



Heidi Rice

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MILLS & BOON
MODERN

Demelza Ryan stood on the granite rocks overlooking The Minack Theatre – hewn from the cliff-face by Rowena Cade and her gardener Billy Rawlings almost three-quarters of a century ago – and breathed in a fortifying lungful of sea air. Tasting the refreshing tang of salt and inhaling the glorious scent of the flowers that grew wild on the terraces, she let the breath out slowly as the summer dawn hit the for-once deserted stretch of sand below the theatre on Porthcurno Beach.

Tonight was going to be absolutely perfect.

A culmination of four years spent schmoozing the theatre's trustees and management committee and four solid months of insanely hard work.

Tonight on Midsummer's Eve, as the sun set over the theatre, Demelza was finally going to realize her dream of seeing the Porthaven Literary and Amateur Dramatic Society – the society she'd created and managed since returning from Bristol University with a degree in Theatre and Performance Studies – take the first of many bows at the place which had saved her life fifteen summers ago.

That was the summer she'd arrived on the coach from London, age eight, with her mum, Lizzie, to be dropped off in Cornwall for a long weekend with her Great-Aunt Ada while her mum headed to Glastonbury.

She hadn't seen her mum since. But Aunty Ada, and Demelza's growing passion for theatre and literature and the arts inspired by The Minack had more than made up for the loss.

Lifting her hand to shield her eyes, she squinted into the rising sun.

What was Sally Chenoweth – their Ophelia in tonight's production of Classic Literary Vignettes – doing charging up the steep stone steps as if Pennywise the clown was chasing her?

‘Dem, we’ve got a problem,’ Sally wheezed, struggling to catch her breath as she staggered up the last step. ‘Jez called to say him and Mel have food poisoning.’

‘But we’re starting our final rehearsals at noon.’ And Jez and Mel were playing Darcy and Elizabeth. It was the big feel-good finale to the show. And it was Demelza’s favourite vignette – by far – because she’d read *Pride and Prejudice* approximately a thousand times.

‘They’re too sick. We’ll just have to drop their scene,’ Sally said.

‘No way,’ Demelza said. She wasn’t losing Darcy and Elizabeth, she couldn’t. ‘I can play Elizabeth,’ she said, the spurt of excitement doing nothing to curb the tangle of nerves in her stomach. ‘We just need to find a Darcy.’

‘Who?’ Sally said, the wind whipping at her flushed cheeks. ‘Jez is the only decent looking guy in Porthaven that isn’t over sixty or under sixteen.’

‘What about Jack Holliger?’ The name popped out as the spurt of excitement raced up Demelza’s torso.

‘That writer chap who moved into the cottage behind Minack House?’ Sally stared at Demelza as if she’d lost her marbles.

Possibly she had. She’d never managed to get more than a few grudging words out of the guy, despite her best efforts to engage him in conversation because he seemed lonely to her. But desperate measures and all that.

‘Yes, him,’ Demelza said, as the spurt became a definite frisson.

Dark, brooding, gorgeous and magnetic enough to make her heart jiggle her tonsils whenever he came in to the Post Office where she worked to pick up his mail, Jack Holliger was the perfect Darcy. He wouldn’t even have to act.

‘Isn’t he a recluse?’ Sally said. ‘How are you going to get him to appear on stage when he hardly even comes into the village?’

Demelza looked at the stage, the hexagonal tiles gilded in the sunny glow of morning, and sent up a silent prayer for divine inspiration.

‘I don’t know how, but I will.’

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‘Is this a joke, Ms...’ Jack Holliger stared at the woman standing on his doorstep, her heart-shaped face flushed the same colour as the rhododendron bush beside her. ‘I didn’t catch your name?’ he added.

Although he knew her name. It was Demelza Something – which was more than florid and in-your-face enough to suit her.

He’d come to Cornwall to get away from people – and women in particular – and lick his wounds after his divorce had become final.

Not that he missed Holly or her histrionics. He even considered the two grand a month he paid in alimony to be money well spent. No, what still bugged him was that he’d once been young and dumb enough to think he wanted to share his life with another person – when he’d always been perfectly happy alone.

But Demelza WhatsHerName had ignored all his ‘back off’ vibes. And in the last few weeks, her persistence had started to get to him.

