

On hands and knees, Catherine backed into the doorway, surveying the shining floor of the drawing room. She'd just spent three hours dusting, sweeping, mopping, and polishing, and she was finally done. She sat up, feeling her back twinge in protest. The muscles in her arms and legs were on fire. No matter. She was finished. She was free.

She could spend the rest of the afternoon curled up in her bed, reading a book or even sleeping. Sleep sounded like the best option at present. She was so tired. She'd been up since dawn helping with the laundry, cooking breakfast, and straightening the mess her father had made when he'd come home drunk the night before.

With a sigh, Catherine rose, hefted the heavy pail, and lumbered down the stairs. The house was unusually quiet today. Neither of her parents nor her younger sister was home. Not that she missed them. She preferred days like this, but all the peace and solitude did give her pause. She wasn't used to it, and she knew it wouldn't last.

Going through the kitchen, Catherine went out the back door and poured the dirty water into the yard. The sheets on the clothesline were almost dry, and she checked the sky to make sure the rain would hold off another hour or more. Satisfied, her clean linen wouldn't be drenched in the near future, she set the pail by the door and went wearily back up the steps.

That was when she heard them. Her mother, her sister, and her father. They were talking and laughing, making their way up the stairs to the first floor. For a long moment, Catherine hovered in the kitchen, wondering how long she could hide down here. How long would it be before they missed her? She bit her lip to ward off a rueful smile. Probably as long as it took before they wanted something.

"Catherine Anne!" She heard her father call in his booming voice.

Well, she had known it wouldn't be long.

And she knew better than to tarry. She scampered out of the kitchen and was almost to the drawing room before her father bellowed again. "Yes, Father! I'm here."

She opened the door and was poised to give a quick curtsy, when she saw the mud. There were two sets of boot prints tracking mud across her clean, polished floor. One track led to her father, seated on the couch, one muddy boot dirtying the upholstery. The other boot was smaller, daintier, and it led to the chair her sister occupied.

"Where were you?" her father asked, sitting up. "Where's the tea?"

Catherine gaped at him. Normally, she would have rushed to bring the tea, but she couldn't stop staring at the mud tracked across her clean floor.

"What's wrong?" her father finally asked. "Why are you just standing there like a patient in Bedlam?"

She pointed to the floor. "The mud. I just—"

“Oh, who cares about the floor?” her sister Lizzy said, waving Catherine’s concern away. “You can clean it up later. I have news.”

But Catherine didn’t want to clean it up later. She’d be folding the linen later, then helping the cook with dinner, and probably darning her father’s socks if her mother had her way. At this rate, she would never sleep. “But I spent all afternoon polishing the floor, and now it’s dirty again.”

“Do you know where we’ve been all day?” her mother said, ignoring Catherine’s complaints, as usual. Before going on, Mrs. Fullbright glanced carefully at her husband. Catherine doubted she even realized she did it, but she continually checked his moods and sought his approval before speaking or acting.

Catherine sank onto a footstool at the far side of the room. “Where have you been?”

Certainly not here, helping to clean the house. “We have been at Lord Valentine’s.”

Catherine nodded blankly. The name was familiar, as familiar as the name of any of her sister’s beaux. She had half a dozen, and they changed as often as Lizzy changed her hairstyle. Valentine was supposed to be some sort of political prodigy. At the tender age of thirty, the man was already a leader in Parliament. Catherine did not have time to follow politics, but her cousin Madeleine did, and she called Valentine a true reformer.

Whatever that meant.

And if he really was a prodigy and a revolutionary, why was he interested in her insipid sister, who had not a thought in her head but which hair ribbon would look best.

“Do you know why we were at Lord Valentine’s, Catherine?” Lizzy asked.

“No . . .” But she had a bad feeling. Her family had identical looks on their faces: like they’d just robbed the Treasury and gotten away with it. “Why?” she said drawing the word out.

“To sign the betrothal agreement, silly!” Lizzy cried. “I’m betrothed to Lord Valentine!”

Catherine blinked and then ducked as Lizzy jumped up and twirled around the room.

“I am going to be the Countess of Valentine.” She rushed toward Catherine and grabbed her by the shoulders. “And one day, dear, poor, ugly sister, I will be the Marchioness of Ravenscroft. It’s practically royalty!” She released Catherine and stood with her hands on her hips. “So what do you have to say about that?”

Catherine opened her mouth to speak, but somehow “No, please God, no” didn’t seem the right response, so she closed it again. It was a good thing, too, because her father was watching her, his gaze shrewd.

“I’m sure you are pleased for your sister.” He dropped his muddy boots on the floor.

Catherine managed to nod. She was pleased. She couldn’t think of anything better than having her sister out of the house.

Except that the privilege would come with a price.

“You know what this means, don’t you?” Her father’s voice was ominous. Or perhaps it just sounded that way because she knew what he was going to say. He’d been saying it since she was a child. Elizabeth was his darling, his pride, his joy, his ticket to wealth that the position of second son had not afforded him. But there was one thing standing in the way of his Elizabeth’s success: Catherine. It was an old-fashioned rule, but Edmund Fullbright was an old-fashioned man.

The older daughter must marry before the younger.

“You’ll need to marry before your sister’s wedding,” he told Catherine. “Do you have anyone in mind?”

Catherine shook her head. She wasn’t socially adept like her sister. She wasn’t pretty like her sister. She didn’t flirt like Elizabeth. She knew no men; none except her father, and he was more than enough.

“You’ll need to attend the Beaufort ball tonight then,” her father instructed.

“But Father, I—”

“No whining, goddamn it!” He stood, and all three women shrank back. “You’ll go, and you’ll smile, and you’ll flirt, and you’ll find a husband.” He crossed the room, until he towered over Catherine. “Because if you don’t, I’ll find one for you.”