

USA Today Bestselling Author

NICOLE
EVELINA

Catherine's
MERCY



CATHERINE'S MERCY

A NOVEL

By Nicole Evelina



Copyright ©2023 Nicole Evelina

All rights reserved. For permission to reuse content, please contact
Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923,
(978) 750-8400, www.copyright.com.

Print: 9780827207509

EPUB: 9780827207516

EPDF: 9780827207523

ChalicePress.com

Printed in the United States of America

EPIGRAPH

Suscipe (Act of Resignation) of Catherine McAuley

My God, I am yours for time and eternity.
Teach me to cast myself entirely
into the arms of your loving Providence
with a lively, unlimited confidence in your compassionate,
tender pity.
Grant, O most merciful Redeemer,
that whatever you ordain or permit may be acceptable to me.
Take from my heart all painful anxiety;
let nothing sadden me but sin,
nothing delight me but the hope of coming to the possession of You,
my God and my all, in your everlasting kingdom.
Amen.

*To Nancy Dixson, my Dublin partner in crime,
and for Sr. Roch, who would have been proud of this book (I hope).*

CONTENTS

Prologue Catherine McAuley	vii
Part I : CONSEQUENCES	1
Chapter 1: CATHERINE	2
Chapter 2: MARGARET KELLY	10
Chapter 3: GRACE RYAN	17
Chapter 4: MARGARET	24
Chapter 5: GRACE	35
Chapter 6: MARGARET	40
Chapter 7: GRACE	47
Chapter 8: CATHERINE	49
PART II: OPPORTUNITIES	53
Chapter 9: CATHERINE	54
Chapter 10: GRACE	61
Chapter 11: CATHERINE	66
Chapter 12: GRACE	77
PART III: FRUITION	89
Chapter 13: CATHERINE	90
Chapter 14: ANNA MARIA DOYLE	93
Chapter 15: GRACE	103
Chapter 16: ANNA MARIA	110
Chapter 17: GRACE	114
Chapter 18: CATHERINE	122
Chapter 19: ANNA MARIA	124
Chapter 20: GRACE	129
Chapter 21: CATHERINE	134
Chapter 22: GRACE	140
Chapter 23: CATHERINE	145
Chapter 24: GRACE	151
Chapter 25: CATHERINE	155

PART IV: TRANSITIONS	167
Chapter 26: ANNA MARIA	168
Chapter 27: GRACE	171
Chapter 28: CATHERINE	176
Chapter 29: ANNA MARIA	185
Chapter 30: GRACE	193
PART V: VINDICATION	201
Chapter 31: CATHERINE	202
Chapter 32: ANNA MARIA	209
Chapter 33: GRACE	214
Chapter 34: CATHERINE	220
Chapter 35: ANNA MARIA	224
Chapter 36: GRACE	226
Chapter 37: CATHERINE	229
Chapter 38: ANNA MARIA	233
Chapter 39: GRACE	237
Chapter 40: CATHERINE	242
Chapter 41: GRACE	247
Chapter 42: CATHERINE	258
Chapter 43: GRACE	265
Epilogue: GRACE	268
AFTERWARD	271
AUTHOR'S NOTE	272
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	278
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	280

Prologue

CATHERINE MCAULEY

April 1809
Coolock House
Outside of Dublin, Ireland

“Comfort comes soon after a well-received trial.”

The words of the priest’s homily from last Sunday came to me unbidden as I stepped out of the carriage, ready to meet my new employers and explore my new home. Those words certainly fit my situation. After years of uncertainty, of depending on the generosity of others, and of constantly uprooting my life as I relocated from one dwelling to another, I finally had a home—and steady employment.

The two-story gray mansion called Coolock House welcomed me, its tall, gleaming windows and bright red front door signs of its master’s wealth and standing in the community. On the top step of a small staircase leading to the entry stood my new employers, William and Catherine Callaghan. Though his brown hair was liberally streaked with gray, William still had the straight, aristocratic bearing befitting a man who served as secretary and treasurer of the Apothecaries Hall, but Catherine’s shoulders were beginning to stoop beneath her shawl and she walked with a cane—assistance she hadn’t needed the last time I saw them.

