

**Chapter 21: The art of pretending**

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*In which Sidney's temper gets the better of him*

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Charlotte sank back onto the chaise longue again. If someone came in she could simply claim she was feeling unwell and needed to rest, even if truth was that she had not felt so well and alert in a long time. Perhaps on fire was a more appropriate way to describe her present state.

Grazing over her own pleasantly bruised lips with her fingertips, she replayed the last hour in her mind. An hour of bliss which she never had expected to experience outside her own vivid imagination. This was probably the reason why she had allowed it to happen. How many times during the months in Willingden had she not regretted that she had been so righteous that day when they said goodbye? If Eliza Champion was to have Sidney for a lifetime, why hadn't she, Charlotte, allowed herself to indulge him for the briefest moment?

The autumn had been hard to endure. Coming home to Willingden, her immediate feeling had been one of relief because it was comforting to return to familiarity and a place where nobody except Alison knew that Sidney Parker

existed. Not even Alison knew much since the only letter where Charlotte had described him in affectionate terms had been discarded after the news of his engagement and never sent.

That relief quickly gave way for something else. When she was not plain sad, she felt restless and listless. She gradually realised how much she had changed and still was changing. The metamorphosis which had begun in Sanditon continued as the past months' events truly sank in. In the stillness of the countryside, she could reflect upon everything more objectively and see things with a new clarity. She understood now, that her opinion of herself at the time when she departed to Sanditon had been skewed by her own lack of knowledge of the world outside this place. Just because she was the eldest among her siblings, aged twenty-two and had read extensively, she thought herself quite knowledgeable, wise and capable of judging characters and situations. The time in Sanditon and the acquaintances she had made there had proved her wrong. Persons and situations were so much more complex than books let on, no one and nothing so black and white as they seemed at first glance. Someone's actions could seem malicious but be based on good intent and experience, whilst another could have good intent yet cause misery in the wake of his actions and oblivious move on without noticing the harm done. Someone who appeared a friend could lead you astray and make you betray other's confidence just to serve her own purposes, and another who had been cool and distant suddenly open up and turn out to be a true friend. These and other insights made her see how little she had known. Despite that she now was wiser, she felt like she still only knew a fraction of what the world had to offer outside her father's estate and the village. For good and for bad, she couldn't help but craving more knowledge and experience. She had outgrown Willingden. It

was no longer enough or perhaps it had never been, but only now her eyes were open to it. Her learnings had been painful, but she did not want to hide from them, did not want to return to square one. Even if she had wanted to she would not have been capable of it. Ignorance is bliss, but only as long as you are unaware that you are ignorant.

She had spent so much time analysing and reanalysing every single micro-event, that she eventually wondered if she was going insane. She already knew her own judgement to be questionable and had moved on to doubt her decisions and even feelings. Was this true love that she felt for Sidney? Could it be after such a brief acquaintance with a man whom she initially thought abominable? Could it be, when there was no future in sight because he wilfully had turned away from it? In the end the argument she had with herself always circled back to the same conclusion; yes, she undoubtedly loved him.

There were also the more painful moments when she had doubted *his* feelings. Thought it impossible that he grieved her like she him. Were his feeling not fickle if he could accept surrendering the fate of marrying another? She tortured herself by imagining that the marks he had left on her was much deeper those she had left on him. He was her first love, but she was not his. She was convinced she would never forget him. Perhaps he had never quite forgotten Mrs. Champion and would happily settle with her, Charlotte turning into a parenthesis in his life. Then again she had felt that no, it was not like that. They were forged for each other. She knew he had given her a silent vow in the church that day, just like she had him. His eyes had told her and they had never lied to her, even when his mouth denied the truth. It had only taken her time to learn to read them.

At this point, reminiscing the shifting expressions in Sidney's brown eyes, from fury to concern, from hurt to love, she usually began crying because the pain was so intense. Her wounds remained open and she wondered if they ever would heal.

