

Patriot Bride

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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Chapter One

Hannah Cooper tucked her chin to her chest as she strode across the common, pulling her cloak tight about her. She wished she could afford warmer clothes, as a damp chill slipped beneath both her skirt and her layers of petticoats. The mob cap on her head helped a little, but not enough. April in Boston wasn't the warmest of times, but the wind across the bay cut that much quicker through the thin cloth of her well-worn cloak and almost-ratty dress.

Driven from England under duress, she had truly adopted her current homeland as her own, despite the fact that she wasn't a native and hadn't been there very long. She had already taken their causes to heart, railing with her fellow employees against all of the unfair taxes that were being imposed by the Crown and Parliament, so far away.

Not that she was dressed much better than anyone else, really, except those toffs who decided to break the boycott of British goods and have new dresses made, consequences be damned. Hannah's head shook from more than the chill, as she dodged the cows grazing placidly and hurried towards her landlord's certain warm welcome. A group of townspeople who were gathered around cackling at each other and waving some pamphlet or other caught her attention.

After several unsuccessful attempts, bobbing up and down in a most unseemly fashion, trying to get a glimpse of what Old George was try to do to them now, she was able to skim quickly over a short man's shoulder at a proclamation entitled 'The Quartering Act.' Apparently, it required that the colonist give food and shelter to the very British Army that was repressing their rights to live as free men.

Almost as soon as she finished reading and turned to continue to Mistress Wentworth's, only to be confronted by the very reason for such an act, a regiment of British soldiers, a bright swath of blood red across the still late winter bland backdrop of the park, lead by a huge man on a large white stallion. One of the things that struck Hannah about the man was that although he was wearing a spit-polished uniform and all the regalia of a British officer, he was not wearing a white wig, which set him apart from the rest of the dandified officers that accompanied him. She

could hear him issue several curt orders and felt a chill run through her at his tone, then realized she was standing in the middle of the common and staring up at him like a lack-wit.

She'd always been just the slightest bit worried that her intended might send someone looking for her, not that he'd have any idea where to look. But still, the worry was always in the back of her mind.

Before anyone else noticed her slack-jawed response to this strange man, she hurried off to work, knowing if she was late the kindly Mistress Wentworth would be worried.

But she couldn't keep him out of her mind for some strange reason. He kept popping up at the oddest of times, when she was sipping some of the strange tasting coffee her employer served with cream and scant sugar or when she was working on sewing the stomacher to the stays of a fine dress for one of their wealthier customers. Why that face should reappear in her mind for no reason, she had no idea. Perhaps she was just a bit tetchy today, and that strong, masculine face was well-burned into her memory.

Hannah tried desperately to turn her thoughts away from him and back to the task at hand. As much as she'd hated learning the needlecrafts her mother had insisted upon, she was much more facile at cooking and basic medicines. It had saved her life when she'd arrived in the Colonies, with little more than those skills to keep body and soul together.

"You cannot deny me, Mistress Cooper."

Obsidian black eyes collided with startling blue ones that refused to yield demurely, as they should, if not merely to the man then to the uniform.

Sweet merciful Heaven, it was the commander of the regiment she'd seen earlier that day. She'd never forget that face for the rest of her days.

Hannah continued to stare up at him, and up it was. He had to be at least a foot taller than she was. He was the tallest man she'd ever seen, and broad as a barn, to boot. The crisp red of his uniform only served to accentuate his size. "I most certainly can and will deny you, sir. We poor colonists are merely supposed to give you redcoats..." She gave that last word a twist that left no room for doubt that it caused a bad taste in her mouth just to say it, "food and shelter at public houses and unused shelters. I'm certain there's room for you at one pub or another." She did her best to close the door in his face, but he had one gigantic spit-shined, black-booted foot remaining on the doorsill, regardless of how she tried to crush it.

* * *

Colonel Wolfgang Anders Preston III, Duke of Northumberland, Viscount Wexley, and Baron of several small dominions, could not believe that this little slip of a thing was actually leaning all of her inconsiderable weight against her front door, such as it was, in an obvious attempt to shoo him away like some common beggar man or thief. Even the women in this savage, upstart country were rebellious colonials.

