

A Cottage Wedding

LEIGH DUNCAN

“*Y*OU’VE DONE SO MUCH ALREADY.” Tara’s hand brushed his forearm. “I’m not sure how I’ll ever repay you.”

Her touch sent warmth coursing up his arm and across his chest. Deliberately, he studied the field. “You can start by picking some berries.” To give his hands something to do besides reach for Tara, he twirled his empty basket by the handle. “We’re looking for the biggest, ripest ones we can find.”

“Of course. Only the best for Heart’s Landing’s newlyweds.” Tara slanted a grin up at him. “I saw a sign for hand-churned ice cream. Last one to finish pays?”

Oh, so she was competitive, was she? Deciding that was another trait he liked about her, he raised the stakes. “Double dips. The Rights use an old family recipe. It’s the best ever.”

“You’re on. Let’s find a good spot.”

Hand on one hip, Tara cast a critical eye at the low, green plants that stretched a hundred yards or more into the distance. A few ripe berries poked out from beneath the closest leaves. Declaring their immediate area picked over, she started moving at a good clip. Layers of straw mulch crackled under their

feet until they reached the middle of the field. At last, Tara hunched down beside a plant laden with large, luscious berries. Deftly, she plucked one and held it up for him to examine. “These are nice.”

Seeing her kneeling on the ground, her long legs tucked gracefully beneath her, her ponytail curling softly over one shoulder, the sun gently kissing the top of her head, Jason felt his heart lurch. *Steady now*. Tara might be smart and kind and make him smile more than he had in a long time, but Heart’s Landing was only a temporary stop on her road to success. Falling for her wasn’t just a bad idea, it was a terrible one. Still...

“Jason? What do you think? Ready to pick?”

Tara stared up at him, a puzzled frown on her lips.

He cleared his throat. “Yep.” He swiped the berry from her outstretched fingertips and popped it into his mouth.

“Hey!” she protested.

“I had to make sure it tasted as good as it looked.” He grinned around the sharp-sweet flavor of fruit at the height of perfection.

Following his lead, Tara helped herself as well. “Mmmm.” She smiled, her eyes closed. “I could eat these all day, but we have work to do. Ready. Set. Pick.” Gathering berries in both hands, she began filling her basket.

Unable to banish the saucy tilt of Tara’s head from his mind, he kneeled beside her, grasped a plump strawberry, and gave it a tug. Their hands in motion, they worked their way down the row while fat bumblebees lumbered through the still air like over-

loaded cargo planes. The noisy shouts and laughter of children faded in the distance.

The sun warmed Jason's shoulders and back while he drank in the good smells of rich earth, green plants, and ripened fruit. Almost before he knew it, their baskets couldn't hold another berry. It was time to leave. He stood and extended a hand to Tara. She grasped it, unfolded her long legs and rose with a grace he only wished he was capable of. In an instant, they were face-to-face, their bodies mere inches apart. His breath stalled.

"What?" she asked, her voice suddenly hoarse.

Falling for someone who lived so far away was not on the agenda, even if she stirred a yearning in his heart he couldn't explain. He straightened and took a step back. "Nothing. You look relaxed and happy. That's all."

"I miss working in a garden more than I thought I did." Like a cloud drifting in front of the sun, a shadow passed over her face. She hefted her basket. "Well, I guess we're done here. We should probably get back."

"Hungry?" Suddenly, he didn't want the day to end. "Connie packed a picnic lunch."

"I could eat a bite or two. And don't forget, you owe me an ice cream."

"Me?" Jason gave her a look filled with mock indignation. "I filled my basket first."

"Not a chance."

The easy banter chased away the tension between them, and they headed for the main building to weigh and pay for their purchases. Tara was telling him a story about her office-mate when they reached a

bench at the end of one of the rows. Amid the backpacks and diaper bags piled atop the seat, a young woman sat wiping red smears off a grinning toddler's face. The little tyke beamed a strawberry smile at them as they passed. If he hadn't been paying attention, he'd have missed it when Tara's face nearly melted.

Jason swallowed. *Someday*. "Do you ever see yourself having a family, children?"