



*The only reason to
Marry
is Love*

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MISS PIONY

The only reason to marry is Love

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Sidney Parker is set on never marrying, but when it is the only way to save a young lady from ruin he changes his mind. Still a reluctant groom, he is determined a wife will not change his life, but soon finds he was quite mistaken. He struggles with his changing feelings, unaware that so does she. Will circumstances and words unspoken keep them apart, or will they find the way to each other's hearts?

Sidney's and Charlotte's gripping love story, written in a different setting but aiming to stay true to their characters.

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Chapter 1: A rose in a dark place

"You got married? Tell me it is a joke?"

Sidney Parker's head snapped up when his friend Lord Babington barged into the parlour where he quite peacefully had been reading the newspaper. Appearances were deceiving though. Only his outside was calm, his insides were in a turmoil already before Babington startled him.

"It is true", he answered flatly and threw the newspaper aside with an eye-roll.

"What? What made the most elusive eligible bachelor in London elope to Gretna Green and marry a woman I never even heard you mention before? When I last saw you, you were on your way to the arms of some courtesan."

"I thought you aspired on that title Babbers, or at least you did until Esther tamed you. Anyway, you are actually to blame for this."

"Me? How?"

Sidney got to his feet.

"Wine first?"

"Oh yes, I need that to take in this news."

Sidney poured two glasses of wine, handed one to his friend and both sat down.

"Now tell me, how am I to blame for you getting married on a whim?"

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A week earlier Sidney, Babington and a third friend, Crowe, had been playing cards and drinking when Sidney happened to spill that it was his twenty-eighth birthday. This instantly made the other two insist that to celebrate properly, ladies had to be involved. They dragged the reluctant birthday child with them through the streets of London to the city's most exclusive brothel, where they told him to sit down and wait while they arranged something for him.

"We cannot allow you be alone on your birthday night!"

"I'm not alone, I'm with you", he protested.

"Yes, but we don't intend to kiss you, dear friend. There are others who can do that so well. Now just sit here and wait."

Sidney had been in this establishment before but less so in the last year, as the appeal of paid female company had faded to him. He was set on never marrying, yet it seemed to him like if one could not have a companion like the one his brother Tom had found in his dear wife Mary, then what was the point of female company at all? He had always been a loner but now more than ever and it did not bother him. It seemed to concern others though. Tom and Mary wanted to see him married, and now even Babington and Crowe wanted to interfere to provide him a more temporary kind of 'love'. He sighed heavily.

"We have arranged you a special." Babington returned, looking extremely pleased with himself.

"A special? Please, no, I'm not in the mood. You can keep your special and I'll stay here and nurse my drink."

"Remember an I'm an engaged man now, so I don't need it. I think you will be in the mood birthday boy, we asked Madame to give you the best she has. It's on me."

"How very generous of you", he said emotionless, but his lack of enthusiasm flew over Babington's head.

"Only the best for you, my friend."

Sometimes Babington could look like a happy, expectant puppy and Sidney did not have it in him to tell him to sod off and leave him alone. Instead he accepted the "gift".

Reluctantly, he let Madame, the infamous hostess of the establishment, show him to a room on the second floor but was determined that once the girl showed up he would either send her away or let her sleep in the bed alone.

Before Madame left, she turned to him.

"She will be with you in a few minutes. You are one very lucky man Mr. Parker, your lady for the night is a virgin."

He snorted in response. Virgins in a brothel were rarer than diamonds. Fake virgins to an overprice were on the other hand very common and he suspected that was what she had fooled Babbers to pay for.

Sidney had always found it hard to understand why many men were so obsessed with being a random woman's first whilst barely caring about their wives. He had never been completely comfortable around courtesans and the idea of paying to be with someone who truly was a virgin irked him. Or rather, the thought of a virgin having to put up with a stranger in bed irked him, especially as he knew that not all men bothered to be gentle and caring when taking their pleasure.

"Just send her in", he muttered.

He slumped down in an armchair after pouring himself another brandy and had not been waiting long when the door opened. He looked up, prepared to brush her off before she started clinging to him, but the words got stuck on his tongue when he saw her.

They had dolled her up with too much rouge and eye makeup and a cleavage too generous for any respectable lady, but even so he could see that she was very young and quite pretty. When she closed the door behind herself and hesitantly turned to him, he also noticed that her lower lip was trembling, and her big brown eyes were glazed with tears. He instinctively knew it had not been a lie when Madame claimed she was a virgin. She was and she was terrified. If he had been a reluctant customer before, he now knew for sure that there was no way in hell he would bed her this night.

He rose to his feet but regretted it when she flinched, scared by his imposing figure and the move. When he stood up she only reached to his shoulder and frightened looked up in his face to see who would own her for the night.

"Don't be afraid." He felt the need to reassure her, to make her trust he would not hurt her or do anything against her will. "I won't touch you."

"Is that not what you have paid for? A night of 'love'?"

She almost whispered but he heard the defiant disdain in her voice and felt an urgent and unexpected need to defend himself.

"Look, my friends did because it is my birthday, but I don't want that. I can clearly see that you don't want it either. I won't force you, I'm not a brute."

He started pulling off his coat as he spoke but realised from her scared expression that his actions may seem to contradict his words. He held it out to show his intentions.

"Put this on to cover yourself up. You don't seem quite comfortable in that dress."

Truth was that he also found her perfectly rounded bosom slightly distracting and he preferred to stay level-headed.

Her eyes widened with surprise, shifting into gratitude and she accepted it with a nod. He put it over her shoulders, careful not to touch her. The black coat dwarfed her and made her look even tinier and more fragile than before. If he had not thought it would scare her, he would have given her a hug.

"Please, sit down."

He gestured to the bed and sat down in the armchair again, so she would understand he did not intend to join her on the bed. Apprehensively she sat down, and he took a closer look at her in the soft candle light. Her eyes were her

most noticeable feature. They were like huge, troubled orbs framed by long dark eyelashes. Behind the makeup, the shape of her face appeared delicate, with a straight little nose, plush lips and a small dimple in her chin. He wondered what she would be like when she was not so completely out of her comfort zone as she was now.

"What is your name?"

"What do you want it to be?" she asked with hollow voice.

"I realise that is what Madame has instructed you to say, but the only name I'm interested in is your own."

She looked down on her own hands, which she kept twisting in her lap, seemingly embarrassed. It was painful to see how far away from a sophisticated courtesan she was.

"I'm Charlotte Heywood."

"And my name is Sidney Parker. Miss Heywood, may I ask how you ended up in this establishment? You seem... and I mean this in the best possible way, out of place."

This made her burst into tears and he was feeling a bit lost when she buried her face in her hands and cried uncontrollably. He was inexperienced in consoling young ladies in general, and girls weeping in a brothel in particular. He awkwardly handed her his handkerchief and just waited for her to calm down a bit.

"I'm so sorry", she finally managed to say between sobs. "Please don't tell Madame."

"I won't. Just take your time."

His kind words had the intended effect. Soon she stopped crying and gathered herself enough to speak.

"I'm a gentleman's daughter, believe it or not." Strangely, he did not doubt it at all and just nodded encouragingly to make her continue. "My father owns an estate on the countryside in Willingden. We are a large family and have never been wealthy but lived comfortably. However, recently our fortune changed. During the past years the crops have been poor, so when my eldest brother secretly started gambling and indebted himself heavily, there were no funds to pay off his debts with. We needed to come up with a way to raise money. My brother is needed at home to help take care of the estate and I'm the oldest after him. My other brothers are still very young. There was no other solution than trying to find an employment for me."

She told the story very matter-of-factly, struggling to keep her emotions in check and he admired her for trying to be stoic.

"And how old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

She was older than he had thought her to be. Her bosom was definitely a woman's but her face so innocent despite the heavy makeup.

"You could have married?" he suggested.

"There weren't exactly suitors standing in line in Willingden and besides, I wanted to marry for love or not at all. I thought working as a governess would be a better alternative to help my family."

She started crying again, her thin shoulders shaking from it and this time he had to lean over and pat her back and take her hand. He thought he must seem very awkward to her, but she did not flinch from the friendly touch and once again he managed to still her tears.

"What happened then? Why are you here?"

This brothel could for sure not be a place any gentleman would send his daughter to and it sounded as if she was fond of her father, so he was likely no scoundrel. The fact that she only intended to marry for love made the likelihood that she was here of her own free will non-existent.

"Through an advertisement in the newspaper, papa found what seemed to be a very respectable couple with two children in need of a governess. The man and woman came all the way to Willingden to introduce themselves. They told stories of their home, the children and everything seemed to be very proper. My parents felt reassured they were good people and I was so excited to leave home. I thought it would be an adventure, how foolish of me! We left Willingden a few days ago, but the carriage never drove to a house with any children. It took me here, where they locked me up and said I will be forced to entertain..."

"It was a scam," he said grimly.

"Yes. I'm a prisoner here. They won't let me go out on my own. I cannot escape. I'm made to dress up like this and..." Her voice broke again.

He was absolutely appalled but he understood why they would do such a thing. Men would pay more for a polished beauty with educated language, than someone who looked and talked like she came from the gutter. A country gentleman's daughter who knew nobody in London would be the perfect target. It would take weeks, maybe months before her family realised she was lost. He had never heard of kidnappings like this before, but it did not mean they did not happen. There was a dark side to London's *beau monde*.

"And this is your first night?"

He swallowed and clenched his jaw, hoping she would say yes. Not because he wished to be her first, he had no intention to be, but he hoped no one had yet ravished her.

"My first night of many, I should expect." Her voice was filled with despair and her bottom lip was trembling again.

"You see, even if I were able to sneak away a letter to my family, and I have not so far because they are always watching me, it would be too late. I will be ruined, and my family's financial situation is as bad as before so they cannot afford to have me at home even if they would welcome a fallen woman back."

"I'm so sorry Miss Heywood."

Actually, words were not enough to express what he felt. When her story unfolded, he felt a rage grow inside him on her behalf. No one spent much time thinking about how girls ended up in establishments like this, assuming it must be down to their own bad choices and sinful ways. Like most other men of wealth, Sidney had sampled those pleasures at times in the past but now he felt contempt for himself over that. Even more so when she spoke again.

"I shouldn't have told you. You must think this a horrible night. I know I am to please you, or they will give me a hard time tomorrow."

She took a deep breath as if to brace herself and made a move to push his coat off her shoulders and get on with the task that had to be done, but he stopped her.

"No, not that. What will please me is if you just lie down and try to sleep. I will not touch you tonight, I promise you. I don't know how to help you beyond that, but for this night, rest assured you are safe."

"But if Madame asks?"

"I will say that I'm very pleased with your efforts in bed."

Her shoulders relaxed.

"And you, will you sleep in it too?"

Her voice was still heartbreakingly anxious.

"I will stay in this armchair."

She met his eyes searchingly but without averting her gaze, something which oddly made his breath catch in his throat. She seemed to conclude that he was to be trusted and smiled at him for the first time, a weak little smile but still like a ray of light in this dimly lit room.

"Thank you, Mr. Parker."

She lay down on the bed and he tucked her in as if she were one of his brother's children. His heart twisted at the thought of what if this had happened to his nieces. Charlotte Heywood was obviously a lady and victim of bad circumstances she could not influence. It seemed very unfair.

The poor girl must have been exhausted because she fell asleep almost immediately. There was something so touching about her sleeping form, curled up in foetal position. Sidney remained awake for long, watching her slow breathing and fluttering dark eyelashes. Inside him a resolution formed that he could not leave her to her fate, not walk away from this situation and let evil people have their way with her.

He was not married and had thought he never would be either. A broken engagement in his youth had left him distant and distrusting when it came to women and he had no need to marry for money, so he had been determined to escape wedlock. With a wry smile he realised that they had that in common, that neither of them wanted to marry for any other reason than love. However, when he continued watching the sleeping Miss Heywood, he thought that if he anyway

never was to marry for that reason, he could just as well offer himself to this girl to save her from ruin.

When morning came and Miss Heywood still was asleep, he went to make the Madame and the owners of this establishment an offer they could not refuse.

Chapter 2: A shocking proposal

When Charlotte woke up, there was a blissful moment during which she had forgotten where she was, and it felt like any ordinary day about to start. Then she took in the sight of the room, where the sumptuous bed she was lying in was the predominant feature. When everything came back to her, reality hit her like a punch in the stomach. She was far away from home, held captive in a brothel. The room may be luxurious but had one purpose only; to serve her on a plate to anyone who was willing to pay. She had been lucky to escape that fate last night, but she was clever enough to know that luck would not last. Likely she would be introduced to another man who was less considerate already this evening.

This made her thoughts drift to Mr. Sidney Parker. To her own surprise, she was disappointed to find him already gone. The armchair was empty and there was no sign of him, the coat he kindly had borrowed her was missing too and instead she was covered by a blanket. She seemed to remember gentle hands tucking her in and caressing her forehead as if she was a child, but perhaps that was a dream.

She had been so frightened when she entered this room last night, certain that on the other side of the door she would meet the first man who would bed her against her will. Home in Willingden her family used to joke that her appetite for adventures was bigger than was healthy for any young lady, but in that moment she had not felt courageous at all. She feared that at best she could expect one of those overweight, lustful but effete elderly men who she had seen around with the

other girls, men who wanted much but had energy for little. At worst, she dreaded to meet a brute who would have his way with her all night.

He had turned out to be neither.

At first sight he had been intimidating, so tall and broad-shouldered, with dark hair and eyes, all dressed in black and seeming strong and tense underneath the clothes as if harbouring rage or perhaps distrust against the world. His stern face was the handsomest she ever had seen, and she thought there must be some hidden serious fault to him, because why would otherwise a wealthy man, looking like him have to pay for company? Even if she knew it was common, she could only feel contempt for such men. Her own father had always adored and been faithful to his wife and had set the bar high for any man Charlotte would come across.

When the stranger first looked up, he had seemed surprisingly annoyed at the intrusion, like he certainly did not want her there. It was not the expected reaction, but an explanation had followed, and she had realised that he wanted to escape this too, even if not with such desperate intensity as herself. He was free to walk away, she was not.

As he listened to her story, his initially hard expression had softened. He had comforted her, had taken care of her like a brother and made it crystal clear he would not claim what his friends had paid for. She got the impression that he was a good and kind man, but for some reason reluctant to let the world know. In his presence she had felt safe for the first time since she was brought here.

She woke up once during the night and saw him sleeping in the armchair. Dressed in white shirt, waist coat and with the cravat untied, he looked less threatening than clad all in black. Sound asleep, he was almost boyish except for the emerging stubble on his chin. She wondered how old he was and if he was not married, since his friends thought a night at the brothel was a fitting birthday gift. She knew that none of that ought to matter to her but was grateful for his presence because for one more night she was able to sleep untouched, unruined, even if he was the only one besides herself who knew that.

Apparently, he had woken up before her and decided to leave without saying goodbye. Of course he had no obligation to do so, but she wished that she had had the chance to thank him once more and being alone made her feel as desperate as before. She irrationally wished he could be there to protect her, but of course he had better things to do with his life than remaining by the side of a woman he did not know and who was nothing to him. She wanted to be brave, like the heroine in one of her novels, but reading about such adventures was one thing, experiencing them in real life was something completely different. There was no salvation or happy ending in sight here.

Suddenly the door flung open, abruptly interrupting her thoughts. Madame was standing there, with a creepy, false friendly smile and Charlotte immediately feared what it might implicate.

"So, you are awake. Don't sit daydreaming here then girl, come with me!" she ordered.

With heart thumping in her chest, Charlotte bent down to put her shoes on, her fingers trembling as she did so. Would she be forced to meet another customer already?

"No need to look so frightened. I hear you have been so pleasing to a certain gentleman this night, that he wants to keep you to himself. Not bad, I never expected you to be so capable. I thought you would be more like a timid little deer."

She chuckled to herself, but Charlotte froze.

"What do you mean? Keep me to himself?"

She knew very well she had not given any pleasure to Mr. Parker. This was all very confusing.

"Apparently he found you such a gem in bed that he wants you to become his mistress fulltime. He doesn't want to share you with anyone else, so he has paid quite a substantial sum to ensure that you are his alone."

"What does that mean? Am I to stay here, with him as my only visitor?"

That would be so much better than having a stream of different men as customers, yet she felt her heart drop with disappointment that he would stoop so low. He had promised he never would. What made him change his mind? Or had he played her all along in some kind of cruel game?

"No, silly. Wealthy men who have private mistresses set them up with an apartment, to keep them away from any other men who might find them

tempting. A man with any dignity would arrange a beautiful home for his mistress, that is the way it works. You are his property now and he can do as he pleases with you, but I must say it seems to me you have won the jackpot. He may keep you for years, perhaps you will even bear his children. Well played."

Madame sounded as if Charlotte had won a prize.

"It won't be a home, it will be another prison." Her voice trembled with fear, anger and pointless defiance.

His consideration last night must only have been an act. Was this what he had plotted all along, to take the virgin away from the whorehouse, to where he had her to himself, then do what he pleased with her? What if he was a vicious man after all? A man who could fake such sympathy and concern to lull her into false security, only to then pull away the rug under her feet again, must truly have a twisted mind. She was ready to burst into tears but held back. She did not want to break down in front of this horrible woman, whom she knew would show no compassion but rather laugh at her tears.

"Don't complain my dear, I can assure you this is the best option you have."

"I'm a gentleman's daughter. You have no right to sell me, I am no man's property."

Madame laughed.

"Try tell that to Mr. Parker. Considering what he paid, I think he would disagree."

He had bought her. Like a vase, or a horse or a slave. How could he?!

"He is waiting downstairs but requested that you clean off your makeup and dress in something more modest before he takes you away from here."

"Why bother, if he anyway intends to treat me like a whore?"

"A *mistress* Charlotte, that is very different. I think he would not want people to know where he found you. He wants you to look proper when he takes you to your new home. Look boring, if you ask me, but that is his call. I have kept the sad clothes you brought in your valise and will bring them to you. Put on one of those dresses and you will probably look prim enough for him, though a bit simple."

Madame laughed heartily, but all Charlotte could hear was her own blood gushing in her ears.

She did as she had been told, understanding there was no use acting defiant now. She washed away the black eyeliner, the rouge, the remains of red lipstick and soon looked like her own fresh-faced self again, though sadder than usual. She pinned her hair up as tidy as her unruly curls would allow and picked a white muslin dress with small blue flowers on. It was one of her favourites, she and her sister Alison had had identical ones made and she thought that perhaps it could give her strength to live through this day. Finally, she put on a bright blue spencer on top. The girl in the mirror looked like Charlotte Heywood, not the mistress of some filthy rich man and she told herself that she must try to remember who she was, no matter what happened to her this day. She took a deep breath and clenched her fists, before descending the stairs. She knew that Madame was right. Of her available options right now, this was likely the best thing that could

happen, but even so the situation was a disaster and the uncertainty regarding her own fate almost unbearable.

Even at this early hour of the day, there were some customers and she passed a few intimate couples on her way to the table where she saw Mr. Parker sitting, staring down at a full glass of amber liquid without touching it. He looked lonely and tormented and had she not been so furious with him, she would have asked why he seemed so distressed.

"Here you have me."

She deliberately made her voice as cool as she could manage. In no way would she let him think she was grateful for the 'service' he had done her, neither would she have him think she pitied him. If he was miserable he probably deserved it.

He looked up and she saw his eyes widen with surprise. No doubt was he disappointed to see what an ordinary girl she was when she was not dressed up like a courtesan. She wondered if he would make her dress like that again behind locked doors, when it was only the two of them. The idea repulsed her and fuelled her anger.

"Miss Heywood?"

"The very same."

"I almost did not recognise you."

"Well, this is the way I look when I can choose for myself, but I understand that I am to ask you about such things going forward."

"What?"

"Madame told me you *bought* me. I am apparently your possession and as such I suppose you intend to tell me how to dress and behave. I assume I will need your permission before going anywhere, effectively changing one prison for another. Is that not your intention? I hope you don't regret your purchase now when you see how plain I am, because I have been told you paid a considerable sum."

He got to his feet and took her by the elbow.

"Enough! I won't have this conversation here. Let us go, a carriage is awaiting us outside."

"As you please, sir", she answered with her most contemptuous voice and did not miss the tick in the small muscle at his jaw. Good, she wanted him to know exactly what she thought of him.

They came out in the greyish daylight and Charlotte glanced around with curiosity. It had been dark when she arrived in London a few nights ago so she had not seen anything of the city yet. Mr. Parker urged her to take her seat in the carriage, so she did not get to see much now either and when the carriage with a jerk started to move, she turned her attention from the street to him.

She had feared he might start to touch her lecherously immediately when they were alone, but he sat at a distance and did not even look at her. His gaze was fixed somewhere outside the window and he looked quite grim. After a while she found the silence unbearable. She wanted to never talk to him again, but she had to know more about what he planned for her or she would combust.

"So, Mr. Parker, are we driving to an apartment somewhere here in London?"

"No."

"No? The Madame said that is how things commonly are arranged."

He turned to her, with a hint of a smile on his lips.

"Please enlighten me Miss Heywood, *what* is arranged *how*?"

"You know."

"No. Pray, tell me."

"When wealthy men take a mistress. Madame said they usually set her up in an apartment..." she stuttered, and the end of the sentence faded away.

Already before he answered, she could tell by the look on his face that this was not what he had planned for her. Dear God, what was it then?

"I may have misled Madame about my intentions when it comes to you, because it is none of her business."

The smile was gone, and he looked even grimmer than before, as if he found it hard to say the words that came next.

"I do not intend to arrange you a special apartment and I do not intend to take you as my mistress."

His dark eyes were locked with hers and she had never been so anxious yet mesmerized in all her life.

"In fact, we are about to leave London. I am taking you to Gretna Green to make you my wife."

Chapter 3: A very bad idea

"Then we drove to Scotland, got married and returned here. End of story", Sidney concluded and emptied his wine glass.

Babington cocked an eyebrow, looking amused.

"Not so fast, my friend. This certainly does not sound like an end. It sounds very much like the beginning of something."

"I can assure you it is not, at least not in the sense you seem to imply. I saved her from that place, which she is very, er...grateful for. Now we simply need to live under the same roof and get on with our separate lives."

"Get on with your separate lives?"

Babington chuckled.

"Parker, you are the most private person I know. You never let anyone in. Now you have gotten yourself a wife, a woman who will stay in your house..."

"One which am completely indifferent to, may I point out."

The double doors to the parlour suddenly opened and the men turned their heads towards the unexpected intruder.

Babington stared at the woman standing there. Through a window, the sun shone on her from behind and transformed the delicate fabric of her white muslin dress to become semi-transparent and made the loose dark curls framing her face look like they had caught fire. She reminded him of a saint with a halo, though a very tempting saint.

He shifted his gaze to look at Sidney and found the other man's eyes fixed on her with an expression of befuddled awe. Something Babington never had seen on his friend's face before.

"I am sorry, I didn't know you had company."

She excused herself with blushing cheeks, then spun around on her heels and left, closing the doors behind her before Sidney came to his senses and got around to introducing her properly.

"Indeed, you seem very indifferent to your wife, Parker", Babington smirked.

"Because I assume that was her? I can see why you couldn't resist being her knight in shining armour."

"Shut up, you do not know what you are talking about. I can assure you she is nothing to me."

"Have you consummated the marriage?"

"No!" Sidney's eyes flashed. "I wouldn't make her do that. I want nothing of the sort from her. I just couldn't leave an innocent girl, a gentleman's daughter, in a

brothel to be passed around. I want her to think of me like... a brother, or a guardian perhaps. I only want her to be safe."

"Whatever you say. Why don't you go fetch her so we can be properly introduced?"

"I think we had better leave her to herself. We are not really on speaking terms at the moment", Sidney muttered.

"You are not?" Babington burst into laughter. "And why is that?"

"She is less than thrilled to be Mrs. Parker."

"My friend, for a man who claims he wants his life to remain exactly as it was, I think you got more than you bargained for when you married that girl. Now tell me what happened when you went to Gretna Green."

"If you insist upon it."

-o-

"Make me your wife?! *Why?*"

It was actually a bit offensive how repulsed she seemed to be by the idea. She stared at him and her brown doe eyes suddenly turned hard as flint stone, her lips into a straight thin line.

"Before you get all upset, please hear me out. I was awake all night thinking about this."

"Really? The one time I woke up you were sleeping in that armchair, snoring like a pig."

Her outrage apparently made her overcome the stuttering. He was not sure which he liked least, when she was sad or when she was angry. Sidney was unused to handle either in a woman, normally they just tried to charm him to no avail.

"I don't snore."

"How would you know when you were sleeping?"

Equally annoyed they stared each other out until he dropped his gaze. How could such a tiny woman make him feel so out of equilibrium?

"Anyway, will you listen to me?"

"I guess I must do as you command."

Anger truly transformed her from a sweet trembling rose to one with sharp thorns.

He had known deep down he was in trouble the moment he saw her standing in front of him without that ghastly makeup, wearing a spencer blue as a clear summer sky, which brought out her own wonderful colours. Free from powder

and rouge her complexion was soft like a peach and slightly tanned. There were even a few unfashionable, but charming freckles on her little nose. Without the cheap black eyeliner her hazel eyes seemed to sparkle with energy even when she looked sad, but most fascinating were her lips. The natural colour was pink like the petals of the roses in his garden and they looked utterly soft and kissable. He was lost for a moment as he took her in, then forced himself to snap out of it. He wanted to keep this uncomplicated. He would help her and knew he did that best if he disregarded any possible feelings of attraction. A pretty face was an inconvenience he had to disregard, paying attention to it would only cause trouble.

Now it also turned out she had a sharp tongue. This was beginning to look like a very very bad idea, but he could not back out now.

"I didn't want to leave you there, I wanted to help you."

"Then please return me to my father!" she snapped.

He was about to retort angrily as he thought her quite ungrateful, but then caught the insecure glimmer in her eyes and held back. He had thought his actions last night would have given her reason to trust him, but apparently not.

"Will you please listen. I spent many hours thinking about this, even if you seem to believe I was doing nothing but snoring."

Her cheeks turned slightly pink, confirming his suspicion that she made up the snoring. It was hard not to get annoyed with her even if she was vulnerable.

"Believe me, I would like nothing more than to return you to your parents' home, but your reputation is ruined Miss Heywood. You said so yourself yesterday evening and it is still true. You have spent several nights in a brothel and no one can vouch for your virtue."

"You can."

His rational words began to sink in, and she sounded less impertinent than before.

"I can and I gladly would, but I am afraid my words would not have the intended effect in this case. Everyone would wonder how we came to be in the same room alone in a brothel and what took place there. And how can I guarantee that nothing happened the nights before?"

"You *know* that nothing happened", she said weakly.

"I do know. I trust you and I saw how afraid you were, but I doubt that we will be able to make everyone else believe it. You know how little it takes to ruin a lady's reputation."

Her eyes glazed with tears again. How he hated when they did. He realised that after all he preferred when they were hard as flint, but mostly he would like to see them filled with happiness.

"I have considered if we could make it seem like you had been staying with that non-existent family for a few days and decided to return home..."

"Can we not?"

"No, I know that if Madame or the owner of the brothel, Beacroft, find out I tricked them and let you go, there is a big risk they will spread the rumour of what actually happened and tarnish your name. If anyone then starts looking for the family where you were a governess, they will not find anything to support your story."

"But why would they be so mean, to ruin me? Why would they even care when you have paid them?"

"Because they are evil people and they do not like to be trifled with. They will retaliate if they think they have been made to look like fools."

"Why would marrying you be better as far as they are concerned? Would they not expose the truth then too?"

"For one thing they would not dare to smudge my name, which they would if they talk ill of my wife. They know I am very well-connected, and it would cause them more trouble than it is worth. Secondly, if I marry you it would be doing what I said I would, only taking it one step further."

"So I would be your mistress you mean, but also married to you?"

Again he heard the distress in her voice. How many times would he have to tell her?

"No! Well, yes. I want them to believe so, but I wouldn't... I wouldn't ask that of you."

"You mean to say you are willing to live with me without asking me to... share your bed?"

She could hardly manage asking the question.

"Yes."

He answered firmly and did not understand why his cheeks felt so burning hot.

"But what about children? An heir? All men want an heir."

"I never expected to get married, so this would not make any difference to me."

"Why didn't you? Expect to get married I mean? It could hardly be difficult for you to find a wife."

She frowned her brow and he learned that he liked her face when she was focusing to understand something.

"Because, just like you, I only ever intended to marry for love and by now I am sure I will never find it."

"Why?"

"It is something I prefer not to talk about."

He cut her short. He was willing to marry her to help her, but not willing to discuss his past.

Her expression shifted and she looked devastated again.

"It would make a difference to me. I am still hoping to marry for love."

"Miss Heywood, I am sorry to be the bearer of bad news but no matter if you marry me or not, I don't see that happening. You have no fortune, no dowry as far as I understand and now a ruined reputation adding to that. Even if your looks are tolerable and you are somewhat accomplished, it will be hard to find a man who loves you enough to overlook all those flaws. Also consider the effect your reputation could have on your younger sisters' chances of finding husbands."

"What do you mean?"

She looked so desolate now and it pained him to tell her, but he had to.

"Don't you know that when one sister's reputation is soiled, the others' will also be tarnished?"

She looked away, chewing her bottom lip and he could see that she knew he was right. She was not stupid. It was silent between them for a while and he understood she was processing everything he had said.

"I still do not understand what you have to gain from this. Why you are willing to do this?"

"I have nothing to gain, but nothing to lose either. Not even if people would gossip. I have always been a bit of an outlier so I would not care what anyone thinks and especially not since I know it would not be true. You are and remain a lady. I have money enough, so I do not need to secure a fortune through marriage, and as for love, I already told you it is not for me. I want to help you, if you allow me to. That is all, no ulterior motives."

Their eyes were locked now, and time seemed to pass ever so slowly. Silently he tried to let his eyes convey he was speaking in earnest.

"If you still want to return home, I will tell the driver to go to Willingden instead. I will not force you."

"You bought me..." she whispered.

"I bought you your freedom! I did not pay for you to be mine!" he nearly shouted and saw her flinch.

He had not intended to lose his temper, but she was pushing his buttons when she implied he had bought her as some kind of love slave. His heart was beating

erratic and he took a deep breath to calm down. When he spoke again, he lowered and softened his voice.

"I am sorry I raised my voice, but I mean it. You are free to do whatever you want. I am only asking you to consider the consequences carefully. The decision is yours Miss Heywood, let me know when you have made up your mind."

They drove another ten minutes in complete silence except for the creaks from the moving carriage and he felt like he was on tenterhooks. She would be foolish to refuse his offer, yet he was far from sure she would accept it.

Finally, she let out a big sigh.

"I will go through with it."

"What? Returning home or?"

"No, you are right. I do not want you to be, I am furious at the unfairness of that you are, but yet you are. I cannot return home. I would ruin my own life and my sisters'. I will marry you."

She made it sound like it was the worst of punishments, but her words still filled him with a strange joyous relief. He had made her see reason.

He only nodded in response, refraining from pointing out that a sign of gratitude would have been appreciated. She was after all about to marry a man whom nearly half the ladies of London society unsuccessfully had tried to tame, but he

knew this was not the moment to be sarcastic. Perhaps she would come to appreciate him in time and at least not look at him like he was the cause for her being in this situation in the first place.

They continued the long journey towards the Scottish border in silence. He told himself it was better the less he knew about her and she did not seem inclined to converse. In Gretna Green they could be married quickly without the written consent from her father and return home husband and wife. An elopement was scandalous, but it was somehow accepted that couples too much in love to wait for approval and engagement, resorted to it. Once they were respectably married, people chose to forget. In every sense, this was the best option for her. For himself, he was not so sure, but he had made up his mind and chose not to dwell on it further.

They arrived late that evening, spent the night sleepless in separate rooms at the inn and were swiftly married by the blacksmith next morning.

Miss Heywood barely looked at him during the brief ceremony, and he had the sinking feeling that she irrationally could not forgive him for being forced to marry him. Whilst she stubbornly stared at her feet, he kept his eyes trained on her and could not help thinking that even in her simple dress she was among the prettiest women he had seen. He knew he would be proud to call her Mrs. Parker even if it was a sham marriage. He hoped one day she would at least not hate being his wife.

At the end of the ceremony they did not kiss, but she finally looked up on him and bestowed him a little smile which made his stomach flutter.

"Thank you, Mr. Parker."

Somehow, that smile, and those words made him feel certain that he had made the right choice after all.

"I think you can call me Sidney now that we are husband and wife, Mrs. Parker", he smiled in return.

"Only if you call me Charlotte."

"I will, Charlotte. Now, are you ready to return to London and your new home?"

Her smile faded away and he realised he had frightened her again. They would return to a home and a reality where everything was familiar to him, but new to her. The only new element in his life was she and that was terrifying enough if he was to be honest, so he could imagine how she felt.

He squeezed her hand as he helped her into the carriage and made her stop to look at him again.

"It will be alright, I promise."

He was not sure why it was quite so hurtful to see written in her face how much she doubted that.

Chapter 4: The most reluctant of wives

She closed the door behind herself with a soft thud but remained with her back leaning against it and closed her eyes. She felt like a fool for barging in when he had a guest. Perhaps he had not even had time to explain to the visitor that he was a married man now, and then *she* appeared from nowhere and they had stared at her like she was some freak. It was understandable if it would make him annoyed, and so she had left without saying anything about who she was. She waited a few moments, part of her hoping he would come after her to introduce her properly, but she heard no movement indicating that he would on the other side of the closed door. Suddenly she sharpened her ears, when she noticed that she could actually hear what the men said, Sidney's deep timbre and the other man's slightly higher pitched voice.

"Shut up, you do not know what you are talking about. I can assure you she is nothing to me."

"Have you consummated the marriage?"

"No! I wouldn't make her do that. I want nothing of the sort from her."

With heart pounding, she left and ran back to her own room. She had heard quite enough and did not want to keep eavesdropping to a conversation which was clearly not intended for her ears. Strangely, she found his words hurtful when they ought to bring her nothing but relief. She did not understand why the

confirmation that he did not care for her physically was upsetting, when the last thing she wanted was that he would find her attractive and claim what now was lawfully his. Perhaps his words simply played on the strings of her female vanity; she did not appreciate him thinking her too plain to desire, even if she was grateful for not having to fend him off. It was a contradiction, but there it was.

She had sought him out to apologize for words said last evening, words which had been harsh and unfair and which she regretted when morning came. Now, when she had to postpone the apology, she was not sure she would muster the courage it took again, especially as he made it so blatantly clear that he cared nothing for her.

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On the way back from Gretna Green, they had paused for the night at an inn and she had been relieved when he without hesitation got them separate rooms and politely bid her goodnight after dinner. Tense and fearful she still remained awake for some time, waiting for a knock on the door and a demand to come inside, but none came. It seemed like he intended to stay true to his promise, at least for now. She did not trust him fully yet but was able to relax a little and slept better than she had ever since she realised there was no governess position awaiting her.

They had continued next morning and eventually arrived in London. The carriage took them through streets quite different to the ones she had caught a glimpse of

on her way to and from the brothel. Wide streets bordered by posh houses and green parks and finally they driver stopped in front of one of the most beautiful houses she had seen; a big one surrounded by a well-kept garden behind fence and gates.

She turned to him in surprise. She had realised he was wealthier than her family, but *this*.

"Is this your home?"

The corners of his mouth tugged upwards in amusement.

"It is *our* home, Mrs. Parker. From now on you are the mistress of this house."

"I do not know how to be mistress of such a house!"

"Are you not a gentleman's daughter?"

"Well, yes, but I never expected..."

"Do you like it?"

"Of course, I do."

Who in their right mind would not like such a house?

"Then I am sure that it will all be very well. Let us go inside."

As soon as they were indoors, he told the housekeeper to summon the other servants and when they all were gathered he introduced Charlotte to them.

"I want to meet my wife, Mrs. Parker. She is now the mistress of this house and you will treat her as such."

If they were surprised, they were skilled at hiding it. She was sure they must think there was something fishy with such a hasty marriage, but all they did was greet her welcome with bows and curtsseys. Sidney sent the housekeeper off to have a room arranged for her, then turned to her with a smile.

"Can I offer you a guided tour?"

She was exhausted after the long journey, the last days unexpected events and the fear she had felt, but she was also curious, and he looked so expectant that she did not have the heart to tell him she would rather rest.

The house never seemed to end. When she felt overwhelmed by all the floors, rooms and carpeted hallways, he finally opened the door to a room she immediately liked best of all. Sun flooded through high windows and a big vase of fresh flowers was placed on a sideboard. There was a bed, so apparently it was intended as a bedroom.

He looked intently at her, as if to see her reaction.

"This will be your room. I mean, all rooms are yours, but this will be your bedroom."

It would be the first time she had a room of her own, unless...

"And where will you sleep?"

"Not here, if that is what worries you", he answered with a tight smile. "Behind that door."

He nodded towards a door which did not face the corridor they just came from but lead into the next room.

"So, there is a door between our bedrooms?"

Her mouth got dry with nervousness.

"Yes. Anything else would be perceived as strange by the servants. It is common that husbands and wives have separate chambers, but they are usually expected to share bed every now and then." He held up his hand to silence her before she said anything. "I do not expect that, but I want us to keep up the façade towards the servants. It will not be difficult, they would not expect us to act affectionate in their presence anyway."

"So, we do not have to...?"

"We will not share bed, neither will you need to kiss me for the benefit of the servants."

She exhaled but glanced at the shared door which still made her feel nervous. It seemed like he understood, because he grasped her hand and led her over to the door and opened it. She caught a glimpse of the bigger bed which was his, but he did not show her inside. He simply reached for a key which sat in the lock on the other side, then closed the door and handed her the key.

"Now please lock the door."

She turned the key and heard the comforting click. He removed the key, took her hand again, put the key in her open palm and then closed her fingers around it. His eyes met hers.

"It is yours. Hide it. Do whatever you want with it. This door remains locked, unless you unlock it."

Her fisted hand with key inside, was enclosed by his two hands and she felt a heat spread from them and continue through her body.

"Thank you."

He dropped her hand, broke eye contact and looked around in the room, inspecting it with a critical eye.

"This has been a guest bedroom and you can change it as you like. Add a dressing table of course and if there is anything else you require to feel comfortable."

"Could I have a bookshelf?"

"A bookshelf?" He looked surprised and amused by the spontaneous request.

"I like to read. Very much." She looked at him slightly defiantly, well aware this interest was something most men would not appreciate in their wife.

"I will not put a bookshelf in your room..."

Her heart sank. How disappointing. What would she spend her days doing if she were not even allowed to read? She was very unskilled at embroidery and a poor sketcher. Her days had always been filled with tasks to make the estate go around; practical ones to help her mother, helping her father with the finances, joining her brothers hunting and riding and whatever spare time she had in the evening she had spent reading or playing cricket or boardgames. She had never been confined to more ladylike pastimes and she thought they seemed infinitely boring. What would she do with her life here in London where she did not know a soul except him?

"...but that is only because I have a quite extensive library downstairs. I didn't take you there because I didn't expect you would be interested, but you are more than welcome to use it and to add books to it as it pleases you. Will that do?"

"It will do very well."

She felt herself split up in a wide smile, which caused him to respond with the same. He was devastatingly handsome when he allowed himself not to be so serious.

She was not sure what she appreciated most, the key or the free access to books. Perhaps that both seemed to indicate that he respected her. Maybe living in this house could turn out quite nice after all.

During the days that followed, Charlotte tried to settle in, but it was hard. She did not see much of her husband, who often was away during the day attending to business she knew nothing of and did things he knew even less about in the evening. Perhaps he had dinner with friends, perhaps he sought the company of courtesans as he certainly did not make any advances towards her. In one way she was relieved that he left her to herself and the many books in the library, but she was also feeling lonely and bored. When she had lunch alone for the fifth day in a row, she decided to go for a walk in the afternoon. If she was lucky she might come across a nearby park or maybe some shops.

She informed Mrs. Huffington, the housekeeper that she intended to go out. This time the other woman could not hide her surprise.

"Should I call for the carriage, Mrs. Parker?"

"No, thank you. I need to stroll for a while, get some fresh air."

Huffington looked like she had objections to this but remained silent and Charlotte set off.

She did not have the intention to go far but realised after a while that she did not know the name of her own street. Many streets around here were confusingly

similar to one another and she became increasingly uncertain of where she had come from. She found a beautiful park but could not relax there as she was no longer sure how to find her way back, it was a bit like walking around in a maze. Dusk was beginning to fall and after crossing a bridge over a narrow river, she found herself in an area of the city which seemed a bit rough. Charlotte felt a flash of panic at the idea that she might pass by the brothel or a similar establishment. Had not the street where it was located looked similar to this?

