

# From Love's Ashes

Frances Patton Statham

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"Love is of the phoenix kind,  
That burns itself with self-made fire;  
To breed still new birds in the mind,  
From ashes of the old desire."

—Fulke Greville



# Chapter 1

March 1935  
Atlanta, Georgia

Creag Trent paced anxiously before the library doors in his rustic stucco-and-timber house and gazed out at the sleet—hard, pelting—as it battered the silvery landscape.

He would never get used to Atlanta in March, with its warm spring weather turning and snarling without warning, like a tamed wolf that suddenly remembers its wild heritage.

Already the telephone line was down and the electricity, erratic and flickering, would go soon too, as it had the previous March, paralyzing the city with not so much as a trolley car running.

In the darkness, the sound that he had waited to hear for the past hour finally emerged—the noise of a plane engine overhead. Creag threw open the library doors and rushed onto the terrace. He looked upward, but the icy trees blocked his view. Yet it didn't matter; for he knew it was his pilot, Babcock, buzzing his house, as usual, to let him know he had gotten through. Only an idiot would fly a mail plane in such weather.

Creag listened until the noise disappeared. Then

satisfied that the plane would make it the rest of the way to Candler Field, he brushed the sleet from the shoulders of his brown velvet smoking jacket and turned to go inside.

The sudden movement of white between iced trees in the distance stopped him. Startled to see a figure silhouetted in the dim light, he walked to the end of the terrace, and as quickly as the slippery ice would allow him, Creag worked his way through the dense mat of vines and rhododendrons, toward the low evergreen hedge that separated his property from that of his neighbor.

Who else, besides Babcock, would be foolish enough to venture out in such foul weather? Closer now, Creag paused and watched while the clash of branch brushing against frozen branch provided an eerie wind-chime accompaniment to the nebulous floating form.

It was a woman, dressed in a thin, white nightgown, with one flimsy slipper to protect her feet from the ice. Stephanie Wexford. He recognized her now, even as he had recognized her four nights earlier, running from the terrace after the gunshot that had killed her husband.

Creag stepped forward and his anger at seeing her spilled over into his speech. "What are you doing out in this weather?" he growled, blocking her way.

The sound of his voice, his sudden appearance had no effect upon her. Creag reached out and laid his hand on her arm to stop her. "Steppie."

Her wild brown eyes gazed beyond him to the crab apple trees. "He's lying on the stones. Neal's hurt. I have to go to him," she said, speaking more to herself than to the man beside her.

Creag tightened his hold on her arm. "He's not out here, Steppie."

For the first time, she acknowledged the man beside her. "Let me go to Neal," she protested, attempting to wrench her arm from his grasp.



"Steppie," he repeated, louder this time. "Neal's dead. Dead and buried."

His brutal words produced a small whimper in her throat. "No," she cried, her head moving from side to side in denial.

A tree branch, coated with ice, broke and narrowly missed Creag as it fell to the ground. He swore at the close call and, not wasting any more time trying to reason with her, he lifted her into his arms to carry her back to her house. The family should watch over her better than this, and he would tell them, too.

She fought against the man who had thwarted her, but Creag ignored her. Finally Steppie gave up the struggle and, as if exhausted, she leaned her head against his shoulder while he spanned the distance to the gray French Normandy house.

Rising out of the darkness, with the tip of its round gray turret partially obscured by the sleet, the house had a medieval appearance. Massive stone lions guarded the heavy oak double doors at the entrance. Yet the side door, left ajar, was vulnerable to the elements and to anyone who wished to trespass beyond the terrace.

Creag crossed the threshold and kicked the door closed. Already the red and blue Persian carpet covering the parquet floor was damp from exposure. He walked into the entrance hall and stopped at the foot of the stairs.

"Verbena," he called, and waited. There was no answer.

"Where's your housekeeper?" he asked, gazing down at the dazed Steppie, clad only in the thin nightgown.

She looked at him with blank eyes.

"Belline," he called out impatiently. Again there was no reply.

Finally, an exasperated Creag, searching for someone to whom he could relinquish his burden, began to walk through the downstairs hall. "Is anyone here?" he called

out in a loud voice. The deserted house mocked the words he spoke.

Steppie's teeth began to chatter. "So cold," she croaked.

