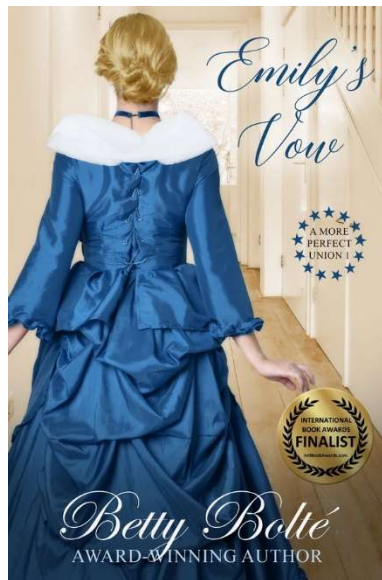


Excerpt of
Emily's Vow
A More Perfect Union
Book 1
By
Betty Bolté



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About

Emily's Vow

In 1782, the fight for independence becomes personal...

How could she love a man suspected of being a turncoat?

As the American Revolution drags on, Charles Town, South Carolina, remains under siege by the British, and one woman's father is determined to marry her off to a suspected traitor. Emily Sullivan is beset from all sides but vows to fight her own war for independence. Using the best tool she has—her pseudonymous essays—she embarks on a path toward her freedom, risking the town's condemnation as a female writer. A path putting her at ever greater odds with her father and the man she's supposed to marry.

Frank Thomson walks a fine line between spying for the Americans and being a perceived loyalist traitor. He desires to end the blasted war and return to his private life. Unfortunately, the enemy conscripted his home. He accepts lodging from Captain Sullivan, happy to be under the same roof as his beloved Emily until his house is returned. Posing as a simple printer of broadsheets and pamphlets, he sends crucial encrypted intelligence to the general camped outside of town. But when Frank learns Emily has been imprisoned by the enemy, he risks his own life, freedom, and heart for hers.

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Preface

Emily's Vow is the first 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 six to eight years. The core of the story remains the same, but hopefully with more skilled telling. This edition is a revised and expanded version of the first book in the A More Perfect union historical romance series. I have added some new scenes and corrected and revised the text throughout the story.

Thanks for reading!

Betty Bolté

Chapter 1

Charles Town, South Carolina – 1782

“Why must Frank be coming back to town now?” Emily Sullivan shivered. If asked, she would blame the autumn evening breeze blowing inland across the Charles Town harbor for her reaction. How dare he even show his face? Why was he pretending to be a loyalist? For his own profit or was he a spy? Either way, she’d have naught to do with the man. “Father’s plan may solve one problem but it will cause more for me.”

“I’m sure he thinks he is doing what is best for you.” Samantha McAlester matched her stride for stride as they continued down the street.

“Perhaps, but I don’t agree that marriage is necessary.” Emily’s long skirts swirled about her hurried steps. “I’m glad you wanted to walk with me, Samantha. It’s nicer than traversing the distance home from Aunt Lucille’s house with my servants.”

“Together we’ll be safe enough for such a short walk,” Samantha McAlester replied, “though I doubt your father will agree, given his recent demand that you remain at home.”

“It’s my fault we left the sewing circle later than I intended, but I miss St. Michael’s bells chiming the hour. What shall we do without them? The British should pay dearly for stripping our treasured bells from the steeple.”

“Come, let’s get you home and off the streets.” Samantha quickened her pace.

Emily hurried down the sandy road beside her friend, noting the waning sunshine draping shadows across the street. The slap of the waves at the distant convergence of the Cooper and Ashley Rivers beat a syncopated rhythm against the array of ship hulls, large and small, in the protected harbor. Many of the masts bobbing against the darkening sky sported the hated British flag. The losing army had resorted to sanctioned looting of the beautiful homes—those still standing after two years of British occupation as well as fires and bombardments—as booty for the officers and soldiers before they withdrew.

