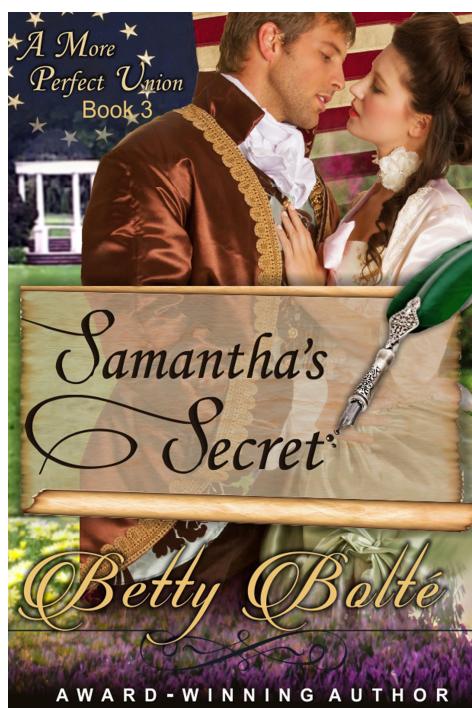


Excerpt of Samantha's Secret

A More Perfect Union Series Book 3



Betty Bolté

Also by Betty Bolté

Becoming Lady Washington: A Novel

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About

Samantha's Secret

In 1782, the fight for independence becomes personal!

Midwife and healer, Samantha McAlester returns from the front lines to find Charles Town under British siege and the town's new doctor at war with its citizens.

Dr. Trent Cunningham intends to build a hospital staffed solely with educated doctors. What he doesn't need is a raven-haired charlatan spooning out herbs and false promises to his patients, while tempting him at every turn.

Then a mutual friend develops a mysterious infection. Trenton is stumped. Samantha suspects the cure but knows treatment will expose her long-guarded secret, risking all she holds dear— including Trenton.

Preface

Samantha's Secret is the third historical romance I ever published and as such it was written many years ago as I was a new author. It's amazing how much my storytelling skills have improved over the past five years since this book was originally published. The core of the story remains the same, but hopefully with more skilled telling. This edition is a revised version of the third book in the A More Perfect Union historical romance series. I have corrected and revised the text throughout the story.

Thanks for reading!

Betty Bolté

Chapter 1

Charles Town, South Carolina ó 1782

óI must say, I hope we can relax and enjoy the festivities.ó Samantha McAlester tried but failed to release the tension building between her shoulders. As night descended upon the garden, she cringed as barks of laughter interspersed the hum of the party guests’ conversation, increasing in volume along with the flow of wine and ales. Before long, Trent would arrive, and then what would she do? How could she tolerate his presence after his disdain the last time?

óI find it hard to fathom the danger you and Amy faced last week.ó Emily Sullivan tugged her shawl around her shoulders to ward off the late November chill. She swiveled to look at Samantha, her long skirts rustling with the movement. óIf Benjamin hadn’t caught up with you, and then Walter hadn’t stepped in to sacrifice his own life to save all of us, I don’t know what we’d have done.ó

óThat’s all in the past, Em. Do not dwell on the matter.ó The horrifying sound of gun shots around the manor house surely would echo in her mind in a similar manner as to other shots and shouts she’d experienced over the past several years. Walter had vowed to die defending his home, and he kept his word. Emily’s cousin, Evelyn, had lost her husband but gained her freedom from his overbearing nature. óNo good can come from reliving that awful day. Let us close the book on those events.ó

Emily shrugged and let her gaze drift over the garden. óYou’re probably right, but it’s hard to ignore the sobs from poor Evelyn up in your spare room. Besides, planning a double wedding with such sadness hanging in the air might be considered disrespectful. What do you think?ó

óI think you and Amy have the right to marry your betrotheds. And moreover, this town needs the happy event after the terror and uncertainty we’ve endured under the British occupation.ó Standing beneath the peaked roof of the white-washed gazebo, which was draped in dormant climbing rose vines, Samantha hesitated to follow two of her closest friends as they made their way toward the cluster of guests.

