

## Chapter One

Follow my lead, Miss Rook,” Jackaby said, rapping on the ornately trimmed door to 1206 Campbell Street. Were my employer a standard private investigator, those might have been simple instructions, but in the time I’ve been his assistant, I’ve found very little about Jackaby to be standard. Following his lead tends to call for a somewhat flexible relationship with reality.

Tall and lanky, Jackaby swam in his long, brown coat. It looked like it might have once been an expensive garment, but it was now battered and affixed inside and out with myriad clinking, jingling pockets and pouches, each loaded with trinkets and tools he insisted were essential to his work. Around his neck he had wound a ludicrously

long scarf, the ends of which brushed the cobblestones as he walked.

On his head, stuffed over a dark mess of wild hair, was the main offender. Jackaby's cap, the knit monstrosity, was a patternless composite of uneven stitches and colors. The threads clashed with his scarf. They clashed with his coat. They even clashed with one another. Alone on a hat rack, the thing would have looked mismatched.

Jackaby was not an ugly man. He kept himself clean-shaven, and always seemed to smell of cloves and cinnamon. In a fine suit and tie he might have been downright attractive to the right sort of girl, but in his preferred garb he looked like an eccentric lunatic. He was fond of reminding me that "appearances aren't everything," but I dare say they aren't *nothing*, either. My employer can be single-minded about some things. Most things, in fact.

The woman who answered the door appeared far too overwhelmed by her own concerns to bother about silly hats, anyway. Jackaby and I soon found ourselves ushered past the threshold and into an elegantly furnished sitting room. The house looked like so many of the regal English manors to which my mother had dragged me as a child. My father was a bit of an explorer—you may have read about the intrepid Daniel Rook—but my mother much preferred tradition and civility. Mother took full advantage of my father's notoriety to find her way into countless London garden parties, and she brought me along in the hopes

that a little exposure would make me wish to be a proper lady as well. It generally made me wish instead that I could go outside and play in the dirt, like my father.

In some ways, there was really nothing *new* about New England. Our current hostess looked as though she would have fit very comfortably into my mother's social circles. She introduced herself as Florence Beaumont and offered to take our coats. Jackaby flatly declined for both of us. I would have preferred he hadn't, as the heat of the chamber was a sharp contrast to the breeze outside. The spring of 1892 had arrived in New Fiddleham, but it had not yet fully chased away the last of the winter winds.

Mrs. Beaumont led us to a small alcove at the rear of the room. Within the recess were a pile of blankets, a little pink collar with a bell on the front, and a set of silver bowls perched on white doilies. In one bowl was a bit of what looked to be leftover tuna, and in the other were water, a great deal of cat hair, and a live fish. The fish circled uncomfortably, being nearly as wide as the bowl itself.

Jackaby squatted, resting his forearms on his knees and staring into the water. He watched the fish take a few cramped laps, studying its movements, and then he plucked a bit of damp cat hair from the rim, sniffed it, tasted it, and tucked it into a pocket somewhere in the depths of his coat.

I whipped out the little black notepad Jackaby had given me upon the completion of our first case, trying not to let Mrs. Beaumont see that I was still on the very first page.

“Your message said something about a sick cat?” I prompted the woman while my employer poked at the sticky pile of leftovers in the other bowl. “I’m sure Mr. Jackaby will want to see the animal.”

The woman’s lip quivered. “Mrs. W-W-Wiggles.”

“Yes, and where is Mrs. Wiggles now?”

Mrs. Beaumont tried to answer, but she managed only a sort of squeak I could not decipher and gestured toward the alcove.

Jackaby stood. “Mrs. Wiggles is right here, isn’t she?”

The woman nodded.

“Mrs. Wiggles is the fish, isn’t she?”

She nodded again. “Only since recently,” she sniffed.

“I see,” Jackaby said.

His matter-of-fact response seemed to burst a dam within the woman. “You must think me mad! I didn’t know to whom I could turn, but your name has come up from time to time. I entertain, you see. Very prominent people come to my soirees. Mayor Spade had tea here, just last week. Some of the people I dine with tell me that you specialize in things that are . . . that are . . . *different*.”

“To put it mildly,” I submitted.

“Nice to hear I’ve come so highly recommended, madam,” Jackaby said, turning his attention back to the big fish in the little bowl.

“Oh, I wouldn’t call them recommendations, exactly,”

she added. “More like anecdotes, some of them warnings, actually . . .”

