

*Summer of the Widows* by Sherry D. Ramsey

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Summer of the Widows

by

Sherry D. Ramsey

The summer of the widows began with a basket of blueberry tarts and ended at the gallows, but what I remember most vividly is my discovery of the body.

I blame Nissio. Had he not been in such a foul mood he would have gone to deliver the cooper's potion himself and left me studying peacefully. But no, his spell research was stymied and he wanted to have a little rant with his impressionable young apprentice out of earshot. So it was I who stumbled upon the still-cooling body of poor old Blodgett the peddler in the Bowshot Woods.

I cannot recommend the finding of dead bodies as a pleasant experience. The blue hood crumpled on the rough pebbled path signalled something amiss, and I knew it was poor Blodgett, for the hood was his trademark. Thinking he had fallen and injured himself I rushed to his side, crying sympathies, but my voice quieted and then stilled. I placed a hand

on his breast to check for the nudge of a heartbeat.

A sharp bite of pain nipped my palm and I yelped. A shock had jumped from Blodgett's body to mine, although he had not moved. Gingerly I touched his chest again, but nothing untoward happened. No heartbeat thudded under my hand. The poor old fellow was gone.

I sent a call-spell to Nissio, a small talent that links apprentice to master. He'd come as quickly as he could, for a call-spell was reserved for matters of urgency. Then I gathered my skirts, settled beside the old peddler and clasped my hands to stop their trembling.

## §

It had already been a difficult summer. Nissio was developing a new spell, kept secret even from me. His moods were mercurial. On good days he was jovial, on bad days, churlish. Most days were somewhere in between, but it wore sorely on my nerves.

There were also the widows. Three good ladies from the nearby village had taken it into their heads to--well, "woo" is the only word I can think of--Nissio. Why any sane woman would be interested in an irascible, cantankerous old wizard...at any rate, there they were. The first arrived on Nissio's doorstep one summer morning with a basket of blueberry tarts.

"You may call me Widow Nona, my dear," she told me kindly, patting her finely curling salt-and-pepper hair. I showed her to Nissio's workshop (after checking his mood), and went to feed the chickens in a state of puzzlement. Nissio was not in the habit of receiving lady callers, except when they wanted a spell. Those ladies were generally distraught and not in the least concerned about the state of their hair. I didn't think the Widow Nona wanted a spell. This was confirmed when Nissio drove her back to the village in the little cart pulled by Benna, the mule. Nissio did not drive clients home.

Not three days passed before Widow Islana appeared at the door, cradling a basket from which wafted the unmistakable aroma of honeycakes. Her nut-brown hair was done up in an artful knot, her celadon gown was pressed, and she giggled occasionally. Ladies requiring

spells did not giggle. Nissio walked her home. I found it difficult to concentrate on my studies.

Widow Augusta completed the trio. She knocked on the door the next noontime, bearing apple pastries, her silvery hair swept up into an elaborate coiffure of curls. She batted her eyelashes and fluttered her hands, even at me.

I muttered darkly that evening as I cleaned Benna's stall. "Something's afoot, girl, and I don't like it." Nissio might have been a cantankerous old fool, but, well, he was *my* cantankerous old fool. The house already had a woman, and I didn't trust any of those three widows as far as the edge of the herb garden.

## §

Consequently, my nerves were already strained when I found old Blodgett. Thankfully, Nissio was at my side in a trice, patted my shoulder awkwardly, and summoned the local constables. The body was carted off to the barber's and Nissio and I attended at the magistrate's office. Mr. Grimes questioned me gently about finding the body, I will say that. I mentioned the shock when I touched the corpse. He looked up sharply.

"What's that?"

I explained again, and Nissio and Grimes exchanged what could only be called a Significant Glance.

"Why? What does that mean?" I asked.

Nissio pursed his lips. "It generally means, Albettra, that the victim was killed by magic."

I gasped. Magic was *never* to be used for such foul purposes, except perhaps in times of war.

"It will happen only if a spellcaster is the first to touch the body after death," he continued. "But usually a murdering spellcaster takes pains to touch his victim before he flees the scene. He takes the shock upon himself, thus eliminating that clue. This murderer was careless."

"Indeed," said the magistrate, his own lips pressed into a thin line. "Or else he did not have time to touch the body. Perhaps he was surprised

before he could do so.”

I shuddered at the thought that I might have been so close to the killer.

Nissio shook his head. “No, Albetra, you were not the interruption. The body had begun to chill, remember? Life, and the murderer, had fled long before you arrived.”

