



**LUCIEN
TREGELLAS**
MARGARET MCPHEE



Lucien Tregellas

Margaret McPhee



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Contents

Cover
Title Page
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Copyright

Chapter One

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‘Sit up straight, Madeline. And can you not at least attempt to look as if you’re enjoying the play?’

‘Yes, Mama.’ Madeline Langley straightened her back. ‘The actors are very good, and the play is indeed interesting. It’s just Lord Farquharson...’ She dropped her voice to an even lower whisper. ‘He keeps leaning too close and—’

‘The noise in here is fit to raise the roof. It’s little wonder that Lord Farquharson is having trouble hearing what you have to say,’ said Mrs Langley.

‘But, Mama, it is not his hearing that is at fault.’ Madeline looked at her mama. ‘He makes me feel uncomfortable.’

Mrs Langley wrinkled her nose. ‘Do not be so tiresome, child. Lord Farquharson is expressing an interest in you and we must encourage him as best we can. He will never offer for you if you keep casting him such black looks. Look at Angelina—can you not try to be a little more like her? No scowls mar her face.’ Mrs Langley bestowed upon her younger, and by far prettier, daughter, a radiant smile.

Angelina threw her sister a long-suffering expression.

‘That is because Angelina does not have to sit beside Lord Farquharson,’ muttered Madeline beneath her breath.

Angelina gave a giggle.

Fortunately Mrs Langley did not hear Madeline’s comment. ‘Shh, girls, he’s coming back,’ she whispered excitedly. Amelia Langley straightened and smiled most encouragingly at the gentleman who was entering the theatre box with a tray containing three drinks glasses balanced between his hands.

‘Oh, Lord Farquharson, how very kind you are to think of my girls.’ She fluttered her eyelashes unbecomingly.

‘And of you too, of course, my dear Mrs Langley.’ He passed her a glass of lemonade. ‘I wouldn’t want you, or your lovely daughters, becoming thirsty, and it is so very hot in here.’

Mrs Langley tittered. ‘La, Lord Farquharson. It could never be too hot in such a superior and well-positioned theatre box. How thoughtful of you to invite us here. My girls do so love the theatre. They have such an appreciation of the arts, you know, just like their mama.’

Lord Farquharson revealed his teeth to Miss Angelina Langley in the vestige of a smile. ‘I’m su

that's not the only attribute that they share with their mama.' The smile intensified as he pressed the glass into Angelina's hand.

'So good of you, my lord, to fight your way through the crowd to fetch us our lemonades,' Mrs Langley cooed.

'For such fair damsels I would face much worse,' said Lord Farquharson in a heroic tone.

Mrs Langley simpered at his words.

Madeline and Angelina exchanged a look.

Lord Farquharson's fingers stumbled over Madeline's in the act of transferring the lemonade. The glass was smooth and cool beneath her touch. Lord Farquharson's skin was warm and moist. 'Last, but certainly not least,' he said and gazed meaningfully into Madeline's eyes.

Madeline suppressed a shudder. 'Thank you, my lord,' she said and practically wrenched her hand free from his.

Lord Farquharson smiled at her response and sat down.

Madeline turned to face the stage again and tried to ignore Cyril Farquharson's presence by her side. It was not an easy matter, especially as he leaned in close to enquire, 'Is the lemonade to your taste, Miss Langley?'

'It is delicious, thank you, my lord.' The brandy on his breath vied with the strange, heavy, spicy smell that hung about him. He was so close that she could feel heat emanating from his lithe frame.

'Delicious,' he said, and it seemed to Madeline that a slight hiss hung about the word as he touched her hand again in an overly familiar manner.

Madeline suddenly discovered that drinking lemonade was a rather tricky task and required both of her hands to be engaged in the process.

Thankfully the lights dimmed and the music set up again to announce the resumption of *Coriolanus*. Mr Kemble returned to the stage to uproarious applause and shouts from the pit.

'He's a splendid actor, is he not?' said Lord Farquharson in a silky tone to Mrs Langley. 'They say that Friday is to see his last performance.'

'Oh, indeed, Lord Farquharson. It will be such a loss. I've always been a staunch admirer of Mr Kemble's work.'

Madeline slid a glance in her mother's direction. Only that afternoon Mrs Langley had made her feelings regarding John Philip Kemble known, and admiration was not the underlying sentiment.

The second half of the play had not long started when Lord Farquharson proclaimed he was suffering with a cramp in his left leg and proceeded to manoeuvre his chair. 'It's a souvenir from Salamanca. I took a blade in the leg,' he said to Mrs Langley. 'I'm afraid it plays up a bit from time to time.' He grimaced and then stretched out his leg so that it brushed against Madeline's skirts.

...and then stretched out his leg so that it brushed against Madeline's skirts.

Quite how her mother failed to notice Lord Farquharson's blatant action, especially given that she was seated on her elder daughter's left-hand side, while his lordship was situated a few feet away on Madeline's right, Madeline did not know. She threw her mother a look of desperation.

Mrs Langley affected not to notice. 'Such bravery, Lord Farquharson.'

Lord Farquharson smiled and touched his foot against Madeline's slipper.

'Mama.' Madeline sought to catch her mother's eye.

'Yes, dear?' said Mrs Langley, never taking her eyes from the stage.

