

Excerpt from Baba Yaga Series

For Deborah Blake Website

WICKEDLY DANGEROUS (novel 1)

The crackle of the two-way radio barely impinged on Liam McClellan's consciousness as he scanned the bushes on either side of his squad car for any sign of a missing seven year-old girl. He'd been down this same narrow country road yesterday at dusk, but like the other searchers, he'd had to give up when darkness fell. Like the rest—volunteers from the nearby community and every cop who could be spared, whether on duty or off—he'd come back at dawn to pick up where he'd left off. Even though there was little hope of success, after six long days.

His stomach clenched with a combination of too much coffee, too little sleep, and the acid taste of failure. Liam McClellan took his job as sheriff very seriously. Clearwater might be a tiny county in the middle of nowhere, its population scattered between a few small towns and a rural countryside made up mostly of struggling farmers, overgrown wilderness, and white tailed deer, but it was *his* tiny county, and the people in it were his to protect. Lately, it didn't seem like he'd been doing a very good job.

Mary Elizabeth Shields had disappeared out of her own backyard. Her mother had turned her back for a moment, drawn by the flutter of a bright-hued bird. When she'd turned around, the girl had vanished. Such a thing would be alarming enough on its own, but Mary Elizabeth was the third child to go missing in the last four months. To a lawman, that meant only one thing: a human predator was stalking the children of Clearwater County.

There had been no trace of any of the missing children. No tire marks, no unexplained

fingerprints, no lurking strangers seen at any of the places from which the children had disappeared. No clues at all for a tired and frustrated sheriff to follow. And this time it was personal; Mary Elizabeth's mother was one of his own deputies. A single mother who adored her only child, Belinda Shields was beside herself with grief and terror, making Liam even more discouraged over his inability to make any headway in the case.

A rabbit bounded out of a tangle of sumac and Liam slowed to avoid hitting it, his tires sending up a spray of dusty gravel. In his rearview mirror, he thought he caught a glimpse of an old woman, walking by the side of the road with a basket of herbs over one gnarled, skinny arm. But when he looked again, no one was there.

The gauzy fog of an early summer morning gave the deserted back road a surreal quality, which only heightened as he came around the bend to his destination to find a totally unexpected sight.

When he was out here last night, the wide curve of road that ended in a patch of meadow overlooking the Clearwater River had been empty. This morning, there was a shiny silver Airstream trailer parked in the middle of the crabgrass and wildflowers of the meadow, along with the large silver Chevy truck that had no doubt hauled it there. Liam blinked in surprise as he eased his squad car to a halt a few yards away. He didn't know anyone in the area who had such a fancy, expensive rig, and he couldn't imagine a stranger being able to navigate his way into the back of beyond corner on a bumpy tertiary road in the dark.

But clearly, someone had.

Swinging his long legs out of the driver's side door, Liam thumbed the radio on and checked in with Nina in dispatch, hoping fervently she would tell him the girl had turned up, safe and sound.

No such luck.

“Do you know of anyone around here who owns an Airstream?” he asked her. “Any of the gang down at Bertie’s mention seeing one come through town?” Bertie’s was the local bakery/diner/gossip central. Nina considered it part of her job to swing by there on the way to work every morning and pick up muffins and chitchat to share with the rest of the Sheriff’s Department.

“A what?” Nina asked. He could hear her typing on her keyboard in the background. The woman was seventy years old and could still multitask with the best of them. The county board kept pressuring him to make her retire, but that was never going to happen. At least, not as long as he still had a job.

“It’s a big fancy silver RV trailer,” he explained. “I found one sitting right smack dab in the middle of Miller’s Meadow when I got here just now.”

“Really?” She sounded dubious. “In Miller’s Meadow? How the heck did it get there?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Liam said, scratching his head. He made a mental note to get his hair cut; it kept flopping into his eyes and annoying him. It seemed like a trim was never enough of a priority to make it to the top of his overburdened to-do list. “Drove here, I guess, although I wouldn’t want to haul a big vehicle down this road if I didn’t have to.”

