

Max, a weekend warlock, loses his beloved wife but gains the friendship of a mysterious New Witch. Max has to return to his ancestral home and ends up in the middle of intrigue and a hunt for a dangerous daemon. Can the New Witch help Max unravel the web of deceit?

The Widowed Warlock

by H. M. Sanders

Order the complete book from the publisher Booklocker.com

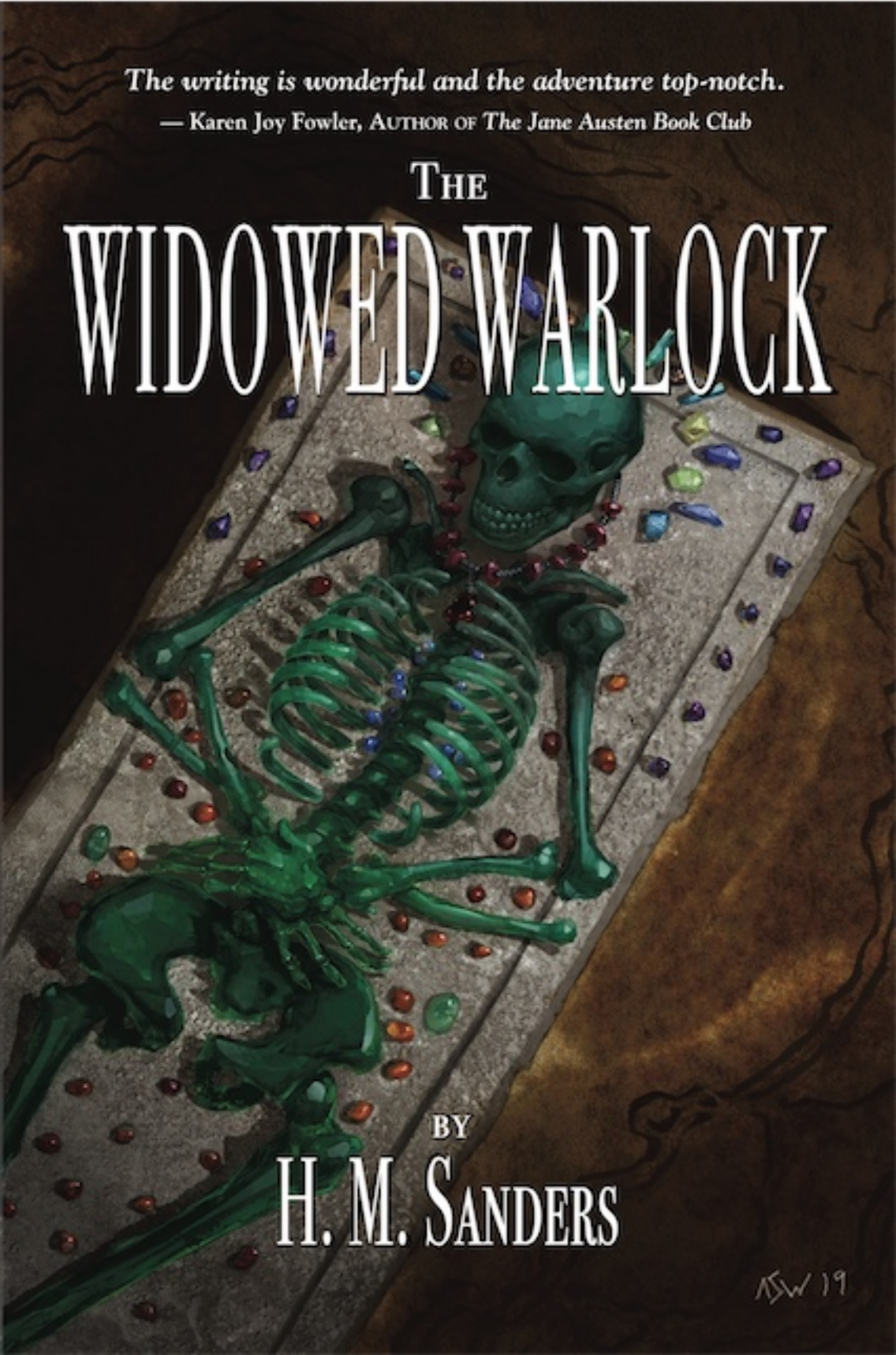
<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/10996.html?s=pdf>

or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.

The writing is wonderful and the adventure top-notch.

— Karen Joy Fowler, AUTHOR OF *The Jane Austen Book Club*

THE WIDOWED WARLOCK



BY
H. M. SANDERS

ASW 19

Copyright © 2020 by Helen MacKay Sanders

ISBN: 978-1-64718-522-0

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Published by Laughing Tiger Publishing

Printed on acid-free paper.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Laughing Tiger Publishing
63 Charlie Lane
Lopez Island, WA 98261
www.hmsanders.com
2020

First Printing

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Chapter 1 - In the Beginning..... | 9 |
| Chapter 2 - The Memory Charm..... | 22 |
| Chapter 3 - Cornelia..... | 37 |
| Chapter 4 - Robyn..... | 43 |
| Chapter 5 - Return Home..... | 48 |
| Chapter 6 - The Celebrations..... | 56 |
| Chapter 7 - Robyn's Real Name..... | 66 |
| Chapter 8 - The Ritual | 79 |
| Chapter 9 - Reference Gnomes and the Cauldron of Chaos | 89 |
| Chapter 10 - The Althing | 100 |
| Chapter 11 - Gerda and the Bear..... | 116 |
| Chapter 12 - Nurses and a Memory Bean..... | 126 |
| Chapter 13 - The Moonstone | 137 |
| Chapter 14 - A Visit to the Daemonologist..... | 149 |
| Chapter 15 - Common Ground | 168 |
| Chapter 16 - The Ferry Ride | 175 |
| Chapter 17 - The Dragons' Graveyard | 185 |
| Chapter 18 - House of the Masks..... | 194 |
| Chapter 19 - Trudeaux's Home | 203 |
| Chapter 20 - Robyn Finds Her Family..... | 209 |
| Chapter 21 - Warburton's Cave and the Surfer | 215 |

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Chapter 22 - Max's Story | 227 |
| Chapter 23 - The Langstrand | 238 |
| Chapter 24 - The Daemon Yntch | 244 |
| About The Author | 251 |

Chapter 1

In the Beginning

I opened the door to home, expecting to hear the usual rich tones of my wife's French horn, but the silence in the living room was conspicuous.

I knew this day was coming and I thought I was prepared for it, but I didn't imagine the house would be so still and empty. An icy feeling swept me.

"Dorry? Dorry?"

My wife was an accomplished musician and also a creature of habit. Her car was in the driveway, and it was her time to practice. She was always practicing when I got home from work.

"Dorry?" Her music stand, black and formidable, stood alone in the middle of the room.

I dropped my case and strode for her music room. I opened the door. She was there on the couch with her long legs folded beneath her, her big eyes luminous not from tears, but from fear.

"Max."

"Dorry--"

Her albuterol inhaler was in the palm of her hand. I could see how pale she was, how the blue veins stood out near her sternum like spidery veins through marble. I could see how hard it was for her to breathe. I sat beside her, took her other hand, and my fingers did a little dance against hers. Slowly she leaned toward me until her head was in my lap. I stroked her hair. It smelled like nutmeg, and the sour sweat of stress. I watched the sunlight through the window. It shone on her French horn, and on the ratty edges of her music books and

stacks of student folders, and on a dusty photo of her Christmas brass ensemble.

"It was really bad today." Her voice was subdued and very thin.

"Did the inhaler help?"

"Yes. No. It's like I just didn't have the strength for it." She listlessly gestured. "I just ran out of gas."

