

The Wedding Night

Olivia was trembling long before Jack came to her. She wished she knew how she should feel. According to her mother, she should be feeling dread. But when she thought of how it felt to have Jack touch her, she felt something else entirely; something anxious and effervescent. Her skin was suddenly oversensitive and her breasts felt oddly heavy and aching. And that other place. The place Jack had stroked with such clever fingers, the place she wasn't even supposed to admit she had. If she were at all fanciful, she would have said it glowed. It throbbed, a hot, wet sensation that embarrassed her.

She got up from her dressing table. She couldn't seem to sit still anymore. It was her wedding night. She was dressed in the most beautiful lawn nightgown she'd ever owned, with a waterfall of lace at her throat and wrists. Her new abigail had brushed her hair to a fine shine and then backed out the door, giggling. She supposed she should check herself in the mirror to see if she'd be pleasing to Jack, but she was afraid to look at this new person. This married woman.

She laid a hand against her suddenly speeding heart. Married. Oh, lord. It had really happened. Her father had spoken the solemn words, his sonorous voice echoing around the little village church of St. Mary's. Her mother hadn't wept. She'd been smiling too widely. An earl for a son. A surety that her daughter would one day be marchioness. For the wife of a country vicar, she'd told Olivia, it was a victory of major proportions, especially when she was also the mother of four other young hopefuls.

Olivia would have been more hopeful if Jack's parents had been there, too. But they had refrained, deciding to be elsewhere on the day of the wedding.

At least Jack's cousin Gervaise had been there. Golden, laughing Gervaise, who had demanded a cousin's kiss. He had beamed on them as Jack had slipped the emerald and diamond wedding ring on Olivia's shaking finger. Other than Gervaise, Jack's side of the aisle had been empty.

Olivia had decided weeks ago that she couldn't let it bother her. She loved Jack. He loved her.

Wasn't that all that mattered? He'd told her it was. He'd assured her of it, harried her with it, even when his mother had condemned the marriage as lunacy. When his father had threatened to disown him.

"He can't, you know," Jack had said later with a grin. "There's enough entailed to keep us swimming for life."

"Jack's right," her cousin Tristram had said as he'd danced with her at the wedding breakfast. "There's nothing his parents can do but accept you. It's up to you to make your place in that house."

She'd been surprised by the burn of tears in her eyes. "What am I doing, Tris? Am I mad to think this will work?"

And Tris had smiled, his brown eyes so gentle and wise. "Very possibly. Jack is like a comet, dazzling and fierce, which can be awfully scary. Do you love him?"

She hadn't hesitated. "With all my heart."

With the smile of an angel, he dropped a kiss on her forehead. "Then all you can do is hang tight and pray for the best."

Standing now before the mullioned window, Olivia wasn't so sure she had the strength. Jack was too much for her. He was too beautiful, too manly, too much, too exhilarating. There wasn't a woman in the valley who didn't envy her this night. She was a pleasant-looking daughter of a country vicar who chronically deserted his flock for the chance to hunt. It was mad to think she could fit into Jack's life.

"Is it still raining?" she heard behind her.

Her heart suddenly stumbled. She didn't even turn. She could see his reflection in the window, and it sent shivers down her back. He had approached her like this only a week ago in the library. She still couldn't believe that they hadn't been discovered that day, especially when he'd touched her the way he had. When she'd cried out in surprise and joy.

This time, he was wearing a heavy silk banyan. Just the sight of it stole her breath. She thought she could see a bit of his chest, and she realized that his feet were bare. She flushed, the heat climbing

her neck. What was she supposed to do? She couldn't think. She suddenly wasn't prepared for what was going to come. If she didn't love him so much, she would have run.

He was the length of a room away from her, and yet her body sensed him. That odd effervescence spilled over into her blood, and set her nerves tingling. Her breath caught in her throat. She could smell him now. Somehow she always did, no matter how many other people were in the room. Not just the citrus tang of his cologne, the subtle smoky night of his own scent. She drew it in like wine and felt its warmth suffuse her.

