

When It's Meant to Happen

A Teapot Cottage Tale (#3)

Chapter One



Darren Davies heaved a long sigh of relief as he finally stopped his truck outside the front door of Teapot Cottage. The sun had long-since set, but someone (presumably the owner, Mrs Raven?) had switched on a lamp in the one of the front windows and left the curtains half open. As he'd pulled up, an elegant wall-mounted sensor light had also come on, above the front door.

It was good to see some welcoming lights. Arriving late at night somewhere strange and remote wasn't much fun at the best of times, and this trip had been a real challenge. Sunset had quickly plunged the Lake District landscape into a pocket of pitch-black nothingness. The last half-hour had been particularly spooky and unnerving, driving through dark valleys flanked by fells that huddled almost oppressively around them, with their backs set solid against a starless sky. There hadn't been a single streetlight, on most of those roads. He'd wondered what might be crouching around the edges of the blackness, watching with beady eyes.

They'd set off from Devon as early as they could, after lunch. The drive to Torley should have taken around six and a half hours, according to the Google map. He'd hoped they would arrive well before dark, but trips like this always took a lot longer than planned. Extra time had been swallowed up by rest stops and a need to come off the M5, to try and find a fuel station that wouldn't ask him for an arm and both of his legs, as well as the contents of his wallet. Thanks to a couple of clutches of roadworks, tailbacks on the M6 had gobbled a fair chunk of time too.

Nightfall had coincided with Darren's satnav showing a truly torturous route after leaving the motorway, and he'd fretted about getting lost. He'd somehow managed to miss a turning at a slightly weird junction called Bracefield's Top, on the other side of Torley valley, and had quietly cursed to himself until he realised the mistake had actually done him a favour. The satnav had recalculated and shown a more straightforward way. It made him wonder, and not for the first time, who'd been responsible for setting up the satellites the satnav hooked into, and whether they knew that at least half of the digitally mapped-out routes they provided didn't make the blindest bit of sense.

He looked across at his wife, Debby. She was sound asleep. She had fastened one of those curved squidgy travel pillows back-to-front around the bottom of the passenger seat headrest, to make her neck more comfortable. It seemed to be working, and he was pleased about that, because she hadn't been sleeping well for a long time now. He was as grateful as she was herself, for any opportunity she could get, to bag a bit of shut-eye. She tended to snore like an idling tractor whenever she slept sitting up, but he accepted that as a small price to pay.

He watched her slumber for a full minute before she somehow sensed the truck was no longer moving, and woke up with a start. Badger, their border collie dog, was also awake now, and whimpering softly, excited to be in a new place. Unfortunately, the dog snored too; as loudly, in fact, as the average drunken lord who'd sunk nine pints of lager. Darren had driven pretty much the whole way from the Warrington turn-off listening to the percussion-heavy Dog and Debby Stereo Show, which had felt like a rather cruel and unusual test of mental fortitude.

Good job I love the bones of both of them! 'Wake up, Debs, we're here,' he said gently. Debby yawned and stretched, and blinked sleepily at him.

Darren was pleasantly surprised by Teapot Cottage. Probably thanks to its quirky name, he'd been expecting some higgledy-piggledy structure with a rickety doorstep, a buckled porch and a crooked chimney. He'd been prepared for finding the place to be as draughty as hell, with wonky windows that didn't properly close, and a thicket of unruly, bug-infested ivy wending its way around an ancient, warped front door.

This place was about as far removed from that as anything could ever be. It was a gorgeous, solid stone house, with clean lines and a perfectly sturdy door. A tall chimney at one end promised an open fire or wood burner, and the multi-paned windows were modern and nicely painted. A dense tub

of yellow miniature roses sat squarely at each side of the front door, and there wasn't a scrap of straggly ivy to be seen. Paving stones were laid in a neat herringbone pattern in front of the doorstep, which made the place look clean and tidy. It all put paid to any misgivings Darren might have had, about staying somewhere so quaintly named.

