

Love Me True

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CHAPTER ONE

September, 1814
Devizes, Wiltshire

“I now pronounce you husband and wife.” Those words concluded the wedding ceremony to cement the union of Lord Ramsbury and Mrs. Winifred Moore, widow, in holy matrimony but somewhere behind Lord Justin Greene, the bridegrooms’ brother, a woman sobbed mournfully.

He did his best not to roll his eyes at the pitiful sound. To Justin’s way of thinking, the happy groom did *not* deserve tears as he kissed his new wife soundly to wild applause. His brother, a rake many hoped to emulate, had recently taken to the idea of monogamy with astonishing single-mindedness. In fact, Justin had been quite shocked by the speed with which Tristan had accomplished his goal of marrying the local bookseller’s daughter.

Of course, the former Mrs. Moore had better connections than most village girls. She was the niece of two current dukes, although not precisely on intimate terms, or even speaking terms, with them, and eminently qualified to her eventual elevation in rank to that of duchess.

And she did love his brother madly.

As the groom and blushing bride tripped past him, Justin followed along with the guests headed for the conveyances. He caught a glimpse of his mother and father, the often overbearing Duke and Duchess of Devizes, and returned their smiles. They’d gotten what they wanted—their eldest son and heir leg-shackled and five months away from delivering the first offspring.

The gaggle of delighted wedding guests followed the bride and groom along to the breakfast at Staplehurst Hall, giggling and laughing as if the world had just become sunnier. But for Justin, it was still filled with disappointments. Filled with things he couldn’t have. He should shake off his black mood before his brother noticed. He was happy for the new couple. They were so very much in love.

However, shaking off his bad mood was next to impossible while the sniffing

grew in volume behind his back.

He needed a drink.

As Justin entered Staplehurst Hall, the family seat of four generations of duke's and duchess', he took a detour to the library, heading for his father's hidden brandy to fortify himself in solitude against the long afternoon ahead.

A lone figure in drab muslin stood near the duke's desk polishing the smooth surface. "Oh, I'm sorry, Lord Justin. I'll be done in a moment." The saucy housemaid winked at him as she hurried to finish her chores. Justin watched the sway of her skirts, feeling an altogether wicked thought stir along with other parts.

"No rush, Lucy." Justin pulled the bottle he was after from its hiding place, and then leaned against the sideboard. He might need more than brandy to get through this day. "Tell me, do you have plans for later this evening?"

Lucy's eyes lit up with mischief. She paused in her chore to draw her shoulders back and remind him of the bounty lying beneath her plain, ugly gown. Clearly, the idea of helping him through the night appealed to her. Her tongue swiped over her bottom lip and bit it, sending a pleasant hum of lust through his body. As she released the plump pink flesh, Justin pushed off from the sideboard and stalked across the room, ready to steal a kiss before he had to face the afternoon festivities. But before he could sample the maid's charms, the door behind his back flew open.

Lucy bobbed a hasty curtsy.

"Is that my good brandy, Justin?"

So much for a pleasant interlude. Justin tipped his head towards the door to hasten Lucy's departure. "Yes, Father. Care for a snifter?"

Lucy gathered her dusting cloth and beat a quick retreat through the side door. Justin shrugged aside the lost opportunity to forget his disappointments. He would catch Lucy later and not finish with her until dawn smudged the horizon with the first sign of day.

"Don't mind if I do. Don't mind if I do." Leather creaked as his father sat. "What a day. At least now my Duchess can stop her carping on about heirs and such. But I must warn you—she's still dissatisfied with the living arrangements."

Justin suppressed a grin as he poured his father a drink. There was a very good reason Tristan and his new bride refused to move into Staplehurst Hall. They wanted privacy, and space to make love. His mother would definitely put a kink in their antics if she stumbled upon them in a state of undress.

Stumbling upon them *once* before the wedding had been bad enough for Justin. After that awkward sight, he'd taken to knocking his fist along the walls before he dreamed of stepping, or even looking, through an open doorway at the dower house. Those kinds of images he could do without.

