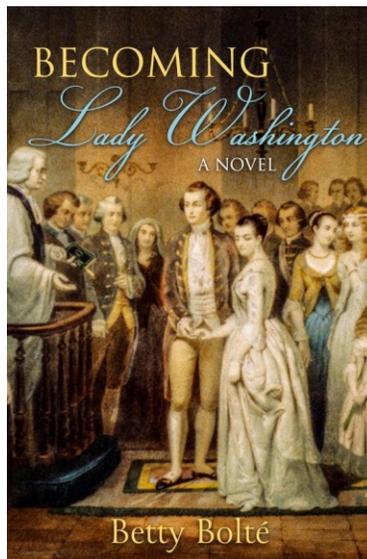


Excerpt from
***Becoming Lady Washington: A Novel* by Betty Bolté**



Mount Vernon Plantation, Virginia – 1802

Our love nestled in my hands. Pen and ink applied to linen pages were the only tangible evidence remaining of the love I shared with my husband. He called to me, softly, urgently. I sensed him more than heard his voice, but he summoned me nonetheless. Alone in my chamber, I knew the time drew near for me to answer his command, but delayed doing so until I'd done what I'd come upstairs to my bedchamber to do. I owed him that and so much more.

Voices along with the parakeets' incessant chatter floated up from the portico below, the reassuring sounds drifting up and into my room. Another more subtle voice in my mind urged me to follow George's private secretary's circumspect example for far different reasons than to protect that awful Jefferson. I'd left everyone below to escape to my private space, using my ailment as an excuse to rest. I didn't tell any one my true intention because I'm sure they'd try to stop me.

I gripped one of the many packets of letters stacked on my bedside table, each tied with a red satin ribbon faded to dusty rose. The papers were creased and stained from their travels from one state to another, from the multitude of hands which passed on the letters, and from the repeated reading of their contents. Words of love. Of private jokes between a man and his wife. Words of anger and dismay, of fear and courage, all kept mostly secure from the eyes of strangers. Safe from being abused and published in the paper, their meaning twisted and contorted to suit nefarious aims by my husband's enemies. Men like that blasted betrayer, Thomas Jefferson. I shall never forgive him for intentionally working to defame my precious life mate. The wounds from Jefferson's actions never healed. How could Tobias Lear have wanted to

protect that man's reputation? Nonetheless, I'd defend George's reputation until the day I died. Maybe longer.

I looked around my bedchamber. Not the one I had shared for so many years with my love. No, that one I'd closed up tight upon his death three long years ago before moving into this third floor chamber. I smiled at the sight of the four-post bed with its pink roses dominating against a cheery yellow backing. They brought a bit of my garden inside to keep me company, now that I no longer had the interest or strength to work among the flowers. My gaze rested on the dark wood dresser, a looking glass framed above it. The fire snapped and crackled, its flames dancing merrily along the logs. The sound of the greedy flames reminded me of my mission.

Pulling a chair away from the writing desk, I positioned it close to the fire with one hand, clutching the treasured missives against my chest. Sitting, I tugged on the ribbon, freeing the folded pages to tumble into my lap. I leaned forward, and began feeding the letters into the fire. Watched the ancient pages burn and curl as they blackened into ash. As each letter shriveled and disappeared, my mind drifted back over my life. A life of love, grief, and peril. Starting with the precocious decision that set the rest into motion.

Williamsburg, Virginia – 1746

Which one would suit my desires best? I wouldn't let such an important decision be made by any one else. Least of all the foppish young men ogling me from across the room. Suppressing a shudder of revulsion with an effort, I skimmed the offerings in the form of the eligible men in the large open room overflowing with people. My breath caught in my throat at the very idea I'd actually be allowed to take such an important matter into my own hands. I'd convinced my parents it was time, despite only having reached the age of fifteen years to be presented to society. I knew what I did and didn't want out of marriage and had taken the reins in hand to steer the course of my future as I did my pretty mare. I'd marry, but on my terms.

The first strains of the musicians tuning drew my attention away from the array of colorful and bedecked ball gowns of the older women to the festively decorated dance floor. The large table and chairs used by the lower and upper houses of the government to discuss the colony's legal business had been removed from the upstairs of the Capitol. Not that I knew from my personal experience. No, my father had to tell me since women were not normally permitted in the upstairs meeting room. I didn't understand the reasoning behind such a silly restriction, but defying it was not worth the effort. I had little to no interest in politics. I'd rather select fabrics and ribbons for a gown than worry about ordinances and laws.