She did not hear a horse approaching until it was close to her and she caught a glimpse of it at the corner of her vision and startled turned around. Sidney Parker, dressed in leather breeches and waistcoat, black coat and top hat, agilely dismounted from the equally black horse. He looked very elegant and slightly dangerous dressed like this. His tense jaw indicated that he was not best pleased with her.

"Let us walk back home together, Mrs. Parker", was all he said in cool voice. She had a feeling he would have more to say when they were behind closed doors and her predictions turned out to be accurate. As they returned to the house and he had said some calming words to the anxious Mrs. Huffington, he nodded for her to join him in the parlour and closed the door behind them.

"A lady cannot simply go out walking on her own in London! You need to be in my company, or you need a chaperone. You going out alone is not *comme-il-faut*. I expected you to know better, Charlotte."

Even if she had been scared and therefore grateful when he showed up, his words lighted a defiant fire in her.

"I thought you said you cared little about people's gossip, that you were an outlier standing above such things, but that does apparently not apply to *me* now that I am your wife. You are afraid that my behaviour will reflect badly on you."

He looked quite upset now.

"Maybe I am, but worse than any gossip is that you put yourself in danger."

"What? By taking a walk in broad daylight? Nothing happened."

"It was not broad daylight anymore when I found you, was it? And it can be dangerous even in daytime if you happen to stray into the wrong streets, which you easily could as you don't know your way around here. Huffington told me you had been gone for many hours. Admit that you got lost. Did not your little adventure at the brothel teach you the lesson that there is a dark side to this city?"

"Yes, but I thought..."

"You shouldn't think so much! You should stay here, read your books and do whatever other ladies do."

"I feel like a prisoner in a very lonely prison cell! I'm used to being outdoors, used to be active, go for walks, to do manual labour even. I feel totally useless. I don't know anyone here and I cannot spend all my hours reading."

"Yes, you can because it will keep you safe."

"But I am not made of porcelain!"

"No buts, I am your husband and I get to decide that", he cut her off brusquely.

She stared at him. She knew he did. Like any other husband he had the legal right to tell her what to do and not to do. It was better than being forced to be a courtesan, but only marginally.

"I already hate being your wife. I hate it! How am I supposed to stand a lifetime like this? I will wither away."

He had looked so furious then, with wild dark eyes and heaving chest. She had wanted to bang her fists against that same chest, hit him as hard as she could, but instead turned her back on him and left before he could say anything further, stormed off and hid in her room. She had not come down for dinner and he had not sent for her.

When she lay in her bed and her tears finally ceased, she was able to think clearer and admit to herself that he at least in part was right. She *had* been worried when she got lost today and she knew the city was not safe for a lady to walk around alone. She could also admit that her reaction had been a bit childish. He was in his right to worry when she disappeared for many hours, but did he have to be so authoritative? It triggered an anger in her she had not known she possessed. Even if she could accept that she too had been out of line, she also knew that she could

not live like this. If she begged his forgiveness and asked him nicely, could he perhaps help her find a way which would be acceptable to him too? It was with that mission she had gone to the parlour this morning, found him busy with his friend and returned to her room with unfinished business.

Half an hour later there was a light knock on the door and when she said 'come in' he poked his head inside. The fury from last night was gone from his eyes too and he looked apologetic.

Almost hesitantly he came to sit in the second armchair by the window, close to her.

"You are reading?"

"Behaving as I have been told to by my husband."

She had not intended to sound so defiant again, but he let it pass.

"I came to say I am sorry."

She watched him, waiting for more.

"I apologise for not introducing you to Lord Babington before. I was caught off guard. I was just telling him about you and... anyway, I am sorry. I should have introduced you. I have no intention to hide you. I am proud to introduce you as my wife, even if you tend to put yourself in unfortunate situations which might compromise your reputation."

Apology and insult at once, she was not sure which to respond to be chose to be forgiving too.

"You are forgiven", she said, pursing her mouth and wondered why she felt a bit like crying.

He looked down on his hands.

"I also wanted to apologise for last night."

A weight fell off her chest.

"That was why I came to see you before", she said softly.

His head snapped up and the appreciative gleam in his eyes made her continue, swallowing her pride. "I spoke out of turn."

"No, *I* did." He admitted seriously. "I got worried when you were missing. For a moment I thought maybe Beacroft and his thugs had come across you and brought you back to that place. I know they have no reason to, and I know they know I would let hell break lose over them if they did, but I still had the notion. I got worried... and I am not used to that. I am only used to have myself to consider. I was so relieved when I found you unharmed, but it came out like anger. I should not have said some of the things I said."

"Neither should I."

'I hate being your wife.' The resentful words seemed to hover between them in the silence and she felt ashamed when he kept his eyes locked with hers, as if trying to find out if she really had meant it.

"I only wanted to go outside for a while, get some fresh air and sun. Sometimes I feel like cannot breathe in here."

"I understand that, so we need to find a solution. I will make sure that we introduce you to some other ladies, so you hopefully can make friends. Like Babington's fiancée Esther for example. Perhaps we can hire a suitable chaperone too. In the meantime, you will have to make do with me."

"With you?" she asked in genuine surprise.

"I realise I may have left you a bit much to yourself, which was not very kind of me when everything is new to you. I thought perhaps you appreciated being alone, but I understand now I may have been wrong? If you want to, I can go with you somewhere today. We need to take you to a dressmaker to have some new dresses tailored for you anyway."

She looked down on the light blue dress she was wearing. She had not though he noticed her dresses at all.

"You don't like my dresses?"

"I do, but they are not elegant enough for London society and as it turns out, I actually care what they say about my wife. I would not want people to say I cannot afford to dress her properly."

There was a mischievous glimmer in his eyes, and she realised he was teasing her because of what she had said before.

"And would you come with me to a dress fitting?"

"Why not? Is that not what husbands do with their wives?"

She blushed. There were certainly other things that came to mind as perhaps being more usual for husbands to do with their wives, but as those were things that were not to pass between them they were better left unspoken.

"I am not sure if that is one of the things that husbands commonly do with their wives, no. As far as I know my father has never accompanied my mother to a dress-fitting."

"But would you like me to?"

"I would like it very much."

"Good, it is decided then. Let us go after lunch."

He made a move as if to get up but then came to think of something and remained seated.

"Oh, that is true, I had something else I wanted to talk to you about."

His bashful expression triggered her curiosity.

"I got you something. I intended to give it to you last night, but then... well, I forgot it when you went missing and we quarrelled. Perhaps you can see it as a token for our truce?"

He reached for something in his pocket and held out his palm. There lay a ring. It was made of gold and adorned with three flowers; two smaller ones made of the metal, framing the one larger in the centre, made of six pearls surrounding a diamond. It looked precious and very beautiful.

"Sidney!"

"You like it?" There was almost a hint of nervousness to his voice.

"I adore it, but it is a far too precious gift. After all..."

"After all, you are my wife and I would want you to have nothing less", he insisted firmly.

Gently he grasped her hand and slowly slid the ring on her finger, where it fit perfectly. Just like when he held her giving her the door key the other day, the warmth from his touch seemed to linger on her skin long after he had let go.

"Now no one but you and me will know this marriage is not for real", she said and smiled at him.

He cleared his throat and rose to his feet, his own smile fading but as she was watching the ring she did not see it.

"Quite so."

The strange thing was that a ring on her finger and having plans with her husband this afternoon, made it less surreal to her that she actually was Mrs. Parker. He was almost out the door already when she spoke again.

"Thank you. Not only for the ring. For everything. I was mean when I said that I hate being your wife. It was not my choice, but I do not hate it. Thank you for helping me."

He just gave her a curt nod, but as he left, the little smile returned to his face.

Chapter 5: Sharing the little joys in life

That evening, Sidney slumped down in an armchair in front of the fireplace. They had returned from their excursion some time earlier and both gone to their separate chambers to freshen up before dinner. Now he sat swirling a whisky around in the tumbler without drinking much, waiting for Huffington to announce dinner was served, content to let his thoughts drift randomly and listen to the crackle from the fire. For some reason he felt more at ease than he had in a long time and he was looking forward to having dinner with Charlotte.

He had liked seeing her happy today. More than could be expected, he reflected and took a sip of his drink without really sensing the taste. First, when he gifted her the ring and even more so when he accompanied her to the dress-maker. She had been so visibly surprised and appreciative, and it had warmed his jaded heart. It was not the first time his own actions and emotions in regard to her surprised him. He had spent considerable time in Rundell and Bridge's jewellery shop the day before, picking out the ring he thought would suit her best, one which was delicate and beautiful, without even considering the price. He had been disappointed upon discovering that she was not home to receive it when he returned that afternoon, then concerned when he understood how long she had been gone and knowing it soon would get dark outside. On horseback he had searched for her in streets, alleys and parks and had been beside himself with worry before he found her. He, who rarely let anyone, or anything get under his

skin. Her defiant ungratefulness which indirectly ridiculed his feelings, had driven him mad and caused him to lash out at her when all he truly wanted was to embrace her and tell her how extremely relieved he was to encounter her safe and sound.

He did not want them to be enemies and making up this morning had restored a calm inside him. Finally there had been a moment to give her the gift and sliding the ring onto her finger had felt special somehow. It was strangely romantic and sensual, even if there neither was love nor physical attraction between them. He was not sure why he had felt so irrationally disappointed when she reminded him of that their marriage was a sham, or so happy when she thanked him for helping her and took back her previous harsh words that she hated being his wife.

He knew by now that he did not hate being her husband, but it had turned out a more difficult task than he had imagined. He had imagined she would be appropriately grateful for being saved from a life in ruin and then he would not notice her much, but she was so much more will-strong and intelligent than he had expected. When she told him she was not made of porcelain, he had to admit to himself that he had imagined she would not be much more noticeable than a figurine. He had not anticipated her to feel loneliness, anger or resentment, had not expected her to have ideas about what she wanted to do with her life beyond spending her days quietly embroidering or playing the piano. She was annoyingly demanding and opinionated, but also stimulating and amusing. He had laughed more today than he had in a long time.

It had been such an unexpected pleasure to accompany her to the modiste. It had been a spur-of-the-moment idea but one which he had not regretted one second. He did not know when he last had felt such pure happiness. Probably when he as a boy played on the beach during his summers in Sanditon, before he realised that the world was a dark place filled with greed and betrayal.

He knew from listening with half an ear to high society ladies' dull conversations, that the best modiste in all of London was *Madame Devy's* so he brought Charlotte there. He had watched her as they stepped inside the large locale and saw how the size of her eyes double and she unconsciously grasped his arm, something he quite liked.

"Is anything the matter?"

"This is just so different from the dress-maker in our village, the one where my sisters and I go to have our gowns made. This place is enormous, so many people working here, all those shelves filled with rolls of fabrics. I do not know how I will be able to choose one dress."

"Then let us make you several."

It felt so natural to be generous to her. He saw that she thought it was a jest and he appreciated that she was not greedy or spoiled and took it for granted that he would lavish her with gifts. It made him want to do it all the more.

"I mean it, come."

With a disbelieving look, she followed him to the clerk that came to greet them.

"I am Mr. Parker, and this is my wife." It felt strange to introduce her as his wife but in a good way. "She is in need of new gowns and can choose whatever she pleases."

He noticed Charlotte's stunned look but simply grinned at her.

"Welcome to *Madame Devy's*. As you may know we have a reputation to be the best modiste London can offer and we can we can create any dress you desire. Am I right to assume that you are a new customer to us Mrs. Parker?"

"I am", she answered shyly.

"Then I suggest we start by taking your measures and after that we will show you different designs and fabrics."

They spent more than two hours there. Initially he had been sitting in an armchair trying to read a newspaper offered to him as pastime but found that his thoughts strayed to what went on in the separate room where her measures were taken. Was she asked to undress to wear only chemise and stays and what did she look like then, he wondered? What did her female curves look like under the dresses she wore? As fashion prescribed, her gowns were high-waisted and loosely draped below, so it was impossible to tell the exact shape of her waist, hips or buttocks and he realised that he was curious to know. Unseeing he stared at

the newspaper and was startled when she stood before him in the flesh again, fully dressed.

"You are not too bored already, I hope? I am afraid this will take quite a while longer."

"Er, not at all... I was simply lost in thoughts." He smiled reassuringly and felt his cheeks heat.

She gave him a curious look but said nothing more.

Next, the seamstresses cut out the pieces for a simple muslin dress which would serve as pattern for the more intricate designs, meanwhile Charlotte was shown countless different dress illustrations and fabrics. At this point he could not resist joining her. He had never reflected on what an art it was to make women's clothes and was pulled in by her enthusiasm when she turned the illustrated pages and admired the colour and quality of different materials. Every now and then she paused to look at him and make sure it was not too much, and every time he just smiled and nodded. Rolls of fabrics were brought out, as well as an abundance of laces and multi-coloured ribbons. They had everything a lady could wish for, from simple muslins to luxurious silks. She pointed at illustrations she liked and occasionally asked if he preferred one over the other and he found that he appreciated being included.

He enjoyed watching her face glow when she stroke over a fabric she thought especially beautiful and when the modiste draped it around her in front of the

mirror so she could envision the dress. First she only looked at designs for day dresses, but he pointed out that she should choose some for entertaining at home and evening gowns for dinners and even attending balls. Perhaps she also needed spencers, pelisses, petticoats, chemises and, he had felt slightly awkward suggesting it, nightgowns?

"Surely we cannot order all that at once?" she asked astounded.

"Of course we can. Choose the models you like and the fabrics you find most beautiful. I assure you I can afford it", he smiled.

"I won't be able to pay you back."

Her voice was suddenly anxious and again he noticed her changed expression, telling him that she still feared that any gift he gave her would eventually be accompanied by a demand to repay with something she was unwilling to give. It made him cringe inside. He took her gently by the elbow and pulled her aside, out of ear-shot from any nosy clerks.

"You *are* paying me back right now. When I see how happy it makes you. When I see you touch a fabric you like or imagine yourself wearing one of those dresses, or when I imagine you dancing dressed in one of them. All that gives me joy and that is enough for me, please trust me on that."

"I just find it hard to get used to such kindness from someone who does not know me," she said with low voice and looked down with flushing cheeks, biting her lip,

understanding he had read her. He desperately wanted that insecurity in her to vanish.

"I guess the only way we can make you feel more comfortable is if we learn to know each other better."

Charlotte looked up at him again and he felt like he was being drawn into those big mesmerizing brown eyes. She seemed to conclude there was no sexual note in his words and nodded.

"So we will, with time, but for now, please go back to enjoying this moment."

Encouraged to do so, she had resumed the task at hand with his assistance. Together they had decided an entire new wardrobe for her and amused themselves in the process. They had admired illustrations they thought dazzling and behind the back of the staff laughed at some they thought ridiculous. They had selected numerous dresses, spencers and one pelisse. His breath had hitched when she paused at an illustration of an exquisite nightgown and he was slightly disappointed when she hastily flipped the page. When they finally left the modiste, he did it with a sense that he had achieved something important even if it only was ordering some female clothing.

In the carriage back home she silently looked out through the window and he began worrying that something was ailing her, until she turned to him with a wide smile.

"I don't know how to thank you enough. I have never been allowed to do something like this before. Growing up in Willingden, I was allowed a few gowns every year when I outgrew the old ones or when they were worn out, but never this much at one time. I am used to mostly have dresses that are designed to be practical enough to wear outdoors on the countryside. I have only ever had one or two evening gowns made for the country dances and there were never fabrics like these. It may seem frivolous to you that it means so much to me, but I never expected to wear something so beautiful. So forgive me if am silly, but I appreciate it so much. You are far too kind. Thank you."

Her words made his heart make an unexpected somersault.

"You don't seem frivolous to me. Please know that I enjoyed myself very much this afternoon too."

Her face lit up even more and he thought that she truly was like a ray of sunshine when she smiled.

"As for what we talked about earlier, learning to know each other more so we feel more comfortable in each other's company... I will not go out this evening. Would you like us to have dinner together?"

"I would like that very much", she said without hesitation. "I only wish I had one of my new dresses to wear."

He was close to telling her that she was beautiful no matter what she wore but held back the words, knowing they likely only would achieve making her feel uncomfortable again.

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Now, she joined him where he sat by the fire and it struck him again that she was indeed more beautiful than he first had given her credit for. She was not plainly pretty even if she was not a classical beauty. Her face was sweet and expressive, her eyes so awake and when she was happy they almost visibly sparkled. As they went to take their seat at the dining table he noticed that she also looked more at ease than he had seen her in the weeks they had been acquainted, reflecting how he felt inside.

The dining table was a large one for a dinner party of only two, but the plates had been laid out on the places opposite one another and it felt surprisingly intimate. Having a meal alone with a woman in his home was another new experience to him and he realised it was yet another thing he could get accustomed to.

"Tell me more about your family", he asked her over the soup.

"What do you want to know? I'm not sure that you would find them that interesting."

"Anything. *I* am sure I will find it interesting."

As they continued the meal, she told him not only of her family but also about how she had lived her life before that ominous carriage ride to London. They were a large family, she had eleven siblings and from what he could read between the lines, Mr. and Mrs. Heywood had a very affectionate marriage. It seemed to be a pretty large estate, one which they all were involved in running and she described her days filled with duties from early morning until late evening and he could now understand why she found it hard to be idle all day in this house.

"You helped your father with the finances?" he asked with surprise when she described her daily chores.

"Yes, I did most of such work. That was why I immediately realised we were in a dire situation when Matthew's, my brother's, gambling debts were revealed. After a few years with poor crops I knew we did not have much to spare, not enough savings anyway." She paused and pushed a green pea around her plate with the fork. "To be honest, I am not sure how they will make it now and I worry exceedingly about them. We were counting on me to provide an extra income, that was the whole point of me going away. I must write them someday soon and tell them what has happened. I have started a letter many times but postponed finishing it, because I dread it so much."

She stopped eating altogether, like being reminded of it made her lose her appetite. He had not thought about this before, but of course her family must be told she had married. What an inconsiderate fool he was.

"What will you tell them?"

"I am not sure, even though I have given it much consideration. I always tell my sister Alison everything and I think I will this time too, but my parents... I want to spare them and Matthew the sorrow of knowing everything. I know they would never forgive themselves for me ending up in a brothel. Then I would rather have them think that I actually worked as a governess for a very short time but met you, fell in love and irresponsibly eloped."

"You would have them think ill of you to spare their feelings?" She amazed him.

"I know they will forgive *me*, but I am not sure they would forgive themselves if they knew I was kidnapped to a brothel and forced to marry a man I do not love."

She bit her lip, as if she had not intended to say those words but they slipped out anyway. He knew it was like that, still the reminder was hurtful. He pretended not to be offended by what after all was the truth.

"You want them to believe you love me?" was all he asked.

"Yes, and that you love me so ardently that you could not wait for my father's approval." She gave him a weak smile. "I know it will be hard to pretend when we see them, but would you agree to try?"

He cleared his throat, feeling flustered.

"Yes... yes, of course I would do that if that is the history you prefer to tell them. I will do my best. Would you like to go visit them soon?"

"I will write them and then we have to see if they invite us. I think they will, but of course I cannot be sure."

She looked down on her plate with a sad expression.

"You miss them."

"I have been with them every day of my life. Now I have not seen them for weeks and they do not know I am a married woman, neither do they know that I will not be able to support the family financially. I feel like I have betrayed them even if I could not help it."

Without thinking, he got up from his chair and walked around the table to kneel beside her and take her hand. She did not pull away.

"You have not betrayed them. You have done everything anyone could ask from a good daughter, but they do not know. I will do everything in my power to help you. Both to make your family accept this marriage and to help them with their financial troubles."

"*That* I cannot ask of you."

"Yes you can. You are my wife and that means they are my family too, even if they do not know it yet. Please write them and we will make it happen."

A tear was trailing down her cheek and before he could stop himself he reached out his hand and smoothed it away with the pad of his thumb. Appalled by his own action he quickly withdrew, letting go of her other hand as well, afraid he had overstepped the invisible boundaries. Hastily he got to his feet.

"Knowing that, do you think you have appetite to finish the rest of this meal?"

He hoped he sounded casual enough. She stared at him with an expression which he found hard to read. Sometimes she was like an open book, sometimes a conundrum.

"Yes... thank you again. It seems I am not able to thank you enough for the things you are doing for me. Like today, for a few wonderful hours you made me forget all my troubles and now this. You are too good to me and I do not know how to ever return it."

He simply smiled and returned to his place.

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They had finished the meal and bid each other good night. Now, he was lying in his bed, with hands clasped behind his neck, staring up at the ceiling unable to fall asleep. He could not escape the feeling how *nice* this day had been. He had never spent this much time with any woman doing normal things, if one did not count his sister Diana or his sister-in-law Mary and not even them he had accompanied to order dresses. Doing errands and having dinner, having

conversations which were both serious and amusing, with a woman who was not family, was all new to him. It was bewildering how much he enjoyed it. He had not missed drinking and playing cards, had not wished to be alone even for a minute. He had simply enjoyed himself in a quiet way.

He had said to Babbers the other day that him and Charlotte would merely go on with their separate lives living under the same roof, but now he was not so sure that that was what he really wanted. Even if there was no attraction between them, perhaps they could be each other's companion of sorts?

Lying there sleepless, he also berated himself for not having considered her family. How ignorant of him to think he could make her happy by buying her things, when she had such serious matters to deal with. He had not thought about how she must miss them, or how she must worry about telling them of the things that had passed. Everything here was new to her, she was forced to live far away from home with a husband she had not chosen and on top of that she had to bring this news to her family, pretending she had acted irresponsibly. He could only imagine the angst that made her feel. From the little he knew of her, he realised it must pain her to withhold the truth. She seemed to be someone who would never tell lies, not even when it might be courteous, and now she was willing to tell a life-long lie to spare her parents and brother from pain. It was incredibly self-less and loyal and he knew he had to do anything to make them not think any lesser of her. He would rather have them think him a lecherous bastard who was impatient

to wed her and had persuaded her to agree to go through with it against her better judgement. If they knew her, that was probably what they would think anyway.

He let out a groan of frustration at the complexity of the situation. It was truly impossible to sleep with all these thoughts spinning and even more so if he allowed himself to think about that she was sleeping on the other side of the wall. Was she already wearing a nightgown anything like the one they had looked at today?

Then he heard a soft click, like the turning of the key in a lock. Expectant he half sat up, supported on his elbows and stared at the door to Charlotte's room. Slowly it swung open and a small figure came tiptoeing. When she saw that he was awake and watching her, she stopped and smiled shyly.

"You said I could do what I wanted with the key."

"I did say that."

"After today, I wanted to unlock the door, wanted to be with you. Is that alright?"

"Well, you are my wife."

She remained standing where she was, with her dark curls swirling free down her shoulders, wrapped in a dressing gown, only held together by a ribbon around her narrow waist. He could see a hint of the roundness of her breasts in the V-shaped opening. He dared not move in case it would frighten her, make her retreat, but realised he may have to say something to make her come closer, which he very much wanted her to. He could not believe she was here.

"You are welcome to share my bed."

She took another step forward, which brought her into the moonlight falling through the window. With a cheeky smile she untied the dressing gown and let it fall to the floor. He heard a gasp and realised it came from himself.

With heart beating out of his chest he stared at his wife, standing before him naked for the first time. Her breasts were as perfect as he secretly had imagined, beautifully shaped with small pink nipples, but there was more. She was more voluptuous than was the ideal in fashion, but he adored every curve. He had to touch her. Without saying a word he held out his hand and when she took it, he pulled her towards him. With a soft giggle, a seductive sound he never had heard coming from her before, she straddled him. The quilt was between them but her breasts touching his bare torso and he felt her nipples turn stiff as they brushed against him. Then she leaned in and kissed him, first chaste but soon opening her lips for him, simultaneously letting her hands slide up along his arms, to clasp around his neck and tug at his curls to hold him closer. This was bliss. Resolutely he flipped her over to have her under him, but somehow he misjudged how far he was from the edge of the bed and fell out of it.

He sat up with a jolt and looked around in the empty room with dazed confusion. His eyes fell on the regrettably closed and locked door. He had dreamed that the wife he claimed to be indifferent to visited his bedroom and it had left him more aroused than he ever had been before. He willed his breathing and pulse to slow down, his physical reaction to fade away.

Dreaming was one thing, but did this mean that he desired her in real life too?

Damnit! If it was so, how very unexpected and inconvenient. He simply could not allow it. Sidney knew that any feelings of the sort had to be buried deep inside him. In his dream she may be seductive, but in real life any sign of desire would without doubt scare Charlotte and make her withdraw, destroying the budding friendly relationship between them. He had come to value that too much to let it happen. This dream had to be forgotten at all cost.

Chapter 6: On an imaginary journey together

Charlotte was seated by the desk in her room attempting to write a letter. She had dipped the quill in ink, but it remained hovering in the air above the paper, whilst her gaze was fixed at a point far away.

She was thinking about her husband.

The last days had been so confusing and she was not sure what to make of it all. Being in Sidney Parker's proximity evoked feelings in her which she never had experienced before, ranging from fury to something undefinable. Recently, he had efficiently suffocated the anger she initially felt towards him and the unfairness of the situation, by showing her nothing but kindness. The generous gifts that seemed to be given without ulterior motive were delightful, but even more she appreciated their conversations and that he always seemed genuinely interested in what she had to say. Also, the concern he showed when she spoke of her family and his offer to both go visit them and support them financially had touched her deeply.

Most confusing of all had been when he kneeled beside her by the dining table and first took her hand, then wiped away her tears, only to abruptly back away from her when he became aware of what he was doing. Before that, she had feared any physical contact with him but in that moment she discovered she did not wish for him to distance himself. When he stroked her cheek, she was so close

to lean into his palm because the unexpected touch was so comforting. How fortunate that he moved away before she did so, preventing her from making a fool of herself.

He had spent more time with her after that. They had dined together the past few evenings and yesterday he had come looking for her when he returned home in the afternoon.

He had found her in the library, the room where she spent most of her time when he was away. Knowing that the servants were unlikely to come in there, she had been lying reading on the floor because the large book was too heavy to hold comfortably. Propped up on her elbows, she had stretched out on her stomach, taken off her shoes and let her stocking clad legs leisurely swing, lost in daydreams.

He announced his presence by a soft knock. When she startled looked up, he was leaning against the doorframe with an amused expression and she was, as happened sometimes, overwhelmed by his handsomeness. She had not seen much of the London high society men yet, so she could only compare to the men in Willingden and she had never seen anyone quite like him. He always appeared so confident and contained, except for the few occasions when she had made him lose his temper or show compassion. His chiselled features, combined with the dark hair and eyes would have made him seem slightly dangerous, had it not been for the contrasting full lips and his brown eyes when they sometimes shifted from piercing to soft. He was also very fashionable, so it was no wonder that he wished

for her to match him better in that aspect. Like now, when his perfectly tailored waist-coat and breeches clung to his body, showing that it was as well-toned as that of the hard-working men at her father's estate. She had never been curious about any of them but found that she now was curious about him. How come he looked like that, only lean muscles, despite a life-style she imagined contained far more leisure than labour?

All in all, she could see that he must appeal to many women, so it seemed so strange he would choose to marry one which he did not desire, as he had made clear was the case to Lord Babington, and one who certainly felt nothing for him.

She wondered how long he had been standing watching her, embarrassed over her own unladylike behaviour. She saw his eyes travel down her body and register the dress that had slipped down her angled legs to fall around her knees and now showed more than was appropriate. She was about to sit up and adjust her skirts, when he stopped her.

"Don't let me interrupt you."

To her surprise, he sauntered over and laid down beside her, though at an appropriate distance so their bodies did not touch. She could still feel him though. Even if she had closed her eyes she would have known he was there, from the body heat emanating from him and the pleasant whiff of cologne, a musky and citrusy scent. She liked it so much she had to stop herself from inhaling noticeably deeply and she moved an inch in the other direction.

"What is this big book of yours?" He took a closer look. "An atlas?"

He seemed surprised to find she was looking at a map.

"Yes."

"Why are you looking in an atlas?" He sounded curious, not condescending.

"You will think me silly."

"I doubt that."

"I am traveling." She admitted bashfully. "In my imagination."

"Away from this house, from me?" He almost sounded hurt.

"Yes. Or no, not like that. This is something I always have done, when I lived in Willingden too."

"Please share with me."

She still felt a bit silly but did as he requested as there was no mockery to be detected in his voice.

"I have always been curious about other places, read about far away countries, towns, the people there. I know that I likely never will see them, but I like to look at the maps and pretend I am on a journey."

She flipped to a page with a map of England and pointed to a spot on the map where there was nothing.

"Somewhere around here is Willingden. Not even significant enough to be included on the map. Now I have travelled from there... to here."

She let her finger draw a line to London.

"What I have seen so far was nothing like I expected, but I can at least not complain about not having an adventure."

She gave him a week smile and got one in return.

"And then, when I look at all the maps, I realise what an infinitesimal part of the world I have seen and..."

"And?"

"I would still like to see more, experience more, have more adventure in my life, but perhaps I would be wise to have that from books rather than real life. I guess one should be careful what one wishes for."

"Maybe, but you should not let one bad experience deter you and you have not even seen that much of London yet. Perhaps you will learn to appreciate it."

Their eyes met briefly, and she wondered about the hopeful look in his. Why did it matter to him if she liked London? Why did it matter to her that he seemed to want her to like it?

He reached out his hand and turned the pages.

"I lived here for many years."

He pointed at an island in a string of islands in a sea, far, far away.

"Antigua? In the West Indies?"

"Yes."

"How come?"

He made a grimace like he had not anticipated that question and was not sure if he wanted to answer, but in the end chose to.

"I tried to escape I guess."

"From what?"

Up to now he had given away almost nothing of his past and her curiosity peaked. There was a pause when he seemed to deliberate internally as to how much he should expose, but finally he answered.

"When I was young, almost ten years ago, I was engaged to be married. She broke off our engagement to marry an older and wealthier man."

She listened, unconsciously twiddling her own wedding ring. Was this the reason why he had been determined never to wed? The reason why he knew he would never fall in love again?

"So you decided to go away?"

"Not at first. I didn't handle it well though. I began drinking heavily and was well on my way to ruining myself."

Even if she had not known him then, it pained her to hear it. He must have been very much in love.

"My brother Tom finally intervened. He forced me to sober up and arranged for me to get away for some time to try to sort myself out. That was how I came to live in Antigua."

"I am sorry to hear it. It must have been hard for you to be so far away from home."

"Not really. Breaking the engagement was hard, going away was a relief."

"And you stayed away for long?"

"Eight years, so I have only been back here in England for three years."

"Is Antigua where you built your fortune then?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Why would you say that?"

"Because I am ashamed how part of it came to be."

"How come?"

"How much do you know of Antigua, Charlotte?"

"Not much. It is a British colony."

"Then you know about as much as I did when my ship set sail there. I was still a naive young man and I was to discover that Antigua is both the most beautiful and the most horrendous place on Earth."

"Please, tell me more."

She found herself mesmerized both by his deep voice and his tale. A tale of how a young heartbroken English gentleman had met a harsh reality and grown into the man he now was. She had to know more.

"At first sight, Antigua was more wonderful than any place I ever had seen even in my wildest dreams. The colours of the nature are like the colours here at home hundred fold; the insanely green vegetation, the turquoise of the sea, flowers, birds and butterflies sparkling like the rainbow. Exotic fruits like pineapple,

oranges and bananas grow anywhere and taste sweeter than anything we know here."

She loved the picture he was painting and wanted to see it, smell it, taste it for real. No one had tasted a pineapple in Willingden.

"It sounds wonderful."

"It is, but... after some time the heat becomes oppressive, the many mosquitos bites infected and there are illnesses we never even heard of, but worst of all are *we*."

"Us?"

"Not you Charlotte", he bestowed her a sad but fond smile, like she was the last person he had been thinking of. "The Brits. White men. Greedy men who exploit other humans to get rich. Men like me."

"How do you mean? You seem to be a decent man from what I have seen."

He snorted.

"I would like to think so. I try to lead my life honourably, make the right choices but there are things in my past I am ashamed of. When I did not take a stand and do the noble thing as soon as I should have."

"And what was that 'noble thing' which you did not do?"

There was a moment of silence before he answered. His eyes seemed more intense than before and she was aware of their shoulders briefly brushing against one another.

"Stand up against slavery. It took too long before I did."

She stared at him. She was not sure what she had expected but not this. Slavery. It was something she had read about and found abominable, but which had seemed as distant as... well, as distant as Antigua. Now he had brought into the room.

"Won't you tell me?"

He sat up.

"I shouldn't have told you in the first place."

"But you did. Perhaps because you actually *need* to talk about it? It seems to still be troubling you."

"It doesn't mean I should burden you with it."

"Then who? I am your wife even if only to the name. I could be your friend, your support, if you let me?"

The look of disbelief on his face made him seem more vulnerable than before and stirred something in her, strengthening her wish to share what seemed to burden him. She put her hand on top of his.

"Let me be that in return for what you have done for me. I am not so fragile as you seem to believe."

He seemed to take in what she said and made a decision.

"No perhaps you are not."

He withdrew his hand, leaving her feeling slightly foolish for the spontaneous touch, and moved to sit with his back leaning against the wall. She sat up too, without letting go of his gaze, willing him to speak. He shook his head as if he could not believe he was doing this.

"Be warned that this is against my better judgement, this story is unsuitable for sharing with a lady."

"You know I have already seen things that are far from suitable for a lady and survived them, so..."

She pursed her mouth and he chuckled.

"That is true, well then. When I first arrived, Tom had arranged for me to stay with and work for a business acquaintance of his, a Mr. Archibald Harris. He had a house in St John's, the harbour town and capital of Antigua, and he also owned

a plantation a few hours ride away. Upon our first acquaintance he seemed like a good man to me, like most other Englishmen there. With time, I learned there was a monster underneath his respectable exterior."

Appalled and fascinated Charlotte listened as Sidney's story unfolded.

During the first few months he had remained with Mr. Harris and his family in St. John's. His wife was one of quite few females who had joined their husbands on the long journey there and it was a comfortable home Sidney was a guest in. He soon learned that most Brits made their money from the sugar trade. Sugar cane was the main crop on the island and if one wanted to make money here, buying your own plantation or becoming an investor in someone else's was the way to make a fortune.

"I was looking to invest my rather modest inheritance to make it grow. I wanted to return to England a wealthier man than when I left."

She heard a hint of self-loathing in his voice and instinctively knew he had wanted to prove himself to the woman who jilted him.

"Harris did not need an investor in his own plantation as it was thriving already, but he advised me to approach a Mr. Lambe whom he had heard was looking for a partner. Mr. Lambe lived at his plantation, located even further away than Harris' plantation, but letters were sent and after some time the deal was agreed and it was decided that I would come and visit him there to inspect my investment, after first joining Harris to visit his plantation and oversee the activities there."

As he said this, Sidney's face contorted in disgust.

"Coming to Harris plantation, was like coming to hell. Not at first sight but when I realised how everything worked out there. I had heard of slave labour, but never realised... there was not as much talk of it here at home at that time, people did not know, and even in St. John's people did not talk about what was truly going on at the plantations. The slaves were treated like animals..."

He turned to her and she saw that his eyes were glazed with tears.

"Worse than animals... They had no rights, no life. They worked until they could not stand up and then they were whipped to do some more, normally by the foreman but now when Harris was there he gladly whipped the "lazy" ones himself. They had too little to eat, no one treated them when they were ill because they were replaceable. Families were not allowed to live together, children were taken away from their parents as soon as they could work, women forced to..." He swallowed the words he had been close to saying and rephrased. "...to do the things you nearly had to do in the brothel. By their white masters. I saw so many children which were mulattoes. I do not know how many of them were Harris', but some of them were. Yet they were nothing to him but more free labour. It was sickening, but most sickening was that I did not say anything. refrained when he offered me to try the whip or to have some company in my bed at night, but I did not tell him how despicable I found it. Everyone thought it normal and justified, so who was I to come and question a well-functioning system that provided money in my fellow countrymen's pockets and sugar in our tea?"

Charlotte realised she had clenched her fists so hard her nails made marks in her palms. Were these women which he had not been able to save, the reason why he had wanted to save her from a similar fate?

"How could you stand it? To stay so long then?"

"I wanted to flee head over heels, but I had already invested my money in Lambe's plantation and arranged to go see it, so I had no choice. I went there with the resolve to withdraw my investment and return home. Luckily it turned out he was a different man altogether.

Lambe's planation was a much larger one than the one Harris had, and it had been thriving for many years. It turned out that the reason that he needed another investor was because he had freed all his slaves. From the first day when he bought the plantation, he had strived to improve his slaves' conditions and a few years ago he had set them all free. The majority of them had stayed as workers, knowing they were safe here.

Mr. Lambe turned out to be the most amazing man. The reason he always stayed at his plantation was that he could not stand most of his fellow countrymen and the way they treated the black. He regarded all humans the same regardless of skin colour and had gone as far as marrying a black woman, without caring for what others thought. I thought it was beautiful. They loved each other and had a daughter together, who was brought up as a lady and he intended for her to inherit his fortune one day.

Lambe became my role model and mentor and I came to stay with him for seven years. As this plantation was located so distantly, it took long before rumours reached St. John's about how he managed the estate and that he had wed a black woman, but eventually it did. I once travelled there and happened to meet Mr. Harris. He joked derogatory how he had heard what kind of a man Lambe was, taking a slave as his lawful wife and questioned how could I remain partner with him. Then I finally lost it and punched him, so he went unconscious. After that I seldom returned to St. John's. The plantation continued to be very successful and in time it made me a rich man. Eventually I missed home and my family and decided to return to England. I will forever feel I should have done more. Spoke up more or floored all the Harrises of Antigua, taken all my money and paid for slaves to be free. I do support the abolitionist movement financially, but I still feel what I have done is too little."

He finally paused with an astonished expression, as if the words unintentionally had poured out of him.

"You should not be so harsh on yourself. Such a fight cannot be won by one single man, only by many people returning home and telling about the atrocities, so public opinion is awakened, and people turn against it. That is what is happening now, is it not?"

"Perhaps you are right, but I wish I could have done more and sooner, made more of a difference. Even if my fortune comes from a plantation where conditions

were good, I still feel guilt and I don't think I will ever forgive myself for staying silent when I visited Harris plantation. It was simply coward."

"All of us make mistakes. It is how we try to rectify them that determines if we are good or bad. In my book you are a good man Sidney Parker."

His pensive frown changed into a smile.

"I never expected to have such a wise wife. Thank you - for listening, for making me feel a little less like a scoundrel."

They held each other's gaze in silence for a while.

"Speaking of doing the right thing, have you written to your family yet?"

"I have, only throw it in the bin", she admitted.

"Charlotte, please just do it. You know you must. They must be impatient to receive news from you and the longer you wait, the harder it will be. Will you promise me?"

"I promise", she had answered solemnly.

"And now, to cheer us both up, will you please bring me on one of those imaginary journeys of yours? Where are we going?"

She giggled.

"I was thinking about China. To see those little silk worms and where they grow the tea and to visit the Emperor in the Forbidden city."

"Then off to China we are. How will we get there?"

"On a ship of course. Then perhaps riding camels at some point? I would like that very much."

He threw his head back in laughter and she had felt happy that she seemed able to relieve his sorrows for a little while. His story had been horrible, but she was grateful he had trusted her enough to share it.

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Sidney's eyes had been filled with true concern when he urged her to write to her family and so now she sat here, bewildered as to what she should write. The letter to her parents was already finished, the one with the lie about finding unexpected love and elopement. Surprisingly, the one to Alison where she intended to tell the truth had proven more difficult. Telling the ghastly part about the brothel was easy enough, but then she got stuck. She had intended to write how horrible her life had turned out, forced into marriage with a man she did not love. It was just that the more she learned to know her husband, the less certain she was that it was such a terrible thing after all. She simply did not know what to think or feel anymore.

Chapter 7: A charade for the Heywoods

The sight of her made him pause in the doorway for a while, without announcing his presence. She was casually stretched out on the floor, lying stomach down, propped up on her elbows with legs swaying in the air, absorbed by a book. Sidney swallowed. He had never known that a reading woman could be so tantalizing.

He softly knocked on the doorframe and she looked up with a startled expression as if he had caught her doing something naughty.

"Don't let me interrupt you."