'Mama,' said Madeline a little more forcefully.

Lord Farquharson leered down at her, a knowing look upon his face. 'Is something wrong, Miss Langley?'

'I'm feeling a little unwell. It is, as you have already observed, a trifle hot in here.' She fanned herself with increasing vigour.

'My dear Miss Langley,' said Lord Farquharson, mock-concern dripping from every word as he attempted to squeeze her hand.

Madeline pulled back. 'A little air and I shall be fine.' She rose and made for the back of the box.

Mrs Langley could scarcely keep the look of utter exasperation from her face. 'Can you not wait a little? Angelina and I are enjoying the play. Oh dear, it really is too bad.'

Lord Farquharson saw opportunity loom before his eyes. 'It seems such a shame for all three of you charming ladies to miss the play, and just when Coriolanus is about to deliver his soliloquy.'

Mrs Langley made a show of sighing and shaking her head.

'I do not mind,' said Angelina. But no one heeded her words.

'What if...?' Lord Farquharson looked at Mrs Langley hopefully, and then tapped his fingers across his mouth. 'Perhaps it is an impertinence to even suggest.'

'No, no, my lord. You impertinent? Never. A more trustworthy, considerate gentleman I've yet meet.'

Madeline's shoulders drooped. She had an awful suspicion of just what Lord Farquharson was about to suggest. 'Mama—'

'Madeline,' said Mrs Langley, 'it is rude to interrupt when his lordship is about to speak.'

'But, Mama—'

‘Madeline!’ her mother said a trifle too loudly, then had the audacity to peer accusingly at Madeline when a sea of nearby faces turned with curiosity.

So Madeline gave up trying and let Lord Farquharson ask what she knew he would.

‘Dear Mrs Langley,’ said his lordship, ‘if I were to accompany Miss Langley out into the lobby, then both your good self and Miss Angelina could continue to watch the play uninterrupted. I give you my word that I shall guard Miss Langley with my very life.’ He placed a hand dramatically over his heart, the diamond rings adorning his fingers glinting even in the little light that reached up from the stage. ‘You know, of course, that I hold your daughter in great affection.’ A slit of a smile stretched across his face.

‘I would be happy to accompany Madeline,’ said Angelina, and received a glare from her mother for her pains.

‘And miss Mr Kemble’s performance when it is unnecessary for you to do so?’ said Lord Farquharson. ‘For have I not already said that I will take care of Miss Langley?’

Mrs Langley clutched her gloved fingers together in maternal concern. ‘I’m not sure...She is very precious to me,’ said Mrs Langley.

‘And rightly so,’ said Lord Farquharson. ‘She would make a man a worthy wife.’

Mrs Langley could not disguise the hope that blossomed on her face. ‘Oh, indeed she would,’ she agreed.

‘Then I have your permission?’ he coaxed, knowing full well what the answer would be.

‘Very well,’ said Mrs Langley.

Madeline looked from her mother to Lord Farquharson and back again. ‘I would not wish to spoil his lordship’s evening. Indeed, it would be most selfish of me to do so. I must insist that he stay to enjoy the rest of the play. I shall visit the retiring room for a little while and then return when I feel better.’

‘Miss Langley, I cannot allow a young lady such as yourself to wander about the Theatre Royal unguarded. It is more than my honour will permit.’ Lord Farquharson was at Madeline’s side in an instant, his fingers pressed firm upon her arm.

She could feel the imprint of his hand through her sleeve. ‘There really is no need,’ she insisted and made to pull away.

‘Madeline!’ Her mother turned a steely eye upon her. ‘I will *not* have you wandering about this theatre on your own. Whatever would your papa say? You will accept Lord Farquharson’s polite offer to accompany you with gratitude.’

Mother and daughter locked gazes. It did not take long for Madeline to capitulate. She knew full well what would await her at home if she did not. She lowered her eyes and said in Lord Farquharson’s direction, ‘Thank you, my lord. You are most kind.’

‘Come along, my dear.’ Lord Farquharson steered her out of the theatre box and across the landing to the staircase, and all the while Madeline could feel his tight possessive grip around her arm.

Earl Tregellas’s gaze drifted between Mr Kemble’s dramatic delivery upon the stage and the goings-on in Lord Farquharson’s box. He watched Farquharson with an attention that belied his relaxed manner and apparent interest in the progression of *Coriolanus*, just as he had watched and waited for the past years. Sooner or later Farquharson would slip, and when he did Lucien Tregellas would be waiting, ready to strike.

It was not the first time that Mrs Langley and her daughters had accompanied Lord Farquharson. He had taken them up in his carriage around Hyde Park, and also to the Frost Fair with its merry-go-rounds, swings, dancing and stalls. On the last occasion, at least Mr Langley had been present. Indeed Mrs Langley seemed to be positively encouraging the scoundrel’s interest in her daughters; more accurately, in one daughter, if Lucien was being honest. And not the pretty little miss with the golden ringlets framing her peaches-and-cream complexion, as might be expected. No. *She* had been seated safely away from Farquharson. It was the elder and plainer of the sisters that seemed to be dangled before him. Lord Tregellas momentarily pondered as to the reason behind Farquharson’s interest. Surely the younger Miss Langley was more to his taste?

