

Also by Frances Patton Statham

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Trail of Tears

The Silk Train

Mountain Legacy

THE ROSWELL LEGACY



Frances Patton Statham

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Library of Congress Card Number: 00-191113

ISBN: 0-9675233-1-1
(Previously ISBN: 0-449-90250-1)

First Edition: September 1988 by Ballantine Books
Second Edition: August 2000 by Bocage Books
Third Printing: October 2008

Cover Design by Steve McAfee

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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CHAPTER

I



“Fool! Do you realize what you’ve done, Charles? Thrown over everything I’ve worked so hard for these last twenty years. And made *bastards* of our children, too.”

Araminta’s voice was harsh, stabbing. He *had* been a fool. But it was not because he’d accepted the Washington appointment, nor even because he’d chosen to leave England. It had happened long ago, when he’d married Araminta, his wife’s sister-in-law. He’d never meant to go near her again. The Bermuda high winds were responsible—they had damaged the British frigate, *Haddington*, forcing the captain to put into the Savannah harbor for repairs and spewing the passengers, including Charles, onto dry land.

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The storm had proved as disastrous to Charles as to the ship, and the damage to Charles had been more far reaching.

Dr. Charles Coin Forsyte tried to conceal his pain at Araminta's accusation, even as he had taken great care earlier to conceal his true identity from the world, changing the spelling of his last name and choosing to be called Charles, rather than Coin, to protect Allison from any chance of future scandal.

He tried to sound clinical and dispassionate, for Araminta had an uncanny knack of ferreting out any sign of emotional attachment and ripping it to shreds.

"My turning up alive, after all these years, is bound to be a shock to Allison. But I'm sure she'll see what's at stake and not say anything to jeopardize our children's happiness."

Araminta suddenly pressed her lips into what, for her, passed for a smile. "Or her position as Senator Meadors's wife. It would be rather difficult, don't you agree, for her to explain to him that she's a bigamist."

Charles's careful facade cracked. "When she married him, Araminta, she thought I was dead. And remember," he warned, "if the truth gets out, you have just as much to lose as Allison."

Araminta's smile turned into a pout. She picked up another chocolate-covered cherry and popped it into her plump mouth. The juice squirted through the gap made by the newly pulled tooth and she quickly wiped her chin with a lace handkerchief retrieved from the bosom of her pale blue afternoon gown.

"You should stop eating so many chocolates, Araminta. The excess weight isn't good for your heart."

She ignored her husband's warning.

"I'll always rue the day when, behind our backs, Ginna

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was introduced to that Meadors boy. It seems almost incestuous, having them—"

"For God's sake, Araminta. They're not related at all. Now if Morrow and Nathan had become interested in each other, then that would have been another matter entirely."

"That's silly. Nathan is only eleven."

"I was merely making a point."

"Well, I still don't like it."

"Neither do I. But it's too late now."

Charles stood up, walked to the window, and peered out at the quiet Washington street. Congress was in recess until August and most of the lawmakers were back home courting their constituents. Only a few of the more dedicated men were left to deal with the upcoming special session.

The summer sun was still high in the sky, but the giant elm trees lining the avenue shaded the front sitting room of the brownstone he had recently leased. Finally, in the distance, Charles could see the familiar carriage from the White House approaching. It looked no different from any ordinary carriage, for secrecy was of the utmost importance.

"I have to go now, Araminta." Charles picked up his medical kit and forced himself to walk over to the chair to kiss his wife good-bye. "You won't be able to reach me for the next several days. But if you need anything, just get in touch with Hadley at the clinic."

"I think it's inexcusable of you, Charles, to leave me just at this particular time and not even tell me where you're going."

"You'll survive, Araminta. You always do."

There was a discreet tap on the door. "The driver's waiting, Dr. Forsyte."

"Thank you, Barge. Did you put my suitcase in the carriage?"

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"Yes, sir." The white-coated manservant followed the surgeon and held open the front door. He knew better than to offer to carry the medical kit. Dr. Forsyte was peculiar about that, as Barge well knew.

From the window at the upstairs landing, a worried Ginna Forsyte watched her father's progress down the walkway. As he opened the gate to the street, she called out, "Good-bye, Papa."

Surprised, he turned and looked up at the open window. What was his daughter doing at home in the middle of the afternoon rather than at the art institute? Oh, God, he hoped she hadn't overheard his heated conversation with Araminta.

He waved. "Good-bye, Ginna."

Charles settled into the carriage and prepared himself for the long drive to the yacht basin. By the next day, he would be in New York, where the best team of surgeons in the nation was being assembled. Once the operating room had been set up on Benedict's private yacht, which was waiting on the banks of the East River, then the doctors and nurses would be prepared to receive their clandestine patient: President Grover Cleveland.

With the life of the president in jeopardy, Dr. Charles Coin Forsyte pushed aside his own family problems. He would have to deal with them later.

For Allison Forsyth Meadors, the month of July was an old wound that she tried to forget every year. She was now in her forties—past time for all vestiges of the earlier trauma to have disappeared entirely. But like a scar that forms a distinctively patterned ridge and begs for occasional remembrance even as it fades, the calendar prompted her

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to remember the war and the tragic events that had made her a widow and then a wife again.

The light tap on the open door elicited no response. Finally, Jonathan, her son, spoke. "If you're going to call on Ginna's mother this afternoon, don't you think you should finish getting ready instead of staring into the looking glass?"

Jonathan's amused eyes met hers, and she smiled. "Yes, of course."

Allison quickly picked up the jaunty silk hat and placed it on her head. With no sense of self-consciousness, she stood and waited for Jonathan's inspection. The years had been kind to her, and today Allison was glad, especially for her son's sake. She had no wish to embarrass him before the family of the young woman he wanted to marry.