He walked over and sat down beside her. Her skirts had slid down her angled legs and were inappropriately heaped around her knees, exposing her feet, slender ankles and calves. He could see that it bothered her that he had caught her with her attire in disorder, but he did not mind. Quite the contrary, he would rather like it if it was even more untidy. What if those skirts were hoisted further up?

Tentatively, he reached out a hand and gently touched one of her legs. Stroked from the ankle to her knee. The legs that had been swinging languidly, froze in the move and she stared at him with widened eyes. He retracted his hand, unsure if he only made her uncomfortable. He did not want that, but he wished she would welcome it.

"Do you mind if I touch you? It is just that your legs... you have very beautiful legs."

That did not cover half of what he felt. The shape of her feminine limbs only clad in thin stockings was sensual and enticing. Seeing them exposed like this made him want to undress her.

She rolled over on her back, wet her lips and parted them.

"No, I would not mind. In fact, I would welcome it. Lately, I have been longing for you to touch me."

Sidney snapped out of his reverie. This was bad in every possible way and getting worse for every day passing by. It had been bad enough when he dreamt of her at night, but then he could at least tell himself that it had nothing to do with his conscious wishes and desires. Now she popped up in his thoughts when least expected, like when he innocently had a cup of tea as was the case now. The sight of her legs in the library had done that to him. He could not believe that he was that easily affected. He had always thought himself a man in control of his desires rather than a lecherous creep, but now his own wife made him wonder.

He did not want to feel like that around her and he definitely did not want her to know about it. He enjoyed her company more and more but had to be careful to keep the physical distance. That was why he had retracted his hand when she took it in a gesture of comfort that day. He was *not* comforted, at least that was not the main reaction. Her touch made his hand and entire body tingle with excitement and he pulled away before the temptation to lace his fingers with hers became too strong to resist.

That moment between them had been seductive on more than just the physical level. The more he learned about Charlotte, the more he appreciated her. Her compassion, her intelligence. He had never felt compelled to tell anyone this much about Antigua and how he truly felt about the time there, about the darkness, despair and his shame for doing too little. His naïve siblings were too ignorant of the shady aspects of the world and most of his London friends cared little about anything beyond pleasures. Babington was an exception, but not even him he had told the difficult emotional sides of it, just the facts.

Despite that Charlotte had little experience, he had sensed that she would understand and want to know more. How could a young woman, brought up in a sheltered country village be so insightful and perceptive? In addition to the surprising depths in her, she also made him laugh. They had spent a long time with their noses over the maps, planning quite an adventurous journey even by his standards. While they were talking, seriously and in jest, he had even forgotten that he had desired her moments earlier because he was absorbed by the conversation, but afterwards those impressions mingled and made him covet her even more.

He was beginning to fear that he was falling for his wife. It would not have been a problem if he had not been so sure she cared nothing for him in that sense.

Everyone assumed that Sidney Parker was a man who had had numerous women, but that was far from the truth even if he was not inexperienced. As a young man he had been quite shy and before his engagement there had been no one. During the destructive period thereafter, his friends had introduced him to the brothels

to cheer him up, but he had been too miserable to enjoy it. His years in Antigua had meant an involuntary almost-celibacy as he lived and worked hard at the plantation and visited St. John's as little as he could. Naturally there were women at the plantation, but they were freed slaves, now workers. Even if he considered some of them beautiful he would not take advantage of his superior position as a plantation owner to approach any of them only for a physical relationship. When he returned to London, now a wealthy man and entrepreneur who dealt with luxury goods, he was frequently invited to balls and other social events where women hovered around him, but as he had no intention to marry he kept his distance to avoid leading anyone on. His acquaintances had brought him along to the high-end courtesans the city offered. Starved of female company, he had welcomed the undemanding diversion for a while, but then began reflecting more and more on the conditions for these women. Even if visiting brothels was almost as common as drinking wine among men of wealth, he began questioning this habit almost in the same way he had questioned slavery. The women did a good job acting like they enjoyed it and he was a very popular customer, but it did not feel right and so he stopped going. The only exception in over a year had been his birthday night. He had never deliberately made the decision that he would remain celibate for life though and having Charlotte in his close proximity reminded him that he was indeed a red-blooded male after all.

His thoughts were disturbed by her entering the room and he felt stupidly caught in the act. He prayed to God that she had no idea what went on in his mind and that she never would understand.

To his relief she did not seem to cotton on to his thoughts at all. She sat down, looking unhappy and slightly distressed over something else.

"I have received a letter from home."

That explained it. He leaned towards her, all ears, hoping they had not been as harsh to her as her expression implied.

"They want us to come visit."

"But that is good news! Is it not?"

"Yes... yes it is. As good as it gets but I am... It just makes me nervous, going there, pretending to those who know me best that we are something we are not."

"It will be fine", he reassured her. "We will manage this together."

Three days later they found themselves in a carriage direction Willingden and he felt less self-assured. He thought it likely that her family would forgive her, based on the kind of relationship she seemed to have with them all, but he wondered how they would receive him. His nervousness did not decrease when they approached Willingden and she suddenly moved from the opposite seat to sit beside him.

She noticed the curious look he gave her and explained.

"I thought, if we were as madly in love as we want to convince them we are, we would sit beside each other."

"Ah", he said, and his mind nimbly shifted to all the things a couple madly in love might do during a private carriage ride. For Christ's sake, this would not do! He could not keep having these fantasies that would never come to anything. Her next words did nothing to help him.

She seemed very insecure when she continued, wringing her gloved hands in her lap.

"When we are in Willingden... I am sure my sister Alison will move into another room and leave the room we used to share to... us."

She watched him from under long eyelashes to see if he understood what she meant, but he did not.

"They will expect us to share... room. Share bed", she clarified bashfully.

The coin dropped. *They would share bed.* In truth, he wanted nothing more than to share bed with her *but only if she wanted it.* Sharing bed with her as it was now, would be torture and he was not even sure it would be sweet.

"We will...? I had not thought about that, God knows why because now when you say it... What do we do?"

"I suppose... we share bed? To keep up the charade. We can sleep with clothes on, but I don't see any other solution if we want them to believe we are happy newlyweds."

Her words were confident, but he could see how uncomfortable the idea made her. He was very aware of her leg pressing against his own. How would it be to

have her beside him in a bed an entire night? Several nights? He tried to suppress the heat the mere thought provoked in his core.

"It is not ideal, but I see that there is nothing to do about it. I promise you that I will not take advantage of the situation. I don't in our house and I never would under your parents' roof."

His words made her smile again.

"Thank you."

"You called it 'our' house", she added as an afterthought.

"Don't you know by now that it is? Because we are married?" he smiled in return. Yes, it was sweet torture to have her near, but he did not regret marrying her.

He noticed how she visibly withdrew, broke eye contact and turned to the window.

"But it is not for real, so I feel I have no right to it."

She did not see his smile fade. It did not matter how many times she said it, he did not become indifferent to those words. Instead they stung more. He did not have time to dwell on it though, as her expression changed again, and she pointed at a bridge which became visible through the window.

"We are there! That bridge marks the border to papa's estate."

Almost contradicting the words she had said just now and to his surprise, she took his hand and turned her face to him again. She was so close when they were

seated like this, that it would only require the smallest shift of his head to kiss her.

"Do you think you will be able to pretend you love me?"

Her question took him by surprise.

"Yes."

Suddenly time seemed to stand still.

"Will you?"

"I hope so", she almost whispered. "They know me inside and out."

"Then I suppose I have to be the more convincing one. It is easier for me as they don't know me at all."

He knew that was not the sole reason why he might be able to act convincingly.

The carriage finally rattled to a stop. His heart was pounding with nervousness, but he tried to keep his exterior in check. The only feeling he wanted to give impression of was fondness for Charlotte so her family would believe the story they had rehearsed.

As they stepped out on the yard he put his hand to the small of her back. He felt her flinch ever so slightly but then lean into him instead of moving away.

"Remember, we are in this together Mrs Parker", he whispered close to her ear and she turned to him with a smile that could have fooled anyone she was deeply in love with him. He knew it was an act but still it made his insides twist. The

loving smile he gave in return felt anything but false and he did not want to shift away from those amazing eyes of hers.

Someone cleared his throat and almost dazed Sidney returned his focus to the surroundings. The entire Heywood family seemed gathered in the yard to welcome them and he was a bit taken aback by how many they were. Eleven boys and girls of mixed ages and Charlotte's parents naturally, in total thirteen pairs of eyes were staring at them with various expressions. Unguarded curiosity and happiness in the eyes of the younger ones. Apprehensive interest in the eyes of the older siblings and, he thought, disapproving scrutiny in Mr. and Mrs. Heywood's. At least when they looked at him. As soon as they turned to Charlotte the expression turned soft with love and he knew they would forgive her without a doubt. If they ever would forgive and accept him was a different story but he could live with that as long as their good relationship with Charlotte was intact.

No matter what they thought of him they greeted him politely and welcomed them both into their home. He noticed that Mrs. Heywood looked a little less tense when Charlotte took off her pelisse, revealing one of her new dresses from *Madame Devy's*, which even if it was a gown for daywear looked far more costly than the ones she had before. At least they could see that she had not made a disadvantageous liaison in terms of fortune. He also noticed that it had no effect on Mr. Heywood's furrowed brow and realised that Charlotte was *his* apple of the eye more than her mother's. The only way to win him over would be to prove to him that he was a good man with honest intentions, despite the hasty marriage.

He looked around as they went inside, curious to see where Charlotte came from. They were now in the main building but there were several other buildings scattered around the yard, indicating the estate was driven as a farm. It was a rather large house but as the family had so many members he understood it must be smallish for them anyway. The inside was clean, well-kept and beautiful in a more rustic way than he was accustomed to, but which seemed fitting here on the countryside. The atmosphere was warm, and he could understand why Charlotte always spoke so fondly of her home. What a contrast it must have been for her to be brought from this safe environment to the brothel and then to his house, even she had claimed she had been longing for adventures when she lived here.

His thoughts were interrupted as Charlotte introduced him to all her siblings, finishing with the eldest of her sisters, Alison. She was but a year younger than Charlotte and there was a definite likeness, although Charlotte was the more beautiful one in his opinion. Alison smiled kindly at him and he remembered that she was the one Charlotte was closest to and the only one who had been told the truth. She knew he had not lured her to elope, but she also knew Charlotte did not love him. He hoped she would help them to keep up the pretence.

"Come, let me accompany you to the room that will be yours. The servants will bring the baggage."

They exchanged glances, it would be as Charlotte had predicted, one room, one bed for them both.

"You can freshen up and dinner will be served in some time", she told them. "Oh, Charlotte, I'm so glad you are home and that you are safe."

The two girls hugged hard and he was touched by how much they seemed to mean to each other. Alison turned to him.

"Mr. Parker, I am very grateful for what you have done for my sister, for our family. As the others don't know, please receive my sincerest thank you also on their behalf."

"You are welcome." It was very nice of her, but he felt a bit awkward in the role as benefactor.

"Will you be comfortable in here? I mean..." Alison interrupted herself and her eyes darted to the bed.

"It will be absolutely fine", Charlotte reassured her.

He could see that even if Charlotte had told her the truth, she was unsure how their relationship worked out. No wonder, as he was becoming increasingly confused himself.

"I'll leave you to it then."

The maid brought cans with warm water and poured into a large bowl, so they could wash themselves after the journey. When she closed the door and left them alone, they remained still, staring at each other without knowing what to do.

"You go ahead first." He broke the tense silence. "I'll turn away and you can wash yourself and get changed."

She just nodded and he sat down by the window, with his back turned to her. He kept his eyes on the rural landscape outside but listened attentively to the faint rustling sound when she removed clothes, the splashing as she washed, followed by more rustling as she got dressed again. The temptation to turn around and watch was almost irresistible, but he did not give in to it. He could not help himself from picturing her in his mind though.

"I am done", she finally told him. When he turned she was dressed in another of her new gowns, a pale yellow one, and looked simply adorable. "Now it is your turn."

"You could leave if you like?" he offered.

She seemed to hesitate.

"They would wonder why I don't wait for you. I can do as you did?"

"Alright then."

Even if she had her back towards him it felt odd to undress with her there and he assumed it must have been the same for her or worse. An unwelcome rush of adrenaline made his fingers clumsy when he removed his coat, waistcoat, cravat and finally pulled the shirt over his head. He glanced her direction, but her gaze was firmly fixed on the window. Still, his heart was thumping hard in his chest and his hands almost trembling. He swiftly washed himself using a cloth but when he reached for the soap, managed to knock over the water can which the maid had left behind. It fell to the floor where it crashed to pieces and the remaining water splashed all over.

The unexpected noise made her instinctively turn around and both froze, staring at each other. Her wide eyes moved over his bare upper body. She seemed absolutely appalled yet unable to divert her gaze. He had never felt so exposed, not even when completely naked with a woman. Her lips parted as if to say something, but she remained mute. His heart was beating even harder and faster than before, but all that was heard throughout the room was the soft sound of their upset breathing.

There was a knock on the door.

"Is everything alright Charlotte? We heard a sound?"

It was Mrs. Heywood. This seemed to stir Charlotte from her paralysed state, and she managed an answer.

"Everything is fine, mama. We just happened to knock over the water can."

"Oh, I'll leave you be then. Tilly can clean it up later."

The amusement in Mrs. Heywood's voice indicated she thought they had perhaps been doing something else than washing themselves and he saw Charlotte's cheeks turn as flaming red as his own felt. Released from the trance, he moved to grab a fresh shirt and hastily pulled it over his head.

"I'm... I'm so sorry", he stuttered, eluding rather to him exposing her to his half-naked state, than to the shattered can.

"No need to apologize. You couldn't help it. Now let us clean up this mess together."

Her words were resolute and practical, and she smiled, but then chewed her lower lip self-consciously and he cursed himself for having made her uncomfortable around him. He could only hope she knew it was not on purpose. He realised he would only make bad things worse if he continued to apologize, so he hid his embarrassment by busying himself tucking the shirt inside his breeches and putting on the waistcoat on top. Both kneeled to pick up the shards and carefully avoided touching or looking at each other as they did. When they shortly after joined her family in the parlour, he thought that they both looked as flushed as if they had indeed been doing what Mrs Heywood assumed they had.

The dinner was pleasant enough even if he constantly were on his toes, aware he was being measured. He was keen to make a good impression and make them believe he loved Charlotte. They were seated next to each other at the dining table and he made sure to be very attentive to her, not that he found that a hard task. The rest of the family gradually seemed to warm up to him, but he could feel Mr. Heywood's piercing eyes on him and knew there was one person he yet had to convince.

He was not surprised when Mr. Heywood asked him to step aside with him after the meal was finished and naturally he accepted, though with a knot in his stomach. Charlotte had heard the request and gave him an encouraging smile before she accompanied her mother and sisters to the parlour.

Mr. Heywood gestured towards the door to another room.

"You go in there, Mr. Parker and I'll be with you shortly."

Apprehensively he entered the room and realised it was the family's library. The collection of books was not as extensive as his own, but impressive enough. With a smile he let his fingertips touch over the backs of the books and wondered how many of them Charlotte had read. He would not be surprised if it was all of them.

"Do you like to read, Mr. Parker?"

Mr. Heywood had joined him, holding two glasses of port and offered one of them to Sidney.

"I do, though I suspect not as much as Charlotte."

Mr. Heywood raised his eyebrows.

"So you are aware that my daughter is an avid reader?"

"I think it would be difficult to live with your daughter without noticing that. I suspect my library, *our* library, is her favourite room in the house."

"So you don't object to her reading?"

"No, why would I? It would be like objecting to her eating. I don't think she would be happy without her books."

"It seems like you understand my daughter better than I had anticipated after such a short acquaintance", Mr. Heywood said dryly, sat down in one of the armchairs and nodded to Sidney to take the other.

The barely concealed critique was not lost on Sidney. Short acquaintance, hasty marriage and without asking for Mr. Heywood's permission. Quite scandalous. It was time to take the bull by its horns.

"I am not sure I fully understand her. Is not every woman a mystery? And perhaps they should be, but I *do* know that I admire her deeply. I admire that she is intelligent, that she reads constantly and helped you with the finances for the estate... yes, she told me that. I admire that she is not an empty vessel, satisfied with just looking pretty. I admire that she is strong-willed and opinionated even if sometimes more than she ought to for her own good. I admire that she is compassionate and caring, to me, to her family and I suspect to anyone she meets. She is the most extraordinary woman I have ever met. I have no idea how she came to be like that, but I... I consider myself very fortunate to have met her and even more fortunate that she accepted to be my wife."

He paused, realising that everything he had said up to now was the absolute truth. He also realised it mattered a great deal to him if Mr. Heywood accepted him as his son-in-law.

"Mr. Heywood let me speak frankly. Before I met Charlotte, I was not set on marrying. Not now, not ever, but there was something about her that made me change my mind. I knew that if she accepted me, I simply *had* to make her my wife. I have never known something to be right so instinctively. I am a man who did not *need* to marry for money, or to make an advantageous alliance for any other reason. The only reason for me to ever get married was..."

His words had been rushed but now he interrupted himself, suddenly overwhelmed by the feelings that were evoked in him.

"Was love?" Mr. Heywood filled in with gentle voice and his eyes were not as sharp anymore.

Sidney swallowed. No, that had not been it. It could not be, he had just wanted to keep her safe, but he could not tell Mr. Heywood. If Mr. Heywood thought it was love, his mission was accomplished.

"Yes", he almost whispered. "And believe me when I say that I am truly sorry that it happened as it did, that I did not seek your permission before we married. My only defence is that when I met Charlotte I got carried away in a way I never experienced before, and I wanted to get married immediately. I managed to convince her, and you must not hold it against her, I beg you. You have my sincerest apologies and I hope I can in some way make it up by doing everything I can to make her happy. I come from a respectable family and I have a considerable fortune, so you need not worry about me providing for her economically."

Mr. Heywood looked down at his glass, swirling the wine around. When he looked up again there was a faint smile on his lips.

"You are right. My daughter *is* extraordinary, *and* she is headstrong. Stubborn as a mule in fact. I know she would never do something she did not want to do, or something she knew deep down was wrong. If she accepted your proposal and married you upon such a brief acquaintance, she must have been convinced that

it was the right thing. I hope that not only you will make her happy but that she will make you happy in return. As you seem to understand her so well already and accept and encourage her to be herself, I think your chances for happiness are promising."

He raised his glass in a toast.

Sidney felt strangely choked, returned the toast and took a gulp of his port before he could respond.

"Thank you, that means a lot to me, Sir."

"Well then, should we go join the others?"

"Before we do, there is another matter I would like to discuss with you."

Mr. Heywood leaned back in the chair again.

"Is there?" he asked tentatively.

"Yes. Charlotte told me of your economic predicament. The debts because of her brother's gambling."

Mr. Heywood sighed heavily.

"I suppose I should be glad she trusts you enough to share such things with you, even if I wish to keep this in the family for as long as we can."

"But I *am* family now and I want to help you. Please allow me to pay off the debt."

"I could not! You don't even know how much it is."

"I dare say I can bear the economic loss and I *want* to help. I know it has bothered Charlotte that she will not contribute with the salary you all had counted on, because she married me instead of working as a governess."

"If you only knew how hard it was to send her away..."

"I understand that and also that you had no choice. Things did not turn out as planned and I am offering a way out. Consider it my wedding gift to Charlotte."

Mr. Heywood watched him intently.

"Normally it is the bride bringing the dowry to the new household..."

"Well, as I said, there is no need for that. I have more than I need. It will make me happy if Charlotte is happy, and for her to be happy I know she needs to know her family is doing well. In the end you will be doing me a service."

"You have very convincing manner Mr. Parker, but you will not be able to convince me that *I* am the one doing *you* a service here. I will accept your generous offer though."

"I'm very pleased to hear it. I only have one request in return. Do not let Charlotte know. We have spoken of this and I said I might be able to help, but upon further reflection I would prefer if she does not feel like she owns me anything in that aspect."

"But surely..."

"Please, that is all I ask. It might make her uncomfortable."

He did not want her to feel more indebted to him than she possibly did already. It had not bothered him before, but now there was this growing feeling inside him that he wanted her to appreciate him for being him. Not just tolerating his presence because she felt indebted to him.

"You are a very generous man Mr. Parker, and quite extraordinary too. I can see why my daughter fell in love with you."

Giving away some of his money to the Heywoods did not bother him the least.

What bothered him increasingly was the knowledge that their daughter was unlikely to ever fall in love with him no matter what he did.

Chapter 8: The sweetest dreams

“He is nothing like I expected him to be.”

Charlotte was walking arm in arm with Alison, watching Sidney on the road ahead, accompanied by Mr. Heywood and their brother Matthew. Even if the girls could not hear what the men were talking about from this distance, they appeared to be engaged in lively, amiable conversation.

“I’m not sure he is what I expected him to be either but I’m curious to know, what did *you* expect?” Charlotte asked her sister.

“When you wrote me that you had seen yourself forced to marry a man who had offered to save you from ruin and seemed to have good intentions, but who you still resented having to marry, I pictured someone quite different. An aged or ugly man who could not find himself a wife, or someone decent but penniless.”

She paused her step and looked seriously at Charlotte.

“Char, most women would give their right hand to marry someone like your Mr. Parker.”

Charlotte observed his tall, broad-shouldered figure, enhanced by the supremely well-cut clothes and the elegant top hat looking fashionably out of place her among the fields and trenches and found it hard to take in that she was married to that man.

“He is not *my* Mr. Parker”, she objected even if it strangely warmed her insides when Alison called him that.

“Are you not Mrs. Parker?”

“Yes, I am but...”

“Then he is yours more than anyone else’s. Just look at him! He is *very* pleasing to the eye *and* he has a fortune. He is well-educated and sophisticated, he is clearly striving to get papa’s approval and last but not least, he seems to adore you. What is there not to like? Is there something seriously wrong with him which I am yet to discover? If not, I don’t understand why you are so opposed to being married to him.”

Charlotte knew she was blushing. Alison was asking her something which had been on her own mind since they arrived here. Perhaps even before, but it was reinforced when he seemed to fit in so well with her family despite that his appearance stood in stark contrast to the surroundings. He got along with them brilliantly and seemed to enjoy being here. She had not expected that.

“I do not *hate* it, like I did first”, she admitted thoughtfully. “But it all came to be for such strange reasons, meeting like we did, him taking pity on me and then getting married without any affections towards one another at all. You know I was determined that nothing but love would ever persuade me to accept a proposal and he did not want *me* as his wife really. He did not want any wife *at all* but married me out of the kindness of his heart. First I feared that he had ulterior motives and perhaps would turn out to be a brute behind closed doors, but I don’t

think so anymore. I think he is genuinely good. You are gravely mistaken though, he does *not* adore me. He tolerates my company but does not have romantic feelings for me. What you see is just an act to convince mama and papa.”

“Then he is *very* good at acting.”

“I suppose he is.”

“So, is he not kind to you when you are alone?”

“Oh, yes, very, but he does not *care* for me. He has said so himself.”

“To you?”

“To me and to his friend, Lord Babington, when I happened to overhear a conversation. Sidney does not mind being married to me, but it does not mean anything to him. He simply does not care.”

“I still doubt it. And what are *your* sentiments Charlotte, if you are truthful? Have they not changed since you first met?”

If she was to be honest, she was confused. The kindness and generosity he constantly showed her without expecting anything in return had made her slowly warm to him. With the exception for when she had walked off alone in London and got lost, he seemed to have no wish to restrain or change her. On the contrary he encouraged sides of her that even her family found peculiar, like her imaginary travels. He always listened attentively and remembered what she said. Without hesitation he had agreed to join her to Willingden, only asked for a few days to arrange some business matters and then declared himself to be at her disposal.

He was very amiable to her family and willingly put up with the lover's charade to make her parents believe the history and did it so well that even Alison, who knew the truth, thought it genuine.

Of course, Charlotte had noticed the little discreet touches he now added and the altered expression when he looked at her. In her family's presence, he acted like he could not take his eyes off from her and was longing desperately to be alone with her. She was not sure how his eyes so convincingly were able to convey emotions which she knew he did not feel, but they did. It created a flutter in her stomach, and she hoped this helped her to pretend as skilfully as him. Staring into his intensely brown eyes for long when he had that special look was indeed so disconcerting that she thought it might result in her resembling a woman in love, even if she simply was befuddled.

As if all this was not enough, there had been the incident yesterday, when he crashed the water can. The memory made her feel heated inside again, like she had then. She had never seen a man without clothes in real life before and it had been quite impossible to look away.

A long time ago she and Alison had discovered a book in their father's library which contained illustrations of ancient Greek and Roman statues. It had rapidly become one of their favourites and in secret they curiously had scrutinised the pictures many times, focusing on the male anatomy. Of course they had known it was not appropriate for young ladies to look at but reasoned that one must have some knowledge before one's wedding night if there ever was one. They had always thought those male bodies were exaggerated in their sharp perfection and

giggling compared them with the less flattering clothed forms of some of the men in the village. Now she knew there were indeed living men who looked like that. Her own husband looked very much like that. At least the upper body, thankfully he had had his breeches on, or she would have been even more mortified.

Her own reaction had surprised her. Even if she was utterly embarrassed she had not wished to look away. What she had wanted was to walk over to him and touch him, to know what that chiselled body felt like, certain it would not feel cold like marble underneath her palms. His male form was so different from hers, intimidating and alluring. The strength that was evident from the contours of the muscles under his skin could be applied for hard manual labour or violent acts, but also for protection. How would it be to be held by someone like him?

It did not matter because she would never know.

She had noticed that he seemed almost as awkward as her. Not uncomfortable in his body, but not liking to show it to her. Once again he demonstrated clearly that this was not the kind of situations he wanted to be in with her or what he expected from their matrimony. That confirmation did not make her as relieved as one could have expected.

She returned her attention to Alison who still was waiting for her answer.

“I do not know, Alison. Being around him confuses me. I have never known anyone like him.”

“But how... how is your arrangement? Do you share bed chamber?”

“No, not in London, only when we are here.”

“So, it was your first night sharing bed? How was it?”

Alison’s eyes were so wide with curiosity that Charlotte had to laugh, but inside her there was a small grain of sadness.

“Nothing happened, he is behaving like a true gentleman to me and I don’t even think he finds it difficult because he does not... like I said, he does not care for me that way.”

She had been nervous when Sidney and papa disappeared after dinner, knowing that this was the final pressure test to their story. Her father was an intelligent man who loved her dearly and if he had been given the choice he would never had let her marry any man he did not think worthy of her. She knew it must hurt him to believe she had eloped, but that was better than the grief it would cause him if he knew he had sent her off to a brothel which she just barely had escaped.

When they returned, she could see that papa had relaxed and there was a happier gleam in his eyes. It was obvious that whatever Sidney had said, he had been able to convince him and ease his mind. In that moment a strong feeling of fondness welled up inside her. How lucky she had been that her sham marriage was with such a good and clever man.

He came over to sit next to her on the chaise longue, as close to her as was acceptable for a married couple and she did not inch away, keen to keep up her part of the act.

“How did it go?” she said lowly.

“Just fine, my dear”, he answered casually and took her hands.

“What are you doing?” she hissed but could not deny that she enjoyed the touch.

“Showing your family how intimate we are, that we are so used to gestures like this that we forget ourselves in their presence.”

Even when he confirmed it was for show, the word ‘dear’ coming from his lips and his hands enveloping hers, stirred something inside her. He leaned closer to speak next to her ear, like lovers would and she could feel a reverberating sensation on her skin as he spoke, causing it to prickle.

“I think your father has accepted me as your husband. I would not go as far as saying he has completely forgiven me for eloping with you, but it seems he thinks we are well suited for one another.”

“Why?” she inquired, wide-eyed.

He smirked fondly.

“Because we are, of course.”

She knew it was said in jest, of course she knew, but it still added to the strange tension building up inside her. She no longer knew for sure if she dreaded or was longing to share bed that night.

Her nervousness had increased when the first of her sisters announced that they were retreating for the night. Sidney had turned to her and said that if she wanted

to go and prepare herself for bed he did not mind staying up with her father and brothers for a while. She understood that he tried to spare them both from the same awkwardness they had experienced earlier and nodded in agreement.

She prepared herself hastily as she did not know how much time she had before he came. Usually she slept dressed solely in nightgown, but the thin fabric would reveal more than she was comfortable with, so she only removed her stays, kept the chemise and drawers on and put the nightgown on top. She removed all hair pins and swiftly brushed her hair, only glancing briefly at herself in the mirror, thus barely noticing her own blushing cheeks and radiant eyes before she jumped into bed and pulled the quilt all the way up to her chin. Then she lay there, waiting tensely for him to come. It took quite a while before he did, but she was still completely alert and wondering if she would be able to sleep at all this night, knowing he was in the same room. Also wondering if, perhaps he would touch her after all.

He knocked on the door and opened cautiously.

“Can I come in? Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

He glanced over at her and his expression turned amused.

“Is it something about me which you find entertaining?”

“I’m sorry, no... or yes, just the way you are positively buried under the quilt.

“I’m glad that one of us finds this situation diverting.”

Her voice trembled from being equally anxious and offended.

“Come, Charlotte, I did not intend to make fun of you”, he said softly. “This is difficult and awkward and perhaps it will be a bit easier if we can laugh at it together?”

It would be, if she had not been so incredibly nervous.

He started taking off his coat, waistcoat and cravat and she turned away her gaze, but he stopped there, leaving shirt and breeches on.

“Charlotte, please look at me. I will not undress more than this. I’m not dangerous. I have told you time and time again I will never force you to do anything and I... I don’t think of you in that way.”

Now it was his turn to look away, to stare down at his feet. He looked vulnerable like that and she realised in this moment that he actually found her distrust hurtful. In truth he had done nothing to indicate he was unreliable. On the contrary he had done everything possible to earn her trust and deserved it.

“I believe you”, she said and heard him exhale softly.

She felt the mattress dip from his weight as he sat down on his side, so near her now.

“We can put some pillows between us, so we do not accidentally move close when we sleep”, he suggested.

“I think I would like that.”

With a protective barrier against him, she might feel less out of sorts than she did right now. She could not even put her finger on exactly what kind of emotion this was. A sort of restless, fizzing feeling throughout her body and her heart was beating out of her chest.

After he had arranged the pillows, blown out the candles, snuck under the quilt without so much as brushing against her and swiftly turned his back to her, she had been lying awake for long, staring into the darkness until she heard from his heavy breathing that he was asleep. Then she had fallen asleep too.

Alison's persistent curiosity brought her back to the present.

"So, you say he is a gentleman who does not care for you in that way, but do you? Do you care for him that way?"

"No..."

Why must Alison keep interrogating her like it was The Inquisition? There were some things she would not tell even her dear sister.

She had dreamt of him. Dreamt that she had woken up and found him sleeping next to her without his shirt on. The quilt had slid down and he had been lying on his stomach, exposing the back she only had seen a brief glimpse of when he turned and reached for a shirt earlier in the day. Her husband's manners may have ceased to be intimidating to her, but his body still was. Less so now when he was asleep and in the dream she had again been tempted to touch him and boldly reached out her hand. While he remained sound asleep, she had let her fingertips explore him, drawing patterns over the muscular planes of his back. Her palms

had slid over the broad shoulders and she had gently twined the curls at the nape of his neck between her fingers and caressed him there. His skin had been warm and soft, his body hard and strong and in the dream she could not get enough of touching him. He kept on sleeping and he still did when she woke up to find him fully clothed beside her, the pillows between them untouched.

When morning light came, the nightly dreams vanished but she could not quite shake the feeling off. Even now she was not sure what to make of the dream. If she wanted to touch him in her sleep, did it mean she would like to do those things to him for real? The thought of him doing the same to *her* did strange things to her insides. Was this what husbands and wives did to each other in a real marriage?

As Charlotte had not been engaged to be married before she left Willingden, her mother had never spoken to her about what happened when married couples shared bed. Now, she assumed there was no reason to have such a conversation, as she thought that her daughter, now a married woman, already had discovered for herself. Charlotte could not ask without revealing their secret. She knew that what happened in bed was something intimate which bonded a married couple, things which one did not want to do with any other man than one's husband. Suddenly she wished she knew what it was.

“If you really don't care for him like that, how come you are blushing?”

Her annoying little sister scrutinized her with narrowed eyes and once again brought her back to reality.

“All this talk about sharing bedchambers makes me embarrassed.”

“So, you are telling me there are absolutely no affections between you two?”

“No, we are more like casual acquaintances.”

“I still maintain that the way you look at each other could have me fooled and I am your own sister.”

The men had paused in front of them to allow them to catch up, so to Charlotte’s relief they had to interrupt the conversation.

She could not help it, but she liked it when he smiled so warmly at her and held out his arm for her to take as they continued the stroll together. She could get used to walking beside him like this, like they belonged together.

“Mr. Parker has told me he too owns an estate in the countryside”, her father said.

“Do you?” she looked up at Sidney in surprise.

“Yes, perhaps I haven’t told you. I don’t spend much time there but bought it as investment sometime after I returned from Antigua. It borders to Lord Babington’s estate and when the previous owner died without heirs Babington suggested I’d buy it, so I did. I suppose we should go visit it sometime.”

Somehow it bothered her that her father and brother had found this out before she did. It reminded her there were still so many things she did not know about her husband; what he did, what he liked, what his thoughts on different matters were. It made her feel estranged to him anew and she wondered if he wanted her to learn more things about him or not. She wanted to know.

“I would like that.”

“We could go when Babington goes so we have some people to socialize with, to make it more entertaining.”

She nodded and smiled back at him, but inside she knew she wished for something different. She *did* want to know more about him, that need grew rapidly inside her. Part of that was naturally to become acquainted with his friends and family, but for the first time felt she would not mind going somewhere where it would be just the two of them and spend more time alone together. Perhaps because it has been somewhat exhausting to have her family’s eyes on them.

She would not dare to tell him though. He would only think her a silly girl demanding things he had no wish to give.

They stayed in Willingden a few days longer and to her dismay, Charlotte felt her admiration for her husband grow further when he continued to engage with her family with natural ease and won them all over. It became clear that he had papa’s approval, when Mr. Heywood pulled her aside and said that even if he wished he had been consulted before the marriage, it was a decent man she had found herself and he could see that their feelings were true and deep. When she had a moment alone with mama, she gifted her a nightgown of the finest thin muslin, which she skilfully had embroidered with white roses along the neckline and hem.

“This was always meant to be a gift for your wedding night. I hope your husband will like it, my dearest girl”, she said with a fond smile. “I can hardly believe you are a grown woman and mistress of your own house now.”

The gift had made Charlotte both happy and tearful. She did not belong in this house anymore, she belonged in her own home with Sidney, but he would likely never see her wearing the lovely nightgown. She had a husband, and she had not. There would not be a true wedding night. For the first time that realisation made her a bit sad.

“Oh mama, thank you.”

Her mother came over and stroke gently over her cheek.

“He is so different from all the boys around here. Now I see why you never fell in love with any of them. When I see you with him it seems so clear to me you needed someone like him to find your match. I am so very happy for you Charlotte.”

“Thank you”, she mumbled again, choked by her mother’s words. How she hated lying to those who only wished her well and the praise of her fake husband and their love made her so ashamed.

It seemed like everyone competed to be the one showing Sidney everything around the estate and converse with him during the meals or, in the case of the younger children, get him to play with them. He went along with everything they suggested as long as she also took part of it. With delighted wonder she saw him happily kneel down on the floor to play with the little ones, or cross over muddy

fields ignoring the smudge on his shiny boots to let papa proudly demonstrate the modernised mill.

Their own game of discreet touches, which were supposed to appear secret though actually were intended to be noticed, became more advanced. His hand on her waist, hers on his arm, his brushing her hip, hers softly placed on his shoulder, the way he bent his head down when he spoke to her so it only would take the smallest movement for their lips to touch, how he spontaneously had framed her between his arms against a tree during one of the outdoor games with the children, making them both freeze before they abruptly moved apart. It was fun and innocent, but it was also something else. For every time, she wished for the moment to last longer and something inside her burned brighter.

They never touched when they were alone though. At night they slept stiffly beside one another without the slightest body contact. She wished they could have talked and laughed together lying there, but she was too apprehensive and shy to start conversation and he simply said good night and rolled over to sleep with his back turned to her. How easy it had been to speak her mind when she did not care what he thought, and how difficult it was now when she was afraid to let him know what she was thinking. The more affectionate they played when her family was near, the more withdrawn she became in private so he would not understand how much she was beginning to appreciate the intimacy. They slept further apart for every night spent in the same bed, but every night she dreamed of him.

He always remained asleep in her dreams while she undiscovered explored him. In the second night's dream he was lying on his back and she caressed his torso, let her finger run over the stomach, revelling in the unevenness of the hard muscles and the softness of the trail of downy dark hairs, before she fell asleep with her head on his chest. The third night she explored the same parts of him but now with her lips, softly brushing him, tasting his skin. The fourth and last night in Willingden, she dreamt she touched his face. Dared to feel the roughness of his stubble, caress his full soft lips and finally let her own lips graze them before she fell asleep with her face buried at the nook of his neck. She woke up on her side of the bed as usual, with him in the same distant position as when he fell asleep. It was only in her sleep she was that bold. Awake she still remained uncertain as to her own wishes and feelings and certain he would not welcome any advances from her.

The visit ended sooner than she had wished, because Sidney needed to attend to his business in London and the entire family waved them off, glad to see Charlotte so happily married.

"Are you pleased with the visit?" Sidney asked her from the opposite seat when the carriage left Willingden behind.

"I am", she smiled. "I miss them already but I'm very pleased with the stay. Thank you for taking me."

"It was my pleasure. So did I play my part as your devoted husband to your satisfaction?"

He asked in earnest, as if there was a possibility she might be displeased with his behaviour. Only a simpleton could have found his behaviour in the last days inadequate.

“Very much so, thank you. I think my parents approved of you. I always thought you might be able to charm mama, but I’m impressed you managed papa too. He told me he was so relieved to see that I had married someone who... who had the good sense to appreciate me.” Her cheeks felt hot, but she hoped they did not look it. “Perhaps he was in an especially good mood because the financial trouble has been solved. He wouldn’t tell me exactly how but when I asked how they were managing now, he said they have been able to pay off Matthew’s debts. I must admit I am quite relieved they did not have to resort to accepting help from you.”

“Would that have been so bad if I had given it willingly?”

“You have given me enough already”, she looked down and twirled her wedding ring, but thinking more of the fact that he had allowed her to invade his life than of the jewellery itself.

“You must be relieved to return to London now? So we don’t have to keep up the pretence anymore, showing affection in front of your family and sharing room?”

His piercing eyes were locked with hers now and she felt quite unsettled.

“Yes... Yes, of course it will be a relief not being under their caring but watchful eyes all the time. Not be forced to lie, not having to pretend.”

There was a tick in the little muscle at his jaw before he gave her a tight smile and averted his gaze.

“My sentiments exactly.”

She had been lying to her parents, but she was lying now too and could only pray she did it convincingly enough, so her bewildered feelings did not shine through. Surely it would only provoke his disapproval and make their common life more awkward if he understood what her feelings really were.

The truth was she would miss him touching her every now and then, she would miss having him sleeping in the bed beside her and it grieved her she would never touch him like she did in her dreams.

Chapter 9: This burning fire inside

When he set foot in the house at Bedford Place it was like he let go of a breath he had not known he was holding. During the visit to Willingden he had rarely had a moment to himself and even if it had been lovely to spend that much time with Charlotte, it had also been exhausting to guard his own his behaviour at all times. He had been forced to shift between showing affection and friendly indifference. In the company of her family he had for the first time allowed his true emotions to shine through but had to let Charlotte think *that* was pretence. Then, alone in their bed chamber he withdrew and acted like he had no feelings for her, which made him feel like he was about to implode.

To make their love story believable to the Heywoods, Sidney let his guard down and showed the affections which actually felt very natural to him by now, but he had not been prepared for how his emotions galloped when he for a while left them unrestrained. He had known he felt *something* for her, but the days in Willingden had made him understand it truly was love. Holding back again as soon as they were alone in their room was so much harder than he had imagined, like he had opened Pandora's box and barely could put the lid back on.

When she looked at him with doe eyed adoration his feelings were fuelled even if he knew it was feigned for her part. When she affectionately put her hand on his arm the touch seemed to almost burn through his clothes, through his skin and travel throughout his body, making him want to pull her close to him, bring her to

their room and undress her, kiss her all over. At night, he wanted her to lie under him writhing with pleasure instead of primly asleep beside him. This heat inside, his own intensifying want, scared him because he knew it would make her terrified if *she* knew.