"Did you have a nap?"

"Yeah. Slept until 2:30. I even had tea." She rolled her head. Her bony shoulder pressed into my thigh and she peered up at me. "I got so dizzy." She closed her eyes and tears seeped and rolled across her cheeks and onto my trousers and everything -- the run-in with my manager in the supply room, the paperwork I had worried over, the check-engine light in the Honda -- disappeared.

"Are you hungry?"

"Sort of. Not really."

Dorry and I had always known that every day we were allowed to go on together was a blessing, but it was hard not to forget, and I slipped frequently into the routine of the mundane. In fact, my simple brain craved routine and the mundane and normalcy. Desperately.

"Dorry. Maybe we should call that cardiologist. The one at Swedish." She was quiet for a while, resting. Then she pushed up off of me.

I waited while she caught her breath. "Let's have dinner. I'll call him in the morning but not right now." She barely got the words out.

"Dorry."

"In the morning! Christ almighty Max, I know what he's going to say and I just can't hear it right now."

"All right. What do you want for dinner?"

"Nothing. No...ice cream."

"How about Indian. A curry?" I could make a curry blindfolded.

"Okay, yes. With little green peas."

That night I lay beside her, listening to her breathing. Thinking about how lucky we'd been, for so long. Remembering how she was when we met. She'd thought I was handsome, with my big nose and ears like two satellite dishes, and eyes with a slavic downturn that

made me look slightly shifty. She said it was my mouth that gave me away. It let her know I was just a big softy. We made love like playful otters.

I remembered the first terror of love, of not wanting to lose her. I remembered the bombed out cathedral on the cliff above Whitby, and the garish amusement park in the town. A bright windy day. We were in front of the ice cream vendor and I took her hand and pulled her aside. She crinkled her eyes at me, licking her ice cream cone.

“Eudora. There’s something I have to tell you.”

“Oh? What is it? You’re not secretly married are you? Or gay?”

“No, it’s serious.”

“Serious. Wait. Are you going to tell me you’re English?” She laughed.

“Eudora, this is important.”

“Well, if it’s important, let’s sit down. We’ve been walking half the morning anyway.”

She led me over to a bench not completely covered with pigeon droppings and we sat. Her big blue eyes were very solemn and then she slapped me on the arm. “Well! Spill the beans, Max. I swear.”

“Yes, I’m afraid I’m English, but also,” I cast about for words. Eudora waited patiently. A small trickle of ice cream made its way down the cone. “I’m from a very old...tribe. Well, perhaps tribe isn’t the right word. Clan is more correct.”

“And?” she leaned forward.

“And I’m a warlock.” I blurted out.

“A warlock.” Her voice was flat. “That’s it? You’re a warlock? What kind of magic do you practice? You don’t do black magic, do you? I mean I’ve read about them in the Whole Earth Catalog. Good witches, I mean.”

I closed my eyes. “No. Not a pretend warlock.” At this point I had raised my voice.

“Are you going to tell me there’s another kind?”

“Yes...the kind that...can do magic. We...my family is from the Stenness clan. My family for example, practices magic that’s especially potent around the sea.”

"Ha!" she burst out in a shout of laughter. "You're not. Go on. You're not! You're just pulling my leg like my granddaddy used to do."

My eyes implored. If she didn't believe me...had I chosen wrong? But no. My intuition said I was right. I clambered on up the hill of her disbelief. "I'm not pulling your leg."

She turned to me, her knees brushing mine. "Show me then, Mr. Warlock." She continued to devour the ice cream cone with serene confidence.

"Yes, all right. Don't let go of the ice cream cone. Can you do that?"

She rolled her eyes again, her tongue languidly lapping at the nubbin of ice cream left, and then it wasn't an ice cream cone she was holding. It was her french horn, only it was a quick illusion and I didn't have time to adjust the spell and so it was a french horn made from ice cream, with a very ice cream cone-like texture to the valves and pistons. "WHOA!" she yelped, and dropped it, and the spell, a small thing with the staying power of a mouse fart, hit the concrete boardwalk with a splat. Eudora stared at me.

"You. You. That was my ice cream. It...you..."

"Yes."

"Can you...can you do that again?"

"Yes, but not here, not out in the open."

That night after entertaining her with countless illusions of musical instruments, food items, and livestock from my family's grounds, she exhausted me further in the bedroom. As we lay in each other's arms, she turned to me. "Now I have something I need to tell you."

"Are you a witch? And I just couldn't tell?" I was joking, relieved from the day's outcome.

"Yeah, you're teasing me, but this is serious." She became very still in my arms. "Listen. Shit I should've told you before."

"It's all right."

"When I was a kid, I guess I was ten or so. I developed non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. And I had these treatments? It was radiation to shrink the tumor but back then they couldn't target as well as they can

now and they irradiated near my heart." Dorry looked away, past me, into the darkened boarding room. I kept silent.

"Well, the treatments worked. They worked. The cancer didn't come back. But a couple of years ago my doc said that there was scarring on my heart. Anyway, you should know that I could basically drop dead any minute."

"We could all drop dead any minute."

"No, Max, this is serious. The chances of me dropping dead are pretty high. And honestly I wouldn't blame you if you left me. I wouldn't blame you one bit." She was crying. "I just love you so much, Max. I should've told you sooner. I just didn't know...you know, me and you..I didn't know."

"Dorry. I would rather spend 24 hours with you and lose you than say goodbye to you because you thought your time was limited. Sweetie."

We'd had a lot more than a day together. So many years. I didn't want to lose her. I couldn't lose her. But there was so little hope.

When hope failed, there was always magic. It was wrong, I knew, wrong to play with life and death. But wasn't that what doctors did, every day? She turned and shifted. She was awake.

"Max? Are you all right?"

"Just thinking. Dorry. Maybe I should call someone...else. In addition to the cardiologist."

"Call who?"

"I know a Permanente. The best. His name is Nubise."

"What's a...Permanente again?"

"Someone who can make illusions permanent."

"But what would that do, Max? I don't want to be an illusion!"

"No...not you. Maybe just...your heart. A part of your heart."

"Then will I still be able to love you?" I could hear the smile in her voice. She was still able to tease me.

"The important thing is that I love you. I will always love you."

"I know." She found my hand, under the covers.

We were quiet, in the dark, with our imaginings. She said, "You know how I imagine death?"

"How?"

"Like the sea. So vast and silver and quiet. Something we drop into. Like a silver shadowed playground. Maybe the idea of our bodies stays until we get the hang of our non-skins. A creeping change, saline and slow. New organs of perception sprout, time doesn't exist. Maybe we just stretch out thinner and thinner until we touch everything. Or everything touches us."

I squeezed her hand.

"Who knows what boundaries slip away from us, what kingdoms open, instead? Freed as we are from this tiresome needy contraption? I just hope there's still music. Even if it's just the sound of souls lamenting loss, or planets making love, I just hope there's some kind of music and that I'll have the ability to hear it, smell it, whatever. It just better be there, is all I'm saying."

"Yes."

She said, "I thought I was ready. For my whole life, Max, I've thought I was ready. But I'm not ready, am I? Because you're not."

"No."

"All right then. Call this person. In that way you do."

The heart - a symphonic highway of rhythmic steadiness, liquid crimson delivery service, oxygen-rich blood served up 24/7 and old blood sagging with aerobic impotence, taken to the lungs to be re-invigorated, restored to eye-opening, knuckle cracking health. The Chinese believe the sparkly-eyed shen spirit is stored in a healthy heart; we even say things like "that performance lacked heart - or her singing was technically flawed but heartfelt." We also say things like the heart feels, the brain knows - a thousand sayings for an organ that rules the blood, controls the number of our days, shines out of the eyes, gives luster and rosininess to the skin, adds a hop to our step and that "ah ha!" moment as the solution comes when we least expect it. Royalty among the organs, the Prime Minister overall, the heart is a muscular Belgian workhorse toiling willingly inside a rib-lined pasture, forcing the bellows of fiery oxygen that flame through the eyes in a steady bright glow.

