



Potent Pleasures

Eloisa James



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*Potent
Pleasures*



ISLAND BOOKS

*For Sharon Kosick,
of the wonderful bookstore
The Book Rack, Too,
who guided my reading and
encouraged my writing.
Thank you.*

Chapter 1



Kent, England
March 1795

Charlotte was one week short of seventeen when her life changed, falling into two halves like a shiny child's ball: *before* and *after*. In the time before, Charlotte was staying with Julia Brenton, her dearest friend from school. Julia and she survived boarding school together: the dreary grind of everyday Latin instruction, music instruction, dance instruction, art class, etiquette with the schoolmistress, Lady Sipperstein. Etiquette was really the only unpleasant class.

"Julia!" Lady Sipperstein would suddenly appear behind her left shoulder. "Cross your legs at the ankle when you sit in a low sofa.

"Walk up the stairs again, Charlotte, and do *not* sway your hips this time! You are wiggling in an inappropriate fashion."

Lady Sipperstein was a terrifying woman with a bosom that extended forward like the prow of a ship. She knew to a hair how low one must bow to a duchess as opposed to a king, and she drilled her students as if they would do so every day.

She was full of maxims: "One dismisses a servant as if he were a young child: with firmness, brevity, and uninterest.... The appropriate gifts for the sick depend on where they live: If they live on your estate, instruct the cook to make bone-marrow jelly and bring it yourself, with fruit; if they live in the village, instruct the servants to deliver an uncooked chicken instead. And of course be sure to ascertain that any illness is not contagious before you enter a house: While it is important to show sympathy, one must not be foolish."

Etiquette was an hour of unnerving questions. "Julia! If a footman enters the breakfast room with an obviously swollen jaw, what is the appropriate response?"

"Send him home?" Julia would suggest tentatively.

"No! Information first. Is the swelling the result of a distressed tooth or an improper brawl the night before? If he has been brawling, dismiss him. If not? Julia?"

"Ah, send him to a doctor?" Julia stammered.

"Incorrect. Inform the butler that he should be put on duties that will keep him out of public view. There is no point in coddling servants."

For Charlotte, art class was the focus of the day. She was happiest in the white square room furnished only with twelve easels. They painted the same groupings over and over: two oranges, one lemon; two peaches, one pear. Charlotte didn't mind.

Julia did. "A pumpkin today!" she would chortle, mimicking Miss Frollip's excited tone when she introduced the latest still life.

For Julia, there was dance class—and that not because of dance, but because of Mr. Luskie. He was a rather hairy man, a family man: robust, friendly, not a bit of danger with the girls, the teachers all agreed. But Julia thought his whiskers were dashing, and she read messages in the gentle pressure of his hand as he directed her through the steps of a cotillion. "I *adore* him," she whispered to Charlotte at night.

Charlotte would wrinkle her nose: "I don't know, Julia, he's rather ... well, he's not ..." It was hard to put into words. He was common. But how not to insult Julia? She thought a bit uneasily of Julia's passionate vows of love: She wouldn't *do* anything, would she? Of course, Mr. Luskie wouldn't ... because Julia was so beautiful. She was like a peach, Charlotte thought: golden and sweet-smelling and soft.

looking. Would Mr. Luskie?

One of Charlotte's governesses had been stridently opinionated about men: "They want one thing, Lady Charlotte!" she would say. "One thing, and don't you forget it and get yourself ruined, now Charlotte would nod, wondering what the one thing was.

So she would whisper back, "I don't think he's so handsome, Julia. Did you see that he has red veins in his cheeks?"

"No!" said Julia. "He doesn't!"

"Yes, he does," said Charlotte.

"How do you notice so much?" Julia said crossly.

Finally school drew to a close, and one by one the girls were taken off by titled relatives, or simply by maids: taken off to be fitted and prinked and "tarted up," Julia said. It was time to start a procession that would end in settlements and dowries, balls and weddings.

As the daughter of a duke, Charlotte was regarded enviously. Her coming out would be magnificent. Her elder sister Violetta had made her bow to society in a ballroom draped from top to bottom with white lilies.

It was only Charlotte who didn't care much. She longed, if the truth be told, to stay in the white square room and paint another apple, or (if the market was particularly exciting that week) even a persimmon. She was *good*, really good, she knew she was, and Miss Frollip knew she was, but that was the end of it.

She had to come out; Julia had to come out; there would be little time for persimmons.

So when her mother picked her up at Lady Chatterton's School for Young Gentlewomen, Charlotte felt resigned, but not excited. Her mother arrived in full armor, in Charlotte's private opinion: in the ducal coach with four footmen behind. The duchess was shy and quailed at the thought of an interview with the formidable Lady Sipperstein. Poor Mama, Charlotte thought. She must have been in a terrible tizzy.

Finally Charlotte and her mother were regally dismissed by Lady Sipperstein and escaped in the coach. The duchess grinned in a most unduchesslike fashion, leaned back against the satin cushion and said, "Thank goodness, you're finished, Charlotte! I *never* have to see Lady Sipperstein again! We can be comfortable. How did the last picture go, darling—oranges, wasn't it?" For Charlotte's mother was a devoted parent, who lovingly kept track of her children's latest exploits, even if in Charlotte's case that had simply turned into a long progression of watercolor fruits.

"All right, Mama," Charlotte said. "I'll show you when we get home." Charlotte frowned a bit. Her mama treated all her work the same: with reverence, delight, and a noncritical eye.

"Good," said Adelaide comfortably. "I shall send it off immediately to Saxony. We're doing quite well on that hallway, dearest. Why, two or three more and the walls will be full!"

