

*Also by Frances Patton Statham*

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Mountain Legacy

# Trail of Tears

Frances Patton Statham

Bocage Books

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## Acknowledgments

Two of the most important people who gave me inspiration for this novel were a Cherokee medicine man, Chief Two Trees, and the Rev. Robert Bushyhead, a direct descendant of the Rev. Jesse Bushyhead, who led one of the detachments out west on the trail of tears.

I am grateful to them both for their sharing with me the oral traditions and some of the history not found in standard reference books.

And only in this second edition do I feel free to acknowledge also the benevolent unseen force that left gifts of feathers and small rocks on my breakfast table and caused a brief power outage three times in a row that deleted a particular page until I finally got the message: that the reference book I was using for a segment of the journey was incorrect. Once I turned to another reference, I had no further trouble.

I hope that this novel will give some insight into one of our more tragic legacies of the past, with the resolve that the past will not repeat itself.

Frances Patton Statham

"I will draw thorns from your feet.  
We will walk the White Path of Life together;  
Like a brother of my own blood, I will love you;  
I will wipe tears from your eyes. When you are sad,  
I will put your aching heart to rest."

Cherokee Traveler's Greeting

## Trail of Tears

## Chapter 1



The storm broke in full force, with lashing rain as cruel as wet leather whipping against the coach horses's flanks.

Laurel MacDonald, the coach's lone passenger, held on to the overhead rings to keep from being tossed to the floor.

Just ahead, jagged streaks of lightning and rumbling voices of thunder pierced the unnatural darkness of the wilderness trail, while less than a quarter mile to the south, three riders hurried to overtake the fleeing vehicle.

Aware of the danger surrounding her, Laurel listened to the coarse heaves of the exhausted horses and the soothing, hypnotic chant of the Cherokee driver, urging the animals to keep up their breakneck pace.

In the best of times the vast, lonely stretch of wilderness beyond the Chattahoochee was filled with a quiet beauty, with crystal waters trickling over polished stones and baby-feathered eaglets gliding awkwardly on the wind gusts that swept past their aeries. Only an occasional sound of an ax told of civilization's encroachment in the aged forest.

But all that was beginning to change. Overnight, lawless misfits had invaded the land, and today Laurel had been unfortunate enough to catch the attention of one of the outlaw bands. Her vivid exotic beauty—her lustrous,

auburn hair, flawless silken skin, and topaz-colored eyes—could not be masked, even by the deliberately chosen drab brown traveling costume.

As she unconsciously fingered one of the gold nuggets she'd sewn into the hem of her petticoats, Laurel glanced back. One of the horsemen had come into view. "Two Feathers," she shouted. "They're gaining on us."

The coach gathered momentum downhill, splashed across a rocky stream, but then was forced to slow when the muddy trail turned sharply upward again.

At the top of the hill a tall loblolly pine stretched toward the sky, its branches forming a canopy over the narrow trail. Shortly before the coach reached the crest, a brilliant streak of lightning hit the pine, splitting it and sending it crashing to the ground. The horses shied in terror as the tree fell in front of them. With the road blocked, Laurel realized that she had lost the race to safety.

But she had not reckoned on the driver's actions. After Two Feathers had brought the horses under control, he jumped down and loosened the harness that yoked the two nervous bays to the coach.

Throwing a blanket across Cloud Maker's back, he said, "Quick, Laurel. Make a run for Dr. Podewell's medicine house."

"But what about you, Two Feathers?"

"I'll be all right. You're the one they're after." The Indian gave her a lift-up onto the horse.

Forgotten was the formal, ladylike seat taught her in the equestrian class at the LaGrange Female Academy. With her petticoats hitched up to her knees and her hands clutching the horse's mane, she rode astride, the howling storm obliterating any sound of what might be happening behind her.

When she was over halfway through the formidable, dark woods, a soaking wet Laurel allowed herself to look

back again. One horseman was still following — close enough for her to see his features despite the rivulets of water falling from his slouched hat.

"Keep on, Cloud Maker," Laurel encouraged. "We don't have much farther to go."

White foam, blown by the wind, brushed past Laurel. She rode the horse over scattered tree limbs, through great puddles of water, and dervishes of wind-caught vines. Finally, in the distance, a log cabin, with smoke curling from its chimney, came into view.

The horseman, realizing that Laurel had slipped from his grasp, shouted after her, "Ya might think you've gotten away. But we'll git ya yet."

The string of threats and the man's blustering laugh vanished in the wailing wind.

