



A Familiar Tail (A Witch's Cat Mystery)

By Delia James

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Suddenly saddled with a witch's wand and a furry familiar, Annabelle soon meets a friendly group of women who use their spells, charms, and potions to keep the people of Portsmouth safe. But despite their gifts, the witches can't prevent every wicked deed in town....

Soon, the mystery surrounding Alistair's former owner, who died under unusual circumstances, grows when another local turns up dead. Armed with magic, friends, and the charmed cat who adopted her more than the other way around, Annabelle sets out to paw through the evidence and uncover a killer.

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Editorial Review

Review

“A special brew of magic, murder, mayhem...and one extraordinary cat.”—National Bestselling Author Laurie Cass

“Much like *Bewitched*, the feline in this one is a blast, and Annabelle is perfect when it comes to magical thinking and doing in New Hampshire. It will be more than fun to follow her journey for a good, long time to come.”—Suspense Magazine

“Anna is so genuinely likable, the dialogue so cleverly written, and the plot so compelling, that readers will enthusiastically follow her adventures and eagerly await their next chance to enter her world. Continual twists guarantee that readers will be as surprised by the truth as Anna, and the wit and confident writing by the author will cement her place on the list of must-read paranormal mystery series.”—Kings River Life Magazine

About the Author

Born in California and raised in Michigan, Delia James writes tales of magic, cats, and mystery from her hundred-year-old bungalow home in Ann Arbor. When not writing, she hikes, swims, gardens, cooks, reads, and raises her rapidly growing son. Visit her at deliajamesmysteries.com.

Elise Arsenault is a classically trained actor, singer, and voice-over artist. She has worked throughout the country with various regional theaters, including Merrimack Rep, Lyric Stage Company of Boston, Ivoryton Playhouse, Imagination Stage, and the Discovery Theater at the Smithsonian Institute.

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Double, Double, Paws, and Trouble . . .

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About the Author

1

I WANT TO be really clear about a few things. I don't chase after stray cats, I don't break into houses and I most definitely do not steal valuable antiques from dead people.

At least, I didn't used to.

My name is Annabelle Amelia Blessingsound Britton. My well-meaning parents settled this bit of nom de overkill on me at the request of my grandmother Annabelle Mercy Blessingsound Britton back when she declared that her dying wish was to have a namesake granddaughter. I was already on the way, and it was only after they filled out the birth certificate that my folks realized Grandma B.B. wasn't departing this vale of tears anytime soon. Or ever.

Some other pertinent facts and figures about yours truly:

Age: 35.

Profession: Freelance artist and illustrator.

Relationship Status: Emphatically single.

Height: Short.

Weight: Seriously?

Skin: Exceptionally pale, except when burned lobster red.

Eyes: Goldy-browny-amberish, kinda.

Hair: Medium brown, shoulder length, with either too much curl or not enough, depending on the day.

Location: On the road with most of what I owned crammed into two jumbo-sized red suitcases tossed in the back of my Jeep Wrangler, heading up I-95 from Boston to the quaint seacoast town of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, for a couple of weeks to visit my best friend, Martine.

Technically, it's about an hour from Boston to Portsmouth, but thanks to a pileup on the interstate, it was already going on four o'clock when I eased my Wrangler off I-95 and past the car dealerships and motels that clustered near the Route 1 roundabout. The two-lane highway snaked under a railroad bridge and bent to the left, becoming Lennox Avenue, and just like that, the scenery ceased to look like an off-ramp town and became beautiful New England.

I followed shady twists and turns past old homes that ranged from stately to eclectic. Another turn, and the homes gave way to converted brick warehouses lining the banks of the Piscataqua River. I put the windows down and breathed in the late-June air filled with freshwater, seaweed and a hint of diesel fuel from the massive black-and-white tanker chugging under the huge steel-girder bridge. My shoulders, tense from the drive, too much caffeine and not enough food, finally began to relax. Portsmouth was not a place I had visited before, though I knew my grandmother had lived there for some time. But I already had a feeling I was going to like it here, and my feelings about places tended to be surprisingly accurate. Spookily accurate, in fact, but that was not something I liked to go into.

My initial destination in town was a three-story Colonial-era brick box of a building with a peaked slate roof and a sign declaring it to be THE PALE ALE INN, EST. 1768. As I turned the key to shut off the Jeep's engine, the inn's door opened and an African American woman in a scarlet chef's coat strode out.

“Martine!” I shouted.

“Anna!” My friend wrapped me in one of her patented spine-crushing embraces. Martine Devereux was almost six feet tall, with deep brown skin and arms like a major league slugger. A professional chef, as well as my best friend since forever, Martine spent her life wielding knives and fire in confined spaces, not to mention barking orders with a force and speed that would put a drill sergeant to shame. “I was starting to wonder if you’d make it!”

“Traffic,” I said, and Martine groaned in deep Bostonian sympathy. She also took my arm and gestured grandly to the saltbox tavern with its weathered shutters and wood-framed windows.

“Welcome to my castle!” Martine gazed on her restaurant with open pride. She’d been over the moon when she got this job. The Pale Ale was a Portsmouth institution. The tavern had been around since before certain radicals met there over tankards of the namesake beer to plot revolution. Now it was the kind of landmark restaurant that got stars in the guides and on the Web sites. My friend had been handed the mission of modernizing the cuisine while keeping true to its New Hampshire heritage. I had no idea how she did that, but I knew Martine was up to the challenge.

“We just finished the family meal, and we open back up in about an hour, so I haven’t got time to do the total girlfriend reunion right now, but I really wanted you to check the place out.” She gave me a significant look and I winced. I couldn’t help it.

Sometimes, some places—homes, buildings, vacant lots, doesn’t matter—give me . . . call it a Vibe. Everybody else can find the place perfectly comfortable, but it will leave me cold, or even sick. Other places that might look ready to be condemned can make me instantly cheerful, even bubbly.