“Yes, yes, very nice.” Jackaby’s attention had migrated back to his investigation. He dropped to his hands and knees, peeking at the pile of blankets.

“I’ve always taken such good care of Mrs. Wiggles,” the woman continued. “I keep her brushed and washed, and I buy her the most expensive cat food. I even get her fresh fish from Chandler’s Market from time to time. At first I thought she was just feeling a bit off due to her—well—her state. But then she began to sprout s-s-scales, and now . . . now . . .” Mrs. Beaumont broke down again, her voice wavering into uncomfortable octaves.

“Due to her state?” I asked, trying to press forward. “What state was Mrs. Wiggles in?”

“She was pregnant,” Jackaby answered for Mrs. Beaumont. The woman nodded.

“How did you know that?” I asked.

Jackaby pulled up the corner of the blanket to reveal a pile of adorable, sleeping kittens. Here and there a patch of scales peeked through the fur. The smallest had fuzzy gills, which puffed up and down as it snored, but they were precious nonetheless.

“Do I deduce correctly that, until recently, Mrs. Wiggles has had significantly more freedom to roam about at night?” Jackaby asked.

The woman blinked back to self-control. “Yes, yes, that’s true. I generally leave the window open at night, and Mrs. Wiggles likes to pop out, but she would always be back home in the morning. I decided it was best to keep her in this past month, at least until she had her litter. It’s been freezing cold out, anyway. Didn’t want the poor thing—”

“Yes, that’s all very good,” Jackaby interrupted. “You mentioned you purchase fish for her from the market, occasionally. Is it also correct to assume you have been treating her to such morsels more often of late?”

“I just wanted her to be happier, cooped up indoors like—”

“Always the same sort of fish?”

“Er . . . yes. Mackerel from Chandler’s Market. Was that wrong?”

“On the contrary, Mrs. Belmont—”

“Beaumont,” she corrected quietly.

“On the contrary, Mrs. Beaumont, it may have been just the thing. Don’t worry. We will see to it the animals receive adequate care.”

“You’re taking the kittens, too?” She sniffled. Her eyes welled up, and her lip quivered.

Jackaby sighed. “Give me just a moment to confer with my esteemed colleague.” He gestured me closer as Mrs. Beaumont wrung her hands.

Jackaby leaned in and adopted the sort of hushed, secretive tones that one nearby cannot help but overhear. “Miss

Rook, on a scale of one to pomegranate, how dangerous would you say this situation has become?"

"Dangerous?" I faltered.

"Yes, Miss Rook," prompted Jackaby, "in your *expert* opinion."

"On a scale of one to pomegranate?" I followed his lead, checking over the notes I had scribbled in my notepad and speaking in my most audible, serious whisper. "I should think . . . acorn? Possibly badger. Time alone will tell."

My employer nodded solemnly.

"What? What is it? Can you make them . . . better?" Mrs. Beaumont fidgeted, worrying the lace on her collar as Jackaby considered his response.

"Contamination, madam. Viral infection, no doubt. You've been thoroughly exposed, but don't worry, you're probably just a carrier. It is most unlikely you will display any symptoms yourself. What's important now is to be sure the litter does not further contaminate the neighborhood."

"Is it really as bad as all that?" she asked. "Sh-should we tell the police or . . . or the animal control officer?"

"If you like." Jackaby looked thoughtful. "Of course, it might be best if we simply take Mrs. Wiggles and her litter to our facility and keep the whole thing quiet. I'm no expert in entertaining, but I do not imagine one's social standing would weather well the news that one is a carrier to an exotic, viral plague. How is Mayor Spade, by the way?"

Mrs. Beaumont sniffed and digested the detective's

words for a moment. “Let me fetch you a bigger bowl,” she squeaked. “I want Mrs. Wiggles to be comfortable, at least.” With one last snuffle, she ducked away into the house.

Some girls work in shops or sell flowers. Some girls find husbands and play house. I assist a mad detective in investigating unexplained phenomena—like fish that ought to be cats but seem to have forgotten how. My name is Abigail Rook, and this is what I do.

## Chapter Two

**I**n a few short minutes, my employer and I found ourselves back on the cobbled road, now with one box of somewhat fishy felines and a bulky, crystal punch bowl full of fresh water and a slightly hairy mackerel. Jackaby nobly opted to carry the kittens. The cool New England breeze was picking up in sporadic bursts, whistling through the narrow alleyways and making me keenly aware of the small patch of damp developing on my shirtwaist where the bowl occasionally sloshed.