I sighed and nodded.

“If we can be of any further help,” Nissio said, standing, “Please let us know. I have no sympathy for murderers, spellcaster or no.”

“Nor do I, sir. We’ll find out who killed poor Blodgett, don’t you worry.”

On our way out one of the young constables stopped us. He handed me a heavy sack. “Peddler’s things,” he said briefly. “You found him, so you’re entitled. Unless you know of any family?”

Startled, I shook my head. “Yours then,” he said, and turned away. I looked to Nissio, who nodded, and we headed home. Blodgett’s things bumped against my back all the way. I little guessed what a heavy burden they would be by summer’s end.

## §

I went through Blodgett’s pack that night, laying each object out on the scrubbed wooden table reverently. There were assorted unsold wares, which I put aside for later use. A few articles of clothing--if Nissio couldn't use them I'd consign them to the poorbox in the village church. A thin silver ring, which Nissio assured me was non-magical and suggested I might wear if it pleased me. The only other item of interest was a worn, leather-bound and much-thumbed marriage book.

It was a custom not widely followed any longer, the marriage book. I knew instantly what it was by the entwined hearts and initials stamped into the leather of the cover. My grandparents had kept one. It had long been the fashion to keep these records of married lives, and they might contain memories, recipes, observations, love poetry, anything the couple might have thought to note down.

This one bore the letters "P" and "W." I knew Blodgett's first name had been Pyotr, but had no inkling of his wife's name. I didn't open the book.

They were intensely private items, usually buried with the latter spouse to die or passed on to children. To read it would have felt sacrilegious.

To be honest, I also knew that such tomes were generally protected by magical charms. They might deliver a nasty shock or worse to the unauthorized browser. I wasn't ready to bury Blodgett's book, since I wasn't sure about children, so I put it and the silver ring away in the little chest in my room where I kept my own few cherished possessions.

I did know that Blodgett's wife was dead. He'd been to tea with Nissio the day before his murder, and naturally our larder was well-stocked with sweets donated by the widows. Blodgett had tucked in appreciatively, and paid me the gruff compliment that I'd learned the knack of proper baking with magic.

"Unfortunately, I haven't," I confessed. "You'd be hungry again in an hour if it were mine. None of this is my work, but donations from some village women. And none of them is a sorceress. So it's just good baking."

Blodgett frowned and harrumphed. "Village women!"

Nissio laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. "Still a confirmed old woman-hater! But don't take it out on Albetra. She's only a girl yet."

I glared at Nissio and rushed to Blodgett's defence as I passed him the sweets. "Mr. Blodgett doesn't hate women, I'm sure. You were married once, weren't you, Mr. Blodgett?"

The old peddler scowled. "There's women," he said darkly, "and then there's wives."

*And then there's widows,* I added silently.

He helped himself to a honeycake and added, "My own wife crossed the river years ago, lass. Hard to say what I've thought about women since then."

It's funny how we prefer to avoid saying the word "dead," substituting gentler phrases like "passed on" and "crossed the river." Just days ago Blodgett had done it, and now he'd "crossed the river" himself. But even with both parents dead, the children, if there were any, should have the book. What duty did I have to try and find them? And how to even go about it?

Just one more thing for me to worry about.

§

A week after the murder, Blodgett's killer was still unknown. The widows had made what I was beginning to consider their weekly rounds, each bearing their specialty. At least Nissio wasn't stingy, and I had to admit that the baking was delicious. Nissio's generosity had its drawbacks, however. I worried that my gowns would begin to feel tight around the middle.

That wasn't actually the only drawback. The more those widows came around, the more proprietary they became. Widow Augusta commented on the bedraggled state of the cottage. Widow Nona remarked upon a spot I'd missed when washing the floor. And Widow Islana one day asked with a giggle exactly what I did around the place. Their hyena-like laughter when they chatted with Nissio, and the calculating way they began to study the place when he wasn't looking, grew tiresome.

I was entirely mystified. The cottage was ramshackle, held together mostly by magic and hope. Nissio was a well-known wizard, but he wasn't wealthy. If he had money I'm sure the cottage would have been in better condition.

Their motivations became clear one day when I went to the village to purchase supplies and visit my friend Blinnet. She always had a sympathetic ear, and let me expound my growing frustration with the Dreadful Three, as I'd taken to calling them privately.

"Well, they've heard the rumours, that's plain," Blinnet said as she poured steaming tea into my cup.

