

Chapter 11: What are my sentiments, exactly?

Mr. Parker had held her so close during the dance, closer than one was supposed to and yet she had felt like it was not close enough. His breath fanned on her face, his palm rested equally comforting and thrilling on the small of her back and she had the sensation of nearly touching his broad chest because his body heat escaped him and filled the narrow space between them. He had looked at her with an intensity no man had before so she had felt almost naked under his gaze but not uncomfortable, sooner like she wanted him to look at her like that when they were all alone, doing things to her she had not experienced before and knew little of.

His expression had shifted as they floated over the floor, from serious, to joyful, then back to serious again in a way that made her skin prickle. She could still not fully understand this change in him since last night; his unexpected repeated praise of her, how he no longer seemed to wish to escape her but on the contrary keep her close. It made her heart thump hard in her chest, made her feel heated, made her want to be closer to him than was appropriate for a lady to be with a man who was not her husband. She could not quite grasp this change in herself either. Lady Susan's words echoed in her head; *'It sound as if you are in love with him'*. Was it

possible? Was this what love felt like? She had always thought love would be a natural, uncomplicated feeling, like finding a safe harbour, nothing like the stormy feelings she had to admit she had for Sidney Parker. She was unable to shake them off though and strangely enjoyed them more and more when she allowed herself to give in to them.

When the music paused, she wished this was not the end. She wanted to stay in his arms, lose herself in him. For a moment he seemed as lost in her as she was in him, but he pulled himself together faster than she was capable of, took a deep breath and broke eye contact. His eyes fell on someone, he abruptly excused himself and disappeared across the room. She was a bit taken aback but still in high spirits when Tom asked her to dance. She thought Mr. Parker would return to her soon for sure.

“How happy I am to see the light return to your eyes, Charlotte”, Tom had said.

“There is nothing like dancing to restore one’s spirits!”

“Quite so, my dear, quite so. It seems to have had a similar effect upon Sidney.”

“Do you think so?” Her heart made a little somersault. If Tom had noticed Sidney’s changed manners towards her and an improvement in his mood it was not only in her imagination.

“It’s undeniable. He is positively revived, but then perhaps that is not so much due to the dancing, as to the presence of a certain young lady.”

“Which young lady do you have in mind, sir?” Charlotte held her breath, hoping he would say she was silly for not knowing it was herself he eluded to, but he did not.

“He's talking to her now. Mrs. Campion. It's unmistakably her. How strange that we were just discussing her only this afternoon. I heard she'd been widowed, I had no idea she was in London.”

Only now did Charlotte see that the person Sidney had left her for was a very beautiful lady and she turned cold for some reason. A smiling Mr. Parker seemed to be absorbed by the woman in front of him. He did not feel Charlotte's eyes on him and did look up to search for her. Breathing got harder.

“I do not recall discussing a Mrs. Campion.”

“Ah! I daresay I referred to her by her Christian name. Eliza. Perhaps they will have their chance of happiness after all”, he mused. “Excuse me Charlotte, I will go and greet her as well. Perhaps she will be interested in our regatta.”

Tom's words were like a wet blanket suddenly covering her from top to toe. The elusive Eliza, the woman who had broken off an engagement and sent Sidney Parker on a downwards spiral until he went off to the West Indies instead. Judging by the way they leaned towards each other talking and her hand on his arm, all that was forgotten. As was apparently Charlotte. Had they agreed to meet here tonight, and *she* was in fact the reason for the change in him? Perhaps Charlotte was just a way of passing time until Mrs. Campion appeared. Suddenly the walls seemed to close in on her and before Tom set off to join them she told him she wanted to leave. He did not accompany her to find a carriage, but she was only grateful for that, as

it meant she did not have to keep appearances up. She was feeling devastated, like lightning had struck her and all she wanted was to hide from the world in her bed.