For weeks, I studied for what we were preparing to do. A medical specialist made me an actual three dimensional model of Dorry's damaged aorta. I practiced. Two days before the actual procedure we assembled for a trial run. I called in sick, as planned. Rain pelted against the window, sluicing down. There was Dorry's pale face, her colourless lips; Nubise's fur-lined silk cap with the mandarin button on top. Dr. Davidson, with her clipboard, her hair done up in a neat twist. I padded around in the gray wool socks Dorry had gotten me from REI. I abhorred them but she said they made my feet adorable. Nubise shut the blinds and turned on the lights in the room, then brushed past me. He smiled, showing slightly yellowed sharp teeth as he went towards the bathroom. "Washing my hands. Back in a second." Dr. Davidson sat on the rolling stool. Dorry was seated in the center of the room, already wearing a hospital gown, open in the back. I went to her, and she reached for my hand. Her palm was clammy. Dr. Davidson looked over her glasses directly at Dorry. Her gaze was clear, intense, compassionate. "Your husband tells me you're quite the sport."

"He just needs all the help he can get, right Max?"

"Absolutely." Dorry's fingers intertwined with mine.

Dr. Davidson rolled her stool around to come behind Dorry. She began to move her hands over Dorry's back. "Eudora. I know this is very strange to you. I know you're used to western medicine, so I'll try to explain as best as I can as I go along, is that all right?"

"Yeah, that sounds good. I appreciate your help." Dorry swallowed.

"All right, now Eudora, I'm going to make the first pass and project your lungs. It will just be an odd tickling sensation. Let me know if you feel anything else."

"Okay." Dorry whispered. And now I could feel Dorry's anxiety roaring around me and I put my other hand on top of hers. Dr. Davidson closed her eyes and a shadowy image began to form a few feet in front of Dorry's...Dorry's lungs, long, like her, lobed and smooth-surfaced, appeared.

"Good god almighty," breathed Dorry.

"Now...your heart," whispered Dr. Davidson. Dorry's heart began to form, nestled inside her lungs; the arteries and veins feeding it fading into nothingness as Davidson focused on the organs themselves. "Now. I've put a binding spell on the shape of your organs but the shadow spell I won't use until the actual event. This will let me work, once we've gotten Max's replica in place, after Nubise does his bit, and materializes Max's aorta. And speak of the devil."

Nubise walked into the room, crisp white cotton shirt immaculate under a raw silk Tibetan vest stitched with red and blue patterns, and bone fasteners. He took in the organs hanging in mid-air. "Nicely done, Dr. Davidson. Such clarity." His eyes flashed obsidian.

"Thank you," she said crisply. "Be careful, please."

Nubise smiled and nodded.

It took only days after the final operation, for Dorry's health and color to come back. Life returned to beloved normal. I stood at the great black gas oven that Dorry called DARTH Stover, putting the kettle on for tea. I lay in the bathtub, making my hair into godzilla shapes while Dorry recited her day's events, and I told her mine, outrageous or strange or trivial or boring, it didn't matter. For two decades I'd worked as a county health inspector. Sometimes she read, to calm me down. A cafe owner had hidden evidence of his bad behavior, a pregnant woman had gotten fired when she most needed the work. Those kinds of things outraged me, but Dorry calmed me down. Just watching her eating that culinary travesty of cream of mushroom and corn casserole calmed me down. And the smell of Prell in her hair, her skin's faint warm scent like apples and biscuits, the blue veins under her clavicles, her long fingered, delicate hands on her French Horn. We talked about going back to the islands, for a vacation.

My sister Cornelia arrived, with a contract to sign, regarding this summer's Celebrations. Bustling, her green beads clacking. She was headmistress at a school for wayward witches. The Celebrations were being held on our lands this year.

"Listen, sweetie. I know you're retired from judging the illusion events, but would you consider..."

"Absolutely not."

In our society, crossover marriages were not smiled upon. These days being married to a nimp wasn't such a big deal, but it had been very hard when we first married. My parents looked down upon our union. It was far easier for me to fit into the world of non-magical people, and so.... I chose the easier path, became a nimp myself, telling myself it would be better for Dorry. I kept my hand in with the PACWWA competitions, but stayed out of Mage culture for the most part. I was happy with Dorry, and happy to live without my heritage.

"Max. You've inherited the title. It's an honour..."

"Cornelia, no. Not ever. I don't care about the title. Or any of it."

"Max, go," Dorry said.

"No, why should I?"

"Because it's special this year. It's only a few days. I'll be fine."

"No. I'll sign the contract. They can have it there. But I haven't come in all these years, and I'm not going to go back now."

Before a month had passed, I knew I'd been right to refuse. Something seemed to be failing in Dorry again. Perhaps the operation hadn't been a complete success. Day by day she grew weaker and more breathless. My calls to Nubise got no reply. Dr. Davidson assured me that progress was never continuous. I told myself not to worry.

At night I climbed into bed with my new Bengalese cookbook, and Dorry crawled in beside me, rearranging pillows slowly.

"Read to me. Max. Out of Africa."

I grumbled. "Where is it?"

"Down here somewhere. Or no...I put it on your side when I was napping. Just look."

I grubbed around in the bottom of my side table. Sloppily stacked Food and Wine magazines fell on my hand, but buried beneath was Isak Dinesen's beloved book, property of my wife. I hauled it out, twisting back up onto the bed.

"You have such a nice voice." Her own voice was a rickety spindle of sound. Both of us pretended not to notice.

"Where did we leave off?" I burrowed back under the covers and Dorry's long body snuggled against me.

“When the little gazelle wanders into the big house...remember?” Her fingers prodded me to begin. She had already closed her eyes before I had even begun reading, but she listened to every word.

At last, I put the book down.

“Hey. Hey.” More prodding.

“What?”

“Will you do that thing you do? Please?” Even though she was exhausted and weak and too thin, her eyes still shone like sapphire.

“Aren’t you too tired for that?”

She rolled her eyes. “Not that! The other that!”

“Oh.” I sighed more heavily. “Must I?”

“Please! Please please please!” She rolled from side to side, back and forth slowly, as her energy permitted, pulling the covers off of me until finally I relented.

“Well. If I must.”

Magic isn’t like calling the plumber. It’s more like coaxing a shy mouse to a peanut butter buffet – once it knows it’s welcome the feasting can begin. But it takes a steady focus and a welcoming attitude. And I had lived with my worry over Dorry for so long that I didn’t notice its shape any more..the worry, that is. All I wanted was to please her. So I did.

The little gazelle I summoned was no bigger than my hand, but it glowed with that radiant light that Magic brought. It stepped out of the lush green of its African forest, and gazed at Dorry.

Dorry clasped her hands. Neither of us said a word. This little gazelle did an interesting thing, though. It turned its flicking tail to us, looked over its shoulder directly at Dorry, and then with a small snort it bounded back into the dark richness of its glen. And was gone.

The next morning I slowly drifted up from sleep and reached for Dorry, but all my hand found was the empty warm spot where she had been. Odd. It wasn’t her habit to get up before 6 am but it was mine. I swung my legs off the bed and went downstairs to the bathroom. I kept an ear out, but I heard no sounds of the kettle being put on or coffee beans being poured or the scuff of her slippers. I finished, flushed the toilet and tightened my robe and ignored the fear in my belly.

