

## Red

by: Lauren Lee

\*\*\*

It was a regal home. White and grand, the plantation home had columns at the entrance and balconies on each higher level. Surrounding the house were fields. Paths weaved along the different sections. Little buggies scattered amongst the area, and there were brown faced intermixed.

For years the house had been the epicenter of Southern culture within the South Carolinian area. Like clockwork, visitors came every week. In shining clothing and polished carriages, Southern royalty would bring their own festivities to the plantation. There were parties for every holiday, and feasts for every crop gathered. No matter how many people came and went the plantation always gleamed pristine.

Between all the swirling faces one family remained. The Tidwells were well-off. Mrs. Tidwell was a debutante winner and her husband held the title as the most influential man in the region. While both were more absorbed in their lives than any of the going-ons of their children, the five children were growing up to be the cream of the crop as well.

They had all been trained in proper fashion, going through nurses and governesses and tutors. The eldest John worked at the largest bank in town and helped advise his father on current business proposals. Timothy Tidwell was away at college. Martha was married off. The younger two were still in the house. Adelaide was shy but observant, and Rebecca was curious although that would hopefully soon be ending. The children were tucked away from the dirt outside. Any grievances that outsiders might be facing were ignored. The house was warm and the kids were taken care of. There was no stain to be seen in the manor.

\*\*\*

On a bright sunny day in the prime of summer, a young face popped up into one of the diaphanous windows overlooking the miles of farmland in the back. Adelaide Tidwell was a demure thirteen years old. The child had an interest in books and a love of the outdoors. She had long curls of gold and wide honest eyes. When she smiled her

occasional smile, there were dimples to be seen. Today her dress was an ivory with elegant blue trim. Her mother had it made by someone over thirty miles away.

The dress made for an elegant silhouette in the window. With perfected posture, Adelaide held herself firmly, eyes on the landscape outside.

Adelaide was entranced by the waving white of the cotton that expanded all into the horizon. Every few acres were a gathering of slaves, tending to the crop. The girl watched as the buds seemed to ripple in the slight breeze. From above, the land was an ocean. She could have remained there for hours observing had her governess not caught up to her. She was always inevitably caught gazing out.

“Miss Tidwell! Why have you abandoned your duties?” the strict Northern woman shrieked. With a sigh, Adelaide turned away. She returned to her stitching. Every stitch was a nail driven into her soul. Tedious and boring were Adelaide’s thoughts of the work. However, her mother demanded that her second youngest be proper. There were countless marriage arrangements that could benefit the family.

After an afternoon of pricked fingers, Adelaide left the house. She was to meet her eldest brother at the entrance of the estate and continue to a friend of their mothers. It was the first time she would be passing the slave fields on her own. Her head kept spinning from side to side taking in the acreage up close.

But then, as the horse trotted forward, a shout was heard coming from a nearby field. Adelaide steered towards the commotion.

All she could hear was whipping and cries of anguish. The path circled up a hill. Adelaide pushed her horse faster, her hair coming loose as she bumped up and down. Suddenly, the scene emerged before her.

“You dirty slave!”

CRACK.

“How dare you!”

CRACK.

“Ya’ll are treated so good here.”

CRACK.

“I ought to sell you.”

CRACK.

CRACK.

CRACK.

On the ground in a cloud of dirt lay a slave, curved on his side. A basket of white cotton lay overturned on his body. His eyes fluttered and blood poured out of his mouth. All around the man was red. It soaked into the cotton on his body, and the white shirt of the punisher. It was against the slave's dull teeth and there were splatters on the blooming buds around the scene. There was another CRACK against the man's side. Adelaide looked down in horror. Stained into her dress was the red.

She looked up into the eyes of the field hand who was holding the whip.

"Miss Adelaide-" he began. Adelaide didn't wait for the rest. She turned the horse around and galloped off. They tore through the field and across the paths. Blind with tears and confusion, she headed straight into the dark forest that bordered the plantation.

Adelaide had seen scars from a distance. She had heard the whispers of frightened slaves. She knew work was harsh in the fields and that there had to be pain. Adelaide had just gotten distracted by beauty instead. The white cotton used to buoy her mind to clouds that were captured on the ground. Her sheets made of the material were so soft and warm. Cotton let her live a happy life. She didn't think of the red that accompanied it.