"Well?"

He nodded, taking in the smart green silk dress with pleats that fell to the floor and the matching hat with a black veil that barely masked the brightness of his mother's amethyst eyes.

Six months ago, he'd thought he would never find another human being half as beautiful. That is, until he met Ginna.

He tried to sound nonchalant. "You'll do. Especially for an old lady." Then he grinned and reached out to give her a hug.

She pushed him away and straightened her hat. "Such extravagant compliments. I don't know how you manage them."

Allison retrieved her purse from the dressing table, opened it to make sure she had her engraved calling cards, and then, seeing them, snapped the purse shut.

"Has Browne brought the carriage around front?"

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"Yes, Mother. He's been waiting for the past ten minutes."

They walked down the winding stairs to the front entrance. The oval-glass-paneled door opened onto a carefully painted porch, where feathery green ferns sat on top of twin balustrades standing guard at the steps.

Allison paused on the walkway and turned to her son. "If your father gets home before I do, tell him I haven't forgotten the dinner party tonight." At his nod, Allison resumed walking toward the carriage.

Jonathan Meadors stood by the hitching post and watched until the carriage pulled out of the circular driveway. Usually cool and self-assured, he felt perspiration trickling down his collar. He was actually nervous about this duty meeting between the two mothers—the same feeling he had when awaiting the outcome of a close horse race. He laughed at himself as he took out a clean linen handkerchief and wiped his brow. Better to keep his mind on the thoroughbreds. Let his charming mother take care of the social amenities.

"Oh, Maudie, I've changed my mind," Ginna said. "Hand me the pink dress instead. Papa always says I look best in pink. And I *do* want to look my best when I meet Jonathan's mother this afternoon."

"Won't matter much what you wear, Miss Ginna. I don't think you'll be seeing Mrs. Meadors today, after all."

"She isn't coming?"

"Oh, she's coming, all right. Only I just heard your mama tell Barge to bring the carriage around back for you and Mr. Nathan. That you'd both be leaving in a few minutes for your sister's house."

A crestfallen Ginna looked at the maid, who was hanging

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up the yellow silk organza. "But I came home early from the art institute to supervise Clara in the kitchen. To make sure everything would be perfect: the silver trays polished, the tea biscuits exactly right. I'll just die if I'm sent away without meeting her. Mummy can't do this to me, Maudie."

"Not much you can do to stop her, Miss Ginna, if she makes up her mind. She's done it to you before."

Maudie was right. And the few times she had tried to rebel or cross her mother had resulted in an even worse situation. No, she had too much to lose, this time. Her mother might find some way of keeping her from marrying Jonathan.

"Then I suppose I'll wear the yellow dress after all, Maudie."

Later, a dispirited Ginna slowly walked down the stairs to the parlor. A fidgety Nathan was already waiting.

He was small for his age, and slender, with unruly blond hair that took only a few minutes to escape from the brush's attempt at control. Below his dark cotton knickers, his left sock was already three inches below his right one. He was busy cupping his hands to make the funny squeak his new friend, Pinky, had shown him.

"Stop that awful noise, Nathan," Araminta admonished her son just as Ginna walked into the parlor. At her daughter's appearance, she forgot about Nathan.

"Well, you certainly took long enough to get dressed. Mr. Meador's mother is due any moment."

"I'm sorry, Mummy."

"I've told you, Ginna, to stop calling me Mummy. We're not in England anymore. People around here might think you're talking to some ancient Egyptian relic on display at the Smithsonian."

When Ginna looked as if she might sit down, Araminta

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chided her again. "The carriage is waiting, Ginna. I've decided you and Nathan will be better off over at Cassie's house this afternoon. First meetings between mothers are always awkward."

"Please, won't you let me stay, even for a little while?"

"No, Ginna. The marriage isn't certain. Your father may not like the Meadors family. And it will be much better this way, for you not to become involved with them before matters are settled one way or the other."

Ginna's face turned white. Not to marry Jonathan? He was her life, her future. It had been so unbelievable that he had chosen her—a nobody—from all of the others. Senator Meadors had an impeccable reputation in Washington, as well as in his home state of Kentucky. He had money, position, and integrity, and his son was exactly like him. So how could her mother even *peak* of his family in that way?

"Go with your sister, Nathan. No, not out the front door. The carriage is in the alleyway. I don't want you to bump into Mrs. Meadors coming down the street."

A few moments later, as a disheartened Ginna climbed into the waiting carriage, Nathan said, "Don't cry, Ginna. Here, you can hold Green Boy if you want." Nathan reached into his pocket and pulled out a frog.

Ginna laughed as she brushed away a tear. "What are you going to do with him when we get to Cassie's house?"

"I thought you might hide him in your purse for me. Then I can take him out when Cassie isn't looking."

"It's going to be a long, dreadful afternoon, Nathan."

"That's why I brought Green Boy along. You'll help me, won't you, Ginna?"

"Yes. But I don't think I want to hold him just now, thank you."

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When the Forsyte family carriage began to wheel out of the alleyway, Ginna peered down the street. She watched as a smart open carriage, pulled by two matching black horses, approached their house and came to a halt.

"Barge, stop the carriage, please."

"You forgot something, Miss Ginna?"

"No. I just want to see the woman getting out of the other carriage. Then we can go on."

From her carriage, which was partially hidden from view by the elm trees, Ginna saw the woman alight from the other carriage and walk toward the front door. She was dressed in cool green silk, and even from a distance, Ginna could tell that Jonathan's mother was slender and beautiful.

When the woman disappeared down the walkway, Ginna said, "You may drive on, Barge."