

A/N: Before I continue beyond episode 8 I want to mention a few things;

I have not read any other continuations because I did not want to be limited by what others have written. I hope I will not duplicate someone else's plot but if I do it is accidental.

I have not written an outline, I never do, so I'm not sure how this will go except that I guarantee a HEA. I do not aim to write what I *believe* would happen on screen, I will write what I *want* to happen to Sidney and Charlotte.

Lastly, thank you for patiently following this story and thank you for all your lovely comments!

Chapter 19: An unexpected encounter

-0-

*In which Sidney feels trapped in his own life and makes an unexpected
reacquaintance.*

-0-

Eliza's shrill laughter cut through Sidney's absentmindedness and brought him back to Mrs Willard's drawing room. An after-dinner game of whist was played over by the table, but he had reclined in an armchair at some distance, feigning reading a book. It had been lying at a side table and he had grabbed it as an excuse to be left alone, but when he turned the first page it turned out to be a collection of quotes by Heraclitus. He could barely hold back a hollow laughter.

Charlotte continued to be ubiquitous in her absence. He did not want to forget her, in fact knew he was incapable of it, but the ceaseless reminders of the woman he loved but could not have were painful. Yesterday he had thought he caught a glimpse of her through the carriage window but knew it must have been another brown-haired woman walking down the street.

His eyes fell on Eliza. It seemed she was laughing in triumph over winning the game. He could not help but constantly comparing them. She was everything Charlotte was not; competitive, ungenerous, spiteful and manipulative. In every aspect she came out short. He resented her more for every day and wondered how he was supposed to survive spending his life with her. He answered himself in his next breath; by continuing to avoid her as much as he possibly could. They would naturally not live under the same roof until they were married, and he was grateful that she insisted on such an extravagant wedding that the preparations had brought them into late autumn and she then wanted to wait until spring so there would be fresh flowers. He had the feeling that she wanted to parade her wealth, beauty and her new young and handsome husband for the entire London society and a sumptuous wedding was more important to her than the wedding happening promptly. It only confirmed to Sidney that she enjoyed the idea of marrying him more than actually loving him. Anyway he was grateful because she had given him a few more months of respite, being as free as an engaged man could be.

She frequently attempted to drag him along to different social events and this evening he reluctantly had allowed her, but he often told her he had business to

attend to. It was not the first time he had buried himself in work, but never had it been such a welcome distraction as now.

“You don’t need to work so hard, now that you will marry me”, Eliza had wined recently when he once again rejected a dinner invitation.

“Do you really think I would want to live of your late husband’s money?” he answered with disdain.

“It didn’t stop you from taking them for Sanditon.”

He froze. It was a cheap shot but true. He knew she would use this as a weapon for the rest of their lives and it made him wonder for the thousandth time if it had been the right decision.

“That’s different. I did that for Tom and because you made sure that there was no other solution. Remember? I need to work to provide for myself, I will not abstain from that.”

“Sidney...” she purred in an attempt to sound seductive, but it only made his blood chill.

“No, Eliza. You will not change my mind in this matter. I’m quite determined. I will never give up running my business. Not now, not when we are married.”

“I’m sure you’ll come around once we wed and realise how comfortable you can live. There is no reason for a gentleman of fortune to work.”

Yes, there is. If he wants to keep his self-respect and if he wants to escape his spouse, he thought grimly.

“You see, that is where we have to agree to disagree”, was all he said out loud, then picked up his newspaper and went on to ignore her until she resumed her embroidering.

The more he thought of the impending marriage, the more he dreaded it. Not only because of Eliza’s malicious traits, but because she was so shallow that he could not picture sharing his waken time with her and so unattractive to him that he could not imagine sharing her bed. He could not even imagine kissing her. He had avoided it up until now and intended to keep it like that for as long as he possibly could. Charlotte’s sweet lips were the last ones he had touched and if he had his way he would never touch any other. He knew that many married couples did not share the same bedroom and he wondered if he could escape it altogether even if Eliza had said one of her conditions was that they would share marital bed. She could hardly force him once they were married. He did not enjoy stringing her along and had she been a different, kind and caring person, he knew he would not have managed the charade. As it was now, he felt that she got exactly what she deserved.

