

***Author's note: So, the small change in how Sidney thinks of Charlotte which I sneaked in in previous chapter, was that he stopped thinking of her as Miss Heywood. He still calls her that but thinks of her as Charlotte, as opposed to Mrs C who stays Mrs C in his mind even when he sees himself forced to call her Eliza.***

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## **Chapter 12: In the spirit of forgiveness**

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He had deliberately stayed away from Charlotte for a few days after the return to Sanditon to try to sort out his thoughts but stayed in town as he felt obliged to keep an eye on Georgiana. When he finally ran into her at Mrs. Griffiths' school house he was so ridiculously happy to see her that he on impulse asked if she would mind if he waited for her downstairs. She looked astonished over the request and he found that he wished she was not. He wanted her to know how much he had come to enjoy her company, even if he did not necessarily wish for her to know he felt like a nervous school boy standing there waiting, hat in hand. Knowing he would bring Mrs. Campion to Sanditon shortly he did not feel at liberty to share those feelings with her, but as they walked down the main street side by side, he was more at ease than he had been since the evening of the ball. His shoulders relaxed, the muscles at the back of his neck magically loosened up and his jaw became less tight as he felt compelled to smile at her.

When she told him he was not nearly as unfeeling as he pretended to be, he took it as the compliment it was and was pleased to have managed to in some way show her he was not the insensitive man she had accused him of being. Jokingly he asked her to keep it to herself because he had a reputation to uphold, but truly enjoyed the feeling of sharing a secret with her. She understood him like no one else and he had come to appreciate that.

Simultaneously, there was a streak of desperation to his feelings during the short walk to Trafalgar house. There was so much he would have liked to talk to her about but did not know how to say. He struggled with how to initiate the conversation given the relationship they had, or rather lack of such. They had no official ties and no feelings had been mentioned except his presumed lack thereof. To the world she was Tom's guest and he the brother, nothing more. He was not certain what they were to each other in her mind.

He wanted to explain to her and apologise for abandoning her at the ball, but she had not come there as his partner and they had made no promises except what he had imagined seeing in her eyes, so he would appear foolish if he attempted that conversation. He wanted to tell her, warn her, that Mrs. Champion was coming for the regatta, but again, if this meant nothing to Charlotte he would seem like a presumptuous fool. So Sidney mentioned nothing of this, just basked in the warmth of her smile for a while, relieved that her face was less stony than it had been on the way back from London and postponed thinking of the predicament he foresaw it would be to have the two women near each other, with Mrs. Champion

expecting him to entertain her. He did not think Charlotte would demand anything from him, but that did not mean that *he* did not want to give it.

Too soon they reached the door of Trafalgar house. He was reluctant to leave her but had no valid reason to linger as he already had met with Tom earlier.

"Er, I am travelling back to London this afternoon."

"But you will return for the regatta?" His heart stirred when her expression turned anxious, but did she care about him for him, or only as a participant in the event?

"It is just a brief visit and I will return tomorrow evening, so I will be here for the regatta. I would not miss it for the world", he smiled down on her, but there was a sadness in that smile as he knew he would not return alone and would not be able to spend the day with her as he had liked to.

"Then I am looking forward to seeing you soon again, Mr. Parker."

She blushed and in that moment he was so close to asking her what that meant but found he only dared to joke in return.

"Does this mean you now find my company slightly more endurable than during Mrs. Denham's pineapple luncheon?" he smirked.

"Perhaps a little, but only because you have learned to be civil", she answered with a twinkle to her eyes that made his stomach twist.

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He travelled back direction Sanditon already the next day, accompanying Mrs. Campion and her maid in his former fiancée's exclusive carriage. Not only was she a widow, she was one of the richest widows in the country and added to that still young and beautiful, so she would undoubtedly have a long line of interested suitors, should she wish to re-marry. During the many hours on country roads, Sidney was contemplating if he seriously considered joining that line. He could not help reminiscing another recent carriage ride with another lady.