He told her to hang on for a minute then walked around and checked the license plate on the truck. Returning to the car, he read off the numbers. “California plates, so someone is a long way from home. Hard for me to imagine anyone driving all that distance to upstate New York in order to park out here at the ass end of nowhere, but I suppose we’ve had tourists do stranger things.”

“Huh,” was Nina’s only response. Clearwater County didn’t get much in the way of

tourism. A few folks staying at the bed and breakfast in West Dunville, which had both a tiny winery and an antique shop, as well as an old mill that housed a surprisingly good restaurant. Campers during the summer who used the small State Park outside of Dunville proper. Other than that, the only strange faces you saw were those of people driving through on their way to someplace more interesting.

More tapping as Nina typed in the information he'd given her. "Huh," she said again. "There's nothing there, Sheriff."

"No wants and warrants, you mean?" He hadn't really expected any; not with an Airstream. But it would have been nice if the gods of law enforcement had suddenly decided to smile on him and just hand over a suspect. Preferably one who still had all the children alive and well, and eating cookies inside a conveniently located trailer. He sighed. There was no way he was going to be that lucky.

"No anything," Nina said slowly. "There's nothing in the system for that plate number at all. And I can't find any record of a permit being issued for someone to use the spot. That's county property, so there should be one if our visitor went through proper channels and didn't simply park there because he got tired."

Liam felt his pulse pick up. "Probably a computer error. Why don't you go ahead and check it again. I'll get the inspection number off the windshield for you too, that should turn up something." He grabbed his high-brimmed hat from the passenger seat, setting his face into "official business" lines. "I think it's time to wake up the owner and get some answers."

The radio crackled back at him, static cutting off Nina's reply. Any day now, the county was going to get him updated equipment that worked better. As soon as the economy picked up. Clearwater County had never been prosperous at the best of times, but they'd been hit harder

than most by the recent fiscal downturn, since most people had already barely been getting by before the economy slid into freefall.

Plopping his hat on over his dark blonde hair, Liam strode up to the door of the Airstream—or at least, where he could have sworn the door was a couple of minutes ago. Now there was just a blank wall. He pushed the hair out of his eyes again and walked around to the other side. Shiny silver metal, but no door. So he walked back around to where he started, and there was the entrance, right where it belonged.

“I need to get more sleep,” he muttered to himself. He would almost have said the Airstream was laughing at him, but that was impossible. “More sleep and more coffee.”

He knocked. Waited a minute, and knocked again, louder. Checked his watch. It was six AM; hard to believe that whoever the trailer belonged to was already out and about, but it was always possible. An avid fisherman, maybe, eager to get the first trout of the day. Cautiously, Liam put one hand on the door handle and almost jumped out of his boots when it emitted a loud, ferocious blast of noise.

He snatched his hand away, then laughed at himself as he saw a large, blunt snout pressed against the nearest window. For a second there, he’d almost thought the trailer itself was barking. Man, did he need more coffee.

At the sound of an engine, Liam turned and walked back toward his car. A motorcycle came into view; its rider masked by head-to-toe black leather, a black helmet, and mirrored sunglasses that matched the ones Liam himself wore. The bike itself was a beautiful royal blue classic BMW that made Liam want to drool. And get a better paying job. The melodic throb of its motor cut through the morning silence until it purred to a stop about a foot away from him. The rider swung a leg over the top of the cycle and dismounted gracefully.

“Nice bike,” Liam said in a conversational tone. “Is that a sixty-eight?”

“Sixty-nine,” the rider replied. Gloved hands reached up and removed the helmet, and a cloud of long black hair came pouring out, tumbling waves of ebony silk. The faint aroma of orange blossom drifted across the meadow, although none grew there.

A tenor voice, sounding slightly amused, said, “Is there a problem, officer?”

Liam started, aware that he’d been staring rudely. He told himself it was just the surprise of her gender, not the startling Amazonian beauty of the woman herself, all angles and curves and leather.

“Sheriff,” he corrected out of habit. “Sheriff Liam McClellan.” He held out one hand, then dropped it back to his side when the woman ignored it. “And you are?”

