

THE PERILOUS JOURNEY
OF THE
NOT-SO-INNOCUOUS GIRL

Leigh Statham



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The author makes no claims to, but instead acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the word marks mentioned in this work of fiction.

Copyright © 2014 by Leigh Statham

THE PERILOUS JOURNEY OF THE NOT-SO-INNOCUOUS GIRL by
Leigh Statham

All rights reserved. Published in the United States of America by
Month9Books, LLC.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Published by Month9Books

Cover by Christel Michiels

Cover Copyright © 2014 Month9Books



*Lovingly dedicated to
Lydia & Magnolia Holt
& all of my sweet nieces,
of which there are many:
Follow your heart,
even when you are not
sure where it will lead you.*

THE PERILOUS JOURNEY
OF THE
NOT-SO-INNOCUOUS GIRL

Leigh Statham

Chapter One



Marguerite held the brass cricket gingerly in her hands. She kept it tucked under the table while she turned it over, her fingers blindly memorizing every feature. She knew it was childish for a sixteen-year-old to have a favorite toy, but she couldn't help it. The design fascinated her. Occasionally she would trip the mechanism and the cricket literally sprang to life, launching itself against the underside of the table with a loud *knock*.

"What was that?" Madame Pomphart cried.

Marguerite caught the little metal bug with one hand and tucked it into the folds of her skirts. "Nothing," she lied.

"I heard a noise." The sour-faced governess slapped the desk with her pointer and stepped closer. "What are you hiding?"

Marguerite didn't flinch. "You must be hearing things

again. You *are* getting rather old.”

Madame Pomphart swung her pointer, making sound contact with Marguerite’s shoulder.

“Ah!” Marguerite grabbed her shoulder and jumped to her feet, knocking her chair over. She quite forgot about the little toy cricket which launched right at the governess’s face.

“What? Oh!” Madame Pomphart batted the air and stumbled backward, dropping her stick as the cricket ricocheted off her nose and landed at Marguerite’s feet. “How dare you bring vermin into my classroom? Your father will hear about this. Lord Vadnay will not be pleased!”

Marguerite scooped up her prize and ran for the door, grateful for the chance to escape.

“Get back here or you’ll receive double lashings!”

It was too late. Marguerite ran much faster than her teacher and was already halfway down the wide corridor. Lined with portraits of long-dead relatives and her father’s collection of modern weaponry, each display tempted her with thoughts of challenging the governess to a duel. She could easily scoop up one of the automated cat-o-nine-tails and turn back to the classroom. She rather fancied the idea, actually. But it wasn’t the right time or the right way to handle her heavy-handed caretaker, and honestly, she wasn’t quite brave enough to do more than talk back—not yet.

Her fear began to lift as she lightly descended the grand curving stairway to the ballroom, sprinting over the marble tiles and through the large doors to the gardens. The French summer sun blinded her. Marguerite blinked as she continued to run around the fountain filled with automated koi. A servant

perched on the edge of the large pool, brass fish in hand. Its tail clicked furiously back and forth as he tried to oil it. The late-summer roses bloomed bright with color all around her. Butterflies seemed to flit merrily on every blossom, cheering her on. Human and automaton servants worked side by side grooming the large hedges ... They jumped out of her way and bowed. None of them seemed surprised to see the young lady of the house running out of doors and they all knew where she was headed.

She tried to slip away to the cool shelter of the small glen beyond the lavender fields every chance she could, but since her father came up with the idea that she needed to be a “real lady,” it had become more difficult to sneak away.

At this point, she could have stopped. Pomphart wouldn’t follow her now, but it felt so good to move quickly after being at a table all morning. Her heart beat like an auto-hammer in her chest by the time she reached the work fields. More automatons and human servants stopped and bowed to the master’s daughter. Marguerite paid them no attention.

Finally reaching the small grove of trees, she flopped merrily on the soft grass and took a deep breath, then giggled to herself. She was safe, for now. The wind picked up and tousled the leaves overhead, sending bits of sunlight swimming wildly around her. The grass outside the glen rustled under the heavy *thud* of work boots: *Claude*.

