

A Cottage Wedding

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JASON NUDGED TARA'S SHOULDER. "JANET'S being modest. It's the best you'll ever eat."

The compliment was high praise coming from a man who'd regularly wined and dined clients in some of Boston's best restaurants. With a slight nod to the chef, Tara moved through the line. The waitstaff manning the chafing dishes and trays efficiently filled her plate with a variety of tasty-looking dishes. At the end of the row, she spooned generous helpings of both the chef's special sauces onto the paper-thin slices of beef a burly fellow cut from a spit.

"Oh, my goodness," she whispered moments later as she and Jason stood at nearby tabletop. "You were right about the biscuits. They're fantastic." Cheesy goodness and sausage filled each round bite. Not to be outdone, the tender beef practically melted in her mouth. She contemplated a skewer of roasted vegetables. Carrots weren't her favorite, but the shiny glaze on these tempted her to try a bite. She was glad when she did. Perfectly done to a nice crunch, the veggies burst with flavor. "I'd love to know what she put on these to make them taste this good."

"It's a balsamic demi-glaze." Jason popped a mushroom cap in his mouth. He chewed and swal-

lowed. "It's part of my job to know my way around Fit For A Queen's menu. We use them for most of our catering needs."

"You're very good at what you do." She nodded, taking another bite of carrot. After spending the day with Jason, his in-depth knowledge of the Cottage's suppliers didn't surprise her in the least. His attention to detail was impressive. Which, she had to admit, made it all the harder to keep the real purpose of her visit a secret.

Just then, the band struck up a spirited number that saved her from embarrassing herself any more than she already had. She tapped her foot to the lively beat as couples poured onto the dance floor.

"C'mon," Jason said, pushing away his empty plate. "Let's join them."

"Why not?" Where was the harm? She could enjoy herself and still maintain her professional dignity. After all, she and some of her coworkers spent the occasional Friday night dancing at The Scribe. No one there gave that a second thought.

Arm-in-arm, they joined the others on the floor as the band kicked off the next number. Music had always soothed her and, for the first time since arriving in Heart's Landing, she felt at ease. The first tune led to a second just as peppy. When that song ended and the band shifted to a waltz, it seemed the most normal thing in the world to step into Jason's arms. Considering their height difference, she was surprised when her head fit perfectly onto the smooth plane beneath his collar bone. His movements were so fluid and graceful that she gave herself over to the music and the comfort of having his arms wrapped around

her. Her feet moved in step with his as if they'd been dancing together for years instead of only a few minutes. Her eyes drifted shut.

A hush descended as they swayed together. Cooned in Jason's arms, she focused on the thud-thud of his heartbeat. Strong and steady, it was a sound she could go on hearing forever. The fresh, clean scent of laundry soap rose from his shirt. It mixed with his spicy cologne to form an intoxicating fragrance she thought she might always associate with him.

Plates rattled at the buffet line. Jason missed a step. Her eyes sprang open. Around them, the dance floor had cleared while the musicians took a break. Shocked that she'd momentarily lost track of where she was, of who she was, of what she'd come to Heart's Landing to accomplish, she backed away from Jason.

"I'm sorry," she said, her face heating. "We shouldn't have... I shouldn't have..." She gave up. "I need to go."