Charlotte grimaced. Her parents seemed to view her painting as a decorating tool, a kind of wallpaper. Each new painting was sent out to the best framer (Messrs. Saxony, Framers to the Crown) fitted into a gold frame with an appropriate mat chosen personally by Mr. Saxony, Sr., and solemnly delivered back to the ducal mansion. Then it was hung up in a long, long row of fruit (and the occasional vegetable) that decorated a long, long hall in the east wing.

"Now, Charlotte," Adelaide said with resolution. "We must start planning for your coming out immediately. Why, I happen to know that Lady Riddleford—Isabella's mother—has already taken the weekend of April nineteenth, which was precisely when I was planning your ball, dearest. So we must choose a time immediately and make it known. I was thinking of the weekend after. What do you think, darling?"

Charlotte didn't answer. She was thinking of her latest painting. But Adelaide was used to Charlotte's lapses into inattentiveness; she simply returned to her plans.

When Charlotte visited what her brother, Horace, called the orchard (the long row of pictures in the east wing) she could see change: hours of painting under Miss Frollip's tutelage had turned her oranges from misshapen to round; apples stopped being poisonously red and gained some reality.

What she was working on now was color. Color was so difficult: oranges, for example. When she closed her eyes, she saw groups of oranges, bright against her eyelids. She mixed and mixed for hours a little yellow, blue, brown, but she couldn't find the orange she saw in her mind's eye. Orange colored the right way, had a slight brownish tinge at the top and streaks of blue: colors that smelled of the sun, of warm seas, of real orchards rather than of long halls or white rooms.

But Charlotte didn't have much time for painting after they arrived at the Calverstill House in Albemarle Square. She endured hours and hours of poking and prodding from seamstresses, and days of her mother's planning.

"Dearest," announced her mother. "Delphiniums!"

Charlotte stared at her.

"Delphiniums what, Mama?" she finally asked.

"Delphiniums! They're *your* flower for the ball! I've been racking my mind ... you know I did Violetta's ball in lilies. I had to avoid colors for her because of her name, but delphiniums are such a lovely blue. They will set off your hair perfectly."

Just now the rage was for blondes: blondes with curly locks and blue eyes, but Charlotte had jet black hair, her mama thought despairingly. She did have green eyes, but her skin was so white—not a drop of color. True, with some coaxing her hair formed perfect ringlets, and her skin was creamy, but she was no sweetly pert debutante. Her eyebrows arched like question marks over eyes as green as the ocean on a cloudy day. In fact, her whole face was pointed like a question mark: Her chin formed a delicate triangle that simply led back to her eyes and those flying eyebrows.

The duchess sighed a little. When Charlotte was happy, she was the most beautiful of her daughters. She would simply have to see that she had a happy first ball, that's all.

Charlotte stood rock-still through all the fittings, closed her eyes, and analyzed the oranges that appeared in her mind. Perhaps more red. Perhaps starting very red, and working back to orange, in layers?

"Charlotte!" her mother said. "Miss Stuart is trying to do up your hem. Please, turn around when she asks you."

"Charlotte! I've asked you twice; please raise your arms."

"Charlotte!"



Finally the fittings were over and the last pearls were painstakingly sewn into Charlotte's presentation dress. Seventeen ball dresses fit for a duke's young daughter were swaddled in tissue and hung in a wardrobe; the delphiniums were growing well, the duchess was relieved to hear; ten footmen were summoned from the country; the ballroom was polished and the chandeliers shined, and the watch notified of the extra traffic. The Calverstills were ready to launch their last child onto society. Invitations winged their way to the London *ton*. And the London *ton* accepted. The duchess may have been shy, but she was beloved, creative, and had money to spare. A Calverstill ball would never be slighted.

Perhaps most important, young men accepted, all of them—fops, courtiers, gallants, Corinthians—all the groups and cliques and sets of London. Charlotte was rumored to be beautiful (her two elder sisters were) and she was sure to have an excellent dowry as her father was plump in the pocket. And still two weeks remained before the ball.

So Charlotte was given permission to visit Julia in the country. Her mama didn't worry much.

~~"Charlotte, you mustn't be seen in public; this is a terribly delicate time,"~~ she said brightly, looking at her dutiful but somehow detached daughter.

Could it be that Charlotte wasn't really interested in her presentation? No, no, the duchess thought. Why, she loves talking about her dresses, and we had such a good time looking at all the silks! Charlotte is so *good* with colors! And she had a positive surge of affection for her youngest daughter who had never caused her any real trouble or anxiety. Charlotte was reasonable, calm, and unexcitable.

Charlotte was driven, in the ducal coach but with only one footman, a few hours out of London to Squire Brentorton's estate. Julia greeted her with glowing eyes. She too had ball gowns to show, with less embroidery and no pearls sewn in the hem, but beautiful all the same. And she had a passion—

course.

"He's adorable, Charlotte! I adore him! He's not at all like that old Mr. Luskie. He's beautiful, really beautiful; you'll love him—no red veins!"

Charlotte wrinkled her nose at her.

"What do you mean, beautiful? And who are we talking about?" She noticed with some dismay that Julia's violet eyes were dreamy with love.

"His name is Christopher," Julia said. "He has curls ... he looks like Adonis, truly, Charlotte."

"But who *is* he?" Charlotte was getting suspicious. There was something evasive about the way her friend's dewy gaze kept drifting off into the corners of the room. Julia pouted, just a little.

"Julia!" Charlotte said threateningly, smothering a grin. Her friend was so *silly* about men. Just a few weeks ago she had cried heartbrokenly because she would never see Mr. Luskie again.

