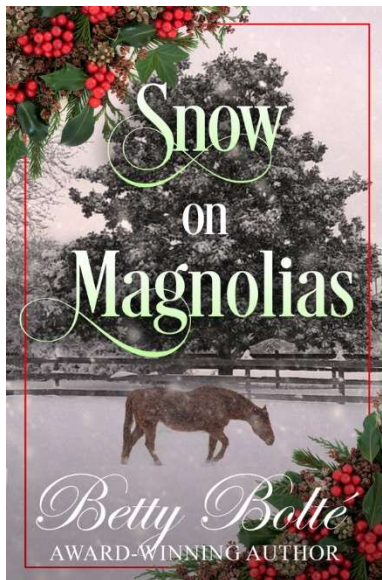


Excerpt of  
*Snow on Magnolias*

By  
Betty Bolté



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*About*

## Snow on Magnolias

One terrible lie, a desperate measure to save her past, just might destroy her future...

**Award-winning author of historical fiction presents a new novel of love and lies, secrets and sensuality, and the hands of fate weaving it all together.**

The American Civil War is finally over and Christmas beckons. Magnolia Merryweather, backyard horse breeder, is eager to celebrate for the first time since the war began even as she continues to grow her business. She envisions a calm, prosperous life ahead after all the terror of the past four years. She's preparing to follow in her mother's matriarchal footsteps, helping to put on a calico ball as part of her training. Only, all of her plans are thrown into disarray when her secret lover returns and starts asking pointed questions she can't answer without disruption and disaster following.

Bryce Day comes home to Alabama after he's discharged from service in the First Alabama Cavalry USA, though with guilt weighing on his heart. He knows his neighbors won't cotton to his Unionist bent and the woman of his heart likely won't give him a second chance after his silence during the war. A silence he felt was for her own good in case he didn't survive. But he's nothing if not determined to win her back. He must. He's dreamt for years about settling down with Lia and starting their own family. That's what he fought for, came back to her for. Only, she's hiding something from him. How can they have any hope of a loving life together with lies and secrets between them?

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## Author's Note

Dear Reader,

I've wanted to write a historical romance set during Christmas for a long time but hadn't struck upon a good story to write. Until I got the idea for this one, that is! What I think makes this post-Civil War story unique is that my main characters are Southern Unionists—folks who remained loyal to the USA even as Alabama and other southern states joined the Confederacy.

I'd like to thank readers like you who continue to inspire me to write stories with joy and passion. I always enjoy hearing from my readers, so please drop me a line at [betty@bettybolte.com](mailto:betty@bettybolte.com) anytime.

If you enjoy this book, please subscribe to my newsletter via [www.bettybolte.com](http://www.bettybolte.com) to be informed of upcoming book related news and appearances. You can also learn more about me, my other books, and read excerpts of each book at my website. You may also enjoy learning more about the behind-the-scenes research I did for this story at [www.bettybolte.net](http://www.bettybolte.net).

Again, thanks for reading! I hope you enjoy *Snow on Magnolias*.

Betty

## Chapter One

*I need her. I need her. I need her.*

The three-word mantra matched the urgent cadence of his horse's canter down the muddy road back to the place he thought of as home. Back to his love, Magnolia Merryweather. Lia, to her family and friends. And to him. At least at one point before he'd fouled everything up.

Captain Bryce Day finally rode his jet-black stallion, named Jet, down one road after another, striving for the courage to arrive at Hopewell, the country manor of Lia's family, as soon as he could manage. Now that he'd been discharged from the cavalry, he needed to make amends. He'd been distant far too long and made the biggest misstep of his life during that time. Would Lia forgive him and give him a second chance at a future with her? Her brother's reply to his apologetic letter seemed to say he should try, which gave him a glimmer of hope.

The once-lush rolling landscape of north Alabama showed signs of the drought and destruction of the past few years of the Civil War. It didn't help that it was December so the trees stood starkly bare against the dreary gray clouds warning of rain. As he cantered slowly down the empty road, he noted where a barn had been burned. Had the livestock been confiscated or merely shot in place? Anything to keep resources from the hands of the enemy. A troubled sigh escaped his lips and he clamped his mouth shut. He had to look forward, not back.

Five years had passed since the first time he'd visited the Merryweather clan clustered on the sprawling two-hundred-acre property. He'd moved to the area without any firm plans other than to take advantage of his friend Doctor Samuel Merryweather's offer to come check out the growing city for opportunities. Back in December 1860, despite the tensions in the air, he'd been focused on following in his father's footsteps so far as finding work, and then a loving wife and raising a passel of children. But he wouldn't follow his father's lead when it came to discipline. He winced at the mere memory of a raised belt or switch. He vowed to be firm but compassionate in the discipline he doled out to his children. They'd respect him, not fear him. Unlike his own experience.

