



A Fiery Winter Game

A chance encounter and a drink game made the evening end in a way neither of them had anticipated, but will assumptions prevent Sidney and Charlotte from taking things one step further? And what is it that they want from each other?

A pretty hot one-shot modern AU story written for the Sanditon creative's 12 Days of Sanditon challenge, prompt 'Games'. I started thinking of the plot for the prompt 'Fire', so there is much of that too. The kind of fire that stems from attraction and anger rather than logs. Hope you enjoy and Happy holiday!

~ *A Fiery Winter Game* ~

He felt the cigarette smoke rasp in his airways before he exhaled and watched as it slowly vanished towards the ceiling. He did not particularly enjoy the taste and was not a habitual smoker but had wanted to escape the dreary pre-Christmas party Tom was throwing and liked to imagine how annoyed his older brother would be if he knew Sidney was smoking in his precious orangery. He chose to smoke here mostly because it was bloody cold outside but also considered it a small pay-back for Tom making him attend tonight or convincing him to come to Sanditon in the first place.

London was the city Sidney called home since many years and he only returned to his birthplace Sanditon when the longing for the nephew and nieces he adored became too strong to resist or he could not avoid it for some other silly reason, usually with Tom's name tagged on it. This time Tom had skilfully played his heart strings, claiming that if the siblings did not convene for Christmas, they should not even call themselves a family anymore. Tom was older than him, but Sidney somehow felt an obligation to him and their younger brother and sister to keep the Parker family together as they did not have any parents to do so and had given in to his arguments. He did not enjoy it here in Sanditon though which made it hard to stay close to his siblings. He always felt like an odd bird and nothing ever happened in the sleepy town. The only thing he liked about it was the location by the sea. Not exactly the season for sea bathing now and he was determined to leave on Boxing Day no matter if Tom and his wife Mary tried to talk him out of it.

"I assume you already know it's bad for you, so there's no point telling you?"

He had been gazing at the snowy landscape, vaguely visible in the December darkness outside the huge paned windows, lost in reveries, and the female voice made him snap around. It seemed the peace he had found in the naughty smoke was over and he was about to retort something sarcastic, but the sight of her muted him.

He could not help but staring at the young woman leaning in the doorway. Sidney met beautiful women all the time and many of them were certainly pleased to meet him, but this girl struck him as different. There was no elaborate makeup, false eyelashes, spray tan, hair extensions or long varnished nails, just clean fresh natural beauty. Her most striking feature was the expressive big brown eyes, perfectly balanced with a cute little nose, soft pink lips, rosy cheeks, a dimple in her chin and wavy chestnut hair framing it all. She wore a dress in a deep red colour, very seductive despite that the neckline went no deeper than to show her clavicles and modestly ended just above the knee. Somehow, she managed to look simultaneously sweet and sexy and completely unaware of it.

She interrupted the silence by breaking out in laughter and he thought it sounded like little silver bells jingling.

“The smoking I mean. It’s bad for you but I’m sure you know. I’m sorry if I startled you. What are you doing hiding here, looking all brooding? Because you *are* hiding, aren’t you?”

Finally, he managed to produce a coherent sentence.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I find Tom’s do pretty damn boring”, he drawled and stubbed out the cigarette in an olive tree pot.

“Why is that? Are you too cool for it? Would you rather be gallivanting around London with your high society dandy friends?”

He heard the amused mockery in her voice and was unsure if it annoyed him or amused him in turn.

“Gallivanting? Did someone feed you an 18th century dictionary? And why would you assume I have such friends?”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“You look the part, that’s all.”

Maybe he did in his tailor-made dark three-piece suit and impeccable white shirt. When he spoke again, he found that he had no wish to be rude to her.

“Okay, I suppose there is a small grain of accuracy to that”, he admitted with a hint of a smile. “What are you doing here anyway, trying to escape too?”

She shook her head.

“I joined the party a bit late and sort of attempted to catch up, so I had a few flutes of champagne too quick and started feeling tipsy.”

She took a little side-step as if to prove her point and he registered the high heels and her well-shaped legs. Despite her short stature, her legs somehow seemed long and alluring as they disappeared up under the dress.

“I went to the bathroom to flush myself with some water to freshen up and on the way back saw the doors to the orangery were open and got curious. Didn’t expect to find a lonesome stranger.” The wry smile accompanying her words, caused a small flutter in his stomach. “If you would rather be alone, I’ll just return to the others. I don’t find this party half as tedious as you seem to do, and I suppose I’m one of the guests you find ‘pretty damn boring’.”

She made a move as if to turn around to leave.

“No.” She looked back at him in surprise and he was almost as surprised himself. He was not sure why, but he did not want her to leave just yet. “Don’t go, stay and keep me company. It would be nice.”

“Really? I’m not disturbing your lonely smoke time?”

“No, you’re right, it’s bad for me anyway.”

He smiled and nodded to the other armchair, as a sign for her to take a seat.

“And you’re going to be civil?” She cocked an eyebrow at him, indicating she had indeed found him rude before even if she clearly was not one to be easily offended.

“I will try, but I can’t make any promises”, he smirked and realised he already enjoyed himself more in her company than he did with most people he knew.

“Well then, I suppose I could join you for a while.”

She made it sound like she graciously granted him a favour, but he saw the mischievous glitter in her eyes. He felt strangely pleased when she after a brief hesitation came over and sat down.

In addition to the many Mediterranean plants it was built to host, the orangery was equipped with two big comfortable armchairs, several plaids and a coffee table as his sister-in-law enjoyed sitting here reading. For Christmas time Mary had decorated the room with fairy lights and an abundance of tea light holders, all beautifully lit up tonight. It was one of Sidney's favourite places in the house because of the contrast between the cosy inside and the harsh coastal winter landscape just outside the huge windows. He would happily spend his entire stay in Sanditon here and preferably alone. At least he had thought so up to now.

"I could get us something to drink?" he offered.

"Thanks, but I'm not sure it is a good idea."

