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Secrets of the Tudor Court

Darcey Bonnette

PROLOGUE

An Entrance

Elizabeth Stafford Howard, spring 1519

He is pulling my hair—it is going to be torn from my scalp, I am sure of it. I struggle and fight against him. The pains grip my womb. I cup my rounded belly with one hand and claw my husband's wrist with the other.

"Let me go!" I cry. "Please! The baby is coming! You're going to hurt the baby!"

He says nothing but continues to pull me off the bed by my hair. It hurts . . . oh, it hurts. To my horror I see the glint of his dagger as he removes it from its sheath. He lowers it in one wild gesture, striking my head near where he is pulling my hair. I am unsure of his aims. Is he going to chop my hair off? Is he going to chop me up?

"Stop . . ." I beg as he continues to drag me about the house in front of cold-eyed servants who do not interfere with his "discipline."

At long last he drops me on the cold stone floor in front of my

bedchamber. The pains are coming closer together. I am writhing in agony. The wound on my head is bleeding. Warm red liquid runs down my face into my eyes.

He walks away.

When his footfalls can no longer be heard a servant comes forward to help me to my bed. It is safe now, I suppose. The midwife, cowering in a corner, inches forward.

“What on God’s earth could you have done to warrant that man’s displeasure?” she asks in her country accent as she wipes clean my face and attends to the dagger wound.

I look at her in despair. “I don’t know,” I tell her honestly. “I never know.”

And this is how my child enters this world. I name her Mary, after the Blessed Virgin. Perhaps so named, God will show her more favor than He has condescended to show me.

1 •

Doll’s Eyes

Mary Howard, 1522

They tell me my father is a great man and I must be his pretty little lady. I must behave myself and stay clean. I wonder what it is to be a great man. I know that he is a favored servant of His Majesty King Henry VIII, and he is a very brave knight. I try to picture him. Is he tall? Is he handsome? I cannot remember. He is not home very much. I cling to my brother Henry’s hand and await my lord, who is to see us and comment on our progress. Our progress on what, I do not know. On being people, I suppose.

My sister, Catherine—she is a bigger girl than me and quite haughty—stands beside Henry. My other brother Thomas is at the end, shuffling from foot to foot. We are a pretty row of little soldiers.

When he appears in the nursery with Mother, another foreign figure to our nursery, he reviews us all. He ruffles Thomas’s blond hair and shakes Henry’s outstretched hand. He compliments my sister on her smart dress.

He regards me a long moment. “Mary,” he says, as though it is a new sound to his ears. “How old are you now?”

"I am three," I tell him proudly.

He is a great man. I can tell. He is so stately and composed, like a living portrait.

"Three," he says. "And what do you know at this great age of three?"

I think about this. I am not sure how to answer his query. Do I tell him about my letters and numbers, my colors and shapes? What does he want to know? I tell him what I am most proud of.

"I never have any accidents anymore—not in three whole months. Nurse says I will have a pretty new gown." I look up at him, beaming.

He grimaces at this. I do not think my answer pleases him. His lips twitch a moment as he stoops down, picking me up and carrying me to the window. "I shall tell you what is most important, what you should know at this great age of three," he says, bouncing me a bit on his hip. "You are a Howard." He looks into my face. "You are a Howard. You belong to the greatest family in the land."

I am held by his gaze; his eyes are black, deep as a starless night. They are eyes that command attention. I am captivated and frightened at once.

I wrap my arms about his neck, pressing my cheek to his, hoping to endear myself to those black orbs that remind me so much of my doll's eyes in their—what is the word? Lifelessness.

"Remember it," he says. "Always remember it."

"I shall," I whisper in earnest.

2 •

Awakening

1530

My father grips my shoulders and I gaze up at his narrow face, now creased in a rare smile. His exacting eyes crinkle at the corners. My lips lift in shy response. He is kneeling before me, his knee caught on the frothy pink lace of my gown.

"A little small for your age, but you'll do," he intones in a voice like sustained thunder. He places a silver circlet inlaid with seed pearls on my head. I reach up to finger the delicate headpiece, in awe. This is my first gift from the Duke of Norfolk. In fact, this is the first time he has sought me out for conversation since I was a wee girl.

He rises and the abrupt movement of his knee parting company with my gown rocks me off balance. I look up. He is a thin man, which gives him the appearance of being tall. His eyes are cold again, his smile converted to a grim line slashed across his face. For a long moment he gazes upon me with eyes that are hard and inscrutable. His hands are locked behind his back. He circles me.

"You examine her like a horse at the fair," my mother comments.