Thankfully, the Vibe was not a constant, or I wouldn't be able to walk into a grocery store without doubling over. In fact, I really wished I could just brush the Vibe off as part of that overactive imagination common to us artistic types. I would have, too, if it wasn't for the times I couldn't make myself walk into a place and afterward I'd find out there'd been a recent death or a divorce or some other disaster. Or maybe it was a birth or a marriage. The good impressions could be just as freaky as the bad ones.

I took a deep breath. "You know I can't control the thing, Martine."

"You will tell me if you pick up anything, though? This is important."

Martine was one of the few people I'd told about my Vibe. I didn't talk about it partly because I didn't want to give people extra reasons to think that Anna the Crazy Artist was actually, well, crazy. Partly because I had no control over when I'd get the impressions or how strong they would be. When they hit, if they hit, the feeling could be anything from a mild sensation in the back of my brain to a tidal wave that left me shaking.

Martine had held my hand through a couple of those shaky times, and if she ever thought I was crazy, she kept it to herself. The least I could do was let her know if her dream-job restaurant hit me with the karma stick. So I smiled and gave her an extra hug. "Okay. I promise."

"Great. Come on in."

Thankfully, when I crossed the Pale Ale threshold, nothing hit me except a wave of mouthwatering aromas reminding me I'd missed lunch. Servers dressed in immaculate black and white bustled around a spare but elegant dining room, lining up silverware on blue napkins and adjusting the white tablecloths. The clatter and bang of a kitchen in full swing drifted out from the swinging doors.

Martine was watching me, so I shook my head. She mimed letting out a deep breath as she steered us to a table by the windows. "Sean," she called to the man working behind the bar. "I need a plate of the brisket tacos for my friend, who is about dead of starvation."

"Yes, Chef!" he answered promptly and headed for the kitchen.

"I'm not about dead," I muttered. Okay, I was hungry, but still. Martine was a wonderful person and an amazing chef. She also had distinct mother-hen issues.

"You are. You've been up since six."

"I'm a morning person, and I ate breakfast. Pinkie-promise."

"Maybe, but you skipped lunch."

How in the heck did she always know? Her instincts about food were almost as spooky as my feelings about places.

"So, how's Portsmouth treating you, Martine?" I said, changing the subject with my usual level of subtlety.

"Practically rolled out the red carpet." She gestured around her dining room. "We've got a great staff, and there's some local farmers who have been able to supply us with heirloom ingredients and . . ."

I let Martine's talk of converting the Pale Ale to a farm-to-table restaurant wash over me and couldn't help grinning. Maybe I wasn't getting a Vibe from the building, but I got one from Martine. She'd found her place, and I was happy for her. Also a little jealous. I had been something of a drifter since I got out of

college, and if I was honest with myself, it had started to get a little tiring.

Martine's talk about ramping up the restaurant's catering department and the upcoming luncheon they were putting together for some city bigwigs had faltered and I realized I hadn't been paying attention.

"And then there's this morning . . ."

"This morning? What happened this morning?"

She frowned at me. "This is what happens when you skip meals. You can't concentrate. I was telling you how the boiler in my building burst this morning."

"Ouch."

"Yeah, ouch. I tried to call to warn you, but you must have been on the road." Since my one way-too-close call with an eighteen-wheeler, I always turned off my phone when I was driving. "Anyway, the building's flooded, and they're saying no hot water until Monday. My sous chef, Beverly, is letting me stay with her, but, well . . ."

I held up my hands. "Don't worry about it. I saw a bunch of vacancy signs when I passed the motels by the highway."

"Actually, I got you covered." Martine pulled a business card out of her jacket pocket. "McDermott's Bed & Breakfast, over on Summer Street. A friend of mine and her husband run the place. They're expecting you, and there's a discount since you're a friend of the 'family,'" she added, with air quotes. "Things should be all fixed by Monday."

"Thanks, Martine. I appreciate it." I dropped the card into my purse without looking at it. If Martine liked the place, it would be fine, and the food would be outstanding. What more could a girl ask for? Yes, the budget was a little tight right now. I hadn't been working much over the past few months. I'd been staying with my oldest brother, Bob, and his wife to help take care of Dad while he recovered from his heart attack. Despite this, I could handle a few days of B and B pampering before settling down on Martine's couch for the remainder of my two weeks.

"Here you go, miss." Sean set a plate of fresh tacos and a martini glass full of pale golden liquid in front of me. "Enjoy."

Sean the bartender was very tall. He looked to be somewhere in his late twenties and wore his golden brown hair pulled back into a ponytail that was long enough to brush the collar of his white shirt. His beard was full and neatly trimmed, and it worked well on his round face.

"What's this?" I lifted the glass.

"That's a Ginger Lady, the Pale Ale's latest custom 'mocktail.'" He paused to make the air quotes. "Seltzer, lime, ginger, of course, bitters and some orange blossom water for the perfume. Seemed a little early for the hard stuff."

I sipped the drink. It was bright gold and slightly fizzy. I got spice, lime and something warm and clean, with just a tiny bit of sweet, which was perfect. I hate drinks, even soft drinks, that taste like sugar water.

"It's delicious." I sipped again.

“Glad you like it.” Sean gave a little waiter bow and, catching his boss’s not entirely approving stare, beat a strategic retreat back to the safety of the bar.

“New?” I guessed. “Still trying to show off for the chef?”

“Trying to show off for somebody.” Martine lifted an eloquent, and not very subtle, eyebrow.

“No,” I said, or rather mumbled, because my mouth was now full of a delicious and spicy brisket that had been wrapped in a fresh corn tortilla. “Family meal” was when the restaurant staff all ate together before their shift started, and Martine made sure her staff ate well. “Plus, no,” I added. “I’m off men for the duration.”