I went out to the backyard, past the plum tree and down the short flight of concrete stairs to the rose garden. She was there, lying half on, half off the concrete. Several cut roses were on the ground beside her stiff hand. I stood very still, above her. Her jaw was open, her eyes filming and slightly bulged, her nightgown draped over her body like a baby doll's shroud. I was frozen with emptiness, and with fury at our failure.

I don't remember leaving her. I don't remember calling an ambulance. I do remember sirens. A hot cup pressed into my hands. Sitting on the sofa in front of the empty hearth while they brought a gurney around the side of the house. I remember the butterscotch color of our leather sofa and the shadowy darker stains on the rounded arms where Dorry would perch her cups. I had groused at her about it. I had even bought her a side table that she hated. I stared at the tea stains. She had been here. I had not imagined her.

There was paperwork. Someone offered to call a friend but I couldn't think. A paramedic asked if there was someone he could call. My sister, I think I said. And I smiled because Cornelia couldn't be called, not in the conventional way. The gurney went past again.

"She's gone." I said. The young man nodded. I stared into the hearth. I had kept meaning to buy a half cord of wood for Dorry, but I was busy at work and the hearth was empty. Dorry loved fires. The young man sat with his hand on my shoulder. He had done this before.

In that moment, I felt my life, my world, kept in check by the beautiful, forgiving flower of my wife, emptied onto the ground. Our hearts' entwinement, messy and lovely but shared, was sundered, like two plants in a cozy pot whose roots had grown into one another, were torn apart. The soul of my Dorry was taking our laughter at the farcical world away.

The young man returned to the other paramedics and I sat for a long time. I did call Cornelia, in the way we do. I think she spent the night with me, in the house. I don't remember sleeping but I must have dozed off eventually.

Time passed. I went into work. I insisted; it helped keep me from falling off the end of the world. The house was still, in the way I'd feared, and empty. Days turned into weeks. I began to have bad

dreams. They were always the same. I would be standing in rain, slithering rivulets that ran into the rutted earth. The dark earth, a fetid stench of the sea and rot. Hedgerows along the skyline. One tree's gnarled branches blazed with blue fire, and this sight made my blood run cold. Throughout it all, I could feel Dorry's confusion. She was wandering and lost.

The dreams became so constant and the lost feeling so overwhelming that I began to drink gin in cupfuls. I knew Dorry was there but I couldn't find her. I dreamed of Dorry in a cave, sleeping. I dreamed of her caught in a black land. The dreams never stopped. Always she seemed puzzled.

I dreamed, I rose, I drank, I went to work. I still had the capacity to be utterly astounded by restaurateurs. I might have shouted. I must have been frightening, as I looked back on the incident. My voice as it boomed. "What tiny brained moron lets a dog into their kitchens! This is beyond the pale! I mean just the fur alone, woman! Think of the fur! Food and fur do not belong together!" I think that's when I threw the clipboard.

My manager suggested strongly that a vacation was in order.

Maybe it was a good idea to go on holiday.

Cornelia fluffed herself like a righteous hen and turned to me. "Maxwell, I want you to listen to me." She held both of my hands and gods forbid, I let her. "You've been through the most horrible trial another human being can go through. But you are killing yourself. I find you here, rolling in gin bottles and rambling about fires in bushes." Her stern eyes filled with tears. Her beads faintly jostled. She always wore beads that matched her outfits, like mother.

"Going back home..." She started, fingering her beads.

I shut my eyes. "...would be a huge mistake."

"Stop interrupting me! It would..." she clutched my hands hard, "make things easier for you. You'd meet other witches and warlocks. You've kept yourself away for so long Max, and it's the Celebrations! You could even do a set piece, you're so good at it...and...you did sign the contract."

"Contract?"

“Max.”

“Neelie, I don’t want to meet anyone. I don’t want to go anywhere. I just want the dreams to stop. I want the pain to stop. I don’t want to remember anything.”

“Are you sure you want me to do this? Max?”

“Yes. Please.”

“Well. You’re probably right. It’s better than killing yourself with gin.”

And then I remember two things fleeting: thankfulness for my sister's gifts as a witch, and the blossoming of a sweet and empty oblivion.

Chapter 2

The Memory Charm

The ferry was packed with visitors. In the car beside me, a Japanese couple leaned, poring over a schedule as intently as if it were a treasure map. A dour regular, in his small weather-beaten truck, seemed to be enduring the onslaught of the tourist season.

As the ferry pushed off from the great black wing walls, I let my seat back, and stared out at the ocean. Unbidden, I remembered a conversation with a friend? A lover? I wasn't sure, but I could hear her voice.

"Death must be like the sea...Maybe we just stretch out thinner and thinner until we touch everything. Or everything touches us...I just hope there's still music."

We'd probably been drinking or eating, maybe she sipped her wine. It must've been a long time ago, perhaps in university—but I remember that whoever she was, she was dear to me.

I looked out the window as the wide ferry rolled along through the waves. Two Dall's porpoises cut the water, slicing in, going under, smoothly cresting again, their shiny dark backs graceful like friendly torpedoes skimming along. I dozed and vaguely wondered why I couldn't remember the old girlfriend's face.

I remembered the island I was going to visit in a polished way. The beauty of the sun setting in firework streaks of red and orange over the harbor. I remembered white wine and rosemary-smoked fish in the old orchard with the crumbling brick barbecue. I remembered the purple cosmos in the borders, small fishing boats, brightly painted, bobbing in the cove as the evening settled. Uno Island had been a haven for me. It would be good to return.

As I'd gotten older, though, I'd noticed more and more holes in the fabric of time, of memory. It couldn't be helped, I told myself. I was lucky to have three weeks off. It had been funny, the look on the owner's face, aghast that I'd disparaged her dog's fur.

When the ferry landed, I drove off, and followed the other cars up the road. Our caravan wound through rows of cedar and Douglas fir, emerging into a bucolic scene of cows and pastures. The words pastorales and adagios and concertos flitted across my mind, which was odd. I wasn't a musician.

I found the rental house, despite the sameness of the winding roads and trees.

The agent had said it was in decent shape, but it looked neglected. The planks of the deck were silvered and smooth, the dark red paint on the doors was peeling. But the house itself was peaceful and small and well built.

Stairs led into an overgrown yard. There might be an orchard. I found a rickety chair where I could sit and watch the sunset. But no wine. I had meant to purchase it but forgot. Well, an adventure.

I drove into the village and found a small grocery store at the edge of a cliff, overlooking the rough ocean. Madrona trees lanced their roots into the rock around it, and stretched their smooth sienna arms to the sky. Seagulls circled the nearby buildings. It reminded me of Scotland, where I was born.

Blazing red begonias hung in baskets from the eaves, and sacks of organic dog food lolled against the wall. Fresh berries and apricots were displayed in flats as I passed through the door.

Inside, a tall woman with coppery gold hair sat perched on a stool behind the counter, reading a magazine. I nodded as I passed. She looked up at me. The skin around her eyes wrinkled pleasantly.

"Did you have a question?"

"Yes, please. Where's your wine?"

She got up in one smooth motion and glided to the back of the store. I followed.

"Red or white?" She was tall, purposeful, strong-jawed, short-haired. She bore a resemblance to Vanessa Redgrave, who I had always fancied.

"Red."

She pulled a blend down and handed it to me. The label read Night and Day.

She said, "I don't drink much, but this one has been a favorite."

She stood close enough that I could smell her hair, a lovely faint odor of coconut. She wore no rings.

An older woman behind us asked if the guacamoles were ripe. The shopkeeper's eyes caught mine and we both smiled.

We met at the counter again where I paid and left.

