

***Author's note: Sorry, this took long. Since last chapter the Sanditon sisterhood received the worst news possible and our world is undone. This does certainly NOT mean that I intend to put Sanditon from my mind! Still hopeful someone will have better sense than ITV and film a second series but in the meantime I will keep writing.***

***Thank you for being so supporting about my writing, it makes my favourite hobby all the more fun.***

***I have gotten a few questions from readers and thought I would answer here.***

***Will there be more chapters? Yes. I will write to the end of episode 8 and then continue beyond by making up my own story/season 2. Now there is more reason than ever. I have no clue how many chapters it will be yet, and I do not know how my story will go.***

***When will next update be? My updates are irregular. I write as often as life permits and post as soon as I feel the chapter is ready. I always tweet (@MissPiony) when there is a new chapter available.***

***This is last chapter before Christmas, but I have published a fluffy one-shot and there might be another so look out for those if you need a HEA in Christmas time.***

## **Chapter 15: With you I am my best self**

---

The race was over, and the crowd had dissolved, some people already heading back to London, but Sidney had stayed behind at the riverbank with the excuse that someone needed to ensure the boats were securely tied to their poles and the oars stowed away. Mrs. Champion was likely waiting for him in town, expecting him to join her to London but he was in no hurry. He needed time alone.

He had been irritable on the verge to enraged after the conversation with Charlotte. He was not annoyed with her but with everything and everyone else, himself most of all. He had snapped at Tom when he disturbed his train of thoughts with his silly strategy talk for the competition. Tom's sense for others' feelings truly was non-existent and Sidney had felt like walking away from the whole event but stayed out of loyalty. He had only answered with an absent-minded snort when Mrs. Champion wished him luck at the starting line, distracted by Charlotte at the corner of his field of vision. He had rowed furiously during the race, not because he cared if *'The Parkers'* won but because he had so much steam he needed to get rid of. In each pull he applied maximum strength, as if rowing away from something, rowing towards something without knowing what. It did not bother him that Stringer's team won, until the team captain accepted the prize cup with the grumpy remark that this was not the prize he was after. The comment had stuck with him and now he replayed it in his mind.

What had Stringer eluded to? What prize? He brought the oars from the boats and put them down in the grass, reminiscing Charlotte bringing them the other way earlier. Suddenly he had a flash of her with Stringer instead. Remembered how easy they always seemed in each other's company; when they talked and laughed at the construction site, her comforting him after Old Stringer's accident, the banter between them during the cricket match and Stringer going soft on her when he bowled. Sidney's head started spinning and he felt slightly nauseous from the epiphany that hit him with force. Why had he not understood this before? All the signs were there, the evident happiness in her company, the unmasked admiration.

Stringer was in love with Charlotte, of course he was. But more important to Sidney; was *she* in love with him?

By now he was so overwhelmed with emotion that he had to sit down in the grass. He was not sure why it mattered so much to him if Charlotte was in love with James Stringer, but it did. It mattered so much that his whole body tensed at the thought and an almost physical pain struck him.

'*Not the prize I was after*'... Did that imply that Stringer thought she was in love with someone else? With Sidney? In his agitated state, that idea suddenly cut through everything else, like a beam of light finding its way to his core. It made him calm, it made him exhilarated. What if *love* was the true reason his words earlier had hurt her?

In his mind he revisited everything that had happened in the last days and it dawned on him how he repeatedly must have hurt her *if* she indeed was in love with him. Not only by words said, but by bringing Mrs. Campion here, by seeking Charlotte's company to ease his own mind only to leave her for another again and again. Part of him hoped she was not in love with him, so he would not have behaved so badly to her and made her sad, but part of him... the joy he felt at the mere possibility that Charlotte had feelings for him. It was like a warm, glowing ball taking shape inside his chest, expanding throughout his body until he had a tingling sensation all over, from his fingertips to his toes.