I smoothed my gloved hands down the yellow silk taffeta skirts of my gown adorned with flowers in the latest fashion with fine gold satin ribbons. The skirts split to reveal the blue quilted petticoat beneath. I tapped the toe of one of my adorable shoes, made from sequin-studded yellow satin with Louis heels, anxious to have the first dance over and done with. I had more important things to contemplate than correct dance steps. Like which of the bachelors in the

room might make a suitable husband, one who could provide a finer house for a family than the simple plantation house my father had given my mother when they'd first moved to the area.

Chestnut Grove plantation overlooked the Pamunkey river and was considered to be a respectable size. Yet the manor house could not hold a candle to the house and grounds my Aunt Unity lived in upriver. Elsing Green boasted a hunting lodge, a small building for occasional use, which was about the size of my childhood home. Uncle William Dandridge had built the new manor house to dwarf the original building, which it did in grand style and elegance. Even the wood floors inside were of better construction and design. I wanted to marry a man I could respect and admire, one who had the wherewithal to elevate my status in the colony and enable me to have the brood of children I longed for. Only I wanted more than a loving relationship and a house by the river. After all, marriage is a partnership more than anything else. I'd not want an abusive or boastful man, but one I could trust to keep me safe and sheltered while I managed his household and large family. Would I find a potential life mate on the night of my first presentation to the governor and our society? Not likely, but I'd decided to begin the search.

The musicians played the first notes of a minuet to open the ball and the first couples, led by Lieutenant Governor William Gooch and his wife Rebecca, stepped off into the intricate and decorous movements. I swallowed a sigh. Ladies making their first appearance, including me, were required to participate in the dance, but not until the higher ranking guests performed for the spectators. Clasp my gloved hands together, I glanced at my parents standing a few paces from me, adorned in their finest garments.

My parents, known as Jack and Fanny Dandridge by their friends, had settled into the colony and made deep connections through his work and charitable efforts, in particular as vestryman and churchwarden for St. Peter's Church. Mother loved having the house filled with children, and hoped to have more than the six of us keeping her busy. With good fortune, one day I'd have my own husband and family. Like Mother, I longed for a flock of children to love.

My mother received glances of approval as she stood in her pale green confection with silver stomacher and scattering of seed pearls on the skirt. All around the edges of the floor, burgesses and the other respected gentility of Virginia, resplendent in their finest attire, chatted amongst themselves as the dance continued. The other ladies, all young women older than me, huddled together with their mothers as chaperones. None of my friends had the courage to make their first presentation yet, so I stayed close to my parents, grateful for their support. The Birth Night Ball, celebrating the king's birthday, was the biggest night of the year and everyone who was any one made an appearance. Fresh dampness moistened my palms and I swallowed the nervousness threatening my composure. I'd begged for this opportunity, so I better not flag in my own courage. My friends would never let me forget if I didn't go through with my plan. I prayed for the strength to make it through the festivities without embarrassing myself or my family.

The beautiful gown gave me confidence, but would I remember the steps when the time came to move onto the floor with my father? I studied the movements of those dancing, rather than comparing the dancers' attire to my own. Mother had assured me the dress, the flowing silk

brocade swishing gently with each step, served the purpose, maybe even better than the others. But did my manners and movements meet the mark of a young lady? I squared my shoulders, determined to present my best self.

Keeping a smile firmly in place, I perused the crowd engaged in watching the performance. A sea of heads nodded to the beat of the music, all eyes on the dance. Except for one pair of startling eyes gazing back at me, surprise and perhaps interest apparent even across the space between us. Something in his gaze drew me, but I dismissed it as whimsy. Still, I couldn't deny the familiar man continued to study me.

Daniel Custis. Tall and strong, and so handsome in his finery my heart skipped a beat before plunging into a gallop. The suit he wore reflected his prominence in the colony. Impeccable tailoring created the very essence of wealth and esteem in the lines and quality of the fabric of the coat, the sheen of the breeches and stockings. Highly polished gold shoe buckles reflected the light from hundreds of candles. I approved his appearance, recognizing it for the statement it was. He was the most eligible bachelor in Virginia. I'd known him in passing all of my life, aware of the mature, thoughtful, and much older man. Goodness, he couldn't be interested in me, though, not at twenty years or so my senior. Could he? He angled his head ever so slightly, enough to convey his appreciation. Never had a man looked at me with such a light shining from his soul. Warmth flooded my neck and crept to my cheeks. Goodness, how should I respond? Flustered, I clutched my fan with both hands. I blinked and then returned the nod before forcing my gaze to slide away from his. It would be unseemly to express too much interest. But I must admit to curiosity regarding his intentions.

