



Wickedly Dangerous (Baba Yaga Book 1)

By Deborah Blake

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FIRST IN A NEW SERIES!

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Older than she looks and powerful beyond measure, Barbara Yager no longer has much in common with the mortal life she left behind long ago. Posing as an herbalist and researcher, she travels the country with her faithful (mostly) dragon-turned-dog in an enchanted Airstream, fulfilling her duties as a Baba Yaga and avoiding any possibility of human attachment.

But when she is summoned to find a missing child, Barbara suddenly finds herself caught up in a web of deceit and an unexpected attraction to the charming but frustrating Sheriff Liam McClellan.

Now, as Barbara fights both human enemies and Otherworld creatures to save the lives of three innocent children, she discovers that her most difficult battle may be with her own heart...

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Wickedly Dangerous* "This is paranormal romance at its best, with all the magic and mayhem tied together with very human emotions, even when the characters aren't quite human."—Alex Bledsoe, author of *Wisp of a Thing* "In *Wickedly Dangerous*, Deborah Blake has updated Baba Yaga for the 21st century; witchy and wild, with a kick-ass woman, witty repartee, and roots to the past. This book has everything I'm looking for." —Tanya Huff, author of *The Silvered* "An addicting plot combined with a unique adventure and an intelligent, pragmatic heroine kept me glued to the page. I never had so much fun losing sleep!"—Maria V. Snyder, New York Times bestselling author of the *Healer* series

About the Author

Deborah Blake has published seven books on modern witchcraft with *Llewellyn Worldwide* and has an ongoing column in *Witches & Pagans Magazine*. When not writing, Deborah runs The Artisans' Guild, a cooperative shop she founded with a friend in 1999, and also works as a jewelry maker, tarot reader, and energy healer. She lives in a 120-year-old farmhouse in rural upstate New York with five cats who supervise all her activities, both magical and mundane.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ONE

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 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 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 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 antiques 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 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 it had been hit harder than most by the recent fiscal downturn, since most people had already barely been getting by before the economy slid into free fall.

Plopping his hat on over his dark-blond 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 a.m.; 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 blossoms 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 of 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 anytime 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.

Liam shook himself and thought longingly of coffee again. He didn't know what the hell was wrong with him this morning. Stress, he figured. And too little sleep.

"No, it's not," he said. "Neither is the fact that she is the third child to go missing in recent months." The muscles in his jaw clenched, hating to say it out loud. It was bad enough to have the numbers racing around in his head all day, and haunting him all night. Three kids, four months, six days, seven years old. It was like a demented counting book used to scare disobedient children. Or incompetent sheriffs.

Barbara gave him an odd look; some indecipherable mix of anger, concern, and resignation. He had no idea what it meant, other than that she clearly didn't like the idea of little girls disappearing any more than he did.

"Well," she said shortly. "We can't have that, can we?"

No, he thought, *we really can't*.

TWO

BABA SCOWLED AT the Airstream until the door decided to stop playing games and settle into place, then slammed it shut behind her, dropping her full saddlebags onto the floor with a thud. Green matter spilled out in a puddle of curly-edged ferns and frothy Queen Anne's lace, its pungent odor warring with the sharp scent of her anger.

"Problems with the law?" Chudo-Yudo asked, jerking his muzzle in the direction of the sheriff's retreating form. "I could eat him if you like."

Baba rolled her eyes. Her traveling companion may currently look like a large white pit bull with a black nose and soft brown eyes, but his instincts were still all dragon. His dog form was a lot easier to fit into the trailer, though, since in his true form his wingspan was over ten feet.

"Not at the moment," she said, kicking her boots off and strolling over to the half-sized refrigerator to mull her limited breakfast possibilities. "The sheriff seems harmless enough. But I think I may have found out what called us here. He told me they've had three children go missing." She scowled at the scant inch of orange juice hiding behind the bottle labeled *Water of Life and Death*. "Remind me to get orange juice the next time I go into town, will you?"

She gave up on the fridge and grabbed a granola bar out of a cupboard overhead, munching on it as she fiddled with the coffee machine. Nothing in the Airstream ever worked exactly as expected, and she really wanted coffee, not hot chocolate, tea, or, gods forbid, liquid gold. That one had been hell to clean up.

"Orange juice. Right." Chudo-Yudo pulled a huge bone out from under the couch, ignoring the fact that the space was taken up by a large drawer. The laws of physics didn't work all that well in the Airstream either.

"So, do you think someone invoked you to find one of the children? Usually they're blaming you for disappearances, not asking you to solve them."

Baba snorted. "That was in days gone by, old friend. No one even remembers the Baba Yaga anymore; certainly no one who realizes it is a job title, not the name of a single person. If we were in Russia, maybe, but who here would know to call on me for a favor?"

She sniffed the coffee, which only smelled a little like the blue roses that made up its essence, and settled down with boneless grace onto the couch. She scratched Chudo-Yudo's head absently, hearing her nails *scritch* on nonexistent scales. A puff of contented smoke escaped from his canine snout as he lay his massive head down on her bare feet.

