

*The Stuff You Fail
To Notice*

A Novel By

Annie Cook

Chapter One



The over-warm and poorly ventilated bus, with its steamed-up windows and slightly dour driver, finally arrived in Torley town. Minty Cartwright gratefully got off it, stretched, yawned, and looked wearily around her. It was such a relief to finally be here. The train journey from Bristol to Carlisle had been long, and then she'd had to take a bus to Torley. Thankfully, she hadn't had to wait for very long at the uncovered stop outside the station. The Lake District weather was notoriously unpredictable, especially in early November. It had been closing in quickly as she'd got off the train and she hadn't thought to bring an umbrella. She berated herself for having walked past the tall tub in the hallway at home, crammed with brollies of all colours and sizes, without even really seeing it.

It's normal enough to tune out to what's right in front of you, I suppose, when you see it every day and don't need it. But how annoying, that I didn't even think to grab one on my way out. Probably 'peri,' messing with my head as usual.

She made a mental note to try and find an umbrella in Torley town, if there wasn't one at Teapot Cottage, but she'd check first. There wasn't much point in getting another to add to the dozen or so that were already sitting at home, if she didn't have to. It was why they had so many, she supposed. They always seemed to be going somewhere without one, buying one to use when they got caught short, then adding it to the collection when they got home again. They were all guilty of it; herself, her husband Leo, and their kids; Belle and Ethan.

It had been a huge relief to finally get off a very tatty train. Minty had muttered to herself more than once, on her long and protracted journey, about how poor the rail services were nowadays, with their endless delays and grimy carriages with ripped upholstery and unwashed windows. Most of the bigger stations had a general air of scruffiness too, with suspect ‘spillages’ congealing in corners, overflowing bins, and dirty little mice hopping all over the tracks, but the smaller stations were even worse. They were marginally cleaner, in most cases, but automation had replaced the need for a human presence at far too many. It left them with a distinct air of abandonment, as if nobody really cared anymore. It always felt a little spooky, and vaguely dystopian, especially when she happened to be the only person there. The presence of CCTV was only vaguely reassuring.

At one time, when she was younger, the rail network had been amazing. Train travel was exciting, back then. She could have gone virtually anywhere, and she often travelled to all kinds of weird and wonderful places. She seldom had to worry about a train being dirty, delayed or cancelled, and she could certainly make a trip without feeling like she might need to sell one of her kidneys for the price of the fare!

How times had changed. Not only were most services unreliable these days; the ticket prices were nothing short of astronomical too. It annoyed her a lot, that she could have had a full week by a pool somewhere in sunny Spain (albeit with a ‘cheapie’ airline and a basic three-star hotel) for less than the eye-watering cost of her return train fare within her home country. No wonder commuters felt ripped off for their simple need to get from A to B, and even that wasn’t as simple or straightforward as it used to be, for many.

Thanks to years of rail network privatisation, hundreds of little towns had lost their train stations, and Torley had been one of them. Some fool, somewhere in high office, had declared that the smaller stations weren’t ‘viable’ anymore for the all-important stakeholders to get their lovely profits from. Lines all over the country had been systematically torn up, and

railway stations closed or demolished. It sent a sad message to the people in those places, that their needs were no longer important.

It all made most people think twice about going on holiday by train anymore but for Minty it had still been preferable to driving all this way – even with the inconvenience of having to ‘bus-it’ from Carlisle city.

On its arrival into Torley, the bus had stopped in front of a florist shop called Heavenly Blooms. The shop’s riotous sign was painted in striped and spotty multi-coloured lettering, and littered with flowers in impossible colours and shapes. It had a distinct sixties-style, flower-power vibe; funky and cheerful, and Minty was faintly amused to see that the local undertaker, Frost Funeral Services, was conveniently situated right next-door. That had a smaller and far more discreet sign, lettered in simple gold-on-black, as if it were making a quiet but important statement of refusal to be intimidated or outclassed by the florist shop’s overt brashness.

Like all the other little shops that lined the High Street, these two were made of local stone and finished with multi-paned windows set into bay-shaped sills. One or two panes, in different bays, had the dimpled glass of ‘yesteryear.’ The overall effect was quaint, cheerful and welcoming. All of the shops seemed to be independently owned and run, too. There wasn’t a single chain-store sign in evidence, which immediately made Minty feel as if she’d stepped back in time. If it weren’t for the cars that lined the curbs on both sides of the street, she wouldn’t have known what century she was in!

