

*Ruin, Reins
and Redemption*

A Teapot Cottage Novel (#4)
by

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Without a scrap of warning, Stuart Thomson jolted wide awake, and realised he'd woken up in a different bed, in someone else's house.

Through the thick, confused fog of a heavy Chivas Regal hangover, he remembered that he was in the Lake District, on holiday with his eternally upset fourteen-year-old daughter Meghan. They were in a holiday house called Teapot Cottage on Ravensdown Farm, on the edge of a town called Torley. He was a very long way, both geographically and metaphorically, from his life as he used to know it.

He winced a little, and squinted, as the early morning sun bounced brightly into the bedroom through the four-inch gap between the curtains. He vaguely remembered dragging them together last night before he'd fallen into bed, but he clearly hadn't done it very well. His bleary eyes struggled to cope with the brutally cheerful light. He wasn't much of a morning person at the best of times, but this awakening felt like someone had smacked him across the top of his head with something blunt and heavy, and thrown shards of glass into his eyes.

He hadn't been drunk when he'd collapsed on top of the multi-coloured crocheted bedspread and passed out. At least, he didn't *think* he'd been drunk. It had been a very long time since he'd been on any kind of alcoholic bender.

No; last night's 'blowout' had consisted of a mere two glasses of brandy, admittedly liberal in portion-size, and with only a smattering of soda. Adrienne Raven, the owner of Teapot Cottage, had briefly dropped in to welcome him and Meghan, not long after they'd arrived, and she'd told him there were a few inches left in the bottom of a bottle under the kitchen sink. It had been left by the previous tenant, apparently, and she said he was welcome to it if he wanted it. The one small can of soda that had been left behind as well was the size you'd normally get on a long-haul flight to somewhere, or in a particularly stingy hotel mini-bar.

It hadn't gone far at all, and Stuart had reasoned (rightly or wrongly – he still couldn't decide) that a couple of very strong drinks were better than just one weak one, and there was no point in leaving half an inch of brandy in the bottle by itself. It would have ended up looking lonely and pathetic, after the soda ran out, and he wasn't a fan of it 'neat.' *Almost* neat, as an eighty-twenty ratio, wasn't quite so bad. As a totally bizarre twist on the Pareto Principle, it was hardly enough to add up to getting roaring drunk, but it was all a matter of tolerance, he supposed, as he rolled over and stretched his legs.

His capacity for alcohol used to be pretty high, although it had never been quite as high as he'd once kidded himself, or anyone else who would listen. Nowadays, it seemed that two generous drinks were enough to turn him into a morning-after basket case of desert-dry mouth and thumping headache.

He shouldn't have had the brandies at all, really. He should have known better. The last six years of having too much time to stare at four straight too-close walls, with everything in the world to think about, had taught him a lot. The top thing on his list of eviscerating revelations was that having a bit too much to drink, even at a level where you assumed you could still function, could quite literally put you on a one-way road to hell.

For Stuart, the worst of circumstances had well and truly taken the shine off getting drunk or even pleasantly merry. He wasn't really interested in drinking, anymore. The brandies had been a token gesture; a kind of 'welcoming himself back to life,' in some vague way, and celebrating his freedom with a drink. It was never intended to be more than that. Even if there had been more brandy in the bottle, he doubted if he'd have drunk any more of it. It wasn't exactly his favourite poison. He'd been a gin and tonic man, once, and nothing like as self-aware as he'd thought himself to be, to gauge when he'd had enough or a bit too much of it.

Gin was fairly fashionable again these days, thanks to carefully executed marketing. It was now available in a dizzying array of colours and infusions too, designed to appeal to the younger crowd and to anyone like the man he used to be; keen to make some kind of misguided impression on colleagues, clients and friends. Stuart had loved to be the life of the party, always ready with a joke or a funny story, and alcohol had always helped to give him confidence. But many people still called gin 'Mother's Ruin,' and the closeness of that to the truth was as near to unbearable as anything could ever be for Stuart, without driving him clinically insane.

One mother in particular had been ruined forever by his desire to impress; a pregnant mother, innocently crossing the street, who wouldn't have been expecting a car to come around the corner at breakneck speed, driven by a man much drunker than he thought he was, who was late for a post-lunch meeting. That poor woman wouldn't have anticipated being flung forward and sent hurtling through the

air at a frightening speed, to end up in a grotesque, twisted heap, a heartbeat later. And nobody in her world would ever have expected her and the baby she was carrying to end up dead.

But that's what had happened, and that poor young mother and her unborn baby were gone forever, in the blurry blink of a drunk-driver's eye. Stuart wondered when – or *if* – his nightmares would ever end. Would the day ever come when he'd be able to enjoy life again without the crippling guilt of still being alive after robbing another man of his wife and child? Would he ever be able to get behind the wheel of his car again without hearing or feeling that gut-wrenching thump, as his car hit poor pregnant Karen Balik and sent her flying for a fifty yards?