William met me at the foot of the stairs and escorted me to Catherine’s side. She embraced me warmly.

“Thank you so much for agreeing to live with us,” she said. “It is my hope that over time we will become like family to one another.”

“I hope so, too,” I said, meaning it.

It was entirely possible we would grow to love one another, as the Callaghans were not strangers to me. The last family I lived with, the Armstrongs, were good friends with their family and mine, and I had attended many balls at Coolock House. At one such event, Mr. and Mrs. Callaghan, childless and both in their sixth decade of life, let it slip that they were considering hiring a live-in companion to care

for them as they aged. My name was mentioned and the Callaghans agreed I was the perfect candidate.

"Come, come, now," Mr. Callaghan coaxed. "Allow me to show you to your quarters."

He took me to a small room adjacent to Mrs. Callaghan's bedroom, just down the hall from his own. It wasn't much, only large enough for a small bed, a dresser, a desk, and a wash basin. But to me it was grand; I hadn't had my own bed, much less my own room, since my father died when I was five and my family's fortunes plummeted. Plus, it was ideally suited for my roll, being near enough to both bedrooms that I could hear either one if they called for me in the night.

On our way back toward the stairs, two liveried servants passed us, each holding two grand silver candelabras. I followed them with my eyes, wondering where they were scurrying off to in such haste. Then a woman emerged from the kitchen carrying a large decorated cake. All three disappeared into a long room just beyond the drawing room that I recalled as the ballroom.

"We're hosting a small event tonight," Mr. Callaghan said, by way of explanation. At the door to Mrs. Callaghan's room, he turned away, saying with a sly grin, "I will leave you women to do whatever it is you do."

His wife beckoned me inside. She was holding an elaborate red ballgown, fluffing its sleeves and fussing with the roses at the décolletage.

"Would you like some help putting that on?" I asked her.

"Me? Oh, no, dear. This is for you."

"What?" She wasn't making any sense.

"We can't have a beautiful young woman like yourself missing a party thrown in your honor."

"My ...what?"

"We want to celebrate your new role here and be sure you are introduced to everyone in our social group. That reminds me, would you honor us with a song, perhaps?"

"I ... of course." I had sung many times before in their home at both formal and casual events.

"Who knows, you might even meet a handsome young man," Mrs. Callaghan elbowed me playfully. "You're what, twenty? Yes, you are the perfect age to find a match. After all, we don't expect you to live here forever."

PART I

CONSEQUENCES

Chapter 1

CATHERINE

January 1822
Coolock House
Outside of Dublin, Ireland

I stared down at the small writing book resting on the table before me. It was where I kept my meditations on God, faith, and anything else that was troubling my mind. But years ago I had dedicated a small section in the back to those I had lost—it was my memory book, my way of keeping them alive, if only in my heart. There had been so many; first my father, then the priest who was my first confessor. My eyes lingered on the most recent entry, made only two and half years ago. Catherine Callaghan. Now it was time to add another.

It was hard to believe two decades had passed since the Callaghans had welcomed me into their homes and hearts. Over the years, they had become like surrogate parents, instructing and correcting me when needed, but also encouraging my dreams of helping the poor. I cleaned and cooked for them, read to them, and tended to their needs in their final illnesses. In turn, they made it clear I was not just a companion or nurse; they viewed me as a daughter.

The one sticking point between us, however, was religion. Though the worst of the Penal Code had been lifted and Catholics were free to openly practice our faith once again, the Callaghans were staunchly opposed to it. It was a blessing they did not force me to renounce my faith, but Mr. Callaghan, a staunch Protestant, and his wife, Mary—God rest her soul—an ardent Quaker until secretly embracing Holy Mother Church on her deathbed only months ago, barely tolerated my faith at first. They allowed me to attend Mass, say my prayers in private with Aoine, their only Catholic servant, but we couldn't possess any outward signs of our faith, like crucifixes or rosaries that others might see. "Believe what you will, so long as Christ is at the center of your life, but keep at that Popery and

superstition outside of these walls," Mr. Callaghan had said on my first day here.