He still found Mrs. Campion very handsome, anyone in their right mind would, but did not fervently admire her features like he did in his youth. It was not because she had aged, even if he when observing her in broad daylight noticed a few fine lines to her face which had not been there before. By the corners of her mouth and eyes, those lines were tilting downwards as if caused by constant displeasure or bitterness, rather than upwards smiling creases and he wondered what had made her feel that way. Yet those lines did not make the difference, it was simply so that he was not as attracted to her polished, classic features with blue eyes, blonde neatly arranged hair and pale skin as he had been once. It seemed like unruly dark locks, hazel eyes and freckles from spending too much time in the sun were more to his taste, preferably combined with smile dimples but adorable even with a frowned brow. He snorted out a laugh when he thought of the number of times he had provoked that frown and Mrs. Campion looked at him quizzically because he had been so grave up to then.

"Something amusing you wish to share, Sidney?"

"Er, no. I was just thinking about the gentlemen's amateur rowing which Tom has made me agree to participate in. I really need to practice before, or I'll make a spectacle of myself."

"Oh. Then I shall be waiting at the hotel, stepping into a boat with an inexperienced rower is more excitement than I find appealing. My dress would be ruined if I fell into the water." She giggled in a way that let him know how unthinkable such behaviour was.

He nodded and made no attempt persuading her to join him. More important than her looks being less desirable to him than in the past, was that during this carriage ride it also had become painfully clear he did not enjoy conversating with her like he used to. The fact of the matter was that she spoke of the very same things she had done when they were seventeen; the beau monde, balls, gossip, dresses. The difference was that at seventeen he had been charmed merely by her voice, her laughter, her pink soft lips moving and further distracted by her cleavage. That spell was broken, and it took more to impress him nowadays. He was not a hormonal adolescent, but a man who had come to appreciate deeper conversations and who had learned that it was possible to have such with the female sex too. He had experienced that unusually often as of late. When they approached Sanditon, he realised that with Mrs. Campion he had not talked of anything substantial during the entire journey. She had not expressed any intelligent or challenging

opinions, had verbalised no thoughts which engaged him, or questioned anything he said.

It also disturbed him how she continued to act like the past decade did not exist. She made no attempt to apologise for her decision then, inquire as to how he had handled it or even ask what he had done with his life all these years. It was like she conveniently chose to ignore what had transpired. When he tried to ask her about her life in the past years, she swiftly switched topic to talk of a ball she had attended recently, and he did not know more about her when they approached Sanditon than when they departed from London. She did not mention her marriage or if there were any children. He would have respected and accepted if she had said she loved her husband, but it was like he never existed. Sidney wondered if the downwards lines in her face implied it had been loveless all along, a mere stepping stone to get her hands on the fortune that now was hers. He found it hard to believe she might be that cold-hearted, but he hardly knew what else to think. After a few attempts to talk about anything that mattered, he gave up and absentmindedly listened when she chatted with her maid about what clothes she wished to wear during the regatta and how she wanted to try out the new fashionable hairdo Lady Something had the other week.

When the carriage passed by the spot where he for the first time had encountered Charlotte in the company of Mary and taken her for a new maid, he remembered how he had mistaken her for insignificant and bland. How he had been forced to re-evaluate that notion. It dawned on him that upon reacquainting himself with Mrs. Campion she was indeed the one who proved to be quite insipid. He was

relieved when they finally stopped outside The Crowne Hotel and, naturally, went to separate rooms. He did not even wish they shared one.

Later, after they had freshened up after the journey, he somewhat reluctantly brought her over to Trafalgar house. He grew increasingly nervous and irritable for every step of the way there, so it was fortunate it was only a short distance's walk.

His niece, Jenny, happily greeted them and shouted so it in Sidney's ears seemed to echo through the entire house.

"Papa! Papa! Uncle Sidney's here! And he's brought a pretty lady with him!"

