

Also by Frances Patton Statham

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The Roswell Legacy

The Silk Train

Murder, al fresco

Mountain Legacy

Phoenix Rising

Frances Patton Statham

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To the memory of
the three hundred American nurses who died while
on active duty overseas
in World War I

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I am happy to present this second edition of the novel that received a number of awards, including Georgia Author of the Year in Fiction.

Frances Patton Statham

Phoenix Rising

Prologue

April 1914

EACH YEAR, FOR AS LONG AS KENNA COULD REMEMBER, the Irish horse traders had come to Atlanta, with the king of the clan riding at the head of the procession.

Today, amid the blossoming of dogwoods and azaleas, they had finally arrived to bury their dead and to marry each other.

Gaudy gypsy wagons—miles of them—and sleek, glistening horses ridden proudly by arrogant, dark-haired men kicked up the dust in the streets, causing businesses to close down and women and children to scamper to safety until the horse traders had passed by with their yearlings and foals, newly come from the spring grazing pastures.

O'Hara, Carroll, McNamara, Sherlock. These were not ordinary gypsies, but sons of Erin, descendants of a single clan that had come to America in the 1850s and dispersed to the South in a wandering, nomadic life, trading their horses, living off the land, and meeting once a year for their celebration of life and death.

Gold coins around the men's necks caught the sunlight and Kenna, standing on the street corner, shaded her eyes, yet continued to watch for fear of missing even one small portion of the colorful procession.

Her lips curved into a smile at the sight of an awkward foal nuzzling its mother's side and then loping on.

As one wagon passed by, an old woman sat in the back and turned the fortune card—face up. Suddenly, her gnarled

hand lifted the curtain. With blue, piercing eyes, she searched the crowd until she saw the small blond-haired girl on the corner.

Crossing herself, the old woman let the curtain drop and returned to her cards.

One

May 1917

TWIN GUARD BOXES AT THE ENTRANCE TO FORT McPherson towered above the blinding rim of late afternoon sun as the Campbellton Road trolley eased to a stop two blocks away.

Kenna Chalmers stepped down to the pavement and waited until the trolley, its bell clanging loudly, continued on its journey. Then with a quick glance toward the guards, she edged near the evergreen hedge that separated the military post from the deserted sidewalk.

On the opposite side of the street, German prisoners of war, sailors from the captured *Kronprinz Wilhelm*, were out for their evening exercise behind the tall barbed-wire enclosure. They shaded their eyes from the sun and watched the movement of the slender, blond-haired girl.

Kenna hurried to escape their stares, quickly pushing herself through the small opening between the hedge and the spiked iron fence surrounding the fort. She gathered up her skirts and with one foot wedged between the spikes, she hoisted herself and jumped onto the government property.

Landing agilely on her feet, she sighed with relief and reached down to smooth her rumpled skirt.

"You'd do well to go through the main gate," a male voice taunted from beside her, "especially at this time of day."

Kenna recognized the deep masculine voice before she turned and saw the man astride his giant white horse.

Startled, she looked up to meet the contemptuous glower of Irish Fitzpatrick. Her eyes darkened and her cheeks flamed with embarrassment at being caught climbing the fence.

"I'll enter any way I choose," she retorted, her haughty voice disguising the chagrin she felt. When she started to pass, the soldier moved his horse in front of her, blocking her way.

"Not if the guard catches you, Miss Chalmers. You're subject to the same regulations as the rest of us. You could have been shot for your actions just now."

"Please get out of my way," Kenna demanded. "I'm late."

Irish made no attempt to comply with her demand. He remained motionless, his eyes taking in the student nurse's uniform, the slender fingers clutching the scarlet and blue cape, the long, pale moonspun hair with its damp tendrils escaping from the severely twisted knot at the nape of her neck. Kenna felt her anger mounting. How dare he keep her pinned to the iron railing against her will while his eyes devoured her like this.

