

Chapter One

*L*ord Edmund Debham allowed his weary mount to stop in front of an unprepossessing hedge tavern under an ancient sign depicting a black lion. The ivy dripping from the walls nearly obscured the light that glowed through smoke-grimed windows, indicating the presence of life inside.

Eyeing the structure cynically, Edmund dismounted, muttering, "As good a place as any to get my throat cut, old friend. I'll try to see you get your hay and oats before passing to my reward." He gave Storm a comforting pat.

Once inside the dark, smoky hall, Edmund felt no surprise at all that no one came to attend him. The shabby old building had held no false promises of bustling landlords and smiling, buxom maids. He moved toward the sounds of voices and faint light that emanated from the north side of the small dark entryway. Pushing through a rough-timbered door, he paused to survey the room out of habit rather than any pronounced desire for self-preservation.

A branch of candles on a small table gave the room what little light it possessed. Around the table sat four men, their attention totally absorbed by the cards in their hands.

Edmund's scrutiny did not reveal anyone else in the room, though he would not have given long odds that the farthest, darkest corners might not hold villains enough. He walked toward the table, wondering when he would be noticed. He wasn't. So he pulled out a nearby chair and sat down heavily, weariness pulling against him more strongly than his promise to Storm. The card game, which Edmund recognized as Brag, held the locals' attention with all the intensity of gentlemen in the priciest gaming hell in London. He studied the group, hoping to discover who might be the innkeeper.

Quickly identifying him by the stained apron he wore, Edmund scanned the others while awaiting the end of the hand. There was only one among them who might be called a gentleman. A youth with disheveled dark locks and a wild look in his blue eyes, his clothes set him apart from the innkeeper and the others, who looked to be farmers or laborers.

Suddenly the table exploded in exclamations as the innkeeper exposed three aces to take the small pile of change in the center of the table.

"Neat as a pin," the young gentleman declared. "Well done, Dutton, old friend." He clapped the innkeeper on the back. "Well, who's for another hand? Come along, I've plenty of blunt left!" He gestured to a pile of pence and shillings beside him, but the others at the table began to mumble and shake their heads.

"'Tis easy enough for you, young master," a tall, red-haired man grumbled. "You've just had yer quarter's allowance, and no chores to do come morning!"

"Just so," the oldest of the group agreed, knocking out the pipe he had been nursing. "Time I sought my bed."

"I've not had my quarter allowance," the young gentleman grouched. "Dutton here has had it. Most of it, at any rate."

"Nay, lad, I've barely touched 'ee." The innkeeper's north country accent seemed out of place in the middle of Buckinghamshire. He motioned to a roll of gold coins spilling from a leather purse by the young man's right hand. "Happen I'd take a good deal more nor yer blunt, but Miss Ormhill would grab me by the ear tomorrow, think on!" He scooped up his winnings and stood. At that moment he spotted Edmund at last. His surprise at seeing the silent stranger caused him to drop the handful of coins, which rolled and tumbled across the table and onto the stone floor.

"Be thee an apparition?" He stared hard, then shook his head. The others seated at the table, equally as startled, muttered among themselves and shifted backward uneasily, so that Edmund had the sensation that the room had suddenly tilted away from him.

"Not at all," he reassured them. "Only a tired, lost traveler hoping to find a warm meal and perhaps a friendly hand of cards before seeking his bed." Edmund looked hungrily at the golden pile by the young gentleman's hand. "Allow me to introduce myself. Edmund Debham." He held out his hand.

Standing hastily and leaning across the table to grasp Edmund's hand, the youth stammered, "You're . . . You're . . . No, don't tell me, I know. Ah, yes! Capt. Lord Edmund Debham. Daring Debham, you were known as after Badajoz. It is an honor to meet you, Lord Edmund. I'm Jason Ormhill."

"Not captain anymore. I've sold out," Edmund replied, shaking the eager hand held out to him.

The boy frowned a little. "Ah, yes. Once Boney was beat, the fun went out of it, I suppose. I'll bet you were glad to be in for the final kill, eh?"

Edmund winced at the memory of Waterloo. He had never loved soldiering, though he knew some who had. *The boy would be much more pleased with Harry Smith than with me*, he thought. "I would have been as satisfied if Napoléon had stayed put, I thank you!"

Jason looked puzzled, sure that any soldier must have loved every minute of glory in the recent battle. "What brings you to these dull environs?"

"Dull! Well, young varmint, I'd give you what for, for that one, if I weren't so filled with ennui myself." The gnarled old man winked at the room at large and stood, startling Edmund by revealing what he had not noticed before, a clerical collar. "Perhaps you'd best not play him, Jason. Looks like one of those London Cap'n Sharps, come to fleece you."

Edmund winced, but the youngster rushed to his defense. "Never say so, Uncle. Lord Edmund is an honorable man. Quoted in the dispatches more than once."

"That's a high honor, given how stingy Wellington is with praise. I'm Milton Ormhill, vicar of Saint Stephens here in Flintridge." The older man held out his hand.

A twinge of guilt smote Edmund. He had kept himself in funds during the long years with Wellington by his skill at cards and his hard head for liquor. He was, indeed, an honest player, but an extremely able one. *Am I really contemplating taking this youngster's blunt?* But the thought of some coins for a bed rather than joining Storm in the stable tempted him too much. *Won't clean him out, though. Just a few hands.*

Dutton, the innkeeper, grinned. "Aye, well, whatever ye do, no drinking, young squire. No telling what might happen, else." General laughter greeted this admonishment which Edmund thought very good advice for the youth. Dutton scooped up what remained of his coins. The red-haired man had been gathering up what lay on the floor while this exchange was going on, and distributed them to their rightful owner before leaving.

"I hope your prohibition of drink does not extend to me." Edmund reached into his vest pocket, prepared to withdraw one of his last three coins. "I could use a good dose of the heavy wet. And my horse could use some attention, too, if you have a stable lad."

"Aye, no fear, m'lord. My boy'll see to him right well. And the first drink is on me, m'lord, for one as has served us so well against them Frenchies. I've naught to lay before you but soup and a joint of mutton, though."

Under the warm regard of the landlord and the youth, Edmund felt the ice that encased his heart melt a little. He took the offered brandy and saluted them both, then downed it. "Join us at cards," he invited the innkeeper.

"Mayhap I will." Mr. Dutton nodded. "Just let me roust out my son to look after tha steed." He went to the door and set up a shout that produced a sleepy lad of perhaps fourteen to care for Storm.

Their first few hands showed the innkeeper to be an intelligent but cautious player. Young Ormhill's playing was adequate but uninspired. Edmund experienced luck along with his skill, and won. *Enough*, he decided. *I've blunt now to last me a few days.* Though his winnings would perhaps only stave off the inevitable, something about starving to death repelled him. He even allowed himself a tiny bit of optimism: Perhaps he could find some honest way to earn a living before this money ran out.

"Well, gentlemen, it is late. I am sure you have had enough cards for the evening." He started to gather the small pile of coins.

But both men loudly protested. The evening was young, and he had to give them a chance to get even. Edmund's conscience submitted. *If they insist, after all . . .* He swiftly parted both landlord and youth from some more of their blunt.

The landlord looked at him shrewdly as he dropped his cards at last. "Ye're a fine hand, m'lord. Cannily done, think on." Something of malice flashed in his eyes. "I'm no match for 'ee, in skill nor pocket, so I'll bid 'ee good night."

"Cannily done indeed!" Young Ormhill scowled sulkily. "Luck, that's what it was. I can beat him. You know, Dutton."

"Aye, happen you could," Dutton nodded. "Play on, then. I'll have a pipe and watch 'ee for a while." He went to his cabinet and brought out several full bottles of brandy. "Doubtless ye'll be wanting some refreshments." He poured Ormhill a drink and watched with satisfaction as the lad tossed it back.

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Puzzled at this change in behavior from his previous protective admonition that the boy shouldn't drink, Edmund stood. "Better quit now. I've a wish for my bed."

"Come, Lord Edmund," Ormhill protested. "Think I can't see you're trying to protect me? Very much obliged to you! I'm not the green 'un you think me, though."

Edmund frowned. "Bantling, you need a lesson. But I've a kindness for you and would not teach it."

"Pah! Arrogance, not kindness, m'lord." Ormhill stood up, anger flushing his features. "High and mighty Lord Edmund, famous war hero, and now you fancy yourself a London beau, too proud to play deep with the provincials." He dropped a second heavy leather purse onto the table. "I've plenty of blunt, and the skill to take yours, too, if you're man enough to accept my challenge."

Teaching the young cub that lesson suddenly seemed more attractive to Edmund. His nerves still raw from his brother's last tongue-lashing as he had expelled him forever from the family, he had no stomach for insult from another quarter.

"Very well, then." He sat back down and poured himself a generous dose of brandy, a nod to keeping the contest even against the young man. "Dutton, you are witness to his willingness—nay, eagerness—to play me."

"Oh, aye, m'lord, and of yers to play him. And may the best man win." So saying, he gave young Ormhill another wink and poured a second helping of brandy into his glass.

Odd, Edmund thought. He warns the boy against drinking, then fills his glass. Have to keep my eye on that one. Could be some mischief afoot. He started to protest further drinking by his opponent, but saw from Ormhill's outthrust jaw that no advice of his would be welcome.

A lamb for the fleecing. Such a disagreeable lamb, though. Edmund smiled grimly, gathered in the cards, and began shuffling them.

At first Edmund steadily raked in the winnings. He did not offer to quit again, though. Young Ormhill had a determined set to his jaw and an apparently bottomless pocket. As he watched the coins pile up beside his elbow, Edmund recalled how, when he had quit his brother's house for the last time, his old nurse had run out to hug him once more, weeping. She had taken his hands in hers, kissed them, and said, "The Lord will provide." He wondered if that strict Scots presbyter would consider a game of chance eligible to be counted as the Lord's provision for him. Perhaps it was, for neither he nor anyone else had made another.

Ormhill partook several times of the brandy bottle, each time urging the same on his opponent. Edmund shrugged and accepted, warning him, "If you think to get me drunk and have the advantage of me, think again. I am notorious for my head for liquor."

"No such thing," Ormhill protested indignantly. "Improve your game. Improves mine. More I drink, better I play. True, ain't it, Dutton?"

The tavern owner pointed the pipe at Edmund. "'S God's truth, my lord, and an honest boy for warning you."

Edmund only smiled at the ludicrous thought that this stripling, who grew drunker by the minute, could manage to both outdrink and outplay him. "I'm much obliged, Mr. Ormhill, for your confession in the interest of fair play." The sarcasm in his voice made no impression, though.

Ormhill's temper had improved after winning the last round. He waved his hand expansively. "Fair play, that's right. Gotta have fair play." He splashed another measure of brandy in both their glasses.

Ormhill won the next hand, too, clearly a fluke, as he looked bleary-eyed and his hands were unsteady as he shuffled the cards. Brag required concentration and the ability to calculate the odds of various card combinations. It also required control of facial expressions so the opponent would not guess the strength of one's hand. Edmund decided that one reason he had misjudged the last few times had been that the boy's drunkenness gave him a vacuous countenance in which it was impossible to read anything. *I'll play more cautiously, he thought, for the lad does have the devil's own luck. But it can't last, nor can he concentrate as he needs to do.*

Edmund confidently made his bet, and watched with surprise as the youngster played a brilliant hand and swept up another goodly portion of what he had previously lost. He pushed the brandy glass aside when Ormhill filled it once again, and concentrated hard on his play. Still, Ormhill trounced him and again had recourse to the brandy.

"I think we are about even now," Edmund suggested.

"Nonshense. You only wish to quit because I am w-winning."

"A while ago you said I only wanted to quit because I was winning."

"Tell you what." Ormhill turned in his chair, nearly falling out of it in the process. "We'll play 'til one o'clock. Tha's 'nuther hour. Finish the hand we're on then, and stop, no matter who's ahead."

Another hour. If he continues to win at this rate I'll be cleaned out by then. But how can he, with such massive amounts of brandy in him? Reluctantly, Edmund nodded. "One o'clock. Not one second after."

Ormhill leaned over and offered his hand on the deal, nearly oversetting the sturdy, battered old table in the process.

Long before one, Edmund pushed the last of his pile of coins over to Ormhill's side of the table. "That's it," he said. "Except for a coin for our host to cover my horse's stabling, I'm out of blunt. 'Fraid our game must end."

"N-n-no," Ormhill said, waving an unsteady hand in front of Edmund's nose. "One o'clock. 'S-what we said. Shook on it. Didn't we, Dutton?"

Dutton nodded silently from his chair.

"But I have naught to wager," Edmund insisted.

"Take your vowels. Look, your luck must change soon. Don' give up now."

Edmund put his head between his hands. "My vowels are worthless, Ormhill. I'm cleaned out."

"Be glad to wait until your next quarter's—"

"I have no allowance," Edmund could not help but shout, and his sense of desperation, renewed by this reversal at cards, made his voice crack. "No income. Nothing. You see before you a prodigal son who came home and was told he wasn't good enough to sup with his brother's hogs."

He lifted his head and looked into Ormhill's uncomprehending eyes. "I've naught but my horse and tack and the clothes on my back."

After a thoughtful silence: "Rather fancy that vest," Ormhill offered. He picked up the brandy bottle in front of him and drained it. "Stake it 'gainst a guinea?"

Insanity, desperation, exhaustion, all overwhelmed Edmund. *Why not? Lose the clothes off my back, then my horse and tack, and I can walk naked until I am taken up by the law and fulfill my destiny as predicted by my brother.*

To his brandy-befuddled, exhausted mind this seemed suddenly a very good idea. He opened the last bottle and poured each of them a generous measure. Even his hard head felt muzzy. The cards swam before his eyes. But young Ormhill actually swayed in his chair. *Surely, surely, he can't play a decent hand now,* Edmund thought desperately.

He soon knew better. As the clock ticked inexorably nearer to one o'clock, his young opponent piled up vowels for his shirt, coat, and riding breeches. Much merriment accompanied the loss of his undergarments, though the joke was less appreciated by Edmund than by Jason and the landlord.

Eager to bring the evening to its disastrous conclusion, Edmund then wagered his tack. He lost his saddle and bridle, and his beloved Storm soon followed.

