

Chapter 20: How to move on

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In which Charlotte and Sidney enjoy a moment of stolen bliss.

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“Miss Heywood, I must say I find your behaviour this evening positively shocking”, Sidney murmured with his lips pressed to the top of Charlotte’s head.

The door was safely locked, and they were resting relaxedly on a chaise longue. Sidney with his back against the backrest, Charlotte leaned against his chest, comfortably fitted between his long legs, with his arms around her. Some time ago they had interrupted the kissing before it completely got out of hand and were now more peacefully enjoying the nearness of one another. However, Sidney’s words made Charlotte stir and turn her face up to his. Concern flashed up inside her as she very well knew this was not the appropriate way to act for an unmarried young woman, especially not with a man who was promised to another.

“Do you think ill of me for it?”

His fond smile calmed her even before he spoke.

“Of course not. I also find you more invigorating than sea bathing...”

He softly grazed her lips.

“...more revivifying than the Sanditon air...”

He dotted another gentle kiss, lingering slightly longer with his warm lips against hers.

“... and more amazing than Tom’s bathing machines.”

Her body relaxed again when she realised he was simply joking. She giggled and answered with feigned indignation.

“Are you comparing me with Tom’s bathing machines?”

“They are after all the finest on the entire British coast. At least if you ask Tom.”

She loved the barely concealed laughter in his voice. She had heard it before but too few times. She had not expected to hear it again.

“You haven’t even tried them, as they are intended for the ladies. If I remember correctly you prefer to go swimming in a more secluded place, like a certain cove.”

“I could make an exception. I would not mind trying a bathing machine with you.”

He spoke with seductive warmth. Despite that she loved the easy banter and despite the situation they already found themselves in, his comment made her blush.

“I am serious about what I said. What we have done this evening, what we are doing now, is not right. You may not love Mrs Campion, but you are engaged to her and she loves you. That makes me...”

Charlotte was about to say ‘the villain’ or even ‘the harlot’. She did not feel like it though, because the intimacy between her and Sidney felt so natural and completely right. He interrupted her before she could finish the sentence.

“That does *not* make you any of the things I suspect you were about to say. Not in my eyes anyway. If anyone is at fault here it is me, but I cannot make myself feel guilty of doing wrong. I may be engaged to Eliza, but I do not love her and furthermore she does not love me.”

“She does not?”

Charlotte’s surprise was genuine.

“No.” Sidney’s expression shifted and he suddenly looked grim. “She wants to *own* me. She does not want me to find happiness with someone else. I suspect that she somehow wants to make up for something she lacked with her first husband, though she chose him over me. She does not know the real me and does not care to do so. She wants to mould me into something I am not, to fit her purposes. To be honest, I am not sure she is capable of true love and being married to her would be like forever being caged.”

“That is a horrible thing to say about someone.”

Charlotte frowned her brow, taking in Sidney’s words. She found it hard to believe anyone could be as horrid as he described Mrs. Campion. It grieved Charlotte that he was engaged to her for so many reasons, but there was also a small joyous flutter in her chest when he once more confirmed that he held no affections for her.

“Yet, the more I see of her, the more convinced I am that this is the case. It is like something is missing inside her or has been destroyed. I am not sure if she changed over the years or if I just was too naïve to see behind her pretty face when we were young. Considering her actions, I think I might have been. Now she seems rotten to the core, like Lady D’s pineapple. Remember?”

Of course she did. She would never forget that luncheon with the maggot-filled exotic fruit and his, then, unsettling nearness. She remained quiet for a while, taking in his words. Then asked something that had been much on her mind.

“What happened in London when you engaged yourself to her? Did you seek her out and propose?”

Over the months that had passed, the thought of that he had turned to Mrs. Campion for help had continued to hurt her. Charlotte was well aware that she herself had no money to put on the table, but she could not help wishing that Sidney had at least sought her advice and support. She tried to shake it off,

repeating to herself that the situation was so grave and there had been no time to waste. She knew that a country girl like her, a gentleman's daughter but of no means, could not contribute with much, but she still ended up wishing that Sidney would have allowed her to stand by his side. She would have, unflinchingly.

"No!" Sidney sounded horrified by the mere idea, then continued with softer voice.

"No, it was not like that. I am sorry you would think so, though I realise it is not a farfetched conclusion. Let me tell you what happened. Seeing Eliza was not even on the map, but she came to me."

Holding her close to him, Sidney told Charlotte everything that had transpired that week. The many closed doors, the negative responses, the nagging feeling that there was something more behind it than just unwillingness to risk investing in a seaside resort. Then Mrs. Champion's surprising appearance at his doorstep and confession that she had made sure there would be only one option; marrying her.

"She made it very clear that she through her connections had ensured that nobody else would even consider investing in the rebuilding. It was she or no one and the condition for her stepping in was that I married her. I could not understand why she wanted that. We had not parted on good terms in Sanditon after the regatta, because I told her I was not interested in resuming our relationship. Then she said that she never entered a race unless she intended to win it. She also said that if I rejected her, she would find a way to soil your name."