"Come on, it's a party after all. What's the fun in staying sober?"

"Okay, maybe a glass but no more fizz, I had enough of that. Some red wine might be nice."

"I'll be back in a minute."

Agilely he got up and went down the hallway, quickly passed the doors to the big room where most of the guests were gathered and sneaked into the kitchen to nick a bottle of red wine and two glasses. As he opened the bottle, he heard Tom's voice approaching and hurried out the same way he had come, knowing that if his brother caught him, he would never make it back to the orangery.

There was a spring to his step when he scurried back, but he stopped just outside the double doors suddenly fearing she would be gone and realising that would make him very disappointed.

He had not needed to worry because he found her just like when he left, except she had kicked off her heels, tucked her stocking-clad legs under her in the armchair and grabbed one of the plaids to cover them. As much as he regretted not being able to see those very well-shaped poles anymore, he quite enjoyed seeing her looking comfortable too. She reminded him of a tiny fairy in that armchair.

She watched him, smiling silently as he put the bottle and glasses down on the table top and poured them each a glass. He was glad he achieved it without spilling any of the liquid, because he felt strangely butter-fingered. When he handed her the glass, their fingertips touched, and a mild electric current seemed to emanate from her and transfer to him, creating a buzzing feeling.

They clinked their glasses together and he watched her over the brim when he took a first sip. In his haste he had picked an exclusive Amarone and the pleasant, rich tastes of black cherry, brown sugar and chocolate hit his palate.

“Good choice”, she smiled and swirled her wine around in the glass.

“We didn’t get properly introduced. What’s your name?”

“Charlotte.”

“Charlotte?”

“Yes.”

He had heard her perfectly fine the first time. He simply wanted to try her name on his tongue and just like the Amarone it was a pleasant sensation.

“I’m Sidney.”

"Like Tom's younger brother?"

"*Exactly* like Tom's younger brother."

"Ah. The middle brother who's here, there and everywhere."

"What?"

"That's what Tom says about you."

"I suppose he would think that as he prefers never to leave Sanditon", he said dryly, annoyed that his brother had shared any type of information about him with Charlotte and wondering what more she knew of him. How did Tom know her anyway?

"Is it not true then?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders and switched topic.

"So, where are you from Charlotte?"

"Willingden." She saw his blank expression. "It's a small country village. I'm not surprised if you haven't heard of it."

"And how did you end up here?"

She took a gulp of her wine and it almost seemed like she was stalling her answer.

"You know what? You ask an awful lot of questions for someone who seems unwilling to share information about himself."

"Don't you find me as easy to read as an open book?" He raised a sardonic eyebrow.

"I have a feeling barely anyone can presume to know your mind, but I have an idea."

"Please share with me."

She leaned forward over the table, looking eagerly playful.

“How about we play ‘Truth or dare’? We can ask anything and the other has to answer truthfully. I’ll answer your questions if you answer mine. And then there’s ‘dare’ of course, if you prefer.”

He was not that keen on answering questions about himself, but the curiosity to find out more about her got the better of him. And like she said, he could always choose dare if the questions started to get difficult.

“I know the game even if I haven’t played it in ages. Okay.”

“I think we need some more wine then.”

“I thought you said you had a bit much already”, he smirked but obediently topped their glasses.

“Enough to mingle but not enough for ‘Truth or dare’. Ladies first, so I obviously get to start.”

“You’re telling me you’re a lady?”

“That’s a question and we just established I get to go first.”

He leaned his head back and laughed, already having the feeling he was slightly out of his depth with this *lady* but strangely enjoying it.

“Don’t worry, I’ll begin with something easy. How old are you?”

“I never got to pick truth or dare, did I? But okay, I chose to answer that. Twenty-eight. And you?”

“You don’t have to mirror my questions. You know that, right?”

“Of course, I know, but I’m curious.”

“I’m twenty-four.”

“Really?”

“Oh look, your eyes are almost bulging out. Is that so hard to believe? Why would I lie?”

“No reason, you just look younger.”

There was something about her rosy freshness and the way life did not yet seem to have damaged her in any way that had caused him to believe she was not much older than twenty.

“Childish?” She frowned her brow as that would indeed be something bad.

“I didn’t say that.”

Definitely not childish, but he was anyway pleased to find out that the age gap between them was smaller than he had thought. Not that it ought to matter to him.

“Truth again?”

He nodded and realised he was curious to know what she wanted to know about him.

“Why are you in Sanditon so seldom when all your siblings live here?”

“I have my life in London.”

“Yes, but why are you home next to never? I don’t think you really answered my question. Most people visit their family regularly, but you don’t from what I hear. I heard it took a lot of persuasion to make you come even for Christmas.”

Again, it disturbed him how well-informed she seemed to be.

“We have promised to speak the truth...” she reminded him with a smirk.

“Alright, I will. For one thing I find Sanditon boring, nothing ever happens here...”

Her expression let him know she disagreed. It was probably packed with action compared to her village.

“...but I suppose the real reason is I haven’t felt at home here since our parents passed away.”

That was more than he ever had told anyone about his motives for staying away.

“I’m sorry, I have heard about that boat accident. How old were you?”

“I have already answered your question, so if you really want to know you have to save it for next round. So, truth or dare?”

She rolled her eyes but accepted the rules.

“Truth.”

“How did you end up in Sanditon?”

“Tom’s and Mary’s car broke down near my dad’s farm in Willingden. We offered them to spend the night with us, until the car could be towed to the nearest garage next day. They... well Tom, spoke so warmly of Sanditon that I thought I had to come see for myself.”

“So, you’re a real country girl then?”

“I thought we were limited to one question at a time, but I’ll be generous and answer; yes, I suppose I am.”

“And now you’re staying at the hotel?”

“Hey, my turn remember?”

With feigned grumpiness he picked truth again. Truth was he enjoyed the banter with her and to watch her in the candle light; happy, with cheeks slightly flushed from the wine and showing small signs of tipsiness. She was simply adorable.

“What have you been up to since you turned your back on Sanditon?”

