

THE MARRIAGE PRICE

ALMA KATSU

St. Andrew, Maine

1818

September was a busy time for farmers, even farmers as far north as St. Andrew. There was the last of the late harvest to bring in before it was caught by frost. There were fields to dress with salt hay or dead leaves, though this was usually put off until the bleak gray mornings of early October. There was food to put by for winter: meat to be salted, fruit to be packed in alcohol and sugar, potatoes and apples waiting to be piled in cold cellars. Everyone tottered on last legs, tired from keeping up with summer's bounty, but all hands would be needed for the final push before winter. No able body would be spared.

All except fourteen-year old Evangeline McDougal. Her wedding day was only a few weeks away, scheduled to take place after the late harvest so everyone in town would be free for the celebration. Jonathan placed the ring on her finger to signify the deal just days ago. It was a pretty, sparkling white nugget flanked by smaller stones, and set in a band of delicate gold. It was very expensive and nothing at all like the rings worn by other wives in St. Andrew, though this wasn't what she'd sought at all. Evangeline had

hoped for the heirloom ring worn by Jonathan's mother: the ring of small diamonds set in a sturdy band had belonged to Captain Charles's mother and been worn by St. Andrew wives for two generations before her. Ruth had agreed that Evangeline should wear it, and had even slid the ring from her wizened finger and held it out to Jonathan to give to his chosen bride.

But her son refused; he said it wasn't seemly to take the ring since Ruth was still alive. He promised to send to Philadelphia for a nice ring; *we'll hire the most talented goldsmith in the country*, he said to appease Evangeline, *and you can pick out any gemstone you wish*. But the jeweler took longer than expected to finish the ring and it wasn't shipped until scant weeks before the wedding day, so she'd had little time to show it around. This irked Evangeline, who felt she'd worked hard for the honor of holding out her hand so others could admire it. *What does it matter*, Jonathan had growled when she'd admitted this to him; *you have the rest of your life to show it to people*.

Posting of the bans came next, and this made Evangeline inexplicably nervous, as though they might be surprised by an unexpected unpleasantness, someone waiting to make a claim on her bridegroom. It would be one thing if Lanore McIlvrae was still in town but she was gone and likely dead. There was nothing to fear from her. As for someone in St. Andrew. . . Well, what would be the sense in waiting until right before a girl's wedding to bring up a complaint? And yet, now that she knew Jonathan better, she was certain that some wicked deed from his past would surface. She was sure that he had dark, unplumbed depths to him. She could see her lovely wedding day ruined by a woman rising from a bench in the congregation hall and pointing at Jonathan with a trembling finger. Evangeline's heart pounded even as she thought of it.

How much simpler life had been before her parents agreed to this match with Jonathan. She had known nothing of the shameful things that transpired between men and women. Now, it was all she could think about, those shameful things Jonathan had coerced her into doing. That was why she was certain a woman would come forward on her wedding day: it would be punishment for what she did with Jonathan before they were legally wed. Maybe it had all been a test—a test by God of her faith, or by Jonathan of her Christian goodness—and she has failed, hasn't she? Failed, and yet God and Jonathan continued to punish her for her weakness.

She could barely believe the things he had made her do on his Sunday afternoon visits, the time allotted for the pair to get to know each other prior to the wedding. Kisses led to prolonged sessions in the woods, and she'd find herself helpless against Jonathan's insistence, his mouth fastened over hers and his hands touching her in places she'd never been touched her before, in places she had never *seen* another person be touched. He pried her breasts out of her corset, worked the tender flesh until she wanted to cry from soreness. At first, she protested that this behavior had to be sinful, sure that no one would approve. *Nonsense*, he chided her; *they were legally betrothed and so in the eyes of the Church, they were as good as man and wife. You know what a man asks of his wife, don't you*, he pressed. Plainly, he assumed she understood what he meant but she didn't, and was sure he'd laugh at her foolish answer—*a good meal? Healthy children?*—if she revealed her ignorance. *I will show you one day*, he promised.

The day came, as she feared it would. He arrived one Sunday quieter, more determined than was his custom. They went on their walk as usual but as soon as they were no longer visible from the McDougal house, he led her to the barn. She didn't want to object and raise his ire, though she knew what

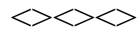
this meant: another long, sinful session, aflame from his touch. Obediently, she climbed the ladder to the loft ahead of him. He shushed her nervous giggles as he laid her on her back, on a cushion of hay. He pried through the layers of her clothing, and that she was used to, but when he ran his hands under her petticoats to the tops of her thighs, she froze. *This is a test*, she thought, sure he was testing her virtue. Or, he was testing her wifely obedience? She was so surprised by the feel of his hands on her bare thighs, then pulling down her linen, that she was unable to think of the right answer, the one that would stop those prying fingers. Deadlocked by confusion, she lay perfectly still.