The British officers sought retaliation for the threat posed by the patriots, who had hidden their true allegiance, against the loyalists living in the city. The officers encouraged harassment

of the Americans, which translated into her father, a leading merchant in town, fearing for her safety. She'd walked alone throughout the occupation, so why did he suddenly want her to stay at home?

Dragging in a deep breath, unease settled over Emily's frayed nerves at the thought of Frank's return. "I cannot believe Father insists I marry him after all that man has done. Surely Americans have matured enough they wouldn't force a woman to marry. I'm not a child. Why doesn't he understand?"

A seagull glided past, its laughing call bringing a smile to her face. Her enjoyment didn't last long, though. The occupation of the town created fear and disquiet throughout the citizenry. Add in the horror of her sister Elizabeth's fiancé Jedediah dying, leaving her pregnant and in need of a husband. Then Jedediah's brother Frank, the man Emily had always cared for, married her sister to keep the child from being a bastard. Emily survived the misery of watching Frank marry Elizabeth, struggling to understand as her heart broke. Only to suffer much more when Elizabeth died in childbirth with Frank away at war. Emily had come to terms with the prospect of raising her nephew, but being forced into marriage with Frank, too? After he'd betrayed her by marrying her sister. Life turned and twisted with disregard for her future goals and plans.

Frank's imminent arrival now distressed her as much as the three hundred British ships crowding the harbor. The rumor about town suggested the ships stood poised to carry away the defeated enemy troops along with any loyalists wanting to flee the town. Many slaves would likely take the chance on freedom offered by the British, despite the American protests.

"Have you told your father how you feel?" Samantha matched Emily's stride easily despite her slight limp and the basket she carried.

Sharing her feelings with her father had once enjoyed an easy place in Emily's heart. Now his demands for her to cloister within the theoretic safety of the town house, joined with his desire that she marry to secure her future, made confiding in him difficult. His concern stemmed from her advancing age and the few prospects for marriage with able-bodied men away fighting an overbearing mother country. She longed for those carefree days, years before, filled with friendly banter and heartfelt discussions with her father.

Emily wrinkled her nose. "I haven't spoken with him, not that I think he'll care. He's more concerned with my supposed need for a protector while he's away." What a pickle. Did he have to choose Frank to serve as both bodyguard and suitor?

The thought created ripples of fear along her spine. Marrying a man, any man, meant losing her individuality, a fate she dreaded. The vows included obeying and honoring him, which translated into having his children. She shivered, recalling her twin sister on her deathbed mere days after delivering her son. Emily had held her hand as Elizabeth's life departed, her fingers falling limp within Emily's clutching grasp. Just like their mother before.

So many young women across the country feared pregnancy and being brought to bed for that very reason. Elizabeth, like many of those women, had written out her will when she discovered she carried a child. At least the document detailed her wishes for her son. And her surrogate husband, Frank Thomson. Elizabeth was to wed Jedediah, the betrothal announced and celebrated, before Elizabeth revealed she was with child. If Jedediah hadn't been killed, Frank would not have felt obligated to do his duty as Jedediah's brother to wed Elizabeth and give the unborn child a father.

Emily used to think of him as *her* Frank, until he told her his decision to wed Elizabeth. Her heart had hurt for months as she tried to accept the reality that she could never have him. But once Elizabeth died in similar circumstances as their mother, Emily's fear of dying as a result of childbirth eclipsed any naive desire to marry.

No, better to pursue her dreams of opening her ladies' accessories shop. She squared her shoulders, ready to face the astonishment of the ladies in town as well as plan a strategy for the battle when her father voiced his objections.

Lost in thought, Emily slowed involuntarily as Samantha paused in front of the empty bakery, its door shut tight. Next door, the printing office boasted the glow of lanterns through the windows, signaling someone working to prepare the British broadside for the morrow. Emily turned her attention back to the vacant bakery. She loved the little building so full of wonderful memories. Signs posted in the two plate-glass windows flanking the front door vainly tempted passersby with blueberry or cranberry muffins, apple pie, or pumpkin bread. She inhaled expectantly. Tears smarted her eyes when she smelled only sea salt and wood fires.

