

THE MERRY WIDOW

by
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To Tommy Roberson and Clare Elizabeth Leigh Glenn
(and me, Johnnie, Mary, Jay, Logan and Kate)
—*FRIENDS FOREVER*—

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Small license has been taken by the author concerning the exact time of actual events set herein. The whereabouts of the lost Franklin party were more east and north of Herschel Island and York Factory. For nonfictional reference, the author recommends *Frozen in Time* by Owen Beattie and John Geiger.

*Drying a widow's tears
is one of the most dangerous occupations known to man.*

—Dorothy Dix

PART ONE

Too Cold to Sleep Alone

CHAPTER ONE

Herschel Island, Beaufort Sea, Canada
Just Before Midnight
February 13, 1857

“Noel Magnus—has—failed,” the man whispered in paranoid starts and stops. He looked behind him as if expecting Satan himself to be smiling at his back. All around, his cronies huddled at the plankboard table in the only saloon north of the sixtieth parallel, their rough, ice-deformed hands clenching tankards of home brew.

They didn’t nod or disagree. They seemed frozen by the words. The unspeakable words.

“He is not a man who fails,” another one whispered. He placed his dark head in his hands and looked wildly about the tiny hovel that posed as the Ice Maiden Saloon. “He swore to Lady Franklin that he would find her husband. He’s been North for three years doing just that. And then there is the reward . . . oh, the sweet mountain of gold; oh, the soft fragrance of Paradise. Don’t say now ’tis all lost . . .”

“This fierce place has not yet conquered Magnus.” A young man with cropped pale-gold hair hunkered defiantly down inside his caribou parka. Gone unnoticed was the wind that blew against the log walls in a pounding baritone. Ominous layers of ice banked the two squares of glass which served as windows in summertime,

but even that didn't seem to daunt the young man; nor the insidious icicles that formed like stalactites from the windowsills to the wooden floorboards despite the fact that the outside shutters had been closed weeks ago to shield the barroom's mad inhabitants from the never-ending night.

"The rumors from Fort Garry of his death will be proved false. Magnus will be here, and soon. Our ice maiden will force him to return—for would not our great friend Magnus rather die a slow brutal death than never lay eyes upon such beauty again?" A last man, Alexander McIntyre, his face old and weathered, peered across the cabin to the dim figure of a woman.

She was a white woman and the only other inhabitant of the saloon, but she made no effort to listen to the conversation. Instead, she leaned against the makeshift plank counter that served as the bar and stared morosely at the frost that grew like mold along the chinks in the log wall.

The ice maiden's clothing was like that of a native. A fringed *amautik* covered her from neck to ankle, and she wore the garment as if it were the only kind she'd ever known. Thick duffle leggings and *mukluks* of polar bear fur completed her attire, along with the ancient flintlock pistol she kept ready in her crude leather belt.

An Englishman untutored in the ways of the North might have been shocked at the woman's appearance, but after the initial disconcert wore off, a certain kind of charm, no doubt, would overtake him. Certainly the bleached moosehide *amautik* complemented the woman's fair coloring, for the garment was the exact color of her blond hair. The huge wolverine-lined hood at her back held a particular kind of fascination also—her present audience included. The hood artlessly displayed her unbound gold curls; it also signaled she was not married. The *amautik* was a garment designed for females to carry their babies in the enormous hood, but this woman's hood held no sleeping babe, and sometimes the younger men who frequented the place liked to imagine that there was a rather forlorn look that crossed her face whenever she glanced behind her.

In any other society, at the age of twenty-seven, unmarried and childless, Rachel Ophelia Howland would have been considered an old maid. But in the godforsaken North, there wasn't a man

for two thousand square miles who wouldn't gnaw off his own leg for a chance to give Miss Rachel a baby.

"Rachel appears especially fine tonight." William Mark, the young man with the pale curls, gave her a gloomy stare.

"Look. She's even washed her hair. Can you believe that? Why, the last time I saw hot water was June." Inigo Weekes, his Spanish blood showing in the dark flash of his eyes, grimly took a swig of his tankard. "Bet she wouldn't wash her hair for none of us." He wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "Oh, please God, say Magnus isn't dead. If he is, not only will Lady Franklin be bitterly disappointed and withhold the reward, but we'll have no choice but to continue this fool's expedition for her husband until we're all dead and froze, too. Worse than that, if Magnus never shows his face here again, Miss Rachel will be treating us like the nastiest wolf-bitch that ever crossed the muskeg."