Adelaide yanked on the reins and jumped off the horse. Before her was a tree that has collapsed and blocked her way. She took off running, tearing through the brush, over fallen logs, through a creek, and down into a crevice. Spinning through the leaves and branches, her dress took the color of the filth around her.

She just wanted to escape. Behind her were her naivety and innocence and ignorance. Behind her was a hell tucked behind pearly gates. Behind her was a lie, a lie she had fiercely believed was pure and good. There was nothing good about what she had just seen.

Finally, Adelaide came to a halt in a clearing. Circling around the area were tall trees holding back all vestiges of light. In the center was a briar patch. Thick and thorny, the briars called out to Adelaide, and she rushed forward.

There was something comforting about the wilderness. Mother Earth was whispering in Adelaide's ear bringing her to peace. But Adelaide couldn't stay still, she

was propelled into action. She needed to hold firm to the truth and erase all that covered it.

Adelaide grabbed at the ground around the bramble, pulling weeds and slinging dead leaves away from the prickled plant. Adelaide worked tirelessly for hours. She plucked and pulled and groomed. Slowly a dead man's image faded from her mind. She tore lines into her skin as she worked too close to the thorns. The blood on her dress was covered by the slime of wet leaved. She sliced open her nail while tugging at a root. Her eyes were no longer blind and she felt less dirty. There were only darkening shadows to keep the girl company. Finally, she didn't feel alone.

The moon was rising when Adelaide was discovered asleep in the forest.

\*\*\*

It was midmorning when Adelaide opened her eyes the next day. She was in soft silken sheets, a long flowing nightgown, and bandages wrapped her arms. Everything was dazed, smooth, and white.

Adelaide turned over to see her mother staring at her, eyes cold. The room darkened.

"What in god's glorious name were you doing?" Mrs. Tidwell interrogated, jumping straight at the throat.

"I'm sorry Mother." Adelaide replied meekly, sitting up in bed. She loved her mother as every daughter should. That being said she doubted her mother loved her as a mother should.

"Never mind that. To run off and go faint in the brush? Is your wish to be in the gossip mill of the entire South?" Quite honestly Adelaide didn't care about the South. She was longing to go higher up where equality was more open and women could pursue more than just a marriage.

"I'm sorry," replied Adelaide. She had been more comfortable in her mad display of scouring of the land than her life on the manor. Even now in the warm confines of a real bed, Adelaide missed the hard truthful earth. Her head was no longer blocking out images of blood spurting out of a body. She could now again feel the heartbreak of seeing a man close to death. Adelaide saw only misfortune at the plantation.

“It is of no matter. I have matters to attend to regarding tomorrow’s dinner. I expect you to be well-behaved and well-dressed. We will quell any doubts of your sanity and present you as a fine lady. I expect that you know how important our family’s image is.

With a final nod Mrs. Tidwell glided out of the room. She was replaced by a black servant who clothed Adelaide in fine pastel green and guided Adelaide back into the privileged life she belonged to.

\*\*\*

It was a few more months before young Adelaide gathered the courage to seek out the briar bush again. Summer was gone and all the hot air of those months was replaced by the cool winds of autumn and the cold air of the North. She wore her hair pulled back and snuck a pair of britches from the laundry to wear under a simple skirt. It took hiking half the night with only a lantern as a guide before Adelaide found the site.

Once again, the Southern belle started by pulling weeds out from under the thorns. She worked quicker this time, finishing just as the hidden sky went from dusk to dawn. It was easier to find her way back to the house in the light, although Adelaide was caught in the eyes of the slaves up early as she snuck back to her room.

Lying back in bed, hair a mess and skin scratched up, Adelaide felt free of all the pressure that had been building on her. She knew that this would be a tradition. Adelaide needed an escape.

\*\*\*

The tradition continued on. The nighttime ritual of the third daughter of the Tidwell’s was a public secret. Her governess was used to seeing smudges of dirt behind the ear of her subject. The laundresses had long accepted the muddy and crumpled garbs that would appear every three fortnights or so. Even Mrs. Tidwell had given up on barring the girl’s room shut.

“I don’t understand,” Adelaide’s youngest sister Rebecca exclaimed, “What is so good about some old bush.”

It was Sunday breakfast, and Adelaide had her bible at hand. She flipped to passage.