“Not looking for trouble,” she said, a slight accent of unidentifiable origin coloring her words. Her eyes were still hidden behind the dark glasses, so he couldn’t quite make out if she was joking or not. “My name is Barbara Yager. People call me Baba.” One corner of her mouth edged up so briefly, he almost missed it.

“Welcome to Clearwater County,” Liam said. “Would you like to tell me what you’re doing parked out here?” He waved one hand at the Airstream. “I assume this belongs to you?”

She nodded, expressionless. “It does. Or I belong to it. Hard to tell which, sometimes.”

Liam smiled gamely, wondering if his caffeine deficit was making her sound odder than she really was. “Sure. I feel that way about my mortgage sometimes. So, you were going to tell me what you’re doing here.”

“Was I? Somehow I doubt it.” Again, that tiny smile, barely more than a twitch of the lips. “I’m a botanist with a specialty in herbalism; I’m on sabbatical from UC Davis. You have some unusual botanical varieties growing in this area, so I’m here to collect samples for my

research.”

Liam’s cop instincts told him that her answer sounded too pat, almost rehearsed. Something about her story was a lie, he was sure of it. But why bother to lie about something he could so easily check?

“Do you have some kind of ID?” he asked. “Your vehicle didn’t turn up in the database and my dispatcher couldn’t find any record of a permit for you to be here. This is county property, you know.” He put on his best “stern cop” expression. The woman with the cloud hair didn’t seem at all fazed.

“Perhaps you should check again,” she said, handing over a California driver’s license with a ridiculously good picture. “I’m sure you’ll find that everything is in order.”

The radio in his car suddenly squawked back to life again and Nina’s gravelly voice said, “Sheriff? You there?”

“Excuse me,” Liam said, and walked over to pick up the handset, one wary eye still on the stranger. “I’m here, Nina. What do you have for me?”

“That license plate you gave me? It just came back. Belongs to a Barbara Yager, out of Davis, California. And the County office found an application and approval for her to camp in the meadow. Apparently the clerk had misfiled it, which is why they didn’t have it when we asked the first time.” Her indignant snort echoed across the static. “Misfiled. Nice way to say those gals down there don’t know the alphabet. So, anything else you need, Sheriff?”

He thumbed the mike. “Nope, that will do it for now,” he said. “Thanks Nina.” Liam put the radio back in its cradle and walked back over to where his not-so-mystery woman waited patiently by her motorcycle, its engine pinging as it cooled.

“Looks like you were right,” he said, handing her license back. “Everything seems to be

in order.”

“That’s the way I like it,” she said.

“Me too,” Liam agreed, “Of course, it kind of comes with the job description. One half of ‘law and order,’ as it were.” He tipped the brim of his hat at her. “Sorry for disturbing you, ma’am.”

She blinked a little at the polite title and turned to go.

“I’m going to leave my squad car here for a bit,” Liam said. “I’m continuing a search down the riverside. Unless you were planning on pulling the Airstream out in the next couple of hours, the car shouldn’t be in your way.”

Stillness seemed to settle onto her leather-clad shoulders and she paused for a second before swiveling around on the heel of one clunky motorcycle boot. “I wasn’t expecting to leave any time soon.” Another pause and she added in a casual tone, that mysterious hint of an accent making her words musical, “What are you searching for, if you don’t mind my asking?”

The wind lifted her hair off her neck, revealing a glimpse of color peeking out from underneath the edge of her black tee shirt.

Liam wondered what kind of a tattoo a BMW-riding herb researcher might have. A tiny rose, maybe? Although in Barbara Yager’s case, the rose would probably have thorns. Well, not likely he’d ever find out.

“I’m looking for a little girl,” he answered her, dragging his mind back to the task at hand. “A seven-year old named Mary Elizabeth who disappeared six days ago. I don’t suppose you’ve seen her?”

Barbara shook her head, a small groove appearing between the dark arches of her brows. “Six days. That’s not good, is it?”

She pulled off her sunglasses to reveal startling clear amber eyes surrounded by long, dusky lashes. For a moment, staring into them, Liam felt like he was falling. Up into the sky, or down into a bottomless pool of water, he couldn't tell which. Then she blinked, and was just another woman with beautiful eyes in an oval face with sharp cheekbones and a slightly hawkish nose.