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Hours later Sidney was pacing back and forth in his room. The Parker family's house at Bedford Place was the closest to a home he had, as he had not bothered to buy something of his own after the return to England. His brothers spent most of their days in Sanditon, so he often had the place to himself anyway. Now he was all too aware of the other guests sleeping under this roof, one in particular. He had not even attempted to go to bed after his return to the house, too agitated by the turn of events this evening.

During that dazzling dance and at the end of it, he had been convinced that there was nowhere in the world he would rather be than by Charlotte Heywood's side. Then he had looked up and seen Mrs. Champion, no longer a figment of his imagination but standing there in the flesh smiling invitingly at him. He had heard a while ago that she was widowed but had brushed it off, thinking it did not change anything between them. It had not occurred to him to seek her out for he had long ago accepted that she was lost to him forever. Her smile now told him something else though.

Without really thinking, he left Charlotte and approached Mrs. Champion, unable to resist as if she were a Siren calling and he a lost sailor. He felt the urge to know what she was like after all this time and needed to find out how she would look at

him. Ten years older, wealthier and more influential he was for sure a better match than the young man she once had passed over.

Up close she was as beautiful as ever, older but still young and with the same classic blonde elegance she always had possessed. It was apparent that she was pleased to see him, and he did not know if he was relieved or disturbed by how easy she seemed to be in his company. Her manners implied no embarrassment or regret over the choice she once had made; breaking their engagement, breaking his heart for a wealthier husband. She smiled sweetly at him, possessively put her hand on his arm whilst effortlessly making conversation and without hesitation called him by his Christian name. He almost reluctantly called her by hers in return but found that in his head she remained Mrs. Champion, the woman who had married another. She behaved like it was only yesterday they last met, ignoring the past decade, husband and events in his life she knew nothing off. Yet, she drew him in. She reminisced of a common past when life was easy and Sidney unjaded. She had been the epitome of elusive love in his mind for so long but was now standing before him beaming at him. She was so enchanting that he only could smile in return but inside he remained on his guard, because he was not naïve like he had been back then. Nevertheless, he was so occupied reading her, her thoughts about him, what her intentions were in reconnecting with him, that he forgot about Miss Heywood.

Now, returned to his room, he did not even understand how that was possible given how he had felt during the dance, but there it was. Mrs. Champion's reappearance captivated him to the extent that he for a while forgot about everything else. It was

only when Tom joined them, happily greeting her, sharing the news of the regatta and without Sidney's consent invited her to come to Sanditon, that he woke up from the spell and immediately was struck by remorse.

"Where is Miss Heywood?" he anxiously asked Tom.

"Don't worry. She was exhausted after this adventurous day and took a carriage back to Bedford Place. She is quite safe, I can assure you."

Sidney was not concerned about her safety, he worried about what she must think of him. Even if she had denied being in love with him to that lady, she surely must have felt the same, tangible connection between them during the dance and then he had deserted her abruptly, sought the company of another woman and ignored her. He was not pleased with himself, but he could not change it now. He wanted to run after her but knew he could not do it without making a spectacle of himself and it was likely too late anyway. Instead he made conversation with Mrs. Champion, smiled when she smiled, politely fetched her refreshments but did not ask her to dance. He was not in the mood for further dancing and after an hour he announced that he too would withdraw for the evening.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Sidney", said Mrs. Champion with a mocking giggle. "I never knew you to be one to call it a night so early."

He had on his tongue that a decade had passed since she knew him and she had no idea how he was now, but he bit back the words knowing she meant no harm.

His intention had been to ignore Tom's previous words about her coming to Sanditon, but she would not let him forget them.

"Before you leave, pray tell me; this regatta your brother mentioned, when is it due?"

"Next Saturday."

"Would you welcome me there? Host me as your guest? A regatta sounds amusing and it would be lovely if you accompanied me from London, so I don't have to do that tedious journey alone with only my maid."