If she was in love with him, nothing could make him happier. No one. *Because he was in love with her*. Laughing out loud in wonder, he lay down on his back in the

grass, spreading arms out as if ready to embrace the sky, or embrace Charlotte. Still smiling he closed his eyes and just stayed like that, felt the warm sun on his face. He was in love with Charlotte Heywood. Her and no one else. Once the thought had appeared in his mind with such clarity, it only took a split second for it to root there, grow and blossom. He was in love and had been for some time. At the ball, during the carriage ride, when he was upset about the danger she put herself in going to London alone, all the times he was furious with her for giving him reason to be furious with her when all he really wanted was to be with her. He did not know when it had started but he knew he did not want it to end, all he wanted was for his feelings to be reciprocated. Were they? He had to find out, but first there were things to deal with. He had let himself be distracted by Eliza Campion, by the past and he had to put an end to that to be able to start with a clean slate, to be able to move on. Move on with Charlotte, if she would have a flawed man like him.

Once that realisation hit him, he sat up abruptly. He had to return to town and send Mrs. Campion away, then he needed to see Charlotte and apologise again, for real this time. The decision was formed inside him. He had been running around in a maze and now it was finally completely clear to him which way he had to go. He stood up without bothering to brush off some grass that had stuck to his shirt or smoothing out his wrinkled breeches and set off in direction to Sanditon with purposeful strides.

His heart jolted when he saw Mrs. Campion standing waiting for him under a tree. It was not the same somersault of joy it had made when he saw Charlotte earlier today, rather the uneasy feeling coming with the knowledge that he now had to face

something he was not looking forward to. He felt sorry for her because he knew with what hopes she had come here and now he had to let her down.

She smiled when he was approaching.

“You know you didn't have to wait for me”, he said politely.

“I've waited ten years. What's another quarter of an hour? The truth is now that I've found you again, I can scarcely bring myself to let you out of my sight.”

Somehow that remark made him shudder.

“Eliza, I...” Her name felt strange on his tongue. It was long since she had been his Eliza. She was Mrs. Campion to him now and he had realised over the course of this day that she never would be anything else.

“You know, I never lost hope that we would stand beside each other once more. Here we are. Fate has gifted us a second chance”, she interrupted him.

He watched her intently and took a deep breath, knowing he could not postpone what he had to say. He had intended for something courteous and vague, not to offend her but for the second time today words did not come out as he had planned. It was as if her words made something within him snap and the pity he just felt transformed into something else. Resentment.

“You didn't though, did you?”

His tone was harsh, and her smile faded to be replaced with a look of insecurity.

“*What* did I not do?”

It was uncommon to speak without a veil of courtesy in the circles they moved, so it was not strange that she was taken aback. For so many years Sidney had not spoken what was on his mind, instead withdrawn inside himself, but time spent, and conversations held with Charlotte had changed that. First because she inspired such intense anger in him that it was impossible to hold back, then gradually and unconsciously, he had come to trust her and *wanted* to talk to her openly and with honesty. With her, it felt natural to speak what was on his mind, like he had in the boat. Now he found that it spilled over to this situation, he was unable to go on pretending like nothing or smooth things over. He felt an intense need to speak frankly to Mrs. Campion, perhaps for the first time ever.

“Wait for ten years”, he answered. “You did not. You got married Eliza. You choose to break our engagement and marry another man.”

Her face changed into a vexed expression, she had not seen this coming.

“Dearest Sidney, I thought we had put that behind us. You cannot seriously hold that silly thing against me after all this time?”

He found her answer extremely provoking.

“I don’t know what makes you think I can so easily put this behind me. You don’t know anything about my sentiments then, or how I feel now. Not once did you enquire as to how I took it when you broke off the engagement, you simply seem to pretend it never happened and assume we can pick up where we were then.”

“Don’t be such a simpleton, Sidney. It was so long ago. Why let it destroy our chance of happiness now?” She sounded like a whiny child to him and he suddenly remembered how she always had sulked when she did not get her way, but back then he had forgiven her because her big blue eyes and her radiant smile were so adorable. How blind he had been to her egoistic traits.

“I have been trying to fool myself into thinking the same and that is the reason why we are here at all, why you are in Sanditon. I convinced myself that given this unexpected chance, I could not let it pass me by. Only today I realised it passed by a very long time ago. I thought I continued to love you all these years, but I didn’t. I loved the idea of you and let no one else in, but I didn’t love *you* anymore.” He paused and looked at her almost in wonder as something occurred to him. “I wonder if I ever really loved you, because I didn’t know you.”

“You knew me Sidney, of course you did, and I am not different now. I have not changed.”

