

Also by Frances Patton Statham

Bright Sun, Dark Moon

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The Roswell Women

The Roswell Legacy

The Silk Train

Mountain Legacy

Murder, al fresco

Frances Patton Statham

Bocage Books

To
Emily, Helen, and Sue

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Murder, *al fresco*



Prologue

“Did you get the key?”

“Yes. It’s hidden in my apartment where no one can find it.”

“Good.”

Lydia Garson Burnside, the aristocratic, white-haired matriarch, sat up in her hospital bed and nodded in satisfaction at Joie Chang, her longtime housekeeper.

“But nothing’s going to go wrong tomorrow,” Joie assured her. *“I’m told that angioplasty is quite a safe procedure.”*

“I know that, Joie, but I have to be careful to protect my granddaughters. Only if something happens to me and they come after either Carley or Morgan are you to give them the key. You’ll know when it’s time. Promise me.”

“Of course, Lydia.”

“Then, you’d better go. Carley’s waiting downstairs to take you home.”

Once Joie left, the nurse came in, carrying a tray of small white paper cups. *“Time for your sleeping pill, Mrs. Burnside,”* the nurse ordered, taking one of the cups and handing it to Lydia.

The hospital regimen was just as bureaucratic as another organization she was acquainted with, and it would not do to be listed as uncooperative. So, as the nurse watched, Lydia duly took the medication and then settled down for

the night.

Several hours later, a man dressed in a white coat entered the darkened room. He worked quietly so that he would not disturb the sleeping woman. Taking a syringe from his pocket, he injected a lethal dose of lidocaine into her IV bag. When he had finished, he smiled and vanished from the room. In less than ten minutes, Lydia Burnside would die of a massive heart infarction, and then she would no longer be a threat.



Chapter 1

"You should have seen it coming, Carley," her twin accused. "After all, it didn't happen overnight."

"Well, I haven't had as much experience with faithless husbands as you have, Morgan."

"You're certainly right about that. But at least, I didn't wind up completely poverty stricken."

"I've got to hang up, now. The light's turned green."

Carley Burnside's cell phone had rung just as she'd stopped at a red light in Fairhope, Alabama. As usual, Morgan was running late—this time for their appointment at Goose's office in downtown Mobile.

George Godwin Goosens, III, attorney-at-law, had been one of their grandmother's best friends, as well as her executor. But no one ever called him anything but *Goose*, one of those nicknames given to him in the first grade nearly sixty years previously and more than likely destined to follow him to the grave.

That was the problem with living almost one's entire life in the same town, Carley thought. Everyone knew entirely too much about everyone else. She resented terribly this insular grapevine, especially since she had been the gossip filler of conversations until Lucinda Bledsoe took over as the hottest topic on everyone's lips.

In fact, she had just come from Lucinda's new property in Point Clear, farther down the bay. Goose had given her name to Lucinda as a possible landscape designer, but

Carley had turned down the commission, even though she needed the job. Now, she was not looking forward to explaining her reasons to Goose.

Gran's death had come at the worst possible time in Carley's life. She still had not gotten over her husband's sudden request for a divorce. To make matters even worse, he had also seen to it that Sherrie, the other woman, had jumped several rungs in the corporate ladder of the architectural firm where he was a junior partner.

With that coup, Carley, who had been the undisputed star of the landscape side of the firm, was placed in an untenable situation. Her award-winning designs seemed to have been forgotten as the senior partner, Arthur Regan, explained, "You realize, of course, that it would be much too awkward for you to continue working at Regan, Barnes, and O'Reilly, especially with Sherrie on the job. But we will certainly recommend you to other firms."

Right. Well, she wouldn't hold her breath for that to happen.

The fog obscured the sides of the long causeway over Mobile Bay, and Carley had to concentrate on the brake lights in front of her. Soon, she was off the bridge and headed toward Cathedral Square downtown.

It had been a week since the funeral, and Goose had summoned Carley and Morgan for the reading of the will. The two were the only heirs, although there was little left to inherit. But through the years, they had received more important things than money from their paternal grandmother. It was Gran who had taken them in hand when they had suddenly become orphans at the age of twelve.

If she had determined to mold them in her own social image, she had done so with love—imparting the necessary skills that would assure their places in Mobile society, while arming them with enough education to make them self-sufficient.

That had meant dancing school, cotillions, being kind to

her friends—especially the Mardi Gras committee, who oversaw the selection of the Court—and pushing them toward all the volunteer work that looked good on their résumés and college transcripts.

Although Carley and Morgan were identical twins, blonde and green-eyed, Morgan was much more adept in the social world. She had a certain flair that caused heads to turn, whereas Carley was more conservative, preferring flowers and gardens to dinner parties. Her hands showed it, too—while Morgan's smooth, long fingers had never touched a trowel or bulb planter.