She was keen to find a taxi and get up to Teapot Cottage as quickly as she could. As the bus had rumbled its way here from Carlisle, the early-November sky had taken on a slightly over-brilliant metallic hue, behind the darkening clouds that now hung like an oppressive shroud above the town. It would be sensible to get to the cottage and get settled before the incoming storm unleashed its fury across the Torley valley.

Sadly, although her mind was focussed on that, Minty’s body had other ideas. As she stepped away from the bus, she

instantly started feeling wobbly and lightheaded, and she realised that she needed to eat something – and quickly – if she didn't want to collapse in the street!

She'd left home at the crack of dawn, without having any breakfast, and the train journey from Bristol Temple Meads to Carlisle, via Manchester Piccadilly, had been ridiculously long. It had also been hampered by a delayed connection. She hadn't fancied anything from the uninspiring selection of food on offer, at the station kiosks or on the train, and she was hungry enough now to 'eat a scabby horse and go back for the rider,' as her grandfather used to say.

The sudden, dire need for sustenance sent her scurrying down a little road called Amble Walk, just off the High Street. She found a lovely traditional café called Ye Olde Torley Tea Shoppe, and decided that a cup of coffee and a sticky bun would probably be enough to save her from passing out.

Despite the fact that it was still around seven weeks until December, the café already had a naked Christmas tree propped up just inside the window. It was still waiting to be decorated, and it looked a little forlorn, in its abandoned state – much like Minty was feeling, herself. Christmas was racing towards her like a freight train she couldn't jump clear of, but she couldn't bring herself to think about it yet. To her current scrambled frame of mind, it would be the best of blessings if someone cancelled the so-called 'festive season' altogether. This year, for the Cartwright/McLeod family at least, it promised to be a monumental shambles.

A woman quickly came across and introduced herself as Peg Tripper, the owner of the café. She grinned and nodded when Minty remarked on the starkness of the tree.

'Ah, yes,' she explained. 'My husband Eric popped in here on a rare visit, a few days ago, so I got him to drag the tree down from the loft for me. I'll chuck a few baubles on it in a couple of weeks, when folk start feeling a bit more festive. I can get those down myself, but the tree's a bloody nuisance to haul down from up there. I took the chance for some help

when it came, but the poor thing does look a bit sad, I'll grant you.'

She responded to Minty's question about where to find a taxi, with a rueful shake of her head.

'I'm sorry, love. There's no taxi stand here, I'm afraid. There's no demand for it, but there is a service. I'll call our local cabbie Adam Driver for you, when you've finished your coffee. It should only take him a few minutes to get here. Where are you headed?'

She smiled broadly when Minty told her she was headed for Teapot Cottage. Apparently, Peg was a good friend of the owner, Mrs Raven.

'Ah, you'll have a nice quiet time up there,' she said with a wink. 'It's a very special, cosy little place. And you're welcome back here love, whenever you want, for more coffee and cake, or something a bit more hearty.'

She offered to sell Minty a wedge of spinach and sweetcorn quiche and a take-away pot of vegetable soup, suggesting she could reheat it for her dinner a bit later on. Minty hadn't even thought about an evening meal for her first night, and she didn't have the energy or the enthusiasm to go trailing round the town's little supermarket that was visible through the café windows. Quiche and soup seemed like an excellent idea, so she readily agreed.

A taxi came to collect her, just as she was finishing her snack, and it only took a couple of minutes to whisk her from the town to Teapot Cottage. She found the key under the rosebush pot next to the front door, right where the owner Mrs Raven had said it would be.

As the heavy wooden door swung open, on its quiet, well-oiled hinges, she was greeted by a surprising sense of warmth. A rush of gratitude hit her but, just as she crossed the threshold, her mobile phone rang. Her stomach plummeted, when she saw the caller ID.

Clutching both her holdall and her bag of dinner with one hand, and pressing the phone's 'decline' button with the other, Minty stretched her right leg out behind her to close the front

door. Terminating the call was the wisest choice for now. It would only be another nasty one, like all the others, from the one person in the world she never wanted to hear from, ever again; ‘Bloody’ Fiona Winterson – the woman she used to love with all her heart.

She fought back the rising tide of fury that threatened to swamp her, and actively resisted the urge to throw the phone to the floor and stamp on it.

For God’s sake, you crazy bitch, give me a break! I haven’t even made it through the freakin’ door here yet!

She closed her eyes and did her fail-safe ‘one-minute remedy.’ She took three deep breaths; in, to the count of six, hold for six, and out to the count of six. After those, and a quick roll of her shoulders, she’d calmed down again, and managed to put the call out of her mind – for now at least.

