

Chapter 1: Bluntness on a balcony

He could not believe how that woman had had the audacity to talk to him. *Who did she think she was?*

Still fuming with anger, Sidney Parker slammed the door behind him and threw himself on top of the bed in the hotel room which temporarily served as his base here in Sanditon. He did not even bother taking his boots off first, just sank down with a curse and then, unable to relax, lay there tense and furious, staring at the ceiling.

Miss Heywood. What an infuriating woman! Or *girl* was a better description of someone so young and immature, with so little knowledge of the world.

No matter what one chose to call her, it had been a long time since anyone had provoked such strong feelings of *any* kind in Sidney Parker. In this case the feelings sparked were anger and frustration and even in resting position he could feel his pulse still racing, his attempts to will it to slow down were futile as long as the adrenaline rush lasted.

Miss Heywood was the summer guest of Sidney's older brother Tom and his wife Mary here in the town of Sanditon, where Tom lived and worked to enthusiastically transform the former sleepy fishing village into a fashionable seaside resort and Sidney was a temporary visitor from London, here to help his brother in his

venture. He had arrived only yesterday, summoned by Tom to come join the first Sanditon ball and bring his fashionable friends, to add some flair to the event. Somewhat reluctant, albeit wanting to support Tom, Sidney had left the pleasures of London and convinced two friends, Mr. Crowe and Lord Babington to join him. He knew that Tom depended on him to make his ambitious plans for the town take off and he also knew that Tom would be in deep financial trouble if he did not succeed. So, here he was, pulling his weight, not by investing money but by using his connections in high- society.

Already when Sidney's carriage approached Sanditon yesterday, he had come across Mary and another woman on the road leading into town. His dear sister in law had been thrilled to see him and happily introduced him to her companion, but Sidney had paid little attention to Miss Heywood, who he at the first uninterested glance mistook for a new maid. He quickly dismissed her as an insignificant, bland country girl who rather belonged in the nursery than with the adults and fleetingly noted how unladylike it was of her to wear her hair down, disobediently flapping around her face in the sea breeze despite her bonnet. He had given her no thought between then and the ball tonight, in fact almost forgot she even existed.

Seeing her at the ball, he had realised that she was far from a child, prettyish rather than plain and somehow, she had disturbed his usual equilibrium even before her tactless remarks about his family.

Sidney closed his eyes but immediately opened them again as Miss Heywood seemed to be projected on the inside of his eyelids, appearing the way she had stood before him this evening. He did not wish to be reminded of that. He did not wish to see her twinkling hazel brown eyes, the little dimple in her chin and another pair

of dimples appearing whenever she smiled, or her dark curls transformed into a fashionable hairdo revealing her delicate neckline and showing she was actually a young lady not some wild peasant girl. He definitely did not need to be reminded of her feminine figure enhanced by the white dress with a very flattering décolletage, showing just enough to make a man curious as to how her curves looked underneath. Nor did he wish to remember how it felt to hold her when they awkwardly had been paired for a dance. He had held her stiffly, almost at arm-lengths distance and avoided meeting her gaze, yet he had been strangely aware of her one small, gloved hand wrapped in his, the other resting lightly on his shoulder as they floated over the dance floor. He had been equally aware of her body heat through dress fabric when he held his palm to the small of her back and the pleasant faint scent of jasmine perfume finding his nostrils. It was like all his senses suddenly were extra sharp, tuned in and registering every tiny detail about her and to his dismay he could not turn it off.

He was confounded as to why she evoked this strange attentiveness in him. Sidney Parker was a man who enjoyed female company and sought it frequently, but he had not developed *feelings* for any woman in nearly a decade and that was the way he intended to keep it. He had been burned once and that was more than enough to teach him that staying away from getting emotionally involved was the safest way not to get hurt or distracted and he was proud to have left the naïve fool he once was far behind. Young and broken-hearted he had left for the West Indies, only to return to England years later, far wealthier than when he left, heart mended and hardened. At 28 he was a more eligible bachelor than ever, but cynical and living in the firm belief that life as a single man was the kind that suited him best.

As soon as the tune was over, he had abruptly let go of the disturbing Miss Heywood, merely thanking her for the dance with a curt nod. He fetched himself a glass of wine and downed it quickly, but suddenly needed some distance to all the people and the loud music. Up on the second floor he found an empty balcony facing the ballroom and remained there for some time, looking down on the sparkling chandeliers softly illuminating the dancing and mingling crowd, taking it all in and contemplating. People who knew Sidney would say this was typical of him, to every now and then distance himself from everything, as if he were an outsider, an onlooker, rather than a participant in life. That had not been his way when he was younger, but that was the man he had grown to be. He did not care much what others said about him though, he did as he pleased and the only one who seemed to really worry about him was Mary. He knew she thought him lonely and wished to see him settled, but he could not imagine that ever happening. To alleviate her concerns, he had told her he was perfectly content as he was and kindly asked her to refrain from match-making. Being the fine woman that she was, she had accepted his wish and stopped introducing him to suitable young ladies years ago.

