A woman with dark, curly hair, wearing a light green dress with a lace collar, is looking out a window. Outside the window, a steam locomotive is pulling a train through a snowy landscape. The scene is framed by the window's panes.

THE
*Winter Solstice
Bride*

SALLY JO PITTS

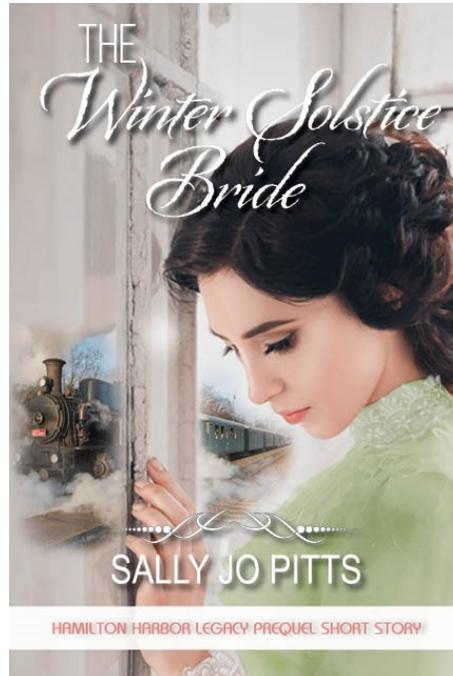
HAMILTON HARBOR LEGACY PREQUEL SHORT STORY

The
Winter Solstice
Bride

A Hamilton Harbor Legacy Prequel

Short Story

by
Sally Jo Pitts



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A marriage of convenience in 1907 begins the union of an intriguing founding family in Hamilton Harbor. The legacy of this couple provides the backdrop in which secrets of the past and restoration in the present generates valuable lessons of faith and love for the future.

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The Winter Solstice Bride: A Hamilton Harbor Legacy Prequel

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The Winter Solstice Bride

December 21, 1936

Five thirty in the afternoon and already dark outside. We had just finished washing, drying, and putting away the dishes from an early supper. Mama and I untied our aprons and hung them by the wood stove, still warm from baking biscuits and simmering venison stew.

The back-porch screen door screeched as my brother, Billy, pushed through.

Whap.

“Billy, that door is going to pop its screws and fall off one of these days.”

“Sorry, Mama.”

Billy had been outside taking care of his evening chores—covering the well and making sure the cow and mule had water and hay. “I didn’t want to miss any of Auntie’s story tonight.”

We all moved to the living room that smelled of burnt ashes and fragrant pine. Great-Aunt Edith stood by the fireplace as Daddy added a log to the fire and centered it with the poker. Bright red-hot sparks mixed with smoke spiraled up the chimney. A freshly cut Christmas tree anchored in a tub of sand proudly displayed strands of popcorn and colored paper chains.

“Teacher says today is the shortest day of the year.” Billy proclaimed his newfound third grade knowledge.

“Makes sense. It got dark mighty early tonight,” Mama said and lit a kerosene lamp. The light cheered the shadowy corners of the room.

“It’s called the winter solstice,” I added, not to be outdone by Billy, who was only a year older.

Auntie warmed her hands and spoke into the fire, her back to us. “In December, the solstice marks a change in seasons—a time and purpose under heaven.”

Billy and I looked forward to Auntie’s unexpected visits and were delighted last week when Mama received the postcard announcing her visit and arrival time. She divided surprise visits between her four sisters. “Sometimes a body has to return to her roots,” she’d say.

Auntie was our evening entertainment. She spun vivid tales that landed you right in the middle of the action.

We took our usual seats, leaving the rocking chair by the fire for Aunt Edith, and waited. Where would she take us tonight? Would we plunge into the raging waters of the swollen Mississippi River? Maybe we’d return to the drought-plagued farmlands of Georgia. She took

her seat, pressed her feet against the floor, setting the chair in slow, rhythmic motion, and spoke in a strong voice.