Over the years, his rigidness had softened, mellowed certainly by the grace of God, but also perhaps by our many spirited debates about faith and philosophy by the fireside on long winter nights. For all his bluster, Mr. Callaghan was an upstanding man who truly believed in his duty to the poor as a Christian. "To whom much is given much is required," was one of his favorite verses to quote from the Bible. Ireland may no longer have fiefdoms and serfs, but he took his role as the wealthiest man in the area to heart. Many times I accompanied him around Coolock village as he enquired into the health and welfare of its merchants, families, and especially those who had fallen on hard times. During sickness, drought, or bereavement, packages were loaded into his carriage and left on doorsteps. He had even once funded a young man's entrance into the military, confiding in us that it was the best opportunity the boy could hope for to rise in the world.

With a sigh, I added William Callaghan's name to the list. *May the Lord have mercy on his soul.* With my last employer gone, I had no idea what my future would hold. At forty-two, I didn't have many options. I was now both too old and too poor to marry, a dream I had given up decades earlier. As a young woman, I would have happily accepted the hand of a man who respected my determination and shared my faith; but such men were a rarity, especially given my family's deteriorating financial state, constant change of address, and ever-shifting social circles as we sought to stay off the streets and keep body and soul joined.

Yet I could not live alone. Not only was it unseemly, it required means I did not have. Thus far I had depended on the kindness of family and friends, but what would I do when that ran out? My brother and sister were both wed and certainly did not want their spinster sister interrupting their lives. With no husband to protect me, where was I to go? What was I to do?

All I knew was I felt still that ever-present tug at my soul, that deep down yearning to do good. The school I ran on the Coolock House grounds was a good first step, but it was not enough. It was like a thirst I could not quench, an ache that no amount of prayer would relieve. Day after day I begged God to show me the way. I knew with the certainty of my own name that he was calling me to

something, that my life had purpose and he had a mission for me. Only I had no idea what it was or how to accomplish it.

In my mind's eye I kept seeing the faces of those I encountered regularly when in town. The rotation of prostitutes at the quay never ended, but I knew a few on sight. Most were teenaged girls from the countryside or the orphanages or workhouses who had been disowned or turned out and run out of ways to feed themselves. Others were abandoned wives or widows, some former domestics who lacked either experience or character references to find additional work. As sad as their plights were, it was the families who affected me most. Mothers and fathers often begged for a few coins to feed their children or heat their homes. They were the lucky ones, for they were hale and whole enough to make the trek from their little dwellings into the city; hundreds more could not do even that, due to illness, drink, or loss of limb. So many men had been mutilated in the Bloody Rebellion and discarded into the gutters like the contents of a chamber pot.

What could I do in the face of such abject poverty and suffering? I was only one person, and a woman at that. I could not run for office or influence politics like the great Liberator Daniel O'Connell, had no financial means to donate large sums to charity like the wives of the politicians in Merrion Square, and God knew I had no desire to become a nun. I shuddered at the mere thought. Spending my days on my knees in prayer, trapped in a place I neither wanted to be nor could ever flee was akin to a living death.

I looked up with a start, my musings interrupted when the door to the receiving room banged open. I quickly closed my book and stashed it in the inner pocket of my dress before turning to greet the newcomer.

Mr. Callaghan's relative, Mr. Richard Powell, was the first face I took in, his jaw clenched, his brown eyes stormy. But before I could form a rebuke for his rude entrance into my home, my gaze flicked to Patricia, my chief maid, whose cheeks were ruddy with exertion.

"Forgive the intrusion, Miss McAuley," she said, dropping her chin to her chest. "I tried to get them to wait in the foyer while I announced them, but he," she tilted her head toward Mr. Powell, "insisted they were expected."

They? It was only then that I looked beyond Mr. Powell and Patricia. Behind them stood Marianne Powell, Richard's wife, her

spine ramrod straight, chin tilted up slightly, a haughty expression on her face. Her eyes roamed the room as though she were calculating the value of every item. Hiding behind her voluminous sage skirts were two little girls so alike in curls and dimples, they could be twins.

Returning my gaze to Mr. Powell, I pursed my lips. "Indeed." I infused my voice with frost. "I was expecting the Powells for the reading of Mr. Callaghan's will, but not quite so soon. Why, the attorney isn't even here yet."

