

Chapter 5: Is it conceivable I had her wrong?

His tongue was glued to his dry palate and he could taste his own foul breath. When he sat up, a splitting headache hit him and he had to fight off a wave of nausea. It was bright morning, but Sidney found himself to still be in the bar of the Crowne hotel where he had downed one too many bottles of wine with Babington and Crowe last night. Obviously he had passed out here at some point but could not clearly remember the end of the evening. All he knew was that he had been drinking to forget. Forget how rattled and embarrassed he had been by the encounter with Miss Heywood. For Christ's sake, she had seen him completely naked!

He had never been naked in the company of a lady before. With women, yes, but not any *lady* and certainly with no woman whose opinion really mattered to him. *Wait, rewind.* What had just passed through his mind? Befuddled Sidney shook his head, which was a big mistake because the throbbing grew stronger and he groaned, leaning his head in his palms. *Why did she of all people have to come by and exactly how much had she seen?* He would never know. When he had blinked away the water from his eyes she had been standing on the shore with her back turned to him, clearly aware of his presence so she had seen *something* of him for sure. Probably far too much because even from behind he could see that her ribcage

was heaving from upset breathing. Their conversation had been brief, he had barely managed to apologise before she took for the hills, running faster than he ever had seen any woman run. It was quite impressive actually. He hoped he had not frightened her. He knew he must have embarrassed her and wished he had not. He hoped she did not think too badly of him, maybe it was in that moment he had realised that for some reason it mattered what this opinionated and passionate girl thought even if he had told her the contrary not long ago.

The bar was empty, but his drunken sleep had been disturbed by noises from the construction works across the street and now Babington and Crowe came barging in.

“I told you he’d still be here. Look at the state of him, Babbers.”

“A wretched sight indeed.”

Judging by how he felt Sidney knew they were not exaggerating.

“Is that not what Miss Heywood said when she ran into you by the cove?”

His two friends looked at each other grinning wide and he wished them somewhere burning hot and unpleasant where sinners like them belonged, at least if one were to believe Mr. Hankins’s sermons.

“I should never have told you.”

He had regretted it already as he had confessed it, realising they would tease him forever, but he had to tell *someone*, and he could hardly tell Tom that he had shown himself naked to his protégé. Mary would never forgive him and would probably

send Miss Heywood home instantly, which might be for the better come to think of it. Then he would not have to face her again.

“You know Sidney, this has been pleasurable enough and your adventures with little Miss Heywood are certainly entertaining, but we feel it is time to head back to London today. I need a change of environment and Babbers has no luck in his advances to Miss Denham anyway. Will you join us or are you too hungover?”

“He is probably still drunk”, Babington chipped in.

“Give me an hour and I’ll be ready to depart. I need to go and find my brother first.”

He put on his black coat and hat, feeling far from fresh and in dire need of a shave but wanted the conversation with Tom to be over and done with as soon as possible.

His head still pounded, sharp and heavy when he arrived at Trafalgar house, adding to his bad mood. He was not looking forward to telling Tom the news because he knew his brother would be disappointed and accusing, probably once again try to convince him not to leave. It turned out he was right. Already in the hallway, before they moved into the office, Tom started objecting, not ready to let Sidney leave without putting up a fight.

“I told you explicitly that we had to go back to London.”

“Dammit, Sidney. Did my words mean nothing to you?”

“I cannot force them to stay, Tom.” He wondered how his brother sometimes could be so blind. Sanditon was beautiful, but it was a small town with few amusements.

“How am I to fill these empty houses, Sidney? I confess, I am relying... Charlotte?”

His brother interrupted himself and alarmed, Sidney followed his gaze. Miss Heywood was crouching under the desk for some reason.

“There it is!” she exclaimed as she almost jumped to upright position, but he had a strong suspicion she had been hiding from *him* rather than looking for something.

Damn woman, why did she keep crossing his path so inconveniently? Hiding under the desk suggested that she wanted to meet him just as little as he wanted to meet her though. It was funny in a way, resourceful even. He had never come across a lady hiding under a desk before. There seemed to be many firsts with Miss Heywood, and he was not entirely sure if it was a good thing or a bad, or perhaps a bit of both. *Ought he to apologise again for yesterday?* He could not do it in the presence of Tom anyway so he could allow himself to think about it for a while. Maybe it was for the better to pretend like nothing, talking about it would probably just make bad things worse.

