

*Author's note: Life kept me from updating for longer than I had intended, but I have next chapter almost complete too.*

*For technical annoying reasons I have not been able to watch episode 7 for some time so have written this with the help of YouTube videos and memory. I might edit at some point when I re-watch if I find I have missed something essential, but I have already spent way too much time thinking about this. This chapter does not sit 100% with me but I have changed and added for so long that I simply publish now.*

*Even if I write for no better reason than that I cannot stop myself, I love feedback and I am always grateful when you let me know what you think.*

*If you are not on Twitter yet, please join the Sanditonsisterhood and fun conversation there to fight for a Sanditon Season 2 - lol. I go under MissPiony on Twitter too.*

### **Chapter 13: Not the same man, not the same river**

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“Miss Heywood. I wondered whether I might persuade you to take a walk with me. Unless, now is not a...?”

James Stringer interrupted himself. There was nothing he wanted more than to be with Miss Heywood, but only if she wanted it too. To his relief she seemed pleased

by his request and bestowed him a sweet smile. She was always so kind to him, but then again she was to everyone and he wondered if her actions possibly could have any deeper meaning. He hoped so with all his heart.

“Oh, no, now is the perfect time. I need to make sure everything stands ready at the starting line. Perhaps you could accompany me?” she suggested.

They wandered across the meadow. It was peaceful here, away from the crowd, but Charlotte’s did not find peace. James noticed that even if she seemed glad to be in his company she was also a bit absent-minded, as if contemplating something.

Charlotte’s thoughts were indeed elsewhere, more specifically with Mr. Parker and Mrs. Champion, anxiously wondering how the two were amusing themselves right now. Were they perhaps stealing kisses behind a tree trunk, or even worse, getting engaged again? Both scenarios made her insides twist. She felt like she in Stringer had another friend in addition to Lady Susan this day, but of course she could not talk to him about her inconvenient feelings for Sidney Parker. For a while she enjoyed the companionable silence but was not truly present.

“Looks as though the regatta will be a success, Miss, and that is in large part down to you”, Stringer now tried to get her full attention. Startled she snapped back to him, feeling slightly guilty. She hoped he had not noticed her lack of attention.

“In truth, I have been grateful for the distraction”, she sighed.

“Distraction from what?”

*From Sidney Parker transforming from the rudest, most infuriating man into the most desirable one, alas already spoken for.*

“My own thoughts, I suppose.”

“What kind of thoughts?”

She looked away, let her hand glide over the tops of the high blades of grass along their path and they tickled her palm.

“It's difficult to say.”

“Perhaps you might find me a more sympathetic listener than you might imagine. It could be that we share the same thoughts.”

*Thinking about a tall handsome man named Sidney Parker? Wondering what the way Mr. Parker sometimes looked at her meant? Asking how he could dance with her like there was no one else in the room, then leave her and act like he forgot she even existed? Dwell upon how Mr. Parker could ask permission to wait for her and accompany her from Georgiana whilst smiling and joking so it felt intimate, only to bring his old fiancée here the following day and almost ignore Charlotte in her presence? Obsessing over if all this was love and if so, was it supposed to hurt this much? She seriously doubted that James Stringer and she shared the same thoughts.*

“I doubt it. You are far too sensible to form such a misguided and futile attachment.”

“Why should it be futile, Miss Heywood? For all you know, your feelings are repaid five times over”, he said eagerly.

She had thought so during the dance, until Tom abruptly pulled her head back down from the clouds.

“I allowed myself to believe so for the briefest of moments, but I cannot deny the evidence of my own eyes.” She blinked to get rid of some excess fluid suddenly glazing her eyes and shrugged her shoulders. “No matter. There is nothing to be done. You were right, Mr Stringer. You are a sympathetic listener indeed.”

Charlotte did not notice how Stringer’s eyes turned dark, how the muscle at his jaw twitched or how he clenched his fists. He understood in this moment that she was not talking about him but another man. She so lacked vanity that it did not cross her mind that he might have feelings for her, and as a friend she shared her trouble over someone else. Someone who apparently was a fool for not appreciating what was offered to him.