It was bad enough, that he'd hit her. She might have survived if that was 'all' it had been. But she'd landed on the opposite side of the road, in front of an oncoming truck that didn't have a hope of stopping or even slowing down before she went under its wheels. Everything had happened *way* too fast and for that desperately unfortunate mother, and her child still waiting to be born, the ruin was crushing and complete.

Stuart remembered again now, how the screams of passing pedestrians had pierced the afternoon, along with the sirens that quickly followed. He'd sat in his car with his face in his shaking hands, as blood gushed into the gutter on the opposite side of the road.

Say nothing, do nothing, look at no-one. Wait for the police to arrive.

Somewhere within his shattered mind, he'd known they'd smell the alcohol on him, and he'd known his career as a high-flying corporate lawyer was over, in that instant flash of mother's ruin, almost unbelievable in how quickly it had all come to pass. Conversely, the minutes that had followed had felt like hours, as he'd sat there in his car, as solid as a statue, waiting for the consequences to unfold.

He'd pleaded guilty in an open and shut case, where there was nowhere to go but prison, and he'd found himself with plenty of time for self-recrimination. When Karen Balik's husband Nengah had found out his prison number and written to him, telling him he'd forgiven him for what he'd done because that's what God would want him to do, Stuart had no idea how to feel.

Simple, stark, straightforward script on white lined paper in a brown, unembellished envelope. Forgiveness, from the one person who should, by rights, have had the entitlement to hang his wife's killer in gibbet irons in the street, and leave him there to rot.

Stuart had served six years. He'd originally been sentenced to nine, without eligibility for parole for the first six. Model behaviour, supplying free legal advice to anyone who asked for it, and a long stint as a trained 'Listener' offering support to other prisoners in emotional crisis, had not only helped keep him safe and respected on the inside. It had all helped his parole application too, which had been granted at his very first hearing. Nobody stood up and howled at the injustice of his early release, and when he walked out of the prison gates with his suit hanging off him, thanks to the stone and a half he'd lost in the exercise yard, nobody was there to throw anything at him, verbally or otherwise. Nobody was there at all, in fact, which was exactly what he'd wanted.

There was a bus stop not far from the prison gates, but he'd decided to walk into town. It wasn't far, and he relished the freedom of finally being able again, to walk to *wherever* he wanted, and for as *long* as he wanted.

A 'greasy spoon' cafe near to the bus station (a place he'd once have turned up his nose at the mere sight of) made good on its promises of bottomless coffee and 'the best breakfast in town,' and it had felt like a guilty pleasure. It hadn't been a pretentious and over-priced bistro like the kind of place he used to frequent, and it hadn't offered a pavement, al-fresco option with a crisp white tablecloth, gleaming glasses and pitchers of bucks fizz to order. But it had been a lot better than the standard prison fare he'd become accustomed to. Luxury took different forms, he'd supposed, depending on where you were in life.

Stuart had then got on a bus for Taunton. On that hour's ride, which he'd also relished, he'd managed to see a lot more of life than he'd seen from his tiny, barred window for the previous six years. Even if most of it was inane and boring to most people, it wasn't at all to him. It was real, everyday life that he hadn't been a part of for way too long. As tragic as it was to admit, the banality of someone else's washing blowing on a clothesline, or a tramp rifling through a dustbin, was entertaining. It was affirming, somehow, that life really did roll on.

The time he'd spent in his hometown on that first day of freedom had been both terrifying and fascinating in equal measure. Things had certainly moved on apace from when he'd last been on the streets, and a lot of the shops had changed. His beloved Rising Moon Chinese restaurant was gone,

replaced by a dodgy-looking dive called 'the Chook Shed,' that looked more like a not-so-subtle advertisement for salmonella than a worthwhile place to eat.

Comfortingly, some places were still where they'd always been. At least nobody had hijacked his favourite department store and turned it into an amusement arcade, and a shoe shop he'd once been very fond of was still trading successfully.

He had gone into the bank first, to pick up the new card that his prison social worker had arranged for him to collect. His mother had transferred some money into this account from one of his others.

His next stop had been the department store, where he'd bought three pairs of dark-denim jeans, half a dozen shirts, and a dark blue, lightweight blazer. He added a pair of funky trainers to the pile, along with some underwear and a couple of bundles of socks.

The baggy suit that had once fitted him like a glove and cost an absolute fortune had somehow felt incongruent with who he was, post-sentence. He'd resisted his initial urge to just bin it, and had asked the shop assistant to bag it up instead. He'd walked out of the store in a new outfit, carrying his old one in a separate bag under one arm, and from the minute he'd hit the streets again he'd felt a lot more 'normal.' No more did he feel like the disgraced, dishevelled, disbarred solicitor with guilt and shame written all over him. He was finally able to shake the feeling that he had no right to return to society.