"I cannot believe they actually hanged the poor Widow Murray." A gust of wind snagged a few strands of Samantha's ink-black hair, tugging them free from the casually wound bun nestled inside her bonnet. She tucked the strays behind one ear and glanced at Emily.

"It is not surprising, when you consider her penchant for gossip, now is it?" Emily stopped also. The stooped woman had delighted in sharing titillating chitchat while Emily

selected her two loaves of bread. Mischievous, she was, cackling over another's indiscretion. The woman refused to be circumspect, saying more than acceptable once too many times. But to be hanged as a spy? The foul Britons had no respect for American ladies.

The darkened shop sat cold and lonely compared to the once-bustling business. A chill skated down Emily's spine. She hugged herself. The Widow Murray had survived the death of her husband at the fight for Stono Ferry in June of 1779, and her bakery served as a popular early morning and late afternoon stop for the townspeople, until the British invaded Charles Town in May 1780. Then everything changed.

Sadness mixed with anger settled in the pit of her stomach. She missed her brothers, off fighting with the militia, but at least their efforts yielded the nearing peace. "And to think, she stopped three deadly attacks on our boys just by sharing with my father what she heard."

Samantha shrugged. "Yes, but it still makes me sad."

"Her little shop feels so abandoned." Emily squinted at the store, assessing its size and features.

The quaint store sat along a normally busy thoroughfare that would provide plenty of customers after peace returned. But first, she had to find the right moment to share her intentions, starting with her cousin Amy Abernathy and Samantha. Amy was her strongest ally and thus the perfect person to stand with her.

Second, find a way to tell her father. After all, her new resolve to take care of herself unfortunately still required his assistance to secure the shop, given contracts were men's domain. Convincing her father she meant to conduct business on her own presented a nearly insurmountable challenge, but she would find a way to do so. Then she'd have to share her plans with the ladies in the sewing circle in order to garner their support of her efforts.

She envisioned mannequins within the cool dimness behind the glass panes, displaying embroidered dresses, shoes, slippers, and gloves. She pictured herself waiting on customers, sweeping up scraps of floss and fabric from her sewing, keeping the windows shiny clean.

Peering at the empty building, she sighed. The stone and wood-plank structure invited passersby through its half-glass door. Large glass windows would allow the sunlight to filter inside, illuminating the interior in a way that made Emily smile with pleasure. She wanted to set up shop immediately. Her father would resist allowing her to do such a daring thing, citing society's expectations of women. Marriage, children, housework. No mention of a proper

education nor avenues to personal achievement in the merchant world. Her father's stature in the community dictated her options, limited such as they were. She wanted more than a clean house and a productive garden from life. Somehow, she must persuade him to see reason.

With a long last look, Emily turned away from the temptation of the store. "We must go. I don't want my father to catch me here, and we're very late as it is."

Few other people ventured onto the street as darkness crept closer and the stars began to wink above. A lone wagon lumbered by, pulled by a dapple-gray draft horse, its ribs clearly visible in the evening light. Emily's heart went out to the beast. Even the horses suffered from want of adequate food, much like the townspeople. The prices of food and wares had increased a thousand percent since the onset of the war. The Continental Congress embargoed staples such as rice, indigo, corn, beef, and pork to ensure the American armies had provisions. If it weren't for her father ignoring those embargoes and continuing to export rice and indigo to the West Indies and France, they too would suffer financial distress. He also imported goods for sale in town, enabling them to continue to purchase food despite the exorbitant cost.