Tregellas restrained the urge to curl his upper lip with disgust. Who more than he knew exactly what Farquharson’s taste stretched to? He saw Farquharson move his chair closer to the Langley chit. Too close. He watched the brief touch of his hand to her arm, her hand, even her shoulder. Miss Langley, the elder, sat rigidly in position, but he could tell by the slight aversion of her face from Farquharson that she did not welcome the man’s attention. Mrs Langley’s headpiece was a huge feathered concoction, and obviously hid Lord Farquharson’s transgressions from the lady’s sight, for she raised no comment upon the gentleman’s behaviour.

Miss Langley’s attention was focused in a most deliberate manner upon the stage. Tregellas’s gaze dropped to take in the pale plain shawl wound around her shoulders that all but hid her dress, and the fact that she seemed not to wear the trinkets of jewellery favoured by other young women. She did not have her sister’s dancing curls of gold. Indeed, her hair was scraped back harshly and hidden in a tightly pinned bun at the nape of her neck. Her head was naked, unadorned by ribbons or feathers or prettily arranged flowers. It struck Lucien that, unlike most women, Miss Langley preferred the safety of blending with the background in an unnoticeable sort of way.

Lord Tregellas watched as Miss Langley rose suddenly from her seat and edged away towards the back of the box. He was still watching when Lord Farquharson moved to accompany the girl. He saw Mrs Langley’s feathers nod their encouragement. Farquharson and the girl disappeared. Silently Lucien Tregellas slipped from his seat and exited his own theatre box.

‘Lord Farquharson, I feel so much better now. We should rejoin Mama and Angelina. I wouldn’t want you to miss any more of the play.’ Madeline could see that he was leading her in a direction far from the auditorium. A tremor of fear rippled down her spine.

Lord Farquharson’s grip tightened until she could feel the press of his fingers hard against her

forearm. 'How considerate you are of my feelings, Miss Langley,' he said, drawing his face into a smile. 'But there's no need. I know the play well. I'll relay the ending if you would like. Following his exile, Coriolanus offers his services to Aufidius, who then gives him command of half the Volscian army. Together they march against Rome, but Coriolanus is persuaded by his family to spare the city. Aufidius accuses him of treachery and the Volscian general's men murder Coriolanus. Aufidius is overcome with sorrow and determines that Coriolanus shall have a "noble memory". So, Miss Langley, now that you know the ending, there is nothing for which to rush back.'

Madeline felt a glimmer of panic as he steered her around a corner. A narrow corridor stretched ahead. 'Lord Farquharson.' She stopped dead in her tracks, or at least attempted to. 'I thank you for your synopsis, but I would rather see the play for myself. Please return me to my mother immediately, my lord.'

Lord Farquharson's smile stretched. 'Tut, tut, Miss Langley...' he bent his head to her ear '...or may I call you Madeline?'

'No, you may not,' snapped Madeline, pulling away from him with every ounce of her strength.

But for all that Lord Farquharson was a slimly built man, he was surprisingly strong and showed no sign of releasing her. Indeed, there seemed to be an excitement about him that had not been there before. He stretched an arm around her back and, when she was fully within his grasp, marched her along the length of the passageway. Not even his slight limp deterred their progress.

Madeline's heart had kicked to a frenzied thudding. Blood pounded at her temples. Her throat constricted, tight and dry. But still she resisted each dragging step. 'What are you doing? This is madness!'

His fingers bit harder. 'Have a care what you are saying, Madeline. And stop causing such a fuss. I only wish to speak to you in some privacy, that is all.'

'Come to Climington Street tomorrow. We can speak privately then.' If only she could buy some time, some space in which to evade him. Thoughts rushed through her head. Surely Mama would notice that they were gone too long and come to seek her? Wouldn't she? But Madeline knew deep in the pit of her stomach that her mother would do no such thing. The chance of marrying her offspring to an aristocrat, and a rich one at that, had driven the last vestige of common sense from her mother's head.

'Please, Lord Farquharson, release me, you're hurting me!' She saw him smile at her words and felt the bump of his hip against her as he dragged her onwards.

And then suddenly they stopped and he steered her into a small dimly lit alcove at the side.

'This shall do nicely,' he announced and pulled her round to face him, his fingers biting hard against her shoulders.

Madeline's breaths were short and fast. She struggled to control the panic that threatened to erupt. Sweat trickled down her back, dampening her shift, and her heart skittered fast and furious. She forced herself to some semblance of calm, and looked up at him. 'What do you want?'

‘Why, you, of course, my dear.’ Excitement had caused the hint of a flush in his cheeks that contrasted starkly with the smooth pale skin of the rest of his face. The suggestion of sweat beaded his brow and upper lip. His dark red hair had been swept dramatically back to best show the bones of his cheeks. It was a face that some thought handsome. Madeline did not. The skin around his eyes seemed tight and fragile, tinged with a shadow of the palest blue. It served only to emphasise the hard glitter of his smoky grey eyes. His gaze fixed firmly on her.

Madeline gritted her teeth hard to stop the tremble in her lips. ‘You are a gentleman and a man of honour, Lord Farquharson.’ His actions rendered this description far from the truth, but she hoped that the reminder would prompt him to abandon his scheme, whatever it may be. ‘Surely you do not mean to compromise me?’