"So how are you going to find out if you were called to this benighted backwater to search for missing children or for some other reason?" Chudo-Yudo asked, his words distorted by the bone hanging half in and half out of his mouth.

Baba snapped her fingers, and a local newspaper appeared out of the herb-scented air. "I expect someone will come tell me, alas." She sighed. She was a lot more comfortable with dragons than she was with human beings, for all that she had been born one. Many, many years ago. Before she met the preceding Baba, who had rescued her from a barren Russian orphanage and set her on the path that had led her to a flower-filled meadow, an attractive sheriff in desperate need of a haircut, and a mystery with her name written all over it.

* * *

LIAM SLAPPED AT another whining mosquito and took off his hat to wipe his forehead with an already sodden handkerchief. He'd searched for over three hours along the river's muddy banks, and the only things he'd found were empty beer bottles, a snapping turtle in a bad mood, and an old red ball that had clearly been there for years. He'd made a note of the ball anyway, just in case, but he finally had to admit that he wasn't getting anywhere. It was time for him to head back into the office; those piles of paperwork weren't going to fill themselves out. And Nina got snippy when he didn't check in every couple of hours. As if he were likely to run into something more dangerous than an irate turtle out here.

Still, he made all his officers follow a regular check-in schedule, and as Nina liked to remind him, part of Liam's job was to lead by example. Never mind that he had more than ten years' experience on most of them. And that he hated having to conform to anyone's rules, even his own.

As Liam came into the clearing where he'd parked, Barbara Yager opened her door and stepped out to raise a hand in greeting. Like the first time, her appearance seemed to cause his mind to stutter and spin, and his heart to beat out of sequence. Then she took a step forward, and the world fell back into place.

He coughed, trying to catch his breath. Too much time out in the hot July sun. Or low blood sugar, maybe. He'd skipped breakfast, as usual, in his eagerness to get to the search.

"Are you okay, Sheriff?" the dark-haired woman asked. She seemed more curious than concerned. "Would you like a glass of water?"

"That would be very nice, thank you," Liam said with gratitude. Water, that's what he needed. He'd forgotten to take any out with him. He followed her into the Airstream when she beckoned, and looked around with interest. It was compact and surprisingly luxurious; the furniture was covered with rich jewel-toned brocades, velvet, and what he thought was some kind of nubby raw silk. Not standard issue, even for a top-of-the-line model. It was a strange contrast with the black leather. The woman was a puzzle. Liam didn't much like puzzles. He preferred things to be simple and straightforward. Like that ever happened.

"I've never been inside one of these before," he said, accepting the crystal goblet she handed him and draining it in one long swallow. "It's pretty impressive."

"Thank you," she said, refilling the glass. "All the comforts of home without the pesky land taxes."

Liam pulled his sunglasses off and stared at her. "You live in it year-round? I thought you taught college in California. There was a Davis address on your driver's license." *Lie number two*, he thought.

Baba shrugged. "I teach on and off. More off than on, these days."

Movement caught Liam's eye, and he took an involuntary step backward as a huge white dog crawled out from underneath the dinette and spat an equally huge bone at his feet. Its black tongue lolled, as if it was laughing at him.

"Holy crap!" he said. "That's a big dog."

"Yes," said Baba. "But a small dragon." She shook one slender, grass-stained finger at the animal. "Behave, Chudo-Yudo. He's a guest."

The dog gave a conciliatory woof and sat back on its haunches, brown eyes watching Liam's every move.

“Chudo-Yudo? That’s an unusual name.” Liam liked dogs, almost all dogs, but he wasn’t going to make the mistake of trying to pet this one. No wonder she called it a dragon; it looked as fierce as one.

“It’s Russian,” she said.

“Ah, that explains the accent!” Liam said, pleased to have solved at least one mystery. “I couldn’t quite pin it down.”

Baba narrowed her eyes and folded her arms over her chest, the motion causing another glimpse of color at the bottom of both tee shirt sleeves where they cut across her biceps. *Interesting*, Liam thought.

“I don’t have an accent,” Baba said, speaking slowly and clearly. The foreign lilt clung to her words like honey, regardless. “I got rid of it years ago.”

Liam shook his head, pushing the resulting flow of hair out of his eyes with an impatient hand. “It’s not very strong, but it is there. You shouldn’t try to get rid of it, though. It’s beautiful.” He caught himself, feeling the tips of his ears flush hot with embarrassment. “I mean, it’s nice. It doesn’t sound like everyone else.” He stuttered to a halt before he could shove his foot any further into his mouth.

The white dog snorted and coughed, rolling on the floor. *Great. At least I’ve amused her dog.* He was fine with belligerent drunks, completely capable of dealing with thieves, drug dealers, and even the occasional murderer. But apparently one woman who smelled like flowers was enough to turn him into a babbling idiot. It had to be the heat.