"And so she is," he snaps. Mother shrinks back. She bows her head and places a curled hand against her cheek, though he did not strike her. She does this every time he speaks to her, as though soothing the sting of a future blow in advance.

I am too fascinated by my gift to pay attention to their exchange. By now I have removed the little circlet and am ogling the pearls, hoping to capture my parents' attention once more. Their visits to Kenninghall are too rare. "Is it real?" I ask. At eleven I am already learning to appreciate the measure of good jewels.

"Silly question—of course it's real!" he cries, patting my shoulder.

I clutch it to my chest and scrunch up my shoulders, smiling.

"Ah, a true Howard girl." He laughs. "Can't resist a shiny bauble. Go now, off with you!"

I run down the rush-strewn hallway, anticipating my maid's expression when she beholds the finery my father bestowed upon

me. What will Bess make of the gift? I am stopped short, however, by the sound of raised voices. I slow my feet and turn, straining my ears.

"It's no place for her," Mother is saying. "I wish you would rethink it."

"She is needed at court," he says. Court? My heart leaps. Dare I hope? "Mary must be in the foreground, not wasting away out here," he adds.

"She's much younger than the other girls," Mother tells him. "I didn't become a lady-in-waiting to Queen Catherine till I was about thirteen."

"Are you so daft that you think I would expect her to be a lady-in-waiting—to this queen?" His tone is mocking. It grates on my ears. I creep closer toward their voices. "She will be a member of her cousin's increasing household." His voice takes on a softer note. "And she will accompany us whenever we visit young Fitzroy so she can see her brother Henry. She'll love it."

Henry! Oh, but I would love it! Mother would be a fool to disallow it! But how can she disallow anything? No one opposes the duke, not even those who want to. He is Norfolk, the premier duke of all England. He is Good King Harry's foremost military commander, the best soldier and most courageous sailor. He holds a string of impressive titles: lord high admiral, lieutenant of Ireland from 1520 to 1522, and lord high treasurer. How many battles has he, a man I cannot even refer to in my own head as anything but Norfolk, won for our sovereign?

Would he let the words of my little mother thwart his plans when the whole of England trembles in awe at his very name? I should think not! My heart swells with pride that I should be sired by such a man.

I smile, anticipating his next words with glee.

"I'll be damned if you bring her now, at this time, so she can be influenced by yet another great whore!" Mother cries. I am shocked by this. Not so much by the profanity; my mother is not known for a sweet tongue. It is that she says so to him, this man whom I have been taught to hold in reverent wonder.

I am drawn from my reflections by the sound of a thump and a series of hard pummels against the surface of what I assume to be his chest. There is a bit more scuffling, followed by an abrupt silence. I creep toward the door, hiding in the shadows. I lean against the stone wall, sweating, my heart pounding. The wall is cool, refreshing against

my skin, and I press my cheek to it. With care, I peer around the doorway to see that my father has Mother's wrists pinned above her head and is holding her against the wall.

"Now hear this," he seethes. "I do not need your permission for anything. She will accompany us where I see fit, and it is most prudent that she be present at court now."

"Most prudent," Mother mocks, craning her neck forward and attempting to bite Norfolk's long Romanesque nose. He manages to evade the small catlike teeth. "I know what you're about, Thomas Howard. You're scheming again. Isn't it enough to have your precious niece Miss Anne Boleyn dangling under the king's nose like so much fresh meat—now you're to bring little Mary? To what purpose? Who is she to be dangled before? There's none higher than the king."

Norfolk tightens his grip on her dainty white wrists, using them as leverage to pull her forward then slam her against the wall. I can but imagine the pain my mother feels as her back meets with the stone behind the tapestry. I bite my lip and begin to tremble. This is why her little hand curls against her face when he speaks. If I encounter such a man in my husband, I shall never speak against him, I vow.

Mother goes limp but is held up despite it. Her smile oozes with contempt. "Perhaps it is better if you do take her, dangle her before whom you must, rather than operate like my father and take her away from the man she truly loves, in favor of someone like you."

"Ah, yes, the Ralph Neville saga again," Norfolk says in a tone that suggests the tedium of the topic. He lowers her wrists and pins them behind her back, pulling her close to him. He speaks as though reciting lines from a play. "Ralph Neville, your dearest love. And yet what are the Nevilles to the Howards? The blood of kings runs through my veins, treasured wife." This he says with the utmost sarcasm. "Have you so soon forgotten your predecessor?"

