed with Bryan after he'd thrown Adie out of the house,

and although she had Creole on occasional weekends and holidays, Christmas wasn't going to be one of them.

But, as luck would have it, that had turned out to be a blessing in disguise. After meeting her glamorous friend Miranda for coffee one morning, and confiding her dread about being alone at Christmas for the first time in her fifty-two years on the planet, Miranda, (who was jetting off to Madeira for the holidays with a new and much younger man in tow) had made a rather interesting suggestion. She wondered if Adie might join a couple of house-sitting websites where people offered others the chance to go and stay in their homes to take care of their property and pets while they were away. She mused that if Adie could get a 'Christmas gig', that might just be the thing to get her 'out of her funk'. Miranda had a wonderful way with words, and she made house-sitting sound like a big adventure.

Adie wasn't entirely sure it would be that, but she had to admit that Miranda was right. She *did* need to 'get out of her funk', and this might just be a way of kick-starting the process. Because it really was going to be a process. Adie was under no illusions about the amount of time it might take to recover from a shattered 26-year marriage that was built on a foundation of lies - even if the lies were all hers.

As she continued to inch the car back towards the next hairpin bend, she thought back to last Christmas. They had tried so hard, as a family, to mend the cracks or at least ignore them for the festive season. Adie and Bryan were still in the house together, but they were living in different parts of it, coming and going at different times, rarely colliding, and being barely civil when they did.

Faced with the inevitable parting of the ways, the decision to have one last 'ordinary' family Christmas was brave and hopeful, but ultimately stupid. It had been a rip-roaring disaster of a day, an excruciating experience of walking on eggshells with everyone holding their breath, waiting for the axe to fall. Which, of course, it eventually did.

Bryan had chipped away all day, with his patronising glances and snide remarks about Adie being a liar and a fraud, manipulating her family to suit her own desires. By the time darkness had descended on Christmas night, after the mulled wine had been poured and the mince pies passed around, everything had finally fallen apart. All pretence had been over when Matty properly lost his temper and offered to tattoo the words 'intolerant asshole' back-to-front on his father's forehead, so he'd never be able to forget the fact. Teresa had then dissolved into an uncharacteristic flood of tears and became incapable of saying anything at all. An entire day of listening to their father openly and spitefully sniping at their mother had finally finished both kids off. Hurt and angry, they'd admitted defeat and rushed off into the night.

Adie hadn't blamed them one iota as she'd sat there wishing she had somewhere else to go, herself. For Matty and Teresa's own sakes, she'd been glad when they left. But she was bereft, being left to endure her husband's overflowing bitterness without a single buffer to mitigate the misery.

She understood Bryan's anger at the revelation that she'd had a baby girl at fifteen, had been forced to put her up for adoption, and had, in his scathing words, 'never bothered to tell anyone who had the right to know.' After secretly tracking Ruth down, Adie had managed to convince Bryan to sell the big family home at short notice and move everyone into the much smaller house she'd bought next door to Ruth and Gina, on the flimsy pretext of 'downsizing'. She had then set about befriending the couple in an effort to be close in whatever way she could to her firstborn. She'd never told her husband the real reason for the move, or let any of her children know they each had a half-sibling across the fence line. She just hadn't known how, in the beginning, and the more time went by, the harder it became to tell the truth.

It only came out at all because of a freak set of circumstances nobody could have predicted in a million years; the kind of thing you really couldn't have made up. Her son Matty had been wrongly implicated in a woman's murder and had in the process been 'outed' as a moonlighting sex worker. Adie was still trying - and largely failing - to wrap her head around *that* particular nugget! After all, how exactly *do* you come to terms with the fact that your twenty-four-year-old son routinely shags women at least a decade older than you and gets paid for it? Adie was pretty sure nobody had written the manual for that, yet.

And whoever it was that first coined the phrase 'the truth will out' hadn't been kidding. Routine DNA samples had linked Matty with the half-sister he didn't know he had. In the most unnerving and random coincidence ever to be established by anyone, anywhere in the entire bloody world, the murdered woman had turned out to be Ruth's adopted sister. She had also been Matty's youngest

'client', at thirty-five. Most of the women he 'attended to' (for want of a more graphic and disturbing description) were roughly double that age at least.

