

Introduction

Today, Southeastern United States is known for cotton, peanuts, country music, and NASCAR. Wind the clock back two hundred years, and you'll find massive long leaf pine forests teeming with wildlife. Among them, along the creeks and rivers, lives a thriving, independent nation.

The Muscogee, named "Creek" by the French and English, once owned the land we now call Alabama and Georgia. The Creek were many tribes joined by a confederacy consisting of a complex yet efficient government.

Because they adopted many of the colonists' customs, they were considered "civilized." They traded for tools, plows, kettles, woolen and cotton goods, and weapons. This noble and proud people grew in strength and power, yet lived peaceably alongside those settlers with whom they generously shared their land.

But it was not to last. Greed turned to theft. Generosity to hate. Tension rose and patience dwindled.

Before long, the once friendly neighbors no longer trusted one another, and the inevitable was set into motion.

War.

Chapter One

McGirth Plantation, Tensaw Settlement
June 1813

Adela shifted her body to allow blood flow to her legs. The mossy ground had long grown hard against her tailbone, and the rough tree trunk dug into her back.

A refreshing breeze blew through the pines lining the northwestern border of her father's land. It rustled the needles and created a comforting, familiar whistle.

A small meadow lay vacant before her. On the opposite side, the evening sun cast its last rays through the treetops. Squinting, she thought for an instant she saw the form of a man. No, it was just a bush moving with the current of the wind.

Surely, she had been waiting nigh on two hours. Her family would be worrying. Just north, civil war raged among the Creeks and threatened to involve the vulnerable Americans in the Tensaw and Bigby settlements. Her parents' constant fear of danger was well placed.

Soon Mama would call Adela's father in from the barn and send one of the servants looking for her. Worry was never good for Mama.

Mama's attacks were rare these days, but Adela never knew what might set her to wheezing and coughing.

Adela's stomach twittered and flipped. She stood then rubbed her lower back. "Please, hurry, Phillip. Please," she murmured, not sure she could stay much longer.

Unheeding, the sun's beams continued down the length of the trees then dissolved, leaving only their orange and purple reflection in the sky.

Not wanting to create undue stress on her parents, she gave up waiting and set out toward home. She lifted her skirt to avoid the prickly blackberry bushes and berated herself for not having thought to bring a lantern. *How foolish of me!*

"Adela...Adela..." Her name rode on the breeze.

Her heart seized and then leapt as she recognized the voice. Haste sped her back through the underbrush.

"Phillip! I waited so long."

He enveloped her in his work-hardened arms. Phillip was becoming more intimate with her. She wondered if it was too soon.

"I knew you'd wait." Resting his hands on her shoulders, he stepped back so he could see her. "I couldn't get away any sooner. Dixon had a list as long as my arm of things for me to do before I leave tomorrow. He hovered like a hawk to see I got them done."

She pulled his hands from her shoulders and held them between her own instead. "You're here now, and that's all that matters."

"How will I ever last three months without you?"

"What kind of nonsense is that? You'll do just fine. The adventure of your life is just around the corner. I hardly think you'll be pining for boring, old Tensaw. You just see that Savannah society treats you well while you're busy getting your commission, Second Lieutenant Phillip Bailey."

A stray lock of ash blond hair fell over his eye, and Adela brushed it away. He caught her hand and pulled it to his lips, his coffee brown eyes sparkling in the waning daylight. The warmth of his lips on her fingertips sent tingles of excitement rushing through her but not without a warning.

I shouldn't be encouraging him this way. Not while I'm still so unsure... She dropped her eyes, but he mistook her guilt for something else.

"That's what I love about you, Adela. You're all innocence and piety."

He cradled the back of her neck with his hand, and her insides fluttered in a dangerous way. She knew she should move away, but she felt drawn to him, like a mouse to a trap.

Adela cleared her throat, "You speak of love when we've only been courting a month. And, I might add, quite unofficially." His deep affection seemed premature.

"Maybe, but I've known I'd marry you from the day we met."

She'd known him since she was just a girl. A grown woman now, had she not noticed he cared? She opened her mouth to ask, but he placed a finger on her lips.