“What was that show about back there, sir?” I asked, straining not to completely soak my blouse with fishy water.

“Show?” Jackaby raised an eyebrow.

“One to pomegranate? And I’m an expert, now?”

“As I understand it, you are a bit of an expert, albeit in

the rather monotonous field of digging up and studying old rocks. I found the title convenient at the time.”

“Paleontology, not geology. I was studying fossils before we met, not old rocks, thank you.”

“Ah, yes, fossils. In other words, bones that, over a great deal of time, have mineralized and turned to . . . what?”

“To stone.”

“Stone. As in . . . rocks?”

“Oh, fine. I don’t know if a handful of classes and one failed expedition qualify me as an expert, but all the same, I’d prefer that you not use my scant few credentials to lie to old ladies.”

“I’ll keep that in mind when next I find it necessary.”

“Thank you for that. Speaking of which, shouldn’t she be quarantined or something?” I asked, glancing back at the stately old house.

“What on earth for?” Jackaby tickled a soft orange nose as it poked gingerly out of the box. “Oh, that whole plague business. No, no—there isn’t any virus. Nothing to worry about. I simply felt it would be much less jarring to the poor woman than the truth.”

“And what’s the truth, then?”

“Pervasive, carnivorous shape-shifters. Oh, look. This one has a fluffy dorsal fin! Hello there, little fellow.”

I stopped in the street. The water sloshed over the far edge of the punch bowl, and the mackerel circled, obliviously.

“Would you run that last bit by me again, sir?”

“Don’t be so bothered,” Jackaby said. “I’m happy to explain. The dorsal refers to the ridge along his back. I was merely observing that—”

“Not about the fin! They’re carnivorous shape-shifters?”

“Oh yes! It’s a somatic camouflage. Isn’t it marvelous? These little beasties are aggressive mimics of an exceptional degree. They physically adapt to take on the appearance of a local food source, infiltrating their prey and allowing their unwitting hosts to provide them with comfort, protection, and supplemental nutrients. Then, when they have won their trust, they devour them. It seems Mrs. Wiggles was fond of snacking on cats, up until she got herself cooped up.”

“But that’s horrific!”

“Not at all. That’s nature. Cuckoos are aggressive mimics as well—brood parasites—and those little scamps get immortalized on finely crafted clocks.”

“I . . . suppose.” I continued walking, eyeing the mackerel more closely as we crossed the street. “Still, rather disturbing to think of a cat out there cannibalizing other cats.”

“It isn’t cannibalism if it’s only camouflage, Rook. In your hands is proof enough that the beast wasn’t feline at all. As soon as she was forced to identify a new, regular food source, her body adapted.”

“So these . . . *things* can just magically turn into whatever creature they eat?”

“It isn’t magic, Rook. It’s science. The abilities of certain

creatures to adapt spontaneously to fit in to their surroundings are well documented. Aristotle himself wrote an account of the camouflage mechanism of octopuses. They can change color spontaneously.”

“Like chameleons?”

“Precisely. The biological mechanism at work here is more complicated, obviously, but not unlike a chameleon changing its skin. In fact, Darwin dubbed these little creatures *chameleomorphs*, in reference to the little lizards with their colorful camouflage. A misnomer, of course, as the term *chameleon* refers not to the adaptation, but rather to the Latin for ‘lion of the ground,’ but such is the tradition of naming one beast after another.”

“That can’t possibly be right. Charles Darwin never discovered shape-changing animals. He’d have written about it.”

“Oh?” We crested the hill at the top of Market Street, and Jackaby gave me a sly smile as we started back down. “Didn’t he?”

There was something about Jackaby that made me want to impress him. It might have been his earnest arrogance, or the way he spoke frankly and didn’t pander or talk down to me. True, Jackaby could be brash and outright insulting—but being treated with kid gloves always felt like a greater insult. I wanted nothing more than to prove myself, and Jackaby gave me that chance. I would like to say, therefore, that I countered my employer’s smirk with a witty rebuttal, or at least that I carried my weight in the ensuing

conversation. Unfortunately, one does not always get what one would like.

Instead, just as I opened my mouth to speak, my heel caught on a broken piece of brickwork, and I pitched forward in a graceless stumble, drenching myself in fishy water before launching the crystal punch bowl—and its unhappy inhabitant—down the slope of bustling Market Street.

