

Chapter 14: What is it that you want from me?

In which Sidney behaves very badly indeed and Charlotte is hurt

She could almost not hear anything above the sound of her own blood gushing, hear heart resounding inside of her like a drum. *How could he?* The day had just turned from confounding into unbearable.

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Earlier this afternoon Mr. Parker had surprised her, joining her by the river. He appeared to be all by himself and Charlotte wondered where Mrs. Champion was. Initially she felt a bit shy as a consequence of his reserved behaviour during the sand castle competition and perhaps also because she found him more dashing than ever. He seemed quite relaxed now though, as he wriggled off his top coat before picking up an oar and sauntered towards the boats. How she liked him like this, when he was not so formal. Clad in white shirt, waistcoat and breeches he looked stylish but more approachable, younger, less contained than in hat, top coat and cane. More like someone she could have run into in the fields of Willingden, but then again no. She had never met anyone like Sidney Parker anywhere.

She felt a new kind of nervous insecurity in his company and this made her do as he asked when he smilingly commanded her to enter the boat, instead of

stubbornly refuse like she would have in the past if he spoke to her like that. It was so strange; she felt completely safe with him, simultaneously intimidated and exposed. Like when he held her to stabilise her in the jump, captured her hand and squeezed it reassuringly after she had landed in the boat. It defeated the purpose because it made her weak at the knees, so she hastily had to sit down as soon as he let go. The butterflies in her stomach stayed.

Even if he seemed to sincerely wish for her to join him, she was a bit out of her comfort zone to begin with, guarded because she feared her feelings for him might shine through. She wanted to be here, with him, so very much but could not figure out why *he* was here. He had come to practise for the race, not to see her, but he *had* asked her to join him. Insisted upon it even. Was it really only to balance the boat? She could see that something bothered him, but it could hardly be the same thoughts that troubled her. The events that came to pass next, she comprehended even less.

They had floated peacefully along the river, but her insides were in a turmoil during and after. She secretly enjoyed watching him manage the oars. She knew all too well from the encounter by the coves, that his upper body was disturbingly well-built and his arms very muscular, and now he moved without effort. Many gentlemen were weak or chubby because they did not use their bodies for manual labour, but not Sidney Parker and Georgiana had gossiped he stayed fit by participating in boxing matches, probably illegal ones. Charlotte found that both appalling and thrilling. It was not difficult to imagine even if he was sitting here so

peacefully now, because there was a strong agility to him, and she had seen him fight when they were on the rescue mission for Georgiana; furiously knocking down the driver of the kidnapper's carriage and rescuing herself from being assaulted using his bare fists. She had not been grateful at the time but looking back her feelings were changed.

She was distracted admiring his long fingers grasping around the oars, so she was slightly taken aback when he unexpectedly opened up to her, sharing his predicament. He started the conversation so grave but after a while, smiled wider and more genuinely than ever before, so it warmed her through and through. He made her feel like he in truth wanted to be with her and nowhere else. It did not even bother her when he asked for advice about happiness and marriage realising his mind must be set on Mrs. Champion, because it still felt like *they* shared a moment of trust.

Then, the way he had touched her; held her hands again, put his palm against her side in the most enthralling way, enticingly brushed her leg. Only light, innocent touches but because it was him, it made her entire body flush, her heart beat frantically, and her breath catch in her throat. His smile gradually vanished, his face shifted to serious but far from unfriendly and there was an almost palpable tension building between them. His brown eyes, now fixed on her, turned so dark and intense that it made her tremble inside. When he looked at her like that, she felt *things*, new strong emotions, which she did not fully understand but nevertheless welcomed.

For a moment she had thought he intended to kiss her. It felt like he was about to raise from his seat and close the small gap between them. She had *wanted* it, her body almost prepared to mould itself into him even if she knew nothing of such things. Her physical reactions this afternoon had not been fitting at all for a young unmarried lady. She should not feel like this *for* him, *with* him, but her emotions had been an overwhelming pandemonium, a maelstrom pulling her with it, and she had not wanted to resist. If he beckoned her, she was ready to come. But he did not.

