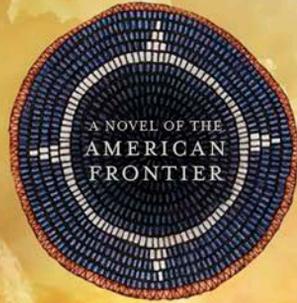




LORI BENTON



BURNING SKY



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P R E S S

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All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version.

The characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

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*In memory of Margaret Johnson,
who kept my first story...
and Lauri Klobas,
without whom the journey
would have taken longer,
and included a lot less confetti.*

I remember the borders of our land, though I have been gone from them nearly half the moons of my life. They are these: the hilltop stone to the north; Black Kettle Creek to the south; to the east, the lake where the warriors found me; and west, the bottomland acres where the corn and wheat were sown, hard by the track that led to Shiloh.

But who there will remember me? Who will know these sun-browned arms, these callused hands, these legs that stride mountains without tiring and stand me taller than other women? What I have seen, what I have done, it has changed me.

I am the place where two rivers meet, silted with upheaval and loss.

Yet memory of our land is a clear stream. I shall know it as a mother knows the faces of her children. I will walk its borders. I will search its ground for what was taken, and what was left behind. It may be I will find me there.

If the land remembers.



ONERAHTÓKHA

The Budding Time—April

New York Frontier, 1784

The woman who had been Burning Sky had kept off the warrior path that came down from the north through mountains, along the courses of rivers and creeks. Doing so meant traveling slow, over steep ground unfriendly to trudging feet, but she had not wanted to be seen by men on the path. Red men or white men.

She'd slept on the cold ground thirteen times before she saw the stone that marked the end of her journey—and the boundary of her papa's land, the place she once called home. Time had not dimmed it in her memory. The stone, tall as a man and pointed as a blade, thrust from the crest of a ridge. But with her step quickened and her gaze fixed on it as she neared, she failed to notice the dog slithering out of the laurel thicket below the stone, until the muddy animal stood in her path and showed its teeth.

The woman who had been Burning Sky halted, shaken less by the dog than by her own inattention. If Tames-His-Horse had been there, he would have scolded her for it.

He was not there, but another was.

The sun had slipped from behind clouds and sent a shaft of light lancing down the ridge into the laurels, full across the man lying in the thicket, showing her a booted foot, a length of knee breeches, a hand cradled on the breast of a brown coat. A white hand.

She caught her breath, while the blood thundered in her ears. When neither the man nor the dog moved, fear began to sift from her like chaff through a winnowing basket. The dog was only standing guard. But over the living or the dead?

It was tempting to assume the latter, but for this: the man lay on her

papa's side of the boundary stone. The significance of that settled on her, a heavier burden than the long-trail basket she'd carried on her back these many days. Maybe the man was dead and it would not matter what she did, but she could not turn her back and walk on as though she had not seen him.

There was still the problem of the dog in her way. It was one of those bred for bullying sheep, black and white, rough coated. The English word for it surfaced in her mind: *collie*.

The woman who had been Burning Sky slipped the tumpline from her forehead and the cord loops from her arms, lowering the basket to the ground. She gripped the musket slung at her side, even as she spoke kindly in the language of the People. "You are a good dog, guarding your man. *Tohske' wahi*. It is so?"

The collie did not alter its rigid stance.

It occurred to her the dog might not know the speech of the *Kanien'kehá:ka*, called Mohawks by the whites. She tried English, which felt to her like speaking with pebbles in the mouth.

"You will let me near him, yes?" She took a step toward the laurels. The collie moved its matted tail side to side. "Good dog."

She set her musket within reach and turned her attention to the man. He was too tangled in the laurels to have crawled in. Likely he'd fallen from the ridge above. Not a long drop, but steep. Closer now, she could see his face. Even for a white man, it was pale, the hollows of his closed eyes bruised, sickly. Hair almost black stuck to his brow in stiffened curls.

While the dog nosed her heels, she wrenched away twigs, keeping one eye on the man's still face. With the small hatchet from her sash, she hacked away larger branches, sending down a shower of leaves and insects, until she knelt beside the man. He had not stirred, but the warmth of his breath against her palm told her he lived. From the way he cradled his right arm across his chest, she knew it to be injured. His legs lay straight and seemed undamaged, save for scrapes where his leg coverings had torn in the fall.

Not leg coverings, she thought. *Stockings*.

She did not know about his ribs, or what hurts might lurk beneath them. Moving him might cause further injury, but he could not remain as he was, unless she stayed and cared for him. She tipped back her head, lifting her eyes to the boundary stone, then to the sky at which it pointed.