"He'll never hold me in his arms again," she'd wailed, "we'll never dance together again," sobbing into her pillow. And even Charlotte was moved, and wondered if she'd been too harsh, constantly pointing out the plumpness of Mr. Luskie's backside and the growing bald spot on his head.

Julia cast her eyes on the ground. "He's a man of God," she finally said, softly.

"What?" said Charlotte, not understanding her.

"He's ... well, he's a curate!" Julia said.

"A curate? Julia!"

"He has blond curls, Charlotte. He looks like, well, he looks like a painting!" Having confessed the worst, she ignored Charlotte's frown and listed the curate's many graces: He was young, and more handsome than anyone including the seller of sweet lavender who sometimes came by the school and who, until now, had been consecrated as the most handsome, even if Mr. Luskie was the most cherished.

"Even *you* will like him, Charlotte. Because he's full of virtue, and quite thin—you know how you were always saying that poor Mr. Luskie was a bit plump. And he would be a wonderful person to paint." Julia sat up, and looked speculatively at Charlotte.

"You don't suppose ... You can't keep painting fruit now we're out of school, Charlotte! Why don't you offer to paint Christopher?"

"You're demented," Charlotte said fondly. "I will not offer to paint a young man I've never even met! Why, my mother would collapse in shock."

"Well, Charlotte, you do have to start thinking about men instead of paintings now, you know," Julia said a bit sharply. "You just never seem to show any interest!"

The curate *is* more handsome than the lavender seller, Charlotte thought on Sunday, her head sinking a bit. Julia stared at him so devotedly that Charlotte had to elbow her twice, so that she would bend her head to pray. Charlotte watched him too, out of the corner of her eyes. He was somber, dressed in a black cassock, blond curls smoothly shining. He didn't look like a painting; he looked like a statue—a statue of a mischievous faun. There was something too smooth about his curls, and his

face looked naughty, she decided. Like her brother Horace's when he'd been sent down from Oxford.

On the way out of church Charlotte watched the curate wink at Julia and give her a very small, veiled private smile while the cold spring sunlight shone on his hair. And when the squire and his wife turned to greet two friends, she saw him slip Julia a bit of paper, and her knees went weak.

All the way home, chatting pleasantly with the unknowing Brentortons, Charlotte's mind was racing. Julia was ruined! If anyone knew that a young man was writing to her, she'd never be able to go to Almack's. She'd never be approved by the patronesses. She would never find a husband.

When they got back to Brentorton Hall, Charlotte took Julia firmly under the elbow and swept her upstairs to her room. Then she pushed the door shut, leaned on it, and stuck out her hand, without saying a word.

Julia looked at her mutinously. Her eyes measured Charlotte's taller height against the oak door. Julia was slight and small. She would never be able to push Charlotte's willowy self from the door. She sighed and plumped down on her bed and pulled the small bit of paper from her bosom with practiced air that chilled Charlotte to the bone.

"It's nothing," she said. "Nothing, Charlotte!" She looked up at her fiercely. "See?" She flashed the scrap of paper.

Charlotte snatched it. There were four words, written in peaky letters with blue ink: *Stuart Hall Saturday, 9 o'clock.*

"Oh, Lord, Julia, you wouldn't—you aren't meeting him, are you? Secretly?" Charlotte slid slowly down, crushing her petticoats, until she was sitting against the door. "What is this place, Stuart Hall?"

"It's nothing bad." Julia leaned forward eagerly. "It's not a rendezvous—I would never do anything like that. It's a masquerade ball that is held every Saturday night, and I just happened to be talking to Christopher about it—"

"Christopher!"

"Well, Reverend Colby, then, but I don't like his last name. Anyway, it is nothing serious," said Charlotte. It's a masquerade ball that lots of, well, merchants and servants attend, and Christopher—Mr. Colby—says that people of our class never get to see real life, and especially how everyone else lives. He says young girls, society misses, are like houseplants. We never do anything, and then we're sold to the highest bidder, and he says that it is a perfectly amiable dance, and everyone wears masks the whole time, so no one could see our faces and—"

"*Our! Our faces!*" repeated Charlotte.

Julia leaned forward. "You must come with me, Charlotte. You see, don't you? If you're with me, everything is quite proper. Mama knows how correct you are, and even if she found out, she wouldn't be horrendously angry."

"Yes, she would," Charlotte replied, picturing Julia's brisk and forthright mother.

"Don't you see, Charlotte? We're just like sheep, being sold to the highest bidder, and—"

"What are you talking about, Julia?" Charlotte asked with exasperation. "What does being a sheep have to do with sneaking off to go to a ball?"

Julia wasn't sure she remembered. It all made so much sense when Christopher explained it to her with his sweet face downcast as he talked of her sheeplike docility.

"You know," she said vaguely. "We just have to get married, and we never get to see anything. Oh, Charlotte," she said, abandoning the messy question of ethics, "it will be fun, don't you see? There's nothing improper about going to a party chaperoned by ... by a theologian!"

A small thread of rebellion lit in Charlotte. After all, had anyone asked her whether she wanted to come out? Whether she wanted to get married? But of course she *did* want to get married, and the only way to do it was to come out, so that train of thought didn't lead anywhere.

"I won't go if you don't," said Julia in a small voice. "We'll just look."

The corner of Charlotte's mouth quirked up in a grin and Julia answered her unspoken consent with a squeal.

"You must promise me that you won't run off to dance with your curate and leave me alone," Charlotte said sternly.

"Oh, I wouldn't, Charlotte!" Julia's eyes were glowing. "We'll have to go up to the attic and find something to wear. Costumes. I think there are some old dominoes up there."