Martine sighed. “Anna, that thing with Truman was approximately forever ago.”

“That ‘thing’ you’re referring to was when the nineteen-year-old, exceptionally perky blond woman arrived on our doorstep at three in the morning.” Sometimes what happens in Vegas just won’t stay in Vegas. This was a life lesson Truman, my now very much ex, learned just a little too late. “And it wasn’t forever ago. It was eight months, two weeks and six days.”

“But who’s counting? You need to get back on the horse.”

“I’m thinking about getting a cat. Does that count?”

Martine sighed heavily. She also looked like she was about to add something, but I was spared any further assessment of my social life when the dining room door opened behind us.

“Uh-oh.”

I twisted around and saw an older blond woman stride into the dining room. Her gray slacks were tailored, and her white blouse didn’t show a single wrinkle. Neither did her face, come to that, even though as she got closer I could see she was old enough to be somebody’s grandmother. Her hair was pale blond, cut short and perfectly coiffed, and her nails were perfectly buffed and polished. She had a designer purse across her shoulder and a matching portfolio in the crook of one arm. Taken together with the designer scarf around her throat and the pearls around her wrist, her outfit and accessories were probably worth as much as the deposit I’d put down when I bought my Jeep.

“Mrs. Maitland.” Martine got to her feet, her most professional smile set firmly in place. “We weren’t expecting you this afternoon.”

“Chef Devereux,” the woman answered coolly. “I have the changes to your proposed menu for the chamber of commerce luncheon. I thought you might want some time to look them over before we talked.” She pulled a piece of paper out of her portfolio. I couldn’t read it from where I sat, but I did see there were a lot of circles and crossed-out lines on it.

Martine didn’t bat an eye. Well, she almost didn’t. “Thank you. I’ll make sure Beverly gets these and—”

“I would prefer to consult with you directly. I have another appointment now, but if you could call . . . as soon as it’s quite convenient.” Mrs. Maitland shot me a sideways glance.

And she froze. Her tight, polite smile faded into a deep frown.

Martine looked from me to the blond woman uneasily. “Elizabeth Maitland, this is Anna Britton, a friend of

mine from Boston.”

“How do you do?” I held out my hand and gave her my own special smile, the one I reserve for tricky clients and reluctant gallery owners.

She did not take my hand. Instead, she leaned forward, like she was trying to make out a blurred face in an old photograph.

“What is your full name?”

I pulled back. “Annabelle Amelia Blessingsound Britton.”

“I *knew* it,” Mrs. Maitland breathed. “You have that Blessingsound look. You’re *her* granddaughter, aren’t you?”

“Umm . . . which her?”

“Annabelle Mercy. Did she send you here?”

“You know my grandmother?” It was only Martine’s slightly panicked look that kept me from asking what the heck was going on with this woman, and what business it was of hers whom I was related to. It was, however, pretty obvious that Mrs. Maitland was an important client for the restaurant, so now was not the time to pull out the Boston attitude, or too many questions. “What a nice surprise,” I made myself say, very politely. “I’ll be sure to tell her we talked. She’s living in Sedona these days, you know.”

“I did not know.” Mrs. Maitland pressed her mouth into a hard, straight line, which made me think she was disappointed to hear Grandma was still aboveground, wherever that ground was. “Well, welcome to Portsmouth, Miss Blessingsound Britton. I trust you will enjoy your *brief* stay. Chef Devereux, I will be expecting to hear from you shortly.”

With that, Mrs. Maitland marched out, a little faster than she’d come in. It almost looked like a retreat, except that Mrs. Maitland was clearly not the retreating kind.

Martine was staring at me. I didn’t blame her. “Who in the heck was that?” I asked.

“*That* was Elizabeth Maitland, daughter of one of the oldest and richest families New Hampshire ever saw. Her son’s heading up this lunch we’re catering.” She held up the menu, with all its circles and X’s. “And she’s got opinions about it.”

“I can tell. But is she usually that . . . pleasant?”

“No. Not that I’ve seen a lot of her.” My friend turned the menu over in her hands. “I didn’t know your grandma B.B. lived in Portsmouth. I thought her people were from Massachusetts.”

“They are, or they were. But Grandma was born here.” And she’d lived here until she met her husband, Charlie, the man I knew as Grandpa C. After that, they lived just about everywhere except here. “I didn’t know she still had any friends left in town.”

“If that’s your idea of her friends, I’d hate to meet your idea of her enemies,” said Martine.

“Yeah. Probably not a good idea to start that family history project with Mrs. Maitland there.”

“Seriously?”

I shrugged. “Not my idea. Ginger’s.” Ginger was my sister-in-law and genealogy was the love of her life, after my brother Bob and their son, Bobby III. She was constantly on the hunt for new tidbits for her scrapbooks and family trees. “When she heard I was coming up to visit, she practically gave me a take-home quiz.”

“And she can’t just call up Grandma because . . . ?”

“Sensitive subject. Grandma’s always been a little fuzzy about why they left Portsmouth and didn’t come back. Dad thinks it might be because he was going to show up a little, ah, early, and they didn’t want people doing too much math.” But considering Mrs. Maitland’s little display, I couldn’t help wondering if there might be something more to that story. Like maybe Grandma stole Grandpa out from under her cosmetically straightened nose?

“Well, if you’re going to get into all that, you should look up Julia Parris, too,” Martine said. “She runs the Midnight Reads bookstore, and she’s an expert on local history. If there’s a Blessingsound branch in Portsmouth, she’ll know all about it.”

“Thanks. Maybe I will.”

“One thing, though,” said Martine hesitantly. “Julia Parris and Mrs. Maitland don’t exactly get along . . .”