They had reached the part of the river bank where the finishing line was to be. He had intended to help her, but found he was too disappointed and upset to put a lid on his feelings for much longer and decided it was for the better to leave. Charlotte simply gave him a warm smile as he bid her goodbye saying he had better return to his fellows. She thanked him for walking her there but did not miss him much when he left. She who usually was an attentive observer, was too preoccupied this day to see the signs of barely contained hurt and frustration, or unrequited love.

In contrast to what Charlotte believed, Sidney was *not* amusing himself. He tried to be attentive to Mrs. Campion, tried to enjoy her company, but found that he could not. Arthur's words echoed in his mind. *'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.'* It was like those words had created small cracks in the dam which for long had existed within Sidney, the wall so efficiently holding his feelings in check. Now, everything he had strived to repress began seeping out like persistent droplets of water finding their way through. As the day went on and Mrs. Campion made one silly or snide remark after another, the cracks widened, and the emotional droplets turned into a rivulet flowing at a steady pace. He needed time alone, needed to think and allow himself to *feel* what he really wanted.

By the time luncheon was served he found the perfect excuse to leave Mrs. Campion. He had already told her he needed to revive his slumbering rowing skills before the start of the gentlemen's boat race, and she had made it abundantly clear she did not wish to join him in a boat which she feared might tip over.

As he walked towards the river he thought to himself that rowing was not the only skill he needed to revive, he was not sure he knew how to love a woman again. Would he remember how to do either?

Then he saw her, *Charlotte*, and his heart made the same little somersault it had ever since the night in the carriage, or perhaps even before that. She had not yet seen him and for a moment he observed her unnoticed, enjoying the view more than he should. She was alone, in the shadow of the makeshift pavilion set up for

the occasion, busy with the last preparations. Her blue jacket had been discarded in the sunny weather and she looked adorable in a white, thin muslin dress. Just like during the cricket match, he allowed himself to secretly admire her shape underneath the layers of fabric and it hit him once again how naturally beautiful she was.

The cracks grew wider within Sidney, the emotional rivulet now turning into a swirling stream.

He was touched by how engaged she was in making the regatta a success for the sake of Sanditon's and Tom's prosperity. Indeed she had done more than anyone both in terms of the initial brilliant idea, the preparations and by tempting Lady Worcester to come here. Incredibly enough, he had not recognised the notorious and admired lady when he saw her in London, but his attention had been on Charlotte not on any other woman then. Until he saw Mrs. Champion, he reminded himself. Yet it was *her* he needed distance from now, meanwhile seeing Charlotte made him feel lighter at heart despite that he had come here to be alone. Instead of wishing he had found the place empty, he wished he could spend more of the day with her.

What would have happened if he had not stumbled upon Mrs. Champion that evening? He wondered but would never now. Now she was here, but so was Charlotte.

She looked up when he approached her and gave him a hesitant, lovely smile. He wondered if she had any idea what effect it had on him, the butterflies she stirred

in his stomach, but he thought not. She was not one to consciously flirt. Charlotte smiled at someone because she was kind, because she liked them, found something amusing or sometimes because she wanted to comfort or encourage them, but never to lead anyone on. It was one of the things he liked about her, that she was genuine. True to herself. Was he? He was not sure where the thought came from and he pushed it to the back of his head.

“Well, what do you think, Miss Heywood? Do I look ready to you?” he said with nonchalance he did not feel.

“I am no expert”, she answered a bit guarded.

He noticed it and wished she would not feel like that, but it was not surprising after his failure at the beach before. Thinking about how he had been remiss in introducing her properly to Mrs. Campion and acknowledge her as someone he valued, he felt ashamed, but Sidney was used to masking his feelings and Charlotte noticed nothing.

“Neither am I, regrettably. I haven't picked up an oar in years.” Saying that, he picked one up and eyed it, then brought it over to one of the boats lying ready for the race.

“I'm sure it'll all come back to you.”

“I wonder.”

He liked how she tried to encourage him, but suddenly he was not so sure he was talking about the oars and rowing anymore. His mind returned to if he was suited

for being involved romantically with any woman and Mrs. Campion in particular. His feelings were not the same as they had been back then, because he was a different man and she a different woman. Could that be for the better? Could they find their way back to each other as adults with a past? The more time he spent with her, the less certain about it he felt. Spending time with Charlotte was such a welcome break.