A rumble in the distance augured bad weather approaching. The temperatures had been warmer than usual, and thus rainier than customary. But after the drought of the previous two years, the rain was welcomed with open arms by everyone. Even if it meant that as the winter approached the possibility increased of freezing rain or even snow. Ah, snow. That thought brought the stirring memory of standing with sweet Lia in his arms beneath the snow-covered magnolias, sharing a kiss or two. Her beauty as rare

as the snow falling on those dark green shiny leaves. He could never forget the love they shared, the hopes they'd shared. In hindsight he knew he'd been an idiot, but the war had befuddled his senses to the point of making such a grave error as to cut off their burgeoning courtship. Would she welcome him back? God, he hoped she would.

Though, he'd not argue with her if she pushed him away. He'd had enough of violence in all forms. During the war, he'd seen and done things he'd never imagined possible. Never thought he'd be called upon to burn women and children out of their homes, for one thing, whether they were enemy dwellings or not. The terror in the mothers' and children's eyes haunted his every moment. He'd done what he could within the scope of his orders to ensure they were not in whatever structure had been deemed necessary to destroy so the rebels wouldn't have use of it. But homes? He understood they were used also for headquarters and hiding places, but it hurt his tender heart to leave women and children and the elderly and infirm to fend for themselves. His only consolation came from knowing they were alive when he rode away.

Unlike the rebels he had fought with saber and pistol, and even with his knuckles at one terrifying moment when he thought his own life was about to be cut short. At that moment, Lia's beautiful face—vibrant green eyes, a smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose, sweet lips ready for kissing, all framed by lush dark-red hair—flashed into his mind for a brief moment, but long enough to remind him of why he was fighting in the first place. To secure a safe environment in a free society to have a family and to have a life filled with promise and prosperity. He'd redoubled his efforts and knocked out the other soldier so he could get away. The sights and sounds—bloodshed and explosions—couldn't be erased from his memory as much as he longed to do so.

After the excitement of the battle ebbed away, all he really wanted was to be with Lia. But he'd stupidly cut off their correspondence while he'd been forced to lie out in the mountains hiding from the rebel posses looking for men like him, unionists who refused to enlist or be conscripted into the Confederate Army but awaited their chance to join the Union Army forces. Months had passed and he'd managed to dodge the groups of hunters in search of their human prey. Slowly it dawned on him what he had to do for the woman he loved: let her go. He'd sent word by a trusted friend to Lia to let her know he freed her from her vow to wait for him until the war ended. He didn't want her to harbor hope when he felt none as to his own survival in the brutality of the war. Then the Union Army captured Huntsville in April 1862 without a shot fired and he'd come out of hiding and joined the Union forces for the remainder of the war. A war that cost him Lia.

He turned onto the lane leading to Hopewell, hoping with all his heart she'd give him a second chance to make their future come to fruition as they'd once planned.

The thud of running feet echoed through the house. Rain beating on the tin roof was no match for the yells and laughter of the five young boys dashing about inside the large home, zipping in and out of the parlor and dining room. All five, ranging from ten-year-old twins down to the youngest at four, were the sons of Lia's brother and his wife. On this rainy Thanksgiving day in December 1865, they'd grown bored and thus started a game of tag. Much to everyone's dismay.

Lia lifted the steaming bowl of mashed potatoes up above her shoulders to avoid the darting figure of the laughing kid as she made her way from the kitchen. The youngest of the bunch perhaps, but he'd proven time and again to be the most determined. Or stubborn. Lia smiled to herself as she pirouetted and placed the fragrant bowl on the cloth-covered trestle table, the aromas of butter and parsley underlying that of the creamy potatoes. She'd do anything for Travis, forgive him most any transgression, too. She surveyed the table, silently applauding the creative centerpiece of pine cones and lemons and the enticing scents from the roasted wild turkey stuffed with walnuts and scallions. Her youngest sister Aster crafted the specially designed decoration for the table using her unique gifts with plants, flowers in particular. The dark-green tablecloth, the pleasing color of magnolia leaves, created the perfect background for the familiar glistening plates and silverware. Two three-branched candelabras provided gentle lighting at either end of the immense table where so many family meals had been shared. Several bowls and platters held the scanty essentials for their holiday dinner, obtained over the last few weeks with some difficulty by their mother and father. Enough to share among them but not the overly abundant feast of bygone times. But now, everything was in place and ready for the family to come together again.