"Rumours?" I spooned in a liberal amount of honey and stirred ferociously.

"About Nissio's new spell. Everyone in town knows he's working on something, of course, and that it's a big secret."

I nodded glumly. "Even I don't know what it is."

"But the rumour," Blinnet dropped her voice conspiratorially, "The rumour is that it's a spell to turn straw into gold!"

"What?" I almost choked, laughing around a mouthful of hot tea. "But that's impossible! Magic can't do that!"

Blinnet leaned back in her chair, shrugging. "I believe you, but most people don't know heads nor tails about magic. Once a rumour like that gets started, there's no stopping it."

My eyes narrowed. "So the Dreadful Three think Nissio is going to be rich. That explains a lot."

"It doesn't help you, though," Blinnet said. "If you deny it, it will only gain credence."

I sighed. "I suppose you're right. What can I do?"

Blinnet shook her head. "I don't know. Wait it out?"

"Should I tell Nissio? No, of course not." He was a man, after all, and he had his pride. He'd never believe the women were after him for money, and he'd only be angry with me for suggesting it. Blinnet's look told me she agreed.

"Well, I'll try," I said. "Thanks for the tea, anyway." Blinnet hugged me and I left feeling slightly cheered.

The feeling didn't last, however. One of the constables met me on my way out of the village and politely requested that I return in an hour with Nissio. The magistrate wanted to ask me some questions. I could tell by the way he wouldn't meet my eyes that I wasn't going to like them.

## §

Nissio and I were barely seated in the magistrate's office an hour later when Grimes fixed a steely eye on me and asked, "How did you get along with Mr. Blodgett, Miss Albettra?"

I shrugged. "Fine. He always called on Nissio when he was in town, brought us supplies that we needed. Came to tea once in a while."

"Did you ever have a falling-out with him?"

"No. We got on well. What could we have a falling-out about?"

The magistrate counted on his well-manicured fingers. "Merchandise. Prices. Unwanted advances--"

"Here, here!" Nissio had quite a bellow when he wanted. "I'll not hear

that sort of talk about Blodgett. Or about my apprentice, if you please. What's this all about?"

The magistrate flinched back but stuck out his chin. "We haven't found anyone in the village with reason to wish harm to Mr. Blodgett," he said flatly. "Your apprentice was the first to find him--according to her story. She gave us the information that he was killed with magic. She knows how to *use* magic," he added pointedly.

"I didn't know that's what the shock meant!" I protested.

"Mmm-hmm. So you say. We have only your word for that. He took tea at your cottage the day before his death. Perhaps something happened then."

Nissio scowled. "Mr. Grimes, this is pure codswallop. In the first place, my apprentice has never had any altercations of any sort with Mr. Blodgett. In the second place, she is not devious enough to be either a practiced nor a capable liar. I know instantly when she is attempting to deceive me. In this matter she has spoken with nothing but the utmost veracity."

That worried me more than being accused of murder. I hurriedly tried to recall my attempts to prevaricate with Nissio. Had I ever lied about filching sweets or snooping in his spellbooks?

"Have you made any progress at all, Grimes?" Nissio demanded. "Have you discovered who might have caused the murderer to flee the scene?"

Grimes grunted. "Two hunting parties were in the wood that day. Neither kept to the paths, so they would not have discovered the body, but they might well have passed close enough to startle the murderer." He fixed me with a gimlet eye. I stared back with as much composure as I could manage, and after a long moment he flicked his gaze to Nissio.

"And what about yourself, Nissio? Had *you* any disagreements with Mr. Blodgett?" Grimes had a determined set to his mouth that made me feel his zeal had gotten the better of his judgement.

Nissio rose from his chair in a single, fluid movement. "When your reason has returned and you are ready to discuss this matter with intelligence instead of idiocy, I shall return. Not before, nor my apprentice. Good-day, Mr. Grimes." Nissio's voice was imperious and

calm, but I scuttled almost reluctantly after him as he swept from the room. The sparks would fly on the way home.

I was right. Once the cart reached the woods he let loose. "That dunder-headed, mumble-brained moldwarp!" he roared. "That tottering pumpion! That beslubbering folly-witted canker-blossom!"

Benna jumped at the first epithet and skittered on the road. I gently eased the reins out of Nissio's hands to try and calm the poor mule. Nissio didn't even notice. He shouted invective almost all the way home.