She dropped her heavy holdall to the floor, put the little paper carrier-bag of quiche and soup onto the coffee table, and shrugged out of her backpack. She turned to look out through one of the picture windows of Teapot Cottage, and took a sharp intake of breath. The view extended right across the Torley valley, and it was *stunning*. Dramatic and tranquil, it instantly soothed her.

Feeling overwhelmed by the desire to escape for a while from everything that had been dragging her down, back in Bristol, Minty had acted on instinct and done a quick internet search for holiday houses. Teapot Cottage had popped up, and she’d immediately given in to an overriding compulsion to book it straight away, drop everything in her life without even bothering to question the sanity of doing it, and rush blindly to its front door. Impulsivity wasn’t in her nature but, for whatever reason, the pull to come here and hole up for a while had been impossible to resist.

She was relieved and delighted, therefore, to find that the cottage was every bit as beautiful as the website showed it to be, and happily just as remote. It was exactly as described; a quiet, tucked away house, nestled into a quiet corner of a small farm on the edge of Torley; a Lake District ‘working’ town. It

was a farming community; not on the tourist trail at all, and that suited Minty just fine. As a God-sent bolthole, where she could catch her breath and ignore the outside world for three weeks, this little place was perfect.

She'd come up from Bristol by train because she wanted to feel like she was embarking on a real adventure; not just jumping into her car and 'running away from home' because things were difficult. That felt too convenient; like a cop-out. So did the prospect of having a car at the ready that would make it so much easier to 'wimp out' and head home again too early, before she'd really given herself enough time to process everything that had happened in the past couple of weeks. She wanted to feel like she was on a voyage of discovery because, in essence, that's what this journey needed to be. A much-needed chance to reflect, get her scrambled thoughts back on an even keel, and find a new way forward from her blown-apart life; it all needed to start right now.

That includes getting a handle on these stupid phone calls from Bloody Fiona, who has no damn right to be angry at all, about anything!

Minty took another couple of deep breaths, and looked around her. She decided that Peg Tripper had been right; there *was* a real cosiness about Teapot Cottage. It *did* feel special; more like someone's much-loved permanent home, instead of the average typically soulless holiday let.

She pinched herself a little when she wandered upstairs and saw the beds with their brightly patterned, patchwork-crocheted bedspreads and their plump and enticing pillows. They looked *so* homely and inviting! The cosy little bathroom tucked between the two bedrooms, with its dove-grey walls and luxurious fluffy pink towels, felt warm and welcoming too.

Oh, this place is gorgeous! I'll be very cosy and happy here. I think the only problem I'm going to have is not wanting to leave, at the end!

Back downstairs in the lovely brick-walled kitchen, she grinned at the bright red Aga. She quickly set about filling the

kettle and setting it onto one of the hotplates to boil, to make a pot of tea. The little Aga was an older version of the black one she had at home. She loved them; they always felt comforting, and this one lent a lot of character to the charming little space. The big, traditional old wooden drying rack above it had what looked like a couple of Keily-printed tea towels hanging off it. Set against the opposite wall was an old Welsh dresser, heavily crammed with crockery and serving dishes, and a dining table and chairs claimed the space in between.

She was delighted to find that Mrs Raven had thoughtfully provided a few provisions. There were some items in the fridge, and a loaf of home-made bread wrapped in another pretty tea towel sitting on the bench. A welcome note with a smiley face on it sat propped up against a very nice-looking bottle of cabernet sauvignon, on the kitchen table.

Okay, so there's milk, eggs, bacon, butter, cheese, bread and wine! How lovely, to walk in and find all this! Quiche and soup for supper then, and scrambled eggs for breakfast! That's not a bad start, is it?

Minty didn't eat meat, so she could probably give back the bacon, with gentle thanks, but everything else on offer was very welcome. She decided to take her cup of tea to one of the two generously padded curved window seats that sat in front of Teapot Cottage's living room windows. She tried to concentrate on the wonderful view of Torley Valley, instead of dwelling on Bloody Fiona's latest telephone 'missile' that had hit her as she was walking through the door. She hadn't answered it this time, which was a 'first,' and therefore a good step forward, but she knew it wouldn't be the last call that came.

Clearly, hightailing it north for the last three weeks of her month's leave of absence, in an attempt to pull her scrambled head together without major distraction, was not going to be as easy as she'd hoped. The plan was still in danger of serious derailment but, to be fair, that was largely her own fault. She could certainly fix it, and stay on track. All she needed to do

was stop answering her phone, and listening to Bloody Fiona's bitchy, rambling rants.