Early November another letter from Esther had arrived. They had stayed in touch, regularly exchanging letters. Charlotte had lightly described life in the countryside, never mentioning Sidney and dreading news of his wedding. Esther had not mentioned him but instead told her of how she and Babington were settling in London as newlyweds. Between the sweepingly elegant lines, Charlotte could read about her growing affections for her husband, but also of the loneliness Esther felt when his commitments took him away from her at times. Her longstanding habit of keeping people at arm's length, made her difficult to warm to. She may seem indifferent to that, but was in fact not. She missed a true friend. Charlotte had guessed as much and the new letter she confirmed it, when Esther asked if Charlotte would please come and join her as her guest in London. She had been hesitant at first, but the pull was too strong. Even if she had not liked London much at first sight in summer, the big town was alluring and the temptation to once again widen her perspectives outside of Willingden became irresistible in the end. So she had left again, this time a woman not a girl.

She was not sure what she had hoped would happen during her stay in the capital. No, wait - who was she trying to fool? *This*, what had happened here tonight was what she had fantasised about, but had not believed would come true. The only difference in her fantasies was that he somehow was free from his engagement and had rounded off a fiery kiss by proposing to her. Instead she

had *stolen* kisses and it baffled her exceedingly that she did not feel remorse. Instead she hungered for more. Much more.

With a deep sigh, half contentment, half despair, she rose to her feet. This had been lovely but she could allow it to happen again, unless they were properly promised to each other. The path to *that* destination seemed winding and treacherous, nearly impossible. However, now knowing for sure that he loved her dearly and still after all these months wanted to be with her, not Mrs. Campion, gave her new strength. She wanted to fight by Sidney's side, for *them*.

She made her way back to the main ball room, feeling like a different woman than the one who had walked the other way. Men had showed her attention all night, but knowing that Sidney desired her made her feel like she was glowing from within. She had never felt so beautiful.

"Where did you disappear off to?" Esther came towards her with Babington in tow, reaching for her hands with a concerned expression. She looked especially lovely this evening in a violet dress and her red curls swept over one shoulder attached with a diamond-adorned clasp. Upon her arrival to London, Charlotte had noticed that Esther's face and figure seemed a little fuller than before and she suspected there was a reason as to why she looked so radiant other than just being in love with her husband.

"I was feeling unwell for a while, almost feverish. I found a room where I could rest for a while."

"You *do* look a bit flushed. Are you sure you feel well now?"

"Never felt better", she flashed them a genuine smile but Babington's gaze had shifted to someone behind her.

"Here comes Sidney and Mrs. Campion. Sidney, come here! Look who is our guest, an acquaintance of yours."

She felt her back straighten by reflex and her skin prickled. Oh, how grateful she was that she already knew he was here, that they had met privately, otherwise she might have fainted. As it was, she felt a bit weak at the knees but remained standing and turned to greet the newcomers as could be expected.

"Miss Heywood."

He managed to pitch his voice perfectly to sound surprised but the eyes that locked with hers after the polite bow conveyed velvety warmth.

"Mr Parker. Mrs Campion." She managed to keep her own voice steady even if she hated to see Mrs campion clinging to Sidney's arm.

"Miss Heywood, have you escaped your little village again? Tired of farming?"

"So it seems", Charlotte answered amiably, ignoring the barely concealed insult.

Mrs Campion looked *very* unpleasantly surprised and sounded quite vexed. She tried to fake a smile but was really pursing her mouth. Almost immediately she shifted her gaze to Sidney to scrutinize his reaction, only to find him looking indifferent. In fact she would have found nothing to complain about, had it not been for Lord Babington. After exchanging a few polite phrases, he jovially turned to Sidney.

“Miss Heywood has been all the rage this evening, but why don’t you take her to the dancefloor now that she is free for a dance, Sidney?”

Sidney looked as taken aback as she felt.

“I’m not sure Miss Heywood feels like...”