Charlotte listened, stunned that someone could be so malicious, and the last part surprised her more than anything.

"My name? Why? I'm nothing to her."

“She is quite perceptive when it comes to some things it seems. It almost seems she understood my feelings for you even before I did. Looking back I think she was jealous of you through the entire visit to Sanditon, judging by the snide remarks she made about you. When I met her in London, she claimed that she easily could slander you for trying to seduce a man who was practically engaged, going out with him alone in a boat.”

“That was completely innocent!”

“We know that and probably she too, but it doesn’t take much to start a rumour if you move in the right circles. She claimed that if I married you, she would spread the word that it was because you were already with child, so I had no choice.”

“I wouldn’t even know how to seduce a man”, Charlotte muttered indignantly.

He laughed softly.

“You don’t need to *know* how to do it, to do it Charlotte. I think Eliza for sure would say that you are seducing me right now. In fact, you were slowly seducing me from the day I met you even if I was slow accepting and realising it. I’m not saying you did it on purpose, but you did it by uncompromisingly being yourself. You are an amazing woman.”

Thinking of herself as a seductress made her slightly uncomfortable, but simultaneously a warm feeling of satisfaction spread inside her. *She had made him feel things from the very day they met, even if he had called her a maid.*

Gently nudging her chin with the back of his hand, he tilted her head and sought her mouth with his own. His words made her think she ought to try to resist, but there was not an ounce of will in her to actually do so. When they several minutes later interrupted the deep kiss her heart was pounding hard again and her breath was shallow. It did not matter that this would be wrong in everyone else’s eyes. This *was* right and what he had told her about Eliza Champion only confirmed it.

He cleared his throat and seemed to struggle to gather himself much like her, before he resumed the conversation.

“Anyway, Eliza made me see that by turning her down *everyone* would lose; Tom would surely be sent off to debtor’s prison and my family would be disgraced. That would make it unfair to ask you to marry me, including you in our shame and, as the cherry on the cake, she would ruin your reputation. It was not a bright future she painted and I knew it was very close to happening. If I on the other hand accepted her proposal, everything would be solved. The only thing I had to give up was my own happiness.”

“And mine”, she whispered.

“And yours... but I thought I could not be the husband you deserved under the current circumstances anyway. I hoped you would forget me and be happy without me.”

He paused and looked deeply into her eyes.

“I also hoped you would never forget me.

“I haven’t. I don’t know how I ever could.”

He pulled her close to him, so her head rested on his chest again.

She thought it strange how surreal yet natural it was to be like this together. To feel his lean, warm body behind her, his broad thighs framing her, his strong arms around her. Sheltering and arousing.

“I wish I had told you everything already then, but things happened so fast. I couldn’t fully believe reality until I told you I was engaged and after that I was strangely paralysed. You were so brave when I told you, but I saw the tears in your eyes and the pain even if you tried to hide it and ran away. The moment I understood that hurting you and losing you was reality, I went into a state of shock I think. I had been entirely focused on finding a solution, but then it truly

hit me what I was giving up and what I was doing to you. I couldn't seek you out again that evening, not without exposing to everyone what we meant to each other and that would only make things worse. Then I had to return to London and couldn't reach you. I must admit that I was also worried Eliza could find out if I tried to contact you and it would have implications for you and Tom. She had made me swear not to disclose anything to anyone about our deal. I am glad you know now, and we simply have to make sure Eliza never finds out about that, or about *this*."

His words made her sit bolt upright.

"We have been here for long, we should go back."

He reached for her hand, wrapped his fingers around hers comfortingly.

"No need to panic. The only advantage with a large ball like this is that you easily can disappear in the crowd. Eliza knows I was angry with her, so I had reason to avoid her anyway. Before we part for now, we need to talk about us."

"How can there ever be an us?" she asked, suddenly disheartened. "Nothing is different from how it was at the end of the summer. You are still engaged and you could not break it off even if you want to, for so many reasons. Under any circumstance it would be dishonourable and adding to that it is still the only way to rescue Tom and no family. And no matter how lovely this moment has been, I cannot allow it to happen again. I won't stoop to being your mistress."

Her words were determined but she found that she believed them less by the minute. His presence and the knowledge their time was borrowed made her desire unfamiliar forbidden things.

"I would never ask you to be, because you are worth so much better, darling Charlotte and neither of us would be happy like that. You are right that some things are the same, but some are also different."

“What is?”

“This.” His arms squeezed tighter around her for a moment. “The fact that we have had this moment together. I already knew my own heart, now I know your feelings remain unchanged. I feel stronger than ever that I must find another way out of this situation because I cannot imagine spending my life without you.”

His words made her so overwhelmed with emotion that she first could not manage to say anything. He filled the silence.

“I have been thinking of you constantly. Everything has reminded me of you. Part of me hoped it was different for you, that you would heal quickly and move on. Perhaps meet another man who could make you happy again, because I truly want you to be happy. But part of me was more selfishly hoping that you felt just like I, that it would be impossible to forget. I knew I had absolutely no right to hope for that after passing you over, for money just like Eliza did with me, but I could not help it.”