"No sense in putting off the inevitable," Marianne said.

Ignoring her, I gestured toward the door. "Please, won't you follow me to the parlor?" There will be more room there once all parties arrive." As I passed Patricia, I added, "Bring us some tea, won't you, dear?"

Over the next half hour, people trickled in, mostly family from the McAuley side—distant relations I hadn't seen in years. The grandfather clock in the corner struck the hour before my brother James arrived, and by then the men had requested whiskey and Mr. Powell sucked on a foul-smelling cigar. Not long after, Patricia showed Mr. Johnston into the room. The gentlemen extinguished their cigars and everyone took seats around the room as the attorney arranged his papers and donned a slim gold pair of spectacles.

After reading through the attestation of Mr. Callaghan's soundness of mind and judgment, dispensing with the formalities of executors of the will, and addressing certain business matters, the lawyer read the section on the distribution of property, land, and other assets.

"To my kind and affectionate friend Miss Catherine McAuley, who resides with me," the lawyer glanced up at me, before returning his eyes to the paper, "for her many kindnesses and attentions I give, devise, and bequeath the four several annuities heretofore mentioned on the lives of Ross Thompson, Lord Howth, Christopher Robinson, and Robert M. Fishbourne, with the several policies assurance connected with the same and all benefit and advantage arising therefrom, together with such arrears of said annuities as may be due at my deceased."

This was not a surprise, as Mr. Callaghan mentioned he would leave me something. But instead of moving on to the next beneficiary, Mr. Johnston continued reading, adding to my inheritance.

"I also leave to the said Catherine McAuley all the grand canal stock or loans which I may have at the time of my death, together with all arrears of interest that may be then due on same. I do hereby appoint the said Catherine McAuley sole residuary legatee of all my estate and effect, real or personal, subject to specific legacies mentioned in my will and I do hereby publish and declare this as and for a codicil to my will and direct it to be taken as such."

What? Could I have heard correctly? Sole inheritor of Coolock House and its assets? A shrill ringing began in the back of my mind, threatening to overwhelm me. I gripped the table to keep myself upright.

Around me, oblivious to my distress, Mr. and Mrs. Powell, several Callaghan relatives, and my brother shouted, creating a collective roar of indignation that drowned out whatever came next.

"Now see here," a man declared.

"What? No! It is unfathomable," Marianne yelled.

"Let me see that paper," my brother demanded, reaching to pluck it out of the attorney's hand.

"Please, calm down, everyone," the lawyer shouted above the din, curling in on himself to protect the document and inching out of William's reach. "There is more. If you will but let me continue."

As the congregation of relatives slowly regained their decorum, my heart continued to gallop as though it would leap through my skin and go cantering off down the lane. I sank back into the fine mahogany chair—my chair, I corrected myself, seeing the entire room in a whole new light. No wonder Marianne was anxious to begin appraising the house. The entire room was made of simple, yet fine things: from the hand-made lace sheers that dampened the light to the thick rugs beneath our leather soles. Why or how I had failed to notice them before remained a mystery; the best I could speculate was that I'd never had reason to. This was simply my home. But now it was a grand estate. And I stood to inherit it.

I struggled to take a deep breath, finding instead that my lungs would only fill to half capacity. I excused myself on account of needing some fresh air. I snuck through the still bickering crowd and had nearly made it before Mr. Johnston's hand came down on my shoulder, not in rebuke but gently, like a concerned uncle.

"There is one more thing, Miss McAuley," he whispered into my ear. "Mr. Callaghan asked that I give you this once you became aware of the considerable inheritance he left you."

The lawyer sipped a folded paper into my palm and I instinctually thumbed it father up my sleeve so no one could see it. "He asked that you read it alone, think it over, and then draw your own conclusion."

"What is it?" I asked in reply.

He shook his head. "I do not know, but whatever it is, it was meant only for your eyes."

I bobbed a small curtsey to him and looked around to be certain no one else had seen or heard, but Mr. and Mrs. Powell were deep into an argument with the Callaghans, and my relatives were squawking amongst themselves about contesting the will in court, which I had no doubt they would do.

