



Snow

is not the only thing that happens in Willingden

HEA story proving Sidney wrong when he said nothing ever happens in Willingden.

One-shot for the Sanditon Creative's '12 days of Sanditon challenge', prompt 'Snow', taking place the winter after Charlotte and Sidney said farewell to each other on the Sanditon clifftops.

~ *Snow* ~

~ *is not the only thing that happens in Willingden* ~

She woke up earlier than everyone else, something that had happened frequently ever since her return to Willingden end of last summer. She did not sleep well anymore. She was often disturbed but nightmares, or worse had the loveliest happy dreams only to wake up to a reality which did not seem far from a nightmare.

Her beloved papa had warned her before she went to Sanditon for the summer, as the guest of Mr. and Mrs. Tom Parker and she had replayed their conversation in her head countless times, wishing she had taken his advice more seriously.

"Now, these seaside resorts can be odd places. No-one quite knows who anyone else is, where they come from and what they're up to."

"That sounds stimulating."

"Yes, well, I suppose it is. But the normal rules of conduct tend to be relaxed and sometimes altogether flouted."

"But if I'm with Mr and Mrs Parker, nothing bad can happen, can it?"

"Just be careful. That's all."

"Careful of what, Papa?"

"Everything."

She had brushed his words off, determined to experience *everything*. In the end she had experienced more than she bargained for, and perhaps exactly what her father had intended to warn her of. She had not expected to return home with a broken heart, but she had.

Silently she got out of the bed she shared with her sister, wrapped a blanket around herself and started tiptoeing out of the room, but stopped in her tracks when she glanced out the window.

Snow.

During the night everything had been covered in snow. She went closer to the window and sat down in the deep window sill, blanket still wrapped around her thin frame. She was always feeling so cold these days. She knew she had lost weight during the autumn and maybe looked thinner than was becoming but she could not help it. Her appetite was lost, she had left it behind in Sanditon just like her heart. Whenever she looked herself in the mirror, she was surprised by the woman who stared back at her, how changed she was from the girl that spirited had set off to Sanditon. She had sworn she would survive the heartbreak Sidney Parker had caused her and she would if only just, but she was not happy, and it took its toll on her physically too. Her brown eyes were now like huge sad orbs in her pale face, with dark circles underneath and even if she forced her lips into a smile it never quite reached the eyes. People who did not know her actually considered her more beautiful than ever because she looked much like the ideal beauty of the time, but those who knew her well missed the spark

in her eyes and mourned because they realised something within her had been lost, perhaps irretrievably.

Now she sat still watching the snowflakes fall from the dark December sky. The layer of snow on the ground was still quite thin but if snow kept falling at this pace snow would be deep this evening. The moon reflected on it and made it shine bright white and sparkle like diamonds. She had always preferred summer, to run free in the fields of Willingden and feel the sun on her face but now the snow seemed to reflect the cold inside her so perfectly and she felt a strange calm watching it. She wished that snow could fall on her just like it did on the ground and buildings, smoothing out all edges, covering anything that was dirty and dark with fresh white. What would she not give to start over with a clean slate like that, Sidney Parker erased?

When she first returned home, she had held on to the memories of him, determined never to forget him, but over time she had come to realise exactly how hurtful and draining it was to love a man who never would be hers and tried to put him from her mind, only to find that she could not. She was his, body and soul no matter if he was not here and never would be.

She had received letters from Mary, Georgiana and at one occasion even Esther Babington. During the first months she had read them greedily as soon as they arrived, but then the pain became unbearable and she had put them away in a box without opening them. It hurt too much to hear that Sidney's wedding plans with Eliza Champion were progressing and the wedding was expected to take place in the spring, that Georgiana had changed her mind about her guardian lately as he had turned into an understanding and caring such. Even the news that Esther was happy with Babington and expecting a baby hurt, because Charlotte

knew that the man she had hoped to share the same things with was out of her reach – even if he perhaps still loved her too.

She did not notice when she started crying and was surprised when a warm droplet fell on her hand and she realised her cheeks were already wet with streaming tears. She was so tired of wondering how fate could be so cruel to let two persons find each other and fall in love, only to be ripped apart by circumstances. Of course, she could not be sure that the depth of his feelings had been the same as hers, but he had so nearly told her when he bid her farewell that day on the cliff top, when he said; 'I don't love *her* you know'.

