

DEFIANT ONES:

*Penelope
Barker*

The American Revolution's Bravest
Women - Patriots, Prophets,
Poets & Spies

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HEATHER BLANTON





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Penelope Barker

By Heather Blanton

A Beautifully Flawed Productions Original

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Penelope Barker's husband was sent to England in 1761 to help negotiate trade deals for the colonies. He did not return to her for sixteen years. In the intervening time, Penelope carried on. She managed her home and her businesses, and rarely whined. She rolled up her sleeves and faced every new day with the resolve to do what must be done. And when British tyranny weighed too heavily upon her, she raised her voice and spoke against it. Because silence was the easy way out, and Penelope was not familiar with that path. This story is for the women among us who know there is no easy way.

“In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

James 2:17

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Chapter 1

Edenton, NC 1761

Penelope Barker was more weary than she supposed she had a right to be. Other women had faced harder trials.

Or not.

Seven children out of nine passed on. The last three mere infants. Such tiny caskets. She squeezed her eyes shut against the images, gouging her fingers into the settee's arm. "The Good Book says the Lord won't put more on us than we can bear." Her voice sounded dead, empty, and cold. "Sometimes, it's hard to believe that."

Thomas stepped away from the window where he'd been staring out at the Chowan River. Sixteen years Penelope's senior, the death of their three infants had aged him noticeably. Deep lines of grief framed his eyes, and his wig covered a head full of gray hair now. Their hopes had risen with little Nathaniel. He'd made it eight months before falling to the fever. His death had broken something in them.

Thomas shoved his hands into his pockets and blew out a long, tired breath. "If anyone can bear up under these tragedies, it is you, Penelope."

The compliment did not ease any of her grief.

He smiled sadly and trudged over to the settee, dropping beside her. "In a way, this is a blessing in disguise. I won't be leaving you with so much to worry about."

"But now? So soon?" *Once, just once, I want someone to lean on.* She wanted so badly to tell him the truth of her feelings, but it would do no good. Widowed twice, she knew what it was to be on her own. She would survive Thomas's departure. She would survive the loss of her babies. She sniffed and squared her shoulders. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't carry on so."

"No, I'm sorry. The governor says go, which means the king says go. I have no choice."

Somehow, she suspected he wasn't sorry. "When *does* a man have a choice of his own destiny? Under King George, you'll be in your grave before you can choose."

He huffed. "Perhaps the timing is not ideal, but..."

“But?” What didn’t he want to say?

“I-I need a change, Penelope. I thought I’d have children by now. Children of my own blood. Stepchildren aren’t the same. My prime has passed. Some time in England, working on the trade agreements will keep my mind occupied.”

And what about her? What would occupy her mind? Bills? Business? Social life in Edenton—the veritable Versailles of the South?

“Four years,” he went on, “less if the agreements we negotiate are clever and well received.”

Fine then. He was leaving her to do her grieving alone. He hadn’t asked her to come with him. One day, she might be angry over the slight, but not today. She didn’t have the energy.

He took her hand and worked up a sheepish grin. “You did a magnificent job of managing your estates before I came along. I’ve no doubt our interests will be in good hands with you.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Samuel will be of any assistance you need, and Governor Tryon said he’ll—”

“Governor Tryon?”

Thomas frowned and pulled back. “What’s the matter with the governor?”

Penelope regretted the offense in her tone, but she couldn’t abide the man. “Nothing. I mean...” She searched for a way out of the awkward conversation, as she would not tell her husband the governor was a wicked flirt and made her uncomfortable. “Samuel will provide all the assistance I need if it becomes necessary. We can’t bother the governor.”

“He seemed quite willing.”

I’m sure he did. “I’ll bear that in mind.”

“And I’ll do my part to fight for fair treatment of the colonies, especially North Carolina.”

Especially *our* interests. She shouldn’t mind. Wasn’t that her husband’s duty, to take care of his family? If Penelope had one complaint against Thomas, though, it was that he was too pragmatic, too rational, and a bit naive. He couldn’t see the value of the colonies separate from England, and she doubted he could see the hornet’s nest into which he was wading. “You do that, Thomas. Fight for us.”

He toyed for a moment with a blazing red strand of her hair, as if he’d never seen it before, then kissed her lightly on the cheek. “I must go. I’ll write every day.”

“As will I.” Perhaps neither of them was lying.

A gray sadness cloaked their last moment together. The deaths of their children had torn open a chasm between them, and she failed to see how his absence would help it. He touched her face in goodbye and strode silently from the room.

Penelope laid Thomas's latest letter on her desk and wondered at her lack of emotion. She pulled her red locks around and began braiding them as she considered his latest missive. He had settled in nicely in England, though he did not care for the weather. He was busy, and he was glad for the challenge.