When we reached the cottage, there was a basket of blueberry tarts waiting on the step, with a note in flowery script attached. He stared down at it for a moment and then turned to me.

"Albettra, that man is a fool and a flap-dragon. However, I have far too much on my mind right now to take on another task. You shall have to apply yourself to the problem of who killed Mr. Blodgett."

And with that he swept up the basket of tarts, entered the cottage and left me holding the mule and gaping like a dimwit. Finally I shook my head and led Benna to the barn. Wonderful. Now all I had to do was keep up my studies, keep Nissio out of the clutches of the Dreadful Three, find out what became of Blodgett's family, and track down a murderer. I filled Benna's feed-bucket and tried to look on the bright side. At least I didn't have to bake.

## §

I went back to Blinnet. If anyone in the village was on bad terms with the old peddler, she'd be likely to know about it. She didn't think so.

"He seemed to get along with everyone, for all he was a grumpy old soul." She studied me. "Why do you want to know?"

"Because the magistrate suspects me, or possibly Nissio, of being the killer. And Nissio in his wisdom has charged me with solving the crime." I crossed my arms and sat back.

Blinnet gasped, then chuckled. "Wish I'd been a fly on the wall in the magistrate's office."

I grinned. "I haven't seen Nissio so angry since he fought with Zipnax."

My grin faded. "I don't think I'm going to be able to fix this so easily, though. How does one go about finding a murderer?"

Blinnet shrugged. "Ask a lot of questions, and see where that gets you. Murders are usually about secrets, right? Secret facts, secret desires, secret grudges."

I sighed. "His wife probably knew all his secrets, but Blodgett told me she'd crossed the river. So those secrets are dead."

Blinnet frowned and tapped her lip with a slender finger. "Although you know, folk used to say the same thing when a wife or husband simply left a marriage. It was more polite than saying they'd run off."

"Really? I didn't know that." I pursed my lips. "So maybe she's not dead after all. I guess I'll have to add that to my list of questions."

"And you know this village," Blinnet said with a smile, "they're not much for keeping secrets."

"I don't suppose you know what Blodgett's wife's name was?" I asked.

She thought for a moment, then shook her head. "I don't think I've ever heard it. Is it important?"

"I don't know yet. But it might help me in finding out if she's really dead or not."

"Nissio didn't know?"

I snorted. "He said not, but I don't think he was really paying attention. When I told him I thought it began with "W"--from the marriage book--he said, 'Yes, yes, that sounds right,' without even looking up from his book."

"Well, I'm sure if anyone knows, they'll tell you."

"Thanks, Blinnet," I said, hugging her. "I have an idea how to start now, anyway."

I spent the rest of the afternoon traipsing from shop to shop, talking to people in the street and in the market stalls about Mr. Blodgett. Notwithstanding Nissio's claim that I was an incompetent deceiver, my story was that I was gathering information for my master about his old friend. It was a simple lie, and most people seemed to accept it at face value, since the ways of wizards are rather expected to be inscrutable and eccentric.

Most folk had liked Blodgett, although they characterized him as grumpy

or gruff. The majority thought his wife was long-dead, although a few maintained that she had tired of his long absences and left him. The elderly proprietor of the Seven Stars tavern claimed in a hushed voice that there had been something strange about her.

"A succubus," he wheezed, bleary-eyed but earnest. "Or possibly a shape-shifter. Pretty thing, by all accounts. I never saw her myself."

I drew back as politely as I could from the haze of alcohol and promptly discounted that notion. The consensus was that Blodgett's prices had been fair and his wares of good quality. If he wasn't well-liked, at least he was respected. No-one had ever heard him mention children. No-one could recall his wife's name, even when prompted with the initial.

So that was one thing. A dead wife and no children meant that I could stop worrying about the marriage book. No-one was likely to come looking for it. But I'd still found no hint of why anyone, let alone a sorcerer, would want to kill the peddler.

## §

The next day all three widows took it into their heads to call, and I was kept busy hopping to the door and manufacturing smiles and tea. Widow Islana arrived first, and annoyed me by calling me "dear." I was forced to make conversation with her while we waited for Nissio to emerge from the workshop and I decided the best word to describe her was "vacuous." I escaped when Nissio joined us. It amazed me that she was even capable of pretending to be interested in Nissio for reasons other than money. She was so dim-witted I thought she'd be bound to blurt it out in the middle of a conversation.