Farquharson’s mouth twisted. His hands were rough against her shoulders. Nothing sounded. No hint of music or laughter or applause. No footsteps. No voices. Not even the closing of a door. He looked at her a moment longer, and she had the sensation that not only did he know precisely the extent of her fear, but that it pleased him.

Madeline’s teeth clenched harder.

‘As if I would do such a thing,’ he said and lowered his face to scarcely an inch above hers.

Alcoholic breath enveloped her. Icy fingers of fear clawed at her until her limbs felt numb and useless. She looked up into his eyes, his hard, cold, glassy eyes, and saw in them her doom.

‘Just one kiss, that’s all I ask. One little kiss.’ His gaze dropped to caress her lips.

Madeline struggled, thrusting all of her weight against him in an attempt to overbalance him.

‘You cannot escape me, Madeline,’ he said softly and lowered his lips slowly towards hers...

‘Ah, there you are, Miss Langley,’ a deep voice drawled.

Lord Farquharson practically catapulted her against the wall in his hurry to remove his hands from her. He spun to face the intruder with fists curled ready by his side. ‘You!’ he growled.

Madeline’s eyes widened at the sight of her timely saviour. He was a tall gentleman with a smart appearance, long of limb and muscular of build. His hair was slightly dishevelled and black as a raven’s wing, and he was dressed in black breeches with a neatly fitted and exquisitely cut tail-coat to match. The man was certainly no one of her acquaintance, although he seemed to be of a somewhat different opinion.

‘I wondered where you had got to,’ he said in the same lazy drawl and stepped closer to where Madeline and Lord Farquharson stood.

Madeline stared at him, unable to believe quite what was happening.

‘I trust that Lord Farquharson has been behaving with the utmost decorum?’

His was a harsh face, angular and stark, a bold nose and square-edged jaw, and clear pale blue eyes that brushed over hers.

‘He...’ Madeline faltered. If she told this stranger the truth, her reputation would be well and truly ruined. No one would believe that he had dragged her down here against her will, in the middle of a performance of one of the season’s most successful plays. Lord Farquharson was a rich man, an aristocrat. Madeline Langley was a nobody. Willing or not, she knew what people would say. She bit at her lip and dropped her gaze. ‘I must return to my family. They’ll be worried about me.’ She hoped

The stranger smiled, but the smile did not touch his eyes. Casually he turned his face to Lord Farquharson. The Baron blanched. ‘Lord Farquharson—’ a chill entered his voice as he uttered the name ‘—will escort you back to your mother. Immediately.’

Lord Farquharson stared in sullen resentment, but said not one word.

‘And I need not mention that he will, of course, be the perfect gentleman in doing so.’

It seemed to Madeline that there was some kind of unspoken battle of wills between the two men. Lord Farquharson was looking at the stranger as if he would gladly run him through with the sharpest of swords. The stranger, on the other hand, was smiling at Lord Farquharson, but it was a smile that would have cleaved a lesser man in two.

Lord Farquharson grudgingly took her arm. This time he seemed most disinclined to make contact with her sleeve, touching her as if she were a fragile piece of porcelain. ‘Miss Langley,’ he ground out from between gritted teeth, ‘this way, if you please.’ He then proceeded to lead her briskly back down the corridor, retracing the path along which he had dragged her not so many minutes before.

Although Madeline could not see him, she knew that the dark-haired stranger stalked their every step. His presence was her only protection from the fiend by her side. She wanted to shout her thanks to him. But she could not. She did not even dare to turn her head back. They moved in silence, their progress accompanied only by the muffled steps of their shoes upon the carpet. It was not until they reached the landing leading to Lord Farquharson’s box that the man spoke again.

‘I trust you’ll enjoy what is left of the play, Miss Langley.’ He executed a small bow in her direction before turning his attention once more to Farquharson. ‘Lord Farquharson,’ he said, ‘perhaps you have not noticed quite how clear and unimpeded the view is from these boxes.’ He looked meaningfully at Lord Farquharson and waited for them to step through the curtain that led into the Baron’s box.

‘There the two of you are,’ said her mother. ‘I hope that a little turn with Lord Farquharson has you feeling better, my dear.’ Mrs Langley did not notice that her daughter failed to answer.

Angelina eyed her sister with concern.

Madeline sat down in the chair, taking care to make herself as narrow as possible lest Lord Farquharson’s hands or feet should happen to stray in her direction. But he made no move to speak to her, let alone touch her. The air was still ripe with the spicy smell of him. She stared down at the stage, seeing nothing of Mr Kemble’s performance, hearing nothing of that actor’s fine and resonant

stage, seeing nothing of Mr. Remore's performance, hearing nothing of that actor's fine and resonant voice. Her mind was filled with the image of a dark-haired man and how he had arrived from nowhere at the very hour of her most desperate need: a tall, dark defender.

She could not allow herself to think of what would have happened had the stranger not appeared. Whatever her mother thought, Lord Farquharson was no gentleman, and Madeline meant to speak the truth of him in full as soon as they were home. But who was he, the dark-haired stranger? Certainly he was a face she would not forget. Classically handsome. Striking. Forged in her mind for ever. A shiver rippled down her spine. Something, she would never know what, made her glance across to the boxes on the opposite side of the theatre. There, in one of the best boxes in the house, was her dark defender looking right back at her. He inclined his head by the smallest degree in acknowledgement. Madeline's breath caught in her throat and a tingling crept up her neck to spread across her scalp. Before anyone could notice, she averted her gaze. But, try as she might, she could not rid herself of the foolish notion that her life had just changed for ever.