"My goodness, if you don't stop running through this house, I'll..." Laura halted in the shadow of the doorway, a silver spoon raised at ear height as a silent warning to the boys to behave.

The woman scowled at her children. Her long, blonde hair was braided and wrapped into a bun on her head. Green eyes flashed as she let out a long-suffering breath. Laura had melded with the family easier than butter in cookie dough. She'd fallen for Samuel, Lia's brother, but the entire family had fallen for her too. Her quiet good nature soothed Lia's unease and helped her find a path forward when the world seemed bleak indeed. The day she'd received that heartbreaking note from the man she longed to hold her, to comfort her during the worry and horror of the war years. Lia loved Laura like one of her own blood sisters and appreciated everything she'd ever done for the family. More than she could ever put into words, truth be told.

"Oh, Mama. We're just having fun." With a burst of laughter, Michael dashed around her and out of range of the weakly threatened smack with the utensil. Blond-haired like his mother, and slender like his father, the ten-year-old was becoming a fine-looking young man.

"Yea, right!" His twin, Ian, darted around the vibrant figure of their mother as they made for the open kitchen door onto the back porch, sliding out of sight in a jiffy.



While December brought cooler weather and more moisture to the state, Alabama still enjoyed a temperate climate. The winter had started off with more rain than usual, however nobody would complain about a little rain. But on this Presidentially declared holiday, one her family always celebrated unlike many of their neighbors, Laura insisted the boys stay presentable in their good clothes, such as they were, until after the family gathered for dinner. The result of boys being dressed up on a rainy day was they were stuck inside and their active little bodies craved something to do. Lia didn't blame them. She understood. She'd rather be out at the stable working with her horses despite the rain drumming on the roof.

Her thoughts strayed to a previous winter day when she'd been delighted to awaken to find a rare snowfall on the ground. She'd taken advantage of the unexpected opportunity to hitch up a pair of horses to the sleigh to teach them how to pull it. They'd taken a while to adjust to the difference from wheels to runners but were soon on their way. It had been a cold, windy day but her companion had kept her warm. His kind eyes, boisterous laugh, and gentle caress... Whoa. No. She couldn't allow herself to even think about him ever again. He'd told her he didn't want her to wait for him, so she'd moved on. Broken heart and all.

"You boys stop running about like jackrabbits on fire!" Samuel bellowed, his light-brown hair swishing about his shoulders. "We're about ready to eat our Thanksgiving dinner and you're acting like imbeciles." He shook his head and rammed his fists onto his narrow hips. "Now wash up and sit down."

The younger boys calmed immediately and, hanging their heads, scurried to the kitchen to do as told. They trickled out of the dining room, but Lia couldn't find it in her heart to be upset with them. She wiped her hands on the apron tied at her waist as she arched a brow at her brother.

"Sam, you didn't have to yell at them. Did you?" Lia eased around the large table set for twelve.

"Somebody had to stop the chaos. That will at least give us one thing to be thankful for on this special day." Samuel gripped the back of the chair at the head of the table, pulling it out and settling onto its cane-bottom seat.

Aster sauntered into the room, her curly brown hair pulled back with combs to fall down her back. Her youngest sister's pink-and-green-striped muslin dress fit her perfectly, not only the style and color but the cut. All thanks to their other sister Rose's special talents with fabric and stitching of clothing of any kind. Give Rose a few yards of material and she'd whip something beautiful together in no time. Not a talent Lia had despite her mother's efforts to instruct her on the basics. Both her sisters were very close and they shared many things in common as a result. Even their worldview and hopes for a peaceful and loving future ahead, although Lia's didn't include a man. She'd prefer to work with horses.

Lia's talents lay with animals, horses in particular. During the recent war, she'd cautiously and secretly developed a strong and docile saddlehorse breed. She'd crossed a Morgan stallion with Quarter

Horse mares, which gave her some sturdy and willing horses. She'd managed to keep them largely out of sight and thus out of the hands of either the Rebel or the Union soldiers who confiscated any decent horse flesh they came across during the violence of the war.

Behind Aster, Lia's parents, Richard and Natalie Merryweather, strode sedately into the room, moving around to take their seats, he at the foot of the table and she to his right. Richard was dressed in one of the somber suits he kept well-mended for his job as loan officer at the recently authorized Federal Bank in Huntsville. Natalie Hunt Merryweather's calm and reserve served her well in her role as a matriarch not only of the family but also for the town of Huntsville. She descended from one of the oldest families in the county and behaved accordingly. Lia's sister, Rose, followed their mother with a large basket of fresh rolls hot from the oven in both hands, evoking sounds of appreciation at the wonderful smell wafting along with her. Rose flicked an errant tress of hair over her shoulder as she turned to find her seat.