Emily's white teeth flashed as she chuckled. "I never thought I could be as happy as I am in preparing to marry Frank."

"The idea of holding the wedding at the end of the holidays is brilliant." Samantha couldn't prevent a smile from easing onto her lips. "Everyone will already be in a festive mood and gathered in town to be with family and friends."

Emily bobbed her head and then indicated the pair moving away from them. "They appear to be as besotted with each other as Frank and I."

Amy Abernathy and Benjamin Hanson ambled away from her, arm in arm down the crushed seashell and pea gravel path toward tables laden with a variety of meats and sweets. So much had happened over the past year, month, even week, she couldn't imagine what more awaited in the near future as the fight for America's independence from British rule finally ended in victory. One thing remained certain: all the dueling and fighting, the anxiety and terror, her friends had endured since the beginning of the occupation had been relegated to the past. As the Britons prepared to evacuate, she and her compatriots could all look to the future and plan for a better world. Mostly, in the event. Her heart sunk at the thought of Trent's imminent arrival and his disdain of her methods.

From where Samantha stood at the very back corner of the property, she could see over the heads of her guests as they wandered through the unusually large and diverse garden. Winding paths crisscrossed the area, providing easy access to the variety of flowers, vegetable and herbal plants, and bushes. Several tall oaks and cypress lent shade in the summer heat as well as ingredients for her simples and poultices. She drew in a deep breath of crisp fall air along with the sense of peace only this space evoked. As long as her parents owned the sizeable property, she'd be content with life.

They'd spent years designing and creating the perfect medicinal garden, containing every kind of beneficial plant that would grow in the hot and humid southern climate. Surely they'd never move. Not after all their hard work and expense. But with the tensions in town targeted at those who sympathized with the British, the future for her family remained unclear, like the harbor on a foggy morning. What if they were forced out by the British? Or someone else? The South Carolina government had initiated a list of known loyalists whose property was subject to confiscation as the British withdrew. Had her father's loyalties become too flagrant in recent months? She pressed a hand to her waist, trying to quell the turmoil within. What would she do

without her garden and charming home? Indeed, without her loving yet stubborn parents?

The gazebo had provided a shady space for numerous tea parties with her dear friends over the last year. Of course, the tea came from plants within the garden or from other countries. As long as it was not imported from Britain or any of its territories she'd consume it. They'd shared many a strong opinion on the war and the depredations on both sides. The soldiers took advantage of the women, children, and property in the absence of husbands, brothers, and fathers. With peace on the horizon, the fog of the future could begin to lift the uncertainties of life in the past.

Now, while she and Emily watched in quiet happiness, Benjamin escorted Amy down the path, newly betrothed to each other as of mere minutes ago, his hand possessing hers where it lay on his arm. On top of Benjamin's skirmish with renegade loyalists a week before that had resulted in his right arm in a sling from a gunshot wound to his shoulder, his slightly bowed carriage hinted at the pain which plagued him. She'd mix up some more simples for him to take home after the feast. And definitely she'd keep a close watch on his condition. Not only would she do all within her power to heal her friend, but her reputation as a healer remained at stake, especially since young and ambitious Dr. Trent Cunningham had arrived in town.

They're so perfect for each other.Emily smoothed a wrinkle from one elbow-length white glove. Who could have guessed she and I would be betrothed to such handsome men so soon after our joint vow.

Who indeed.Samantha tossed her head, her ebony locks settling between her shoulders.

So much had changed in such a short period of time. Last month, the three friends had made a vow to remain unmarried. Each woman choosing their own independence rather than rely upon the whim and largess of a man. They'd agreed the vows could be broken only if the woman desired to do so, not by force or compulsion. Now, both Amy and Emily chose to follow their hearts and were making wedding plans for the biggest event of the holiday season, a joint affair on Twelfth Night.