He prayed that Charlotte was visiting Georgiana and had not heard it, when first Mary, then Tom came to greet them. Mrs. Campion proudly informed Mary that Sidney had asked her to stay for the regatta, something which made his sister-in-law thrilled but he flinched inside, knowing it was not true. Tom had asked her, she had willingly taken the bait and he had seen himself forced to say he would appreciate if she came. That was not the same as inviting her.

He suddenly had the feeling of someone observing him and looked up to meet Charlotte's eyes. It sent a jolt through him. They only had been apart one day, but he felt such immense joy at the sight of her, though blended with the most horrible feeling of betrayal for standing here next to Mrs. Campion. In the candle lit hallway, Charlotte's eyes were dark, almost black and even if she looked straight at him he could not read her. Was she disappointed, did she silently reprimand him, or did she not care at all? During their first conversation at the balcony she had angered him with her transparency, now he desperately wished for it to return.

Another night passed when he barely slept. At dawn he gave up and went down to the empty beach for a swim. The crying seagulls above sounded as if mocking him and the water was numbingly cold when he first lowered his lean body into it, but strangely he enjoyed torturing himself physically. As he swam with long, strong strokes, the surrounding water seemed to embrace him, fill the void around his naked limbs and made him feel heated instead, the saltiness of it easily keeping him afloat.

Afterwards he felt refreshed, his mind suddenly clearer. When he got dressed again, the friction between his damp skin and the clothes made them difficult to put on but finally he managed. He pondered that perhaps it was the same with Mrs. Campion; his body was set on putting up some initial resistance, but it could be overcome. Damn it, he had yearned for her for ten years! He would be a fool if he did not give her a fair chance now, or gave himself a chance to experience happiness, would he not? When he left the beach behind, he was firmly determined to spend time with her this day because he owed them to explore this opportunity to have what they should have had back then. He would for sure regret it for the rest of his life if he did not give this a serious try.

Sidney was hesitant as to where Charlotte fit into all this. In fact he avoided delving into it because it was slightly painful. His fear of giving up the past made him blind to that she was the sea water in his own allegory; an initial shock alerting all his senses because he was unused to it, then heating him up in a pleasant way, filling the empty space around him, keeping him afloat, staying on his skin even when he



tried to leave it behind and making his body reluctant to put on the clothes he had worn before.

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If she were in any doubt regarding her feelings towards Sidney Parker before, the breath-taking punch to her stomach it was to see Mrs. Champion stand beside him in Tom's and Mary's hallway told her clear enough.

Charlotte had come downstairs, drawn there by the merry voices of the children but froze in her step at the sight that met her. He had been to London to fetch his old fiancée. That could only mean one thing; he loved her still and had resumed wooing her. Judging by the contented look on the woman's face his prospects of succeeding had much improved since the other time.

She wanted to turn around, sneak away unseen but was unable to move. She felt like a statue with an inside in turmoil. All she could do was observing the quartet, register how painfully confident and possessive Mrs. Champion's body language was, how welcoming Tom and Mary were to her. She saw no sign that any of them held the slightest grudge towards Mrs. Champion for jilting Sidney and as for him... In that instant he turned his head and their eyes locked. She felt as if he could read her like an open book, but hoped she was wrong so that all her chaotic feelings were not on display. Worse than unrequited love would be him knowing about it, nothing could be more embarrassing than that.

He only acknowledged her with a brief tight smile, dropped his gaze to almost bashfully look down on his own feet before he returned his attentions to Mrs. Campion.

Charlotte did not wish to be introduced, not for the world, but nevertheless it hurt that he did not even find her worth introducing to this fine lady. He may not have feelings for her, but she thought they were something. Apparently she had been mistaken about that too. Mercifully, her paralysation was broken when he looked away and she made a silent retreat from a room where no one seemed to miss her. It appeared Tom had been right in his predictions that his younger brother soon was to be engaged.