It was uncanny how she pretend like their meeting in London after the fire, when she essentially forced him into the engagement, had never happened. She had told her acquaintances that he had proposed to her by the riverside after the regatta. She had described the romantic event quite detailed and proudly demonstrated the costly ring she had picked out herself. It made him shiver with

disgusted anger when he remembered how the conversation actually had gone when they parted as enemies. It seemed like she almost believed the false story herself and sometimes it made him wonder if something was not quite right with her. Besides denying how their engagement really had come to be, he had nothing solid to put his finger on though and resigned to the fact that it probably was his own resentment of her that made him look for additional flaws.

The one thing that made him stand it all were the regular letters from Tom, exuberantly telling him how the rebuilding of the ruined houses had started and how well everything was with Mary and the children. That reminded Sidney of why he had done this terrible sacrifice and had to live with the choice he had made. He heard nothing of Charlotte and could only hope that she led a better life than him home in Willingden, protected from the slander Eliza had threatened with.

-0-

A few weeks later he reluctantly accompanied Eliza to a ball. He was not the least in the mood for it, but she had insisted, or rather made a poorly concealed threat, saying that if he did not start paying her more attention she might feel inclined to break off the engagement. Even if that was truly he wanted, he knew that her support to Tom and Sanditon would disappear in the same moment and then he would be back to square one. Thus he had agreed to go to the ball but was not looking forward to it.

He had not lied to Charlotte the time when he said he felt like an outlier in the London beau monde. He saw the majority as prospective clients and very few as

friends. Eliza was not the only factor making him want to escape, almost everything here made him long for the peace he had found in Sanditon last summer. He was happily surprised when he suddenly saw a familiar face in the crowd as Babington came criss-crossing over the floor.

“Sidney! It’s been a while and didn’t expect to see you here this evening. I know this is not your favourite sort of gathering.”

“You are right, it is not. Eliza insisted though.”

He felt slightly embarrassed at the sight of his friend, because truth was that he had avoided him and Esther since his return to London. Partly because the apparent growing affection between them made him mourn what he had lost, but mainly because there was a conversation he wanted to avoid having with Babington.

Babington was among the few who had understood his feelings for Charlotte and the lack thereof for Eliza. Sidney knew he must have wondered when he ended up engaged to the latter one after all, but he did not want him to ask about it simply because he was ashamed. The situation Tom had put them all in was shameful and he wanted to keep it in the family as much as possible, even if it apparently had leaked in some circles as Eliza had managed to find out. He was even more ashamed that the only solution he had managed to conjure up was selling himself. Of course, marriages happened all the time for no other reason than getting access to a fortune, but he had always been so adamant that this was not for him. His close friends had used to joke that he would end up marrying a pauper so that

no one could doubt money had nothing to do with it. He felt like he had placed himself on a high horse and fallen hard. When it came to it, his principles had been worth sacrificing but he wanted as few as possible to know that and it would be more difficult to admit it to Babington than anyone, because he would understand how hard it had been. At the wedding Babington had been too occupied to ask and after that Sidney had skilfully dodged one-to-one conversations. As for asking Babington for help, it was unthinkable. He would not stoop so low to ask his friend to even consider putting up such a humongous amount of money even if he was good for it, because there was no way Sidney ever could repay it.

“Ah, I see. Eliza, your *fiancée*. As a matter of fact I have been wanting to talk to you about that, but first of all, there is something I must tell you...”

“Lord Babington, what a pleasure to meet you here.”

Speaking of the devil, he thought to himself when they were interrupted by Eliza appearing by his side. He flinched when she grasped his arm with her usual possessiveness. He could tell by her slightly glazed eyes and more than usually high-pitched voice that she had had quite a few glasses of punch. He did not like that because it usually made her even nastier than when she was sober. He was grateful he was slightly numbed by wine himself, so he might endure it.

“Mrs. Champion, the pleasure is mine. I often attend balls like this. I just said I am more surprised to find my friend Sidney here to be honest. I know this is not his right element”, Babington chuckled.

