

CHAPTER ONE

Theodora Cronenworth, called Theo by her family, strolled down the London street toward her home. She'd just attended the latest rally of the Matron's Brigade, and she was lost in thought, struggling to deduce why she was still a member.

The group claimed to have begun a crusade against the dandies and vixens of the demimonde. The city had become a den of iniquity and they were determined to clean it up. Illicit conduct was rampant, and from the most toplofty aristocrat to the lowliest opera dancer, people were openly wallowing in sin and vice.

There seemed to be no limit to their depravities and civic leaders ignored what was happening. In fact, many of them were the worst offenders. So the Brigade had been formed.

The ladies had shrouded themselves in the mantle of moral indignation, and their purported goal was to root about decadence, but from Theo's perspective, they simply argued amongst themselves over which direction to take. They also liked to point fingers as to who was sufficiently devoted to the cause and who wasn't.

When they finally chose a target, it was a female who had no power or rich friends to protect her. The Brigade liked to punch *down* at those who couldn't fight back and their focus enraged Theo. In her view, if a woman was lured into wickedness, it was always the fault of a corrupt man. She constantly suggested they shame some of the scoundrels who instigated so much of the trouble, but the group wouldn't hear of it. She'd flat-out been apprised that they didn't dare harass any important males, and their cowardice infuriated her. None of their motives were true and they were a gaggle of hypocrites.

Her stepmother, Georgina, had encouraged her to join. Theo was clever with words, and she'd

been tasked with writing pamphlets that would spread their message, but any *message* she penned was watered down to irrelevance.

Though she never discussed it, her own family had been destroyed by a cad when she was a little girl. Her mother had run away with him and vanished forever. Theo had never learned his name or any other information about him, but he'd never been held to account for his mischief.

Shouldn't he have been? Could any prominent gentleman ever be forced to answer for his dissolution? Shouldn't women demand better behavior from them?

Well, if the tepid antics of the Matron's Brigade were any indication, no changes would ever occur.

She shoved the issue out of her mind. It was a beautiful May afternoon, the sky clear, the temperature balmy, and it was silly to waste any energy fretting about the situation. She wasn't the Brigade's prisoner and she didn't have to continue to participate.