He had not known if he should laugh or cry that first evening, when he found her with the nose tip barely visible under the quilt. Ravishingly beautiful with her dark curls spread over the pillow, still fearing advances of intimate nature almost as much as the first night they met. *Her* feelings were unchanged in that regard. *His* feelings on the other hand were very different. He still wanted to protect her, but he also wanted her to want him and beyond that he wanted her to feel happiness with him. He had never cared so deeply for anyone.

As she certainly did not desire him, he would sadly have to make do with keeping her safe and trying to make her happy. Reluctantly he turned his back to the beauty beside him and made his breath slow down so she would think he was asleep, but for long stared into the darkness with heart pounding hard, very aware of her sleeping form next to him.

Under the current circumstances it was a relief to be back home and get some distance to her. He was convinced it would be possible to repress the unwelcome feelings now when they would not act like lovers or sleep in the same room anymore. He missed her that night though and the nights that followed. Lying in his bed alone, he finally realised that the time in Willingden had made his feelings cross a line and that there might be no turning back. He wanted her there with

him and he wanted to hold her. The fact that he could not was slowly but surely eating away at him.

He soon understood that his resolve to make her happy despite that he could not have her, might be difficult to combine with staying sane. Spending time with her, talking and laughing with her, made him crave *more*. A few days after their return he therefore started to distance himself from her almost by instinct, to protect himself and her. He spent the days working and the evenings much as he had before he met her, drinking and gambling with friends, occasionally participating in illegal boxing, a residual habit from his time in Antigua. It did not make him happier. He was done with his bachelor ways but sadly unable to fully be with his wife. He found that every night away from home he missed her painfully and wondered what she was doing, if she felt alone having dinner by that big table alone or if it was a relief to her that he was gone. Probably the latter, he thought bitterly.

However, she confirmed that this was not the case when they had breakfast one morning. Almost two weeks had passed since they last had breakfast together, as he lately had made sure to leave the house before she woke up, but this morning she had been sitting by the table already when he descended the stairs. He was not sure what had prompted her early rise but noticed that she had dark circles under her eyes, something which made him quite concerned. He felt as drained as she looked after another restless night dreaming of her. He wanted to close his arms around her and ask her if she was alright but was afraid of the potential

emotional chain reaction is might cause and simply acknowledged her presence with a nod before he sat down and served himself. The tension was palpable.

“Do you regret marrying me?”

She broke the silence which previously had been interrupted only by the sound of tea cups touching saucers.

Startled he looked up from the newspaper he was hiding behind, aiming to avoid conversation. Her brown eyes were fixed on him and he hoped she could not see what went through his mind.

No, he did not regret it. He just wished it was very different.

“Why would you ask?”

She took a deep breath as if bracing herself.

“Maybe I am imagining but it feels like you have been avoiding me since we returned to London. I see less of you now than before we went to Willingden. I thought it went so well there, and before, I thought perhaps we were becoming... friends and now I don't know anymore. I wondered if you were regretting that you went through with this marriage after meeting my family? Did you find them disappointing? I know they may not be as fashionable as your social circle, but they are good people. ”

There was genuine sadness in her voice. He put down the newspaper, folding it carefully to buy himself some time. What should he say that neither exposed him, nor made her think he was wilfully avoiding her? The last thing he wanted was to hurt her.

“I don’t regret it, and especially not after meeting your wonderful family, but I also see it for what it is; an arrangement to get you away from the brothel and keep your reputation intact. Nothing more, nothing less. I have my business and social life to tend to and I assumed you might appreciate to see less of me.”

“Oh.”

She looked down on her plate and chewed her bottom lip. He felt the urge to kiss her, just another confirmation that he should spend as little time alone with her as possible.

“Is it not so?”

For a moment there was a flutter of hope inside his chest.

“It’s only that, my days are so tedious. I don’t have any social life here besides you. I understand if you don’t have time to be with me, but I don’t know anyone else in London. I don’t want to whine or seem ungrateful, but you have seen where I come from and I hate being idle and useless. Perhaps I could be of service to you, help you with your business somehow?”

She met his eyes again, looking so hopeful that it made his stomach twist. Her question and eagerness to help made him smile, even if it saddened him that it was company in general she was missing, rather than his particular presence. He would have enjoyed involving her as a partner in his affairs, to get her advice and support, but that would mean spending more time with her and he should not, no matter how tempting. It would only end badly.

“I’m sure you could, I know you are very clever, but people would talk if I had my wife working for me”, he dismissed the idea. “I do see your point however and

admit I have been remiss in introducing you in my social circle. If I try to improve that, will it make you happier?"

"It would, thank you. I thought perhaps you did not wish to introduce me, and I didn't want to impose, but maybe I can make some new friends."

She gave him a weak smile and he had the nagging feeling there was something else she wanted from him, but since she did not seem inclined to spell it out, he let it be.

They continued the meal in silence and went their separate ways afterwards. He missed their companionable conversations and would have loved to join her looking at maps or doing anything else together but knew if it was for the better if he did not.

She had been right assuming that he wilfully had postponed introducing her to his friends but mistaken in regard to the reason. Even if nothing would have made him prouder than showing her off as his wife, it would mean that they once again had to pretend to be happily married and that was a dangerous game. At least for him. To make her feel less lonely he re-considered this approach.

Something had to be done so she would not be quite so miserable and spending time together with others was a better option than spending more time with her alone. In the weeks that followed he stayed good to his word and introduced her to his closest friend Lord Babington, his fiancée Esther Denham and some other acquaintances who all welcomed her among them after recuperating from the shocking news that the permanent bachelor Sidney Parker had eloped and

married. He knew that there were speculations about the back-story but did not care as long as the truth remained concealed and Charlotte's reputation was untarnished. Only Babington knew the true nature of things and would not tell anyone.

He soon realised that he had been wrong assuming it was safer spending time with her in others' company, at least when it came to protecting his own heart and prevent his feelings from deepening.. Seeing her interact with those he counted as his friends, only made him admire her more. Initially she was a bit insecure in the new setting, but soon bloomed and participated in conversations with natural charm and wit. He often caught himself staring at her, listening to what she said, instead of partaking in the conversation himself. Mesmerised he saw her win his friends' approval, one after another.

Babington was the kind of jolly man who liked almost everyone and eagerly welcomed Charlotte, curious to finally get to know Sidney's elusive bride.

"It is a fine woman you have married, my friend", he said during a dinner party he had invited them to. The meal was finished, and the group had moved on to the drawing room.

"It is."

Part of him wanted to tell Babington to shut up, part of him wanted to proudly boast how amazing his wife was, so he ended up saying almost nothing.

"And how are you getting on, living your separate lives under the same roof? Is it as smooth as you thought it would be?"

"Not quite", he answered through gritted teeth.

Babington raised his eyebrows at the confession.

“So?”

”So what?”

”What is not to your liking.”

”I don’t know... She is always there. It gets to me.”

Babington watched him searchingly.

“Are you still only married to the name?”

Sidney looked at her across the room where she sat together with Esther. Esther was a famed high-society beauty, but nothing compared to Charlotte in his opinion.

“Yes.”

“And why is that?”

“Because that is the way we both want it.”

“Is it? Or is that the way you *think* she wants it?”

“I know it is!” he snapped.

“But not the way you want it anymore... Am I right? Is that what is ailing you?”

“Babbers, please, just leave it be.”

Taking notice of the warning in his voice, Babington had refrained from saying anything further, but Sidney knew he had not convinced him. He could only hope that Charlotte was less perceptive than his friend. It pained him how accurate Babington’s observation was. This was not how he wanted things to be, he wanted so much more. Confessing it would make it more real though, so he held his tongue even in front of his best friend.

“As you wish, but it seems to me you made a fortunate match. Don’t waste it, that is my humble advice.”

He patted Sidney’s shoulder and left him to nurse his drink.

More surprising than Charlotte winning Babington’s immediate approval was that Esther liked her too. Esther Denham was a graceful but reserved lady, who usually did not warm to people instantly, but she could not help being charmed by Sidney’s country bride. She was naïve and sweet in a refreshing way, yet intelligent, opinionated and humorous and even the normally blasé Esther found her quite irresistible and declared they would surely be good friends. Babington had not revealed the true nature of the marriage to her and she was instantly struck by the almost tangible tension between the Parkers. She could easily imagine how passionate they must be when they were alone, and it made her long for her own wedding night to come soon. Like everyone else Esther had thought Sidney Parker a lost cause and Charlotte must truly be a remarkable girl to have penetrated the indifferent facade he always had kept up towards all other ladies. She had many high-born friends who would have allowed themselves to stoop to marrying a self-made man and entrepreneur if that man was indeed Sidney Parker, but he had brushed them off one after one, politely but efficiently. Charlotte had succeeded where all others had failed and hence she triggered Esther’s curiosity already before they met. Once they got acquainted, Esther found her absolutely charming and immediately took it upon her to introduce Charlotte to all her friends. Sidney felt relieved knowing his wife would not need to be alone anymore and hoped this would make her happier.

Babington and Esther were only two of many that soon congratulated Sidney for having married such a wonderful woman. Even the normally cynical Crowe told him that he could see a certain appeal in her, that she seemed to have spunk. Sidney found that for each new person who told him what a fortunate match he seemed to have made, the well wishes made him feel a bit more choked. For every kind comment, his doubts increased that he would be able to keep the charade up for much longer. What was he supposed to do?

“Esther told me we are invited to a ball together with them next Saturday. Is it so?”

Charlotte interrupted his thoughts during the carriage ride home from the dinner party.

“Err yes, that is true.”

He realised she was waiting for him to say something more.

“So yes, Babbers, Esther and a few others with whom you are acquainted with will be there. Would you like to go?”

“Would you like to bring me? I thought as you had not mentioned it, perhaps you didn’t want...” she interrupted herself.

“What did I not want?”

“To introduce me on such an occasion where so many of the *beau monde* will be gathered?”

“I’m sorry you would think that. That is far from the truth. I...”

Truth was, he was terrified to dance with her, to hold her in his arms for a while.

That was the only reason he had not told her of the ball.

“I thought I might have to go away a few days for business so I wouldn’t be in town for the ball, but in the end I don’t need to. If you want to attend, it would be my pleasure to bring you.”

“Are you sure? You would have to introduce me as your wife to more people than you have up to now. Are you willing to do that?”

“Of course”, he answered casually. “You are a gentleman’s daughter and you are beautiful and well-versed. Why would I not want to introduce you?”

“Everyone will know you are married.”

“Everyone who matters to me already knows. You have met my closest friends here in London. I have written my family in Sanditon to tell them.”

“Have you?”

”Yes. My marriage to you is nothing I am ashamed of and I know they will be thrilled to meet you one day.”

He did not doubt they would be, he was only dreading playing this charade in front of them.

“If you want to go, let us go.”

“Thank you.”

Spontaneously she touched his knee in a gesture of gratitude and the jolt it sent through him made him flinch. Embarrassed she quickly retracted her hand and he immediately missed the touch.

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From the moment she came down the stairs, he knew this was an awful mistake. She was always beautiful, but this evening she was so stunning that his heart ached from knowing she was not his for real. She wore one of her evening gowns, a creation in golden silk and chiffon which enhanced her own warm colours. It emphasized how delicate her figure was, but the décolletage also revealed the full and beautiful shape of her breasts in the most flattering way. How he wanted her in this moment. He wanted to lift her in his arms and carry her up those stairs to his bed and do ungodly things to her, things to make her scream his name. He diverted his gaze so she would not see what was on his mind.

“Will it not do?” she asked insecurely when he said nothing, and he had to pull himself together and look at her again, smiling.

“It will do very well.”

If she only knew.

His desperation grew as the evening went on. He could see the admiring looks other men gave her. No wonder because she was dazzling. She smiled kindly and made conversation without being flirtatious, but still he was bothered by emerging thoughts of what it would be like if she one day fell in love with someone else. He was sure she would never do anything to shame him, but it would be hard enough anyway. She was his wife and gave him no reason to be jealous, still angst took hold of him merely from imagining what it would be like to see her look at someone with loving eyes and know that he was the one standing in her way to marry for love.

He had not intended to dance with her, had thought he somehow would get away with not dancing, but Babbers began joking that he must for sure be the first one to introduce his wife to the amusements of a London dance floor and so there was no escape.

“Do you wish to dance?” he asked nervously, both hoping and not hoping she would say no.

“Yes.”

Her answer was so soft, like she was saying yes to something else and the way she looked up on him when her gloved hand slid into his made him tremble inside.

He knew he was only supposed to support her hand, not really wrap it in his like he did. He knew he was supposed to hold her at some distance but closed the gap between their bodies. He was not sure he did all steps like he should even if he normally was a skilled dancer, and he could not bear to spin her far away because he wanted to keep her close to him. Strangely, her body was like clay in his hands, following his silent directions, adapting to the slightest pressure, moulding itself after him like they were one. If their compatibility when dancing was any indication of what it would be like to make love to her... He did not even dare to finish the thought.

He never wanted to let go. Holding her like this in his arms, he felt like he was going to combust from the strong emotions inside him.

When the music stopped and the dance was over, a few long seconds passed when neither of them moved away. He was unable to and she was probably too

courteous to break away before her husband did. Everything around them had stilled and disappeared from his field of vision. He saw only her, flushed from the dance and looking at up him with her big dark eyes, her chest heaving just like his own. The only sound he heard was his blood gushing in his ears, his heart beating hard, his breaths, her breaths. He wanted her madly. She was the one and only he wanted. He wanted everything else to disappear so he could let his lips crash to hers.

Then he remembered how things really were and what an absolute fool he was. It would not matter if everything else disappeared, because she did not want him like that, so it would never happen even if they were alone. Abruptly he let go of her and stepped away. He noticed that she seemed confused, which was natural as he for a while had allowed himself to be absorbed by her and danced too intimately, only to then act so brusquely when he realised his mistake. He felt anger directed towards himself rise inside. What was she supposed to think? He could not keep doing this to her or to himself. He had to get away from her. Now. Desperately he let his gaze sweep around the room and unexpectedly noticed someone who might help him escape this situation.

“Excuse me Charlotte, I see an old acquaintance over there. You go find Esther and Babington.”

With a curt bow, he turned his back to her. He knew well enough that a normal polite husband would have brought his wife, not left her alone on the dance floor to find someone else’s company but he had to get away from her in this instant, or he could not be held responsible for his actions anymore. As he moved over the

floor words of reality rang in his ears and fuelled his desperation; *he loved his wife, he wanted his wife, but she did not love or want him in return.* All she felt was gratitude and it was far from enough, but he could not make her feel anything else.

He stopped in front of the woman in a striking burgundy gown who had caught his attention from a distance. In any other situation the sight of her might have been a shock, but he was so tuned in on his feelings for Charlotte that every other sensation felt like a Mrs. Eliza Campion, the woman he once had been engaged to but who had jilted him and made him take his escape as far away as to the West Indies. Recently he had heard rumours that she was widowed and had returned to London. He had not expected to meet her here.

He would likely not have cared much even before he met Charlotte and now he found that the sight of her left him completely indifferent, but he had to get away from Charlotte and distract his mind by any means possible. Eliza could perhaps offer such distraction for a while and so he escaped to her instead of from her. He threw a glance back at Charlotte and saw her remain almost frozen on the same spot on the dance floor, watching him with questioning, reproachful eyes. His heart wrenched when she gave him that look, but he did not sign for her to join him. He needed the distance now, had to cool down, so he directed his attentions to the woman in front of him.

Ten years had passed, and Eliza was now a mature woman sooner than a girl, but still very beautiful with her sapphire blue eyes, pale skin and blonde hair. Yet,

there was nothing about her that thrilled him when she smiled invitingly at him, saying his name to let him know she recognized him too. He greeted her politely and pretended to be enthusiastic about the encounter, but inside him there was no flutter, neither excitement nor anger. He simply did not care anymore about what she once had done to him or who she was now. She only served the purpose to let him distance himself from Charlotte for a while. He listened with half an ear to what she said and managed his part of the conversation but was distracted thinking of other things. He thought of how he had transformed since he last met her. He had changed gradually during his years in Antigua, growing up to be a man not a boy, hardened himself, overcome her but not trusted or cared for any other women for so long. Then he had changed anew upon meeting Charlotte and falling in love with her. For the first time he had allowed himself to open up and be vulnerable again, but nothing would come of it this time either.

No, there was hardly anything left of the young man Eliza Champion once had known. As for her, she was so different to Charlotte, he could see now that she had been already then. Prettiest of everyone but not much else to recommend her as a life-long partner in terms of intelligence, humour or kindness. Perhaps she had been the wiser of the two of them, breaking off the engagement because it was clear to him now they never had been suited to marry. Not like him and Charlotte. *Charlotte. Charlotte. Charlotte. Charlotte.*

It was like he heard her name resound inside with every heartbeat. How could he be so consumed by her? He felt like his unrequited love and want were a growing beast which he soon would be unable to contain inside himself.

“Perhaps you have heard that I am a widow now”, Eliza called on his attention.

“Err, yes, I think I heard that. My condolences.”

She smirked.

“I dare say I can bear the deprivation. Mr. Campion and I did not spend much time together. I had my interests and he had his own, which I very much encouraged. Sometimes days passed without us seeing each other and it made my life as his wife enjoyable. However, I find that being a widow suits me even better. I am free... to do whatever I want.”

She let her fingers discreetly caress up his arm and baffled he stared down at the moving hand without stopping her. Her invitation was evident.

“I am married”, he said.

“I did not say I was looking to be married again. I only said, I am free to do as pleases me now.”

Something in her words struck a chord inside him and with sudden clarity he knew what he had to do. It was not what he wanted, but he could not live like this. He would not be able to hide his fervent feelings much longer. Eliza’s words had provided him with a solution, a way out. It was an extreme measure but so much better than anything else he could think of.

It had to be done.

Chapter 10: Shifting emotions

Charlotte found it hard to decipher Sidney and follow his mood swings despite spending a considerable amount of time analysing him. Truth was that she spent most of her waking hours thinking about her husband and most of her sleeping ones dreaming of him but did not come much closer to understanding him. Just when she thought she was beginning to know him he changed again.

Before, during and the days right after the visit to Willingden much of what he did and said indicated that he wanted to know her better and wanted to spend time with her. He had not forced himself on her but seemed glad to offer his company and gradually she had enjoyed it more and more and wanted to spend time with him. Her budding affections had been nurtured by the intimacy in Willingden, his efforts to fit in there and how well everyone liked him. She had always respected her family's opinion so of course it mattered that her parents approved of him and Alison thought she had married well. Her sister's conviction that Sidney had feelings for Charlotte was certainly good for thought and there were moments when she wondered if this marriage could turn into something more than what it had started as. Therefore she was equally surprised and hurt when he suddenly withdrew soon after their return to London. Naturally, she had expected the physical signs of affection to cease, as they only were for show, but the change was more profound than so. If he had sought her company before, he now seemed to shun it and she could not understand what had provoked the shift.

Most days he left the house early and arrived home very late, without telling her anything of his doings. She was usually in bed already and ought to be sleeping but found it difficult to find peace when he was away and often did not fall asleep until she heard his steps outside. Sometimes they paused outside her door, but he never knocked.

One afternoon they bumped into each other in the hallway when he was on his way out after a brief stop at home to change clothes, and she noticed he had a black eye, but he offered no explanation. When she spontaneously raised her hand to touch the bruise he flinched, gave her a curt smile and hurried off. He had shut her off completely. It hurt.

When she first came to this house and he left her to herself, she had been annoyed and restless to stay in what she perceived almost as a jail. Now her feelings were very different. She did not mind the house or being married. She missed *him*. With him gone the house felt so empty. When he did not want to be with her or share things with her, she felt rejected.

During night time her dreams continued to be as vivid as in Willingden and evolved from quite innocent to increasingly fiery. He went from always being asleep in the dreams to waking up when she touched him. When he caught her caressing him, he was never annoyed with her, instead he smiled in acceptance and then touched her in return. She dreamt of his large hands softly stroking over her skin, tangling themselves in her hair and pulling her to him in a kiss but soon the dreams left her oddly dissatisfied because she did not have the knowledge to dream what came next. She had no experience of what it would feel like to be cared for like that by a man. She usually woke up flushed and hot with a wave of need for *more* gushing through her. Each time it was utterly disappointing to find

the bed empty and cold beside her. She wished he had at least been sleeping there again like when they were in her parents' house.

The fact that he seemed to avoid her, disturbed her more and more as the days went by and she was feeling incredibly lonely. She wrote letters to Alison, who wrote her in return, but letters travelled much too slowly. Charlotte was missing conversation and company desperately, but most of all she missed Sidney's presence.

'Sometimes you know me better than I do myself dear sister.' she wrote Alison. *'I think, no I fear, that I have fallen in love with my husband. Alas, you were quite mistaken in regard to his affections towards me. He does not return my feelings. At least I see no signs thereof. Truth is that in the last weeks I have barely seen him at all.'*

Finally, after another restless night when she had been lying awake for hours after waking up from an intense dream of him, she decided to confront him. Not with her feelings but with her lack of social life and the way he avoided her. She could not live a half-life confined between the four walls of this house. She needed something more to occupy herself with even if he did not want to give her his own precious time and so took the bull by its horns.

When he was faced with the question if he regretted marrying her, he so matter-of-factly explained his view on the arrangement, making it blatantly clear there were no emotions involved for his part and he had more important things to do than keeping her company. It hurt, it really did, but at least he offered to introduce her to his friends, and she realised she had to be thankful for something to distract her mind with.

Over the next weeks Sidney brought her to all sorts of social engagements and kindly watched over her almost like a big brother, and she sensed that with that there was a shift in him again. He still kept his distance but sometimes when she sat conversating with Esther, she caught him observing her from the other end of the room with a strange intensity to his gaze and a look that resembled pride. She had the feeling that at least he was not ashamed of her and did not regret bringing her into his social circle. She felt happier and thought that in time, perhaps, they might grow closer after all. One day he might admire her and long for her like she longed for him even if it seemed like an elusive dream now. Perhaps she could be content with this life in hope that in time it would evolve into something more.

Then came the ball and turned everything upside down again.

She was looking forward to the event for many reasons. She was curious to experience what a London ball was like and hoping to get to dance, something she enjoyed very much but rarely had had the opportunity to do in Willingden. She wondered if any of the fashionable high society gentlemen would care to dance with her, but as she tried to make herself look pretty for the night she was aware it was all for him. Dressing herself in her new amazing gown, arranging her locks, pinching her cheeks for colour, it was all for him. Only for him. She did not care a fig about anyone else. All she hoped for was to see a glimmer in Sidney's eyes indicating that he found her slightly attractive, that he was proud that she was his wife. If she saw any sign of that, her night would be complete, even if not a single person asked to dance with her.

When she walked down the stairs to meet her waiting husband, she knew she had never been prettier than she was in this moment. The deep disappointment when he held out her pelisse, looking away without so much as a word, nearly stunned her.

“Will it not do?” she could not help asking.

Then he gave her a brotherly, encouraging smile and told her it would do very well, but she felt like she had fished for the compliment, forcing him to say something, when he in truth did not care for the way she looked. Her husband remained completely unattracted to her. If he did not think her beautiful when she looked like *this*, he never would.

The ball was sumptuously spectacular, but she found it hard to enjoy herself. Initially she thought that if she was not enough in his eyes, she would hardly be in other’s either. Then she noticed how flattering and charming other men were to her, seeking her company. They requested a dance or offered to fetch her refreshments, but this made her feel mostly uncomfortable. She was married and she was in love with her husband even if he neither knew nor cared, so she did not aim to seek the attention of other men. She would not shame Sidney by acting flirtatious towards others even if he paid little attention to her. She was not the type of woman who would try to make him feel jealous.

It seemed like he did not intend to dance with her, but Lord Babington’s jokes that he for sure had to be the one to introduce her to such pleasures, made him

reluctantly ask her and she accepted. How could she not say yes to dancing with her husband, even if she was not sure if she longed for it or dreaded it?

Again, he had surprised her. When the musicians began playing, his blank expression transformed, and his focus was suddenly on her alone. He stepped closer and pulled her to him, holding her like he never had before. She had envisioned him to lead her in the dance with stiff politeness, but instead he held her with a combination of gentleness and determined strength. Unexpectedly she was wrapped up in a cocoon of sensuality and passion. There was an almost feral look to his eyes as he stared into hers, as if the dance drew out something he had tried to hide deep within. It would have scared her, had it not been that it evoked similar, wild and unfamiliar feelings in her. The way he watched her, held her, made her long to be alone with him in their bedchamber. She was enthralled by him, followed his every move with a fluidness she had not known she was capable of. She wanted to be one with him, merge with him without knowing how.

When the dance was over, she remained completely lost in him, dazed and confused. What was it he had allowed himself to show, allowed her to see a glimpse of during the dance? Was he not indifferent after all, but the contrary?

She kept watching him intently, thinking he might say something but instead his expression changed again, like he woke up from a trance and wondered what the hell had been doing.

When he abruptly left her to herself on the dancefloor, she did not understand. How could he turn his back to her after sharing *that* and go to speak to another

woman, without even bringing her? Incredulous Charlotte saw him approach a lady she did not know. It was a striking blonde beauty, tall and slender like a willow and so very different from her own short and curvier statue. Moments ago she had relished feeling small in his arms, seeing him next to that woman she suddenly wished she looked different.

“Is anything the matter?”

Esther had appeared by her side.

“No, I just... it was a wonderful dance and I got a bit caught up in it.”

“I could see why.” Esther smirked.

“Why?”

“Because you and Sidney looked almost nauseatingly in love when you were dancing. Most inappropriate even for a married couple, but I envy you”, her friend chuckled.

She was close to denying it but bit her tongue. For all Esther knew they were in love.

”I am glad to know the two of you are so happily married or I would have been worried seeing Sidney talking to that minx.”

Anxious, Charlotte turned and saw him still engaged in conversation with the blonde woman.

“An old acquaintance he said. Who is she?”

She tried to sound casual and ignore the uneasy flutter of jealousy in her stomach.

“Oh, you don’t know? That is Mrs. Eliza Champion. She recently became one of the wealthiest widows in the country, but long ago she was engaged to Sidney. I’m sure he didn’t tell you because there is not much to tell. It must have been ten years ago.”

Why did she feel like the walls were closing in on her?

“He told me he had been engaged once but I didn’t know she was here in London.”

“I heard she returned from her country estate when her husband died. I think it might be the first time he has encountered her since.”

Esther scrutinised the two with narrowed eyes.

“*She* looks like she wouldn’t mind to renew the acquaintance now, but obviously she has nothing to fetch there as he is so madly in love with his wife.”

Knowing well that he likely was not, even if the dance had been special, Charlotte’s heart was thumping very hard in her chest now.

“But how could she even think so, when he is a married man?”

“Ah, women like her are the most dangerous ones. Perhaps she does not know he is married but perhaps she knows and does not care. She is a widow in possession of a fortune, so she never has to marry again. She is completely independent and as long as she is reasonably discreet she can do whatever she wants because she does not need to bother much about her reputation. I bet she would not hesitate

to take a married man as her lover, perhaps even think it is for the better because then she knows there cannot be any proposal, just a pleasurable arrangement.”

“A pleasurable arrangement? People do such things?”

Charlotte was shocked. Obviously she knew men went to brothels and some had mistresses, but the idea that a respectable lady could take a man she knew was married as her lover was scandalous on a different level.

“*Men* do it all the time. You should only know how many among the high society men that have mistresses on the side. You and I are lucky who have found ourselves men who adore us.”

Charlotte thought that Esther was indeed lucky, but things were different for her own part.

“But ladies?”

“As I said, there is a small number of ladies who are wealthy and independent so they can do as they wish. Discretion is of utmost importance to them of course, or they would be banned from all social life, but it does happen. The Prince Regent himself is rumoured to have an affair with such a lady, Lady Worchester. Of course everyone is fighting to be acquainted with *her*. That liaison is accepted by everyone.”

Charlotte’s mind spun.

“Do you mean to say that if I was not sure Sidney loved me, I would have reason to worry about Mrs. Champion?”

“No doubt. Just look at how she touches his arm now, a discreet but definite invite. Oh, Charlotte, you look absolutely devastated but I’m sure you have nothing at all to worry about. He will turn her down or politely pretend like nothing.”

She wished she had been as convinced as Esther. There had been something tangible shivering in the air between them during the dance, but Mrs. Campion’s appearance and the fact that he chose to stand over there with her instead of here with Charlotte, made her doubt what she thought she experienced.

“Men usually seek other company in their bed only if it is not kept warm by their wife. If you feel worried by Mrs. Campion after all, just make sure to be extra affectionate when you come home tonight.”

The heat in the room and the surrounding crowd suddenly made her feel like she could not breathe properly, and she excused herself and went searching for a balcony where she could get some fresh air. She wanted to escape the sight of Mrs. Campion touching Sidney’s arm possessively.

Further down a long hallway she eventually found a room where the double doors to a balcony stood open and she inhaled the chilly fresh air as if she was a fish on dry land, finally allowed to return into the water.

“Is anything the matter?”

She nearly jumped, realising she was not alone in the room. When she turned around she noticed a very elegant lady seated on a chaise longue, her kind brown eyes fixed on Charlotte.

“I just needed some air.”

“Are you sure, you look quite distressed my dear. Come sit here.” She patted the seat beside her.

Apprehensively Charlotte walked over and sat down.

“Now, please tell me what is troubling you.”

“I cannot. You do not even know me.”

“I find that sometimes it is easier to share your troubles with a stranger, someone who will not be around to judge you or check if you live up to the advice they give.” She smiled. “And if it makes it easier to confide in me, I am Susan.”

“I’m Charlotte Heywood... Parker I mean. I’m Mrs. Parker.”

Susan raised her eyebrows.

“It sounds like you are not certain? That means either that you married very recently, or you are uncertain about your marriage. Which is it?”

“Both I suppose.”

Charlotte hesitated. It seemed very inappropriate to tell Susan anything, but she was desperate to confide in someone.

“We married not so long ago, only two months. We did not marry for love but for reasons I cannot share with you.”

“It sounds like there might be a hidden scandal?” Susan mused.

“There nearly was but he saved me from that. He offered to marry me even if he does not care for me, to save my reputation and I accepted. I did not want to marry him but saw myself forced to, but now...”

“Now?”

“Everything has changed, and I don’t know what to think anymore.”

“Your feelings has changed?”

“Yes, but his have not.”

“How do you know? You said he does not care for you but judging by his actions it seems like he cared a great deal.”

“He may care but only because he is a good man. He does not have romantic feelings for me, and I know that because he does not want my company. When we had to share bed a few nights he did not even try to touch me, there has been nothing to indicate he has feelings for me lately except...”

“Yes?”

“When we danced tonight, the way he held me and looked at me then. He was so different then and now I am totally confused.”

“I see why you would be befuddled. Dear Charlotte, I would say that a dance is as close as a man and woman ever get to what married couples do in the privacy of their bedchamber outside of said bedchamber. If you felt during the dance that he has feelings for you, I think your instinct is right. It is likely so that he let emotions that he normally represses shine through during the dance.”

“You think so?”

“I think it is very likely. I have not met your husband but meeting you I am thinking that any man would be foolish not to appreciate a wife like you.”

“What should I do?”

“Does he know how you feel?”

“No!”

“If you love him, tell him.”

It was unimaginable.

“If I don’t dare?”

“Show him. I cannot imagine anything sadder than a couple who love each other, spending their lives together without telling one another. You need to be brave my girl.”

“There is another woman here tonight who I think may try to claim him. One he was engaged to once.”

“As you are wed that would be shameful of her indeed, and if he is in love with you she does not stand a chance. A man can never be conquered if he already is in love. He is your husband to the name, now make sure to let him know you want him to be for real. Claim him. He *is* yours.”

She wished she could ask Susan what a wife was supposed to do in the marital bed except just lying there but that would have been asking too much from a

stranger even if she was kind and understanding and seemed well-versed in matters like this.

This night, both Esther and Susan had in their different ways encouraged her to visit her husband's bed and she was beginning to think that maybe, maybe she should.

Several times already she had brought out the key Sidney had given her to safeguard. She had longed to open that door but not dared, because she had not thought he wanted it and because she did not know what to expect on the other side. The look in his eyes tonight, the spark of jealousy Mrs. Campion provoked in her and the advice she had received made her think that perhaps it was time to take the leap.

When she returned to the others after saying goodbye to Susan, Sidney was already there. He seemed very distracted and she was not sure he even had registered she had been gone and after another half-hour of brooding silence, he asked if she would mind going home. She wondered about his behaviour. Either she had been mistaken about the fire in his eyes before or he had hidden it well again. She hoped it was the latter and tried to hang on to the hope Susan had induced in her rather than the jealousy Esther unintentionally had caused her to feel.

In the carriage home he did not utter one word and upon arrival at Bedford place he politely bid her goodnight before she went up the stairs. He remained standing at the bottom of the stairs and when she glanced down over her shoulder and saw

him still watching her in the flapping candle light, she thought she caught a glimpse of the same raw emotion she had seen during the dance. It lasted only for a second before he dropped his gaze and in the dim light she could not be sure, but it was enough for her to make up her mind. No matter how terrifying it was to take the step she would visit his room this night.

In her chambers she took her time to nervously prepare. She pulled off the gown, chemise, drawers and stays, washed herself and put on a dab of perfume. Then she brought out the beautiful nightgown her mother had gifted her and pulled it over her head. She removed the hairpins to let her hair fall loose around her shoulders. Her heart was beating faster by the minute. She was not sure she had the courage to do this, but the need to finally be with him as his wife exceeded her fears. She stopped in front of the full-length mirror to look at herself and realised she was even more beautiful than she had been earlier tonight, she looked like a blushing bride on her wedding night with the thin material of the nightgown enticingly giving away her forms rather than hiding them. She thought it brazen to appear in front of him like this, but as her mother had thought it suitable for a wedding night then so be it.

When she at last brought out the key from the jewellery box where she kept it, the cool metal felt like it burned her palm, almost pulsating like a live thing.

Trembling she padded over to the door. She stopped there for a moment, leaning her forehead to the solid wood, bracing herself, before she with shaking hands put she key in the lock and turned it around.

What would he say? Would he welcome her? She had to know.

Silently the door swung open on its hinges, but she remained frozen in the doorway. Nearly an hour had passed since they returned home and there was no reason why he would not be in bed by now, yet the moonlight shining through the window revealed an empty room. The bed was uncrumpled, untouched. He was not there and had not been.

With an unmotivated sense of embarrassment, as no one was there to see her, she hastily backed away, closed the door and locked it again. Her cheeks burned with shame almost as if he had been there to reject her in person. She put away the key in the box again, before she jumped into her own bed and hid under the quilt with tears burning in her eyes. She was not sure why, but she sensed deep inside that it was a bad sign that his bed was empty. He ought to have been there. Where had he gone in the middle night?

She slept badly, with a strange pressure over her chest and when morning came she was more tired than when she went to bed. With an ominous feeling in her gut she went down the stairs, wondering if he would be there for breakfast and what mood she would find him in. She now regretted going to his room in the first place. What signs of affection had he really shown her to make her feel that it was the right thing to do? How unwise of her to follow the advice of a stranger who did not know him. It was fortunate that he had not been there, thus sparing her from deep embarrassment.

She almost stumbled over him in the library, slouching in an armchair, wearing the same attire as yesterday but now wrinkled and disordered, with the cravat untied. There were dark circles under his eyes, a stubble on his chin and his usually so neat hair was dishevelled. An empty tumbler and a half empty bottle of brandy were standing on the table next to him. He looked exhausted, hungover or still drunk and very much like he had not slept in his own bed.

She wondered if he had slept in *any* bed.

Had he slept or been awake in Mrs. Champion's bed?

When he met her eyes, the look in his was hollow and he did not light up in a smile. The man who had held her so close in the dance yesterday was gone, as was the one who happily had accompanied her to the dressmaker and laughed with her over maps. This one felt like a stranger, almost more intimidating than the first time she had met him because now there was a coldness in his eyes.

If she had not been certain last night when she found his bed empty, she was now - he was not hers and he never would be.

"There you are", he said with coarse voice, like he had been waiting for her and she had taken too long to come.

"Were you waiting for me?"

"I need to talk to you."

Her heart skipped a beat and she sat down on the nearest chair because her legs felt wobbly. There was something about his voice, his manners that provoked the reaction.

“I have been thinking...”

He looked like he had been carousing rather than thinking, or perhaps something worse. The mere thought made her feel like crying and vomiting simultaneously. He avoided eye contact as he continued talking.

“I thought this fake marriage would be easier than it has proved to be. I did not think having you around would interfere much with my daily life, but I was wrong. It bothers me that you always are around, so I never feel like I have my own house to myself anymore. It is like I cannot find peace here anymore and that drains me.”

The words pouring out of him hurt and sucked the air out of her, much like a punch in the stomach.

“I am obliged to accompany you to social events, introduce you to people, dance with you... it just goes on. I don't even get to see my friends alone anymore because you need to be entertained.”

Another punch. His words were mean and hurtful. She knew she should talk back and tell him he was behaving badly. She would have if anyone else had talked to her like that, but it hurt too much. Being in love with him rendered her defenceless. She hated that her voice was so trembling and weak when she answered.

“I thought you enjoyed it too? I never meant to be so demanding.”

“Perhaps you never meant to, but you are! And I don’t enjoy it. I need space or I will suffocate”, he said gruffly and abruptly got to his feet to pace the room, running his fingers through his hair in affect.

“I make you feel...?” she was lost for words

“I need my life back as it was. I want things to return to normal. I don’t want to come home to a house where a stranger is a permanent house guest. I want to be able to see whomever I want whenever I want, without you in tow, and bring people here without you barging in.”

“It was you who said we ought to get to know each other better...”

She fought to keep her voice steady.

“Well, I have changed my mind.”

She wished she had no idea where this sudden outburst came from, but it was easy to guess. Mrs. Campion. He had reacquainted himself with his old flame last night, one which probably never had burned out. She was widowed now, but he was regrettably stuck in a sham marriage. It had been tolerable before, now it was not.

“If that is how you feel, what do you want me to do? We are married, we cannot change that even if we want to. Believe me, I never wanted this either.”

For a brief moment, their eyes locked and there was so much raw emotion in his. He seemed truly desperate to be rid of her. He looked away again.

“I have a solution, so we will not disturb each other anymore.”

She would not disturb *him* anymore. He had already ceased disturbing her, she thought sadly.

“What do you propose?”

She was afraid to ask.

“You are a country girl who enjoys living in the countryside, much more than living in London I suspect. I told you I own a country estate. I think you should go there.”

She stared at him in shock.

“You are sending me away?”

“Trust me, it is for the best.”

He sounded strangely choked.

“But why?”

“I think you will be happier in the country, there will be lots of things you can engage yourself in, like you are used to. You may even be able to assist my foreman like you assisted your father if you wish to. *I* will definitely be happier here with you gone.”

If his previous words had hurt her, it was nothing compared to this. There was a cool finality to his voice, and she knew his mind was already made up. She was an obstacle which had to be removed, he did not care what her sentiments were. He had never made her feel like a possession before, but now he did.

She took a deep breath, fisted her hands, pressing the nails into her palms to keep herself together.

“You said once you had not paid the brothel owners for me to be yours, you had only bought me my freedom, but now you won’t let me take part in deciding my own future?”

“I am allowing you to be free Charlotte, free to do what you want, just not in this house.”

Frustration was evident in his voice.

“And if I don’t want to go?”

“It doesn’t matter. You are just being obstinate. In time you will understand and agree that the decision I have made is for the best.”

She doubted it.

“Can I not go home to Willingden instead?”

The thought of going somewhere new where she knew no one was terrifying.

“No, that would make people gossip. It is not that uncommon that husbands and wives live apart...”

So that husbands can have mistresses, she thought bitterly.

“...but it is not acceptable for a married woman to return to her parents. You will still stay in my household, just not with me.”

“But...”

“Enough! End of discussion!” His voice nearly broke with upset emotions.

They stared each other out. He with brow frowned furiously for being questioned and she trying to hold back the tears that pricked behind her eyelids. She had been willing to give herself to him last night, longed to be his wife for real. She had thought that perhaps it was what he wanted too and been willing to put herself out there to find out. How mistaken she had been.

Perhaps this was for the best. It would be unbearable to live under the same roof as him under the current circumstances.

“When do I leave?”

His tense shoulders dropped when he realised she would accept his command without further objections.

“I think it is for the better if you leave already tomorrow, so start packing immediately.”