The crystal miraculously withstood the jarring drop and bumpy ride for the better part of a block, bouncing down the cobbled road like a runaway sled. New Fiddleham streets are never empty, and half a dozen passersby stood watching until the road bent off to the right and the bowl slammed into the curb. Pedestrians jumped aside as the container exploded at their feet, spraying the storefront of a small leather shop with expensive shrapnel. The last glittering shards had not yet spun to a stop before I was back on my feet and after it.

The startled mackerel flopped and waggled across the damp cobbles, and from half a block away I could see it balancing on the edge of the storm drain. I cursed under my breath and willed the fish to just hold still. Was it too much to ask that, just once, one of my failures be a simple little thing, instead of compounding itself into a big ordeal? Time slowed as the scaly little rascal flipped itself up in a clean arc directly over the grate.

The very moment it seemed that my failure was absolute, my salvation arrived in the form of a broad bear of a

man. His thick fingers swept down with remarkable skill, snatching the fish up by its tail in midhop. He palmed the mackerel in one hand and helped steady me to a stop with the other. When my feet were firmly beneath me, the man laughed a deep, throaty laugh and patted me firmly on the shoulder.

“Hah! Gotcha!” His wide smile sat nestled in a thick, bristly, auburn beard.

“Catch of the day, Hudson,” came my employer’s voice from directly behind me.

“Bah. The mackerel’s not bad—but I don’t think this one’s fully grown. I’ll have to toss her back! Hah!” The man laughed again, loudly, and slapped me on the back so enthusiastically, I nearly toppled. “Figures that the fish start flying and yer the one behind it! Good to see ya, R. F. Oh, hey—speaking of which, let’s get this fella a drink. Hold on.”

The big mountain of a man lumbered back toward the leather shop and popped inside, still clutching the struggling fish. My shirt dripped, and crystal shards tinkled under my feet as I turned to face my employer. “Mr. Jackaby, I—”

He regarded me sternly.

“I am so sorry,” I said.

His eyes remained fixed on mine, and his eyebrows rose a fraction.

“I am so, so, so sorry.”

He sighed. “The number of *sos* in your apology is irrelevant. Miss Rook, what do you see when you look at these

creatures?” He held the box toward me, and a little furry face peeped out, inquisitively.

“I see . . . a kitten.”

“Would you like to know what I see?”

I nodded. Jackaby was not an ordinary detective. The cases he tracked were not the sort an ordinary investigator could unravel, but fantastic pursuits, delving ever beyond the pale. What made Jackaby so good at uncovering the perplexing and paranormal—more than his extensive library of the occult, more than his vast knowledge of the obscure—was that Jackaby was perplexing and paranormal himself. Where you or I could observe only the surface, Jackaby perceived a deeper reality. He said this made him “the Seer”—though not like any old tarot reader or charlatan with a crystal ball. Jackaby saw the truth behind every thing and every person.

“What do you see?” I asked.

“I see untempered chaotic potential—they’re positively bubbling with it. It doesn’t rest above their skin like an ordinary aura. It pops and fizzes and rolls. They are adorable at present, and relatively docile for now, but with the capacity for untold destruction. Darwin discovered the little chameleomorphs for the first time on the island of Mauritius. You won’t find them in any grammar school textbook, but he did. There was a bird that used to live there as well—until something began to prey upon it. Dutch sailors dubbed them *walghvogels*, the ‘loathsome birds.’ According to a few

very old accounts, including a secret dossier compiled by Darwin himself, they were witnessed devouring their own kind. Within half a century of their discovery, the birds had been eradicated. You may know them better by their more common name, the dodo.”

“You think cats are going to go the way of the dodo if I accidentally let one of these chameleon-morph things escape?”

“They appear as cats today, but as you have seen, they could be anything tomorrow. My point is simply that the introduction of a foreign predator, particularly one with such intense latent potential as this, could be devastating to the local ecosystem.”

The big hairy man emerged from the leather shop, and our discussion came to an end. “Heyo, Jackaby! You owe that fella inside a new mop bucket. Don’t worry, I gave it a good rinse.” He held out a dented tin bucket, and I stepped up and accepted it graciously. The fish spun within it, cramped again, but safe and unharmed. “And who would you be, then, little lady?”

“Abigail Rook, sir. I really can’t thank you enough.”

“Whoo—a Brit! Watch out, Jackaby. You might accidentally pick up a little class workin’ with this one. The name’s Hank Hudson, Miss Rook.”