At least you have managed to stay faithful to your promise.Emily's porcelain cheeks reflected the soft light from the many hanging lamps decorating the edges of the gazebo. And if Frank hadn't protected my reputation in that scary duel, I'd never have let him persuade me of his affection.

“I won’t mention such an act in my comments later. He might have died for you, you understand, right?” Samantha sniffled. Pondering Frank’s close call reminded her of other similarly dangerous situations. Ones so painful to recall she hadn’t shared them with anyone and probably never would. She slipped the perfumed kerchief from her sleeve to dab at her nose, and relished the scent of lavender floating on the night air. The crowd mingled in the open spaces between the variously colored bushes and plants and strolled the many winding paths through the garden. “Frank truly loves you and will always protect you. Speaking of whom, someone appears to be seeking you out.”

Emily’s smile widened when she spotted Frank Thomson walking toward her. “It’s about time for your speech, so I’ll go and—”

“Right. You two should find a good place to watch.” Samantha chortled and shooed her friend toward the tall blond striding purposefully toward where the ladies conversed.

Frank reached Emily’s side, taking her hand in his with a smile, a nod of greeting to Samantha. Emily had once vehemently declared she would never marry. Samantha permitted her lips to curve into a smile, having anticipated the two cousins would succumb to the desires of the men accompanying them. She may not know everything, but she did know how to interpret a woman’s behavior and thus descry their next actions. In the event, her friends would succumb to the attentions and intentions of Benjamin and Frank.

The guests mingling about the garden included all of her family and her friends, the new lawyer, George Manning and his wife Catherine, as well as a few artisans she’d not been introduced to yet. The invitation list had not changed much over the years, adhering to her parents’ desire to include a balanced mix of political views. Her father’s attempt to appease both camps; one she feared may have failed. Her parents had held a harvest feast each November for the past ten years, war or no war. This garden, packed with medicinal herbs and flowers, soothed her chaotic thoughts and emotions. Mingled scents of jasmine and rosemary tickled the noses of the throng of guests. Her father had bowed to her midwife mother’s demands to forego the typical decorative garden most residents had surrounding their two-story homes and open piazzas. Instead, they created an extravagant oasis of flowers, bushes, and trees. She pulled her silver shawl around her shoulders, her midnight blue skirts swishing against the wooden floor of the gazebo when she pivoted to peruse the happy group milling amongst the multitude of plants she could identify by name and purpose. Her mother had ensured Samantha would be well

prepared to follow in her calling as a healer and midwife. A purpose her father also endorsed and supported in every way within his significant means.

Her friends had chosen to marry, leaving her to carry on alone in this vow of staying unmarried. Her decision rested upon her desire to never again subject her heart to the anguish of watching a loved one die. The cries and groans. The blood. The agony. Once was definitely more than enough for her to bear. A sigh wiggled from her pressed lips before she could subdue it. She squared her shoulders, her gown soft against her skin. The past had no bearing on her plans for the future.

Points of light emerged overhead to surround the crescent moon hanging in the sky. The heavenly stars beckoned, guiding her healing endeavors as much as her day-to-day activities. She glanced to the dark bedroom window, imagining Amy's sister, Evelyn, sequestered and tearful over the death of her little boy's father. The horrific images flashed across her mind, but she pushed them aside. Just as she'd shoved aside the memory of the bloody field of battle the year before. One day at a time. How else could she cope with everything? Her focus must stay on helping her patients, her friends, as best she could. Tomorrow would be soon enough to discuss the widow's plans.

Tonight, Samantha intended to enjoy a respite from the tension and horror of the occupied town and the rampant violence across the countryside. Fortunately, no recent tar-and-feathering patients had landed at her door. The vengeance of the patriots against the loyalists continued, maybe even increased, with each passing day. For one night, she hoped the townspeople would join together. Her neighbors, her friends, fellow citizens all without regard to political leaning, had gathered to celebrate as they did every year, even though the repast was meager compared to what they enjoyed before the war and the British occupation of Charles Town. She shook off the weight of sadness, determined to focus on the approaching evacuation by the Britons, as soon as the unusually active hurricane season ended and they could safely navigate out of the treacherous harbor.