He put the goblet down in the sink and started wandering around the trailer; as much to end the awkward conversation as to take advantage of the fact that his newest—and only—suspect had conveniently invited him inside her home. Besides, it was seriously cool.

“Do these dinette benches fold out to be beds?” he asked. “My parents had an RV for a while, although not one nearly as nice as this, and it seemed like every other piece of furniture was actually a sleeping area in disguise.” He looked inside a cupboard, impressed by the clever way everything was kept from moving around when the Airstream was on the road.

“That’s what it said on the brochure,” Baba said. She watched him poke around, her only response a raised eyebrow. “I rarely have guests.”

Liam stopped in front of what looked like a closet and tugged on the handle. It didn’t move. His lawman’s instincts went into high gear. Locks meant secrets. And people rarely hid things for no reason. A frisson of disappointment made his hand feel like it was vibrating.

The cloud-haired woman was at his side before he even realized she’d moved, the pit bull at her feet. “That door has kind of a tricky latch; it’s meant to keep it from opening when the vehicle is in motion.” She put one lightly callused hand over his, making the vibration slide up his wrist and into his arm. A tiny click made the handle buzz against his palm, and then the door swung open to reveal a mundane wardrobe full of black leather pants and patchwork peasant skirts. A silky red minidress winked at him enticingly from one corner before Baba closed it up again.

“Seen enough, *Sheriff?*” she asked, a little acerbic. Apparently he hadn’t been as subtle as he’d thought. “Or would you like the grand tour of the entire trailer, so you can make sure there are no small children tucked into the storage bins?”

Liam smiled, trying to take the sting out of his words. "Sure, if you're willing to give me one."

Baba heaved a sigh and rolled her eyes, but proceeded to show him every inch of the Airstream, from the bedroom closets at the far end of the trailer, to the tiny shelf in the corner of the shower, which he was interested to see was across the hall from the toilet. She showed him that too, although it was so small, he wasn't sure how anything could have been hidden in there. There were herbs everywhere; hanging from the ceiling, confined to jars, tucked into corners. Other than that, there was nothing unusual. Still, the back of his neck itched with the feeling of *something wrong*.

All he knew when they were done was that there were definitely no children tucked away, or any sign that there had ever been any. But then, he hadn't really expected there to be. If this odd lady was collecting other people's kids for some reason, she was clearly too smart to keep them in the place she lived.

"Satisfied?" she asked, leaning against the dinette table, one slightly dirty foot swinging idly. "Or did you want to check my pots and pans, in case I cooked and ate them?"

Ouch. "No, of course not," he said. "I apologize if I offended you. Besides, that kind of thing only happens in fairy tales and on *CSI*."

"CS what?" Baba said, as if she'd never heard of it.

"CSI." He looked at her expression to see if she was kidding, then looked again. It was still blank and baffled. "You know—the TV show? There are a whole bunch of them. *CSI: New York*, *CSI: Miami*. For all I know, there's a *CSI: Alaska* by now."

"Oh, TV," Baba said dismissively. "I don't watch TV."

Liam glanced around the Airstream and realized what he'd missed on his first pass through. No television. Just a bare spot on the wall where one would usually be, opposite the dinette, where you could see it from the couch in the lounge area beyond.

"You're kidding," he said. "You don't watch TV at all?"

She wrinkled her nose. "I read."

"Huh." Liam tried to imagine life with no television, ever. It wasn't as though he had much time to spend in front of one, but a cold beer and a baseball game on a Sunday afternoon could make a bad week a lot better. "I get that there's not much worth watching on TV these days, but don't you at least miss watching movies?"

Another odd expression flitted across her face. He was usually good at telling what people were thinking; it was part of his job. But Barbara Yager was impossible to read.

"I don't watch movies either."

"What, *never*?" Liam had never met anyone who didn't like movies.

"My foster mother, the woman who raised me, didn't believe in them." Baba gave a tiny shrug. "She thought they were newfangled nonsense, designed to distract the ignorant masses from real-life problems, so they wouldn't make a fuss. I suppose I never bothered to find out if she was wrong, after she was gone."

"Your foster mother must have been an interesting woman," Liam said, thinking that sounded better than saying *nuttier than a fruitcake*.

Baba's lips twitched. "Oh, that she definitely was."

Liam had a sudden thought. "Wait—do you mean you've never actually seen a movie? Not one?"

"Nope."

The concept floored him. "You never saw *Star Wars*? *Ghostbusters*? *Casablanca*? You never saw *The Princess Bride*?" Good grief. That should be against the law. He should arrest her, just on general principle.

Baba rolled her eyes. "Princesses. Highly overrated, most of them. But no, I have never seen a movie."

"You know, if you're going to be in the area for a while, there is a theater in town that shows classic movies for a couple of bucks on Tuesday nights," he said. "You should go sometime."

One feathery eyebrow floated upward again as she gazed at him. "Are you asking me out, Sheriff?" Humor lurked in the depths of her clear amber eyes.

