

# The Powder

*Tales from a Revolution: Bermuda*

# Chapter I

**F**or countless centuries, the surf had rolled in on this beach, with the steady rhythm of calm seas like tonight's, or the wilder crash and ebb of a storm. It would continue doing so for countless eons after his name was forgotten, the sea taking no note that anyone named Harold Cooper had ever existed.

Tonight, though, something was different, and it had every nerve in his body on alert. Even though he knew intellectually that he should not be able to sense it, he was aware that somewhere out there beyond the surf, an American ship lurked in the darkness, its presence a rebuke to Royal authority on the island of Bermuda.

Harold — Hal to his friends, and 'that accursed rascal' to his enemies — had but a small part to play in this night's plans, but he could not help but think that it might secure his place in the annals of the island's history, if ever it could be spoken of.

At the moment, though, the only thing demanded of him was that he wait, and hope. He peered into the darkness, but could discern nothing other than the stars slowly wheeling through the sky into the inky murmuring darkness of the Atlantic Ocean, the moon glinting off an occasional wave in the distance.

He reflected on the strange and discomforting road that had led him to this desperate action, which was technically an act of treason against the Crown. He supposed that it had all started with Molly.



“What do you mean, that you wouldn’t consider accompanying me to the dance unless I were the last man on the entire island?”

Molly Haskins crossed her arms in front of herself and answered starchily, “Just what I said, Harold. You’ve failed in your apprenticeship to your father’s business, and instead you’ve found nothing better than working on the docks as hard as a slave might, and moreover, you’ve a reputation as a rake among my friends.”

Hal bristled. “I’ll have you know that my work on the docks demands as much skill as did my father’s business — and quite a lot less time under the lash than either my father or a foreman might apply. As for my reputation” — Hal grinned — “I’m no rake, but neither am I so unworldly that will I step on your foot as we dance, or slobber on your hand. I rather like to think of myself as refined than some alleyway hound.”

Molly favored him with a dubious grimace. “In any event, with the trade being stopped by the Continental Congress in answer to Parliament’s blockades of their harbors, what honest work can you even find on the docks?”

Hal had to admit that this was an awkward question to answer. At present there were no ships carrying food and supplies from the mainland colonies, and accepting what goods the islands could produce. As a result, there had been distressingly little legitimate work of late for anyone on the docks, never mind for a barely-skilled stevedore.

After a long pause, he considered the girl and said quietly, “There is always some traffic, even if it is from sources that

Parliament neither knows nor approves of.”

Molly’s frown deepened. “You are hardly improving your standing, Harold, by hinting that you might be involved in smuggling.”

Hal made a shushing motion with his hands and hissed, “Not so loud, Molly.” Then he shrugged, adding, “When the law makes it impossible to fill our bellies legally, haven’t we an obligation to break the law?”

Her expression grew thoughtful as she considered his argument for a moment. Finally, she said, “It depends upon the nature of the law. If you must deny somebody else their bread in order for you to eat, it seems difficult to justify that exchange. However, if you are defying a distant and wrathful body of men who seek only to exact revenge upon the people of a town far from here, and are well-satisfied to injure us by incident . . . I suppose I could see that obligation.”

She pursed her lips, though, adding, “Not that it makes any difference whether you hang from a gibbet for stealing from a neighbor or for cheating the Parliament of their claimed due. Your pitiable remains will be of no use to me or anyone, whatever brought them there.”

It was Hal’s turn to frown. “I have seen no victims of the gibbet here of late. At worst, the governor’s men might hand me over to the impress service to serve on a Royal Navy ship. They hardly require one to be convicted of any crime to do that. Nobody my age with any sense stays within a loud shout of the port when a naval vessel comes to call.”

Molly waved her hands in a frustrated gesture. “You are raising yet more reasons why a girl would be foolish to entertain

any suit you might offer. Why, you might go in to work one morning, and not be heard from again until the mails brought word that you'd drowned in some far-off port, or lost your head to a pirate's sword."

Hal scoffed, "You raise the most lurid and remote objections to a simple invitation to a dance. In any event, the Royal Navy has been most engaged in visiting violence upon innocents and imposing the Parliament's will on our mainland counterparts. In consequence, none of their ships have been seen here in months. I dare say that we won't see one again until after this unhappy affair has been concluded, and all of our circumstances have returned to normal."

"What you call lurid, I call but sensible. It matters not, though, as there is no chance whatever that my father would permit you to call on me, even for the most casual of visits. You must have anticipated already that your family's name is infamous at our table."

Hal's eyes flashed angrily. "What has my family to do with anything? I have scarcely seen my father in a year, and my break from him was for reasons both private and all too public."

Molly shrugged. "I mention it only to demonstrate the futility of your pursuit, Harold. You cannot deny that, completely aside from whatever sentiment in favor of mindless devotion to the Crown that you might have absorbed from your father, that you stand to benefit from the resumption of normal trade, owing to your occupation."

He started to speak, and she cut him off with a sharp motion of her hand. "Whether it's outright smuggling or merely shaving the corners off of a duty owed to the King's man, you also cannot deny that your interests and those of the Crown align at

least somewhat. Your labors on the docks would be easier, and you would enjoy more reliable work should the King prevail over our mainland cousins, and reduce them under a rule of absolute despotism.”