A strange blend of horror and hope pervaded both days and nights. Only a week ago, the three friends barely escaped with their lives when renegade loyalists attacked Evelyn's home. Tonight, a celebration of the culmination of the harvest. She would not perjure herself and say she'd miss Walter, not after his abuse and, she suspected, attempted poisoning of Evelyn. The stomach cramps and pangs Evelyn had agonized through completely vanished as soon as Emily

assumed responsibility for the cooking at the country manor. Walter only reluctantly permitted the three ladies to invade his dwelling to provide care for his wife during her travails and lying in. He had declared he would die protecting his property. And so he did. Dying in such a manner did not equate to making him a hero in her eyes. Again, that chapter had ended and the book closed on the past events.

It was time to move on. She eased down the steps, bracing herself on the hand rail to prevent her injured leg from failing her. Despite her best efforts, the limb was not as strong as she'd like. She had to maintain her dignity, which did not include falling down among her guests. The puncture wound where a thorny stick had pierced through her thigh would eventually heal, no thanks to the tumble she had taken followed by the forced march by the renegades. Thank goodness they'd all made it safely back to town. A shiver worked her shoulders at the thought of what might have happened to the two women had they not escaped. Mentally, she closed the book, intent on writing a new beginning for both her and her town.

“Samantha, we’re ready for the toast.” Amy’s grin shone in the subdued light. “Hurry, now.”

“Coming.” Samantha increased her pace, rehearsing her short speech as she limped along the seashell path reflecting the moonlight.

The responsibility of inspiring the gathering had fallen on her. Locating a fitting passage to share with her friends and neighbors had taken several hours earlier in the afternoon. Her father’s impressive library contained a wealth of material, but finding a quote worthy of the town’s momentous events, indeed the future of the country, had proved a challenge. Eventually she’d uncovered a most fitting sentiment.

On a side path, her parents strolled toward her, arm in arm. They carried flutes of wine like candlesticks against a dark night. Aaron’s burly frame dwarfed his petite wife, Cynthia. They each sported gray on their otherwise dark heads, brought on no doubt from the never ending tension and suspicion in town. With the Britons stripping everything of any value as they prepared to leave, her parents had become more and more withdrawn from her. What did they attempt to shield her from? Her biggest fear remained their intention to flee the town, forcing her to accompany them to some far off land, away from her beloved surroundings, her beloved country.

“My darling, you look beautiful this evening.” Her father stopped before her and glanced

at her mother. öDon't you agree?ö

öYes, of course.ö Cynthia sipped her wine, cutting off any further comment she may have made. She wore a gown of dark gray with pink insets and small lavender bows dotting its skirts. A white lace cap rested on her dark curls. Her appearance hid the worry she expressed about her reputation among the townspeople, a reputation based upon the frequent deaths of those under her care. Was it the result of bad fortune or bad choices? Samantha had started making notes on the cases she could, but most of the past cases would remain a mystery.

öThank you for your kind words. I'm pleased the weather cooperated so we could enjoy the garden tonight.ö Samantha smiled and briefly inclined her head. The mingling crowd wore an array of somber colors mixed in with the occasional pastel gown or trousers. All wore some form of outer garment for warmth. öAnother week and it will be too chilly to entertain out of doors. We'd miss a glorious night such as this to share with our friends.ö

öIndeed, indeed.ö Aaron's smile faded as he looked around the area, his gaze lighting on first one, then another, of the guests before finally focusing on the two-story home. öThis house has served us well for many years. It will be hard to find another as fine.ö

Samantha heard a note of regret in his voice as her mother squeezed his arm. The sound of sadness raised tiny bumps along her flesh. She studied the shifting emotions playing across his features. öIt is a good thing, then, that won't be necessary. The British will pull out ere long, and the town can return to normal.ö

