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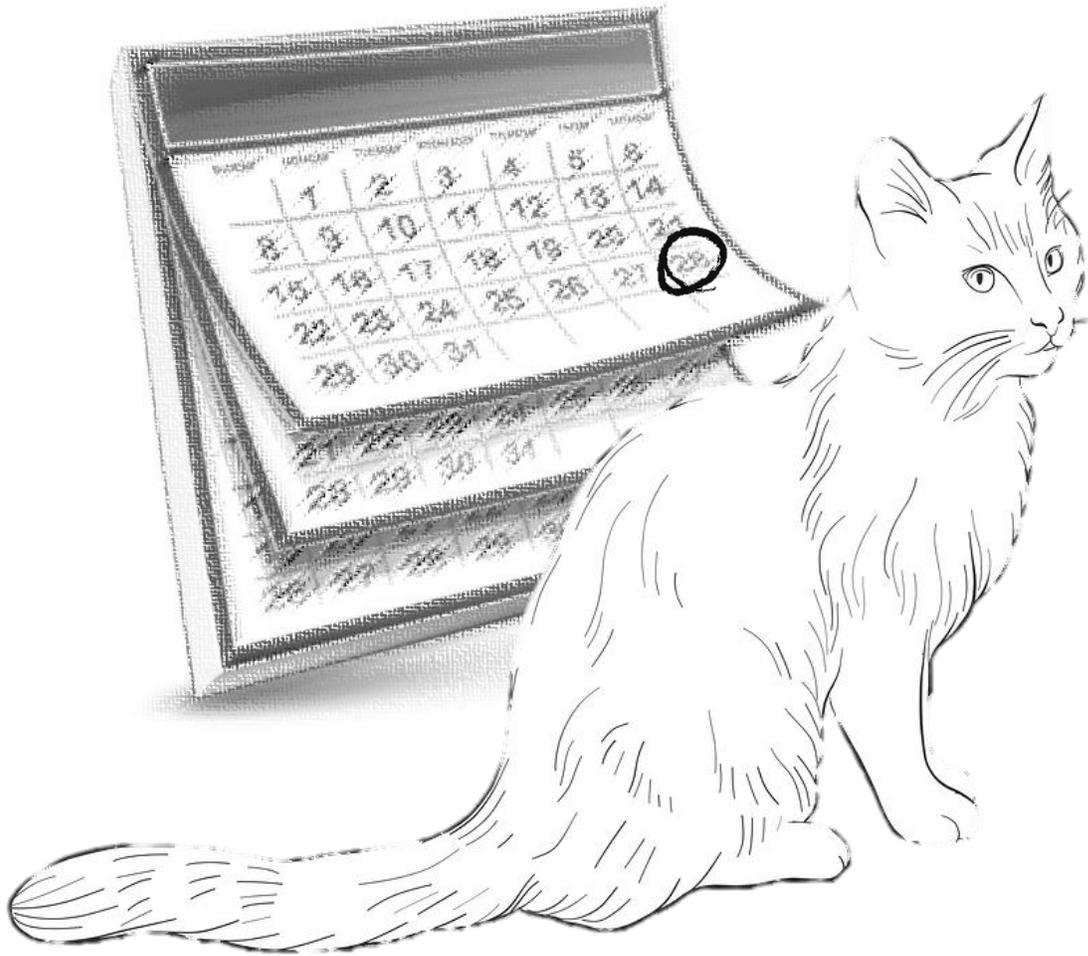
Cats, Cannolis and a Curious Kidnapping

An Anna Romano Mystery Series

Book One

By Cheryl Denise Bannerman

1 CHAPTER 1: Present Day



Anna could NOT believe she had just stolen an ice cream cart from a little old man — *with a cane no less* — and was being chased by a deranged murderer. Just a few weeks ago, her life was PERFECTLY NORMAL.

Wishing she had taken those spin classes her friend tried to sign her up for, all she could think about was stopping for a triple scoop, chocolate chip ice cream cone. She was definitely out of shape.

She was pedaling as fast as she could as she merged onto the local highway. Cars were honking their horns and kids were gawking and pointing at her through the windows. It was humiliating. For the first time in her life, she was *hoping* no one would recognize her.