Charlotte tried to remain calm but it was no use. Her reasonable, unexcitable temperament had deserted her, leaving a racing pulse and a seductive taste of excitement.

Julia jumped up. "This is the perfect time to go to the attic. Mama and Papa always visit the tenants on Sundays until time for luncheon."

So the girls crept up the stairs, all the way past the servants' floor into the huge, echoing attics that lay under the timbers of Squire Brentorton's manor roof. Blocks of pale sunshine fell across old pine boards, the dusty shapes of covered furniture, trunks of outdated clothing. Charlotte paused for a moment and watched dust specks eddy and dance in the light as Julia briskly trotted across the floor toward the trunks. Within a minute she had found two voluminous black cloaks that would cover the whole bodies. At first it appeared that there were no masks, but then with a little shriek Julia pulled them from the corner of another trunk.

"Hush, Julia!" Charlotte's heart raced.

"It's quite all right," Julia replied, looking up from where she was bundling the dominoes into a clumsy parcel. "No one except one of the servants could possibly hear us."

"And what if one of the servants did hear a noise and came to investigate?" Charlotte demanded.

"Oh, Charlotte, you're such an innocent." Julia laughed. "We would bribe him, of course."

And, in fact, that very night Julia bribed her maid into airing out the dominoes and by the time she returned them a week later, pressed and sweet-smelling, the excursion had come to seem inevitable. Giggling wildly, Julia powdered Charlotte's hair with face powder so that it looked vaguely like the old-fashioned hairstyles of twenty years ago.

Julia was delighted. "Look at me! I look just like that portrait of my mother upstairs on the landing. And no one would recognize you, Charlotte," she said encouragingly. "With your mask on, all I can see is powdered hair and a little bit of your face. Do you think we used too much powder?"

Charlotte looked at herself. Julia had certainly been liberal with the powder.

"Well, at least we don't have to worry about being asked to dance," Julia said, giggling. "A gentleman would probably start sneezing if he got too close!"

It should do, Charlotte thought dubiously. They could go see how the other half of the world danced and then come home. Escaping the house was no problem. The east wing, where Julia's bedroom was, had stairs in the back for servants, but the servants were in bed in the west wing when the girls stole out at nine o'clock at night.

The curate was waiting around the curve of the drive as Charlotte and Julia rounded the bend. Seeing a dark figure leaning against the carriage door, Charlotte's footsteps faltered. She felt a wave of passionate conviction that this masquerade was a mistake. But Julia danced forward irresistibly, shouting "Christopher" and generally acting as if surreptitious meetings on dark roads were nothing new to her. Charlotte followed slowly, feeling that she really ought to tell the curate that they had made a mistake and drag Julia home.

Yet to Charlotte's relief, Mr. Colby was respectful when the two girls reached the carriage. He bowed solemnly when Julia introduced him to Charlotte, and mentioned that he had visited the chapel at Calverstill while at Oxford. Somehow that comment managed to give the whole excursion the air of a school outing. Charlotte felt immeasurably relieved, and at any rate Julia bounded into the carriage before Charlotte had a chance to say anything about returning home. She found herself seated on the

dusty seats of a hired hack, sitting forward gingerly so as not to crush the folds of her domino.

Then Mr. Colby pulled a bottle of champagne from a basket with such a flourish that it seemed the must join him. Did people really drink on the way to balls? Charlotte sipped at her wine uncertainly. The carriage gathered speed, lurching along the main road. Julia babbled of dances and balls and servants.

Finally Charlotte pulled herself together. Mr. Colby must think she was dreadfully ill-bred, sitting in total silence. She cleared her throat, a small uncertain noise, but Julia was deep in her normal flow of distracted chatter and there was no space for Charlotte to speak. In fact, Julia paused only to cast fascinated glances at the curate seated across from them, his head politely bent toward Julia.

Finally Charlotte seized an opening and began asking the kind of question she had heard her mother ask the curate: about his flock, so to speak, and how were the poorer people doing?

"This is a fortunate area," Mr. Colby replied courteously. "Miss Brentorton's father is more than generous in his support of the parish."

"My mother says—" Julia broke in and dashed away with the new subject, and so Charlotte relaxed even more and felt that while the excursion was daringly bold, it wasn't beyond reproach. Someday she might even be able to tell her mother, and laugh about it with her.

Charlotte was able to keep her feeling of calm equanimity when they arrived at Stuart Hall. It was an imposing brick building with long windows casting light across gardens: not so different from an gentleman's house, she thought. Inside, everyone was in costume, and most people had masks, just as Mr. Colby had said. There were many, many people there, pushing slowly through crowds in the hallway, and she could see, down the steps into the ballroom, couples lined up in close rows on the floor.

They wormed their way into the ballroom, and found a little space over to one side, between a statue of Narcissus and the open doors to the gardens. Mr. Colby pushed off and came back with some rather vile lemonade, and they stood about sipping the drink.

"Do you know," Julia said, "I think there's some liquor in this lemonade."

"I shouldn't think so," was all Mr. Colby said. "They simply can't afford the best lemons here, the way *you* can at home."

Charlotte and Julia both felt a flash of shame at all the best lemons they'd eaten in their lives, and they drank with renewed fervor.

Mr. Colby turned to Julia: "Shall we dance?" He looked respectfully at Charlotte. "You'll be perfectly safe here, and Julia and I shall return in a moment. They're playing a minuet, which was my dear mother's favorite dance, and I should love to honor her memory...."

