

Frenzied Flight

Candlelight cast eerie shadows over the sumptuous furnishings as Richard Bertie walked into the darkened library. "Dearest Cathy, we have a summons."

The color left Cathy's face as she gasped and dropped her quill, splattering ink on the paper before her. "What?"

He crossed the thick woolen rug as he walked toward her. In his hand he held a paper made of parchment. "This just came from Stephen Gardiner. He called us to meet with him."

Her hands shook as she pushed her chair away from the engraved walnut desk. "Wh-Wh-What does it say?"

He pursed his lips as he pulled up an ornate chair to sit by her. "It bears the seal of the Crown, and it demands we present ourselves at the palace before the Lord Chancellor, Stephen Gardiner."

Since the sun had set, no light filtered through the multi-paned window to her right. So she took the paper from him and leaned toward the candelabrum on her desk. Her eyes narrowed as she read.

Catherine, Duchess of Suffolk, was thirty-four years old, and quite pretty. She had toffee-brown hair, pale blue eyes, high cheek bones and a flawless ivory complexion. Her mother had been a lady-in-waiting to Queen Katherine of Aragon and her father an English courtier. Since her late husband, Charles Brandon, had been close to Henry VIII, Catherine had spent much of her life at court. Wealthy from her first husband's estate, she wore an embroidered gold dress. The snug bodice had a square neck. The sleeves were narrow at the shoulders, but ballooned at the elbow and fastened at the wrist.

Wrinkling her nose she tossed the paper toward her husband. "This is exceedingly wicked. That man is evil."

He leaned over to pick up the paper which had landed on the floor beside her voluminous skirt. Her second husband, Bertie, had completed a degree at Cambridge and could read several languages. Before her first husband died, he hired Bertie to manage their affairs. Once the Duke of Suffolk died, Catherine sought Bertie's excellent judgment while she settled her husband's estate. While not considered handsome, his deportment suggested a cultured, intelligent man. He had receding brown hair, a full beard flecked with gray, large gray-green eyes, and full lips which he often pressed together when thinking.

He cleared his throat. "I have been expecting this."

She scooted her chair closer to his and took his hand. "Aye! They imprisoned Hugh Latimer over a fortnight ago. At that time, I knew we could be next." A theologian and reformer, Latimer had preached often at court during the reign of Henry VIII. His sermons deplored the authority of the pope and clergy, and pointed his listeners to the sacrifice of Christ. Catherine heard him speak, and put her faith in Christ. Afterward, she acquired a copy of Scripture in English. Along with the late Queen Kateryn Parr, she participated in Bible studies.

While still at Cambridge, Bertie found Christ, and their faith served as a deep bond. Many evenings they spent hours discussing the Bible and considering how to live by faith. As a result of these discussions, Catherine had furnished money to publish Protestant theologians, and supported needy ministers.

Struggles and Triumphs

Bertie wore a frown as he took his wife's hand in both of his. "Queen Mary is determined to make England Catholic again." Mary, eldest daughter of Henry VIII, had just ascended the throne. She took immediate steps to reverse her father's religious reforms and return England to Catholicism. Her priests began executing those who disagreed.

"Aye!" Cathy frowned and shook her head. "Henry disowned her when he divorced her mother. I daresay she wants revenge for what her mother suffered."

"Revenge must be left in the hands of God." Bertie said with a trembling voice. "But she must use force to accomplish her goals because her beliefs cannot stand up under debate. Torture is a poor way to alter someone's opinion."

Cathy's eyebrows flew up. "My opinion shall not be changed."

Bertie groaned. "I know, my dear. But your distaste for Stephen Gardiner could have been a bit less obvious."

His wife pulled her hand from his. "What do you mean?"

He pursed his lips a moment, then said, "The dog—I am sure you could have contrived another name for the dog."

She sniffed. "I rather think the name Gardiner is a suitable one for a dog. The man himself fails to act human most of the time. He plots and schemes to snatch the truth from the people and return us to popery. My dog actually behaves more like a human than he."

He spread his hands. "I agree about Gardiner, but perhaps a less personal attack on him would have been better. But then we had no idea he would return to power after Henry VIII died. Now we must think of a plan—we may be in mortal danger."

"Darling husband, we would still be in danger even if I named the dog John. We are Protestant. And Gardiner hates us."

Bertie frowned as he ran a trembling hand over his beard. "Aye, Gardiner hates us. He longs to purge the country of Protestants. He is dangerous!"

She bit her lip. "Aye, the man will burn us at the stake."

Her eyes wandered to their copy of the Great Bible, which lay on a huge pedestal table in the center of the room. Their chaplain used it for services, but they often read it together in the evenings. "Our faith is the core of our lives, and we must not waver. Just think—I could never have married you as a Catholic. Church leaders stopped relying on God's word, so they valued a person's status in life."

Her husband nodded.

"I would have married beneath my station, and authorities would have forbidden it. But as a Protestant, we study Scripture, and believe each person valuable in the eyes of God. Marriage to a believer is our only restriction. Can you imagine how much joy we would have missed?"

"I agree with you, dear wife. Much joy comes from obeying the truth, and we have been so happy together. We must not deny our faith. But what shall we do?" He punched his right fist into his left hand.

"I cannot help but think of Queen Kateryn Parr. How much Mary loved her. I wonder if the queen—had she lived—would be able to soften Mary now?"

He grimaced and shook his head. "Nay, Mary is adamant. Her mother received evil from Henry VIII, and she wants to restore her mother's church."

She threw up her hands. "Then what? We must also remember the baby. Whatever we do, we must find a way to protect her from popery." Cathy and Bertie had an infant daughter named Susan.

Struggles and Triumphs

Anxiety twisted his face. He got up and paced the length of the room.

She extended trembling hands to him. "Dearest, come! We must pray for guidance."

In the semi-darkness Cathy adjusted her full skirt as she knelt by the desk. Her husband, who wore tight hose, pantaloons, and a doublet that extended below his waist, waited until she settled herself and then knelt beside her. They joined hands and bowed their heads.

"Father, our lives are in danger. Please give us wisdom," Bertie prayed.