'What on earth did you think you were doing?' said Mrs Langley to her elder daughter. 'Trying your hardest to undo all of my good work!'

'Mama, he is not the man you think,' replied Madeline with asperity.

'Never was a mother so tried and tested by a daughter.'

Madeline controlled her temper and spoke as quietly and as calmly as she could manage. 'I'm trying to tell you that Lord Farquharson came close to compromising me at the theatre tonight. He is no gentleman, no matter what he would have you believe.'

'What on earth do you mean, child?' Mrs Langley clutched dramatically at her chest.

'He tried to kiss me tonight, Mama.'

'Kiss you? Kiss you?' Mrs Langley almost choked. 'Lord Farquharson tried to kiss you?' Her cheeks grew suddenly flushed.

'Yes, indeed, Mama,' replied Madeline with a sense of relief that her mother would at last understand the truth about Lord Farquharson.

'Lord, oh Lord!' exclaimed her mother. 'Are you certain, Madeline?'

'Yes, Mama.'

Mrs Langley stood closer to Madeline. 'Why did you not speak of this before?'

'He frightens me. I tried to tell you that I disliked him.'

Her mother stared at her. 'Dislike? What has "dislike" to do with it? Now, my dear...' she took Madeline's hand in her own '...you must tell me the whole of it.'

Madeline detected excitement in her mother's voice. 'I've told you what happened. He tried to

kiss me.'

'Yes, yes, Madeline, so you say,' said Mrs Langley with undisguised impatience. 'But did he do so? Did Lord Farquharson kiss you?'

Madeline bit at her lip. 'Well, not exactly.'

'Not exactly!' echoed her mother. 'Either he kissed you or he did not. Now, what is it to be?'

'He did not.'

Mrs Langley pursed her lips and squeezed Madeline's hand. 'Think very carefully, Madeline. Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

Mrs Langley gave what could almost have been a sigh of disappointment. 'Then, what stopped him?'

Madeline found herself strangely reticent to reveal the dark-haired stranger's part in the affair. It seemed somehow traitorous to speak of him. And her mother was sure to misunderstand the whole episode. Surely there was nothing so very wrong with a little white lie? 'He...he changed his mind.'

'Gentlemen do not just change their minds over such matters, Madeline. If he did not kiss you, it's likely that he never intended to do so.'

'Mama, he most certainly meant to kiss me,' insisted Madeline.

A speculative gleam returned to Mrs Langley's eye. 'Did he, indeed?' she said. 'You do understand, of course, that were his lordship to compromise you in any such way then, as a man of honour, he would be obliged to offer for you.'

'Mama! How could you even think such a thing?'

'Come now, Madeline,' her mother cajoled. 'He is a baron and worth ten thousand a year.'

'I would not care if he were the King himself!' Madeline drew herself up, anger and outrage welling in her breast.

Mrs Langley sucked in her cheeks and affected an expression of mortification. 'Please afford me some little measure of respect. I'm only your mother, after all, trying my best to catch a good husband for a troublesome daughter who refuses the best of her mother's advice.'

Madeline knew what was coming next. She had heard its like a thousand times. It was pointless to interrupt. She allowed her mother to continue her diatribe.

'You care nothing for your poor mama's nerves or the shame of her having a stubborn plain daughter upon her hands for evermore.' Fortunately a sofa was close enough for Mrs Langley to collapse on to. 'Whatever will your papa say when we are left with you as an old spinster?' She dabbed a tiny piece of lace material to the corner of her eye. 'I've tried so hard, but it seems that my

clutched a tiny piece of lace material to the corner of her eye. 'I've tried so hard, but it seems that my best just is not good enough.' Her voice cracked with heavy emotion.

'Mama...' Madeline moved to kneel at her mother's side. 'You know that isn't true.'

'And now she has taken against Lord Farquharson, with whom I have tried so hard to secure her interest.' Her mother gave a sob.

'Forgive me,' said Madeline almost wearily. 'I do not mean to disappoint you. I know you wish to make a good match for me.'

Mrs Langley sniffed into her handkerchief before stroking a hand over Madeline's head. 'Not only a good match, but the best. Can't you see, Madeline, that I only want what's best for you, so that I can rest easy in my old age, knowing that you're happy.'

'I know, Mama. I'm sorry.'

Her mother's hand moved in soothing reassuring strokes. 'It is not your fault that you have the looks of the Langleys and are not half so handsome as Angelina.' The stroking intensified.

Madeline knew full well what a disappointment she was to her mother. She also knew that it was unlikely she would ever fulfil her mother's ambition of making a favourable marriage match.

'That is why I have sought to encourage Lord Farquharson.'

Madeline stiffened.

Mrs Langley felt the subtle change beneath her fingers. 'Oh, don't be like that, Madeline.' She removed her hand from Madeline's hair. 'He's a baron. He has a fine house here in London and a country seat in Kent. Were you to marry him, you would want for nothing. He would take care of you every need.'

Madeline looked with growing disbelief at her mother.