On silent feet perfected over years of coming and going from the Callaghan's sickbeds, I slipped out the door and into the garden. As soon as it closed behind me, I leaned against the sun-warmed stones and heaved a great sigh. Try as I might to comprehend the last few minutes of my life, my brain stuttered to a complete halt.

Then I remembered the paper tucked up the bell of my left sleeve. Maybe it would yield some insight. Pushing away from the house's outer wall, I began tracing one of the many paths leading through the gardens. This one began amid the skeletons of herbs like basil, rue, and lavender in the kitchen garden and continued on through what would be in spring more formal flower beds. But now, all was silent, with only the occasional breeze shaking the hibernating plants beneath a light dusting of snow.

I found my favorite fountain, a simple round, three-tiered basin that tinkled like the finest crystal or like icicles splintering after a deep freeze. I sat on its edge and removed the note. Mr. Callaghan's elegant script greeted me.

My dear Kitty,

If you are reading this, then I have gone home to the Heavenly Father and my dear wife. Do not grieve for me, for you know just as well as I that to be free from this world and its suffering is the greatest reward.

I felt I owed you an explanation for the shock you surely received when my will was read, but it was not something I felt the others needed to know, so I commit this information to you alone. It is your choice whether or not to share it with others. You know I always intended to see you well looked-after upon my death. In its original form, I split the profits from my estate between you and the Powells, just as we had discussed. However, not long ago I overheard the most disturbing discussion between them.

One of the days they came to call, you were away at Mass, and having tired, I asked them to take a turn about the garden while I rested. They obliged, but lingered on the back terrace and had a lengthy discussion about my health, which they did not know I could hear through my open window. That I forgive them for, of course my condition would be of concern to them. But what they said next shocked and saddened me more than I can say. Mr. Powell mentioned that he had word from a reliable source that I was entertaining the idea of making you mistress of Coolock House. (Who would have told him that I cannot guess.) Mrs. Powell laughed quite haughtily and responded that the idea was too absurd to be entertained. He, in turn, agreed, saying I may as well leave the house to my favorite horse.

After a few more moments of such talk, they finally took the footpath toward the orchards, leaving only my hurt and betrayal in their wake. I resolved then and there to amend my will, doing exactly what they thought so outrageous. The more I thought on it, the more I realized the Powells were exactly right; no one else cared about our home so much or would put it to as good of use as you. After committing the decision to God in prayer, I dreamed that you would use the estate for your good works. I summoned my solicitor and had a codicil added to my will the very next day.

That is why, my dear, you are now inheritor of our family home. No words can express my love for you or my appreciation for your companionship all of these years.

With all of my love,

William Callaghan

Vision blurred with tears, I seated myself on one of the stone benches overlooking the frost-bitten canes of last summer's roses. A second page listed out exactly what I was owed according to the codicil: ready money in the form of bonds and loans in the name of one Frederick Moore of Mountjoy Square, a barrister whom I assumed held this money in trust for Mr. Callaghan; the house itself plus its outbuildings; its contents, including furniture, plate, and linen; and various other property, including the Callaghan carriage, horses, and farming implements, plus annual income. The sum at the bottom of the page was staggering: nearly £30,000. That was a substantial sum for any man to inherit, let alone a woman who was no blood relation, and a spinster at that.

I stared across the fields, listening to the giggles and shouts of some of the local children as they played stick ball; these were the true inheritors of Mr. Callaghan's munificence. They would reap the rewards in learning, religious education, and skills, and go on to lead respectable lives that would otherwise be out of reach.

I glanced back up at the house, where, through the large glass windows, the Powells were still gesticulating wildly at the poor barrister. There was no doubt this would only be resolved in court, and if needs be, I would reveal Mr. Callaghan's private correspondence to put an end to it.

A smile crossed my lips. In that very room was the one thing I would insist the Powells take with them as part of their inheritance: an oil painting of Cuchulainn, Mr. Callaghan's favorite race horse.

Chapter 2

MARGARET KELLY

January 1822
Lord Montague's Townhome
Dublin, Ireland

So many girls. So many eyes on me. Some little more than dull pools sunken with hunger, others sparkling with cunning and competitive pride. Most bloodshot or rimmed with purple from early rising and late nights, a sign of our occupation just like our calloused palms and ragged fingernails.

