A Novel

The FROZEN RIVER

ARIEL LAWHON

NEW YORK TIMES *bestselling author of* I WAS ANASTASIA

ALSO BY ARIEL LAWHON

The Wife, the Maid, and the Mistress

Flight of Dreams

I Was Anastasia

Code Name Hélène

When We Had Wings (co-written with Susan Meissner and Kristina McMorris)

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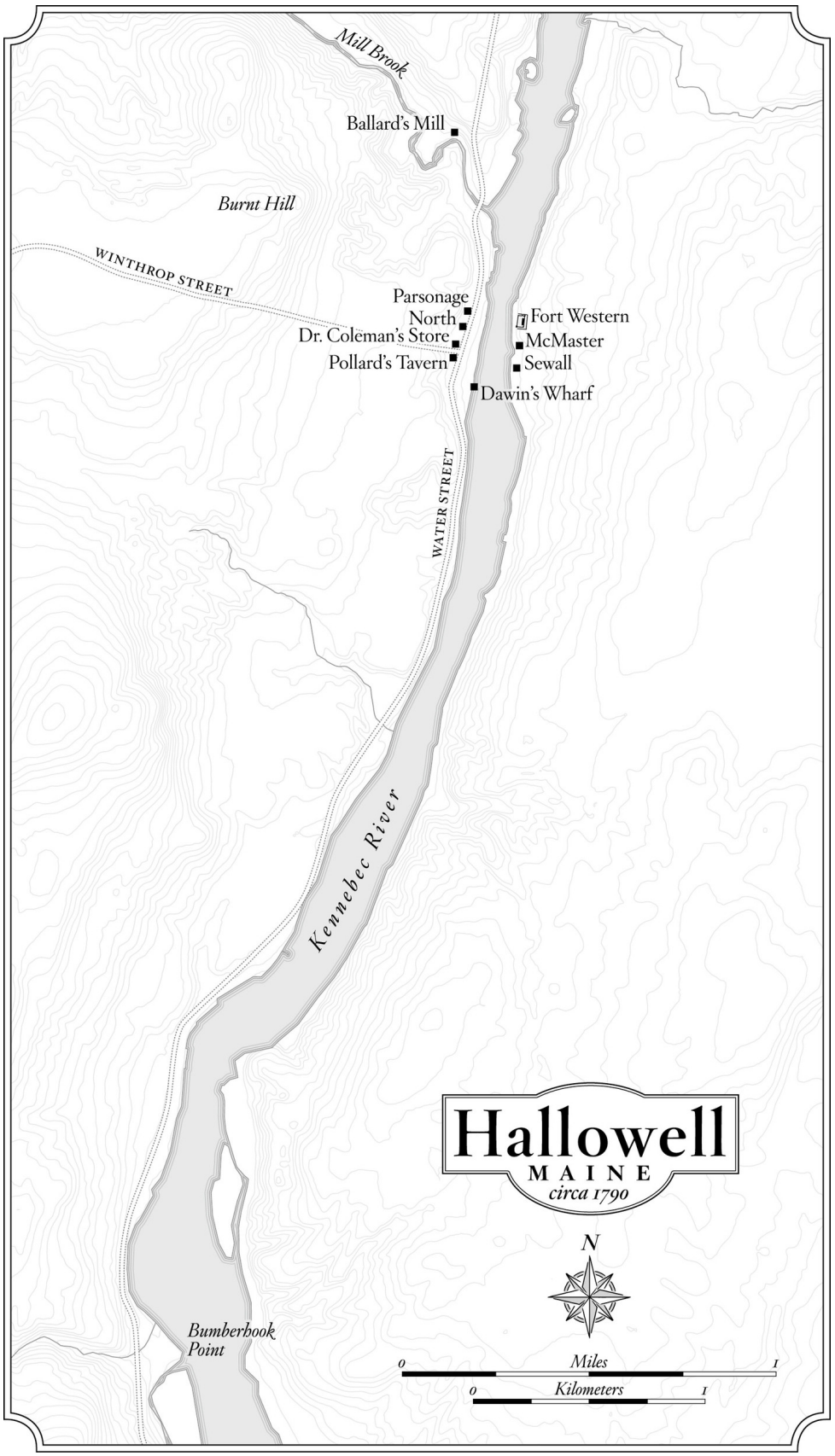
Contents

My mother taught me that midwives are heroes.
My sister let me witness the miracle.
My husband sat beside me and held my hand.
For these reasons, and ten thousand more, this novel is dedicated to them.