He hadn't paid any real attention to the pictures on the website. He'd just been keen to book something, *anything*, that was available for an entire month at the start of summer, that would allow them to bring their dog. Suitable places were already thin on the ground by the time he'd got around to booking but he'd got lucky. As Mrs Raven had said in her email, she'd had couple of late, back-to-back cancellations, so her cottage was available for the full month they wanted, and a dog was fine as long as it slept downstairs.

Research about the cottage or the area wasn't even on his mind when he'd said yes. He'd just been relieved to have found somewhere for the three of them to relax in while they tried to figure out what – if anything – was next in their lives together.

As promised, the key was hidden under the left-hand rose bush pot. As Darren opened the front door, and allowed the ever-inquisitive Badger to push past him, he was met with a surprising sense of warmth. He was delighted to find that a fire had been lit, and a few embers were still alive and glowing gently, behind a pretty wrought iron screen.

Debby gave a small cry of pleasure. She picked a fresh chunk of wood from the log basket, and carefully placed it onto the fire to boost it up a bit. The flames licked around it straight away, and it quickly crackled into life. She looked around, and then grinned at him.

'Wow! What a place! It's gorgeous. It feels so homely already, don't you think? Good choice!'

Darren gave her a wink, and went back to the truck to start hauling their bags in. They'd brought lot of stuff, but being here for a month meant they'd need a decent amount of clothes and personal things. Also, because it was the Lake District, where the weather could change in the blink of an eye, they'd been advised by Mrs Raven to pack for four seasons. Random bouts of rain were common, even through the summer, and it could still be chilly at night.

One of the heavier bags contained enough books and jigsaw puzzles to keep them both absorbed for probably twice the length of time they'd be here. The paperbacks would only be read once, and Darren figured they could then be given to a local charity shop, or even left at the cottage for other guests to enjoy. He didn't intend to drag them back to Devon, but he *would* be keeping the two new John Grisham hardbacks his mum Barbara had given him for his thirty-ninth birthday, a month ago. He was looking forward to reading those, before they joined the already impressive Grisham collection that had its own full bookshelf, back at home.

He'd discovered his joy in reading many years before, in a past life, on one of his longer holidays at His Majesty's pleasure (or *Hers*, as it was back then). A prison cell was the ideal place to sit and read a good book, especially when you were lucky enough to have a pad-mate who wasn't a drama king or a crack-head, and who also liked a quiet life. Darren had come to love escaping into different worlds, whenever he had the chance, but finding the time to sit and enjoy a bit of escapist 'downtime' was pretty hard to do these days. Balancing careers and their relationship, meeting the needs of a boisterous dog, keeping fit, and catching up with friends and family didn't leave a lot of time for him and Debby to relax and unwind.

It was hard to know where the time went, sometimes. You got up in a morning, with an entire day in front of you, but by the time you rolled back into bed at night it was all you could do to account for the time in between. Reading in bed never worked; he was usually asleep within two minutes. Curling up with a book was a luxury he couldn't wait to indulge in again, in the coming weeks, here in this lovely little cottage.

He set their bags down by the foot of the stairs, and wandered into the compact but well-appointed kitchen. It was brick-lined, with a flagstone floor. A small Welsh dresser occupied one wall, loaded with cups and plates, and a good-sized table and chairs sat squarely in front of it. Debby was staring anxiously at a fire-engine-red Aga cooker with two chrome lids on the top, that dominated the opposite wall. An old-style rope-and-pulley drying rack hung above it, and two tartan-patterned tea towels were neatly folded over the rack-handles in front of the hotplates. The little beast was switched on, lending more warmth and a great deal of character to the rustic but charming space.

Darren remembered hearing somewhere that cooking in an Aga was a practised affair. He wondered if Debby would take it on, or decide to give it a swerve and use the small electric bench-top

oven sitting next to it, instead. She was so tired, so burned out, he wasn't sure if she'd be up to any kind of challenge, however small. Maybe a month here would bring the sparkle, that he missed so much, back to her lovely blue eyes. It had been a long time since he'd even heard her laugh.