"Are you sure you won't come with me? It's not too late. We can marry tomorrow, first thing and—"

"Marry? Tomorrow? You know I can't. You haven't spoken to my father about courting me, much less marriage. And there's Ellie...did you forget? You know how she adores you."

Phillip gave her a placating smile. "She might hurt for a while, but she'll see reason. She's not foolish, simply a bit of a romantic...albeit misplaced."

Adela chuckled. "Elizabeth, romantic? Determined more likely. She decided years ago to love you, and it would take a direct message from God to persuade her otherwise." She propped her hands on her hips, noticing the first chirps of the crickets. "Did you know she just rejected an offer of marriage from Mr. Pierce?"

"The school teacher and Ellie? Married?"

"Well, *he* would have liked as much."

Phillip tipped his square chin and laughed outright.

The sound brought a smile to Adela's face, but she chided him nonetheless. "Come now, it was a perfectly decent offer."

Phillip wiped his eyes. "But the man is twice her age and desperate to be married. Have you seen his cabin? Chaos!"

Adela dismissed his objections with a wave of her hand. "All that aside, I am not prepared to be at odds with my sister. So she must *not* find out about us...for the time being, anyway. We'll address the issue when you return."

"She has to find out eventually. Why not now?" Phillip crossed his arms and gave her the back of his shoulder.

He'd never been one for patience, and at the moment, he reminded Adela of a spoiled child denied a piece of pie. She chuckled.

"What are you laughing about?"

"Just now, you reminded me of Mrs. Haverty's youngest."

His eyes darkened as he took a step closer. His stiff form towered above her. "You're comparing me to that little monster?"

Adela sobered at the intensity of his gaze. "It was a silly thought. Please forgive me."

He studied her in silence.

Warning bells clanged in her mind. Just as another apology formed on her tongue, he let out a puff of air and relaxed his stance. "I just want to take care of you, Adela. I want to build a home for you and provide for you, give you beautiful things and walk with you through town on my arm. Let me talk to your father tonight."

He could be quite persuasive. Still, she refused to allow him to push her into something for which she wasn't fully prepared.

She gave a tentative shake of the head. True to form, her hesitance produced a huff of frustration. "If not now, then when? When will that dear sister of yours *ever* take the news well?"

"Why would I tell her something I'm uncertain of myself?"

He scowled then spoke as if she hadn't mentioned her ambiguity. "You need to know the moment my feet touch Tensaw soil in August, I plan on asking your father for permission to court you properly." He grasped her chin in his hand and pressed a hard kiss to her lips. "So you'd best prepare her."

She took a step back and smoothed out her skirt. "Aren't you the bold one tonight, Mr. Bailey?"

He merely grinned and removed the bear claw pendant that always hung around his neck. "Wear this to remember me by." He held it out.

"Phillip, it was your grandfather's! I can't. It's too important to you."

"Of course you can. You're to be my wife. It means what's mine is yours. I love you, Adela McGirth, and there's no one else I'd give it to." His voice rang with longing as he ran his eyes over the length of her, pausing in all the wrong places.

She resisted the urge to cross her arms over her chest. At least the dark of the night covered the blush on her cheeks. Never had a man appreciated her body the way Phillip did, and never had one assumed so much. "You're being a bit presumptuous. Aren't you?"

"Not at all. I'm a man who knows what he wants and doesn't stop until he gets it." Playfulness tinkled his tone, but Adela heard the truth behind his words. "Take the pendant. If it helps, see it as a gift from a friend. Not as a token of betrothal."

Seen in such a way, what could it hurt?

She slipped it about her neck then gasped as he pulled her into a fierce kiss. His moist lips moved confidently against hers. Warm hands stroked her back and almost melted her resolve to remain chaste.

"I love you," he murmured against her mouth.

She knew he wanted a similar reply, but she couldn't give it. The words caught in her throat, as if uncertainty held them from escaping.

She split apart from his searching mouth and sought retreat. "Please, be careful in Savannah," she managed. "I have to go." She dropped her arms and ran for home, the claw thumping against her chest.

