

Chapter 4: So this is what a man looks like

Charlotte strolled along a secluded cove, barefoot, enjoying the feeling of the pebbles, surfaces smoothed by the sea over the centuries under her soles. She felt carefree on the verge of irresponsible, because she knew a young lady should not walk here alone, should not take her shoes off or turn her face to meet the lovely warm rays of sun as they inevitably would give her an unbecoming tan, but she could not make herself care. Seldom had she felt so free. This had been a remarkable afternoon in many ways, and she did not want to end it by returning to Trafalgar house yet.

Earlier on, she had been to Lady Denham's all by herself to apologise for speaking her mind during the luncheon yesterday. She did it for Tom Parker's sake, because the old dragon had been so upset when she sent them home and as his guest Charlotte did not want to harm the relationship with his most important investor. Slightly intimidated upon her return to the grand house, she had found that the lady was amused by her innate outspokenness sooner than anything else. Lady Denham had chuckling told her that she liked to provoke and tease.

On her way back to Sanditon Charlotte reflected over that irritation, anger and fear might be the only feelings Lady D were able to stir in others, because no one seemed to feel the slightest affection for her. Maybe it was like she had read in one of her books; that everyone wants to be loved, failing that admired, failing that feared, failing that hated and despised. Everyone wants to make others feel *something* to leave their mark in this world. Suddenly she felt sorry for Lady Denham. Even with Clara around, she seemed lonely and people had clearly come to her luncheon either because they were commanded like Miss Lambe, or because they wanted something from the rich woman. Well, except Charlotte who had gone because she was curious to find out what a meal in such a fine home was like, how a pineapple looked and tasted and dying to get to know Georgiana Lambe. To Charlotte's disappointment they had had no chance to speak to one another for real and she never got to taste the pineapple, but it had been a quite an exciting event anyway apart from the company of the abominable Sidney Parker.

At that point during the walk, her thoughts had been interrupted as she caught a glimpse of purple moving near to the edge of the cliff at some distance. It was only a brief glimpse before it disappeared, but enough to know it was a person and that that someone had continued down the steep cliff side towards the water. Charlotte thought she recognized Miss Lambe and was immediately alarmed even if she was not sure why. She hurried in the direction where the purple dot had vanished and soon saw Miss Lambe further down, unharmed but well on her way towards the water. Charlotte sensed the other young woman was not out for a pleasurable stroll

and hasted downhill, felt loose stones roll under her feet and almost slipped in her urgency to reach Miss Lambe.

When she thought herself to be within hearing distance she had called out. Miss Lambe did not react at first, only continued determinedly towards the water until Charlotte finally caught up with her and grabbed her arm. When she turned, tears had been streaming down her face and she was trembling with emotion.

“Are you all right?” Such a stupid question when it was obvious she was far from, but Charlotte did not know what else to say.

“Not really. I hate it here.”

After the nasty treatment she received yesterday that was no wonder.

“I think it must be very difficult for you. I feel something of it myself. I'm a stranger here, too.”

“But people don't look at you the way they look at me.”

“No.”

Miss Lambe had stopped moving towards the water and as they continued talking the two girls spontaneously sat down. Charlotte had comforted Miss Lambe and eventually her tears ceased falling. They had spoken of many things; of how Miss Lambe missed her home and hated the English climate, how she resented having Sidney Parker as her guardian and realised they share their animosity towards him. Miss Lambe, Georgiana resented that she had to be managed because she was in

possession of a fortune, Charlotte found him impolite and cold. They had eventually laughed at how terrible Lady Denham had been the day before and agreed they could survive this together.

Giggling they had taken off their shoes and walked into the sea, dipping their feet in the water. Charlotte had told Georgiana about her adventure trying swimming from the bathing machine and promised to join Georgiana if she wanted to try it too. Too soon they had been interrupted by Mrs. Griffiths, who had been searching for Georgiana for hours, now terribly upset and out of herself with concern. Brusquely she had pulled Georgiana with her, but the girls had shared affectionate smiles, knowing they would seek each other's company again.

Now alone again, Charlotte was happy she had made a new friend. She missed her sister Alison and even if she had become acquainted with Clara Brereton and Esther Denham, they were both in their own ways distant and difficult to understand so Charlotte did not feel particularly connected to either of them. She sensed that the friendship with Georgiana had the potential to be different, to be a true friendship and added to that, she was such an exciting personality. This promised to be the most exciting summer so far in Charlotte's life.

Her eyes suddenly fell on a pile of clothes, neatly laid out on the pebbles out of reach from the waves. Male clothes as it appeared. How come someone had left them here?

