

A Waterfront Wedding

LEIGH DUNCAN

“*K*NOCK, KNOCK.” EVELYN’S VOICE FLOATED up through the hole in the floor of the tree house. A light tapping sounded as she rapped on the ladder.

“You need a hand up?” He peered down at her. When they were kids, climbing up the ladder had felt like climbing Mount Everest.

“I’ve got it,” she grumbled.

Same old Evelyn. Competition was part of her nature. He stepped back as her head popped through the square hole. With an effortless grace, she hoisted herself up the rest of the way.

“You sure picked the strangest place to meet. Frankly, I wasn’t sure you knew our old fort still existed.”

“Oh, I knew, all right.” They’d spent a lot of time in the tree house when they were younger. He had a thousand good memories of the place. “I checked it out soon after I came back to Heart’s Landing. A couple of the steps on the ladder had come loose. So had one of the railings. I replaced those. Otherwise,

it was in decent shape considering how long it's been here."

"Hmmm." She folded her arms across her chest. "You don't have to do that. I can have the gardening crew give it a thorough look every so often and make whatever repairs are necessary."

"I don't mind." He paused, uncertain whether or not he was saying too much. "I stop by from time to time. It's a good place to think and clear my head."

"Really?" She peered up at him, surprise flickering in her green eyes. "I've been too busy lately, but last summer, I'd fill a thermos and come out here first thing in the morning at least once a week. I like listening to the birds, watching the Cottage come to life."

Memories from their childhood came back in a rush. "We had some good times here when we were kids, didn't we?"

A wide grin broke across Evelyn's face. "We'd pretend the tree house was a pirate ship and sail the seven seas."

He glanced toward a wooden lean-to in one corner. "Jason was always trying to get you to stay in the cabin so we could rescue you." He laughed. "But you rarely went along with his plans."

"I wanted to be captain of my own ship." She flicked a thick braid over one shoulder.

He shook his head. He and Jason had had a lot to learn about girls back then. Fortunately, Evelyn had been more than willing to teach them. As a matter of fact, she'd actually insisted on it. When they'd tried to tell her girls couldn't captain a ship, much less be a pirate, she'd grudgingly abided by the rules. But

not for long. One rainy afternoon when they couldn't go outside to play, she'd dragged them both into the Library. There, she'd hauled down a book that was nearly as big as she was. She hadn't even been able to read yet, but she hadn't let that stop her. She'd pointed to pictures of Anne Bonny, an infamous *lady* pirate of the 1700s. After that, Evelyn had demanded they all take turns playing the role of captain. He chuckled. He'd always admired her spunk.

Standing, she wandered over to the railing. "I wonder what happened to our flag. You remember it? Your mom made it for us."

"I have it." His heart expanded at the thought of their initials stitched into the corners, and he smiled. Once, long after they'd outgrown their pirate days, he'd taken a shortcut through the woods on his way to visit Jason and had spied the tattered piece of cloth hanging from an old fishing rod they'd used as a flagpole. He'd retrieved it and, later that night, he'd tucked it among the mementos he kept in a footlocker by his bed.

"You do?"

"I thought my children might like it for their own tree house someday." He cleared his throat. "If and when that day comes, that is." He shuffled his feet. Why on earth had he mentioned children? Any discussion along those lines was bound to lead to talk of hopes and dreams for the future. That was not the kind of conversation he wanted to have with a woman who'd long since made it perfectly clear she wasn't interested in him.

Hoping to change the subject, he grabbed the bags he'd brought with him. "I guess we ought to talk

about this Wedding-in-a-Week thing. Have a seat?” He gestured to the bare planks where, as kids, they’d spent long hours shooting marbles and playing card games.

“Well, I’m glad someone ended up with the flag.” Evelyn settled on the edge of the rough flooring, her feet dangling in the air above the ground.

“I brought sandwiches.” Paper rustled as he plopped one bag between them on the boards. “I hope you don’t mind, but I’m starving.” He’d gotten so lost in putting the finishing touches on the Boat Works this afternoon, he hadn’t eaten.

Evelyn stared at the brown paper bag. “Is that what I think it is?”

He grinned. “If you’re hoping for grinders from The Aisle, this is your lucky day.” A sign over the tiny storefront read Down The Aisle of Sandwiches, but everyone simply referred to the sub shop as The Aisle. From the time they were old enough to pedal their bikes along Procession Avenue, he and his friends had ridden as often as they could.

“Oh, man. I’m dying for one of those.” Grabbing the bag, Evelyn stuck her nose inside and breathed in. “The best smell ever,” she declared, handing it back.

She was right, and he didn’t bother to deny it. He pulled out two subs wrapped in thick white paper. “You want chips?”

“And ruin a perfectly good sandwich? No thanks. You asked for extra hot, didn’t you?”

“Of course.” The pickled red peppers added an extra kick that set the subs apart from all others. Eagerly, they peeled back the layers of paper to reveal

classic Italian grinders stuffed full of salami, ham and provolone atop a bed of shaved lettuce. The air filled with the aroma of The Aisle's secret dressing. The smell made his mouth water almost painfully.

"Dig in," he suggested, barely able to wait for her to go first.

She did, and they ate in silence for a few minutes. After they'd devoured the first salty, tangy bites, he pulled out two bottles bearing the familiar anchor of a popular Rhode Island brand.

Eyeing the drinks, Evelyn squealed, "Oh, my goodness. You remembered."

"How could I forget? It's still my favorite." His mom made sure the old-fashioned metal cooler on their back porch held an assortment of Yacht Club sodas whenever Jason and Evelyn came over to his house. The three of them had made a game of sifting through the melting ice until each of them found their favorite flavor. He and Evelyn had always been partial to cream soda, while Jason preferred root beer. He pried the top off his and drank deeply. Evelyn did the same. The cool, refreshing taste made the perfect accompaniment to the spicy sandwiches.

At last, he sat back, his arms angled behind him to support his weight. "The Aisle and cream soda. I think I missed those the most when I lived in Maine."

"That, and the brides," Evelyn teased lightly.

"And the brides." He laughed, feeling more at ease than he'd expected after confessing that his love for Heart's Landing had drawn him home.