Debby Cameron had walked into his consultation room one morning, eight years ago, with her little tortoiseshell cat, 'Lindy-Lou.' The poor thing had been vomiting for two days and Debby was at her wit's end. He'd vaguely remembered her from school as a quiet, almost timid girl, who'd kept very much to herself. She'd had very few friends, and wouldn't have said boo to a goose. She hadn't seemed to be the kind of girl who would ever let a boy get to second base, either, so she'd held no interest whatsoever for a teenage boy looking to score.

But that day in the surgery, as she'd confessed her anxiety about Lindy-Lou, Darren had looked at her with fresh eyes. No longer was he looking for an easy score. He wasn't actually looking for *anything*, being more focussed on establishing his career as a newly qualified vet. But Debby had spoken to him with real respect, and when she remembered too that they'd known one another at school, their conversation had become more animated and informal. They recalled a few classmates in common, and talked about the ones who'd gone on to achieve big things.

He'd been too embarrassed to tell her about his own life journey, peppered with petty crime and a few short stretches in prison. But he'd guessed that she already knew about it, because she hadn't asked him anything at all about what he'd been up to since school, and he didn't think it was because she had no interest. She was intelligent enough to read the court reports in the local papers. She probably knew other ex-classmates too, who wouldn't hesitate to indulge in a bit of gleeful gossip about the school's biggest 'bad egg,' and the sorry state he'd got himself into.

Luckily for Darren, life had thrown him the kind of curveball chance most people in the doldrums only ever dream of getting. He'd been incredibly lucky, to get a rare opportunity to turn his screwed-up life around, and he'd never failed for one single second to be profoundly grateful for his good fortune.

Sadly, that didn't matter much to a handful of local people, who still thought of him as a common thief, long after he'd made a fresh start. He'd dreaded the prospect of being confronted by someone he'd robbed, waltzing in with their pet and learning that he was the one who'd be treating it. But you had to expect that at some point, didn't you, if you'd made a new nest in exactly the same place where you'd fouled the first one? People had long memories. It was going to take time, for the new leaf to turn.

But, slowly but surely, it was turning. Most people *were* taking him seriously now, and Debby Cameron had been one of them. She'd stood beside the sterile stainless-steel table, in her faded black jeans, scuffed boots, and a fluffy mohair jumper that matched the colour of her lovely blue eyes, with her once-mousy brown hair gleaming richly with blonde and caramel highlights, and she'd treated him like a vet.

To her, he was intelligent and competent, and she trusted him to heal her little cat. He had done exactly that, and she'd shyly said yes to meeting for a coffee. And, even after he'd hung his head in shame and confessed everything to her about his previous life, how he used to be, what he'd been through, telling her what she doubtless already knew but had been kind enough not to ask about or pass judgement on, she still said yes to going out for a meal. After that, she said yes to another one, and spending a night with him, then to a weekend away, and eventually she even said yes to his hesitant, stuttering proposal of marriage.

They'd been married for seven years now and it was something *else* he gave thanks for, every single day of his life. To a man who once thought his future would amount to a big fat zero, and that no worthwhile woman would ever give him the time of day, Debby was about as perfect a partner in life as he ever could have hoped for.

He grabbed the last little holdall from the truck now, and brought it into the cottage. He was surprised by how light it was. Did it even have anything in it? Then he remembered.

Oh, shit. Oh no! What the hell is this doing here?

It was the bag full of baby things; wool, needles and knitting projects, a few of which were only half finished. Debby had taken up knitting around the time they'd decided to start a family. She'd started making booties, matinee jackets, hats and blankets, enough for ten babies. But no baby had materialised, and with every IVF treatment that crushingly failed, and every unwanted period that

showed up, month after month after month, her interest in making baby clothes had shrivelled to the point where she simply couldn't bear to even look at any of what she'd started, let alone finish it.

Darren's heart broke afresh, thinking about the last five years. After their wedding they'd both been keen to start a family, but they'd put it off for the first two years, to spend time just together. He was thankful for that, because those first couple of years had cemented their relationship, providing good grounding for a union that – so far at least – had managed to withstand a further five gruelling years on a soul-stripping merry-go-round of failed attempts at getting (or staying) pregnant. The last three years had been particularly brutal, dealing with the endless, eviscerating pain of no less than seven unsuccessful attempts at IVF, six of which they'd had to fund privately.