"You. . . you'll treat him well," Edmund demanded. "Carried me from one end of the peninsula to the other. Saved my life more than once, too."

"I'll re-rev . . . worship him." Ormhill nodded. His head rested on one hand; his cards almost dangled in the other. But he played brilliantly. At 12:45 A.M. Edmund had nothing more to wager.

"And that's an end to it," he groaned, as Ormhill prepared to play another hand. "I'll strip and be off."

Ormhill stared. "Wha'zat mean?"

"Just what I said." He stood and started to take off his coat.

"Wait a minute." Ormhill seemed to focus clearly on him for the first time in an hour. "You don' mean ye're really and truly done in?"

"Rolled up, horse and foot."

"What . . . what will you do?"

"Take a long, refreshing walk toward London."

"Can't do that! Scandalize the county!"

"Aye, it would and all," Dutton chimed in, yawning. "Get taken up by the bailiffs."

"'Sides," Ormhill drawled, "catch cold."

"In late July?" Edmund laughed as he started on the buttons of his vest.

Horried, Jason urged him, "Come on. Mus' have sompthin' . . ."

"I've nothing left but myself."

Ormhill stared at him hard, then slid back in his chair. "Dutton?"

"Sir?"

"Wh-wha's a man worth?"

Dutton rubbed at his stubbly chin. "Well, now, that depends, young sir. If'n he's a common laborer, sixpence a day. If'n he's a shepherd, or . . ."

"But what if he's a lord?"

"Shouldna think he'd be worth a thing, begging yer pardon, m'lord, if he has neither land nor blunt nor prospects."

"Bah! Lord Edmund on the marriage mart'd be worth a fortune."

Edmund shook his head. "Penniless and without prospects? Nonsense."

"Hmmm. Still, a cit looking to hook up to a noble family?"

"Rich cits didn't get that way by being stupid. My family has completely cast me aside, so marriage to me would not pave the way into the *ton*. I'm broke. I haven't the least notion of how to earn an honest dollar except with a sword, and I've done with war. Price me at common labor, if you will, and we'll play one more hand."

"Couldn't do that. Wouldn't seem right."

"If I lose, you'll have to employ me, right? Better than dying of starvation, as I would if taken up by the law for indecent exposure, for there's none to pay for my keep in jail." Hope reentered Edmund's fuddled brain. If the young chub took this bet, he would win a way of sustaining life even if he lost. Of course, he had friends who would help him, but charity appealed to him even less than the other alternatives.

Stumped, Ormhill sat, chin in hands, considering Edmund as if he hadn't really seen him before. Finally he leaned back in his chair and snapped his fingers, or attempted to. Lack of coordination deprived the gesture of its sound.

"No. Not as a laborer. If I win, you'll marry m'sister."

"What? You can't seriously want someone like me to marry your sister!"

"Do! I' fact, you're perfect."

In spite of himself, Edmund felt a jolt of hope. *Doubtless some property comes with her. Something wrong with her, of course, but I'm in no position to be choosy.*

"Wan' anyone to marry her. Can't marry 'less she's wed to a lord. Right, Dutton?"

" 'S truth, young sir."

"Mine is only a courtesy title, you know." Edmund's brief hope began to fade.

"Don' matter. Jus' so she marries a lord. Tha's all it says."

"It?"

"M' father's will. Says Livvy must marry a lord."

"She must be an antidote, if you think I am a perfect candidate for her husband."

A crack of laughter from the landlord seemed to confirm this thought.

"Well, wouldn't say that." Ormhill rubbed his mouth, seemingly at a loss for words.

Edmund ruminated. "Never mind. I'm in no position to be choosy. If she has a decent dowry, I'll take her. Couldn't support her otherwise."

Jason scratched his nose. "Mus' be honest. She has, and then she hasn't. Has a tidy little farm of her own. But her husband can't sell it, and if I decide he's mistreating her, I get it. M' father's will tied it up right and tight. Husband can use th' income to feed and clothe the family. Can't nalannate . . . nailienate . . ."

"Alienate. As in sell it, or wager it away?"

"Tha's it. Not even the income."

A tidy little farm! Warmth crept into Edmund's voice. "I don't care about that. Or about her being an antidote. A place to live. Land! You've offered me a glimpse of heaven. I don't even want to win this hand." He started to sit down.

Ormhill stared. "Gotta wanna win," he wailed. "Notta real bet, otherwise."

"That's true." Hopes dashed once again, Edmund recommenced removing his clothes. His hands seemed all thumbs, and he knew he had seldom been this foxed before.

Ormhill studied the by-now tall stack of coins sitting by his elbow, with the pile of hastily scrawled vowels on top of them. Abruptly, with the loose-limbed gesture of inebriation, he swept the whole into the center of the table.

"M'stake, Lord Edmund. 'S at enough?"

"I have to be honest, Ormhill. I've always dreamt of being a country gentleman. Land to manage—heaven! Even though I'd have an antidote for a wife. Don't know but what I'd prefer the farm to the money." He managed to peel off the vest.

Desperately, Ormhill tried to invigorate his opponent. "Did I say she's a managing female?"

"But not a shrew," Dutton interjected. "Can't say Miss Livvy is a shrew."

"No, not a shrew, but she likes to get her own way, you see. Wouldn't want you to manage her land—manages it herself. And, uh . . ." Ormhill looked desperate. "And . . . and . . ." His face lit up. "She's a bluestocking," he announced triumphantly.

Edmund eyed the pile, calculating. He had little wish to marry a learned female, and even less a managing one, if any other option were open to him.

"I'll make it worth your while," Ormhill declared. "I'll give you my vowel for another thousand. Plus your clothes 'n' horse'n' all."

Over a thousand pounds. It seemed a fortune set against his bleak future. It would be an honest bet, then, for he would certainly rather have that sum than Ormhill's sister.

"Done!" Edmund sat down, pulling his jacket loosely around his shoulders, and took up the cards to shuffle. "One hand. Winner takes all."

Ornhill offered him a drink, and when he shook it off, tipped up the brandy bottle and drank deeply. He dealt the cards just as the clock struck one. Edmund examined his hand through bleary eyes. He had two kings and a jack, but no brags to use as wild cards. Everything depended upon what cards the boy had received.

Dutton watched avidly as Ornhill studied his cards. Edmund knew the innkeeper could tell this story over many a bottle in years to come. When the two men laid down their hands, it was bleary-eyed, loose-jointed, half-unconscious Ornhill who emerged the victor.

"Tha's it, then!" Grinning hugely, he stood up, swaying dangerously before finding his balance. "At last, I've got a lord for Livvy!"

Chapter Two

After a celebratory glass of brandy, Ormhill insisted on taking his winnings, including Edmund, home with him. Storm was turfed out of his meager stall, and Edmund struggled to mount the bay stallion, very much the worse for all the brandy he had drunk.

Ormhill, even more well-to-go, had difficulty controlling his showy, restive black gelding, whose white stockings flashed as he half reared and jibbed against the ill-balanced load and inept handling of the reins. "Whoa, Moonstar. Hold still, won't you," Ormhill beseeched the beast as he struggled against gravity. It took a strong push by the hostler to get him firmly in the saddle. Once seated, the young man gave his animal its head. Home was sufficient enticement for the black to set a spanking pace down a dusty country lane. Under the light of a nearly full moon Edmund had no difficulty keeping his new owner in sight. His head ached too much to ponder his status as "winnings." He had one thought and one only—to find a warm bed and sleep for at least a year.

The road widened out into a well-kept boulevard, which in turn became a carriage roundabout in front of a handsomely proportioned Georgian mansion. Every window was dark, and no one came on Ormhill's hail to take their horses, so he rode Moonstar right up the short flight of stairs to the front door, which he slammed vigorously with his fist, roaring out, "Livvy, Livvy! Wake up. I've brought you a lord."

Edmond dismounted at the foot of the stairs and stumbled up them to catch at the gelding's bridle. "For God's sake, man, get down. You'll be in the hall with this animal next."

Unfortunate prophet! Edmund was thrown back as the door opened and Ormhill pressed his mount through it. The servant, an elderly man, jumped aside with surprising agility to avoid being run down. Ormhill halted at the foot of an elegant stairway in the center of the hall.

Once again he called, "Livvy, Livvy. Wake up."

Edmund followed him in and joined the elderly servant in trying to calm the prancing animal and entice its rider to dismount, when a woman appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Jason, for heaven's sake. What are you about?" The female figure at the top of the stairs was ominously substantial, and her voice just as ominously shrill. Edmond flinched. Even in his inebriated state he realized that a snug little farm might not be adequate compensation for having to marry a woman with such a carrying voice and nasty tone.

As soon as she saw Moonstar, she yelped, "Get that creature out of the hall!"

"Not till you see what I've brought. Look. I've brought a lord."

"What? Here? Who?" Though no less shrill, the tone of the woman's voice shifted to one of interest, and she began to descend the stairs with a heavy tread.

Edmund, one hand at Moonstar's bridle, the other soothingly stroking his muzzle, looked up, shame and embarrassment warring with curiosity to see just how distasteful Miss Ormhill might be.

As she came into view Edmund flinched. The woman was not only stout and shrill of voice, she was plain and by no means young. *Can this really be my bride-to-be?* he thought, becoming unpleasantly sober. *I can't say he didn't warn me, though I think he and the innkeeper erred in saying she wasn't shrewish.* Still, he acknowledged that Miss Ormhill might have some justification for her loud protests, with a horse stomping and snorting in the hall, while Ormhill yelled like a wild man.

Edmund briefly contemplated mounting Storm and fleeing the scene. He went so far as to cease trying to calm Ormhill's animal, turning instead to seek his own horse. He had not far to search.

Storm, whose warhorse disposition had served Edmund so well in battle, had followed his master up the stairs and into the hall, apparently concluding that if the other horse could enter this house, he could, too. When Miss Ormhill charged toward them, arms waving in shooing motions, screaming at the top of her lungs, it must have seemed to

Storm that they were once again in battle, for his head snaked forward, his formidable teeth bared, and Edmund barely managed to grab the reins in time to save the woman from a nasty bite.

As might have been expected, this did not exactly soothe the stocky dame's temper. She began to scream, "Murder, murder, help!" She backed away so swiftly she tripped over her own feet and fell to the floor with a crash, which undid all the efforts of Jason, the elderly doorman, and three other servants to calm and control Moonstar. He reared onto his hind feet and began thrashing and pawing at the air, unseating Ormhill and completing Miss Ormhill's rout. She turned, clambered up the first few steps on her hands and knees, and then ascended them with astonishing rapidity given her bulk, yelling all the way.

Moonstar took two or three turns around the great hall, evading all attempts at capture. Storm gave a victory snort and allowed himself to be led outside. Edmund stood at the bottom of the steps, looking up at the handsome mansion, now alight and buzzing with activity, and spoke soothingly to his mount while his brain churned. Perhaps it would be easy to escape his fate. That woman, no matter how desperate she was for a husband, might reject him after this contretemps. He suspected he was grasping at straws, though.

Finally Moonstar emerged, a servant on each side of his head and one in the saddle. Trembling and prancing nervously, he allowed himself to be led away. Edmund followed, leading Storm. Flight would be dishonorable. A little too sober to believe he would escape Miss Ormhill's clutches, he turned his mind to practical matters such as bedding down his horse and then, upon returning to the house, inquiring about the well-being of Jason Ormhill, whom he had last seen hurtling backward through the air.

The hall was filled with servants, and they were gossiping loudly among themselves. When Edmund crossed the threshold, he heard hoarse whispers of "That's him. The one as is to marry our Miss Livvy." Comments, mostly favorable, on his face and figure ceased when he loudly addressed the room at large.

"Where is Mr. Ormhill? Is he injured?"

A tall, dignified older man stepped forward. "Just had the breath knocked out of him, my lord. Miss Ormhill says I am to take you to your room and valet you for the night. Will your servants and baggage be arriving tomorrow?"

Edmund considered confessing the truth: that he had neither servant nor baggage, except what occupied the carpetbag he had detached from behind Storm's saddle and now held in his hand. But the servants would know soon enough that he was penniless; he preferred for what remained of this one night to receive their respect and solicitous attention. So he ignored the questions, merely inclining his head.

"Lead on," he ordered. "I place myself in your competent hands."

Edmund fell asleep almost instantly, but as usual when he had imbibed too deeply, awoke two hours later and could only toss and turn, worrying about his situation. He had little hope that Miss Ormhill would reject him. She must surely be eager to wed, or young Ormhill would not have set up their wager in the first place. Edmund had always known he would have to marry late in life, when he had made enough of his estate to support a wife and family. He had hoped for a marriage based on the kind of love his parents had shared. His mother's bad choice in a second husband had deprived him of the estate, and he now had gambled away any chance of marrying for love and must face the consequences.

When the sky began to lighten, Edmund arose, dressed himself, and slipped quietly down the servants' stairs and through the kitchen. He begged a roll and some cheese of the surprised cook, who was already ordering about a small army of helpers busy at breakfast preparations. He consumed the roll on the way to the stable, where Storm greeted him eagerly. No grooms being about, Edmund fed him a measure of oats and some hay, filled his water bucket, and curried him as the animal ate.

The noise Edmund made in the process brought a sleepy stable boy to investigate. The lad stared at him in awe. "You be the lord wot our master won at cards!"

"The same," Edmund said, smiling grimly. A sudden thought gave him a glimmer of hope. "Tell me: the heavyset woman my horse almost bit. Is that Miss Ormhill?"

The boy nodded. "That be Miss Lavinia Ormhill."

Hope died. Jason had called his sister "Livvy," clearly a pet name for Lavinia.

"I am told she possesses a farm. Do you know where her land lies?"

The boy scratched his head. "Miss Ormhill's farm?" He looked about him unsurely.

"Surely *this* isn't Miss Ormhill's property." He had assumed that this fine Georgian mansion, with its sturdy stable and surrounding park, belonged to Jason Ormhill.

"Beaumont? No, 'tis the young squire's."

"Do you know where Miss Ormhill's land lies?"