"Have you forgotten that I am the daughter of the Duke of Buckingham, not one of your common whores? I bear as much if not more royal blood than your scurvy lot!" Mother cries, but her face still bears that wicked smile. Both are smiling, in fact, and I find this to be a most disturbing discourse. I am unsure as to whether they are enjoying their little banter. "And I haven't forgotten my 'predecessor,'" she goes on, her tone biting. "I haven't forgotten that your marriage to Lady Anne Plantagenet was steeped in poverty and that you lived off the pity of relatives. I haven't forgotten that all that royal blood combined couldn't sustain

any of your offspring past age eleven, and it certainly couldn't sustain your 'princess'!"

Norfolk shakes her till her teeth chatter. I hear them click together like dice cast against the floor. "Venomous little bitch!"

Mother does not stop. Her voice is uneven as he jars her. "Royal blood is as red as everyone else's and spills even easier."

In one quick movement, Norfolk whirls her around so her back is to him as she kicks and writhes against him. He pulls her to the sedan. I stand stunned. I want to cry but cannot. I just watch, fascinated. As wiry as he is, he has the strength to hold her arms behind her with one hand and maneuver her over his knee. He hikes up her skirts and strikes her across the bottom like a naughty child.

My face burns in shame as I listen to the resounding crack of skin striking skin.

What inspires the most fear in me is that Norfolk's face bears so little expression given the severity of his actions. No anger, no malice. No remorse.

When he finishes he pushes her onto the floor in a crumpled heap. She struggles into a sitting position. Norfolk has turned his back on her and folded his arms across his chest, drawing in a deep breath. Well done, his bearing suggests. I shudder. Mother crawls forward. To my complete amazement she wraps her arms about his leg and rests her head against his thigh. They remain like this a long moment before my father reaches down and pushes back her hood to ruffle her wavy brown hair. Like a dog, I think, my stomach churning in revulsion.

She raises her head to him, smirking. "When shall we tell Lady Mary?"

"I knew you would see it my way, Elizabeth." Norfolk's tone is quite pleasant.

I turn around and lean against the wall a moment for support. Tears flood my eyes. The circlet is clammy in my cold hands. It is all right, then, what just happened? Is it some game between them? I take in a few shuddering breaths. I should not be so upset. I have much to look forward to now, it seems. Whatever occurs between my parents is best left to them. This may be how all couples relate. Should this be the case, I shall pray fervently that I am admitted into a convent. But one does not have babies in a convent! I begin to wring my hands in panic.

"My lady?" a gentle voice queries. Hands white as lilies rest

upon my shoulders, and I see through a veil of tears the sweet face of my favorite maid. Her wide-set brown eyes are filled with familiar tenderness. "What is it, lamb?"

I attempt to still my trembling lip. "I . . . I do believe I'm going to court," I say, not wishing to confide the disturbing scene between my parents to Bess.

Her full, rosy lips curve into a radiant smile. "But that's wonderful!" she cries, guiding me down the hall into the nursery, where we sit on the settee. She produces a lacy handkerchief and dabs my eyes. Her other hand seizes mine and strokes my thumb in an absent fashion.

"It is wonderful," I agree, but the words are empty. I am nervous. I need to do something. I take the handkerchief. I am far too grown-up to allow her to continue blotting my tears away, and it will occupy my fidgety hands. As I bring it to my face I find the monogram, embroidered in the lovely shade of Tudor green. "T H," I say. The corner of my mouth curves into a teasing smile. "Now, what lad would have given you this, Bessie Holland?" I reach out and tug one of her white-blond ringlets.

She flushes bright crimson and lowers her eyes. Such a demure creature, I think to myself. She is everything I want to be.

"'Tis nothing," she says, snatching it from me.

"But, Bess, it's so romantic! You must tell me!" I cry, taking her hands. "Is he very handsome? And kind?" I add. After what I just witnessed it is now vital that he be kind to my gentle Bess.

Bess offers a slow nod. "Yes," she says at length. "He is kind to me." She rises and begins to stroll about the nursery, picking up knickknacks and setting them down in a distracted manner. I admire how her voluptuous figure swaggers a bit as she walks. "I shall miss you, my lady." Her voice is wistful. "Now it will just be little Thomas, and he'll be sent away soon enough for his education. What fine ladies and gentlemen I have attended these past years! And think—soon you shall be among the finest."

"I can hardly wait to see what the ladies of the court are wearing," I muse, perked up by the thought of glittering jewels and cloth of gold.

Bess's tone grows quiet. "Take care around Anne. I used to attend her before coming here. She is the loveliest of women, but her mind is . . . unquiet."

"I don't remember her. I have not seen her since I was a child."