Nissio drove her home in the cart--and returned with Widow Augusta. He'd met her on the road on her way here. Once again I boiled the kettle and set the table with a fixed smile

"You've just missed Widow Islana," I said pleasantly, setting cakes and pastries on a plate. The widows never came up in conversation with each other, but suddenly I wanted to stir something up.

Widow Augusta raised her eyebrows. "Oh, really? Here for a spell, I

suppose? Of course you can't divulge what it was," she said hopefully.

"Oh, no," I said with a dainty laugh. "She was here on a mission of mercy, just as you are. Saving Nissio from the fate of my baking."

Nissio darted a pleading glance at me, which I ignored. "The ladies of the village are always generous," he ventured.

"Well, a few in particular, Master, let's give credit where it's due. Widow Augusta, here, and Widow Islana, and of course Widow Nona." I laid out teacups, spoons and honey with delicate grace.

"Really? Nona as well?" Widow Augusta looked as if she'd spooned salt into her tea instead of sugar. "You're certainly well thought-of, Nissio."

I set the plate of sweets before them and poured out the tea. "It's such a help this summer, as we're so involved with Nissio's spell research."

"Oh? A new spell?" Augusta was all feigned innocence.

Nissio shook his head. "Nothing really, just a small project. Idle hands are the devil's playground, they say."

"I suppose, then, it was someone with idle hands who killed poor old Blodgett," I said tragically.

"That was horrible. Shocking," Widow Augusta agreed. "He was a good man, no matter what folk said of him."

"Oh? I thought most got on with him pretty well." I hadn't questioned the widows on my investigative rounds. I saw quite enough of them as it was.

Widow Augusta smiled. "Yes, yes, of course. There was some talk when his wife left him, naturally. Rather ugly."

"I thought his wife died years ago," I said. "You don't recall her name, I suppose?"

Nissio had given up on the conversation and was glumly eating a honeycake. Served him right. He was the one who told me to solve the mystery.

"No, I never heard her name. She may well be dead by now," the widow said in a hushed voice, "But I've heard she was alive and well when she left him. There were some said," her voice rose to a thrilling pitch, "she was a witch!"

Perhaps remembering her present company, she hastened to add, "Not

like you, of course, Miss Albettra, not a sorceress, as such. By 'witch' I mean the dark arts...the, er, unclean--"

"Black cats, cauldrons, hexes, yes, of course," I said sweetly. In other words, a sorceress whom folk didn't like. I excused myself to attend to my chores and left them in awkward silence.

*Puzzling*, I thought, as I tossed grain for the chickens. Another hint that Blodgett's wife had been something out of the ordinary. Perhaps in dismissing the barkeep's tale I had overlooked a grain of truth that lay within.

Could his murder possibly have anything to do with a wife who'd left him years ago? It hardly seemed likely. And yet Blodgett's wife was the only aspect of his life that was in any way unusual.

The chickens pecked contentedly around my feet as I scattered their supper, a sharp contrast to my frustrated musings. It was a peaceful moment, the only sounds the soft rain-like patter of grain on the ground and their rhythmic scratching, and I suddenly thought of the one clue I hadn't explored.

The marriage book.

## §

I spirited Nissio's Charms book out of his workshop and up to my room when he drove Widow Augusta home. I doubted he would notice it missing. It was such a mess in there I wondered that the widows persisted in their quest after seeing it.

Which spell would work to make it safe for me to open the book? I pored over the manual in indecision. There were any number of incantations for opening books, disarming traps, unlocking latches and the like.

I dithered a while, until the image arose of poor Blodgett, crumpled on the path in his blue hood. Then I steeled myself, chose a general disarming charm, and spoke the words.

Nothing happened.

Was this a good thing? I fetched a deep breath, closed my eyes, and

opened the marriage book cover.

Nothing continued to happen, so I opened my eyes.

I tried my utmost not to "snoop." I did not read every entry, merely let my eyes scan the sometimes-faded handwriting for items that might lend a clue to the current mystery. There were reminiscences, some so private as to make me blush, memories of travels together, recipes, notes and love poetry, among many other things. Some entries crawled across the page in a cramped yet haphazard hand that I thought must be Blodgett's, while others, in a more flowing script, I attributed to his wife. Names were never mentioned, much to my chagrin, only pet names and initials.

A few bitter notes near the end of the book indicated that dissatisfaction had entered the union, and it seemed likely that the wife had indeed left Blodgett. Several entries, in the flowing hand, noted useful household charms, many of them talents I used myself in the upkeep of Nissio's cottage. So it seemed that the tales of witchery and magic had not been groundless. The entry that made me sit up straight and stifle a gasp was the notation of a charm for successful cooking with magic.