Enough for him to notice the tempting curves displayed by the cotton dresses she wore in bold colours and retro prints. Enough for him to wonder what her creamy skin would feel like under his fingertips. Enough to make him find her one-sided chatter as he waited for her to sort out his mail, or the jaunty hellos whenever he crossed the street to avoid her, harder and harder to ignore.

Enough, even, for him not to slam the door in her face when she'd turned up on his doorstep five minutes ago spouting a load of gibberish about the local outdoor theatre, some Am-Dram Society he'd never heard of, and Jane Austen. He still hadn't figured out what it was she wanted, though, because it sounded like she was asking him to play Darcy in this evening's show – but that was way too insane to be correct, even for her.

'Ryan, Demelza Ryan,' she said. 'I know it sounds a little bonkers, but the Porthaven Literary and Amateur Dramatics Society really needs your help. It's only one scene. I can feed you all the lines.'

His eyebrow hiked up his forehead. She actually wasn't kidding.

'A *little* bonkers?' he said.

'Okay, a lot bonkers,' she conceded, the hope still sparking in her eyes. 'But Obi Wan Kenobi, you're our only hope.'

The vintage *Star Wars* quote came so far out of left field, a rusty chuckle burst out of his mouth.

'Please Mr Holliger, it would mean so much to me,' she said, pouncing on the momentary weakness. 'I'll deliver your mail in person for the next month, so you won't even have to leave the house.' She fluttered her eyelashes. 'You know you want to.'

'Actually, I know I definitely don't want to,' he managed, determined not to be captivated by the enthusiasm in her flushed face.

'Why not?' she said. 'You'd make the perfect Darcy.'

Something blossomed in his chest. Why did he have the feeling this was high praise from her and he should feel flattered? Hadn't Darcy been a bit of a dick?

‘How about because I can’t act and I’ve never even read *Pride and Prejudice*?’ he supplied, stating the obvious.

Her face fell comically. ‘You’ve never read the best book ever written? But you’re an author.’

‘I write horror,’ he said, bluntly, annoyed now by the pulse of desire. A pulse he hadn’t felt in a long, long time. He didn’t want to be captivated by this woman’s energy and enthusiasm – or her complete inability to take no for an answer. It was aggravating not amusing.

‘I’ll do it on one condition,’ he said, suddenly seeing an opportunity to end this attraction once and for all.

Her face opened up like a flower facing the sun. ‘A condition? Absolutely. If you’ll step in as Darcy, Mr Holliger, I’ll do anything you want.’

The pulse sharpened as a stream of erotic visions ran through his mind involving those curves, those lips and those corn-flower blue eyes bright with passion and positivity. He quashed them ruthlessly.

‘If I play Darcy tonight, you promise never to speak to me again.’

‘I...’ She stuttered, and stiffened and hurt shadowed her pretty blue eyes.

He stifled the pang of regret. It was for her good as much as his. He didn’t need the distraction – and a woman as cute and optimistic as she was really did not need to get tangled up with a guy like him.

‘I... I could do that,’ she said. ‘If that’s really what you want.’

‘It is,’ he said, ignoring the pulse of regret.

‘Then I guess we’ve got a deal Mr Holliger.’ She held out her hand.

Her soft flesh shivered beneath his palm as they shook on it. Sensation skipped up his arm and echoed in his groin.

She let go first, the vibrant blush illuminating the freckles across her nose.
Had she felt it too? That electric connection?

Christ, he hoped not.

‘We’ll see you at the theatre in...’ She pulled a smart phone out of her backpack. ‘Three hours.’

‘What for?’ he asked. It was only nine o’clock and the performance she’d mentioned wasn’t until seven tonight.

‘For rehearsals, of course,’ she said, suddenly all business.

‘But I thought you said it was only a single scene? Can’t you just email me the script and I’ll learn the lines.’

‘If you could learn the lines in the next three hours that would be terrific, but we’ll still need to rehearse the scene,’ she said. ‘Together.’

‘For *seven* hours?’ he said, becoming exasperated. *What the hell?* The whole purpose of their deal was to curtail this attraction. Not exacerbate it.

Her lush lips flattened into a fierce line. Perhaps Demelza Ryan wasn’t a pushover after all.