“Hullo!” His voice sounded merry as he peered through the low branches that poked and tickled at the earth, surprised to see her there so early. “How’d you manage to beat me?” His wavy, light brown hair was just shaggy enough to soften his

strong jaw and angular nose. His cheek was smeared with gear oil, right up to the corner of his smiling blue eyes. He was too tall for his work trousers and his chest had grown too broad for his cotton shirt. The buttons tugged a bit, but he wasn't the type to care about his clothes. He pulled his welding goggles off of his head and wiped the sweat on his brow with the arm of his shirt.

"I ran." She smiled wickedly.

Claude flopped down in the grass beside her. "That's not very ladylike, and Pomphart doesn't usually let you out till half past."

"I had to run after this marvelous toy you made for me attacked her." She held up the cricket like a prize gem freshly plucked from the earth.

"Marguerite!" he cried. "I asked you to keep it safe, not use it to get yourself tossed out of ladyhood!"

"It was an accident. I swear. The lessons are just so boring. I needed something to do, so I had it under the table. She's such a brute. You should have seen how she hit me with her blasted pointer."

"She struck you again?" his face turned dark.

"Yes, but it's nothing, just a welt on the shoulder." The last thing she wanted was to be the damsel in distress.

"Still." Claude's brow furrowed. "It's not right. Ladies don't strike other ladies. Please keep good care of that little bug. It took me a long time to build and I didn't record the plans. I may need to borrow it back someday."

"All right." Disappointed at his lack of enthusiasm for her naughtiness, she carried on. "But you should have seen her

face! If only I could have a portrait made of that. I'd hang it over my bed and have a miniature made to keep by my heart."

Anasally voice attached to a pointy-faced, pale girl in bright pink skirts burst through the cool glen. "Whose miniature are you keeping by your heart? You haven't even had your ball yet."

"Hello, Vivienne." Marguerite sighed without enthusiasm.

"Marguerite has just sealed her doom," Claude chimed in. "She threw the cricket I made her at Pomphart's face today, so there may not be a ball."

"That's rubbish! I did no such thing. It just got away from me and bounced right off her nose." Marguerite laughed again while recalling the image, but Claude's words made her a bit nervous.

"Oh dear," cried Vivienne. "What are you going to do?"

Of course Vivienne would make a big deal out of it, Marguerite didn't expect anything less from her childish neighbor.

"I'm not sure. That's why I came straight here." She turned pointedly to Claude. "I thought you'd want to celebrate my freedom and take the rest of the day off."

Claude was quick to reply, "I'm afraid I can't. Lots to be finished at the forge and I am on stall-mucking duty with the bots."

"What do you possibly have to finish at the forge that's so important?"

Claude raised his eyebrows at her. "A certain girl's father has requested automatic serving dishes made of twenty-four-karat gold for her introduction to society."

“Oh my!” Vivienne drew a dramatic breath. “How elegant. I so wish I were old enough to come.”

“Don’t worry,” Marguerite patted the girl’s knee, “I’m sure you can borrow them for your own ball.”

“Marguerite ...” Claude hissed at her.

It wasn’t a very kind thing to say, but Marguerite had never been very fond of Vivienne. She mostly endured her company because she was the only girl within a hundred miles that was close to the same age and station as Marguerite. That, and Claude had insisted she be kind to her.

“You’re right, Claude.” Marguerite smiled in repentance. “I’m sure your father will have loads of wonderful things for the guests to marvel at when your time comes, Vivienne. Still, it would be nice to have both of you there. I suppose I will be forced to talk to strangers.”

“I can’t believe you’re not excited!” Vivienne chattered. “New dresses! Handsome suitors!”

“I am excited,” Marguerite cut her off, “to have it over and done with! Dressing up might be fun, but dressing up to catch a man is not my idea of a good time.”

“Don’t be vulgar.” Vivienne blushed. “It’s not like that at all.”

