

SEDUCING THE HEIRESS

by

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Chapter 1

Colin Byrd, Viscount Ratliffe, was on the prowl for a wife. He intended to snare the richest heiress of the London season.

Halting his mount in the night-darkened alleyway, he glanced at the mansion beyond the trees. The faint lilt of a waltz drifted from the opened windows, the squares of golden light glowing against the black monolith of the house. How ironic that he would make his conquest right under the nose of the Duke of Albright.

An unholy zeal gripped Colin. He would like nothing better than to come face to face with the long-time enemy of his family. It would give him great pleasure to fell the bastard with one blow.

But not tonight.

Tonight, Colin was on the hunt. His quarry was female – one girl in particular. She was young and vulnerable, and her low status as a commoner would make her all the more susceptible to a nobleman's calculated charm.

His charm.

He dismounted, his booted feet landing on the narrow lane that led to the stables. As he fastened the reins to a post, the nag whiffed softly in the darkness, nudging his hands for a lump of sugar.

Colin rubbed her nose. It was past time to put the ancient mare out to pasture. But he couldn't afford to replace her. Yet.

"Hang on, old girl," he murmured. "If all goes well, you'll have plenty of oats in your future."

Leaving the horse tethered in the shadows, he paced to the stone wall and peered into the gloom of the garden. The mews was quiet, in contrast to the front of the mansion where a long line of vehicles circled the square and coachmen gathered around makeshift fires to ward off the April chill. Albright's ball marked the opening of the Season. Every member of the ton was here, and that would work to his advantage. It should be simple to blend in with the hordes of aristocrats. He was one of them himself – even if his blackened reputation had barred him from their gatherings.

Because of that, he lacked the requisite invitation to enter by the front door. But he wouldn't let such a minor complication stop him.

At the rear gate, he lifted the latch and slipped into the formal garden with its dim paths arranged in geometric shapes. As he started toward the house, a clear sense of purpose fueled him: find his prey and isolate her. And in the doing, avoid Albright. Colin knew that if he encountered the duke, he'd be thrown out into the street. His plans would be ruined. But he could not – would not – fail.

Too much depended upon his success tonight.

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Miss Portia Crompton knew she'd said the wrong thing the instant the words left her lips. The shocked stares of the aristocrats sitting at the supper table proved the rashness of her comment.

Lady Whittingham arched a thin gray eyebrow. Mrs. Beardsley scowled, a forkful of roast partridge clutched in her plump fingers. Her daughter, Miss Frances Beardsley, a blonde china doll clad in pale pink, uttered a breathy squeak of horror.

Bide your tongue. In her head, Portia could hear her mother's scolding voice. Similar rebukes had been directed at Portia many times over the past year while she had been preparing for this, her grand entry into London society at the Duke of Albright's ball. She was to engage in polite chit-chat about the weather, the splendor of the ballroom, and other dull topics.

She was *not* to mention any of her experiences growing up in India.

"You've bagged a tiger?" asked the Marquess of Dunn, straightening his gangly form in his chair. "How extraordinary."

Lord Wrayford's pale blue eyes goggled in his florid face. "By gad, Miss Crompton, you must be a crack shot. You make our fox hunting tales sound tame by comparison."

"If only I'd been there," the Honorable Henry Hockenhull said fervently. The third son of an earl, he had auburn hair and a youthful freckled face above an elaborate cravat. "I vow I would have protected you with my life!"

For the first time, Portia noticed it was only the ladies who looked disapproving. The three gentlemen at the small round table cast admiring looks at her. But she refused to be flattered by their fawning attention. Although the mirror in her bedchamber this evening had reflected a pleasing transformation, she knew it was her outrageously large dowry that fascinated them the most. If not for her father's riches – earned in trade overseas – she would never have been admitted to their exalted circle. These aristocrats were willing to overlook common blood for one reason alone: wealth.

Little did they know, Portia had no intention of marrying an English nobleman. Absently, she fingered the tiny gold key that dangled from her bracelet. She had a plan for her future. A risky plan she had kept secret even from her beloved younger sisters.

“Do tell us about this hunt,” commanded Lord Dunn. “You must have suffered a terrible fright.”

Just like that, Portia was transported back to the humid heat of the jungle, seeing the tiger burst out of the thick underbrush, hearing its guttural snarl, smelling the pungent reek of musk and gun powder. She had fired on instinct, her senses honed by the long hours of instruction from Arun. Only afterward had she become aware of her pounding heart and weak knees. She had stood over the magnificent carcass, shaken yet exultant at having killed the man-eater that had terrorized several villages.

