

# **BABA YAGA**

By Matthew C. Lamb

*In Slavic folklore, Baba Yaga is an elderly woman who lives in the deepest, darkest hollow of the forest.*

*Legend describes her as unnaturally strong, deformed and ferocious, a wizened hag who flies around in a mortar, eats the fattest children and dwells in a ramshackle hut that stands on chicken legs.*

*Neither good nor evil, she may help or hinder those who cross her path, and is known to accompany death as he searches for expired souls.*

Chapter 1

Principal Schneider's called me to his office and when I get there, he's standing by the window looking out over the school grounds. His freckled hands are clasped behind his houndstooth waistcoat and there's a dent in his usual rod-up-his-arse posture. Outside, the high school kids are grunting and cavorting like the baboons they are.

Schneider turns to me.

"Gin," he says with a bloated sigh. "I think I'm being blackmailed."

Now, I like Schneider. He's a Good Man. Might not be readily apparent to someone who only focuses on his scowling spectacles or is blinded by the glare coming off his bald dome, but he cares about this school. And the people in it. Been at the helm ever since I started here and the ship's still afloat, which by all measurable indicators it shouldn't be.

But I ain't buying his hangdog act. I give him the dead-eye squint as I take a seat on the penitent side of his desk. The spindly chair creaks under my weight.

"Odd turn of phrase you got there, Chuck," I say, reclining as far as my ageing back will allow. "You *think* you're being blackmailed. In my experience, blackmail's something people are usually quite clear on. Not much of a grey area. Extortion—now there's wriggle room there, but blackmail's more black-and-white. Black, mostly."

That puts the spark in him. Schneider sheds his whimpering contrition like a soggy towel and his eyes become fireballs. It's the look he uses on recalcitrant kids who skip too many classes, or who egg his car. It's the look he pretends not to know has earned him the nickname *Mad-Eyed Schneide*.

"I called you in here," says Mad Eyed-Schneide, his feminine shoulders all tense with righteous indignance. "Because I *thought* you were someone I could trust. Because I thought you could *help* me. Jesus, Gin—a little *compassion!*"

He's glaring at me from behind his hornrims, awaiting my response. I'm not caving. I just sit there, arms across my substantial chest, giving my guns a little flex to make sure he knows I'm not backing down and I've got the firepower to follow through. To his credit he holds my gaze, but it's a stronger man than Chuck Schneider who ain't intimidated by a fifty-nine-year-old woman with biceps the girth of his waist.

Schneider throws his hands in the air. "Oh, for Christ's sake, Gin!" He turns back to the window. The students are squealing and guffawing outside, chucking things and shoving each other around. Over by the school sign a bunch of students are surrounded by a thick grey haze, bubbling away on an old Gatorade bottle with a piece of garden hose stuck into it.

Schneider's watching the chaos, eyes lost to the distance. Then he twists the blind rod and the view disappears.

"I got this in my mailbox last night." He stalks over to his antique filing cabinet, pulls a key attached by a delicate fob chain from the pocket of his waistcoat. Opens a drawer. Inside is a blue manila folder which he slaps down in front of me.

"What's this?" I ask.

"What do you think it is? Open it."

"I'm not touching that."

Schneider gives me an over-the-top grunt of exasperation, then reaches across the desk and flicks the folder open as tartly as if he were smacking a small child.

Inside is a piece of stiff white paper covered in letters that look like they've been cut from a Woman's Day magazine. A puff of ylang-ylang and banana floats above it.

"What's this?" I ask.

"What does it look like? It's a ransom note. I'm being blackmailed."

I lean back and squint at the damn thing, but it's such a scrappy cut-and-paste job that my poor eyesight just can't put it all together. A kindergartner could have done better work with the Clag applicator up their nose and their scissor hand still shaking from all the Cocoa Pops they ate that morning.

I pull out the reading glasses I keep tucked between my cleavage.

"Shit," I say after a read. Only word for it.

"Shit is right." Schneider crosses to the window and bends a slat to peek through. He looks fidgety, unsettled. That ain't like him. He keeps rubbing his bald head as though it might give him some good luck. He's the kind of man who attracts stress, is Schneider. Might be the reason he's hairless even though he's still clinging desperately to his thirties.

I sink back in the chair. "You got ten thousand dollars they're asking for?"