Rachel Howland took out her father's old flintlock pistol from her belt. Discreetly, as if it were second nature, she slammed the butt of the gun into a large chink between the logs. From outside the cabin, a strange grunt followed, then an odd chuffing noise. When she removed the gun from the opening, the leathery black nose that had almost plied itself between the logs was gone; in its place was an enormous white bear paw with claws the size of sharks' teeth.

"Take that, you rotten cur!" she cried, dueling with the paw that searched blindly for a target. She batted at the paw until it finally pulled back. The polar bear was ripe for round two when she pounded a green glass whiskey bottle into the chink and ended the fray. All that was left was the sound of bear teeth on glass, a strange kind of music that was quickly eclipsed by the scream of the wind.

Rachel paused. Her dark blue eyes turned to the four men huddled around the table in her saloon. She cocked an eyebrow as if to say, "What are you looking at?" Chastised, the men tore their gazes away.

"He's already four weeks late in picking us up to return to ship. Maybe we need to accept that . . . something has happened." Grimly Weekes emptied his tankard.

Luke Smith, the fourth man in the group, nodded. "Do you

recall what happened the last time he was here? For as many years as the man has been in the Arctic, Magnus has made his journey to the Ice Maiden Saloon. But that last time—last year after her pa died, remember?—Miss Rachel was feeling so low. Magnus seemed to finally break a little; he wanted to cheer her so badly. He even talked about maybe marrying her and taking her from this wretched place. I've never seen the man so tore up. No, he'd be back here if he could. If he could, he'd be back, I know it."

"Would he?" asked William Mark, a cynical gleam in his eye. "And do you recall how she's been ever since that last visit? She's been really put out. *Really* put out. I wager Magnus might not be showing his hide because he left her behind last year, marriage promises and all, and he knows what kind of temper Rachel has."

"She gets a might testy," Alexander McIntyre agreed, "but all the gel wants is to go back to civilization, to marry, to have children. She wants what every female I've ever known wants—and it's all been denied her because her father was a whaler, and then he had to go and buy this saloon, and now he's gone and died on her here on Herschel."

"You think Edmund Hoar might have finally struck old Magnus down?"

The dark question seemed to sober them all into silence.

Inigo Weekes looked around the table at each man before he spoke again. "Hoar's been wanting Magnus dead for years. They're mortal enemies. Hoar has sworn to find Franklin before Magnus."

"The land may have conquered Magnus; too, his old foe Edmund Hoar might have taken him down at last . . ." McIntyre took another glance at Rachel. "But I fear more a woman. A woman can fell a man like no other." He met the other men's gazes. "Magnus will be here. 'Tis all I know. If he's got a beating heart and didn't fall through the ice at Wager Bay as rumor has foretold, then he'll be here. He's driven to it. Trust me."

Inigo frowned. "I agree Magnus isn't the kind to go and fall in the ice. He's too experienced for that, but Edmund Hoar might have set a trap for Magnus. Maybe the rumors are true. Maybe Magnus is gone—" Weekes's words were cut off by the chiming of the clock bell. After twelve rings, the room fell dead silent.

Each man in their turn took a glance at Rachel. The reverbera-

tion of the last chime was so strong and vital, it seemed to rise over the wind and echo through the small log room until it turned deafening. Rachel held her breath. Her gaze fixed on the battened door and she stared at it, as if to look away would turn her into a pillar of salt.

"See the will at work in her . . . if she were a witch she would conjure him to appear at this very moment . . ." William Mark whispered darkly.

Inigo took another deep dram. He looked away from the door as if it disturbed him.

"Her father was cruel to bring her up here, and even more cruel to up and die and leave her vulnerable to the likes of Magnus." McIntyre gazed down at his drink. The sight of Rachel's face taut with hope rocked him to his core. "Someone else needs to melt the ice maiden. Someone other than Magnus. Magnus likes the North far too much for any true flesh-and-blood female. Rachel deserves better."

"Any one of us'd take her home, but she wants him and only him," Luke Smith grumbled.

"I want no man!" a female voice cried out to him.

All four men turned to stare at Rachel.

Inigo cringed and whispered to the group, "Great. Now she be listening to us, the she-wolf of the tundra . . ."

She was a sight. Her face was snow white beneath a mass of golden hair, the only color on her at all was the lightning blue of her eyes, which flickered beneath the lamp only to become blurred in a pool of unshed tears.