“How am I even supposed to answer that? I haven’t lived here for 10 years.”

“A summary will do fine.”

“I went to university, Cambridge, graduated, worked for a while then decided to start my own trading firm, was more successful already from start than I ever had dreamed of which meant I had to work a lot and then some more and in a flash ten years had passed. Not very exciting.”

She giggled.

“Why do I have the feeling you are omitting all the juicy stuff?”

“What juicy stuff would that be?”

“The stuff that makes Mary calls you ‘one of the most eligible but also most elusive bachelors in London.’”

“For fuck’s sake, how much are Tom and Mary actually talking about me when I’m not here? And what are they actually saying?”

“If you spent more time here, they would have less reason to talk about you in your absence you know.”

“Fair point. I think I need to have a chat with Tom, but for now know this; you should not believe everything you hear about me.”

Her eyes were fixed on him and he had the feeling that she was measuring him and, to his satisfaction did not find him completely wanting.

“You have an excellent opportunity to prove any rumours wrong right now.”

“I’m trying, believe me”, he said flatly. “So... Charlotte, what do you do for a living?”

He still had to figure out what she was doing in Sanditon and if her stay was temporary or permanent.

“A bit of this and that, trying to figure out what to do with my life. At the moment I’m tending to some children.”

“Like a nanny?”

“I guess you can say so. I’m the eldest of a bunch of kids so I it comes naturally to me even if I’m not trained for it.”

He did not find it hard to imagine that children liked her.

“Here in Sanditon?”

“That’s a second question... It’s my turn to ask you Mr. Parker. How long did your last relationship last?”

“Define relationship?”

“Any kind of interaction with a woman that wasn’t purely platonic.”

“Er... let me think.” He wished the truthfully answer was something that contradicted what Tom appeared to have said about him but unfortunately it was not. “I think it

must have been Amber Harrison, at the Pink October gala, so... something like twelve hours.”

The answer made her fold double in fits of laughter and when she looked up again she had tears in her eyes.

“Didn’t you just say I shouldn’t believe everything I hear?”

“Well, yes...”

“You really suck at proving it wrong.”

He was not sure if she worded her questions more cleverly than him or if she simply was more skilled at avoiding answering his, but he had the feeling she got to know more about him than he about her. He decided to up the game a notch from the so far pretty innocent questions he had asked her.

“How old were you when you first slept with someone?”

“Sixteen.”

That she answered without hesitation or trying to dodge the question.

“Sixteen? I’m quite shocked, you have such an innocent air about you”, he grinned.

“Do I? There are a lot of haystacks in Willingden.”

She flashed him a cheeky smile and the picture of her lying on her back in a haystack with her hair fanning out around her face again caused a disconcerting flutter in the pit of his stomach.

“I’m just kidding”, she added.

“About being sixteen?”

“No, that is true, but about they haystacks. I went out with the same boy for very long, from when we were fourteen, so at sixteen it felt like we already had waited a long time. Your turn.”

“Truth then.”

“As you seemed so appalled that I was only sixteen, how old were *you*?”

“Er, I... I was twenty.”

“Seriously? I would have guessed much earlier.”

“I was this lanky beanpole with a unibrow, the epitome of a dorky teenager, not very lucky with the girls. The rest of my body sort of caught up with my height the summer I turned twenty and then... Well, I think I have answered your question.”

She nodded.

“A late bloomer and enjoying your good looks ever since.”

He hoped he did not blush.

“Yet more assumptions about me... Truth again?”

“Why not.”

“So, you and the guy who popped your cherry...” She snorted out wine, giggling again.

”Yes?”

”Did you stay together?”

”Another year or so. After that I stayed single a while, then had another long-term relationship. We broke up two years ago and since then I have been on my own. It’s not my style to jump around.”

“Spare me your judgement.”

“I’m not judging, I’m just saying I don’t have much experience of one-nighters.”

He thought her experience was quite the contrary to his. When he had transformed from being the nerd with the unibrow, more girls than he could initially handle had been interested. He had started late and with the exception of one longer relationship there had been a high turnaround rate, that much was true, although things had calmed down considerably the last year because he got fed up with it. Amber Harrison had been an exception, or rather a mistake. This was different however. The way she said she had little experience of one-night stands made it sound like the sentence was supposed to continue ‘but I’m considering if I should change that now’. If that was how she felt he might not be that hard to convince, but she changed topic slightly.

“Have you ever been in love for real?”

“Once. It didn’t end well.”

The last part slipped out of him unintentionally, giving away more information than he wished.

“And you? At least twice I suppose what with your long relationships?”

“Now *you* are making assumptions.”

”So, weren’t you?”

”I thought so at the time, but looking in the rear-mirror, no. I don’t think we were truly compatible and even if I liked them very much and was *in* love, I don’t think I ever *loved* for real.”

“Interesting distinction. So, do you think you could go as far marrying someone without loving him?”

“No, why would I? Not sure I will marry at all and if I do it will be with the one I love, there is no other reason.”

“Do you believe there is one person out there who is like, you know, your soulmate?”

“Not sure there is only *one*, but I believe in finding someone I truly belong with.”

“That is sweet, and a bit naïve.”

His comment made her sigh.

“Why did I even answer? It’s your turn. What happened with your love that didn’t end well?”

He knew he shouldn’t have mentioned it.

“Eliza. We were together through uni and I thought we would stay together. Then she went off and cheated on me with some guy-turned-out-to-be-millionaire and married him instead. End of story.”

“Not end of *your* story. Were you crushed?”

“It’s your turn...”

“Please?”

He liked that she cared and surprised himself by giving an earnest answer.

“I was. I thought I would die, but I didn’t. I survived and here I am.”

“Alive but more cynical than before”, she added thoughtfully. It was a statement not a question, but he nodded. Alive but infinitely more cynical.

“Have you ever cheated?”

“Nope.”

He had to smile. Cynical as he might be, he did not doubt that was the truth.

“What is one thing that you would want to change about yourself?”