“I knew your charms during a London season. I was bold enough to kiss you a few times after we were engaged and I was infatuated with you up to my ears, but I am not sure I knew you or you me. You did not share your innermost thoughts and I never expected you to, I was pleased with you just being pretty and I don’t think you wanted to be anything beyond that. It never occurred to me that it might be a good thing if we sometimes challenged each other, if we were aware of each other’s flaws.”

She batted her eyelashes in surprise, and he could see in her eyes that he had no clue what he meant by this because she never had experienced, neither sought, challenge in a relationship. She was too shallow for that. Once batting her eyelashes had been enough to make young Sidney weak at the knees but now it did nothing to him and he continued relentlessly.

“I thought I knew enough, but when you without warning sent me that letter breaking off the engagement, told me you were to marry another and did not even have the decency to tell me to my face...” His voice broke, filled with emotion but then he resumed with newfound strength. “I should have realised I never knew you. Instead I put you on a pedestal, found excuses for your behaviour for so long. I have realised now that there can be none. The choice you made and the way you treated me were despicable.”

“I didn’t want to...”

“Then why did you? No one forced you, you had a *choice*. Your family had already accepted my proposal. I was good enough for you!”

She flinched at his raised voice.

“Surely you must see that the marriage I secured was a more advantageous liaison?”

He snorted with contempt.



“That is exactly what I mean. You *chose* him over me, not for love, that I could respect, but for money. Or maybe that is what love is to you, something to be paid for.”

He knew he was offending her beyond repair, but he had waited ten years to let these words out and once he had started he could not stop himself.

“You nearly broke me Eliza. Or you *did* break me, but Tom saved me when pulled me out from the gutter, paid my debts and sent me off to the West Indies. I managed to build myself up again there, far away from you, but only just. Now you expect me to start over with you, trust you, but I cannot. You say you are no different now, but I am, and I need another kind of woman. Truth is, I don’t even like you anymore, the way you treat people around you with so little care. You are unkind and petty, insensitive of feeling. Worse, you are toxic because you make me behave no better than you when I am in your company. I don’t blame you for that, I blame myself for that moment of weakness, but I won’t let it happen again.”

“Are you thinking about the incident with the Heywood girl?” Her laugh was hollow. “Is that it? Is all this about her?”

“Leave Charlotte out of this, this is between you and me. You made your choice. A life with me would not have been as luxurious compared to with him, but you would hardly have lacked anything. You certainly would not have lacked love. I loved you and I continued to love you for so long. I am the fool for not realising sooner you were not worthy of it.”

“Sidney, I am still fond of you. I always were”, she pleaded.

“Don’t you see that even if it were true it would make your choice so much worse?”

“But you must be fond of me or you wouldn’t have invited me here?”

He clenched his jaw.

“Truth is you cannot presume to know my mind and at this point I don’t even want you to know it. I didn’t really invite you here if you must know, you and Tom managed that just fine between the two of you and I was foolish enough not to stop it in time.”

Her eyes went from tearful to hard.

“You will humiliate me. Everyone expects us to get engaged. Now I will be the widow who came to Sanditon to pursue Sidney Parker and was rejected.”

He sighed heavily.

“I’m sorry, I cannot help what people assume. After you left me, I thought I went my own way, but I see now I never did. All this time I have done what people expected of me. Mourned you, closed myself off to others and when you turned up again showed you attention anew, but none of that is what I want. It is not the life I want, and it is time I chose my own path, for real.”

“Is this your final word?”

“I think it is.”

They stared each other out for a moment, and he noticed how the displeased wrinkles in her face seemed to have become deeper. “Let me walk you back to town”, he finally said.

They walked back in cool silence and found her carriage awaiting. Before she entered it she turned to Sidney.

“I am sorry”, he said but realised he was not really.

Her steel blue eyes challenged him for the first time, showing the inside of Eliza Champion was far from sweet.

“No, you are not, but you *will* be Sidney, I promise you that. This is not the last you have heard from me. You see, I don’t join a race unless I think I can win it and I don’t consider this one lost yet.”

“You had better accept defeat because my mind is made up.”

“If you claim to have learned so much about the world in these years, Sidney, I’m surprised you still have to learn that there is so much more than our free will steering our actions and decisions. Reality will catch up with you.”