"Patsy, it is time." Father appeared at my side, holding out one gloved hand.

Four simple words set my pulse pounding in my ears, damping the sound of the music. I put my hand in his, glad for the warmth and strength flowing into my fingers. I followed Father's lead and took my position, feeling as if all eyes rested upon me. The moment had arrived for me to be judged on my comportment and grace.

Father squeezed my hand, raised a brow, and smiled. "You're a beautiful and kind young woman, a prize for any man here. This is your night. I'm honored to be your first partner."

"Thank you, Father." Heat rose to my cheeks again. Lifting my chin, I vowed to do my best. The music signaled the beginning of the set and I fell into step, mirroring my father's movements as he led me through the dance.

We circled each other, first to the left, then to the right, clasping hands and then separating. In time, the rhythm of the music and the swish of my skirts combined with the repetitive movements to calm my agitation. Faces peering at me from the sidelines blurred into an indistinct image. As long as I paid attention to my actions I would retain my composure and with good fortune not trip over my feet. My father, the man who all my life had supported and encouraged, beamed his approval and pride.

The tune ended and the dancers performed their acknowledgements to one another, the men bowing, the women curtsying. I rose from my deep curtsy and my father crooked his arm to lead me off the floor, allowing the next set of eager couples to take their positions.

“That was lovely.” Mother smiled, bumping her fan closed against one gloved palm. “You’ve made us both proud.”

“I was so very nervous. Could you tell?” I needed something to do with my hands to conceal my nervousness. I retrieved my fan from where it dangled at my wrist, opening it to move slowly before my warm face.

“Not at all.” Mother dropped her fan to hang from her wrist as she folded her hands before her. “Jack, darling, I’d adore a cup of punch.”

He inclined his head in acknowledgment. “Patsy, would you care for some?”

Could I keep it down? Or would I spill it on my dress? Visions of terrible and mortifying results made me shake my head. “No, thank you. I believe I’ll move closer to the window for some air.”

“Very well. We shall return shortly.” Father wrapped his hand around my mother’s elbow and propelled her toward the array of delicacies spread on tables in the open space at the top of the stairs.

I made my way through the throng of guests to stand by the open window. A cool breeze bathed my cheeks, bringing the scent of dried leaves and the smoke of many fires to tickle my nose. Moonlight splayed across the formal garden and the buildings of the town in the distance. Naked trees stood starkly against the deep black of the starry heavens in the soft light. In a few months snow would blanket the land, but for now the ground remained hard and dry, making road travel possible if not pleasant. Aunt Unity had graciously invited us to ride to Williamsburg with her in a fine coach pulled by four matched black horses. Arriving in such a high fashion lent a different level of elegance to the ensuing events I hadn’t dreamed of. Maybe one day I’d have my own coach-and-four to take me places.

Turning my back to the window, I observed the crowd. Through the arched door to one side, I spotted tables surrounded by seated card-playing guests. The music changed to a lively tune, announcing the beginning of the less formal English country dances. My parents eased through the crowd, stopping often to chat. They knew most everyone in the room as a result of their involvement in the colony’s church and government.

I surveyed the other guests, feeling part of the society in an entirely new way. Not as a child looking through the window, but as an active member with my own role. Then my heart leapt into my throat when Daniel Custis separated from a circle of men, probably assemblymen of one rank or another, and strolled in my direction. What did he want? What would I say to him? Oh, how I wished my mother were at my side. I wasn’t as ready as I’d thought.

He seemed intent on me in a way he’d never been before. Not when I’d seen him at church, or floating past the plantation in his schooner, or even when I accompanied my parents to

Williamsburg for market day. I swallowed hard, clasping my trembling hands. When I'd been preparing for the ball it never occurred to me someone like the man drawing nearer with each beat of my heart would take any interest. He'd make a fine partner, with his sterling reputation and financial security.

On the other hand, becoming involved with him would mean having to deal with his quarrelsome and volatile father. My skin itched at the thought. Where was the old man, anyway? I skimmed the crowd, finally detecting John Custis, eyes narrowed, watching his son approach me. The man had a colony-wide reputation for his temper and vengeful attitude. I'd witnessed it at church on more than one occasion, given he and my father both served as vestrymen. No love was lost between them, either.

"Good evening, Miss Dandridge." Daniel greeted me with a bow. "Congratulations on fascinating every man in the room with your dancing and your charms."

"How kind of you to say so. However, I cannot imagine you are correct, sir." I spread my fan open and moved it lazily back and forth, heat once more on my cheeks. Acting as mature and grown as possible. Having something repetitive to do with my hands also calmed my sudden anxiety. "But I appreciate the sentiment."