Schneider throws his hands in the air again. "Do I look like I have that much money? I'm a public school high school teacher in the western suburbs of Melbourne. My car is more electrical tape than mechanical parts."

He's not exaggerating. I've seen his car. And I've been through his pay slips. They're a lot healthier than mine, mind you, but a far cry from what a principal living closer to the city centre would haul in. Especially at one of them big private schools.

"So what have they got on you?" I ask.

Schneider waves dismissively at the note on my desk. "There's more underneath."

He's got a palatial desk, does Chuck, so it's quite an effort to reach the stationary stand on the other side. Grab myself what turns out to be one of them fancy fountain pens, like we're living in colonial times. Use the nib to slide the ransom note to one side.

“It’s not what it looks like,” Schneider suddenly belches as a photo is revealed. He’s shaking his head like a twitchy rabbit. “They’ve got it all wrong.”

“You saying this isn’t you?”

It’s a grainy shot, taken at night in what I’m guessing is a school carpark. Not ours, mind. Some other school that can afford to fill in potholes and to remove burned out car bodies. I’m seeing a figure in a BMW—can’t really make out their face or the number plate—and they’re holding a brown paper bag out the window. Not an egg and bacon roll, I’m guessing.

But it’s the person outside the car that’s the focus of the shot. A slender man, quaintly-dressed, the streetlight reflecting off his bald scalp as he anxiously reaches for the bag with his dainty fingers.

“It was one time!” Schneider snorts.

I use the pen nib to slide the photo aside. Underneath is a second. And when I slide that one out of the way, a third. Different car parks, different European vehicles, different brown paper bags.

Same Schneider.

“You’ve been a busy man, Chuck.”

Schneider glowers at me through his ugly specs, but he can’t hold it. His brown eyes soften and he starts looking like a sugar glider in need of a big hug. “Gin, I know what you are thinking. But it’s not what it looks like.”

“What’s in them bags, Chuck?” I ask.

Schneider seems to melt down around his own bones.

“It’s a bribe. OK? You got me. I’m a scummy man has been taking bribes from rich parents who want their kids to win debating competitions.”

He makes his way around the desk and slumps down into his chair. Never seen the man so floppy.

I’m about to say *Want to tell me the story, mate?* when he tosses his head back theatrically and launches into it anyway.

“The Victorian Inter School Debating Competition – Western Suburbs Division,” Schneider says. “It’s mainly rich inner-city schools: Westbourne, St Aloysius, Baptist Grammar those sorts of places. No-one from *this* school has even the *slightest* chance of qualifying.” He looks genuine pained by that admission, his jaw muscles all fluttery in his porcelain face.

“I’ve been doing it for years. The judging! Not the bribes. I bring a certain *lay man’s* perspective to the judging panel, they tell me. Anyway. One day, a parent approached me during the break between rounds and gave me this sob story about how their child was having a hard time. Parents breaking up, grades dropping, bullying was involved – the whole gamut. She just needed a little *boost* to get her through, they said. I remember the girl: real miserable little lady, scared stiff out there, stuttered whenever she had to speak and couldn’t get a single thought straight. Probably never won a thing in her whole life. I felt for the kid, I really did.”

“How much did her parents give you?”

“Nothing! Nothing. I just made up an award to give her at the end of the night that had no consequence. The Panel Pick, I called it. You should have seen her face! And that’s when things started sliding. Next week, another parent. They wanted their kid to have an award, too. I said no. They offered me a sob story. I said no. They offered me money. I said no. Held

fast, I tell you. So they threatened to reveal what I had done the previous week. What choice did I have?"

Schneider's all downcast, but I get the sense it ain't just because of the blow to his integrity.

"So you took the money anyway?"

Schneider's face snaps back up. "Of course I took the money! You think these rich twats need it? For them that's a pedicure and a half hour massage. For me – *for this school* – that's new Bunsen burners for the science rooms and new ceiling tiles to replace the smoke damaged ones."

"How much did they give you?"

Schneider pauses. "Five hundred dollars."

I almost vomit my spleen onto Schneider's desk. "Five hundred bucks? For a *Panel Pick*? I'd have asked for a set of steak knives and an extended warranty for that much."