“Nonsense. I will change that.” She playfully tapped his arm with her fan, and he felt like grabbing it and throwing it across the room. “Who in their right mind would be so boring to sit home when they are invited to a splendid ball like this? Or work, for that matter. Lord Babington may I inquire, what is your position in regard to Sidney working? You who are a gentleman.”

Babington looked a bit surprised by the question.

“Sidney is certainly a gentleman too, just a working one”, he answered diplomatically.

“That is my point. Gentlemen of fortune who don’t have to work, *should* not work. Would you not agree?”

Sidney felt the familiar anger rise up inside him. She was obviously determined to mould him into the husband she wanted. He would not let that happen.

“I don’t know about that. I quite admire Sidney for what he is doing, and it is a very respectable business. I think he is proof that a gentleman can indeed work. Times are changing Mrs Campion and I dare say more of us will work in the future.”

He appreciated that Babington supported him, but the intoxicated Eliza was on a mission.

“Oh, I don’t believe that Lord Babington. There is something so... *simple* about working. Sidney will for sure give it up once we are married.”

“I. Will. Not.” He kept his voice low and calm, though speaking through gritted teeth.

“Oh, of course you will, dear. I never expected you to be so persistent, but I will make you see how diverting and comfortable your life can be without tedious work.”

He turned to her and made sure to remain composed so he would not cause a scene, but no one who was close enough would have missed the cool fury in his voice.

“Eliza, forget it. We have discussed this before, and my position remains unchanged. I will not give up my business to be an adornment by your side. For your information I find gatherings like this infinitely more tedious than my work. I feel restless, I feel useless. Babington is the only person I have seen here tonight whom I was actually glad to see.”

The one he was least happy to see was she, but he did not say as much.

“But...”

“No buts, that is the end of this discussion.”

His blood was boiling, and he knew he was close to losing control. It was not simply her words, it was the built-up desperation of being trapped in an unwanted engagement that threatened to erupt.

“Sidney...” she attempted, but he cut her short.

“Excuse me, I will get myself another glass of wine. I need it.”

After a nod to Babington, Sidney turned and left. He did not care if he had hurt her, in fact he hoped he had made her as furious as she had made him.

Increasingly he felt like he had sold his soul to the devil to ensure that Tom, his family and Charlotte were safe. He would do anything for them, but did it have to be so damn hard? What had he done to deserve this?

He went to the refreshment table, poured himself a glass which he emptied in one swig, followed by another. He wanted to get drunk and it would take a substantial amount of wine to achieve that. He knew the answer to his own question. *Nothing*. He had done nothing to deserve this. Even if he felt guilt about some things in his past, he knew that was completely unrelated to the situation he now was in. It was Tom’s recklessness and a stroke of bad luck that had brought this upon him. Fate is not always kind and the moment he had felt like the sun finally was shining on him, the thunderclouds had rolled in. It was unfair, but he had seen enough to know that life was unfair and that he in so many ways still were among the privileged ones in this world. However, the increasing feeling of being trapped, like a caged animal, ate away on him.

'Should not a marriage be based on mutual love and affection? Without equality of affection, marriage can become a kind of slavery.'

Charlotte's words from Lady Denham's pineapple luncheon many months ago suddenly echoed in his head. That luncheon was probably the first time he had realised that she was an intelligent woman, not just a frivolous girl waiting for a suitable suitor to come along. He had thought her right already then, but never expected that he would be unable to make that choice freely himself. Nor had he imagined that his choice would be Charlotte if he still had been free to make it. He downed a third glass and registered that the heat from the crowd and the hundreds of lit candles was becoming quite oppressive and decided to find some privacy and fresh air. He could not leave before Eliza, but he could damn well avoid her until the ball was over.

In his search for some calm and quiet, he left the main ball room and the adjoining rooms where people merrily played cards, smoked, ate and drank behind him and walked down a hallway. Again his thoughts went to Charlotte and how she had escaped in a similar manner during the London ball they had attended together, only to befriend none other than Lady Worchester. Striding along he turned a corner and bumped into someone quite painfully, which made him curse until he saw her face.

"Char... Miss Heywood!"