"All right, everyone, let's gather together for this special meal." Laura shooed the boys back into the dining room, drying their hands on their pants as they came. "Is everyone here?"

Richard nodded as he gazed at the family surrounding him. "I believe so. Come join us, Laura."

With a last perusal of her sons, Laura sidled around the table to take the seat to Samuel's right. "Let us say grace and share what we're thankful for."

"We do have much to be thankful for this year." Natalie reached to take the hand of Richard on her left and that of Travis on her right, then pulled back. "What's in your hand, son?"

"Isn't it pretty?" Travis held up a small piece of reddish-brown wood.

Samuel sighed. "Son, you shouldn't have brought that to the table. Now put it away."

"I want to widdle somethin' out of it. Can I, Dad?" Travis aimed hopeful green eyes at his father. "Please?"

"We'll talk about it later." Samuel gestured to Travis to pocket the wood. "Take hands and I'll say grace."

Sam's deep voice filled the quiet room as he said a blessing on the food before them. Lia kept her eyes closed until she heard rustling from across the table. Lifting her gaze, she met that of Travis, smiling at her as he held hands with his grandmother and next older brother, Theo. She canted her head and arched a brow at him, silently suggesting proper behavior, and he grinned in response before obediently lowering his gaze. The whipper-snapper.

"And thank you for helping the community mostly reopen the railroad in order to make receiving the simple offerings before us possible. Amen." Sam opened his eyes and scanned the expectant faces waiting for the signal. "You may eat."

Bowls and platters quickly passed from hand to hand, as the adults helped the younger children

fill their plates. Between the sounds of appreciation, sporadic conversation followed.

“The volume of sound in this house is much better when the boys have their mouths full.”

Richard chuckled, his deep throaty laugh echoing in the quiet room.

“Indeed you’re right. If only the town would rebuild the school soon, then they’d have a place to go during the week to use up some of that energy.” Laura passed a bowl of tangy cranberry-orange sauce to Samuel. “And I’d have time for my other chores.”

Richard wiped his mouth with his napkin. “We could lend the money to the town if they have the capital to secure the loan.”

“Don’t they?” Natalie glanced at her husband. “I’d think they’d want to find a way to educate the children, the next generation of leaders.”

Richard shrugged. “They haven’t confided their financial situation to me, my dearest.”

“My impression from what some of my patients have told me,” Samuel interjected, “is that there are limited funds in the coffers after the resounding whipping of the South. It will take some time for the government to stabilize and be functional, let alone to fund building projects.”

Natalie laid her napkin beside her plate. After a few seconds, she nodded to herself and refocused on her family members. “Then we will need to help them out. I shall organize a Calico Ball before Christmas to raise the necessary funds to rebuild a school. Maybe even a bigger one.”

Her mother was known for her charity works, and for her ability to get things done. But Christmas was only a few weeks away. How on earth could she manage such an impossible task on that schedule, with dry goods and foods so hard to come by? Lia had a sinking feeling she could guess but still...

Lia blinked slowly at her mother. “Before Christmas?”

“That’s a splendid idea, Mother.” Rose’s expression revealed her excitement as she overrode Lia’s astonishment. Her middle sister was always eager to jump into a new project. “I would enjoy designing dresses for the ladies to wear, ones that could then be useful to donate to other less fortunate women of the town.”

“Yes, I’m sure everyone would enjoy having something new in their wardrobe for a change.” Aster glanced down at her satin gown, one discreetly mended and refurbished throughout the war years. “I know I am tired of wearing the same rags for so long.”

“But before Christmas? Can you do that?” Richard asked.

Lia shot a grateful look to her father for raising her concern more clearly. “That’s only a few weeks, Mother.”

“I can if I must. I will need a little while to formulate an appropriate plan. And I’ll need help.” Her gaze slid pointedly over every one in the room, a gleam in her tawny eyes.

Lia's heart raced when her mother's gaze stayed on her for several beats of her heart. A very familiar look, one foreboding and worrisome.

Suddenly, the dogs started barking out front of the house which stopped the conversation. Samuel stood and left the room, heading for the front porch to greet the visitor. Followed quickly by the scraping of chairs as the kids pushed back from the table and dashed after their father to see who had arrived, their pounding feet drumming across the wood floor. Who could it be? A shiver flashed down her spine as a premonition swept through her. Lia dropped her napkin to the table and rose to peek out the window. She spotted the three dogs on point at the end of the front walk as a rider approached on a black horse. They were not expecting company. In fact, very few people ventured so far from town unless for the purpose of seeing her doctor brother or her to buy a horse. But hopefully neither would be interrupting their dinner hour on a holiday without an invitation.