öYou speak the truth.ö Aaron patted his wife's hand gripping his arm but did not meet Samantha's eyes for a moment. Finally, he locked gazes with her. öThe Britons will depart very soon.ö

Yet his tone— a quaver, a hesitation— suggested something amiss. Worry lines carved a valley between his brows, surrounded his tight lips. Her mother's usually expressive face held no hint as to her feelings other than boredom. Obviously, she must be agitated to have schooled her face into such a rigid mask. What had happened to provoke them so?

öHow is Evelyn?ö Cynthia changed the subject as she gave her attention to Samantha.
öPray tell me she is not still crying over that man.ö

öIt is to be expected she'd grieve the death of the father of her child.ö Samantha slowly shook her head. öEven if he did treat her abysmally in the end. At one time, she must have been fond of him.ö

“So I’m told.” Cynthia sighed and folded her hands. “I’ll take some soothing tea up to her after everyone has eaten. Which reminds me, I had meant to inquire earlier. Did you have a plate sent up to her?”

“Amy carried a small plate up a while ago. Whether the poor woman ate it or not, I cannot say.”

“She still must provide for her infant.” Cynthia flexed her fingers and then studied the second floor window. “Evelyn’s life has certainly been filled with sorrows and challenges.”

“With luck, her fortunes will change for the better while she resides in town.” Samantha’s experiences would help her counsel the new widow on the hard decisions and unpleasant realities she’d face. In the distance, Amy waved at Samantha to hurry. “Tomorrow, I’ll speak with Evelyn about her plans for the future.”

“Very kind of you. Ah, I see you’re being sought out.” Aaron half bowed and then motioned for her to precede him down the path. “Time for the annual salute. Have you chosen a suitable sentiment to share with our guests?”

She nodded, aware of a sense of relief emanating from her parents, and made her way down the path, shells crunching with each step. She glanced back at her father’s guarded expression and then drew in a breath, savoring the sweet aroma emanating from the massive rosemary bush huddled in the corner. Eager faces, alight with smiles, surrounded her. The string quartet finished playing Haydn in the background and fell silent.

Benjamin handed her a flute of sparkling wine when she reached the group of people gathered by the banquet table. She frowned, worry blooming inside. His lips pinched together as though he fought pain. His face appeared ashen in the flickering shadows of the lamplight. With surprise, she noticed when she accepted the flute from him that the touch of his hand left moisture on her fingers.

“Benjamin, are you feeling well?” Samantha studied his expression. The perspiration and tautness of his face sparked grave concern in her chest. “Tell me the truth.”

“I’m fine, a touch tired.” He wiped his hand down his dove gray evening coat and then smiled over Samantha’s head. “Excellent. You made it!”

She turned to welcome the new arrival and froze, her flute trembling in tense fingers, the liquid sloshing within the fragile crystal. Dr. Trenton Cunningham. His sandy blond hair waved back from his open expression, crystal blue eyes echoing the wide smile revealing even white

teeth. Broad shoulders filled the dark navy evening coat he wore, a canary yellow cravat neatly tied at his throat and tucked into an elaborately embroidered waistcoat. Creamy breeches hugged his strong thighs, and tall black boots completed his attire. Despite the formality of his clothes, Dr. Trent appeared as though he'd recently arrived on board a ship from some distant intriguing port. Fresh and windblown and ready for adventure.

“Benjamin, should you be out here?” Trent strode to stand by his friend, inspecting Benjamin with a sweeping glance. “You look terrible.”

“I’ll be fine. Besides, I wouldn’t want to forego hearing Miss Samantha’s toast, after all.” Benjamin shook Trent’s hand and then drew Amy up to his side.

Trent nodded at Amy, who smiled a greeting. “My heartfelt wishes to you both.” He bowed at Samantha, his eyes sparkling as he gazed at her. “Miss Samantha, I’m honored to be included in your gathering this evening.”