Bess laughs and I gather it is because she still considers me a child. I puff out my chest in indignation, imagining the breasts that will soon erupt from the flat landscape of my girlhood. I break into giggles.

"She is much favored by the king." Bess sits down again. Her eyes are alight with intrigue. "You know that she usurped her sister's place in that—"

The door bursts open, interrupting her tale, and I am disappointed. I want so much to learn of this world I am about to enter and know I cannot ask anything of my father.

"Mary." It is Norfolk himself. He offers a smile as he enters. "We will be leaving for court directly. Why don't you see to the packing of your things? Just a few things, mind you. I shall have new gowns ordered upon our arrival."

"Can Bess come?" I ask, clinging to her hand.

He bows his head, clearing his throat. "No, not just now."

I pout a moment before seizing Bess's hands and kissing her cheeks. I exit but do not run this time. Something keeps me rooted in place outside the door and I wonder if this is my fate, camping outside of doors, listening to things I do not want to hear, for surely what I am hearing now is out of a dream.

Sweet murmurs assault my ears. Yes, assault, because they are not exchanged between those who should utter them. I turn. My father has Bess's head cupped between his hands. She is smiling up at him with the unadulterated adoration of a love-starved child. He gathers her in his arms, kissing her with the same fierce passion he used in striking my mother. When they part they are breathless. They lean back on the settee and I watch his hand snake down her stomach.

T. H. Thomas Howard. So the handkerchief she offered me was his. On what occasion had he lent it to her? Had she been crying over her undesirable role as mistress? Had she been demanding that he rid himself of my mother to set her, wicked Bessie Holland, in her place? I picture the whole scene, my cheeks hot with rage. My father wrapping his arms around Bess and consoling her, promising her the world if she'd only be patient a little while longer. He gives her his handkerchief and she clutches it to her ample bosom just to lure his eyes to that ripe spot wherein beats her sinful little heart. Oh, the seducer!

Bile rises in my throat as I quit the mental imagery. A firm hand grips my shoulder. How is it he can move so swiftly and silently, I think as I squeeze my eyes shut against whatever is to come. But when I open them it is into my mother's face I look.

"So. Now you see," she says in her low voice. There are no tears in her eyes. She is a strong little woman, her angular jaw set in a line of determination, her challenging gaze stormy blue. She is not like Bess—soft, round Bess—who is made of honey and cream. Mother cannot afford to be honey and cream. She is fighting, always fighting. Now I know what she is fighting for.

"Yes," I say with profound sadness. "Now I see."

"You will be careful at this court of Henry, the Eighth of That Name." I nod at the gravity of this formal order. "You must know that when you are there you will not see His Grace your father very much at all, and I will be busy attending Her Majesty. Be quiet. Watch and learn. Never tattle on anyone else, no matter how tempted you are by the promises of others. Be still. Keep your own counsel. Self-preservation, Mary, is of the utmost importance at this court."

"Yes, Mother." My throat contracts with tears. I want her to enfold me in her arms the way Bess does when I am sad or frightened. But I am angry at Bess and remind myself to admire my mother's cool sense of control rather than long for the embrace of that vile betrayer.

Mother nods to me. I nod back. We part company.

This is how true ladies conduct their business.

I am leaving. Bess catches me before I descend to the great hall.

Sensing my coldness, her soft eyes make their appeal. She clings to my hands as if she does not know of her transgression. I snatch them from hers and scowl. Her face registers her sorrow as she seizes my wrists.

"My lady." Her voice is almost a whimper, stirring my heart. "Your father is a powerful man. We can only all of us do his bidding. My family . . . they depend on His Grace." Tears stream down her cheeks with abandon. "I . . . I have no choice, my lady."

I blink several times to keep fresh tears at bay. "Such topics are not suitable for my ears," I say, thinking myself to be quite dignified, but feeling a fraud. I disengage myself and turn around to go meet my parents.

"Mary!" Bess cries.

The unchecked agony of her voice causes me to stop.

"I love you like my own," she says, her milky voice edged with desperation.

I burst into tears and run to her, flinging myself into her arms. "Oh, Bess, dearest Bess," I sob. I forget the coolness of my mother and the wantonness of Bess's actions. All I know is I am in the arms of the one person I have trusted to love me without reserve—my Bess. I cannot fault her for anything now, nor can I blame my father for loving her. My sense of right and wrong has been thwarted. I do not know what game I have been thrust into. I have yet to ascertain the character of the players.

I only know that I am one of them. My mother's words ring in my ears. Self-preservation, Mary . . .

With effort I extract myself from Bess's embrace and know that as I leave her I am leaving all vestiges of childhood behind me.