Why the man? Why now, so near her journey's end?

Neither the stone nor its Maker gave answer. For whatever inscrutable reason, the Great Good God—the Almighty—had placed this man in her path, as He'd removed so many others from it.

It did not seem a fair exchange. But sitting there, wishing it was not so, would change nothing. This she well knew.

Returning to the basket, she found a length of sturdy basswood cord. With the hatchet, she cut cedar saplings to serve for poles and crosspieces, then retrieved the elk hide from her bedding. Through all this and the building of the travois, the dog milled about, whining. She met its fretful gaze but had no promises to make it. She would do what she could.

Though she was strong for a woman, and tall, the man's deadweight proved no easy burden. While she maneuvered him out of the laurels, she expected him to rouse. But not until she knelt to secure him to the travois, sweating from the exertion, did she look up to find his eyes open. He had blue eyes—the drenching blue of trade beads—and they were fixed on her in glittering bewilderment and pain.

Responding to his pain, she touched his face to reassure him. His beard was coming in. The rasp of it against her palm stirred memories. Papa's face had sometimes rasped with stubble, against the touch of her childish hand. Not black stubble—reddish brown like her own hair. Was it red still, or had the years made it white?

Then she thought she should stop touching the face of this man who was not Papa, whatever memories he stirred, but her fingers stayed pressed to the cold, bristly cheek.

While she hesitated, bewilderment fled the man's blue-bead eyes,

replaced by something like awe, then a look she had not seen in another face since the day she watched the longhouse burn. He was gazing at her with the trust of a child, innocent and complete.

“Oh, aye, that’s all right, then,” he said. The warmth of his breath brushed her face as he exhaled, closing his startling eyes.

The woman who had been Burning Sky sat back on her heels, stabbed beneath her ribs by a blade so sharp she wanted to beat her breasts to drive it out. Never again had she wanted to see that look of trust on the face of the sick, the dying. She’d fled far, thinking she could outdistance that sorrowful pairing. Had she not seen suffering enough to fill a lifetime?

A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench. The words settled in her mind like a hand on the shoulder, large and steadying. She drew a breath through lungs that fought with grief for space inside her, and looked at the man on the travois. *A bruised reed.* There would be many such scattered over the land, broken and uprooted by the war just past. She was not the only one.

Though she was no longer adept at judging the ages of white men, this one seemed young. Not as young as she, though she doubted he was past thirty winters. No white threaded his hair, and the lines at the corners of his eyes were faintly drawn. The quality of his woolen coat marked him a man of consequence. *Not a farmer,* she thought.

She could not begin to guess why he was there, fallen on the edge of what the whites called the Great Northern Wilderness, a sea of forest rolling away in mounting crests to Canada, where the redcoat soldiers of the defeated English king had retreated since the war to lick their wounds. Was he someone Papa knew, here by his leave? If so, Papa would be glad she helped him.

She wanted Papa to be glad when he saw her again. *If* he saw her again.

Though the long winter had finally ended, the day was chill for the

moon of budding leaves. She unrolled her rabbit-skin cloak and spread it over the man. She gathered the few belongings she found scattered around him and secured them on the travois. One of those was a small glass bottle, dark with the liquid it contained. She uncorked the glass, put it to her nose, and grimaced at the bittersweetness of opium dissolved in spirits. Was this the reason he'd fallen, or had he found it afterward and dosed himself to bear his injuries? It explained why he had remained unconscious, save for that brief moment.

Perhaps, even then, he had been in a dream's grip and had not really seen her. Perhaps that look of trust had been for someone else. She greatly hoped so.

She corked the bottle and dropped it into her carrying basket.

The snow thaw had passed on the lower slopes, leaving only the marshy places impassable with mud. There on the ridge, the ground was moist but not saturated. Gripping the travois poles, she hoisted her burden and picked herself a path through the wide-spaced trees, while the dog followed.

Though the going now was even slower, the land beneath her feet grew more familiar with each step. In her mind she rushed ahead, seeing it in memory—its fertile dips and rocky ridges, the broad noisy creek called Black Kettle, the lake with its tiny islet, the broad flats where Papa grew his corn and wheat. The clearing where the barn and cabin stood. So close now.

Relief and dread warred in her belly.

She found the little stream where she remembered it to be, and the footpath that followed its winding course south, then east, then south again. She saw no tracks of men, but the deer had kept it clear. Though the travois passed with little hindrance, the man's weight dragged at her shoulders, causing a burn across the muscles of her back and arms. The basket's tumpline, tight across her brow, strained the bones of her neck. She turned her mind from the pain, continuing as she had done through each day of

her journey. One foot, then the other. A step, and another. As she went, she spoke aloud a name, one she had not heard for many years, and so she said it with care, her enunciation precise.

