

A Waterfront Wedding

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FIVE MINUTES PASSED. THEN TEN. Beside him, Evelyn danced on the balls of her feet. Finally, the door of one of the passenger cars opened with a noisy creak. A familiar figure stepped into the vestibule area. Smiling broadly, Greg Thomas lifted a microphone.

“Welcome, welcome. Thank you all for being here today. I’ve just met with our Wedding-in-a-Week couple, and I don’t mind saying you’re in for a treat! You’re going to fall in love with Brianna and Daniel, just like the judges at *Weddings Today* did. You’ll get to meet them in a minute, but first—before I introduce them—let’s find out a little bit more about the winners of Heart’s Landing’s Wedding-In-A-Week!”

Greg tugged an envelope from the pocket of his suit. Hampered by the mic, he slid one finger under the flap and ripped it open. Inside was a single sheet of paper, which he held up to the crowd. “Um, bear with me,” he said. “This is the first time I’m seeing this, so don’t expect a perfect delivery.”

“Like all your other speeches, Greg!” someone shouted.

The comment earned scattered chuckles before, with a throat-clearing harrumph, the mayor began, “This year’s winners of a Heart’s Landing Wedding-In-A-Week, courtesy of *Weddings Today*, have traveled all the way from Geneva, Florida. They’ve been best friends ever since their teacher, Mrs. English, assigned Daniel the seat next to Brianna’s in first grade.”

His voice as clear as a radio announcer’s, Greg continued, “Daniel and Brianna spent an idyllic childhood growing up in Central Florida. Along with a close-knit group of friends, Daniel and Brianna enjoyed the best the area had to offer—fishing in nearby lakes, kayaking and swimming in the crystal-clear water of artesian springs, picking oranges in the citrus grove owned by Daniel’s family, and drinking root beer floats at the local diner run by Brianna’s parents.

“Once they entered high school, both Brianna and Daniel began to think about the future. Brianna planned to help run her family’s business while she pursued a culinary degree. Meanwhile, Daniel had set his sights on a career in the military. But their plans changed when... Oh, my.” Greg’s voice halted abruptly. Clearly struggling to maintain his composure, he gazed toward the station, his eyes damp. After a long pause, he shook the paper and cleared his throat. His voice dropped an octave. “When Brianna’s parents were tragically killed in a car crash the summer before her junior year of high school.”

Sympathy rippled from one end of the gathering to

the other. Ryan studied his feet. His heart went out to the bride-to-be.

Eyes lowered, the mayor resumed speaking. “More than anyone else, Daniel was there for Brianna. He stood beside her at the funeral and stuck by her side during the days and months that followed. It took time, but with Daniel’s help, Brianna eventually settled into her new life with her aunt and cousins. While the two remained good friends, they headed in different directions after graduation.

“Brianna got her degree from the local college. There, to honor her parents, she studied emergency medicine. After graduating, she went to work as an EMT at the hospital where her folks received treatment the night they were killed. Daniel attended college on the other side of the state. He earned his degree in Criminal Justice. This helped him fulfill a lifelong dream when he enlisted in the Marines.”

Applause erupted for the young man who’d chosen to serve his country. When it died down, the mayor waited a beat before he continued, “Remembering how supportive he’d been when she’d needed someone to rely on, Brianna sent letters to her friend while he was at boot camp. Daniel claims her letters gave him the strength he needed to make it through one of the most rigorous training programs in the military. Once he’d completed basic training, he headed home on leave with one thing on his mind—to ask Brianna out on their first real date. That night, an enduring friendship blossomed into love. Daniel and Brianna have known they were meant for one another ever since.”

Several women sighed audibly into the pause

when Greg stopped to take a breath. Ryan rocked on his heels. Brianna and Daniel's story had all the hallmarks of a true Heart's Landing love for the ages.

"The couple will soon report to Camp Geiger, where Daniel will undergo further training." The mayor lowered the paper. His eyes crinkled, and he practically beamed at the crowd. "But not before Heart's Landing—and *Weddings Today*—gives this very deserving couple a perfect wedding!"

A round of thunderous applause echoed from one end of the platform to the other.

When it died down, Greg said, "And now, without further ado, I give you Private First Class Daniel Johnston and his lovely fiancée, Brianna Smith." The mayor hustled down the steps. A photographer followed and stood at the foot of the stairs.