

Jane Nickerson, *Strands of Bronze and Gold*, Alfred A. Knopf New York

ONCE UPON A TIME...

there lived a very powerful lord, the owner of estates, farms and a great splendid castle, and his name was Bluebeard. . . . He was very handsome and charming, but, if the truth be told, there was something about him that made you feel respect, and a little uneasy.

FROM "BLUEBEARD" IN  
TALES FROM THE BROTHERS GRIMM

CHAPTER 1

THE FAIRY TALE BEGINS

You see, I had a fabulously wealthy godfather. That was why anything was possible for me. I couldn't remember a time when thoughts of him didn't send a silvery little thrill through my body. He was a mystery and a magician and all my family's hopes for the future rolled into one. Soon, when the carriage covered the last miles of our journey, I would meet him at last—my godfather and guardian, Monsieur Bernard de Cressac.

And his wife, of course, but I tended to forget about her.

The wildwood we had plunged into might easily have been the setting for the thief's lair in "The Robber Bridegroom," so tangled and murky and haunted it seemed. However—I smashed a mosquito against my neck and my own blood spurted out—fairy-tale forests would never have been this itchy or this sweltering. Perspiration dripped off my nose before my handkerchief could catch it. Inside my bonnet my curls were plastered to my head.

My godfather had referred to my hair as "bronze" in one of his letters when I was younger—a letter featuring a delightfully spun story about a princess with tresses the shade of my own, strands of bronze and gold. . . .

M. de Cressac's last letter lay in my lap, its ivory paper limp from much handling. As always, at sight of the bold black handwriting, my chest tightened. A few months earlier, while my family had been going about the sad business of mourning the death of our father, M. de Cressac had been thinking of me, had been penning this invitation to his home, Wyndriven Abbey. Telling me he could not return to his "solemn duties" until he had asked me to come to him so I might "sweeten the atmosphere of an old man's dwelling" with my "companionship, youth, and beauty."

My brother Harry had snorted at that last part.

In that letter M. de Cressac called himself an old man. This conflicted with the image I had always held of the saint, soldier, explorer. The adventurer I had fantasized about had been old, of course, since he was a friend of my father's—forty at least—but muscular and hearty. Well, shortly I would know everything. Shortly my godfather would take his place in my life as a real, solid person, rather than a misty figure of daydreams.

On and on we twisted and snaked beneath arched branches in dim green leaf light, swallowed whole by trees. My eyes grew tired of the sporadic, flickering patches of pale sunshine. It was getting late, but evidently in Mississippi, summer heat didn't fade with the day.

Surely we'd get there soon.

I pulled down my bonnet's crinkly mourning crape veil and shoved down my long, tight sleeves just as the trees thinned. We rounded a curve—and there it stood.