She was not sure how she managed to stand up and walk when she felt like her entire body was shaking almost feverishly, but she had to get away from him before she started crying and forced herself to move.

“Charlotte”, he called for her just as she reached the door and she turned around, hoping he would say he regretted it all.

“Bring all your things, don’t leave anything behind.”

“You don’t intend for me to ever come back, do you?”

His eyes were completely devoid of emotion before he turned his back to her.

“No.”

Then she spun around and ran upstairs.

Behind closed doors she let her tears flow freely, breaking inside. How foolish of her to fall in love with a man who from the first moment had told her he did not want her, who had told her he did not want a wife because someone had broken his heart once. He was willing to help her, that was all. Now when his long-lost love had reappeared, the situation was changed, and he wanted her out of the way.

With sight still blurred by tears she eventually started packing. He had said not to leave anything behind, so she carefully folded all the beautiful gowns and other garments he had gifted her. The memory of the happy day when they had picked them out together made tears well up in her eyes with renewed intensity. She did not care about the dresses, she wanted to be with him. More than anything she wanted him to tell her to stay here with him. She wanted the ring on her finger to mean something.

She had not married Sidney Parker out of love, but she loved him now even if he did not deserve it.

Chapter 11: Spiralling down

When Charlotte had swept out of the room and disappeared up the stairs, Sidney collapsed in the armchair feeling more battered than he ever had after a boxing match. He was close to crying from exhaustion and what just had passed. He had achieved exactly what he had set out to do, but it left him feeling far from triumphant.

He had spent the entire night here, drinking to numb his desperation and trying to figure out how to realise the idea Eliza Campion had planted in his head. He found it ironic that the woman who once broke his heart should be the one to inspire him now when he felt at risk to have it broken anew. He had not been blind to her shameless advances and could not care less, in fact it irked him that she would think he wanted to be her lover when she had rejected him as her husband once, but he was grateful for the solution she unknowingly had presented him when it came to Charlotte.

After last night he had known he would not be able to hide his feelings for her much longer if she stayed in his proximity. The solution was to not have her here.

'Mr. Campion and I did not spend much time together. I had my interests and he had his own, which I very much encouraged. Sometimes days passed without us seeing each other and it made my life as his wife enjoyable', Eliza had said, setting the cog wheels of his brain in motion.

He was ashamed of how out of control his feelings and his desire for Charlotte were. Had he been another man he would likely have sought his release in a brothel or with Eliza since she offered it, but for him this was about so much more than a physical need. He knew that the arms of another woman would not even give him temporary satisfaction, only cause him to feel self-loathing. He wanted only Charlotte and he wanted her to be his with mind and body, not one without the other.

He wished for her to be happy and safe and was certain she would feel neither if she knew his mind. His love and lust would make her uncomfortable and scared that he one day might claim her. If he slipped, she would never be at ease in her own home again and neither would he even if he, in difference to her, knew he never would force her. Telling her would be selfish and accomplish nothing, so he must find another way out.

Tormented he had deliberated different options all through the night. There was no way to terminate the marriage. Returning her to her parents could not be done, it would be too big a scandal and reflect badly on her. There was a third option though; to let her quietly settle in his house on the countryside.

He had bought the estate, which bordered to Babington's larger one, as an investment sometime after his return from Antigua. He almost never went there but handled it from a distance by corresponding with the grounds keeper, Stringer. If she were to move there, months or even years could go by without them seeing each other.

The more he thought of it, the more convinced he became that this would be the right thing to do. He knew that she missed being useful and involved in practical matters like she had been at her father's estate. She would likely be much more content in the countryside than she ever could be here in London, where her only options were to socialise and look decorative. She did not love him, so she would not miss him. That pain would be his alone to endure but would for sure fade away with time and distance, thus fulfilling the purpose of the whole exercise to remove her.

As the night went on and the content in the brandy bottle shrank he convinced himself that this was the only way. Even so, the raging angst inside him only seemed to increase as dawn came closer, because this was not how he wanted things to be and he dreaded telling her.

Knowing Charlotte, she would put up resistance at first because she would not approve of him making such a decision over her head even if he as her husband had the legal right to. He would have to be firm in his stance and in the end she might agree it was for the better, but he hated that she would think he got rid of her only because she was an inconvenience in his life. Yet, this was what he had to make her believe to conceal the true reason. His deepest wish was the two of them planning a future together, as equals, but it could not be. He simply had to live through this.

It turned out to be even harder than he expected. The reproachful look in her eyes when she saw the state he was in was only the beginning and from there it got worse. It was excruciatingly difficult to lie to her face, tell her she suffocated him,

and he needed space when it was the contrary. She seemed sad and disappointed rather than angry and it took everything he had not to close the gap between them, wrap her in his arms and tell her how he felt. He could barely look at her out of fear of breaking down, he spoke to her harshly because he dreaded he might start crying. When she finally left after accepting defeat, he was so full of mixed emotions that he felt completely empty instead. It was like the emotional overload made him black out inside.

He avoided her for the rest of that day, locking himself up in his room and only came downstairs next morning to see her off. He had considered avoiding even that, but the pull to see her one last time was too strong. He was not sure if it was co-incidence or deliberate, but instead of any of the garments he had gifted her she was wearing the same dress and blue spencer she had that morning when she came down to greet him in the brothel, the first time he saw her as she was.

Natural and unspoiled. She looked just as fresh and lovely now as she had then, and his heart twisted. He had not known he would come to love her then. Would he have put himself through this misery if he had? Deep down he knew the answer to that, to save her he would have done the same a thousand times over.

When she stood before him, he noticed her eyes were red-rimmed as if she had been crying. He had not expected her to take it so hard to be sent away from a house she never really had considered her home. Again, he had to fight the strong urge to hold her and repeat to himself that his intentions were good, and this would for certain be for the best. She would get over changing a London house for a country house soon enough.

“So, this is goodbye”, she almost whispered.

It was a statement, not a question but he answered nevertheless. Perhaps to make himself understand it really was so.

“Yes.”

“Then I should return this to you.”

She held out her closed hand and spontaneously he reached out his palm too, to receive whatever her fist was hiding. Her touch burned him but the small object more so. It was her wedding ring.

“No”, he protested.

She looked up in surprise as he grasped around her wrist and gently slid the ring on her finger for a second time. Her hand was trembling, and he fought to keep his own steady, knowing this might be the last time he touched her.

“You need to keep it on, or people will wonder.”

Truth was, he could not bear the idea that she would not wear his ring, that there would be no sign that she ever had been his, if only to the name.

She bit her lip, accepted with a nod and made a move for the door. There was no reason to prolong this awkward moment.

“Don’t think too badly of me.”

The words slipped over his tongue unpermitted and made her meet his eyes again. How could soft brown eyes be so piercing?

“I won’t. I will forever be grateful to you for saving me. I wish things were different, but I understand that you are doing what you believe is best. I assure you that I will think of you as little as I possibly can.”

With that she turned her back to him, almost ran out through the door, down the stairs and swiftly stepped into the waiting carriage without looking back at him again. He wished he had not spoken, because her words left him feeling worse than before. *She would not think of him at all.* God, he hoped he would cease to think of her too in due time.

He remained standing there, watching as the carriage drove away and thought he had closed the brief chapter of his life that was Charlotte, one which had been equally beautiful and painful to live. In this last shivering moment there was nothing but pain. His eyes were blinded by tears, his limbs paralysed with grief and it felt like his heart crumbled to dust sooner than the sound of the horses disappeared.

In the weeks that followed, he learned the hard way that it was not so easy to turn the page. He wondered how such a small person could leave such an immense empty space behind her. She had only been part of his life for a few months and much of that time he had spent trying to avoid her, yet everything reminded him of her, and her absence seemed ubiquitous. It was like her non-presence was more tangible than the things actually surrounding him. There were memories of her in the library, the parlour, at the dining table, in the carriage, even in his bed even if she never had set foot there in person. He bitterly marvelled at how precious moments transformed into purely painful ones, simply because she was

not present anymore. He wanted to tell her things, show her things and again and again had to remind himself that he could not. He would never be able to share that again.

A brief impersonal letter came, letting him know she had arrived safely and was establishing herself there, but after that it was silent. He knew she had no reason to write him after what he had done, and even less reason to tell him she missed him, still he irrationally wished she would. He had picked up a quill several times and dipped it in ink, but in the end just held it to the paper until a big black stain bled on it. If he had sent it to her it would accurately have summarised how he felt, but he simply crumpled the paper and threw it away, remaining silent whilst withering away inside. He had been devastated after Eliza and thought nothing ever could be worse than the stormy feelings the young version of him had survived, but this ran deeper and was so much harder. Charlotte had made him live again, not merely exist, and now it was like that life was seeping out of him.

He found spending time home alone increasingly unbearable. As a happily engaged man, Babington was less out and about than during his single days, but Sidney resumed his acquaintance with Crowe and some other wild bachelors and drank away his evenings, interrupted by frequent illegal boxing matches where he fought more furiously than ever. He relished the physical pain of getting punched as it was a welcome variation to only hurting inside. Stumbling to bed in a drunken state was the only way he could fall asleep, even if the sleep that followed was restless filled with dreams of her. He was not sure if he tortured or consoled himself when he sometimes went into her chambers instead of his own, sat on the

edge of the bed stroking over the quilt, unable to hold back the tears, then laid down to sleep there. In the beginning he could feel her lingering scent and when it faded he grieved it like losing her a second time. He was only half a man without her but refused to accept that she had the power to unknowingly destroy him even in her absence.

He lost track of the weekdays and did not care if he slept away half the day. It was therefore not an unusual circumstance that he was still in bed around noon, hungover from last night, when he one day was disturbed by some commotion coming from the stairs. He could make out protests from his housekeeper and the insistent voice of Babington approaching. The door swung open and just as he had suspected Babington appeared in the opening with Mrs Huffinton in tow.

“I’m terribly sorry, Sir. I told him you were sleeping”, she apologised with an anxious face.

“You can leave us now.” Babington gently pushed her out and closed the door, then merciless went straight to the windows and pulled the curtains open to let the sunlight in. Sidney groaned as it cut like sharp knives into his eyes.

“Sidney Parker! What the hell are you doing?!” Babington brawled, making Sidney’s head hurt more than before.

“Leave me be”, he groaned in response and pulled the quilt over his head, a strategy which worked only the few seconds it took for Babbers to transfer himself to the bed and brusquely pull away the quilt.

“Damn it Babbers!”

“Have you lost your mind?”

“I had a bit much to drink last night, not the end of the world. When did you become such a moralist?”

“I’m not talking about that even if you are in a sad state. I heard the news that you sent Charlotte away? Why?”

“What’s it to you?”

“WHY?!”

“I didn’t want her here.”

“I don’t believe you! I think you wanted her here very much and the fact that she is not, is what made you end up like this. If I am to believe Crowe you have been constantly intoxicated for two weeks and in between almost passed out because you allow yourself to be beaten up so badly.”

“Maybe. Who is counting anyway?”

His mouth was dry like a desert and a drink seemed like a brilliant idea.

“*You* should be, it is your life.”

“And if I don’t care?”

“I will not even dignify that with an answer, you are pathetic. I’m going to make you sober up, and clean up, because now you look and smell like something that has been chewed and then vomited in the gutter. After that we are going to have a serious conversation.”

“Can you not leave me in peace? That is all I’m asking for.”

“Not when you do this to yourself. For Crowe to think you are drinking too heavily, things have to be really bad. I refuse stand by passively when you are ruining yourself and your life, because I am your friend Sidney. You may not like me right now, but you *need* me, so get your sorry arse out of that bed.”

An hour later they were seated in the library. Sidney was clean, shaven, had fresh clothes on and had been forced by Babington to drink strong coffee and eat a bread roll. He still looked haggard but much less so than before.

“Now, will you please tell me what has happened?”

“I don’t know why you of all people need to ask? You *know* it was a sham marriage. I put us both out of our misery.”

Babington watched him with sharp eyes.

“Misery? Who do you think you are fooling Sidney? I have known you for a long time, both before and after Antigua and I have never seen you as happy as with Charlotte. What you had with her was far from ‘misery’, sham marriage or not. Where is she?”

“At my country estate”, he muttered.

“At your...?! What on Earth possessed you to send her there? Or did she ask to go?”

“She did not want to go...”

“You took the decision about where she is to stay over her head?”

“... but I know it is the best solution.”

Incredulous, Babington shook his head.

“Solution to *what* exactly?”

“That I cannot stand having her around!”

“But why? She is a lovely woman.”

“Because I love her!”

He lashed out, then buried his face in his palms.

“...and she doesn't love me.”

“Finally we are approaching the heart of the matter.”

Sidney looked up again, desperation radiating from his eyes.

“I always said I would marry only for love and consequently never would marry. I should have stuck to that.”

“But you *do* love?”

“It takes two.”

“How do you know she does not love you? Have you asked?”

“I did not need to”, he shook his head but immediately regret it as a sharp pain shot through it again. “She told me often enough that it only was a façade and the

time we shared bed she slept so far to the other end as she possibly could without falling out from it.”

“Did you not do the same?”

“Yes, but only because she did.”

Babington stared at him like he was an idiot.

“It never occurred to you that you could win her? You are not a completely unattractive man if we disregard how you look today...”

“Thank you”, he snorted.

“...and if you made the effort to show her affection, it is not impossible that she might fall in love with you.”

“I think I did try.”

“But did you try enough? Or were you too coward? If you did not allow any of your true feelings to show, how could you possibly have tried enough? I had to completely humiliate myself before Esther accepted me, but it was totally worth it because she will be my wife.”

“This is different. Charlotte already is my wife and cannot escape the fact. I don’t want her to feel I’m forcing myself on her. That is all.”

Babington sighed, realising he would not get anywhere with this discussion right now but had secretly not given up.

“I think you made a huge mistake not telling her, but it seems I cannot convince you. Let us leave it for now then, but Sidney, you cannot live like this. If you are determined not to live *with* her, you cannot waste your life living *without* her. This has to stop. Now.”

Even if Babington was unable to change his mind with regards to Charlotte, the intervention made Sidney realise it was indeed time to pull himself together.

Babington was right, if even Crowe thought things were bad, they were *really* bad.

Over the coming weeks he changed his habits, cut down on the heavy drinking, stayed away from boxing and focused his attention on his business again. He resumed a more normal social life, at least on the surface but he never felt like he was really present during any social gatherings. Every now he got letters from his grounds keeper, Stringer, and that was the only thing that made his heart beat faster because he hoped there might be some lines disclosing something about Charlotte. Stringer kept him meticulously updated on everything related to estate, sometimes asked for money for improvements or investments that needed to be done on the grounds, however he never mentioned Charlotte with so much as a word. Perhaps Charlotte kept to herself, so they did not have much contact at all, but Sidney still found it a bit odd.

Months went by like this and Sidney found a rhythm much similar to what his life had been like before Charlotte, but he was a different man on the inside. The sharp pain had transformed into a dull, ever-present ache and he wondered if it

ever would cease and if he one day would truly care about anything again. He was alive, his business thrived, it seemed like he had to accept that as his lot in life.

Autumn turned into winter, which turned to spring. Then two things happened which rattled his emotional vacuum of an equilibrium.

The first was that Babington announced that Esther had changed her mind and did not want a big, fancy London wedding. Instead she preferred a more modest wedding in the country.

“We will marry in the church at my country estate.”

He knew Babington was watching his reaction and tried to keep his face blank, but the words created butterflies in his stomach, and he placed his hands on the mantelpiece he was standing next to, to ground himself as he took in the news.

Naturally he would attend the wedding, he was the best man. He would have to visit his own estate then. There was no reason for him to stay at Babber’s house when they were neighbours and consequently no valid reason for him not to see his wife.

Charlotte. Even now her name sounded like a whispered promise in his head.

“Even if Esther does not hold you in high esteem after what you did, you are still invited and have to come. You will have to see *her*.” Babbers stated the obvious.

“Will you be alright?”

“I will be perfectly fine”, he said with conviction he did not feel.

“I was thinking about...”

“I know, but I am over it. Over *her*. Whatever it was I convinced myself I was feeling, I know now it was just a passing fancy. I think I can handle seeing her for a few days. It will be a good opportunity to check up on the estate, talk things through with Stringer and to see Charlotte without any drama.”

He was lying through his teeth and hope he did it well enough.

“Good, I’m glad to hear it. Then we will travel there together in May.”

Babington did not look entirely convinced but as Sidney had promised to come, he said nothing further. Deep down, he hoped that this might give his friend an opportunity to put things right because he remained downright miserable.

The second thing that happened was even more unexpected. In the early spring, Babington invited Sidney to join him to one of the most spectacular balls of the season and he had grumpily accepted knowing it was a great opportunity to maintain important business relationships. He had always been grateful that Babington, a lord and friend of the Prince Regent, helped opening doors to the beau monde for him. Once he had considered it a mix of pleasure and business, now he saw it as plain work. There was nothing here to tempt him.

A few hours in on the evening, when Sidney already wished to be home in his bed, there was some commotion by the entrance and people nearby seemed to almost stand to attention, which soon was explained by the announcement of the arrival of the Prince Regent and his favourite dame, Lady Worcester.

Sidney thought everyone was embarrassingly eager to meet them, but as Babington was closely acquainted with the Prince he approach him without

hesitation, knowing he was likely one of the few people in here which the Prince really had any interest in seeing. He convinced Sidney to join him and Esther, so reluctantly he did.

After jovially greeting the couple himself, Babington introduced both his fiancée and Sidney. Sidney bowed most courteously but did not expect that any of them truly would take any interest in him or even remember his name and he did not care much either. However, as he looked up from his deep bow, he noticed a curious look on Lady Worcester's face. Moments later, when Babington and the Prince were occupied in conversation, she surprised Sidney by approaching him.

"Excuse me for asking Mr. Parker, but do you happen to be the Mr. Parker who is married to Charlotte?"

"Yes, indeed. Do you know my wife, Lady Worcester?"

That the Prince's illustrious mistress would know his wife was the last thing he had expected. Charlotte did not cease to astound him even in her absence.

"Please, call me Susan. Charlotte and I are acquainted, and I became very fond of her during the short time we met. We had a very interesting conversation at another ball in October and I have been curious ever since how things developed for her."

"Developed?"

"Yes, in a certain matter that was close to my heart."

"As I'm not aware what you refer to, I'm afraid I cannot be of assistance."

“Is she here tonight?”

“No. No, she does not live in London for the moment.”

Her expression changed to one of concern.

“She does not live in London? Where does she live then?”

“At my estate, in the country.”

“Oh, I see. If you don’t mind me asking, how long has she been living there?”

He felt increasingly uncomfortable about the conversation topic but could not snub the Prince Regent’s mistress.

“Since October. She moved shortly after the ball you mentioned.”

“But you live here in London Mr. Parker?”

By God, this woman was inquisitive!

“Yes.”

She squinted her eyes and made a disapproving sound.

“I’m sorry, Lady Worcester...Susan, but I’m not sure I understand why our living arrangements are of such interest to you?”

“Because if you live separated from such a lovely wife as Charlotte, I fear she never dared to have the conversation with you I was hoping she would have. The one I encouraged her to have as you two so obviously needed it.”

Her words made him increasingly confused.

“And what conversation would that be?”

“That, my dear Mr. Parker, is something you should ask your wife. It is not for me to tell. I will tell you this though, if you are a man of any sense, you will seek out your wife instead of leaving her alone in the countryside. My gut feeling is that you have both been very silly and I am never wrong when it comes to matters of the heart. I hope we will see her here in London soon again.”

With a knowing smile she turned her back to him and left him alone with so many questions. He had a feeling similar to when he had been told off by his stern governess as a child, for doing something in a way that was not to her standards. He should perhaps be offended for being called silly, but instead he felt an inexplicable glimmer of hope deep inside.

He could not stop thinking of what the conversation signified, not that night, not in the following days.

Charlotte must have met Susan after that wonderful yet devastating dance, because that was the only time he had left her side that evening, and it was also the only ball she had attended.

What had Charlotte told Susan, that she apparently never had told him? Why would it make things different? What would it change? Why was Susan so convinced they would not live apart if Charlotte had told him? What had they both done or not done that she found so silly?

Ever since Babington told him that the wedding would be in the country his feelings had been equal measures of dread and giddy expectation. He was

desperately looking forward to seeing her even if he knew it was bad for him. Susan's words made his heart strings play, slowly shifting from minor to major and eventually he realised he would not be patient enough to hold out until the rest of Babington's party would leave for the wedding. He could not put off seeing Charlotte for that long when Lady Susan's word constantly were on his mind, nagging him to go. When he departed from London Sidney was nervous like he never had been before but could hardly wait to see his estranged wife.

Chapter 12: Time for healing

She had not known it was possible to feel like dying and then keep on living. It was as if everything inside her collapsed, fell apart, crashed and crumbled but the outer shell stayed intact and continued to breathe, talk and move. She had not known herself capable of such strong emotions of any kind, as the bereavement she felt when he sent her away. Her love for Sidney had been like a fragile sprig, trembling and apprehensive, not yet in full bloom, but her grief was all-consuming, passionate and flaring. It swept her off her feet and made her finally realise the depth of her feelings for him. Foolish feelings because he did not reciprocate them.

As the carriage drove away from Bedford Place, she allowed everything she had contained inside during the farewell at the stairs to erupt, and she was overflowed with the despair caused by her unrequited love. With body shaking and face buried in her palms, she cried until there were no tears left to cry and she was filled by a sense of exhausted emptiness. Then she fell asleep, lulled by the movements of the carriage taking her further and further away from Sidney.

She was not sure how much time that had passed when the cringing of the carriage rattled her awake and after a blissful moment of oblivion, sadness filled her again. It was Sidney's private carriage, which would return to London after taking her to her destination and as the journey went on, she thought of the two previous occasions when she had travelled long-distance in it. The first was back

and forth to Gretna Green when they only just had met, he had paid to get her out of the brothel and announced his plan to marry her. She had been terrified of the unknown man, the imminent marriage and what his expectations would be on her afterwards.

The second journey was to and from Willingden. By then she knew he was a good man but on the way there she had still been incredibly nervous about introducing him to her family and sharing room with him. He had handled that so well, gradually calmed her, made her trust him and admire him, made her want him not to turn his back to her in bed at night. When they returned to London, she was already in love with him. In hindsight she could see that clearly, but the realisation did nothing to comfort her..

And now, now she was going away from him, the horses increasing the distance between them by the minute. No, she was not going away, *he* was sending her away and never wanted her to return. How things had changed over the course of a few months. How could fate be so cruel to unexpectedly let her fall in love with a man she was married to, yet not allow her to be his?

Tear drops rolled down her cheeks again, slower this time. She wiped them away as the driver stopped by an inn. He wanted to have a meal before they continued the journey and she joined him, but only pushed the food around on her plate unable to force herself to eat and was relieved when she could hide inside the carriage again.

It was late afternoon when they finally reached the destination. When she first had arrived at the house at Bedford Place, she had been nervous and tired but also curious. Sidney had seemed so eager to show her around and she had followed his lead. Now all she felt was relief to have reached the end of the journey and desperate need for a bed and privacy. The poor housekeeper, a Mrs. Morris, first seemed completely confused by the arrival of an unexpected guest, but after reading the letter Sidney had sent along she courteously welcomed Charlotte as the new mistress of the house. Without asking any questions she quickly had a room prepared. Charlotte was offered dinner but asked to be taken to the room without any detours. As soon as Mrs. Morris was out the door, she went straight to the bed and tucked herself in under the quilt. There she stayed.

Days passed, she did not keep count how many. Mrs. Morris came and went. Initially she just knocked softly on the door and left when Charlotte did not answer. Gradually her voice sounded more worried at the lack of response, so Charlotte told her to go away. She did, but eventually returned bringing food which Charlotte never touched. She never even acknowledged the housekeeper's presence, silently keeping her back turned to her, but Mrs. Morris was deeply concerned now and did not give up so easily. Obviously something was the matter and she would not let the poor girl starve herself to death on her watch.

Charlotte's half-slumber was disturbed when the housekeeper finally spoke to her.

"I'm sorry if you find me disrespectful. I know it not my place to say but you must get out of that bed and this room at some point Mrs. Parker."

She had heard the knock on the door but ignored it, hoping Mrs. Morris would go away but now she was standing by the bed.

"Leave me alone."

"I have, but I cannot let this go on for longer. You must eat something at least."

"Do I? To what end?"

"You must be hungry, you haven't eaten since you got here. I have brought tea and toast with butter."

She had not felt hungry before but at the mentioning of food her empty stomach churned.

"Perhaps I could eat a little", she conceded.

She turned around and saw Mrs. Morris standing there so awkwardly, tray in hand. Pity for the caring servant more than anything else made Charlotte sit up and accept the food. Mrs. Morris left her to eat alone, but returned after a while, bringing another cup of tea.

Charlotte accepted it and the kindness in the middle-aged woman's eyes made her own fill with tears again.

"I'm sorry you are so sad Mrs. Parker."

"It is not your fault."

"I could guess as much." She pursed her mouth. "I don't mean to pry, but I know that such sorrow usually is caused by a man."

"Yes", Charlotte whispered even if a question was not really asked. Suddenly she wished desperately she had someone to confide in. If only Alison had been here, or even Esther.

Mrs. Morris hesitated and took a deep breath.

"I know you do not know me, and I am just a servant, but if you need to get it off your chest, if you need someone who listens, you can talk to me. I swear I am to be trusted, I would not utter a word to anyone else."

She knew it was improper, that one should try to keep one's private affairs away from the servants as much as possible, but she felt like she would break if she had no one to talk to. Still she hesitated and the housekeeper had started turning to leave before she spoke.

"I love him. I love my husband."

The other woman turned back with a look of surprise.

"I didn't when we got married, but I do now. He doesn't know though and he doesn't love me. He sent me away and I don't know how to live through it. How to live without him. How do I?"

Mrs. Morris returned and hesitantly sat down on the bedside and patted her arm. This made Charlotte's crying intensify and suddenly she felt the other woman's motherly arms around her. She allowed herself to be hugged and leaned her cheek against Mrs. Morris' sturdy shoulder.

"Come now Mrs. Parker, just let it out. Have a good cry. No one but me will now. You are a young strong woman and you will get through this."

"Will I? I don't think so. It hurts too much."

"It may not feel like it now, but you can do it one day at a time. You managed to live before you met him, and you will manage to live again. Your heart will mend. It may not be the same as it was before, but it will keep on beating."

She did not believe it, but she allowed herself to be held. They remained like that for a long time, with Mrs. Morris' arms around Charlotte's trembling body. The only sound heard throughout the room was sobbing.

Mrs. Morris had experienced much in her days, but never expected this. It was unheard of that a housekeeper should console the mistress of the house like this, but she had the feeling that if she did not, this girl would break, and she seemed to deserve better. How any man could let a sweet thing like her slip away was

beyond her. She had only met Mr. Parker a few times and never quite figured him out. He had seemed very private, lonely even, but he had always been kind to his staff. Men who were good to servants did not usually tend to act cruelly in general, but then again, she had not seen much of him and knew nothing of his motives. It was, however, clear that Mrs. Parker not had chosen to leave him voluntarily and Mrs. Morris' heart bled for her.

Finally, Charlotte pulled away and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry for making such a spectacle of myself but thank you for your kind words. I *will* try. I would appreciate..."

"Don't worry Mrs. Parker, my lips are sealed."

Even if she barely had met Mrs. Morris, she somehow knew that was the truth.

Charlotte did not leave the room that day either, but she did the next. Encouraged by Mrs. Morris' words she decided that enough was enough and the housekeeper was right, she could not wither away in that room.

When Mrs. Morris came knocking on the door with another breakfast tray, she was happily surprised to find Mrs. Parker dressed already, asking to be brought to the breakfast room instead of having her meal in bed. She never saw the mistress of the house crying again.

Once she had left her chambers, Charlotte began exploring her new home. The house was even larger than the one at Bedford Place though not as elegant. It was

almost like a compromise between the luscious London residence and her parents' rustic house in Willingden and she knew she would feel more at home here except for the fact that she was missing Sidney. There were more rooms than she knew what to do with as it was unlikely she would entertain large parties of guests, a decent library and enough servants for her to never do any household work. It was by no means a shabby place Sidney had sent her to, only a very distant one.

The second day of exploration she ventured outdoors. It was late October and the harvest was over since long, leaving the fields cropped and bare. The trees were still flaming in yellow, orange and red, providing a magnificent, almost surrealistic scenery, but she knew this colourful display was the last of the year and that it only would take one stormy night and the twigs would be stripped naked instead. There was an earthy smell to the chilly air and a calmness to the surroundings which somehow seemed to fit her mood. Nature was preparing to hibernate, much like she wanted to herself and she found consolation in that.

After a random walk, she approached the stables which belonged to the estate and had just decided to take a peek inside when she was startled by a male voice.

"This is private property, Miss."

She turned and only now noticed a man leaning against the wall, his face half-shadowed by his hat.

"Oh, I'm sorry I... I didn't intend to trespass, but I think I have the right to be here. I'm Mrs. Parker, my husband owns the estate."

He tilted his head so she could see a pair of friendly eyes and his frown slowly transformed into a wide smile as he took in her words.

"Of course, how stupid of me. Mr. Parker sent me a letter telling me you were coming. My sincere apologies."

"Don't worry, I was not offended. And you are?"

"I'm James Stringer, the groundskeeper. I take care of the estate in your husband's absence. Perhaps we will see more of him here, now that you have come here?"

"I doubt that."

She turned away from him, suddenly feeling choked.

"Oh... I", he paused, refraining from commenting further, because what was there to say? It was none of his business if Mr. and Mrs. Parker were planning on living separate lives as she seemed to imply, though he could not imagine why anyone would want to keep a woman like *her* at distance. Even if she looked a bit pale and tired, she was one of the prettiest girls he ever had seen, with eyes as brown as a squirrel's and loose dark curls mischievously peeping out from under the bonnet. Perhaps she was very annoying? Mr. Parker had told him nothing about the reason for Mrs. Parker's being here, but he had said that if she wished to be

involved in the maintenance of the estate he had nothing to object and he considered her knowledgeable enough to be of help. Stringer had snorted when he read that line, wondering how a woman belonging to the London beau monde could be expected to know anything that would be of value here. Now, when he met Mrs. Parker's bright brown eyes he felt less sceptic somehow. Perhaps she would turn out to be a pleasant surprise. Time would tell.

"Allow me to show you around", he kindly offered.

That afternoon and the following days Stringer not only showed Charlotte the stables, but also all the other farm buildings and cottages belonging to the estate, accompanied her exploring the grounds by foot and on horseback and introduced her to the local people, some living on the estate's grounds, some in the nearby village.

"So, what is your opinion of it?" he asked expectantly once their tour was completed.

By then Charlotte had told him of her upbringing on the countryside and her role in handling her father's estate and Stringer had realised it might not be such a farfetched idea that she could be a valuable addition here after all. He still had no clue why she was here instead of with her husband but that was not for him to ask. Mrs. Parker was kind and approachable, clearly intelligent and curious about everything that had to do with the estate, but she volunteered no information about her relationship with Mr. Parker and every time they came to talk about

him it was like a shadow passed over her face. There was obviously a history there but not one which she would share and that was only what could be expected. Her husband was after all the owner of the estate and Stringer one of his workers. Consequently, he was her employee too, but already after a few days in her company he knew he would have to remind himself of that frequently because he enjoyed her company far too much.

"I can see you are doing an excellent job looking after the grounds, but it is also apparent that Sidney... my husband is not an active owner. I think there is much potential for improvement if he would only agree to make some investments."

"I agree, but frankly I have been hesitant to ask for too much. "

"If we, or you, write clear proposals and estimate the costs I think he would be willing to spend some money here. The estate is perhaps not on top of his mind, but I do think he wants it to thrive. I mean, why would he not? Land is a good investment if you take care of it. By modernising we could easily both increase the yield and improve the conditions for the workers."

"Aye, I agree Mrs. Parker." He looked amused.

"What's funny?" she asked warily, wondering if he thought her silly.

"Nothing, I'm just impressed. Honestly."

Embarrassed she shrugged her shoulders but also felt encouraged by his words.

Over the next weeks they drafted long-term improvement plans, some of them inspired by Charlotte's father's estate, some were novelties they read about in publications on modern farming. Stringer was continuously amazed by Charlotte's enthusiasm and knowledge, never had he come across a woman like her. She was a lady who could have chosen to comfortably sit on her couch embroidering, but she chose not to. She could easily have replaced him as groundskeeper, and he was glad to unexpectedly have a partner.

For Charlotte it all started as a means to think of something else than Sidney, a task to fill her days and the void inside her, but her engagement in the project soon grew into genuine passion as she and Stringer together painted a vision of what the estate could become if they managed it well.

In his letters, Stringer fed Sidney their ideas piece by piece and asked for the required funding. He always got an encouraging response in return, telling him that Mr. Parker truly appreciated his efforts and was impressed by his inventiveness, knowledge and good sense. Stringer would have liked to tell him that more than half of it originated from his wife, but Charlotte had asked him not to mention her at all in his letters. He wondered if she wrote to her husband herself, but nothing she said indicated that. Stringer's confusion over the Parker's relationship grew in parallel with his admiration for Mrs. Parker, or Charlotte, as she had told him to call her. Who in his right mind would not want to be close to this woman?

The first months were tough for Charlotte and Christmas worst of all as she had none of her dear ones close to her. Sidney had not forbidden her to visit or invite her family, but she was not prepared to let them all know that she and Sidney were living separate lives now. It would raise too many questions and she still did not want to disclose how they had come to marry in the first place. She also knew they would see that she was unhappy, blame Sidney and make her feel ashamed for so foolishly loving him despite that he was the source of her misery. Of course, she would invite them sooner or later, but not now and so she spent the Christmas alone. Her only comfort was Alison's long letters. The sister she always shared everything with was devastated for her but could not do much as Charlotte did not allow her to.

On Christmas Day Charlotte had dinner alone, opened the gifts from her family that had been passed on from London and wept because there was no word from Sidney. She continued crying when she went outside to make snow angels, something which always had been a Christmas tradition with her siblings, then lay still on the ground letting snowflakes fall on her until she was freezing cold.

"It can only improve from here", she said out loud to the dark sky, but the only response was more whirling snowflakes, confirming this was something she had to endure alone. So, she got to her feet, brushed off the snow and went inside, where she fell asleep reading a book in front of the fireplace.

Fortunately, her prediction turned out to be true; things got better from there. In the new year, she and James Stringer began setting their plans in motion, in

parallel with the gradual return of daylight and warmer weather. Charlotte felt like life slowly was restored to her after a dormancy, much like it was to the surrounding nature. When the first new grass sprouted and the apple trees began to blossom, her spirits rose. She still missed Sidney every day but not every moment of the day. She feared that part of her always would yearn for him, but she knew by now that Mrs. Morris was right. She would survive. Her heart would mend, re-shaped compared to how it was before she met him, but at least beating. She did not expect to ever find love again and it would anyway be useless as she was a married woman, but she had found other purpose with her life. She was of use here and could make a difference not only for the estate but for the people living here. It was enough. It had to be.

In addition to measures aiming to modernise the farming and improve the workers' cottages, Charlotte also came engage herself in the education of the local children. In Willingden her father had helped to fund a teacher who schooled the village children, to at least teach them basic reading and math skills, but here she was appalled to discover there was no schooling at all. Stringer told her that even if there had been a teacher, many parents might be reluctant to let their children spend time studying instead of helping in the household or in the fields as soon as they were old enough to contribute.

"But if they are able to read and count their prospects will be so much better. It seems totally unfair that they won't get the opportunity!" Charlotte protested vehemently.

Stringer smiled at her passion.

"I agree with you and perhaps they could be convinced of the benefits so they would let their children attend for a few hours a week, but the fact remains we don't have a teacher."

She frowned her brow, thinking for a while.

"Then I will do it. I will teach the children."

"Mrs. Parker..."

"Charlotte, I have said."

"Charlotte, I'm not sure it is appropriate."

"Who is to decide? My husband?" She looked over her shoulder. "He is nowhere to be seen. The London high society? Nowhere to be seen either. Perhaps the villagers will find it inappropriate but, if I can help the children to a better future by teaching them, I don't care."

He shook his head at her stubbornness but did not object further. Instead he helped her to set up a class room in an empty warehouse in the village and joined her as she visited the parents trying to convince them to let their children attend for at least a few hours a week. Many were hesitant initially, but they trusted Stringer and liked Mrs. Parker and the changes she had initiated since she came. She was so enthusiastic and seemed to genuinely care about their children, so in

the end the majority allowed the children to go and the rest followed in a few weeks.

Like this, Charlotte filled her days and gradually the razor-sharp grief over Sidney gave way for something else. The intense feeling of loss turned into an ever-present dull ache, always there in the background but forgotten in between. She could focus on achieving things, on doing things for others and with time she found herself capable of smiling again, not only on the outside. The first time she laughed out loud, she cut it off in surprise. She had not thought she would laugh like that ever again. When Sidney told her to leave it had felt like all her future laughter was extracted from her, but here it was, only buried deep within and brought out by the joyous children. That was the moment she knew for sure she would live, not only survive. She may never again love another man, but she was able to feel joy.

Still, the lonely nights remained hard. She dined alone, sat in front of the fire reading alone, went to bed alone and always wondered what Sidney was doing now. She tried to push away all thoughts of him together with Mrs. Campion and only remember him as he had been on the good days because even if it did not make her less in love with him, it was less painful. In her imagination, during day as well as night time, he was always hers. No matter how futile, she could not stop dreaming of what it would be like to be with him. Her lack of knowledge set frustrating limitations, yet her imagination managed to play vivid scenes of her touching and kissing his skin, having his arms around her, nestling by the crook

of his neck, burning under his caresses. She still wanted him despite what he had done to her. It would have been easier to hate him, but she could not.

There were moments when she had pondered if she ever would be able to let someone else into her heart. Like when James one day jumped over a muddy ditch to pick her the first spring flowers they spotted but accidentally dropped his boot in the mud. She watched him laugh, caring more about holding on to the small bunch of violets than rescuing his boot. His laughter was as warming as the first rays of sun, his face so happy. And handsome, it struck her as an afterthought. It was not an intimidating handsomeness, like she had thought about Sidney the first time she saw him. In fact, they were quite the opposite. Both men had thick, wavy hair but there the likeness ended. James's hair was honey coloured and his eyes a hazel brown with a cheerful glimmer. Sidney's curls were dark and even when he was in a good mood his eyes were almost black and their expression could shift from hard onyx to soft velvet. His stare could sometimes be so intense that she had felt naked and flushed under it.

James' face and body language were always friendly and open, he was approachable and easy to like. With a few exceptions, Sidney radiated tension and distance but that made her value the rare moments when he let her inside so much more. When he opened up to her it was like receiving a precious gift. She had thought she was on her way to permeate that hard outer shell of his, to reach him, but she had been wrong. When they had said goodbye it had been like talking to a wall.

James was gentle and carefree. Sidney seemed hard and stern but had experienced pain and was vulnerable underneath. Sending her away had been a despicable thing to do but saving her in the first place utterly selfless. He was so complex that it was impossible to understand him. How could she be so in love with a man who had not allowed her to understand him?

James was uncomplicated and loveable. What one saw was what one got.

Could she ever love someone like him?

Him?

The thought took her by surprise and curiously she deliberated with herself for a few moments. Any woman would be lucky to have him as her husband for sure, but even if she had not been married already it would not have mattered. If she had met him before Sidney perhaps she might have fallen in love with him, but Sidney was imprinted on her heart and there could be no other. With Sidney it had not been love at first sight, but she instinctively knew she would love him for always.

She had proven to herself that she could live without him, but she was certain she would not fall in love with anyone else.

"A penny for them."

"Sorry?" She felt her cheeks turn hot.

"A penny for your thoughts."

He finally managed to put his boot on again, agilely jumped out of the ditch and handed her the flowers.

"Thank you. I was thinking about love and how unpredictable it is. Do you have a special girl James?"

"I do. You have met her. Isabella, Mr. Parson's daughter. We got engaged over Christmas."

"Oh, I didn't know. Congratulations! I'm happy for you."

She was, but simultaneously there was a sting in her heart, because she wished for such happiness too.

"She is jealous of you sometimes", he confessed with a sheepish smile.

"Me? Why?"

"Because we spend so much time together and she knows I admire you. She says I can talk to you about things I never discuss with her. I cannot tell her it isn't so because it *is* true."

"But there is nothing for her to worry about. I'm a married woman."

"I guess it is because Mr. Parker is not here."

She remained silent a few moments, so he began wondering if he had offended her.