In years past, Charles Town had bustled at this time of day. The town's women would have been chatting together while strolling to the marketplace, once replete with a variety of foods and wares. The men engaged in heated discussions on their way to McCrady's Tavern for a pint after a day spent at the Exchange conducting business. Wagons and carriages rumbled along to the steady rhythm of horses' hooves, creating puffs of dust to drift up and settle on the long skirts and pants of those on the street. All under the watchful eyes of the seagulls soaring overhead.

Danger patrolled the streets in the form of British soldiers searching for anyone who dared be a patriot within the town limits. Those who had not signed the loyalty oath to King George's dictatorial ways were either run out of town, their property confiscated, or imprisoned on the ships at anchor in the harbor.

Samantha gripped the basket's arched handle with both hands and shrugged. "Your father will chastise us no matter, so what's the point?"

"At least I can honor his request by being home before night completely falls. He objects to me being on the street, but my skills are needed. The cloth and shirts we're sewing will make our soldiers' lives a little more bearable. Perhaps even one of my brothers will receive comfort, wherever they are now." A seagull swooped onto the street in front of Emily, and she shooed it

away with her skirts. Looking down the shadowy lane, she tensed. “Fiddlesticks, I’d hoped to avoid this.”

Two British soldiers, replete in crimson coats boasting dark blue facings and white breeches, ambled up the street, their rifles slung over their shoulders, bayonets sheathed. The two men saluted a third—a loyalist officer, by the hated dark blue coat faced with white and the crossed white straps—as they neared him on the opposite side of the road. To her mind, loyalists were worse than the British regulars because they chose a distant, controlling king over their friends and, in many cases, their own families.

“Quick, while they are busy.” Samantha pulled her bonnet closer around her face, though she kept an eye on the men. “Perhaps they won’t notice.”

Emily’s heart sank. She’d gone and done it now. Her father would skin her like a rabbit if she landed in trouble. Again. Try as much as she did, she seemed to invite mischief. She furtively watched the men engage in a brief exchange. Solidly built, they stood as tall as young saplings, their broadcloth uniforms stretched taut over massive chests. One soldier winked at her with a slow, hungry leer as they approached. She lowered her head so the bonnet shaded her face but still allowed her to watch their actions. “I fear it’s too late.”

She glanced at the men, the lanterns they carried casting wavering light across their features, alarm sparking inside her at the hungry amusement on their faces. She grabbed Samantha’s arm and started down the sandy road. Her heart beat a staccato rhythm when the men neared, intercepting the two women on the nearly deserted street. As the soldiers drew to a halt in front of them, a low, menacing chuckle from the taller of the men sent terror snaking down her back.

“Now, now, ladies, don’t be in such a hurry,” the first soldier said, blocking her path.

He reached out to tug loose a string from her tea-colored bonnet, her last decent one. She’d pulled it from her mother’s trunk, forced to use even those last remaining articles of clothing. The filth. Bad enough they were British. Emily recoiled, gagging at the odor of sweat and tobacco. She swatted his hand away. The major—from the insignia she could now see far too closely—approached them. Something in his eyes, glittering beneath his hat, tugged at her memory. She dared not investigate more for fear he’d misinterpret her look as one of interest. She glanced away but kept an ear on the soldiers’ movements.

“They just want to have some fun,” he said, his voice sharp as he stepped closer. “Where

is your father, Miss Sullivan? Surely he didn't allow you to venture out alone?"

"He's awaiting my return, if you'll permit me to pass." Emily made to continue on her way, but the officer raised a hand, stilling her movement.

"Don't be in such a hurry."

"Let us pass." Samantha planted her feet and gripped the basket with both hands, glaring at the men. "Or I shall be forced to defend our right to."

She would, too. Samantha proved the strongest of her friends. Emily often wished for Samantha's fortitude. Where had she learned to confront an adversary with such confidence?

The officer chuckled, a rough unnerving sound. "And you'd both perhaps be injured, but in fact arrested for your actions. Perhaps then, Miss Sullivan, your father will mind his business ventures with more care."

What did he mean? Her father was a highly regarded man.