Blodgett's grudging compliment that day at tea came back to me with startling clarity: "I see you've caught the knack of proper baking with magic. Most can't get it right."

But it hadn't been my culinary creations he'd been eating, it had been donations from the widows. What if--what if one of them used magic in her baking? What if she were Blodgett's long-lost wife?

What if she were Blodgett's murderess?

I slammed the book closed and clutched it to my chest, breathing deeply. My mind raced as if pursued by wolves. It could make sense. Blodgett's wife left him, and ended up living in our village calling herself a widow. Perhaps they'd never crossed paths here, or perhaps they had; if so, neither had ever mentioned it to anyone else. Of course, none of the Dreadful Three had names beginning with "W," but how difficult would it be to change one's name in a town where no-one knew you?

Then the wife decided to set her cap for Nissio and his imagined riches. Blodgett would be a nuisance, an obstacle in her path. He might speak up. At the first opportunity this summer, she'd removed him, using the magic

arts she'd kept secret all these years. Someone or something--probably the hunters--had frightened her off before she could take the tell-tale shock, but she wouldn't have worried too much about it. No-one knew she was Blodgett's wife, no-one knew she wielded magic. Suspicion would never fall upon her.

She just hadn't counted on the marriage book, or on Blodgett's chance remark. Or on me.

But what, oh what, had Blodgett been eating when he'd made that observation? I squeezed my eyes shut against the gathering dusk, trying to picture him that last time I'd seen him alive. Nattering on with Nissio, the blue hood hanging askew around his shoulders, crumbs in his beard--but crumbs from what? I'd set a plate with delicacies from all three widows that day. For the life of me, I could not remember what the old fellow had been eating. Probably a little of everything.

I laid the marriage book carefully back in my little chest and locked it, slipping the key into my pocket. Then I paced the length and breadth of my small room, thinking hard until Nissio bellowed up to ask if there was to be any supper tonight.

I smiled grimly on my way downstairs. Supper would be thrown together and Nissio might be peeved, but I cared not.

I had a plan. A plan to trap a murderess.

## §

Widow Islana I was able to eliminate from my suspicions immediately. Her husband had been a well-known citizen of the village and the two had lived there all their lives. This was fortunate, since I could not begin to entertain the notion that Islana was either cunning or clever enough to have lived such a ruse and orchestrated Blodgett's death. Augusta and Nona, however, had both moved here following the deaths (purported, at least) of their husbands. Any tale they told of their past lives could be pure fabrication.

My plan was simple enough. Nissio's disdain for my ability to deceive notwithstanding, I was going to tell a little lie, and see what came of it.

My chance came the next afternoon. Widow Augusta dropped by with the inevitable apple pastries. I let her in and greeted her civilly enough, but made it evident I was in ill humour. Once I'd banged enough pots about she politely inquired what was wrong.

"Oh, just that Nissio," I complained bitterly. "He's accused me again of using magic in the cooking, says it gives him indigestion and that I should stop."

"Well, my dear," Widow Augusta said stoutly, "he is the man of the household. You should abide by his wishes."

I threw my hands up in exaggerated exasperation. "But that's the problem. I'm *not* using magic in the cooking or the baking, I can never do it properly anyway. I haven't the knack and I've told him so. Still he complains that it's upsetting his digestion and he's certain that's the cause. I'm at my wits' end!"

I looked at her with imploring eyes. She appeared not at all guilty, only perplexed, her brows drawn delicately together, puzzled but mindful of wrinkles.

"Well, then it must be something else...I shall have a word with him."

I shook my head vehemently. "No, no, don't do that, please. He'll only know I've been complaining and probably deny it anyway. Men do so hate to appear ill or weak to their lady friends." I smiled at her conspiratorially. "I'll root out the mystery eventually. It had me vexed for a moment, that's all. I'll go and call him for you."

And that was that. No response that I could detect. Ah, well, there was still Nona.

The following morning she appeared on schedule with the blueberry tarts. I went through the same affronted act with her, and she, too, suggested that I should take Nissio's digestion into account. Upon my protests that I was not using magic she laughed.

"Men are vexing creatures, are they not?" She shook her head. "Always thinking they know everything about everything. Here's my advice, dear. Keep on making everything just as you've been doing--but *tell* him you've stopped using magic. No doubt he'll feel much better and will thank you for it."

