

ROSE COTTAGE

By
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Chapter One

"Gah! This isn't working." Anni Wells pantomimed banging her head against her desk. For three days the paper sat there, daring her to fill it with words, mocking her when she came up empty.

She picked up her pen and held it poised, waiting for the spark of imagination to burst into flame and consume the glaring emptiness of the page.

The paper jeered at her.

Anni jammed her pen into the paper and scribbled black ink all over the page. "Ha! Not so smug now, are ya?" She tossed her pen onto the defiled paper.

"That's it. I am officially bananas." She ran her hands through her shoulder length copper hair, massaging her tight scalp.

"If I'm going to get this book done before my deadline, I gotta get out of here." She picked up the phone and dialed.

"Slover Reality," A young woman answered.

"Janey? I have to get away from here. Do you guys have anything I can rent for the summer? I know it's the middle of June and this is last minute, but I really need a change of scenery."

"Why, hello Annietta. It's so nice to hear your voice. How are you? We're all fine. Thanks for asking. The Weather's a bit rainy, but it's still officially spring for another week..."

"I'm sorry. How are you, my wonderful fabulous friend? How is that hunk of a man you're married to? Everyone well? Good. Now, do you have anything I can rent for the summer

"Stay with us. You know you're always welcome."

"Thanks, but this isn't a vacation. I need a new place to work. Plus I want to stay for the whole summer and that's way too long to be a guest."

"I see your point. Give me a second to see what we have." There was a click and Janey's voice was replaced by canned muzak. A minute later, Janey was back. "It looks like all we have for rent is Rose Cottage. Actually, I'm surprised it's available. But I think it'll work. It's about two miles from Slover proper, set back in the woods. Very secluded."

"Sounds perfect. I'll be on the first flight I can get out of L.A. tomorrow morning."

"Boy, you must really be in a dry spell."

"Dry as the Gobi," she confessed. "I've got to have this book finished and ready to ship to my publisher by the end of summer and my brain is a waste land."

"Now, that's just sad." Janey sympathized. "The pressure to produce another mega-hit got to you, huh?"

"Janey, this is torture. I have no idea how my one and only little novel managed to sky-rocket onto the best seller list or turn into a Hollywood mega movie. But it did and now the world expects me to do it again. And I've got nothing."

"Then you're coming to the right place. If Michigan's Upper Peninsula can't coax some good ideas out of you, nothing can. I'll go over to the cottage and get it ready for you. Call me when you land."

"Thanks, Janey. I owe you one." Anni hung up and called the airlines. She booked a seat on the eight am flight the next morning.

She had to admit she loved the perks of having her first book rake in big bucks. Three years ago she was scraping nickels together to buy gas. Now she was booking last minute airline tickets. Coach, of course. There was no sense in squandering her windfall. Besides, if this nonexistent second book didn't do well she could be scrounging for gas money again sooner than she wanted to think about.

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Anni had her cell phone out and was dialing Janey the minute the plane stopped moving. "I'm here," she said when her friend picked up. "We just landed. Give me a couple of hours to get my bags, rent a car and get to Slover." She looked at her watch and calculated the time difference. Meet me at the cottage around five o'clock. give or take?"

"You've got the directions, right?"

"Yep."

"Then, I'll see ya at the cottage."

The ground crew had their act together that day. It only took twenty minutes for them to unload the plane and get the bags on the carousel. Anni grabbed her suitcases and made her way toward the Rent-A-Weck counter at the far end of the building.

A half hour later, she was speeding down the highway in a nineteen-sixty-eight white convertible Mustang, singing to the radio at the top of her lungs. Motoring along the deserted, tree lined road to Slover, she missed the tiny Rose Cottage sign staked into the ground beside a narrow dirt road.

"Crap." She slammed on the brakes and cranked the steering wheel, making a u-turn just as an orange jeep rounded the curve behind her.

Horn blaring, the jeep swerved and flashed its headlights. Janey hung her head out the window. "California driver!" she waved and followed Anni down the long wooded lane and parked beside the Mustang in the wide grassy driveway. "Perfect timing." She held two white bags out of the jeep's window. "The food's still warm. Grab your stuff and come eat."

