

Love Me Tender

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CHAPTER ONE

July, 1814
Devizes, Wiltshire

The sleepy afternoon silence of the Davey Lending Library ended abruptly with the harsh jangle of the doorbell and rushed footsteps crossing the room. Winifred Moore turned from the bookshelf she was filling with new books in time to glimpse a dark shape disappearing behind the bookshop counter.

Fearing a thief had designs on the day's meager takings, Winifred hurried to protect her father's business interests, holding a tome before her as a weapon.

"Please, pretend I'm not here," a deep, masculine voice rumbled up from the vicinity of the floor. "I shall inconvenience you just a few moments."

Winifred rounded the corner of the counter and spied a dandy lying on the shop floor. Quite unused to such a dubious honor, the widow took a moment to memorize the image for her later fantasies. Dark, windswept hair, greatcoat open to expose the expensive tailoring of his superior class. Matching sapphire cravat pin and signet ring identified the owner of the piercing, blue eyes as the favorite son of the Duke of Devizes. His heir.

Winifred stepped back. "My lord, you should not be upon our floor."

Tristan Greene, Viscount Ramsbury, propped himself on one elbow and flashed a cheeky grin. "My dear Mrs. Moore, I am exactly where I wish to be."

Winifred glanced at the dusty floor, sorely in need of sweeping after a long day of business, and shuddered. "Have a care for your consequence, Lord Ramsbury, or you risk becoming quite unpresentable."

The viscount laughed. "If I am indeed in Mr. Davey's Lending Library on High Street, then my consequence will be utterly preserved."

Winifred glanced toward the door, longing for her father's early return from his book-buying trip to Bristol, or any other timely interruption that would banish this foolish delusion. After several moments, when no parental guidance or visiting custom intruded, she pinched her hand to return to sanity. Unfortunately, Viscount Ramsbury still adorned her dusty floor. Only one logical explanation occurred to her. "Are you foxed, my lord?"

Ramsbury straightened his greatcoat about his legs. “Oh, would that I were, but during times such as these a man must keep a level head upon his shoulders else he’ll run afoul of a fiendish plot.”

Winifred slid her book to the table. “Are you in danger, Lord Ramsbury?”

“Danger of the most perilous kind,” he murmured, glancing about him unconcerned. “But the shelter of your premises is the most perfect foxhole a desperate man can hope to find. I am most grateful to you.”

Clearly, the viscount had lied about his consumption of spirits. “Grateful?”

Ramsbury flashed another smile she felt all the way to her toes. A warm flush swept over her skin as his gaze skimmed down her body. Then, he tipped his head toward the front of the shop. “Yes, grateful that Miss Claribel Wheaton prefers not to read.”

Puzzled, Winifred glanced out the window and spied Miss Wheaton across the road. The young woman seemed most comical today, peering into all the Devizes’s shop windows with great enthusiasm, dragging her companion forward by the arm. Suddenly, a whisper Winifred had overheard and had discounted as ridiculous gossip explained the viscount’s actions.

She smiled. “I believe I begin to understand your dilemma, my lord.” Winifred chuckled, and then quickly suppressed the unkind thoughts swirling through her mind about Miss Wheaton’s designs to become the next Lady Ramsbury. “Indeed you are quite correct in your assessment of your safety. Miss Wheaton does not visit the lending library often.”

The viscount sat up. “Do you mean to say she does come into this establishment?”

“Only when forced to by a visiting relation. At present, I believe she is without the company of her extended family.”

The viscount subsided to the floor, crossed his ankles, then tucked his hands behind his head as if he planned to be there awhile. “I’d be much obliged if you could inform me when Miss Wheaton’s coach departs. I believe the conveyance stands at the ready beside the seamstress’ establishment.”

Winifred approached the window. As Lord Ramsbury suggested, Miss Wheaton’s carriage awaited her and her companion some distance away. The lady in question, however, had reached the last business on the street and after a short debate with her companion crossed the road. “The enemy advances, my lord,” Winifred warned. “Have a care for your continued freedom.”

Behind her, Lord Ramsbury moved—a rush of footsteps across the floor, the rear door crashed shut, and the lending library fell silent again. Winifred returned to the counter and picked up her book, disappointed the unusual disturbance had passed so quickly. But with luck, Lord Ramsbury would be halfway home by the time Miss Wheaton returned to her carriage.