"Am I—what? No, uh, I mean, no, of course not. I just meant, uh, that you should go. By yourself. Or not." Liam seriously considered taking his gun out of his holster and shooting himself. The woman was a suspect, for god's sake. Or suspicious anyway. And besides, he didn't date. Had he actually accidentally asked her out? Surely not.

As if things couldn't get any more mortifying, his stomach chose that moment to rumble loudly. Baba bit her lip, clearly trying not to laugh.

"Sorry," he said. "I skipped breakfast. I guess this is my body's way of telling me to get back into town. Thank you for the water. Enjoy your visit to Clearwater County." He tipped his hat at her, shoved his sunglasses back onto his face, and strode out the door with what was left of his dignity.

On the bright side, after this, those piles of paperwork were going to be a positive relief.

THREE

BABA WATCHED THE tall lawman walk away, his back rigid and broad shoulders squared—standing at the window long past the time when the dust from the squad car's tires was just a memory. Outside, a small bird twittered until her glare sent it winging away to friendlier skies. Distant thunder growled over the hills.

"I think he likes you," Chudo-Yudo said, laughter rumbling in his deep, white chest. He crunched on the bone again, slobbering a little because he knew it irritated her. It was boring guarding the Water of Life and Death day in and day out for centuries. It might be the stuff that gave the Babas their longevity and a boost to their magical abilities, but the rest of the time, it just sat there. A dragon had to find amusement somewhere.

"Don't be ridiculous," Baba said, finally pulling herself away from the empty view. "He just thinks I'm hiding something, so he's poking around." She twitched a finger and the bone turned into a butterfly and flew away. Chudo-Yudo's jaws snapped shut on nothingness and he let out an indignant *whuff*.

"Well, you *are* hiding something," the dog pointed out. "Just not what he thinks you are hiding." He scratched at an ear with his hind leg. "I'm pretty sure I'm going to have to eat him, before this is all done."

"Maybe."

“So, are you going to go see a movie?” Chudo-Yudo asked. “With the handsome sheriff, before I eat him?”

“He didn’t ask me,” Baba said, feeling grumpy for no obvious reason. “And even if he had, he’s too young for me.”

Chudo-Yudo snorted, sounding more dragon than dog for a moment. “You’re eighty-two, Baba. Everyone is too young for you.”

“Not Koshei,” she argued.

“Koshei is a dragon. Even when he looks like a Human, he’s still a dragon,” the dog said. “Wouldn’t you like to spend time with one of your own kind occasionally?”

“Humans are hardly my own kind,” Baba said, flopping down on the couch. “Not anymore. Not since I came to live with the Baba Yaga, and grew up to be one. Besides, Koshei and I get along fine. He shows up, we have sex, he goes away. Why would I want anything more than that?”

Chudo-Yudo stared at her. “If you don’t know, I suspect that answers the question.”

She jumped back up, skin too tight around her bones and the walls closing in like a narrowing tunnel under the earth. Or maybe the damned dragon-dog was just getting on her nerves.

“I’m going for a walk,” she said, thumping in her bare feet over to the wardrobe. A graceful woman, she could make an impressive amount of noise when she was in the mood. “Try not to break anything while I’m gone.”

She jiggled the wonky handle and pulled the door open. Glared at the clothes inside and shut it again. Slammed it with the palm of her hand, jiggled the handle again, and opened the door to see the Otherworld passageway. “Fucking door,” she muttered, and walked through, slamming it behind her. Crockery rattled in the kitchenette cupboards.

“Well, that was interesting,” Chudo-Yudo said to himself, hauling another bone out from underneath a couch that had no underneath. “Change is in the air. Babas hate change. This is going to be fun.” He settled down to take a nap, humming a little Russian lullaby he’d learned back in the Old Country long ago from a peasant woman. He couldn’t remember if he’d eaten her or not, but he liked the song anyway.

* * *

AS LIAM HIT town, emerging from scrubby fields back into an area with cell reception, his phone beeped insistently at him to let him know he had voicemail. A quick glance showed him three messages from Clive Matthews, president of the county board, and all-around pain in his ass.

Liam contemplated throwing the phone through the window and running it over with the squad car. He settled for shoving it back into its holder on his belt. He knew what the messages would be without listening to them anyway: *Why haven’t you solved these crimes yet? Why don’t you have any leads? Maybe we should consider replacing you with someone more competent. Call me when you have something to report. And you’d damned well better have something to report soon.* The man had had it in for Liam since he beat out Clive’s son-in-law for the sheriff position. Clive had already made it quite clear that if Liam couldn’t solve these crimes, or god forbid, another child went missing, he could kiss his job good-bye.

Liam pulled up to a spot in front of Bertie’s, got out, and plunked some change into the meter. A tattered pink poster with a gap-toothed youngster on it fluttered at him from a telephone pole, asking *Have you seen*

this girl? Suzy Townsend, the first child to go missing, almost five months ago now. That had been late February, bitter cold and snowy with a wind that gnawed at the bones. Suzy had been visiting a friend's house; the two small children bundled into snowsuits, making angels in the front yard. And then her friend's mother went into the house to answer the phone, and suddenly, there was only one.