Still looking puzzled, the boy gave sketchy directions, which, however, proved adequate. Edmund quickly found the public road again, turned left as directed, and proceeded up rising ground to the tiny village of Flintridge. At the

end of its one street he turned down a country lane that led to a dilapidated cottage surrounded by over-grazed pastures and neglected fields which obviously were set to deliver a minuscule crop.

This might have been thought to cast Edmund into the doldrums, but in fact it lifted his spirits. He could bring little enough to a marriage, but one thing he had to offer was a love of the land and an eagerness to learn all he could about managing it. Young Ormhill's estate manager clearly might be relied upon for good advice in that regard, for in the morning light the land belonging to his host had impressed him for its well-tended fields, fine livestock, and variety of woods. The boundary between it and Miss Ormhill's land was easy enough to spot. It was, quite simply, the difference between good husbandry and bad.

As he rode back to Beaumont, he remembered Ormhill saying his sister managed her farm herself. He'd have to have an understanding with her on that score before their marriage. There was no way he could sit on his hands and watch such potentially fine land go to rack and ruin.

The subject of his musings sat at the breakfast table when he returned. He checked at the door, and hardly knew whether to feel relief or further dismay, for she had a friendly, even eager look on her face, and in the morning light he could see that she was older than he had supposed, being well on the shady side of forty. *She must be young Ormhill's half sister*, he thought, *to be so much older*.

"Miss Ormhill," he said, bowing to her from the doorway.

"Lord Edmund. Come in, come in. Don't look as if I might eat you. I know last night's folly was Jason's doing. A naughty brat, to be sure, and apt to get up to anything when he is in his cups. Perhaps you may bring him into line, sir, if this marriage goes forward."

Edmund smiled vaguely and, after a moment's hesitation, went to the sideboard to fill his plate. When he approached the table, he took a place across from his prospective bride.

"You are in favor of the marriage, then? For I assure you, I would not be a party to anything that smacks of force."

"As if Jason would, or could, do that! Indeed, yes, I am in favor. I have heard of your reputation as a soldier, sir, and knew your father and mother. Good people. 'Tis a shame you could not have inherited instead of that stiff-rumped half brother of yours."

Edmund choked on his ham. "That would require displacing a good deal more than merely my brother, Miss Ormhill. I am—"

"I know. Fifth in line, after Heslington, his three sons, and your other brother. Doesn't matter, though, whether you succeed to the title. A courtesy title will be sufficient. Just so your wife can be addressed as 'my lady,' all will be right and tight. Lady Edmund will do nicely." She smiled at him before addressing herself once again to her breakfast.

Miss Ormhill's acceptance of her father's unreasonable requirement for her marriage astounded Edmund. It was as if she were speaking of someone else.

"There is one matter that we must discuss," he said.

"What is that, Lord Edmund?"

"The question of the management of your land."

"Of my land? What business is that of yours?"

Edmund grimaced. "Ormhill told me that you had been made quite independent, and I can live with that, but I must have the management of your land."

"Management?" Miss Ormhill sputtered indignantly. "Management of *my* land? Why, the nerve!"

"If you were managing it properly, I would say nothing. But the condition of that farm is a disgrace. To be sure, I am no expert, though I would like to be. I will consult young Ormhill's estate agent, for he clearly knows what is what. You would have been better served to have allowed him to manage your farm. I could not stand by and watch your fields deteriorate further. Nor should you want me to. After all, your prosperity will only be enhanced by better management."

"But—"

"It is all very well for a female to manage her household, and even to hold the purse strings, if need be, but I feel strongly that the management of your farm belongs in masculine hands. Specifically, in my hands. I must insist upon this point."

"As a condition of the marriage?" Miss Ormhill asked, her face wrinkled most unbecomingly with an irritated frown.

"Yes. You may well say I am not in a position to lay down conditions, but—"

"Well, you certainly are not in a position to lay down conditions to me, nor why you should wish to do so, I cannot tell. In point of fact, a man *is* managing my farm, but as you have observed, he makes very poor work of it. So if you require that as a condition of the marriage, I will agree."

"I do beg your pardon. I thought Jason said that you managed your farm."

"One, the other, or both of us is indeed confused, young man. But I wish to cooperate in any way necessary to further this marriage."

Edmund did not really know whether to be pleased or horrified by her acquiescence, but having received it, he had no further choice but to proceed. A man must, after all, pay his gaming debts.

"Well, then, Miss Ormhill, you may consider this an offer in form. Shall we publish the bans or obtain a license? I must warn you, I am quite penniless, so you must decide, as the fee for the license would have to come from your pocket."

Miss Ormhill half rose from her seat, her expression ominous. "What can you mean?"

"I expect Jason had little chance of explaining matters to you—none at all, I now recall, as he was too far gone to be coherent. You may wish to withdraw once you know I am quite penniless. I lost all I had to him, and then—"

"Don't, for God's sake, tell her that tale!" Jason Ormhill's alarmed voice rang out from the doorway to the dining room. "We must ease into this thing."

"I'm afraid it is too late. I have explained—"

"You've explained nothing." Miss Ormhill stamped her foot, making the table jump. "Will you please be so kind as to tell me why this . . . this . . . rake has just offered for me? For *me*! Demanded control of my land, which I thought sufficiently peculiar, and then offered marriage to me!"

"To you?" Jason turned on Edmund. "Now that is a cork-brained thing to do, Lord Edmund." Jason's expression became as thunderous as Miss Ormhill's. "Don't tell me you have been overcome with passion, for that won't fadge. As for getting control of her land, well, you shan't have it! As one of her trustees, I would never give it to a man who reneged on a bet."

"Reneged? Not I. But she is not competent to manage her land, nor to choose who will, if what I saw this morning is an example. Her trustees must acknowledge that."

"Explain instantly what is meant by this bet," Miss Ormhill demanded. "None of your roundaboutation, either, Nephew."

"Nephew? Thought you said she was your sister." Edmund began to feel he had landed in Bedlam. The way they were looking at him, the Ormhills thought him a candidate for the same place.

"Is this not Miss Ormhill?" he demanded.

Ignoring him, Jason continued trying to calm his aunt. "Listen to me." He launched into an abbreviated explanation of the events of the evening before. Edmund listened as closely as Miss Ormhill, hoping to find a clue to his own puzzlement. Jason got no further than Edmund's financial situation when he was interrupted.

Miss Ormhill looked ever more ominous. "Penniless, a gamester, cast off by his family? You think to bring such as that in here, just like that, and have him accepted?"

"No, that is why I didn't want him to tell you. Odds are ten to one you'll go straight to Olivia with it."

"Better odds than that!" the stout damsel declared, quitting her place and marching toward the door.

Chapter Three

“*O*livia?” Edmund mused aloud, beginning to discern the answer to the puzzle. “Who is Olivia?”

Ignoring him, Jason moved to intercept Miss Ormhill, holding her back with difficulty. “Wait, Aunt Lavinia. Just listen, will you? Lord Edmund will suit Livvy very well, you’ll see. But he needs some time to work on her, to court her. She needn’t know about the wager until—”

“Oh, yes, she does, and I will tell her.” Miss Ormhill pushed past Jason and stormed into the hall. “Buckman, has Miss Olivia returned?”

“Yes. She went straight through to her office, though. She asked not to be disturbed.”

“There, you see, Aunt. This will disturb her a great deal.”

“It certainly will. Imagine her brother losing her in a game of cards. Though you have no authority over her, you know.”

Once again the heavyset woman tried to run Jason down. He pushed against her shoulders, and she walked him backward as she progressed down a hallway under the stairs. Edmund was strongly reminded of a bullfighter impaled upon the horns of a stout, angry bull.

“Aunt, listen to me. You want Livvy married, don’t you? You want me to be able to travel; you’ve always said you thought I should. You don’t want her to be an old maid, and me to be tethered in the country the rest of my life, do you?”

His aunt stopped abruptly, almost causing Edmund to run into her from behind. “Well . . .”

“There. You see. Now, it’s not like you think. I didn’t *lose* her; I *won* him. So Lord Edmund won’t shab off as Corbright did, even though her fortune is tied up so tight, ‘cause he’s honor-bound to marry her. Part of our wager. He’s got no money, so he can’t hope for a better marriage elsewhere. It beats the Dutch out of starving, don’t it, Lord Edmund?”

Edmund nodded. Humiliated to be so situated, he nevertheless believed in looking facts straight in the eye. “So you are not the Miss Ormhill I am to marry?”

Miss Lavinia Ormhill turned around to address herself to Edmund. “No. How can you possibly have thought . . . Oh, I see. It *can* be confusing. Livvy is also Miss Ormhill. Olivia Ormhill.” She eyed him calculatingly. “You must indeed be desperate to offer for *me*, young man.”

Edmund stammered, trying to say something polite. She stopped him with an imperious lift of her right hand.

“Speak me no nonsense, young man. I cut my eyeteeth many years ago. A plain female of a certain age cannot be your idea of an ideal bride. Don’t feel sorry for me, either. I have no inclination to marry, and not being encumbered by an unhappy brother as my poor Livvy is, I do not need to do so. Now. Let us go back to the dining room and discuss this thing rationally.”

When the events of the evening before had been fully explained, Miss Ormhill came over to her nephew’s side. Indeed, she spoke with some awe in her voice. “Very ingenious, Jason. Astonishing what you can accomplish when you are cast away! I do pity you, Lord Edmund, to be so utterly destitute. Did your father make no provision at all for you?”

“My mother’s estate was to come to me. That and my father’s recommendation that I should be trained and employed as my brother’s estate agent were my only patrimony. Unfortunately, what was to have been my inheritance had to be sold to pay my mother’s debts after she and her second husband died in a carriage accident.”

“Yes, I recall that. Her second marriage was something of a disaster, I think. Beau Gregham was a rake and a gamester.” Lavinia Ormhill continued to regard him suspiciously. “But can you not appeal to your brother?”

Edmond gritted his teeth. “He has disowned me.”

"But why? Just because you gamble? But what gentleman doesn't?" Miss Ormhill responded. "Ought to be proud of you. Your bravery is well known, and you've not been the subject of any notable *on dits*, that I am aware of."

"Not because of my gaming. Let us say we agreed to disagree, both as to his manner of handling my mother's affairs, and as to my choice of a profession. Our parting was quite, quite final, on both sides. I would not ask anything of him even if I had any hope that he would assist me."

"Ah, yes, I see. Managing estates seemed entirely too tame to you. You *would* go off soldiering, thus causing your brother to cast you off. Harsh."

"It wasn't like that at all." Edmund shook his head. "I never wanted a military career. I loved the land and meant to make my life in the country from the time I could begin to plan my future. In spite of which, when my father died, Carl bought my colors, outfitted me, and thrust me on a ship bound for Portugal."

Miss Ormhill protested. "You cannot have been much above twelve then!"

"I was sixteen and utterly his to command. He obtained a commission and packed me off, against my mother's pleas. I had no recourse."

"How odd. It would have been an expensive investment for him. To pay out so much blunt to set a boy up in a profession he did not desire seems quite unaccountable to me."

Edmund turned away, looking blankly out the window. How hard it was to admit the truth even to himself, much less to others. "My brother always hated me. I will not bore you with my family history, but he wished me out of the way. If I had died in combat, he would have been well satisfied with his investment."

Jason swore softly; Miss Ormhill gasped. "Such perfidy! Did it have something to do with the irregular nature of your parents' marriage?"

"It had everything to do with that. The scandal of my father marrying his sister-in-law deeply embarrassed Carl."

"Thought that was illegal," Jason said, looking alarmed. "You aren't a bastard, are you? Can't be called Lord Edmund if you are, even if you *are* a marquess's son."

"Your uncle can explain it all, I daresay. Something of a legal anomaly, I always thought. Marriage to a deceased wife's sister is not illegal, precisely, but the church frowns upon it, and such a marriage can be voided easily."

"But it wasn't voided?"

"No, Carl spared me that. He never let me forget the possibility, though, or how much such an action would devastate my mother. So even after I reached my majority, I stayed in the army as he wished. Doubtless to his chagrin, I didn't die, as you can see. Came back to England for the premature victory celebrations," Edmund replied wryly. "Mother had remarried by then, and her husband and I had an instant, mutual antipathy for one another. I had no home or prospects, so I shipped out for America, then returned just in time for Waterloo. That was when I learned my mother had died deeply in debt and my estate had been sold. My brother was her trustee, you see, in accordance with my father's will."

Jason groaned. "Feeling as he did about you, he probably did not try to avoid the sale."

"Indeed, he lost no time doing so. I suspect he was delighted. He knew how much the property meant to me. In fact, the sale did not cover all of the debts: Beau Gregham was an expensive husband. What prize money and other resources I had went to settle them. Still, I resigned my commission, knowing I simply could not soldier anymore. I yearned for the English countryside, for the fresh air, the rural way of life. I went to my brother one last time, calling on him to train me and employ me as father had asked him to do. When he learned I had defied him and left the army, Carl disowned me. As I said, the final interview held animosity enough on both sides to make the rupture quite, quite final."

Surprised to find he had told these new acquaintances so much about his personal affairs, Edmund apologized for burdening them with his troubles. But both Jason and Lavinia assured him of their sympathy.

Miss Ormhill, in spite of her unfortunate appearance, clearly did not lack sensibility, for her eyes teared over as she contemplated Edmund's situation. "So cruel! I feel for you, young man. But take heart. You might indeed be the man for our Olivia. You do have a title, after all, even if it is a courtesy title. And you are no fortune hunter." She paused and frowned, then continued in a musing tone, "Not in the usual way, at least."

Edmund wondered just how plain the younger Miss Ormhill must be, for both her brother and her aunt to consider him a suitable *parti* for her.

"I was pretty well-to-go when you explained matters last night, Ormhill. Why are you in such a pelter to marry your sister off, especially to an indigent stranger of whose character you know very little?"

"I know you, sir, by reputation," Jason protested indignantly. "And every woman needs a husband."

"Try another," Edmund demanded, folding his hands across his chest.