'My daughter would be Lady Farquharson. *Lady* Farquharson! Imagine the faces of my sewing group's ladies if I could tell them that. No more embarrassment. No more making excuses for you.'

'Mama,' said Madeline, 'it is not marriage that Lord Farquharson has in mind for me.'

Mrs Langley laughed. 'Tush! Don't be so silly, girl. If we but handle him properly, I'm sure that we can catch him for you.'

Madeline placed her hands over her mother's. 'Mama, I do not wish to catch him,' she said as gently as she could.

Amelia Langley's eyes widened in exasperation. She snatched her hands from beneath her daughter's and narrowed her lips. 'But you'll have him all the same. Such stuff and nonsense as I've ever heard. Madeline Langley turning her nose up at a baron! I'll bring Lord Farquharson to make you an offer if it's the last thing I do, so help me God. And you, miss, will do as you are told for once in your life!'

Chapter Two

The ballroom was ablaze with candlelight from three massive crystal-dropped chandeliers and innumerable wall sconces. The wooden floorboards had been scraped and polished until they gleamed and the tables and chairs set around the periphery of the room were in the austere neo-classical style of Mr Sheraton. The hostess, Lady Gilmour, was holding court in a corner close to the band and its delightful music. Despite the heat, the French doors and windows that lined the south side of the room remained closed. It was, after all, still only February and the year had been uncommonly cold. Indeed, frost was thick upon the ground and the night air held an icy chill. With the Season not yet started, London was still quiet, but Lady Gilmour had managed to gather the best of London's present high society into her townhouse. Everybody who was anybody was there, squashed into the noisy bustle of the ballroom, and spilling out into the hallway and up the sweep of the staircase.

Mrs Langley was in her element as Lord Farquharson had managed to obtain an invitation for her entire family. She was making the most of the evening and taking every opportunity to inveigle as many introductions as possible. Mr Langley, having found an old friend, had slipped discreetly away leaving his wife to her best devices.

'Lady Gilmour,' gushed Mrs Langley, 'how delightful to meet you. May I introduce my youngest daughter, Angelina? This is her first Season and we have such high hopes for her. And this is my eldest daughter, Madeline. She is such a dear girl,' said Mrs Langley. 'She has engaged the interest of a certain highly regarded gentleman. I cannot say more at the minute other than...' Mrs Langley leaned towards Lady Gilmour in a conspiratorial fashion and lowered her voice to a stage whisper '...we are expectant of receiving an offer in the very near future.'

Madeline, who had been smiling politely at Lady Gilmour, cringed and turned a fiery shade of red. 'Mama—'

'Tush, child. I'm sure that Lady Gilmour can be trusted with our little secret.' Mrs Langley trod indelicately on Madeline's slipper. Her smile could not have grown any larger when Lady Gilmour offered to introduce Angelina to a small group of other débutantes. Looking fresh and pretty in a ribboned white creation that had cost her poor papa a considerable sum he could not afford, Angelina followed in Lady Gilmour's wake.

'Keep up, Madeline,' whispered Mrs Langley as Madeline trailed at the rear. 'What a perfect opportunity for Angelina.'

Less than fifteen minutes later, Angelina's dance card for the evening was filled. A crowd of eager gentlemen stood ready to sweep the divine Miss Angelina off her feet. Mrs Langley's head swam dizzy with excitement, so much so that she clear forgot all about her plans for Madeline and Lord Farquharson. 'Oh, I do wish your father was here to see this. Where is Mr Langley?'

'He's talking to Mr Scott.' answered Madeline. happy that her father had managed to escape.

‘Typical!’ snorted Mrs Langley. ‘Angelina is proving to be a success beyond our wildest dreams and her father’s too busy with his own interests to even notice.’ Mrs Langley shook her head sadly, but her spirits could not remain depressed for long, especially when Angelina took to the floor with Lord Richardson, who was the second son of an earl. ‘La, is she not the most beautiful child on the floor?’ demanded Mrs Langley, clutching at Madeline’s hand.

‘Yes, Mama,’ agreed Madeline with a soft smile. ‘She is indeed beautiful.’

‘And elegant,’ added Mrs Langley.

‘Elegant, too,’ said Madeline.

‘And graceful.’

‘Yes.’

Mrs Langley looked fit to burst with pride. ‘That’s my baby out there, my beautiful baby. Oh, how it brings it all back. I was just the same when I was eighteen.’

Mrs Langley and Madeline were so taken up with Angelina’s progress around the dance floor that they did not notice the arrival of Lord Farquharson.

‘Mrs Langley, Miss Langley,’ he said, lingering a little too long over Madeline’s hand. ‘I hope I’m not too late to claim a few dances from the delightful Miss Langley.’

Madeline’s lips tightened. ‘I’m afraid I’m not dancing tonight, my lord. I twisted my ankle earlier in the day.’

Mrs Langley drew her a scowl before announcing, ‘I’m sure that your ankle is much repaired, Madeline. And a dance with Lord Farquharson shall not tax you too much.’

‘But—’ started Madeline.

‘Madeline.’ Her mother threw her the ‘wait until I get you home’ look.

Grudgingly Madeline held the card out to Lord Farquharson, who smiled and tutted and lingered over the empty spaces beside each dance name.