I found three different reasons for visiting in the next few days.

Her name was Robyn. As I strolled around the store, she was still. But if someone asked her about local wheat or gluten free bread, or wanted to talk about computers, she suddenly smiled a broad toothy grin and began to talk. One day, as I stood in line with my silken tofu, the person ahead of me asked about what a goat might eat.

She clapped her hands. "Oh!" She exclaimed. "Forsythia, salal, ocean spray, but I have to say a lilac bush or an apple tree...just heaven, to a goat. It's the sugar in the bark. Kills the tree, though. They're great to sketch when they're focused on nibbling the bark."

I liked the sound of her voice.

On the fourth day of my vacation I walked into the store with the intention of asking her to lunch. Lunch seemed neutral, no dressing up, no weighted expectations regarding good night kisses. She was holding a calculator and counting inventory and kept her shoulders back like a dancer.

"Hullo." I said.

She looked up. Her eyes, magnified through her reading glasses, looked like those of an inquisitive goldfish. Except they were blue, not gold. Clear blue, and what struck me were the little creases of sadness around them. I noticed that now.

"Oh! It's you." She put her calculator down. Her cheekbones had little spots of color on them, and she smiled at me, the toothy goat smile, not the customer service smile, so I knew I had a chance.

"Yes." I stumbled, my face suddenly flaming hot. "So, I was just in the area, and was wondering if you ate lunch." I could've kicked myself.

"Yes. I eat lunch." She glanced at the clock. "It's almost time for my break, speaking of lunch."

"Right. What I meant was, would you, if you had time? Or maybe not today. Because of course you would have made different plans. But would you like to go to lunch? With me. I could make us lunch and bring it here. Tomorrow." I couldn't bring myself to look at her. "I can cook."

"Oh. That would be lovely. Except that I work the next four days, across lunch time." She smiled and my insides unwrapped themselves and relaxed. "Is 2 p.m. too late for you?"

"Not at all. Really? Is curry all right? Maybe a shrimp curry?"

"Fabulous."

The next day I made the shrimp curry with coconut milk, peppers and onions. It was simple and delicious and traveled well. I arrived just as Robyn was coming out the door. She was wearing a brown vest that showed off her long arms nicely.

"Hallo!"

"Hi! Over here." She waved and led me down a flight of stairs to a picnic table.

I sat and opened the steaming curry container. Her eyes closed as she took in the aroma. "That smells wonderful!"

I spooned the rice into bowls. My stomach twisted at the smell of the curry. Odd.

"Delicious. I haven't had a good curry in ages."

I helped myself. My stomach heaved and clenched. What in the world?

"So, are you on vacation? Or have you moved here?" She eyed me as she dipped the curry into her bowl.

"Vacation. Really, half vacation, half work. I used to come here. A long time ago. With...with..." My mind went blank. I couldn't remember who I came here with. Again my belly shifted queasily.

She started spooning the curry towards her mouth. "Are you married?"

"No. I..." Again, I wasn't sure. Girlfriends? Surely. I couldn't think. My guts churned. "No. How about you?"

"Divorced. A while back." She clipped a shrimp in half with her teeth with some aggression. "How long are you on vacation for?"

"Three weeks. Maybe longer."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a health inspector for Seattle. And I just sold my home in Seattle. So! Celebration." I smiled and stood. "I'll be right back. Is the bathroom...?" She pointed to the walkway and I saw a bathroom at the end of the store.

I sat huddled on the toilet holding my hands, while my insides sorted themselves out messily. It wasn't just that my guts weren't right. I felt cold in my mind. It was terrifying that I couldn't remember, I could not remember with whom I had come to the island.

I rinsed my face, looked at myself in the mirror. My nose looked pinched. I wore my hair swept back, it was a nutmeg color, but today it seemed grayer, lacking vigor.

I had to recover quickly. I wiped my hands and returned to the picnic table.

She eyed me. Her bowl was empty. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I don't know where that came from." I kept from meeting her eyes but she got up in one swoop and came around and sat beside me in a way that brooked no argument.

"Give me your wrist."

"Why?"

"I'm an acupuncturist. I'm going to check your pulses."

"There's nothing wrong with me." But I gave her my arm. Her fingers on my wrist were cool and probing. She sat very still, looking out over the ocean. I kept still as well, enjoying her touch, but it was odd to have my vein danced on like that with her nimble fingers. She pulled away, thinking.

"Well? Am I going to die?"

She maintained her gaze out over the ocean. "Have you gotten divorced? Or lost someone? Had a very bad argument with someone you loved?"

"No. Why?"

"I thought maybe your pulses would be weak in the spleen or stomach sections but...it's your lung pulse. It's very weak and thready.

Hardly there at all." Robyn moved to the other side of the table as swiftly as she had come. "Well. It's certainly not an exact science."

"What does that mean? Weak lung pulse?"

She spooned more rice into her bowl and troweled another helping of curry over it with seductive enthusiasm. "Well, the lungs, in Chinese medicine are affected very strongly by grief, sadness, anxiety. Are you really stressed by your job right now? Fearful of your employment, that sort of thing?"

"No." I scooped up my own cooling lunch and ate. The bad stomach had passed.

"Hmm." Her mind was far, far away, but she was enjoying her curry and that was my reward. To delight a woman with a meal had always been a secret fetish.

We saw each other a few more times, and toward the end of the month I invited her to a scotch tasting party in Seattle.

We met at the condominium where the party was held. She looked long and muscular in a vest and skirt. I wore my Highland dress.

The rooms and hallways were crowded with people, drinks, plates of food held high. Brass lamps and fine cherrywood tables, old Audubon prints, and Scottish landscapes. We shimmied through the crowd around the scotch bar, then made our way into the kitchen. Couples drank and smiled. Three older men held paper plates. The hostess, Clarissa, looked harried but happy as she carved a turkey and the sheets of white flesh fell away from her knife as she chatted and smiled. I got myself a plate and followed Robyn as she picked up slices of cheese, carrots, a Scotch egg, a piece of cake and some water crackers, then I maneuvered us off to a quiet inlet, away from the swirl of energy by the table.

I ate one of my Scotch eggs. She was keeping her eyes elsewhere and finally in the silence, I put my hand gently on her shoulder. Finding no resistance, I moved my body closer to hers.

Then she touched her hand lightly to my hand and blood poured through my veins like water rushing through a lock in a canal. Thank god the sporran was there to protect me. She must have felt it too, for

her eyes widened and a flush spread across her cheekbones like a magic stain.

We left the party early. She kept her hand on my thigh, her eyes a smoky shade of lust as I navigated Seattle's downtown on auto-pilot. At the entrance of the Mayflower Park Hotel, I gave the keys to the bellhop.

In the lobby, I turned to her. "Look, I had gotten us two rooms."

She held my hand lightly. "We could stay in a room together. Unless you'd rather not."

My heart leapt. "I would rather stay in one room."

"Okay."

We went together to the check-in desk. As it happened, we were in luck; one of the larger suites was available, it had an extra sitting room, would we like to exchange for that?

Yes, we would.

The elevator was small and box-like. We rode it silently, then walked together down the corridor to the room. She opened the door with the electronic key. It pushed open with a pneumatic heave. The room was darkened and I saw a couch and chairs in chocolate browns and honey tones. Very relaxing.

She put our bags in the bedroom while I admired the enormous bath. We met again. I said, "Did you see the size of the bathroom? We can go swimming in there!"

She came right at me. "Take that off." She indicated my jacket. I did so. She kept unbuttoning my shirt buttons and I tried to help. "I can do it." Her eyes were intent and she pushed her own shoes off and slid them to the side. She pressed herself into me as she worked the buttons loose, pulling the tails of my shirt out of my kilt.