Anni caught a whiff of hot french fries and her stomach growled. "Right behind you." She pulled her luggage out of the trunk and followed Janey up the cobblestone path leading to a little two story stone cottage. She slowed for a better look around the English-style garden surrounding the house. *Oh yeah. I can work here.* She inhaled the heady scent of the wild flowers.

Janey unlocked the front door and Anni started to follow her in. "Oh wow, look at this." She stopped to admire the brass plaque set into the wall beside the door. An open rose carved out of rock crystal was inlaid in the center of the plaque between the words Rose Cottage.

"Aren't you pretty." She traced one petal of the smooth stone.

The crystal rose flashed bright white and zapped her finger. Anni yelped and stuck her stinging finger in her mouth.

"Janey," she yelled around her finger. "You need to get someone out here to fix the wiring to this plaque. It just shocked me."

Janey stuck her head around the kitchen wall and pulled her glasses down her nose and threw Anni a what-the-heck-are-you-talking-about look. "What do mean, it shocked you."

"It shocked me."

Janey nudged her out of the way and ran her hand all over the plaque. "It isn't wired, Anni. It couldn't have shocked you."

Anni held up her numb hand with her good one. "Tell that to my dead hand."

"Only you..." Janey shook her head and led the way through the rustic little house and into the surprisingly big country kitchen.

"Janey," Anni set her suitcases by the door. "There aren't any roses here. I mean there's tons of flowers, but no roses."

"And?" Janey tossed the bags of food on the long burnished wood table.

"So, why is it called Rose Cottage?"

"Eat." Janey pointed to the bags on the table. "I'm not sure. I think they named it after the rose tree in the back yard." She opened the curtains covering the French doors and pointed.

A tall weeping rose tree held court in the center of the lush back yard. An explosion of dark apricot roses covered the cascading branches, bending them down to lightly brush the ground.

"Wow. I've never seen a weeping rose tree before. That's beautiful." Anni admired the sight as she up-ended the food bags on the table.

"Yes, it is. It's in our contract with the owner that we have to make sure it's taken care of."

"I can see why." Anni snagged a french fry and sat so she could see the rose tree while she munched.

A light breeze feathered through the tree causing the weeping foliage to sway gently back and forth. The air in the back yard shivered and her skin prickled like a bad sunburn. A wave of dizziness washed over her. She closed her eyes, rubbing them, trying to steady the vertigo churning her stomach. A moment later the sensation vanished.

Anni put it down to a long day with little sleep and reached for her hamburger. She froze mid-motion. The rose tree was gone and the sun shone high in the eastern sky instead of low to the west. A freshly dug hole in the ground gaped where the tree should have been. Not daring to breathe, Anni watched a dark haired young man carry a tiny version of the rose tree across the yard. He lowered the tree into the ground and filled in the hole.

She went to the door and stared. "What the...?" she whispered.

The young man turned his head and looked at her. "Pretty, isn't it?"

Anni gasped. Everything around her went fuzzy and the young man with his tiny rose tree faced away. "What in the world...?"

"What?"

Anni jumped. "What?" She looked from the full grown rose tree back to Janey. "Huh?"

"What did you say?"

"I just saw a guy in the back yard, planting that rose tree. And then he just vanished." She looked back at the rose tree and forced a laugh. "Jet lag." She rubbed her temples, trying to ease the headache banding across her forehead.

Janey put down her hamburger and craned her neck around. "I don't see anybody."

"Of course not. I just said he vanished." Anni snapped her fingers. "Poof. All gone. Weren't you listening?"

Janey sucked in a sharp breath and chewed on a knuckle, her eyes wide. "Anni," she said in a breathless whisper. "You just saw the ghost of Rose Cottage."

"Ghost?" Anni slid into her seat. "Seriously?"

"Oh dear." Janey picked at the ends of her long blond braid. "Did I forget to mention Rose Cottage is haunted?" She dropped her chin and peeked up at Anni.