The day of the regatta offered sunny weather which in no way reflected Charlotte's melancholic mood. To distract herself she offered to take the children off Mary's hands and join them to the sand castle competition down on the beach. Jenny had strong opinions on how their castle should be built, and Charlotte and Henry took her directions, Henry with more eagerness than skill and Charlotte absentmindedly unhappy. She had been looking forward to this day so much, now she wondered how to get through it.

When she saw Sidney Parker approach with Mrs. Campion by his side she wished that she could do like that exotic bird she had read about, the ostrich, and put her head in the sand to hide. Instead she remained seated where she was, trying not to breath fast and shallow, busying her hands building the castle so they would not tremble visibly. She hoped they would pass by, but Sidney, who never missed an

opportunity to show his niece and nephew affection, stuck his fashionable cane in the sand and playfully lifted Henry high up in the air, making him squeal with laughter.

"Miss Heywood, what a handsome construction. I assume you and Henry are the architects?"

His tone and words were friendly, yet he seemed distant and avoided looking directly at her. He was more handsome than ever today in black coat and vest, tidy cravat and top hat and Mrs. Champion was a perfect match in a costly dress and neat feather adorned bonnet. Charlotte felt like a silly girl kneeling in the sand with hands buried in it and her loose hair flapping around her face.

"Oh, no. That would be Jenny. I'm merely a labourer." She was surprised that she managed to sound quite normal.

"Well, it is a fine piece of work." He chuckled softly, put down Henry again and she thought of how she loved that sound.

"And if this doesn't win, there is no justice, is there, Henry?" he continued.

He was so lovely with the children, it was one of the first things she had realised that she appreciated about him, playing down by the river. Mrs. Champion did not look very impressed though, more like the children were a nuisance and she thought it better the sooner they continued. Charlotte had the feeling that if she had any children they were safely stowed away with a nanny not to bother her.

"Yes, well done, children!"

Mrs. Champion's words rang falsely in Charlotte's ears and even if she felt childish compared to the more mature woman she resented being diminished by being grouped with the children, adding further distance between her and Mr. Parker. It seemed so obvious in this moment, that he and Mrs. Champion belonged in a world where she did not. He had said he did not feel at home in that fashionable world, but it seemed it only took one look at Her to change his mind, if those words ever had been true in the first place. Perhaps he had only attempted making Charlotte feel better by claiming he felt like an outlier.

"Right." He cleared his throat, still without looking at her and it suddenly struck her that he was awkward just like her but surely for other reasons. He turned to Mrs. Champion who smiled smugly. "I shall show you Tom's new bathing machine. Good day, Miss Heywood."

Even bidding her goodbye, he looked at the sand castle rather than at her, brushed away some grains of sand Henry had left on his coat, took his cane, gave a curt nod to the sand castle and walked away. Charlotte watched them leave. Her heart was heavy, but she hoped dearly that Mrs. Champion would make Sidney Parker a happy man this time around, because she had come to think he deserved it more than almost anyone she knew. Even if it made her miserable in the process, she wished him that.

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"At the last regatta I attended, they raced Arab stallions. The one before that featured eight clippers in full sail. But for sheer exhilaration, what could compare to a sandcastle competition?"

It annoyed Sidney that she mocked the arrangements. He had attended events far more spectacular than this, but for Sanditon and his brother this was important. And for Charlotte. He had intended to avoid her as much as possible today to be able to focus on Miss Champion, but it was hard to focus on her when her conversation was so tedious and even more so when he almost stumbled over a kneeling Charlotte, engaged in the sand castle competition Mrs. Champion just had mocked.

"Well, this is no ordinary sandcastle competition." He tried to joke away her remark, not to sound too vexed. "Look at this one, for instance. Miss Heywood, what a handsome construction."