‘Can it be that Miss Langley has kept her dance card free for my sake? Is it too much for my heart to hope?’

Mrs Langley cooed her appreciation of the sugary compliment.

Madeline examined a scuff on the floor and waited until he pressed the card back into her hand. It was now warm and slightly damp to the touch. She held it gingerly by the edge and scanned to see which dances he had selected. A lively Scotch reel and, heaven help her, the waltz!

Lord Farquharson’s slim white fingers took hold of one of her hands. ‘Just in the nick of time.’

he said as the band struck up. 'I believe this is my dance, Miss Langley.' And with that he whisked her out to join the lines of bodies upon the floor.

The dance had a nightmarish quality about it. Not only was Madeline thrust into the limelight, a place in which she was never happy, but she had Lord Farquharson squeezing her hand, whispering in her ear and peering down the bodice of her dress for the entirety of the time. She was perforce obliged to smile politely and skip daintily about, as if she were enjoying the occasion immensely. It seemed to Madeline that a piece of music had never lasted so long. She progressed down the set, birling in the arms of every man in turn, each one granting her but a brief respite from Farquharson's company, for no sooner had she thought it than the dance had led her to meet in the middle of the set with Lord Farquharson once more. At long last the music ceased, and Lord Farquharson returned her to her mother. His eyes glittered with something that Madeline did not understand.

'She has the grace of a swan,' he said to Mrs Langley.

Mrs Langley, who had seen Madeline tread on Lord Farquharson's toes no less than four times, miss several steps, and drop her handkerchief halfway through, marvelled that a gentleman could be so forgiving of her elder daughter's failings. 'Dear Lord Farquharson, you are so kind to Madeline.'

They smiled at one another.

Madeline looked away and counted to ten—slowly.

Mrs Langley raved about Angelina's growing posse of admirers. Was the young man with blond hair merely a baronet? Angelina could do so much better. Let them move here to better see Angelina progress around the floor. And they simply must gain an introduction to a patroness of Almack's. Mrs Langley could not survive without securing tickets for one of the assembly room's famous balls. It would be quite the best place to catch a husband for Angelina. And so the time passed. Madeline did not mind. She preferred her place in the background, quietly observing what was going on around her. Nodding her head and smiling politely, but never really engaging. At least there was no Lord Farquharson forcing his attention upon her. Even so, he managed to catch her eye across the room on several occasions as if to remind her of what lay ahead: the waltz. Madeline's throat grew dry and tight at the very thought. She could see him watching her through the crowd, licking his lips, smiling that smile that made her blood run cold.

Quite suddenly Madeline knew that she could not do it; she could not let him rest his hands upon her and draw her close, pretending to be the perfect gentleman when all along he was just biding his time, waiting for an opportunity to strike. And strike he would, like the snake in the grass that he was. She shuddered. No matter what Mama thought, Lord Farquharson was not honourable. He would ruin her and there would be no offer of marriage. He did not want her as a wife any more than Madeline wanted him as a husband. What his lordship wanted was something quite different. Madeline drew a deep breath and determined that, come hell or high water, she would keep herself safe from Lord Farquharson's attentions. Mrs Langley scarcely noticed when Madeline whispered that she was going to find her papa.

Mr Langley was not anywhere in the grand ballroom. Nor could he be found in the magnificence of Lady Gilmour's entrance hall. Madeline followed the stairs up, searching through the crowd for a

sight of her father. It seemed he was not there either. She spent a little time within the ladies' retiring room, just because she was passing that way, and enquired of several ladies within if they had seen a gentleman by the name of Mr Langley. But the ladies looked at her as if she had just come up from the country and said that they knew no Mr Langley. So that was that.

She left and was about to make her way back downstairs when a hand closed tight around her wrist and pulled her to the side.

'Miss Langley, what a pleasant surprise to find you up here.' Lord Farquharson pressed his mouth to the back of her hand. 'But then perhaps you were looking for me.' He stepped closer and did not release his grip on her wrist.

Madeline knew that the people surrounding them afforded her protection from the worst of Lord Farquharson's intent. But she also knew that she could not risk drawing attention to herself or her situation lest they think the worst. 'No,' she said, and tried surreptitiously to disengage herself.

But Lord Farquharson had a grip like an iron vice, and tightened it accordingly. 'Tut, tut, why don't I believe you?' he laughed.

'I'm looking for my papa. Have you seen him?' Madeline hoped that Lord Farquharson did not know just how much he frightened her.

The sly grey eyes watched her. 'I do believe that I saw him not two minutes since, Miss Langley. But it was in the strangest of places.' Lord Farquharson's face frowned with perplexity.

In the strangest of places. Yes, that sounded most like where Madeline's papa would be found. Papa hated large social occasions and would frequently wander off to hide in the most obscure of locations. 'Where did you see him, my lord?'

Lord Farquharson's grip loosened a little. 'On the servants' stairwell at the other side of that door.' He gestured to an unobtrusive doorway at the other end of the landing. 'He seemed to be wandering upstairs, although I cannot imagine why he should be heading in such a direction.'

Madeline could. Anywhere away from the hubbub of activity. Papa would not notice more than that. 'Thank you, Lord Farquharson.' She looked pointedly at where he still held her.

'You've not forgotten my waltz?'

How could she? 'No, my lord, I've not forgotten.'