"You seem on a mission." I kissed the top of her head as she tore at the straps of the kilt.

"Take off your shirt."

I took off my shirt while she got the clasps off of my hips. Then she turned around and ripped down the heavier covers from the bed. She pulled the sheets down with another vigorous tug and then turned back to me. She unbuttoned her vest and her eyes had gone that smoky shade of lust I had seen earlier in the car. I was going to go into the

bathroom when she grabbed my wrist. "You're not going anywhere." She took me by my ears and pulled me over her, bodily, on the bed. "Take my skirt off." Her voice was husky and my heart began to pound. I hadn't been wanted like this in so long that I was inordinately aroused. We ripped her underwear off...her blouse had gone soon before with her vest, and now she was completely naked. She was long armed and muscular, with a round belly and gorgeous soft-skinned legs. Her arms pulled me to her and she whispered in my ear. "Now. I've waited a good two hours for this, and I'm going to share a secret with you."

"Yes?" I waited, very interested in starting the slow thrust in.

"I'm already very ready, if you follow me. I want you to hold back...I want to feel you on top of me, then I want you to take me from behind." She whispered this last into my ear.

"I...can try. I'll give it my best shot. But..."

She gripped my face with both of her hot hands. "I know. It's a lot to ask. But you're just so...you're perfect." She looked into my eyes, and I was lost.

"Yes, all right."

I woke up. It was dark. Very quiet, and I was looking up at a ceiling I didn't recognize, and then I remembered where I was. I turned over and there was Robyn; I was so dazed from sleep and sex that I didn't want to disturb her, but she seemed awake, staring at the ceiling. I raised on one arm and glanced at the digital clock. 5:10 am. I relaxed; still lots of time to sleep. She turned to me. Her hand was soft on the side of my head.

The next time I woke, the sun was leaking through the hotel blinds and spilling onto the side table. I propped up on my elbows. "Robyn?" Her side of the bed was cold. I looked around. Her clothing was gone. And her suitcase.

Naked, disoriented, I padded into the bathroom. Her toothbrush, soap, all of it, gone.

On the coffee table in the living room was a single piece of hotel stationery. I smelled it. Faint coconut.

"I had to leave. I called my sister. She lives in Seattle, so don't worry about me. I need to think. Thank you for everything."

Robyn"

And that was it. I sat down. I looked at my penis. "Did we do something wrong?" I looked at the note. "'I need to think', it says." I thought some more. "She seemed to enjoy both of us. Maybe she really does need to think." I held my head in my hands. "But it seems sudden. Cruel, a little. To leave me like that."

The room was empty. There was no one here but me warming the place. It smelled like upholstery and cleaning and the dusty ducts inside an air conditioner. I scrubbed my eyes and tried to hoist up my interior self, but he sagged. There was no phone to call, and nothing to do but clean up and head back to the island without her. And that's what I did.

I wanted to be angry, but honestly, I was just sad. Maybe it really had thrown her for a loop. I remembered waking up. She had been awake. And she had touched me, a touch that...yes, definitely, had been filled with tenderness. Was that what she was scared of? Real tenderness?

All of this seemed plausible.

I wouldn't call her. If she needed space, she could damn well call me when she was damn well ready. Jesus.

That evening, home at the rental property, I opened a bottle of white wine. I remembered how she felt against me. I remembered her hands, tender and enthusiastic. I drank my second glass quickly, out on the deck with the stars radiating white light like neutrinos above me.

After the third glass I went up to my cold bed and fell asleep.

After a week of silence she called, on a day of pouring rain, and asked me to come over. She wanted to talk. I decided I could do that.

I got to her home at 7:45 pm. It was still raining. I made my way to the porch and knocked lightly. I could see her in the kitchen, scrubbing something with violent energy. Small white votives burned in brass holders. I saw bookshelves lining the walls. She opened the door.

I seemed to tower over her. My breathing wasn't right. The pie, in my hands, seemed irrelevant. We stared at each other in the sound of rain.

"Come in."

The room was thick with the scent of lilies, lavender, and roasting chicken. Light shone from two beeswax tapers on the table. She took the pie from my hands and set it on the counter, then came back, smoothing her skirt with her hands. Her eyes were soft.

I opened my arms and she pressed into me. "You smell like the rain," she whispered.

I held her. I closed my eyes and rested my chin against her forehead. She settled into me. I breathed in the delicious smell of her hair. "It wasn't nice, what you did."

She tightened her arms around me. "I know. It's very hard for me to...all of this is hard. It's harder than I thought it would be."

"Then what changed your mind? About tonight?"

She looked at me and smiled, detaching herself and moving towards the kitchen. "My sister called me a coward after I told her what I did at the hotel. I left her house in a huff and then apologized to her for being right when I got back to Uno. Do you like dark meat or white?"

I followed her to the table but didn't sit down. "But you decided...?"

"To try. To try and deal with...how I feel." She ran her hand through her hair like a shark cutting water. "Anyway. Thank you for coming." She motioned to the room. "I know what I did, leaving, was ill-advised."

My heart squeezed tight. I shrank into myself.

Robyn glanced at me. Her hands stilled.

I sat down on the sofa and looked beyond her, towards the double glass doors that led out to her patio. The rain came down. I could hear it muted, a hundred small hands patting the top of her roof. The light had begun to go, and the candlelight helped sedate the room with soft shadows. I could hide in the shadows. I laid my head back against the sofa. Robyn came and sat down beside me.

I looked around. "I love what you've done with the place."

She smiled. "You've never been here before."

"I know. But I drove by. I always imagined I'd been in. I quite fancied you."

She tapped my hand. "That was past tense."

I was quiet.

"Max?"

"I think I've gone a little past fancying you." I took her hand in mine. "I do care for you." I worried her hand with mine. "And...I think that's why it upset me so when you left that morning. I don't rut on furniture with just anyone."

Leaning back in the sofa, with her hands loose by her side, I could see a softness around her eyes that hadn't been there before. Was it the sex, the intimacy, or was it a beginning of trust, or both? Had one inspired the other? "Yes." Her voice was very quiet. Her gaze was kind, and open, a precious look in the light behind her eyes that made my heart flutter in a tender spasm.

"Can I tell you something really strange?" her voice was low.

"Sure."

"I always felt like an alien when I was little. Like I had fallen from outer space into my family's midst and they were all pretending not to notice."

To my horror I laughed out loud. "God, I know that wasn't the right response."

"No. I know it's strange. Did you feel that way about...when you were growing up?"

"I can't remember." I couldn't. There was something in the way of my mind. I remembered a home on moors, and a lake. But people, my parents. It was a blank...this was very disturbing but I decided to move around it. "I don't think so. I have different issues."

"Like what?"

"If I told you that, would you still share the chicken with me?"

Robyn laughed. She moved closer to me on the sofa.

"You were divorced though?" I buried my nose in her hair. It smelled slightly of coconut.

"Sort of. All right, not exactly. I had a serious relationship. He was married. And that lasted...20 years? Until his wife died. Then...well. I never saw him again."

"That was it?"

"Oh," she sighed. "I had one or two boyfriends. Nothing serious. I was taking care of my mother's farm. My father died when I was 23 and I came back to the island to help manage things. I met the married man on the mainland when I was 26. And that ended...8...7 years ago? I think. I'm 53 now."

"I see."

"Max." She stroked my arm. She didn't say anything for a while. She leaned her head against my shoulder and her hands stroked my one hand. The rain was a muted drumming and a long way off in the dark of the night, thunder stumbled around the island, shaking itself out like a giant wet lion. She had left a window open in the kitchen and the candles' light dodged this way and that in the breeze. The light in the bathroom suddenly went off.

