



THE COTTAGE

Water gurgling in a nearby stream, Birds chirping in the beech trees, Pink blossoms cascading down on the overgrown garden of the small grey cottage on the outskirts of the village. The dilapidated trellis which once supported a myriad of rambling peach coloured roses, the perfect setting for my new retreat. Here nobody would find me, I could come and go as I pleased. No nearby dwellings with screened windows from behind which a curious person might cast an eye." *MY UTOPIA.*"

I strolled back to my mossy green 1968 Fiat Bambino, the perfect colour to blend in with the countryside. I drove back to the city and returned to my noisy flat which was situated above "Moves Nightclub" I would not miss this place. Now that I had found the perfect home I was anxious to move in as soon as possible. On returning, I began to pack my belongings. All the treasures, trinkets, bits and bobs, memories that I had gathered on my various travels were carefully wrapped and packed into boxes.

The auctioneer told me that the cottage had once belonged to a retired School -teacher. Mary-Rose Ryan had decided that she had had enough of dreary Irish winters and had purchased herself a small country house in the south of Spain. A number of people had viewed the cottage before me. For them it was either too small, too old, too remote, to say that it required a little modernisation was a serious understatement.

"Congratulations Sarah" Joanne from the auctioneers finally said. "You are now the proud owner of a beautiful country cottage, but there is one request that the previous owner has made," "oh!" I said "What might that be?" I asked curiously. "Mary-Rose has asked that the trap door which leads down to the basement beneath the cottage remains undisturbed." "But Why.....?" I queried. "I cannot answer that question" Joanne replied. "Cannot or will not?" I pursued with increasing curiosity "Cannot" said Joanne. "I gave Mary- Rose my word." "Very well," I replied a little disappointed, "I will do as you ask." As I drove towards my new home I began to wonder what secret this cottage was keeping from me."

It was dusk when I arrived. "I hope the electricity has been connected", I thought to myself. "Otherwise It would be candles for tonight, perhaps I would have to use my little gas camping stove I had bought many years ago". As I pulled up outside my new home, a combination of emotions overcame me, excitement accompanied by a tinge of anxiety and undoubtedly sense of anticipation.

I inserted the key into the lock of what had once been a shiny turquoise door. After a few jiggles the key finally turned and in I went. I reached for the light switch and to my disappointment nothing happened. "Never Mind" I thought to myself, "scented candles it is." I returned to the car and started to unload the boxes I had brought with me. By now the Sun was beginning to set. It created a wonderful amber hue as it seemed to sink effortlessly into the nearby river to take it's rest.

Darkness descended on my little haven. The peace and tranquillity was soothing, calming. The aroma of the Lavender candle was welcoming, subtle yet inviting. "Time for a cup of tea!" I thought to myself. I searched for my camping gas stove among the array boxes on the kitchen table, found both it and my tiny purple steel kettle and went outside to the river to fill it with the cool clear water. The night air was refreshing, a fat ginger cat was snoozing on the front lawn. He had no intentions of moving. I returned to the cottage and placed the kettle on to boil on my little stove. A further search into my boxes yielded a blue china mug with delicate white freesias that I had purchased in Berlin four years previously, tea bags, some sugar, milk and of course the all important chocolate chip cookies.

One morning about a week later I was awoken by a sharp tap, tap on my front door. I peeped out through the curtain and saw a tall dark handsome stranger wearing a grey uniform with pink crocodile teeth on his right sleeve. The van parked a little further down the road had the logo "Snappy Couriers", painted in bold lettering on it's side. The delivery man did not appear to have any parcel in his hand. I was returning to my very old four-poster canopy bed when a second tap-tap sounded. "I had better see what he wants," I thought to myself, "otherwise I will have no peace."

I opened the door slowly and mumbled "Good Morning." "Hello" the courier said cheerily, "I am looking for Sarah Jennings." "You have found her" I said. "I am here to collect a parcel" he said "Really?" I ask. "Yes" he said. "The former owner has left instructions with the auctioneer for our company to collect a box from your basement."