Suzy's poster had company now, a multicolored patchwork of proof that he was failing at his job. A woman he knew from the Methodist church's potluck dinners, passing him on the street, averted her eyes and scowled as she went by.

The bell over the door dinged as he entered, barely audible over the hum of voices and the clatter of dishes. As he stood, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dimmer light inside, he cast his glance over the room, scoping out the vicinity more out of habit than any expectation of trouble.

At a few minutes after noon on a Friday, the small restaurant was almost full. There was no décor to speak of, unless you counted Bertie's collection of license plates from all the states she'd lived in before she settled on upstate New York, and a lopsided bulletin board layered with announcements for the next library book sale, a yoga class for seniors, and the usual collection of kittens in need of a good home. Some of the fliers were so old, those kittens probably already had kittens of their own.

The mismatched tables were covered with cheerfully worn red-and-white gingham-checked plastic tablecloths, and the napkins were paper. But the customers usually sounded happy, and the place smelled like fresh apple pie and hot coffee.

Liam used to think Bertie's was heaven. Now the conversations were muted, and people shot sideways glances at their neighbors when they thought no one was looking. There were barely any children in evidence, despite it being the midst of summer vacation. Folks were keeping their kids close to home these days. Inside, behind locked doors. All the children who'd disappeared had been outside when they vanished; that knowledge turned the playgrounds into ghost towns of abandoned swings and vacant monkey bars, and emptied the swimming pools of their laughing, cannonball-jumping, Marco Polo-playing youthful summer crowds. Clive Matthews had a few choice words to say about that too.

A waitress came up to Liam, menu clenched in white-knuckled hands. "Any news?" she asked. Her son went to school with the missing boy, number two. Liam just shook his head.

Then he caught sight of Belinda Shields across the room, sitting with her elderly parents at a table full of barely eaten food, and he had the cowardly impulse to back out the door, get into the car, and go pick up something at the pizza place down the street. It was already too late, though, as their eyes met over the heads of the other diners, and she waved a hand for him to join them.

Damn.

Liam nodded at the people he knew—which was most of them—as he crossed the black-and-white squares of the old linoleum floor, avoiding the missing tile by table number six out of mindless habit.

"Hey, Belinda," he said. "Hey, Mr. and Mrs. Ivanov. How are you all doing?" He knew how they were doing, of course. Belinda's parents looked liked they'd aged twenty years in the last six days. They doted on their late-in-life daughter, and even more on their only grandchild, especially after her drunken fool of a father took off and never looked back. Mrs. Ivanov's gentle face was pale and bewildered, her wrinkles falling in on themselves as though they'd given up trying to hold on to any expression other than sorrow.

Belinda was in her uniform; she'd insisting on working, but when she wasn't actually on the search, she

spent most of her time giving out tickets to people who stepped the tiniest bit over the line. Masses of tickets were accumulating on his desk for people parking an inch into a crosswalk, jaywalking when there was no traffic, or walking their dogs without leashes. Hardly anyone complained. The locals all brought the tickets to him to deal with, and the few tourists just shrugged and paid the insignificant fines, figuring that's what they got for not knowing the rules. He didn't know what else to do, so he let her keep working. If that's what she needed to stay sane, who was he to take that away from her?

Of course, the county board didn't see it that way; four different members had called to question his judgment in the matter, although he could hear Clive's voice behind them all. He didn't care. Either they trusted him to do his job or they didn't. Unfortunately, it was starting to look like they didn't.

"Is there news?" Mariska Ivanov asked eagerly. Her hands knotted together under the tabletop as if weaving arcane symbols of hope.

"No, I'm sorry, nothing," he said. "We've had a number of calls to the 800 number, but none of them have panned out so far." He patted her on the shoulder. "I'm sure something will turn up soon." He wished he felt as confident as he sounded. The truth was, there was such an absence of evidence, even the state police, who had shown up after the second disappearance, reluctantly concluded that there were no leads to follow up on. They showed up periodically, looking over his shoulder and criticizing his lack of progress, but didn't have the men to spare for a case with no suspects and nothing to definitively tie the three disappearances together.

"Sure, sure. Soon," Mariska's husband said, not believing it any more than Liam did. "You sit with us, yes? Eat some lunch. I hear you were out searching all morning, you must be hungry." Belinda's parents had Russian accents too, much stronger than the slight lilt he'd detected in the herbalist's voice. They'd defected during the cold war; scientists, both of them, although from what he'd gathered, they'd given up their life's work, rather than hand it over to any government, and taken up farming instead. After all they'd survived, he knew they would survive this too. But he wasn't sure they'd want to.