“Either?”

“Either. So you might want to take anything she tells you with a grain of salt.”

“Listen to you, already the expert on all the local gossip.”

Martine chuckled. “It’s a small town, and you’d be amazed what people will say in front of their waiter. Now, I hate to shoo you out, but there’s less than an hour before we open for dinner . . .”

“I’m going, I’m going.” I took another swallow of my ginger mocktail and grabbed my purse.

“Call when you’re settled at McDermott’s, okay? The restaurant’s closed Monday. We can make it a girls’ day after we get your stuff moved over to my place.”

Martine had one of her minions wrap up the rest of my tacos in a take-out bag, and we hugged one more time. I got myself out of everybody’s way and started across the parking lot, my head full of random thoughts of friends and families and old towns and grudges, and how many things could get lost in the cracks of time. I had the taco bag in one hand and fished around in my purse for my keys to open the Jeep.

“Merow?”

Merow?

I froze. I blinked and I stared.

A cat crouched on the driver’s seat and stared right back at me.

“MEROW?”

The cat on my driver’s seat tucked all four of its paws underneath its belly. He (or she) was a solid smoky gray color, with a surprisingly delicate face and bright blue eyes. Somebody had given him (or her) a matching blue collar with a silver bell, but I couldn’t see any tags. I also couldn’t see any sign that she (he?) planned to get out of my car anytime soon.

I looked back at the inn and half expected to see Martine laughing at me. After my comment about getting a cat, this had to be a joke. I mean, the Jeep’s doors were locked, the windows were up and the top was on. How could a cat get inside unless somebody deliberately put her (him?) there?

But our table at the window was empty and the inn door was still closed.

I looked at the cat. The cat looked at me. We both blinked.

“Shoo?” I suggested.

The gray cat yawned, displaying a curling pink tongue and a whole lot of very white teeth.

I folded my arms. “All right. What do you want?”

The cat blinked his (her?) slanting blue eyes at me again. It looked uncomfortably like he/she was waiting for me to say something sensible.

“Okay. We’re gonna do this the hard way.”

I lunged forward as if to make a grab. With a rolling growl of feline contempt, the cat flowed away from my hands. Victory! Or so I thought, until I realized the cat was now pressed against the pavement, under the Jeep, and right beside my front tire.

I swore. The cat hugged asphalt and put his/her ears back.

“Hey. Everything okay out here?” called a man’s voice from behind me.

It was Sean the bartender. He was strolling out from the Pale Ale, wiping his hands on a side towel.

I sighed and sat back on my heels. “I seem to have a cat.”

“Yeah, you sure do.” Sean bent down to peer under the Jeep. “Hey, you know what? That might be Alistair under there. Alistair?” He held out his hand and spoke in that gentle, coaxing tone used by people who were comfortable around animals. “Hello, big guy. You got half the town looking for you, you know that?”

Alistair, if that was the cat’s name, was not impressed. He just pressed his belly closer to the asphalt and glowered at the impudent human.

“Who’s Alistair?”

“Oh, he’s a local legend.” Sean rested his elbows on his thighs. “Alistair, the ghost cat of Portsmouth.”

“Seriously?” I thought about how he’d been inside my locked Jeep just a minute before and felt a small

shiver creep across my neck.

“Seriously,” answered Sean. “His owner died, maybe six months ago, and nobody’s been able to lay hands on him since. Whenever anybody gets close, he just”—Sean made a hocus-pocus gesture—“disappears!”

“Well, I’m seeing him now, and he doesn’t seem to be going anywhere. How come nobody took him to a shelter or anything when he lost his owner?” I knew, of course, that cats were famous for self-reliance. I also knew this was New England. It was only a matter of time before the weather turned too hot, or too cold, or too wet, for anybody’s comfort.

“I told you, it’s like he disappears.” Sean straightened himself up, and it was a long way up. “But we can try. See if you can keep him here. I’ll go round up a box and some towels.” Sean trotted back toward the inn, leaving me to stare at the cat.

“Okay.” I sighed and rubbed the back of my neck. Alistair gave another little growl and extended his claws like he meant to dig in. How was I supposed to keep him there if he decided to take off? Then I remembered my bag of tacos. I pulled one out, tore it in half, and held it toward the recalcitrant feline.

“Here, kitty.” I inched forward. “Puss, puss, kitty, kitty, kitty?”

Alistair twitched his ears and shrank backward, clearly unimpressed. I reminded myself that this cat had lost home and owner. He’d been out in the cold for months. Of course he was nervous around strangers.

“Come on, Alistair.” I leaned forward, bracing myself with one hand against the fender. “You’re not going to turn down free food, are you? I warn you, Martine won’t like it.”

This time Alistair stretched his neck out to sniff my offering. He sniffed again. He took a tentative lick of taco. This was followed by a much more enthusiastic lick and a nibble. I found myself smiling. I reached out and rubbed him between his ears. As Alistair nibbled and licked at the brisket taco, I noticed the smoke and silver color of his fur, the delicacy of his face and the way it contrasted with his rounded belly and hindquarters. If I’d had to guess, I would have said he weighed in at fifteen pounds of surprisingly sleek feline, maybe more. What breed was he? And how was he keeping himself fed? He didn’t have any of that ragged, desperate air of an abandoned pet.

“So what’s the answer, big guy?” I held out my fingers so he could lick off the last of the taco sauce. “Huh, Alistair? What’s been keeping you out in the cold?”

Alistair lifted his face and gazed at me with those slanting baby blues.

And he vanished.

I am not being metaphorical. He really vanished, as in there one second, gone the next. There was no trace of tail or whisker left behind, just me toppling back onto the asphalt and the remaining half a taco flying away to land *splat!* on the pavement.