“Nonsense! She has told us how much she loves to dance. You have been dance partners more than once in the past if I’m not mistaken. We can keep Mrs. Campion company.”

Charlotte did not know why he would suggest that. Of course an engaged man was allowed to dance with others and for anyone who did not know the history it would not be strange that Sidney politely danced with her to make her feel at home in London, but she had the distinct feeling that Babington knew there had been something between them. Was he cruelly toying with them, or was he giving them a chance to be close? Given what she knew of his good nature, the latter seemed more plausible.

She thought that Sidney might continue to object as the whole situation was so awkward, but instead he nodded solemnly and managed to look as reluctant as he had the very first time they were paired for a dance. Mrs Campion looked like *she* wanted to protest, but it would seem very impolite to do so, so she held her tongue.

As Charlotte took Sidney’s arm and he led her to the dancefloor, he whispered seriously to her.

“We have to be careful now.”

And so they began a strange dance. To an outsider it would seem as stiff and impersonal as their first dance in Sanditon. Sidney held her at armlength's distance, her gloved hand rested on top of his without him wrapping his fingers around it. His other hand held lightly around her waist without pulling her towards him. Yet the air between them was as charged as during the previous London dance and when they were hidden between other couples she could feel his fingers briefly caressing the small of her back. As soon as he had his back to Mrs Campion, his eyes silently repeated what he had told her before.

"We should probably make conversation", she hissed and tried not to inhale his heady scent so deep that it was visible to others.

"Is your family in good health, Miss Heywood?" he inquired with a smirk.

"Just as good as the last time you asked."

They both remained silent for a moment, remembering that time. The conversation and what had followed. Charlotte wished she simply could enjoy the proximity of him, but a knot of uneasiness was forming in the pit of her stomach.

"I'm not comfortable with this game. Dancing in front of your fiancée."

His eyes shifted from affectionate mischief to earnest concern.

"I don't want to play games either. I wouldn't have asked you to dance now if Babington had not insisted. Even if I love to dance with you, I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable or draw unnecessary attention to us. That is what I meant when I said we have to be careful. I wouldn't want Eliza to suspect I have been interacting with you."

"Interacting?" She could not help but smiling, amused. "Is that what you call it?"



“No, that is not what I call *it*.” The corners of his serious mouth twitched upwards. “When I say ‘interact’, I referred to our conversation. It would be bad enough if she realised I have told you the truth when she explicitly forbade me. As for other aspects of our earlier meeting, I think we had better not name them amongst others”

“I think you are right. She did not look happy to see me.”

“As I said, she was very perceptive to my feelings for you already from the start. Perhaps she watched us dancing at that ball, before I saw her. It is actually the first time it occurs to me, but maybe that is the reason for her jealousy towards you. It was a magical evening until she appeared. I wish I had never left your side, wish I had never met her again.”

“If it is as you think, she would have sought you out sooner or later. If she was set on winning you this time.”

He clenched his jaw.

“She won’t win. I’m determined of it now.”

“Just be careful Sidney. As much as I want to be with you I don’t want to jeopardise anything for Tom, Mary and the children.”

“I don’t want to jeopardise their future *or* yours. I will be careful and we will find a way.”

“Yes”, she allowed herself to smile at him and for a moment forgot about Mrs Champion, floating with him accompanied by the music.

The musicians finished the last accords of the song. Before he let go of her he closed his fingers around her hand for the briefest moment. Then he stepped away, bowed and stiffly held out his arm to lead her back to the others.

Mrs Campions watery blue eyes glistened dangerously with cool fury, telling Charlotte that even if they had been careful, their dance had been enough to fuel her jealousy. She was therefore quick to accept when a young man she had been dancing with earlier this evening appeared by her side to ask for another. She did not dare to glance at Sidney before she was swept away to the dancefloor, but did not have to see him to instinctively know that he was clenching his jaw.