Then she had stopped him and told him he must not speak that way. Afterwards she desperately wished she had let him speak, that she only once had got to hear the words come over his lips. If he was to give his life to Eliza Campion, Charlotte wished that she at least had those words to hang on to for the remainder of hers.

"What are you doing?" Alison asked sleepily from the bed.

"Oh, I couldn't sleep. I got stuck here watching the snow."

"It's snowing?"

"Yes, come and look. It's so beautiful."

She wiped away her tears, hoping Alison would not notice. She hated how weak she was and would rather not show it even to her sister.

Alison padded over to the window and sat down beside her.

"You have been crying."

It was not even a question, Alison knew her too well and there was no point denying.

"Yes, you know why."

"Is it not possible to forget him?"

"I wish it was, but it's like he lives in me. He changed me, what I want, what I need. I feel like I'm only half when I'm not with him. To forget him I would have to forget myself. Does it make sense?"

"It does not, but I'm not sure if true love ever does. Not in the novels I read anyway, and it feels like you could be the heroine in any of them."

Charlotte snorted.

"I feel far from a heroine, sitting here sniffing wrapped in a blanket."

"Oh, but you are! You are kind and beautiful and brave, your heart has undeservedly been broken. If this was a book, this would not be the end and I'm sure it isn't for you either. You will recover from this, you will be happy again Charlotte."

"Thank you. I hope so." She sighed. "Anyway, it is Christmas Eve today, so we had better get ready to help mother prepare for tomorrow."

The Heywoods kept servants, but they were a large household and tomorrow there would be guests joining them for Christmas dinner and everyone's assistance was needed to get ready for the lavish feast.

"I'm so looking forward to wearing my new dress", Alison smiled.

"Me too", Charlotte confessed. "Even with a broken heart a new dress brings some joy."

Truth was that Mrs. Heywood had said to Mr. Heywood that he had to allow Charlotte a new dress for Christmas as everything she owned hang too loosely on her body and then he should allow Alison one too, because Charlotte would never go to the dress-fittings alone. As it was, the girls had spent quite a few hours with the seamstress, selecting models and fabrics and trying out the dresses. The fabrics they had chosen were heavier than the muslin they preferred in summer and instead of white which was their favourite then, Alison had opted for a blue fabric and Charlotte a red. They were quite excited to wear them for the first time during the Christmas celebration.

Besides helping to get everything ready in the household this day, they girls had another task. In the afternoon on Christmas Eve, they and the eldest of their brothers, Simon and Matthew, had a tradition to visit all the households on the estate and gift them a basket of groceries. As the snow continued to fall heavily, they put on warm clothes and brought out the sled. Even with the sled to transport them, it took them a few hours to get around because there was some distance between the houses and once they got there, the grateful recipients asked them to stay for a while and they always did out of courtesy and because they enjoyed it. Despite the cold, Charlotte felt happier and warmer inside as the day went on. She had such a good

laugh with her siblings, giving gifts to people who needed them caused her to feel a sense of satisfaction and she loved the snow that kept falling. It made her hair damp, her cheeks frost bitten and rosy but somehow it also made her feel lighter at heart. Perhaps this would be a good Christmas despite all.

By the time they arrived back to their own house dusk was already upon them, but that did not stop Simon from throwing a snow ball on Charlotte, who was quick to return it and soon there was a full-fledged snow fight just like when they were children. A quarter of an hour later, they were all lying panting and laughing in the snow. Alison had started making snow angels and the others followed her example.

"I have missed this", Simon said.

"What? Snow fight? Playing?" Charlotte asked.

"Yes, both, but most of all I have missed you laughing Charlotte. I'm glad to know you still can."

She was just about to answer when their mother opened the door to the house and peeked out from inside.

"There you are. Hurry inside all of you, we have a guest."

The siblings looked at each other. An unknown guest? Who might that be, who had travelled here in the snow? If it had been one of the locals their mother would for sure have said who it was. They hurried to bring the sled into the stable and now noticed an unfamiliar horse standing there, an impressive black mare. Curiously they entered the house and discarded

their wet coats and hats before they entered the parlour. Charlotte thought to herself that they hardly looked very presentable but there was not much to be done about that as mama had instructed them not to delay.