\* \* \*

"Land sakes, child, you're wetter than a settin' hen." Mrs. Podewell stood at the cabin door and watched Laurel, already on the porch, finish ringing the water from her skirt and petticoats. "What happened? And where's Two Feathers?"

"We had an accident. A tree's blocking the road, so he stayed with the coach."

"Well, come on in. The fire's all stoked up. You can dry your clothes while I finish cookin' the supper."

"I have to see to Cloud Maker first."

"Johnny can rub her down for you. And I'll get Will to take his ax and ride down the road to help Two Feathers."

Laurel hesitated. "He'd better take his musket, too, Mrs. Podewell. There're some unsavory characters around."

Tish Podewell touched the bulge in her apron pocket. "Humph. They're gettin' worse every day. Chappie makes me carry my pistol all the time—even to the outhouse."

"Johnny! Will!" she called to her sons. "Laurel's here."

The ten-year-old and his awkward teenage brother appeared almost immediately. When he saw her, the older Will's face lit up. "How are you, Laurel?"

"She'll tell you at supper," Tish interrupted. With quick instructions, she dispatched both her sons on their way and drew Laurel inside to the hearth. "Take off your wet clothes," the woman ordered. "You can wear one of my shifts while they're dryin'."

"I can wait for my trunk."

"There's no tellin' how long it'll be before your coach gets here. You hankering to be one of Chappie's patients, with the pneumonia?"

"Not if I can help it, Mrs. Podewell."

"Then hurry up and strip before Johnny comes back from the barn."

Tish Podewell made no allowances for Laurel's modesty. She stared curiously as the young woman removed her wet clothes. "Looks like you've changed from the skinny little girl you was several years ago. Filled out in all the right places—"

A few minutes later, with Tish's blue shawl tied around the linen shift, an anxious Laurel walked to the window. She saw no sign of the coach or Two Feathers.

Finally she turned back to Mrs. Podewell, busy with her cooking chores. "What can I do to help?"

"You can set the table. I don't know whether Chappie will get back tonight or not, since all the Bothwell babies take their own good time gettin' into this world. But put down six plates, just in case."

Familiar with the rustic log cabin, its sleeping loft above the large keeping room, and the brick cooking hearth where the aroma of possum stew, sweet potatoes, and corn bread wafted through the room, Laurel walked over to the cupboard in the corner.

She took down the chipped enamelware plates, so different from her own family's Wedgwood china. And then she reached into the drawer for the few pewter knives and spoons. By the time she'd placed them all on the rough-hewn pine trestle table, a cheerful Johnny returned from the barn.

"Cloud Maker's been rubbed down proper, and she's eatin' her oats," he announced, gazing hungrily toward the hearth.

"Thank you, Johnny."

The faint sound of a musket firing caused Laurel to rush toward the door.

"Sounds like Will's gun," Tish commented, still stirring the cooking pot.

"Let me go and see, Ma," Johnny said, edging closer to the hearth.

"No, son. I need a man in the house with Laurel and me," Tish replied, softening her refusal. Feeling the sudden gust of wind from the outside sweeping through the cabin and threatening to put out the cooking fire, she said, "Close the door, Laurel. The wind and rain's blowin' in."

Once her attention returned to the hearth, the woman was not quick enough to ward off the boy's attack on the skillet of corn bread, kept warm in the ashes. "Mind your manners, Johnny," she scolded, swatting at his hand. But he had already stuffed a large piece of bread into his mouth.

A few minutes later, the wind suddenly ceased. An eerie blackness crept through the cabin, forcing Tish to lay down her long-handled ladle and light the wick in the oil lamp. Once the crystal globe was in place, she carried the lamp across the room and placed it on the trestle table, where the other two occupants of the cabin were already seated.

Joining them, Tish frowned at the silence now surrounding them. "I don't like it," she finally said. "When it gets too quiet out here, something bad always happens."

"The last storm we had took the roof off the barn," Johnny informed Laurel. "And blew the rooster in the well."

"Hush, Johnny, and listen."

Soon the rain and wind started afresh. With a dull thud something fell onto the roof, causing soot to fall onto the hearth. Then, from the barn, Cloud Maker snorted a loud protest, followed by a sudden, loud-pitched squeal from one of the pigs.

Tish rose from her chair. Reaching one hand into her apron pocket, she motioned for Johnny and Laurel to remain quiet while she tiptoed toward the barred door.

Seconds stretched into minutes, with lesser sounds swallowed up by the wind. Then the barely distinguishable creak of the wooden steps and the scraping of feet across the porch indicated that someone was about.