“Miss Heywood. Always popping up when least expected”, was all he said dryly. Annoyed he registered that his own palms suddenly were clammy. Simultaneously he noticed the pink tinge appearing on her cheeks and thought it was not unbecoming.

“I'll leave you to it, gentlemen.” She looked like she wanted to retort to him but swallowed it and instead excused herself and left them. He was relieved and disappointed in equal measures, though confounded as to why he would feel disappointed at all. He shook it off and turned to Tom again.

“Look, the fact of the matter is, there is simply not enough to tempt them here. They need more... They need more entertainment.”

“Sidney.”

“I'm sorry, Tom. But we leave this morning.”

He hated to disappoint Tom, but he also disliked being too involved in his affairs. Tom always had grand schemes, one idea crazier than the previous and more costly too. In the past Sidney had invested money in Tom's ventures and lost it. He would not repeat that mistake. He tried to help him in other ways because he truly wanted his brother to succeed, both for his own and his lovely family's sake, but there was only so much he could do. He had his own business he could not neglect for long either. Still, he had a bad conscience for leaving Tom behind and was therefore feeling moody when he, Babington and Crowe later stood waiting for the coach to London.

His brooding was interrupted when Mrs. Griffiths' maid came running and handed him a note, with a request from Mrs. Griffiths to deal with his ward who apparently had painted a naked man swimming in the sea. Sidney's cheeks flushed with anger and shame; anger at Miss. Lambe's inappropriate behaviour and shame because this meant that Miss Heywood had told Miss Lambe about the embarrassing encounter, thus inspired her to the painting. He prayed Mrs. Griffiths did not know about it too. Somehow he had thought Miss Heywood would keep the unfortunate incident to herself but once again she had proven herself a mindless girl. His blood boiled when he told his friends he would have to remain in Sanditon another day

to deal with his feral ward. He hoped he would at least be able to avoid Miss Heywood, but alas.

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The following evening Sidney still found himself lingering in Sanditon, feeling a bit like his world had been turned upside down. He could honestly not say when he last had felt this confused.

He had started the day still disturbed by Miss Heywood. There really was no escaping her. He had run into her, quite literally, when he went to deal with Georgian Lambe. When he fuming had left his ward, he had bumped into Miss Heywood, their bodies clashing abruptly and hard as he turned a corner in Miss Griffiths' hallway. He had grabbed hold of her to steady them both, tried looking at her with cold disapproval for the bad influence he thought she exerted on Georgiana, but he had felt anything but cold. The brief contact of their bodies had an alarming effect on him. This time he felt like he was the one fleeing from her when he let go and abruptly left.

Then in this morning, as he was enjoying a quiet moment, reading the newspaper in Tom's office she had appeared like a Jack in the box again, making him roll his eyes at her.

"The ubiquitous Miss Heywood. Can't I even read the news in peace?"

"If you don't wish to be disturbed, you might choose somewhere more secluded", she answered impertinently. She really was too cheeky for a well-behaved lady.

“Yes, well, I tried that. It wasn't entirely successful.”

He was somehow pleased to see he made her flush again, but his musing did not last for long when Tom appeared and insisted he joined to Lady Denham's where some German doctor, Dr. Fuchs's, was to demonstrate his excellence. Sidney thought the idea that a doctor was what Sanditon needed foolish. A doctor no matter how skilled and famous would hardly make fashionable people travel to Sanditon, only hypochondriacs like his own younger siblings. More pleasures were what was needed. Yet, he found himself to once again be persuaded to do as Tom wished and when the doctor's demonstration of a shower bath had turned into a fiasco, making Lady Denham kick him out of her house, Sidney vexed had found he had missed the daily London coach again to no avail.

Frustrated he had gone for a walk on the beach to get away from his family, and perhaps also to avoid Miss Heywood but the minute he returned to Sanditon high street he had been involved in a bloody mess. Unsurprisingly, it involved Miss Heywood. Unsurprisingly in the sense that once again she crossed his path, but very surprising indeed when it came to how she acted.