Of course she was cold, with almost nothing on, Creag thought. He stared at her bare feet. She had lost the other slipper, too, he noticed. The sneeze that escaped her lips decided him. He couldn't stand around, waiting for someone who might never come. She could take pneumonia and die if she didn't get warm soon.

The globe light hanging in the entrance hall flickered, and Creag, aware of the buildup of ice on the power lines, hurriedly shifted the weight in his arms and walked up the winding staircase, his shoes leaving a wet imprint upon each carpeted tread.

At the head of the stairs, Creag saw the remnants of a fire through an open bedroom door. He walked into the room and dumped Steppie into the small, chintz-covered chair before the hearth. On the floor lay a crocheted afghan. Creag stooped to pick it up and hastily draped it over Steppie. A hot bath was what she needed to counteract the chill, and so Creag left her, to look for the nearest bathroom.

He found it adjacent to the bedroom, with dark mahogany paneling and mirrors reflecting the gold dolphin fixtures of the tub. His feet sank into the soft white lambswool carpeting, and the odors of lavender and jasmine, permeating the space, hinted of spring, despite the cold, icy winter outside.

Creag reached out, grasped the dolphin handles, and turned on the water. A spray splashed against the white marble sides of the tub and ricocheted back onto his chin. He straightened and quickly brushed the water from his face.

While the tub filled with water, he walked back into the bedroom. Stephanie Wexford hadn't moved. She still sat in the same position in the chair, her wet brown hair

plastered to her well-shaped head.

He didn't know why that should make him angry, seeing her like that, appearing so vulnerable, and yet so aloof from everything that was happening.

"Get up," he ordered, his voice rougher than he intended. "Your bath is ready."

She obeyed him, moving from the chair toward the bath, her bare feet making no noise on the floor. He followed her into the mahogany-paneled bath, shut off the water, and tested it with his hand. Not hot enough to burn her skin—he'd made sure of that. He straightened and without bothering to close the door between the bath and the bedroom, he left her, to attend to the dying fire.

Creag removed the fire screen, placed the last two logs into position and, with the black iron poker, he stirred the embers. Kneeling on the hearth beside a large white ceramic cat, he listened for sounds from the bath. An occasional splash indicated that at least she had gotten into the tub.

He had been a fool to buy the house next to Neal Wexford. But from the moment he had met Stephanie, he realized he could purchase no other. It didn't matter that she belonged to another man and wasn't even aware that Creag Trent was alive. He had to be near her, just to watch her whenever he could; for the vision that he had nurtured in his mind for so many years, and had used as a measuring stick for each woman he met, had finally appeared before him. Creag had made an altar of his heart and lifted the unattainable Steppie Wexford above all mortals.

But she had plummeted from her position with a rudeness that shattered his entire being. She was not the angel he had made of her. She evidently had plotted to have her husband murdered. How else could she explain talking with her accomplice in the shadow of the trees a

few short moments before she'd sent Neal outside to his death?

Standing up and brushing his hands against each other, Creag left the fire. The Widow Wexford would need a dry nightgown before he put her to bed.

Through one drawer and another he searched until he finally came to the gowns. It was strange that the drawers held only her things. She hadn't wasted much time, Creag thought, his jaw tightening, to remove all reminders of her dead husband. There was no sign of him, except the picture on the table beside the bed.

With a pale pink gown slung over his arm, Creag walked closer to the table. He stared down at the picture of the serious, blond-haired man and at the prescription box beside it. He might have known why Steppie was acting so strangely. They'd given her something to calm her, but the sedative had backfired, producing the opposite effect. Curiously, Creag picked up the box and shook it. It was empty. How many pills had Steppie taken?

His head jerked upward and he listened for some sign of activity from the bath. He was greeted by silence and the odor of lavender and jasmine. His eyes returned to the empty prescription box in his hand. There was no name on it, no indication of the drug it contained. His heart began to beat against his chest in alarm. If she had taken all the pills at once, then she could be in trouble.

Creag dropped the box and the wispy gown on the floor and began to run toward the bath. "Steppie," he shouted. With trembling hands he thrust back the curtain that had been drawn to screen the tub from view.

She was almost completely submerged, her hair no longer plastered to her head, but floating in every direction. Stifling a frantic groan in his throat, Creag plunged his arms into the water to rescue her.