He looked so apologetic and sad about his mother (she must be recently deceased) that Charlotte nodded, even though she had made Julia swear that she wouldn't dance, no matter what happened. And Julia, of course, turned quickly and vanished into the press of people.

He's not wearing a cassock, Charlotte thought rather stupidly.

And then, vaguely, one doesn't think of the mother of a curate whisking about the dance floor.

It was rather embarrassing standing alone in the ballroom. Charlotte gazed out over the dancers as if she were looking for someone. Slowly she realized that the party wasn't, in fact, exactly what she might have expected. Quite a few of the ladies seemed to have taken their masks off, and the costumes were—well, revealing. For example, there was a lady dressed as Marie Antoinette. She was carrying a shepherd's crook and was wearing a towering wig. But her dress was so bright, and so low-cut, Charlotte thought. Really, if it was any lower, her bosom would pop right out. And look what she was doing with that shepherd's crook! Charlotte felt pink creeping up her cheeks. The lady's escort was laughing and laughing, but every instinct told her that no one behaved like that at the balls her mother attended.

But after all, this was why she and Julia had come tonight, wasn't it? Of course the atmosphere wouldn't be exactly as it might be in London. Mr. Colby said young ladies were kept like houseplants and not allowed to see anything, she reminded herself. Well, this must be how ladies and gentlemen actually behaved when they were not at debutante balls.

And so she lifted her eyes and tried to find Marie Antoinette again, but she just caught a glimpse of her going up the stairs; actually she must have taken ill, because it looked as if her escort was carrying her up toward the ladies' dressing room.

Then her gaze was caught by a man standing on the stairs. He leaned back against the railing and Marie Antoinette's thick skirts brushed past him. He was tall, taller than her father, wearing a dark green domino rather than a black one like most of the men. He looked ... he looked arrogant, and lordly, and very handsome, even given his mask. He had broad shoulders and curly black hair shining through with silver.

Just then a very pretty girl, dressed as Cleopatra, stopped next to him. She seemed to know him; they were laughing and he rubbed a finger against her face. Charlotte instinctively touched her own cheek and kept staring. From here, his eyes looked black and his eyebrows arched just as her own did. People always said that she looked as if she had a perpetual question in mind; his eyebrows gave an entirely different impression. They made him look a little devilish: not childishly naughty, like Julia's curate, but altogether more dangerous. Something stirred warmly, deep in her belly. For the first time she saw a man whom *she* would like to ... to what? To kiss, she decided. Yes, she would even like to kiss him, she thought with a delicious shiver. Although kissing, Lady Sipperstein had said over and over, was something one did only with one's betrothed, and then only after all the papers were signed.

Suddenly the stranger's green domino swung elegantly out from his shoulder as he turned down the stairs and escorted the laughing Cleopatra to the dance floor. Charlotte tried to follow them with her eyes, even standing a bit on tiptoe, but there were too many people. He was taller than most men; she occasionally caught glimpses of his silver-black curls. Her heart thumped loudly.

"Oh, for goodness sake!" she said aloud. A tiny smile lit her face. She was behaving just like Julia, falling for the first handsome man she saw. He was probably a footman. But where *was* Julia? The orchestra had played at least two or three dances since she left; Charlotte had lost track. She felt a little anger stir inside her. How could Julia leave her alone, when the ballroom was full of people who were definitely behaving in a less than restrained manner? Even as she watched, a stout man dressed in a frayed domino grabbed his partner by her bare shoulders and kissed her, and they didn't even seem to notice the hissing annoyance of the other dancers who bumped into them.

Charlotte turned a bit and stared into the corner behind the statue. The room was papered in a perfectly unexceptional blue with gold flock. She drank up the rest of her lemonade.

Suddenly she felt a push and she toppled into the corner. She would have caught her balance, but her head was fuzzy and so she teetered and fell forward. And the person who had shoved her fell on top of her, heavily.

"Ow," Charlotte said. Her mask was twisted, she could feel that, and powder had fallen from her hair all over the polished floor.

But she was whisked to her feet in a second and large hands brushed the powder from her cloak. She looked up. It was the man from the steps. Charlotte looked at him a bit owlishly. Just at that moment he looked up from brushing off her cloak, met her eyes, and froze.

"Thank you," she said, remembering to smile.

He didn't move. Charlotte looked away from his eyes. They were so intent: black and deep, like polished obsidian, she thought absurdly, and almost giggled. Would a footman wear a domino made of thick green silk? She stole another look at him. He was younger than she thought, and even handsomer. His eyebrows formed thick peaks over his eyes. He was still staring at her. At her mouth.

actually. Nervously she bit her lip, unable to move, caught by the intensity of his gaze.

~~Then without saying a word he put his arms around her waist and pulled her against his body.~~

“What!” Charlotte managed to say, but he bent his head and a warm strong mouth descended on hers. She didn’t say another word, not even when his lips opened hers and his tongue lunged into her mouth, not when he pulled back slightly and delicately traced the shape of her lips with his tongue, and certainly not when she—she!—leaned toward him in a silent request and his mouth took her again.

He swung her about so that they were shadowed behind the Narcissus statue, safe from people’s eyes. Then he swiftly pulled her mask over her head. Charlotte looked up at him. He wasn’t wearing a mask anymore either. The light in the corner was rather dim, and it enhanced the strong planes of his face. He was staring down at her, his eyes glittering, as if she were a rhubarb tart ready for eating, she thought. She nervously wet her lips and his eyes darkened visibly.

Charlotte still didn’t say a word. In fact, she had no thought of leaving, or of speaking. She was simply waiting. His large hands swept down her back and cupped her bottom through her cloak and dress, and even though she knew exactly what he was doing, she mutely raised her face for another kiss.