Wolf was not entirely unsympathetic to the plight of these 'Americans,' as they had come to refer to themselves. Especially having spent as much time here as he had; he'd come to recognize a certain grudging respect for them and their savvy leaders, John Hancock, George Washington, Samuel Adams. They were all smart men, with sound thoughts and ideas. He just thought there were better ways of going about it than the direct conflict with the largest military power in the world that they were heading towards, and which they would most certainly lose.

But these colonists had spunk; he had to give them that, case in point, the small woman who was still pushing against her door, her Sampson to his Goliath, as headstrong and impulsive and bullheaded as the rest of her kind, despite her feminine appearance.

And she certainly was in the flower of her femininity, despite the grunts and groans she was emitting while trying to stem the tide of his invasion. And despite his vast family fortune, he was the type of man to look past the rags she was wearing to see what was beneath them. He could see the masses of clean, curly blonde hair piled on top of her head, a few delicate ringlets framing her face. Her clothes were near worn clear through in spots. The fabric was so thin it was nearly an obscenity for her to wear them, but they were clean, and she smelled faintly of the wildflowers he'd seen blooming in the yard.

Wolf could feel a most ungentlemanly strain against his breeches, but he brought that to a full stop immediately, giving a carefully controlled shove against the door so as not to hurt her, but enough to assure that he would gain entrance to her less than enchanting abode.

* * *

It was like trying to discourage a grizzly bear, no matter how hard she tried. She was leaning her entire weight against the door, and it was having absolutely no effect. He was slowly, and with depressing ease, gaining entry to her house, and there didn't seem to be anything she could do about it.

Finally, Hannah just let go and walked away, getting no small amount of satisfaction when he stumbled badly, nearly falling flat on his face. She knew that the victorious feeling

when he'd almost hurt himself was wrong, and she said a quick prayer for forgiveness as she bustled about the place, suddenly realizing just how small it was with his imposing presence.

Hannah had never regretted leaving England, not from the moment she set foot on the ship at Portsmouth harbor, despite the fact that she nearly died of the seasickness throughout the entire voyage, along with everyone else who had booked passage. They were all held below decks nearly every day, herded together next to the animals, the air wreaking of both human and animal wastes, and the crew looking them all over as if they were going to be next in the pot, or worse, for the women.

It wasn't as if she'd had much choice in the matter, regardless. Women in this world didn't have much in the way of choices, which was probably why she'd taken the Colonists' cause so much to heart. She had thrown off the yoke of her father's oppression; why shouldn't they do the same? While they were living in their fathers' houses, as she had been, they were subject to his rule, benevolent or dictatorial. Then they were sold by virtue of their dowry, or the lack thereof, to the man most likely to aid their father in whatever his pursuits were, no matter that the man was ancient or a drunkard or likely to haul off and hit whoever was within striking distance for no particular reason.

Like her father.

Hannah wasn't about to marry the man her father had chosen for her, although she knew that he expected her to do her duty as his daughter and simply surrender herself to his will. Deferring to her father was the healthier thing to do, if one was interested in keeping body and soul together and avoiding broken bones and black eyes. She had done that only for her mother's sake. Momma had made everything all right, while bearing the brunt of her husband's anger herself, to save her children from his wrath.

Despite his love for whiskey and not much else, William Cooper was a successful merchant with an eye on things well above his station. He wanted a title of any sort. He wanted to weasel his way into the landed gentry, into the posh set. And he most certainly wasn't above using his children to do so. William liked to brag to his friends at the pub and anyone else who would listen that although every other man in the country prayed for sons, he was just as happy that his wife had seen fit to give him daughters, for whom he could arrange advantageous marriages. Hannah, as the eldest girl, was the first candidate to be married off to some viscount

or baron she had never even met, or anyone else he could wrangle into while holding out the carrot of a tidy dowry.

Hannah had stayed as long as she could, long enough for her mother to die in her arms, gasping for breath from the consumption. She desperately wanted to take her two younger sisters with her, but she couldn't afford passage for the three of them. So she decided to go on ahead, lest her father get wind of her plans.

She thought about her sisters nearly every waking moment, wondering how they were faring. Their father had gotten wilder after Momma died, staying out even longer than he had and drinking nonstop. Hannah had told Mary, who was ten and the next oldest, that if their father stayed away for any longer than a day, she was to take little Priscilla and hightail it over to their aunt's across town. Kindly old Aunt Polly would take them in, Hannah had no doubt.