Her eyes twinkled and she looked very jolly--not guilty in the least. I concealed a sigh and went to fetch Nissio. Perhaps my deductions, and my plan, had not been quite as brilliant as I'd thought.

Islana came the next day with honeycakes as usual. I didn't even bother telling her any lies. That night, dejected, I went through the marriage book again, this time with less trepidation. The only thing I gained was an increased melancholy at the way relationships deteriorate. I was no closer to knowing who'd killed Blodgett and I was sure Grimes would soon be sniffing around me again with his horrible accusations. The moon had risen and passed well above the top of my window before I fell into a dispirited sleep.

## §

Two days passed in wretched normality. Nissio barely emerged from his workshop. I tried to apply myself to my studies but could not quell the image of poor dead Blodgett nor the memory of that tell-tale shock upon my hand. I puzzled over the widows until my head ached, but I could come up with no further plan of action.

When Nissio did appear it was to tell me tersely that he "needed some air." He stormed through the cottage and out the front door. Not long after, I'd begun to brew up a headache tisane on my little burner when someone knocked. I answered the door listlessly, forcing a half-smile when I saw it was Widow Nona with a covered basket as usual.

"Is Nissio about?" she enquired brightly, setting the basket on the table. "I've brought him a little treat."

*Yes, yes, blueberry tarts,* I thought maliciously. *How can blueberry tarts be a treat when you've eaten them every week for an entire summer?*

"He's just gone for a walk," I said, and twitched the covering aside, prepared for the array of perky little golden-topped pastries staring balefully up at me with blueberry eyes.

Except that they weren't blueberry tarts. They were scones.

I stared stupidly at them for a long moment. Taking in the milk-brushed, sugar-sprinkled, raisin-studded tops. Scones. They were golden

and round and they smelled like a baker's dream.

But Nona never brought scones. Islana brought honeycakes, Augusta brought apple pastries, Nona brought blueberry tarts. They each had a specialty. They only brought their best. It had been the same all summer.

I looked up and met her eyes. Grey eyes that studied me intently, and I could almost see the pieces falling into place behind them, just as they were behind mine.

She'd taken my bait after all, believed my story about the indigestion. She'd been using magic to bake the tarts to their blueberry perfection, but now she had to stop using magic, and rather than risk a noticeable change in her wares, she'd switched to another confection. No-one would think anything of it.

Except me. She read the entire story in my face, just as I read it in hers. I knew she was Blodgett's estranged wife, and his murderess. And she knew I knew.

She was fast, I'll give her that. I was still standing stupefied when she began murmuring the words of a spell. I only came to my senses when I felt a tug in the magic ether as she pulled power from it. I ducked below the table and scuttled to the scant cover of my workbench. Something sizzled through the air I'd occupied a split second before.

*Breath of the Gods!* She meant to kill me, too!

I heard her cross to the door, presumably checking for Nissio—she certainly wasn't leaving.

My mind tore through my pitifully small repertoire of spells. A few talents, a couple of potions, and three spells that were useless at the moment. I might be able to distract her a little, but nothing I could do could hold her for long. Silently I sent out a call-spell to Nissio, but I could not hazard a guess as to how far he'd gone.

"Too bad you're so intelligent, girl," Nona muttered. "I can see why the old gudgeon keeps you around."

I heard her begin to murmur again and felt another tug in the ether, more powerful this time. I stood, snatched my smouldering burner, and hurled it at her. My aim was guided by the perfect luck that occasionally

accompanies absolute desperation, and the burner struck her full in the chest.

The widow gasped and staggered back a step, more in surprise than from the weight of the burner. A few embers clung to the bodice of her gown, and she instinctively brushed at them, while I darted across the room and through the door to Nissio's workshop. I had interrupted one spell, but no doubt she had more in her repertoire. I slammed the door shut so fiercely that a dusting of plaster showered down from the roof above me.

"That was for Blodgett!" I surprised myself with the ferocity of my voice. My hands were trembling, a combination of fear and anger, and which contributed more I could not say.

I shot home the bolt on the door but was under no illusion that it would offer much protection. It would probably be just as easy for Nona to knock down one of the rickety walls and walk through that. However I had no time to waste in worry. I cast a wild gaze around the room, searching for a weapon.

Weapons were in short supply in Nissio's workshop. Beyond the door I heard Nona's voice rise and fall in the arcane syllables of another spell.