"Verily, I say, you bewitched the bachelors with your grace and pleasing manners." Daniel shifted his weight, subtly closing the distance between us.

"Now I know you jest." I espied a new intensity in his gaze. His nearness set my heart aflutter, stealing my breath for a moment. "Where is your companion for the evening?"

He lifted a shoulder and let it drop. "I have not the honor of a companion but have arrived alone, as usual." He shot a glance over his shoulder, in the vague direction of where his father stood observing our conversation. Then his eyes returned to me, his lips curving into a seductive grin. "I shall be honored if you'd give me the pleasure of a dance."

I couldn't help but look at the older Mr. Custis. I was not at all surprised to note disapproval in his expression. My back went up, much like I'd seen the hunting dogs do when strangers approached the property. Hackles standing away from their necks as a warning. I am not quick to anger, which proved useful in times such as this. A slow burn started in my stomach at the continuing frown from across the room. Despite his opinion, what harm would one dance possibly do? Daniel was a man and could make his own decisions. Lifting my chin to meet Daniel's gaze as much as show his father how much I thought of his opinion, I nodded. "I'd enjoy dancing with you."

He held out a gloved hand with a smile on his lips. "Miss Dandridge."

I accepted his arm and followed him onto the floor as the musicians started a new tune. I intended to thoroughly enjoy myself. The weight of the elder Custis' glare threatened to make me stumble, but I ignored him, keeping my attention instead on his charming son. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my parents exchange a look before turning to witness the dance. Daniel extended one leg to bow—a movement designed to demonstrate the strength of his legs—as I

curtsied and lowered my eyes. Daniel's leg proved nice, indeed. Returning to a standing position, we regarded each other for a beat as the music wrapped around us. The dance soon drew my entire attention and had my feet flying. My heart raced with the touch of his hand guiding me to perform a turn in first one direction and then the other before parting for several steps.

Was it the idea of me being a woman now prompting me to search his face for signs of interest? Or perhaps the question of whose wife I wanted to be? Surely, he would not be truly interested, not when my father's financial situation could not hold a candle to John Custis' wealth. Yet something had changed inside, making my breath catch each time Daniel's twinkling eyes lit upon me. Making me notice the classic qualities of his face and long, straight nose. Making me wish for some miracle to make it possible such a distinguished man would consider me a suitable life companion. I imagined he asked me to dance as a charitable action, seeing that I stood alone while the dances continued. That thought settled in my stomach like a day-old biscuit, weighting my feet as well as my heart.

When the dance ended, Daniel and I bowed and curtsied again before he offered to escort me from the floor. Feeling suddenly silly and embarrassed, I laid my fingers on his steely forearm. He led me toward my parents, while a flutter of nervousness filled me.

Father cautiously greeted Daniel as they approached. Daniel returned the greeting, including Mother in his bow. Straightening, he relinquished my hand. "I surrender your daughter to your care, Colonel Dandridge."

"Thank you, Mr. Custis." Father lifted his cup of punch in salute. "Are you enjoying the ball?"

Daniel nodded, ending with a quick sideways look at me. "Congratulations on your daughter's successful presentation."

Father inclined his head to accept the compliment. "I never doubted her ability to win over any one. She is a very special young lady in our view."

Daniel cleared his throat and shifted closer to me, keeping his gaze on my parents. "Would you object if I were to wait upon your daughter?"

I inhaled sharply, converting a gasp of surprise into a deep breath. My heart bumped in my chest with alarming speed. What would Father say to such a request?

Father's brows arched, then relaxed. "We'd have no objection to your courtship, so long as she agrees." He turned to me and waited as I grappled with the concept.

Did Daniel's father know of his desire to visit me? I refused to look toward the elder Mr. Custis. Daniel, not his father, wished to call on me. Me! The earlier flutter stretched its wings like an eagle preparing to take flight. Daniel, the handsome, kind man beside me, wanted to become better acquainted. His fortune and management skills provided a solid foundation for a couple to carve out a life together. His plantation, White House, was only four miles from Chestnut Grove, and while not nearly as comfortable and inviting as Uncle William's Elsing Green, it was a step up from my home. As long as he wanted lots of children it might work.

Daniel had everything to recommend him, other than his disagreeable father. Indeed, where would I ever find a better man to be my husband?

I tilted my head so I could meet his eyes, yet again wishing I was taller. I saw only approval and hope in Daniel's expression. There was only one thing I wished to make clear. "I have no objection."