"I was out by Miller's Meadow, checking the river," Liam said, pulling out a faded blue wobbly-legged chair and sitting down reluctantly. "I know it is really too far from the house; five miles or more, but kids love that stretch of water, so I thought I'd have a look. Anything to avoid the paperwork on my desk, you know." He smiled at them and they all smiled back, none of them very convincingly.

"Did you find anything?" Belinda asked. She looked like she always did, mouse-brown hair in a short, tidy French braid, pale pink lipstick, tiny gold studs in her ears. Only her red and swollen eyes gave her away, and the dark circles underneath them. "At the river?"

Liam shook his head. "No, nothing. Sorry."

Lucy, a comfortably middle-aged waitress whose plump form was a walking advertisement for Bertie's food, appeared at his shoulder to offer him the choice between meatloaf and fried chicken, and save him from apologizing again. Not that any amount of *I'm sorrys* could make up for his not finding Belinda's child. Or anyone's child.

"Any news, Sheriff?" Lucy asked, chewing on the end of her ballpoint pen. She drew a picture of a chicken on her pad, her idea of shorthand, and stuck the pen into her fluffy blond tornado of hair. "You know, I can't believe that a local would have anything to do with these disappearances. It must be one of them tourists. You just can't trust those people. They never shoulda opened that bed-and-breakfast in West Dunville."

Behind her, a balding man in a Yankees tee shirt turned bright red, grabbed his female companion's hand, and left his table without a tip. Liam sighed.

Desperate to change the subject, he said, "Hey, you'll never guess what I found down at Miller's Meadow. One of those fancy silver Airstream trailers. Belongs to a woman from California, some herbalist professor type name Barbara Yager." He added cheerfully, "She even has a bit of a Russian accent. Maybe she's a long-lost relative. She says people call her Baba."

Belinda's mother dropped her coffee cup, spilling milky brown liquid everywhere. Her face turned two shades paler than it had been, and Lucy clucked at her as she mopped at the table with an already sticky cloth.

Mariska insisted she was fine, but Liam could see her hands shake as she asked him, "This herbalist, was she an old woman? Ugly, with a long nose and bad teeth?"

He blinked. "No. Not at all. Her license said she was thirty-two, although she didn't look nearly that old to me. Her nose might have been a little long, but her teeth were fine."

Belinda laughed, a rusty sound. "You're hardly an expert on women. I'm surprised you even noticed she had teeth."

"Hey," he said, pretending to be wounded. "I'm a professional lawman. I notice everything. And I know plenty about women."

Belinda's father came to Liam's defense in his usual well-meaning but clumsy fashion. "Sure he does, honey. He was married, you know."

An uncomfortable silence flattened the air around the table. Lucy cleared her throat and said, "I'll go get that chicken for you, Sheriff," and scuttled for the kitchen. Nobody mentioned Liam's wife. Ex-wife. Whatever she was.

Melissa had left town two years ago, after spending the year before that trashing what was left of their marriage and her reputation. Shared tragedy should have brought them closer together. Instead, it had torn them to shreds and left nothing behind but dust and tears and a few pieces of stale popcorn from the circus she'd run away with.

Into the echoing chasm of their conversation, Mariska said hesitantly, "Are you sure the woman said her name was Baba?"

"Yes, pretty sure," Liam answered, grateful. "It's an odd nickname, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes it is." Mariska stood up, tugging on her husband's arm. "We should get going, Ivan. Those cows aren't going to milk themselves, and we should let Belinda get back to work." Her face had gone from pale to flushed, and she had a strange look about her; Liam hoped that the stress of the situation wasn't making her ill. He stood up as the women rose from the table.

"Belinda, why don't you walk us out to our car, dear?" Mariska said, still pulling at her baffled husband. "Sheriff, it was nice to see you."

Ivan pushed away his hardly touched plate of meatloaf and stood up. "Are you going to be at the anti-fracking meeting later?" he asked Liam. "I know I should stay home, under the circumstances, but the issue is so important, I hate to miss it. If the land goes, what do we have left?"

"I don't know, Mr. Ivanov," Liam said. Hydrofracking was a hot-button issue in Clearwater County, with about half the folks believing the drilling process would destroy the environment and contaminate the water

table, and the other half insisting that leasing land to the natural gas companies was the only thing that would bring in much-needed money during the recession.

Liam tried to stay out of anything even vaguely political, although he sure as hell wouldn't want them drilling on his land. "I'll make it if I can. I'm supposed to be off duty, but the last few meetings have been a little . . . unsettled . . . so I might come just to keep an eye on the hotheads and make sure no one gets too worked up." At least this might be one instance where he could actually do the job he got paid for.

The old man held out one gnarled, arthritic hand for Liam to shake, making *I'm coming, I'm coming* noises at his wife. "Well, we really appreciate everything you are doing to try to find our *malenkaya devotshka*. You're a good man."

The three of them left, and Liam sat back down with a thud. Lucy put his lunch in front of him and he took a bite, but it tasted like sawdust mixed with bitter desperation.