Instead Mrs. Champion appeared and the spell that Charlotte had been under was abruptly broken. By the way he reacted, immediately breaking away, she realised that their special moment was a figment of her imagination. There was no attraction for his part, he belonged with another and she was a fool for thinking anything else.

As soon as Mrs. Champion called, Sidney had brought them back to the riverbank, leaped out of the boat with impressive speed and nearly forgotten to help Charlotte out of it. He seemed distressed and eager to get away from her now that he had been reminded of his commitments to the other lady.

Mrs. Champion had observed them with grave face and narrowed eyes and Charlotte had the uncanny feeling she could read her mind. How ridiculous she must find her thoughts if she could; a countryside girl pining for the man *she*, the wealthiest widow in England, had her eyes on, perhaps was engaged to already. Charlotte blushed under the scrutiny, excused herself and hastily returned to her preparations by the tent. Mr. Parker left in Mrs. Champion's company almost

without saying goodbye or thanking her for balancing the boat. Part of her wished she had never joined him in that boat so the abrupt dismissal would not be so hurtful, but part of her would not have wanted to miss it for the world. Even if she was a delusional fool, she knew she counted that moment alone with Sidney Parker among the most precious ones in her life so far.

With the couple gone, she had tried and failed to understand why he sought her company in the first place if he was to turn his back on her the minute Mrs. Campion re-appeared. Here she was, with even stronger feelings for Sidney Parker than before and once again he had run away when Mrs. Campion summoned him. Charlotte's imagination had run wild and she cursed herself for that, for allowing herself to nurture a grain of hope only to be so bitterly disappointed. Was he toying with her, she wondered, or did he not even realise what effect he had on her? She thought him a good man, so the sensible part of her said he meant no harm, but her heart ached nevertheless. He would surely not lead her on intentionally only to cruelly drop her, but that certainty only slightly diminished the pain.

It hurt because she was a passionate woman who could not simply shut off her feelings at this point. Just as she always had known she was unable to marry without love, she now discovered that she was incapable of stopping herself from loving once the feelings had begun to blossom, even if there was no prospect of a marriage.

A heated shiver went through her when her body remembered the feel of his hand against her midriff. Oh, to have his hands grazing over her body and have them

buried in her hair. To feel his lips. She gasped, almost like a sob and was grateful no one was around to hear or see her in this state. She did not want to imagine those things, but she could not help herself even if it only worsened the pain of losing something that never was hers in the first place.

When she finally regained her composure, she returned to the large tents where a sumptuous luncheon was being served and was very relieved when Lady Susan immediately came to meet her, determined to take her under her wings. It was a welcome distraction when she introduced Charlotte to several prominent people, as if she was a dear old friend. Lady Susan's personality was indeed such that it felt like they had been friends forever. It was obvious that many of the spectators had come to Sanditon on her invite.

"You have made the day a success. I hardly know how to thank you", Charlotte said.

"You have no need to thank me. I came here to enjoy your company."

Charlotte was grateful that at least *someone* enjoyed her company. Lady Susan served herself some cake from the buffet, but Charlotte had no appetite.

"Look who's coming our way." Susan giggled naughtily when she saw Mrs. Campion with Sidney Parker in tow. "I think we can safely say we have found Mrs Campion's Achilles heel."

"What is it?" Charlotte asked curiously.

"You", Susan mused as Mrs. Champion steered towards them. Susan was convinced that her aim was to keep a close eye on the competition and by that not eluding to the boat race.

"May we join you?" Mrs. Champion demanded sooner than asked, in a meddlesome manner.

Charlotte noticed that Susan barely could refrain from rolling her eyes, but in the end just nodded politely.

"What is the topic of discussion?" the ignorant Mrs. Champion asked.

"Miss Heywood and I were just discussing marriage."

Charlotte wondered why she would say that, when they had discussed nothing of the sort. Susan turned to Sidney.

"What is your opinion of marriage, Mr Parker?"

Charlotte's gaze shifted to him, but he was back to avoiding looking at her just like at the beach. She noticed that his body language strangely reminded of an earthworm squirming on a fishing hook and thought it must be embarrassing for him to be asked that question if he planned to propose in the imminent future. The thought stung her.