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Adela climbed the ladder to the loft, careful not to wake her sisters. She hung her dress on a peg and slipped into her nightgown. Phillip's bear claw thudded against her. She clutched it through her gown as panic seized her. Had she hid it from Mama? So intent on getting home, she hadn't thought of it until now.

Her shoulders dropped in relief when she realized Mama would have questioned her about it if she'd seen.

The wooden timbers of the bed squeaked as Adela climbed in next to Lillian. They had always shared a bed. Even when given the option of each having their own in their more spacious, newly built house, they had both refused, preferring the warmth and closeness the other afforded.

Although the two were completely opposite one another in every way, they held a special bond. Maybe it was Adela's quiet dependence on God which supported the more flighty Lillian, or maybe it was Lillian's carefree spirit which drew Adela to her sister's side. Perhaps, it was the need for an ally against Ellie's domineering onslaughts.

Regardless, with just a year separating them, she and Lillian understood each other and thrived on their friendship.

Lillian turned over to face her. "Where have you been?" she whispered, her anger barely concealed. "I've been worried sick. We all have."

"Shh! You'll wake Ellie." Adela glanced at Elizabeth but their older sister's breathing remained deep and even.

"Well?" Lillian demanded.

"In the woods."

"In the woods? That's all you're going to say? I hope Mama believed you more than I do."

The fearful look on Mama's face and the way she'd clung to Adela when she'd walked through the door flashed across her mind. She tasted guilt and couldn't swallow. "Me, too. But I didn't lie, if that's what you're getting at."

Lillian practically snorted. "That would be something *I* would do. No, silence would be more your style." She thumped Adela on the shoulder. "Am I not getting any more details, like where you got that – that – whatever it is hanging around your neck?"

Adela grasped the pendant. "You saw it?"

"Of course. When you got undressed. If you don't want anyone else to find out about it, you should be more careful. So out with it. What have you got there?"

"It's nothing. I shouldn't have accepted it."

"Nothing? I saw the way you were holding it," she rasped.

"Shh! That's not what I—" Would Lillian understand? "Oh, never mind."

"Well, give me all the details. Who is he?"

"How did you know it was from a man?"

"Adela, Adela, ever so naive and oblivious. You and I don't think the same at all. So tell me already."

"If I tell you, you *have* to promise to keep it to yourself! At least for a while. Promise?"

"Fine, I promise...just tell me."

Adela took a deep breath and said his name on less than a whisper.

"What? No! It's—it's not as if he has no reason to love you, but *you*? Lover of all things peaceable and non-confrontational, I never imagined you to be so audacious as to set your bonnet for Ellie's man!"

"Shh! See why it's a secret? No one would understand. Besides, he's not Ellie's man. And I'm not even sure I feel anything for him."

"You've got to be half mad. You do realize Elizabeth will practically disown you?"

Adela inhaled sharply. "Do you think so?" The tears she fought overpowered her and spilled out the sides of her eyes and into her hair. .

"Come on. Don't cry. I exaggerated. It won't be so bad. She'll forgive you...eventually. She's never really had a claim to him and will see it in time. But you *have* to tell her. You can't keep it from her forever, and if she finds out from someone else, it'll be worse."

"Lilly, I've tried a dozen times to tell her, but I just can't."

Adela moaned and Lillian put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"It'll humiliate her, if it doesn't kill her first," Adela said. "I should have put an end to it before he left, especially since I'm not sure I even love him. But he's so..."

"Handsome? Daring? Everything a woman could want in a man?"

Adela sighed and fiddled with the claw strung about her neck. "Yes, he's all that, but there's something missing...or maybe it's what he has too much of. A bit too brash, maybe? Too self-confident? He angers easily, and I don't see much of the Lord in his life."

"Is *that* what's bothering you? Do yourself a favor and stop focusing on his faults. We all have them." She propped herself up on an elbow, then paused. After a moment of silence, soft snoring from the other side of the room confirmed Ellie still slept.

