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MILLS & BOON
MODERN

Alessandro de Luca stood in the centre of the ancient stone bridge, one hand clenched around the 10-carat diamond ring. It was a peaceful place, the fells of Ambleside stretching away to a twilight horizon on this late summer's evening, just a few miles from the lovely village of Grasmere, with its charming cottages of Lakeland stone, the River Rothay meandering through its centre.

The air was surprisingly balmy, the skies clear. Really, someone else should be making use of High Sweden Bridge, long considered one of the most romantic spots in the whole Lake District, and the most popular place to propose. Alessandro had been there a year ago exactly, asking Maria Dibona to marry him.

His fingers clenched harder around the ring, the sharp edges of the jewel cutting into his palm. Then, taking a deep breath, he drew his arm back and then pitched it forward, sending the ring hurtling through the sky, towards Scandale Beck below.

'Ouch!'

Alessandro stiffened at the sound of the woman's voice. 'What the...'

A face appeared on the other side of the bridge, green eyes blazing, surrounded by a cloud of auburn hair.

'Is this yours?'

His ring, the ring he'd given Maria which she'd returned two months later, when she'd run off with his best friend, lay in the woman's palm. Worse, Alessandro saw with a jolt of shock, the woman had a cut on her cheek that was oozing blood.

'I'm so sorry,' he choked out. 'I thought I was alone. Are you all right?' Quickly he reached for a starched handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her.

She took it ruefully, a smile quirking her mouth. 'Who carries handkerchiefs around these days?'

‘I do.’

‘And I’m glad of it.’ She dabbed at the cut. ‘You should be careful where you throw things. That is... if you meant to throw it?’

‘I did.’

Slowly she opened her palm so they could both look down at the ring in all its glittering glory. ‘It looks quite valuable. A shame just to throw it away.’

‘It felt like the right thing to do.’ He shrugged, feeling strangely vulnerable by the admission. He hadn’t intended for anyone to see him in this moment, when he was letting go of all the dreams he’d once had, the hopes he’d dared to harbour. The fact that this young woman had seen him in such a moment of weakness made him feel uncomfortable. Raw.

She glanced at him, compassion softening her features. ‘Do you want it back?’

‘No.’ The ring was worth a fortune, but it was pocket change to him. Still, it now seemed wasteful to chuck something so costly away. ‘Keep it, if you want.’

The woman shook her head. ‘I could hardly do that. But if you really don’t want it, why don’t you sell it and donate the proceeds to charity?’

This was a much more sensible solution than hurling it into the beck. ‘If you like,’ he said with a shrug.

She cocked her head, her gaze sweeping over him in far too thorough assessment. ‘Just because it didn’t work out this time doesn’t mean it might not again.’

Perhaps the words were intrusive, but Rachel felt them deeply. She believed in second chances. She believed in hope. Because heaven knew she was in trouble if she didn’t.

The man arched an eyebrow, incredulous. ‘If I were of a mind to propose again, I’d hardly use the same ring.’

‘True.’ She almost laughed at his deliberate disdain. ‘But I wasn’t actually talking about the ring.’

What made her want to reach this man? Perhaps it had been the look of naked pain that had flashed across his face before his features had hardened into determined indifference. She knew what that was like. *Act like you don’t care, and maybe you wouldn’t.* She’d felt that way after she’d lost her job at the hospital, fired unfairly because of a co-worker’s mistake. It was eighteen months ago now and she was finally learning to let go, to move on. Life hurt sometimes, but she still needed to believe in hope and happy endings. But what about this man?

He looked arrogantly assured, standing on the middle of the narrow bridge, the jagged grey-green fells a dramatic backdrop to his powerful form. Dressed in a perfectly tailored suit, oozing both charisma and wealth, Rachel knew she should have been intimidated by him but she wasn’t. She felt his pain.

‘So how long ago was it?’ she asked quietly.

He paused before answering, ‘a year.’

‘Did you love her very much?’

Another pause, and something flickered in his silvery grey eyes. ‘I thought I did, but now I wonder if I knew what love was.’

She was both touched and humbled by his honesty. Hadn’t she felt the same once? *I thought I knew what happiness was, what love was, until it was all swept away and I wondered if I’d ever had it at all.* After she’d lost her job, her fiancé had broken their engagement. He hadn’t believed in her innocence. It had taken the better part of a year to get her life back, and she was still hurting, which was why she’d come up to this lovely, lonely spot. To think. To heal. *To hope.*

‘It will get better,’ Rachel said softly.

The man arched an eyebrow, supremely sceptical. 'There are no guarantees of that.'

'I know, but I still believe.'

'Don't you think you might be naïve?'

'I'd rather be naïve than cynical.'

He let out a huff of laughter and then shook his head. 'What's your name?'

'Rachel.'

'Alessandro.'

It felt as if they'd crossed a bridge, standing on that ancient crossway. Rachel held out her hand, the ring lying in her palm. 'Take it back.'

'Why?'

'Because it's a waste to throw it away. Believe in second chances. Believe that you might love again, someday.'

He stared at her for a long moment, his gaze hard and unyielding. Then he reached down and took the ring, his fingers sliding across hers, sending a tingle of awareness as well as a far deeper longing through her, both a shock and a delight.

Alessandro must have felt it too, for his eyes widened a fraction and they remained there, standing on the bridge, joined by the touch of their hands.

'Will you have dinner with me?' he asked, his voice a little hoarse, the act of indifference discarded in this moment. 'I'm staying in Grasmere... I've reserved a private dining room, overlooking the lake. Champagne, oysters...'

She laughed, stunned by the invitation, but also tempted. Seriously tempted. 'Were you planning on dining with someone?'

'No, I was planning a meal alone, a sort of commemoration. But you've convinced me of the folly of that, and now I find I want to be with someone. With you.' His gaze lingered for a moment on her. 'Will you dine with me?'

Rachel felt as if she were on the brink of something far bigger than she could have ever imagined. It was just dinner... but it was also hope. For both of them. A new start, whether it was for an evening or a lifetime or something in between.

For a second Alessandro's fingers tightened on hers, and then he let her go, waiting for her answer.

'Yes,' she said simply, because she'd told him she believed in second chances, and here, perhaps, was hers as well as his. 'I'd love to have dinner with you, whether its champagne overlooking the lake or fish and chips in a greasy shop.'

'It certainly wouldn't be the latter.' Alessandro smiled and then slipped the ring into his pocket. 'To be used for a charitable cause,' he murmured, before taking her hand and leading her off the bridge, as the sun sunk below the fells and the world was filled with both twilight shadows and luminous rays.