Samantha's eyes narrowed at his comment, but she held her ground. "We are late, sirs. Please, let us pass."

"We'll not detain you for long. I only want to kiss an American lady before I board one of those ships for England," the first soldier said, leaning closer to Emily and laying a hand on her arm to restrain her. He snatched the lace-trimmed bonnet from her head." You're such a pretty little blonde, too."

She gritted her teeth when he mauled her mother's delicate bonnet. "That's mine!" Emily grasped at it, clutching air until finding purchase on the hat, and pulled it from his filthy fingers. With shaking hands, she straightened the lace-edged brim as the man chortled. She inhaled to calm her roiling stomach. "Gentlemen, please."

Seething, she inspected her hat. At a minimum, he fouled it by his touch. Her hands trembled, but she steeled herself to face the loathsome men. "If you'll step aside, we'll continue on our way home."

The second soldier yanked the bonnet from her hands and lifted it to his nose. "Love the smell of a fine woman."

He rubbed her bonnet on his face, inhaling deeply each time it swiped across his nose. She swallowed the bile rising in her throat. Suddenly footsteps echoed behind her, but she dared not tear her eyes from her assailants to turn to see who approached. Might it be yet another foul British soldier attacking from the rear? The apprehension pounding in her ears along with her

pulse prodded her into action.

If Samantha could defend herself, then so could Emily. Gripping the strings of her purse tightly, she swung it in a large arc at the closest soldier, hitting him on the elbow with a loud crack. Good, the tin of snuff she'd purchased for her father had earned its worth this day.

"Gramercy, woman, watch what you do there." The soldier rubbed the injured joint, scowling. "I just wanted a little kiss or two. No need to get angry."

"Let us pass unharmed like gentlemen should, or I'll hit you again." Breathing hard, she pulled back to deliver another blow when a hand gripped her upper arm and stayed her movement. The heat from the gloved hand seared her where it lay, the grip nearly hurting her but not quite.

"I'll thank you to leave the ladies alone, *gentlemen*. And I use that word loosely." The deep, familiar voice sounded above her head, sparking nearly dead embers of feeling in her core.

She knew that voice even with the new hardness in it. She heard it in her dreams on too many nights and had dreaded hearing it again in person. Its timbre reverberated against her chest, a physical caress as he stepped close enough his heat warmed her back. Relief mixed with despair as a jolt of awareness flowed into her body, tempting her to lean against his powerful frame.

Emily glanced over her shoulder at the tall blond. Her pulse quickened. Light from the open printing shop door pooled onto the ground behind Frank. Her lips parted, remembering the long ago fleeting touch which had started a feeling like a bubbling creek in her veins, a longing in her heart and inner core she did not fully comprehend.

She snapped her mouth closed, afraid she might reveal too much of the intense physical response she experienced when he touched her. She braced herself against the onslaught of emotions he stirred within her, attempting a frown to show her displeasure.

His dove-gray eyes enthralled her. She could lose herself in their tantalizing depths. When he winked at her, her breath hitched. She broke eye contact and turned to face forward.

"I believe you have something of the lady's." Frank held out a hand to the soldier, snapping his fingers, demanding the garment.

His steady gaze made the soldier shove the bonnet toward Frank before hastily stepping back several yards, well out of range of any physical response. Did everyone jump when he snapped his fingers? He may be surprised when she did not.

Frank handed the bonnet to her with a grim expression and a nod. Although still heavenly to look at, with lush, sandy-blond hair, chiseled jaw, and steely gray eyes, now a determination filled those eyes, his firm mouth. He seemed taller, broader, more dangerous than nine months earlier, before he left town after his swift marriage to Elizabeth.

She folded the offending garment and glared at the circle of men dwarfing her. Why must he show up now? After all this time away from home. Her heart skipped a beat, then restarted wildly with a crazy mix of joy and resentment. Where had he been when her home life fell apart?