He found it impossible to act natural in the simultaneous presence of Mrs. Champion and Charlotte. His entire body tensed, it was hard breathing, he did not know where to look. He was in flight mode but unable to escape the situation so he simply had to ride it out best he could, and he felt he did not handle it very well. Christ, he had not even introduced Charlotte properly to Mrs. Champion. He did not mean to dismiss her, not at all, but he was afraid that if he spoke to her too much, if he let his eyes rest on her, it would be obvious to Mrs. Champion that she was something more to him than Tom's guest. If she understood that, his intentions to allow them a fair chance exploring what their relationship was now, would be lost.

Even when he avoided looking straight at Charlotte, it had not escaped him how absolutely lovely she was this day. She had looked ethereal at the ball, still he preferred her like this, with curls moving in the wind, playing with the children without any concern for propriety. The bright blue jacket she wore on top of her thin dress brought out her colours and made her look like she belonged here, one with the sea. He would have loved to remove his own coat and toss away the hat and join them, let his hands touch hers digging in the sand, like they had touched during the dance. Instead he acted like the stiff gentleman Mrs. Campion expected him to be, brushed off the sand Henry had left on him though it did not really bother him and turned away from the playing trio. His thoughts lingered with Charlotte, but he was abruptly brought back to reality by Mrs. Campion.

"Who did you say that girl was?"

He was immediately alert, heard the streak of suspiciousness in her voice and made sure his own tone was calm and neutral when he responded.

"Miss Heywood." Charlotte. "She's a guest of my brother and Mary's."

"And she helps with the children?"

"Well among other things, yes."

*She kept him on his toes, challenged him, made him furious, made him laugh, made him want...*

"She is rather a sweet little thing", she said condescendingly rather than complimenting.

He resented the way she belittled Charlotte when he knew she was so much more than sweet. More than Mrs. Campion ever could be. But he held his tongue, knowing nothing good would come out of it if he spoke back in this instant.

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She wished something would happen that could take her mind off Sidney Parker and his guest - and then it both did and did not.

Just as the sand castle competition was wrapping up and Tom prepared himself to hand out the prizes, there was news about the arrival of a prominent guest. A carriage with none other than Lady Worcester had just rolled into town.

Tom left the beach running, with Mary and a very curious Charlotte in his tracks.

"My dear, come along! Her every whim must be indulged" Panting he shouted over his shoulder. "If we can secure her patronage, we shall be rendered fashionable at a stroke."

"Who is this Lady Worcester?" Charlotte queried.

"My dear, she's quite notorious! London society positively revolves around her. It is a well-known fact that her and the Prince Regent are simpatico."

Charlotte was intelligent enough to have some understanding of that might imply and her curiosity grew. However, when she saw the familiar face of the woman Tom was welcoming she was in for a surprise.

"My lady! A thousand welcomes! I beg your forgiveness for missing your arrival. Mr Thomas Parker at your service."

Overly eager he introduced Mary, boasted about the town and generally made a fuss.

"As you shall see, we have the finest situation on the south coast. Our seawater and our..."

The lady impatiently interrupted his rambling.

"Oh, shush, never mind all that. If I gave a fig about the sea, I would have gone to Brighton! No, no, no. The reason I came here was to continue my conversation with Charlotte."

Lady Worcester looked past the astonished Tom, at Charlotte standing behind him.

Charlotte was amazed. Lady Worcester was none other than Lady Susan she had spoken to at the ball, and she had come all the way to Sanditon to see her.

"Susan? Very nice to see you."

Lady Susan ignored all the curious and fussing people around her, took Charlotte under the arm and asked to be taken for a walk. She had found Charlotte's acquaintance so refreshing at the ball. A totally natural girl, free from pretence and who did not approach her with ulterior motives because of the advantage it may be to know someone who was connected with the Prince Regent. She had also been intrigued by her story and the very handsome young man who had asked her to dance. The looks they had exchanged had left her in no doubt about their mutual



feelings, but later she had seen him talking to Mrs. Campion with Charlotte out of the picture and thus had made some enquiries. She had not liked what she learned. She simply had had to come here and talk to Charlotte to hear how things were developing and to silence her own curiosity.