“I’m pleased your schedule permitted you to attend.” She dipped a curtsy, but her thigh underwent a spasm and jerked in protest. She lurched and flung her hands wide in an attempt to stay on her feet.

Trent grasped her arm as she found her balance, the contact of his hand jolting along every inch of her skin. *Gramercy*. Brows knitted, he gazed at her with concern evident in his countenance. She stepped away, out of his reach, and drew in a long breath. “Thank you.”

He half bowed again, his arm sweeping in front of his waist, as he smiled at her. “My pleasure.”

Although she’d been in his presence a handful of times—mainly when he challenged and decried her abilities as a healer—she couldn’t deny the intense visceral impact she experienced each time. A purely physical effect, of course, one she would scrutinize and then ignore. After all, the combination of a tall gorgeous man who also proved strong and clever could not easily be dismissed. His mere presence was extraordinarily dangerous to her sense of well-being. She forced herself to remain still, appear calm, even while her heart raced. She’d never experienced such a combined sense of imbalance and headlong emotion. A definite curiosity, given her intended path forward.

The last time she’d seen him, Trent had been furious at what he’d called her ineptitude while treating Emily’s young nephew the month before. He’d been wrong, of course, as little Tommy fully recovered from the snake bite without the doctor actually doing more than

administering a small dose of emetic and then bathing the fever after her treatment. But she'd never had the opportunity to discuss the proper treatment, so he continued to act as though her skills proved inferior to his. After the fact, her mother relayed news of the latest snake bite remedy based on plantains, rum, and tobacco juice. If only she'd learned of the amazingly effective poultice sooner, little Tommy would have never suffered a prolonged ordeal. Next time, she'd know. Another chapter ended and book closed.

Though aware of the disquieting fact Benjamin summoned the young doctor, she'd hoped he'd wait to arrive after the party ended and the guests dispersed. Or at least he might have the courtesy to dawdle until after she'd made her short speech. But he'd shown up as eager and affecting as ever, unsettling her normally unflappable composure preceding her annual duty. Indeed, time had slipped away and the moment arrived. She turned back to face the guests, and raised her glass, the golden wine sloshing in the flute.

She waited for the conversations and laughter to die as one by one they noticed her. When all was quiet except for the call of night birds to one another, she lifted her glass a bit higher. öMy friends, we gather this evening as in years past to rejoice in the bounty we've realized this year. As our country begins to define our government and create a new society, consider the wise words from the lauded Anna Bradstreet, who some have called the Tenth Muse, in her wonderfully inspiring *Meditations, Divine and Moral*.ö

Trent locked gazes with her, disconcerting her already churning thoughts. Strange how his presence caused such an extreme reaction. Was it the animosity she sensed flowing from him like sea foam after a storm? Or could it be more of an underlying awareness triggered by similar interests? He widened his eyes and then winked at her as a slow grin eased onto his lips. Startled, she blinked and then focused instead on the cluster of her closest friends and her parents. She took a breath, trying in vain to calm her agitation, and aimed a shaky smile at the gathering.

She must push through this disconcerting situation as swiftly as she dared. öMiss Bradstreet reminded us that, -Authority without wisdom is like a heavy axe without an edge, fitter to bruise than polish.ø Pray keep this thought in mind as the year draws to a close and we face new challenges. Our governor and other state leaders will need our support and God's guidance.ö

Glasses clinked all around her to the accompaniment of öHuzza! Huzza!ö She let out a sigh masked as a laugh, raising her glass again to acknowledge the well wishes of the people

before her.

She sipped the wine, the cheer of the moment echoing inside her heart. The sweet liquid slid down her throat, calming and buoying her at the same time. Looking over the crowd, she noted others mimicking her actions. All but two anyway. Her parents, grim faced and rigid, turned and stalked away. Their actions could only mean one thing. A chill born of dismay and fear froze her smile into place.