"A man cannot step into the same river twice", he added as he placed an oar in the rowlock, initially talking to himself but then turned to Charlotte. "Have you ever heard that?"

He was prepared to explain what it meant but once again he had underestimated her.

"For he is not the same man and it is not the same river. It's Heraclitus", she told him softly. Just like that, neither boasting nor hiding her knowledge like many young ladies might because intelligence when encountered in a woman was not considered a virtue by all.

"Yes. Of course you'd know that."

A smile played on his lips. Would she ever cease to amaze him? Not only did she know of Greek philosophers, as soon as she said it he knew she understood the full meaning of the quote as well and was not only repeating words.

He knew in this instant that he very much wanted her to join him. He had no wish to get away from her, leave her behind on the riverbank. He reached out his hand for her to take.

“Well, I need a second person to balance the boat, would you mind? he said with the same feigned casualness as before but looked away, afraid to expose his staggering need to be in her presence

“I’m not sure if I...”

He heard the insecurity in her voice and had to turn to her, to convince her. Out of fear he might sound like a needy beggar, he made his words come out like a command but smiled to take away the edge from them.

“Come on.”

She still hesitated, then put one hand in the hand he offered, placed the other on his shoulder, causing an almost burning sensation on his skin where they touched, and jumped into the boat so swiftly that he was not entirely prepared for it. Their bodies collided for the briefest of moments and he felt the whiff from her familiar jasmine perfume, the one he had found tantalizing already at the first ball in the early days of their acquaintance when he still mistook her for a frivolous, irrelevant girl. By instinct he held on to her hand a little longer than was needed, even placed his other hand on top so hers was gently trapped between his. He told himself he wanted to stabilise her after the jump, but in fact it was himself he needed to keep steady in her proximity and he relished the body contact too much to let go immediately. This was the first time he held her hand without the barrier of a glove.

A small, warm hand easily wrapped by his larger ones and the sensation was more exhilarating than the full length of any naked woman ever had been. A buzzing sensation spread with the speed of lightning from their touching fingers throughout his entire body. His demeanour was calm, his insides everything but.

“Careful.”

He was not sure if he said it to her or himself. He wanted to keep her safe, that much was true, but he was also rattled by what she was doing to him. He was in deep waters here in more ways than one. “Sit down behind here.”

He placed her so they were positioned face to face, took up the oars, pushed away from the riverbank and set the boat in motion.

It took him some time to find a rhythm but soon the boat glided over the water. In her company he *did* remember how to row it seemed. It was nearly quiet, the only sound heard was the chirping birds and oars breaking the water surface. All would have been peaceful had not his mind been in a turmoil. He wanted to look at her so badly but found it too intense to meet her gaze without pause. Every now and then he looked out over the water, or down on his moving hands, but was compelled to turn back to her again and again, noticing she did the same. Every time their eyes met anew his breath hitched.

After a while he impulsively broke the silence, unable to resist sharing his thoughts though unsure what possessed him to do so with her of all people. He simply felt he had to release the pressure inside.

“May I ask you something, Miss Heywood?” he asked. He appreciated how she by just looking at him let him know he had her full attention, no words needed. “Why is it, when I finally have a chance of happiness I cannot accept the fact?”

“What is it you cannot accept?” she asked, looking slightly confused.

It was a good question which he was not entirely sure he had the answer to.

*Pull. Moving away from her, then leaning forward again, closer.*

His moves were fluent, strong yet almost distractedly gentle. He was more focused on trying to savour this serene moment with her than achieving speed, despite the built-up frustration inside him.

“I had convinced myself that I was destined to remain alone, that I was ill-suited for matrimony.”

For so long he had identified himself as the outlier she rightfully had accused him of being. If he was not, who was he? Who did he *want* to be? Who did he want to be *with*?

She frowned in the way he had learned was not a sign of her being vexed, just thoughtful, deliberating carefully what to answer. Once he had thought all her opinions to be formed on a whim, now he knew she analysed everything, only quicker than most people with an eye for details and strong instinct for what lay beneath the surface. Her analyses were not infallible, but accurate more often than he first had given her credit for. Sometimes *painfully* accurate, opening his eyes, making him want to change. Into what?