And *She* knows, because She warns him, and Her instincts never fail,
That the Female of Her Species is more deadly than the Male.

—RUDYARD KIPLING, "THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES"


Mill Brook
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A HANGING

NOVEMBER 1789

Truth will come to light; murder cannot be hid long.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

WHAT'S PAST IS PROLOGUE

The body floats downstream. But it is late November, and the Kennebec River is starting to freeze, large chunks of ice swirling and tumbling through the water, collecting in mounds while clear, cold fingers of ice stretch out from either bank, reaching into the current, grabbing hold of all that passes by. Already weighted down by soaked clothing and heavy leather boots, the dead man bobs in the ebbing current, unseeing eyes staring at the waning crescent moon.

It is a miserable night with bitter wind and numbing frost, and the slower the river moves, the quicker it freezes, trapping him in its sluggish grip, as folds of his homespun linen shirt are thrown out like petals of a wilted brown tulip. Just an hour ago his hair was combed and pulled back, tied with a strip of lace. He'd taken the lace, of course, and it is possible—fate is such a fragile thing, after all—that he *might* still be alive if not for that choice. But it was insult on top of injury. Wars have been fought over less.

The dead man was in a hurry to leave this place, was in too much trouble already, and had he taken more care, been patient, he would have heard his assailants in the forest. Heard. Hidden. Held his breath. And waited for them to pass. But the dead man was reckless and impatient. Panting. He'd left tracks in the snow and was not hard to find. His hair came loose in the struggle, the bit of lace reclaimed and shoved in a pocket, and now that hair, brown as a muddy riverbank, is a tangled mess, part of it plastered to his

forehead, part in his mouth, pulled there during a last startled gasp before he was thrown into the river.

His tangled, broken body is dragged along by the current for another quarter of a mile before the ice congeals and grinds to a halt with a tired moan, trapping him fifteen feet from the shore, face an inch below the surface, lips parted, eyes still widened in surprise.

The great freeze has come a month early to the town of Hallowell, Maine, and—the dead man could not know this, nor could anyone who lives here—the thaw will not arrive for many, many long months. They will call this the Year of the Long Winter. It will become legend, and he, no small part of it. For now, however, they sleep safe and warm in their beds, doors shut tight against an early, savage winter. But there—along the riverbank, if you look closely—something dark and agile moves in the moonlight. A fox. Tentative, she sets one paw onto the ice. Then another. She hesitates, for she knows how fickle the river can be, how it longs to swallow everything and pull it into the churning depths. But the ice holds, and the fox inches forward, toward the dead man. She creeps out to where he lies, entombed in the ice. The clever little beast looks at him, her head tilted to the side, but he does not return the gaze. She lifts her nose to the sky. Sniffs for danger. Inhales the pungent scent of frost and pine along the river and, farther away, the faintest whiff of woodsmoke. Satisfied, the fox begins to howl.

CLARK FORGE

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 26

"You need not fear," I tell Betsy Clark. "In all my years attending women in childbirth, I have never lost a mother."

The young woman looks at me, eyes wide, sweat beading on her temples, and nods. But I do not think she believes me. They never do. Every laboring woman suspects that she is, in fact, moments away from death. This is normal. And it does not offend me. A woman is never more vulnerable than while in labor. Nor is she ever stronger. Like a wounded animal, cornered and desperate, she spends her travail alternately curled in upon herself or lashing out. It ought to kill a woman, this process of having her body turned inside out. By rights, no one should survive such a thing. And yet, miraculously, they do, time and again.