It was all a gigantic, mortifying mess that took a lot of unravelling and explaining, but the long and short of it was that Adie had been forced to come clean about everything, and the revelations had left everyone well and truly shell-shocked with anger and disbelief. Bryan hadn't been willing to look her in the eye for almost a year now. Neither had 'grab-a-gran' Matty, albeit for very different reasons.

As far as Bryan was concerned, there was a lot to take on board, and a lot to forgive, and Adie understood that. But his resentment and nastiness had cut the family to the quick. As confused as Matty and Teresa were about everything, and as unready as they still were to talk about it in any real depth, they did at least try to understand. Sadly, their father didn't, and they struggled with that too. To say the family was a paralysed mess of anger, shame and confusion was the understatement of the century.

Matty's confused face was never far from her thoughts, nor was Ruth's outraged one, or Teresa's tear-stained one. And as for Gina, frighteningly ferocious in her desire to protect her vulnerable wife, she'd virtually torn Adie in half with her strident volley of insults, with Adie – for once – being profoundly glad she didn't understand Italian.

Again, here in her now-dented old banger of a car, stuck in the middle of nowhere and desperately grappling with the latest of the ferocious hot flushes that now routinely plagued her, Adie couldn't quite manage to stay ahead of yet another deluge of tears. There were simply no words to describe the agony of knowing how much she'd hurt the people she loved the most. Tears were all she had left. She hadn't known it was possible to hate herself so much, to cry as much as she had over the past few months, or to be so *sick* of crying. Some of her wretchedness was free-falling hormones, but most of it wasn't.

She blinked hard and forced herself to stop thinking about Bryan. Another emotional surge like the one she'd just had only intensified the heartache, and exponentially increased the likelihood of her poor little car being fully written off before she'd ever manage to guide it back to the main road.

Menopausal mood swings and everything else that went with them were the new 'normal' now for Adie, and she struggled to get used to managing her symptoms with no real idea how long they might last. Although Covid restrictions had initially prevented her from physically seeing her doctor, there had been a good long telephone talk about hormone replacement therapy. Adie had also picked the brains of various friends in the same hormonal boat, to try and weigh up the apparent choice between the increased risks of breast cancer or osteoporosis. She eventually decided against HRT.

Unfortunately, part of the deal of "flying solo" hormonally was being knocked sideways several times a day by 'power surges'. Weeping at the drop of a hat went with the territory too, and so did having to forcibly ignore far too many random and shocking impulses to punch innocent people in the face, and stave off the unfathomable urge to commit some seriously bizarre acts of homicide. Waking up at all hours was part of the fun as well, most times drenched and panicking, and fighting through the night to get her breath back.

She supposed that if her life was a bit less complicated, she might manage her symptoms a lot better. Her mood swings, in particular, were probably a lot more keenly felt than they otherwise might have been if everything else had been on a more even keel. Her doctor had said as much, and had stressed the importance of family support, but of course there was fat chance of that. As for the recommended 'circle of helpful and understanding friends', well that was just laughable. Most of Adie's so-called friends had effectively melted into the woodwork since her split with Bryan, having picked their camp by way of their absence. It was safe to say that her life wasn't exactly bursting at the seams with allies.

But even the isolation she was feeling, or the see-sawing state of her relationships and the ever-present worry about the future, weren't enough to convince her that HRT was a better option. Her doctor had assured her that she could change her mind at any point and go for the drugs but, so far at least, Adie had stood resolutely against her body being flooded with fake hormones.

I just have to get on with it, don't I? What's the alternative? Sitting in a sobbing, hysterical heap, waiting to be rescued or going completely mad?

She gave herself a mental shake and forced herself to focus. Reversing along this narrow, crater-riddled ribbon of 'road' was going to need all of her concentration.

Suddenly, a sharp, piercing whistle made her jump. Braking quickly, she glanced in her rear-view mirror to see a tall stocky man standing right behind the car with his hands on his hips. He didn't look angry, just a bit bemused, but she realised how narrowly she'd avoided hitting him. He had literally stepped up from behind the bend she was about to reverse around.

Really? People actually battled their way down this back-of-beyond track, with its lacerating thorns and ankle-busting potholes?