Claude cut in, “I’d love to stay and discuss this matter with you girls, but I do have a few chafing dishes waiting for their motors in the shop.”

Marguerite tensed at the thought of not only being left alone with Vivienne, but also being without Claude’s protection should Pomphart come looking for her. “Do you think I could come help you at the forge today?”

“Not if you want me to get anything done.” Claude smiled merrily.

“Stop it! You know I’m a whiz with gear-work.”

“When you are actually interested in the work, yes, but I’m afraid that auto-spoons and brass tureens would bore you to death.”

Marguerite tried to make her eyes look large and beseeching, but she knew it was no use.

“No. But you can walk me there. I forgot my lunch anyway,” Claude said as he reached to help Marguerite up.

“I didn’t exactly have time to grab a snack as I fled the dungeons,” Marguerite quipped.

“Oh! I know!” Vivienne was bursting. “Let’s have lunch in town today. You’re not going back to your lessons are you? And Claude is busy with work. It will be such fun girl time!”

Marguerite sighed, but Vivienne was right. There was no way for her to return to the estate house without being trapped by Pomphart, and she had nothing to do if Claude insisted on finishing his chores. Still, she was uneasy about the idea of being on her own with Pomphart’s wrath hovering around an unknown corner waiting to pounce. The woman was ruthless when no one of importance was watching. She had a way of getting Marguerite off on her own and exacting whatever form of punishment she felt was suitable for the crime. Marguerite tried to complain to her father, but he wouldn’t listen, he thought Marguerite just didn’t want lessons anymore.

Claude knew all of this and sensed her fears in her quiet gaze.

“Come with me, both of you. I have someone I want you

to meet.” Claude smiled.

Marguerite jumped up at his tug, tossed her wavy brown hair, and set her skirts aright, glad someone was helping her make up her mind. “Very well.”

“Hooray! Oh, I know just the place,” Vivienne said. “There is a new little patisserie I saw the other day I’ve been aching to try.” She skipped up the hill ahead of the other two, babbling on about buns and cakes and half sandwiches.

Claude reached for Marguerite’s arm and squeezed a bit. He used this gesture when he was about to chastise her, but she didn’t think she’d been that rude to Vivienne. The girl got on her nerves with every word, but her intentions were good and Marguerite wasn’t cruel by nature, just impatient.

“What?” she hissed.

“I have some news, but I wanted to tell you first.”

“Oh?” Relieved not to be in trouble, but also perplexed, Marguerite wished more now than ever that Vivienne would just skip into oblivion with her bouncy blonde curls and scattered thoughts.

“Yes. You know how we spoke a few weeks ago about my plans?”

“Did you find a position in Paris?” Marguerite could scarcely contain herself. Her friend was so talented, and she knew better than anyone that he was wasted working as a bondservant on her father’s estate. If he could secure an apprenticeship in Paris he could come back to La Rochelle as a master tradesman. Plus she could visit him there. Still, apprenticeships were hard to come by.

“No, I think it’s better than that.”

“What could be better than Paris?” In her mind, crowds of well-dressed ladies paraded down glittering avenues while the latest autocarts passed by in a blur of technology and innovation. Paris was the hub of all things Marguerite admired.

“I’ve signed into His Majesty’s service. As of next week, I’ll be an official member of the Royal Corp of Engineers.”

“You what?” She was stunned. It took her a moment to sort out her emotions. How could he have made this type of decision without consulting her? They had shared everything since they discovered each other as bored children on the estate a decade ago.

“I knew you’d be angry with me for not telling you beforehand, but an opportunity just presented itself and I knew it was right—I had to take it.”

“No, I’m not angry at all. Just shocked. You know how my father feels about the military.”

“But you see, that’s just it. I won’t have to worry about your father anymore, I won’t owe him anything. My first assignment is to New France.”

“Are you two coming or not? I’m starved!” Vivienne had doubled back when she realized she was talking to herself.

Marguerite wasn’t sure she could eat or talk at that moment. She wasn’t sure she could even take another step.