“Ah, shoot,” said Sean, who must have come back out at some point while the cat was giving me a heart attack. He carried an empty cardboard box in one hand and a white bar towel in the other. “Did you see where he . . . hey, are you all right?”

No. No. I really was not all right. My hands were shaking and my mind was doing that running-around-in-circles thing that happens when you don’t want to believe what you’ve just seen. So I did what anybody would do under the circumstances.

I lied.

“Yeah, sure, fine. Just . . . startled.”

I don’t know if Sean believed me or not, but he did put the box down so he could pull me to my feet. I needed his help way more than I cared to admit.

“Oh, well.” He shrugged. “We tried, right? I’ll let Chef know Alistair’s hanging around the parking lot. Maybe we can call Critter Control to bring a humane trap out.” He stopped and put one broad hand on my trembling shoulder. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah. Sure. Fine,” I said again, and this time I tried to really mean it. “I . . . You . . . you said something about the cat, Alistair . . . being a ghost?”

Sean chuckled. “That’s just something the local kids have started. They say Alistair died with his owner and now he’s some kind of vengeful feline spirit.”

“Vengeful? Why vengeful?” I thought about that delicate face, the plump belly and the way he fastidiously nibbled on his taco. “Vengeful spirit” was not the description I’d have picked, even after he vanished . . .

No. I wasn’t going to think about how Alistair vanished. Because that didn’t happen. It was impossible. Like getting into a locked car.

Sean glanced behind him, and the good humor faded from his expression, as if he was suddenly sorry he’d said anything about Alistair’s former owner, let alone tried to make a joke out of it. I, uncharacteristically, kept my mouth shut and waited.

“Alistair belonged to Dorothy Hawthorne,” Sean said softly. “She was one of those fixtures a town like this gets. You know, the ones who are involved in everything and seem like they’ll just live forever? When she died, there was some talk that she’d, well, maybe been helped out of the world before her time.”

“You mean she might have been murdered?”

“Some people thought so, but you know.” Sean shrugged. “It’s a reality-show world. Nobody believes in the normal anymore.” He sounded almost angry as he said it.

“Did you know her?”

“Everybody knew Miss Hawthorne, and she loved that cat. Her nephew, Frank, put the word out after the funeral that he’d gone missing, so . . .” Sean stopped and reclaimed the box. He tossed the towel into the bottom. “Listen, I’ve got to get back to work or I’ll be the ghost bartender of Portsmouth. You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” I told him, and this time I was telling the truth—mostly, anyway.

“Okay. See you around maybe?”

There was a hopeful note in his voice. I smiled back in what I hoped was a friendly but noncommittal fashion. “Maybe. It’s a small town.”

“That it is.” Sean smiled back. “And you never know what’s going to happen next.”

YOU MIGHT THINK somebody with a Vibe like mine would be open to all sorts of . . . let's call them "alternative perspectives" when it comes to the nature of reality. That's not how it works, though. What really happens is you get very good at talking yourself out of having seen or experienced anything the least bit, well, weird.

By the time I turned the corner onto Summer Street I had pretty much managed to convince myself that Alistair the cat had not, in fact, vanished into thin air. He had just done the regular cat thing and whisked away, really fast. I'd blinked. I'd looked around. I'd missed it. That was all.

As for how he got into the Jeep in the first place . . . well, I must have left the window down and not realized it. Or maybe the top wasn't on quite right, or it had gotten jiggled when I went over a particularly impressive Boston pothole and there was a gap someplace. It didn't matter. What mattered was there would be some kind of simple explanation, and it'd show up soon. There was nothing more to think about here. Move along, Anna.

• • •

PORPSMOUTH, LIKE A lot of harbor towns, had grown outward in rough rings from its center by the river. The oldest buildings were the ones closest to downtown and the Piscataqua. After that, it was like a tour through the timeline of American architecture. I went from the 1700s and 1800s, with their brick-and-clapboard farmhouses, into the Victorian era, with its cozy cottages or elaborate gingerbreaded homes, to bungalows from the 1920s and ranch houses from the 1950s, with the newest homes and the strip malls curving like a shell between the town and the highways.

Summer Street and McDermott's Bed & Breakfast turned out to be squarely in the 1800s ring. The B and B was a beautiful Georgian house, doubtlessly the former residence of some prosperous sailor, merchant or smuggler. A tangle of ivy and rambler roses climbed the orange brick walls. As with a lot of older Portsmouth homes, there was only a narrow strip of lawn between the front of the house and the sidewalk. Here, the yards and gardens were mostly at the back or sides of a home.

"Good morning!" A gate in the privacy fence swung open and a pale woman wearing a denim skirt and loose pink T-shirt waved as she walked down the drive. "You must be Annabelle. Martine phoned and told us you were on your way over. I'm Valerie McDermott. Welcome to Portsmouth."

We shook hands. Family vacations had left me with the idea that B and Bs were all run by white-haired grandmotherly types. Valerie McDermott, though, looked to be about my age, maybe a little younger. The bandanna tied over her strawberry blond hair matched her pink T-shirt, and her heart-shaped freckled face was as cheerful as her greeting. She also had a spherical bulge under her shirt, which signaled the imminent arrival of yet another McDermott to the Portsmouth area.

"Your room's all set." Valerie smiled as I heaved the massive red suitcases I dubbed Thing One and Thing Two out of the Jeep.

"Ummmm . . . , " she said. "Martine didn't say you needed a room for the whole summer . . ."

I laughed. "Oh, no. I'm only with you for a couple of days. I've been living out of my brother's spare bedroom for the past few months, and it just seemed easier to toss everything in the backseat instead of sorting out a third bag." Yes, I've heard of traveling light. It is one of those things that other people do.

Valerie was doing her best not to look relieved. “Well, let’s go in. Normally I’d help you with those, but”—she gestured toward her belly—“Roger would throw a fit.”