“I’m glad I have realised I’m not as cynical as you. I believe we all can chose who we want to be. Goodbye Mrs. Champion.”

“Goodbye but I’m certain we will meet again.”

Not if he could avoid it.

She gathered her skirts and entered her carriage. Sidney felt light at heart when he watched it drive away, her words did not scare him.

He knew what he had to do now. Apologize to Charlotte. He knew *that* would frighten him beyond belief if he spent too much time thinking about what to say or what her reaction might be, so he resolutely set off for Trafalgar House at once, hoping he would find her there.

The house was quiet when he arrived, and he assumed everyone was resting in their rooms after the regatta. He was just wondering how he might get Charlotte to come down from her chambers without alerting anyone else, when he noticed light in Tom's studio, went looking and found her there tending to Tom's papers as it seemed. Alone.

She looked up when he entered. She had told him to leave her alone, but the eyes that now met his seemed weary rather than angry.

"If you're looking for your brother..." her words trailed off and he instinctively knew that the first thing he had to let her know was that her was there for one thing only, one person; *her*. His throat felt dry and his heart was beating like a drum, but he managed to speak with confidence. He found it hard to meet her gaze but forced himself to shift it from the floor where it had dropped without his permission.

"I'm not. As a matter of fact, I was looking for you."

Initially her eyes seemed harder than usual, but he did not miss the flicker of surprise even in the dim candle light and prayed she understood.

“I thought you and Mrs Campion would be heading back to London.”

Almost amused, he registered her chin up in the air and the tone of defiance in her voice, telling him she wondered why he hell he was he was here after the way he treated her earlier. How he loved that there was a fire to her even when her appearance was calm.

“She's already left.” He answered with the same exterior calm, without being provoked. She was in her right to be angry with him and he was not here to argue. He was here to make amends, to make up... and to let Charlotte know it was her he wanted to be with. “I decided against joining her.” He took a deep breath and kept his eyes locked with hers. “On reflection, I realised I would rather be here.”

The silence that followed seemed to echo in his ears and he watched her intently. The words were spoken, but did she understand what he was saying? He could not be sure, he knew he had to give her more, disclose more of himself if this was to be the apology he wanted it to be. If he in any way was to make up for his actions and words ever since the ball.

“I... er... I am a great deal less than perfect. You've made me all too aware of that” he confessed.

She had made him see all the things he seemed to be in the eyes of others but did not wish to be, and all the things he was not, but wanted badly to strive for. For her. She had made him want to be as true to himself as she was and to show that version of himself to her.

“But for whatever it is worth I believe I am my best self my truest self when I'm with you.”

Her look was one of utter confusion as her big dark eyes seemed to stare inside his soul and suddenly his courage failed him. He wanted to add ‘All I want is to be with you. Do you feel the same?’ But what if he was wrong, if she had no feelings for him and wondered why he was making this foolish declaration? He knew he could not bear to hear her say that, not just now when he had exposed himself so completely. He had taken a leap of faith and spilled his heart to her, for the first time in so many years opened himself up to anyone. He could not bear a possible rejection in this moment. His outside remained unperturbed, but he clenched his hands behind his back and was nearly overwhelmed by the distress that now inhabited him. The sudden panic that shot up inside him made him end the conversation.

“That is all.”

He broke eye contact and with a curt nod spun around and left her before she had a chance to respond.

His heart was still beating fast when he almost stumbled out on the street and he inhaled the fresh evening air deeply to try to calm himself. Damn, this was even harder than expected. Before he went there he had only thought so far as to what he had to say, had to let her know. He had not allowed himself time to reflect upon what her reaction might be and now he had fled before she could let him know.

He spent the night awake in bed and realised it was not the first time she made him sleepless, but it was only now he understood why. Because he had feelings for her,

always had had even if they had changed and deepened better he got acquainted with her.

Lying there, he saw her before him, like she had been in the soft candle light in Tom's studio. So amazingly beautiful. In his imagination her eyes showed him forgiveness and a need equalling his own. In his mind he did not leave, instead he walked over to her and took her in his arms and kissed her. Or she walked over and wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. This was more than enough to keep him awake, but even more disturbing was not knowing what her thoughts were about what he had told her, and he wished he had been courageous enough to stay and find out.