He downed a quick mouthful then topped up his glass before turning to pass his father his drink. The duke was sprawled in regal splendor, a pleased smile on his features. He looked a great deal like himself—or Justin should say, *he* looked a great deal like his father. Except for that pleased smile. The duke had been this way since the marriage was announced a little under a month ago. The duchess was worse.

His father took a long swallow of brandy, rolling the flavor around his mouth as Justin prowled the library. When Justin finished his glass, he eyed the half-empty decanter. The wedding breakfast was sure to be a long and arduous celebration.

Eighteen courses the last time Justin had listened to his mother's plans. One more snifter should do the trick and help him through the long, drawn out affair.

"You're next to marry you know," his father said suddenly.

Justin filled his glass to the brim and downed the contents in three swallows. Wonderful. With Tristan married, and well on the way to filling his nursery, Justin hadn't considered that his parents would focus on him so soon. He wasn't looking forward to marrying some sour-faced, well-dowered, connection-hungry young miss. All he desired was his poetry. "Is that so?" He tried very hard to sound bored with the idea, hoping his father would find another subject soon.

"Well, yes. A quick marriage is just the thing. I won't be putting up with Tristan's nonsense again. No chance of cold feet that way."

Thanks to the two glasses of brandy—well, maybe two and a half—Justin didn't panic quite as he would if completely sober. He did experience some discomfort, though, that he wouldn't get to marry the girl of his dreams. Not when she loved another. He would forever be the man she couldn't see. Justin reached for the decanter again.

Another drink sent the room tripping and when his father clapped him a stunning blow to his shoulder, Justin stumbled forward.

"Let's get this over with," his father said. "Otherwise, my duchess will come looking for us."

Heaven help them, then. He forced a smile to his lips. "Of course."

Justin turned unsteadily for the library door and followed in his father's wake, entering the noisy hall. One hundred guests filled the room, most already seated and consuming his father's fine wines. Justin threaded through the crowd until he found his assigned table. To his surprise, and considerable horror, he found himself seated beside Miss Claribel Wheaton, the haughtiest young lady he knew, and across from the stuffy Earl of Edenbray, his new sister's estranged cousin.

And Miss Wheaton was still sniffing her grief over his brother's marriage.

The brunette, small and well-rounded, shared more opinions than anyone he knew. Normally, she appeared the perfectly flawless debutant. But not today. Today the little woman couldn't keep her countenance. A broken heart could render even the strongest disposition useless.

As he sat, Justin signaled for the footman to fill his glass and then he turned to his companion, resigned to another awkward conversation. "Miss Wheaton, you look lovely."

The watering debutante's nose wrinkled with distaste, and then she buried it in her handkerchief again. Justin shrugged, determined to ignore the snub. Really, what could one say to comfort a broken heart? In his experience, it was better to pretend the whole farce of falling in love had never happened in the first place.

Justin crooked his finger at the footman. "Bring a bottle from the lower shelf, and keep them coming."

The footman obliged and when the other guests were amply distracted, he topped up Miss Wheaton's glass with something containing a little more kick than that served to most in attendance.

The woman lifted her nose from her scrap of lace and eyed her now brimming glass. Her gaze skittered sideways. "Thank you."

“Always happy to assist.” Justin admired the rich liquid. “However, this might be a tad too strong for you. Don’t feel you need to drink it all.”

As if challenged by his words, Miss Wheaton sat up straighter and took a swallow. Unfortunately, she gulped the liquid instead of sipping and sputtered into her handkerchief, no doubt because the liquid burned her throat.

“‘Tis much better to savor than to rush, sweetheart.”

Justin scowled at his own words. The reminder of his brother’s most recent taunt, that he had little skill at charming women, angered him. What he didn’t bother to explain to his smug brother was that one woman was much like the next, especially since pleasing the woman that mattered most to him remained far beyond his reach. He would please *her* if she gave him half a chance. However, the woman he loved barely acknowledged his existence. To find relief, he dabbled with ladies who’d rather tumble into bed than talk. But their charms were pale substitutes for the woman he’d never have.