The emotional toll was heavy enough. Financially, it was now more or less untenable too. They just couldn't find any more money for more treatment. The first round of IVF had been free, and their savings had comfortably covered the three after that, but the last three had cleaned them out. They'd drawn the line at re-mortgaging their house, but they now had to face the fact that they were at the end of their reserves. They were tapped out. To add to their anguish, they'd been advised that Debby's chance of conceiving through IVF, now that she was in her late thirties, was reducing with every round of treatment.

The worst of it was that nobody could even explain why she couldn't conceive! She was normal and healthy, and according to the doctors there were no clinical reasons why she wouldn't be able to have as many babies as she wanted. All tests had indicated that Darren was functioning properly too. It was baffling, and when one of their doctors had ventured to suggest that maybe the problem was more psychological than biological, Debby's response had been astonishingly hostile.

Her reaction had been so extreme, Darren knew there had to be more to it. So he'd dug into her, despite massive resistance, and he eventually managed to break through her wall of stubborn silence. She'd finally admitted that she'd fallen pregnant when she was sixteen and had been forced by her parents into having a termination she didn't want. She knew it had been the most practical decision at the time; she'd known she wasn't emotionally or physically equipped to raise a baby, but the termination still haunted her. She'd never told Darren, in fear of being judged and rejected.

He had a less-than-spotless past of his own, so he knew exactly what that particular fear felt like, and he fully understood why she hadn't told him. It was something that happened a long time before they'd got together. He wasn't angry that she hadn't said anything, but he was sad that she'd felt forced to keep it all to herself for far too long, and that it still preyed on her mind so much. Her hostile, uptight parents (who had about as much emotional awareness as a pair of concrete slabs), had flatly refused to ever discuss it with her too, which only made her feel more isolated.

An unwanted termination was a lot for someone to carry all alone. It was no surprise that Debby was tearing herself apart over it now, constantly worrying if that was the reason why she couldn't get pregnant. Every hurt was larger than life now, even potential 'causes,' however big or small they might have been.

Every single medical professional involved had done everything they could to reassure Debby that it wasn't the case; everything was still intact, and working exactly as it should. One had tentatively mentioned the possibility that the early termination might have created a psychological block that was having some kind of biological impact, but Debby stubbornly kept refusing to even consider that. Darren was no psychologist, and with his wife angrily refusing to see one, or even talk to a counsellor, there was no way of knowing for sure. All he knew was that her misplaced guilt over the termination certainly couldn't be helping.

He felt so inadequate, and at such a loss, for how to help her, or cope with her increasingly fragile mental state. On top of that, he had pain of his own. He was grieving too, in his own way, at the prospect of never becoming a father. But Debby hadn't seemed to consider his feelings, or if she had, she never asked him about them. She was too wrapped up in her own anguish. Generously, he wondered if maybe acknowledging his too would simply be more than she could cope with.

He was surprised though, at just how unexpectedly lonely he felt. He had friends he talked to, from time to time, and he had been able to confide in his mum. It did help a little, to offload some of how he was feeling to people who cared about him, but talking about something so deeply personal wasn't easy, even with his best friend Paul, who he'd gone through vet training with, and who probably knew him as well as anyone did. Darren could never bring himself to go into much detail, so his isolation was often profound.

He and Debby were friendly with a handful of couples, including Paul and his lovely wife Pam, but there were two who had quietly and unexpectedly drifted away without a word, and that had really hurt. One of the couples had young kids, and maybe they thought that talking about them wouldn't help Darren and Debby feel any better about their own situation. The other couple had got pregnant very quickly, after deciding to try, and maybe they felt too cruel in expressing their joy and excitement. But he missed those friendships, and he knew Debby did too. She'd also lost other friends, who had let her down when she needed them. It made him angry, that when she was at her most vulnerable, and most in need of support, certain women who'd once declared what a great friend she was to them hadn't managed to find it within themselves to be one to *her*. Hypocrites, one and all. It was such a painful way to find out who cared and who didn't.