“I don't believe that anybody is truly unsuited to marriage.” She paused. “Not even you.”

This made him chuckle, Charlotte would never fail to be honest. Her answer was slightly insulting yet comforting.

“I suppose it's just a question of compatibility?” she added, taking a deep breath as if she was afraid she once again had been too free with her opinion and offended him, but he had sought for it and welcomed it.

He realised that she did not fully understand how much he had come to value her opinion. It was surprising to him too but apparently there was no one else he would rather turn to in confusing matters like this. Not his brothers or Diana, not Mary, certainly not Babbers or Crowe. Not Mrs. Champion.

“Yes. I suppose you're right.”

Their eyes locked and something clicked into place inside him. He felt her words land there and comfort him in the strangest way. It was not written in the stars that he could not find happiness, it just had to be with the right person. *‘It is just a question of compatibility.’*

Who was he compatible with then? What did it mean that Mrs. Champion never even would consider joining him in a rocky boat, whilst Charlotte after only a brief hesitation did? What did it mean that he wanted Charlotte with him here more than anyone? He knew in this moment that even if Mrs. Champion had changed her mind, he preferred to have Charlotte here right now.

“Now it's your turn. Give me your hands.”

Again she hesitated but did as he asked. He placed her hands on the oars and covered them with his. Perhaps it was not necessary, but he did it anyway because he could not resist the urge to touch those enticing fingers again. She did not seem offended. Her expression was slightly quizzical mixed with trusting when they began moving the oars in circles, leaning back and forth in sync.

“Lower your hands. Good. That's it. Here”, he instructed and encouraged her.

“Keep your back straight.”

He let go of one oar and without thinking pressed his hand briefly against her waist, intended to correct her position but resulting almost in a caress. He could feel how delicate her body was beneath his palm. She straightened immediately, but not flinching, instead almost instinctively sinking into it. He let go, because propriety demanded it, not because he wanted to. As if the hand protested against the departure from her body it, almost without his permission, cheekily brushed against her thigh and her knee lightly before returning to cover her hand again. Her response was a bewildered smile and he felt himself split up in a relaxed, happy grin.

His hands stayed on hers even when she had found the rhythm. Together they moved the oars, moved their bodies in tune. The easiness between them stayed but was accompanied by a building tension. Shadowing each other was strangely sensual. It amazed him how something innocent done in broad daylight turned into something almost erotic. Smoothly moving back and forth with eyes locked, his

hands still enclosing hers on the oars. Her chest heaved slightly from the exertion and it was impossible not to notice the perfect roundness of her bosom, her shallower breaths, her flushing cheeks. Moving in perfect synchronicity, so close to one another, it was all too easy to visualise what it would be to have her under him, freed of clothes, wrapping her arms and legs around him as he buried himself inside her. His mind strayed there and there was no turning back. He felt his own smile fade away, as did hers and he had the feeling something momentous was happening. The fact that someone so sweet, someone he was so at ease with, suddenly stirred the strongest desire in him, caused Sidney to feel utterly confused and totally mesmerised. He forgot time and place, there was only Charlotte's beautiful face, her hazel eyes now firmly locked in his and her body inches away. He noticed how her soft, pink lips were slightly parted and with sudden clarity realised he wanted to close the gap between them, pull her into his lap, hold around that delicate waist and place his lips to hers. He needed it more than anything in this moment, he had to...

"Sidney!"

Dazed he became aware of the surroundings outside the bubble they had been in and saw Mrs. Campion on the river bank. A flash of panic shot up inside of him. What was he thinking?! He had nearly kissed Charlotte, but Mrs. Campion was here... people expected things... were already talking... even Tom assumed... and Charlotte, what would she think of him if he had? What was he doing here in this boat with Charlotte, imagining things which would have ruined her reputation if

he had indeed done them and anyone had seen? Mrs. Campion had saved them both, yet he desperately wished her to be elsewhere.

Abruptly he got to his feet, so the boat rocked, and waved awkwardly to Mrs. Campion, feeling like a buffoon. For heaven's sake, could someone be kind enough to end his misery and help him out of here? Sidney felt like the dream state he had been in moments ago had turned into a living nightmare.