The minute she entered the room she stopped in her tracks and her heart skipped a beat. By the mantelpiece, a man was standing with his back turned towards them, but she would recognize him anywhere. Unless her mind was playing tricks on her after having hoped for so long that he one day would be here.

"Here they are finally", her father said when the four of them nearly stumbled into the room eager to find out who the guest was.

The man turned around and she locked eyes with Sidney Parker. Her family was there, but all she saw from that moment was him. She knew she looked a mess with wet curls and skirts damp and dirty, but nothing in the look of his eyes indicated that he even noticed that. There was a warm golden glimmer to them that did not only come from reflecting the fire and she felt how her frozen body slowly warmed under his gaze. What was he doing here in Willingden? What reason did he, who was to marry another, have to come here to her family home? Had he simply been surprised by the snow on his way to or from London and taken shelter in the first place that came to his mind?

She did not know, but what she did know as soon as she set eyes on him was that she loved him no less than when they last had said goodbye.

"Miss Heywood." His voice was the same soft timbre it had been before. Not the cold, harsh voice it had been in the beginning of their acquaintance but the one it had changed into when they grew close.

"Mr. Parker. What a surprise. What brings you to Willingden?"

"Not a too unpleasant surprise, I hope?" he said, and she heard the sudden insecurity in his voice.

"No, not unpleasant at all. Just... unexpected."

"Yes, well, er..."

"Were you surprised by the snow on your way to London perhaps?"

He looked her straight in the eyes.

"No, I set out to visit Willingden in a matter of urgency."

"So you were not planning on going somewhere else?"

"No, my destiny... er... my destination was Willingden."

"And we are very pleased to have you here, Mr. Parker. Charlotte, please show some manners and introduce your brothers and sisters", Mrs. Heywood interrupted, reminding Charlotte they were not alone.

Like in a daze she introduced him to her family whilst frantically trying to figure out why he was here. She would have expected her father to be reserved but he seemed terribly cheerful, as did everyone else. Only herself and Sidney were tense and nervous.

After an unbearable eternity of polite small talk, Mr. Heywood got to his feet.

"Dinner will be served in half an hour and of course we will arrange a room for you for the night Mr. Parker because you can travel nowhere in this snow."

Sidney glanced at her with an expression which was hard to interpret, and Charlotte's heart rate doubled in speed. He would spend the night under their roof. Her heart did not calm down when her father continued.

"Now, Mr. Parker has requested if he could have a few minutes with Charlotte alone, so if all of you could please..." he gestured with his hands towards the door, ushering everyone but Charlotte and Sidney out of the room. All except her mother looked surprised but obediently moved out of the room. Mama sent her a conspiratorial glance, but she could not make out what was about to transpire. It all seemed surreal. Not only had Sidney Parker come to Willingden, he had asked her father permission to be alone with her and he had agreed.

When the door closed and they found themselves alone, they just stared at each other in silence for a few intense moments. With the others gone she allowed herself to drink him in and noticed with a sting of pain that he too had changed over the last months. It was easy to be fooled by his broad shoulders but looking more closely she saw that he too had become thinner. His handsome face looked a bit haggard and he had the same dark circles under his eyes she had, as if he had not slept well in a long time either. He did not look like a man who

was happily engaged. Now he gave her a weak smile, but she got the impression he was very, very nervous. She hoped he had not come only to say he needed to see her once more before he got married. She was not sure how she would survive that heartbreak yet another time.

She was startled when he suddenly got to his feet, but he simply moved from his chair to come and sit beside her, and she felt a heat run through her body which she knew did not come from the fireplace. She could almost not breathe when he took her cold hands in his and laced their fingers.

"Miss Heywood... Charlotte..." he began, like he had once before on a balcony. "Dearest, loveliest, Charlotte... I don't dare to call you mine when you are not."

She bit her lip to prevent a sob of pain to slip out. It must be so, he had simply come to see her once more before his wedding.

"Why are you here?" she interrupted. "Please don't tell me you have come to tell me goodbye once more, like you did on the cliffs. That time I thought you had changed your mind... I don't think I could take the same pain once again."

She saw his eyes glaze, acknowledging her pain and remembering his own.

"Indeed, that is not why I have come, but I'm not sure if your feelings remain unchanged. If you want anything to do with me. I would never presume... but I have to ask."