"Are people talking much about it?"

"Not much, but a bit, I'm afraid. I tell them not to if I hear any gossip, but they are curious."

She sighed.

"Of course they are. I would be if I were them. I will share the truth with you, and you can share it with Isabella if it makes her feel better about you spending time with me."

He raised his eyebrows in surprise over the unexpected confidence.

"My husband does not love me and that is why he sent me here, but I love him and will never love anyone else. I am his wife even if he does not want me."

"Charlotte, how can he not?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I think he had given his heart to someone else long before we met and could not change that, but I don't know for sure."

"For what it is worth, it is beyond my comprehension how he could send you away. He has always been a good master but between the two of you, my loyalty lies with you. I want you to know that."

"Thank you James, I'm very flattered but you will never have to choose. He is in London and I am here, and I suppose we will lead our separate lives until the end of our days."

"Perhaps you will but you deserve better. I hope you know that."

"I do, even if I can think of much worse places to be. Now tell me, when are you and Isabella planning to have you wedding? If there is anything you need that I can help you with? I would only be so happy. You have to introduce me properly to her so she can see for herself I'm quite harmless."

They continued their walk together, chatting amicably, safe in the knowledge that they had a friend in one another and that that was all there was to it.

Then came two letters, turning her world upside down once again.

The first one was from Esther. It was not the first time she wrote her missing friend, but this time it was to tell Charlotte they would meet again in a near future as she and Babington would marry nearby. It made her heart beat erratically. She wondered if it meant he would come too.

A few weeks later a letter came from Sidney. It was polite and impersonal and told her she could indeed expect him to arrive for the wedding.

Even if she had understood he might come from the moment Esther wrote her the wedding was to be here, she had not known for sure until then. His bold, sweeping letters changed everything. She had found peace here, now he would

come and disturb it. Charlotte did not know what to expect from the meeting. The mere thought of being in the same room as him again made her tremble with equal measures of fear and longing. It made her furious. Her time here had made her feel stronger and more independent. Why did he have to come here and disturb that?

She was determined she would overcome her fears and bury her need for him. She was not the same weak girl who had left Bedford Place in October. She was *someone* without him and intended to remain so even if he came here. She loved her husband but had no intention to make him feel welcome here. She was done being hurt by Sidney Parker.

Chapter 13: Reunited

He slammed the door shut behind him with a curse, furiously threw his top hat on the bed, then remained standing, breathing heavily while the anger slowly seeped out of him to be replaced by despair. He turned around to lean his forehead against the door's solid wood. Nothing had turned out as he had hoped since he arrived here, quite the opposite and he was not sure it was in his power to change it. He was furious at himself, no one else, but also desperate. As he stood there and the anger evaporated to give way for the other more difficult emotions, he felt like crying rather than banging his fists at the door.

Sidney had received no response to the letter he sent Charlotte telling her he was coming but had not expected one either. He had not dared to be personal, to tell her how much he longed to see her. Lady Susan's words had ignited a small spark of hope inside him that Charlotte was not completely indifferent to him, but he was far from sure. Secondly, he felt like he had forfeited the right to tell her his feelings when he sent her away against her will. If she indeed had feelings for him too, sending her away had been the most dreadful mistake and only in her presence could he ask her forgiveness and possibly earn the right to tell her he loved her.

In the end, he set off to the country weeks earlier than the wedding demanded, because he could wait no longer to see her and find out what Lady Susan's words had meant.

Earlier this afternoon he had stood nervously in his own empty hallway, feeling like an intruder when Mrs. Morris came scurrying and stopped in her tracks at the sight of him.

"Oh", she said scrunching her nose like she disapproved of the view, before she realised it was not the appropriate way to welcome one's master after a long absence and plastered on a welcoming smile instead.

"Welcome Mr. Parker. We knew you were coming for the wedding but not already today, otherwise we would have been given you a proper welcome."

"Er, I decided to come a few weeks in advance of the wedding."

Why did he feel the need to excuse himself for coming to his own house?

"Of course."

"Is Mrs. Parker around?"

"She is, but not in the house at present. She went out earlier and said she would be gone for a couple of hours. She will be home before dinner, I am sure."

His need to see Charlotte was so strong that for a moment the disappointment almost crippled him, then he pulled himself together knowing Mrs. Morris' sharp eyes were still on him.

"Then I think I will ride out and see if I can find her."

Mrs. Morris made a face like she wondered why he was in such a hurry after many months of absence, but knew it was not her place to question him. Her reaction made him feel increasingly anxious about meeting Charlotte.

He headed for the stables, had a rested horse brought out and set off with the intention to find her.

Nearly an hour later he had seen no sign of her despite that he had covered a large part of the estate and was beginning to feel discouraged. He met several villagers and workers along his path but did not ask them if they had seen her, embarrassed to seem overly eager to find his own wife.

Suddenly he noticed something in the field at the corner of his eye which made him abruptly halt his horse. A woman was lying down on the ground, partly hidden by the high grass, aiming with a gun at a hare sitting still at a distance, munching some greens. Fascinated he watched the scene, curious if she would hit the target. He did not intend to disturb, but the ignorant horse neighed loudly. The gun went off in the same instant, but the hare had already set off and the bullet missed it. Cursing in a very unladylike manner, the woman got to her feet and turned around, the gun now pointing at him.

Slowly she lowered the weapon and silently they stared at each other as he dismounted from the horse and walked towards her.

He thought he had committed every detail that was her to memory, but she looked so different. She was slimmer than she had been before. This somehow made her seem taller and the eyes appeared even larger in her delicate face than he remembered. She wore no bonnet and her hair was pinned up, except for a few disobedient strands of hair flapping in the wind. He had always loved when she wore her hair down, but she looked beautiful like this too, more mature. Her skin had turned into an almost golden tone, there were even some freckles dispersed over the ridge of her nose. He both loved them and hated them. They were so sweet that he wanted to dot kisses over them, but he hated that he by his own doing had not been there when she got them and that he had no right to take her in his arms and kiss her like that.

However, the main difference in Charlotte was the look in her eyes. It was hard as flint and defiant, as if challenging his right to be here.

"Charlotte."

"Sidney. I wasn't expecting your arrival."

Her voice was flat, devoid of emotion, or at least there was a complete lack of warmth.

"I came early."

Because I could not wait a day longer to see you, he wanted to add, but her expression silenced him. After only a minute in her company, he knew that telling her all the things he wanted to tell her would not be any easier after time spent apart. He had changed, but so had she. If he had been uncertain of Charlotte's feelings back then, they were at least as hard to interpret now.

"Obviously. If you had waited another few minutes we would have had hare for dinner."

"You can shoot?"

A ridiculous thing to ask when she clearly had demonstrated that she could, and he mentally slapped himself.

"Since I was ten".

He noticed that she just barely refrained from rolling her eyes.

"Are you hunting hare?"

"Yes, as I just said. James and I thought it might be nice to have hare for dinner."

"James?"

Who the hell was James? he wondered.

"Good day, Mr. Parker. Wasn't expecting to see you here, Sir."

His groundskeeper Stringer appeared out of nowhere, probably he had been crouching in the grass too. *James* Stringer. Sidney felt jealousy flare up inside at the familiarity between them. She called him by his first name and was hunting together with him, alone, without any kind of chaperone. It was also beginning to annoy him that everyone he met pointed out how completely unexpected his arrival here was. He owned the damn estate, had that fact escaped everyone's mind?

"Mr. Stringer, good day."

He gave him a reserved nod and for the first time registered what a handsome young man Stringer was. Tall, broad shouldered and with thick, wavy hair.

"Well, with Lord Babington's wedding in a couple of weeks it should hardly come as an overwhelming surprise that I visit my own estate. Do you have anything to object?"

He cringed at his own arrogant tone but could not help himself. He was overwhelmed by the feelings stirred in him by seeing Charlotte again, combined with her being friendly with Stringer.

"No, of course not. I am glad to finally have you here again Sir and I'm looking forward to showing everything that has been accomplished on the grounds since you were here last. Perhaps we can have a look around tomorrow?"

Stringer's answer was friendly and made Sidney dislike his own behaviour even more.

"Yes, thank you", he mumbled.

"Then I'll leave you to it. Mr. Parker, Mrs. Parker."

He gave a curt nod to Sidney and smiled warmly at Charlotte, then turned to walk away. The smile fuelled Sidney's jealousy.

"And Stringer, thank you for accompanying my wife hunting but now that I'm here I can do it myself."

His words were polite but with a clear message underneath telling the other man to back off. He knew he came out like a bastard, but again he could not prevent it. He thought he saw a flash of something in Stringer's eyes and heard a definitive snort from Charlotte beside him. Anger welled up inside him.

"Of course, Mr. Parker", was all Stringer said before he strode off over the fields.

When they started walking back towards the house side by side, him leading the horse, she kept her distance and there was a cool silence between them. He knew she did not approve of his behaviour and neither did he. He should not barge in here and try to control her life when he had let her go, but it was hard to control himself when love and desire was mixed with fear, uncertainty and jealousy. He was thinking of what to say to break the ice and had an apology on his tongue when she pre-empted him.

"There was absolutely no need for you to be unkind to James. He has done nothing wrong."

The use of Stringer's first name triggered him again and he swallowed the apology.

"James! I suppose he calls you Charlotte too?"

"As a matter of fact, he does, because I asked him to."

"You asked him to? Do you realise how inappropriate it is that you let the groundskeeper call you by your first name? It could give everyone the wrong ideas."

"Really? What ideas would that be?"

"That you are... close."

"I consider him a friend. A friend who has been here for me, contrary to my husband who has been completely absent and now appears out of nowhere with a whole lot of opinions about what I should do and say."

Her words stung because they were true, and he grew more defensive.

"I'm entitled to have opinions about my wife's behaviour if it reflects badly on my name."

She stopped and stared at him like he was insane.

"You claimed once you do not care about such things, but now it seems that was another one of those things you said but did not mean. Why would you worry when nothing that happens here ever reach the gossip mill of London? Not that there is anything to gossip about."

He ignored her questions, but they chafed inside him.

"Do you go hunting alone often?"

"We do a lot of things, *alone and often*, because there is an estate to take care of! It does not mean that anything untoward is going on. Jealousy is never becoming, but least of all in a man who has renounced a woman. I'm not an object you put aside on a shelf and then say you want for yourself when someone else picks it up."

"I never said! I'm not jealous, I was rightfully questioning the appropriateness of you two hunting alone, but I can see you have a point with regards to taking care of the estate."

"Is that so? Do I have your approval?" Her tone was dripping of sarcasm. "Since you already plan to replace him as my partner when hunting, perhaps you intend to take over all his other duties too? Tell him there is no need for a groundskeeper anymore? Well, I have got news for you Sidney, that would require for you to stay here! Permanently! I suppose you haven't planned for that? I think this place and all of us who live here are a bit too colloquial for your taste!"

Little did she know how wrong she was. It made him so incredibly frustrated that she would think like that of him.

Her eyes were not devoid of emotion anymore, they were sparkling with fury. They had arrived at the house and now she did not wait for his answer. Instead she rushed up the steps to the entrance. He could not run after her as he had to leave the horse by the stables but shouted angrily at her back;

"I expect to see you at the dining table."

Then he remained standing looking at the closed door, with a sinking feeling in his stomach that he was the one at fault here, the only one to blame that this conversation had derailed. He had wanted to tell her that he missed her and wished he never had sent her away. Instead he had acted like a jealous jerk and implied that she and Stringer were behaving inappropriately, which he did not even seriously believe because he knew deep down that both were too good for that.

At that point he had thought the day could get no worse. Unfortunately, he had been wrong.

He had not meant to order her to dine with him. In truth, he was prepared to beg on his bare knees to make her join him, so he could try to make things right, but he hoped she would be there anyway.

She was.

She was already seated by the table when he entered the dining room, nervous like a school boy even if on the outside he was composed. She was already serving herself some soup and barely acknowledged his presence. Her hair was still pinned up and he admired the curve of her neck, when she stubbornly turned half away from him. If she had been beautiful earlier in the day, she was absolutely stunning now and still as furious as when they parted it seemed. Her brow was frowned, her lips pursed, and her moves jerky. Once she opened her mouth, her words confirmed the impression.

"Don't flatter yourself thinking I'm here for your company. Opposite to what you may think, I also care about what the servants say, and I believe they are already speculating more than enough about why we are living separate lives."

"They do?"

He always treated his servants well but did not dwell much on what they thought about him.

"Yes, and unlike you *I* have had to live with it, despite that you were the one who put me in this situation."

"I'm sorry, I never thought..."

"You didn't?" She put down her spoon and stared hard at him. "Did it not cross your mind that everyone here would talk about why I am living here alone without you? Or did it simply not bother you what people say here in the

wilderness, as long as it was fine and dandy in London and you could live your life the way you used to?"

"There is nothing bad to say about you. The decision to send you away was not based on anything you had done."

"You and I know that, but the people here don't know, do they? A woman who is cast away by her husband must surely have done something terrible to displease him. I heard the whispers, I saw everyone's glances before I had proven myself to them. It took time and hard work. I had to pay a price for your decision."

"If I had known I would have..."

"Exactly *what* would you have done, Sidney? Come to my rescue? There was a time in the very beginning when I would have welcomed that, when I was lost and needed you by my side. Where were you then? When I was completely alone over Christmas, where were you then?"

God, she had *needed* him, and he had not been here. His entire being tensed, ready to run to her side even if she had said she no longer needed it.

"Didn't you have anyone from your family here? Or why didn't you visit them over Christmas?"

He was appalled, never in his wildest bad dreams had he imagined she was alone then. *He* had been drunk and alone and his only consolation had been the conviction that she was better off without him.

"No, I didn't, and do you know why? Because I am ashamed to tell my parents we live separated. They would ask if we do not love each other anymore and I would have to tell them that we never did, that you married me only to save me from a brothel! I wasn't strong enough to look them in the eyes and tell them that, so yes, I was alone, and I was very lonely!"

"Charlotte..." he said softly, with a lump in his throat. It was beginning to dawn on him what harm he had done her. He had thought that he would only harm himself. How wrong he had been. The realisation made him ache inside, more than before.

"Don't! I managed without you then and now I don't need you. I moved past all that and I don't want you here."

It hurt to hear those words. She was so beautiful and so strong. He loved her more than ever and needed her to feel complete. She had never loved him and now she did not need him for any other reason either. She had said she had proven herself here and with the lovely personality she possessed, she likely had made lots of friends, not only Stringer. There was no place for him in her life.

"I have every right to be here."

It was not what he wanted to say, but it was the words that came out because he wanted to convince himself it was so.

"You do, but I am asking you to leave. I want as little to do with you as possible while you are here. I will accompany you to the wedding, so people won't talk and because I am looking forward to seeing a happy couple getting married, that is all. Then I would appreciate if you leave as soon as the wedding is over, and we can both get on with our separate lives. As you so clearly wished."

He wanted to scream it was the last thing he wanted.

"Can we discuss this?"

He had had a speech prepared in his head before he came here. He had not even said the first line of it and now he did not know where to start. Everything he had intended to say seemed inadequate in this moment and everything he did say came out wrong. He loved her so much that the thought of living his life without her stifled him, but how could he begin to tell her?

"Is that not what we are doing?"

"No, you are telling me your perspective and wishes but you don't want to listen to mine."

"Oh, please. Are you trying to make me feel pity for you? Or claiming you feel regret over how you treated me? It will not work no matter what you say. Do you know why? Because I hate you and I curse the day we were married."

"Damn it, Charlotte! Please listen to me!" he raised his voice, almost shouting.

She stood up.

"I refuse!"

She strode towards the door, but he got to his feet and swiftly intercepted her, grabbing her arm. She met his eyes with a look of utter contempt in hers.

"Will you force me, using your strength? I thought you said you would never force me to do anything I didn't want to do, but perhaps that was another lie?"

Ashamed and pained as if she had stabbed him, he let his arm fall limp to his side and stumbled backwards.

"Leave then." His voice was hollow. Suddenly he felt exhausted, realising he had to accept defeat in this moment, and she left.

He looked at the table neatly set for two and knew he would not be able to eat. Her empty chair and half-finished plate mocked him, a reminder of how much he had looked forward to dining in her company again when he travelled here. Instead he had stormed back to his own chambers, slammed the door closed and ended up leaning his head towards it because he needed something to support him.

He remained with his forehead to the wooden door for long. As solid as it was, it offered very little comfort. He had made mistakes in the past and again today. Meeting Charlotte and Stringer had brought out the worst in him and he was not proud of himself. He had never loathed himself more than in this moment, not

even in Antigua. He had to find a way to make things right. If he could not make her love him, at least make her not hate him.

She had said she hated him in the beginning of their relationship too and it had hurt even if he did not love her then as he did now. Then, she had not hated him and his love for her had grown. Had she come to love him too during a brief time? If she had, he might never know for sure because he had ruined it.

How was it possible to fail so spectacularly telling her he loved her? The simple answer was, because she was not interested to hear it. The harder and probably more accurate answer was that he was trying in the wrong way. The more he pushed, the more she withdrew and became defensive. If she ever had wanted to hear such words from him or wanted to tell him herself, as Susan insinuated, he had missed that window of opportunity. It was a mistake he would have to pay for, for the rest of his life unless he managed to break through her defences, something that could not be done by force, but perhaps by finding the right words.

The night offered little rest, as he struggled with thoughts of her and his own failings. He was ashamed to admit that also physically he wanted her more than ever, that in his fantasies their fights turned into searing kisses. It seemed wrong when he knew she wanted nothing of the sort, but desire has its own ways.

Next morning, Charlotte was nowhere to be seen at breakfast and he instinctively knew she intended to stay true to her promise and stay out of his way for the

remainder of the visit if she could. For now, he let her be and met up with Stringer as agreed, for a tour around the estate. There was one thing he at least intended to do this day and that was to behave better towards Stringer. He was a decent, hardworking man who deserved no less. He should not have to put up with mean remarks from someone who was fortunate enough to be in a superior position in society.

As they rode through the fields, visited farm buildings and cottages and Stringer demonstrated everything that had been done, Sidney was increasingly impressed by the improvements already made and projects in progress. The estate was no doubt in very good hands.

"You have achieved great changes in only a few months, I'm impressed Mr. Stringer", he complimented him as they dismounted their horses towards the end of their ride.

Stringer remained silent a moment before he answered, removed his hat and scratched himself at the back of his neck.

"In all honestly, it is not me you should thank, Sir. Credits due where credits are due, and I have only played a small part in all of this. The one behind the majority of the ideas and the real driving force behind the changes is your wife."

"Charlotte?"

Sidney chuckled amused and a sensation of joyful pride shot up inside him. It did not surprise him, he should have understood when all of these suggestions started coming soon after her arrival.

"Why didn't you say? I told you from the beginning I wouldn't mind if she was involved in the maintenance of the estate."

"I know, but *she* asked me not to mention her in my letters."

"I see."

His heart sank. The lack of information about her had been obvious, but the fact that she had asked to have it like that discouraged him even more. She had wanted to cut all ties to him long before he came here.

"But she *does* deserve to be appreciated for her work. In addition to what you have seen today, she has also started a school for the village children and teaches them herself a few days a week. She was adamant they have to learn to read and count. Everything she does is much appreciated by everyone here, by me and all the locals, but she deserves to hear how brilliant she is from you, if I may be so bold to say."

Sidney took off his hat too and ran his fingers through his hair, suddenly feeling hot.

"Of course. I appreciate her very much."

"Do you, Sir? You have an odd way of showing it."

Sidney had the feeling that Stringer no longer could hold back something that had bothered him for some time. Instead of rebuking him for talking of things that were not his place to talk about, he encouraged Stringer to continue as he was eager to know what he had to say.

"How do you mean, Mr. Stringer?"

"You sent her away. How can any man send away a woman like her? It is a very strange way to show appreciation. She thinks so and so does everyone else. I'm sorry to tell you Mr. Parker but you are not very popular around here even if you are the owner."

"Why?" He asked even if he could guess what was coming.

"You see, everyone loves Mrs. Parker and what she has done since she came."

"And why would that make them dislike me?"

"Everyone knows you broke her heart by sending her away and knowing her, we all think she deserved better. I know I could lose my job over this, but I cannot keep quiet."

Sidney's heart skipped a beat.

"Don't worry, your job is safe, and I appreciate your honesty, but you are wrong. I did not break Charlotte's heart. I couldn't have because she never loved me."

"How can you be so sure of that?"

"I am... I was... She did not marry me for love, and she stays married to me only because there is no other way. That made living together very hard. I sent her way for her own good."

Stringer watched him intently, which made Sidney feel like he was being measured and found inadequate.

"Perhaps you really think you did."

"And you don't agree?"

"May I say what I think, Sir?"

"I think we have already crossed that line, so yes go ahead. Please."

"In a place like this everyone knows basically everything about each other. Mrs. Parker was devastated when she came here. She kept herself locked up in her bed chambers without so much as eating for many days. Eventually she started to get out and about and always showed a brave face, but it was apparent that she was grieving something. Or *someone*. I drew my own conclusions and then she told me..."

"What did she tell you?"

"Mr. Parker, I think you should ask your wife, but you should also know this was many months ago and she is doing well now. She has become accustomed to life here, where she is loved and appreciated by everyone, so what was true then may not be true now."

Sidney stared out over the fields. Was it possible that she had loved him? Was that what Lady Susan also had implied? And if so, had he foolishly wasted that love?

"Do you think she is in love with... with someone else?" he asked with steady voice and trembling heart.

"No, but again, if you really want to know you should ask Mrs. Parker."

"Thank you, Mr. Stringer. You are absolutely right. I need to speak to Charlotte and the sooner the better. One more thing. Thank you. For everything."

"Thank you, Sir. As it is Saturday I'm heading over to my fiancé in the village now, if you have nothing to object."

Sidney smiled widely as he waved goodbye, understanding that this was Stringer's subtle way of telling him he had nothing to worry about when it came to him, should he have thought so.

He did not see as much as a glimpse of Charlotte that evening, she kept herself invisible and in one way he was relieved because he needed time to take in everything Stringer had said and decide what to do with it. He had come here to try to do what Babington once had advised him; to win Charlotte. So far his efforts had been disastrous. This did not mean he would give up. He had to try harder, or rather try in a different way. For real. He had the feeling he was quickly running out of tries, so when he tried one final time he had to do it in the right way.

Next morning, Sidney knocked on Charlotte's door. He said nothing, hoping she would believe it was Mrs. Morris with the breakfast tray. When she opened, her eyes widened in surprise.

"Sidney?"

"Good morning. I was wondering if you would go for a walk with me? If you want to have breakfast first, I could wait for you? I'm sorry for the early hour but I did not want to miss you if you went out. I... I really wish to speak to you Charlotte."

His voice was soft, and he hoped his eyes could convey how important this was to him. She remained silent and he had the feeling she struggled internally, torn between anger and curiosity.

"Please."

"I... Yes, I'll go with you. I don't have much of an appetite now, so I don't mind leaving at once. Let me just fetch my spencer."

"Yes, of course."

He waited for her with heart pounding in his chest and she returned in a minute. Swiftly they left the house and garden behind and walked over the fields, initially without saying anything. It was like they both sensed they wanted some privacy, away from the house and servants before they spoke. He adapted his long strides to her shorter steps almost without thinking about it. It felt so natural. Being with her was his natural state.

"I have missed walking by your side", he said spontaneously but instantly regretted it when she frowned her brow.

"What do you want with me? Are you planning on shouting at me again?", she asked. "Then know I will have none of it. I'm not yours to discard and then seek out to treat me badly. I deserve better than that."

Her voice was defensive, but he did not allow himself to be provoked. Not this time when everything was at stake and she was right anyway.

"I don't want to shout at you, I don't intend to. I never did. You are absolutely right, you deserve so much better than that and I had no right."

He swallowed, measuring his words with caution, knowing his future happiness depended on it.

"I would like to ask of you to listen to me, this one time. I cannot demand it, but I beg you. Please?"

After a brief hesitation she nodded, and they continued the walk.

"There are so many things I want to say to you and since I came here I have not managed to say any of them. Having this moment with you is more precious to me than you could know. Thank you."

He glanced at her sideways and saw he had her attention even if her eyes were fixed on the path.

"First of all, I want to ask your forgiveness, for shouting at you, but even more so for sending you away."

She pulled in a breath as if to say something, but he held up a hand.

"Please let me continue before you say anything. I *know* you cannot give your forgiveness to me at this point, as it may seem like I haven't done anything to deserve it, but if you allow me I will try to explain myself. Let me tell you why I did the things that I did and why I am here now."

It seemed she found it impossible to remain quiet though.

"You mean to say you regret it? Does the great Sidney Parker ever regret anything?"

Her expression was one of utter scepticism and she almost spat out the words.

"I do. I regret many things but none so badly as what I did to you", he answered with calm earnest.

The confession stunned her for a moment but then she resumed angrily.

"You expect me to believe that? After months of silence? Not a single word from you! It was like I never existed in your life."

"Believe me, I wanted to write you, to see you, but I thought it would be selfish of me. I thought that telling you what I feel and think would be an act of pure egoism which would lead to nothing good, so I refrained from doing so even if it was the hardest thing I ever have done. Then I met Lady Susan Worcester and something she said gave me a glimpse of hope. It led me to believe that maybe I had gotten it all so wrong and I am here to find out."

"Lady Susan? Is that the Susan I met at the ball in October, before you sent me away?"

"Yes, so it seems. I was quite impressed you had befriended her."

"I don't understand. What did she say?"

"When she understood I was your husband but you're no longer living in London, she told me that if I was living separated from such a lovely wife as you, she feared you had never dared to have a conversation with me which she had encouraged you to have. One which she thought the two of us badly needed."

"Oh. She said that?"

Charlotte quickly turned away her head, but he had already seen her blushing cheeks.

"Yes. I cannot know for sure what that conversation was about, what you never told me, but it gave me hope. It also made me devastated because I feared I had made an enormous mistake sending you away."

"Why would you think that?"

"Charlotte, please look at me."

Reluctantly she turned to meet his eyes.

"Because the reason I sent you away was that I was convinced that you had no feelings for me and never would have. It was hard living with you because I was... I *am* very much in love with you."

Her eyes widened in shock.

"It is the truth. Every day I spent with you, my love for you grew stronger and I wished that you were my wife not only to the name. When we were in Willingden and acted affectionate, it was all real for my part. The only charade was when we went to bed and I had to turn away from you when all I really wanted..."

He interrupted himself as he did not find it appropriate to tell her in this moment what he had wanted to do.

"When we returned to London and everything was supposed to go back to as it was before, every day turned into a struggle. It was so hard to put a lid on my emotions."

"Why did you?" Her voice seemed filled with sad curiosity.

"I was convinced you felt nothing for me. God knows you said it often enough, and I did not want to burden you with my feelings when you were trapped in a marriage with me. Instead I withdrew from you and thought it was going quite well until that ball. During that dance... I could not hold back, I felt that by just looking at you I was giving all my feelings away and it made me so desperate... I had to do something so I wouldn't reveal everything. It was then it occurred to me that if I sent you away, to here where I thought you could be happy because it is more similar to your own home, you would never need to be troubled by my feelings for you."

"I thought you sent me away because of Mrs. Campion?" she said challenging, but her voice trembled.

"Mrs. Campion? What do you know of her?"

Her question could not have surprised him more.

"Esther told me about her when you were talking to her during the ball. Your old fiancé, now a widow. I figured I was in your way if you wanted to resume the acquaintance and..."

She could not make herself say it, but he understood, and it made his blood boil that she would have thought such a thing. He had wanted to escape Charlotte to regain his composure after that passionate dance as he had feared he would kiss her without permission, but he never thought the conversation with Eliza Campion could give Charlotte the impression it obviously had. How blind he had been to her feelings, because he was too preoccupied hiding his own.

"No! She is nothing to me but a memory from the past. She shaped who I am but has no part in my future. I have no feelings for her, that is the honest truth. All she did was give me the idea that if one wasn't happy in one's marriage one could live separate lives. I thought you would be happier without me, than living close to me knowing I wanted more out of our marriage than you did."

"So you did not keep seeing her?"

"I have not seen her since the ball, no, and I don't care if I ever do."

She looked away again and a sound, like half a sigh and half a cry escaped her. He was not sure if it was a sound of relief, pain or contempt.

"Still, it makes no sense. Why would you send me away so callously? You were so cruel to me that morning in the library. You really hurt me."

"I know that now and I will forever regret it. All I can say to my defence is that I was falling apart inside and the only way not to do it in front of your eyes as well, was to act as I did. I did not want to send you away, but I was convinced it was the

best for you. I did not want you to feel pressured to show me affection out of gratitude. I did not want you to live in fear that I one day might ask more of you than you were willing to give. The only way I ever wanted your love was if it was given by your free will and I thought you did not want any of it. I still don't know if you do, or did, but Susan made me think perhaps I had misjudged everything. That there was a small possibility... If she had not said those things I might have still remained silent. I realise many months have passed since then so whatever you felt then might not be the same now. I hurt you in ways I did not understand, so maybe you can never forgive me, but know I never did that wilfully. I thought the pain was mine alone to bear."

"The pain?" her voice had softened, it was almost a whisper in the wind.

"Yes, the pain of not having you in my life. With you gone everything fell apart, I have missed you so much I cannot even begin to tell you. Without you I exist, but I don't live. Without you I am nothing."

His voice broke, the emotions overwhelming him. She remained silent and he continued, filled with fear yet compelled to. He had been coward when he did not tell her before, he would not repeat that mistake.

"I love you, love you more than anything, but I don't want you to be mine against your will.

He averted his gaze, more insecure than ever when she said nothing.

"Charlotte, I need to know... are you happy here? If you are, and want me to leave

you be, I will. Even if it is not what I desire. Your happiness is more important to me than my own and if I accomplish nothing else, I hope I can at least make you believe that. I never intended to make you unhappy or hurt you."

"Yet you did. You talk about my own free will, but you sent me away against it. You should have trusted that I was capable of handling the truth and be part of deciding my future. It was wrong to make that decision for me."

"I can see that so clearly now, that it was an arrogant and presumptuous thing of me to do. To assume you had to be protected from me. You are stronger than that. I *did* hurt you even if it was the last thing I wanted. I can never undo that, but if you let me I will spend every day of the rest of my life making it up to you."

She took her time before responding. It seemed like an eternity to him, the silence filled only with the sound of the chirping of the birds.

"I was happy here... there is so much to love and I'm proud of what I have achieved. Yes, I would be happy here... but now you have come and turned everything upside down and I don't know what to believe anymore."

"Believe that I love you."

He wanted to step closer and take her hands or pull her into an embrace but could see she was not ready for that. He was well aware she had not said words of love in return, given away nothing of her sentiments except how betrayed and hurt she had felt. Still felt. Yet there was something in the depth of her eyes that

gave him hope, even if tears were now streaming down her cheeks and she clenched her fists as if wanting to contain her feelings inside.

"Words are not enough, not after what you did to me. You can't just sweep in here and expect me to love you."

Her words sounded tired rather than angry. He felt tears pricking at the back of his eyelids too and fought to hold them back. He had spilled his heart to her, and it was not enough. He had foolishly ruined everything because he did not tell her his true feelings months ago. Losing her once had been torture, he knew this would kill him. Not today, not tomorrow, but slowly, bit by bit, until there was nothing left.

"Charlotte..."

"You need to *show* me."

He took a deep breath. Was it not the end after all?

"How?"

"Stay here, show in actions that what you say is the truth. Show me that this is not some whim and you will abandon me again, that your feelings are true and deep. Show me that you are able to treat me like an equal, not like a delicate porcelain figurine you need to protect. I will not come with you to London, will not uproot myself again when I have done it twice unwillingly. If you want to try to win me, it will have to be here."

"Would you allow me to do that? Try to win you?"

She looked up at the clear blue sky where the sun was rising higher, then met his eyes again.

"Yes."

He exhaled and now his brimming eyes overflowed with tears. Warm and salty, they trailed down his face, but he did not care. He was filled with a sense of enormous relief and joy.

"I can't give you any promise you will succeed, but I will allow you to try."

"That is all I ask for, that you allow me to court you. You know I would have stayed the weeks up to the wedding anyway, but I promise you I will stay as long as it takes, or until you send me away. I hope with all of my heart you never will but at the end of this I will do as you wish."

She held his gaze, her tears had stilled and finally the corners of her mouth tugged upwards. She reached out her hand and grazed his cheek, wiping his tears away rather than caressing him, but never had a touch felt sweeter.

"Well then."

He smiled back at her, praying this was a new beginning of something which would never end.

"Well then."

Chapter 14: The key to her heart (part I)

From the moment Charlotte told Sidney she would allow him to try to win her, there was a remarkable transformation in her husband. Looking back, it was almost ridiculous how those few words completely changed his behaviour towards her. Given permission he ceased trying to restrain his affectionate side and openly demonstrated feelings which she previously only had seen so brief glimpses of that she had thought herself mistaken. It was clear that he did not want to leave her in any doubt of his wishes and affections; he wanted her to be his wife in every sense of the word.

The question was, did she want the same? She loved him, but could she trust him enough to let down her guard and bridge the gap between them, or had he hurt her so irreparably that she never would let him know that he already owned her heart?

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During the past year Charlotte had encountered more adventures than she had expected to experience in her lifetime and gone through a spectrum of new, strong emotions which she had not been prepared for. Spending her days peacefully back in Willingden, she had always longed for more and thought herself adventurous and not easily rattled. She had laughed when her mother used to say that one should be careful what one wished for because it might come

true. Now Charlotte admitted her mother had been proven right because this year had entailed far more excitement than she had bargained for, even if she had survived it.

Looking into the eyes of her estranged husband appearing out of nowhere that day in the field, overtrumped everything she had been through though. She was grateful she had not fired the gun at him in sheer surprise.

She had heard a horse neigh, scaring of the hare she had in sight, turned and been shocked to find him standing there like a mushroom sprung out of the soil. He had seemed even taller than she remembered him. Dressed in leather waist coat and breeches under the black coat and with chest heaving like he was short of breath, it seemed almost like he had ridden on horseback all the way from London to this field. His face was still as handsome, though perhaps even more chiselled than before and there was a tired shadow under the dark eyes which now were intensely fixed on her. It was like he tried to look inside her, penetrate her outer shell and read her. Charlotte could not allow that, because in the same instant she saw him, she knew that her feelings had not changed. She was as much in love with him as ever and the pain he caused by sending her away was still as raw.

The emotions shot through her like fire and ice. Emanating from her heart they travelled through her and in a split second reached every part of her body, every fingertip, every toe and the intensity was such that it took her breath away. She

could not and would not let him know however, because she was determined not to allow him to damage her more than he already had.

This made her act like a wounded animal, furiously fighting back against its attacker. She channelled all her unwelcome feelings into anger, the one true emotion she could safely show without exposing herself. It was easy to be angry with him; for scaring her prey away, for being arrogant to James, for telling her how to behave and for ordering her to show up at the dining table; for sending her away, for coming here and for being the object of her love against her will.

It was also very hard. In her resolve to keep him at arm's length not to let him hurt her again, she ended up hurting herself instead.

When she returned to her chambers after their disastrous dinner that evening, she cried like she had not allowed herself to cry in many months. She had said such harsh and hurtful things to him, because she needed him to understand what she had lived through but saying it out loud and see the hurt in his face did not bring the expected relief. It was like injuring him and picking on her own wound at the same time, until they both bled. This was not who she wanted to be, but the only one she *could* be for now, even if she was not sure how to cope.

Being angry with someone when all you want is to be in his arms is very exhausting and at this point Charlotte was exhausted to her core. She collapsed on her bed with tears streaming and thoughts spinning. Why had he arrived here so early? The wedding between Lord Babington and Esther Denham was not due

to take place until in a few weeks' time and she had not expected Sidney to arrive yet. It disturbed her balance that he had. Her rational self did not want him here, but against her good judgement her heart did. Her heart wanted him here for always and as close to her as was humanly possible, but as his intent likely was to pass by briefly and treat her as carelessly as before, it was better not to have him here at all. She figured that the only way for her to survive the upcoming weeks and endure life after he was gone, was by avoiding him. She had told him she would shun him and intended to stay true to that promise.

Yet, she lay restless in her bed that night and thoughts of him were more vivid than they had been lately. It was like he was invading her mind anew, solely by being in her proximity. She could not help but imagining him lying in his bed further down the hallway, or picturing him taking her into his arms, kissing her fervently, instead of scolding at her. To be fair, he *had* tried to have a normal conversation, but she had turned it into a quarrel because she could not allow herself to soften towards him, or she would be lost. It was bad enough as it was, her body felt feverish at the thought of his touch and his lips and she cursed herself for being so weak when she wanted to be strong and resist him. Her only consolation was that at least he would think that she did.

She managed to avoid him the following day. She knew he planned to ride out with James to look at the estate. As relieved as she was when she saw him leave the house, it disturbed her that she would not be there and take part in showing him all the things she had achieved with James help. She wanted Sidney to be

impressed by and proud of her, wanted him to realise what he had tossed aside, but most of all she would have loved to simply share that moment with him. However, it was not meant to be.

Except for a walk in the garden, she stayed in her room all day and instructed Mrs. Morris to serve her meals there. The older woman had since long turned into more of a friend than a servant and was more than willing to help Charlotte escape Mr. Parker, whom she thought had treated his wife scandalously. Like that, Charlotte managed to avoid him but knew already when evening came that spending her days like this until the wedding would be insufferable. Pining for him and conceal it was hard enough, but she would also be half bored to death. Furthermore, she had the school children to consider. Today was Saturday and no lessons were planned so she had not neglected them, but she would have to come up with a plan to combine her teacher duties with dodging Sidney.

Next morning, she got up very early hoping to have breakfast downstairs before he woke up and then escape outside for a few hours. Even if she expected him to be fast asleep still, she tiptoed when she prepared herself to leave her room, but at that moment heard a faint knock and thought Mrs. Morris must have prepared a breakfast tray for her before she could intercept her.

Her breath hitched and her heart raced when she was met by Sidney's brown eyes instead of Mrs. Morris' blue ones. He stood there in the hallway, with hands clasped behind his back and head bent down as if to show her he came in peace.

His subdued request to go for a joint walk caught her so off guard that she was unable to refuse.

Walking beside Sidney was nerve wrecking, exhilarating and strangely comforting all at once. His massive figure moved agilely next to hers, but despite their fight the other evening there was nothing threatening about him. She sensed deep down that he never would harm her physically. On the contrary he had always been protective of her. Now it seemed like a warmth radiated from him, enveloping her as they initially walked in silence. She knew she could lose herself in that feeling forever but did not want to succumb and so she forced herself to snap out of it.

"What do you want with me?" she had asked, but nothing could have prepared her for the candid, defenceless answer he gave.

He said many things, but most important was that he loved her. He loved her and needed her and had done so for a long time but tried to repress it and when he could not do it anymore he sent her away.

That was the reason he sent her away.

Not that he was indifferent to her, not Eliza Campion. Then Lady Susan had told him something which had given him hope. This had made him hasten to her side and now finally dare to tell her what his feelings truly were.

As he spoke, her blood seemed to swirl faster inside her until it was a roaring flood, almost drowning his precious words with its noise. She was not sure if the ground under her feet was disappearing or feeling more solid, if she herself was dissolving or being more anchored than ever. He had told her he belonged with her, *to her*, if she would have him.

This made her disbelievingly jubilant but also distressed, because how was she supposed to act? How was she to know if he could be trusted or not? If his words were true, or if he would leave her again? How does one know if it is right to throw one's reservations aside, when someone has hurt you so profoundly as Sidney had hurt her? Her feelings were like a maelstrom pulling her along. She had to find something to cling on to or she would drown.

"Words are not enough, not after what you did to me. You can't just sweep in here and expect me to love you", she had told him. "You need to show me."

She wanted to buy herself time and she wanted to try him. Everything stopped inside her whilst waiting for his response. Would he want to? Would he stay here for her or was it all empty words? She prepared to be disappointed but hoped he would not let her down.

He did not hesitate for a moment. With tears streaming down his face, he had told her that a chance to try to win her back, to court her, was all he asked for. He would stay as long as it took or until she sent him away, but he hoped she never would.

She just barely managed to hold herself together then, so that the immense wave of joy and relief remained contained inside her instead of being manifested in another outburst of tears. Spontaneously she had touched his face, wiping his tears away. His masculine features were so vulnerable in this moment and the sensation of his warm, tear damp skin to her palm so wondrous. She knew already then that she wanted more but doubted if she would ever allow herself to fully indulge him. Reluctantly she retracted her hand. She needed him to win her confidence first. Part of her was incredibly happy, part filled with gruelling doubts.