“Speaking of the shortest day, I want to share a story about a girl who arrived in the town of Marianna, Florida, on the shortest day of the year nearly thirty years ago.” She pushed the rocker forward and adjusted the pillow to support her back. “I’ll call her Hope.”

“Miss. Are you okay?”

The words were those of a man’s voice, but all Hope could see were his boots, black and in need of polish. Seated on a stool at the drug store fountain, she pressed her head against her arms folded on the counter to keep the room from spinning.

“She been here long?” The man asked the soda jerk.

“About twenty minutes I’d say. She seemed disoriented when she came in. I offered her water, but she just sat on the stool and put her head down. You know her?”

“Not sure.”

The young woman felt a hand touch her shoulder. “Are you Hope?”

“Umm.” She tried to respond, but prior sleepless nights, the long walk from the train station and her stomach trying to deal with the basket lunch of boiled ham and bread her mother had packed was taking its toll.

Auntie cleared her throat, shifted in the chair then continued.

That morning, Hope’s mama had said, “You can eat this on the train. When you get to Marianna, Mr. Feldman should be at the station. He’ll have a sign with your name on it.”

But he wasn’t there. All the other passengers had gone, leaving her alone. She’d pulled out the linen handkerchief her mama had poked in her homemade drawstring purse and dabbed at tears threatening to spill. Then she took a deep breath and stiffened her back. What was she doing? Crying? She shoved the handkerchief back in her purse and tramped inside the station.

“Help you ma’am?” the clerk inquired.

“Do you know a Mr. Feldman?”

“Can’t say I do, but Mary Scroggins would. She’s the postmistress.”

“Where can I find her?”

“Smack dab in the middle of town next to the drug store.” He peered at the clock on the wall. “She’s likely at lunch about now, but she’ll be back.” The clerk offered to hold her luggage while she walked into town.

Auntie grasped the arms of the rocker. “I have to tell you—the poor girl was scared but determined to find that Mr. Feldman.”

She wanted to tell the men talking over her who she was, but her mind was fuzzy. Her chest felt as if weighted down by a concrete block. Their conversation blurred. Waves of noise washed over her then turned into prickly static in her ears. The man's boots became a black hole, drawing her, and she fell in.

"Fell in what?" Billy asked, scooting to the edge of his chair.

"She passed out, silly," I said.

Mama shushed us. "No name calling, children."

Auntie nodded and rested her head on the chair back.

Hope's mind gradually cleared, and she opened her eyes. Above her, billowy clouds joined together to form a quilted pattern of light and dark grays. She was surrounded by the wooden slats of a wagon. Her head lay on a scratchy, musty-smelling burlap sack.

"Here, drink this."

"The voice had a face now. The cheeks were pockmarked, but the eyes were pools of blue that bore into hers—soul deep. The man lifted her head, cradling her against his strong arm. He held a metal canteen of water to her lips. She drank. The moisture revived her, but excess liquid streamed down her chin and dripped onto her dress. Her wedding dress."

"Oh, wow. Was she wearing a white lacy dress?" I asked.

Auntie shook her head.

Hope's mother had fashioned the dress by remaking her pale green plaid Sunday dress and adding trim at the neck and wrists. The ivory lace was given to her mother in trade for ironing she had taken in.

When her Papa died, Hope's mother was left with five girls to raise alone. But she had only housekeeping skills, which weren't enough for rent, let alone food and other expenses.

Her two older sisters had beaux, got married and moved to Biloxi, Mississippi, where their new husbands had the promise of working on the loading docks. The twelve-year-old twins, Tessie and Jessie, went to live with her Aunt Gert and Uncle Dell in Jackson. Her mother was going to squeeze into one-room living quarters and take care of her ailing brother in Hattiesburg. That left finding a place for eighteen-year-old Hope.

The newspaper advertisement sent from her Uncle Dell had seemed the best answer—a bachelor of 35, reasonable appearance, sufficient means, wants a wife; she must be amiable, tolerably well-educated, and thoroughly versed in the mysteries of housekeeping and caregiving.