"It is not—ugh!" Schneider stands. Goes back to the window. Puffs out his birds' nest of a chest and spins around on the heels of his leather brogues. "I asked you in here in good faith, Gin—in *good faith!*—to help me with a serious predicament and all you can do is—"

I stop him right there.

"There's only one reason you called me in here, Chuck."

My bass is husky at the best of times, but right now I've sunk it even deeper into the rock quarry. Imagine having a nasty cold, swallowing a handful of gravel, then washing it all down with half a litre of whiskey. Add an ocker nasal twang and there you have it, my dulcet tones.



And I just discharged both barrels of it. Point blank range. Pops the balloon he was inflating in his chest. The man shrivels.

“You got me, ok? You got me.” He slouches over and perches on the corner of his massive desk. “I know I did wrong here, Gin. Real wrong. And maybe I should have put an end to this long ago and it is all my fault. I get that, ok? I get that. But you are my friend, and I need a friend right now.” He bats his brown eyes, blown large by his lenses. “And I need something else. I also called you in here because—”

“Because I used to be a cop.”

And there you have it. It was a long time ago, during my twenties and thirties. Half a lifetime ago. Not a lot of people still living know about it. Schneider is one of the few in the club.

Schneider’s nodding even though I’m not saying anything else. He seems relieved to have it all out. “So I’m sure you’ve come across this sort of...predicament before. You’d know how this works. What can I do?”

I glance at the photos again. For grainy shots with poor lighting, they are quite artfully-framed. Nice use of angle, depth. Quality paper, too. Taken by a skilled hand using the best equipment. In one of the photos Schneider’s wearing this strange felt hat low over his eyes, making him look like a spy in a Cold War movie. A Fedora, I think you call them.

I say, “Well, first things first, mate, I’m gonna need to see the other photos.”

Schneider’s frozen by the comment. Slowly, this hue begins to rise in his skin that is verging on a nasty shade of beetroot. If I couldn’t see the way his nostrils are flaring I’d be wondering if he was suffocating.

“I have no idea what you are purporting,” he says in the tiniest of voices.

I lean back in the chair again, get a vague sense that the thing might give way. But it doesn't. My arms cross my chest again. Make sure Schneider gets a good look at the tattoo on my deltoid, the one I got while a guest of the state in Siberia.

"Look, mate," I say. "Three things for you. Firstly, it ain't just panel picks, is it? You've been taking these bribes and letting the parents pick the winner. Five hundred bucks buys a lot more than a participation ribbon. Second, ten grand is a lot of money for these blackmailers to be asking for. The numbers don't add up, mate. So I'm guessing they've got more on you than just a few paper bag drops."

I pause there, gazing at him with the eyes of a sated lion.

"And the third?" Schneider gulps.

"The third is this." I lower my voice a full octave than could be considered feminine. "I know you, Chuck. So show me the other photos."

Schneider holds my gaze for a moment, probably hoping there's still a way to avoid what's to come next. But his eyes soon drop and he lets out this deflated sigh.

"I guess you do know me, Virginia Moody."

Schneider goes around the back of his desk, extracts yet another key from his waistcoat. Gives me a look, then kneels down so I can't see nothing but the top of his shiny head. I hear a drawer slide open, the bottom one I'm guessing, then a sound like a wooden ball rolling around in a wooden maze. It takes him a moment, but the next thing I know he's standing up again, sliding the drawer closed with his foot, another blue manila folder in his hand.

He purses his lips. Drops the folder on top of the other photos.

"What's this?" I ask.

"You wanted to see the other photos? You open it."

“I’m not touching that.”

Schneider is almost set alight with frustration. He slams the folder open to reveal a side of the man I never thought I’d see.

It’s a carpark again. Night-time, with another European SUV. This time, though, both people are inside the vehicle. Hard to see them, mind, because the windows are so fogged up. But I can make out the top of a bald head, Schneider’s long nose pointing toward the cream headliner, and just above his nose, two voluptuous breasts paused in pendulous swing, attached to a forty-something woman whose facial expression suggests she is delighted that her child will be awarded a Panel Pick that evening.

“It’s not what it looks like,” Schneider says.

“Unless this is some strange way of jumpstarting an electric vehicle, mate, I’m thinking it very much *is* what it looks like.”

There are more photos, of course. Different car parks, different European vehicles, different mums. I get it. Schneider’s an attractive man, in a mopey pug dog kind of way. And it all looks consensual. But nude photos rarely make a scandal any better.