His eyes narrowed. “I do not like your intimation that I would for any reason favor the selfsame Parliament that has choked off our trade, whether it be that I am a mindless devotee of my father’s sentiments or to the ease of lining my pockets by fair means or foul. Perhaps I have misjudged you, if you think so little of me.”

Molly closed her eyes for a long moment, her mouth tight, and her head slowly shaking from side to side.

Hal was beginning to wonder if she was going to refuse to open her eyes again until he left, when she drew a deep breath.

Sighing, she looked steadily up at him. Her tone was far quieter as she said, “Please accept my apologies. My argument got ahead of me, and I spoke both out of turn and without cause. I did not intend to give you offense.”

She again gestured him to silence as he tried to answer. “That does not change the simple fact, however, that my father will tolerate no involvement between us, not even to the slight extent of accompanying you to this proposed revelry.”

His scowl did not ease, but he relented, shaking his head. “I suppose you have the right of it, though I don’t doubt that you could talk your father into anything that you wanted badly enough.”

She acknowledged his comment with a grimace and a tip of her head. “Be that as it may, even if my father were amenable, the prospect of spending an afternoon among the rowdies of the town as they drink enough courage to persuade them to take liberties

with anyone in a skirt is scarcely an appealing one.”

He shot her a reproving glance. “I’d let nothing happen to you, Molly.”

“I am not only worried about the other rowdies, Harold.” She crossed her arms before herself. “As I said, your reputation precedes you.”

He started to roll his eyes, but then caught himself. After a pause, he asked, “Is there aught that I can do to change either your opinion of me or your father’s? Or, at the very least, gain some modicum of trust from either of you?”

Her surprise at his measured and calm response was visible on her face, and it was her turn to think before answering carefully, “I can think of nothing at this moment, but I will ponder it.”

He nodded his acknowledgment. “That is more consideration than might be deserved by the rake you say you believe me to be, which either speaks well of your true sentiments toward me, or of your willingness to believe in the capacity of a man such as that to change his ways.”

Hal grinned playfully at her unrestrained eye roll, and watched her thoughtfully as she turned and walked away.

He wasn’t sure what had given him the confidence to approach her in the market as she moved from one stall to the next, but he had to admit that he had not expected her to do anything except flatly refuse his invitation. She wasn’t wrong about the nature of the dance — such events were usually just an excuse for the free laborers around town to enjoy some of the rum received in trade from the distillers of the islands further to the south.

There was little prospect of such revelry this year, though, with the interruptions in the trade. What rum there was still about

had to be drawn from the barrels that had been hoarded from prior years' purchases — or smuggled in.

Unfortunately, the majority of smuggling was now in the form of more essential goods. Instead of rolling barrels of rum through the darkness to evade the eyes of Crown officials, Hal's nights had more often consisted of secreting ashore such commodities as salt beef or dried beans.

He'd once heard someone say that Bermuda had to import eight out of ten of the meals a family ate, and while he didn't know how precise that assessment was, he did know that his own diet had become both plainer and less satisfying ever since the mainland colonies had declared that they would suffer no trade with any British colony that did not support their demands.

Political wrangling was of limited interest to Hal when it did not directly affect him, but he'd heard enough animated conversations at the tavern where he had a room to have gathered the broad outlines of the mainlanders' complaints.

There had been trouble for years, of course, starting with some sort of a special tax laid on newspapers, legal documents, and — this was where it had reached Hal's awareness — playing cards. As a gangly youth, he'd vaguely aspired to someday acquire a set of the brightly-colored things and teach himself to play the games on which gentlemen whiled away hours. The new tax in question had placed his aspiration that much further out of reach.

More recently, there had been resistance to a flurry of measures out of London that had culminated in the senseless destruction of several shipments of tea at various ports along North America's coast.

In retribution, Parliament had shut down the port of



Boston entirely, and — most galling to the men Hal had heard discussing it — swept away the locally-elected government in the Massachusetts-Bay Colony, to be replaced with officials appointed by the Crown.

Hal didn't see that it mattered all that much whether the officials who made life difficult were appointed by one's neighbors or by a faraway ministry, but it seemed to be terribly important to the mainlanders.

While he did not hold with his father's open admiration for the King and Parliament's "firm hand" in dealing with what he called the American "rabble rousers," Hal did not appreciate his dinner table being used by the Congress to apply pressure against royal authority, nor by Parliament to crush their resistance.

Regardless of who was directly responsible for the interruption of shipping from the nearby mainland of North America, it meant that Bermuda would go hungry. Hal knew all too well that it was hopeless to expect that the mother country could be bothered to transport enough supplies across the broad Atlantic to feed the thousands of people on this little island. Indeed, based on the battered condition of what stores he had handled from the ships that had undertaken that long and arduous voyage, he knew that it wasn't even a physical possibility.

To the extent that he had given the matter any conscious consideration at all, Hal had supposed that it would be best for all concerned if the troublemakers in Boston were quietly rounded up and brought to justice, allowing normal trade to resume.

Of course, that had been before Molly's fiery accusations of his interests aligning with the Crown's — accusations that he was none too eager to confirm.