“When are you due?”

“September.” Valerie sighed. “Really, really ready for the debutante here to make her appearance. Aching ankles and . . .” She stopped. “I am not going to start in on pregnant-woman whining while you’re standing out here. Let me show you to your room.”

Six months pregnant she might be, but Valerie set a brisk pace up the steps, across the pillared front porch and into the house. I had to blink hard to get my sun-dazzled eyes to adjust to the dim and narrow oak-paneled foyer. A staircase—equally dim and narrow, and also very steep—ran up along the left-hand wall. Valerie had her foot on the first stair.

“Your room’s on the second floor. I hope that’s all right?” She eyed my suitcases again.

“I’m good. I’ve had plenty of practice with these monsters.”

Valerie gave one of those little shrugs people use when they don’t know you well enough to say, *It’s your funeral.* “Okay, then. This way.”

Did I mention those stairs were steep? Two hundred years old, fainting-couch-on-the-landing steep. Wrestling Thing One and Thing Two up was indeed a challenge, but I’d met worse and we all made it safely, if a little short of breath. The upper hallway had been done in shades of gold and cream—that is, where it wasn’t dark carved paneling.

“Is this your first time in Portsmouth?” Valerie asked while politely waiting for me to stop panting.

I nodded, then added, “My dad’s family is from the area, though.”

“Really?” I watched her do that thing where you run through an index of names in your mind. “I don’t think I know any Brittons . . .”

“It was my grandmother who lived here. She was a Blessingsound,” I added, because she was going to ask anyway. Because this was New England and even the people who didn’t give a darn in general about genealogy cared about the local families. It was kind of like how living in Detroit made you care about cars whether you wanted to or not.

“Wait a minute.” Valerie staggered. She actually staggered. “You’re a *Blessingsound*? You’re not related to Annabelle Blessingsound, are you?”

“Annabelle Mercy Blessingsound is my grandma, my dad’s mother.” Okay, this was getting spookier than the thing with the cat. “And you know what? That’s the second time her name’s come up today. I didn’t know there were Blessingsounds left around here.”

“Not for years,” Valerie said. “And you’re really just visiting Martine?”

“Ummmm . . . yes.” Valerie was still staring and I narrowed my eyes at her. I did not like this. At all. “I hope that’s not a problem?”

“No. No. Sorry. Just . . . no. Your room’s at the end of the hall.” Valerie turned away and started walking, leaving me and my suitcases to catch up.

Oooookaaayyy . . . first we've got the rich blond lady interrogating me; then we get a ghost cat with a dead, possibly murdered owner. Now we've got a landlady getting weirded out about the family name. Looks like I picked the wrong week to visit Lovely Portsmouth.

“Here you go!” Valerie’s cheery tone was a little strained as she pushed open the door. “The Green Room.”

And a very nice choice of greens it was. The color on the walls was clear and delicate, while the trim and ceiling were closer to a moss agate. Area rugs softened the dark floorboards, and simple white curtains decorated the windows. The centerpiece, though, was the four-poster bed with a white crewelwork canopy and matching coverlet. Anywhere else, that a piece of furniture would have looked like overkill, but it fit here. As a bonus, the room had its own fireplace, and the faint scent of woodsmoke told me it was in working order.

Valerie unfolded the luggage rack beside the closet so I could heave one of my suitcases onto it. The rack creaked and wobbled, but it held.

“It’s all en suite.” Valerie waved toward a small green-and-white bathroom. “I’ll let you get settled.”

“Thanks.”

She smiled, and I smiled and kept on smiling until she closed the door.

Now, a normal person would have begun checking out all the details of this lovely sunny room, or at least started unpacking. Me, I folded my arms and tried to brace myself for a Vibe to shimmy through the bright summer morning and into my unwilling self. Valerie’s reaction to my Blessingsound ancestry had come too soon after the whole thing with Alistair, and the other whole thing with Mrs. Maitland. I fully expected the other shoe of weirdness to drop anytime now.

But the Vibe stayed quiet for the moment. Instead, I pulled out my cell phone, hit Grandma B.B.’s number and waited while it rang.

“Hello! This is Annabelle Britton, but I can’t come to the phone right now . . .”

I rolled my eyes. Grandma B.B.’s social life was a matter of amazement for the rest of us. Wherever she lived, she was always joining some new club or other; then there were all the church committees, not to mention the adult education lessons and the knitting circles. The words “sit still” were simply not in her vocabulary.

The message ended and I got the beep. “Hi, Grandma B.B. It’s your namesake. I’m in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and . . .” I hesitated. What was I going to say? *I’m in Portsmouth and everybody here seems to think they know you?* “And I thought I’d give you a ring,” I finished lamely. “Call me when you get this.”

I hung up and let myself flop backward onto the bed and sigh. It wasn’t even dinnertime and I was already exhausted. More than that, though, I had a twitchy, uncomfortable feeling, and I couldn’t tell where it came from. It wasn’t one of my Vibes, really, but it wasn’t anything else I could readily identify. I rubbed both arms and told myself it’d be okay. It wasn’t like I had to stay here at McDermott’s. I didn’t even have to stay in Portsmouth. I could figure out some excuse for Martine, climb in the Jeep and head straight back to Boston. Maybe I could say an important client meeting had come up. Martine understood about scrambling for work, and while I wouldn’t say my bank account was on CPR, it was definitely not healthy enough to be left alone without trained supervision. I thought about this as I gazed at the canopy and tried not to feel like I was a coward running away from shadows. Then I thought about the client I really did have. She needed

poster art for a community theater production of *Hedda Gabler*. I pictured a spill of white-patterned fabric draped over a Victorian sofa and a dark and gloomy background. My fingers twitched. I had pencils and a fresh drawing pad in my suitcase (somewhere). Maybe I'd just get a quick sketch of the crewelwork pattern. At the very least I could snap some pictures and work on it with PictureShop and DrawingPad.