She clutched the curtain as the rider halted. No. It couldn't be.

Aster joined her at the open window and blinked in surprise. "Is that Bryce Day?" Aster nudged her in the side. "Your former suitor?"

Her face flushed hot. Nobody knew. And yet her sister's comment suggested otherwise. But no. That wasn't possible. No matter. She couldn't face him. Couldn't explain. His return would ruin everything. She needed space and time to think. "I-I have to go. Now." She spun away from the window, dropping the curtain back into place, and fled. Out the kitchen door, across the carriageway, and up the steps into her safe haven.

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The rustic yet welcoming setting before Bryce recalled many fond memories but also emphasized his deep unease. Two magnolias, their dark-green waxy leaves glistening in the afternoon rain, stood accusingly beside the long drive leading to the barn. Those trees evoked piercing memories he'd be better to forget. Could not forget. Didn't actually want to forget. He slowed his stallion to an easy walk, giving himself just a bit more time to compose his aching heart.

His gaze drifted to the smaller white clapboard house situated to the left of Samuel's home facing the road. A welcoming place with a few bushes nestled around its foundation, a shaded porch with a couple of chairs for people to relax in while they waited to be seen by the good doctor. Only one story tall, he vividly remembered it contained three rooms inside. The doctor's examination room, a surgery room, and a good-sized room toward the back set aside for convalescing patients. And guests when not needed for patients. Where he'd spent many evenings alone with Lia, talking, touching, planning. Kissing, too. And more. Ah, so much more. He shifted in the saddle as he shook his head slowly.

The war had come between them. Divided them as cleanly as a knife through a watermelon on a hot summer afternoon. He'd gone to fight for the Union, with a desire to preserve it and everything his

ancestors had fought for during the American Revolution. Without a strong union, a strong united country, how could anyone even think of settling down and starting a family like he longed to do? His goal was to establish a more safe and secure environment to raise a family and grow old with the woman he loved.

An environment like the two-story home standing before him. He slid his gaze over the larger structure. Sam had started with a typical dog-trot house, two living areas connected by a covered open porch. Over the years, he'd enclosed the central porch to add more interior space and added on to the upstairs to allow for sleeping quarters for his sons. The result was a white-washed clapboard house with sparkling windows to greet visitors riding up the winding lane to the farm. A wraparound porch featured several benches, chairs, and even a swing to encourage the family to gather. The large family stable behind the two houses had also expanded over the last few years, with more horses grazing in the paddocks at the edge of the forest beyond. He nodded to himself at the evidence of Lia's success with her breeding plans. He couldn't stop his gaze from sliding on to the other home on the property. The patriarch's house lived up to the name, even grander than Sam's fine home.

Richard and Natalie Merryweather deserved a lot of credit for establishing Hopewell, a beautiful property with a loving atmosphere for their children and grandchildren. The entire family resided together on the two-hundred-acre farm. Sharing most everything as a close-knit family would. Samuel had married Laura before the war and started his family. But what about the girls? Had Richard and Natalie's three daughters found husbands despite the fighting? Or were they still living within the brick and wood-frame building, surrounded by bushes and flower beds? Aster's skill with flowers was evident from the landscaping around the house. He'd bet she still lived at home. And Lia? Where was she?

His gaze lingered on the magnolias for another moment as he drew Jet to a halt, the tawny dogs milling around. Resting his hands on the pommel of his saddle, he grinned as a small herd of young boys flew through the front door, the shadow of a man following more slowly. The number had grown since he'd last visited his friend and his wife. Relief swept through him as his lingering concern vanished as to his friend's wellbeing. Sam had declared neutrality in order to serve all of his neighbors during the fighting, but that didn't mean his neighbors would agree with his stance. Several former—or remaining—rebels must still live in the area, probably defiant and angry after the end of the American Civil War. How long would they carry that particular grudge? Or would they come to accept the reality and move on? He hoped for the latter so he could work on making his dream of a quiet life with a wife and family a reality. A small hope but one that existed.

He didn't much care how long they were unhappy as long as they'd stop taking it out on those who had remained loyal to the country instead of the damn Confederacy. Why should he be called a traitor when he'd stood by the country he'd been born and raised in? The country he swore an oath to

defend and had successfully done so amidst far too much bloodshed. If only the belligerent, stubborn rebels had realized their error in judgment then the tens of thousands of men wouldn't have been killed. The cause had stripped generations of men from the land. He mentally shook his head to chase away the angry ponderings. That was behind him, behind all of them too if they'd only see it and get on with rebuilding their lives. He grimaced at the thought of the effort it would take. Simply feeling right in civilian clothes had taken some getting used to, to be honest.

