

Excerpt from Baba Yaga Series

For Deborah Blake Website

WICKEDLY WONDERFUL (novel 2)

Marcus Dermott watched the sunrise from the windswept deck of his father's fishing boat and wondered if the sea had changed, or if it was him. When he was a boy, growing up on this very boat, the sight of the water being painted with light could make his heart sing, no matter how troubled the rest of his life was. But all he felt now was numb. Numb, and a little bit cranky. The ocean might be beautiful, but it was the last place he wanted to be.

He'd planned to spend his life in the Marines, far away from the restless sea and the memories that came with it. He'd sure as hell never planned to come back to this damned boat. Or to his father. *Especially* to his father. But as the master sergeant who'd trained him liked to say, "Life is what happens while you are making other plans."

Turns out that twelve years in the Corps was all he had in him. Three tours in Afghanistan had sucked him as dry as the desert sands, and as much as he missed the action, and the close bond with the other men in his unit, his head just wasn't in the game anymore. He'd been around long enough to know that if you didn't get out when that happened, you were dangerous to yourself and to everyone around you.

So he'd finished out his time, packed his kit bag, and headed home. One of the guys who'd gotten out a year before him had invited Marcus to work with the extreme adventure vacation company he'd started, and that seemed like as good an idea as any in the post-exit blur Marcus had been in. But life had had other plans there, too, apparently.

"Are you going to stand there daydreaming all day, boy?" a low-pitched voice snarled in his ear. Even the musical Irish lilt couldn't make his father sound like anything other than a bear with a sore paw. "We finally start catchin' some fish after pullin' up empty nets day after day, and you can't bestir yourself

to lend a hand? I thought you came back here to help me, not to stare at the sea like you've never seen it before. It's the same ocean it always was—waves and salt and finally, dammit, some fish. So move your ass and check the lines, will ya?"

Marcus sighed. He and his father had never gotten along, and twelve years apart hadn't helped that in the least. When he got the call telling him his father had cancer, Marcus had hoped that maybe if he went home to help out, they could move past their differences. But the past had its barbs in them too deep, and the present was as cold and gray as the ocean. He didn't see either one of those things changing anytime soon.

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The red-gold glow of the rising sun turned the sea into a fire of molten lava that belied the cold Pacific waters of Monterey Bay. Beka Yancy didn't mind, though; her wet suit kept her somewhat warm, and it was worth braving the morning chill to have the waves mostly to herself.

Soon enough there would be plenty of people around, but for now, she reveled in her solitary enjoyment of the frothy white lace overlaying blue-green depths, accompanied only by the sound of the wind and the hooting laughter of a nearby pod of dolphins. She gave a chortling greeting in dolphin-speak as she went by.

Beka paddled her surfboard out until the pull of the ocean overruled the calm of the shore, and she felt herself settle into that peaceful space she only found when there was endless water below her and infinite sky above. On land, there were human beings and all their attendant noise and commotion; here, there was only the challenge that came from pitting herself against the crushing power of the rolling waves.

The fresh scent of the sea filled her nostrils, and a light breeze tugged playfully on a strand of her long blond hair as she steered in the direction of a promising incoming swell. But before she could angle herself toward it, her board jerked underneath her as if it had suddenly come to life, and she had to grab on tightly with both hands as it accelerated through the water at impossible speeds, cutting through the

whitecaps as if they weren't even there.

What the hell? Beka held on tighter, ducking her head against the biting teeth of the icy spray that washed over her. Through squinted eyes, she could barely make out what looked like a pale green hand grasping the end of her surfboard, gossamer webbing pressed against the bright red surface of the board. A powerful tail with iridescent feathery ends undulated just beneath the water, only occasionally breaking through the surface as it stroked forcefully through the ocean.

Mermaid! Beka thought to herself. But the identification of her mysterious hijacker raised more questions than it solved. She doubted the water creature meant her any harm; they normally stayed far away from Human civilization, preferring to hide in their own territory concealed by ancient magic within a two-mile-deep underwater trench. And Beka was friendly with most of the local non-Human residents, on the rare occasions that she saw them.

Still, she was glad of the small knife she wore in a waterproof sheath strapped to her calf, carefully disguised from sight with a tiny glamour that kept the other surfers from noticing it. Not that she really expected to need it, as she had other defenses much more powerful than cold steel, but she'd discovered long ago that it paid to be prepared for the unexpected. It came with the territory, when you were a Baba Yaga.