Anni took a long sip of soda and waited. She knew this was going to be good one.

"Yeah, I guess people have heard someone playing the guitar on the bridge and when they look, no one's there."

"But this guy was planting a tree."

Janey's eyes unfocused. She looked off into the distance for a moment. "No." She shook her head. "I don't remember anyone ever mentioning him planting anything, just playing the guitar."

"Well, I'll tell you one thing," Anni wagged her hamburger at Janey. "If he plays half as good as he looks, he can serenaded me any day of the week." She fanned her suddenly hot face.

"You're so gullible, Anni." Janey shook her head. "I was kidding. Rose Cottage doesn't have a ghost. It does have a legend, though."

Anni threw a french fry at her friend. "Uh-huh."

"No, really." Janey ducked and swatted the fry, sending it sailing across the room. "The legend has been around for as long as the cabin's been here. The legend says if you spend the summer solstice at Rose Cottage you'll find your one true love. There's more, but I don't know it."

Anni lobbed another french fry at her. "Do you know how depressing that is? I'm here all alone except for a rose planting ghost that doesn't exist and I'm supposed to find my true love in five days?"

"Stranger things have happened." Janey fished the french fry out of her cleavage and popped it into her mouth.

"I think you've been living in this little townlette far too long. Your imagination is way out of control."

"Says the woman who writes paranormal fiction for a living." Janey wrapped up their garbage and tossed it in the trash. "Grab your stuff, Writer Girl, and I'll show you where your bedroom is. Then I have to get home to my man."

Anni picked up one suitcase, handed the other to Janey and followed her up the narrow stairs.

Janey pushed open the first door on the right. "Your boudoir, M'Lady," she set her suitcase next to the soft peach, wing-backed chair beside the white brick fireplace.

Anni crossed the cozy room, dropped her case on the antique blanket chest at the foot of the bed and went straight to the window overlooking the front garden and the woods beyond. She opened the window and breathed in the cool summer air. "I love it."

"And with that stellar endorsement, my friend, I am outta here." Janey saluted her and headed for stairs. "I'll shut the lights off and lock up behind me."

The minute Janey's jeep was out of sight, Anni flopped on the bed, reveling in the ultra soft down comforter. Still running on Los Angeles time, she wasn't tired, but the bed was so comfortable, she couldn't make herself get up and go back downstairs. Instead, she laid there and listened to the crickets talk to each other in the garden below. Such a peaceful sound.

Was that a car?

Anni's eyes flew open, straining to see in the pale dawn light. She could have sworn she heard a souped up engine rumbling down the drive. She took a deep breath and held it, listening to the night sounds. She must have been dreaming. She resumed breathing.

Kicking off her shoes, she glanced at the clock. 6:30. *I slept all night long. So much for not*

being tired. She yawned. It was only 3:30 California time. And that was much too early to get up. She pulled the covers over her and closed her eyes again.

Outside, a car door slammed.

Anni froze, wide awake. That was no dream.

Someone's messing with the front door.

It couldn't be Janey. She'd never seen 6:30 in her entire life. Anni reached for her cell phone. It wasn't on the night stand. *Crap. I left it in the kitchen. Last night. Perfect. I can see the headlines now: Famous Author murdered in B.F.E. while fighting writer's block.*

Downstairs, the door opened and closed. Footsteps walked across the hardwood floor in the living room and up the stairs, pausing outside her door.

Her heart hammering against her ribs, Anni jumped up and rushed to the bedroom door. *Oh hell no. You aren't getting me without a fight.* She grabbed the poker from the fire place and secured a two handed grip on the handle. Raising it over her head she yelled. "Whoever you are, you better get the hell out of my house." She flung the door open and jumped into the hall.

Her foot caught on the edge of something big and hard and she went flying, sprawling face first on the hardwood floor. The poker was knocked from her hand and skittered down the hall. Behind her, the sound of a guitar banging to the ground echoed through the still house.

Anni pushed herself to her feet and flipped on the bedroom light, to see what she'd tripped over.

There was nothing there.