"Oh, very well. The matter stands thusly. Just before my father's death three years ago, he revised his will, including saying, 'Olivia shall marry a lord. I have ever felt she ought to be called "my lady." ' It may have been a

jest he made, which our humorless solicitor misunderstood. Or possibly a reference to her titled fiancé, Lord Corbright. Nevertheless, it was signed in front of witnesses. Signed in haste, I might add, without Father's reading the finished document, because he was dying. He knew I had the wanderlust even then, and asked me remain with her until she was safely wed. Of course, he expected that to be as soon as the mourning period was over."

Jason stared out at the horizon, blinking away suspicious moisture at these memories.

"Unfortunately, when her husband-to-be saw the will, he cried off. Not that he is a fortune hunter. Rich as the Golden Ball! He felt that he had been insulted, that the will implied he could not be trusted with Livvy's property. Also, he could not like the thought of a wife being so independent of her husband. By the will, any marriage settlement must give Olivia the right to live on and manage her own land and receive its income in the case of estrangement."

"It *is* an unusual arrangement," Edmund said.

"Yes, well, my father had a sister who made a disastrous marriage. Her husband treated her terribly, and wasted her fortune while he did it. Father swore such would never happen to his daughter. At any rate, the broken engagement hurt Livvy deeply. She withdrew from society and now declares herself a spinster. She manages my land as well as her own, and fills her days with schemes of drainage and crop rotation, while I am left kicking my heels here in Buckinghamshire." As he spoke, Ormhill became progressively more agitated. He banged his fist upon the dining table, making the dishes rattle. "I'm bloody well tired of it! So it is up to you, Lord Edmund, to free me."

"An appalling situation for you, I agree. But it seems to me that your father never intended this outcome."

"No, but a man cannot break his word to his father, given on his deathbed."

To this point Edmund had seen Jason as a spoiled, self-centered creature. This response raised the boy in his estimation. He gnawed at his lower lip. "I shall do what I can, of course, to win her over, but it sounds a difficult task. When I agreed to the wager, I assumed she was eager to be wed."

"As you thought I was your intended, one look at me must have confirmed you in that opinion," Miss Ormhill said, amusement glinting in her eyes. "But she must be told of the wager, Jason. She will smoke it out soon enough, and then you'll find her fighting shyer than ever."

"Once she gets wind of it, the game will be up," Jason grouched. "I thought to present him as a friend, and—"

Edmund responded firmly. "I agree with your aunt. I won't be a party to force or trickery. Your sister must be told of the wager. Get over the heavy ground lightly, then we shall see."

Jason wrinkled his nose as if at a bad smell. "She has this cork-brained notion she'd rather be a spinster."

"Which is not such a terrible fate as you men seem to think," Miss Ormhill growled. "Still, though right for me, it won't do for Livvy, no matter what she may believe. And I dislike seeing Jason so discontent. I'll give you what help I can on the project, gentlemen. But as for your managing her land, Lord Edmund, I know she won't allow it. She's made quite a study of the thing, and done well by herself and Jason, I must admit."

"She manages Jason's land?" Edmund whistled softly. "Then I take it the dilapidated farm I viewed earlier this morning is yours, Miss Ormhill?"

"Yes, to my sorrow." Lavinia Ormhill began to chuckle. "I've rented it to a shiftless rascal, and can't seem to get a better tenant. I suppose I should have turned it over to Livvy long before now, but I felt she had enough on her plate."

"Far from wishing to wrest the management of her land from her, I am filled with admiration. Her knowledge vastly surpasses mine." Edmund frowned. "It means I have just that much less to offer as a husband, alas, since she needs no assistance. What would I do with myself, I wonder?"

"Now, you aren't going to shab off, are you?" Jason cried.

"No, of course not. It was a wager, and I am bound to marry her if I can."

"Don't look so downpin, Lord Edmund," Miss Ormhill soothed him. "You may be just the man for our Livvy: A man who recognizes her ability, and won't try to take over from her, yet one who loves the country life, might be perfect for her, if she will but give up her decision never to marry. Surely you can find a role to play in our family's extensive holdings. Manage mine, at the very least." Having reached her decision, Lavinia Ormhill clapped her hands on her knees. "Well, shall we approach the lioness in her den, Nephew?" She leaned forward expectantly.

"You insist she be told the truth?"

"I do." Miss Ormhill folded her arms across her broad bosom. "I'll not be moved on that score."

"Ah, well. Come along, then, Lord Edmund. We shall try our fate, eh?"

Chapter Four

Once again the trio traveled the narrow hall that led to the offices. This time Jason led, followed by Edmund, while Miss Ormhill brought up the rear.

At the end of the hall, Jason carefully opened the final door and peered in. Satisfied, he quietly pushed it open, motioning his comrades-in-arms to remain behind. From his vantage point in the hall Edmund could see a young woman, her back to them, sitting at a wide, cluttered desk. It was positioned to face a French window that revealed through diamond-shaped panes of glass a panoramic view of the valley below the manor.

Edmund steeled himself for the meeting. In spite of the Ormhills' tale that she had chosen not to marry, he realized that the younger Miss Ormhill must be of a similar stamp as her aunt. After all, Jason and Lavinia closely resembled one another. The swarthy complexion, heavy brow, long Roman nose, and strong chin of the nephew found their counterparts in Miss Lavinia Ormhill. These features, pleasing enough in a man, served a woman poorly. Edmund pitied the other Miss Ormhill if she shared them, and himself for having to look at such over his meals for the rest of his life.

But a gaming debt must be paid if at all possible. *At least she is young*, he comforted himself.

Gazing at the bent head of the young woman in front of him, Edmund noted immediately that unlike those of her relatives, her neck was long, slender, and graceful. Delicate curling tendrils of brunette hair escaped a high, loosely arranged upsweep of curls, giving the neck a tender appeal. He caught his breath, barely daring to hope, as Jason proceeded to his sister's side and kissed her cheek.

She lifted her head to look up at him affectionately, presenting Edmund with a delightful profile that might have served the most exacting of cameo makers. Dark curls kissed a high forehead above a patrician nose and sweetly curving lips.

"Hullo, love," she said in a throaty voice. "You're up and about early for a man whose allowance was burning a hole in his pocket the night before. Did you have luck?"

Jason stepped to her side and took her hands in his, laying down the quill pen she had held. "The best of luck, Livvy. I've found you a husband."

"How thoughtful of you, dear," she murmured vaguely. "But I don't want a husband, you know." She reached up and patted his cheek. "A pity you could not have got me someone to bring in the hay."

She tried to return to her work, but Jason tugged on her hands impatiently, pulling her from her chair. "No, no, you don't understand, Livvy. He's a good man, and a lord, you see. I've brought you a lord. Come, let me introduce you."

Miss Ormhill allowed herself to be turned to face Edmund, whom Jason urged into the room, closely followed by his aunt. Jason hastened to make the introductions, grandly announcing his guest as "Lord Edmund Debham, youngest brother of the fourth Marquess of Heslington."

Edmund's breath caught in his throat as Miss Ormhill turned toward him. She was exquisite. Her eyes were as blue as the summer sky, and her complexion smooth and creamy. She had a perfect oval face with a tiny cleft in her chin. Her only resemblance to her brother and aunt lay in the color of her eyes and her full lower lip. He was as astonished as he was relieved to find that this was the woman he had agreed to marry. But it made her unwed state even that much more amazing. He had felt skeptical of the Ormhills' story of love betrayed as a reason for her being single, but now he had to give it credence.

Olivia Ormhill curtsied, then offered Edmund her hand. Her firm grip brought her hand against his own in a contact that affected him like a shock from a Leyden jar. To his vast relief she gave him a shy but welcoming smile instead of the contempt or aloofness he might well have received. *Perfection*, he thought, taking in her tall, slender form and elegant dress.

"Aunt," she said, nodding in acknowledgment of Lavinia Ormhill. "So you are here to lend countenance to this match?" Her lips curved again in a smile that was almost mischievous.

"I hope you will not be hasty in your decision, dearest. Lord Edmund has much to recommend him."

Miss Ormhill's eyes briefly swept Edmund head to foot. He knew he did not show to great advantage at this moment, having been forced to dress himself in the clothes he had been wearing the night before. That his garments were neither new nor in the highest kick of fashion he suddenly felt keenly. Miss Olivia Ormhill looked to be a young woman of refined taste.

He swept his hand through his unruly brown hair and felt himself licking his lips like a frightened lad from the nursery. *This won't do*, he admonished himself. *If you could lead the forlorn hope in an assault on a Spanish fortress, you can face this lovely creature.* He set himself to charm her, straightening to his full and rather imposing height and smiling down at her, the lazy, caressing smile that had won so much feminine admiration in the past.

"I, too, hope you will not be hasty, though at the moment I am afraid your aunt is too sanguine. I do not have so very much to recommend me, Miss Ormhill, other than my own person and an ardent desire to wed you."

"So sudden a wooing, Lord Edmund," she murmured. But her expression remained pleasant. She cocked her head to one side curiously as he hastened to explain, for he would not have her humbugged.

"I'll be brutally honest with you. As a result of a dispute with my eldest brother, I am quite cast off by my family. Thanks to your brother's skill at cards, I am also virtually penniless. But—"

"But he is a hero, sister," Jason hastened to add. "Wellington mentioned him in his dispatches, and you know how stingy the duke is with such praise."

"And he yearns for the country life, Olivia. No Bond Street lounge, this," Lavinia added in a challenging tone.

"I see." Miss Ormhill's delicate eyebrows began to draw down in a frown. "Is this proposed marriage the result of a wager?"

When Jason hesitated, Edmund answered for him. "It is, Miss Ormhill."

"Really, Jason!" She half turned away, then rounded on her brother. "Penniless, did he say? You won a great deal from him last night?"

"Well . . ." Jason looked acutely uncomfortable.

"All that I had," Edmund stated baldly. "Your brother is a formidable opponent."

"And were you drinking at the time, Jason?"

"Now see here, Livvy. It is just as Lord Edmund says. I played well and—"

"Drinking heavily?" She tapped her right foot on the ground in the manner of impatient, determined females from time immemorial.

"He drank as much," Jason growled, not meeting his sister's gaze. "Tell her, Lord Edmund."

Not quite sure of the relevance of this part of their tale, Edmund nevertheless asserted, "I did, indeed, drink heavily."

"I don't doubt it." Miss Ormhill turned those clear blue eyes on him, all traces of humor gone. "You aren't the first to attempt to fleece my brother in such circumstances. But in fact, he fleeced you. You see, the more my brother drinks, the better he plays. No one understands it, but it is true. We've discussed the unfairness of playing others thus, Jason."

"It is because I learned to play while dead drunk," Jason explained, looking proud of himself. "Anything I learn while drunk, I have difficulty remembering when sober, but remember soon enough with a few drinks in me. And I can do sums foxed I could never tackle sober."

At her use of the term *fleeced*, Edmund had winced. But what right had he to pride? It was a bit too true to his intentions, at least at one point last night, for him to protest. He did not want her to doubt the validity of the wager. He ardently hoped she would choose to honor it, as her concern for the fairness of the game suggested she might. Never had he wanted anything as much as to convince this lovely creature to marry him.

"I was warned, Miss Ormhill, by both your brother and the innkeeper. You need not scold your brother, for I played with that understanding in mind."

"But did you believe them?"

He hesitated, then shook his head.

"As I thought. He took advantage of you, while you tried to take advantage of him. A pretty pair, to be sure! I don't precisely see how you managed to lose your money but win me from my brother while he was in his cups, my lord. In these parts, at least, he is reckoned unbeatable in such circumstances. However, that is neither here nor there. The choice of my husband lies with me. Jason wagered a stake he could not pay. He has no power to compel me to marry, my lord. And I will not do so. Most particularly not a penniless gamester who does not shy away from taking advantage of his opponent. Moreover, one who has nothing to recommend him but a courtesy title, a name for

foolhardy bravery, and a pleasing appearance." Those bright blue eyes scanned Edmund coldly and contemptuously before turning back to her brother, who was spluttering out a protest.

"You must make matters right with Lord Edmund yourself, Jason. I am not a chit to be wagered away in a card game."

"You mistake the matter, Miss Ormhill," Edmund snapped, caught on the raw by her harsh words. "I do not come to you as a winner claiming his prize, but as a loser, bound to marry you by the terms of our wager. Your brother warned me that your circumstances were such as to make you independent and that your disposition was far from pleasant. I see he did not exaggerate. Yet however little I might wish to take such as you to wife, I am bound by my word."

Edmund had the satisfaction of seeing her face color with embarrassment and anger. She needed taking down a peg. Nor did he misstate his feelings. His sudden desire to marry this self-possessed, beautiful, wealthy young woman had just as suddenly been blasted to nothingness by the heat of her scornful diatribe. To do so would be utter misery. Better she had been plain and dowdy. Better she had been Miss Lavinia Ormhill, who at least had a heart, and needed his help with her land.

"How dare you speak so of my niece," her aunt protested.

"Of all the rag-mannered, ill-advised things to say," Jason shouted at him.

"Take your 'winnings' with you, Jason! I hope I may never set eyes on him again." Miss Ormhill turned her back on them. Closing the ledger she had been working on with a bang, she swept around the edge of the desk and toward the window.

"But . . . but . . . Olivia, this isn't fair. I have at last found you a husband in no position to object to the terms of your settlement under Father's will, and can make you 'my lady,' as Father wished."

"I do not believe in slavery, Jason. If he were the most desirable of husbands I would not have him under such circumstances." Miss Ormhill jerked open the French doors. "I suggest that the two of you work out some other way of satisfying the wager. And be sure it does not involve me!" She stepped out onto the stone veranda and briskly walked away.

"Now you have done it! You've forfeited," Jason snarled wrathfully at Edmund.

"I have not. I won't be abused in that way by any woman. But I will keep my word, however reluctantly, if she can be persuaded to change her mind. Though how you ever expected such a creature to fall in with this scheme, I cannot imagine."

"You've made mice feet of this whole thing, both of you," the elder Miss Ormhill declared before following her niece out of the room.

* * *

Olivia stormed down the path that led from her office to the stables. Nothing would ease her feelings but a hard, fast ride. Anger at her brother's scheme was the least of it. The disdain she felt for Lord Edmund did not surprise her. The pain his stinging words of rejection had caused her did. What was he, after all, that she should wish his regard? She had spoken nothing but the truth about him.