How could Ivan thank him? He wasn't doing *anything*. Nothing at all, except spinning his wheels and wasting the taxpayers' money. What was worse, he knew in his gut that if he didn't find any answers soon, another child would go missing. And there didn't seem to be a damned thing he could do to stop it.

FOUR

BABA TURNED SIDEWAYS past blue-tinged trees covered with hanging chartreuse ivy and slipped back through the door to the mundane plane. Stepping out of the minuscule wardrobe, she banged her head on the low doorframe and muttered a few rude words; it seemed like both worlds were against her today.

She had hoped for a pleasant stroll; something to wash away the vague feelings of unease she couldn't explain. A trip to the Otherworld should have been a calming retreat. But none of the paths she was used to seemed to be there, and her friends on the other side were either hiding or having fun without her. Something was clearly off-kilter, but she wasn't in the mood to figure out what. It was her job to watch over the doorway between the Otherworld and the mortal lands, but it wasn't her job to police either. And she had enough problems on this side of the door. There was something "off" about the local environment; she just couldn't figure out what it was. If she stuck around long enough, she'd have to look into it.

As she slammed the closet shut behind her, Chudo-Yudo lifted his massive head from where it was resting on what looked like the remains of one of her favorite spike-heeled boots and said, "About time you got back. We've got company."

Baba's heart did a little dance to music only it could hear. "Oh?" she said in a casual tone. "Anyone we know?"

The dog snorted. "It's not that yummy sheriff, if that's what you were hoping. It's a woman. She's wearing a uniform like his, but she fills hers out a lot better." His tongue lolled in a leer.

"Has she been here long?" Baba asked, walking over to look out the front window. Chudo-Yudo padded over to stand next to her and gave a canine version of a shrug.

"You know I'm not good with time. If it's not a century, it's not long. But I can tell you that she spent a while walking around this thing trying to find a door, before she gave up and went to sit on her car and wait."

"Oh for the love of all that's sacred!" Baba smacked the wall with one curled fist. Hard. "House! Make a

damned door and leave it there.” There was a brief pause, and then the front entrance reappeared, shimmering for a moment before settling into place with a disgruntled thump.

Baba glared at it. “How am I supposed to blend in with the Humans if you keep playing these silly games? I have half a mind to go back to living in a hut with chicken legs.” The Airstream seemed to shiver. “Right, then. Let’s see who our unexpected guest is.”

She opened the door and stuck her head outside, taking a minute to check out her visitor before the woman noticed her. Uniform aside, the woman didn’t seem like anything unusual; pretty in an unexciting sort of way, if you disregarded the droop to her shoulders and the sadness on her face. Baba didn’t, of course. Those things meant something in her line of work.

“Hello,” she called. “Were you looking for me?”

Her visitor jumped up, startled. “How . . . I couldn’t find, I mean . . .” her voice dwindled away as she took a few steps toward the trailer. She walked slowly, her feet dragging as if unsure they wanted to take her in this direction, but eventually ended up at the front door. The difference between the deputy’s five foot two and Baba’s five foot ten was noticeable; the woman had to tilt her head to look directly into Baba’s amber eyes.

“Are you Barbara Yager?” she asked, finally meeting Baba’s gaze.

“I am.” Baba didn’t smile. Those who sought her out always had to pass certain tests. Getting through the door wasn’t supposed to be easy. If it were, then everyone would want to do it.

“Uh,” the woman squirmed a little, but didn’t look away. “Are you also the Baba Yaga?”

“I am. And you are?”

“Belinda Shields,” she said. And then added. “My daughter is the one Sheriff McClellan was looking for.”

“Ah.” That explained part of it. “So, are you the one who called me here, then?” Baba scowled, but the woman stood her ground.

“No, that was my mother, Mariska Ivanov. She’d heard stories in the Old Country about how the Baba Yaga sometimes helped those in need. I mean, she told me the stories too, when I was growing up, but I thought they were just fairy tales and—”

“And she believed,” Baba said, cutting to the marrow of the matter. “And so she summoned me, and now you’re here.”

“Yes.” Belinda squared her shoulders and looked Baba in the face. “Can you prove you are who you say you are?”

Baba suppressed a sigh. Things used to be a lot simpler, back in the old days. “You’re not supposed to need proof, you know.”

The smaller woman stared at her through red-rimmed eyes. “I’m a cop. Humor me.”

Tiny swirls of energy flowed from Baba into the ground. “Fine. How’s that for proof?” She gestured at Belinda’s feet, which were now firmly attached to the earth by the thorny vines of a wild rose entwining mockingly around her boots, poking tiny holes in the thick brown leather.

“Oh.” Belinda looked down, blinking in mixed shock and relief. “You *are* the Baba Yaga. Will you help me find my daughter, please?”

“It is not that simple,” Baba said. “If your mother told you the stories, then you know that there is always a price. Are you willing to pay it?”

“Anything,” Belinda said, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “She’s my child. I would trade my life for hers, if that’s what it takes.”

