

Also by Frances Patton Statham

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Mountain Legacy

Murder, al fresco

The Silk Train

Frances Patton Statham

Bocage Books

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ISBN: 0-9675233-4-6

13 digit ISBN: 978-0-9675233-4-7

(Previously ISBN: 0-449-14928-5)

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2009901126

First Edition: Ballantine Books, September 1994

Second Edition: Bocage Books, February 2013

Cover Design by Steve McAfee

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Bocage Books

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For Marie and Willa

Acknowledgments

On a warm, Southern, April day, I departed from Atlanta, a city already heralding spring with its extravagant blossoms of dogwoods, tulips, and azaleas covering the landscape. My destination was North Dakota to research *The Silk Train*. I was a stranger, traveling out of season, when many of the places that I needed to see were closed. As I arrived at the airport in Bismarck, claimed my rental car, and began the sixty-mile trek to Dickinson, the nearest town to Medora, it began to snow. I looked at my friend, Marie, whom I had persuaded to make the trip with me. Words were not necessary. We both realized that the trip was going to be more of an adventure than we had planned.

But despite the extremely cold weather and the snow, we found some wonderful people, whom I wish to thank for their warmth, friendliness, and hospitality.

Carol and Don Beckert, oil consultant from Dickinson, were most helpful in introducing us to those we needed to see and in arranging much of our itinerary. Don, acting as guide, first took us in his four-wheel drive through the wilderness areas of the Theodore Roosevelt National Park, with Carol keeping in touch by mobile phone. The previous week, an enthusiastic tourist taking photographs far too close to a bull buffalo, had met his demise, a sobering story to me, who, without the warning of danger on foot, might have met the same fate.

After the park tour, with Bill Andrus of the TR Foundation showing us the Roosevelt Maltese Cross log

cabin and other interesting memorabilia, we went on to Medora, where the site supervisor of the Château de Mores, Doug Paulson, met us and opened the twenty-eight-room frontier château for our inspection. On our last night in Dickinson, the Beckerts invited us to dinner, to celebrate a successful trip.

By the time we drove east toward Bismarck, the weather had improved. We stopped off at Fort Abraham Lincoln, where Breezy Kohls, the administrator of the Foundation, met us and opened the restored General Custer house.

Mandan villages, views along the Missouri and Little Missouri rivers with their cottonwood stands, ranch houses, windmills, prairies of grain, and the stark, khaki landscape were images resolutely stored in memory.

Yet, with all the related lore and tales of the Dakotas, no one mentioned a silk train. Had I dreamed it, or was it a fact ignored by historians—that in the 1880s, raw silk had been imported from China, loaded on a guarded train in Seattle, and traveled cross country through the Badlands to New York, where the cargo had been reloaded on ships bound for Europe? The answer finally came at the North Dakota Heritage Center in Bismarck, as an archivist brought out old railroad logs, written in faded, Spencerian script. And there, in one of them, I found the proof of a silk train, with the route, the grades, the number of auxiliary engines needed to pull the cars over the steepest inclines. I shall be forever grateful to the archivist and his persistence.

I also wish to thank my editor, Elisa Wares, for her encouragement and interest in the story.

Medora, the town founded by a French marquis, who attempted to build a cattle empire in the West, is a tourist attraction in season, with its own hotels and exciting musical drama produced on those soft "Medora Nights" when legend and history blend to portray a time once forgotten.

I hope you enjoy the story.

Frances Patton Statham

Chapter 1

Along a stretch of northwestern Pacific coastline, where water and sky merge into a colorless abyss, Anya remained hidden under the salt-encrusted tarpaulin while the longboat slipped quietly toward shore. All around her, the forlorn, steady bellow of a foghorn resembled the frightened cry of a sea calf separated from its mother, and its voice served to magnify the sense of urgency and danger she felt.

She longed to speak, to ask Ashak, the oarsman, how much longer it would be before they finally reached the docks at Elliott Bay. But Anya knew that even a whisper, overheard on the water, could give away her position.