His mouth left hers and she felt warm breath on her ear, and shivered instinctively. A tongue swept around her ear, and a husky voice murmured, “Very nice, a lovely ear,” and swept without a pause to reclaim her mouth again, his tongue stabbing into her mouth. Finally he stole her tongue altogether and sucked it into his mouth.

All the time his large hands kept up a disturbing rhythm on her back, and even on her bottom. He molded her to him, his fingers caressing her through the worn domino and her frock. He pulled her body up against his hard muscled body; Charlotte’s legs felt as if they were made of jelly.

Thinking back, she knew she couldn’t have protested, even if she’d thought of it. Her body was hardly even hers anymore. Maybe she could have said something when he put an arm behind her shoulders and another under her knees and simply, smoothly, picked her up and backed out into the warm garden. Instead she just leaned against his chest and felt his fast-beating heart against her cheek.

He was gazing at her, his eyes black as jet and thickly fringed with lashes. Charlotte blinked, her mind possessed by the idea of licking those lashes.

The insanity of this notion almost jerked her back to reality but then he was kissing her again and she heard herself moan faintly. He lowered her to the ground, and she smelled flowers and fresh grass and felt the fierce warmth of the large male body hovering just above her. And so it was she who wound her hands in his curls and pulled his masculine pressure down onto her softness.

He pushed aside her cloak, but her eyes were shut tight and she was lost in the intense pleasure of the moment. When he ducked his head and his mouth closed on her breast, Charlotte—uncaring of the ballroom a few feet away, just on the other side of some trees—gave a moan that wasn’t a moan but almost a scream.

His mouth sent trails of fire up and down her body and especially down her legs, and she gasped and twisted in his arms, her body instinctively arching up, her hips lifting off the soft grass. And he was murmuring something, murmuring his strange, delicious kisses against her skin. Charlotte strained to listen and then forgot to understand; lips moved down her body as if he were tracing messages, teaching her a language of which she had known nothing until now.

Charlotte was on fire and exploding at the same time, and so when his face appeared over hers, all she did was delicately put her tongue to *his* lips, and run her hands through his curls again. With a muffled groan, he did something, she didn’t know what, and he was pushing about her clothing, but his hands were on her breasts and she couldn’t think. And when he said, “Would you like ...” in a deep, velvety hoarse voice that she still shivered to think about, she whispered, “Please,” and strained

toward him for another kiss.

A knee pushed between her legs, but he was bending down to kiss her and she swept into a swirling, breathless haze, her body ignited by the closeness of his. But then, in a split second, pain shot through her and she screamed.

“What the *hell!*” he said in a furious tone, rearing up on his arms. Charlotte shrunk back, suddenly coldly sober.

Alex McDonough Foakes, future Earl of Sheffield and Downes, looked down at the girl in stupefaction. She was a virgin, for God’s sake. She was staring up at him, absolutely white in the face, her lips swollen with his kisses. Lovely lips, he thought wonderingly: such a dark, dark red, and she tasted like honey.... And, not thinking at all, he lowered his body back down onto her softness and reclaimed her lips again.

She was devastatingly beautiful, this serving girl: so wild even if she was a virgin. He didn’t remember ever feeling so frantic with need. He ran a slow hand down her lovely languorous thigh, and in spite of herself, Charlotte squirmed against his hand.

He cupped her delicate, triangular face in his large hands and pressed kisses on her eyelids. Still she didn’t make a sound, just opened her mouth a bit and gasped when he drew his tongue over her eyelids. Which was such an entrancing sound that even though Alex knew he had to get out of there, he stood up, deal with the unpleasant fact of having deflowered a wench, he bent back to her lips and brushed his across hers, tantalizing, asking, demanding.

His hand ran down her thigh again and then up the inside, sliding slowly over the gossamer silkiness of her stocking, over the slight bump of a garter at her knee, into the creamy smoothness of her inner thigh. His hand closed over her, and her body arched again, surprised by desire for something she had never felt before. Gasping, Charlotte stared blindly into the dark leaves overhead. Mindlessness descended and she moaned, small ragged sounds, parting her lips. The burning pain of a moment ago was forgotten.

Alex stared down at her, almost puzzled. She had a perfect, aristocratic nose, and such delicate flyaway eyebrows.... She turned her head and looked squarely into his face. Her eyes were glazed, her mouth swollen. Alex was struck by such a bolt of lust that he shuddered all over. He reared over her again, easing his fingers from her, his knee thrusting between her legs.

But in that instant—before he could reclaim her, virgin or no—Charlotte struggled, a belated instinct for self-preservation replacing the unwelcome coolness when his fingers left her.

Alex let her go instantly, rolled himself off to the side. Charlotte ignored how unpleasant the loss of his heat and weight felt. She was shaking slightly all over, her heart pounding as if she’d run for miles. She tried not to look at him as she stood up, almost stumbling from the sudden pain between her legs, pulling her bodice up.

But she couldn’t not look. He was much younger than she thought, probably only a few years older than her brother Horace, and Horace was only twenty-five. And he was so lovely: His skin looked golden as shadows of leaves played over his white shirt. Her eyes fell. He was politely looking away, so she rearranged herself, straightened her cloak, and put her mask back on.

The only thing she could think of, besides throwing herself back into his arms, was getting home, so she gently laid her hand on his arm and said (with an inborn politeness which was natural to her) “Thank you. Goodbye.”

She didn’t think how odd it was to say thank you for being ravished—the worst thing that could happen to a young lady, after all.