She stamped her foot and brushed against the horse in a bid to get free. The animal reared at her sudden movement and, dodging a dangerous hoof, she darted past.

Kenna didn't heed the disturbance behind her. Totally ignoring Irish's effort to calm his mount, she began to walk briskly down the worn, dusty trail.

The sound of hooves directly behind her told her, without looking back, that she was being followed. Yet, Kenna had no intention of turning her head to acknowledge either horse or rider.

Suddenly, Kenna's feet left the ground and her body was suspended as a strong muscular arm encircled her midriff to draw her roughly against the rippled sinews of horseflesh.

"Put me down," she shouted, struggling against the iron grip. But the man's arms merely tightened as the ground underneath Kenna swept by with alarming speed.

The jolt of each rise and fall of rhythmic cadence as the horse galloped along the hard trail matched the rapid beating of Kenna's heart. Around her, the landscape spun in a whirl of colors, changing from pattern to pattern.

The man was mad—brutal in his anger—out of all proportion to her burst of defiance. But there was nothing she could do until he finally came to his senses.

Completely at his mercy, Kenna closed her eyes and held tightly to Irish Fitzpatrick, for fear of falling and being trampled by the surging animal.

As she sensed her body shifting Kenna moaned and clung to the man even more. Then she felt the hard leather of the saddle. She was no longer suspended, but secure, with his arms about her, the gait of the horse slowing from a runaway gallop to a steady trot and finally to a walk.

Irish's breath touched her ear and Kenna arched her back to avoid the closeness. Then, taking a tentative look, she blinked and waited for the trees to stop their unnatural swaying.

She listened for the man to make an apology, but he remained silent. Kenna turned and looked into brown, penetrating eyes the color of ripe, golden tobacco. She saw only anger. Matching his indignant stare, she accused, "You had no right to..."

The tightening of his arm around her waist cut off her breath. "*You* had no right to behave so foolishly," Irish interrupted. "You're just an empty-headed little society snob who's determined to play at war but can't be bothered to obey the simplest rules."

The fury that Kenna had fought to control erupted. "Go to hell, Irish Fitzpatrick," she screamed at him, pummeling his chest in an effort to free herself.

His laugh rang out over the deserted trail. "Hardly the Florence Nightingale oath," he commented and waited for her to stop struggling. His smile left his rugged face, and his jaw tightened. "One day soon, we *both* might be in hell," he

warned. "I have no choice. But there's still time for you to back out."

He looked down into the mutinous gray eyes and urgently whispered, "Forget about going overseas. Go *home*, Kenna Chalmers. Go home," he repeated, "to your tea dances and your alms for the children of Belgium."

The slap intended for his face was aborted as he caught her hand. In frustration, Kenna cried out, "I'll never back out. Never."

"Then heaven help you," he said, a grimness suddenly invading the arrogant brown eyes. He released his hold and immediately she slid to safety.

She stood and watched as he galloped away. A disquieting foreboding caused her to shiver until he disappeared in a cloud of dry red Georgia dust. Why was he so angry with her? For taking a shortcut over the fence? Or for frightening his horse? Kenna straightened her uniform and wiped her dusty shoes with her handkerchief before hurrying toward the base hospital. But the words spoken by Irish Fitzpatrick still rankled. Empty-headed. Little society snob. That's what he'd called her, as if she weren't capable of anything but wearing satin dance slippers and raising money for relief.

Aware that her effort to save time had failed miserably, and that she was even farther away from the hospital because of Irish's abduction, Kenna quickened her pace. She passed the Victorian red brick barracks where soldiers, finished with duties of the day, lounged on the porches. Ignoring the men, she walked on. The tree-lined avenue of officers' houses appeared on the right and reiterated the color of the trainees' quarters, but with added gingerbread trim and stone turrets and yards filled with spring flowers.

Kenna had no time to stop and admire the residences or oak leaves unfurling in a glory of green on the lawns. Her thoughts and actions were now centered on getting to the

hospital and washing up, before her supervisor, Miss Dacus, missed her on the wards.