A few minutes later, the sun slowly began its appearance over the seven hills in the distance and, seeing its rays, the Aleut quickened his pace, rowing in double time. Soon, the morning light would penetrate the heavy layer of mist surrounding the crude wooden warehouses that had sprung up along the entire wharf of the bustling inland port.

Despite the tarpaulin's protection, Anya was cold. For the past hour, she had forced herself to remain still. But now, the numbing dampness took over, and she began to shiver.

As if sensing her discomfort, Ashak said, "I see the docks now. Five more minutes and we'll be there."

Anya's initial relief was marred by his immediate

warning. "But people are beginning to mill about. You'll have to be careful."

"Do you see any other women?" she asked.

He hesitated. "A few."

"Good. Then I should not be noticed."

He did not tell her that the ones he saw were leaning out the windows of a brothel and flirting with the stevedores starting their morning work.

Anya tried not to think of all she'd left behind. More important to her was in getting to the railway station of the Northern Pacific, for her very life depended upon her reaching it and leaving Seattle before she was caught and taken back to Sitka.

Igor's spies would be monitoring all ships headed south for San Francisco. They would not suspect that she would take the rugged and dangerous rail trip through the badlands of the Dakota Territory. So, if she could get from the docks to the station without being noticed, then she stood a chance of vanishing without a trace.

Ashak did not share Anya's enthusiasm. He'd noted that her disguise was already wearing thin. The damp salt air had eroded the black Russian tea rinse on her burnished copper hair in the same way that the sea air had affected the iron rings of the boat. If she kept on her hat, perhaps few would notice. But there was little she could do to hide the strange color of her eyes—that startling blue-green of an Alaskan inlet once the winter ice had melted. Someone would be sure to remember her. Nevertheless, Ashak brought the boat to rest against the nearest wooden piling.

After he'd secured the line, he carefully removed the tarpaulin from his passenger and pointed to the ladder that led to the wharf. He stood watch while she reanchored her hat with a hurried jab of the pearl hat pin, drew the short veil over her face, and began the awkward climb. Then he hoisted Anya's paisley velvet valise so that it landed with an almost imperceptible

thud at her feet. With a final salute, Ashak took up his oars to row back to the ship.

Anya Winstead Fodorsky was now on her own.

* * *

At the expensive Western Empire Hotel, built on one of the hills overlooking the city, an unsteady Matt Bergen stared into his minuscule shaving mirror. He'd drunk entirely too much the night before, and the sun coming through the window hurt his eyes. But the preceding two weeks had been filled with such backbreaking hard work that he didn't mind the hangover.

He'd deserved one night of irresponsibility before starting on the long, arduous trip back to Medora. A pity that he couldn't remember more of it than he did.

Matt continued shaving until his hand slipped and the straight razor drew blood. With an oath, he dropped the razor and grabbed a towel to press against his chin. But before he could get the bleeding under control, the sound of jingling spurs and a tap at the door announced his foreman's arrival.

"Matt, the silk train's loaded and waitin' to pull out," Lynx called. "Are you ready?"

Still holding the towel to his face, the towering blond-headed man walked to the door and opened it.

"God, you look awful," Lynx said, staring at his boss.

"Shut up, and come on inside," Matt ordered. "Make yourself useful and throw my clothes together while I finish shaving."

"Is that what you were doin'? I'da swore you were tryin' to butcher yourself, instead."

Matt ignored the sarcasm. "Have you seen the schoolteacher?" he asked.

"No. But the stationmaster said she spent the night at Miss Emma's boarding house. And the lumber for the school is already loaded."

"I still don't know why I have to play nursemaid to some female. Why couldn't George have dispatched her on the next passenger train?"

"Because there ain't one until next week on account of the trestle." Fastening the straps of the leather case, Lynx added, "It's not like you need to do much for her, except rustle up some food twice a day, at the most."

"It's not that at all," Matt said. "I just don't want the guards to have their minds on anything but the silk."