Moonlight from the small window washed Lillian's face in its glow. Their Mama's full Spanish blood showed itself most in Lillian. Even in the dim light, Adela noted her sister's small nose and delicate jaw. Everything about her features was petite, except for her eyes.

Doe eyes, Papa called them.

"It's simple," Lillian said. "You tell Ellie. She's hurt. When Phillip proposes, you accept, and in time, Ellie recovers."

Lillian tugged the pendant from Adela's grasp. "This was his grandfather's. I take it Phillip loves you."

"He claims he does."

"And you saw him tonight to tell him goodbye?"

Adela bobbed her head.

"Your secret is safe with me, but my advice is sooner is always better than later."

"I know. I know. I'm such a coward."

"Hardly." Lillian patted her hand.

It felt awkward to be the one consoled. The tables were usually turned.

"I didn't plan for it to happen and now...I'm risking Ellie disowning me for a man."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've heard yet. Ellie isn't *that* scary. Now why don't you get some sleep, and we'll talk about how to handle it tomorrow. I assume there will be a wedding when he returns. You can't prepare for a home of your own and still keep it a secret.

We'll think of something."

"Thanks, Lilly. Love you," she said with a peck to her sister's cheek.

Lillian flipped over. Much later, her mind exhausted, she relaxed and followed her sister in sleep.

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Kossati Village, Upper Creek Nation

The door to the summer house creaked on its leather hinges. Totka stepped inside careful not to wake the children. He left the door ajar allowing the moonlight to guide his steps. Its soft glow illuminated his sister's little ones piled like counting sticks on the bearskin mat. Four sets of arms and legs sprawled in every direction.

His youngest nephew stirred, flipped to his back, and wiped drool from his pudgy cheek.

Noiselessly, he removed his bow and quiver and propped them beside his own pallet. His blade he kept sheathed and strapped to his waist.

From her couch on the opposite wall of the cabin, his sister, Singing Grass, propped herself on her elbow. "You are home early." Her whisper was a shout in the stillness.

Running the gauntlet of little appendages, Totka stole across the room and lowered himself to sit beside her.

"Where is Nokose? Did he send you home to check on me?"

Totka rubbed his aching leg and decided to let her believe the lie. "You know your husband well."

She laid a warm hand on his knee. "I also know my brother and the pain he suffers."

Totka shifted and her hand dropped. "I did not mean to wake you. How are you feeling?"

"Hungry – all the time." Her voice gentled. "I am sorry you needed to come home early."

"It is no matter. There was little to hunt." He tried to keep the frustration from his voice. It was worrying enough to be forced to hunt during the summer months.

"Nothing? You caught nothing?"

"Three rabbits and a squirrel, as if I were just a boy. No one else had done any better when I left. I doubt one more day would have mattered much." He glanced at the floor. "I would rather be home with the children than listening to the men's talk of war, death, and starv –" he cut his words short.

"You do not have to hide things from me, Brother. I am pregnant--not blind and deaf. I know what happens around me."

"We will be fine."

"My husband is joining the Red Sticks. I hardly think it is fine."

Just before leaving with the hunting party one week earlier, Nokose had revealed to Singing Grass his intention to join the warring party.

She had not been pleased, and she still didn't know Totka planned to join as well.

Civil War had raged in the Creek Nation since the 1811 Grand Council. For over a year, Totka had publically remained neutral, along with Chief Red Eagle.

Now, he found himself forced to choose sides.

A *taskigyalgi*, a warrior without rank, Totka did not face the same decisions as Nokose. Still, he aligned himself with his sister's household and would suffer whatever fate befell her.

According to the Red Sticks, if the Long Knives were not stopped, the Muscogee would eventually be lead to starvation or worse...slavery.

With the purpose of protecting their nation and keeping its traditions pure, the Red Sticks were executing those displaying American sympathies.

Most in Kossati knew Singing Grass' household was partial to the Americans. Nokose spoke their language, understood their ways, and welcomed their inventions. Against Red Stick policies, Singing Grass traded for cotton, and Totka advocated fencing their communal garden.

Yes, the settlers' cattle encroached on Creek land, and no, the white farmers did not ask permission to run their iron plows through Creek soil. All of that aside, Totka found it difficult to justify fighting them.