At the corner, the base hospital loomed into view. Walking beyond the hospital sign, Kenna went up the steps and paused at the door. Before her fingers touched the knob, the door was jerked open and she quickly stepped aside to avoid collision.

"It seems my last warning was not sufficient for you, Miss Chalmers." The grating voice matched the hostility in the hawk eyes staring at her.

Kenna drew in her breath. "Miss Dacus..."

"There'll be no excuses for your tardiness this time, young woman. I've made up my mind. You can come by my office in the morning for your dismissal papers."

Numbed by this unlucky encounter, Kenna remained silent. Yet her expression revealed her disappointment more eloquently than mere words. The cape suddenly felt heavy on her shoulders, and the slender girl with the silver-blond hair visibly drooped.

"Did you get the typhoid serum for me, Miss Chalmers?" a man's voice inquired, seemingly oblivious to the tension between the two women.

"Serum?" Kenna repeated. "No, sir. I..."

"You sent Miss Chalmers on an errand, Dr. Grant?" Miss Dacus asked in surprise. "She was due to relieve Miss Hannon on the wards ten minutes ago."

Dr. Grant's eyebrows lifted at the woman's harsh voice. He looked at Kenna and back to Miss Dacus. In a cold voice he said, "I trust Miss Chalmers won't get into trouble for following my orders."

And then, as if the matter were too insignificant to bother with, he strolled past them to the steps and onto the sidewalk.

Miss Dacus, her face flushed at the reprimand, returned her attention to Kenna. She looked her over from the repaired knot of her silky hair to the hastily cleaned shoes.

Kenna forced herself to keep still and waited uneasily for the inspection to end.

"What happened to your uniform? It's dusty."

Kenna's heart sank. For a moment, she had been hopeful that Davin had saved her. But she should have known that her untidiness would not go unnoticed. She was still going to be dismissed. Miss Dacus would see to that.

"It's my fault entirely," Kenna answered with a weariness to her voice. "I got in the way of the cavalry."

"You realize, of course, that you can't go on the wards in a dirty uniform."

"Yes, Miss Dacus."

Disheartened, Kenna turned to leave, but the next words stopped her. "So you might as well report to Jackson to help her scrub the convalescent porch."

"You mean..."

"Put on one of the green aprons, Miss Chalmers, and get to work. You're over fifteen minutes late."

Irish Fitzpatrick sat in the officers' quarters, his face shadowed by an intense frown. He couldn't get Kenna Chalmers out of his mind. How could he—with the feel of her body wrapped in his arms and the newspaper clipping burning a hole in his pocket? He pulled out the picture, creased and worn from his constant fingering. PATRIOTIC DEBUTANTES JOIN NURSE CORPS, the headline read. Staring at him was Kenna Chalmers with her dark-haired friend Steppie Hannon. He didn't bother to look at the other girl. He was interested only in the silver-haired Kenna, with her high cheekbones and innocent, wide eyes that denied the sensuality apparent in the shape of her mouth.

He remembered the first time he had seen her up close, when he had been thrown by Godrin before the horse had accepted him as master. He had limped to the post hospital to have his finger set, and Kenna Chalmers had been on duty behind the desk. He couldn't believe his eyes, looking

at the small, porcelain figure before him. Staring at the picture again, Irish felt his rage growing—at Kenna's family for allowing it and at the army nurse corps for accepting her for training.

Hefty, raw-boned girls from the country were much better suited to care for the wounded; for they were less likely to flinch at the sight of blood, the slaughter and the carnage. But it would serve her right—this foolhardy Kenna Chalmers—to be shipped off to Europe.

She wouldn't last long, Irish thought. That was for sure. One battle, and one man with his guts hanging out, would be enough to send her scampering home. With a sense of satisfaction, Irish folded the newspaper clipping and pushed it back into his breast pocket.