Had he dreamed her up or was she real?

“Mr. Parker!”

He stared at her, trying to grasp it was truly the physical form of her standing before him, not just a figment of his imagination. She stared back with wide eyes.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m visiting Esther, Lady Babington. She invited me to come and stay with them for a while.”

“You are staying at the Babington’s residence?”

“Yes.”

Why the hell had Babington not told him? Then he remembered that Babington had intended to share something when Eliza interrupted them.

The shock of running into Charlotte unprepared made adrenalin pump through his body, but he was not inclined to neither fight or flee. Well, perhaps fighting *for* her. Having her in front of him made him wonder what temporary insanity that had possessed him to ever let her go because the feelings she evoked in him were even stronger than before. They flushed over him like a wave, almost sweeping away his feet under him and preventing him from breathing.

She was the same and yet different. It was hard to put his finger on what the difference was exactly. There was a maturity to her that had not been there

before, perhaps that was it. And a wariness. Had he caused that? He wished it was not so, but at the same time also found this altered Charlotte even more fascinating and desirable than before. God how he wanted her, needed her. More than ever because of the desperate rage he still felt against Eliza after the earlier conversation.

He reacted without thinking.

He grabbed around Charlotte's shoulders and half pushed, half dragged her with him down the hallway and into an empty room. Maybe she was too surprised to put up any resistance or she wanted to come, but either way she allowed him to maneuver her.

He closed the door behind them and just stared at her for a moment, still needing to convince himself that she was real. The air was shivering with tension. She leaned her back against the door and he was not sure if it was because she needed support or because she wanted to stop others from entering.

"I can't believe you are here", he said hoarsely. "I see you everywhere, all the time and I can't believe this time it really is you."

"It is the same for me", she whispered. "I have seen you everywhere since I arrived in London and even before that you were on my mind. Constantly."

It was all it took to tear away his last shred of self-control. He knew he should not because it was not right by her, yet he stepped into her to catch her between

himself and the door and pressed his body flush to hers and cradled her head in his hands. His lips hovered above hers for a second, long enough to see the approval in her eyes, before their lips locked.

Their first kiss on the clifftop had been so gentle and tentative. She had been insecure and inexperienced, and he had not wanted to take more than she was willing to give. Their mutual desperate longing for each other made this kiss very different. He was unable to put a lid on the passionate feelings he had tried to bury inside all these months. They relentlessly welled up the moment he saw her again and he could not hold back. He would not have wanted to even if it had been in his power.

During their clifftop goodbye when she left Sanditon, she had been strong enough to resist a kiss and even prevented him from speaking words of love. It seemed that strength had withered away over time, or perhaps it was that her feelings had grown too strong to withstand, just like his. He did not delve upon the reason, only revelled in that she returned his kiss with the same fervent intensity. She buried her fingers in his hair and tugged at his curls to hold him closer. She parted her lips for him and when he allowed his tongue to probe inside, she did the same. If their first kiss had been quite innocent, this was the opposite and they latched onto each other with matching fire while his hands roamed her body and she pressed herself to him. He could not hide his arousal, but it did not seem to scare her, only make her kiss him harder.

They kissed until they ran out of breath and everything around them disappeared. He wished he could merge with her then and there, be one and never part again.

For some time they allowed themselves to forget that outside this room he was engaged to another. For some time they were the one thing existing in this world. What finally made him come to his senses was a moan escaping her. Not because it made him want to interrupt, but because it so nearly pushed him past the point of no return. He wanted her and she wanted him, but he would ruin her if they allowed themselves to go any further than they already had. It was the last thing he wanted. He loved her too much for that.

He let go and stepped back with heaving chest and ragged breath and simply watched her. She was the most spectacular sight he ever had seen. Her breaths matched his, her eyes were larger and darker than he ever had seen them, her lips full and red after the intense kisses. He wanted to have her under him in a bed, but only as his wife.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have... forgive me”, he said even if he was unable to feel the slightest regret.

“We shouldn’t have... but I cannot claim that I am sorry, or I would be lying.”

Charlotte answered coyly, but then to his dismay and absolute delight, closed the distance between them and kissed him again.