“There was no time to be afraid,” she said. “It all happened rather quickly. It was a long time ago.” Two years. A lifetime. A world away from this gilded

dining chamber with its high vaulted ceiling and elegantly attired guests.

Nostalgia vanished as she spied her mother at a corner table, glaring in her direction. “Er, the weather is rather chilly this evening, is it not?”

Her attempt to change the subject failed miserably.

“Hunting tigers,” huffed Mrs. Beardsley. Her rotund form encased in brown silk, she resembled the sausage on her overloaded plate. “It’s a wonder your parents would allow such behavior.”

“It wasn’t their fault,” Portia felt obliged to say. “They didn’t know where I’d gone.”

“Indeed! Were you permitted to roam at will through the countryside?”

“And in such a heathen land!” old Lady Whittingham said in a quavering tone.

“/ would never dream of behaving in so improper a manner,” Frances Beardsley added. “Of course, / had a genteel upbringing.” She batted her pale lashes at the men, but their attention remained fixed on Portia.

“India sounds dashed exciting,” Henry Hockenhull said wistfully. “Were I not destined to enter the clergy, I should have liked to have gone there myself, as an officer in the cavalry, perhaps. I believe I would have made a first-rate commander.”

The Marquess of Dunn leaned forward to block the young man from Portia’s view. “The exotic locale only seems to have nurtured the delicate flower of your beauty, Miss Crompton. Perhaps after supper you would consent to another dance with me—”

“Have you ever seen a cobra, Miss Crompton?” Lord Wrayford interrupted in a bid to forestall his rivals. “I’ve heard there are magicians who can coax a snake out of a basket by playing a flute.”

Portia had witnessed much more than that. She could regale them for hours with stories of mad dogs running wild, of holy men in turbans and women in colorful saris, of riding through the jungle on the back of an elephant. With all her heart, she yearned to return there. “Yes, I often saw snake charmers perform in the bazaar. They would sit cross-legged on the ground and play a tune on a *pungi* – a flute fashioned from a gourd. As if by magic, the viper would rise slowly from the basket and perform a dance, swaying back and forth.”

“How very barbaric!” Mrs. Beardsley declared. “Pray consider our delicate sensibilities.”

“Yes,” said Miss Frances Beardsley, mimicking her mother’s shudder. “If I hear any more, I shall swoon!”

Tickled by the image of the girl pitching face-first into her plate of lobster salad and roasted capon, Portia suppressed a smile. She would never understand the tendency of these English-bred ladies toward silly histrionics.

Mrs. Beardsley patted her daughter’s hand. “There, there, my darling. One must make allowances for Miss Crompton, since her parents never saw fit to send her and her sisters back to England for their schooling.”

“We had the advantage of excellent tutors,” Portia said in defense of her two siblings. “Ask me any question about geometry or astronomy or literature. If you like, I can provide the answers in Greek and French, as well as in Hindi.”

Mrs. Beardsley glowered. "Cleverness is most unbecoming in a lady. My Frances learned the skills of the pianoforte and singing, not mathematics and shooting."

"I fear we are doomed to differ on the quality of my education," Portia said, smiling to take the sting out of her words. "For I shall never regret the tiger skin rug that lies on the floor of my bedchamber."

As one, the gentlemen leaned forward, their eyes avid. "Your bedchamber?" said the Marquess of Dunn.

"That must be quite a sight to behold," added Lord Wrayford.

"I should like to see—" Henry Hockenhull broke off, blushing to the tips of his big ears.

Belatedly, Portia remembered that ladies didn't mention their bedchambers in public. It was another of the many ridiculous rules of the highbrow British society that she had never aspired to join.

Mrs. Beardsley fanned herself with a white lace handkerchief. "This is too much. Close your ears, my darling Frances, lest you hear any more unseemly remarks."

"Yes, Mama." Miss Beardsley obediently lifted her hands to frame her face, although it was obvious from her alert expression that she had no intention of missing a single word of the conversation. Undoubtedly, she would take glee in repeating it to all of her friends. Portia would become the object of malicious gossip.

And then she would be in grave trouble with her parents. They wanted

desperately for her to make an excellent match and establish the Crompton family as full-fledged members of society. At present, they were accepted solely on the basis of their immense wealth. It wasn't for her own prospects that she feared. Rather, her parents had warned Portia that failure would mean the ruin of her sisters, too.

And that she could never abide.

She forced a contrite smile. "I spoke out of turn. Pray forgive me if I've offended anyone."

The three gentlemen spoke all at once.

"You've done no wrong."

"No offense taken."

"You're utterly blameless."