She had not asked him if he was married or engaged but perhaps she knew he was not. Her interest in him flattered his ego but he found it slightly disturbing how convinced she seemed to be that he wished to be with her. Her tone of voice suggested that she expected a favourable answer and Sidney found himself cornered. He was not sure at all that he wanted Mrs. Campion there for the regatta. For one thing he did not know what his feelings for her presently were, secondly this regatta was something he had been looking forward to experience with Charlotte now when they were on good terms. The regatta was her idea, she had helped to make it come to life and he now realised that he unconsciously had imagined to share it with her. It would be very impolite and definite to turn down Mrs. Campion's request though, putting an abrupt end to reacquainting himself with her and he was not prepared to do that either. Faced with two options of which he liked neither, he hesitated but leaned towards saying no when Tom intervened

again. His brother was so excited at the prospect of prominent visitors that he did not dwell on how Sidney might feel about having Mrs. Campion there.

“Of course you must come! Sidney will be delighted to have you there as will Mary and I. Splendid, splendid!” he said exuberantly, clapping his hands together.

Sidney had nodded in acceptance then, there was no other choice if he did not want to come off as terribly rude, but it did not sit well with him and now in the solitude of his room he felt trapped somehow. Without succeeding he tried to figure out what he truly felt about Mrs. Campion returning into his life but most of all his thoughts went to Charlotte, sleeping only a few steps away. What had she felt, what had she thought of him when she left the ball and what would she think when he brought Eliza Campion to Sanditon?

Yesterday evening in the carriage she had accused him of being insensitive of feeling. Of all accusations she had made against him, this was the one he found to be most unfair next to that of him being racist and it was the one that disturbed him most. First he had not known why but processing it over and over during the night with her in his arms he had finally understood it.

Sidney had gone to lengths to distance himself to others not to be hurt again, but in doing so he had become skilled at hiding who he really to the point that he nearly had forgot it himself. No wonder he always seemed to be lacking good qualities in her eyes, when he deliberately chose not to share of himself. If he wanted her to ever think differently of him, he had to show her who he truly was, open up, let her inside. It was a daunting challenge, one that made him terrified, but he had realised

that even so, he felt compelled to try and had during the past day and evening. He had noticed how this shift confused her, but she also seemed to appreciate it. How strange it then must seem to her that he at the first opportunity turned to another woman and dismissed her. This realisation made him feel ashamed of himself. He wanted to make amends for it but was not sure how in the current situation, because he was undoubtedly curious how things could develop with Mrs. Champion as well and she would inevitably come to Sanditon.

When someone has wanted something for very long, and it suddenly and unexpectedly is within reach, it may be difficult to grasp that wishes have altered over time. The love of Eliza was an illusion, as much now as during the ten years they were apart, but this night Sidney Parker had not yet reached that insight and his own indecisiveness tore him apart and kept him awake until the early morning hours.

Next day, him and Charlotte travelled back to Sanditon but in the company of Tom and Georgiana so he could not talk to her about the things he would have liked to even if he had dared. Her expression would perhaps have discouraged him anyway, because her face was blank and her eyes like opaque hazel coloured stones, giving away none of her feelings. For once, she was quiet, and her emotions locked inside. The connection he had sensed during the dance had either been a fantasy or was undeniably broken. Strangely, Sidney had shared more of himself than he had for long, and now Charlotte had retreated within herself where he did not know how to reach her.

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Charlotte felt very uneasy during the carriage ride back to Sanditon. Over breakfast that morning, Tom chirpily had shared what she had missed after her early departure from the ball; how they had reacquainted themselves with the lovely Mrs. Champion and Sidney had invited her to the regatta, which was wonderful indeed as she had a large fortune and was very well-connected.

“I will not be the least surprised if my brother is getting engaged in the near future, mark my words”, he added conspiratorially and tapped the side of his nose with his index finger.

A wave of nausea welled up in Charlotte and she excused herself from the table, just as Sidney made a late entrance. He looked tired, with dark shadows under his eyes and she thought he must have had a very late night up, probably enjoying the company of Mrs. Champion.

She could no longer keep up with her own shifting emotions. Yesterday he had stirred awake something in her which she never had felt before and today it seemed like he was spoken for by another, making her current feelings futile and ridiculous. It made her confused, sad and introspective to the extent that she missed the glimmer in the depth of his eyes that could have told her she had not been wrong when her intuition told her he had feelings for her.