He'd waited and bided his time until he could safely get to the Union troops and sign up to defend the Union. He'd been forced to lie out in a cave for near a year, scrounging and hunting up food, dodging the rebel scouts searching for him and others like him. But finally his moment arrived. Bryce had joined up with the First Alabama Cavalry USA as soon as the Union troops occupied Huntsville in 1862. No more hiding and feeling like a hunted animal. He'd ridden and fought with them across the South, all the while aware that the state he called home harbored a different view and attitude toward the Northern "invaders."

A large contingency of Southern Unionists, people who remained in southern states that had seceded from the union, lived in north Alabama although they tended to lay low rather than broadcast their political views on the war. But the majority of the state sided with the Confederacy so they had to remain cautious. Lying out in the hills was safer than facing the threats, abuse, and hangings by the roaming rebels in search of supposed traitors to the Confederacy. Until the Union Army arrived and then they could safely sign up with the side they wanted to fight for. The war ended back in April 1865 and he was finally released from service in October. He'd pondered what his future might hold, especially considering his daft idea of ending his courtship of the only woman he loved. But he loved her enough to let her go. Then. Now he wanted to plan his future and strive to forget the past. If only that were indeed possible.

As the boys approached, he thought about how much had changed since he saw them last. The older boys he remembered as little boys. Now they'd grown and matured, showing hints of the fine men they'd soon become. They'd been so young when he'd left. A lifetime ago. So much had transpired during those years, some good as in strong friendships forged in the fires of battle but mostly horrific. Next in age to the twins, their next younger brother had been hardly more than a toddler with his chubby legs and cheeks. And the baby back then, who was now taking after his father's slender build and sharp eye.

The last of the boys was the smallest and youngest of the bunch. He was a new addition, not a boy he remembered. He'd always had a pretty good memory for faces, and thus knew he'd not seen this lad before. He looked determined to catch up with his older brothers, squinting his eyes and pursing his lips as he pounded across the front porch and down the stone steps into the yard. In his hand he carried

something he obviously treasured as he held it close and enclosed in his fist.

“Oh, hello, Mr. Day.” The lad shielded the lessening rain from his bottle-green eyes as he gazed up at Bryce. “It is Mr. Day, isn’t it?”

The boy—Ian?—had grown in the years since Bryce had last laid eyes on him. Close-cut blond hair surrounded an open and interested expression. He’d matured certainly but remained a young, energetic firebrand of a lad. His twin, Michael if he recalled aright, skidded to a halt beside Jet, tentatively reaching a hand to stroke the warm neck of the horse. Jet, being a level-headed stallion, merely jangled his bridle and permitted the attention.

“Yes. Hello, Ian. Are your parents home?” Bryce shifted his gaze from the boy to the dog at his side and on to scan the front of the house and the adjoining stable yard. Then he saw a woman crossing quickly from the rear of the house away and across the yard. One with dark red hair. Lia?

“Yessir. We were having Thanksgiving dinner when you rode on up.” Michael patted Jet once more and then shoved both hands into his front pockets.

Bryce lowered his gaze to meet the lad’s. “Ah, I’d forgotten President Johnson had declared December seventh as a day of Thanksgiving. I’m sorry to interrupt.”

The slam of a door drew Bryce’s gaze up to see Sam marching toward him, down the front porch steps and the flagstone walkway with a huge smile on his face. “Don’t be.” Samuel maintained his smile for a beat, then scowled at his sons. “You boys, however, shouldn’t bolt out the door without knowing who is approaching. You hear me?”

Sam’s welcoming grin warmed the nervous chill in Bryce’s gut. At least his friend was glad to see him. Why had Lia left?

The boys murmured “yessir” in unison, but kept their heads up and shoulders back.

“Sam.” Bryce swung out of the saddle and dropped the reins to ground tie Jet. The men clasped each other in a great bear hug for a brief moment and then stepped back to assess each other’s condition. “You’re looking fine.”

“As are you.” Sam’s eyes glinted with happiness. “You’ve been away far too long. We thought you were dead.”

“I thought I was a few times as well, but no such luck, I’m afraid,” Bryce said on a chuckle. “I’m sorry it’s been so long. Thank you for your very kind response to my inquiry as to a visit. You didn’t have to.”

“As I said, I think it’s time and for the best. I’m glad you’re here now and we can catch up on all the news.”