There was a splashing sound coming from the ocean behind her. Startled she turned around, in time to see Mr. Sidney Parker emerge from the water, a sight that made her breath hitch. He shook his dark wet hair and more water streamed down along his completely naked body as he rose from the waves like some god of the sea.

For a few seconds the shocked Charlotte could not tear her gaze away, even if she knew she should. She had never seen a man undressed before and for a short while curiosity overrode dismay. Even with non-existing experience in the area she had a feeling this particular male body might be a more beautiful specimen than most and could not help but taking in the sight. He was so different from her own softly rounded female body. Mr. Parker was supremely fit, boxing and other exercising had made sure of that. His frame was lean, looking hard and strong, almost triangle shaped because the shoulders were so much broader than his narrow waist. The outlines of the muscles were visible everywhere; along the shoulders, the arms and his impressively well-developed chest, and dividing the flat stomach into a pattern of squares. There was a dusting of dark, damp hair on said stomach leading down to... *Oh, dear Lord!*

Charlotte finally came to her senses and turned away before he caught her looking, but it did not help much. The sight of him was etched on her retina. Her heart was pounding hard and she felt flushed, not only her cheeks but all over. Being a country girl, she had inevitably seen farm animals mate, so even if no one had talked to her about such things she had a vague idea that men and women might

be doing something similar to procreate. Still, learning that a man looked like that *down there* was the most shocking part of the whole experience.

By now he had noticed her and spoke to her back. She was grateful that at least he could not see her heated cheeks or that she was hyperventilating .

“Oh Miss Heywood. Am I never to get away from you?” he drawled.

Did he have to be so sarcastic? Surely he must understand this was a very unfortunate coincidence and she was well and truly embarrassed to be in his naked presence.

“Mr Parker, I assure you you're the last person I wish to see.”

It was true for any version of him and especially a very naked one, or at least she told herself so even if seeing him like that also was disturbingly exciting somehow.

”You're right, I spoke out of turn. Forgive me.”

She almost turned around to face him then, out of sheer surprise that he had apologised to her. That was a first from this man and by now she had dismissed him as incapable of behaving with any degree of civility, at least towards herself. She could not and should not stay around though. In addition to feeling all nervous and embarrassed, her reputation would be ruined if someone came by and found her with a naked man, no matter if it was completely involuntary.

”Of course. Excuse me.”

With back still turned to him, she did what any sensible lady already would have done; ran. Fled. Sprinted until she was panting, gasping for air and her side burned. She ran to get away, but her feet did not take her in the direction of Trafalgar house. She needed to be alone and calm down before she could meet the Parker family, before she could look them in the eyes with the knowledge that she had seen Tom's brother, Mary's son-in-law in the nude. God, she was so embarrassed and ashamed!

Charlotte ran until she reached the wide sand beach where a few people were walking, enjoying the afternoon sun, but thankfully no one she knew, and she finally slowed down. She did not want them to think her completely crazy, Sanditon was after all a quite small town and if she ran like a maniac on the beach word would likely spread. She continued walking at a more normal pace, with her arms wrapped protectively around her own thin frame. Eventually her pulse slowed down too.

As she calmed down she began to re-evaluate the situation. Why should she be embarrassed? *He* was the one who had not worn a thread on his body, not her. *He* was the one who had chosen to swim were people might come walking. She had done nothing wrong. A little smile spread over her face. Was it possible that Sidney Parker was embarrassed now? *He* should be.

She could not help reminiscing the sight of him naked. So, *that* was how a man looked. Or at least something like that. Even with clothes on it was easy to tell that Mr. Arthur's form was much fuller and softer and Mr. Tom was thinner and less

muscular. Just like women, men came in all sizes and shapes apparently. Even if she did not like Sidney Parker's personality one bit, she had to bashfully admit that she found his body to be... tantalizing and total perfection. She tried to stop her thoughts from running wild but realised with dismay that she wanted to let her fingers wander over that stomach, feel the ridges of his abs, the softness of the trail of hair, let her palms slide over that chest to know if it felt like it looked. She was curious to know if his skin was smooth or rough, if he felt warm or as cold as he behaved. She wondered about what was between his thighs. Was that to be used with a woman, or was that meant for something else entirely? Then she shook her head, trying to clear it from forbidden thoughts. She should not be having thoughts like this. She was not sure a true lady even should think like this about her husband. If she ever married she would know soon enough, but until then she should forget all about this. It was just so very hard not to picture him, like he had looked emerging from the water. He had been so beautiful in the soft afternoon light with droplets glimmering everywhere. It was a pity that a handsome appearance like that did not come with a kind personality.

She was hoping with increasing intensity that he would decide to leave Sanditon very soon, even if she knew that would disappoint Tom. Because how would she ever be able to face Sidney Parker again without thinking of what he looked like underneath his clothes?