"Hmm" I was somewhat surprised at this, "But that door is locked and I have been asked not to interfere with it" I answer churlishly. "Neither do I have a key to open it." "The auctioneer has given me a key" he said, a little too smugly. I was infuriated when I heard this. "Here am I the new owner of this beautiful cottage with no access to the basement. Along comes a stranger calling to my door looking to gain access to that exact "Forbidden Chamber!"

"I would like to check with Joanne before I let you in" I said to him. "Suit yourself" he retorted. "Please wait in your van," I requested. Off he slouched somewhat disgruntled. Three phone calls later, confirmation received. I opened the door and I beckoned him to come in. "Looks like you get to go down to the basement after all" I said to him.

He followed me through the kitchen, the small sitting room, down the long hall and creaky stairs which finally led us to a violet coloured door. "Mary-Rose loved her Purple Pandora Parlo.....," James had started to mumble. "H-H- How do you know that?" I asked curiously, "Ooh I, Never mind!" he said. James placed the key in the lock, Wiggled it, jiggled it, to no avail. The lock would not budge. I tried to hide my disappointment. "Oh Fiddlesticks," he said, "The lock appears to have seized." "I have been given strict instructions not to leave here without the box. "Well it looks as though you will have to," I stated with glee. There was a second key on the rusty key ring which bore the letters "M" and "R." "Is there another door, that leads to the basement?" he asked. "I don't know," I replied. "It was almost dark when I arrived last night, so I didn't walk all the way around the outside of the house."

My memory told me there were three or four Ash trees quite close to the Northern Gable. We went outside and walked around to the back of the house. Discreetly hidden amongst those tall ash trees was another door also violet in colour.

“ Oh I said, I didn’t realise this entrance was here.....”

James fumbled for the keys in his pocket and inserted the rustier of the two into the lock.

After a bit of gentle persuasion and a good shove by the both of us, the door finally released itself.

My eyes were not prepared for the spectacle that lay before me!

I let out a huge gasp and James did likewise. “I was not expecting this “He said.

“It wasn’t like this the last time I was in here.....”

“Have you been in this basement- in this cottage before? I splutter

“Well I..I..I ,only once” he stuttered. “When I called to collect Mary- Rose’s personal items , the specific ones that she had wanted to be put away..... into storage” He said .” Our Courier company also provides a long term-, storage facility,” He added hastily.

“When Mary-Rose arrived in Spain, she requested that all her items from storage be shipped over to her which we duly did.” “Once she had everything unpacked, she realised that she was missing one very important item from her delivery”. “Let me guess, “*THE BOX*” that you seem to be in such a hurry to get your hands on” I said

“Precisely!,” he said. She rang Joanne, the auctioneer straight away and left instructions with her as to what to do, as I have already told you!” He growled

I was not convinced, but for now, I was willing to accept his explanation.

Just then James’ phone rang. “**O.K,O.K.**” He shouted down the line. “Half an hour and I will be with you.” He turned back towards me ...“Sorry, impatient customer” he said “Peggy Jones down the road has been waiting two months for a special parcel”.” She rang the depot and they told her it was out for delivery. “Have to go!”

“But what about the” I called after him as he climbed into his van and sped off.

“He certainly left in a hurry.” I thought to myself.

I turned to go out the door and lock up but I couldn’t see the keys anywhere.

There was a flash and then darkness! “Drat, the bulb must have blown.” I used the light on my phone to show the way. I searched, poked and prodded in various cupboards, presses and boxes, stumbling over obstacles, to no avail. The keys were gone!

As I approached the door I felt something brush against my leg,

A quick flash of the phone light around showed me nothing. “Probably a bat,” I thought to myself.

I made my way back into the kitchen and started to prepare dinner. Dusk was beginning to set in. I closed the curtains and lit the bronze coloured oil-lamp I had brought back from Russia some three years previously. I turned on my C.D. player and before long the sweet melodic tones of Josh Groban were soothing my somewhat addled brain. Before long my culinary attempts were ready for consumption, accompanied by a glass of Merlot.

I had just started to doze on my oversized pink arm-chair, when I was awoken by a loud bang , followed by the sound of a vehicle leaving my yard.