“It’s good to see all your boys are doing well, too. But who is the new addition to the family?” Bryce nodded toward the youngest who regarded him with curiosity as he held what looked to be a block

of cedar. Bryce recognized the grain and reflexively reached in his front pocket to finger the small cedar carving he always carried.

“Oh, that’s right. Let me introduce you.” Samuel cleared his throat as he gripped the boy’s shoulder. “Travis, this man is my friend, Mr. Bryce Day. Bryce, this is my son Travis.”

“Nice to meet you, Travis.” Bryce stuck out his hand to the boy who glanced at his dad for approval and then grabbed hold of the offered hand. “How old are you?”

“Four. Do you know how to widdle?” Travis stared up at Bryce with hope in his green eyes.

“I do. Do you?”

Crestfallen, Travis shook his head. “Papa won’t let me.”

Bryce solemnly regarded the disappointed lad. As a boy himself, he’d been fascinated by the old men sitting around the cracker barrel at the general store in the small town where he grew up. They’d play checkers for as long as the sun hung in the sky. Some would pull out a small knife and a length of wood and start cutting away the excess until they had something new in their hands. Bryce had watched the magic transform a plain piece of wood into a bird or a horse or any of a vast number of things imagined by the man holding the knife. Whittling seemed magical then and still did. The very idea of imagining something in your mind and finding it within a bit of wood in your hands seemed entirely mystical. He fingered the last thing he’d whittled, hidden in the depths of his pants pocket. His talisman kept him safe through many a trying time.

The front door of the parents’ home across the expanse of lawn and carriageway closed sharply. The house where Lia lived, too. His lady love. She’d fled rather than come to him as he’d hoped. He sighed. He hesitated mentally over the endearment. Did he have the right to think of her in such terms? Probably not.

Sam shook his head, drawing Bryce’s attention. “You’re not old enough to handle such a sharp thing, Travis. I’ve told you, when you are old enough, I’ll teach you myself.” Sam ruffled the boy’s hair, copper strands intermixed with brown and blond. “Now run along.”

The boy was stubbornly persistent in his aims. Which reminded of him of his own childhood wants and demands. Ones his parents had quickly taught him to control or he’d feel the ramifications of his petulance. They’d been strict but he’d learned their lessons well. Still, the lad was very young. He had much to learn, including patience by the looks of things.

“But when will that be?” whined the boy. “I wanna widdle now.”

“What did I say, Son?” Samuel’s tone brooked no argument from his youngster.

“Travis, you’ll need to be patient.” Bryce winked at him. What a cute little fellow. The hope and sincerity in the child’s eyes tugged on his heart. Sam was a lucky man to have such a son. All of his sons were treasures. “Trust me. I know your dad will teach you as soon as he knows you won’t hurt yourself



with a sharp knife.”

“Listen to Mr. Day, Son. Patience is a virtue.” Sam tilted his head toward Bryce, acknowledging his friend’s support with regard to the youth’s eagerness. He swatted Travis on the butt, chuckling. “Now go play before I find some chores for you to do.”

Travis raised his brows, glanced once at Bryce, and then dashed off to join his brothers who were playing with small wooden soldiers in the mud beside the house.

“Oh no, Laura will not be pleased.” Despite his spoken sentiment, pride and laughter shone in Samuel’s eyes as he supervised his sons at play. “Their good clothes will need to be laundered yet again. Anyway, my friend, come on inside and have something to eat.”

“Thank you. I feared you’d not be so welcoming after my long silence.” He started to follow his friend and then paused. “I need to stable my horse first.”

“I figured I’d hear from you eventually.” Samuel acknowledged his desire to tend to his horse with a wave to follow him to the stable.

Just then, the front door of the main house opened and Laura stepped out onto the porch, a sedate smile on her lips. “Hello, Mr. Day. It’s wonderful to see you again. We’ve plenty yet on the table. I’d be mighty pleased if you’d share with us.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Merryweather.” Bryce fingered Jet’s reins as the smile on his face faded. Join the entire family and fend off questions as to what he’d been doing for the last few years. Why he’d ended communications with everyone. Nothing for it but to face the interrogation. “I’ll just put Jet in the stable and wash up.”

“We’ll wait for you.” Laura smiled at him and then opened the door and went back inside.

“Now you’ve been officially invited to our Thanksgiving dinner. Want a hand with the horse?” Sam asked. “I’m sure there’s either a stall or a pen we can put him in. Come.”

“Thank you. Are you sure Lia won’t mind?” The words slipped out before he could think better of them. Of revealing just how much she was on his mind. How would she really feel about his horse in her barn? After all, she’d walked away from her own family at his arrival. His heart sank at the thought.