What also made him angry was the fact that, of the friends who'd fallen silent or disappeared, not a single one had asked beforehand; 'what do you need from me?' or 'what can I do for you?' If they'd asked those simple questions, perhaps they wouldn't have felt so awkward that severing contact had ended up being the more comfortable option for them. The truth was, if any of them *had* asked him, he'd have told them honestly that they didn't need to do or say *anything*. They just needed to be there, with a kind word or a listening ear, or even just with as something as simple as a cup of coffee, now and then.

That's a really big part of the misery of infertility that most people don't understand, he mused to himself now. The inability of some friends and family, to know what to say or do, meant that some of them drifted away instead. All it did was make a isolating situation even more lonely and difficult to bear.

Darren didn't know where he and Debby would be now, without the friendship, trust, love and belief in one another, that had cemented them so firmly in that first two years they were married. Without that, would they have been able to survive this kind of stress? He doubted it. They hadn't been prepared for how powerless being unable to conceive had made them feel. Now their marriage *was* unravelling, and he really wasn't sure if they even had the strength to stop it from happening.

He wasn't sure why she'd brought the bag of knitting, and he didn't want to ask.

'I really don't know, about this thing,' Debby was still looking dubiously at the Aga, while Badger sniffed intently at the bottom of the back door. Darren set out the dog's big metal water bowl, and the smaller one for his biscuits, but the curious dog was less interested in eating or drinking, and more intent on sniffing around and getting to know his new surroundings.

'Maybe I can give it a go. There's an instruction book, here on the bench, with a recipe for fail-safe fruit scones. Might not be a bad place to start?'

Darren grinned, glad that she was at least considering the prospect of tackling the red oven. It was quite intimidating. He wasn't too keen to get up-close and personal with it, himself! 'Yeah? Go on then, babe. I guess we could live with the worst that could happen, like busting a tooth on a raisin rock or spitting out something half raw. I reckon you should give it a go. You might surprise us both.'

On the old, scrubbed pine table was what looked like a fairly decent bottle of red wine, a loaf of home-made bread wrapped in a tea towel, a small bag of dog treats, and a note from Mrs Raven, welcoming them to Teapot Cottage. It said that she'd be down to see them briefly in the morning, but if they needed anything in the meantime, all they had to do was go up the driveway to the farmhouse, and ask.

Darren opened the fridge door to find a litre of milk, half a dozen eggs, a pack of bacon, and a small slab each of cheddar cheese and butter. Glass containers next to the bench-top oven held teabags and sugar, and a new packet of ground coffee sat next to a plunger on the bench. They'd be absolutely fine for tonight, he decided. They had already stopped for some overpriced and underwhelming food at a motorway services on the M6, near Preston, so they only needed something light. Grilled cheese on toast and a glass of wine seemed perfect. They could explore the town tomorrow, and pick up some groceries.

Teapot Cottage had an unusually warm and welcoming feel, unlike the typical sterile, characterless holiday houses he'd stayed in before, where people passed through without getting or leaving much of an impression. This little place was very different. It was beautifully decorated, with gentle warm, muted colours, and furnished very simply with a comfy sofa and matching armchair, a coffee table with a lamp on it, and an elegant sideboard that held another lamp, a TV, and a small stereo

with a docking station portal at the front. A bookshelf tucked behind the front door was loaded with books and board games. A pair of generous custom-built, curve-fronted windows seats with deep-filled pads and pretty cushions offered cosy places to sit, where you could hunker down and while away an entire day, lost in a good book or daydream.

The cottage felt like a real home, where you could easily settle and feel like you belonged, at least for a little while. Darren felt more at peace here than he did in his own house in Devon, which seemed a tad strange, but he shrugged it off. Tiredness did trick the mind sometimes.

Upstairs, the cottage was just as comfy and cosy, with two bedrooms of similar size, and a well-equipped bathroom with a stand-alone shower and a generous roll-top bath. On the top landing, the space had been neatly filled with a small but comfortable armchair and a little bookcase holding books of various genres. It was clearly a morning suntrap, if the skylight window above it was anything to judge by. Whoever had designed or remodelled this place had made the most of every available space and feature. It was lovely, and Darren was sure they'd be happy here. Badger's tail was wagging nineteen to the dozen. He was certainly happy enough. It was almost as if the house were actually hugging them all, from the moment they walked into it. *Extraordinary energy*, some would have said.