We stood shoulder to shoulder in the alley behind Lord and Lady Montague's Merrion Square townhouse, a towering red brick mansion that soared four stories above us, unseen chimney pots puffing gray swirls of smoke into the Dublin fog. Whether little girls of seven seeking their first employment or women of twenty or more with years of experience, we were all here for the same reason. We sought a position in this esteemed house.

I clutched the wrinkled advertisement torn from the pages of the *Irish Times*. By now I had read it so many times, I could recite it from memory.

Wanted

In a gentleman's family of Dublin, a good PARLOUR MAID. She must be accustomed to the care of plate, glass, and waiting at table. There are four sitting rooms to keep, with stoves. A thoroughly respectable, steady young woman, of religious character desired. No Catholics. Apply for name and address at the office of this paper.

A house of this size must employ dozens of servants. How many of these women were applying for the same position as I? Surely, they all had more experience and were more likely to be chosen. What must they see when they looked at me? A naïve sixteen-year-

old scared to death of being rejected? A few dismissive looks from dark-haired beauties in fine store-bought uniforms told me they surpassed me in knowledge, skill, and sheer willpower. They had likely been serving in fine houses since their adolescence, whereas this was my first interview at a grand city house.

At least I wore the proper attire. Thanks to the generosity of Mrs. Witcombe, the wife of my current employer, a merchant living on the outskirts of Dublin. Both husband and wife had encouraged me to seek this position after he saw the advert in the newspaper. They had fallen on hard times and were going to have to dismiss me, but kind-hearted souls that they were, didn't want to do so without first seeing me securely employed. When I pointed out that the advertisement specified no Catholics, they dismissed my fears, saying all I had to do was pretend to be a Protestant and no one would be the wiser.

The future deception weighing heavy on my heart, I agreed anyway. What choice did I have? Mrs. Witcombe prepared me for the interview, including sewing the dress I was wearing.

"Margaret Kelly." The stern voice that interrupted my musings had a tone of command, not question. It was my turn to be interviewed.

I turned and approached the green-eyed woman who had called my name, elbowing my way through the crowd with mumbled apologies, praying the terror that squeezed my heart was not visible in my eyes. Struggling to keep my expression neutral and my voice from shaking, I stood before her. "I am Margaret Kelly."

Her gaze flicked from my eyes down to my scuffed boots and back up to my worn bonnet. She turned and took a step inside. "Follow me."

A cloak of heat enveloped me as she led me into the kitchen, where three women were busily preparing the noontime meal, the thwack of a knife on a wooden cutting board and the moist pounding of dough its own kind of rhythm by which all life moved in this world of steam and smoke. We passed a large open hearth where a joint of meat hissed and popped on a spit turned by a young boy. Another darted between us, a large ceramic pot supported by one hand, lid held on by the other, hurriedly fulfilling the cook's call for more flour.

The woman leading the way opened a plain wooden door and ushered me inside. I blinked rapidly. As my eyes adjusted to the relative dimness, I beheld a long, dark wood table with benches

parallel on either side. A maid was dressing it with plate and utensils. This must be where the servants took their meals. The table was worn smooth in places a little over a meter apart, presumably from years of arms and hands polishing it as bread sopped up gravy and meat was sliced with dull knives. Pray God, tomorrow one of those places would be mine.

We passed through another door and into a small room lit by several tapers. A rectangular window faced us, flanked by bookshelves filled with neatly arranged volumes. In the center of the room a desk dominated the remaining space, an empty chair in front, and seated behind it, a middle-aged woman with perfect posture, her graying brown hair held in a bun and a pair of wire spectacles perched on her thin, bony nose. She did not rise to greet me, but gestured to the vacant chair. With a nod, she dismissed the other woman.

I sat carefully, minding my every movement so I didn't do a single thing wrong, and flattened my palms on my skirt in an effort to hide their shaking.

The woman looked me steadily in the eye, her expression revealing no emotion. "I am Mrs. Gallagher, the housekeeper," she said by way of greeting, the way she shortened the "o" in "housekeeper," a clear indication her people hailed from the north. "It is my duty to oversee all of the females employed by this house, and therefore also to hire those best suited for each role. How old are you, Miss Kelly?"

