

HERE I AM

Charlotte sat in her usual chair by the study window, the smell of books and drying ink scratched on parchment wafting into the air with a peppery aroma that filled her lungs with an infusion of tranquillity.

She liked it best here—right here—in this very room, this familiar setting where many a scene, many a conversation, had taken place, some fraught, some bold, some new, some old.

She had first met *him* here, just a few feet away, in fact, a fraction to the left, if she were not mistaken. She let out a sentimental chuckle. Little then had she known that day that a new chapter of her life had begun to unfold, forever etched upon her heart.

Yes, she liked it best in here, especially when she was not alone, but whole, the other half of her here also. But never mind that, he would return soon enough.

Settling down and making herself comfortable, Charlotte watched with blissful calm as the silver-cloaked goddess of Winter stretched out her fingers and brushed them across the park, her touch turning them white, their earthy garments bejewelled with the diamonds of sparkling frost. Sweeping her spell of hush upon the world, Winter lulled the sleeping land that lay cocooned under a blanket of snow, unblemished by the footprints of man, undisturbed by the trembling tracks of time as it took its first, unsteady steps into the unfamiliar, the unforeseen, the untried dawn of this new year.

As Charlotte gazed out at this wintry quintessence, a sense of awe settled upon her. It was a moment frozen in time, each delicate snowflake a reminder of nature's meticulous creativity. The air was crisp and pure, carrying with it the sharp scent of pine and the promise of a fresh beginning. The scene outside, a day that was a mere infant in the calendar, seemed to hold its breath, every tree branch adorned with a subtle lace of gossamer rime, the sky a soft blue backdrop, every detail rendered with magnificence and majesty—a scenic masterpiece waiting to be admired, caught in the magical embrace of Winter's enchantment. It was as if the world had been painted by a master's hand, perfected by the quietude of this place that was known for its defining trinity: simplicity, serenity, and the sea.

She smiled to herself.

With her mouth hitching upwards, and her cheeks creasing with joy, her gaze fell upon the clinkerbells that hung around the window, glittering with their stems of icy water, affecting it to look like a frame that promised to reveal the most heavenly picture of all.

This was more than the window to her home. It was the window to her life.

Yes.

It was all as it should be.

Charlotte had lived here now for an entire year, witnessing the seasons come and go upon the sea, the fields, the plants and the hills, thinking how they were part of her now, for she would live here, and she would die here, just as they did, in the place where they had taken root and grown to be what they were, just as she had too. These same roots ran through her, knitted into the pleats of her flesh and the current of her blood, and like the veins of her body, it was an essential part of her in which the nourishing sap of happiness now did flow, promising to sustain her for the rest of her days. She had felt it ever since she stood on the soil of these shores, the sands of Sanditon. From that day, the waves had washed over her soul, overwhelming, but not overpowering her with an irresistible sense of hope and uncertainty, and all that existed between.

Charlotte relished everything about this little world of hers, this tucked-up corner of England that was still peaceful and relatively unknown, with all its wonder and whimsy. The town had revealed its charms like a storybook brought to life. As she wandered its cobbled streets, she could not help but feel she was stepping into chapters of a vivid tale. The buildings, with their timeworn architecture, were a testament to the changing times, where old met new and austerity met money. The locals, with their matchless personalities and warm smiles, seemed like protagonists with charming backstories waiting to be discovered. It was a dreamland where every corner held a fascination, every interaction a plot twist, and every day a disclosing narrative.

Her coming here had been by chance, the fateful result of a carriage accident that had so happened to play out near her father's farm. And after being invited here, she had fallen in love, but not just with a person, but with a place, and with a people, each slanting house, and friendly face, and golden grain of sand leaving its mark upon her, never to be erased, but always to be held dear. Yes, Charlotte had felt it the very moment she had arrived, and stepping forth from her carriage onto the brink of the unknown, the coastal wind had whipped up around her and whispered in her ear:

'You are home now, my dear.'

Lost in the happy haze of her memories, ones which seemed a lifetime ago, her regard floated across the restful landscape, and there she spied a figure walking towards her, their steps brisk and purposeful as they made their way through the garden, their features sharpening in definition as they approached, and she could see the anxiety writ upon their face, their keenness evident, their desire to be by her side, *their side*, once more manifest.

It was as she felt the chords of her soul thrum with jubilant anticipation to discern her heart's true mate draw near, Charlotte sensed something shift in her arms, and looking down, she smiled once again. There, in her tender embrace, were two tiny treasures, gifts that had been bestowed upon her on Christmas Day, no less, and *oh!*—how she loved them!

Charlotte had not expected to have found herself with child so soon, or rather, two children, but then again, what had she known of these things? Perhaps such speed was perfectly normal, and besides, her husband had been most attentive in his affections. From the day they had wed, they had scarcely left each other's presence for a minute, they had been apart too long already as it was. Even so, they had made a point of being with their family and friends, dear

hearts who had been unfailingly faithful to them throughout their journey, one that had seen them transcend the divide between employer and employee to become equals, even if, in truth, they always had been before. Nevertheless, they had been impatient to be left quite alone, united as one, not merely in name, but in every possible meaning of the word. Her husband had proved the most gentle and generous of lovers, patient with her as she learned how to be a wife, he already trained, albeit out of practice, in the role of husband. Hence, Charlotte supposed it was only natural that the seed of his adoration should have found a welcome in her womb and bloomed there, and thus blossoming from it the most miraculous creation of their shared love for one another.