She was limp and the wetness of her body caused Creag's hands to slip. Quickly, he circled her waist with

his arms and lifted her out of the water.

He placed her over his knees, like a limp sack of goods. And with a rolling motion he began the painful process of forcing the water from her lungs.

She couldn't have been submerged for long. Not long enough to drown, he kept telling himself. Why, then, wasn't there some sound, some movement from her?

Every shred of anger in him was directed at her, for of all her sins, this coming so close to death herself was the worst. It never occurred to him that she might be dead already.

"Cough," he said, his fierce voice demanding, but she was slow in responding.

Finally, a gurgling sound of water came, and with the sound, Creag renewed his rolling motion, forgetting his awkward position and the strain to his muscles. A great whooping noise filled the room, while the water rushed from her lungs. It was as if she had drunk the whole damned tubful, he thought.

On and on, Creag continued the rolling motion, making her rid herself of the water and any pills not already absorbed by her body. She coughed; she choked. With every movement, she protested his harsh treatment of her. At last, when her lungs were clear, when there was no more water to be forced out, nothing left in her stomach, Steppie looked up at him with accusing eyes.

He clasped her to him, his hoarse voice rasping. "What were you trying to do? Kill yourself, too?"

She weakly shook her head. "No," she whispered.

Averting his eyes, Creag quickly covered her with a towel, but he was loath to give her up. Aware of the softness of her trembling body, he held her in his arms a moment longer, their images fused in the reflecting mirrors.

Later, Creag leaned over the bed where Steppie lay. He looked down at the woman clad in the wispy pink

gown. His eyes traveled from her porcelain face to her small hand touching the raglan sleeve of the blue robe he now wore.

"Neal?" she said, hesitantly.

Creag shook his head. "No, I'm Creag. Creag Trent," he added.

He bore no resemblance to the aristocratic Neal Wexford. Creag was earthy, with dark golden hair curling from the dampness. His eyes were the color of burnt sienna, giving the impression that he had seen much of life. The permanent frown line, etched like a V between his eyes, indicated that he had not always liked what he'd seen. Yet his expression, faintly cynical and knowing, was immediately softened by the deep cleft in his chin—a whimsical touch that worked to his advantage in his dealings with other men. Too late, his adversaries realized that he was far more astute than his deceptively benign face showed.

Steppie, still touching the sleeve, moved her finger back and forth over the material and the caress of her hand caused a tightening in Creag's muscles.

The robe. It was the blue robe, of course. He had found it hanging on the other side of the bath, and it belonged to Neal. Probably the one item she had missed when she'd disposed of Neal's clothes. And it was lucky for him that she'd missed it; for his smoking jacket and the rest of his clothes were drenched, not so much from the sleet as from rescuing the woman from drowning.

"Are you feeling better?" Creag questioned, removing her hand from his sleeve and placing it on the coverlet of the bed.

"Yes," Steppie replied.

He felt the power of her questioning brown eyes, luminous and liquid, great pools of darkness drawing him to her—enchantment that threatened to make him forget his anger, his disillusionment. At that moment he wanted to hold her in his arms as he had dreamed of

doing ever since he met her. But then his anger took precedence over his desire. Abruptly, he moved from the bedside. "I'm going downstairs for more wood," he announced tersely, with a wave of his hand toward the empty log holder by the hearth. She made no comment as Creag left the room.

He hurried downstairs to the back porch where a supply of hickory logs, placed by Wash, the Wexford gardener and yardman, lay neatly stacked in a corner. The wind swept the porch while outside, the ground, frozen solid, was a mirror—hard, reflective, treacherous. But at least the sleet was no longer coming down. Loading the logs in his arms, Creag wound his way through the kitchen and up the stairs.

"The sleet has stopped—for a while, at least," he commented, aiming his voice in the general direction where Stephanie Wexford lay.

Creag walked to the hearth, unloaded the logs, and added one to the diminishing fire. But before he had time to set the fire screen in place again, he saw a small, bare foot on the hearth beside him.

"You shouldn't be out of bed," he growled, standing up immediately. The scolding words stuck in his throat.

