

PROLOGUE. *A Daughter of the Blood*

SHE WAS, ANYONE WITH EYES TO SEE OBSERVED, a daughter of the blood. For those lacking that vision she appeared, I suppose, an urgent, eccentric, private little woman bent upon life's inscrutable, fierce tasks. She toiled, like Scarlet O'Hara in her post-bellum Atlanta lumberyard, to maintain herself in public relations work. Her standards—unnecessarily high—embroiled her at all times in a succession of triumphs and consternations. Her heart—a soft but impenetrable mystery—led her to passionate sorrow, stern abiding, ancient tolerance, impatient explosion.

"Even the dogs eat the crumbs under their master's table," Ned told himself. Often that's all there was to share—scraps, leftovers. If you were foolish enough to tag along, you had to know it was "my way or the highway"—although she would never have employed that expression, which she would have considered crass, but which so closely fit her philosophy.

She had a great admiration for someone who could do a thing well. Didn't matter what it was. It could have been playing the concert piano, putting up drywall, or a man's maintaining a flat abdomen. It was the excellence she liked. And he came to realize, as perhaps she did or didn't, that what appealed to her was any manifestation of high expectations—the *modus operandi* almost more so than the product. To wit, she liked people who were like herself. She would have found "work ethic" to be another vulgarism, but the thing itself she much respected. Occasionally a man mistakenly assumed she was attracted to him, when she merely, simply and honestly, admired his achievements. Someone who got ahead through wit, grit, and talent—that was it. That was her club, and she was the president. One of her small boasts, delivered with a wry grin, was of a former maid's calling her "the hardest-working white woman in this town." In her view, no Episcopal Communicators Polly Bond Award for Excellence could hold a candle to that appellation. Yet she could also declare a steadfast allegiance to those who knew which forks to use "and also owned them."

Her talk was dry and wise, folksy and funny, erudite or local, as it suited her. The English language was a plaything of which she never tired. Though an introvert, she rattled on without ceasing, with little semantic prizes for the recipients of her

sentences, like toys in a box of Crackerjacks—her coinages or gems from her ear’s and heart’s collection.

That was Bella, the available, unattainable lost love of his life. He knew what lay behind her door. He did not know what lay behind her eyes.

Was her belief that she descended from nobility a truth or a delusion? The evidence had been consumed when flames engulfed a country house and charred the manuscripts in an ancient leather trunk to ashes—the fire so hot it smelted silver, china, glass, and lead to tiny balls and colored globes left in the gritty soil of northern Georgia, 1939.

She knew her horse, her gun, her book, the occupants of graveyards from Columbus to Macon, Savannah to Charleston, Midway to Waycross. She came from men who founded clubs and plied the waters in pleasure craft, who spent the summers on the bluff. She came from women who were stalwart mistresses of households late, dizzying debutantes when young, and competent merchants of real estate, if need be, after the divorce. In Ned’s dreams, she came galloping, clad in a lacy red bra, out of the mist on a sleek black charger, her long, rich tresses flying behind her, firing a pistol in the air and brandishing a sterling silver slotted spoon engraved “Aristocrat.”

Scarlet O’Hara, Lois Lane, and Annie Oakley rolled into one.

He remembered delivering the *Durham Sun* on his rusty orange bike, along the sandy paths in colored town. He had the highest average for a boy in his class at Grove Township School. He always buttoned his shirts up to the very top. Their little house his bitter, artistic mother called “that goddamned crackerbox.” When he grew up, she wanted him to be, she said, a gentleman.