

Chapter One

London, April 12, 1818

"Let go of me."

Roger Templeton slowed his pace as he heard the woman's angry voice coming through the trees on his right. He couldn't see anything in the darkness. If he remembered correctly from past experience, there was a clearing of sorts over there, a favorite trysting spot at Crumley's entertainments. Perhaps this was a lover's quarrel? In which case he ought to just move on.

He'd slipped out of the ballroom to take a walk through the garden and get some fresh air. He wished he had his own tryst awaiting him since he hadn't had a woman in over two months. There wasn't anyone to his taste here this evening, either, in spite of the interest of several women of questionable character. He'd actually had to sneak out of the house to avoid their pursuit. This party was fiendishly boring despite the crush and he was seriously contemplating leaving altogether to simply get drunk in his room back at his friend Sir Hilary St. John's house. Hil was probably out enjoying one of his numerous, mysterious lovers, so he'd have to drink alone, which was so damned sad.

“I said let go,” the same woman demanded in a loud, angry voice. Roger stopped walking. There was something vaguely familiar about it. She certainly wasn’t trying to be discreet.

“Madam, perhaps you have forgotten why we came out here.” The man’s voice was a harsh whisper. At least he was attempting discretion.

“The why matters not,” she said coolly. “What matters is that I now find your company unappealing and wish it removed.”

“I will remove my presence when it suits me. And it will not suit me until I get what you so blatantly offered inside.” He was clearly angry.

Roger had just let out a deep sigh of resignation at the inevitability of having to interfere when she let out a sharp cry. He swiftly cut through the light brush in the stand of trees off the path and headed toward the sounds of struggle.

When he emerged through the trees into the clearing, lit by the pale moonlight, he saw a tall, voluptuous woman grappling with a man of equal size. The battle was even, but rather than leave them to it, Roger stepped forward so they would see him. He hated to leave the woman’s safety to chance. She saw him first.

“Well, don’t just stand there,” she admonished. “Get this cretin off me.”

Roger laughed out loud as the other man quickly stepped away from the woman, smoothing the front of his jacket. "It would seem my services are not required after all," Roger commented. He made a shooing motion with his hands. "Go on, then. The lady has made her wishes known."

"You shall regret your interference, Templeton," the man said in an unsteady voice.

"Good God, Dumphrees?" Roger said incredulously. "You actually found a woman who would agree to an assignation? It's no wonder she changed her mind after she got a good look at you."

"What's wrong with him?" the woman asked suspiciously. "Shall I have to see a doctor?"

This made Roger laugh even harder. "Not that I am aware, but I shall make discreet inquiries if you desire."

"How dare you?" Dumphrees demanded. "I'll have you know that women adore me."

"For a steep price," Roger said with amusement.

"Enough," the woman said in a strong, no nonsense voice. "Dumphrees, you are dismissed. Be gone."

She raised both arms as she repinned her hair and for the first time Roger noticed how outrageously attractive she was. She was incredibly voluptuous, her

curves accentuated by her clearly expensive and well-cut dress of some indeterminate light color, which highlighted her hourglass figure against the dark trees behind her. Her hair was a rich, burnished dark gold, a riot of unruly curls barely contained by the pins she shoved in randomly. While she seemed familiar, Roger was quite sure he'd never enjoyed the pleasure of this particular lady's company before. He would definitely remember that.

"Why . . ." Dumphrees was speechless. "I've never . . . that is impossibly rude."

"Hardly. I found it entirely possible." She lowered her arms and treated Dumphrees to a glare from the largest almond-shaped, long-lashed eyes Roger had ever seen. He knew those eyes, yet try as he might he couldn't place her. Her sharp, slanting cheekbones highlighted those amazing eyes and drew attention to her luscious, full-lipped mouth. She had the body of Venus, and the face to match. The result was an exotic mix. If not for her proper British accent he'd have thought her Italian, or perhaps Greek. Her heavy dark blond hair was barely contained by those flimsy pins in an entirely too suggestive style. She looked like she'd been well and truly tousled. Her beauty was almost ludicrous. No woman should look like that. Particularly not one who had been in Dumphrees's arms. Roger shuddered in revulsion at the thought.

"Slut," Dumphrees threw at her caustically.

Roger took a menacing step forward, but she only laughed.

“Really? If that were so, the fact that I found you entirely disgusting says more about you than it does about me, I’m afraid.” She shook her head.

“Honestly, I must have been confused by the heat and press of the company inside when I agreed to this. What could I possibly have seen in you? Whatever it was, rest assured I have regained my wits.” She snapped her teeth at him like a tigress suddenly and Dumphrees leapt back in alarm. She laughed harder. “Be gone, toad.”

Dumphrees stalked off in a huff. Roger watched as his damsel in distress adjusted her clothing. She didn’t seem to be too perturbed by her encounter with Dumphrees. There was a curious sort of satisfaction in her expression and her movements. “Are you going to stand there staring at me all evening?” she said archly, putting her hands on her hips as she regarded him. He saw the moment her regard went from amusement to calculation. “You could do more than stare, you know.” She turned and showed him her back. Her dress was partially undone. “You could do something with this.”

Roger met her look with calculated regard of his own. Apparently there *had* been a tryst awaiting him in the woods. “I might be tempted.”