His face jerked up when he heard her voice, but she slipped away without a backward glance and dashed through the tall windows into the crowded ballroom before he even moved. And when Alex cursed and sprinted after her, he couldn’t distinguish her among all the cloaks and dominoes and

masks moving about the floor. Burnt yellow silk brushed shoulders with rose cotton and the occasional greeny gold taffeta. Men dressed in shabby black coats peppered the floor. But there wasn't a slender girl wearing a black domino to be seen.

Alex sighed. The girl couldn't have just disappeared. She must have rejoined her party. And like a guilty thief, struck with remorse and eager to compensate for his crimes, he needed to find her. With a muttered curse he mentally divided the room into quarters and then patiently wove through each quarter, surveying all the young women who reached his shoulder. But he couldn't find her. Yet even when he knew rationally that she must have left the ball, he kept searching, doggedly, until the dance closed down.

She was gone. And whoever she was, she'd gone with her loss of virginity, and he'd paid nothing. But that wasn't it, and he knew it. He wanted to see her again. The thief was only hiding behind a wig to compensate for his crimes: In fact, he wanted her, with an urgency that made him feel slightly insane. He wanted to reclaim that lovely, untouched body, to kiss away her little pants, to repeat the crime again and again and again.

The odd thing was that she sounded like a lady. And she looked like a lady. But of course no ladies came to the Cyprians' Ball on a Saturday night, and so she was just a very clever whore—but who was a whore thinking, to give away her most prized possession for free, in the gardens? Alex left the ball in a ferocious temper.

That night he woke from dreams of wild seduction completely confused, gazing around his room as if he'd never seen it before. His garden girl ... her body had been just there, and he had been tracing the shape of her breast with his tongue, and she was moaning in his arms. For some reason she had stolen into his mind and wouldn't go away.

For a few weeks Alex treasured the hope that he'd receive some sort of a ransom note from his protectors or perhaps even from her parents, if she were a serving girl rather than a whore. He rather hoped she was; he would protect her, and find her a house in London, a quiet little house. But there never was a note.

And even though he went back to the Cyprians' Ball the next Saturday night, to the distress of his brother, Patrick, who had had no fun at all the week before, she wasn't there. He also went to a few society balls in the next two weeks, thinking if she *was* a lady he might see her, but he couldn't find any tall, slender girls with green eyes. The young girls in London were bouncy and curled and smart, whereas he was looking for willowy and composed.

If only he knew the color of her hair it would be easier, but she had been wearing a ridiculous amount of powder. Alex's domino smelled faintly of lavender for weeks. He thought about it carefully and decided that she had red hair. With skin that white, her hair had to be red. So he looked for a red-haired girl who smelled of lavender, and Charlotte, whose hair was jet-black and who smelled of orange blossoms, never crossed his path.

When Alex wasn't dreaming about making love to her (and he didn't even think how odd it was to use that term about a probable whore), he dreamt she was weeping, and he was comforting her, and saying tender things. Probably, Alex told himself rationally, he kept thinking of her because he hadn't gone through with it and finished: But even thinking about how wet she had been, and how smart, made him pale. She couldn't be a lady; there was proof positive. No lady enjoyed sex, let alone a virginal lady.



On her side, the truth came slowly to Charlotte. She ran into the ballroom and thankfully saw Julia and Mr. Colby standing by the statue of Narcissus, although she didn't notice the mutinous set of

Julia's mouth. She didn't have to say anything; Julia simply shoved her across the ballroom and into Mr. Colby's carriage. In fact, she didn't even think until later how odd it was that no one said a word on the way home. Her mind was so tumbled that she barely felt as if she were in the carriage at all.

And when they got home and Julia babbled about Mr. Colby, that he had tried to kiss her—to kiss *her*, Julia!—and she had had to grind her foot into his in order to make him let go, Charlotte just sat numbly on a chair and nodded occasionally. Finally Julia stopped.

“Are you all right, Charlotte?” she asked, seeing that Charlotte's eyes were shadowed and her face was waxen.

And Charlotte simply said, “I think I shall be ill.” And she was, right on the Axminster carpet in Julia's bedchamber. Which was problematic because it was the middle of the night and Julia did not want to sleep in a sour-smelling room, so finally they both went into Charlotte's bedchamber and prepared for sleep.

Except that Julia gasped when Charlotte was undressing, and when Charlotte looked down she saw blood on her thighs and nearly jumped out of her skin.

“Oh, aren't I silly,” said Julia. “You've got your monthly: Do you have the right cloths?” And when Charlotte shook her head silently (it wasn't even due for weeks), Julia tripped off into her room and got the necessary items.

Charlotte washed at the basin in the corner, delicately touching that part of her which stung and ached and throbbed, and which she'd never really thought about before.

He'd ruined her, she suddenly realized. *This* is what is meant by ruined. She must be torn inside and changed.

And then, like a chill blowing down her back, she understood that she could never get married because any man she married would find out, would know that she was ruined. Charlotte's mind went very, very quiet, and she even managed to smile at Julia when she rushed back in the room.

She put on her soft white nightgown and curled up in bed, facing away from Julia. But she couldn't go to sleep for a long time. And when she did, she sobbed aloud and woke up, imagining the faces of her mother and father. What would they say if they knew?

The next morning Charlotte lay in bed feeling miserable. Julia sat next to her, sipping hot chocolate and talking. Luckily, Julia never needed much of a response to engage in lively conversation.

“I simply cannot *believe* Mr. Colby's perfidy!” she repeated again and again. Charlotte noticed that “Christopher” was now definitively “Mr. Colby.”