'Clothes make the man,' someone once had said, and a lot of people laughed at the notion. He'd once thought it ridiculous himself, that a man could be so easily transformed simply by what he might choose to wear. But, having donned a far more casual set of clothing, Stuart had finally understood that in some cases, how you felt really *did* depend on how you were dressed.

In any case, he wasn't a confident, practising solicitor anymore, so why would he want to look like one? He was officially unemployed; one of the 'great unwashed' he used to sneer at, and the pretence of looking otherwise, as he wandered the streets in an effort to feel like part of the world again, had actually started getting on his nerves. There was no-one to impress anymore, with his over-priced and now less-than-fashionable suit and natty tie, or his obscenely expensive shoes. The man who had once been so driven by his own desire to stand out from the crowd was now overwhelmed by the need to conform; to not be obvious at all, to anyone.

That particular reality had been as new to Stuart as the outfit he was wearing. He'd handed the carrier bag of suit, shirt, tie and shoes into the first charity shop he could find, not caring that the only remaining testaments to his old sartorial self were his boxer shorts and his pair of dark grey diamond-patterned socks.

The next things on his list that day had been getting a good shave and a decent haircut, then calling into the High Street phone shop. He replaced his impossibly outdated i-phone with a new one that was eight times more capable, according to the shop assistant who'd been unusually kind and patient in explaining its different functions.

At the end of that first free day, he'd collapsed into a cab for the journey home from town to his mum's. Travelling by taxi was something he'd always taken for granted, in his past life, but that day it had felt like a true luxury, as he'd sat back and marvelled at how well the day had gone.

Nobody had spat in his breakfast, and the bus driver had been friendly. The shop assistants he'd interacted with had all been kind and polite. The woman in the charity shop had been absurdly grateful for his little gift of clothing and shoes, and the barber and the taxi driver had both been inanely, cheerfully chatty. What's more, Stuart's money had appeared to be as good as anyone else's.

Yes, his first day on the streets had been a better start than he'd expected. He'd come to the conclusion that since he didn't have 'killer' tattooed on his forehead, nobody was any the wiser about who he was, where he'd been, or what he'd done to an innocent bystander in a flash of drunk complacency and smug self-absorption.

He blinked hard now, and dragged himself back to the present. It was probably time to get up.

Welcome to the first day of the rest of your life.

Stuart yawned, stretched again, and hauled himself out of bed, trying to ignore his pounding head. It was time to get the kettle on. Some good strong coffee was in order, not to mention a bacon sandwich, and it was possible that when those heavenly smells permeated the upstairs bedrooms, Meghan might be tempted out of her self-imposed exile. Her bedroom door was firmly shut, as he padded past it in his stocking feet, and headed down the stairs. He wasn't sure she'd even roll out of bed much before midday. From what he knew about teenagers, which admittedly was woefully little, he imagined they generally stayed stuck in their beds until someone went in with a crowbar and levered them out.

Yesterday's long trip up here hadn't exactly been laden with scintillating conversation, as he'd somehow foolishly hoped. Instead, his daughter had sat in resentful, belligerent silence for most of the way, only perking up slightly when they stopped at a motorway services so she could demolish a plate of chips with some hideous form of plastic cheese poured all over them. All attempts at conversation had been met with sighs, monosyllabic grunts and rolls of the eyes.

More than once, on the journey, he wondered why the hell he'd bothered to try and instigate a 'bonding holiday' with his only child. After so much time inside, he'd felt he owed it to Meghan to spend some quality time with her, without the normal day-to-day pressure of the home environment. As cramped as it was, they'd bumbled along together at his mum's little house ok for a couple of weeks, but he'd realised that some time away with Meghan wouldn't just give his poor old mum some much-needed breathing space. It might also lay the groundwork, for getting to know his daughter properly again and enabling her to learn a few things about the dad who should have been present but wasn't, during the most important developmental years of her life.

Rebuilding his relationship with Meghan was Stuart's top priority now, and he wanted their time away together to be meaningful and positive. It occurred to him that as far as his daughter was concerned, being taken away from her friends and familiarity for most of the summer break would probably feel less like a holiday and more like an abduction. But he wanted to make this work. He wasn't about to turn around and go home. Admitting defeat wasn't an option – at least not yet.

Downstairs, he frowned at the bright red Aga that dominated Teapot Cottage's cosy little kitchen. He knew nothing about how to use one, but it was switched on, and its hotplates were working. A whistling kettle sat on the bench, so he filled it from the tap, opened the chrome lid of the right hotplate, and sat it on to boil. So far, so good.