That everything about him appealed to her, from his wavy brown hair and warm brown eyes to his handsome face and tall, vibrantly masculine form, should have nothing to say to the matter!

When she heard her aunt calling her, she had to fight the desire to break into a run and gain the stable and her mount before Lavinia could catch up to her. But ingrained habits of respect caused her to turn reluctantly.

"Don't put on that mulish face to me, my girl. What you just did was appalling."

"What I just did? Aunt, how can you? Surely you don't wish me to marry such a . . . a . . ."

"Handsome, well-mannered, well-bred, and willing man? Yes, I do. Or at least, I wish you to give yourself time to see if you would like to do so. But even if I did not, I would deplore your hateful words. Equivalent to kicking a man when he is down, Livvy, and not at all in your usual style."

Olivia turned and began walking away. She could not, would not admit to her aunt what she hardly admitted to herself: her heart had fluttered, then raced, at her first sight of Edmund Debham. The touch of his hand on hers had sent a thrill straight to her toes. The attraction she felt to him had astonished but not displeased her at first, for she had never thought to feel thus again for any man.

Then she had discovered the truth: he was nothing but a rum-soaked gamester, a shabby one at that, and a Captain Sharp, attempting to best her brother under unfair circumstances. And then to learn that he had lost. That he sought her hand only because he had no alternative. *Oh!* The taste of ashes was in her mouth. She barely heard her aunt scolding her.

"If you must refuse them, carry it off with humor; that is what you have always said, and what you have done in the past. What maggot got into your head? Now you've got Jason horribly upset, and he has already been far too unhappy lately for me to be comfortable as it is."

This caught Olivia's attention. "What . . . what do you mean, Aunt?"

"You know how moped he has been. He is an active young man, ripe for adventure. At eighteen, no wonder! It is his birthright to discover the world. To remain shut up here in Buckinghamshire with his older sister and his ancient aunt is torture to him."

"If he would only interest himself in the management of his estates . . ."

"Well, he won't. Not until he has had a bit of fun."

"I have said many times that he may go, that he should go. I am no longer the young girl my father begged him to protect. As if he could have protected me at fifteen anyway."

"You know he would never break his promise. Nor would you have him be the kind of young man who would do so."

Olivia shook her head impatiently. "We have been over this a hundred times. But what did you mean to imply? You do not suppose he will do himself an injury?"

"Yes, my dear, I do. Oh, I don't mean that he'd take his life, not on purpose. But there are other ways. Drinking and gambling in taverns . . ."

"With Uncle Milton to keep him company! Coming it too strong, Aunt." Olivia strove for jocularly.

"May I point out that my brother had retired to his bed long before the mischief was done last night? Nor was this the first time Jason has gambled into the night with strangers. And then there is the riding."

Olivia shuddered. Jason had always been a bruising rider. Lately he had become a reckless one. Not two weeks ago he had come a cropper at a wall he never should have attempted, injuring his favorite hunting hack in the process.

"Yes, you understand me. Somehow this situation has got to be resolved. And that poor young man may just hold the key."

"But not the key to my heart. Not that you care for that!"

"The man who had the key to your heart threw it away. The heart can be a very false guide, my love. You pride yourself on being a rational female. At least consider the advantages of wedding Lord Edmund."

Olivia shook her head. "You heard him. He doesn't want to marry me. But even if he did, and even if I gave up my determination to be a spinster, I simply can't—won't—give myself to such a man. Now, if you will excuse me, Aunt, I have some . . . some fields to inspect."

"At the least, apologize to him for your harsh treatment. You don't know his full situation." Not to be denied, Lavinia took Olivia's arm and steered her back toward the house as she explained what she knew about Lord Edmund.

"And I don't doubt his brother disowned him," Lavinia added at the end of the recitation, "for he is a hard man. Your father disliked him intensely."

"Yes, I remember now," Olivia murmured. She had met the marquess a few times in company with her former fiancé. "The question is, just how much like him is Lord Edmund?"

As Lavinia tried to calm Livvy and convince her to at least consider marrying Lord Edmund, stressing his love for the land and admiration of her abilities to manage it, her nephew was loudly quarreling with him, convinced he had deliberately provoked his sister into her resounding refusal.

"Not fair," Edmund protested. "Nor was the wager itself fair. You led me to think you had a homely, plain sister, eager to wed. Knowing her as you do, you must have been foxed beyond reason to propose the wager in the first place."

"I hoped you'd take your time with her, court her. Thought you might win her over, at least enough that she would marry to please me. But I think she refuses to marry to displease me! And then you go and insult her and end all hope!"

Jason seemed to grow angrier and more agitated the longer they talked, so Edmund turned and walked away.

"Where the devil do you think you are going?"

"It doesn't matter. It will come to fisticuffs or worse, if you go on any longer."

"Oh, ho! A duel. Well, I hope you may challenge me, you card cheat."

Edmund whirled on him. "Take care, bantling."

"Why? Why should I? You have just forged the last chain in my shackles. At least a duel would relieve the tedium."

It was at this point that Olivia and Lavinia arrived back at the door to her office. "A duel? No, no!" Olivia raced into the room. "You can't! I won't allow it."

Jason snarled. "Don't pretend that you care a whit for me, Livvy, for it won't fadge. I'm leg-shackled to you for life, and I've no taste for a long one, on such a tether!"

Olivia shrank from the bitter ferocity of his expression. All her aunt's fears seemed confirmed by Jason's shouted words and livid face. Truly frightened for him, she turned an imploring face to his opponent.

"Lord Edmund . . ."

"You needn't fear, Miss Ormhill. I won't act as your brother's executioner. I am not quite that low, in spite of your assessment of me."

Olivia studied his tense, almost haggard expression. *He must have truly been devastated by his brother's rejection, and my words were so harsh.* Not for the first time in her life, she regretted her hasty tongue.

"I must apologize for my remarks, Lord Edmund. They would have been rude in any event, but after hearing the story from my aunt, I realize I have wronged you."

His face softened marginally. "Not so completely as I wish I could claim. I was desperate and drunk last night, a good combination for causing a man's sense of right and wrong to slip."

"As my brother's did, with less excuse. Now, Jason, I want you to release Lord Edmund from his obligation to us, and to restore his property."

"No, I can't accept that," Edmund protested. "He won all from me, fair and square. The marriage idea was ridiculous. I should never have entered into such a bargain in the first place. What we can do, Jason, is go back to the stake I proposed first: a year of my labor in exchange for its worth."

Olivia and Lavinia both objected to such an idea, while Jason said with a sneer, "Which is exactly nothing, as Mr. Dutton so accurately observed."

"Not true. Did I not understand you to say, Miss Ormhill, that you needed help with your haying?"

Olivia Ormhill once more looked disdainfully at him. "I hardly think you could be of much help."

"Why not? I am strong and willing. I will work alongside your crew from sunup to sundown—you'll see. And once the haying is done, I will find other ways to make myself useful through the year."

She shook her head, amusement lightening her expression. "You are a gentleman, Lord Edmund. What I need is someone who knows how to load a hay wain."

"Why?" Jason demanded. "What is wrong with old Bleck and the Joneses?"

"They have found employment elsewhere, at double their wages."

"Double? Now who would pay that?"

Olivia looked away briefly. "Everyone around Flintridge has an abundant harvest this year. Laborers may name their price."

"Then pay them more."

"Most of them prefer to work for a man when they can."

Jason shook his head, baffled. "Then we shall simply purchase hay."

"If you had attended more to estate matters, you would understand how dearly that would cost us. The estate must be self-sufficient insofar as possible, if there is to be any profit in what we sell. Without our hay, we will have to sell off much of our livestock, thus ruining my breeding program, not to mention your stud."

"Then all the more reason you need me, Miss Ormhill," Edmund insisted.

Olivia laughed softly at his naiveté. "You might master a scythe, Lord Edmund, if you did not cut off your leg first, and to pitch hay up to a wagon . . ."

"Unconscionable," Lavinia objected. "One cannot allow a gentleman to work in such a way."

Olivia continued without responding to her, "But one man's labor will not solve my problem. I have many fields left to cut, and hay lying on the ground. I need an experienced crew to load and unload the hay wains as quickly as possible and make up the hay cocks, for such a harvest as this year's will spill over our barns, I am sure."

"Anyone could load a hay wain," Jason yelped. "What a piece of work you are making of this. It is just a matter of stacking it up as high as possible, after all!"

Olivia turned back to him, a challenging light in her eyes. "Then you accept Lord Edmund's proposition to substitute a year of his labor instead of this marriage scheme?"

Jason frowned. "No, I do not! I only meant you can hire any strong man to bring in the hay. It would be unseemly to put Lord Edmund to work in our fields. He is a gentleman." Jason almost shouted, "And your future bridegroom."

Olivia shook her head. "You'll vex me about this scheme forever, won't you." Her aunt's warning, combined with her brother's attempt to force Lord Edmund into a duel, made ending the impasse between her and Jason imperative. She put one finger to her lips and tapped them, thinking. "I know. You are so fond of wagers, perhaps you will enter one with me?"

"What sort of wager?" Jason asked suspiciously.

"Very simple. As you seem to believe anyone can load a hay wain, I propose that the two of you each load one. If you both, working separately, can load your wagon to the usual height, and have the hay remain on it until it reaches the storage barn, I will marry Lord Edmund. If you cannot, you consider yourself released from your pledge to my father. Also you will restore Lord Edmund's property to him, plus what he had won from you before you began to drink heavily, and let him go on his way."

Jason's eyes lit with triumph. "Done! By Jove, you shall have a husband by this time tomorrow!" Jason grabbed her in his arms and swung her about exuberantly. "Did you hear, Aunt Lavinia? Olivia has at last been caught!"

"I suppose," Lavinia said doubtfully.

"You agree to these terms?" Olivia asked Edmund as soon as she could free herself from her brother's embrace. "Understand, I do not refer to merely loading the wagons up to the top of the sideboards. We would be forever at the job, and be overtaken by the rains, if we transported our hay at that pace. A properly loaded hay wain is almost a full story high."

"I understand, and accept most gladly, Miss Ormhill. I have only one question: what if one of us succeeds in loading the hay wain and the other does not?"

Her brows arched together. "I hadn't thought—"

"Then allow me to propose a slight modification to the wager."

"Such as?" She looked as wary as her brother had a few minutes ago.

"If only one of us can load the hay wain and have the load survive intact to the storage barn, the wager between your brother and myself is at an end, but you will agree to allow me to remain here for one year. I will work for you in various capacities on the farm, while you teach me as much as possible of what you know about estate management." Edmund's voice rang with enthusiasm.

"You surprise me, Lord Edmund. One would almost think you wish for that outcome."

Lavinia interrupted. "Indeed, when we talked earlier, and he was demanding the right to manage my land—"

"He *what*?" Olivia drew back, astonished.

"Never mind; I will explain later. At any rate, at that time he told me he would seek to learn how to manage my land from Jason's estate agent."

"Exactly so," Edmund said. "And now I know that agent is you, Miss Ormhill."

Olivia felt her cheeks warm at this compliment, so rare from a man. "You do not scruple to apprentice yourself to a female? There are many around here who think it quite impossible, indeed, almost blasphemous, for a woman to manage an estate."

"I am a pragmatist, Miss Ormhill. I believe what my eyes tell me. As I rode about this morning I could see evidence of advanced agricultural practices, and have been told that you are the one who is responsible. I therefore conclude that I have much to learn from you."

Olivia's mouth opened slightly and her eyes widened, showing a softness he had not seen in them since she had learned of the wager. "You are an unusual man, Lord Edmund." Again she tapped her finger to her lips. "Very well, I will agree to that, on one condition: that Jason agrees to learn right alongside you."

"Oh, no! If I win, you wed. If I lose, you don't. That was our stake," Jason responded.

"I wish to modify it," Olivia said. "If you lose, you learn." Her expression became stern. "Accept that part of the bet or I'll have none of it."

Chapter Five

"Now see here, Olivia," Jason began, obviously intent on arguing over the stakes his sister proposed.

"A word in private, Ormhill?" Edmund's tone of voice reflected his several years as an officer in His Majesty's service. He gestured Jason to follow him out onto the veranda.

"You've clearly decided to lose this bet and wiggle out of your obligation to me," Jason grouched as he followed Edmund.

"No such thing. How could I know she'd propose this wager, much less these terms? At least it gives you a chance to achieve your aims. Otherwise I may as well leave today."

"And if we lose the main wager, this side bet you have proposed will give you an excuse to remain here and become better acquainted with Olivia. Perhaps you will discover that you like one another very well!" Jason brightened at this thought.

"It seems unlikely," Edmund said, "but possible." In truth, he thought it impossible. Miss Ormhill's raking him over the coals had made him disinclined to even attempt to win her over. Still, he didn't like to upset the youngster further. "And even if that is not the outcome, you will be capable of managing your own lands."

"Don't want to manage them," Jason snarled. "Told you. Want to travel."

"In that case I shall manage them for you, once I am able. Remember, if you lose, you will be free to travel."

Jason shook his head. "A wager can't erase what I promised my father, whatever Livvy may think of the matter. I agreed only because it gave you a chance of marrying her."

"Then I wonder if it is a valid wager," Edmund felt troubled about the situation. On the one hand he sympathized with Jason's devotion to duty. On the other, he saw that Olivia was trying to free him from an unnatural restriction.

"As long as we understand between ourselves—Oh, hang it all! We can load two hay wains, can't we?"

"I'm not sure. But consider this: If I take over management of your estate, Olivia may find that time sits heavy on her hands, and will look about her for a husband. And it will be far better for you to spend the next year learning than roving aimlessly about the countryside seeking oblivion in card games and wine bottles."

"Will it?" Jason scowled. "You can't know what it is like, Lord Edmund. You've had the opportunity to travel, to see the world. I can't so much as leave Buckinghamshire without my sister. It's not only boring, it's humiliating."

Edmund laughed mirthlessly. "'Tis true I've seen a large part of Europe, but through a haze of dust and blood. Never did I pass a day in Spain, Portugal, or France without yearning to return to English soil. In the heat of New Orleans and the muddy, blood-soaked fields of Quatre Bras, I dreamed of just such a peaceful valley, of just such calm summer days. Even the thought of cold, rainy winter days on English soil filled me with longing! This is where I yearned to be, and whether I be here as husband or agent, or even a mere farmhand, here is where I'd like to remain while you travel to your heart's content. If that is impossible, I can gain credentials here that will allow me to find employment elsewhere."