"I cannot speak of it with any authority, I'm afraid.", was all he said, with a tight smile and continued to avert his gaze. Charlotte was grateful that at least she did

not have to witness a look of adoration directed to Mrs. Campion or hear him say that matrimony was a blessing he hoped to experience soon.

"What about you, Miss Heywood? You're of marrying age. It must be much on your mind", Mrs. Campion chipped in, widening her bright blue eyes innocently but Charlotte saw the steely look in their depth.

"There seems little point considering marriage until you've found someone you'd wish to marry", she responded with a sweet smile but feeling defiant. The other woman was the last person she wished to share her thoughts with and neither with Mr. Parker as things were.

"There must be a boy in your village that's caught your eye?"

Susan had her eyes on Sidney, and it did not escape her how uncomfortable he looked, yet like he was all ears to hear Charlotte's answer. She knew she was never wrong when it came to matters of the heart and she was certain that Mr. Sidney Parker's heart belonged to Charlotte even if he had not realised it himself.

"And why should Charlotte be limited to her village?" she challenged.

Charlotte wanted to sink through the ground. No boy in Willingden had ever made her feel like the man before her did. She was grateful that Susan came to her aid because she would not have known what to say.

"I always think it helps to share a common background, that's all. Miss Heywood is hardly likely to find a kindred spirit in this company", Mrs. Campion answered with feigned concern, followed by a chuckle. The perceptive Susan detected a hint of malice, but also insecurity.

"And why not?"

"I just imagine she must find all our London talk unspeakably tedious. Wouldn't you agree, Sidney?"

A woman who had to tell a man that he rather belonged with her than another, was a woman suspicious that her feelings were not reciprocated. She was marking her territory, intimately calling him by his Christian name and requesting him to share her opinion. Susan saw the signs of the growing rift between them but knew that her dear friend probably was too inexperienced to understand the true nature of things. Her heart went out to her, but she could not comfort her right in this moment.

During the brief silence that followed Mrs. Campion' question, Charlotte held her breath, hoping that Sidney would join forces with Susan and tell Mrs. Campion that he for one appreciated Charlotte's company and would not be surprised if she found love outside of Willingden. For a split second their eyes met when he glanced at her, but then he looked down almost bashfully and answered.

"I have no doubt that Charlotte would rather be sat somewhere quietly reading Heraclitus." A small laugh which sounded false to her ears escaped him.

Those words hurt like a whiplash. How could he sink so low just to appease Mrs. Campion? Not only did he choose not to come to Charlotte's defence, he turned the previous sincere and beautiful conversation between them into something ugly, a hurtful joke diminishing her.

Mrs. Campion jeered, gleeful in what she perceived as a victory.

"Sidney, you are wicked! That will certainly not help her find a husband."

Charlotte felt like she was in a game of chess she had not asked to be part of, with the King and Queen joined in front of her and she a pawn who could easily be expended without any concern for her feelings. She was not sure how she did it, but she managed to keep appearances up just long enough to retort with dignity.

"You are quite right, Mrs Campion. I'm a farmer's daughter who reads books. What could I possibly have in common with anyone here? Excuse me."

She sent Sidney a reproachful glance, then fled, hoping no one but Susan realised how upset she was and why. She did not know where to escape. Soon Tom would expect her assistance so she could not run home to her room and hide like she wanted. Instead she stopped in a somewhat secluded corner and tried to retreat within herself. She could almost not hear anything above the sound of her own

blood gushing, hear heart resounding inside of her like a drum. *How could he?* The day had just turned from confounding into unbearable.

Mrs. Champion had been mean, but Charlotte could usually handle such talk and bite back, like when Lady Denham had pried into her own and Georgiana's plans to marry. What upset and wounded her were her own feelings for Sidney combined with that he so willingly played along with Mrs. Champion. Before, down by the river she had the feeling they shared something special, something precious. Even if nothing more was to come out of it, she had never expected him to turn their togetherness into a joke which ridiculed her.