“I... er... I don't know.”

“Come on. You can't seriously think you are perfect in every way? There must be something you want to change”, she teased.

“Of course, there is. I'm a great deal less than perfect.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“And here I took you for the kind of guy who thinks he is God's gift to women.”

“I'm not! I mean, I don't think I am. Not at all. It's just hard to put words to it. Well, maybe that's it. That I don't let people know what I think. I know I'm hard to read and I don't let that many come close, not even the ones I love. The idea of being dependent of somebody, falling in love and give that person the power to hurt me... it scares me so much that I chose not to get emotionally involved. I suppose the thing with Eliza is to blame. I keep my distance. Always. In the end it makes me end up alone.”

Her accusation of him thinking he was some wonder boy triggered the need to defend himself and to his dismay he ended up being far more outspoken than he had intended.

“Shit. You really know what buttons to press to make me talk”, he sighed.

She stared at him as if she was unsure if he spoke the truth. He looked down in his lap when it suddenly felt too intense.

“It is the truth.”

A few silent beats passed before he flashed her a smile to break the tension.

“So, give me three words to describe what you thought of me when you first saw me.”

“Arrogant. Gorgeous. Trouble”, she said without hesitation.

“Ouch! Insult and flattery combined,” he grinned, not really offended at all but hoping she did not find him as arrogant now.

“You asked and as you know we have pledged to tell the truth. I’d actually like to know what you thought of me too. Three words, please.”

He took his time to answer, appraising her with a teasing smile.

“Oh, come on Mr. Trouble.”

“Sweet.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Beautiful.”

She looked surprised.

“Hot.”

Did she actually blush?

“You clearly forgot something. There was no insult.”

“I didn’t forget. There was none.”

“Oh.”

She seemed lost for words and was now the one to avert her gaze.

“So, truth or dare?”

“Er, I think I’ll go with dare for a change.”

“Interesting. Does that mean that the questions are making you uncomfortable?”

“Didn’t I just say I pick dare? No question this round.” She poked her tongue at him, making him laugh. In fact, he did not know when he last laughed this much.

His let his gaze wander around the room for inspiration and it fell on a book lying on the coffee table. “Okay, so pick a random line from this book and read it in your most seductive voice.”

She raised her eyebrows and giggled.

“Are you sure you can handle that?”

Smirking he leaned back in the armchair and nonchalantly clasped his hands behind his neck.

“Oh, I think I can.”

“Okay...” She opened the book and let her eyes travel over a random page. When she turned her face to him again her expression was transformed. Her big eyes seemed darker, her parted lips stayed silent for a moment before she spoke, and he felt his skin prickle with anticipation. Her acting skills were impressive, she looked like she wanted to seduce him for real and damnit, he had to admit it worked. When she finally spoke, her voice was husky.

“In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed.” She paused to sensually suck her own plush bottom lip. *“You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.”*

The way the last words were said, they sounded more to his ears like ‘*you must know how I want to make love to you*’. Their eyes were locked and in the silence that followed he could hear his own heart beat very loud and hoped it was only inside him. The tension was palpable until she giggled again.

“So, did I pass? Will that do? Would I be able to seduce someone with that speech?”

“Oh, you would - if they were born two-hundred years ago.”

“Hey, I can’t help what book you picked. I made the most of it.”

She certainly did and despite what he said, the words worked just as fine in 2019 when spoken by her, like that. Shit.

“Anyway, my turn. I’ll follow your example and go for dare this time.”

She tilted her head and smiled sweetly.

“Interesting. Does that mean that the questions are making you uncomfortable?”

“Just tell me what to do Charlotte.”

“I dare you to whisper something in my ear that you think will turn me on.”

He cocked an eyebrow.

“My turn to ask, do you really think you can handle it?”

She mimicked his body language from before, leaning back in the armchair and clasping her hands behind her neck. He registered the rounded shape of her breast as the move made her unintentionally puff them out.

“Oh, I think I can.”

Languidly he got up and kneeled in front of her, leaned forward so their faces were only inches apart and framed her body with his arms. He stayed like that for a moment, noticed that her brown eyes where a lighter shade than his own and with amber flecks, and that even in the middle of winter she had tiny freckles dispersed over her nose. She watched him intently and it felt like their mingling breaths fell into the same pace. He moved so his lips were close to her ear, knowing his breath would tickle her like this. Then even closer, so his lips grazed her earlobe. To his satisfaction he thought he heard her gasp.

“You are the most wonderful surprise of this Sanditon visit. I never expected to meet someone so witty...” His lips brushed against her ear again. “... or so beautiful.”

Being close to her like this, feeling warmth radiate from her skin and stray hairs tickle his cheek, and smelling her mix of shampoo and perfume, turned him on more than he had anticipated, and he withdrew but stayed positioned in front of her. When their eyes met again her pupils were dilated, her expression serious.

“Damn, you *are* good.”

Somehow the remark disturbed him.

“What is that supposed to mean.”

“Just that you live up to your reputation as a womanizer. You know how to make a woman feel special, even when it’s only acting.”

Was it only acting? It had started as that, but he was not so sure anymore.

“Well, I’m glad if it worked”, was all he said and made a move to get up. His heart jolted when she grabbed hold of his forearms to make him stay.

“I chose dare too.”

He watched her with silent, tense anticipation and she did not disappoint.

“Kiss and lick my lips and try to get me to lose control and kiss you back.”

Oh God, thank you if you exist, but how on Earth was *he* supposed not to lose control?

Simply the way she said it with equal measures of shyness and sultry flirtatiousness made him more turned on than he could remember being for a very long time.

“As you wish”, he said casually and let his lips hover over hers before he closed the gap.