Carley suddenly smiled, remembering Gran and the secret that she had kept from Mobile society for twenty-five years. Her investment club had actually been a poker club with Goose, Edward Raines, and Henry Wetherbee. Each Wednesday night, the four had met while the Methodist Prayer Meeting suppers were taking place only a mile from her English Tudor, half-timbered house. But since the Burnsidés were Episcopalian, she wasn't missed. Yet, it did seem strange that none of her female friends had ever breached that particular secret. And it seemed even stranger to Carley that she and Morgan had been cautioned never to mention the club. It was almost as if something more clandestine were going on than a mere poker club disguised as an investment club. In the end, Carley finally decided that she had read too many mysteries in her childhood, and she attributed her questioning to an overactive imagination.

She turned on to Government Street, where a number of beautiful old historic houses were shaded by huge, moss-hanging live oaks. The only good thing about the Civil War was that the federal shells bombarding the city from the bay had been mostly duds, and so little damage was done to the residential areas. Many of those same houses that survived the cannons had been faithfully restored and now functioned as business or law offices.

Goose's office was in one of the most lavish houses on the street, with its white-columned porch and green stag-

horn ferns at the beveled-glass double doors beckoning clients inside. But Carley had seldom entered that front door.

She pulled into the driveway in her red Toyota truck and drove on to the graveled parking lot in the rear. The truck, with her landscape design logo emblazoned on the side, was one of the few things that she had kept after the divorce, since it was clearly in her name.

She walked up the steps and tapped on the back door of the office as her grandmother had always done. Far from being considered a tradesman's entrance, the back door had a special significance, indicating the closeness between visitor and occupant. Soon, Goose, himself, opened the screened door.

"How are you, darlin'?" he asked, giving her a big bear hug.

"It's been a difficult week, Goose."

"I know. I still can't believe Lydia's gone." As the two passed by his assistant's desk, he said, "Agnes, I'd be pleased if you could get Carley and me a cup of coffee, and maybe some of those orange-chocolate cookies that she likes so much."

Goose must have realized that Carley needed comfort food. Coffee, too, since she had not stopped for breakfast.

"Morgan called. She's going to be a few minutes late," Carley informed him.

"Then we'll have time to chat on our own until she gets here."

Goose was a wonderful old white-haired gentleman—among the last of that genteel world of earlier Mobile that was fast vanishing with the influx of new industries. But make no mistake; he was still one of the major power brokers.

Agnes was almost as old as Goose, but she had recently colored her hair a bright strawberry blonde and had started working out every Saturday at the new yoga sanctuary next door to the art gallery.

"How is the yoga class, Miss Agnes?" Carley asked as Agnes brought in the silver tea service with bone china cups and placed them on the coffee table between the cordovan leather chairs.

"Coming along quite well. It's a great de-stresser."

"Then, maybe I need to check it out."

Agnes smiled and discreetly left the room.

The first thing that Carley had noticed when she walked into his office was Goose's antique mahogany desk, which was usually cluttered with papers. Today, all the papers were gone. In their stead was a deck of cards, carefully splayed into a fan-shaped design.

Puzzled, Carley looked again at the desk, but then Goose quickly diverted her attention. "So, how did the appointment with Lucinda go?"

"I turned down the job, Goose. People keep putting up unpleasant signs around her yard. And I just couldn't see my landscape sign as a companion to all the graffiti."

"Well, I can't say that I blame you," he admitted.

Lucinda was also one of Goose's longtime clients, but she had not taken his advice in her most recent endeavor.

Instead, this seventy-two-year-old widow had married her thirty-six-year-old chauffeur and handyman, who had spent time in prison. Rumor had it that he had murdered someone.

Lucinda was from a fine old family that had first settled at Dauphin Island and made a fortune in shipping and timber. This unfortunate marriage had caused an immediate estrangement from her family and friends. Miffed, she had sold her home in the city and purchased property farther down the bay. But her new neighbors were equally aghast. Soon protest signs had begun appearing all along her driveway.

Goose reached for a cookie. After he had taken a bite, he said, "Carley, you know Boris Cavanaugh, don't you?"

"Not personally. But anybody who passes through Fairhope knows of his artists' colony. Why do you ask?"

"Because of something he said last week, he might be a potential client for you. I could give him a call while we're waiting for Morgan."

"Goose, I really appreciate your trying to help me out, but I'd rather you didn't."

"And why not?"

"I need to find work on my own."

By that time, he had already risen from his chair and headed toward his desk. "Just this one call," he insisted.

"Then, I think I'll go and talk with Agnes while you make it." Carley took her coffee cup and another cookie with her and stepped into the hallway.