His words hurt her so much more than Mrs. Champion ever could because she expected more from him and because his good opinion of her had come to mean the world. She had been mistaken. A good man would not be spiteful towards a... a friend?... like this, but perhaps he did not regard her a friend even if he had come to her for advice. His behaviour made it clear that she was nothing to him, at least nothing he valued. The realisation made her feel choked, made tears prick at the back of her eyelids threatening to burst out any second. She *had* to hold them back, could not be seen crying in public and start the gossip mill. How pathetic everyone would think her if they realised she had feelings for Sidney Parker. She tried to calm down by wrapping her arms around herself and control her breaths but now a heavy teardrop rolled down her cheek. No one had ever hurt her this way. She had foolishly given her heart to the wrong man, but there had been no active choice involved. Susan was right, love was truly an affliction and the worst kind.

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The temporary calm Sidney had found in Charlotte's company during the boat ride vanished the moment Mrs. Campion called out his name. He found himself torn between what he *wanted* to do and what everyone including himself expected him to do. When he left by Mrs. Campion's side, all he wanted was to run back to Charlotte, but something held him back. It would have caused an awkward scene and he was not even sure what he would say or how Charlotte would react. All he knew was that he did not like leaving her behind. Having the two women near each other left him so confused. One was his past, but was she also his future? What about Charlotte then, what he had felt for her, wanted to do with her just now? Was he simply caught up in the moment? Something told him it was not so. He felt there was a deeper connection causing lust to flash up in him rather than sudden desire leading him to believe there was more to their relationship than it was, but he could not be sure. Not of his own feelings and certainly not of Charlotte's.

His doubts increased by the minute, leaving him in a foul mood and to make bad things worse Mrs. Campion pulled him into a conversation with Charlotte and Lady Worcester, one which he did not want to be part of. He did not want to share his thoughts on marriage, did not want to hear about Charlotte's. Well, not like this anyway. The conversation in the boat had been something different.

Sidney still did not fully admit it to himself, but truth was he did not want her to be fond of any other man than him and did not wish to hear her thoughts on marrying... someone else.

When Mrs. Campion asked Charlotte about a boy in her village, an intense feeling of uneasiness inhabited him, but he failed to recognise it as jealousy. Just to imagine her with another made him want to punch something hard or wrap her in his arms and shield her from the world, but this desire was not something he was able to put words to in his mind, it merely expressed itself as a wave of disturbing emotions. It was a relief when she maintained her previous position, that she had not yet found anyone she wished to marry, but Mrs. Campion would not leave it at that. He could not understand why the woman was so overly interested in Charlotte's love life. It had nothing to do with her for all she knew.

When Mrs. Campion forced him to join the conversation, asked him if he did not agree that Charlotte must find their London talk tedious, he had not intended for his answer to come out like it did. He was frustrated with her for pursuing the topic in the way she did and felt cornered into saying something. It was near impossible to find an answer that would please both women and because of that, words which in his mind were a compliment to Charlotte, were twisted into an insult when spoken out loud.

"I have no doubt that Charlotte would rather be sat somewhere quietly reading Heraclitus."

He intended to give a secret nod to their conversation earlier, but as soon as the words left his lips, he heard how wrong they were, sounding nothing but mocking.

Sidney *did* agree that she probably found the London talk tedious, *but so did he*. The more time he spent with Charlotte here in Sanditon, the less he wished to return to that superficial life and Mrs. Campion's presence only emphasized that.

He did *not* doubt that Charlotte rather would be seated somewhere quiet reading Heraclitus, *but he admired that and would want to sit next to her*. He would be perfectly content watching her read, if he could talk to her every now and then and hear her thoughts on what she had read, was allowed to hold her hand and perhaps steal a kiss. He would gladly spend his life like that, instead of going back to London and listen to Mrs. Campion talk about balls and dresses and gossip about people who meant nothing to him.

All that, was hidden behind the actual spoken words but he could not right his wrong by admitting that. All Sidney managed in his cornered state was a jest at her expense.

Her words in response hit him like a punch in the stomach. *'I'm a farmer's daughter who reads books. What could I possibly have in common with anyone here?'* At the London ball he had told her she was more than equal to any woman in the room and he thought it truer now than ever, acting so dignified despite the undeserved ridicule. When she swept away it only took him a few seconds to realise he had to follow her, or he would not be able to look himself in the mirror. She was hurt and angry, he knew her well enough to know that and he could not stand the thought. He hated that he had partaken in causing her to feel that way.