Samuel glanced at him and then shrugged. “Her priority is always the horse, so I’m pretty sure she’d rather we look after him before we take care of ourselves.” Sam strode faster toward the stable, Bryce trailing behind as he drifted his gaze around the empty yard toward her house.

He had hoped to see her. He’d thought she’d at least greet him. But then again, what a idiotic thing for him to expect. He’d broken his promise to her. To come back for her. To love her always. Years had lapsed and he’d failed her. Why would she want to have anything to do with him?

The barn welcomed him with the sweet scent of fresh hay and the tang of horse manure. The most wonderful combination of aromas on earth as far as Bryce was concerned. One reason he’d jumped at the

chance of serving with the First Alabama was so he'd have horses around him every single day. His beautiful bay, Lily, had served him well for several years before she'd been shot out from under him during a particularly heated skirmish. He still grieved her loss. He loved animals and found it pleasant to be accompanied now by the three dogs as they made their way down the barn aisle.

"This middle stall looks open. There's already some hay in the corner too." Samuel peered over the half-wall into the stall. "I'll grab a bucket and some water."

Bryce opened the latch on the stall door and swung it open into the aisle so he could lead Jet inside the roomy space. Pulling the door to behind him, he tossed the reins over his horse's neck and prepared to remove the saddle. The sound of water being pumped into a bucket filtered into the stable from the well out back of the building. He loosened and removed the saddle, hanging it on the stall door. Then started loosening the bridle and slipping it off. Draping it over the seat of the saddle, he quickly lifted both and carried them out of the stall. All the while he couldn't help listening for Lia's voice, for her to investigate who was doing what in her barn. He pushed the door closed just as Sam lugged in the brimming bucket of water.

Bryce quickly pulled the stall door open again to let Sam inside. "Where should I put these?"

"There's a saddle rack on the front of the stall that should hold everything." Sam hung the bucket on a hook inside the stall and then emerged to fasten the door closed. He met Bryce's gaze. "Unless you think your horse will bother them there?"

Bryce glanced from the finished leather in his hands to his stallion. "It's probably safer to have them away from his teeth."

"Follow me then." Sam led Bryce to a closed door down the aisle. Pushing it open into the room, he stepped up onto a raised floor. "There's space beside Lia's tack."

His heart stuttered in his chest as he strode across the wooden floorboards to the spot his friend had indicated. At least his tack would be close to hers even if he couldn't. Impressive how she'd organized the tack room with brackets jutting out from the walls to hang the saddles on, and curved hooks for the bridles. He turned to see Sam smiling at him.

"Anything else?" Sam asked.

"Before we go in to dinner, I have a question for you." Bryce raised his brows as he folded his arms. "How have you managed to do so well despite the hardships and destruction of property?"

"It hasn't been easy. I've worked very hard to stay neutral, at least as far as my neighbors are concerned." Samuel glanced toward the open door but didn't make a move to leave. "It's best to stay out of it if you can."

"Unlike me, you mean." Bryce pressed his lips together as he wiped his hands on his pantlegs. "I was smack dab in the middle of the worst of the fighting."

“Really? What did you do?” Samuel crossed his arms as he regarded Bryce, his smile sobering into a more serious expression.

“My guys were chosen by General Sherman to escort him on his March to the Sea. That was the most elevated and most destructive part of my time in the cavalry. We were honored to be selected but the level of destruction wreaked all across the South to the Atlantic was horrifying. Necessary, but horrifying.”

“You rode with Sherman? That is impressive. We heard all about his campaign to end the bloody war. Of course, he wasn’t revered south of the Tennessee River as much as he was in these parts. Another example of why it’s wise to not share your opinions too widely.”

Memories of the weeks and weeks of riding, fighting with saber, pistol, bare hands flooded his brain. He’d relished the determination Sherman had to end the war once and for all. He succeeded in his aim but left behind much destruction and death in the process. Still, the war had ended and he could finally pursue his own dreams.

“I see. I’ll come out in a while to rub Jet down and settle him in.” Bryce pointed to the open door. “I suppose we should get inside before everything is stone cold.”

“And before my wife comes out to chastise me for keeping you out here so long.” Sam grinned as he ushered Bryce out of the tack room and shut the door. “I hope you’re hungry because the women really put together quite a feast for us.”

The women. Lia’s mother and sisters, and Samuel’s wife. They should all be at the table, too. But Lia had gone back to the other house. “I look forward to thanking them all for their delicious cooking.”

If only *all* of them were indeed at the table.

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