As much as she knew she shouldn't give in and answer the calls from her ex-best friend, the urge to do so was irresistible; almost as if she felt on some level that she actually deserved to be shouted at. She didn't of course, but could she say no? No. Not yet, but Fiona's constant barrage of abuse still had her fuming, nonetheless.

She'd been fuming a lot in recent weeks, which wasn't like her at all. Normally, she was quite easy-going. She didn't suffer fools for more than a split second, but she was pretty good at keeping her blood pressure where it should be, and not getting too upset by stressful situations or by the people who caused them. Rarely did she ever lose her cool and feel like throttling someone.

Walking away was usually the easiest and absolutely *always* the more dignified choice. But, in the space of twenty days, nineteen hours and sixteen minutes, everything – and it really was *everything* – had turned completely on its head. Minty's life now looked and felt more like an ash-filled nuclear winter, than the sun-filled 'picnic in the park' of just a few weeks ago.

And it wasn't just her life that was undergoing a sea change. Minty truly felt that she *herself* was changing. Despite her best efforts, she wasn't quite able to connect anymore with the chilled, laid-back person she'd been just prior to finding out, in the course of an accidental conversation she arguably shouldn't have been having in the first place, that her husband Leo – the erstwhile love of her life but now officially the Biggest Asshole of the Century – was having an affair with her best friend Fiona, and had been for two and a half years.

Minty's 'chilled' vibe had all but disintegrated, along with her marriage and the longest and most important friendship of her life. She was now, more or less, a seething mess of murderous intent.

Oh, and let's not forget about my questionably stable hormones, which are probably fuelling all this fury and confusion raging around in my head!

Minty was officially in 'peri'; that delightful premenopausal place where she was teetering on a hormonal cliff edge, dealing with all kinds of random and unpredictable emotions and bodily quirks and bangs. Most of the time, she felt as if she were suspended, in the weirdest, unfamiliar psychological state; of continually bracing herself without really knowing what for. She sensed a storm, rumbling in the distance. As low-key as it was right now, she had a horrible feeling that behind the gentle rumbles, a full-force, hormone-stripping hurricane was on its way to turn her inside out.

Timing was everything. But it was such a cringeworthy stereotype, wasn't it? Mid-life Marriage Meltdown colliding ever-so-sharply at the intersection with 'The Change Of Life'? It seemed to happen with monotonous regularity. She knew far too many women who had suffered from the exact same set of circumstances – the worst that life could throw at them, all at once.

'Okay, here you go; how about *this* for a laugh? Your husband's shagging your best mate. Yeeha! Oh, and just for the joy of it, now that we've popped you onto *that* rollercoaster, let's also chuck some haywire hormones at you too. Wassamatta? Not enough hot flushes and bouts of weeping? Palms and feet not sweaty enough? Need a few more homicidal mood swings? Well, let's dial things up a bit then, shall we? Let's turn your top lip into Sherwood Forest, litter your chest with pretty little pimples, pop out a couple of random varicose veins, drench you in a few really nice night-sweats, and wehey! Strap yourself in good and tight, sweetheart, because the ride's about to start.'

Yes, the timing was a bitch. Minty's journey towards the menopause had subtly started, at the precise point where the *rest* of her life had imploded without warning, in the course of a random meeting in Sainsbury's supermarket, with a woman called Margie Bluett. Margie was a long-remembered, much-

feared high-school bully that Minty had never wanted to see again, after the torment of her school days had ended. But, unhappily, Margie had chosen Bristol University too, after leaving college in Cheltenham, so the two women did occasionally see one another around town. They usually managed to avoid any meaningful contact but, that day in the supermarket, they had more or less collided in the coffee aisle and the awkwardness of manoeuvring trolleys around one another, without some kind of nod to one another's presence, was plainly ridiculous.

After a superficial exchange about the weather, and the local authority's relentless persistence in trying to close down the local library, Margie had casually enquired how Minty was doing, in the aftermath of Fiona Winterson having run off with her husband.

The incredulous look on Minty's face had been enough to move Margie, by now grown up and far more compassionate and caring, to tears of embarrassment over her detonating clanger. She'd been nearly hysterical with panic and regret, that she'd been the one to spill the beans and blow Minty's world apart. To give her some credit, she hadn't even tried to backtrack, bleat all manner of inane excuses, and pretend to have made some kind of terrible mistake. Margie Bluett *spectacularly* blew it but, to be fair to her, she'd owned it, and she'd tried to do her best to mitigate the damage.