Justin kept drinking and topping up his companion’s glass with each unending course served until Miss Wheaton disappeared from his side without a word. *Haughty minx*. He hoped she nursed a terrible head for the disrespect of not speaking more than two words to him.

He glanced around. Since the hour was late, the revelers were a merry bunch, forming little groups to suit themselves. His brother and his new bride were gone. Justin lurched to his feet. He’d not be missed by those present—most were too wrapped up in their own conversations to notice—so he took himself off to find more pleasurable entertainment. Lucy might just be waiting him in his chambers if he were lucky, or would be joining him there very soon.

All he had to do was remember where the hell his chambers were.

After a few false starts, Justin fell through his bedchamber door. Would he ever find this new bedchamber easily? Probably not. The move to Tristan’s old chambers had been his mother’s idea. She’d wanted to freshen up the family wing in the hope of enticing Tristan and Winifred to move into the Hall. Dumping him in the now empty east wing, and away from his mother’s unpredictable visits, suited him just fine.

Justin stripped his coat, waistcoat and shirt from his chest in the dark, relieved to be free of the restrictions. He sat—stumbled, to put it more accurately—and after a few blunders, managed to remove his boots. His hands fell to his formal breeches and he tugged the buttons undone. A woman’s heavy sigh and the rustle of sheets reached his ears.

Despite his over indulgence tonight, his prick thickened at the sound.

Lucy awaited him already. She must have shirked more of her duties tonight to share his bed at this hour. If it wasn’t his bed she’d been gracing on occasion since his twentieth year, she’d probably have been dismissed for her outright laziness.

Justin kicked off his remaining clothes and crawled under the covers.

Lucy cuddled into him and sought his lips in an ardent closed-mouthed kiss. Her attempt to appear virginal tonight amused him, but the press of her hardened nipples spoke loudly of her desires. He liked her games. He liked the pretense that she hadn’t spread her legs for anyone but him. But as her wine-scented breath puffed over his lips, he scowled. She’d obviously helped herself to the refreshments

laid out for the guests tonight and, by the scent tickling his nose, she had also sampled a guest's perfume, too.

He'd censure her about it in the morning, but for now she seemed altogether too delicious to ignore. He set his lips to her neck to lightly nip at her skin. Lucy shuddered and moaned with almost believable surprise, building the fiction that she'd never lain in a man's arms. She'd missed her true calling in life, it seemed. She could have performed on the stage.

Justin pulled Lucy atop him. She stiffened and squirmed, rubbing her breasts against his chest awkwardly as if unused to the position. When he hastened to kiss her into compliance, she wriggled around until she was comfortably draped over his body, putting his stiff prick against her thigh. Justin tugged a little more until he lay primed and ready to slide into place. His delicious bundle whimpered.

"Shh, love. You know your safe with me." He pushed her long, heavy hair back from her face and cupped her cheek. He couldn't see her face clearly and he brushed his lips across her cheek. "I'll give you everything you need. I promise."

Lucy twisted suddenly and planted her lips tightly against his. Surprised by the sudden move, Justin kissed her back, pressing his tongue into the seam of her lips until they parted. The taste of her was heaven. Blind desire washed over him, leaving him breathless. He wrapped his arms around her and plundered her mouth, desperate to join with her in every way possible. He slid his palm down her back, over the firm round swell of her bottom and grasped one thigh. He inched her legs apart until she opened to him.

Justin flexed his hips, aligning himself to thrust inside. With Lucy's hands threaded through his hair, her mouth open over his, he pushed in gently—as if they'd never done this before. As if she was in truth virginal—not wanton and hungry for pleasure. Lucy tensed, clamping her lower muscles tightly around him. Another thrust seated him inside her and his world shrank to just the pair of them.

God she was a good actress. Her initial whimper had sounded authentic. The tight control she used on her sex to simulate a novice in the bedchamber could almost fool a man, but as he slid in and out her rough pant gave her away.

This was no virginal, scared miss. This was a woman swept away by desire. Justin rolled them until he hovered above. He braced himself on his elbows, holding his weight suspended and gave himself over to the delicious illusion they'd woven.

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