His thoughts were formal, even distant. The letter left her a little sad, but only because it was a shame that this was their life. It seemed to hold so little meaning.

She considered answering right away with formal, distant thoughts of her own, but decided against it in favor of paying a few bills. As she pulled the ledger from the center drawer of her desk, someone knocked on her bedroom door. "Yes?"

"Madame Barker, the governor is downstairs."

Penelope rolled her eyes as dread crashed in on her. Coming to call on a lonely young wife? He was known for such visits. "Prepare some tea, please, and tell the governor I'll be down in a moment."

"Yes, madame."

Penelope fluffed her fichu to better cover her cleavage and resigned herself to the visit.

She let herself into the library, startling the governor. He whirled in a spin of crimson, tearing himself away from the view of the river. "Good heavens, you gave me a start."

"I'm sorry. I should have knocked."

"No, no. It's your home." He waved chubby fingers, dismissing the apology. "You have such a lovely view. I get lost when I study it. What a shame the Chowan is so shallow."

She settled on the settee, annoyed that the tea wasn't here yet. The faster they drank it, the faster she could rid herself of this portly man in his bright red coat. Clearly tailored to resemble a British officer's, it did nothing to flatter his round body. "I'm sorry, why is it a shame?"

"I miss seeing the sails of his majesty's ships whipping in the sea air. They draw too much water to come upriver."

"Ah, I see." She folded her hands in her lap. "So, what brings you by, Governor?"

Before he could answer, Padgett entered with the tea tray. She was a young black girl of twelve or so, from Jamaica, kind and sweet. Penelope's favorite of the servants. "Thank you, Padgett. I'll serve the governor."

She set the tray on the coffee table. "Yes, madame, if you're sure."

"I am. Thank you."

Penelope waited for the door to close and then smiled coolly at Governor Tryon. The look on his fat face, however, curdled her blood. Lust glimmered in his watery blue eyes. She cleared her throat and began preparing their tea.

“Two sugars, please. How is Thomas liking England?” He patted his snow-white wig, drawing attention to the expensive headdress. “I hear he is having difficulty finding his footing. The ground between what benefits the Crown and what benefits the colonies can be treacherous.”

She handed him his cup and avoided his gaze. “He has only complained to me of the weather.”

“Oh, yes, that’s right. He’s not a natural-born Englishman.” He took a sip, savored it for a moment. In the silence, she could feel his eyes crawling over her as she made her cup. “Do you miss your husband, Mrs. Barker? He’s been gone, what, six months? Being so long without the comforts of a man surely could make a pretty little thing like you...antsy.”

“I’m quite settled, Governor. I stay busy. It keeps my mind off...” Oh, she hadn’t meant to go there. The moment called for embellishment. “Uh, off how much I miss Thomas. Terribly. I miss him terribly.” She flinched at her melodramatic exuberance.

“You love him dearly?”

“Oh, there will never be another man like him.” Her third husband, surely, he would be the last.

“You know...” the governor slowly rose and changed seats, settling beside Penelope, his brocade-covered elbow touching hers. “I have quite a bit of sway with Parliament and the business association. I could get Thomas home sooner.” He set his tea down and dropped his hand on Penelope’s knee as he pivoted to her. Forced to look at him, she skimmed past the burst veins in his cheeks and nose, to his beady, pig-like eyes.

Bile rose in her stomach. Her heart raced with panic. “How would you do that?”

“It’s very simple. You and I need only to become better friends.” He squeezed her knee.

Penelope dumped her scalding tea on him, making sure to get most of it in his lap. The man leaped up with a howl, dropping his own tea, wiping frantically at his nether regions.

She surged up as well, gushing apologies. “Oh, I’m so sorry, Governor. I can’t believe I’m that clumsy—” She bit that off before laughter broke through, and snatched a tea towel from the tray. “Here.” She forced it into his hand before he got the idea she should wipe his area. “I am so, so sorry.”

He growled in pain and snatched the towel away from her. “You did that on purpose,” he snarled, dabbing desperately at his privates.

“I assure you, Governor, it was an innocent accident. I can be quite clumsy.”

He patted several more times and then threw the napkin on the tray. Sneering at his stained white breeches, he shook his head in disgust. “Yes, well, your clumsiness is—”

“Forgivable, I hope.” She tried for a sincerely apologetic expression. She did not need to make the Governor an enemy.

“Yes, well, forgivable.” He cleared his throat and tugged on his coat. “We’ll see.” He snatched his tricorne from the end table. “Goodbye, Mrs. Barker. And on my next visit, make sure your maid serves the tea.”

Huffing a breath, he stormed out the door.

Penelope didn't move or breathe until she heard the clip-clop of horses taking his carriage away. Then she burst out laughing.



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