Through the noise of the traffic, she thought she heard laughter, and maybe even a ‘catcall’. She turned sharply, almost giving herself whiplash. She hadn’t had a man ‘call’, let alone heard a ‘cat-call’, directed at her in quite some time. When she turned back around to focus on the road ahead, she could see a man on a motorcycle gesturing something to her from her peripheral view, but could not quite make out what he was saying. Then out of nowhere, a gang of his ‘no doubt’ *motorcycle buddies* pulled alongside him. They were all whistling, whooping, laughing, and ironically yelling out ice cream orders.

Seconds later, they were moving closer to her 'lane', otherwise known as 'the shoulder', since there was *technically* no bike lanes on the highway.

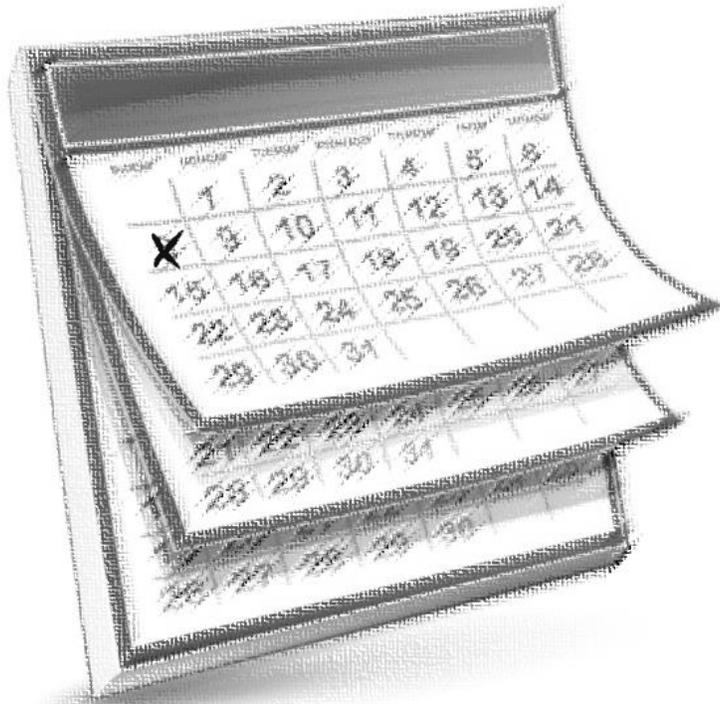
They were gesturing for her to pull over!

Not looking where she was going and becoming frantically nervous at the attention, Anna was caught off guard by a construction cone. She quickly swerved right to avoid it, but it was too late.

Down the embankment she went, ice cream truck and all. Run off the road by a bunch of bikers who were craving Rocky Road. Damn.

She had to get to the police station, but had lost her main source of transportation. They were never going to believe this story.

1 CHAPTER 2: Just 3 weeks ago...



Welcome to my life. My name is Anna Romano. I'm the lonely Italian lady from the shore. The Jersey Shore that is. Who now lives in the suburbs of Central Jersey. The quaint, preppy town of Princeton to be exact. Thanks for reading about my exciting life of writing, cats, Cheetos (my favorite snack), and kitty litter. I never thought I would turn into an old maid, unmarried with seven cats at the age of 37, but here I am.

The most fulfilling part of my life is my work as an author. This is my fifteenth year in the world of fiction, murder mysteries to be exact, and I love it. I get to work from home with my cats and not have to deal with the politics of working in an office. I've always said that "death by cubicle" would be the worst death EVER. I could see myself stuck, almost frozen in time, listening to co-workers ramble about their spouses, and fake-smiling through a large array of kid's photos in various stages of life, and slideshows of family vacations. Ugh!

In addition to writing novels, I also write part-time (from home) for the local newspaper's *Dear Jesse* Relationship column (the last topic I should be advising anyone on, but I manage to get by using my sarcasm and sense of humor – in case you haven't picked up on it yet).

If I'm not on my laptop or cleaning litter boxes, I am usually watching the food and travel networks, cooking new recipes, or watching scary movies.

Not that I don't like people, but I have never been much of a social butterfly.

I keep a few close friends, *and even fewer family members*, in my circle.

Most of them live out-of-state and visit now and then, texting more frequently than they visit. I don't mind, because if you get any of them on the phone it would be hours before you could get them off. It seems that if married life and having kids is so stressful, people would choose against it more often. Oh well. I refuse to become a part of the social media culture, so either way, I am continually flooded with texts and emails of their happy family photos. I am assuming this is to prove to me that I am missing out on a large chunk of happiness in my life, and that I should hurry up and have a family before it's too late. God forbid!