Her lips were warm and soft. First, he just grazed them with his and desire shot up in him when he felt her part them ever so slightly. He went on to lightly nip them, run his tongue over them, suck her bottom lips between his own and gently rake it with his teeth. She did not react the slightest and he was just wondering if perhaps he should finish before he seemed pathetic, when she surprised him. She entwined her fingers in his locks and held him to her, simultaneously opened her mouth and kissed him back. Sidney felt as if the synapses in his brain were about to short circuit and explode when she deepened the kiss and let her tongue swirl into his mouth. His hands moved to hold firmly around her waist and pull her closer to him, though

careful not to press her against his groin as it would give away his increasing arousal. This resulted in her sliding further down in the armchair and he followed close, leaning over her, pressing his upper body to hers. He managed to stifle a groan but only just. He had lost control, but it seemed she had too, so he no longer cared. Or, on the contrary, he cared a lot, but it was everything he wanted, needed, to lose himself in her.

His hands slid down the curve of her hips, her thighs, down to her knees and when they moved upwards again, slowly pushed the dress along, leisurely hoisting it up over her hips prepared she would tell him to stop any second. He nearly died when she moaned in his mouth instead and caressed the nape of his neck, then nearly died a second time as he reached the laced trimmed edge of her stockings and felt the bare, soft skin in the gap between them and her knickers. He let his thumbs graze the inside of her warm thighs and apprehensively tested the waters, running them ever so softly over her satin knickers.

She interrupted the kiss and he was alarmed that it was the end of it, that he had misread her and gone too far. Her eyes were as dark as when she played seductive before, her lips red like summer berries and he desperately wanted to continue.

“So, truth; what are you thinking right now?” she asked, breathless .

He chuckled, filled with relief that she did not seem like she wanted to end it either.

“That I really want to stop the game and go on kissing you.”

“Oh pity”, she pouted her lips. “I was thinking to dare you to kiss me all over my body next.”

“Now that’s a dare I wouldn’t mind”, he smirked to hide how extremely happy and turned on he was.

“Not here though, someone could come.”

It made him become aware of their surroundings again. It would be awfully embarrassing if Tom, Mary or any of their guests walked in on them.

“True, that could be awkward. Would you care to join me to my room?”

Even if it was not ideal to have a night guest in his brother’s house, he thought it the best option. He had no idea where in Sanditon she stayed as she had dodged that question, but he knew that even if the town was small, any distance would feel too far to walk right now when all he wanted was to glue her as close to him as was humanly possible.

“Your room would be lovely.”

“You’re not too drunk for this? I wouldn’t want...” He wanted her so much that he only reluctantly managed the words that gave her the opportunity to pull out.

“... to take advantage? Don’t worry. I *am* a bit drunk but I’m not doing anything I don’t want to, so just lead the way to your room.”

She ran her fingers through his hair and raked her own bottom lip with her teeth, slightly nervous and adorable and all he could think of was that he wanted to kiss her again.

“Well then.”

“Well then.”

-0-

Charlotte woke up early. She always did when she was hungover, but she was not now despite the alcohol she had consumed last night. On the contrary she felt really comfortable. So incredibly comfortable that she did not want to move, and it took her a few moments to understand why. Then she became aware of the hard, warm body pressing against her back, following her contour so perfectly and the seriously muscular arm wrapped snugly around her. A flood of memories from last night came back.

Oh my God! She had slept with *Sidney Parker*! Not once, not twice but so many times she was surprised there actually had been any time left to fall asleep at all before morning came. It had been absolutely mind-blowing, amazing sex and she felt a flash of desire shoot up between her thighs just thinking about it.

She had known who he was the moment she saw him there in the orangery, of course she had. In fact, she had been curious to meet him for some time, the man, the myth Sidney Parker. The middle brother everyone spoke of but rarely saw, the one that had left Sanditon to become an extremely successful business man with a trading company of his own, and a notorious womanizer. At least that was an accurate description of him if one was to believe the Sanditon gossip mill combined with Tom's and Mary's half proud, half concerned conversations about Sidney. Mary always spoke of him with fondness but sounded convinced and worried he would never settle. Tom made no secret of that he thought Sidney was wasting his time shagging his way through the better part of London when he was not busy running

his firm, and bitterly added that his time would have been better spent with his family in Sanditon.

Charlotte had listened carefully to everything that was said since she first had seen a photo of Sidney in Tom's studio a few months ago and been pathetically captivated by his smile and dark eyes. It was all too easy to picture women falling at the man's feet because she almost had a crush on him only by seeing him in that photo. She had hoped she would get to meet him sooner or later, just to find out what he was like and not rely only on hearsay. Never had she imagined it would lead to *this*.

She had made assumptions about how a playboy like him he must be and in that first instant, sitting there, distanced from others, puffing smoke and utterly bored by everything Sanditon he had seemed to live up to that, but then he did not. He was different from and so much more than she had imagined. More captivating than the photo or the stories about him ever could be.

Even if she had not admitted it to herself before last evening, she had probably desired him from when she first saw the picture but never in her wildest imagination thought anything of the sort would happen. Seeing him in the flesh, the attraction had been even stronger. Tipsy and over-confident, she had decided that she would try to seduce him. Not that she was a skilled seductress but that had escaped her mind last night and she had simply determined that she would have him. With his reputation he would hardly be a stranger to spending one night with a woman he barely knew, and it was not like his feelings would be hurt in the process. Casual sex was probably as common to him as eating a sandwich.

It was just that it all had been so different from what she had imagined. The sexy fun game had made her want him more by the minute and apparently her seductive skills were not that bad because he had obviously been keen too. The banter between them had turned her on, his touch had set her on fire like never before. In his room it had continued to be sexy fun, but also incredibly intense and serious. He had been totally present and attentive, nothing suggested that this was routine to him or that he did it because he had a badboy reputation to uphold. When he had been inside her and they moved together, it had been like she was one with him in a way she never had been with anyone else. Their eyes remained firmly locked and she had the all-consuming feeling he was giving himself up to her just as completely as she was to him. It was not what she had intended, but she could not avoid it. It felt like he worshipped her body when his hands and mouth grazed every inch of it. Her heart melted when he was moving south, trailing a burning path on her skin and asked her if she did mind in an old-fashioned gentlemanly manner. Did she mind?! Would any woman ever mind if Sidney Parker gave her a tongue lashing? Not likely. But now he was with her and the strange thing was that it felt like he wanted to be nowhere else, not this night, not any night. It felt like it was as special to him as it was to her and that he too was completely absorbed in what was happening between them. When he made her come undone and followed closely after, she had the strange idea during the trembling aftermath, that they were made for each other. Not just in bed but made for each other and compatible in every possible way.