“Wil-helm-ina O-ben-chain.”

The collie trotted up beside her, ears perked, already accustomed to her voice. The woman who had been Burning Sky nodded to the dog, whose name she did not know.

“Wilhelmina Obenchain,” she said, more assuredly this time. “But you may call me Willa.”

She came down off the last ridge and halted at the northern edge of the long clearing. At the other end, on a slight rise near the far tree line, the cabin still stood. That much could be said.

A sweeping glance took in the rest of the homestead, or what remained of it. The charred bits of what had been the barn and crib and smokehouse. The pasture where the horse and cattle had grazed, choked with brush. The saplings advancing on the clearing her papa, Dieter Obenchain, had hacked from wilderness over twenty winters ago.

For more than half those winters, far to the north, she had pictured her parents, and Oma, going about their lives in this place, believing she would never see them again but comforted by such thoughts all the same.

Where was comfort to be found now? Where was Papa? Mama? With shaking arms she lowered the heavy travois to the weeds, then folded to her knees. Whatever army had done this burning, redcoat, bluecoat, or Longhouse warriors, they'd left no one to welcome her home.

And no one to spurn your homecoming, a dark voice countered.

She cringed from the voice, though it was no stranger. Had it not with every step of her journey insisted she was foolish to go back? She was better off alone, for to clear a path to her heart for another to tread was only to invite more grief. Had she not done so twice—loved two families, lived two lives? Both had been torn from her, ripping out great pieces of her soul in the taking. Why should she gather in that spilling wound again?

She should have listened to that voice. It had been right in its dark warning. Now it was taunting her, saying, *Why not sit in the weeds and wait to follow your precious lost ones?*

Why not, indeed?

The dog, bossy creature, would not let her do so. It shoved its nose

under her hand. It trotted toward the cabin, turned, and fixed her with expectant eyes. “Come, you,” it said, clear as speech.

It had some sense, that dog. She might not care whether she lived or died, but the man she’d hauled out of the laurel thicket would no doubt wish her to choose living. For now at least.

Willa Obenchain thrust down her grief and refused to think of past or future. The past could not be altered. The future would bring what it would. There was a now to deal with, and it needed all her strength to stand and meet it.

“All right. Let’s get your man inside and see what can be done for him, *hen’en?*”



The air inside the cabin swirled with stale memories, echoes of once-familiar voices trapped within, awaiting her coming to free them.

“Do ye gather in the eggs, Daughter, then help your mama with the bread.”

“Willa, it is well done. Turn and show me the back seams.”

“She’d make a passable sempstress, could she pull her nose from those frivolous books for more than an hour.”

The onslaught dizzied her as she lowered the travois and the man it supported—dragged in over the porch steps—before the hearth. As her eyes adjusted to the dimness, the memories receded, flowing past her and away. She propped the carrying basket against the paneled wall and looked about, heart thudding like a water drum, with the strangeness of hardwood under her feet again.

And it was hard. The main room of the cabin appeared reasonably sound. The roof had not leaked, nor the floor rotted. This was not too surprising. Her papa possessed a German sense of craftsmanship. What he’d made, he had made well.

Even so, something felt at odds with the cabin’s obvious abandon-

ment. The open door admitted light enough to show the main room swept clean. Hardly a cobweb draped the corners, except high up among the roof beams.

The cabin's state of cleanliness was not all that felt strange. There was order here, in contrast to the neglect outside. Kindling for a fire was laid in the hearth, wood stacked at the ready nearby. From the old iron cooking crane hung a battered kettle. She lifted the lid to find it scoured clean, half-filled with water. Most puzzling of all were the wildflowers tied with string, dried to brown now but clearly placed there by some caring hand, as one might put flowers on a grave.

Unease tightened Willa's chest.

The cabin's front room was stripped of furnishings, save for a trestle bench once belonging to their table. She began for the first time to wonder if her parents had survived the burning—and whatever violence attended it—taken away their belongings and gone east to Albany, or south to German Flats.

Or had the place been raided and stripped clean?

She'd heard accounts of the devastation the war between the Americans and the British had wrought upon New York's frontier. Homes and crops burned. Settlers murdered, captured, driven off their land. For all she knew, Papa's cabin now stood in the midst of an unpeopled wilderness—if not for the flowers, wood, and water.

The man on the travois did not stir while she coaxed a fire to life and swung the kettle over the flames. She did not think *he* had left the cabin thus. His dog had come inside with her, but with a wariness that told her this was not a place it knew. It watched her, sniffed the man over, and went out again.