Schnieder pipes up. “This is something else entirely. Nothing to do with the bribes. It’s just...” He swallows like he’s remembering a long-lost love. “*Amory*.”

I close the folder. Give Schneider the obvious advice, and the advice that leaves me as far from this debacle as possible.

“It only matters what it looks like. You might just have to find that ten thousand bucks, mate.”

“I don’t have ten thousand dollars! I put all the money into the school! All of it!”

Schneider's starting to look a bit like a wilting pot plant. He's going to lose his eyebrows next. There'd be nothing left of the man.

So I say, "What if I gave you the money, Chuck?"

I've got some cash squirreled away. It ain't much: a tidy little rubber band bundle in the false bottom of my bra drawer. Could be ten grand in there, if I'm lucky. Probably a fair bit of it in foreign currency, but I'd get over the line.

"I couldn't ask you to do that," Schneider says.

"You're not asking and I wouldn't have offered if you had. These things, mate, sometimes it's just easiest to pay."

Schneider stiffens, lifts his chin. "I appreciate the offer, Gin, but we'll find another way." And he holds that pose for a moment, before looking down at me through his hornrims. "And I know how little you get paid."

Schneider smiles. It's not something the man does often, and even then it's usually just a stiff sneer for the school newspaper. But on rare occasions he'll drop the snooty pretence and I get to see the boy with a toy train set hiding underneath.

I lean back in my chair, give my triceps a stiffen. "Look, it's not all bad, mate. This blackmail lot, they're amateurs. That ten grand figure? They pulled that straight out of the prize page of whatever magazine they cut up, all in one piece. Didn't even alter it. It's like they had no idea how much to ask for. And ten grand ain't much of a sum, neither, given they have paparazzi quality photos of you in the buff and a man who could lose his career over it. I'd have gone you for a third to half your annual salary, but maybe I'm greedy."

Schneider looks hopeful. "Is that a good thing?"

“It is and it ain’t. Amateurs will leave traces they don’t realise they’re leaving. And they haven’t given the payment instructions yet. Just trying to put you off balance. Anyone with any experience would make a quick grab for the cash. Especially with such a lowball figure. Problem is, amateurs are also unpredictable. Don’t know the etiquette yet. We’ve got no idea who they are or what they are capable of. But we do know one thing.”

“What’s that?”

I lean forward, purely for effect. “They’ve never come up against Gin Moody before.”

Schneider’s bottom lip quivers. He could be a puppy piddling on the lino. A wiry terrier, he’d be. With a little vest on.

“So you’ll help me?” he says meekly.

This is the turning point, right here. Go one way and I leave my boss to his own debacle. No-one would fault me. This is his thing. Brought it on himself and all that.

But then there’s the fact that he’s the one who got me my job at the canteen. I’d still be mopping floors at K-Mart and delivering junk mail in the rain if it wasn’t for this man. It’s not easy for a woman my age to get a job in this town. Who knows who his replacement would be, and whether they’d be happy having an underqualified grouch burning the cheese toasties in the sandwich press.

“I’ll see what I can do.” I nod toward the photos on the desk. “Has anyone else touched those?”

Schneider thinks on it, but only for a moment. “God no.”

“What about you? Have you touched them?”

“Yes.”

“Great. You got any of those evidence bags lying around? You know, the one’s you put the stuff you confiscate from kids in to scare them into thinking you’ll go to the police?”

“I have no idea what you—”

“Just get a bag, Chuck.”

There’s relief in the way he huffs with righteous indignance. After dusting his waistcoat with his fingertips (as though it had somehow gotten dirty since I walked in), he goes back over to the filing cabinet. This time he pulls out a zip-lock plastic sleeve. Red stripe with the word EVIDENCE stamped on it. Not official, but kids can’t tell the difference.

“Put all the photos into one of them folders and put it all into one bag,” I say, while taking my weight on the desk to help me stand up. The spindly chair wheezes a sigh of relief.

Schneider does as he’s told. Our eyes catch as he hands me the bag.

He starts to say *Gin, I don’t know how I can—* but he is cut off by the bell, and by a big hug from me. I can feel the stiffness ooze from his bony frame. By the time the bell’s done deafening the hallways I’m halfway out the door, ducking under the frame to avoid hitting my head.