As they strolled, Charlotte began telling her of the ongoing intrigues in the little sea town, starting with Lady Denham being on her deathbed and her presumed heirs watching like vultures over her.

"How thrilling! But more importantly than any of that, does a certain person know yet that you are in love with him?"

"I fear you're mistaken, my lady."

"I was not or I am not Susan, and I am never wrong when it comes to matters of the heart."

Charlotte swallowed. Perhaps there was no use denying what she now also knew was the truth. Susan had been right all along.

"Even if it were true, he is spoken for", she said sadly.

"Oh, yes, I know all about Mrs C. She must be the wealthiest widow in the country, not to mention the most elegant. I can see why you'd find her a dispiriting rival."

Charlotte felt like crying upon hearing Mrs. Campion described like that. If someone like Lady Susan thought her rival so rich and elegant, it was not only Charlotte's own inexperienced eye that found her so. That made it even more daunting to imagine competing with her, not that Charlotte had any intention to.

"But she will have a chink in her armour. We just need to find it." Susan continued encouragingly and squeezed Charlotte's arm to give her strength.

Having Susan there did not exactly help Charlotte to ban Sidney from her thoughts, but she felt so much better for having a friend present to support her. Perhaps she would survive this day after all.

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"You seem a different man", Tom said to Sidney.

The three Parker brothers stood together on the river bank, and Sidney had just thought how nice it was to be gathered, he had missed so many years of this companionship with his brothers. He had hardly known Arthur growing up. He did feel a different man today, but not in a good way like Tom seemed to think. He felt confused, like he was running around in a maze without knowing which direction to chose to find his way out. One that looked so promising could just as well be a dead end. Tom displayed his usual lack of talent in reading other's feelings. He was in a terrific mood after Lady Worcester's arrival and so assumed everyone else to be too.

"And there is no doubting the cause; the lovely Mrs Campion. Although I doubt she will remain Mrs Campion for long if you have your way."

Sidney's breath hitched. *Did people already take it for granted? That he would engage himself to Eliza Campion?* The thought did not stir any joy inside him.

"Steady on, Tom. There's no need to rush things", he said flatly.

"And why not? She is beautiful, witty and rich and you have loved her for a decade. Why would there be the slightest doubt in your mind?"

*Had he loved her for a decade? Or had he loved her a decade ago and only thought he continued to do so?*

"You know, it is a strange feeling", he answered thoughtfully. "When you've been wanting something impossible for so long, and suddenly it's within your grasp."

"Do you know, for years, all I knew about my brother Sidney was that he was driven to the West Indies with a broken heart", Arthur chipped in much to Sidney's surprise. It was quite seldom his little brother reflected upon anything besides ailments, food and drink.

"Then what's your point, Arthur?" he asked with curiosity.

"I admire your spirit of forgiveness. That is all. If it were me, I do not think I could bring myself to trust her again."

Struck with dismay Sidney stared at his brother. When Arthur for once made an intelligent remark, he had put words to the uncanny thoughts that had nagged Sidney ever since he saw Mrs. Campion again but had refused to acknowledge up to now.

*Could he forgive her? And even if he did, could he trust her? Was it so that he was making a gigantic mistake?*

Perhaps he did not owe her anything. Perhaps he would not be a fool for not giving her, then, a second chance. Perhaps he sooner was a fool for not immediately

realising that opportunity was lost long ago. Perhaps he was well on his way to let another chance of love pass him by in the present because he was blinded by the past.

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***Author's note: Sorry, we still did not make it to rowing before this chapter got too long but there is so much to imagine about what went on inside their minds, especially Sidney's. I think Charlotte's thoughts were quite transparent and in line with how she acted, but he was so contradictory, and I think that was because he struggled internally. Hope you enjoy this version of their thoughts.***