Nissio's spellbook lay open on the workbench. Feverishly I rifled through the pages, looking for something--anything--that seemed offensive. *Charms, combat, curses--wait!* I flipped back to combat. *Aclover's Adamantine Arrow* caught my eye. A bolt of energy in the form of an arrow that would unerringly strike where I directed it. I had to speak a single word, then direct the bolt with my finger.

Sounded easy enough.

Of course, it had taken me three days under Nissio's close tutelage to produce a tiny magical fire in the fireplace, but this was not the time to dwell on that.

Blue fire crackled around the edges of the door and for a moment the air sizzled with the frenetic potency of a lightning strike. Then the door disintegrated into a million splinters. Nona glared through the opening with nasty satisfaction.

My heart was trying desperately to escape the confines of my chest and

the air seemed too thick to breathe. I pulled energy from the ether, glanced down at the single word of the spell, pointed a trembling finger at Nona, and spoke it.

"*Azturchan!*"

The syllables echoed through the cottage, much louder than I'd intended, but no bolt shot from my finger.

Nona grinned.

She grinned for so long that it took on a rictus-quality. Then she pitched forward and hit the smooth-scrubbed boards of the floor like a felled tree.

Behind where she had stood I saw Nissio in the doorway, a finger extended in a perfect mirror of my own. I thought it trembled, just a bit.

"Emphasis on the *second* syllable, Albettra," he advised, then strode forward to gaze down at the fallen sorceress. He snapped his fingers suddenly. "Wynona!" he said, pleased with himself. "Blodgett's wife! Her name was Wynona."

If he hadn't just saved my life I might have throttled him, but all I could manage was a watery smile.

"Damn," he said regretfully. "I really liked those blueberry tarts." He flashed me a sudden grin. "And I don't expect she'll share the recipe with you now."

## §

Nona wasn't dead, only stunned, and they called in three wizards from neighboring towns to stand guard until her execution. Nissio had been invited to assist, but refused. And neither of us was in attendance when she went to the gallows. She'd murdered Blodgett because he was an inconvenience, tried to kill me as well, yet I took little joy in the idea of her death and certainly had no desire to witness it.

"I wonder why she left him in the first place," I pondered aloud one late afternoon, as the sun set the turning leaves afire outside the cottage.

"Ah, well, we can't know everything, Albettra," Nissio said in his most philosophical voice. I grimaced inwardly, sensing a lecture in the offing.

"However," he continued, "there are things that we *can* know. Remind

me to teach you a little something called 'Scry Intention' one of these days. Comes in particularly handy when you want to know what someone's up to."

With that he disappeared into his workshop, once again leaving me gaping dunce-like by the kitchen table. He'd known all along that those widows were only after his imagined money! He'd just liked their baking.

*And their attention*, said a mean little voice in my head.

I quashed it and began clearing away the supper dishes. He'd trusted me to puzzle out the murder, after all, and he'd let me take the news to Grimes myself. Now *that* had been satisfying.

Nissio wasn't so bad, for a man--and a wizard. I smiled. Perhaps I'd bake something for him. It didn't hurt to remind him once in a while how useful I was.

I shuddered suddenly as the sun dipped below the horizon. If I did any baking, it wouldn't be blueberry tarts.

*The End*

About the Author:

Sherry D. Ramsey writes speculative fiction for both adults and young adults, has been the Editor/Publisher of The Scriptorium Webzine for Writers for over ten years, and is one of the founding editors of [Third Person Press](#). Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in publications such as *Thoughtcrime Experiments*, *Speculative Realms*, *Neo-Opis*, *On Spec*, *Oceans of the Mind*, and *Astro-poetica*. Her latest stories appear in the anthology *Destination: Future*, and in *Semaphore Magazine*. From 2004 to its final issue in February 2010, Sherry acted as a copyeditor for the *Internet Review of Science Fiction*.

When she's not actually writing, Sherry moderates her local writers' group, participates in a vibrant writing community in the virtual world of Second Life, works on Third Person Press projects, and sometimes even spends time with her husband and two children at their home in Cape Breton. Every November she disappears into the strange realm of National Novel Writing Month and emerges gasping at the end, clutching something

resembling a novel.

A member of the Writer's Federation of Nova Scotia Writer's Council, this year Sherry is also serving as Secretary-Treasurer of SF Canada, Canada's national association for Speculative Fiction Professionals.

You can visit Sherry online and read her sporadically-updated writing blog at [www.sherrydrumsey.com](http://www.sherrydrumsey.com).