The stone mason, Mr. Stringer, had fallen from a height at the construction site, got his head and injured his leg badly. The leg was clearly broken, and blood was pumping out from a deep wound. When Sidney came by minutes after the accident had occurred, his son, young Stringer was already by his side, but so was Miss Heywood. Intrepid, she had kneeled beside the injured man, talking soothingly to him and immediately identified that the bleeding had to be stopped. To Sidney's

utter surprise she had attempted ripping a bandage from her own petticoat and when she was unsuccessful, demanded that Sidney did it for her. Slightly hesitant he had obeyed and torn a long strip from it, which she immediately took from him and with nimble fingers tied hard around the old man's leg. It appeared it was not the first time she was faced with a situation like this.

"That should do it", she had said to Sidney.

He was still slightly shocked by the inappropriate but somehow thrilling act of ripping her petticoat, revealing her stocking clad, well-shaped leg for a moment, but even more taken by her calmness and presence of mind. There was no sign of her being frightened or near fainting, which would have been the natural reaction for most ladies at a grim sight like this.

Together with young Stringer they had brought the old man to Trafalgar house and someone had fetched the doctor. Strangely, Miss Heywood had been the one taking charge, ordering a table to be prepared, requested clean sheets and boiled water, remaining unmoved when old Stringer shouted, 'Don't let them take my leg!', knowing his livelihood depended on it.

When the doctor arrived and stated it looked as bad as something from the battlefield, it would have been perfectly acceptable for her to make an exit, but she insisted on staying to help.

"Now, this will not be pretty, *fraulein*, you might want to turn your head away", the doctor said with concern.

She had frowned in the way that was starting to become very familiar to Sidney, like she was focused, pondering over something, perhaps a bit annoyed and prepared to speak her mind.

“I’m not afraid of a little blood.”

Then she went on to hold Stringer’s blood smeared face, feeding him whiskey to numb the pain, talking reassuring words to him. She had drilled her eyes into Sidney’s and told him to hold the man’s hand and he had obediently done as he was told. Her gaze returned to Stringer’s face, but Sidney’s remained fixed on her, fascinated by her. Not even when the doctor set the man’s leg with a cracking sound and Stringer screamed out in pain, she flinched one bit. Before this day, Sidney did not even know women were capable of being this courageous. He was... impressed.

Afterwards, she had gone out to young Stringer who had been told to wait on the street and reassured him everything would be fine, seeming less shaken by the whole thing than Sidney himself was. When he joined her on the street and found her with young Stringer, something flashed in him. A feeling, he was not sure what, but he did not like seeing her with him and when Stringer went inside to his father Sidney stopped her from joining him immediately.

She looked quizzically at him and he felt his blood swish in his ears.

“I must admit, Miss Heywood, you, err... have given a good account of yourself today.”

She stared at him with raised eyebrows, probably because he never had been close to complimenting her before.

“I should never have expected you to be so, err capable”, he continued, suddenly feeling very insecure about himself.

“Because I’m a young woman? Or because up until now you’d dismissed me as frivolous?” she took a step closer, turning her little face up to him in an innocent yet provocative look.

“Well, a little of both, I dare say”, he admitted and felt like a fool. “Forgive me.”

During the silent beats that followed he held his breath.

“How can I not? Since I am equally guilty of dismissing you.

She gave him a totally disarming, sweet smile and he exhaled. He was forgiven it seemed and a strange sensation of relief seeped through his body.

“Oh? And what exactly have I done to deserve such condemnation?” He felt the corners of his mouth tug upwards in a smile. He did not smile that often these days and it was an unusual sensation. He quite liked it.

“Well... You always seem so reluctant to help Tom.”

That remark felt like a knife to his heart, maybe because he had a bad conscience for not doing more than he did and now planned to leave for London.

“Oh, that’s hardly fair. I’ve done all I can for my brother.”

“Have you? And if I may? You’ve hardly proven yourself a sympathetic guardian to Miss Lambe.”

Oh, dammit, did she have to bring up Miss Lambe too?

“Well, a guardian shouldn't need to be sympathetic. My task is to see that she is taught to behave like a lady.”

“That's the least of it. Georgiana is miles from home, and you are the closest thing she has to...” She interrupted herself, he wished she had not. He found he wanted to know what she had to say. “Now you'll tell me I'm speaking out of turn again and you do not care a fig what I have to say.”

She sighed and looked adorably apologetic combined with defiant.

“No. I invited your opinion, and, actually, for once. I think there is some small value in what you say.”