The doorbell jangled again. When she turned, she found Miss Wheaton edging into the shop.

“Miss Wheaton, what a delightful surprise!” Winifred exclaimed, hurrying forward with the intention of drawing the young woman farther into the shop. If possible, she could entice her to use the lending library’s services, make her father happy with the added custom, and ensure Lord Ramsbury got away cleanly.

“Mrs. Moore,” Miss Wheaton answered, but didn’t budge from the door’s arch. “Are you unwell? Your face is unfashionably flushed. Quite an unfortunate shade of pink, truth to tell.”

Could Winifred ever stop her emotions from sweeping across her skin? Probably not. The telltale flush always gave her away. Usually, she’d ignore the disparaging remark, but to hear Miss Wheaton comment upon Winifred’s unpopular looks, especially after her brief encounter with the handsome viscount, infuriated her.

“I always enjoy excellent health, Miss Wheaton. But I am gratified to see you recovered from your recent indisposition.”

The young woman sighed dramatically. “You wouldn’t know from your limited acquaintance with the Duchess of Devizes, but boating upon the river in her company is an exhilarating, albeit exhausting, undertaking. I defy anyone to endure it without fatigue.”

Winifred hadn’t been invited to the picnic or to go boating, much to her disappointment. But she shouldn’t be cast down by her exclusion. Her black widow’s weeds would have dampened the festive mood of the duchess’s gathering. And it wasn’t proper for a widow to display too much enjoyment, especially so early in her period of mourning. Winifred squared her shoulders, determined not to let Devizes’s reigning debutante get any farther under her skin. At least she had been married. “How may I be of service, Miss Wheaton? Were you looking for a particular book?”

Miss Wheaton wrinkled her nose, as though an unpleasant smell had reached her. “No, thank you, Mrs. Moore. I merely stopped to be polite. I cannot abide how you appeared to be hanging out the window in search of new customers. Quite unseemly. Good day to you.”

“Good day”—the door rattled shut—“Miss Wheaton.”

Of all the rude, cruel creatures to walk Devizes’s streets, Miss Wheaton behaved the worst. Winifred glanced at the clock, and, seeing only minutes remained until closing time, she locked the front door, then drew the drapes over the front windows. Privacy and a long night of blissful solitude lay ahead. Tonight, she could be herself.

“Is she like that all the time, so puffed up with her own sense of self worth that she thinks she can scold you?”

Winifred yelped and turned around. Across the room, leaning idly against the door leading to the family’s private rooms, stood the viscount, watching her. “My lord, you scared me. I thought you’d gone.”

“Not yet.” Ramsbury stepped forward, skirting the shop counter until his greatcoat brushed her gown. “I asked a question. Is she rude to you on a regular basis?”

Winifred’s skin heated to match her embarrassment. She dropped her gaze to his cravat pin, unprepared to be honest about the snubs she’d endured since her return.

The viscount caught her chin and raised her face until she met his bright blue gaze. “Jealousy truly does bring out the worst in women, doesn’t it?”

Winifred tried to hold Ramsbury’s direct stare but found it impossible. He was, quite possibly, the most sought after and admired man in three districts, but he was

also her social superior. Allowing him liberties, however minor, would only diminish her remaining reputation. "I cannot imagine what you mean."

She stepped back, feeling the slide of firm, bare skin caress her chin.

"They're all a bunch of spiteful tabbies," he murmured, following her retreat. "Could you ever imagine your return to Devizes would be responsible for the salvation of Mrs. Lynch's business? I'm told she's quite worn out from the rush."

Although Winifred hadn't caught the scent of strong spirits on Ramsbury's breath, he must be deep in his cups to speak as he did. "How could I be responsible for the dressmaker's exhaustion? I haven't purchased a new gown in an age."

Lord Ramsbury smiled, a wicked flash of teeth that set her heart to thumping. He slid closer, forcing her tight against the counter. Winifred drew a cautious breath but still detected nothing to account for his addled state.

"Because every single man in three districts has heard of your return and, like me, waits for brief glimpses of you outside these walls. The unmarried ladies are poised on every corner to tempt us in your absence but few spare them any attention. Do you never go out?"