In the saffron glow of the fire, he stared openly at her, seeing the slender legs, the soft dark mound of hair, the firm, round breasts pushing the flimsy material of the gown outward. Nothing in her appearance proclaimed the disastrous accident of the previous hour. She stood, an open invitation in her seductive gown, her wanton eyes begging for love.

He had heard how recently bereaved women reached out to the first willing man for comfort. If love was what she wanted, then he was more than willing.

Creag moved, suddenly enveloping her in his strong arms and holding her desperately against him. He leaned down to cover her mouth with his own, not gently, but in a harsh, demanding manner, holding all

the bitterness of love denied by propriety, by marriage vows, and his reverence for a woman beyond his reach.

Stephanie Wexford was no longer an enshrined image, but tarnished; a widow freed from marriage by her own hand. She was no longer beyond his reach, but in his arms. "Stephanie," he whispered, and then pressed his lips against hers, gentler this time, his anger losing itself in the softness of her response.

He lifted her and placed her on the bed, where he lay beside her, only the fleece blue material of the robe and the flimsy pink nightgown separating them.

Cut off from the outside world, the French Normandy house with its steep slate roof rose into the mist, with a thicket of ice blocking and protecting it from view. And inside the bedroom at the head of the stairs, Creag Trent made love to Stephanie, the woman who had fallen so abruptly from her position of honor.

The lights went out once and for all, leaving the room bathed dimly in the hearthlight—an orange glow, with an underglaze of blue, where no air could penetrate the flame's innermost citadel.

The robe fell to the floor. The gown was removed by impatient hands. Now flesh against flesh, the two became one—silken heat and desire clothing them, as no woven garment was ever capable of doing.

But something was wrong. The woman, wrapped in the closeness of his arms, bringing him to the edge of ecstasy and beyond, had been wife to no man for a long time. The awful truth rose to his consciousness too late—far too late for him to make amends. Down, down, beyond reason, Creag went, fighting the tight, almost impenetrable defense of a body long denied the ways of love.

"Steppie," he moaned, mingling his breath with hers, feeling his passion roar and then subside, to be replaced by a sense of inordinate sadness.

The enormity of his deed overwhelmed him. He was



in a place he had no right to be; with the widow of a man who had been buried less than two days. Creag moved, attempting to break the embrace. But Steppie, sensing his withdrawal, tightened her arms about him and refused to give up the closeness of their bodies.

Creag braced himself to withstand the lips that kissed him on the brow and moved to the cleft of his chin. Steppie's fingers ran through the still damp, golden curls and lingered at the nape of his neck.

Unable to bear the intimacy any longer, he pushed her from him and leaned over to retrieve the blue robe that had been discarded in a heap by the bed. He put it on, tied the tasseled rope around his waist, and escaped to the window, where he stood, breathing hard and gazing out into the vast darkness. He waited for the recriminations that were sure to follow.

The silence built, but the censure he expected to hear did not materialize. Creag straightened his shoulders and took a step closer. "Steppie," he said. "I'm sorry."

She didn't answer, and Creag, staring down at her with the soft shadows on her face, saw that her eyes were closed. He frowned, and the V-shaped line between his eyes deepened. Could she have gone to sleep as quickly as that—casually dismissing what had happened between them? Perhaps. On the other hand, what if the pills had worked their insidious damage before he'd gotten to her? What if she were lapsing into a coma? How could he tell? With the telephone line down, he couldn't even call a doctor for advice.

Damn! Should he try to wake her and pour some coffee into her? Creag tried to recall what old Doc Massey had told him about Babcock. "Pinch him or pull his hair, Trent. See if he moves. If he does, then you can bet he's not in a coma."

Of course, Babcock's trouble had been alcohol, not pills, but they probably had the same effect on the body. Creag placed his hand on Steppie's arm and squeezed it

gently. She stirred and mumbled something unintelligible before turning on her side. So she was merely asleep. Creag felt relief. But the knowledge that she had not been affected by his lovemaking nearly so much as he rankled him.

Feeling compelled, nevertheless, to watch over her the rest of the night, Creag Trent moved from the bedside to the chair in front of the fire. He stayed awake for a long time, while Stephanie slept quietly a short distance from him.

At intervals during the night, he placed more logs on the fire. At first light, Creag dressed in his own clothes, now dry. Casting one last glance at the sleeping Steppie, he left the bedroom and slipped out the side door to his own house.