His voice was unusually soft, and he felt a warm smile spread over his face. *What was happening to him?* He was so used to wearing a mask of cynicism and keeping people at a distance that this conversation suddenly felt like a fresh experience.

“Coming from you, I shall own that as the greatest compliment imaginable.”

She shot him another charming smile and started walking away, but he was not prepared to let her go yet. It was about time he apologised.

“Ah, Miss Heywood, erm I've been meaning to say, I... Our meeting down at the coves, I hope you weren't too embarrassed.”

She looked him straight in the eyes and answered without any sign of embarrassment in her voice.

“Why should *I* be embarrassed? *I* was fully clothed.”

He was not sure if he wanted to laugh, cry or bury himself somewhere out of pure embarrassment. He had been right after all, he never should have brought it up. It only made things worse.

“Yes. Very good point. Well, it was hardly fair of you to, err, ambush me like that.”

“I can assure you, it was not deliberate on my part.” She looked so amused and Sidney wanted to sink through the ground.

“Nor mine.”

“Well, then.” Her smile, so mischievous. Her hazel eyes, also twinkling with mischief. In that instant, Sidney found her quite irresistible.

“Well, then”, was all he responded but his heart was thumping hard in his chest.

“Good day.”

She left him and he returned to the hotel, feeling like someone had pulled a rug away under his feet. Unbalanced. Falling.

Later that afternoon, Mary had asked him if he would not bring the children with him down to the river to play and he had agreed, both because he relished spending some more time with his nephews before returning to London and because it was a welcome distraction from the events earlier.

As a remedy to distract his thought from Miss Heywood, the excursion to the river turned out to be futile, because she had joined them there.

It was so strange. When he saw her come walking over the green meadow with her hair moving in the wind under the bonnet, bestowing him the loveliest smile free from caution, he felt a warm glowing ball was forming inside his chest and he realised he welcomed her presence. Their conversation had been light, the animosity between them vanished and he wanted it to stay like that. Very much. The children obviously loved to have Miss Heywood, or Admiral Heywood as they called her, around and this playful, serene moment sailing the children's toy boats had been a new experience for Sidney together with a woman. He had felt relaxed and happy in a way he never had before. He did not know what to make of it, he just knew he did not want it to end. He could have stayed in this moment forever.

Miss Heywood's thoughts seemed to go beyond the present and she had come up with the terrific idea of arranging a regatta in Sanditon. As soon as she said it, he knew it was brilliant and had encouraged her to share it with Tom. His brother had thought it equally brilliant and in his usual manner quickly forgotten that it was someone other than him who had had the inspired notion. Sidney was not too bothered this time, because Miss Heywood did not seem to mind, and it was a relief to see his brother in good spirits again. Overjoyed Tom had brought the family to the beach, too energized by the vision of the regatta to stay confined in Trafalgar house even if dusk was closing in. He had urged Sidney and Miss Heywood to come along and for once Sidney had not felt he wanted to object.

This was how Sidney found himself walking side by side on the beach with Miss Heywood, enjoying the pinkish late afternoon light reflect on the waves, in her eyes and play softly over her delicate features. Again, he felt relaxed and happy.

On a whim, he asked her if she would keep an eye on Miss Lambe for him when he was gone. He did not trust his ward to stay out of trouble one bit, but he could not stay around and watch her constantly either. Miss Heywood had proven today she was a resource to count on.

“I wonder if I might presume to ask a favour?”

“Of me?” she sounded delightfully surprised.

“Extraordinary as it might sound, I do believe you're better positioned than almost anyone. Would you keep an eye on Georgiana for me? See that she's kept out of mischief.”

“I thought you considered me to be a bad influence.”

He had. Now he had changed his mind quite dramatically. *What a difference a day could make.*

“Well is it conceivable that we've had each other wrong Admiral Heywood?”

She broke up in a genuine smile reflecting his and there was a flutter in the pit of his stomach.

“How long will you be absent?”

“At least a week. I have some business matters I have to attend to.”

A fleeting expression passed on her face. *Disappointment?* He could not be entirely sure, but it stirred a pleasant, fuzzy, warm feeling inside him. A feeling that had been completely unknown to him for so long.

This was the reason why Sidney was so confounded this last evening before his departure from Sanditon. He had been desperate to leave the town and return to London, desperate to get away from Miss Heywood. Now he found that he wanted neither and he did not understand why.