Now when she was lying here with his arms still around her, that thought stifled her. That was then and now was now. She had been lulled into a post-coital security, but now doubt seeped into her mind. The ability to make a woman feel like that, was probably what separated a truly skilled womanizer from the mediocre. The ability to make every woman feel special,

chosen, not like a cheap shag that could be replaced by anyone. All at once she felt like crying even if she still was in his arms.

Carefully she wriggled out of his hold and turned to watch him. He was such a beautiful man, almost boyish in his sleep with the long dark eyelashes resting against the high cheek bones but his sharp features and muscular frame were certainly those of a man. She suddenly knew with clarity that she did not want to be here when he opened his eyes and looked at her like she was no one special and perhaps asked her to leave. She could not bear *that* to be the end of a beautiful night like this. Then she would rather leave and remember how he was to her before they fell asleep and how close he still had been holding her when she woke up. She had to get up to catch her train to Willingden, where she was going to celebrate Christmas and she decided that she would rather go without waking him up than risking him dismissing her. This night had been so precious, and she did not want to ruin it by being treated like she did not matter.

“I’m obviously not cut out for one-night stands. I’m way too soft-hearted and it’s only when I’m drunk that I get the notion I can pull it off”, she whispered and gently pressed her lips to his one last time, before she slipped out of the bed, pulled the dress on, gathered the underwear and stockings that were spread here and there over the floor and tiptoed out of the room. She was not sure if the memory of him would make her happy or miserable in the months to come, but at least she preferred to remember the look in his eyes as it had been during the heated night hours, not as it might be in the cold morning light.

When he woke up, the bed space next to him was empty and cold. Stupidly he ran his hand over the crumpled sheets and looked around the room as if she might have hidden somewhere, but of course she was nowhere to be seen. A while he lay there hoping she only had gone looking for the bathroom, but then accepted the hurtful truth that she was not coming back.

How the hell could she leave without waking him up after a night like that? It had been... well, spectacular did not even begin to cover it. It was not simply that it had been great sex. He had once slept with one of the dancers in the Russian ballet, a *very* agile girl, and that had been great sex. Yet it came nowhere close to this, because it had felt like they were one-hundred percent compatible. Her shape fitting so perfectly to his, her scent, her taste, the softness of her skin, her silky hair, even her body temperature had been perfect. The way she had seemed to know exactly how he liked it, the way she had responded to everything he did, the way giggles, moans and silence had mixed throughout the night, the way he simultaneously had wanted to treat her gently and pin her hard to the mattress. It seemed he could go on forever, but the sum of it all was that he never had experienced anything close to this before and was pretty sure he would not again, unless with Charlotte. He had no idea why she had left but hoped it was because she needed to be somewhere and did not want to wake him up, and that he would be able to find her. As soon as that thought occurred to him, he almost leaped out of bed, got dressed and hurried to join Tom and Mary for breakfast with the hope to find out something about Charlotte.

“There you are!” Tom exclaimed when he entered the room, sounding half cheerful, half reproachful. “Where did you disappear last night?”

“I got stuck talking to one of your guests in the orangery”, he answered truthfully, hoping he sounded casual.

“Oh really, who was that?”

“Charlotte.”

“Charlotte Heywood?”

“Er... I never asked what her family name was.”

“Well, that’s the only Charlotte we know. Isn’t it my dear?” Tom asked Mary.

“It is. So, did you two get along?”

“She was nice.” He shrugged his shoulders and had a flash of her, writhing under him with flushed cheeks. He was grateful he was sitting down with his lower parts covered by the table, because of the immediate physical effect it had on him.

“She is lovely. We really have the perfect nanny, the children adore her”, Mary continued unaware.

Sidney nearly choked on the tea. For fuck’s sake! The nanny?!

“She’s your nanny?”

Mary nodded.

“She never mentioned. So, she lives here in town?”

“She stays in our house, she has a room upstairs.”

Whaaaat?!

“She helps Tom with his paper work too. She is very clever and organized, isn’t she darling?”

“Yes, she is quite invaluable. I’m not sure how we will manage when she returns to London.”

“London? I thought she was from Willingden?”

“She is, but she lives in London. Works at some big architectural firm, but nearly had a burn-out and decided to take a sabbatical. We met her by co-incidence when our car broke down and mentioned we were looking for a nanny, so she offered to move here and take the job. It was really a stroke of luck. She is very over-qualified but so sweet and amazing with the children, so we are grateful as long as she stays”, Mary explained.

“So, she lives here, in your house?” he repeated incredulous. Not once had she implied that last night and he felt deceived.

“Well, yes, but she has taken the morning train home to Willingden for the holiday, so you won’t get to see her more while you’re here.”

He felt Mary’s sharp eyes rest on him and did his best to keep his features neutral even if he was boiling inside. She had lied to him, or if not lied at least been very economical with the truth. She lived in this house and was the nanny of his brother’s children. She had known she was to leave in the morning yet said nothing to him and not woken him up before making her escape.

The joy he had felt the moment he woke up had already transformed into disappointment and now he felt it turn into anger. Sure, he had seen many women in his days, but never, not once, had he left before any of them woke up or pretended to be anything other than he was. It was a really shitty and immature thing to do and it was the last thing he had expected from her.