"Excuse me", he echoed Charlotte and moved to follow her.

"Sidney? Where are you going?" Mrs. Campion inquired with alarm. She put her hand on his arm. He flinched and pulled away.

"This jest went too far, I have to apologise", he answered brusquely, though angrier with himself than with her.

"Surely there is no need?"

He noticed Mrs. Campion's annoyed expression but found he did not care. She had just proven to be an even a lesser person than he thought her before, by being mean to a girl of inferior position than herself. He regretted badly that he had allowed himself to be drawn into it just because he could not decide which foot to stand on. He could perhaps forgive Mrs. Campion for the past, but he could forgive neither her nor himself for turning him into someone who would do such a thing to Charlotte. It was coward and that was not the man he wanted to be. Charlotte deserved so much better and he had to make amends.

He feared he would not find her, but she had not gone far and soon he caught up with her. To his dismay the composed outside she had maintained in front of them had started to crumble and he realised he had hurt her even deeper than he first thought. Her arms were protectively wrapped around her own thin frame and her heavy breathing disclosed how upset she really was. When he called her name and

she looked up, he caught her wiping away a tear. It was unbearable. The last thing he wanted was to make Charlotte Heywood cry, yet he had.

"Miss Heywood."

"Would you excuse me? The race is about to start."

She turned her back on him and strode away. He had upset her to the extent that she would not even talk to him. It had happened before, when he interfered between Georgiana and Otis, but this was entirely different. This time it was a matter of him and her only. He easily caught up with her with his longer strides and took hold of her elbow.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait." She turned around. "I only ask for a moment", he pleaded, with heart thumping in his chest.

"Well?"

It was only one word, but he knew from her impatiently expectant tone that he had better give her a very good explanation or she was out of here. Never had it felt so important to achieve forgiveness.

"I hope you were not too offended by Mrs Champion. It was only meant in jest."

It was the lamest of apologies but this moment words failed the usually eloquent Sidney Parker. Too much was at stake and too little he had yet put words to in his own mind. He could hardly speak the truth before he fully understood it himself.

He had been at fault, *he* had insulted her, but if he admitted what their moment earlier meant to him, what *she* meant to him, why he could not bear his own words hurting her, then he would finally acknowledge the depth of his feelings for her. And she would understand too. He was not ready for that.

"Is that all I am to you? A source of amusement?" she said with a sad smile.

The disappointment and disdain in her eyes choked him. She was... she was *everything* to him, but again, he could not make himself say that. Not here, not like this, not yet when he only was in the beginning of understanding.

"No, of course not, you're..." he stuttered instead, fighting to manage something coherent. "Forgive me."

"On the contrary, you have done me a great service. I'm no longer in any doubt as to how you regard me."

Her words were harsh, but he sensed she was more saddened than furious and that was all the worse.

She turned and started walking away again. It seemed she had not the faintest idea how he regarded her. How could he put this right? He had to try. Once again he followed her, took hold of her arm and made her turn around.

"Miss Heywood."

"What?" she snapped, no longer able to keep a lid on her strong emotions. "What is it you want from me?"

He wanted so many things that it was impossible to tell her. He wanted to make her happy; he wanted to be by her side; he wanted her to stay just like she was; he wanted to hold her to his chest and whisper against her hair that he was sorrier than she ever could imagine and that the only moment this day that had given him any joy was when he was with her in that boat, and he wanted the rest of his life to be a stretch of such precious moments. With her, always with her.

He did not know how or where to begin without exposing himself more than he dared, so all he could do was meet her stare, her hazel eyes tearful and simultaneously so hard that it pierced his heart.

"Please be kind enough to leave me alone. Excuse me."

His attempt to apologise had failed spectacularly. This time he did not follow because he sensed he could not manage what she needed to hear in this moment. He needed time. He watched her walk away feeling like a lesser man than he ever had. Now he knew he had been wrong thinking Charlotte would not expect anything from him this day. She expected him to treat her with decency and respect. Only that and yet he had failed. He must find a way to put this right.