Now she turned to him so she could look him in the eyes and cupped his face between her palms. She was almost distracted by the feeling of his warm skin under her palms, but pulled herself together enough to speak.

“Not like her”, she said with calm emphasis. “You didn’t do it for your own gain, only for others. And to keep me from harm. There is a big difference. I don’t think ill of you for it, on the contrary. I will never forget you. I wouldn’t know how. I have wished I could because I knew it was futile to hang on to you, but I cannot. When Esther invited me to London, you were the first thing on my mind. I was not sure I wanted to see you. I dreaded meeting you with Mrs Campion again, perhaps married now, but since the moment I came here I have been looking for you. When Esther told me you were still unmarried I almost cried because I was so relieved.”

“And that is why I cannot go through with it. Impossible. I must find a way out.”

“No. *We* must find a way out. You *and* me. Count me in, together we can perhaps find a way. If you want me as your partner in life we should start from here. I mean...” she interrupted herself, suddenly remembering that after all he had not declared his love verbally. There had been no proposal and could not be. Was it presumptuous to after this evening assume he wanted her as his partner in life?

Her determined words and look made him smile with equal measures of fondness and wistfulness.

“You are right and I wish I had indeed treated you as the partner I want you to be. I know what you are capable of. No one else had so many creative yet realistic ideas as you when it came to saving Sanditon. Still I didn’t invite you to be part of saving it this time, or saving us. It is the worst mistake I have ever done. I hope it is not too late now. Will you forgive me? Will you be on the same team as me once again?”

She knew he was reminiscing the cricket match, the first time they teamed up in a game. They had collaborated already before that, saving Old Stringer’s leg. They had been good team players before they warmed to one another. There was no limit to what they could achieve together when in love.

“Of course I will... Sidney.”

Saying his Christian name again felt almost as intimate as kissing him. He was her Sidney even if he was engaged to Mrs Campion. In his heart he was and together they would make it real.

Hearing his own name from her ignited the flame inside him again and with a swift move he shifted them so she came to lie under him on the chaise longue. He stared down on her with focused hunger. All her senses registered the wondrously enticing feeling of being captured under his hard body, his form matching her so perfectly that there literally was no space between them. Both knew it was a dangerous game, but the desire enhanced by not knowing when they would be

able to allow themselves to do this again was a more powerful force. Their lips touched again. Soft at first, but soon clashing hard almost like they wanted to breathe each other in. Her hands roamed the muscular planes of his back. Her hesitation seemed to evaporate simply because she could not get enough of *feeling* him.

Sidney supported himself on one arm, but the other slowly travelled along the roundness of her hip, lingered caressing her waist, then continued up her side, exploring her form. Tentatively he grazed the outside of her breast. This made her gasp but not flinch and encouraged he continued caressing her. His fingertips found her nipple through the fabric of her dress and he paused, almost as if the discovery astounded him. It astounded her. The sensation of him touching her there. How her nipple immediately responded by turning rigid and even more sensitive to his caress. Their very first kiss had woken things inside her so many months ago, things she had tried to repress since then. Now he was breathing air on the dying embers bringing them to full flame again. Her skin felt heated, her insides felt heated. When his lips moved to her neck every bone in her body seemed to dissolve. All she wanted was to succumb to these sensations, hold him to her, inhale the scent of him. She buried her nose at the crook of his neck and sighed loudly with pure happiness. This made him interrupt his ministrations and burst into soft laughter.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Because I feel the same. Happy. For the first time since... you last made me happy. Only with you I feel like this. Like I’m where I’m supposed to be, like I am who I’m supposed to be.”

With the pad of his thumb he traced her lips.

“We have to stop now though. I don’t want to lead you where we don’t want to go.”

She knew what he meant. She was not that kind of woman but she had never expected the path to ruin to feel so good.

'We' he had said. He did not want to end up like that either. She loved him. She wished she dared to tell him that. She wished she had the right to.

He sat up, pulled her with him and carefully adjusted her dress and put an escaping lock of hair into place.

"We should probably not be alone again, not for now. I don't trust myself to resist you."

"How will we meet again?"

"I'll call on Babington's house in the next days. Perhaps it is time I share with him how things really are."

She nodded.

Reluctantly they moved apart, knowing now it was time to do so.

"I'm afraid that when you leave, this will all feel like a dream."

"It will." He smiled sadly. "The very best of dreams. We have to fight to make it come true. Meeting you tonight has given me the strength to fight and made me dare to believe we can do it. Don't give hope, Charlotte. That is all I'm asking of you."

"I won't, I promise."

And she felt in her heart it was true. After this, there was no way she was giving up on them.

"So, let me leave first and wait a while, so no one sees us together."

He cupped her cheeks in his hands but this time only pressed his lips to her forehead. Then he rose to his feet and she immediately missed the nearness of him. He stopped with his hand on the door knob.

“Charlotte, I...”

He did not say more. The time and circumstances were not right but she knew what he wanted to say. After tonight she knew with certainty.

“I know.” She smiled at him with glazed eyes.

He left with one last long glance over his shoulder and closed the door behind him.