I got up to push open the curtains to let in more light and immediately stumbled backward. I think I said something like, "Gaaah!"

Alistair sat on the windowsill, staring in at me.

4

"GOOD GRIEF, CAT! You scared the life out of me!"

Alistair did not seem at all perturbed. He just put up one paw and batted at the spot over the window latch. "Mrrowww?" The feline question filtered through the pane. "Mrrp?"

"No," I said, after I'd gotten my breathing back under control. "You are not coming in. There is no admittance for spooky cats, okay? Shoo." I waved my hands. "Scat!"

Alistair blinked those big blue eyes once, indicating that he was not in the least impressed by my strange human antics. Then he got calmly to his feet, walked along the sill, leapt off the edge and was gone.

After a certain amount of internal debate, I shoved up the window sash. Leaning out into the afternoon sunshine, I looked down. Ah-yup. We were still on the second floor. No, there was no visible cat below me.

Neither was there a cat when I looked to the left or to the right. I twisted my neck to see if he could have jumped onto the roof, but the overhanging eaves were too wide. Plus, those eaves were another whole story up above what I took to be the house's attic. I also couldn't help noticing that the ivy, which had been allowed to grow across the front and sides of the house, had been cleared away back here.

In short, there was no visible way up to my window from the ground, just like there was no visible way down to it from the roof.

I closed the window, latched it and pulled the curtains. Normally, my Vibe is reserved for places, but something about that cat set the back of my neck prickling, and those prickles spread quickly down my spine.

"It didn't happen," I told the universe at large. "I am not being stalked by the magical mystery cat with the murdered mistress. This is not the kind of thing that happens to Annabelle Amelia Blessingsound Britton. I declare this to be a Rule."

I don't think the universe listened.

• • •

MY VIBE FINALLY hit in McDermott's great room.

I'd spent the rest of Friday in my room. I called Grandma B.B. again and got her answering machine, again. I also called Bob and Ginger to check up on how Dad was doing. Unfortunately, he was napping, so there

went that chance to quiz him for extra information about the family's Portsmouth history. I sketched the crewelwork patterns from my coverlet and canopy, caught up on e-mail, dined on leftover tacos, and had a long gossipy phone conversation with my buddy Nadia, who ran a gallery in the Hamptons.

In short, I did everything I could to avoid thinking about my spooky stalker cat. I most definitely did not do anything radical like tell Nadia about Alistair or call Martine to tell her about Alistair. I also didn't open the window again, not even when I woke up from a surprisingly deep night's sleep and saw the beautiful summer Saturday outside.

I dressed in yoga pants, a paisley T-shirt and my red Keds. I tiptoed downstairs carefully to avoid creaking the floorboards, just in case my fellow guests were not Morning People. We are a rare and special breed.

McDermott's narrow foyer opened into an airy and beautifully restored great room with white-painted trim and pale yellow walls. The moment I stepped over the threshold, warmth bubbled up like spiritual champagne. People had been happy here, my sparkly feelings told me. People cared for this place, loved and nurtured it. A stupid grin spread across my face before I got a handle on it.

Even without the emotional booster shot, the room was beautiful. The French doors had been opened to let in the morning sun as well as the fresh breeze that blew across the garden and the broad back porch. All the furnishings were simple, sturdy and comfortable. The curving corner alcove with its built-in bookcases and deep chairs looked like the perfect place to curl up on a rainy evening. I thought longingly of the pencils and drawing pad back in my room. I particularly wanted to do a detail of the elaborate chandelier hanging from the smooth white ceiling, and a close-up of the carved mantelpiece.

"I may never leave," I said to myself.

At least, I thought it was to myself, but a laugh came from out on the porch, and Valerie appeared at the threshold, carrying a silver coffeeepot. "Thank you. I'll tell Roger you said that. He's in the kitchen now, getting breakfast together. But the buffet's set and the coffee"—she hefted the carafe—"is ready. Or do you prefer tea?"

"Coffee would be great."

This turned out to be an understatement. The brew Valerie poured smelled not so much like coffee as like the anticipation of paradise normally associated with your finer chocolates.

"Aaaaahhhh!" I sighed happily as I wrapped my hands around the warm mug.

Valerie grinned. "It's serve yourself today." She gestured toward the buffet tables that took up one side of the porch. "Unless you'd like some eggs?"

"Thanks, but this looks perfect."

Is there a phase beyond perfect? If so, it surely comes with homemade pastry, granola, yogurt and fresh berries. Carafes of juice and milk had been set out in ice trays, alongside several pots of that wonderful coffee, not to mention a chafing dish from which rose the mouthwatering and unmistakable scent of bacon. I wouldn't need to move for a week.

Then it got better.

"Make a hole! I got grunt!"

A tall blond man backed out of a screen door carrying a cast-iron skillet in his oven-mitted hands. Valerie slapped a cork trivet onto the buffet so he could set it down. The pan was filled with golden brown biscuits floating on a dark bubbling liquid that smelled of berries and cinnamon. My nose thought it smelled divine. My stomach agreed.

“Traditional New England blackberry grunt!” announced the man, stripping off his oven mitts. His white apron had the words BACK OFF, MAN, I’M THE CHEF emblazoned on the chest. “Welcome to McDermott’s! I’m Roger, and you must be Miss Britton.”

“Anna.” We shook hands and I beamed. I liked this guy already, and it was clear from the indulgent way Valerie brushed at the flour smear on his suntanned arm, she was soppy in love.