"Maybe Magnus's ship became fast in the ice near Bathurst—"

"Maybe his dogs didn't hold out from the trip overland—"

"We're lost, too, Miss Rachel. He was supposed to fetch us back to the ship when the ice melted this spring. He told us we could keep the Franklin reward if we found—"

Alexander McIntyre raised his hand and silenced the lot of them. He stood and looked at Rachel. "You can sell this place to Edmund Hoar. You know his Company of the North owns everything on Herschel. Sell the Ice Maiden to him—"

"I despise Edmund Hoar," Rachel declared. "He's a greedy,

dark-souled pig of a man. I'll never give him what my father wrought with his blood, sweat, and tears." The planes of her face hardened.

"Go south, Rachel. You needn't stay up here. Any young man'd have you—" William Mark interjected.

She sniffed back impending tears. "I don't know anyone in the South. All I had was Father. Now I have nothing but the Ice Maiden."

"Sell this place and go find your way. You'll die up here, Rachel. Oh, you might still breathe and walk and talk, but, inside, you'll be froze just like the landscape." Alexander stared after her. His heart was breaking for her.

She turned away. Alexander heard another sniff, then another.

The bear chose that moment to push the green glass bottle from the chink in the logs. The bottle hit the floor with a loud, nerve-peeling crash. Rachel wiped her hidden tears, reached for another half-empty whiskey bottle, and tried to seal the crack in the daub with it, but this time she seemed unable to do it.

The other men stood to assist her. It was then, at the height of the drama, that the batten door to the saloon flew open.

Snow and ice swept in with all the violence of a warmonger. A large figure of a man entered with the fury. He shoved his bulk against the door and shut out the storm. When all was silent, he leaned back against the battens and slowly allowed his exhausted form to slide to the floor.

It was Noel Magnus.

Most wouldn't recognize him. His face was all but hidden in a wolverine hood. Like the Esquimaux, he wore a plate of ivory over his eyes, with two small slits cut into it to allow him to see even in a whiteout. His dark beard was covered with thick icicles, especially around the mouth where his moist breath froze at the point of exhale.

He drew off the ivory plate. His eyes were dark and wild as if they'd seen too much death, too much hardship. Outside his dogs began to bark and squeal. They smelled the polar bear. A dog would be missing in the morning; such was the hard luck of the North. No second chances.

Magnus's gaze found the woman across the room. He stared at

her—stared hard—then his eyes closed in exhaustion. He leaned his head back against the door.

Rachel said nothing. She peered at the great hulk of ice, caribou fur, and man lying prostrate in the threshold of the door. Slowly, on silent polar bear *mukluks*, she tread over to the form.

She looked down at him.

Alexander McIntyre stood motionless with the other men, watching her.

An aching tenderness haunted Rachel's expression as she took in Magnus's face. His eyes were still shut as if he were too exhausted to reopen them, but even slumped over in a heap, his face covered with hair and ice, he was indeed a handsome man. His brow was fine, his nose large but supreme. And then there were his eyes. Lined by laughter and long, harsh winters squinting from snow blindness, even unopened as they were, they were the kind of eyes that seemed to long for a feminine hand to caress their corners, the kind that beckoned a soft pliable mouth to kiss away the harshness of them.

Rachel uncorked the whiskey bottle. With a pale hand, she touched his cheek.

The eyes opened. Dark eyes, the color of exquisitely aged sherry, stared up at her. Despite the strength in Magnus's expression, his eyes pleaded for mercy. Compassion. Forgiveness.

"I missed you. It's been a year," she whispered to him, her words all womanly softness.

The eyes pleaded even further.

She straightened. She was beautiful in her fury. She poured the half bottle of whiskey over his head, all the softness seeping from her expression until she looked as cold as her nickname.

"You dare to come back here, you breach-of-promise bastard?" she cried, tears welling again in her beautiful blue eyes.

"Rachel, you've got to understand—I didn't exactly promise. And I couldn't take you with me. Even now, the ship is locked in the ice off Victoria Land and, nigh, seven weeks ago I had to bargain for another team of dogs—" Magnus growled through the rain of whiskey.

"You promised me a wedding." She pressed her lips closed as if choking back a sob.

"One of us'd be happy to marry you, gel. You know we would be," Alexander chimed in wickedly, though all prudence told him to stay out of it.

"I did the best I could, Rachel." Magnus squeezed the whiskey out of his eyes—his red, wind-burned eyes. "You've got to believe me. I couldn't take you with me."

"No. I won't believe you. I won't." Choking back a sob, she pulled open the batten door. The wind nearly knocked her off her feet but that didn't deter her. Not even bothering with the hood, she slipped past Magnus and the batten door, and ran outside into the white, blowing oblivion.

* * *

Rachel slammed the door shut to her cabin and quickly lit the lantern. Next she fumbled to light the stove. It would take at least a half an hour to warm the tiny room, so she didn't remove her *amautik*. Toasting her hands over the flame, she watched helplessly as tear after tear fell and sizzled on the scorched iron top of the potbelly.