Still, he was protecting her from these buffoons. And her father's subsequent anger, should aught go awry. She'd sacrifice her pride *this* time. She sidled behind him, placing his bulk between her and the aggressors.

The major evaluated Frank's height and size, his look changing from antagonistic to resigned when he noted the insignia on his uniform.

"What right do you have to interfere?" the first soldier asked Frank, seeing the change in the major's demeanor.

"General Alexander Leslie himself requested my presence. And this lady's father is my father-in-law, who charged me with ensuring the ladies' safe passage."

Frank knew the hated general? On top of that, Frank admitted he had already talked with her father. She had wanted more time. Time to face her father's unrealistic dreams for her. Time to take the steps necessary to open her own shop and determine how she would proceed with her plans. If she were to be truly independent, then she must insist on being treated as such. Frank's officious behavior stoked her irritation.

"We'll see about that." The soldier surged forward and pointed his rifle at Frank.

Emily gasped, gripping Frank's cloak involuntarily. He set her from him then stepped forward, drawing the man's attention and the path of his aim away from her.

Frank braced his feet as he faced the frustrated soldier. "Be sensible, man."

Trembles rocked her core at the tableau playing out before her. Motion slowed to a crawl as she attempted to make sense of the scene. Her breath caught in her throat when the seriousness of the situation sank into her rattled brain.

The man stalked toward Frank, his finger on the trigger of the weapon. His thick fingers curled around the dark wood stock and supported the long metal barrel. Stubble shadowed his jaw and surrounded his yellow smile. He aimed the rifle at Frank's abdomen. "I'll have what I

came for, and you cannot stop me.”

At this close range, even if he tried, he couldn't miss. She fixed her eyes on Frank, saw when his eyes turned to mirrors, focused on settling the challenge. He appeared capable of killing her assailant then and there. Cold fear lodged in her chest. Frank came home, only to be shot? Over a bonnet? No. She wouldn't allow it. She made to take a step to intervene, stop the madness, but Samantha grabbed her arm with a fierce grip all while shaking her head. Emily tried to ignore her, but her friend held fast.

“I believe the lady has a say in the matter.” Frank whipped a pistol from some hidden place, cocked the hammer with a deadly *click*, and leveled it at the man. “I'd think again about your intentions, sir.”

Emily tugged on Samantha's hold. “Frank, no!”

Frank locked eyes with his opponent, his thumb ready to release the lethal ball. His eyes narrowed, hard and deadly.

“Stand down, soldier,” the major cut in. “This has gone far enough. Next thing you'll be challenging him to a bloody duel over nothing more than a thwarted buss.”

“Put your gun away,” Frank said to the soldier, “or face charges of assaulting an officer.”

The soldier reluctantly cradled his gun, glaring at Frank.

“Are you Captain Thomson?” the major asked, scrutinizing him.

“Yes, sir.” Frank lowered his pistol, keeping it handy.

“General Leslie mentioned you were taking over the printing press and the broadside.”

The major considered Frank and the lethal weapon, his internal debate evident in his expression. “But your point is well-made. This is neither the place nor the time.” He turned to address the soldiers. “All right, men, return to your duties.”

“But sir—” The man's voice held a barely concealed whine.

“You heard him. Move along now.” Frank replaced his pistol, though he did not relax his demeanor. Fortunately, the officer quelled the whiner's eagerness with a severe look before tipping his hat to Emily and Samantha.

“Ladies, my apologies,” the officer said slowly. “You may be on your way.”

“Thank you for your assistance.” Frank studied the officer as the disgruntled soldiers stalked away. Still, he remained ready to defend himself even as the officer followed the men down the street.

The fear that had bolstered Emily's strength fled, leaving her weak at the knees. That was close. Taking a deep breath, Emily faced Frank.

Frank's dark gray eyes turned stormy, his hands on his hips as he studied her.

"Pray tell what you two are doing on the street alone?"

Let the journey continue!

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