"I don't understand. Are you not engaged anymore?"

"I am not... but I hope to be."

For the second time today she felt a tear land on her hand and realised this time it was Sidney's. He smoothed it away with his thumb and looked up in her face again. He took a deep breath before he continued talking.

"I have come here with the sole purpose to ask you if you would do me the honour of becoming my wife."

As he spoke, he slid down on the floor, to stand on his knees still holding her hands and without breaking eye contact.

She gasped.

"But what has changed? Why are you not engaged? What about Sanditon?"

"She released me from the engagement. She did not enjoy being engaged to a man who was withering away because his heart belonged to another, who did not like to join her in her social circles and was not affectionate. I tried to keep my part of the bargain, but it was never good enough because it was not true. In the end she told me she had fallen in love with someone who showed her more attention and wanted to break our engagement. She wants to remain an investor in Sanditon because she thinks it will pay back ten-fold in the long run so Tom is safe anyway. When I left London the scandal was already out, that she had left me a second time and nearly everyone thinks me heartbroken by the same lady twice." He smirked sadly.

Charlotte remained silent, listening carefully and trying to take in that this was really happening.

"What they don't know is that the worst pain afflicted to me when it comes to love, was never caused by Eliza, but by myself when I walked away from you. I despise myself for the pain I had to cause you and can only hope you can forgive me. There has not been a day, a minute when I have not missed you. I'm only half without you."

There it was, the same words she had said to Alison this morning. They were two halves of a whole, never complete without one another. He felt the same as she did. Her heart was beating out of her chest.

He brought their laced hands to his lips and kissed her knuckles, looking into her eyes.

"I'm already yours Charlotte. Will you be mine?"

Now tears were streaming down Charlotte's cheeks again, but this time they were tears of happiness.

"Of course, I will... I mean I have been all this time. I could not put you from my mind either. I love you."

"So, it is a yes?" he smiled, almost disbelieving.

"Yes, yes, yes."

He cupped her face between his hands and wiped away her tears with the pad of his thumbs. She did the same, felt his warm skin under her fingers, the slight rasp from his emerging stubble. He leaned his forehead to hers and she could feel his breath fanning on her face.

"I have thought of our one kiss about a thousand times. Am I allowed to kiss you now?"

"My father might throw you out, but as far as I'm concerned... yes."

"He gave his permission for me to ask for your hand. He said he was not sure I deserved it after what I made you go through, but on the other hand he thought I looked like I too had been quite miserable, and he knew you would never forgive him if he turned me down. That gave me some hope you could accept my proposal. Coming here, I thought you might resent me, but I had to try anyway. Had to let you know how I feel."

"I could never think ill of you. You hurt me, but I understood why you did it and admired that you saved Tom."

"He saved me once...he is my brother. I had to..."

"I know and I don't hold it against you. Dearest, loveliest Sidney..." she smiled calling him by his Christian name for the first time and he smiled in return.

For a moment, their smiling lips hovered close to one another before they gently closed the gap and kissed. Their first kiss had been wonderful but there was a different depth to this second one, coming from that neither of them had thought they would ever be allowed to kiss again. They did not break apart until there was a knock on the door.

Mr. Heywood poked his head inside and quickly took in the young couple's radiant expressions and flushing cheeks.

"So, Mr. Parker, judging by the way you are holding my daughter's hands and her sparkling eyes, am I right to assume we have something to celebrate and that you will stay for Christmas?"

Sidney laughed and Charlotte felt a laughter bubbling up inside herself too, together with an intense feeling of happiness.

"Indeed, we have something to celebrate and I would very much like to stay as your guest over Christmas, if you don't mind."

"Oh, I'm glad it all went well", Mr. Heywood mused. "It is a snow storm outside now so you wouldn't have been able to go anywhere, so it could have been a bloody awkward business if she turned you down. I'm thrilled, absolutely thrilled. Congratulations!"

He embraced his daughter and patted Sidney on the back, before they went to share the news with the rest of the family before they died of curiosity.

Snow kept falling outside, white, sparkling, cold, covering everything, so what previous was hard became soft and smooth. Indoors, shared words of love and perhaps also the touch of lips, had had the same softening effect on Charlotte and her husband to be. She could not sleep that night either but for completely different and all the lovelier reasons than the night before.