Over the months to come he tried to focus on the rage rather than the feeling of loss whenever he thought of Charlotte, and truthfully that was quite often. His heart had been broken once and he refused to go through the same again for a woman he only had known a night. He tried to forget her or think of that night as a diversion like any other but found he could not. She appeared in his mind again and again and he could not shake off the feeling that what they had shared was something out of the ordinary. Already before Charlotte he had reduced the casual dating and one-nighters that had been his habit up until a year ago, but now he completely lost interest in all this and focused solely on work. For a while he nurtured a small hope that he might hear from her, because it would have been easy for her to contact him through Tom and Mary, but there was no word. He could have contacted her just as easily, but since she was the one who had left, he felt too insecure, too proud to take the first step. He visited Sanditon once during the spring and with her in mind entered his brother's home with his heart beating out of his chest, only to find out she had gone visiting friends for the weekend. He instinctively knew she had gone because she knew he was coming, and his anger was further fuelled.

As time went by, he was not sure which feeling was strongest; the anger over that she had treated him like a non-recyclable item to be thrown away; or the longing to once more share

what they had that night. One thing was for sure, and it was that even with time and distance, he was unable to put her from his mind.

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One weekend at the end of May, the weather forecast promised an early heat wave and Sidney decided to drive down to Sanditon on a whim. He had barely thought of Charlotte for weeks because he had been swamped with work, but as he approached the little town driving his convertible, he grew increasingly nervous and cursed himself for not being more relaxed about it. He had one-nighters with other women and met them again under perfectly relaxed and friendly circumstances. Why would Charlotte be any different? Deep down he knew the answer to that; *because he had wanted more. Wanted it so much that his body ached for it.*

He had taken half the Friday off and it was early afternoon when he arrived in Sanditon and parked outside his brother's house. Tom and Mary were ecstatic over the surprise visit, which immediately gave him a bad conscience for not coming more often.

"I was just heading down to the beach, join me for a refreshing swim. The children are already there", Tom said cheerfully.

"Are they there by themselves?" Sidney asked alarmed. He would not be surprised if Tom had let them go there alone, but he did not expect Mary to be that irresponsible.

"No, of course not", she reassured him, "Our nanny Charlotte is with them."

"Oh. Charlotte."

Now the nervousness hit him with full force. She was here this time and he would meet her.

“I forgot you met her. Maybe you can cheer her up. I said to Tom the other day that she hasn’t been the same happy Charlotte since she returned from Willingden after Christmas, but he has noticed nothing of course. I tried to talk to her about it, but she claims nothing is the matter. Perhaps she might talk to you, if you got along well?”

“I doubt it”, he said curtly, trying to steel himself. It was none of his business if she was out of sorts. *She* had made sure it was none of his business.

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Charlotte was busy building a sandcastle. Tom’s and Mary’s eldest, Jenny, was bossing her around worse than her boss at the architectural firm ever did and even if she enjoyed herself, it struck her that it might be about time that she resumed her proper career after the summer. A shadow fell over her and made her look up. Her breath hitched at the unexpected sight of Sidney Parker towering above. His style was relaxed, wearing a grey V-necked t-shirt combined with low-slung cargo shorts and aviator sunglasses, but there was something tense about him and he did not smile. She instinctively knew she was in for trouble, if for no other reason, because her pulse spiked alarmingly.

“Do you want to take a swim with daddy?” Tom asked the children, who were quick to accept the offer and soon all four entered the waves happily splashing water, leaving Charlotte and Sidney to themselves.

He sat down next to her but fixed his gaze at the horizon, ignoring her. She glanced at him sideways. Noticed how he despite living in the city had a healthy bronzed tan, as deep as the one she sported after spending the last week on the beach. Judging by his forearms and calves, he was still as fit as he had been when she undressed him that night and she had a flash of how it felt to run her fingertips over the ridges of his abs and how that had made him shiver. He was so gob-smacking gorgeous and even if there was a gap of air between them where they sat, her whole body was buzzing, and she realised that no matter what she had tried to tell herself in the last months she was totally in love with him. He was a man she did not even know for real, but it was the undeniable truth. It was not because of his looks however desirable he was, but his presence reminded her of the undeniable connection she had felt to him that night. Too bad it was one-sided.

In the days following that steamy winter night, she had wondered if she made a mistake when she escaped but when she never heard from him, she grew increasingly certain she had made the right choice. He did not want to stay in touch, he did not want her. She had thought she could avoid feeling miserable by leaving without an awkward goodbye and regrets from his end, but soon found out that she was miserable either way. When Mary had told her that he was coming for a visit in April she had saved them both from an embarrassing encounter by going away for the weekend.

But now he was here, and she had the uncanny feeling he was pissed with her. *Very* pissed with her.

“Hi”, she said softly when she could not stand the not so companionable silence any longer.

“Oh, hi.”

He made it sound like he had noticed her only now and it was as welcome as noticing a chewing gum under one’s shoe. He removed the sunglasses and turned to look at her without any warmth in his eyes and she felt like she wanted to shrink away. She bent to reach for a sundress in her bag, not quite comfortable being dressed only in bikini in his company in broad daylight, especially not when he looked at her like she was a little piece of shit.

“Leaving so soon?” His voice was cold and challenging.

“No, I just... I felt a bit bare.” She could feel her cheeks burn when she met his hard stare. He *was* angry with her.

“Nothing I haven’t seen before.” His gaze travelled down her body and back up to her face and now her cheeks was not the only part of her feeling heated. “And it was a fair assumption since you have a track record of leaving without saying goodbye.”

Now there was a bitter edge to his voice. Not only did he sound angry, he seemed... hurt? He was so handsome and so close, and it was difficult to breathe and even harder to think. Was he simply pissed that she had pre-empted him doing the exit he rightfully thought was his being the playboy he was, or was it possible that he really had been hurt when she left?

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He had thought he was prepared to meet her after all these months but seeing her playing in the sand with only a white bikini to cover her bronzed limbs and her chestnut hair tousled by the sea breeze, made the feelings he had tried to repress return and hit him with full

force. He wanted her so much it hurt, not just her body or in bed, but all of her and all the time. Too bad it would never happen because she was a callous little minx who could walk out without a single word after an amazing night. He did not even understand why he cared about her after that, but he undeniably did.