"Sixteen."

She picked up a quill, dipped it in ink, and scribbled in the journal laid flat on the desk before her. "And you hail from what part of Ireland?"

"Howth."

Her quill scratched the page. "So, your family is nearby. I suppose you'll be wanting a few days a year to see them," she said, more to herself than to me. Mrs. Gallagher laid her pen down and folded her hands atop the journal. "I think it prudent to advise you before we begin that there has been a change in the position you are applying for."

She paused and my heart sank, a lead ball in my stomach. What if I would be dismissed without uttering a word? I had enjoyed my work for the Witcombes, but not only was it coming to an end, now that I had seen a bit of Dublin, I wanted more. I wanted to know where

every lane and alley ended, who lived behind each brightly painted door; most of all, I wanted to know what life might hold for me here. It had to be better than marrying a farmer like my father—that was my only option back home, if I could ever piece together a dowry.

“We recently lost one of our kitchen maids, so we find ourselves in need of someone who can handle working both in the parlor and in the kitchen, a between maid who can do whatever is needed.”

I had heard tell of “tweenies,” as they were called among those in service. It was a demanding role, for you never knew what your duties would be when you woke up in the morning and they could change at any time throughout the day. But because of this, tweenies were paid slightly more than low-level parlor or kitchen maids. That meant I could save a little money of my own in addition to what I sent back to mam and da.

Mrs. Gallagher gave me an appraising gaze. “What is the nature of your experience in service, Miss Kelly?”

I swallowed, trying to remember how I had rehearsed this answer with Mrs. Witcombe. All of it was true, but it was important that I portray myself in the best possible light. “I began my training caring for my younger brothers and sisters and taking care of my family. I learned to cook basic meals and tend our household while my mam took in laundry and other odd jobs. I had some education while I cleaned the houses of the other farmers outside Howth. I am good at needlework and can read and do basic sums.” I smiled, unable to keep the pride from my voice. That was much more than most other country maids could say. “When I finished school, I was taken in by a merchant family who lives in the city. They had me as a maid of all work, so I can do anything you need me to. I can light fires, clean floors, work in the kitchen, polish plate, and I know how to turn a house in spring and for the winter.”

Mrs. Gallagher’s expression was dubious, a deep v forming between her brows. “But you have never worked on a large estate?”

I dropped my gaze to my hands, which were fluttering in my lap, and laced my fingers together. “No, ma’am.”

“Mmmm.” The noise she made was not comforting. My heart sank a little lower, resting now on my pubic bone. “Lord and Lady Montague will be spending the season here in Dublin and then retiring to their much larger country estate. I believe you might be able to get along here, but I fear you will be overwhelmed at the

summer manor. Perhaps it would be best if you return to us in a few years when you have worked in a larger household.”

I closed my eyes, fighting back burning tears. So that was it then. A few words about what I had and hadn't done and back to Howth it was. How disappointed my parents would be; they had been counting on this job to provide room and board, and I know my mother secretly hoped that having a child employed in fashionable Merrion Square would elevate the family somewhat and perhaps provide better opportunities for my siblings. Now I would have to return home to tell them I had failed, a burden on their already overtaxed lives.

A chime jangled behind Mrs. Gallagher and I started. I hadn't previously noticed the row of bells behind her. The older woman cocked her head and said, “Ah, that would be the lady of house. Come on girl, I'll show you out on my way upstairs.”

I stood and Mrs. Gallagher brushed my shoulder with her hand, steering me toward the door. We passed through the empty dining area and back into the kitchen. Instead of the loud cacophony that had greeted us before, the room was silent, save for the crackling of the fire and the burbling of boiling soup in a large iron cauldron. Every person stood perfectly still, eyes cast downward. Even the boy had ceased turning the spit.

“Ah, Mrs. Gallagher. There you are,” a statuesque woman in a ruffled cream dress held her hand out to the older woman.

Mrs. Gallagher stepped forward. “How may I help you, Madam?”

Madam? My eyes widened with shock and I quickly lowered my gaze to the stone floor. That was why everyone else stood at attention. This was Lady Montague.