"Raining?" she echoed, knowing she sounded stupid. "Um. Yes."

It had rained all day, a grim, grizzly kind of drizzle that weighted down a person's soul. The last thing a girl wanted to see on her wedding day.

She forgot it as soon as Jack walked up and slipped his arms around her. "That's good."

"Good?" she asked, her eyes drifting closed with the languor his touch spread through her. "You want it to rain on my wedding day?"

His chuckle vibrated through her like slow thunder. "It's good for the crops. We've been overdue for rain for weeks."

She huffed. "It couldn't have waited lit tomorrow?"

Spinning her around, he gathered her into his arms, a fierce, commanding embrace that ended with an open-mouthed kiss that took the strength from her knees.

"What do you care?" he murmured against her exquisitely sensitive ear. "You're not going out in it."

She couldn't think. "I'm not?"

"No...not tonight...not tomorrow."

His hand was on her breast. His head was bent over hers, and his other arm tight around her. She could feel his impatience in his movements, in his ragged breathing. She understood. She was as impatient as he.

"Is tonight the night?" she asked, running her hands up his chest.

They had waited for weeks, teasing and pleasing and seducing up to the very edge of completion. He'd promised her that it would be worth it. Suddenly she didn't care. She just wanted to be with him.

He smiled down at her, his sea-green eyes like gems in the shadows. Olivia could live on his smiles; she gained strength from them, joy, wonder. She still couldn't believe that he saved the best of them for her.

Lifting his strong, callused hand, he gently brushed the hair back off her forehead. "Sweetheart, if it isn't tonight, I could die."

Her own smile was giddy with relief. "Oh, good. I can't imagine waiting another day."

Before she knew it, her night rail was a puddle on the floor and Jack was lifting her onto the bed. He slid out of his banyan, and she gasped. He was so beautiful, sleek and hard and tanned to his waist from the hours he'd spent working alongside his tenants. There was a dusting of hair down the center of his chest that arched straight down to...

She should squeeze her eyes shut. She should protest. She must be the most debauched woman alive, because she couldn't look away. She knew the mechanics of what would happen. She'd felt the bulge that had strained Jack's trousers when he had become excited. He'd never let her touch him there, though, telling her that he wouldn't be able to control himself if she did.

She shivered with anticipation. Could she make him lose control? Did she want to? He was already hard and throbbing, and it fascinated her. What would it feel like in her hand? Inside her?

"Sweetheart," he growled, laying down next to her, "if you don't stop looking at me like that, I'm going to embarrass myself like a first former." His hands were on her then, ravenous hands, clever hands that set her skin on fire. "Oh, God, Livvie," he groaned, dropping kisses along her throat as his hands skimmed up her legs to sweep over her pelvis, up her sides. "I can't believe that the waiting is over. You're mine....you're all....mine."

It was the last thing he said, the last moment Olivia could marshal her thoughts. She had her hands on him, too, all over him, and no one could tell her nay. He was hers, too, every ridge and hollow, every inch of sun-warmed skin and hair-roughened chest. She'd never felt such compelling textures, such delicious angles, bone and muscle and sinew. Hers. And then he dipped his head to take her breast in his mouth, and she was lost in a tide of pleasure.

She never hesitated, not even when Jack spread her legs and settled himself between them, not when he pushed slowly into her, inexorably, not when she thought in a sudden panic that he was too big, that it would be impossible and he would rend her apart if he kept up. He never gave her the chance to be afraid. He kissed her and petted her and urged her on with murmurs and endearments and the breathless laughter of amazement as he promised her pleasure, and suddenly he was deep inside her, and she realized he'd told the truth. She felt as if she were flying, as if she were splintering apart, as if she were dying and being newly born at the same time, and she couldn't hold it to her. She cried out, and cried out again as she hung onto Jack, just as Tristan told her to, and swore she'd never let go.