Totka agreed with Singing Grass. The whites were powerful and well studied in war, and the Red Sticks would eventually be slaughtered.

But unless they pledged their allegiance to the Red Stick cause and soon, they would all find themselves taken unawares by a band of warriors.

Singing Grass shook her head in despair. "The Red Sticks will kill themselves in vain. Must Nokose?"

"Yes, we must."

"We? What is this? Will you fight as well?" The unbelief in her voice stabbed him to the core. He swallowed his anger. Only his sister could say such a thing and not incur his resentment.

Silence surrounded them as Totka bit back offense to keep his voice low and even. "I am a warrior without rank, a man of twenty-two winters dependent on his sister. Would you deny me the chance to rise in the nation?"

"Of course not. But you can barely..." Her voice trailed off on an irritated huff.

Wishing to ease the tension, Totka poked her in the arm. "Fear not, Sister. The prophets say we will not be harmed. They say the White man's bullets will bounce off our chests like pebbles."

"The prophets are insane! Surely you have not succumbed to their--" She quieted when she heard his soft chuckle. "You tease."

A month after the Grand Council, the sighting of a star with a fiery tail traveling across the sky had frenzied the Creeks. It was the "sign." It was the "arm of fire" Tecumseh had claimed would prove his prophecies were from the Great Spirit. The sighting had driven the Creeks into the Red Stick faction by the thousands.

"Madness has overcome our people. They are being led to the slaughter." Singing Grass's voice filled with grief. "We shame ourselves, Brother, and our children will pay."

"Pushmatahaw is a wise chief. He was right to force Tecumseh from his nation. Because he did, the Choctaw were spared this insanity. If only our chiefs had done the same..."

"Lower your voice," Totka cautioned. "Do you want the children to hear and repeat your words? We are already at risk. Careless words could be our destruction."

She sat up. Her single braid slipped from her shoulder and landed on the bearskin with a soft thud. "What do you mean we are already at risk?"

"Our leanings toward White ways will not be forgiven. We must clearly oppose the Americans."

"And what of our leanings? Does it make us a threat? Will my husband join with their soldiers? No!"

"Red Eagle has joined the war party."

"I care not what Red Eagle does. You should go to Big Warrior. Join his White ranks in Tuckabatchee. I hear all who desire peace with the Americans are flocking to his protection."

Totka cradled his head in his palms and massaged his scalp. "I agree with Big Warrior, but sooner or later, Tuckabatchee will be under siege, and his White warriors will be forced to surrender to the Red Sticks. We either submit now or later."

"Bah! Again with this talk of *we*. I need you here, Brother, to protect the children."

Totka's eyes wandered to the shadows on the floor. Being the children's maternal uncle, he was more responsible for their upbringing than Nokose. He cared for them and loved them as his own. Who would protect them when he went away?

He shook his head. "After we embrace the Red Stick cause, there will be no need to protect the children. My brother will do as he vowed and join the Red Sticks. Red Eagle is their chief now. He is clever and a good warrior. He will lead well."

Singing Grass picked at the end of her braid. "And you are certain my husband has no choice in the matter? That harm will come to us should he not join?"

"If Red Eagle, as influential and powerful as he is, has been forced at the threat of his family's life to join the Red Sticks, how will Nokose avoid it?"

"And you will fight?"

He stood and stretched his leg. Placing his weight on it, he cringed. Maybe his sister was right...

No. It was time. "I must bring home hair. I will go with Nokose Fixico."

Singing Grass grabbed his fingers and squeezed. "Wipe the worry from your face, Brother." Resolve strengthened her voice. "All will be well. Do what you must." She eased herself to the couch and pulled the blanket across her legs. "I ask one thing of you."

"Yes?"

"My husband, he can be..."

Totka smiled into the dark. "Yes, I know. I will do my best. Rest well. Morning comes soon."

He returned to his pallet, lightness in his step. He hadn't realized how much her approval meant to him until he obtained it.

He prayed to whatever god would listen that his family be spared the sufferings and hardships that were the sister of war.