Almost immediately, she heard the reckless crunch of Morgan's Jaguar on the gravel, and then a door slam. So, carefully balancing her coffee cup, she changed directions and walked into the foyer toward the front door. Morgan never entered back doors.

"I do wish Goose would pave his parking area," her twin complained immediately. "Pea gravel is so hard on good shoes."

Morgan was wearing the perfect color to enhance her blonde looks—a sherbet green silk Mizrahi suit, with matching high-heeled sandals.

"I see that you're wearing green today, too," Carley said with a smile.

Examining her twin's white slacks and navy blue linen blazer, Morgan in all seriousness said, "I'm sure that Raymond can get the grass stain out of your slacks. He's really good."

It was a standing family joke—Carley's propensity for ruining her clothes. Even dressed for a party, she couldn't seem to resist pulling up one last weed, as she left her yard behind.

"Hello, Morgan. Good to see you."

During the exchange, Goose had come into the hallway. "It's all settled, Carley. I've set up an appointment for you to see Boris. Now, you two come into my office."

"What was that all about?" Morgan asked.

"A potential job."

"Oh."

Without being asked, Agnes had another coffee cup ready for Morgan and, within a few moments, Goose became the family executor, explaining the contents of their grandmother's will.

"As you both know, Lydia left a small insurance policy for each of you. The only tangible property she had were the two houses."

"Two houses?" Morgan and Carley chimed at almost the same second.

"Are you counting the old carriage house in the backyard?" Carley asked.

"No. That's considered part of the Mobile property. She also owned a small villa in France, which she rented out."

"Well, that's certainly news to us," Morgan said. Carley agreed.

"And since there are two of you, each will inherit a house."

When Morgan became thoughtful, she always bit her lower lip. "Did she specify who gets which one?"

"Not exactly." Goose coughed, as if slightly embarrassed. "You know how Lydia always enjoyed games of chance."

"Oh, no." Carley suddenly realized why the cards had been spread out on the desk. "We're going to draw for them."

Goose nodded. "So we might as well get on with it." He paged Agnes, saying, "You can bring in the video camera now, Agnes."

As much as Carley loved the large old house in Mobile, she was aware of the repairs that it needed, especially to the slate roof. The property in France would more than likely need some upgrades, too, but the idea of owning a villa in Europe was instantly more compelling.

Although their grandmother's death had been a shock, it was not unexpected, since they'd known about her heart for a long time.

But Carley thought that it had been particularly callous of Bob and Sherrie to announce their marriage in the *Mobile Register* only one day after Gran's obituary had appeared. If the villa became hers, then there was nothing to keep her from leaving Mobile behind. For the first time in weeks, she felt a rush of enthusiasm.

She had already worked in Europe as a former member of the firm—to develop a community park in Brussels, and an environmentally friendly playground near Amsterdam. If she had a European base, then she was sure that she could find other work there, while allowing time for her personal wounds to heal.

With the camera recording the event, Goose explained the procedure to be followed. Facing the camera, Goose said, "Today is Friday, July 12,—. In my office are Carleton LeMoyne Burnside and Countess Morgan Burnside-Bramante, heirs to the estate of the late Lydia Garson Burnside. According to her last will and testament, and with the desire not to show partiality to either of her granddaughters, the decedent has stipulated that her two heirs are to draw cards for the two houses, which constitute the bulk of her estate.

"On my desk is a deck of cards, face-down and in no particular order. The decedent has also stipulated that two draws are to be made; the first to determine which house is to be considered, and the second draw to determine who wins that house. The granddaughter with the lower number in the second draw automatically receives the other house."

"My God!" Morgan exclaimed. "She's still playing games beyond the grave."

Carley laughed at the ludicrous situation, so like Gran to devise.

"Who goes first?" she asked Goose.

"The draw will be simultaneous. So both of you step behind my desk and face the camera," he instructed. When the two had done so, he continued. "Now, each of you may pick up a card."

Morgan and Carley reached at the same time—Carley, with her right hand and Morgan with her left. "What's yours?" Morgan asked, looking down at her own card while she waited for Carley's reply.

"The queen of spades. And yours?"

"The ten of diamonds. So I guess you'll decide which house we'll draw for."

"The villa in France," Carley immediately responded.

Again they drew cards while the whirl of the video camera indicated that their every move was being recorded.

Carley was afraid to look at her second card. Instead, she clutched it to her blazer while she said a silent prayer. *Oh, please. Let me get the villa.*

"Hold up the cards for the camera, please."

They did so, while Goose explained, "Carley has drawn the jack of clubs."

She held her breath and waited. "But Morgan has drawn the ace of spades. So let it be recorded that Morgan receives the villa at Milly-la-Forêt, while Carleton inherits the Mobile house."

How disappointed Carley was! Instead of running away, she was destined, by the luck of the draw, to remain in Mobile.