They walked back to the house in silence that morning, both overwhelmed by the feelings inside, but when they arrived home they had breakfast together and resumed their conversation. Apprehensively at first, treading carefully, but as the day went on more and more at ease in each other's company.

Over the weeks that followed, Sidney did everything he could to erase her doubts. Given permission to woo her, his ways transformed. He did not use grand gestures like bestowing her expensive gifts or make daily verbal declarations of love, as if he understood that would make her uncomfortable rather than lead to her believe that his intentions were genuine. It was like he understood that when she said, 'show me', she meant 'show me your truest self, show me that you will be here for me' and knew that he constantly had to do that in the small everyday things.

She had seen glimpses of this man before, when he had allowed her, but it seemed like he previously had restrained himself and now did not. He was still the man who patiently had accompanied her to the modiste and seemed to enjoy it. Same man who had dreamed up journeys over an atlas with her, charmed her family and tried to blend in with them, but he also turned out to be so much more.

Spending their days together, their relationship continued to unfold like a budding rose. Tight and closed at first with thorns to watch out for, then petals slowly opening one by one, turning into a flower in full bloom. They gradually revealed more of themselves and let the other come further inside, though for Charlotte's part not yet all the way to the core. To begin with, her actions and words remained guarded, but inside her there was no doubt in what direction her heart wanted to race, if only her mind would let go of the reins. Sidney on the other hand did not hesitate to show her his feelings and intentions and his uninhibited ways were infectious. Now when his secret was out, he allowed himself to relax in her company and showed a more boyish side of himself. She soon discovered he was much more humorous than she had taken him for, and he often made her laugh once she stopped fighting the joy that bubbled up inside her.

Most days, he spent some time making sure he from a distance attended to his business in London, but other than that he was to her disposal whenever she wanted and in difference to before he often asked her opinion in business matters. When she needed time alone, he accepted that without objections even if

it happened to be together with James. He let her set the pace but made it clear that if or when she wanted more, he would be there.

He often joined her to the school, where he first only observed but soon offered to help her teaching the children. She was surprised to see how kind and patient he was with them and how he gladly joined them playing during the break. When she pointed out that he seemed to have a natural talent for playing, he laughingly shrugged his shoulders and said he had his nieces and nephews to thank for that.

He was also interested to know what progress the school children had made from the start and asked if he could take part in planning future lessons. He told her that he clearly could see how much she enjoyed the teaching and would not want to deprive her of it, but if she ever felt the need to be released from some of the duties in the future, he was more than willing to pay the salary for a teacher. He admitted that he regretted he had not thought of it before. Charlotte was touched by his interest because it seemed sincere, not only a means to come closer to her. The only time his presence disturbed her was when it distracted her from her task and the more time they spent together, the more distracting she found him.

They often spent afternoons and evenings drawing up more plans for the improvement of the estate. Sometimes in the company of James, but before dinner he usually excused himself and left them to themselves. She had to admit that she longed for the moments alone with Sidney, they were the best part of her day. They shared their meals chatting or in companionable silence, then sat by the fireplace reading or playing chess or backgammon, which was entertaining

even if they bickered over the rules. Sometimes he offered to read for her, and she leaned back on the chaise longue, closed her eyes and for a moment allowed herself to be seduced by his velvety voice and forget that he still was on probation as her husband. When she opened her eyes, she would find him staring at her with love in his eyes, but she was the one left feeling caught in the act because of the sensation his melodious voice stirred in her.

Many days they rode out together, enjoying the freedom of travelling on horseback around the estate. They had never done this while they lived in London and Charlotte thoroughly enjoyed surprising Sidney with her skills in this area. To race with him, galloping over fields and jumping over ditches. Her countryside upbringing with many brothers had perhaps made her wilder than a lady ought to be, but Sidney did not seem to object. She loved the way this made them laugh together and the how his eyes rested on her when they paused, filled with joy, admiration and a hunger that did not scare her.

Sometimes she became acutely aware of his presence. His solid body when he was standing next to her, his pleasant masculine scent, his strength when he helped her over a ditch. It all made her stomach twist and the rest of her body tingle. It made her wonder if the hunger in his eyes was reflected in her own even if she still fought to hold it back.

Sidney did not give her costly presents but liked to surprise her in other ways. During one of their horseback outings, they came across a blanket lying invitingly

spread on the grass underneath a blossoming apple tree, with a big picnic basket beside.

"What is this?" she asked curiously as they halted their horses.

"Our lunch, if you don't mind a picnic?"

"A picnic would be very much to my taste", she smiled.

She had not been to a picnic for a long time, not since she was a girl in Willingden and felt a bit mischievous sitting down for a meal in the grass. She allowed herself to enjoy observing Sidney as he proudly unpacked the contents of the basket. It amused her to see how pleased he seemed to be that he had been able to surprise her, and he unconsciously hummed while at work. He had removed his coat and rolled up his shirt sleeves and something stirred inside her as she watched his slightly tanned, strong forearms and large hands while he nimbly served her.

She had enjoyed Sidney's company before but never felt so at ease with him as she did in this moment when they both slouched on the picnic blanket, with stomachs pleasantly full and their bodies warm to the core in that way it only can be when you feel happy on a sunny day. It was perhaps this that made her dare to put into words something that had been on her mind for some time, but she never had expected to have the courage to ask.

"When did you realise that you had feelings for me?"

The question simply came over her lips, but as soon as she had spoken her nerves failed her and she looked down, busying herself twirling grass between her fingers.

"When I realised that I love you?"

She looked up at him again and found him smiling fondly, where he lay propped up on an elbow. He seemed happy that she was curious to know. It was the first time they had spoken of their feelings since he confessed to being in love with her, even if he had tried to show her in his actions every day. Hearing the word 'love' from him again made her cheeks feel hotter than was caused by the sun.

"Yes."

"Well, I'm not entirely sure because it happened gradually, but I think I first realised in my dreams."

"In your dreams?"

She thought of the dreams she had had of him. Still had. Had his dreams been of the same nature? The mere possibility made her feel even more heated.

He nodded.

"That was how I first realised I had something beyond brotherly feelings for you, beyond just wanting to help you and make sure you were safe. Then, I admitted to myself how surprisingly much I enjoyed your company. I had settled for a life alone and was fine with that but came to realise how everything was better with you. Infinitely better. I liked things I had never imagined to like. Like accompanying you to the modiste or imagining travelling the globe looking in an Atlas. Just being near you doing anything. I realised I wanted to tell

you *everything*. Amusing things and things that troubled me. Share how my day had been. I wanted *you* to share things with me in turn, so I could get to know you. I wanted to know everything about you, involve you in my life. I realised I wanted to make you happy above anything. I also wanted to protect you from harm. That was the first feeling you evoked in me, the very moment we met, and I suppose that is also where I went too far in my good intentions. If I had focused more on understanding you and getting to know you, we would never have ended up where we did, but I lost my way."

He smiled sadly.

"I am not sure I can tell you the exact moment when I realised that what I felt was love, but when we were in Willingden I knew for sure I wanted you to be my wife in every possible way. Still, I was foolish enough to think I could get rid of that feeling if I sent you away. I didn't. When you were gone I understood that I would never get over you, my life would always be half a life without you. If Babbers had not come to my rescue I'm not sure I would have been here because I was well on my way to ruining myself. I'm not saying this for you to pity me, only so you will understand how I felt."

She knew how miserably she had failed trying to harden her heart towards him, because the thought of his pain made her ache inside too.

"Ruining yourself?"

"I drank far too much and participated in illegal boxing matches where I let myself get beaten up badly. You saw me with a black eye from that once, but I snubbed you off because at that point I did not know how to handle your kindness without telling you my feelings then and there ."

He shook his head and she reminisced that day, sometime after they had returned from Willingden and he had begun to withdraw from her. They had met in the hallway when he was home for a quick change of clothes before heading out again for another raucous night on town and she had been appalled to see the bruises on his face. Without thinking, she had reached out her hand to touch him, but he had flinched, mumbled something and hurried off. She had remained standing there alone, thinking she had done something wrong. Now she understood he had evaded the touch and ran because he was afraid.

"I neglected my business. In truth, I was a sad sight to behold. Babbers convinced me I could not continue down that track, so I pulled myself together, but I was still as unhappy as before. The only thing that kept me going was the conviction that you were better off without me."

She resumed twirling grass. Part of her wanted to tell him that she had indeed not been better off without him. That even if she had not resorted to drinking or fighting and on the surface had managed well, she had been equally miserable. She wanted to tell him that she too had realised she loved him and still did, but she was not ready to say that aloud yet. She sensed that if she told him of her

feelings, it would mean accepting his love and attempts to make amends and she was unsure if she was ready to fully open up her heart to him.

"And then came Susan and made you change your mind?" she asked instead.

"She made me realise I could not give up without a fight. Not a fist fight this time, but rather trying to tell and show you how I truly feel. She made me doubt that bottling up my feelings had been the right choice."

He diverted his gaze with an almost pained expression.

"Coming here and spending more time with you has made it very obvious that it was a momentous mistake. It would have been better to dare and possibly win than to simply fold down as I did. It would have been better to trust you were strong and capable enough to handle it. Here, where you have had the chance to blossom I can easily see that you are. I was afraid of my own feelings. You would not have been."

In the beginning she would have been terrified, but not towards the end, he was right about that.

"Are you afraid now?" she asked.

He reached out his hand and for a second she thought he would caress her cheek, but he simply removed an apple blossom petal which had landed in her hair. Her wayward body sighed with disappointment when he retracted his hand.

"Yes and no. I'm not afraid of my feelings, but I am afraid that my actions caused a rift between us which I will not be able to mend. I am not sure if I stood a chance in the first place, but my worst fear is that I did and ruined it all."

His eyes met hers and she saw the unspoken question there. The one she had not yet answered, and he had not pressured her to. He still did not know if she ever had had feelings for him.

"You did. You did have a chance," she told him softly.

His face reflected the conflicting emotions inside him, not knowing if he should be happy over her confession or devastated if that chance was gone forever.

"Spending time with you... and after Willingden...and then the ball, I felt like you did. I wanted to show you. Be with you", she continued. "So I came to you that night."

"What do you mean?"

He sat up abruptly, his relaxed mood gone.

There was a pause and they both looked up as a gust of wind made more apple blossom petals rain down on them. When she spoke again, her voice was choked. Even now, knowing his feelings, she was embarrassed to admit this.

"To your room. I came to your room."

She looked down and her eyes teared when she remembered the pain and humiliation she felt when she found his bed empty.

"You came?"

His voice was hoarse now, filled disbelief and alarm.

She nodded quietly.

"I never guessed you had been there."

She met his eyes again and saw despair reflected there, because he knew far too well what had happened next.

"Your bed was empty and the next morning you told me to leave."

"If I had known... Why didn't you tell me?"

His jaw was tight, and she could see how he too was fighting to hold back tears.

"How could I?" Her voice was almost a whisper. "I was so utterly embarrassed. I was convinced that I had been mistaken and you had been with... with her."

Her words made him look almost physically ill.

"But now you know it was not so. I was in the library all night, thinking of you."

"I know but I..." her voice broke and she was unable to resume speaking as she began crying heavily. She had thought she could tell him this now without tears, but it turned out it still hurt too much.

For a moment he seemed lost, like he did not know if she wanted him to comfort her, if he had the right to do that, when he was the one who had caused her tears. Then he threw his hesitation aside, moved closer on the blanket, put his arms around her and pulled her to him. She sensed that this was not a move to try to

seduce her or even to try to convince her to forgive him. It was only an attempt to console her and she allowed herself to mould into him. She was not sure if anything ever had felt so good.

They stayed like that for long. His arms was around her, her wet cheek pressed to his chest. Time seemed to stretch out endlessly and she became aware of every tiny detail of the here and now. The slightly raspy fabric of his waistcoat against her face, the salty taste of teardrops reaching her lips, his heartbeats under her ear, his warm firm body holding hers tightly, her own sniffles as her tears slowly stilled and his sniffles even if he tried to bury them in her hair and the fallen petals moving aimlessly over the blanket in the breeze.

"I am sorrier than I ever will be able to tell you for what I did to us, did to you and I am afraid I love you more than I can show you", he mumbled to her hair. "With all of my heart I hope you can forgive me, but I understand if you cannot. I just want you to know that you never need to doubt my feelings for you again. I won't ever go away unless you send me away. I am here for you, only for you."

It would have been easy turn up her face to his in that moment and allow herself to be kissed, but she did not want a comfort kiss. If she ever would kiss him, she wanted it to be because things felt right and joyful, not because she needed him to kiss away her tears. So, she allowed herself to be held for long and admitted it was the most wonderful feeling, but in the end withdrew from his arms and simply bestowed him a smile.

"Thank you, I think I know that by now. I just need..."

"...time?"

"Yes, time to think about what to do about all this and if I can trust you again. I know you try to show me in every possible way, but I have to *feel* it. Here."

She put her hands over her heart.

"I understand", he said but she could see how he struggled inside. This was at least as hard for him as it was for her.

In this moment she asked herself if she was wisely cautious, stupidly stubborn or simply scared, but no matter what the reason was, she needed more time before she could say yes.

Chapter 15: The key to her heart (part II)

Following that picnic, their days continued much as they had been before or so it appeared on the surface, but inside Charlotte there was a shift. She felt it so distinctly and struggled to understand what had caused it and what it meant.

During the picnic, she had finally shared the secret that she had come to Sidney's room one night and found his bed empty. She revealed the leap of faith she once had taken, taking a new leap of faith in telling him so. She shared the pain it had caused her. They say shared sorrow is half sorrow and in retrospect she could see that this somehow helped her to leave it behind, almost like clothes you discard because you have outgrown them. He had in turn exposed how he fell in love and had remained in love all this time and she sensed that it was true. All these pieces served to rebuild her trust in him.

Secondly, the intimate moment they had shared changed her. It was like previously slumbering parts of her had been awoken by being held so close by him. The memory was clearly imprinted in her mind. Now, whenever he was near, her body seemed to gravitate towards him. Her logical, independent self was still slightly wary and trying to put up a fight, but rapidly losing it against her growing affections and treacherous body. She *wanted* him and that was not a thought, it was a sensation. A instinct impossible to resist. She was not even sure that any part of her wanted to resist it anymore. If he wanted her and she wanted to be his, how could it be wrong?

Her feelings were much like a small rivulet turning into a spring flood, growing in strength every day until she barely could hold it inside. Being close to him became more and more charged somehow. His presence overshadowed everything else around her.

Eating and sleeping was increasingly difficult because of this restless energy and aching need inside. When he was close to her without touching her, the air between them seemed to almost fizz. When he brushed against her or touched her, her blood felt as if it was boiling.

Nothing in his behaviour suggested that he was running out of patience, but *she* was. The wedding was approaching but he did not seem like he was preparing to leave after it. He had said he would stay until she sent him away but hoped she never would. Charlotte finally admitted to herself that she did not want to send him away and now, at last, she wanted him to know that.

It was well past midnight the night before the wedding when she consciously accepted that this was the case. She wanted Sidney to stay and she wanted to be his wife and, perhaps more importantly, she trusted that he wanted the same. Once her mind was made up, she became eager to tell him but did not dare go knock his door in the middle of the night. She turned restlessly in the bed, convinced she would not be able to fall asleep at all, but finally she must have anyway because when she opened her eyes again daylight had returned.

She rose from her bed, padded over to the window and gazed outside. The sun had barely made it over the horizon and a thin veil of fog hovered over the fields. It was still in the very early morning hours, just past dawn it seemed, but she did not have the patience to wait any longer. She *had* to speak to Sidney, there was this unstoppable urge inside her. She could not hold off another day, another hour even if perhaps Babington's and Esther's wedding day was not the best choice for such a conversation. She swiftly got dressed and headed for his chambers down the hallway. Outside his door, her courage almost failed her but then she knocked hesitantly.

Almost immediately she heard noise from someone stirring inside, like he had been awake already. During the torturous moments it took before he opened the door, her heart was beating frantically. When the door eventually swung open and he stood before her, surprise was written all over his face. He looked as if he had hurried to become respectable enough to open, with stubbled chin and dishevelled hair, dressed only in a white shirt with a few buttons unbuttoned, half tucked into the breeches. The sight of bare skin where there normally was a tidy cravat, caused a surge in her stomach and she had to tear her gaze away and pull herself together.

"Charlotte? Is something the matter?"

He gently grasped around her forearm and his touch stirred up more disconcerting emotions inside her.

"No, nothing. I just... Would you care to join me for a walk?"

"Now? At this early hour?"

"Yes.. I... We will be occupied with the wedding all day, so I thought... It would be nice to have some time alone before. If you want to?"

His whole face lit up, the charming creases appearing at the corners of his eyes made him look younger rather than older.

"You want to spend time alone with me?"

The alarm in his voice had been replaced by happy curiosity. She only nodded, because her mouth had turned uncomfortably dry. Her palms felt clammy and her legs a bit wobbly. She was not sure why her feelings and reactions suddenly became so overwhelming after weeks in his presence doing quite fine.

"Let me get dressed a bit more properly and I will join you downstairs in a few minutes."

She would not have objected if he had joined her looking like *this* but did not say, just left him to it.

Similar to the other time when they had left the house for an early morning walk, they initially walked in silence and Charlotte was convinced he must be able to hear her heart pounding loudly inside her rib cage. She had acted on impulse,

driven by an irresistible need and now she was not sure what to say, how to start, but the silence soon became unbearable.

"Don't you just love to be outdoors this early in the morning?"

She glanced at him and saw him cock an eyebrow in amusement, which only increased her nervousness. How silly this must seem to him, an impromptu stroll at dawn.

"It is so silent except for the birds and the air is so fresh and the morning dew still remains on the flowers and leaves. I love dew, it is so beautiful. Just look at this lady's mantle, the drops are glistening like diamonds in the sunshine. Esther and Babington are so fortunate, it will be a wonderful day for their wedding. I'm so much looking forward to it. I haven't been to a wedding that I can remember, if you don't count ours and that was.... well, not quite the same."

Once she got started she could not stop herself from rambling nervously. Insignificant words kept pouring out of her mouth, until Sidney gently grabbed her elbow causing her to hold her breath. He watched her inquisitively, with a wry smile on his lips. Oh, how full and lovely his lips were. In his haste he had forgotten his hat and now the breeze ruffled his hair. She liked him much like that.

"Charlotte, this is not like you. Did you really bring me out here at this hour to talk about the weather and the wedding? I don't mind at all because I enjoy being

with you, but it is somewhat surprising. Is there something else on your mind?
Something you want to tell me?"

There was, but how?

She pulled away from him and briskly walked a few steps, stopped with her back turned to him and inhaled deeply a few times to collect herself and summon her courage.

"Have I upset you?"

He had followed her, and his voice came from so close behind her that she nearly jumped out of her skin.

"No... no, but... Can we walk? It just feels... it is easier to talk when I don't look you in the eyes."

"Of course."

She could hear amusement, curiosity and a hint of concern in his voice. She knew she was acting like a complete fool but could not help it.

Now walking side by side again, she was able to resume the conversation and finally approach the core of the matter.

"There is indeed something I need to tell you."

"I'm all ears."

They continued on a winding path and approached a small beech forest. This early in spring the foliage was almost surrealistically intensively green and walking along the path with the tree crowns above and sunshine seeping through, was like entering a tunnel of green light.

"I thought I was managing quite fine, you know. I believed I had found a way to live a good life without you. You had sent me away, but I was coping... Then you came... and I realised that my feelings are unchanged."

Glancing at him sideways she saw his body tense. His head snapped her direction and she quickly turned her gaze forward again, unable to go on if she faced him.

"The moment I saw you in that field when I was hunting, I realised that despite all the anger and grief, I feel for you as I did when you sent me away. I mean to say, *before* you sent me away."

Her heart was pounding out of her chest now.

"What *did* you feel then?" he asked softly.

She swallowed but said nothing because now her tongue felt like glued to her palate. Sidney's eyes burned on her and after some time he continued to fill the silence in her place.

"If you won't say, then let me tell you this... When I first saw you outside my room this morning, I instantly feared something was wrong. Feared that you had come to the conclusion that you no longer wanted me around and would ask me to

leave after the wedding. But now... the way you are acting, what you just said... Do I dare to hope?"

He was silent for a moment, with bated breath waiting for her answer, but she still could not make the words come over her lips.

"If you won't tell me what you felt then, I will tell you what I felt that day and every day since, just to make sure that there is not a scrap of doubt in your mind about that."

They had stopped, and he put his hands lightly on her shoulders, turning her towards him. She still felt the need to avoid looking at him but was like clay in his hands. When she turned her face up, his expression was one of utter sincerity.

"I felt like my heart was being ripped out of my chest. I felt like half of me disappeared when you left, and worse for knowing I had *made* you. I lost hope, direction, joy, life. Only here, with you during the last weeks, I have found that again."

Now it was his turn to divert his gaze a moment, only to immediately return it to her face.

"I am not the most eloquent man, at least not when it comes to matters of the heart. It has not been easy for me to tell you how I feel. It has been far easier trying to *show* you, now when I allow myself to do so. I may have seemed rough to you in the past, but in fact it was always much harder *not* to show you my true

feelings, so once you gave me permission to try and do that... it was a relief. I could finally be myself fully with you."

He shook his head slowly, in what seemed like sad desperation.

"...But words... they still seem inadequate. I still feel like they fail me, like I constantly stumble and fall when all I want is to make sure you know that I am yours with everything that I am. I have been for a very long time and I will be to the end of my days, if you will have me or not. I *hope* you know by now how deep and sincere my feelings for you are. So I ask of you, won't you please try to share with me how you feel too? I will be the last one to judge if words don't come out as you intended."

She fixed her now teary gaze on his cravat and tried to keep from hyperventilating. He had already confessed his feelings to her most beautifully, despite his self-doubt. She finally believed him, both his words and his actions, so she did not understand why this was so hard. Why she felt like she was about to throw herself off a cliff, or throw up, or both. The plea in his eyes mixed with her own urge to tell him was in the end too much to resist and finally she overcame her hesitation.

"I know I *can* live without you, but I don't want to."

"Why is that?"

His tone was not in the least way challenging. It was a question from someone who perhaps knows, but very much wants to hear the answer anyway.

"Because I love you. I did then and I do now, perhaps even more. No, not perhaps. I *know* I love you more because I allow myself to do so and for the first time *I* dare to hope..."

When the words dropped from her lips, she finally looked up at his face again and saw a sunny smile transform it. She had seen Sidney smile before, but never had he looked so genuinely happy as in this moment. Her words released the tension inside herself too and an unbridled joy welled up inside her.

"You love me", he repeated.

"And you love me", she established in return.

"Yes."

He let go of his gentle hold of her shoulders and instead closed his arms around her to pull her close to him. For the first time, she dared to circle her own arms around his waist to hold him too, revelling in the strong solidity under her palms and the feel of his hard chest pressed against her softer one. When his mouth slowly searched for hers it was exactly what she wanted, needed, craved.

What she felt inside when his lips gently touched hers for the first time was indescribable. The intimacy and giddy exhilaration caused by being mouth to mouth with the only man she loved and wanted, were almost too much to take and she clung on to him not to lose her balance. He seemed more than willing to hold her, and she sensed he needed her to support him in turn. Her hands moved

from his waist to coil around his neck and bury themselves in his curls. Such soft, thick hair and how she had longed to touch it. His hands moved up over her back, one cradling her head protectively yet assertively. Breaths got ragged as they were completely absorbed in the presence, sensation and taste of one another.

When they finally broke away, both looked and felt dizzy and as if someone just had woken them up from a trance. They laughed slightly embarrassed at how they were affected, but at the same time did not truly care because they were so incredibly happy.

"We should probably head back and prepare ourselves for the wedding, so we don't miss it. Babington would never forgive if his best man did not show up", she said even if she had no wish to end this.

"I suppose you are right", he chuckled but made no sign of letting her go from his hold. He pushed away a few strands of hair from her face, then looked around to localise where they actually were, something neither of them had paid any attention to for some time.

During the last part of their walk, the forest had opened up and they found themselves in a sunny glade. The ground was covered by a green and white carpet of blooming lilies of the valley. Now both looked around in silent awe, letting the sweet flowery smell fill their nostrils.

"So beautiful", Sidney said but with eyes fixed on Charlotte rather than the flowers.

"I have been here before but then they were not in bloom then, I have never seen anything like it."

"Me neither."

She let go of him long enough to bend down and pick one of the delicate white flowers.

"I'm glad it is not a field of bluebells."

She said pensively and touched the little bell-like shape of one of the flowers and almost expected it to jingle.

"Why?"

"Because there is an old saying that if you walk through a field of bluebells you will anger the fairies and they will curse you so you will not have the one your heart desires."

Her eyes locked with his again, conveying that he was *the one*.

"I'm not sure if I believe in fairies but I wouldn't want to risk *anything*... ever again... when it comes to you. I'm also glad this is not a field of bluebells."

He put an arm around her again as he spoke, took the flower from her and tucked it in the hair behind her ear, then cupped her cheek.

"Charlotte?"

"Yes?"

"Am I allowed to kiss you?"

Her face was turned up towards him as if she was one of the flowers and he the

sun.

"Don't you think it is a little late for asking?" she teased but even if they already had kissed for long, his request caused a tingling sensation inside her. At the same time she was strangely calm. The angst of the early morning hours, before she spoke what was on her mind, was gone. He *knew*, and that was how things were supposed to be.

"I'm asking if you will allow me to kiss you for the rest of our lives, as my wife."

Wide-eyed she gasped.

"You want that?"

"More than anything."

Charlotte felt like they were rewriting their history in this moment. The past was not forgotten, it had taken them where they were now and in light of the present it was less hurtful. It had made them grow together instead of apart. They had started over with a proper courtship and this was the proposal they never had.

"Then... yes."

She saw the same exhilarated, yet calm, joyfulness she felt reflected in his eyes. He held her even tighter and she clasped his lapels, to anchor herself not to push him away.

She had wanted this, dreamed of it, for so long that she could not quite believe it was happening for real. She could not imagine a more beautiful place for it to happen. Hidden birds were chirping and there was the soft whooshing sound

from the breeze moving among the tree leaves, but other than that it was silent. Sidney and the sun made her feel warm inside, like her core was thawing after a long, grim winter.

The kiss lasted long this time too. Much longer than it ought to, considered they had a wedding to attend, so when they finally made their way back to the house it was with hurried steps, almost running, while holding hands and laughing.

Charlotte's preparations for the wedding had to be done much quicker than she had planned, but her morning had been better spent and by the look Sidney gave her when she came down the stairs she knew she would do well enough.

"Now you look like one of those ethereal forest fairies you spoke of", he told her as he took in the sight of her, clad in a pale green gown. Her hair was neatly pinned up in a hairdo with a matching green ribbon tied like a diadem and the lilies of the valley she had picked earlier dispersed among the locks. The way his warm brown eyes rested on her made her feel more beautiful than ever before.

When her husband took her arm to lead her to the awaiting carriage, she thought that it was astounding how things could change over the course of a day. This morning she had been in agony when she prepared to tell him her feelings. Now she felt happy and secure. If her life would continue as it was in this very moment, she would be completely content. She knew he loved her. He knew she loved him. She had never been happier.

The wedding ceremony was to take place in the little church attached to Babington's estate and the following celebration at Babington Manor. As Babington's estate was vast, it was almost an hour's ride by carriage to get there even if it was bordering to Sidney's smaller estate. Needless to say, Mr. and Mrs. Parker were not displeased with being confined to a closed space in each other's company during that hour. When they arrived he had to help her tidy her hairdo as some locks had escaped and when they entered the church together her lips were plush and her cheeks unusually rosy in a very flattering way.

During the ceremony, Sidney's eyes darted to her more frequently than was appropriate considering that the best man was expected to pay full attention to the bride and groom. Charlotte had to admit that she found it hard to look away from her husband standing there beside the altar, looking more dashing than ever. Esther was an extraordinarily beautiful bride, Lord Babington a handsome groom, but her husband was the magnet she was drawn to. She fought to grasp that finally he was truly hers and could not help staring adoringly at him. It seemed to be the same for him. A smile was constantly playing on his lips and there was a twinkle in his eyes which had not been there before. She tried hard to remain serious, even bit her lower lip to manage, but in the end split up in a big smile and he returned it with a silly, wonderful grin. The joy of knowing that they now belonged together was so overwhelming that it could not be contained.

After the vicar had declared Lord and Lady Babington husband and wife, everyone gathered outside the church to throw flower petals as the newlyweds

came out the doors. For a split second Charlotte lamented that her and Sidney's wedding had not been a celebration with friends and family like this, but then thought that all that mattered was that they had found their way back to one another, a feeling which was enhanced when Sidney appeared by her side and took her hand. It did not seem to bother him that such displays of affection was not common in public and it certainly did not bother her.

"Charlotte, will you please come with me inside for a bit?" he said in hushed voice close to her ear, causing a pleasant buzzing feeling.

"But the wedding luncheon? Everyone is going to Babington Manor now." She frowned her brow in confusion.

"Don't worry. We will be there in time for that, this won't take long", he reassured her.

They returned inside the church, now empty except for the vicar, still standing by the altar and Sidney pulled Charlotte along with him in that direction.

He stopped only a few meters away from the altar. The vicar did not seem surprised at all to see them there, she noticed.

"Charlotte", Sidney said in low voice so only she heard. "I told reverend Frickleton that we were married by the blacksmith in Gretna Green and that it would mean much to us, at least to me, if he would give us his blessing too so it feels like we have been more properly wed. He has agreed to do that, if you want it?"

Much to Charlotte's surprise he then went down on one knee, holding her hand.

"Charlotte, would you do me the honour of becoming my wife a second time? It

would make me the happiest man on Earth."

Her mouth fell open and her eyes glazed with tears. It had felt like a proposal earlier in the glade, but this truly was. There was a moment when she could say nothing because she was too emotional, but then she smiled.

"Yes, there is nothing I want more."

Upon hearing those words, and still holding her hand, he carefully pulled the wedding ring off from her finger, then got to his feet and led her the last steps to the altar where reverend Frickleton smilingly greeted them.

During the brief, unromantic ceremony in Gretna Green, they had stood beside each other stiffly and apprehensively without touching. Now she placed her hand on his arm. Their hearts were filled with love and the church filled with light from the tall windows as the reverend spoke the solemn words and they exchanged their sacred vows.

When Sidney for the third time put the wedding ring on her finger they both knew that now they were husband and wife for real and this time until death did them part, because none of them would have it any other way. Their hands were trembling and when he looked up from her hand after returning the ring to where it belonged, both were tearful with emotion.

They were not expected to kiss here inside the church but ignoring decorum, he leaned in and placed his lips to hers.

"I love you, Charlotte Parker, never doubt that again."

"As I love you Mr. Parker."

Reverend Frickleton cleared his throat, seeming slightly embarrassed at witnessing such an intimate moment, wished them all happiness and then turned to leave. Giggling like naughty children caught with the hand in the biscuit jar, Mr. and Mrs. Parker left the church and went to join the festivities.

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The celebration was over, and the carriage was taking them back to their own home. The wedding luncheon had been extended by many hours as neither the wedding couple nor the guests wanted it to end. The entire afternoon and evening had been absolutely wonderful, filled with Lord and Lady Babington's happiness and their own. After a sumptuous meal, there had been plenty of refreshments, mingling in the garden, music and even spontaneous dancing.

Charlotte and Sidney had barely let go of one another. When she for a moment thought she perhaps was clinging on too hard to his arm and loosened her hold, he had determinedly put his arm around her waist and pulled her closer to his side, indicating that was exactly where he wanted her. During the luncheon they had been seated next to one another and as often as they could let their hands lace under the table and in between smiled like fools. Afterwards they had laughingly sneaked away to the boxwood labyrinth in the enormous garden, where they had kissed until they ran out of breath before they attempted to find their way out again. They were feeling intoxicated but by love rather than wine.

Lord and Lady Babington were happily surprised to see them like this but had not asked what had brought about the change. It would not have been polite to do so openly among the other guests and anyway it was obvious to everyone that the reason was love.

It had all been so lovely, but eventually she had longed for the festivities to come to an end because she could not wait to be alone with Sidney. *Her husband.*

However, when she finally had him to herself in the carriage heading home, she almost dozed off because it had been such a long and emotional day. Her head leaned heavy to his shoulder, her hand rested on his chest and she could feel the safe warmth and strength from his body. When she snuggled into him like this, they fit so perfectly together. He had put his arm around her to hold her in place as the carriage cringed and leaned his head on top of hers. She could feel him press his lips to her skull. She wished they would sleep together like this tonight. All night. Once she had been afraid he would ask that of her, now she hoped he would.

At last, the carriage rattled to a halt in front of the house, *their house*, and suddenly she was wide awake again. When they walked up the stairs side by side, with her hand on his arm, she felt her pulse increase with every step. She was not sure what they would do now. She wished to have him in her bed tonight, but she did not feel brazen enough to suggest it. They had waited for so long, far too long, but they had only fully reconciled this very day. Maybe he was not ready to receive her in his bed already.

They stopped outside the door to her room, both feeling slightly awkward.

"I hope..."

"I have..."

They spoke simultaneously and the mutual laugh that followed released some of the tension.

"You say."

"No, ladies first."

She was not sure what to say without seeming too forward, but she also wanted to make her wishes clear so that there would be no more misunderstandings between them. Looking into his eyes she saw a combination of love, desire and vulnerability glimmer there and it dawned on her that he was even more insecure than her about what to do in this moment.

He had repeated countless times that he only wanted from her what she would give freely and that still held true. Suddenly she knew with absolute clarity what she had to do to close the remaining small gap between them for good.

"I was about to say that I have something for you... a wedding gift."

A bewildered smile spread over his face.

"A wedding gift? But we didn't know we would..."

"Just stay here and I will get it."

She touched his arm and smiled reassuringly even if her own stomach twisted with nervousness.

Soon she stood before him again with blushing cheeks. What if he did not want

what she was about to offer him?

"Give me your hand, please."

"Last time you did this you tried to return your wedding ring. That morning, on the stairs, when we said goodbye", he reminisced with hoarse voice, and a pained shadow travelled over his face. "I couldn't bear the thought of you not wearing it. Such a momentous mistake all that was."

Tears emerged in her eyes at the memory. So mistaken they both had been that day with regards to what the other one felt, both wrapped up in despair because they were convinced their love was unrequited. But that was then and now was now and not the time for sadness.

"I'm not returning my wedding ring ever again. I am yours."

"As I am yours."

"Give me your hand then."

"As you command Mrs. Parker", he smiled then and did as she said.

She took it, placed something in his palm, closed his fingers around it and then moved it to her lips to kiss it.

"Now you can look."

Slowly, he opened his hand and looked down to find a key lying in his open palm. She watched him intently. When he returned his gaze to her face his dark eyes had widened.

"Do you know what it is?" she asked apprehensively.

"I think I do. Is it the key I once gave you?"

She nodded and swallowed hard.

"It doesn't fit any lock here, but you said once I should do with it what pleases me.

It would please me very much if you have it."

"You want me to...?"

He glanced over her shoulder, inside her room.

"That is what I'm trying to tell you without making a total fool of myself."

Embarrassed she cupped her own flaming cheeks to hide them. He stepped closer and circled his hands around her waist.

"You are not making a fool of yourself. You are making me incredibly happy."

"So you want it?"

"I have wanted that for a *very* long time, Charlotte."

Indeed, Sidney looked like a man who could not believe his fortune. Now he watched her from under long eyelashes, speaking almost bashfully and she could not understand how she once had found him intimidating.

"It means the world to me that we exchanged our vows a second time today. I meant every single word. I always said I would marry only for love, and now I finally have. I thought love had eluded me and I was destined to remain alone, but you proved me wrong and I'm infinitely grateful for that. "

He bent his head to kiss her, but she placed her fingers to his lips to prevent him even if she wanted it badly.

"If we kiss now, I'm afraid we will never stop, and I would like... I would like to prepare myself properly for our wedding night."

"Of course." He chuckled fondly and his shyness seemed to evaporate. "My loveliest, dearest wife, you are so wise. If I kissed you now there is no way I would be able to stop until morning came."

His words made a shiver of need travel through her.

"Me neither."

Instead he pressed his lips to her forehead and then, with one last long, yearning look, let go of her and stepped away to allow her some time alone. It seemed like he could not stop smiling.

Elated and full of anticipation she closed the door behind her with a soft thud and could not help but childishly skipping a few steps, hugging herself. In every sense she felt like a newlywed bride with the first night together with her husband ahead of her. A husband she loved so dearly. She tried to wipe off the silly grin from her own face, telling herself now was the time to behave like a woman not a child, but it was hard when she was brimming with joy.

Swiftly she ridded herself of all her clothes and let her hair down. When she untangled the locks, the lilies of the valley that had adorned the hairdo, fell to the floor and filled the room with their lovely scent.

Washing herself by the basin, she felt flushed imagining that soon *he* would be touching her skin instead. For the second time since her mother gifted her the special nightgown, she brought it out from the wardrobe where it had been resting neatly folded. She had given up all hope of ever wearing it, because it was intended for her wedding night and she had believed that would never come to pass. Not after she turned around on Sidney's threshold. Now her heart was singing whilst she pulled the exquisite garment over her head and let the thin muslin fall around her otherwise naked limbs. Her fingertips traced the white roses which so carefully had been embroidered around the neckline. She knew her mother had wished her marital bliss when she had made each of those neat stitches and now that happiness seemed to be within her grasp.

Just like that other time, she now looked at herself in the full-length mirror. Her eyes twinkled like all the night sky stars were reflected there, her cheeks and lips rosy and her long hair fell like an unruly, dark waterfall around her shoulders almost down to her waist.

That time she had nervously prepared to go to him. Now he was coming to her.

The knowledge that within minutes Sidney would be here and see her like this was daunting and exhilarating in equal measures. Would he approve of her? Would she live up to his expectations? And what was she to expect herself? She did not know, only that whatever it was she needed it like oxygen and hoped he would guide her.

Fortunately, there was not more time to allow self-doubt or nervousness to grow, because there was a faint yet decisive knock on the door. Charlotte swallowed and willed the swarm of flapping butterflies in her stomach to calm down.

"Come in", she invited her husband and expectantly watched the door knob turn.

Epilogue: When two hearts sing the same song

When Sidney raised his hand to knock on the door to his wife's bedroom, he felt like everything in his life had led up to this moment. As if all the heartbreak and rough times he had been through, had served the sole purpose of shaping him into the man he now was and transport him on winding paths so that he would end up right here, right now, ready to belong to her and, he hoped, worthy of it.

This was everything he wanted. Still, or perhaps because of that, he was incredibly nervous. He had been with women before and was aware he usually did not disappoint, but it had never been like this. He had never been with a woman who he cared so deeply about and wanted to spend the rest of his days and nights with. He wanted to make everything right for Charlotte. When she with a pink tinge on her cheeks had handed him that key and he understood what she meant, his heart had almost burst with happiness. *She wanted them to be together.* He had to make sure she did not regret that wish.

He knew of men who had married the woman their heart desired, but yet managed to ruin the relationship during the wedding night, or at least cause considerable damage. He had listened to the drunken complaints of these disappointed and ignorant men, who did not understand why their wives were so cold in bed. To Sidney it had seemed obvious that the reason was that they were more preoccupied with taking than giving. Their own pleasure came first and last with no regard to the wife's wishes and when her enthusiasm was not what they

had hoped, many turned to mistresses. He did not want to make the same mistake and forever ruin the intimacy between them. He knew that if he could not have this with her, he would not want it with anyone else and he wanted her to take delight in it as much as him.

It had never before mattered to him if he was a woman's first and he always considered men who saw a virgin as a coveted trophy pathetic. With a snort he reminisced how little he had appreciated the 'special birthday gift' his friends arranged for him at the brothel and how determined he had been to turn it down. Little had he known it would bring the ray of sunshine that was Charlotte into his life. Now things were so different, and it seemed like fate that they had met. He was eternally grateful that he would be her first so it would be in the safe harbour of marriage and love, not forced on her but also boyishly proud that he would be the one to introduce her to such intimacy.

Without a doubt he wanted them to be each other's last. He wanted to make her happy and content in all possible ways, including physically. Now he was nervous because he wondered if he would do well enough, if he would be able to make her enjoy it. If he would know how to introduce her to the act of making love in the right way.

When her soft voice beckoned him inside, his heart made a somersault and he turned the door knob.