He made her touch it and wouldn't stop asking her questions: had she even seen this part of a man before? Had she ever held one before? *Touch it*, he encouraged her; *you must wrap your hands around it and touch it lovingly. It's your duty to please me now*, he said. He would teach her how to do that. *You have a silly, scared look on your face but in a few weeks' time you won't be scared. You'll learn how to enjoy it—Enjoy it*, she blanched?—*yes, you'll even beg for it*. She thought him daft or that he delighted in being cruel to her. When he was finally still, she sat up, pounded and raw and unable to recall what had just happened to her, and then an unexpected wetness leaked out of her, as if she had urinated on herself. The rest of the day passed in a sullen daze: she retreated from her family, fleeing from their well-meaning concern. She hid in the attic, embarrassed by the wetness still leaking out of her and the stink that slithered up from her undergarments. That night in her bed, she woke up crying and shaking for no reason she could think of.

Jonathan was right, however: she did get used to it. There were times when she even enjoyed it, though it was the closeness and not the act that

she found pleasing. Because she'd first been afraid of him at first, she had tried to avoid physical contact but, luckily (she came to realize), he saw through her foolishness and had been insistent with her, and now it was as he said. She liked to feel his weight on top of her, the smell of his sweat, his breath, the sounds that escaped from him as he pushed against her. And afterwards, as they lay together, she could ask anything of him and he would be patient with her. *Which bedroom will we share in the big farmhouse? Will you take me to Boston or Philadelphia?* she asked and he always responded, *Yes, whatever you want.* . . . He was always so agreeable after they'd finished.

The only thing that troubled her was that, after the first time, he wouldn't complete the act inside her. He'd press his slick, hard thing against her quivering belly as he spasmed. *You mustn't get pregnant before the wedding*, he explained, wiping the stickiness off her stomach with her handkerchief. But she became obsessed with the idea. Pregnant with his child! Swollen with a baby, a mixture of the two of them; it made her feel better about this arrangement, somehow. After each aborted consummation she ran her hands hungrily over her abdomen, and she came to miss the wetness that had seeped out that first time. She begged him to let her become pregnant right after the wedding. And that date was only weeks away. She would be pregnant by Christmas, easily, and then the shame of what he did to her in the barn would be over and it will have been worth it.



The last few weeks rushed by. The bans were posted uneventfully and Evangeline admitted to herself that she had been silly to worry so. Her

wedding day would be over after today, and what would she remember of it but a blur of worry?

There had been a scramble—the traditional race of the village men to the bride’s house—that morning, but Evangeline did not join them for breakfast, nor present the bottle of rum to the winner. Her mother told the assembled crowd it was a case of nerves, but it wasn’t, not truly. All the boys were so much older than she, friends of Jonathan’s and of her sisters, with only one or two boys her age. *Is this how it will be*, she wondered as she lay face down in bed, flushed all over. Her house full of grown-up men and women discussing grown-up things, and there she will be in the corner, dandling a baby and unable to follow the adult conversations?

The St. Andrew house was full of grown men and women, she knew from experience, having been brought over for chats with her future mother-in-law. Ruth seemed less kindly these days, though surely that couldn’t be true. The sessions were like a series of tests for which she was hopelessly unprepared. What was the best way to roast a fowl? To clean silver? To handle a thieving servant? Certainly she couldn’t be expected to know the latter—her family had never had servants. *Show me your sampler*, Ruth had asked; *I want to see the quality of your needlework*. Evangeline thought she might faint when she handed it over. A thousand excuses came to mind: *I was only nine years old when I stitched this, ma’am. The thread was poor, my needle dull*. The truth was she hadn’t tried her best at the time; she didn’t think that her entire future might depend on the quality of her sewing.

And her father-in-law couldn’t come to her rescue. Poor Charles was declining daily. He came back from the General Court session in the county seat looking to be at death’s door, holding on only to see himself home. His color was more blue than pink, his hair—which had gone white years ago—

was falling out in clumps. Was it politics that had made him so ill? Now Charles spoke of Jonathan assuming his chair in a few years—*if you're elected*, he'd reminded his son curtly, but Jonathan said he had no interest in anything as tedious as politics, and Evangeline was glad to hear him say it, even if it made Charles so agitated that he had to be helped to bed.

Evangeline stood now before a mirror, in her petticoat, smoothing down the front piece of her corset. *Oh my, I don't look the bride at all*, she thought as she took in her reflection. *That girl doesn't look happy in the least bit*. She had a lovely dress to wear—not every bride gets a new dress in the bargain—and her clever sister Amanda was going to arrange her hair. Her slippers had been cleaned. There was no way to keep from going through with the ceremony, though she wasn't sure of the significance of a ceremony, when she'd already given herself to her husband-to-be. Wasn't it odd that she wanted to cry?