John Cowan—the young blacksmith apprenticed to Betsy's husband—came to fetch me two hours ago, and I'd told him there was no time to dally. Betsy's children come roaring into the world at uncommon speed, with volume to match. Shrieking banshees, all slippery and red-faced. But so small that—even full-term—their entire buttocks can fit in the palm of my hand. Wee little things.

John took my instructions to heart, setting a pace so fast that my body still aches from our frantic ride through Hallowell.

But now, having barely arrived and situated myself, I find that the baby is already crowning. Betsy's contractions are thirty seconds apart. This child—like her others—is in a hurry to greet its mother. Thankfully, she is built well for birthing.

"It's time," I tell her, setting a warm hand on each of her knees. I gently press them apart and help the young woman shimmy her nightgown higher over her bare belly. It is hard, clenched at the peak of a contraction, and Betsy grinds her teeth together, trying not to sob.

Labor renders every woman a novice. Every time is the first time, and the only expertise comes from those assembled to help. And so Betsy has gathered her women: mother, sisters, cousin, aunt. Birth is a communal act, and all of them spring into action as her resolve slips and she cries out in pain. They know what this means. Even those with no specific job find something to do. Boiling water. Tending the fire. Folding cloths. This is women's work at its most elemental. Men have no place in this room, no *right,* and Betsy's husband has retreated to his forge, impotent, to pour out his fear and frustration upon the anvil, to beat a piece of molten metal into submission.

Betsy's women work in tandem, watching me, responding to every cue. I extend a hand, and a warm, wet cloth is set upon it. No sooner have I wiped the newest surge of blood and water away, than the cloth is plucked from my grip and replaced by one that is fresh. The youngest of Betsy's kin—a cousin, no more than twelve—is charged with cleaning the soiled rags, keeping the kettle at a boil, and replenishing the wash bucket. She applies herself to the task without a flinch or complaint.

"There's your baby," I say, my hand upon the slick, warm head. "Bald as an egg. Just like the others."

Betsy lifts her chin and speaks with a grimace as the contraction loosens its grip. "Does that mean it's another girl?"

"It means nothing." I keep my gaze steady and my hand gentle on the tiny head that is pushing into my palm.

"Charles wants a boy," she pants.

Charles has no say, I think.

Another brutal wave descends upon Betsy, and her sisters move forward to lift her legs and hold them back.

"On my count, push," I tell her. "One. Two. Three." I watch the rise of Betsy's contraction as it tents her abdomen. "*Now.*"

She holds her breath, bears down, and another inch of bald head is revealed, the tips of little ears cresting beyond the confines of her body. She doesn't have a chance to catch her breath before the next wave rolls over her, and then they come, unrelenting, one on top of another, never loosening their grip upon her womb. Betsy pushes. Gasps for air. Pushes again. Again. And again. Someone wipes the sweat from her brow, the tears from her cheeks, but I never look away. Finally, the head pushes through.

I ease my hand forward, cupping a cheek and one small ear in my palm. "Only the shoulders now. Two more pushes ought to do it."

Betsy, however, is ready to be done with this business, and she heaves with the last of her strength, forcing the child right into my hands, then flops back onto the bed as the baby is freed from her body with a *whoosh,* the only remaining connection a slick silver cord.

A tiny, outraged squall fills the room, but Betsy's women neither cheer nor clap. They watch, silent, waiting for my pronouncement.

"Hello little one," I whisper, then hold the baby up for Betsy to see. "You have another daughter."

"Oh," she says, crestfallen, and pushes onto her elbows to see the child.

There is work yet to be done, and I go about it with deliberation. I lay the little girl on the bed between her mother's legs and snip the

umbilical cord with my scissors. Once that primordial bond is cut, I tie it off with a piece of string. Then I plunge my hands into a wash bucket, clean them, and swipe my thumb across the roof of the baby's mouth. No cleft palate. Another tiny miracle that I mentally log during any successful birth. I wipe the blood and waxy vernix from the writhing, slippery infant even as I keep an eye on Betsy for excess bleeding. Nothing seems out of the ordinary.