He offered a hand and I shook it. Clad in a thick brown duster with wide lapels and boots that looked fit to cross the continent, the man was a mountain of worn leather,

and he smelled like horses and firewood. He was like the rugged, American mountain men I had read about as a little girl, only Davy Crockett had never looked so massive in the pages of my magazines.

“Mr. Hudson is a skilled trapper and a cherished associate of mine, Miss Rook. How long have you been back in New Fiddleham, my friend?” Jackaby braced the box of kittens on his hip and held out his own hand, but Hank Hudson pulled him into a quick hug, instead, giving Jackaby a hearty slap on the back while my employer awkwardly struggled not to drop the box.

“Only here on a quick stop. Spent a year out in Oklahoma Territory, tradin’ with the Cherokee. There’s good huntin’ out there, but I got that cabin in Gad’s Valley to tend to. Once I’ve unloaded some goods an’ restocked, I’ll be headed back down that way. I’m glad I caught ya. I picked up some good herbs from the traders you might be interested in. Oh—hey, and I also got me a Cherokee medicine wheel you might take a shine to. You gonna be in this evening?”

“Yes, indeed. I’m still up on Augur Lane. Do you remember the house?”

“Sure enough—hard to forget a haunt like that.” Mr. Hudson gave Jackaby a wink, which made me wonder if he knew the full details of the odd house on Augur Lane. “See you folks later, then. A pleasure meetin’ ya, little lady.”

He tipped his fur cap and tromped off down the sidewalk in the opposite direction. Jackaby and I resumed our trek back to Augur Lane. I took great care to watch my step and keep the bucket level. I hoped Jackaby might explain how he had come to know the trapper, but my employer said nothing. I found it hard to read from his expression if he was still miffed at me for my bungling, or if this was just his usual lack of social tact.

There was a lot about Jackaby I found difficult to read. He was so blunt and direct all the time that it became easy to lose sight of the fact that I knew almost nothing about my employer. I had noticed, for instance, that Mr. Hudson had referred to him by his initials, when virtually every other person we'd met called him only "Jackaby."

"What does 'R. F.' stand for?" I asked as we crossed through the business district, nearing Augur Lane.

He turned his head and regarded me for a few seconds before responding. "In my line of work, investigating eldritch events and all manner of magical matters, it behooves one to maintain certain safeguards of a supernatural nature."

"You mean, like the garlic and lavender you put all around the property line?"

"It isn't lavender; it's Irish white heather—but yes, like that," he replied. "Names have power. To purveyors of certain very old, very dark arts, a name, willingly surrendered,

is tantamount to strings on a marionette. I choose to keep my own name closely guarded.”

“I promise not to turn you into an evil puppet,” I said. “I don’t know any dark arts, anyhow. I don’t even know any card tricks.”

“Reassuring though that is, I think I’ll keep it to myself all the same. It isn’t you I’m worried about, Miss Rook,” he added, “but you will find my resolve on the matter absolute. I’ve not even shared my full name with Jenny, and she is not only exceptionally reliable but also dead.”

Jenny Cavanaugh was one of those peculiar details about the house on Augur Lane. The property had once been hers—and she had stayed on even after her untimely and mysterious demise. My employer raised no complaint, and the ghostly Jenny had simply become a regular member of the household. In spite of her grim history, Jenny was the most pleasant specter a person could ever hope to meet. She had turned out to be a closer confidante and far less of a curiosity than my enigmatic employer.

“May I guess?” I said.

Jackaby rolled his eyes. “You may do whatever you like. It will have no bearing on my decision.”

“Is it . . . Richard Frederic?”

“No, and I am not going to—”

“Russell Francis?”

“No. You’re being—”

“Rumpelstiltskin Finnegan?”

Jackaby sighed. “Yes, Miss Rook. Rumpelstiltskin. You’ve found me out. I am the devious imp of the fairy tales.”

“It wouldn’t be the strangest thing you’ve told me since I started working for you.”

## Chapter Three

Upon our return to the house on Augur Lane, Jackaby sealed himself alone in his laboratory. I had offered to help him manage the furry little chameleomorphs, but he shooed me out with a waggle of his hand and kicked the door shut behind me. I shuffled down the crooked hallway and slumped to my desk in the foyer, resolving to throw myself back into my daily work. The piles of Jackaby's wrinkled receipts and old case files were still in sore need of organizing, but as the afternoon stretched on, my mind refused to focus.