“Here sister. Hebrews 10:22: ‘let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.’ I see the lord in my briar. There is pain and misfortune. Thorns cut into my hand as they cut into the head of Jesus the day of his death. It is worth it though. Because someday there will be salvation to make up for the pain. Someday my briar will bloom. I must just help it to grow first.”

“That doesn’t sound like what the minister preaches,” Rebecca replied

“Well neither does slavery, or stealing land, or drinking on a Sunday, but you’ve been around Momma and Papa enough to see all of that ungodly mess.”

Rebecca shrugged and turned back to her breakfast.

Adelaide studied her sister before returning to her food as well.

\*\*\*

The next night Adelaide went out she just sat before her bush and looked at the moon. She was seventeen and her mom has just condemned her. Adelaide wasn’t expecting a happy life, but she was hoping for moments of happiness. She didn’t want to be enslaved in marriage. She didn’t want her own scars to bear. She has seen many more horrors of slavery. While her skin was white and so she would never know such an extent of suffering, there were chains that came with arranged marriage too.

Under the full moon, the world looked different. The shadows were deeper and while parts of the forest were illuminated, it just meant that it was harder to see what wasn’t.

Once again, the briars were as bare as Adelaide felt inside. For the first time since she was thirteen, Adelaide cried. She lay amongst the thorns and let the water run down her face as she mourned her future.

Was Adelaide being overdramatic? Perhaps. After all, her sister enjoyed her life raising children on a plantation not far from home. Adelaide just didn’t want that. She saw who her mother was and what corruption lay in raising a home in the South. The marriage was in four months. Her suitor and his family were staying at the house to assist with preparations and to make a few business deals.

“This is the last time I will be in my sanctuary,” Adelaide thought. She was wrong.

\*\*\*

It had been four months in a flurry. From flowers to extensive dowry deals, every day brought a new adventure for everyone in the Tidwell Plantation; everyone but a young girl who just wanted to go to the forest and breathe in air that wasn't permeated with perfume.

She wore her hair pulled back. It had white flowers pinned in place and a veil that shaded her face in elegant lace. There were ruffled sleeves that cascaded over her shoulders. A flower was at the center of the bodice and the waist was cinched tight. From there the skirt flowed. It fell down into a cave. There was a second layer below that expanded into the train. It took effort to move. It was a cage. The dress was another cave of white.

As Rebecca got dressed in the next room, Mrs. Tidwell ran to and fro trying to put on the best show South Carolina had ever seen. The men were smoking in a separate section of the house. The priest was putting on his robes. The sun was shining outside and the ground was dry and warm. And so as bells rung and family and friends filled the pews, Adelaide stood ready to escape.

Thirteen steps to reach the stairwell, seven to go down the stairs, twenty three before she was out of the door, and then Adelaide ran. She ran like she was the horse galloping through the forest. She ran like she was being whipped in a cotton field. She ran like she was going to be freed.

The path was different in daylight. There were colors around Adelaide. The world was more than black and white today. The sky was a bright blue. The leaves were a strong green. Even the hard earth beneath her feet was a rich brown. Gone were her shadows.

The clearing was ahead. Adelaide sprinted. No wedding dress would hold her back.

Before her was a plant but it didn't look like her briar. The bride went forward. There were flowers among the thorns. Sometime in the last four months buds had formed and then bloomed.

Tears ran down Adelaide's face. Everything was ruined. Her bush was corrupted.

She grabbed the scissors that lay beside the bush. They had been taken years ago out of the shed. When Adelaide was younger and more hopeful she prayed for the briars to bloom. It would have been a sign of something better in her life. Adelaide kept the scissors so she would be able to capture a flower and bring it back to the house to her. She wanted to be able to show the plantation what true beauty was. But this wasn't it, Adelaide decided.

The scissors lay in her hand. The grips faced outward and the blades pointed straight at her breast. In one hand were the rusted silver and another gripped one of the flowers.

It was quick. Adelaide took the scissors and stabbed straight into her heart. Blood filled the area around her. It poured out of her chest. Red was the only color the clearing would remember. Her white dress was white no longer. Her skin stained crimson as well.

\*\*\*

When Adelaide was found over a day later, the body was stretched out in the clearing. As they carted her away the only thing remaining was a white flower turned red.

\*\*\*

Years later a battle was fought in the forest. More blood was shed. The red always washed away but the forest remained. The plantation crumbled. Slavery ended. Shadows won in the end. Adelaide smiled as she watched, free at last.