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He made sure he and Eliza left before Charlotte and her admirer returned. Even if he did not doubt her feelings after what had passed between them, he could not prevent jealousy from welling up inside him because that man was allowed to show his unmasked admiration for Charlotte. He was probably free to propose to her this very evening should he wish to – and she was free to accept. *He* was the one who was bound to Eliza. Bound by honour, bound by economic considerations, bound by love though not for his fiancée. He detested it and wished he had been a scoundrel who could throw all such concerns aside, except he knew he would never be able to live with himself then and Charlotte would not want such a man so it would all be for nothing. Dearest, loveliest Charlotte. The fire she evoked inside him, the longing. He could not be hers soon enough, but how?

Luckily, Eliza seemed as eager to leave as him. They walked in silence to the carriage and for a moment he hoped he might be left to his thoughts during the ride, but as soon as it started moving she turned to him.

“Miss Heywood looked very pretty this evening.”

He was not fooled by her feigned casual tone.

“You think? Since when do you care how Miss Heywood looks?” He made sure to sound indifferent too.

“Well, since the man I am engaged to cannot take his eyes off from her.”

“That is far from the truth.”

She exploded.

“How could you embarrass me like that?!”

“Like what?” He made a point of still keeping his voice calm, sounding tired more than anything despite the instant flash of anger her words provoked him to feel.

“You know very well what I mean, Sidney Parker. Dancing with Miss Heywood, looking at her like...”

“May I remind you that it was Babington who insisted? I didn’t want to dance with her, I tried to get out of it.”

“That was a half-hearted, ridiculous attempt! You may not have asked her to dance, but you certainly *wanted* to! I could see it in your eyes! Your damn expressive eyes, they betray you!” She almost spat the words out.

“Your unmotivated jealousy is clouding your judgement.”

Deep breaths. Stay calm. He could not allow himself to be provoked.

“It is not! That temptress is trying to steal you from me.”

“Temptress? Steal me? I assure you she cannot steal me from you.”

Because he was not hers to begin with. His heart had belonged to Charlotte all this time and it always would. Anyway it seemed like his words managed to calm her slightly. She stopped hyperventilating.

“I am warning you though. If I see any signs of you and Miss Heywood being friendly towards one another I will withdraw my investment in Sanditon and make sure her reputation is ruined. Don’t you ever forget that!”

“How could I ever forget that Eliza? You are a constant reminder of it.” He sounded more bitter than he had intended to.

Her eyes widened.

“So you don’t love me?”

He let out an involuntary snort.

“Have I ever said I did? This time around? You know this marriage is a business arrangement which you forced me to accept.”

She had gotten under his skin. And he could not stop himself.

“Because I know we belong together! I *know* you will love me again!”

“Then you know more than I do.”

“So you admit you love Miss Heywood after all?”

“I don’t admit anything! What I feel or don’t feel for Miss Heywood is irrelevant as I am engaged to *you*, but I can assure you this; I. Will. Never. Again. Love. You.”

He took a deep breath and immediately regretted his words. He had spoken out of turn. He should not have said that, but all the events combined this evening had pushed him over the edge. His anger towards Eliza, the tender and passionate moment with Charlotte, Eliza’s justified jealousy and his own sense of confinement. It was all too much to keep locked inside and finally he had burst.

She stared back at him in shock. Then she smiled an uncanny, cold smile and batted her eyelashes.

“Then you’d better be very good at pretending, dear.”

She turned to the window and she drove the rest of the way to her house in silence.

Sidney sensed something very similar to hate, combined with a sinking feeling that he had made a terrible mistake exposing himself just now. He became increasingly convinced that something was not quite *right* with Eliza and he should not provoke her because God knows what she might do. He and Charlotte should secretly work to find a solution for themselves and Sanditon and he hoped that he losing his temper for a minute had not jeopardized their already small chances of succeeding. He feared that Eliza Campion would stop at nothing to have her way and it was imperative that he kept her unaware of that things were not going that direction.

She was right about one thing – he had to be better at pretending.