"Well, maybe she's plain. Maybe the boys won't be taken by her."

"She wears petticoats, doesn't she?" Considering the discussion of the teacher at an end, he changed the subject. "Does Kwa-ling have all the cooking supplies on board?"

"Yep."

"Then let's go."

In the almost deserted depot, with its two crude benches facing each other, brown-haired Sarah Macauley, unremarkable in looks, sat and waited. But as the minutes ticked away, she began to realize the enormity of what she had set in motion. Two months previously, her life had seemed so dismal. Then she'd seen the newspaper advertisement.

"Northern Pacific Railway seeking teacher for the town of Medora in Dakota Territory. Must be single, of excellent character, and possess teacher's diploma and certification. Generous room and board."

At first, she'd done nothing more than cut out the advertisement and hide it in her diary. Then, after a week, she'd summoned enough courage to reply. She had not expected to get the job. And she probably would not have taken it except for Cousin Lettie, who had opened the acceptance letter.

"So this is what you were doing behind my back, Sarah," she'd said, waving the letter in front of her. "Just

like your ungrateful mama, leaving the one who took her in. But remember, your mama didn't last much more than a year out in the wilderness. If you go, you probably won't either, with all those wild outlaws and Indians."

"But I've been trained as a teacher, Cousin Lettie. Not a house servant."

Her defensive remark had triggered a glazed look, devoid of love. "Then, go. But don't expect me to take you in again. Once you leave this hearth, you're on your own."

"Yes, Cousin Lettie."

As Sarah sat and remembered the chilling conversation, the waiting room door creaked opened and another woman, with valise in hand, entered the station. Sarah immediately brightened. Perhaps she wouldn't have to brave all those lonely miles without companionship, after all.

While Anya walked across the rough-planked flooring to the stationmaster's cage, Sarah watched. She took note of the woman's slender, aristocratic carriage and the well-cut traveling suit. But sometimes, looks were deceiving. Even a town prostitute could hire a good seamstress. It was the speech that always gave one away. So Sarah listened unashamedly to the ensuing conversation.

In a cultured, well-modulated voice, Anya said, "Please, I'd like to buy a one-way ticket on your Eastern route."

"Where to?" the man asked.

"Chicago."

He consulted the schedule pinned to his cage. "Next week. Either Wednesday or Thursday, depending on the repair crew. That'll be —"

"No. That's too late," she protested. "I want a ticket on the train getting ready to pull out now."

"Can't," he said, adjusting his green eyeshade.

"That train's not on the regular run. Besides, it don't go all the way to Chicago."

"But can't I purchase a ticket as far as it's going?"

"No. It's a private train with a private cargo. Only the lady over there gets to ride on it. By special permission."

Anya glanced at the bench where Sarah sat and then back to the stationmaster. "Who would I have to see to get permission, too?"

"The president of the railroad, and he's hundreds of miles away. Now, do you want a ticket for next week, or not?"

"I don't think so." With Igor's spies directly behind her, Anya knew she could not afford to spend even one night in Seattle.

With her reply, Wagoner, the stationmaster, returned to his desk.

For a moment, Anya remained by the window, as if uncertain what to do. Then she resolutely picked up her velvet valise, walked to the empty bench opposite a disappointed Sarah, and sat down.

The silence, punctuated at intervals with the metallic sound of Morse code keys, was finally broken by Sarah. "I was hoping that you were another teacher."

Anya responded. "Is that what you are?"

Sarah nodded. "I'm on my way to Medora. It's a pity you won't be traveling on the same train."

"Yes. I really don't know what I'll do until next week."

"Miss Emma's boarding house—across the street—is very nice. I stayed there last night."

Anya's rueful smile indicated her dilemma. "I have only enough money for the railway ticket." Once again, she stared toward the stationmaster. Then she leaned over to retrieve her valise. As she stood, she nodded to Sarah. "I hope you have a safe trip."

"Just a minute. Perhaps if I spoke to Mr. Wagoner..."

"Oh, would you?"

"It might not help, but there's no harm trying."

