

## **The Wedding Party**

**by Alma Katsu**

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“Go saddle your horse; you’re to represent the family at the Jacobs’s wedding,” Charles St. Andrew told his son, Jonathan, late one autumn morning. Jonathan did not care to be sent on a three-mile ride through the woods to attend the wedding of two people he barely knew. But there was nothing to be done for it: his father’s health was such that he seldom left the house, and his mother would not be put out for the likes of the Ostergaards.

Jonathan carried with him the cast-iron pot his mother had culled from their kitchen stock to give to the newly wedded couple. It was, perhaps, too generous a present for Jeremiah Jacobs and Sophia Ostergaard, but Jonathan knew that his mother was conscious of their position in town and felt it necessary to uphold certain standards of propriety as the town’s founding family.

He was surprised there was a wedding party at all. Jeremiah Jacobs, the groom, was not known for being sociable, so the neighbors—who thought it a shame that the poor bride would get so little out of the bargain—banded together in the spirit of Christian charity to give Sophia a party. Jonathan saw as he rode up that tables had been laid with platters of ham and baked beans; molasses bread with currants served as the wedding cake. Planks were laid on the ground and an Acadian fiddler would accompany the dancing.

Jonathan placed the heavy pot among the meager collection of gifts and then went to pay his respects to the bride and groom. Jeremiah was stuffed into his best clothes, though it was hardly an improvement: he was a bear of a man with a great, red face and the look of someone used to being over-challenged by life. He stammered some small thanks as he shook Jonathan's hand, and was impertinent enough to mention Charles's absence. Did he really think his nuptials merited the presence of the town's founder, Jonathan wondered?

Sophia, the bride, said even less but clasped his hand in both of hers, briefly. He tried to recall if he'd met this woman before. She was young and it seemed a shame she was wed off to Jacobs, but the Ostergaards were poor and, as likely as not, glad to have her out from under their roof.

His duty done, Jonathan headed toward the tables, thinking he would make one pass through the crowd before returning home. As usual, he felt eyes follow him: this happened wherever he went, but he never got used to it. He knew it came with his role as Charles's son and heir to the family timber business. One day he would hold the deeds to half the farms in the settlement, the other half of the farms dependent on his patronage to earn their livelihood.

So, too, did the eyes of every lady in the room follow him wherever he went. Yes, he had been born with a pleasing face, but he hardly thought it worth the admiration of these women he'd known since he was a boy, mother and daughter alike. He gave polite nods to acknowledge their greetings as he wove through the crowd, their glances like hands reaching out to pet his cheek. He felt like a lapdog or tame rabbit to be treated so.

In fact, Jonathan found people's reaction to his looks so unnerving that he'd once toyed with the idea of running a razor across his cheek to put them off.

He rushed to make his way through the crowd, not stopping to speak to any of his neighbors, and sidestepping a gaggle of girls, their faces turned up at him like moonstruck calves. Just as he was about to leave, however, Jonathan spied Lanore McIlvrae on the far side of the gathering, looking his way. She was, inarguably, his closest friend, but today he was not in the mood to speak, not even to her. Today, she seemed just another lovesick girl. Still, he knew he'd not be able to ignore her: she expected his attention, felt privileged of his company.

She took him in with her pale, blue eyes. "It is a pleasure to see you, Jonathan, if a surprise. I wouldn't think you had reason to attend the Jacobs's wedding."

No one knew him better or watched him more closely than Lanore, and even she put him ill at ease at times. Though closer to him than anyone, Jonathan knew he'd never be able to fully return her attentions—there seemed to be no end to her want. "I'm here on my family's behalf, nothing more. And what about you? You're no friend of Sophia Ostergaard."

She shrugged one shoulder. "No friend and no enemy, either, but now we are neighbors, so there was no excuse to miss it." That was true; her family's property abutted Jacobs's farm. "Besides, there is precious little distraction in this town, and for that reason alone I would be grateful for their union."

Jonathan wondered how she had developed this cynical tendency, and he wished she would give it up—it marred her otherwise sweet nature—but didn't feel it his place to

instruct her. She would do anything he asked of her, of course, but then she would have expectations.

After a minute more in conversation with Lanore, he excused himself and headed to the barn, relieved that he could now escape his neighbors' curious stares. Just as he placed the saddle on his horse's back, however, the door opened a crack and the new bride slipped in.

"I wanted to thank you for gracing my wedding day with your presence. I did not expect to see a St. Andrew at my humble wedding," she said, her tone teasing and assured for a woman who didn't know him. He guessed from her confidence, and because she stood more closely than was proper, that Sophia was no virgin. She wasn't tentative around men; for her, there were no mysteries left. No doubt she'd given herself to her prospective husband already to ensure that the match would take place. How different she was from Lanore, who was pretty enough but a chaste little virgin with no idea how to inflame a man's ardor.

Sophia stood close enough so that he could smell the lavender water on her breast beneath her kerchief. She looked up at him from under the brim of her bonnet. "Master Jonathan, now that you have made yourself known to me, I pray this won't be the last time I see you. I hope you will not find me too bold if I ask you to favor me with your presence again? For nothing would give me greater pleasure." Sophia put a hand to his chest, her palm to his heartbeat, and he felt an unexpected jolt of desire. She did not hide her intentions from him; fate put him in her path and she would not waste the opportunity. His father had told him that some women found marriage freeing, as they no

longer needed to preserve their virginity or worry about pregnancy. Indeed, his father had enjoyed the attention of such women.

If this was to be his lot—taking his father’s place in the town council, acting as moneylender and magistrate—it stood that he should enjoy the benefits of the position as well. Perhaps this had been his father’s unspoken guidance all along. Settle down with a woman for whom marriage is an arrangement that will benefit both families. Seek your pleasure on the side. That was another reason why he could not claim Lanore McIlvrae’s virginity: she loved him too deeply to let him pursue his natural inclinations.

He drew off Sophia’s white glove to kiss her hand, an act so intimate that he felt as though he’d undressed her. No other response was needed. With a last sly glance, the new bride hurried back to the wedding party. Jonathan smiled then and shook his head as he mounted his horse, still warm from the ride over. He put heels to the horse’s flank and set off for home, more favorably disposed to his fate.

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