Winifred's heart pounded, from the compliment and from the touch of the viscount's fingers over her arm. Did he have to stand so close?

"My father likes to keep me busy." Winifred gulped. "I am in mourning, after all."

The viscount eased backward an inch. "You were only married a month. Will you mourn him the full year?"

No one had ever dared to ask her how she felt about her widowed state. No one expected her to be happier as a widow than she had been as a wife. The viscount's direct question pleased her, and she wished she could answer honestly without appearing gauche.

Ramsbury's lips twitched. "You want to say no, don't you? Between us—the opportunistic bastard doesn't deserve one second of mourning."

Winifred stared at his lips, struck by his nearness and curiosity over how he would kiss. "I hadn't considered the matter. His death was all so sudden."

"I wouldn't have you mourn him a day." He lowered his head, and the soft press of his lips against her own surprised her. She had come to expect aggression, possession, and little choice in the matter of kisses. What a difference the morals of a man made. Ramsbury brushed his lips over hers, sending delightful thrills through her body. Winifred swallowed nervously. But he persisted, dropping gentle kisses on her lips, nibbling at the soft flesh. To her considerable astonishment, Winifred responded in a way she had only imagined in her nighttime fantasies. Every sense she possessed sprang to life and obscured the world around her.

Despite the desire to be good, respectable, Winifred closed her eyes and pressed closer to the viscount. The warmth of his body penetrated her hideous, black gown. His hard body crowded yet didn't overwhelm. He held his emotions in check, restrained his passion without forcing himself upon her as her husband had done.

Suddenly, her lips were cold. The viscount had pulled back. "You taste the same."

Heat swept across Winifred's cheeks. "How could you remember that? The kiss you stole at the Winter Ball seems so long ago."

"Because." He caressed her burning skin. "Once tasted, your sweetness is something a man could never get enough of; he would always want more."

Ramsbury kissed her again, pulled her so close she touched every inch of him, discovered the effect she had over his body. His aroused state thrilled her, and she shut her eyes to enjoy him better. He ate at her mouth with neat, precise kisses, then he caught her lower lip with his and tugged. Her eyes flew open at the stunning sensation. Winifred had learned a few valuable truths since becoming a wife and widow. Society deemed Lord Ramsbury a rake and a much-sought-after bed partner, despite his benign appearance. Since she'd joined their ranks, the previously prissy widows of town whispered now, within her hearing, that it was said he did not simply toss up one's skirts and have his way, but devoted hours to worshipping his lover.

Winifred could stand to be worshipped.

Feeling altogether reckless, she aligned their hips and pressed her lips harder against his. Ramsbury's gasp thrilled her, and Winifred reveled in her newfound power. She nuzzled his lips enthusiastically, and he groaned around her kisses. His lower lip tempted her, so she captured it and subjected Ramsbury to the same delicious torture. She might never have the chance to experience passion with a man of his accomplished reputation, and she wanted to see what all the fuss was about. Winifred threaded her fingers into his hair, letting her actions convey her desires.

He hitched her from the floor and pressed her body to the wall, pinning her with his hips as surely as if he were already inside her. He teased the sensitive sides of her breasts with his fingertips. Winifred squirmed restlessly in his grip. She didn't know where to put her hands or her dangling feet, but she wished these delicious sensations would never end.

Ramsbury appeared ravenous. He clutched and released her breasts, sending spikes of throbbing pleasure to her core. She wriggled and slid her leg around his thigh as far as her gown would allow. The viscount didn't misunderstand her encouragement. He pressed his groin harder against her body, letting the firm ridge of his erection rub against a place that ached. Yet, all the while, he nibbled lightly on her lips, never taking away her ability to refuse, never demanding more than she wanted to give. Cool air swirled about her ankles as he raised her long skirts. He caressed her stockings as he pushed her skirts higher. When he touched bare skin, she gasped out loud, rocking her hips desperately into the hard ridge of him.

"Shh," he whispered against her lips, before he claimed them again.

Winifred clutched his shoulders, unable to believe she was but moments away from becoming the viscount's next lover. Never in her bravest fantasies had her imagination led her so far. But she wanted him. She wanted to discover what lay beyond this desperate ache. She yearned to explore every sensation.

When their lips parted, Ramsbury held her tight, his warm breath churning over her throat. "Too fast," he whispered.