Her head went up. "I'm glad the chicken finished cooking."

We were both quiet. The storm was becoming denser, the rain bumping hard on the roof, clattering to get in. We could hear the spouts rumbling and the streams pouring off her roof like the military rolling down the highway in a night convoy. I twisted my upper body around on the sofa, and I brought my fingers to her face and I kissed her. Her warm wet lips were heaven.

She broke the kiss. "Do you want to eat?" she whispered. I shook my head and found her mouth again. Her fingers danced on my neck but then she pulled away from me. She looked sad and perplexed at the same time. "I feel like I know you. Like I've handled all of your bones so that I know every contour." Suddenly she stood up from the sofa like a shot. "God, it's confusing!" She stalked back into the kitchen. "We should eat. I'll turn into a harpy if I don't eat soon."

There was half a roast chicken still left on the platter when I got hauled into Robyn's bedroom. The rain's rhythm and the candlelight kept us company deep into the night.

I woke up. It was dark, I was in a strange place, the smells were all wrong, and then I remembered where I was. I turned, and Robyn was

watching me. Her face was soft. I reached to touch her and her eyes closed. I was suffused with sleep and gentleness, but our bodies drew us together. She stretched out underneath me as I slid over her. I kissed the palms of her hands. I kissed the tops of her eyelids. I kissed her lips, and her throat, and she shifted, and I pressed in and slid home. She was slick from the evening sex and we went slowly for a long time. I gave her everything; every part of me that pressed into her. She wrapped her arms around my shoulders as she got closer, and I could feel her heart and breath rapid against me as her pleasure peaked.

Slowly my breathing came back to normal. In the dark and quiet warmth of the bed, she pressed her face against my throat and hid there, relaxed. She stroked my chest. Then she said, "Don't fall asleep yet. I want to show you something."

She turned on her bedside lamp and leaned over, rummaging in her drawer, then scooped back into me, holding something highly cherished in both hands.

"Let me see."

She opened her hands slowly, as if to release a butterfly or a baby bird. Inside her palms sat an object of silver, like an opaque watch face. A circlet of very small diamonds was set around where the face should have been. We both stared at the small object. And that same blank feeling came into my mind, as if...I should have recognized it, but for the life of me, all I could feel in my head was a space made of cottony damp. I touched it.

"Do you know what it is?" Her voice was uncertain, and hopeful.

"No, I don't."

Robyn's hands closed around the watch. Clearly crestfallen, she put it away. "I felt sure...well."

"What?"

"That you would know what it was."

I was silent, wondering why I couldn't move around that wall of cotton in my mind. Robyn lay there, staring at the ceiling.

I said, "Where did you get it?"

"An inheritance. My mother gave it to me when I was 10, said it was an heirloom from a distant dead relative. That was all she knew about it."

She switched off the light. I fell asleep again, and I dreamed.

My wife was there, Dorry, a skeleton in repose. Her kneecaps sparkled like knitted diamonds. Her legbones were like clear glass, her ribcage like quartz inlaid with rubies, her cranium so clear it looked like sunshine through a waterfall. Only her deep eyesockets seemed to pull in all light. Her teeth were the decaying yellow of old ivory, and around her neck in loops like Christmas festoons was a coral necklace the color of blood.

Around the cave, other skeletons lay strewn like neglected toys, but Dorry lay in state on a white silk bier.

Someone began to laugh, deep and delighted. It was terrible. I began to run, tripping over glass, steel, silver, amethyst, diamond and ivory leg bones and arm bones, the laughter following, as I tried to find my way out.

I woke up and flung the covers off of me. I bowed over, trembling, slick with sweat. I needed water.

Where was I? Where the fuck was I? Jesus Merlin Agatha Circe. Sweet sweet gods, I remembered. The memory charm had worn off. I got out of the bed, not my bed, not my room...then I remembered. Robyn. The sex, her skin, her fear. I found my way to the bathroom, closed the door too hard but it was all I could do to keep my heaving stomach from losing its contents. I clutched the sink with both hands and hunched over it, shaking, until I could steady my breathing. The spasm passed and I turned on the water, cursing, my hands shaking. I began to cry. Robyn knocked on the door.

I doused my head in the water, I swallowed it, I took palmfuls of it and dashed it into my eyes.

"Are you all right?"

I breathed. I wiped the water from my eyes. "Yes. Just a nightmare."

"You don't sound all right."

I opened the door and moved past her in the dark bedroom. I found my pants, and my shirt. "I have to go."

"Really."

"Yes." I got into my pants and shrugged on my shirt. I walked into the living room and found my shoes, my car keys. I had to find

Cornelia. I had to get back to the house. Had I agreed to this? Had I agreed to the memory charm? I turned around and saw Robyn's silhouette, arms crossed over her naked breasts, watching me from the bedroom's doorway in the darkness. And I left.

Chapter 3

Cornelia

The memory charm had blocked my wife's death, my secret life as a warlock, even parts of my childhood. It all came back into view; entire vistas of my life with Dorry, meeting her in Whitby, England; our courtship, her illness, my life as a pyromancing illusionist in the world of warlocks and witches, my parents and their marginalizing of Dorry, who was not magical. Now I was out to sea with no oars and no sunset, no wind, no light. Just the lapping of emptiness against the gunwhales. There was so much emptiness, that deep, hollow well of grief. The memory charm had slicked over huge swathes of my life but it had also smothered the grief. There was gin where I had left it at home and it was my one antidote.

I got the car back to my rental house. I shoved my way into the dark dining room and groped at the light switch. There, as my eyes focused, were three stone cold empty bottles of gin, lined up on the bar.

"Cornelia!" I screamed. "Cornelia!" She must've come and dumped my gin while I wasn't at home, knowing the memory charm would wear off. Witches!

I threw myself onto the sofa and buried my face in the pillow. I smelled ash, dust, mold, shadows of old grease and cooking.

Nothing stopped the dreams but gin. And I couldn't bear to go to that place again, to see those wretched rain-soaked furrows stretching out forever, feeling but not seeing my wife's strange confusion. I clutched my ears and held onto the pillow and my head. And I remembered Robyn's dead-on diagnosis of a week ago.

Robyn. Robyn!

The signet! My head reeled. I had to talk to Cornelia. How...how in Merlin's name did Robyn come to be in possession of that signet? It was most assuredly a signet of one of our Houses of magic! God, I needed a drink.

I got up, found a bottle of white wine, and drank it like it was water, staring into the dark silence of the house. I let the bottle fall from my hand. The soft thread of sleep's winding sheet found me.

I blinked. It was gray dawn. Something had woken me and I tried to sit up. Rain was pattering on the deck and the light was coming in the windows, the color of dirty dishwater.

There was a muffled thump from the back bedroom, and I heard rustling. A case being set down, the sound of jewelry clinking. A woman's sounds.

"Cornelia? Is that you?"

"Max!" And my sister, short, stern, in a lime green dress and low pumps, came from around the corner of the back bedroom. She clip-clipped up to me, holding a couple of boxes. Her delicate eyebrows tilted up in concern. "Max? Sweetie?" My sister's pudgy hand was on me. Her grip tightened. "I came as soon as I could."

We hugged. She smelled like lilies and dust from a chalkboard. She seemed softer and I fought the sudden urge to weep. "Did I agree to this? The memory charm?"

She nodded slowly and I sat back down. I rocked back and forth on the sofa, grinding my palms deep into my eyes. "The dreams started back up last night." She sat down next to me. "And you dumped my gin. You knew I had it! That was a really mean thing to do."

Cornelia clucked. "That was one of the reasons you agreed to the memory charm, Max. Even you knew you were killing yourself with booze."