“*THE BASEMENT*,or what whatever secret it holds.....,”

“I must go and se.....Crunch!” a red Mercedes convertible screeched to a sudden stop outside my window.

“Somebody must be lost, “I thought to myself.

I cautiously opened the door and there before me was...

“Joanne?” “Is that you?” “Why are you here?.....at this time of night?”

She pushed past me into the kitchen looking a little flustered.

“I forgot to give you the spare set of keys to your new house, so I came out here with them to see how you were settling in”

“At this time of night?” I asked disbelievingly.

“I was visiting friends living close by, was on my way home,so I decided to drop in.” She said.

“I’m settling in just fine, Thank You!” I replied testily.

“I chose this cottage because of it’s quiet rural location, an escape, yet today I have had three unwelcome callers and you are one of them!”

“Well...I.....” she started to mumble

“Why are you really here?” I demanded from her,

“I..I.. I’m dropping off the spare set of keys for your house”, she stuttered.

“Yeah Right!” I mumbled under my breath.

“It’s late “, she said. “ I better be off.”

“It’s a long drive back to the city.”

“Thanks for the keys” I said.” I could have collected them from you when I was back in town.” “A phone call to say you had them would have sufficed, or you could have posted them.”

“I came across them in the safe when I was....I meanthe drawer when I was tidying my office earlier today.” Joanne said. Her face was now a bright shade of red

“Good Night and Thanks “ I said ushering her forcefully towards the door.

“Good Night” she blurted. There was a soft purr followed by a large crunch and at last

She was gone. “Time to change the locks I thought to myself. I must look up a suitable local locksmith tomorrow.” Happy with this decision I finally went to bed. It had been a long yet Intriguing day. As I drifted off to sleep, I wondered why Mary Rose Ryan had really left this seemingly perfect cottage behind her.

An alarm on my phone brought me back to reality. A memo about my first meeting with new clients, a couple in the city.

I had been recommended to them by Harry and Louise Finchley whose high society wedding I had successfully planned six months previously. The meeting was set for 8.30 the following morning. Securing the account for this wedding should be my current priority. I needed a clear head, and a killer business plan with which to convince them to hire me. I threw the keys in the drawer of the locker beside my bed. For now Mary Rose’s box would have to wait.

I awoke the following morning to a bright, crisp, clear day. I opened my wardrobe and chose a pale blue cashmere suit, a cream silk blouse and for this occasion my Louboutins. I tied my hair up in a loose knot at the back of my neck, a quick spray of “La Vie est belle” and I was ready. I gathered my Cream Gucci bag, leather briefcase my tablet and drove into the city.

On my arrival Marianne informed me that Sally and Nicholas were waiting for me in my office.

“Hello , my name is Sarah Jennings, Welcome to *Happily ever After Weddings* ,lovely to meet you both,” I said offering my outstretched hand to the couple sitting before me.

“You are 2.5 seconds late,” the groom stated rather testily with a scowl on his face.

“Oh,I’m Sorry ,”I said not knowing exactly why I was apologising . This couple were going to be challenging. I was not sure if I wanted to take them on. However they were here now, I settled in my chair, turned on my tablet ready to discuss what type of wedding they desired.

“Would you like some coffee, before we start?” I asked “Absolutley not “Sally said.” Neither of us drink coffee and we have wasted enough time already.” I glanced at my Gucci watch and only five minutes had passed.” I hope you don’t mind but I am going to have some.” I said, trying not to sound exasperated. I buzzed Marianne and asked her to bring me a Large Latte, a jug of fresh water with lemon(not that they needed this) and two glasses for my clients.

The clock on the wall ticked rather loudly as all three of us waited for the drinks to arrive. It felt like an eternity. I was never so relieved to see Marianne coming into the office. “Thank You”

“Will You please hold my calls for now. If my next clients are early, will you buzz me? “Certainly Sarah” Marianne replied. At this point Sally glared at Harry and he threw his eyes up to Heaven.

Meanwhile, back at the cottage, a person was knocking at the front door.

The note delivered read, “Ms Jennings, please contact; **08755554433** at your earliest convenience.”

Ellen Looby