Noel Magnus was never going to truly love her. If he truly loved her, he'd have married her after that last visit, and he would have taken her away from the life on Herschel Island.

But he was never going to do that. Because he didn't have to do it.

And she couldn't make him.

The hard-bitten realist in her told herself to accept this fact and get on with her life, but even now it seemed impossible. The hurt—the want—still balled in her chest like a lump of ice on the Beaufort Sea.

She touched her cheeks. In the frozen cabin, her tears had become nothing more than rivulets of ice on her skin. It was a fitting end for a snow queen who should prefer cold and alone. But Rachel Howland didn't.

Dismally she sank down onto a rickety wooden chair. She melted the ice on her cheeks with her palms. Her eyes clouded with despair.

Perhaps it was just that since her father died she'd been focused

on all the wrong things. Certainly, Herschel Island was hell on earth eight months of the year, but there was a five-or-six-week period around July when the place was quite habitable, a time when Arctic wildflowers graced the raw tundra and musk ox rummaged the hills. Her father always used to take her exploring during these weeks. They'd walk the muskeg and pick up pretty stones along the coast, and sometimes find a horn needle or a bone carved in the shape of a man, the residue of the ancient peoples who used to live there. In the Arctic, she'd seen the sight of two hundred thousand caribou crossing the Porcupine River; she'd watched the heart-melting play of two polar bear cubs. There were not a whole lot of white women who could say that. None of them in the fancy ladies' magazines ever got to see such sights, she'd wager.

A small frown creased her forehead. She gazed over to the table where her only edition of *Godey's Lady's Book* lay. Unable to stop herself, she picked up the issue and tortured herself anew.

The color plates spoke volumes. There were pages and pages of fashionable ladies to study. In their lace caps and horsehair crinolines, they perched on tuffets and chatted amiably, always in a surrounding that was both luxurious and pretty. Her favorite was of a lady in a rose taffeta gown studiously painting the portrait of a young girl. Behind the woman stood a passel of her female admirers, all equally fitted out, and behind the entire tableau were magnificent white satin draperies looped up like the train of a wedding gown.

Depressed, she crushed the magazine to her chest and swatted away fresh tears. There was a whole life out there she could only imagine. When she'd been a child, she remembered her mother in a gown such as those in the magazine. She lived with her mother in Philadelphia in a house that possessed such amenities as red wool carpet and mahogany furniture. But at the age of ten, she watched her mother die of yellow fever. There was no one else for her except her father, who roamed the cold seas in search of whalebone, the integral structure of the picture she had just admired.

Her sole issue of *Godey's* was from 1849. One of the seamen who visited the saloon had brought it to her when it was only a year

out of date. She cherished it like a Bible. She knew every piece of furniture upon which the ladies perched, she knew every hemline of their gowns, every swag, jabot, and ruching of the drapery that graced its pages. Even the occasional potted oleander didn't miss her hungry eye. It was a world she knew in the dark reaches of her memory. It was filled with grace and comfort, and the tender hand of a mother who loved her little girl.

But now it only existed in fantasy, printed on the static pages of worn paper. Even so, she'd had it in her head for so long, it seemed real. Somewhere, there was a parlor with bridal satin drapery and a lady painting the portrait of a little girl. There had to be.

The door to her cabin banged open. She reached for her pistol and half expected to see the bear at the threshold. Once, she'd seen a polar bear knock a door down with one swipe of his broad ivory-furred paw.

But it was not the bear come to call. It was Magnus.

"Get out." She raised the pistol and took aim with one eye closed.

He ignored her. With an arrogant cock of his head, he shut the door, barred it, then began to unlace his parka. "Are you going to shoot me?" he asked gruffly, not pausing. "Well, shoot me then. Put me out of the bloody misery I've endured just to get the hell here."

"You dog, you don't know misery until you've been seduced and abandoned like I've been." Her lower lip quivered, betraying her. "That last time, you promised—"

"That last time I was here you were sobbing over your father's death. You were afraid, you were cold and lonely. You begged for comfort. You know what I told you. I told you the truth." His deep voice crackled with ire.

She lashed at the tears that now fell freely down her warm cheeks, but her anger deflated into dejection. "You loved the North, that's what you told me," she whispered, almost to herself.

"That's not all I told you," he answered, throwing his parka on the table. Without invitation, he bent to her and gripped the pistol barrel with both hands. He pressed the muzzle to his heart, then looked at her. "It took me two and a half months to get here. Ten