“Now, you have to try this,” Roger said. I recognized that tone from meals with Martine and knew better than to attempt refusal. Not that it would have been a serious attempt. He scooped out one of the biscuits along with healthy spoonfuls of blackberry goodness. “It’s even better if you do this.” He snatched up a pitcher of cream from the coffee station and poured a circle around the biscuit. “There you go.”

He watched anxiously as I dug out a spoonful of warm berries, cream and biscuit.

“Oh. My.” I rolled my eyes in sensuous appreciation. Valerie and Roger slapped palms in an energetic high five.

“Umm . . . would either of you care to join me?” I mumbled, only a little awkwardly around a second mouthful.

“Why don’t you sit, Val?” said Roger. “You’re supposed to get off your feet more, and I’ve got everything under control.”

I did not imagine that Valerie looked awkward. I tried to keep any possibly prejudicing eagerness off my face by eating more grunt.

“Well, all right.” Valerie gave me an eye roll that said she was humoring the anxious father-to-be. “Just for a minute.”

Carrying the bowl and mug, I decided to live dangerously and take a table on the brick terrace below the porch, in the full blaze of the morning sun. Valerie sank carefully into the chair across from me with a cup of peppermint tea and an audible sigh. I nodded in sympathy as I dug into my blackberry grunt. My invitation was not purely social, which was probably not going to come as a surprise to my hostess, who had already started eyeing me sideways. What she probably didn’t guess, though, was that my deep ulterior motives for asking her to sit with me were not limited to her reaction to finding out who my grandmother was.

“Valerie, do you guys have a cat?” We could work around to what she knew, or thought she knew, about Blessingsounds slowly.

Valerie shook her head. “We’d like one, but so many people have allergies we decided against it. Why do you ask?”

“There was a gray cat on my sill yesterday.” I waved my spoon up toward my window and kept my tone very, very casual. Because on the way downstairs I hit on the perfect explanation for what had happened. The cat who’d turned up here last night wasn’t actually Alistair the Spooky Cat who had been in and under my Jeep. This was another cat entirely. It only *looked* like Alistair. Maybe they’d come from the same litter.

It was a small town. It could happen.

Valerie followed my gesture with her gaze. She frowned and my heart plummeted. “Was he a sort of solid silvery gray, by any chance? With blue eyes?”

“Yes, that’s the one.” *Oh, no. No. Come on, no.*

“Alistair?” Valerie breathed. “Oh, my G . . . you saw Alistair? Where? When?” she demanded, leaning forward over her rounded tummy. Her pink cheeks flushed bright red, and she clutched her mug so hard I was afraid the thing might break.

I have to admit, the force of her reaction startled the heck out of me. “On my windowsill yesterday, and he was hiding under my Jeep before that, if it was the same cat.”

Valerie pressed her fingertips against her mouth and stared up at my window. “Could it . . . ? After all this time, I’d given up . . . Alistair? Really?”

“Alistair,” I repeated gloomily. I was right. The universe had heard my declaration about no mystery cats for Annabelle, and the universe had laughed. “Sean, the bartender at the Pale Ale, recognized him and told me he’d been missing for a while.”

“Yes,” murmured Valerie. “Yes,” she repeated more firmly, like you do when you’re dragging your thoughts back from a long ways off. “Six months and more . . . since Dorothy—she was his owner . . . since she . . . died.” Her voice wobbled.

“I’m sorry for your loss.” This was a guess on my part, but normally a person didn’t wobble for absent strangers, not to mention strangers’ cats. Plus, I couldn’t help noticing how Valerie was chopping her sentences to bits. This was also not normally a sign of emotional detachment.

“Sorry. It still hits me sometimes.” Valerie took several rapid sips of her tea, as if trying not to talk too much, or to cry. Guilt shriveled my insides. Here I was worrying about a weird cat encounter when the woman in front of me had lost her very real friend. “I’ve known her since I came to Portsmouth. I had known her, that is,” Valerie said. “We were neighbors.” She gestured toward the back fence. “She was always in and out of here. In fact, she was the one who talked me into buying this house and setting up the business. It was after that I met Roger . . .” Val cut that sentence off too. “Anyway, very few people have seen Alistair for more than a minute since Dorothy passed. Not even us . . .” My hostess stopped yet again. “Well, cats, you know?” she went on, trying to sound casual and failing. “I guess we all assumed he’d come home when he was good and ready.”

I nodded, trying to look thoughtful. At the same time, that thing old novels call “a profound sense of unease” welled up in the back of my brain, complete with the theme from *The Twilight Zone* playing in the background.

“Maybe somebody in the neighborhood took him in,” I said, and it felt like a last-ditch effort. “He had a collar on, and he certainly didn’t look underfed.”

Val smiled, but it was weak and watery. “Alistair will eat anything that doesn’t move fast enough. Once, Dorothy left a loaf of fresh zucchini bread out on the counter, and when she came in from gardening, there was Alistair burrowed into it up to his shoulders.” That troubled, introspective look drifted back across her face. “You will let me know if you see him again?”

“Uh, sure.” I scraped my spoon through the last of my blackberry grunt.

“It’s just that we’ve been worried about him. Dorothy died so suddenly and . . .” Valerie studied the steam curling across the surface of her tea. “Well, it was unexpected and unsettled.”

You’re lying to me, I thought dazedly. You’re a nice, open, friendly person, and you’re sitting here lying to me, about a cat.

A cat and a dead woman.

“Was she, Dorothy . . . ill for very long?” I asked. I figured this was a better way to go fishing for the source of Valerie’s lie than, *So, Sean the bartender says this Miss Hawthorne might have been murdered. What do you think?*

“Dorothy was healthy as a horse.” Val’s smile softened; it was also real this time. “In fact, we were making plans for her eightieth birthday. We were going to hold it here. A surprise party. The whole . . . town was going to be here.”

“I’m so sorry. That’s hard.”

Users Review

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