"Indeed, you win either way," Jason grouched. "Oh, very well. This bet is the best I can do, it seems. But we doubtless will lose. If I know my sister, and I do, it is not as easy as I thought when I mocked her, else she never would have agreed to the terms."

"No, it isn't," Edmund chuckled. "Ormhills are certainly dangerous to wager with."

"Oh, I say!" Jason's gloomy countenance brightened. "I'll bet you know how. You must teach me!"

Olivia and Lavinia had followed the men out and stood nearby, fearing another confrontation. "Do you know, Lord Edmund?" Olivia demanded, hurrying toward him.

Edmund smiled reminiscently. "When I was a boy, I was fascinated by all the activities on our home farm. Never one for the books, I'd escape my tutor to help with the planting and harvesting as often as possible. Though it was a

long time ago, I did stand atop a hay wain more than once, helping to load it. Not that I was much help. There is a technique to it, as you well know, Miss Ormhill." He lifted his eyebrows in amused accusation.

Olivia's cheeks pinkened a little. "Of course. Otherwise I'd be a fool to make this bet. And you may *not* teach Jason what you know. He made the wager thinking there was nothing to it, and that is how he must fulfill its terms. I'll have your word of honor on that, gentlemen!"

"You have it, Miss Ormhill," Edmund said, extending his hand to her.

"Devil take it! Well, know this, Livvy: If we lose, I cannot agree to break my word to my father. I will drop trying to get you to marry Lord Edmund, and I will work on the estate, but that is all."

"Oh, Jason." Olivia sighed. "Please reconsider."

"Absolutely not! Nothing will ever make me do anything so base." Jason stormed from the room.

"Oh, dear." Lavinia hurried after him.

"I am sorry you have been forced to witness our family turmoil, Lord Edmund," Olivia said, mortification plain in her flushed cheeks.

"Do not consider it, Miss Ormhill. I assure you, my family's disagreements were legendary, and have recently become so parlous as to end all sense of kinship."

"I owe you another apology, for an offense less easily dismissed, sir. I spoke hastily—and cruelly—to you earlier, when I learned of the wager. Now that I know something of your situation, I—"

Edmund interrupted her by holding up his hand for silence. "We both spoke more sharply than we should have. I must confess there was a great deal of truth in what you said. I have done quite a bit of gaming in my life, and I did, at one point, hope to separate Jason from his purse. And I cannot deny the mercenary nature of my matrimonial aspirations, can I? In fact, only one of your charges was patently untrue."

Olivia cocked her head to one side. "What was that? I am sorry to say I do not remember everything I said in the heat of the moment."

"You accused me of foolhardy bravery, Miss Ormhill."

"Oh, that was truly inexcusable of me," Olivia wailed, wringing her hands in chagrin. "I have heard what carnage Waterloo was. You have risked your life in battle in the service of your country. I had no right to trivialize it in such a way."

"I meant to deny my bravery, not my foolhardiness."

"What . . . what do you mean? My brother says Wellington himself praised you."

"I performed only one act of true bravery in all my years of service, Miss Ormhill." Edmund's expression turned somber. "That was the first time I went into battle, as a raw sixteen-year-old. That in my terror I did not turn and run when the enemy began to fire upon us, I will allow to be called brave. After that, I went into each battle as to an unpleasant job. I learned, you see, that death on the battlefield is utterly random. Good men die, bad ones live. The brave perish, the cowardly survive, and vice versa. It seemed pointless to worry about my fate."

"But you were mentioned in the dispatches. . . ."

"If I fought hard, it was not out of bravery, but out of anger at the waste of it all, the ugliness of it. When the men under my command and my fellow officers began to fall, wounded or dead, a kind of fury rose up in me, a desire to protect those I cared for by killing as many of our enemies as possible."

Olivia watched in fascination as Edmund's expression took on the ferocity of a man in mortal combat. A little shudder went through her. *He would be a formidable opponent*, she thought.

Edmund saw Olivia's eyes grow round, her expression almost fearful, and swore softly. "I beg your pardon. I had no intention of speaking of such dreadful experiences to you—a gently bred female should not have to think of such things."

"I am not so weak a creature as to be unable to bear hearing unpleasant truths," Olivia snapped. "And I think you would be called brave by any definition, so my apology stands."

He smiled. "I most definitely do not think you a weak creature, Miss Ormhill. But I prefer not to speak of the war if I can help it. I want to forget it!"

"I can understand that," she murmured.

"But tell me: Do you really mean to keep your brother kicking his heels in Buckinghamshire forever? I'd say his bad temper now is only a mild foreshadowing of what is to come if he is denied the right to pursue his own way for very much longer. A young man of his temperament, full of juice, must be given a long lead."

"It is not I who keep him here! You do not understand."

"I think I do. He will not be freed by anything less than your marriage."

Olivia turned her head away. "I do not intend to marry."

Edmund watched her expression grow stormy. "Why do you hate the idea so?"

She bristled. "That is none of your business, Lord Edmund."

"No, of course it isn't. But I seem to have landed in the midst of your business. I could deal with the situation better if I understood more. Most women are eager to marry. You act as if it is a fate worse than death. Was your parents' marriage terrible? Have you always disliked the idea of marrying, and dared refuse it only after your father's death?"

"No, Lord Edmund. I just do not wish to put my fate in the hands of a man."

Edmund spoke softly, gently. "Your fiancé's rejection broke your heart. You still love him, don't you?"

Olivia shook her head. "No, I was well rid of him. His character has become better known to me in the intervening years."

He studied her face thoughtfully. "Perhaps you no longer trust yourself. Having chosen so badly once, you fear to trust your judgment again."

Olivia felt as if she had been taken into strong, capable arms for a comforting hug. Not only was Lord Edmund sincerely trying to understand her point of view, but he had succeeded in discovering what she had never been quite able to put into words. She could only nod, her eyes brimming with tears. Determined not to cry in front of him, she said, "If you'll excuse me, I have work to do." She withdrew to her office and busied herself with adding some columns of figures. It was all pretense, of course, for she sat there and fought against the tears that threatened to engulf her. Experience had taught her that once tears had begun, they were almost impossible to shut off. Odd how the understanding and tenderness Lord Edmund had just displayed loosened the spigot in a way that no amount of hurtful comments from her brother could do.

Edmund watched her for a few moments, then turned to survey the vista spread out before him. Beaumont Manor overlooked Norvale, the fertile valley he had surveyed from the road that morning. A variety of grain crops grew there, and along the banks of the small river that meandered through it, rich grass waved in the summer wind.

"Time and past to cut that grass," he muttered, understanding Miss Ormhill's anxiety to get on with the harvest. He remembered enough about farming from his childhood to know that grass must be cut while it was still green if it was to retain its nourishment when dried. And once cut, it must be dried in the fields before being stored, which meant the task must be completed before rainy weather brought on mildew. These pleasant late July days were haying time, and the farmer delayed at his—or in this case her—peril.

Edmund vowed silently to see that the tart-tongued but appealing Miss Olivia Ormhill succeeded in bringing in the harvest. *My life is in a muddle, and I have no idea how I may come about, but this at least I can do.*

That evening Jason seemed to have conquered his bad mood. After dinner he and Edmund had an excellent game of billiards over brandy and cigars. When Edmund had won the third game in a row, and was richer by the possession of Storm and his own waistcoat and riding breeches, Olivia stuck her head in the door. "Six of the clock comes early, gentlemen," she advised. "You might wish to turn in soon."

"Six of the . . . !" Jason stared at her, openmouthed. "You cannot be serious."

"Indeed!"

In spite of her advice to Jason and Lord Edmund, Olivia did not go directly to bed, but returned to her study to go over her accounts. *If I sold those three colts Jason wanted to keep, I could afford to offer higher wages to get back some of my workers.*

The thought of the howl her brother would set up over that made Olivia shudder. She stood, stretched her back, and walked to the French doors to stare out over the valley. The river blazed with orange fire, giving back the light of the newly risen full moon.

Harvest moon, she thought wryly. *If only we actually have a harvest!* Her glum mood lifted, though, as she took in the beauty of the scene. The rising moon was hidden by the side of the house. She opened the French doors and stepped quickly along the veranda, determined to drink in the magic of a full moon. As she rounded the corner she crashed into someone. "Unnh," she groaned as she staggered back. Momentary alarm had her struggling to flee even though she had not yet caught her balance. Strong arms caught her as she swayed dangerously near the edge of the porch.

"Miss Ormhill." Lord Edmund pulled her sharply toward him, dragging her against his chest and holding her there to steady her.

"Lord Edmund. You startled me!" She pushed against him. "What do you mean, sneaking around my office like that?"

"I stepped out to admire the moon. As you did, I don't doubt. But I have found something even more magnificent to admire."

His eyes swept her face with wonder. "Tomorrow will decide my fate, Miss Ormhill. I will become your employee, or be on my way. One way or another, everything will change."

"You don't mention the third possibility," she said, tilting her head and looking up at this handsome man, fascinated against her will by what she saw in his eyes.

"That Jason will also manage to fill his wagon and get it to the barn? I think that as unlikely as you do." He grinned, and she felt her lips turning up in an answering smile.

She had apologized for her insults, soothing his raw pride. Now she stood smiling up at him in a beguiling way. Edmund felt again the attraction that had swept over him upon first catching sight of her.

"Will you grant me something I've wanted all the long years of soldiering, something I could obtain only in England?"

"What might that be, Lord Edmund?" she asked, lifting her eyebrows disingenuously, for she had a good idea what it was he wanted.

"To hold a lovely English miss in my arms and give her just . . . one . . ." He lowered his head slowly, giving her time to evade him if she wished. When she held still, he pressed his mouth to hers, breathing out the word *kiss* on a long sigh as he buried his lips in the soft pillows of her own.

For a long, enchanted moment Olivia let him press his lips to hers in a kiss so gentle and yet so fiery she felt longing spread throughout her body. It was he, in fact, who broke off the kiss. Their lips clung for a moment as he pulled away, and she lifted her hand to touch her mouth with wondering fingers.

"Magic," he proclaimed. "Everything I yearned for as I fought." He pulled her close once again, and bent for another kiss.

She pressed against his chest, though, stopping him. "You said one kiss," she reminded him. The pounding of her heart and the sweet yearning in her body told her she must deny him what she herself wanted far too much.

"But I didn't say I'd not ask for another."

"I, however, think one was entirely too many." She broke away, determination to resist him giving strength to her shove. "You think to take by seduction what you could not accomplish by wager. But I'll not wed you, so you may as well desist."

He drew back as if slapped. "So our bet is off?"

She hesitated a moment. "No, but as you said, that particular outcome is extremely unlikely." She turned her back on him and virtually raced through her study and upstairs to her room, where she forced herself to read a boring treatise on drainage until the urge to return to him for the second kiss was overcome by sleep.

Edmund remained a while, staring out over the countryside, struggling against bitterness over his situation. Never had he yearned so much for a woman, and never had he been less likely to win her over. It wasn't just his lack of fortune that put her out of his reach. He had forfeited hope of her respect last night when he had made that foolish wager.

When Edmund joined Jason at the breakfast table, he laughed at his host's reaction to his clothing. "I asked Morton to bring me some workmen's garments, rather than ruin my own clothes." He modeled the old leather breeches and smock shirt. "These will be more comfortable, too. You'd best do the same."

"Rot! I can't appear dressed like that among my own workers. I would look and feel a right fool. I will anyway, you know. Me, the squire, on a hay wain."

Edmund grinned. "You'll get a nice view of the countryside from up there."

"Yes, and that's another thing. Been thinking about that. Why do they stack the hay so high? Just bound to tumble off, isn't it?" Jason looked a little uneasy.

"Your sister explained yesterday. Unless you have a fleet of wagons and battalions of workers, it would take too long to carry the hay to the barn if the wagons were not loaded to the skies."

"Well, it seems to me it would be better to make a number of trips than to risk dumping a load of hay on the way."

"And she also explained that a good worker can load a wagon in such a way that that doesn't happen." He studied Jason's expression. "What is it, lad? Don't like heights?" Edmund challenged as he loaded his plate with ham slices and coddled eggs.

"Don't call me lad! And I'm not afraid of anything," Jason snapped.

"Nonsense. Everyone's afraid of something. The bravest man I ever saw in battle was terrified of mice. Jumped up on a chair like a girl whenever one came near."

"Like a girl?" Olivia Ormhill swept into the room, her voice chiding. "I never mind mice, nor snakes, nor bugs. Not all females are so hen-hearted, my lord."

"I daresay they are not." Edmund looked at her appreciatively. Miss Ormhill looked a treat in a green riding habit and a gleaming white habit shirt. She carried the train looped over her wrist with an ease that was obviously second nature to her as she stepped briskly up to the buffet. She filled her plate, then sat next to her brother.

"Well, at any rate, I'm not afraid of heights." Jason returned to his original topic. "I'm afraid of not being able to keep the hay on that wagon. I want to win this bet!"

Olivia grinned wickedly. "You have good reason, brother! Yesterday my newly recruited crew dumped their loads as they climbed the hill to the barn. If it had not been so inconvenient it would have been quite amusing."

Jason did not find this information humorous. But before he could voice his feelings, Edmund interrupted him.

"Where are we going to be working? I did not see any cut fields yesterday."

"On my farm, near the river. When it begins raining, that area will become damp, possibly even flood, so we must get the hay made there first. 'Tis a half hour's ride, no more. We have a lovely day, so we'd best finish our breakfast and be off. Forgive the truism, but we must make hay while the sun shines." She then focused single-mindedly on demolishing the hearty plateful of food in front of her.

When the elder Miss Ormhill entered the room a few minutes later, she looked puffy-eyed and out of sorts. "I don't see why you could not have held this event later in the day," she grouched as she took a cup of coffee and a plate of buttered toast from the servant.

"Oh, Aunt, you had no need to get up for this." Olivia stopped eating to look pityingly at Lavinia. "I know how you hate to be up before ten of the clock."