I had only recently managed to convince my employer that I was not some porcelain vase that needed to be protected. I was not inclined, now, to accept a role as the bull

in his china shop, either. Admittedly, the fish fiasco was not my finest moment, but I could handle myself in the field. I could. I stuffed another long-forgotten receipt into the dusty filing cabinet behind me and scowled. Nothing set my skin to itching quite like feeling useless.

It wasn't that I didn't understand my employer's concern. My post as assistant to the foremost and perhaps only detective of the supernatural was wondrous in so many ways—but I couldn't deny that it was also dangerous. Jackaby's mad laboratory looked as though it might be equipped to raise Frankenstein's creature, and the library housed menacing shadows that crept across the floor and reached for my heels if I trod too close to the Dangerous Documents section. All around me sat exotic animal skulls and angry statues of foreign gods. Even the innocuous-looking drab green frog in the terrarium beside me—Jackaby called him Ogden—had a habit of venting a noxious stench from his eyeballs when he felt threatened. Such was life with my employer, a medley of madness and menace, and all this within the walls of the house.

During my very first foray into actual fieldwork, I had nearly gotten myself killed, facing off against a murderous villain. Like a careless damsel from one of my storybooks, I had failed to heed the warnings and bumbled directly into mortal danger. I hated to admit it, but if it hadn't been for Jackaby's intervention, I would almost certainly be dead, and I wouldn't be the only one.

“Does it still hurt?” came a gentle voice, startling me back to the present.

Jenny Cavanaugh had drifted into the room, her silvery feet hovering just above the floorboards, and her translucent hair drifting gently behind her. My hand had risen unconsciously to brush the small scar on my chest, a memento of that nearly fatal night, and I quickly let it drop.

“No, I’m fine. Just thinking.”

“Good thoughts or bad?” she asked. Her movements were fluid and graceful as she came to rest, leaning on the corner of the desk. Since my arrival in New Fiddleham, Jenny had become my closest and dearest friend. Immaterial though she was, her counsel had always been solid and sound.

“I botched an assignment today.”

“Any casualties?”

“Just a crystal punch bowl—and very nearly a fish that isn’t a fish.”

She raised an opalescent eyebrow.

“It was a Jackaby case,” I said, and slumped my head down on the cluttered desk.

Jenny nodded. “Sounds about right, then. Don’t worry about Jackaby. He’ll come around. That man has botched plenty of assignments without your help.”

“I know. It isn’t even really Jackaby—it’s just . . .” I pushed my hair out of my face and slumped back on the chair. “It’s everyone. It’s the ones who said I couldn’t or I shouldn’t.

My parents. Myself, mostly. In a strange way, I'm glad that Jackaby is disappointed. Don't tell him I said so, but it's nice to have somebody actually expect something of you for once. Still, it makes it all the harder to let go of the regrets."

Jenny's eyes drifted down to her translucent hand. "I do understand," she said quietly. "It's refreshing to be treated as an equal. It's one of the reasons I said yes, all those years ago." The ghost's engagement ring was a slim band, a spectral hint of silver nearly lost in her own silvery complexion. I held my breath as she touched the metal delicately. Jenny so rarely spoke about the years before her death. "Hard as it may be to imagine," she said, looking up, "I have a few regrets of my own."

I swallowed. "Jenny . . ."

Her face lightened, and she smiled at me softly. "Let them go, Abigail. Leave the past to us ghosts and focus on where you're going next. Besides, Jackaby is great with spotting *paranormal* stuff, but you know he's positively lost when it comes to *normal*. If you want to impress him, don't think about your weak spots—think about his. What did *he* miss?"

I shrugged. "This was a pretty simple case—or as simple as his cases are. The whole thing only took a few minutes. He spotted the creature right away—and a whole brood of its kittens."

"I thought it was a fish."

"They're fishy kittens. Long story. You know Jackaby's

not the sort to bring home an ordinary pet.” I paused. A timid thought peered from around a corner at the back of my mind. “But Mrs. Beaumont is precisely the sort,” I said. “And she seemed to think that she had.”

“Why, Abigail, are you being clever right here in front of me?” Jenny teased.

“Not clever—just wondering,” I said. “Jackaby said they’re rare and they’re not indigenous. So, where did Mrs. Wiggles come from?”

“Oh, look at you, all inquisitive and focused.” She smiled affectionately. “I’m beginning to think you and Jackaby are cut from two ends of the same cloth.”

Before I could respond, three loud knocks issued from the front door, and I found myself suddenly alone in the room. I said a quiet thank-you to the space where Jenny had been, and I rose to receive our visitor.