

A Cottage Wedding

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“*J*ASON, I’D LIKE TO INTRODUCE Tara Stewart from *Weddings Today*. Tara, my cousin Jason Heart, the owner of the Captain’s Cottage.”

The figure behind the desk rose with a smooth grace. Tara got a quick impression of a man with the same regal bearing as his great-great-great-grandfather. Nor did the familial resemblance stop there. Tall and muscular, Jason Heart towered over her own five-foot-six-inch frame. A thick mop of jet-black hair barely brushed his shoulders. High cheekbones similar to the ones in the portrait in the foyer led to a sharply angled jaw. She extended her hand and stared up into slate-gray eyes the color of the sea beneath a cloudy sky. A touch of vertigo hit her when his palm grasped hers. It passed just as swiftly as it came when, after giving her hand a firm shake, his fingers dropped from hers.

“Welcome to Heart’s Landing and the Captain’s Cottage,” Jason said. “We’re very glad to have you here. Although, you’ve caught me a bit flat-footed. I must admit I’m confused. We were told to expect Ms. Charm. Tomorrow. Has there been a change of plans?”

“I told Evelyn that Ms. Charm has been unavoid-

ably detained in New York.” Tara darted a glance at the woman who lingered nearby. “That’s not entirely true.”

“No?”

Two sets of eyes bore into her, but Tara had practiced what she’d say during the long train ride. “No. See, the thing is, Ms. Charm didn’t want her own experiences in Heart’s Landing to influence the town’s chances in the contest. She was afraid that coming here again so soon after her breakup might stir up bad memories. She sent me to take a fresh, in-depth look at the place, but don’t worry. Since Heart’s Landing has consistently emerged as the magazine’s top pick for ten years running, this visit is more a formality than anything else.” She shrugged. “As for my early arrival, that’s entirely my fault. My last project wrapped up sooner than expected, and I’d been so looking forward to the trip that I thought I’d just pop on up. I hope that’s not a problem.”

“Nothing we can’t handle.” Bright intelligence gleamed from Jason’s gray eyes. Tara couldn’t be sure he accepted Regina’s excuse, but he definitely wasn’t buying the reason for her sudden appearance for a second and had the self-confidence not to care whether she realized he was on to her or not. “Of course, you’re missing out on all the pomp and ceremony of the formal greeting party we had on tomorrow’s agenda. And our mayor, Greg Thomas, will be disappointed that he wasn’t on hand to welcome you himself. He’s planned a tour of Heart’s Landing for you tomorrow. With the packed schedule we have planned over the next ten days, he and his wife went

out of town for the afternoon. I'm afraid you're stuck with me for now."

She could think of worse ways to spend the time than in the company of a man who reminded her so much of his swashbuckling ancestor, though it seemed like a far more prudent plan to keep her distance from someone who literally upset her equilibrium. She tugged on the hem of her wrinkled T-shirt. "I'd love the opportunity to freshen up after the long trip. Do you think you could have someone show me to my room?"

Jason's lips thinned. "We'll have so much going on over the next two weeks that we gave most of the staff the day off. There's only a skeleton crew on duty today. As I mentioned, we weren't expecting you before tomorrow." The skin around his mouth tightened. "I've pulled two of our best workers off their other tasks and told them to prepare your suite, but it might be several hours before they finish. I'm sorry for the inconvenience." All gracious apology and sorrow, he ducked his head.

This was exactly the kind of snafu Regina had told her to be on the lookout for. Tara supposed this was the point where her boss might have pitched a hissy fit and checked one of the many negative boxes on her judging form. But, as much as she wanted to please the executive editor, Tara wasn't Regina. Jason's well-mannered explanation had touched a soft space in her heart. She couldn't condemn him for not having everything ready when she'd sprung her arrival on him without any warning. Given the popularity of the Captain's Cottage, she should probably be thankful her room was available at all.

“There’s a fully stocked salon reserved for our brides on the first floor. No one’s using it right now, so you’re welcome to it. As for the rest of the day, I can offer you several options. It’d be my honor to escort you into town and introduce you to a few of our more prominent shop keepers. Or give you a tour of the Captain’s Cottage. Or, if none of that appeals to you, the dining room is at your disposal. You’re welcome to work in there.”

Thanks, but no thanks on that last one. She’d spent most of the train ride doing research. The prospect of sitting at a table and poring over her laptop when there was so much to see and do around Heart’s Landing seemed like a perfect waste. On the other hand, if they’d planned on showing her about town the next day, throwing another monkey wrench in the plans might raise too many eyebrows.

“I vote for the Captain’s Cottage. I’d like to see every nook and cranny,” she said with a growing enthusiasm. Who knew what secrets she might unearth?