She'd been here, living on the outskirts of Boston for almost a year, as a widow. She'd known that people would accept her as a widow sooner than a single female traveling alone, so she'd invented a husband, becoming Mistress Cooper instead of Miss.

In those long years, she'd had but one letter from Mary that told of their father's further decline and mentioned that she and Priscilla were going to take her advice and go to their aunt's shortly. Though the cottage she lived in was owned by the woman she worked for as a seamstress, and it wasn't nearly big enough for three people, Hannah ached to bring them to her. She was scrimping and saving every tuppence and shilling she earned, and if things continued as they were, it would be another six months or so before she was able to send the money for their passage.

* * *

Wolf watched her as she wandered about the tiny room, sweeping a gnarly broom uselessly over the dirt floor. Despite the dilapidated appearance of her little hovel, and beyond that which was on the floor, there wasn't a speck of dust or dirt anywhere. It was tiny, but it was scrupulously clean. Along one wall was a large stone fireplace, from which hung a smallish black kettle that simmered something that made his mouth water with the scent of onions and bay leaf. One corner had a small, rough table and the other a rope bed with a feather mattress.

There was a tiny china figurine on the mantle; as well as more books than he'd seen in one place since he was at home in his own library, everything from several volumes of

Shakespeare and Chaucer to one of the more scandalous authors that really should not have even been in her possession, in his opinion.

"You read?" he asked, unable to quite control his amazement. Most of the ladies of quality that he knew didn't take the time to read, although they were certainly taught to by the various tutors their wealthy fathers hired for them. But their mothers were busily whispering to them that it was not something one did for entertainment, but merely to avoid the cane. And it didn't help one to appear any too smart when trying to catch a husband, which was, after all, the entire reason for a young girl's existence.

Wolf's mouth twisted at the thought. He should have been married by now himself, and he knew his mother and uncle were hard at work on arranging that, but he'd never really had the time to woo and win a woman. He'd barely been back to his estates in the past ten years, despite the long distance needling from his mother about not paying attention to his heritage. Wolf felt that his career in His Majesty's service spoke volumes about himself, and he never bothered to explain himself to much of anyone.

* * *

Hannah eyed him distrustfully from across the room, where she was fussing with the spare bedclothes. "Yes, I do," she answered, rather defiantly. Her father had never missed an opportunity to berate her for her intelligence and her desire to read and learn more than he thought was necessary. Her mother was at least somewhat gentle about her reproaches. Father had felt no such compunction.

She tried to cross to his side of the room, to the fireplace he was standing in front of, in order to check and stir the meager dinner she had boiling in the kettle. The closer she got the bigger he got. The cottage was so small that wherever she looked, there he was, standing therein all his glowering, unnerving glory. Even with his hat off, he was just enormous, a veritable mountain of a man. She decided to be cowardly and veered away from him at the last minute, then berated herself as she fiddled with the chipped vase with two wilted wildflowers that served as decoration for the tiny table.

He didn't say anything else, just stood there like an angry lump, staring at her. She really didn't think he had any right to be there, but what was she to do against a man his size? Hannah figured that she probably had to put up with him this evening, but tomorrow she would make

sure that her rifle was more at the ready, and he'd find himself staring down its muzzle if he tried to get in here again.

Finally, she'd gathered up enough courage to stand before him and glare right back at him. "If you expect to have anything edible this evening, sir, I suggest that you move aside, unless you're also an expert in tending to venison stew."

* * *

The only part of Wolf that moved at her order was his eyebrow, which rose nearly into his hairline. Few people in this world would dare to address him so, and even fewer of those were women. Actually, only one was a woman, his mother, and even then it would have had to have been a matter of life or death since he'd come into the title and taken firm control of her runaway purse strings.

Yet here was this little strip of a girl, with probably less than twenty years to her credit, obviously of no social rank whatsoever, taking him to task for standing in front of her kettle. No matter that she was right, and he moved away immediately, if not quickly. He was amazed at her spunk, her downright Colonial spunk, with no appreciation or deference whatsoever for her betters.

He watched avidly as she bent and stirred the pot vigorously, then reached up without looking to grab a crude wooden bowl, ladled some out, then moved to sit at the table and begin to devour it with delicate greed. She was obviously doing her best to be discourteous and ignore him entirely.

So Wolf proceeded to be discourteous to her, removing his uniform coat without asking, hanging it off one of the pegs in the wall next to the door, where her tattered cloak already resided.