"As if I would not be there to observe what very well could determine the fates of my niece and my nephew." Aunt Lavinia nibbled uneasily at the toast before pushing it away.

Both the Ormhill siblings stiffened at this reminder of the importance of the wager. Jason scowled at his plate; Olivia gnawed at her lower lip.

Edmund made himself look away. He had realized last night how hopeless his situation was. So why was he thinking only of again kissing that full lower lip, of gently nipping with his own teeth where Olivia's white eyetooth indented her pink flesh?

Chapter Six

*B*y the time they left their breakfast, the sun was up and the day already promised to be warm. Edmund mounted Storm and rode alongside Jason and Olivia. They were followed by a gig driven by Lavinia Ormhill, and a farm wagon loaded with provender for the midday meal. When they reached the field where they were to work, Edmund stood in the stirrups and looked around, wondering how extensive Miss Ormhill's holdings were. No fences showed where Jason's lands ended and Olivia's began.

As if in answer to his thoughts, Jason pointed to a large stone marker. "From here to the woods at the head of the valley," he said, sweeping his arm in a wide arc, "is Olivia's property. That is her manor house, Wren Hall. It has a fine view of Norvale." He leaned toward Edmund and whispered hoarsely, "The hall and grounds are rented to some friends of ours, but, coincidentally, they are vacating at Michaelmas. You newlyweds can live at Melmont till then; I plan to be on my way to France as soon as your vows are said." He winked at Edmund, for Olivia had heard every word and was glaring at him.

She wagged her finger at him. "I'm not ready to cancel my search for new tenants just yet." She urged her horse toward the knot of workers ahead.

He was amazed at the small number of people awaiting them, rakes and pitchforks at the ready. *She really is hard up for workers! She never will get all of these fine meadows cut and stored if this is all she has to help her.*

Two hay wains stood empty, and a murmur of surprise swept through the workers as they watched the young squire and his friend climb into them. But when Olivia told them to begin loading the wagons, they fell to with a will, and soon a veritable blizzard of fragrant dried meadow grass flew at the men in the wagons.

Edmund had reviewed over and over in his mind the few times he had actually assisted in loading a hay wain. It began that magic summer of his thirteenth year, when his father gave up trying to make a scholar of him and turned him loose with the admonition to learn how to do every task on the farm, however unpleasant. Bartlett, the manager of the home farm, had grinned mischievously when told what Edmund's plans were. "I'll take him in hand, m'lord. I don't doubt he'll be a-wishin' to be back at his books before the summer ends."

But Edmund hadn't. He took mucking out stalls philosophically, thinking that even that was better than struggling to decline Latin verbs. He learned how to curry, comb, saddle, hitch up, and doctor horses, and then moved on to fieldwork just as the haymaking began. He had sweated gleefully while wielding a scythe, earning the grudging respect of the farm workers. Then he had stood side by side with doughty old Chester Crabton, an aptly named man in his seventies who seldom had a good word for anyone, but who yielded to none in his ability to load a hay wain so high he had to lie flat as it passed under the huge barn doors to be unloaded.

He remembered thinking that in a way the loading resembled weaving, with swathes of hay lain crosswise of one another in a spiral around the wagon, narrowing ever so little with each layer. Now he followed this long-ago learned pattern, sweat pouring from him as he labored to keep up with Miss Ormhill's workers while stacking the hay so that it would hang together once it rose past the high sides of the wagon. He had little chance to observe Jason's struggles, but could not forbear to grin as he heard the youth crowing, "Nothing to it," when they began.

He'll sing another tune once the mound rises high, Edmund thought. Sure enough, after they had been at it for almost an hour, he heard Jason's voice, loud and furious, using extremely impolite language. He paused in his task long enough to watch as the boy followed a sliding avalanche of hay over the side of the wagon. What was left of the pile unceremoniously followed, covering him entirely.

The workers laughed as they dug him out, spluttering with frustration. "Leave me be," he growled, shaking them and a quantity of hay off and stalking up to his sister. "You think you've beaten me, don't you? Well, I'm not done yet!"

Edmund nodded in approbation of the lad's determination before returning to his task. He tested the load with his feet to see if there was any tendency to move in one particular direction. If so, he knew he had to alter the pattern of the next layer to knit the growing tower of hay more firmly together.

At last he stood atop a veritable mountain of hay, too high to receive any more from the workers so far below. He put his rake carefully in the center and used it to brace himself as he tested the load all around. Then he looked around to see how Jason was doing. His stack was only half as high, and leaning to one side, for which reason Jason was desperately adding new bundles of hay to the other side. Edmund had mixed emotions as he watched the youth struggle to balance the load.

It will never make it to the barn, particularly as it must go up an incline to do so, he concluded. That thought should have given him pleasure, for it meant he could learn about agricultural management from Miss Ormhill, and would have a roof over his head for a year.

This practical point of view did not keep him from regretting, when he looked at the lovely Miss Olivia Ormhill, that she would not be his bride. So he reminded himself of her tart tongue and low opinion of him.

He looked around, and found that she had ridden near and was looking up at him. "You still have to get it into the barn, you know," she said, her eyes flashing a challenge.

"True enough! Lead on," he commanded the boy who had been entrusted with keeping the pair of oxen from wandering, not that they had any interest in doing so, with all of the sweet fresh hay they could ever desire right beneath their noses.

"No, not yet," Olivia said, stopping the boy with a gesture. "I want to wait until Jason's wagon is ready to move, too." She didn't want any of the workers coaching him while she followed Edmund up the hill.

Edmund leaned on his rake and watched as Jason stacked the hay higher and higher. Perhaps the boy had caught on. He glanced down to see Olivia looking up at him, a frown on her face, and her lip caught by one eyetooth again. He smiled slowly, and gave her an elaborate bow.

Olivia had watched with growing dismay as Lord Edmund caught the hay her workers threw up to him, his movements ever more dextrous as he built up the load. She hadn't the slightest idea how the hay was made to stay in place, but it became painfully clear that Lord Edmund did. How could she fulfill her part of the bargain? She feared she would never be able to be in his presence, working with him every day, without yielding to her attraction to him. And she was attracted to him. She had been even before that delightful kiss last night. However she might disdain him for the cardsharp and fortune hunter he had shown himself to be, the heat still rose in her cheeks and elsewhere in her body whenever she looked at him.

Watching his long, lean frame as he caught, laid, and teased the hay into place was torture. Sweat had long since plastered the workman's tunic to his broad chest and muscled thighs. He had become a piece of moving sculpture, with a body to put those pagan statues of Lord Elgin's to shame.

As she noted Jason's improved performance with his haystack, she found herself half yearning for him to succeed, that she might be wedded and bedded by the so-tempting Lord Edmund. She gnawed at her lower lip and looked up to encounter the subject of her fantasy looking down at her, heat in his brown eyes.

The effrontery of the man! Looking at her as if he were undressing her! Olivia touched her heel to her horse and rode toward Aunt Lavinia, who sat upright in the gig beneath a wide umbrella, avidly following events.

Lavinia studied her niece's expression carefully. "Will they win, do you think?"

"I pray not." Olivia compressed her lips tightly.

"He is very handsome, is he not? And very well set up."

Very well set up. You might say so! Olivia blushed and turned to study the vast acres of uncut hay beyond the little tableau. Only two workers were scything, all she could spare this morning. Somehow she must get it all cut, dried, and into the barn or made up into haycocks before the halcyon weather changed.

"Livvy, dear?" Her aunt interrupted her worried thoughts. "Do you mean to keep your bargain? For I do believe Lord Edmund would be a very good influence on Jason."

"A good influence? The man is a gamester. Do you forget that if he had faced any other young man the other night, he would likely have taken every dime his victim had to wager? He is a penniless n'eer-do-well, a fortune hunter, a..." Olivia spluttered, her indignation outrunning the charges she had to lay against Lord Edmund.

"I think you are being unfair. Look, Jason has managed to load his wagon. Will you keep your bargain, dear?"

Olivia turned back, grimly noting the truth of her aunt's observation. Jason's load sat slightly off center, but it rose fully as high as Lord Edmund's. "Yes, I will, if they win, which I by no means concede. After all, they must yet take their loads up Partridge Hill. Doubtless they will both spill out there, as the others did yesterday."

As they headed for the barn, Olivia rode behind them, followed by Lavinia in the gig. Behind them trooped the workers and an assortment of children, all laughing and talking loudly. They knew there was a wager being played out, though they had no way of knowing what the stakes were. Some of the men made their own bets on the outcome, to Olivia's vexation. *My brother and Lord Edmund have set a very bad example today*, she thought, then remembered with a guilty twinge her own role in the affair.

The road to Partridge Hill rose slowly but steadily from the flat meadowland near the Sparrow River to the relatively high ground of a small bluff midway up the side of the valley. Her father had placed storage and cattle barns here, safe from the occasional flood.

Thinking of her father, she forgot to watch closely what was happening in front of her. A shout, quickly followed by a deluge of hay, caused her horse to shy and then stumble. She managed to pull it up just as her brother tumbled from his perch. He began cursing most colorfully until his diatribe was drowned out by most of the remaining load on his hay wain. He quickly disappeared from sight under the golden cascade.

At Jason's shout, Edmund turned his head just in time to see the younger man's hay separate along the fault line created when he had tried to balance his off-center load. He watched the boy slide from sight. *So much for marrying Olivia*, he thought, then consoled himself: *That rose has thorns*.

He called down to one of the gamboling boys beside the wagon, to see if Jason was okay.

"He be well enou' to say more'n what he ought," the lad responded. And indeed, Edmund could hear Jason's swearing quite clearly, and frowned at the notion of the same sounds reaching the ears of the women and children. Before he could move to put a stop to this unseemly display, though, Jason's voice fell silent.

Seeing that Jason had survived his fall, Edmund decided to continue on to the barn, mindful that his own load was very much the product of an amateur, and might follow the same path as Jason's if he continued to defy the laws of gravity by stopping on an incline.

It wasn't far to the barn, and Edmund halted just at the door, as he stood to have his head knocked if he tried to enter atop the hay. He slid down, and the young boy who had charge of the team took the wagon inside.

Not pausing to brush himself off, Edmund hastened back down the hill to see whether Jason was injured or just angry. As he moved around the second hay wain, he saw several people, including Olivia Ormhill, frantically pawing through a large mound of hay. Abruptly Jason's head popped up, quickly followed by the rest of him, looking more like a straw man than a young squire. He wiped his hand over his face, struggled to his feet, and grasped Olivia by the shoulders.

Edmund started to move faster, fearing the young man's anger would cause him to harm his sister. Jason shook Olivia and said something to her that Edmund couldn't hear, and suddenly they were both laughing. Then Jason stooped and picked up an armload of hay, throwing it at her. Soon Olivia was only slightly less covered with hay than Jason, and the sight of them made Edmund laugh, too, in amusement as well as relief.

Joining elbows, brother and sister turned toward him. "Well, my lord, it seems as if you have won your share of the bet," Jason said, catching Olivia closer to his side. "My sister will make you an excellent teacher. Do you see that you are an excellent pupil." He winked at Edmund on the side away from Olivia's view. Edmund smiled and took the proffered hand.

"That I will," he promised, looking at Olivia to see how she felt about the turn of events. She was still smiling as she nodded her acceptance. Mischief kindled in her expressive eyes.

"I collect you are vastly relieved to have won your way free of any obligation to marry me, Lord Edmund." She looked down at her hay-covered costume. "I must seem even less of a bargain just now!"

He grinned. "No, indeed, Miss Ormhill. Hay becomes you. I find myself snatching defeat from victory when I look upon such a fetching sight and realize you might have been mine!"

"Fustian." She smiled slyly at her brother. "It seems to me that Lord Edmund is not dressed appropriately for the occasion, do you not agree?"

Jason squinted at Edmund. "Indeed! But we can rectify the situation. Shall we?"

As of one mind, they scooped up armsful of the hay and threw them at him. The golden shower briefly obscured his view. When he could see again, he returned the favor.

Abruptly Olivia stopped, merriment fading from her face. Edmund followed her gaze and saw an elegantly turned-out rider approaching down the country lane on a handsome roan gelding.

"Oh, no," he heard Lavinia mutter. She rushed up to her niece and began brushing hay from her clothing.

"Jason, Olivia, what can be the meaning of this?"

"Lord Corbright." Olivia drew herself up, combing at her hopelessly hay-bedecked hair with shaking fingers.

"Frank, you've arrived just too late to see the result of a famous wager," Jason crowed. "Come, join us for lunch and we'll tell you all about it."

Edmund was surprised at the cordiality in Jason's voice toward the man who had jilted his sister. He was even more surprised to realize who the man was.

Corbright surveyed the trio with an ambiguous smile playing across his lips. "Throwing yourself into the role of farmer again, Olivia? You look most charming in the part."

Olivia pasted a smile on her face. "Thank you, my lord. Gallant as usual. May I make known to you Lord Edmund Debham?"

Lord Corbright had barely glanced at him before, doubtless taking him for one of the estate workers. Now he stared at Edmund insolently and for an unconscionably long time before acknowledging the introduction. Edmund returned his perusal calmly. He knew this overdressed gentleman, though he had not been Lord Corbright at the time of their acquaintance. *So this is Olivia's former fiancé*, he thought. *A nasty piece of work! A crony of his brother, Franklin Melwin had long since shown his true colors to Edmund. Little does she know how fortunate she has been to escape marriage to him.*

"Well, Eddy," Corbright drawled at last. "I see you have finally achieved your life's ambition—to labor in the fields." He shook his head. "I suppose you have found your level—what must cannon fodder do, once the cannon fall silent?"

"Now see here," Jason spluttered. "Lord Edmund is our guest, and I won't have you—"

"Jason and Lord Edmund have just been having a bit of fun, Lord Corbright." Olivia's voice shook as she spoke, and Edmund suspected she feared an altercation.

"Did you ever notice, Jason, how easy it is for those who have never faced cannon to look down on those who have?" Edmund sneered at Corbright. If there was to be a quarrel, he would draw Corbright's fire. He did not fear the man.