‘Believe me, Mr Holliger,’ she said, the disdainful tone slicing right through his usually robust ego. ‘It’s going to be much more of a trial for me, than it is for you.’

She marched off down the garden path, her hips swaying provocatively.

‘Somehow I doubt that, Demelza,’ Jack murmured, as the pulse of unwanted desire was matched by a pulse of equally unwanted admiration.

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‘You are too generous to trifle with me, Elizabeth, if your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once. My affections and wishes are unchanged. But one word from you will silence me on this subject forever.’

Demelza let Jack Holliger’s deep voice echo through her, as he said the lines they had been rehearsing all afternoon. She could almost hear the audience holding their breath. Her own breath was trapped in her lungs. How could he look at her with such purpose and make every inch of her skin bristle with awareness – and yet be so guarded and cynical underneath? If only his feelings towards her had changed in the last seven hours, the way Elizabeth’s had towards Darcy.

Surely it was at least possible?

After all, despite his initial objections, he’d more than honoured his half of their bargain today. He’d learned all the lines she’d emailed to him. He’d arrived bang on the stroke of twelve. He’d allowed himself to be prompted and prodded through four grueling hours of rehearsals, a costume fitting and then an hour-long dress rehearsal in the blazing sun in a frock coat. He’d even chipped in to help move scenery, sell programs and seat the audience in the last hour before curtain time...

And all without a single complaint.

He’s only doing it so you’ll never speak to him again.

She forced herself to push aside the fanciful hope that had gathered weight during the afternoon – every time she’d caught him watching her and she’d convinced herself she’d seen approval, or admiration, or amusement, or even affection in that quiet, assessing gaze.

Get real. It’s all in your overactive imagination. He’s not Darcy, and you’re no Elizabeth Bennett either.

She gathered in a jagged breath, to launch into her closing speech. The speech which would put an end to four months' hard work – and an afternoon spent fantasizing about Jack Holliger and what might have been, if only he'd come to like her as much as she had come to like him.

'Mr Darcy, I beg you not be silent,' she said, knowing the pleading note in her voice wasn't acting anymore. 'For I must tell you that my sentiments have undergone so material a change from the period to which you allude, as to make me receive with immense gratitude and pleasure your present assurances,' Demelza finished, breathlessly.

'Elizabeth, the happiness your reply has produced, is such that I have never felt before,' Jack replied with such fervour, she felt her heart break a little more at what might have been.

As they had agreed in rehearsal, he drew her into his embrace as the spotlight faded to black – leaving them cocooned in starlight.

The audience erupted in applause.

'Thank you so much for doing this,' she whispered into his ear, drawing in his sea salt and soap scent one last time. 'You've been terrific and I promise to keep my side of the bargain now and never speak to you again.'

But as she went to slip out of his arms, his hands remained clamped on her hips.

'Don't...'

He murmured, preventing her from drawing away.

The audience were still applauding, the rest of the company joining them on stage for their final bow. But all she could feel was his muscular body vibrating with tension, and all she could see was the anguish on his handsome face as her eyes adjusted to the summer night.

‘Don’t ever stop talking to me, Demelza,’ he said, his voice rough and tortured. ‘I’m sorry I asked you that. I was being a dick. But I’ve had fun this afternoon...More fun than I’ve had in a long time...’ He paused, his breath warm against her cheek. ‘I didn’t even mind the acting, because it was with you. I’d love to see you again. If you’ll let me.’

The canopy of starlight burst into a conflagration inside her as she grasped his cheeks and tugged his face down to hers.

She captured his lips, giving him all the answer he needed, and felt his huff of surprise, before he dragged her the rest of the way into his arms.

The sea breeze whipped around them, the applause joined by whoops and cheers as the lights came up and their kiss became hungry and seeking – and so full of passion and possibility Demelza could feel it glittering around them in the sultry Cornish night.

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Later that evening, she gripped Jack’s strong, capable hand as they strolled barefoot on Porthcurno beach – the giddy rush of new love making her chest tighten.

Tonight had been more than perfect. Because tonight more than one dream had come true.

She spotted The Minack’s arches, silhouetted against the moonlight on the cliff top – and the giddy rush became focused and intense as she considered the best way to break the news to Jack that she really, *really*, wanted to play her namesake in

their next production ... And there was only one person she could possibly consider casting as Ross Poldark.

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