

Also by Frances Patton Statham

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Bright Sun, Dark Moon

Flame of New Orleans

Jasmine Moon

Daughters of the Summer Storm

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From Love's Ashes

On Wings of Fire

To Face the Sun

The Roswell Legacy

Mary Musgrove, Queen of Savannah
(former title: Call the River Home)

Trail of Tears

The Silk Train

Mountain Legacy

Murder, al fresco

The Roswell Women

Frances Patton Statham

Bocage Books

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To Charlsey

The Roswell Women

Chapter 1

The magnificent white columns of Rose Mallow appeared beyond the rise of early morning fog. Coin Forsyth loved this part of the day best—before the river mist burned away and the soft cool breeze vanished under the searing heat of the summer sun.

As he viewed the house, his lips formed the name of the woman he loved: Allison. She was the reason he'd built the mansion on the bluffs of the gently flowing north Georgia creek. From the moment he'd first met her in Savannah, he had coveted her as his wife.

Half hidden by the fog, Coin watched as the front door opened. Then Allison slowly walked onto the wisteria-sheltered porch and gazed down the long graveled vista in the direction of the Roswell road. Seeing her, he was replete with happiness. She was his and nothing would ever part them.

With a sudden urge to close the distance between them, Coin Forsyth mounted his horse Roan and moved from the hidden copse of willow trees. He smiled, raised his hand in greeting, and then galloped toward the woman standing on the porch.

"Cap'n Forsyth?"

"Allison?"

"Beg pardon, sir, for wakin' you, but General Gordon wants to see you."

All at once the weary Confederate captain opened his eyes and sat up. The early morning fog still lay heavily upon the damp earth. But Rose Mallow had vanished. The wisteria scent had given way to the odor of rotting vegetation, and the lofty trees were now charred stumps that silently cursed the spoilers of the Virginia wilderness.

"What is it, Corporal?"

"The general, sir. He's sent for you."

"Where is he?" Coin asked.

"Over on Plank Road. There's a man waitin' with the picket to lead you to him. Lee's in trouble."

"Then more than likely we'll be moving out soon."

"Yes, sir. Seems a shame, though, after we spent half the night throwin' up these earthworks for the guns."

Coin ignored the corporal's comment. "Get Sergeant Gibbs for me," he said.

"Yes, sir."

The name was taken up and whispered down the line. Within a few minutes, the sergeant, crawling on his belly in the brackish watered trench, reached the earthworks, hoisted his body, and tumbled over the pile of dirt. "You sent for me, Cap'n?"

"Gibbs?"

"It's me, all right, even if I *do* look more like a mummichog flappin' around in all this mud."

"Well, scrape the mud off your beard, Sergeant, so the men will recognize you. I want you to take over the company, or what's left of it, until I get back.

"And don't waste any shot," Coin added, "before you see the blue."

The sergeant nodded. "We killed enough of our own, I reckon, to last us awhile."

A sadness clouded Coin Forsyth's eyes; for the armies were hopelessly entangled in the dense undergrowth of laurel bushes and prickly briars, interspersed with stagnant streams and marshes.

The previous evening, darkness had crept along the ridge like a ghost probing for its prey—spread out, hollow— with no substance except terror in the air. Then the muskets started flashing, with a response from the larger guns. Battle lines disappeared, while the soldiers, two hundred thousand of them, exchanged bullets, killing almost as many of their own comrades as they did the enemy. But then the woods caught fire, and the eerie cries of the trapped soldiers rose on the hot breath of the wind. Suddenly, the color of uniforms no longer mattered—only the wounded, damned in the raging inferno.

Coin glanced down at his blistered hands. He had rescued only a few men before being driven back by the solid sheet of fire.

"Allison," he whispered as he picked up his Enfield musket and left the earthworks. But her face eluded him. The nightmare of living was too powerful to recapture the dreams of his sleep.