I don't know why I never found the 'right one', but I haven't. It could be (A) from a lack of trying, (B) my sarcasm and independence is a turnoff, or (C) I find most men annoying and harder to clean up after than my cats.

Or maybe it is because I never saw any type of happy family scenarios growing up. Raised by a single parent, my mother was constantly bitching about life, work, men, etcetera; even though she was mildly successful and

considered 'middle-class'. She never married my Dad and he wasn't around much anyway. Holidays and birthdays were his thing. He really showed out on those occasions with the gaudy presents and long hugs. I guess I should be grateful for at least that.

Mom was also a writer, but in the marketing industry, writing ads, commercials, and oftentimes jingles for the coolest kid's products on the market. It felt like Christmas when she was working on an ad campaign for a toy and had to bring it home for work. Mom was talented and creative, and I thank her for transferring that gift to me. Now living with her boyfriend of seven years, she resides in Texas and still works part-time for the same firm. Not sure how she ended up so far away, but it suits me fine. We talk weekly.

Dad passed away a few years back of a heart attack. And it wasn't the wine or cigarettes that got him. It was the women. You guessed it. Here's how it went...A prostitute, drunk and pharmacist walk into a bar...Nevermind, bad joke. Anyway, the blue pill was not recommended by his doctor and neither was the enthusiastic prostitute who wanted to 'try something different' that night. Dad's heart gave out during round two. He was a good man and did the best he could with what some refer to as 'the hand he was dealt'. Now

that I think about it, I can see life being compared to a random game of cards, where 99.9% of the time, you lose. Hmph!

Anyway, let's get to the most important thing about my life that I know you are dying to hear about...My cats! There are seven in all: TatorTot, Tiny, Petra, Jasmine, Sonny, Liza, and Bette. I was on a Broadway kick when I picked the last few names. Anyway, they keep me from thinking about not having a social life and their meowing helps to drown out the biological clock that everyone keeps telling me is ticking.

TatorTot is my only Persian, mostly because of my allergies, and she is shy, gentle and quiet. While Tiny, Sonny and Petra are American Shorthair cats with unique stripes in various colors among the three. Tiny is the most friendly and full of energy, while Sonny and Petra are the sneaky instigators who fight for my attention and can never seem to stay out of trouble. If they were kids, I can imagine one pointing to the other "He did it!" or shouting "It wasn't me!" after getting caught in some type of conundrum.

Jasmine, the most entertaining of them all, is a black Siamese who loves to put on a show...especially when company comes over.

And then, there are Liza and Bette, my latest acquisitions. Two gorgeous Ragamuffins who are literally inseparable. And no, they are not the

entertaining type like Jasmine, despite their names. They love to eat, climb, jump, and most of all, try to type on my keyboard when I'm trying to work.

All of them have their own individual personalities, and all of them love to eat and poop, based on the amount of litter I seem to have to clean every day.

Oh wait, my publicist is texting me. The message says: "Don't be late tomorrow!"

One of the great things about my career is that I get to meet my fans, at least three to five times per year at various events. The event tomorrow is at the Rizzoli Bookstore in New York City for my last book, *The Purrfect Crime*. It was crime committed by a veterinarian's assistant who catered to the animals of the rich and famous, just so she could get close to the families, kidnap their beloved pet, and demand a substantial ransom. After collecting millions, she was finally caught when the kidnapping of a prized Shitzu turned to murder. Apparently, the maid's day off was changed at the last minute, and the owners caught the kidnapper off guard. My *animal lover* fans ate it up and the book was on the Bestseller list in just two weeks after its release!

Anyway, my publicist's name is Shirlene Booker, and yes, that is her actual last name, and we have been a team for almost ten years now. She was just as passionate about books as I was, and even more passionate about public perceptions. And that means that punctuality was at the top of her 'pet peeves' list.

I texted her back: "Yes SIR!"

An inside joke between us that refers to her as having the bedside manner of a drill sergeant. Next, she will be asking what I am wearing. Oy vey!

I can't complain though. She's been by my side through thick and thin, and she always has my best interest at heart. And every time I push her too far and get on her last nerve about a venue or promotion, I just bake her a pan of my famous lasagna and all is well with the 'Booker' again.

Now to pick out the perfect spring outfit for my trip to the city tomorrow!