'Good,' he said, and released her.

Lord Farquharson fluttered a few fingers in her direction, then turned and walked briskly down the main staircase.

Madeline waited until she could see that he had gone before heading towards the servants' stairwell.

‘Papa?’ she called softly as she wound her way up the narrow staircase. The stone stairs felt cold through her slippers. ‘Papa?’ she said again, but only silence sounded. The walls on either side had not been whitewashed in some time and, as there was no banister, bore the marks of numerous hands throughout the years. A draught wafted around her ankles and the band’s music dimmed to a faint lilt in the background.

The stairwell delivered her to the rear of the upper floor. She stepped out, scanning the empty landing. Several portraits of Lord Gilmour’s horses peered down at her from the walls. Where could Papa be? A number of doors opened off the landing, to bedchambers, or so Madeline supposed. She stopped outside the first, listening for any noise that might indicate her father’s presence. Nothing. Her knuckles raised and knocked softly against the oaken structure.

‘Papa,’ she whispered, ‘are you in there?’

Madeline waited. No reply came. The handle turned easily beneath her fingers. Slowly she pushed the door open and peeked inside. It was a bedchamber, decorated almost exclusively in blue and white. A large four-poster bed stood immediately opposite the door. Mr Langley was clearly not there. Madeline silently retreated, pulling the door to close behind her. Quite suddenly the door was wrenched from her grasp, and Madeline found herself pulled unceremoniously back into the bedchamber. The door clicked shut behind her. Madeline looked up into the eyes of Lord Farquharson.

‘My dear Madeline, we meet again,’ he said.

Madeline kicked out at him and grabbed for the door handle. But Lord Farquharson was too quick. He embraced her in a bear hug, lifting her clear of the door.

‘Now, now, Madeline, why are you always in such a hurry to get away?’

‘You tricked me!’ she exclaimed. ‘You never even saw my father, did you?’ How could she have been so stupid?

Lord Farquharson’s shoulders shrugged beneath the chocolate brown superfine of his coat. ‘You’ve found me out,’ he said and pulled her closer.

She could feel the hardness of his stomach, and something else, too, pressing against her. ‘Release me!’

‘The Earl won’t save you this time, my dear. He’s not even here. I checked.’

Madeline refused to be bated. Speaking to him, pleading with him, would be useless. Cyril Farquharson would not listen to reason. She willed herself to stay calm, forced herself to look up into his eyes, to relax into his arms.

Lord Farquharson’s eyes widened momentarily, and then he stretched a grin across his face. ‘I think we begin to understand one another at last.’

Madeline sincerely doubted that.

Lord Farquharson's grip lessened. 'Madeline,' he breathed, 'you are such a fearful little thing.' The intent in his gaze was so transparent that even Madeline, innocent as she was, could not mistake it. 'I will not hurt you.' His fingers scraped hard down the length of her arm.

Apprehension tightened in her belly. 'But you are doing so already, my lord,' she said, drawing back her leg and delivering her knee to Lord Farquharson's groin with as much force as she could muster. She did not wait to see the effect upon Lord Farquharson, just spun on her foot and ran as fast as she could, banging the door shut behind her. Across the landing, down the stairwell, running and running like she had never run before. The breath tore at her throat and rasped in her ears. Her feet touched only briefly against each stair. And still she ran on, pulling her skirts higher to prevent them catching around her legs. Anything to flee that monster. She rounded the corner, dared a glance back, and then slammed hard into something large and firm. A gasp escaped her. She stumbled forward, her feet teetering on the edge of the stair, arms flailing, reaching for some anchor to save her fall.

A pair of strong arms enveloped her, catching her up, pulling her to safety. Please God, no. How could Lord Farquharson be here so quickly? She had been so sure that he was behind her; even though she'd heard the pounding of his feet upon the stairs. But it was only the sound of her own blood pounding in her ears. 'No!' She struggled within his arms, reaching to find some purchase against the smooth surface of the walls.

'Miss Langley?' The deep voice resonated with concern.

Madeline ceased her fight. She recognised that voice. Indeed, she would have known it anywhere. She looked up into a pair of pale blue eyes. It seemed that her heart skidded to a stop, before thundering off again at full tilt. For the arms wrapped around her belonged to none other than her defender. She glanced nervously behind, fearful that Lord Farquharson would creep upon them.

Her defender raised one dark eyebrow. 'I take it Farquharson is behind this—again?'

Madeline nodded nervously. 'He...' Her voice was hoarse and low. She cleared her throat and tried again. 'He's upstairs in one of the bedchambers.' Only when she said it did she realise exactly how that must sound.

His eyes narrowed and darkened. She felt the press of his hands against her skin. 'Farquharson.' The word slipped from his throat, guttural and harsh in the silence surrounding them. He set her back upon the stair and brushed past her. Anger radiated from his every pore. He began to climb quickly and quietly up the narrow stairwell.

'No!' shouted Madeline, twisting to follow him. Her feet thudded after his. 'No,' she shouted again. 'It's not what you think. He didn't—' She reached ahead, grabbed for the tails of his coat disappearing round the next bend and tugged. 'Wait!'

The man stopped suddenly and looked back down at her.

She released her grip on his coat and leaned back, panting against the wall.

'What do you mean, Miss Langley?'

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