"That's right," Jason snapped. "And Lord Edmund's bravery in battle deserves your respect."

Corbright flicked at an invisible speck on his coat sleeve. "Oh, do not fly up in the boughs, either of you. I referred to something Lord Edmund's brother said of him. That, of course, was before he distinguished himself as a spiker of cannon rather than as fodder for same. No offense was meant, Lord Edmund."

"Then none is taken," Edmund said, shrugging. He turned to Olivia. "Did I hear a rumor of luncheon? Haying makes one quite peckish."

"Indeed, yes." Lavinia Ormhill, standing between her niece and nephew, linked her arms with theirs and tugged at them. "All is in readiness. The trestles are set up in the shade of the barn, and I daresay our avid audience is peckish, too."

At this, they all became aware of the interested observers standing all around them: the house servants who had set up the luncheon, the farmworkers, their children, their wives, and even a pair of mongrels, though the latter were doubtless more interested in the food than the fodder for the gossip mill that they saw unfolding before them.

"I do not expect that Lord Corbright will wish to partake of so unsophisticated a meal," Olivia said, and her expression made it clear she hoped he would concur.

"On the contrary, with such a fetchingly attired maiden as my hostess, how could I pass up a bucolic feast?" Corbright swung himself down from his horse.

Lavinia directed the seating at the picnic table with Olivia Ormhill at one end as hostess, and Lord Corbright at the other as the most distinguished guest. Jason sat at Corbright's right hand; Lavinia took Olivia's right, and directed Edmund to her left.

The house servants she arrayed on one side of the table, the field-workers on the other. This odd caricature of a formal dining table might have amused Edmund at another time, but he could see that Olivia took no pleasure in looking down its length at her former fiancé. Her laughing, light-hearted manner, so briefly but delightfully displayed while exchanging barrages of hay, had been replaced by a stiffness that thrummed with some deep emotion. Edmund could not tell if it was fear or anger, sorrow or desire, that underlay her frozen manner. *Perhaps all four*, he mused. Though far from an expert, he had sufficient experience of females to know that they could be quite complicated creatures.

If he had not known Corbright for the cad he was, he might have wondered at the man for lingering where he so obviously was not wanted. Certainly he wondered at Olivia's brother, for he positively fawned on the man. It confused him to find the boy so lacking in spirit as to make a bosom beau of the man who had supposedly broken his sister's heart. That Corbright would flirt with her though he was now married, Edmund didn't wonder at. That Lavinia and Jason seemed to be delighted by such behavior confused him thoroughly.

Chapter Seven

Olivia looked around the table at the pastoral scene. It would be a fit subject for Constable's brush, she thought: the rosy-cheeked country folk with their tankards of ale, laughing and joking among themselves; the handsome, well-dressed lord of the manor at one end of the table, chuckling with one of his workers, his wife at the other, presiding over a harvest feast.

Only the man at the end of the table was not the lord of this manor, nor the woman his wife. *Nor ever shall be*, she reaffirmed to herself. She tried to catch Jason's eyes, but he seemed determined not to look her way. *I pray he does not explain all about that wager*. It would make her look pitiable in Franklin's eyes.

She glanced at Lord Edmund. *He looks as confused as I feel*, she thought. For her former fiancé to visit her, tease her, and join in their midday meal must seem very strange. Corbright's recent behavior seemed strange to her, too, though no stranger than his sudden ending of their engagement and immediate marriage to a wealthy tradesman's daughter. He had paraded Jane about, exclaiming upon her womanly submissiveness and her very proper willingness to let her husband manage her substantial fortune. After her death in childbirth, Corbright had attempted to renew his relationship with Olivia, but his recent actions had put paid to any hopes he had voiced for a rekindling of their romance.

During Jane's life he had pursued a policy of harassment of Olivia that she had been at great lengths to hide from her volatile, heedless brother, who had long since accepted Franklin's explanation of why he had broken off the engagement, and thought him the best of fellows. He had smiled approvingly at Corbright's recent attempts to renew his attentions to Olivia, as had her Aunt Lavinia.

He would have a hard time believing Corbright's recent behavior, she thought, *but once convinced, he would leap to my defense in a way that might be fatal to him*.

She shuddered at the thought. Jason's accuracy when aiming a shotgun at pheasant or ducks was much admired in the neighborhood, but he had no great expertise with pistols. As for his swordsmanship, he had little training and, she suspected, a style distinguished more by vigor and aggression than skill. Corbright, on the other hand, was widely acknowledged as an accomplished marksman and swordsman. Moreover, she feared he would delight in doing something that would grieve her.

A loud ripple of laughter brought her attention back to the present. The company was becoming entirely too jolly, and she realized they had lingered too long at the meal, drinking the ale that workmen insisted was necessary to their doing a good day's work, but which she suspected only slowed them down. She had long since learned not to attempt to wean the English farm laborer from his ale, so she provided it, but she knew better than to offer unlimited helpings. She stood, signifying that the meal was over.

Lord Corbright stood, too, rapping his tankard on the table for attention. "Before we go, I'd like to propose a toast. To the fairest, best-loved lady farmer in all of England." He saluted Livvy with the mug, then raised it to his lips. The sentiment was applauded, and the toast drunk. The servants and workers exchanged significant glances and sly nudges. Livvy felt her cheeks heat, and looked away, only to meet Lord Edmund's wondering eyes. What must he think? The very idea of such a toast in public, and to his former fiancée at that!

As the workmen and women walked away, talking and laughing, and the house servants began clearing the table, Lavinia bustled up to Livvy. "Well, did you hear that? Very promising, I'd call it."

"Would you?" Livvy snapped. "Promising of what? My descent into infamy?"

"Of course not, dearest. It is clear that he has accepted you for what you are at last, and is going to court you again."

Livvy shook her head emphatically. "That's not it, nor would I find it cause for celebration if it were. He is making mischief again, drat the man."

Edmund had watched and listened throughout the meal, trying to sort out and understand the relationships among these people. Thoroughly confused and frustrated, he blurted out, "I think it very odd that a married man would court your niece, Miss Ormhill, and even odder that you would applaud it."

"Mercy upon us, Lord Edmund. Lord Corbright is not married. He is a widower. His poor little wife perished in childbirth over a year ago."

"Ah." He looked at Livvy, whose eyes met his unflinchingly. "That explains his behavior." What, he wondered, explained Olivia Ormhill's red cheeks and sparkling eyes? Any number of emotions could account for them, from anger to embarrassment to pleasurable excitement.

Her answer shed little light on her feelings, but made it clear she did not wish to discuss the matter further. "I do not take it to be anything but a hum. Now if you will excuse me, Lord Edmund, I must organize the workers. The hay must be put into the barn and as many more loads as possible brought in yet this day. And someone must begin cutting another meadow or we shall be at a standstill in a day or two."

"Shall I help with the unloading, load another wagon, or take up a scythe?"

Jason joined them just then, along with Corbright. "None of that," he said, laughing gaily. "Frank has invited us to look over the two stallions he recently purchased."

"Alas, we cannot avail ourselves of Lord Corbright's gracious offer, Jason." Edmund threw his arm around the boy in a companionable gesture. "We are pledged to your sister. Have you forgotten our wager?"

"You surely do not intend to hold your brother to this foolish bet, Livvy." Corbright moved in front of her, standing too close, his position such as to suggest an intimacy that she found all the more uncomfortable because it had once been so very much what she wished for. "You cannot mean to make a farmhand of the boy."

She wondered exactly what Jason had told him. If he had given away the part about trying to marry her to Lord Edmund, she would wring his neck. "I've no intention of doing so, *Lord Corbright*." She stressed his title and moved backward, firmly rejecting what his posture and use of her pet name implied.

Corbright pivoted toward her brother. "No? That is not what it seems." He plucked a bit of hay from Jason's hair. "Next I expect to see him wielding a scythe."

"I say! The very thing! Much more fun than stacking hay." Jason brushed at his clothing and grimaced humorously.

"No, brother. We'll leave the mowing to men accustomed to the scythe. You and Lord Edmund agreed to apprentice yourselves to me as estate managers, not fieldhands. You *should* have a look at Lord Corbright's horses. After all, the stud is an important part of your estate."

Jason took this notion up instantly. "Just so. Come along, Lord Edmund."

Edmund shook his head. "You seem to forget we have neither horse nor carriage at our disposal, and your sister has something of a mess on her hands."

"The workers will pick that up," Jason declared, waving this objection away. "And we can return to the manor with Aunt Lavinia, for I certainly shan't wear these clothes anywhere!"

"You go on, then," Edmund declared. "I intend to remain here. Miss Ormhill needs help getting her hay in, and I intend to do just that." He deliberately made his tone disdainful.

Jason's chin came up. "I'll stay too, then. You can explain to me how to keep it on the wagon this time."

Corbright's glance shifted from Olivia to Edmund and back again. His lips tightened, though his words were cordial. "As you wish. But you doubtless are a prime judge of horseflesh, Edmund. I would like you to take a look at a filly I think to purchase. Godolphin's line, and looks to be fast."

Edmund was tempted; there was no gainsaying that. He had a weakness for fine horses, and knew himself to be an excellent judge. But he also knew Corbright. He had been the victim of some cruel pranks into which he had been drawn, a naive boy seeking the company of his much admired older brother, by the cozening ways of Franklin Melwin. He had no wish to spend time with the man.

"I am no child to be tricked into a leaky boat now, Frank," he growled. "Nor is young Jason such a fribble as to leave his sister in the lurch when she is short of workers and has an abundant harvest of hay to bring in."

Corbright's smile twisted a little, resembling a sneer as he looked at Olivia. "You do appear to be a little short-handed, my dear. Tch. You should realize that the haying won't wait on your whims. Your fields should be full of workers now, as mine are."

Olivia could bear it no longer. "Your fields are full of *my* workers, Lord Corbright. Hired from me at double wages, poor ignorant creatures."

"Ignorant? I think not." Corbright laughed patronizingly. "What man in his right mind wouldn't take double wages? I need their labor; they need the money. Business, my love. If you understood these things so ill, you should never have set yourself up as an estate manager."

"How dare you!" Olivia felt her cheeks flushing. Aunt Lavinia's hand was on her sleeve, urging temperance. She lowered her voice. "Do not dare to call me your love, or I shall slap your faithless face."

"Mmmmm. The lady doth protest too much." Corbright flicked her cheek briefly with his right hand. Several of the workers tittered, reminding them all once again that they had an audience.

Olivia turned toward the sound. "Get to work, all of you. Lunch is over, and we have much to do."

Corbright turned to the knot of men nearby. "Come and work for me, if you do not like being ordered about by a woman. As Miss Ormhill said, I am paying double wages this year, and—"

"See here," Jason protested.

"And who is to carry your families through the winter if you work for him?" Olivia snapped. "I have always made bread available to my workers' families throughout the winter. But I shan't be able to do so this year if my crops ruin in the field."

"The county will give us bread, Miss Ormhill," one bold young man called out.

"You men can get bread from the outdoor relief, true enough. But do not forget, as my other workers have, that your ration will feed only you, not your family."

Several of the women began to murmur and move among the men. Clearly they found this argument persuasive, even if all of the men did not. The group of workers drifted toward the pile of hay and the wagons.

Corbright snorted. "Sentimental twaddle. Such patriarchal solicitude has no place in the modern world. Jason, instead of being schooled by your sister, why do you not school her to return to her needlework? You'll be a poor man at this rate."

But Jason, feckless, heedless Jason, stood silent, fists clenched. Edmund could see that the scales had fallen from his eyes. "You tried to hire our workers right from under us. And here I thought you were hoping to regain Olivia's affection."

"That were a forlorn hope indeed," Olivia said. "Come, dear. Lord Corbright has much work to do, and so do we." She attempted to turn Jason from the confrontation.

"Your sister has no affections to engage," Corbright retorted, his face almost purple with anger. "She's turning into a harpy, an ape leader, but that doesn't mean you have to let her bankrupt you. Come, Jason, be a man. Stand up to her."

Edmund wanted to put his fist through Corbright's scheming face, but saw no way to intervene without extinguishing Jason's suddenly kindled manhood. He stepped a bit closer, though, and knew by the tightening of Corbright's jaw muscle that his support of Jason had been noted.

"My sister is not a harpy," Jason responded. "You think to turn me against her. If you are paying double wages, you have been conspiring to destroy her, and me as well. How could I have been so blind? You have outworn your welcome, sir. I am sure my sister will join me in desiring you, in the future, to approach your estate by the public road instead of across our property."

"You are a fool, boy! She'll squander your inheritance, and then where will you be?" Corbright clapped his expensive beaver derby on his head. "Under the cat's-paw and not even married."

Jason started for him; Edmund caught at his elbow, stopping him before he had well begun the charge.

"And you are *de trop*, Franklin. I know a gentleman of your impeccable lineage would not wish to linger where he is not wanted."

Twin gasps from the Ormhill women followed Edmund's words, for they knew just how provocative they must be to the grandson of a gunsmith and son of a munitions manufacturer, whose late father had been so recently made a baron the ink had scarcely dried upon the parchment. Corbright started toward him, then checked his stride. Edmund held those pale blue eyes with his own until Corbright looked away.

"I don't need you to fight my battles," Jason sputtered, striking at Edmund's hand where it gripped his elbow.

But Corbright turned on his heel. Without another word he mounted his horse and rode away. And Edmund noted his direction with great satisfaction. "He's taking the road, Jason. You did well."

"I'd have done a great deal better to give him a facer. I'll thank you not to play nursemaid." Jason's fists were clenched. Clearly he would like to take on Edmund now that Corbright was out of reach. "Put your hand on me again, if you dare!"

"Not now. Your sister has enough on her plate."

Jason looked at Olivia's pale, drawn features. "Now, Livvy. Don't fret," he said, catching her up in a hug. "Why didn't you tell me what that mushroom was up to?"

"I . . ." Olivia leaned against him, straining to hold back tears. "I didn't want to worry you."

"War," Lavinia intoned. "Not flirting, not trying to rekindle your affections. War. I feel quite as bad as Jason, encouraging him as I did."

Edmund felt admiration at the way the family drew together. He also felt envy, and a deep sense of loneliness. He turned away, for he had a hay wain to unload.