Even if he did not care admit it to himself, Sidney had not only wanted to escape the ball guests in general, but Miss Heywood in particular and he was therefore mildly annoyed when she too found her way to the balcony. It was obvious though that she like him had sought a place to get away from everything, rather than seeking his company and as she seemed shy and out of her comfort zone he had felt obliged to engage in polite conversation.

“A penny for your thoughts, Miss Heywood.”

Why had he even said that? He was not the least interested in knowing her thoughts, was he? He hardly expected her to have any thoughts about anything besides dresses and other pretty things and finding a suitable husband for herself and he was not interested in any of those things.

“I was thinking how very hard it is to make people out.”

Not the answer he was expecting he had to admit.

“Did anyone in particular provoke that thought?”

“People in general. I like to amuse myself by observing and trying to make conclusions, but in a place like Sanditon where strangers mingle freely, it's hard to form a reliable judgement. People can be so difficult to interpret. Don't you find?”

Her remark had surprised him, he had not expected her to be an observer, much like himself and it piqued his curiosity.

“And what have you observed about me upon our small acquaintance?”

She hesitated briefly but seemed encouraged by his interest.

“I think that you must be the sensible brother of the three.”

He laughed on the inside. He had made himself a fortune by trading and investing wisely, thus made his modest inheritance grow vastly, but due to his habits when it came to drinking, women and occasionally engaging in boxing to get rid of some steam, it was rarely if ever that anyone called him sensible.

“Oh, the *sensible* brother? And what makes you say that?”

The apparent amusement in his voice loosened her tongue and words poured out, perhaps more freely than she had intended.

“Well I may be mistaken but it seems to me that your younger brother, Arthur, has a very contrary nature, alternately over-lethargic and over-energetic. While your elder brother, Tom, could be called over-enthusiastic. I'm afraid that, despite his good nature, he neglects his own happiness and his family's in his passionate devotion to Sanditon. Don't you agree?”

He was completely taken aback when she put into words to what he himself had thought so many times, especially when it came to Tom. Sidney often worried that Tom not only neglected his family but that his obsession with Sanditon might leave him bankrupt as well. However, *thinking* such things about his own brother was one thing, hearing a stranger pinpointing it so bluntly after only a short acquaintance was something entirely different. He was already annoyed by her presence and the odd effect she had on him, and now anger flashed inside him on his brother's account.

“Upon my word, Miss Heywood, you are very free with your opinions.”

Her smile and temporary confidence faded when she noticed the sharpness in his voice.

“I beg your pardon, I didn't...”, she stuttered but he interrupted her.

“And upon what experience of the world do you form your judgements? Where have you been? Nowhere. What have you learnt? Nothing, it would seem, and yet you take it upon yourself to criticise.”

He saw her shrink under his words, her eyes seemed to grow wider and darker and the twinkle disappeared. He realised how stern he sounded and when her eyes glazed and there was a faint tremble to her bottom lip, he felt an unsettling urge to pull her into his arms and comfort her and say it was not so bad. This just made him angrier and provoked him to instead continue scolding at her.

“Let me put it to you, Miss Heywood, which is the better way to live? To sit in your father's house with your piano and your embroidery? Waiting for someone to come and take you off your parents' hands? Or to expend your energy in trying to make a difference? To leave your mark. To leave the world in a better place than you found it. That is what my brother Tom is trying to do. At the expense of a great deal of effort and anxiety, in a good cause for which I do my best to help and support him. And you see fit to criticise him, to amuse yourself at his expense.”

He almost spat the words in her face and saw her flinch.

“I beg your pardon.”

He stared hard at her in silence, looking down into eyes now large like saucers and full of regret.

“I have offended you.”

Her lower lip was definitely trembling. Sweet Jesus, he hoped she would not start crying. Then he would be forced to comfort her, or he would not be allowed to call himself a gentleman. Time to make a hasty exit.

“Please forgive me”, she pleaded, and he steeled himself.

“No, you haven't offended me. I'm the one at fault. I shouldn't have expected so much from a girl with so little experience and understanding. Excuse me.”

He left then, not only her but the entire ball because his festive mood was gone. Instead he strode back to his hotel room and now lay here with pounding heart, missing out on any fun because of *her*.

She had offended his brothers, thus offended him, but as he calmed down he admitted to himself that her observations though tactless, were spot on. He had told her she was a silly, ignorant girl, but the truth was that she seemed to be the contrary. Her accurate analysis of his brothers let on that she might be more perceptive and intelligent than many people he knew, and he wondered what else she had figured out about himself besides that he was the more sensible of the three Parker brothers. It disturbed him how much he wanted to know, and for that reason he decided to ban Miss Heywood and her opinions from his mind.