Momentarily forgetting about the size of her personal contribution to global warming, Adie slid her window down. "I'm so sorry, I didn't see you! Are you alright?"

The man peered at her, then nodded. "Oh, yes dear, don't worry, I'm fine. You don't look that great yourself, though, if you don't mind my saying so. Lost, are you?"

Acutely embarrassed, Adie wiped her weeping eyes self-consciously with the back of her hand, knowing she was anything but a 'pretty crier'. She hoped, against all odds, that her face didn't look as blotchy, shiny and clammy as it felt.

She sniffed hard. "Yes, sorry. But I think I *am* completely lost. I'm trying to find a place called Teapot Cottage, in a town called Torley, but the postcode must be wrong because the stupid sat-nav has brought me here. Right now I haven't a clue where I am."

The man stepped forward, and she could see he was in his mid-fifties. He had a distinctly windswept look about him, like he'd spent his whole life walking down remote country lanes in all weathers. Dressed in a domed-up Barbour jacket, scruffy jeans, wellington boots and a flat cap, he looked like the quintessential English farmer plucked straight from a country magazine, but with a lot more mud and unkemptness about him. He smiled kindly and nodded.

"Teapot Cottage. That's the Robinson's little place by Torley town. Converted old shepherd's hut. At the edge of Ravensdown Farm." He spoke very well, and his sentences were statements, rather than questions, indicating that he knew exactly where Adie was supposed to be going.

"Yes! That's it. Glenn and Sue Robinson. I'm their house sitter, but I haven't a clue how to find the place. I wanted to get there before they left, and I don't know now if that's possible, or whether I'll find it at all." She fought back her tears yet again. The last thing she wanted was for this kind stranger to write her off as the raving basket case she was trying so hard not to be.

But I can't be THAT lost, can I, if this chap knows where it is? It might've been nice if the Robinsons had mentioned the small matter of it being in the middle of bloody nowhere, and nigh-on impossible to find!

"Well, you were heading the right way, as it happens, so if you just keep going the way you were, for another mile or so, you should bang straight into it."

Adie looked dubiously at the disappearing track, and gnawed her bottom lip. The countryman laughed. "Yes, it's a tad narrow in places, and getting worse, since the row about who's meant to maintain it keeps rumbling on with no end in sight. But persevere, and you should get through alright. My brother-in-law comes up once or twice a year with a dozer and widens it out a bit, and I do the same. Makes life a bit easier for a few months at a time, but it's not our land so we don't do any more than that with it. Local authority clearly can't be bothered maintaining it. Makes me wonder what we pay our council tax for, but don't get me started on *that*."

Adie noticed for the first time that the man had a dog with him, a collie cross, possibly a working dog, since it kept out of the way and wasn't as friendly as most domestic dogs Adie had met.

"Are you a farmer around here?" she asked him.

He proffered a weather-beaten hand. "Yes, I am. Bob Shalloe, pleased to make your acquaintance. My wife and I own Bracefields farm. It straddles this end of Torley valley. Ravensdown, where you'll be staying, is on the east side. They have sheep and a few beef cows. Ours is all sheep, two hundred and fifty-four acres."

Adie took his hand. "Adrienne Bostock, just here for a three-week adventure. Very pleased to meet you, Mr Shalloe."

"You can call me Bob, my dear. Most people call me that, if not something worse. Only the dreaded bank manager calls me Mr Shalloe."

He winked at her, and grinned. "Three weeks, hmm? Well. You should call on us for a cup of tea while you're about. My wife Sheila makes a jolly good Parkin, and the best pot of black tea this side of the Lancashire border. She'll be glad to see you, if you come. You can get the directions from Mark Raven, at Ravensdown Farmhouse. It's the bigger place, further up the drive from the cottage. He's my brother-in-law. You can tell him you met me, if you like."

With that, Bob Shalloe tipped his cap and stepped back. Adie gave him a wobbly smile and the thumbs up, put the car into first gear, and doggedly proceeded. A mile down the track, which had widened again just a little, she realised she was still thinking about having met the upbeat weather-

beaten farmer, his English gentleman's accent (which stopped just shy of being posh), and his offer of tea and Parkin.