Sitting next to her was even more disconcerting. It was like his body was gravitating towards hers and he had to be careful, so he did not suddenly find himself touching her skin. How pathetic that would be. She seemed uncomfortable too, judging by the way she moved to clumsily reach for her sundress. Good.

“It was a fair assumption since you have a track record of leaving without saying goodbye”, he spat. He prepared to say more of the harsh words he had been bottling up for months, about not being honest about who she was and screwing him over, but the look on her face when she met his eyes again after pulling the dress over her head silenced him.

She looked nothing like someone who did not care. She looked quite devastated and shit, her eyes were glazed with tears.

“I’m sorry. I... er... I thought it wouldn’t mean anything to you if I left.”

“What? Why would you think that? Do you think me completely insensible of feeling?”

He seemed truly astonished and Charlotte had this growing feeling in the pit of her stomach that she perhaps had made a big mistake. She looked down on the sand and started drawing circles with her index finger.

“I had heard Tom and Mary speak about you, so I knew you aren’t exactly the guy who tends to stay around...”

“So, you thought it was okay to just ditch me without a word after a night like that? I would never do that to anyone.”

The heat in his voice made her cringe at the decision she had made back then, she had to explain.

“It wasn’t like that. I had the best time. I wanted to be with you and thought I could keep it casual, do it just for fun but I woke up and realised that night wasn’t like I had thought it would be. It was...” Her voice broke and she looked up on him. “...so much more.”

His heart literally skipped a beat. Had she felt that too after all? But why had she left then?

She told him in her next breath.

“I just couldn’t bear the thought of you waking up and looking at me like it wasn’t meaningful to you. I couldn’t stand you looking at me like I was no one.”

As the words sank in, his expression slowly softened. The furrow on his brow disappeared, his jaw relaxed, and the mouth was no longer a tight line. His eyes ceased being like impenetrable onyx.

“Let me see if I get this right. Because of what others had told you, you assumed I would dump you when morning came, and you decided it was better to leave first?”

“Yes, that pretty much sums it up”, she almost whispered.

“Didn’t our conversation, or how we were together, tell you something else? That it was... special?”

“It did, but I thought it was only for me. I guess I... I thought you were just really skilled at seducing women.”

She had seemed so confident and alluring that it never had occurred to him that she could have doubted him.

“Skilled at... Charlotte for f... Don’t you know that *you* seduced *me*?” He looked at her searchingly, as if to see if she really could be so naïve as not to understand what she had done to him.

“You didn’t try to contact me?”

“And you didn’t try to contact me! As you just disappeared, I assumed you didn’t want me to...”

“I did. I hoped for a few weeks but then I realised you wouldn’t, and I just tried to forget you. I know Tom and Mary and they wouldn’t make up stuff, so I assumed it must be true that one-night stands was something you do regularly.”

He sighed deeply.

“They didn’t exactly make up stuff, but they aren’t up to date with everything in my life, so it doesn’t necessarily make it true either. I know I told you about Eliza when we played the game and it *is* true that in the years after her, I saw a lot of different women and no one really meant much to me. That said, I *never* walked out on anyone the way you did on me. It also feels unfair because I had changed that long before I met you, I simply didn’t care for that lifestyle anymore. I don’t have a serious relationship either, I mostly work and hang out with friends for the rest.”

“You told me about the woman at the Pink October gala...”

Fuck, he had forgotten and now he realised how it must seem in light of what she already thought she knew of him.

“And you took that as confirmation that I had flings like that all the time? Well, I don’t. For the record Amber is a friend these days. We dated a short while a few years back and we did snog that evening, but realised we aren’t attracted to each other anymore and ended up watching a movie and eating popcorn before we fell asleep. I think it may have come out differently, I’m sorry it did but that was before I knew what would happen with us.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Perhaps that it seems like we both got each other wrong? I was so disappointed when you were gone, then sad, then angry, but I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you. I really hoped I would see you last time I was in Sanditon, but you had gone away.”

“Mary said you were coming so I decided it best to avoid you. I thought it would be too awkward.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

They remained silent for a while. Then she felt his hand on top of hers where it was resting on the sand.

“So, you didn’t really want to escape from me that morning?”

She heard the smile in his voice already before she looked at him and it warmed her more than the sun.

“No, it was the worst thing ever to leave that bed.”

“Did I at least get a kiss goodbye in my sleep?”

“You did.”

Somehow their fingers were now laced together.

“Is there any chance I could get one now?”

He moved closer and bumped his shoulder softly to hers.

“You’re not angry anymore?”

“I’m furious. I’m furious that I have been miserable for many months because Tom couldn’t keep his big mouth shut and made you assume things about me which aren’t true, at least not

anymore and certainly not with you. I'm angry at myself for assuming things about you which aren't true either... but I'm very happy we sorted that out now.

He smiled and leaned his forehead to hers without letting go of her eyes and a hesitant smile spread over her face too. Slowly, their mouths sought one another and finally touched. Even when they deepened the kiss it was a gentle one, because neither of them could let go of the feeling they were treading on thin ice here despite that it was a warm day in May. The gap between them became non-existent when Sidney pulled Charlotte firmly to him and she willingly moulded into him.

They were interrupted by familiar but confused voices.

"Why is uncle Sidney kissing Charlotte?"

"I don't know Jenny, even for uncle Sidney this was... an unexpected and unusually quick development."

Charlotte giggled with joyful embarrassment. If Sidney had not been so extremely happy he would have punched Tom in the face for coming between them before and for interrupting them now, but as it was he simply answered with a silly grin;

"Shut up Tom and let me kiss her in peace. Trust me when I tell you it was long overdue. Don't you agree Miss Heywood?"

"As a matter of fact, I do." Her eyes were glimmering with the same lovely mischievousness they had in the orangery candle light and he knew he would adore her to the end of his days if she let him.

The perplexed and slightly distressed Tom hurriedly removed the curious children from the beach, as it was obvious that the beaming couple in front of them intended to resume and possibly intensify the kissing, no matter what anyone in their surroundings had to say about it.