It was Saturday and there was, apparently, a fairly decent Farmers Market in the church hall, which acted as the town's community centre. Mrs Raven had mentioned it yesterday, when she'd popped in. She said it was worth a visit, to get a few provisions and he seemed to remember that it started at ten o'clock. He checked his watch. It was just after eight-thirty, so there was plenty of time to get a shower, a much-needed shave, and a bit of breakfast. But nothing ever happened before his first, all-important caffeine fix.

He found a packet of ground coffee in a cupboard next to the Aga, nestled next to a good-sized cafetiere. Just after their arrival, he'd also found half a dozen eggs in the fridge, along with a small pack each of cheddar cheese and butter, a bottle of milk, and a packet of bacon. A loaf of home-made bread, a bowl of fresh tomatoes, and a bottle of red wine sat on the table, with a welcome card propped up against it.

Considering holiday cottages didn't usually provide anything at all, Stuart thought the offerings were incredibly generous. It felt unusually kind, and that in itself was humbling. In prison, life had been anything *but* generous. It was a hard, uncompromising place, where kindness was pretty thin on the ground in all directions, and generally something to be suspicious of when it did rear its head.

He'd come out from his six years in 'the can' to find that he'd lost pretty much everything. His career was gone, of course, and so was his marriage. It had been an unpleasant revelation, how shallow his second wife had been. Annabel had very quickly decided that being associated with a banged-up killer was never going to help *her* career as a solicitor. She'd divorced him, sold the house from under him, and abandoned his daughter Meghan; all within the first year of his sentence.

Meghan had gone to live with her nan; his mother. She'd been just nine when Stuart had gone inside, and the transformation she had undergone in the six years he'd been absent was awesome yet terrifying to him. She was a young woman now, and she felt more like a stranger than his own flesh and blood. Aside from knowing nothing about teenage girls, he was all at sea to pinpoint even a small commonality between himself and his daughter, other than the shared loss of her mother, his first wife Willa, who'd died from a brain haemorrhage when Meghan was four.

Stuart appreciated how challenging life had been for Meghan. She was angry at the world, and in many ways her hostility was predictable. But he was very concerned that she'd started directing her anger towards people who *hadn't* abandoned her or let her down, as well as the ones who had. People like her teachers, the school psychologist, her nan, and a lot of the kids at school, had suffered a backlash from her. Her belligerence hadn't won her many friends. A lot of people had started actively avoiding her, which only made her even more isolated and upset.

Meghan was 'remote,' her teachers said. She had a few friends that she spent her time with but to everyone else, she was mostly uncommunicative, and unwilling to talk to anyone in authority about anything that mattered to her. When pressed, she became hostile and abusive. The school counsellor hadn't been able to get very far with her, other than to simply confirm what Stuart and everyone else already suspected; she had 'abandonment issues' (*no shit, Sherlock!*) and was carrying a lot of rage and resentment, some of which appeared to be non-specific. It was hard to tell for sure, because she wouldn't talk about anything.

She was messing up her grades at school, too, and Stuart was conscious that her GCSE's were coming around in another year. The reality was that if she didn't pull her socks up, she wasn't going to get anywhere near the marks she was capable of achieving. Unless he could get her to change her attitude, it was going to be almost impossible for her to pass those all-important exams.

The last thing Stuart wanted to do was nag, or make like the whining parent, but he knew how important it was that Meghan do well at school. At some point in the near future, they were going to have to talk about it, and he hoped the holiday would put them on a better footing, so that when he did voice his concerns, they might be more amicably received. She might not yet fully understand the importance of her GCSE grades, but she needed to, one way or the other. Failing her exams (and shortening her prospects) wasn't the way he wanted her to appreciate how critical they really were.

He knew that Meghan had been heartbroken when he'd gone to prison, leaving her without the most important person in her life. She'd been forced to live – initially at least – with the stepmother she hadn't really warmed to, and he knew she was pretty pissed off with him for that. It was something they could and *would* talk about soon, and he'd brace himself for however hard she might rage at him over it, because it needed to come out, and he probably deserved every last lacerating word she had, to slash him with. But he still wasn't sure how she felt now about what he'd actually *done*. That conversation might be even more difficult, on both sides.

He'd written to her, all the way through his sentence, and she'd written back for a long time, but it all changed when she hit puberty and suddenly decided she was too angry with him to keep in contact. She'd written a blistering letter, just before she'd turned thirteen, telling him what an embarrassing, murdering asshole he was, and that she never wanted to write to or see him ever again. The letter had broken his heart, and although he'd continued to write to her after that, she'd never responded.

The prison psychologist had helped Stuart to appreciate that the angry rantings of a bewildered adolescent girl who was trying to make sense of herself and her messed-up life, with only her gran to guide her, were entirely understandable. He got it; he just wasn't entirely sure what he could do about it. But he resolved to do his damndest to keep plugging away, in every way he could think of, to get things on an even keel.