The master bedroom had a king-sized bed, which had been covered with a cheerful old-fashioned crocheted blanket made up of various multi-coloured squares. It wasn't the kind of thing Darren would ever consider for his own house, but it was exactly the sort of home-made comfort his mum would have at her place, so it made him feel at home. The plump pillows looked comfy and enticing, and he realised how tired he was, after working an intense half day then driving what had turned out to be a full eight and a half hours to get here from their home in Exeter.

Debby was tired too, after pulling a night shift at the hospital. Her job as a theatre nurse could be intense and demanding. There was rarely a dull moment in an operating theatre, and sometimes the job could be heart-breaking. Last night had been routine for her, without any drama, but she was completely exhausted, and the relentless disappointment she'd been battling with for far too long now was starting to etch lines into her face that hadn't been there before.

He checked his watch. It was just after ten thirty. Normally they didn't get to bed much before midnight, with one thing or another, and for Debby the rotation of different shifts often made it hard for her to drop off quickly, however tired she might be. A quick bite to eat and an 'early' night would be just the ticket for them both.

He saw that his wife had found a corkscrew and was opening the bottle of wine.

'Debs, d'you fancy cheese on toast?'

She nodded. 'I was just thinking the same thing, but I'll do it in that little bench-top oven. I'm not sure yet, about the Aga. It's probably straightforward but I know where I am with the little one. It's got a grill element, so it'll be perfect.'

She set about preparing their supper and fished a can of tomato soup from the small box of supplies they'd brought with them. 'I can heat this on the Aga's hotplate though, because that's ready to use.' She rummaged in the cupboard for a suitable pan.

The log Debby had put on the fire when they first came in was now blazing brightly and throwing out enough warmth to extend the upstairs. He'd felt the heat in every room when he'd gone up there. There were central heating radiators too, in all the rooms, and he suspected the Aga would be the source of the heat that powered them. Currently they were turned off but it didn't matter. They weren't needed right now. Clearly, being cold wasn't going to be a problem here, no matter what the weather might choose to do.

He started lugging their bags upstairs and put them in the second bedroom. There was no need to clutter up their sleeping space when they had the choice to spread out.

He decided to take a quick shower and came back down the stairs to let Debby know, so she wouldn't run any taps while he was in there. He found her standing at the bottom, with her arms firmly folded, glaring at the knitting bag.

'Why is that here? Did you pack that, Darren?' she demanded. He shook his head vehemently. 'Nope, I thought you must have.'

A shadow passed across her face. 'Well I bloody didn't.'

'I dunno, babe. I must have grabbed it by mistake then. I'm sorry. I don't even remember picking it up, to be honest. D'you want it upstairs?'

‘No.’ Debby snapped. ‘I don’t want it here at all. Please put it back in the truck or, better still, dump the damn thing in the nearest bin.’ She turned on her heel and went back to the kitchen.

Mystified, Darren picked up the bag and headed for the front door. He was absolutely certain he had not picked up this bag to bring with them. Even if he’d even *considered* bringing something so sensitive, he would definitely have run it by Debby first. She said she hadn’t included it, and he believed her. How it had come to be here was a complete mystery. All he could think was that he’d somehow grabbed it with other bags without realising, even though he knew it generally just lived under the stairs, out of sight and mind. It probably hadn’t seen the light of day for more than a year. Had he gone under the stairs for something else? He really couldn’t remember.

In any case, the bag was going back into the truck, and there it would probably stay. The last thing either of them needed in here were reminders of all that was wrong in their lives. A bag full of baby clothes would do nothing but torment them at precisely the time they needed to relax. Darren didn’t even want it in the truck, and Debby didn’t either. He was tempted to just throw it away, as she’d suggested, but that somehow felt like the wrong thing to do, as if disposing of it would be a direct acceptance that they were never to have any children. He couldn’t bring himself to do that. Not yet. Even if it was what Debby *really* wanted, he doubted if he could say goodbye yet, if push came to shove, to that little bagful of white, lemon and mint-green hopes and dreams.