Laurel had heard no carriage come into the yard. Would Will be coming back alone? No, she told herself. Not unless something had happened to Two Feathers.

As they all watched, the handle of the door began to twist slightly. "Who's there?" Tish challenged.

A deep voice called out, "It's me—Chappie. Open the door, wife. It's worse'n hell out here."

Chapman Podewell was a bear of a man, with a grizzly beard to match. He'd deliberately chosen to live on the edge of civilization, for he didn't like other men telling him what he could or couldn't do. His freedom to come and go as he pleased and his friendship with the Indians, who could help him with his healing herbs and plants, were more important to him than all the amenities of a settled town. The wilderness life he'd chosen was healthier for his family, too.

When Tish unbarred the door for her husband, he gave himself a great shake, sending droplets of water across the porch.

"Did you see Will?" Tish inquired.

"Yes. He and Two Feathers'll be here in a few minutes."

The worried lines vanished from her forehead. "Then you know that Laurel's come."

He nodded in her direction. "The Bothwell baby, too. Another boy."

Later that evening, after Two Feathers and Will had arrived with her trunk intact despite the outlaws, Laurel sat at supper with the Podewell family while Two Feathers chose to take his plate to the barn.

For four years Laurel had traveled safely back and forth through this wilderness—in the fall to the academy, and then back home when the term was over. On each occasion Two Feathers had driven her, and they'd always stopped at the Podewells' medicine house to spend the night.

In the silence that accompanied the first part of the meal, Laurel tried to keep her mind on the food, as the others were doing, rather than on the next day. But she was grateful when Tish got up to replenish her hungry husband's plate, her action signaling that conversation could now begin.

"I was tellin' Laurel earlier," Tish remarked, "that it's a shame her last trip has to be spoilt by such a bad storm."

A stricken Will gazed at Laurel. "You mean, this is the last time I'll ever get to see you?"

Staring disgustedly at his older brother, Johnny said, "Don't you know? Laurel's graduated. She's too old to go to school anymore."

"I won't be going back to the academy next fall," Laurel admitted to Will. "Johnny's right about that. But it doesn't mean I won't ever come this way again."

"You get your teaching diploma?" Chappie inquired.

"Yes." Her voice was filled with pride as she announced, "And the Reverend Worcester's offered me a job at the mission school in New Echota."

When the meal was over, Laurel helped Tish to clean up.

It was a chore that she enjoyed, for at home, the servants always attended to it.

Late that night, when the last lamp had been blown out and the two boys had climbed the ladder to the sleeping loft, Laurel lay on her pallet by the hearth. She was fully clothed, for Two Feathers had warned her to be ready to slip out quietly at a moment's notice.

It seemed that she had no more than gotten to sleep when she heard someone whispering her name. She sat up quickly. "Is it time to leave?"

"No. It's still the middle of the night. But I just had to talk with you, Laurel."

"Will, go back to bed. You'll wake your parents."

"No. Pa's a sound sleeper. And if we whisper, we won't wake up Ma, either."

Brushing the hair out of her eyes, a sleepy Laurel said, "Then hurry and say what you've got to say."

"I love you, Laurel."

"Will..."

"No, I didn't mean to blurt it out like that. But ever since supper tonight, I've been thinkin' about it. I've loved you from the first time I ever saw you four years ago, and I want to marry you, Laurel."

"You know I would never move away from my people."

"Yes, I know that." Will's earnest young voice continued, "So I've decided that three months from now, when I turn eighteen, I'll sign up for the land lottery. There's plenty of good farmland in the valley not far from your folks. I know I couldn't give you everything you have now—at least not right away, but—"

His voice began to get louder with his eagerness, and Laurel reached out to put her hand over his mouth. "I think your parents are stirring. You'd better go back to bed."

"But you haven't given me an answer."

She hesitated. "Will, I like you. I like you a lot. But I'm not ready to settle down. Can't we just be friends?"

A disappointed Will reached out and took her hand. "If that's what you want. But you won't forget what we talked about, will you?"

"Of course not."

"And you'll write to me this fall from New Echota?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, Laurel." Will leaned over and quickly kissed a surprised Laurel on her lips. Then he fled across the room and climbed the ladder to the loft.

Several hours before dawn, as the Podewell family still slept, Laurel MacDonald was awakened again—this time by Two Feathers. On the hearth she left a nugget of gold for Tish. With a small portion of dried venison and two pieces of leftover corn bread wrapped in a napkin, she slipped from the cabin and, being careful to listen for the door bar falling back into place, she began the second phase of her journey along the wilderness trail.