He had half expected to find her buried up to her nose under the quilt like in Willingden, but this was not the case. She was standing in the centre of the softly illuminated room and was so beautiful that she looked like she was from another world. The fireplace cast a golden shimmer over the dark hair, cascading untamed down her shoulders. She had worn it pinned up since he came here and now he noticed it was much longer than when they parted in London. It was a reminder of the sad months that had passed in between, but her showing herself like this to him again also symbolised the newfound closeness between them. He felt an urge to run his hands through the long locks, bury them there and tie himself to her using the silky strands as ribbons.

However, her hair was far from the only appealing feature about his wife in this moment. Her white, ankle-length nightgown was made of cotton so thinly woven that it almost revealed more than it covered. Through the single muslin layer, without any stays, chemise or petticoat underneath, he could clearly see her soft curves. Enticing hips, narrow waist, rounded breasts, even the shadow of her nipples. His breath hitched and his pulse raced, in fact his entire body reacted at the sight of her and his only concern was how he was supposed to hold back, so he would not overwhelm her with the immense desire that welled up inside him.

Charlotte watched the door swing open to reveal Sidney's tall, broad shouldered frame. Apprehensively, but with a big smile on his lips he stepped inside. She noticed his Adam's apple bob once and almost giggled with relief when she understood that he was nervous too. His gaze was first fixed on her face, to read

her expression but when he saw her welcoming him, he allowed it to travel down her body and then up again whilst he slowly stepped closer. When his now almost black eyes met hers anew, filled with warmth, love and undisguised desire, she knew without a doubt that he very much approved of what he saw.

He put aside the candle he had been holding to light his way through the hallway and for a moment they stood still, facing one another, just taking each other in. He was so handsome and overwhelmingly masculine that she found it hard to breathe. His change of attire alone made her feel like they were more intimate than they ever had been before. Gone was the top hat and cane, the coat, waistcoat, cravat, breeches, socks and shoes. Similar to her, he was dressed only in a white nightshirt, reaching to his knees, exposing his calves and bare feet to her for the first time. Curiously she registered how muscular his calves were compared to her own slender ones and covered with dark hairs. A need to see more of the man hidden under that shirt shot up inside her, striking like a lightning where her thighs met.

As on a silent signal, both stepped closer. She placed her palms to his chest, and he placed his hands gently on her shoulders, to then run them down her arms, close them around her waist and pull her to him. A sigh escaped her because this felt so completely right, and she could almost feel how this made his lips smile as he pressed them to the top of her head. For a moment they simply savoured the feeling of their bodies pressed flush against one another, separated only by two layers of thin cotton. She inhaled the heady smell of the skin by the pit of his

neck, freed of cravat and exposed to her. Instinctively she pressed her lips there and felt rather than heard how he too sighed with contentment. She noticed how he, whilst still holding her upper body as tight to his own as before, shifted his hips slightly away from her. She wondered why and immediately missed the pressure. There was a pulsating place between her own thighs craving it. When she turned her face up to his he was watching her intently, with a slightly embarrassed smile but gave no explanation as to what made him do it. Instead he cradled her head in his hands and leaned down to kiss her. She wondered how lips could be so soft and wonderfully demanding at the same time.

Sidney was almost embarrassed over how much the sight of Charlotte and first touch aroused him. He felt himself grow hard and moved away his groin from her, defying the need to press himself to her. He did not want to frighten her and did not want to rush things.

Despite that they had kissed several times already today, the feeling was new when they kissed now, the touch of her lips exceedingly tingling and exciting. For the first time they were kissing behind closed doors, where no one would walk in on them. They had all the time in the world and now they claimed each other little by little. He tentatively parted his lips and she willingly followed and opened up for him. Softly he let his tongue run over her lips, which to his pleasant surprise made her nibble his bottom lip. Mutely they explored one another, soft grazes turning into deeper kisses, lips parting more and more, noses softly bumping which would have made them laugh had it not been so intense between them. The

kisses elicited a soft moan from her, telling him he was doing something right. It was like her response fuelled embers glowing beneath his skin into full-blown fire and now he deepened the kiss even further, allowing his tongue to swirl into her mouth at the same time as his hands moved down the small of her back to cup her buttocks.

His large hands on her body made Charlotte feel tiny, but also safe, protected and aroused. It was the strangest combination and she thought that it must be right to feel like this with one's husband. She felt embarrassed when sounds involuntarily escaped her but noticed how it only seemed to spur him on. With her mouth latched to his, she coiled her arms around his neck, buried her fingers in his hair and almost unconsciously pressed her hips against him again. This induced a low groan from him, and she nearly jumped back in surprise when she felt a prominent hardness that was not there before press into her. It was not a sharp cold shape, more like a warm, softly rounded form with definitive solidity underneath.

When she looked down his nightshirt was tenting out.

"I did not mean to frighten you. I hope I didn't. That I don't."

"No, but what is...?"

She *was* slightly terrified even if she did not admit it, but most of all terribly curious about this new discovery.

"It is just how it is supposed to be when a man who loves and desires his wife, is alone with her like we are now. Then this happens."

"Can I touch you there?" she asked before she could think.

He swallowed.

"If you want to."

Carefully she touched ever so lightly over the bulge and felt it twitch underneath the fabric. This almost made her giggle, but she stopped herself when his eyes fluttered shut and she saw the sensation of pleasure that ran through him.

Obviously he enjoyed being touched there. Was it even a burning need, similar to what she felt between her own thighs now? She would like if he touched her there but would not dare to ask. It seemed vulgar to do so and if it was meant to be, he surely would. For a few moments longer she caressed him through the cotton and felt how this part of him seemed to grow even longer and harder from her touch. When he opened his eyes again and stared into hers, his irises were darker and more intense than ever. Her curiosity was over-ridden by sudden shyness and she retracted her hand. She wanted him to look at her like this but was unsure how to respond to it.

Sidney understood that she was not ready to explore him more like this right now. In fact he had been surprised when she dared to touch him there at all but thanked God for her innate inquisitiveness. She wanted to learn about his body, she wanted to touch him. He could not imagine a better beginning and there was

absolutely no need to push her to do things faster than she was comfortable with. It was obvious that she knew very little of what was to happen in the bedroom, and he lamented that their hasty marriage likely had not allowed her mother to prepare her properly for this. He hoped he would do it well enough. Now he caught her escaping hand, laced his fingers with hers and smilingly led her towards the bed.

"Come."

"Did I do anything wrong? Touching you?"

"No, you did everything right, believe me, but let's just wait with that. We don't need to rush anything. In fact we don't need to do anything you don't want to do tonight. We can kiss until we fall asleep, or we can just hold each other. Don't get me wrong, there are so many things I want to do with you, but not too fast. I won't risk ruining anything between us when we can have a lifetime of wondrous nights together. You set the pace."

"But I do not know what we are expected to do. What *I* am expected to do."

There was a hint of frustration and desperation in her voice. For a moment she looked heartbreakingly vulnerable and his need to protect her overshadowed his arousal.

He took her face between his palms and caressed her cheeks with his thumbs.

"Don't worry Charlotte. We will find out together and only do what we both desire and then we can do nothing wrong. You must know that you can *never* disappoint me. By just being here with me now, as my wife, you are giving me more than I could ever dream of."

Charlotte could see in his eyes that he was speaking the truth. It did not disappoint him that she did not know exactly what was to be done, he was more than willing to show her and do so at the pace she decided. The only problem was that she felt she wanted and needed so *much* but did not know exactly what it was. Perhaps they together could find out how to satisfy this disconcerting yet thrilling hunger. She hoped they would.

Now he sat down on the edge of the bed. Smiling up at her he guided her to stand between his open legs, something which made his night shirt slide a bit further up, exposing his knees and lower thighs. Her heart fluttered from exhilaration and nervousness at seeing more of his bare skin exposed. She willed herself to relax, but it was easier said than done. His strong body could make her feel safe, but it was also uncharted territory and she was very conscious of her own inexperience in this moment. It seemed like her wonderful husband could sense her lingering insecurity and wanted to make her feel more comfortable. Keeping his eyes locked with hers, he placed his palms to the small of her back and let them run slowly up and down. He leaned his head to her stomach, first just hugging her and then began placing languid, open mouthed kisses over it. She

gasped at the sensation of his lips there through the thin muslin. He looked up at her face again.

"I have never seen a vision as beautiful as you in this moment. I love you and I cannot believe how fortunate I am to be with you."

The combination of his words and his reassuring, simultaneously rousing touch made something fall into place inside her and her nervousness faded. She accepted that she could do nothing wrong tonight. There was no way she would disappoint him, because his highest wish the same as hers; to be as close as possible.

"I love you Sidney. I feel the same", she told him and bent her neck so they could kiss.

She was not sure which sensation that was most enticing; his tongue swirling deeper into her mouth than it had before, or his hands slowly travelling over her back and buttocks. He allowed his fanned fingers to run up and down her sides. His thumbs grazed the side of her breasts and then, watching her reaction, he let his other fingertips follow. Through the sheer cotton she felt the soft pressure, the heat and the tickling sensation when he found her nipples. With fascination she watched him gently play with them until they were visible as stiff little nubs through the fabric. He moved a little further in on the bed and brought her with him, so she came to sit straddled over his legs instead. It took her slightly by surprise, but she enjoyed this new position with their faces level with one

another, his warm firm body under hers, his arms around her. Slowly, he untied the ribbon holding the nightgown together at the neckline and even slower pushed it down over her shoulders.

Charlotte remained slightly nervous but more and more curious and confident that he would guide her. She could feel the unknown need pulsating through her body. When he untied the ribbon and exposed more of her skin, her shoulders, clavicles and some of the roundness of her breasts, her spinal reflex was to cover herself up. Years of exercising chasteness appropriate for a young unmarried lady had taught her to act like that, but then he met her eyes with a look of pure wonder in his and she knew that this was what she had been saving it all for. For him to discover her. In that moment he leaned in, placed his lips to her neck and began kissing along the neckline and the collarbone, then trailed upwards again to a spot right under her ear which turned out to be surprisingly sensitive. She closed her eyes and felt his lips travel soft and hot, his teeth now playfully nibbling one earlobe. It was such a wondrous sensation that she would have relaxed completely in his arms, if she had not been so excited and curious about what he would do next.

He paused and looked at her, bashfully.

"Do you... like it?"

She thought that saying that she 'liked' it would be a grave understatement.

"I find it very... stimulating", she smiled in response, somewhat short of breath.

"Stimulating is good", he mused and let his fingertips caress over her collarbone in slow, tender circles, for every time circling a little wider and lower. Now she almost forgot to breathe altogether out of anticipation, as he gently cupped both her breasts again. She had always thought them a bit on the large side, but they fit so perfectly in his palms that they seemed to be made for being cupped by him. For a moment he simply held them like that, then moved to cup from underneath so he could graze her nipples with the pads of his thumbs again. She was still getting acquainted with the new thrilling sensation of being touched there with only the sheer muslin between, when he pushed the nightgown even further down so her bosom was fully revealed. She found it slightly shocking but also incredibly arousing, especially since he continued his ministrations, caressing one breast but leaning down to kiss the other one. Everything, the proximity and sight of him, his sensual touch and the feeling of sitting on his lap, increased this new feeling inside her. She was not sure how to define it; a thirst, a pressure, a need, an urge – but for what? All she knew was that she needed *more* of what he was doing with such attentiveness and so much love. For every new inch of bare skin that was revealed to him, he looked like he was watching a miracle unfold and he made her feel like she was wrapped in a cocoon of adoration.

Sidney took his time worshipping her breasts. They were every bit as perfect as they had been in his vivid dreams, heavy in his hands and with light pink nipples as pretty as everything about her. It was astounding that something so innocent simultaneously could be so seductive. He had never been so aroused in his entire life and needed to sternly keep himself in check not to go too fast. It pleased him

enormously to see how she fought to try to hold back moans of pleasure yet was not quite able to prevent them from slipping over her lips. He was determined that he would draw those sounds out from her in due time, they were too sweet to be dampened.

When he pushed down her nightgown a little further, he noticed how she shuddered slightly even if the room was not cold. He understood that it sooner might be because she felt a bit exposed sitting half naked on his lap while he still had his nightshirt on and berated himself for not thinking of that before. Gently he put his arms around her and flipped her around, so she came to lie on her back. She giggled with pleased surprise and her brown eyes twinkled with mischievous happiness. He felt a bit choked at the wonderful sight of her lying with the dark hair spread over the pillow, with flushed cheeks, lips plump and rosy from all the kissing and her beautiful breasts still uncovered. She made no attempt to pull up her nightgown and the fact that she allowed herself to be like this with him increased his arousal further. Her smile beckoned him closer.

He placed one knee on either side of hers, then slowly lowered himself over her holding his weight on his arms. When her mouth met his again, it was with a new hunger, one similar to the feeling he tried to restrain. She twined her hands around his neck, holding him to her, drinking him in and the feeling of her body stretched out under him like this made him a bit light-headed. He tried not to press himself into her but knew she must feel his hardness against her thigh because there was truly no way to hide it by now. It did not seem to scare her

though, instead she adjusted her position slightly, wriggling almost by instinct it seemed, so he rested between her thighs. He could not hold back a moan and just barely refrained from pushing hard against her, nearly overwhelmed by desire.

He moved her so surprisingly easy from the position sitting on top of his lap, to lying down with him covering her and his evident strength stirred something inside Charlotte. Had he not been so gentle and loving, he could have felt like a predator ready to devour her but using his strength and agility in the way he did, he made her want to be under him like this, more than anything. When he lowered his hips onto hers, she could feel that fascinating hardness she had touched briefly before and just knew she needed it to rest between her legs. He seemed to like it like that because now it was his turn to moan in the same way which she had found so embarrassing when she did it but found utterly delightful now when it came from him. The realisation that she could provoke such a reaction from him made her feel jubilantly powerful, like she was in possession of magical abilities herself unbeknownst up to now. She let her hands move on from tugging the locks at the nape of his neck, to instead roam his back. She lost herself in this for a moment meanwhile he kept kissing her neck and her breasts in the most marvellous way, because she loved to feel the broadness of his back and the contours of his muscles through the night shirt.

Suddenly she felt it was not enough.

"Sidney?"

She placed a palm to his stubbled cheek, and he looked up from kissing her collarbone, almost drowsily.

"Yes?"

"Would you... would you take off your shirt? I would like to feel your skin. Can I?"

It seemed like he was incapable of producing a coherent answer. He just swallowed and nodded, then wriggled his hips a bit so he could hoist up the long shirt and in one fluid move pulled it over his head and discarded it. Even if she had requested it, she was slightly taken aback by the speed with which he fulfilled her wish. He remained hovering above her, supported on his arms so she could take in what he looked like. His hips were resting on hers again and she would anyway not have dared looking further down, not yet anyway.

She had seen his naked upper body once, a glimpse, and that had been alluring enough to set her imagination on fire. Now he was going nowhere, he was hers and had every intention to remain in this bed with her. She could not stop staring at him in awe and her heartbeats were resounding very loudly in her ears. He was so different from her, so beautiful and tempting. Hard and sculpted under the smooth, warm skin, with a dusting of dark hair trailing downwards. Trembling she touched him, using first only her fingertips to draw patterns, then returned to his back to feel his flexing muscles under her palms. When her exploring hands reached the small of his back, she returned upwards every time because she did not yet have the courage to wander further down. She wanted to tell him how

much she loved his male form but would feel strange to say words like that. Maybe one day she would but for now she had the feeling that he anyway could read it in her eyes, by how she touched him and by the way her own body was humming at the contact with his.

She was very aware that her nightgown now was the only thing separating them and yet that was beginning to feel like an unwelcome barrier rather than protection. She was craving to be skin to skin with him now and when it was hoisted further up by a combination of their hips moving and his hand caressing up her thigh, she did nothing to pull it down again.

Still supporting himself on one arm, Sidney let his other hand caress down her body, following her curves all the way down to her knees. Her nightgown was hoisted so far up that their naked lower legs were free to be entwined and he revelled in the feeling of her smooth legs mingling with his own for the first time. Almost of its own accord, his hand found the soft skin at the backside of her knee and began touching her there. He was encouraged when he noticed how she shifted position slightly to allow him better access, without attempting to adjust her nightgown. Whilst kissing her, he therefore let his hand slowly but purposefully slide up her leg, all the way along the roundness of her hip, bringing the fabric with him, exposing more of her leg. He could feel her skin prickle under his palm and noticed how she unconsciously raised her hips from the bed, to press herself against him. His hand now ventured under the hem of the up-hoisted nightgown, to caress her waist, the slight curve of her stomach. It made

her shiver under him and she kissed him deeper and more fervently than before. He kissed her back with the same feverish intensity and moved his body a little to the side to be able to reach where he now was aiming. This made her break the kiss for a moment, with a look disappointed, but it was changed into wide-eyed wonder when his hand now continued down the slope of her stomach until it reached the dark triangle of downy hair.

Now lying beside her, propped up on an elbow, he softly placed his hand between her legs and let it rest there without moving further. With eyes fixed on his face she parted her legs a little more and when he remained still, almost invisibly moved to press herself towards his hand. He could *feel* it against his palm and fingers rather than see it, and it increased his own arousal to the brink of what was bearable.

Light as a feather, almost lazily, he began moving his hand again. Her hairs were so soft, and her female folds even softer, like velvet. He dipped his hand further down in the warmth between her thighs but touched her only on the outside and sometimes deviated down the inside of her thighs. Her legs fell even more open, inviting his touch and he watched her bite her own plush bottom lip, unaware how sensual she was to him. He bent closer to claim her lips again and she met him with the same hunger as before. It was almost difficult to believe that they had shared their first chaste kiss at dawn this morning, because their bedtime kiss was something different entirely. They let their long pent-up needs out here in this bed, starting slow but with increasing intensity.

Charlotte loved the touch of his hand. She had never known that this was a place that longed to be caressed but he had stirred it awake. Now that he had changed position, she could feel his hardness press into the side of her hip instead, rubbing her bare skin. She wondered what it would be to have that rubbing her where he now had his hand, with nothing between them, but would not ask and instead simply enjoyed on the wonders his fingers now were accomplishing. It seemed he had found one place where she was extra sensitive and for a while he focused his attentions there, whilst continuing to kiss her mouth, her neck, her breasts. Then, his thumb kept circling that place, but a long digit strayed downward, tickled her entrance and then dipped inside briefly. Her breath hitched and she froze for a second but immediately knew she wanted him to repeat it. He had stopped kissing her to watch her reaction and she looked back at him with parted lips, wordlessly asking for more. Before he returned there he allowed the finger to migrate upwards and spread some wetness that seemed to come from within herself, so that when his thumb continued its ministrations it was deliciously slippery and the touch even more arousing. His finger moved down again. This time she was prepared when he pushed inside, now a little deeper and she felt a slight stretch. It all felt excitingly forbidden but she realised at this was the marital bliss that could not be much spoken of outside the bedchamber. When he carefully pushed his finger inside next time, she pressed against it, needing him deeper inside and whimpered at the amazing feeling. She wanted to keep him there and this time he did not pull it out fully, instead began slowly moving it in and out of her, continuing to circle with his thumb on the

outside. The strange sensation she already had inside continued to build and when he inserted another finger, the glorious feeling exceeded the small discomfort it initially caused. Suddenly she was overwhelmed by the need to have him cover her not lying beside her. She did not want him to stop but she needed *more*.

"Sidney?"

"You want me to stop?"

She adored the sudden concern in his voice, revealing he feared that he had let himself get carried away.

"No, not really. I... I enjoy it very much, but I want to be closer. I want to feel you. All of you."

"Would you like me to undress you?"

"Yes", she admitted coyly.

He grinned with relief and an urgent need to do exactly as she wished. She sat up and stretched her arms over her head, so he could help her get rid of the nightgown. His hands were warm as they ran over her naked body, sliding the garment with them until it came off. Now as naked as God created her, she leaned back on the pillows again and watched him resume his position on top of her. Skin to skin, almost too wonderful to be bearable. She could feel the warm,

pulsating hardness resting between her thighs and it felt like it was made for being there. Like they were made for being joined at that place.

He looked at her seriously now. His strong arms were framing her head again, allowing the length of his body to rest on hers only so much that it was comfortable for her, keeping her warm, safe and utterly aroused. His hips and legs pressed her down in the mattress with an thrilling heaviness. His eyes conveyed the deepest love and affection and a wish to make her happy. He was not sure what she wanted in this moment, but *she* knew.

"I want you to make me your wife."

It was almost a whisper and she would not have dared to repeat it because she was barely brave enough to say it a first time, but he was completely tuned in on her and heard her request. There was a tug upwards at the corner of his mouth, as if he wanted to be solemn in this almost sacred moment but was so incredibly happy he could not keep it inside.

"Yes, of course my love."

He reached down and adjusted himself so the tip of him nudged her entrance, then slowly began to ease himself inside her. He kept his eyes trained on her face and seemed to register her initial shock at the fullness she felt.

"Are you alright? Tell me if I should stop, I don't want to hurt you."

It did hurt a little, more like a chafe from the friction than a stinging pain, but behind that there was a more powerful sensation. The feeling that this was the answer to the elusive craving she had felt. That having him inside her, joined with her, was what she had wanted. Her instincts told her that if they continued, the pain would eventually fade away and be replaced by the incredible sensation that had started to build up inside her when he caressed her before. She also knew that if he left her now she would feel empty and bereft in a way she would not be able to bear.

Her hands found their way to his cheeks.

"No, don't. Don't stop. Stay with me."

He wondered if her hazel eyes could see inside his soul. It felt like it and he found that if it was so, he would not mind because he had nothing to hide. Not anymore. He wanted to share everything that was him with her. Speechless because he was overwhelmed with emotions, he continued to push himself all the way inside her. He paused and kissed her again, touched her face, stunned by the sensation of being inside her, enveloped by her soft heat.

Then he moved, with slow, deliberate strokes. He stayed close to her all the time, did not forget to read her for a split second. He adapted his pace so she could follow, moving her hips in rhythm with his even if this was new to her. After a while she spontaneously arched his back to meet him, twined her legs around him and splayed her fingers over his buttocks as his hips worked more intensively.

Having her wrapped around him was so astounding that he realised he would not hold out for very long this first time. He had wanted it for too long and desired her so much. The combination of the strong emotions and sensational physical experience was like nothing he had experienced before. When a loud moan escaped her, it was his undoing and with a groan he buried himself in her one last time, deeper than before.

Shaken to his core he collapsed on top of her, but not more lost than to remember to hold his weight so he would not crush her underneath him. He felt almost like he was returning to his own body after an experience hovering outside of it, even if he had been very much present in the bed. His skin was covered with a thin film of perspiration, his breath was ragged but slowly returning to normal, his drumming pulse gradually sounding less loud. He remained inside her, just resting there now, but unwilling to separate from her. He felt like they were meant to always be joined, two parts of one unity rather than two separate individuals. He buried his face by her neck and inhaled her scent deeply and felt her heaving chest move slower in pace with his own and delighted in the sensation of her slender legs still wrapped around him as if she did not want to let go either. Her hands which had been clasping his back so firmly just now, instead began a lazy fingertip dance, caressing and almost tickling him. He felt her breath fan against his temple and turned his face up to hers again. She was smiling, not only her mouth but her eyes too. She looked out of breath, wonderfully flushed and as if she had had an epiphany of sorts. Like something had changed her perception of the world as it had been up to now. He understood this because it

reflected his own sentiments exactly. He knew he had not managed to make her reach the peak in the same way as him this first time, but it made him very happy to see and feel that it had been special and intimate for her too nevertheless. With this start he was confident that they would reach there together in due time.

Now he pressed his lips to hers and could feel her smiling even through the kiss.

"I love you, you know." He said against her lips.

"I love you too."

The three little words had a different meaning to Charlotte now than they had earlier this day. In the glade and at the church she had *known* they belonged together forever, but now she *sensed* it with every fibre of her being. She had given herself to him, he had made her his, and he had simultaneously given her all of him in return. The act of making love had been shockingly all-consuming and she realised that whatever her mother could have told her about it, would never had been words enough to explain or prepare her for this overwhelming reality. She was endlessly grateful she was allowed to discover it together with Sidney.

Their kisses were tranquil now, filled with post-coital satisfaction and affection. After some time, he rolled off from her and to lie down on his back. His arm went around her, to pull her tight to his side and make her head nestle against his chest. Her hand almost distractedly caressed along the streak of dark hairs over his flat stomach but paused when she reached the quilt covering him from hips

down. Some other day she would touch him there again, she knew she was too curious not to touch that alluring male part that could bring her pleasure, but for now she had had enough excitement for one day. He seemed to be perfectly content too, because he pulled the quilt higher up to cover them, so they would not get cold during the night and gently began stroking her hair. She felt completely serene and fulfilled and could hear the steady, comforting rhythm of his heartbeats under her ear.

"Good night Mrs. Parker. I hope we will spend all our nights like this", she heard him say just before she fell asleep.

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As a newlywed couple they mapped out how they wanted their life together to be, much like their imaginary journey that time in the library, but this time it was for real and they made the plans whilst lying entwined in bed instead of with their noses over an atlas.

Their first priority would be to be apart as little as possible. They decided they would spend most of their time in the countryside because it turned out both felt most at ease here. Charlotte was a bit surprised when Sidney confessed to this, because she had imagined that London society was his natural habitat, but he told her that living here together with her made him feel more at home than he could remember feeling since he was a child spending his days by the sea in the small coastal town Sanditon, where his family still lived.

Sidney's business did however require him to be in London from time to time, and when he went Charlotte would come with him, take the opportunity to socialise and renew her wardrobe content. It would be just the right dose of the London *beau monde* to satisfy them both.

"It might be more difficult for me to join you when..."

"When what, my love?"

"If we have children one day", she said, blushing because they had not spoken of such things before.

"I certainly hope we do and whatever adjustments we need to do, we will do them then, but for now I simply want to indulge my wife as much as possible."

He put his arms around her and silenced her giggles with a passionate kiss. The truth was that they indulged one another as often as they could and would not have it any other way.

Sidney also suggested they would travel to Sanditon and visit his family for a few weeks during the summer season. Charlotte was a bit hesitant to leave the estate to its own fate until Sidney pointed out that Stringer surely could be entrusted with it and tempted her with the prospect of sea bathing. Charlotte had never seen the sea and going for a swim sounded like an experience she would not want to miss out on.

"There are indeed many good reasons for us to visit Sanditon", Sidney continued his persuasion attempt. "I cannot wait to introduce you to my family and I'm sure you will love the sea. Especially, I would like to show you a secluded cove where I used to go swimming alone. In fact, it is so private that I am sure no one would notice if we went swimming completely naked you and I."

The last words he murmured with his lips pressed to her neck and Charlotte felt the by now familiar desire well up inside her.

"Your proposal is positively shocking, Mr. Parker. You know very well that we would not be swimming if we were alone and naked."

"Oh, I know", he said laughingly without a hint of shame and pulled her on top of him. Strangely, no further objections were heard from his usually opinionated wife.

The first time he jested about things of intimate nature, she had been so mortified that her cheeks burned, and he had seen himself obliged to sheepishly apologize. Under his admiring gaze and loving hands she had become increasingly comfortable about her own nudity as well as his. The more secure she became in bed, the more playful were their physical interactions. Tentatively she also attempted to joke about such matters and these days jingling laughter was often heard from the Parker's bedchambers. The laughter somehow made everything even more intense once desire overwhelmed them anew and left them serious and breathless.

To their happy surprise, Lady Esther had also taken Babington's country house to heart during the weeks they spent there for the wedding preparations, so now the couple wanted to spend part of the year there and Charlotte and Sidney met with them frequently and to everyone's merriment.

Much time they spent together alone though, and that was what they enjoyed most. They loved each other's minds, but they also worshipped each other physically and could not keep their hands off from one another for long. At night, they usually stayed awake long after they had withdrawn to their bedchamber and never slept in separate rooms. Sometimes they woke up in the middle of the night, spooning, and were compelled to drowsily make love as if in a dream. More than once had they hurriedly left the breakfast table to return to the bed, too much in love to be bothered with what the servants might think about their behaviour. They had to tidy up a pile of books from the library floor, which strangely had ended up there because someone had rocked them out of the bookshelf. The horses in the stable had once been startled when Sidney shouted out Charlotte's name too loudly, when they were overwhelmed by sudden need after a horseback outing made love hidden behind a haystack. This had made Charlotte burst into fits of laughter even if she was half terrified that someone would walk in on them, though not terrified enough to resist when he had sneaked up on her from behind and began caressing her front and kissing her neck. He was her weakness but one she did not mind to possess.

She was madly in love with her husband and her desire for him grew stronger every day, as he willingly helped her discover her own body and his and find out what she took pleasure in. She loved everything about him and could spend hours just watching him and touching him while they lay in bed talking about everything and nothing. She loved the solidity of his chest, the ridges of visible muscles on his stomach and the angled sharp lines pointing down towards his groin, but her obsession was his back. She found this broad, smooth muscular surface which exuded strength absolutely captivating. She did not tire of caressing up and down his spine, trace the contours of his fascinating muscles, kiss along his shoulder blades or circle down to the firm buttocks. Sometimes she stretched out on top of him to feel the full length of his strong body under hers, but then he usually did not remain still for much longer.

Sidney was more than grateful for her wish to explore him and noticed how she gradually became bolder. He let her have her way with him, sometimes almost slumbering because it made him so relaxed, sometimes with increasing arousal so he had to move and take action. Especially if she stretched out on top of him so he could feel her round breast flush against him, her nipples rasping against his back and her hairs tantalizingly tease his buttocks. He was still the one guiding her, but her perceptiveness left him in no doubt that in a near future they would both be guiding each other.

A month in on their marriage, Charlotte asked Mrs. Morris to have a lunch basket prepared for them so she could surprise Sidney with a picnic like he once had her,

with the difference that she made him carry the basket all the way to their intended location.

"I hope you have not planned for us to walk very far, because I can swear that Mrs. Morris has provided us with enough food to feed a battalion. For a month. We should have transported this on a horse instead."

"Don't whine. I promise it will be well worth your effort."

She threw him a cheeky glance which made him increase the length of his strides until she almost ran beside him and mumbled between gritted teeth that he intended to hold her to that promise. When they reached the edge of beech forest, Sidney realised where she was headed.

"We are going to our glade", he said triumphantly.

"Don't be a spoilsport, Sidney. Couldn't you at least pretend to be surprised?", she laughed and did not really mind he had guessed what she planned.

True enough, the trees soon opened up and they found themselves in the glade. The lilies of the valley were no longer in bloom, but it was anyway a beautiful place, almost like a secret green cave now when the foliage was denser, and one which held a very special place in their hearts.

"Now you may put the basket down", she said graciously when she spread out the blanket.

"Am I really allowed? That is very generous of you, milady", Sidney answered with feigned humbleness. "And what is my reward?"

"You reward?"

"You promised it would be worth my while."

He stepped closer, looking intently at her.

"Oh, I simply meant you will have a nice meal, here in the glade, with me. Isn't that reward enough?"

She was jesting but felt how the piercing intensity in his gaze made her not want to joke anymore. That look and his presence was enough to make her feel a surge in her stomach.

"I can think of something else I would like more, here in this glade, with you."

A wry smile played on his lips, but his words were serious and suddenly the air between them was charged. It seemed like Sidney knew by the way she looked at him and parted her lips already before he reached them, that she wanted the same as him.

In the month they had enjoyed each other, she had learned that sometimes she wanted Sidney slowly and tenderly, sometimes fast and hard. First she had been embarrassed to admit she could need him like that, but he had taught her not to hide it and not to hold back. He had told her that the most sensual thing he knew,

was to feel that she desired him, no matter how, no matter where. They had never been together out in open nature before and for a split second she thought of how shameful it would be if someone saw them, but then pushed it aside because her need was too strong and the likelihood that someone would come across this place in this moment infinitesimal.

Kissing fervently they ended up on the blanket, but she was not fully aware of how it happened. Sometimes, or in truth quite often, she became so lost in Sidney that everything around them disappeared. The attraction he exerted on her grew stronger the more she had of him and it certainly seemed to be the same way for him. Today he seemed uncommonly eager even for him and she had a feeling that the cause was her teasing combined with returning to the glade. Now he tugged at her dress by the neckline and loosened her stays a bit so he would be allowed access to her breasts. Perhaps she ought to scold at him for not behaving gentlemanly, but she wanted it too much. She even felt impatient during the moments it took for him to get past the garments and when his lips demandingly closed around one nipple, while caressing the other, she moaned with relief and satisfaction.

His other hand had started to grope under her skirts, hoisting them further up. With matching eagerness she reached down to unbutton his breeches and was excited by how the hardness underneath implied that imminent pleasure was to be expected. She was therefore a bit taken aback when he caught her hand and removed it.

"Later, my darling. There is plenty of time for that, but first I want to do something for you."

His voice was hoarse with want, which made her excessively curious about what he was up to when stopping her. Accepting his wish she leaned back, supported on her elbows and simply watched her beautiful husband.

"I know you enjoy it when I do this", he said.

His hands now grazed up the inside of her thighs, and instead of responding verbally she allowed her legs to fall apart. It was no longer a secret that she was quite partial to him caressing her there and she bit her lower lip as a hand found its way to the downy hair between her legs and a very specific destination there. He slipped a finger inside her and teasingly kept it still there until she impatiently pressed back to show him she wanted more. She was already turning wet, so he retracted the finger and spread some of that wetness and then began circling lightly on the outside, provokingly avoiding her most sensitive place.

Sidney revelled in the lovely, slippery feeling of his wife's arousal and knew very well that it annoyed her when he toyed with her like this. Today he had a special purpose with it though.

"Don't you?" he paused his touch, challenging her to answer if she wanted more.

Her eyes fluttered shut.

"Yes, you know I do", she admitted with flushing cheeks. This was one of very few topics she was not yet comfortable talking to him about.

She was wet for him every time but had not yet had her first orgasm. He knew such things could take time for women and he was aware that he had brought her close to the edge several times but not managed to take her over it. He was determined to try to give her that gift today.

He moved his mouth close to her ear, nibbled her earlobe and dotted hot kisses along her neck.

"Would you then allow me to try something new? Something I think you might enjoy even more?"

"What would that be?"

He moved to her mouth and kissed her, let his tongue probe inside.

"Kiss you."

"But we already have? You already are?" She asked confused, then followed his knowing gaze down her body.

"Oh, you mean..?"

His fingers now drew circles down below again and she realised she was very keen to know what it would feel like to have his lips there.

He nodded with an disarming smile.

"Sidney, are such things even allowed?" she giggled, with a hint of anxiety.

"If you allow it."

She still wondered if it was appropriate for a lady, but his fingers felt so good and she could not resist.

"Yes."

Given permission, he let his lips travel down her body. He paused half-way to give attention to her nipples until they were so pointy and hard that they almost hurt, and she was desperate for him to continue to the intended destination. Only then, he finally moved down and hoisted up her dress above her hips. He spread her legs further apart, placed himself between them and paused briefly to watch her. She felt embarrassed in the midst of excitement and diverted her gaze, but he found her so beautiful and utterly desirable and told her so. With her white skirts spread around her, she looked like a flower belonging in this glade, though he was pleased that she was not as delicate as the lilies of the valley.

She could not look away from him for long, too curious when his dark head lowered itself until it hovered above her so she could feel his warm breath tickle. Was he really going to do what she thought he might?

She gasped at the first feel of his tongue when he slowly began exploring her. He started by tracing along her folds and slipping his tongue inside her, then moved

closer and closer to where she most needed his touch, until his tongue finally ran over her centre. First casually, almost unintentionally. Then again and again, until his firm lips instead closed around it and he began sucking softly.

Charlotte's eyes widened in surprise and pleasure, causing her to gasp and bury her fingers in his locks. Simultaneously, he let a finger slide inside her. Her hips bucked from the ground to meet him and he inserted another. He increased the intensity of his lips ministrations and pumped his fingers harder in and out of her, angling them so he touched a part of her walls that he had made her aware was very receptive to stimulation. She tried to stifle her moans but was unable to, then ceased to care at all if anyone but the forest animals heard them.

"Oh Sidney, I think you ought to stop... I am... I feel..." She did not want him to stop but the pleasure that rolled through her was almost too much to take.

But he felt how her walls began to clench around his fingers and had absolutely no intention to stop until she reached her peak. He only slowed down a little to drag it out and let his tongue lick softer but made sure to keep touching just the right places. He heard his wife's words become more incoherent, replaced by louder and louder moans. She was writhing under him, but keeping herself towards his hand and mouth, holding his head firmly in place where she needed him and then she came undone in her first shattering orgasm, his name echoing through the woods, stirring up the innocent birds.

She finally opened her glazed eyes again and stared up into the green roof, where the sun broke through the foliage. His fingers were still inside her drawing out the

last twitches, his mouth lingering in a tender kiss while her body ceased to shiver and eventually relaxed, more wonderfully at ease than it ever had been. She had seen stars. She had felt something erupt. She had fallen and she had flown. Sidney had made her. Charlotte almost felt like crying out of a combination of utter release and love.

"Come here, please", she whispered.

Sidney was quite taken too. Her female taste was so sublime, the feeling of her on his tongue and her response was the singular most arousing thing he had experienced. When he finally brought her to a climax, her reaction had been stronger than he had anticipated. The shyness and thoughts of propriety that sometimes still restrained her in their bed, had been forgotten here in this glade. Her building arousal and final rupture of ecstasy had enchanted him completely. He could hardly believe what an extraordinary passionate creature she hid inside or that he had been able to release her.

Naturally, his own lust had grown while watching, tasting and touching her and when he now moved her eyes widened when she noticed the evident tenting of his breeches. Charlotte's arousal grew anew, and she was moved by his expression of reverence combined with boyish pride.

"I almost forgot I promised you a reward my dear husband", she teased and lazily let her fingers caress over the hard bulge.

"To be honest, I was already rewarded in part, but I wouldn't mind if you feel obliged to show further proof of your gratitude for carrying that damn basket all the way."

"Oh, I think you have done other things to deserve my appreciation."

Giggling, she nimbly unbuttoned his breeches and helped him pull them down, so he swayed free. He loved that she no longer was too demure to look at him or touch him. She closed her fingers around him and caressed towards the rounded tip. Normally he would encourage her but not now.

"No, I cannot take teasing now. I need you", he demanded.

"Come then, because I need you too."

This time he thrust hard into her, knowing she could take it by now and because it was what they both craved in this moment. She wrapped her legs high up around his hips to allow him to bury himself deeper inside her and moaned loudly when every stroke hit the perfect spot. She felt the relentless wave of lust flush through her again and when his strokes intensified further at the same time as his hand reached down between her legs, he brought her with him a second time, so they reached the pinnacle together.

In the aftermath of their smallish earthquake they were lying down, facing each other with their foreheads leaned together and still joined by their hips. His eyes

were so sincere, his lips so close and his breath so sweet and warm. She brushed her lips against his and felt him smiling.

"We ought to eat our luncheon or Mrs. Morris will wonder what we have been up to during our picnic."

"And may I add that I refuse to carry the basket content all the way back to the house, so you had better eat a healthy portion."

"I thought I had made it worth your while by now, so you wouldn't hold it against me?"

"Absolutely, but we only needed the blanket for that", he grinned.

"Sidney..."

"Alright, since you mention it you have actually made me feel quite starved... and who knows what miracles we might achieve with the renewed strength a meal will give us."

He winked mischievously, but in fact he knew that if he was allowed to fall asleep here beside her in the grass, listening to the birds, trees and humming bees, he would be more content with his life than he ever had thought it possible to be. He loved his wife and every day with her was an unexpected gift.

She touched his beloved face and ran her fingers through his hair, smirking fondly.

"You are indeed very wicked, husband."

"Yes, I have no idea what I did to deserve a wonderful wife such as you."

With a happy laughter Charlotte sat up, adjusted her dress and began unpacking the luncheon.

"The brief answer would be that you visited a brothel, but that would be a story without a proper moral lesson."

He raised a sardonic eyebrow.

"Do we need that?"

"Of course, and there is if you just let me finish. You won me because you have a good heart and because you fought for me, even if you were a bit slow in the start... and perhaps, just a little bit, because you are so incredibly handsome that I cannot resist you."

He threw his head back in laughter.

"And who is the wicked one now?" He pulled her close to him again.

The kiss that followed was anything but wicked. It was gentle and affectionate and expressed the immense gratitude they both felt for being here together.

Charlotte thought that it was impossible to love one's husband more than she loved Sidney.

She also had the distinct feeling that today, right here in this glade, they had planted a seed inside her which would grow to become the ultimate token of their mutual love.