“I just can't *believe* that he tried to take liberties with me!” Julia elbowed Charlotte again, trying to get her attention. “Charlotte! This is important! He didn't just try to kiss me, you know. He put his hand—*on my breast*, Charlotte! *On my breast*” Julia said again, emphasizing each word. “I could have been ruined,” she said with relish.

Charlotte didn't respond. Julia peered at her. “Are you quite all right, Charlotte? You're very quiet. I could ask my mother ... she has some good remedies for a bad monthly. Would you like that? Or no,” she wailed, “I couldn't! Why, she would take one look at me and see that I was almost *ruined* last night!”

Charlotte thought dully that Julia certainly was enjoying herself.

“Why,” Julia continued, “if I hadn't trampled on his foot, just at the right moment, well, who knows? He might have overcome my resistance!” Julia giggled. “But you know, Charlotte,” she said, “His lips were rather wet, and it was revolting ... I don't know what came over me! Kissing the curate!” She giggled again.

Charlotte listened silently. What was the matter with *her*? At least Julia knew Mr. Colby. She even adored him. But Julia hadn't lost her head. They both knew that if Julia had been able to tell her

mother, which of course she couldn't, Lady Brentorton would have approved of her response to the curate's kiss.

But when a stranger, a total stranger, kissed Charlotte out of the blue, she collapsed into his arms as if she were begging for more. So Charlotte separated her guilt from her anger. How evil could the man be? He must have thought ... she didn't want to think what he must have thought, and quickly covered her burning cheeks with her hands.

It was only when the huge house was quiet, around two in the afternoon, that Charlotte started to cry. Julia had gone riding with her parents; her maid was down in the kitchen. Charlotte soaked her pillow with tears: for the husband she would never have, for the babies she thought to have, for the unfairness of discovering that she—she, Charlotte—was an insatiable woman. She'd have to stay away from men, she thought finally, after crying hopelessly for a long time. She couldn't trust herself, that was clear. And she couldn't allow herself to be publicly ruined; her parents would be devastated.

Finally she got out of bed and rang for a bath. She sent the maid out of the room because she wasn't sure whether there might be other signs of her ruination. But she didn't seem to be bleeding anymore.

It was only when she leaned back into the steaming water that Charlotte remembered her painting and given the way the world had shifted in the last few hours, she allowed that to shift too. Since she couldn't have a husband, or a baby, she could learn how to paint properly. She would make a focus for her life in the easy sweep of new canvas and wet paint, far from the humiliation she felt at the moment. The thought—the plan—calmed the agonizing jumble of feelings inside Charlotte; she rose from the bath and allowed Julia's maid to button her into a chaste white gown.

Chapter 2



As Charlotte's world fell into *before* and *after*, so did the world of her mother. When Charlotte returned to Albemarle Square the next day, she didn't say much. She looked at her mother with a tearless, somber look that made her mother want simultaneously to shake her and to burst into tears. What on earth had happened to Charlotte? She wasn't herself anymore, as the duchess told her husband in bewilderment. Charlotte became moody and even harsh.

If the truth be told, Adelaide was exhausted, too exhausted to deal with a new, irritable Charlotte. Presentations were tiring. The planning had taken weeks, and just this week Gunter's had put up a fuss about the ices. She had ordered ices colored a delicate violet, and they appeared with a violent purple sample. The footman who was set to washing the center chandelier broke seventeen crystals before anyone noticed he was dead drunk. The new gown she had ordered (blue velvet, embroidered with silver fleur-de-lis) was ghastly. The sleeves were short and far too tight, and the overdress sagged, making her look old and matronly. So she had to pay four times the price to have Madame Flancot create a new gown of rose brocade, practically overnight.

And then, the very day before the ball, Charlotte announced that she wouldn't go to any ball, including her own presentation. Adelaide stared at her in disbelief. She turned sharply to Charlotte's maid, Marie.

"Fetch Violetta, please, Marie. And then you may go."

Marie slipped from the room. Her mistress must have gone crazy. That beautiful dress! How could she even think of not wearing it?

Charlotte's sister Violetta strolled into the bedroom with all the nonchalance of someone with two seasons behind her and an almost-for-certain marriage proposal from the Marquess of Blass.

Violetta tried persuasion. "You know, Lottie," she said, reverting to Charlotte's pet name from childhood, "I was terrified at my coming out ball. Mama had the place absolutely covered in white lilies—which was very nice, Mama," she hastened to add, "but the perfume was so powerful. When I slipped downstairs to see the ballroom in the afternoon, I just kept sneezing and sneezing, and we all panicked. But then Champion suggested scotch, which he said was a perfect remedy for sneezing, and he was right. Of course," she said meditatively, "I don't remember much of what happened after the glass of scotch, but at least I didn't sneeze all evening."

Charlotte just looked at her sister miserably. She hadn't cried since leaving Julia's house, but she felt like it, all the time. One minute she was desperate to see *that man* again; the next she was consumed with rage and self-pity.

Violetta sat down next to her on the bed, so close their shoulders were touching. "I wouldn't worry about Charlotte. You're the most beautiful of us three, you know. You always have been. And you're the reason for the whole ball: You don't have to worry about not having someone to dance with...."

Charlotte just shook her head. Why go? She couldn't get married; she might as well start the war she meant to go on. She felt, in her old nurse's phrase, as stubborn as a pig about it.

"It's no use, Violetta," her mother broke in. "She's set against it! Why? Why, Charlotte?" Adelaide's voice rose perilously near a shriek. "At the least you owe me an explanation, after all the work I've done. If you'd said four months ago you didn't want this ball we could have discussed it rationally. But now you *must* tell me why you won't attend the ball or I shall summon your father!"

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