Sarah walked to the window and cleared her throat to gain the stationmaster's attention. "Mr. Wagoner?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

She tried to keep her voice steady. "No doubt that you're aware that Mr. Jenkins, the president of this railroad, hired me to teach at Medora."

He merely stared.

"But it's a long and difficult trip over the mountains, especially for a woman traveling alone."

"That it is," he agreed.

"So why can't this other woman ride the train with me? There's plenty of room."

Wagoner immediately became defensive. "Got to think of the cargo. Raw silk's as expensive as gold. Why, she might be a spy in cahoots with outlaws waitin' to rob the train."

"Come now, Mr. Wagoner. Look at her. She's not the type."

"Well, no. Doesn't appear to be," he admitted. "But Ma Berry, who held up the bank last month, didn't look the type, either."

As the train whistle sounded, Wagoner said, "You'd better go ahead and board, Miss Macauley. The train'll be pullin' out any minute." Thinking the conversation at an end, he picked up his lantern.

"Oh, dear. I really don't know what to do. Maybe I'd better wait until next week, too."

Her words caused him a momentary panic. "But they're expecting you and the schoolhouse lumber to arrive at the same time. It's too late to take it off the train."

"Then, what do you suggest, Mr. Wagoner?"

He glared at Sarah. He should have known she would upset things at the last minute. It was always the quiet ones you couldn't trust. Stubborn as a mule when it suited them—just like his wife Martha, who never lost a

round when she had that look in her eye.

When the train engine whistled impatiently a second time, he suddenly capitulated. "Oh, all right. Tell the woman to hurry up to the window. But if something bad happens because of her, it's gonna be on your head, Miss Macauley."

Anya, listening to the conversation, responded immediately to Sarah's motioning. Being careful not to reveal the large bag of gold coins, she reached for her smaller purse and hurriedly counted out the money for the ticket.

A few moments later, as the pair set out toward the train that belched large, black puffs of smoke into the air, Anya said, "I'm so grateful to you. I just hope you and the stationmaster won't get into trouble on my account."

Sarah laughed. "I know Mr. Wagoner won't. He stamped your ticket for next week."

By the time the two women boarded the private passenger car that had been attached to the train like an afterthought, a queasy Matthew Bergen was already settled in the first car up front, while Lynx had taken his place beside the engineer. Only Kwa-ling, the cook, and Wagoner, the stationmaster, who signaled the train's departure with his lantern, were witnesses to the boarding of the two women.

With armed guards hidden in every boxcar containing the crates of raw silk that had traveled by ship from China to Vancouver and on to Seattle, the silk train began its hazardous journey. For the next five days, it would traverse a large portion of the two thousand miles of track connecting West to East, through mountain wilderness, deep gorges, the badlands, and vast prairies, to its final destination—the filature on the Red River of the North.

Chapter 2

Less than a half hour's journey from Seattle, all traces of civilization vanished. Gone were the saloons, seamen's hotels, and brothels lining the docks. In their places stood great fir trees, pines, and red cedars that stretched upward toward the gathering clouds. At regular intervals, a sharp northerly wind swept over the iron tracks, dispersing the black cinders spewn from the twin engines's smokestacks and leaving a fresh scent that permeated the passenger car shared by Anya and Sarah.

After an exchange of names and a few impersonal remarks, the two settled into a companionable silence, with Sarah by the window, while Anya, alias Anna Ford, sat in the shadows as far from view as possible.

But as the noisy train approached a crystal lake where a flock of wild geese began to take flight, its pristine beauty prompted Sarah to break the silence. "Oh, you must come to the window and look out," she urged. "What a lovely sight."

Anya had no wish to peer out the window where, even with the slightest chance, she might be seen by a passing trapper on his way to Seattle, or spied upon by one of the guards making his periodic checks from the catwalk overhead. But refusing Sarah's attempt at friendliness would be churlish, especially after the woman had gone to such lengths to help her. So, as she reluctantly left her seat, she took a white lace hand-