She was weak from fighting tears. She sat on the corner of her bed, clutching at the post. When she walked out of this room, she realized, she would never come back to it in quite the same way. It would no longer be her bedroom. She would only come to this house as a visitor. *Her* bedroom would be in the grand house on the bluff, and in the bed would be Jonathan, every night Jonathan, cold and gruff or diffident but always expecting, in his way. In all that big house, there would be no room of her own: everything would come from Jonathan. When people saw her, it would only be as an adjutant of her husband.

She clutched her stomach, thinking she would vomit. She fell to her knees and pulled the chamberpot from under the bed, hunched over it and retched, but nothing came out. She hadn't eaten for a full day. Too nervous.

Maybe it was nerves keeping her from going downstairs and talking to those boys she didn't know.

The ceremony, too, went by in a blur. Evangeline couldn't make herself look into her husband's face, nor at anyone in the benches. Then she would see there were so many people, everyone she had ever known, waiting on her to take her vows. Suddenly, she was embarrassed to be seen, unable to escape their attentions. Why did it matter to any of them if she and Jonathan were married, she thought, teary. Why should anyone else care?

When Jonathan's mother said she looked faint, she was allowed to leave the crowd, the dancing and toasting, ushered away (still in her tightly laced corset, still in her cream silk dress) to a quieter spot in the house. Her friend Elizabeth fanned her face and gave her a great, cold glass of punch.

"I bet you haven't eaten all day, the way you drunk that punch," Elizabeth said as she took the empty glass from Evangeline.

Evangeline shook her head.

"Well, no wonder you're faint." Elizabeth was such a practical girl. Helped her father birth a calf once, and cared for her mother when she was laid up with a broken leg. "Are you feeling better?"

Evangeline nodded. Fiddling could be heard through the walls. Music, laughter, the sounds of happiness. Delight, at the least, if not true happiness.

Elizabeth snuck a look sideways at her. "I can scarcely believe you've been wed. The first among us," she said, meaning their small circle of friends.

"Aye, me neither," Evangeline answered, solemn.

"And do you know—what it will be like?"

The question, so open, could have meant anything, but Evangeline knew what her friend wanted to talk about. Anything could be said now, on

such a solemn occasion. “Well, Elizabeth, you’ve been betrothed for nearly a year now.” Her voice was breathy; she could scarcely believe what she was about to say. “Have you and Edward. . . have you seen his. . . his. . .” She blushed, unable to go on.

Elizabeth squealed. “His willy, you mean? His yard arm?”

“Lizzie!” She laughed in relief.

“You’re a married woman now, Evangeline, you cannot be so timid. So tell me, have you seen Jonathan’s willy?”

Evangeline blushed. “Yes.”

“And that’s all you’ve done, seen it?”

“Oh, Lizzie.” She had to turn away because she could never lie to anyone’s face and there was no question of admitting the truth.

“Oh, Evangeline, don’t be such a mouse. My sister Abigail told me that she’s seen Jonathan’s willy. She said it was right frightening.”

Funny, how in the span of just a few words your world can go topsy-turvy. What’s up becomes down and what’s hot goes cold. She had been feeling better, but now it was as though someone had opened her up with a knife. All that was left was a shell of skin, held upright by tight dress fittings, and the hollow thump of her heart in her chest.

“How could Abigail have seen Jonathan’s willy? She’s a married woman.”

“Don’t be a goose, Evangeline. Don’t you think Jonathan’s been sweet on other girls before you?”

Sweet is one thing, Evangeline fumed, but in her limited experience, a man shows you his willy for one purpose and one purpose only. That meant Abigail had done all the things that she’d done with Jonathan; she’d amused Mr. Willy and gone on to marry another man.

“My goodness, does anyone know? Does Matthew?”

“Of course not, silly, and you’ll not tell him, either. Abigail only told me herself after making me promise not to tell another living soul. I caught her sneaking back into the house after Papa thought she’d gone to bed.”

“And did she tell you what she did with Jonathan’s willy?”

“She said she only looked, nothing else.”

Now who’s the silly goose, Evangeline thought. Or maybe her husband had gone around town showing himself to any woman who would be still long enough to look. How many women had Jonathan been sweet on? She threw herself into the tufted wing chair, cream silk billowing around her. Her slippered feet dangled. Under the circumstances, there was only one thing a wife could do.

“Shame on your sister for being so slatternly!”

“It was your husband that showed her his willy!”

“It was your slatternly sister who led him on. Probably let him look at her miserable titties.” Abigail’s breasts were far from miserable and outshone her tiny ones, but she couldn’t think of anything else to say. She felt like crying now, and wished Elizabeth would leave her alone. “Does Matthew know what a loose woman he has wed? Perhaps I should tell him.”

That pushed Elizabeth over the edge. She lifted the hem of her dress as she huffed out of the room, but not before flinging a scathing look at her friend, the new bride. But the scathing look bounced off Evangeline, nothing compared to the hurt welling inside her. Yes, Evangeline knew enough about her new husband to make her break into hot, lurching sobs. She had already learned enough on her very own.

THE END

Based on characters from **THE TAKER**
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