Despite his noble birth, Wolf had been on enough campaigns and had spent enough time well away from the reaches of what society considered civil surroundings that he was quite comfortable serving himself. As a matter of fact, much to his mother's disgust, the older he got, the less patience he had with the trappings of his existence as a member of the landed gentry. Recent years had brought him to the New World. He'd fought in the French and Indian war, and had spent some time in the beautiful area around Quebec, as well as the Ohio valley and Fort Frederick on Lake Champlain. It was God's own country, full of incredible promise for any man brave enough to seize it and defend it against all comers.

Sometimes, he wanted nothing more than to leave his commission, which was up in about eighteen months anyway, and just ride west, completely ignoring the King's command that no Englishman was to venture past the Mississippi.

But here he was, watching this tiny woman ignore him completely, as if nothing was amiss. He grabbed the other wooden bowl off the mantle and served himself some of the stew, not paying much attention to what he was dishing up until he found himself across the small, wobbly table from her. She staunchly refused to look up at him, her eyes never leaving the enthralling contents of her bowl.

Suddenly hungry from the wonderful aroma that drifted to his nostrils, Wolf took a big spoonful and wasn't disappointed. The broth was just right, thick and hot and full of flavor, slipping down his throat and warming him from the inside out. He bit down on a tender potato chunk, a small onion, and some carrot, but no venison whatsoever, not in the entire bowl. "This is venison stew?" he asked doubtfully, cleaning his bowl nonetheless. "I don't see any venison in it."

Hannah got up from the table, using a small bucket of water to rinse and wash her bowl and spoon, placing them back on the mantle to dry. "There isn't. It's venison stock. If you'd like meat in your stew, I suggest you go hunting. I can't afford to buy it."

Wolf made a note to stop by a butcher tomorrow, before he called formation, and send an order of meats to her cabin. Leaning on the table as he got up, noting the irritating wobble, he reached down to see if there was something he could quickly do to fix it. What he found were several pieces of parchment stuffed beneath the shorter leg.

He opened the carefully folded papers and read them, while she puttered nervously about the cabin. They were all inflammatory treatise against the Governor of Massachusetts, and even the King himself, citing a lot of pure rubbish about taxation without representation and how the Colonies were being treated unfairly and punitively, in regards to trade arrangements and having to provide room and board for the King's troops at their own expense.

Wolf threw the pamphlets onto the table, adding fixing the table to his list of things to do to make this place a little more habitable. "I see you side with the rabble rousers in town," he commented lightly, watching her with narrowed eyes.

Hannah was folding the bare blanket she kept at the foot of her small bed, but his low, accusatory voice stopped her in the act for a long moment. Then she reassumed her nervous

straightening, knowing those piercing black eyes were watching every move she made and trying to come to grips with the fact that it didn't look like he was going to go anywhere. He, apparently, had every intention of just blithely moving in with her, right or wrong.

And of course, as an officer in His Majesty's Army, he felt he was well within his rights.

Grabbing a firm hold on her gumption, Hannah turned to face him, her legs quivering beneath her skirts and against the bed frame. "You aren't really going to stay here, are you? I'm sure there are plenty of places..."

That bushy dark eyebrow rose nearly to his hairline, but he didn't seem to be angry—quite—just firm and unyielding and obviously not much interested in explaining himself to the likes of her. "Not that you are in quite this strategic a spot, and yes, I fully intend to quarter myself here, Mistress Cooper."

Something about the way he said her name put Hannah on alert. He said it as if he didn't believe it, whether it was the married part or the surname part, she didn't much care. She was already wary around him, how could she not be? She was a small woman, alone in her house, with a huge man who was not her husband.

In a voice much shakier than she would have liked, Hannah asked as she kept her hands busy worrying a handkerchief, "And have you no care for my reputation whatsoever?"

To her complete horror, this question motivated him to stand and walk silently over to her. Overwhelmed by his presence, she found herself sitting on the edge of the bed and craning her head to see him.

"No, Mistress Cooper," he accented her last name in a tone that left absolutely no doubt that he questioned its status, "I have no care for the reputation of a woman who runs away, rather than fulfilling her obligations, and who assumes a false identity, lying to everyone who has befriended her in this small town."

Hannah's open mouth went completely dry. The man in front of her, the huge, physically imposing man who had barged his way into her little house by virtue of his brute strength and his uniform, was the man her father had contracted for her to marry!