Most people had never heard of Baba Yaga. Those who recognized the name were usually only familiar with the legendary witch from Russian fairy tales: a curved-chin, beaky-nosed crone with iron teeth who lived in a hut and ran around the forest on giant chicken legs, flew through the air in an enchanted mortar and pestle, and ate small children when they misbehaved.

Some of that had even been true, once upon a time. Certainly, the Baba Yagas were powerful witches, gifted with the ability to manipulate the elemental forces of nature. Even the tales about the huts and the odd form of transportation had been true, back when the Babas had been found only in Russia and its Slavic neighbors. Things were done a little differently these days though.

Beka might have been the youngest and most inexperienced of the three Babas who lived in the United States, but she was still more than a match for a single Mermaid. So it was with more curiosity

than trepidation that she sat up straight on her board when they finally reached their destination.

A swift glance around showed her that the Mermaid had brought her quite some distance from the shore, only barely visible as an ochre-colored smudge on the horizon behind her. Two or three miles out at least, then, a guess reinforced by the sight of a commercial fishing boat moving ponderously through the steely blue sea, dragging its gnarly mesh of nets behind it like a stout wooden bride with a too-long train. Red and blue buoys bobbed on the surface, giving the nets a festive look. Up on the bow of the boat, two men argued about something she was too far away to overhear; luckily, they were looking at each other, and not at her.

Beka jumped as the Mermaid surfaced without a sound, her auburn hair turned almost black by the wetness that slicked it back from her face, green eyes bright with fear as she started speaking almost before her lips reached the open air. The now-risen sun glittered off shimmering scales and glinted on sharply pointed teeth.

“Baba Yaga, you have to help me!” The Merwoman’s head swiveled anxiously between the boat and Beka. Beka was about to reply, something about it being good manners to ask first before dragging someone out into the middle of the ocean, when a large cerulean tear rolled down the woman’s sharp cheekbone and she added, “My baby—my baby is caught in the net!”

Damn it to Dazhdbog, Beka thought. That was bad. Not just for the poor, defenseless Merbaby, who was much too young to be able to change shape or breathe outside of its natural watery environment, but also for the water peoples—the Mer and the Selkies—who had successfully hidden their existence from Humans since the rest of the paranormal races had retreated to live in the Otherworld; this situation could be catastrophic for that closely held secret.

And since the Baba Yagas, while acting independently, ultimately reported to the powerful and volatile High Queen of the Otherworld, a failure on Beka’s part could be catastrophic to her, as well. The Queen had once turned a half a dozen handmaidens into swans during a fit of pique; Beka had no desire to discover if she looked good in feathers.

“What was your baby doing out here in the open waters?” Beka hissed, trying not to panic. It wasn’t

that she wasn't sympathetic, but she'd been trying her best to avoid any major issues since her mentor, Brenna, the Baba Yaga who'd raised and taught her, had retired to the Otherworld a few years ago and left her to handle things on her own. After years of being told by the elder Baba that she wasn't "quite ready yet," a tiny inner voice seemed to have taken up residence inside Beka's head, constantly whispering the same thing.

"Why aren't you in the trench with the rest of your people?" Beka slid into the cold water, barely noticing the chill as she tried to figure out how she was going to rescue the Merbaby without being seen by the men on—she peered up at the clean white side of the boat—the *Wily Serpent*.

The sea creature tightened her grip on Beka's surfboard, gazing at the nets with terror in her wide-set eyes. "Didn't you know?" Her head bobbed up and down with the waves as she flapped her long, elegant tail in agitation. "There is a problem with our home; all the life there is being poisoned by something our healers have been unable to detect. The plants, the fish, even some of the people have become sickened by it. All the Mer and Selkies must move to a new place closer to land to escape the contamination, and my little one got away from me in the confusion."

She let go of the board to grasp Beka's arm. "Please, Baba Yaga, I know I should have watched him more closely, but please don't let him die."

Not a chance, Beka thought grimly. Then she gritted her teeth as she realized the boat had stopped its lazy forward motion and come to a halt. The mechanical screech of a winch disturbed the quiet sea air as the nets slowly started being drawn in toward the boat's hull. Pain accompanied the sound as the Merwoman realized what was happening and unconsciously tightened her grasp, webbed fingers turning into claws.

"Oh no," she said, seaweed-tinted tears flowing faster now. "It's too late."

Beka shook her head. "Not yet, it isn't," she said, and set off swimming with strong, purposeful strokes toward the slowly rising mesh of ropes. "Stay here," she ordered, tossing the words over her shoulder. Then she swam as if a life depended on it.