The hot soapy water and the strong disinfectant took their toll on Kenna's delicate white skin, but she paid no attention to the stinging of her hands, or to the discomfort of her knees on the hard gray boards of the convalescent porch. Kenna didn't even mind that Jackson had disappeared, leaving most of the scrubbing to her. Miss Dacus had not dismissed her. She still had a chance.

Her only companion was a fly that buzzed about the electric light bulb hanging from the ceiling. Off and on, the fly, bombarding the screen, frantically searched for some escape. Back and forth from light to screen it went, until exhausted from its fruitless search for freedom, it lit on a wooden slat.

Then the sound of a wet brush scrubbing against the grain of the wooden floor planks took over, marring the silence. Only a few more boards and then she would be finished. A strand of hair fell across her face, but when Kenna reached out to push it from her forehead, she collided with another hand that smoothed the wayward curl.

Startled at the encounter, she looked up into the concerned blue eyes of Dr. Davin Grant. He gently clasped

her red hand as he knelt beside her on the floor.

"Kenna – Kenna," he whispered.

"Thank you, Dr. Grant," she said, "for rescuing me from Miss Dacus."

He winced at the formality as she removed her hand from his larger one. "We're alone, Kenna. You don't have to be so formal with me."

"I'm still on duty," she replied and reached again for the scrub brush.

"I should have let her dismiss you. It would have put an end to all this."

"No, Davin," Kenna remonstrated and suddenly looked around to make sure she hadn't been overheard. In a softer voice she continued, "I have to get to France and this is the only way. *You* know that, don't you?"

"He's dead, Kenna. Why do you torture yourself?"

The stubborn jut of her chin caught the harsh glare of the light bulb. "No one saw him die."

"The plane was shot down –"

"But it didn't catch fire," Kenna added, suddenly standing up. "Don't you see? There's still a chance. So many things could have happened –"

"Your brother crashed behind enemy lines, Kenna," David said, his voice sounding brutal.

"That doesn't automatically mean that Neal's dead." Her voice disturbed the fly and once again the buzzing started, back and forth from light bulb to screen. "I...I have to finish the porch," Kenna said and sank to her knees again.

A frustrated Davin Grant took one last look at the slender, determined figure, and then walked down the hall to his office on the second floor.

The conversation with Davin had effectively taken Kenna's mind off her encounter with Irish Fitzpatrick. Now left alone, she continued her chore mechanically while she reexamined the events that had made her so late to the fort in the first place – seeing to the house and taking Neal's

black roadster out for its weekly run.

Kenna could still hear the family servant's disapproving words spoken only an hour before at the house on Boulevard, as she hurriedly changed back into her nurse's uniform for the trolley ride to Fort McPherson.

"But I worry about you, Miss Kenna, down at that army fort. If your grandmama was still alive, she wouldn't be allowin' you to live there with all those soldiers."

"You sound as if I'm sleeping in the barracks with them, Verbena," she'd protested.

The black woman snorted. "Don't get smart with me, missy. As for bein' in the nurses' dormitory, it ain't much of a step above that. Better for you to be back home where you belong, and where I can keep an eye on you."

"Just keep an eye on the house, Verbena. That's all I ask. I want it to be spotless when Neal comes home," she added.

Kenna smiled and handed the week's wages to the woman. "I'll see you the same time next week."

The plump black woman put the envelope in her apron pocket. Muttering to herself, she walked out of the house and trudged down the path to the servant's house in the backyard.

As Kenna continued scrubbing the convalescent porch, a great love welled inside her for the woman who had taken care of her and shared all her joys and her hurts from the moment she was born.

Verbena had been her strength during those terrible months after her parents had gone down with the *Titanic*. And for four years, she had served as a buffer between the rebellious Kenna and her aged, aristocratic grandmother, until that link too had been severed by death.

Now, only her half brother, Neal, remained. And it was left to Kenna to find him, wherever he might be.

She mustn't forget to make arrangements at the bank for Verbena's wages to be paid while she was overseas.