“Hope?”

The girl pushed her elbows against the stubbles of hay in the wagon and rose to a sitting position. “Yes?”

“Told you, boy.” Hope turned to see a wiry, white-haired man seated in the front of the wagon. He grinned with a bit of spittle attached to gray whiskers.

“I’m Albert Feldman,” the man holding the canteen said. He attempted to push back unruly sandy-blond hair hanging low on his brow. “And this is my father, Frederick Feldman, your charge.”

“Charge?”

“The person you’re to care for, as agreed.”

“But I was expecting a child.”

“Well ...”

“You read honey? I love to hear stories,” the elder man said.

“Yes, sir.”

“I like her, son.”

Though the air was turning colder, perspiration beaded across Albert’s forehead.

“The doctor calls it a stroke. The condition left him ... child-like.”

“Can we keep her?” Albert’s father asked.

Albert’s face flushed red.

What was she to do? She’d taken care of girls and boys, never a grown-up. These were men. And one, she was expected to marry. If only she could go home. But she had no home. She looked at Albert, his forehead wrinkled in question. Their eyes connected in a mystifying bond of understanding. Hope nodded.

They traveled to the train depot, picked up her luggage, and Hope and Albert were declared husband and wife by the Justice of the Peace. As the three rode out of town into the long, dark night, Albert’s father giggled and repeated over and over, “We’uns has got us a wife.”

The rocking chair creaked as Aunt Edith leaned forward and stared into the fire.

I broke the silence. “Is Hope you, Auntie?”

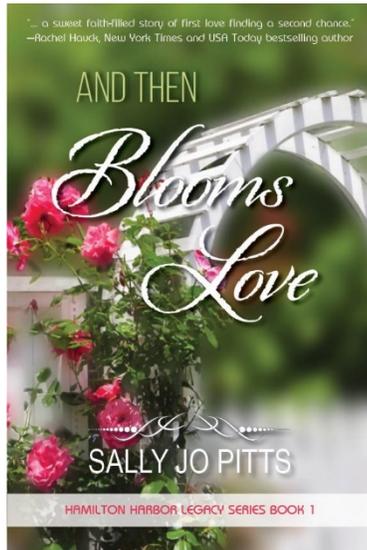
An easy grin spread over her face, and the firelight reflected in her eyes. “She is. And the marriage—after that Winter Solstice night—is the subject of many more stories.”

I hope Auntie stays long enough to share them all.

The Beginning

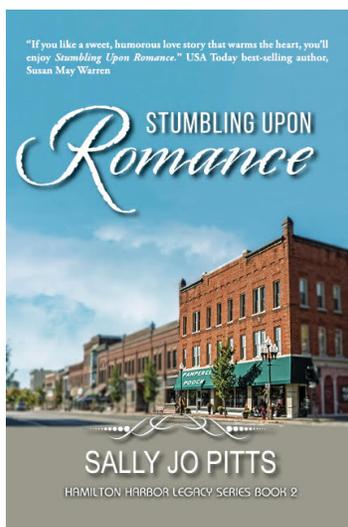


Find out what happened with the legacy this couple started ...



Book One

Emme Matthews, owner of The Flower Cottage, is the behind-the-scenes florist for her former fiancé's wedding when it's discovered she is legally married to the groom. *And Then Blooms Love* is a story of first love and second chances.



Book Two

Accident-prone dog groomer, Claudia Stewart, thinks she's a misfit. She arrives in Hamilton Harbor hoping for a new image and fresh start. Handyman, Pete Cullen, believes he's unlovable, steers clear of romance, and wants to concentrate on the town's renewal. But when Claudia knocks Pete off a ladder, providence sets the stage for *Stumbling Upon Romance*.

For a free first chapter of *And then Blooms Love*, the first book in the Hamilton Harbor Legacy series, email me at sallyjopittswrites@gmail.com