Baba felt the universe shift; reality changing in some minute way to accommodate the bargain offered and accepted. No turning back now. She was well and truly involved.

She sighed, snapped her fingers to make the vines slither grudgingly back into the soil, and gestured toward the Airstream. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that, shall we? You’d better come inside. We have a lot to talk about.”

* * *

BABA PUT A kettle on the stove for tea and started pulling assorted herbs out of jars to toss into the teapot. After a minute, she realized that her guest was still standing awkwardly by the door, and waved her toward a seat at the dinette table. Too many years living with the old Baba and minimal contact with normal humans meant her manners were less than smooth. She did much better with tree sprites and talking dogs.

Chamomile for calming, she thought, crumpling a few white-and-yellow flowers between her fingers and releasing their pungent odor into the small space. *Rosemary for remembrance and honesty. Lemon balm for healing.* Without turning around, she said, “So, tell me about your daughter.”

Belinda made a sound that caught halfway between a sigh and a sob. “She’s seven; just celebrated her birthday two weeks before she disappeared. Small for her age, with long blond hair and blue eyes. She takes after her father, not me,” she added, as though answering a question that most people asked. “She’s beautiful.”

“Of course she is,” Baba said impatiently, pouring hot water over the herbs to steep. She realized with a start that she’d never turned the stove on. The water still got hot, because she wanted it to, but she’d have to be more careful if she was going to have wayward guests and snooping sheriffs around. “But I want you to tell me about *her*. What is her essence? What makes her unique? I can’t find her if I don’t have any sense for who she is.”

She turned around, leaning back against the counter, and gazed calmly at the distraught mother, waiting for her to say something vaguely useful.

“Oh,” Belinda took a moment to think. “Well, she’s smart. She already knows her alphabet, and how to write her own name, the whole long thing: Mary Elizabeth Shields. She loves the color yellow, hates Brussels sprouts, and she wants a dog in the worst way. She’s been bugging me for a puppy for years, especially since her father left.” She sniffed. “If she comes home, the first thing I’m going to do is get her a damned puppy. I don’t care if I end up walking it every single time.”

Chudo-Yudo chose that moment to appear from the back of the Airstream and let out the short, growly bark that was his version of “hello.” It gave most people a sudden inexplicable desire to be elsewhere, but Belinda just smiled and held out a hand to be sniffed.

“What a handsome dog!” she said, which got her the honor of a wet black nose pressed against her knee. She took the hint and scratched him behind the ears, and Chudo-Yudo’s eyes drooped closed in doggy bliss. “Is he a pit bull? What’s his name?”

“Chudo-Yudo,” Baba said and waited to see how extensive the tale telling had been.

“Chudo-Yudo; wasn’t that the name of the dragon who guarded the Water of Life and Death?” Belinda asked. “Is he named after that Chudo-Yudo? How cute.”

Cute. Baba shook her head. “He is that Chudo-Yudo. And don’t call him cute. It will just give him a swelled head. And look at the size of the one he’s already got.”

Belinda’s eyes got big. “He’s a dragon? But, but, he looks just like a dog.”

“Looks can be deceiving,” Baba said, a warning hum behind her words. “Often.”

Belinda started, probably feeling the menace of something she couldn’t quite put her finger on, but knew alarmed her. Baba had that effect on people. Often. Sometimes even on purpose.

Baba changed the subject, pouring tea into two pottery mugs carved with ancient magical symbols and decorative chickens, placing one in front of her visitor. “So, your daughter is the third child to be taken. Do the children who vanished all have something in common, that you know of?”

Tired brown eyes gazed back at her. “Not that we’ve been able to find. And believe me, Sheriff McClellan has been looking for a connection. Not to mention the state police, who searched every database they had for any disappearances remotely like these. There are two girls and one boy, between the ages of two and eight, from different areas of the county. They don’t all go to the same school; their parents aren’t members of the same organizations. Nothing.”

“Interesting,” Baba said. “And no evidence of any kind left behind at the scene?”

“None.” Belinda nibbled on an already ragged nail. “You’d think they vanished into thin air.” A single tear tracked down her face, as if she’d cried so much already and it was the only one left. “I swear, I turned my back for less than a minute. I heard her giggle, like she’d seen something funny, and when I turned back around, she was just *gone*. The state police didn’t find anything more than we did.”

Chudo-Yudo raised the corner of one pink-edged lip to reveal sharp and shining teeth. Baba nodded back in agreement. There was something very wrong here. More wrong than three missing children. *Otherworld involvement* wrong, maybe. That would explain a lot.

“Huh,” Baba said, for lack of anything more helpful. “So, tell me about your child’s father. Is there any chance he was involved? Anything . . . unusual . . . about him?”

Sometimes if one parent came from the lands beyond, they eventually returned home, taking the child with them. Not that many there had children anymore, even on the rare occasions when they dallied with the mortal kind. These days, an Otherworld child was a rare and precious thing, a treasure to be prized above all else.

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