She set the items she'd found among the laurels beside the hearth: canteen; satchel; a small glass that made things seen through it loom large; an odd container made of tin, round-sided and long, with a leather strap for carrying and a sliding pin for a clasp.

The man moved his head, turning it toward the hearth. The firelight revealed a faintly reddened patch of skin, high above his left eyebrow. Most of his hair was tailed back, but shorter wisps curled on his brow. Thinking she might have overlooked a wound that needed tending, she brushed the stiffened hair aside.

It was a wound, but one long since healed. The pinkish scar sliced a messy line along the man's hairline, from his temple halfway across his brow.

A knife blade had left that scar. A scalping blade.

She drew back from the man, a little shaken, and went to fetch her herb pouch, from which she extracted a measure of willow bark. When steam rose off the water in the kettle, she dipped a gourd cup full, added the bark, and set it on the hearth to steep. Whatever hurts he might have besides the arm, the bark would ease their pain. When the laudanum wore off.

Turning, she nearly stumbled over the man's satchel.

Before she could think twice, she crouched and reached inside. The first thing she touched was flat, broad, and leather covered. She pulled it out. With a furtive glance at the man, she unwound the string from the horn toggle that secured its flap.

She'd expected a journal, something written down that might give understanding of who the man was. What she found instead were drawings. In pencil, in ink, even in colored paint. Page after page of them, mostly of plants and flowers, now and then a bird or insect with the plant—all recognizable by their remarkable detail. They were carefully labeled, with notes on the borders. Or most of them were. No writing accompanied the last dozen likenesses.

The stillness outside the cabin was broken by the dog's sudden barking. Willa returned the sketchbook to the satchel, took up her musket, crossed to the door, and stood there blinking in surprise.

Somewhere the dog had found a nanny goat, a half-starved, brindled

creature, and was attempting to herd it across the cabin yard, creeping, crouching, circling around when the harried goat made a dash for the woods. Where it had come from was a mystery and made her wonder if it had belonged to her parents, or perhaps some other farm nearby, burned and abandoned like her own. She searched the sky above the wooded horizon, expecting to see smoke from another chimney.

There was no sign of neighbors.

After propping the musket by the door, she stepped off the porch and bent to wrench up a tuft of new spring grass. “Dog! Bring it this way. *Hahnio!*”

It was the goat that responded. Breaking off its escape with a protesting *bla-a-at*, it trotted straight to her outstretched hand.

Rolling its odd-pupiled eyes at the lurking collie, the goat followed Willa—or her handful of grass—around the porch to the addition her father had built when Opa died and Oma came up the creek from German Flats to live with them. This was the only part of the cabin that had fallen into disrepair. Half the roof was open to the sky, and the front timbers had rotted with rain and snow. The far corner timbers still stood solid, and the door to the main cabin was shut firm.

With some arranging of the fallen logs, Willa made a pen and with the help of the dog persuaded the goat inside it. She snatched up handfuls of grass for the creature, wondering after all that effort if it was not better to leave it loose and chance its staying. How would she feed it otherwise? She could not spare her seed corn. She needed every precious kernel. Perhaps she could build a proper pen. . .

If she decided to stay. Or to stay alive.

She was hearing voices again—women’s voices. The singing and chatter that flew above brown hands busy planting; tending kettles, fires, babies; scraping hides; weaving mats; piecing moccasins and dying quills. So many hands to make the work fly. The memories pierced like arrows through her chest, her throat, her burning eyes.

Desperately, she reached back to dimmer memories—Mama and Oma making soap, dipping candles, sewing quilts, husking corn—but even their time-blunted points could wound.

The dog nudged her palm, and with a shake of her head, she came back to the present, where no hands offered help. Did she have it in her to go on? Was there any point in it now?

The dog whined. Willa sighed.

“I have not forgotten your man.” She’d taken him into her care and under her roof—if she could call it that. She was obligated to see that decision through. What first, then? There was that arm she suspected was broken. If it needed to be set, best to do it before the laudanum wore off.

But when she came into the cabin, she found she was too late. The man had freed himself from the travois and was sitting up on it, looking about, blinking those eyes as blue as bits of sky fallen to earth. Dark brows soared at the sight of her, before he offered a tentative smile.

“’Tis not the first time I’ve waked to find myself cast upon the mercy of strangers,” he said, the words rolling over her, thick as corn porridge. “Though come to that—”

Whatever more he meant to say was cut short when the dog, hearing his voice, pushed past her, bolted joyfully across the cabin, and hurled itself at the man.