Minty had politely and distantly declined Margie's kind and genuine offer of a cup of tea and solace at the supermarket's corner cafe. She'd stumbled home, with white noise hissing in her head, and spent the evening ruminating on everything Margie had reluctantly spilled forth after being pressed into finishing what she'd started. 'You have to put the full stop at the end of the sentence, Margie. It's unfair, and far too cruel, not to finish what you started to say.'

Margie had promptly dragged her over to one cold corner of the supermarket, where they managed to wedge themselves between two semi-deserted freezers. In the course of that miserable and only half-private conversation, it transpired that

Bloody Fiona had been bragging about her long-time bedding of Leo, and how he ‘already had his bags packed,’ to leave his oblivious wife! It had all come out one night in the Black Horse pub, when the two women had met for one or five drinks too many, which they apparently did quite often.

Why didn't I know they did that? Where the hell was her loyalty to me? She was supposed to be my best friend, yet she regularly meets for drinks with a woman who tormented me horribly for years when we were at school?

The conversation had ended with Margie biting her bottom lip and apologising yet again. She'd added how sorry she was for having bullied Minty relentlessly at school, too. ‘My home life was a terrible mess, back then, Minty, and I wasn't handling it well at all. It's no excuse for being a horrid little bitch, and taking it out on you, but please believe me when I say I'm truly sorry for everything I did.’

Margie's apology for *that* had helped, more than she could have known, but it didn't ease the shock of all the other stuff she'd said. Slowly but sadly, as Minty started trying to wrap her head as best she could around the multiple forms of betrayal, certain things had started falling into place. Leo's sudden and increasingly more frequent ‘work’ absences, particularly on Friday nights when they usually went out somewhere together instead, now began to make more sense. Only now did she make the connection between those and the fact that she could never get hold of Fiona either, to arrange to meet *her* for dinner, a drink, or a movie instead, when Leo let her down.

Other changed behaviours that had only ever vaguely puzzled her also began to take on a different meaning, like Leo fussing more than usual over buying a new shirt, suddenly taking more care with his previously unkempt appearance, insisting that Minty buy him a nose-hair trimmer, of all things, and getting straight into the shower when he got home after working late, even before he'd kissed her hello. Stupidly, naively, she'd thought the stupid fool was making more of an effort for *her*!

The acceptance that Leo had been playing away finally hit home at around the same time as Minty's third rum and coke. It amazed and angered her that she hadn't even been the slightest bit suspicious, in the whole two and a half years he'd been doing it, with the kind of predictable 'textbook' behaviour that had sailed straight over her head. She'd trusted him, like she thought she could and should. That's what good marriages were based on, wasn't it? Trust? Clearly that trust, that quality it never occurred to her to doubt, had made her as blind as a bat to what was going on right under her nose.

Some people might have described Minty's unexpected conversation with Margie Bluett as unfortunate. Others would have said it was one of the luckiest she would ever have in her whole life. The jury in the court of Minty's mind was still out but, somewhere in the deepest part of her consciousness, she knew that finding out about Leo and Fiona really had been the best thing for her – however much it hurt.

She'd confronted Leo in the kitchen that very night, as soon as he'd walked in from work, and to her utter dismay he hadn't even tried to deny the affair. He'd come clean, and admitted it, knowing that the game was up. He'd told her everything, rounding off with a whiny, peculiarly desperate-sounding 'Oh, come *on*, Mints! You know we haven't been happy for a long time now!'

'*Really?* Haven't we? Well, that's news to me, Leo! I've been happy, actually. Patently ignorant, it seems, but still happy enough after twenty-two years of marriage to not want to blow it all apart. You know? Still feeling like two children and more than two decades of history together is worth more than a roll in the hay with someone else?'

'There's none so blind as those who will not see,' Leo had muttered in response and, in that instant flash of clarity, Minty had understood that there wasn't much more to be said; only to ask him if he wouldn't mind leaving please, and finding somewhere else to stay, before she gave into her overriding impulse to run him through with the sharpest kitchen carving knife in the block on the kitchen bench.

She had then left the room, run herself a hot bath, poured an entire three-kilo bag of lavender-scented salt crystals into it and lay in it for a good hour, until well after she'd heard the front door slam behind her cheating bastard of a husband, and the water had gone stone cold. For the first few seconds after Leo had left, she hadn't known whether to laugh or cry but, predictably, tears had won the toss...