Did he scold himself, or had she behaved with too much passion? Ramsbury released her leg, letting her skirts fall, and she landed on the floor with a thud. He

did not, however, release her completely, and that reassured Winifred her behavior had not been vulgar or unwanted. He clutched her close, digging his fingertips firmly into her bottom. They swayed, and Winifred couldn't help but twine her arms about his neck to draw him into another kiss.

Ramsbury pressed his hands to the wall on either side of her head. He angled his, and the wet swipe of his tongue across her lips curled her toes in her slippers. He licked her mouth again, short strokes that had her opening for him. He invaded, explored, and taught her that she understood nothing of kissing.

She could have died from the ecstasy of his taste, from the warmth of his tongue, and from her overwhelming need to stay connected to him.

When their lips parted, Ramsbury chuckled at her whimper. "And here I worried my pursuit too speedy. Such passion." He curled a broad hand around her nape and held their heads together. The viscount's breath beat fast against her lips. "When does your father return?"

Winifred's mind whirled as he peppered her temple with more kisses. She could lie and tell him her father returned soon, and he'd be on his way in a trice, or she could let the evening unfold to see what delights the viscount's touch might bring.

"He returns tomorrow. Late." The truth rolled off her tongue easily, and she blushed again at how forward she sounded. So much for her intention to avoid indiscretions. She would fall headlong into an altogether scandalous affair without even trying to prevent it. One touch, one, two, ten delicious kisses from Lord Ramsay had completely muddled her mind.

The viscount pressed his lips harder to her skin, then he released her completely. He picked up a sack from the floor. "I brought supper."

She studied the oddly shaped sack she hadn't noticed before. "Supper, my lord?"

He chuckled. "Perhaps not as my mother might expect. It's simple bachelor fare, but enough to satisfy the two of us."

Winifred smoothed her hands over her gown, self conscious that she'd almost been ravished and disappointed now that she had not. "How did you know my father had left town?"

The viscount's devilish smile stole her breath. "I, ah, overheard his conversation with the farrier yesterday."

She stared at him. His visit was not the surprise she had first imagined. He had come with seduction firmly in mind, not escape from Miss Wheaton. Winifred couldn't decide whether to be flattered or offended.

Ramsbury strode through the shop, shrugging out of his greatcoat as he went, moving toward the kitchen with his lumpy sack. His tuneless whistle preceded a noisy clatter, then the pop of a bottle opening rang through the air. "Rather than have me ransack the kitchen," he called, "would you care to join me and find us some glasses?"

Winifred rushed in, dug two of her father's best wineglasses from the battered cupboard, placed them on the table at his side, and then hurried to lock the rear door.

"A good decision," Ramsbury observed as he handed over a glass. "I might not be the only man bent on seduction tonight, but I'm fortunate enough to be the first to arrive."

Winifred put her glass down on the table. “That doesn’t sound the least bit complimentary, my lord.”

He chuckled again. “My lord? Perhaps we could dispense with the formalities at long last. Tristan.”

Every nerve ending sizzled as she repeated his given name. *Tristan*. The name she whispered to the dark of night.

“Winifred.” He moved close again, so close she could see the ring of black around his blue eyes. “A beautiful name to match the woman. Welcome home.”

She couldn’t hide the burst of happiness his words created. Their lips connected once more. Desire and delight destroyed her efforts to control her emotions. She gripped his coat and held him close to her. Why should she deny herself the very thing her wedding had promised but failed to deliver? She could, if she was very daring enjoy an interlude with the viscount. She had heard that many widows took lovers with no lasting harm if they were discreet about it. So far, Tristan appeared willing to accommodate her greedy demands for pleasure. He strummed over her breast with one thumb, while he squeezed her bottom with his other hand. His touch shattered her remaining desire to be a good and cautious woman. Winifred didn’t resist. She encouraged, provoked, and set her hands upon his broad chest to begin removing his clothes.

Tristan released her, snapped his coat from his shoulders, tossed it in a heap on the floor, and pulled her close again before setting his lips to her neck. As his tongue flicked over the hollow of her throat, Winifred arched her back. Her late husband, Mr. Peter Moore, had never affected her senses like this. Quite the opposite, in fact. She reached for the edges of Tristan’s waistcoat and began unbuttoning him, until a loud knock forced them apart.

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