Benedict and Rose were a beloved blessing. The couple could not fathom where their names had come from, they were not in recognition of anyone they knew or in remembrance of anyone they had known. However, it was as if the names held a mysterious significance to them, almost as if they were the spirits of those who had embodied them in some other time and sphere. Either way, they had liked them, and so the babes would be christened so, later today, with Arthur Parker and Georgiana Molyneux (née Lambe), as their godparents.

However, there was more.

Their middle names.

Sidney and Lucy.

The wife and husband had barely needed to discuss it, for when the subject came up, she had looked at him and said, ‘Lucy?’ and he had nodded and replied, ‘Sidney?’ and it had been settled with peace upon their hearts.

It was in homage to two people who had been an intrinsic part of their pasts, neither of them had been mistakes to be blotted out and forgotten, chalked down to the indiscretions of youth and the innocence of naivety. *No-no*. For they were vital portions that made up their new selves, their memories woven into the very fabric of the couple’s beings, fragments that if they were absent altogether, scattered and discarded upon the winds of times gone by and never to be returned, never to be recovered, they would feel like they were missing pieces of themselves, reminiscences that had made them who and what they were today.

They were two people who had taught them love and loss, and how to survive both, and in turn, they had been taken too soon from this world, torn from it without pity by the callous hand of doom. As such, Charlotte and her husband had agreed that they wished to honour them, and through their children together, they would give Sidney and Lucy the opportunity—*nay*, the right, to know the contentment that death had so cruelly denied them. This way, they would not be ghosts, destined to suffer in eternal discontent, but instead, they would be given a second chance at life and be reborn anew. And, in a sense, had she, had *they*, too not been born anew?

In finding each other, they discovered not only a refuge but a reawakening—proof of the enduring power of a love that grows even in the most arduous of terrains. The universe, in its sage wisdom, devised a meeting and played its role as guardian angel. For in the quiet crooks of despair, where the heart hums its most vulnerable longings, their stories converged. She, a

symphony of resilience, had danced with the imps of doubt and treaded through the warren of shattered dreams. Her spirit, like a flame flickering in the gale, yearned for solace. He, a nomad of the soul, had traversed desolate deserts of solitude, grappling with echoes of the past that clung to him like the mist on a bitter morning. Each step carried the weight of untold burdens, yet the compass of his heart unfailingly pointed towards an unseen destination that would bring them home.

Swallowing thickly, and suppressing the tears that trickled from her eyes, Charlotte leaned down to kiss both of her babies on their cheeks, for she was determined that they should always know love, every day of their lives.

'There, there, my darlings,' she murmured, wrapping the blankets around them more snugly, and as Charlotte cooed, they each opened their eyes, and watching their mother in wonderment, they blinked in sleepy contentment before yawning, stretching, and going back to sleep, aware of just how utterly cherished they were.

It was then that her tranquil haven was interrupted by the sound of paws clattering on the wooden floor of the corridor, and in padded a grey dog who bounded up to her at first, but then slowed, mindful of the precious bundle its mistress cradled. With its nose sniffing the air, it nuzzled into her lap, telling her that the childrens' loyal guard had returned to his post. Patting her devoted companion on the head, Charlotte turned her own, and there, in the doorway, stood someone else, watching her intently. He was slanted against the frame, his sleeves rolled up, his dark hair ruffled, his waistcoat unbuttoned, his demeanour one of casual ease, the weight and worry he had known in former days now nowhere to be seen. She took in his face, one which regarded her with unabashed awe, a grin playing around the edges of his mouth and tugging his cheeks upwards beneath his bristled jaw. With eyes that studied her with something akin to worship, he wondered how he had done it, how a man who was so lacking in every way, who had made so many mistakes, could have convinced such a woman to love him.

But here he was, here they were, man and wife at last. In the quiet corners of his soul, where shadows once lingered, a man had found the gentle glow of a second chance. Life, in its mysterious alchemy, had granted him the privilege to embark on the sacred voyage of husbandhood once more, and this time, with God as his witness, he would get it right.

'Mrs Colbourne,' he breathed, those sacred syllables like honey upon his quivering lips.

She smiled.

'Mr Colbourne,' she replied, aware that they need not address each other so formally, but they liked to do so from time to time, it was a particular pleasure of theirs.

Walking towards her, Alexander knelt by her side, like a knight before his lady, and with a thumb stroking his childrens' fingers, theirs reached out to grasp their father's in turn, causing him to sniff, his once lonely heart now full to burst with exultation.

'Here you are, then,' he observed, glad that he had found her in here, in the sanctuary of his study, safe and well, for he worried about her, it had only been a matter of days since she had

given birth, and he knew only too well what such a fierce event could do to a woman. But his wife was wonderfully strong, as were their little ones, and so, he trusted that all would be well.

It was as he did so, and said so, that Charlotte once again looked out of the window, out at her Sanditon. She felt such pride to think of how far she had come. She had first come here a girl. Unworldly. Curious. Resolute. She had made so many missteps, each one unintended, but now she saw that they had each been slips and stumbles that had led her in the right direction. At the core, she discovered the beating wings of authenticity, unfurling in the soft light of self-acceptance. A woman, once tethered by the expectations of a world that sought to confine her spirit, now danced upon the shores of her independence. In the water-colour of her liberation, wetted by the tears of joy and woe, she interlaced a heritage for others to follow—an inheritance of independence—a witness to the beauty that reveals itself when a woman, unshackled from the chains of expectation, finally embraces the freedom to be herself.

And as the seasons had come and gone, she had grown up, and she had progressed into a woman who respected her own mind, her own heart, and her own worth. She was a daughter, a sister, a friend, a wife and a mother, caring and courageous as each, but most of all, she now knew exactly who she truly was...

She was Charlotte.

That was enough. That was everything.

'Yes,' said she valiantly. *'Here I am.'*