Back in Sanditon he took a room at the hotel again instead of staying with Tom and Mary, so a few days passed when she did not see him at all. Part of her was relieved, part of her longed to be in his presence again. She wished she would stop thinking

of him but found it impossible. It was like once the idea that she might be in love with him had rooted in her, she could not rid herself of it. She tortured herself replaying past conversations between them, regretting she had been so outspoken and critical. She must seem so childish and impulsive to him, compared to Mrs. Campion whose appearance had been so controlled and coolly elegant. No wonder he chose her over a silly girl like Charlotte.

His face often appeared before her, the stern version as well as the tender one. When she thought of how he had looked at her in the carriage, when she came down the stairs before the ball and during the dance, hope flared up inside her but then she remembered all the times he had been angry with her and felt like a fool for even for a minute thinking he might be in love with her.

Despite that he was on her mind almost constantly, or perhaps because of it, she was unprepared to meet him when she finally ran into him. He came out from Georgiana's room having paid his ward a visit and Charlotte was about to do the same. She had only just run into James Stringer and thought to herself how nice it was with men who did not leave her feeling like she was treading in a swamp. With Mr. Parker it seemed like every step she took from the day she met him only had led her deeper into trouble, meanwhile with Mr. Stringer things were as easy as if he were one of her younger brothers. Just as the thought crossed her mind she bumped into said Mr. Parker and her heart immediately race proving her right – more trouble.

Since their return to Sanditon, Georgiana had been very dispirited. Charlotte was worried for her and visited her every day, but always found her lying in bed, refusing to leave Mrs. Griffith's house. The expression on Mr. Parker's face right now suggested he was as worried as Charlotte.

"How did you find her?" she asked him as soon as she found her bearings after the collision.

"Oh I daresay you'll have more luck." His words were nonchalant, but he did not look it and after a brief pause he added, stuttering slightly; "I, er I might wait for you downstairs if you don't mind?"

"No. Not at all."

Still, she half expected him to disappear and was pleasantly surprised when he stayed true to his word and waited without looking impatient when she came down the stairs a while later. Her whole being was tense, she both wanted and did not want to be with him.

"You must be patient with Georgiana", she said. "Every minute spent apart is... Well, you know how sharp the agony of separation can be." With these words she acknowledged that she knew of his past and that he suffered too. Little did he know that because of him she now understood that type of sentiment far better than she would have only days ago. Tense she awaited his reaction, wondering if he would be annoyed she knew and even more annoyed she brought it up, but it had never been in her personality to avoid difficult topics.

“Yes, I expect you're right, Miss Heywood”, he simply said. “Although fate has a strange way of surprising even the most jaded amongst us.”

He must find it the most amazing stroke of luck to have met Mrs. Campion again. Charlotte felt like a cold hand was squeezing her heart but smiled bravely at him.

“You are not nearly as unfeeling as you pretend.”

“Well, if that is the case, I would ask you to keep it to yourself. I have a reputation to uphold”, he jested with a smile in return and she thought how unfair it was that he seemed so wonderful now when he was more out of reach to her than ever. She had been a fool to believe that he ever was attainable and now she felt like a small part of her was withering.

"Your secret is safe with me", she answered and despite all, felt like they were sharing something important here. Perhaps he could be her friend like Mr. Stringer was after all, one day when she had ceased to have feelings for him.

Author's note: If you were expecting we would make it to the lovely boat scene in this chapter I am sorry to disappoint you, but I felt like there was so much to explore about their feelings in this part of the story, especially Sidney's. HOW could he run to Mrs. C after a dance when he basically looked like he wanted to devour Charlotte? How could he bring Mrs. C to Sanditon? Surprise, habit, ego, curiosity,

politeness, fear of letting a dream pass him by, those were my thoughts about that.

I included a small alteration in his thoughts about Charlotte compared to previous chapters. Did you notice what it was?