Betsy's women pull back her hair, wash her face, make her sip lukewarm tea. They help her into a sitting position and a clean shift. They ready her to nurse.

"Look how pretty you are," I say to the baby, then add, "Look how *loved* you are."

And I pray to God that it is true.

Charles Clark is so desperate for a son—this is their third child in four years—that his determination might well kill his wife if he isn't careful. As for Betsy, she is desperate to please her husband and will never tell him no.

All appears in order with mother and child, so I wrap her in clean, soft linen and hand her to Betsy. She puts the bundle to her breast and hisses as the baby latches onto her nipple. It makes her abdomen contract once more, ridding itself of the afterbirth. Even this is fascinating to me, and I inspect the remnants of labor for irregularities, making sure it is intact, that nothing has been left behind. It too is normal, and I discard the residue into the bucket at my feet.

"There's one last thing," I warn.

Betsy nods. She's been through this before.

"Bear with me. It will be a few seconds. But it may hurt."

"Go on, then."

I knead Betsy's abdomen, rolling the heel of my hand this way and that, helping it contract. The girl winces but doesn't cry out, and then there is nothing left for her to do but nurse the child.

"What will you call her?" I ask.

"Mary."

A name that means "bitter," I think, but offer the young mother an approving smile because it is expected.

The women work in tandem to clean Betsy and wrap her groin in clean, dry cloths. These will be changed by the after nurses every hour for the next few days.

It is four thirty in the morning—still hours before dawn—and Betsy's women slip away to clean the last of the mess, and then to find what sleep they can. They will come in shifts to care for Betsy and her children over the next week. It will be the only rest the young blacksmith's wife will get.

I remove my soiled apron and wash my hands again, then tie back the pieces of hair that have come loose before I sit on the edge of the bed and drink a cup of tea—now cold—that was brought to me when I arrived. For several moments I observe mother and child.

"Shall I let Charles know that all is well?" I ask.

"Yes," Betsy says, "but don't tell me if he's angry."

"He has no right to be angry. You've given him a beautiful child."

"It means nothing, whether he has a *right* to his anger or not."

I take a deep, calming breath before reassuring her. "Don't worry about Charles. I'll take care of him. You enjoy your daughter."

The Clarks live in a small cabin adjacent to the only forge in three counties. It is a short walk, but I slide into my riding cloak anyway. The frigid air hits me like a slap, so startling after the near-oppressive heat inside the birthing room. It stings the inside of my nose with each inhale. The night is clear and crisp, the moon proud, and stars bright against an inky blanket of sky.

I don't bother to knock on the forge door—Charles wouldn't hear me with all the hammering anyway—but push it open without announcing myself. Betsy's husband paces, muttering curses and prayers. He is utterly helpless and totally to blame for his wife's recent agony.

Charles lifts his head when I enter his field of vision, and brings a cross peen hammer down on a rod of white-hot iron with such force that I can feel the vibrations through the hard-packed earth beneath me. The room smells of hot metal and baked mud. Of sweat and fear. Charles Clark stands straight, sets his hammer aside, and pushes a wet clump of hair away from his forehead. He's starting to bald—I can see the receding patches at each temple—and it makes him appear older than his thirty years. Dark hair. Dark eyes. Dark beard. Piracy would have been a good option for Charles had he never taken an interest in the smith.

He braves a furtive glance at me, then looks away. "Does my wife live?" he asks, then clears his throat to hide whatever rush of emotion he feels.

"Yes. Of course. She is fine and healthy."

I think this is the closest I will ever come to seeing the man tremble. Relief buckles through his body, and his knees sag, but then he pulls himself together and turns to face me.

"And the child?"

"She has very strong lungs."