“I need to speak with all of you urgently,” she said, her voice kind, but stern. “I have just been informed that the Duke of Wellington has been called back to London. He leaves at first light but wishes to dine with us tonight, as he has urgent matters to discuss with Lord Montague. Needless to say, we will need to completely change the menu.”

The kitchen staff exchanged concerned glances, but held their tongues in the Lady's presence.

The lady of the house gestured to the head cook and head housekeeper. “Please, Mrs. Gallagher, come with me—you too, Mrs. Donahue—and we will discuss what needs to be done.”

"But what about all of them?" Mrs. Gallagher gestured to the throng of women still waiting for their turn in the alley outside. "There is no way I can interview them and oversee the preparations."

Lady Montague let out an exasperated sigh. "Send them away then. Tell them to come back next week. But hire one of them. We need additional hands tonight." Her gaze fell upon me for the first time. "Was this girl in with you when I rang?"

"Yes ma'am, but ..."

Lady Montague approached me and leaned down so her face was level with mine. I inhaled her delicate scent, something like soft powder and jasmine. "Can you serve at table? Can you cook?" she asked, speaking a little more slowly, as though she was afraid I was a simpleton.

"Yes, ma'am." I dared to glance up at her. "Both."

She smiled, her wide brown eyes glowing with relief. "Well then. It seems you are just what we need. Put her on the books and meet me upstairs," Lady Montague commanded.

Mrs. Gallagher pulled a small notebook from a hidden pocket within her skirts, wrote something down, and said so rapidly I could barely understand her, "Don't count your eggs, deary—you aren't hired yet. But we need your hands tonight." She pierced me with an unyielding stare. "We will start you out in the kitchens. Consider this a trial. If all goes well, you will officially join us in a week. Mind you, this job is also probationary. Do you know what that is?"

"No ma'am."

"It means it is only yours until the missus says it's not. If, after the season is over in mid-March, you're doing well, Lady Montague may choose to hire you on. If she does, then you'll make the journey to the country estate where we spend most of the year. But that is two months away. Let's focus on now. If we ask you to come back next week, at that time you will be entered as an official part of our household, paid regularly like everyone else, and given a ration of sugar, butter, and tea for your own personal use. You are responsible for your own clothing. We can go over the other particulars later. Do you understand?"

I nodded, though what was happening was anything but clear. My mind was whirling with the suddenness of it all. I was hired, yet not. I would be working in the kitchens, but only on a trial basis. How had a simple interview turned into this?

"Grace," Mrs. Gallagher called. "Please show this one around and give her a task while Cook and I talk with Madam."

"Yes, Missus," came a voice from one of the three servants still posed behind a large wooden worktable.

A beautiful woman a few years older than I with blonde hair tied back into a braid wiped her hands on her apron and approached me. "Hello. I'm Grace, second assistant to Cook."

I shyly introduced myself, overwhelmed by her looks and comportment.

"Welcome to the Montague house."

Based on a true story, USA Today bestselling author Nicole Evelina brings to life Irish reformer and Sisters of Mercy founder Catherine McAuley in *Catherine's Mercy*.

*"It's a lively ode to a trailblazing woman."
— Publisher's Weekly*

In 1824, Catherine, a Catholic spinster of 44, unexpectedly inherits millions. However, she doesn't use it to climb the social ladder or snare a husband; she uses it to fulfill a lifelong dream of building a refuge for the poor and sick of Dublin, Ireland. That an unmarried woman would dare propose such a thing is so scandalous, even her own brother calls it "Kitty's Folly." Society turns against her. The Church tries to take over. Catherine must defend her choices or lose not only her inheritance, but her reputation and life's calling.



Nicole Evelina is a USA Today bestselling writer whose work has received more than 50 awards, including four Book of the Year designations. She was named Missouri's Top Independent Author by Library Journal and Biblioboard as the winner of the Missouri Indie Author Project in 2018. She has also received the North Street Book Prize and the Sarton Women's Book Award.



chalice stories

FICTION
BIOGRAPHY
SISTERS OF MERCY

ISBN 978-0-827207-50-9



9 780827 207509 >