I closed my eyes and sank into the sofa. "It would be so much easier to have the memory charm back in place..."

"You know that's not prudent. Use them too much and no more memories at all." She set the boxes down on a side table. "I brought you a few things." She offered me the first box gingerly. "This one first."

I took the top off and inside were salamanders. They glistened. "Oh." Their little traveling tub still had plenty of water and their skins percolated golden sparks of potent magic as they writhed and wiggled. "My lovely little Anatoles! My delightful friends!" I whispered. Salamanders are the illusionist's friend; they help a warlock recover his magic...at least, that's what the witches' herbal says about them.

Cornelia shoved me gently. "Open this one."

I set the salamanders down. Here was another parcel inside, wrapped in delicate tissue paper, layers of it, taped up. I tore through it and saw my old cape, the one Dorry had decorated for me. I held it up.

Illusionists wear capes when they compete. I had had several. A team cape that was flashy candy apple red, trimmed with gold, then a dark purple plaid long cape, with the black, green and dark blue patterns of the Stenness clan. I wore that one in early Spring at the start of the annual meetings. But in summer, I wore this short cape of blue silk, with silver brocade. Dorry had sewn tiny crescent moons, stars, and planets all up and down the edge of the brocade. The day I found her on the sofa, hunched over these little symbols with her needle and thread, I had laughed at her.

"Yeah, Mr. Warlock." She had said. "You laugh, but these are how people think of witches and warlocks and sorcerers and whatnot. You'll appreciate them one day when I'm gone."

Now the little symbols glimmered in the morning light. They began to blur. "I just miss her so much, Neelie. I don't know what to do. I've made such a huge mess of things." I was beyond humiliation. I couldn't move one muscle.

"Max." my older sister held me. And for the first time in a very long time I became incoherent. There was snot and drool and my hands even shook.

"My poor baby brother. It will be all right." I was being rocked and I closed my eyes.

Cornelia's voice became wistful, her palm on my silvering temple. "Do you remember mummy buying us those candies? Those little sugared violets that you used to ogle in Butterfinches? Do you remember?"

"Yes." I wiped the goo from my oozing nose. "You always nicked them from me."

I could picture her eyes getting a far away look to them. "That's because you ate them all in one go without even tasting them. You just opened your mouth like a mindless sheep. And do you remember the sticks? The peppermint sticks that twirled when you sang to them? I loved those."

"They were lovely, weren't they? And the curry flavored whistles we always got confused with the lemon flavored ones that tooted God Save The Queen." Cornelia popped out a laugh. She handed me a tissue and I blew my nose.

"My gods, I had forgotten those! Come on now." She heaved me up on my side, but I was still limp. It's like my nervous system was so overloaded with missing Dorry that I could barely breathe, much less move.

Cornelia got up and bustled into the kitchen. I heard water running, the kettle being put on, rustling for tea in the cupboard. "What is this crap? Oolong? Oh, here we go...Tetley? Max, Tetley?"

I didn't open my eyes. "It's an island, Cornelia. It's not even Canada we're in."

"Needs must."

My eyes flew open. The memory charm had worn off, and my life as an illusionist, a widower, the dreams, had come back, and now so did Robyn, the scent of her, the hotel, the roast chicken, the beeswax candles, the jut of her ribcage...I knew which House the signet was from.

"Cornelia! Cornelia...Robyn has a Chronomancer's signet."

Cornelia set the kettle down. "Robyn? Who's Robyn?"

I studied the weave of the sofa's cloth. "A woman I met on the island."

Cornelia was staring at me, teacup steaming in midair. "A woman. You met. At a concert? On a walk? At the doctor's office?" She dipped her teabag. She paused in her dipping and I saw her mind ticking over. "Were you having sex with this woman? You were! How did you fall into bed with her so fast?"

"I dunno. It just happened."

"Come off it, Max. You're about as promiscuous as an old trout."

I rolled my eyes.

Cornelia clip-clipped over to the sofa and sat. "I've told you before about witches and warlocks. It can be downright tawdry if they hit it off. She showed it to you then? The signet?"

"Yes. While we were in bed. The bloody memory charm was so strong I couldn't recognize it."

Cornelia remained unruffled. There was a reason she was the headmistress at Madam Morris' School for Wayward Witches. "Do you know where she got it?"

"Inherited it. From a distant relative. That's all she knew."

Cornelia's mouth turned down thoughtfully. "She could be a witch."

"Don't be daft. How could she be a witch?"

"Was it a watch casing, empty, with little garnets?"

"Yes, but no garnets. They were little diamonds."

Cornelia whistled. "Diamonds, not garnets? A signet of the Chronomancers has garnets, but diamonds? Are you sure?"

"Gods. Yes."

"That's the Chronomancers' House, the watch casing, but diamonds...I can't remember what diamonds indicate. Surely not...that just couldn't be..." Cornelia's eyes went distant.

I tapped my sister's teacup, interrupting her thoughts. "She couldn't be a witch, could she? I mean, how is that even possible? She's 53. She's my age. We would know."

Cornelia frowned. "It's possible she was orphaned, her parents hurt or lost...but you're right. It would be quite extraordinary. I've got to meet her. It's the only way I'll be able to tell if she's got the slightest magical ability about her." She set her empty teacup down. "We should take her to the Celebrations."

"You can. I'm not going."

"Oh, yes you are. You agreed. Remember? It's at Stenness? You signed the contract?"

"Merlin's socks, did I really?"

She nodded, watching me. She looked a little scared.

I rubbed my eyes, softening. "I don't want to go." I sounded like a baby who'd lost his lolly.

"Why not, sweetie?"

I sighed. "It just seems so overwhelming. Mother and father's house. Our house. Obligations. Just the whole lot of it."

"Your house. We didn't want it."

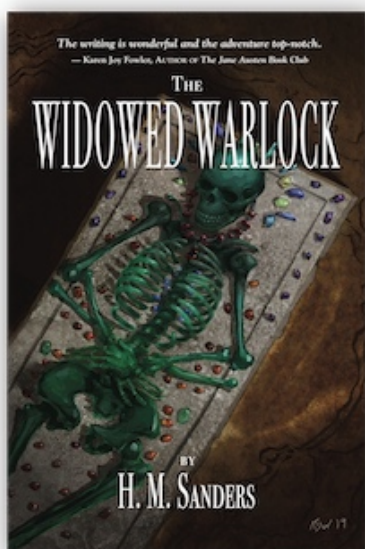
"Our house. The memories there. Mum and dad's rudeness to Dorry." I frowned. "I just don't want to put myself in a place where there was such...reluctance to accept someone I cherished so much."

"But sweetie, they're gone now." She squeezed my hands. "It's just ghosts in your head."

"I know. I know about the ghosts in my head, Cornelia." I must've looked so sad, that Cornelia patted my hand once, and turned to leave. "You could make better ghosts, Max. I know it's possible. Buck up now, there's my sweet baby brother." She picked up her bag. "Look, I would love to meet Robyn. Can you arrange that?"

I smiled at Cornelia, the only person to think of me as a sweet baby. "Yes. I can arrange it." But my mind was on ghosts.

From a distance, I heard the door slam and I realized that Cornelia had left. I pulled out another bottle of white wine. I drank two glasses, staring at the sunset through the dark trees and pondering over Robyn.



Max, a weekend warlock, loses his beloved wife but gains the friendship of a mysterious New Witch. Max has to return to his ancestral home and ends up in the middle of intrigue and a hunt for a dangerous daemon. Can the New Witch help Max unravel the web of deceit?

The Widowed Warlock

by H. M. Sanders

Order the complete book from the publisher Booklocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/10996.html?s=pdf>

or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.