His expression doesn't so much crumble, as collapse. I can see the muscle along his jaw work as he clenches, then grinds his teeth. Finally, he swallows hard and asks, "Has Betsy given her a name?"

"Mary."

"I'd hoped for a son."

"I know."

"Because of the forge. I need help. I…" Charles catches himself, embarrassed. "I *do* love my daughters."

"I never said otherwise."

"It's just that I need more hands. There's so much work to do. And I wanted to teach him."

I don't bother to tell Charles that there is no *him,* and that infants are no help in a forge, regardless. That it would be a decade,

at least, before a son—if he'd had one—could make even a small contribution to the family business.

"You have John Cowan for help. And you may yet have a son. Betsy is still young. As are you."

Charles nods as though deciding on something important. "We will try harder again next time. I'll make sure of it."

Foolish man.

I step toward the glowing bricks and stretch out my hand until it rests on Charles's forearm. It is muscled and scarred, warm from the fire. Any hair that once grew on it was long ago singed away.

"Not for several months," I tell him. "At the *very* least. If you want a son, you must give her body time to heal. And even then, it is God, not you, who chooses what you will have. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"I'm not cruel," he says.

Just demanding and ungrateful. I do not say this aloud, however. He is the kind of man who will hear the truth, but only when it is spoken indirectly.

"But Betsy needs more than that right now. She needs you to be *gentle.* And patient."

He says nothing, so I give his arm a final squeeze and leave Charles to his work. Having done his job for the evening, John Cowan has retreated into his loft at the other end of the forge. The young man is big, built like an ox, and not much smarter. For now he is lost to a deep and rumbling sleep, oblivious to both the new life that has just entered this world, and the pounding of his master's hammer. John's days are filled with clanging metal, so why should his dreams be any different?

I return to the cabin, find an empty spot beside the hearth, and stretch out on the straw pallet that has been left for me. In a couple of hours, Betsy's women will rise to cook a meal in celebration of this new life. The ritual is commonly observed in Hallowell. A child is born, and a meal is served. Sometimes, it is an elegant feast spread

on a linen tablecloth, and at other times a sparse, cold offering thrown together in haste. Sometimes I sleep in a spare bed, and sometimes there is no place for me to sleep at all. I have spent more than one night sitting upright in a chair, jerking awake every time my head lolls. But tonight is typical of most births I attend. A modest home, a normal labor, a simple bed and—in the morning—a hearty breakfast.

I lie curled beneath my riding cloak, staring at the rough-hewn beams of the ceiling, listening to the sounds around me. Little snores and rustles and whispers as Betsy's women bed down for the night. As my eyes grow heavy, the front door opens and Charles walks across the creaky floor toward the bedroom. I listen for the sound of anger, but only hear a man whisper softly to his wife.

*

It feels as though I have barely closed my eyes when I am woken by a large, calloused hand on my shoulder. Charles is there, a lantern in his other hand and urgency in his voice.

"Mistress Ballard," he whispers. "You must get up."

I look to the bedroom where I left mother and child, panicked that something has gone wrong in the night.

"They're fine." He points to the front door. "But someone has come to speak with you. Says it's urgent."

Perhaps an hour has passed, at most, since I fell asleep. It feels as though there are cobwebs in my head and cotton in my eyes, but I wrap my riding cloak a little tighter around my shoulders and follow Charles outside. The blast of cold air is sudden and merciless, and I gasp, then shudder.

Charles lifts the lantern, and I recognize the man sitting astride the horse. He is of middle age and middle height and minor attractiveness, but I can't understand why he is here, and not halfway to Long Reach on a raft with my son.

James Wall looks to be the kind of exhausted that can only happen after being awake all night in the brutal cold. His eyes are red rimmed, hair disheveled, and face unshaved. He licks his chapped lips. “Pardon me, Martha, I don’t mean to intrude,” he says. “But you’re needed in town. *Immediately.*”

“I thought you and Jonathan left on the raft hours ago.”

“We did,” he says. “But there’s been an accident.”