Mrs. Beardsley's lips pinched into a thin line. "Spoken very prettily, Miss Crompton. However, I am reminded of the old saying: one cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

The insult slapped Portia. Although she had expected intolerance from the nobility, she had never anticipated such unbridled spite. To make matters worse, Mrs. Beardsley had projected her voice, and some of the guests at neighboring tables had cocked their heads to eavesdrop.

You're the nasty sow.

The retort sprang to the tip of Portia's tongue. It remained unspoken, for at that moment a tiny missile soared through the air.

It struck Mrs. Beardsley just above the décolletage of her gown,

splattering red droplets over the pasty mounds of exposed skin.

Portia blinked. Was that ... a *strawberry*?

Mrs. Beardsley released an unearthly howl. She reared back in her chair, her tight curls bouncing around her pudgy face. For the space of a heartbeat, the juicy morsel perched on the mountain of flesh. Then the strawberry skied down the white slope into the deep valley of her bosom and vanished from sight.

She screeched again. Throughout the supper room, gentlemen sprang to their feet. A flock of ladies flew to the rescue. Frances proved useless, half-swooning into the arms of the hapless Lord Dunn. Lord Wrayford attempted to fish out the fruit with his silver spoon, which only made Mrs. Beardsley yell louder and beat at his hand.

Portia swallowed another untimely gurgle of laughter. Now *that* was judgment from the heavens.

But the strawberry hadn't fallen from the sky. Nor had it been dropped accidentally. Someone must have thrown it. Who would have dared?

She turned to scan the gathering. Throngs of people clustered around the table, making it difficult to see past them. Rising from her chair, Portia squeezed her way out of the crush. Her gaze stopped on an extraordinarily handsome, dark-haired man leaning against one of the pillars near the buffet table. His burgundy coat and crisp white cravat enhanced his powerful male physique.

She guessed at once he was the culprit. Perhaps it was the way he stood watching her, his eyes a startling green against the tanned skin of his face. Perhaps it was the wicked smile that quirked one corner of his mouth. Or

perhaps it was just that he looked like the sort of rascal who would enjoy playing a prank on one of the grand dames of society.

His next action affirmed his guilt. His gaze holding hers, he plucked another strawberry from a dish on the buffet and proceeded to eat it with relish, licking his fingers clean afterward.

A flush radiated from the core of her body. The warmth made Portia long for the fan she had left lying on the table. She couldn't quite fathom her spontaneous reaction to him. It rattled her composure and awakened irrepressible questions.

She had strict orders to avoid the company of any gentleman to whom she had not been properly introduced. But curiosity overwhelmed her. Seizing advantage of the hubbub, she marched straight to the stranger.

He was tall, forcing her to lift her chin to meet his gaze. Despite his casual pose, he radiated confidence and something else, something that made her pulse beat faster. Oddly, it robbed the breath from her lungs as well.

Unwilling to be intimidated, Portia resisted the impulse to take a step backward. "Sir," she said, keeping her voice low. "You threw that strawberry. Why?"

"It seemed an effective way to distract the woman."

Had Mrs. Beardsley's abuse been so loud? "You couldn't possibly have heard our conversation from halfway across the room."

"Shall I claim to be blessed by acute hearing?" He paused, considering her with those remarkable eyes. "No, I can see you're too clever a girl to trust

such a boast. So let's just say I know the old baggage and the poison she spews."

He smiled, and her heart gave an irksome lurch. Of course, the involuntary effect didn't signify anything. He had done her a favor – even if in an indecent manner. "Well," she said, allowing a trace of hauteur to enter her voice, "I appreciate the diversion. You saved me from insulting her in public."

"Hypocrites deserve to be insulted." He picked up the dish of plump red fruit and offered it to her. "Would you care for a strawberry?"

Eyes widening, she glanced over her shoulder. Thankfully, most of the guests still gathered around Mrs. Beardsley, who was being helped to her feet by a crimson-faced Henry Hockenhull.

Portia snatched the dish out of the stranger's hand and replaced it on the table. "Have you gone mad? Everyone will guess you're the cause of this uproar."

"You're quite right. I shouldn't wish to be tossed out on my ear when I've only just met the loveliest female present."

The tribute was too outrageous to be genuine. Yet he had a smooth sincerity that warmed her nonetheless. "Thank you, but we *haven't* met. I shouldn't even be speaking to you. If you'll excuse me."

He took a quick step to block her departure. "Viscount Ratcliffe, at your service. Otherwise known to my friends as Colin Byrd. There, I am no stranger to you now."

It was hardly a proper introduction. But he was a peer, so surely her

mother wouldn't object to her bending the rules. And Portia did so want to loiter in his company. There was a compelling aura about Viscount Ratcliffe that drew her interest like a lodestone. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, my lord."

She offered him her hand, intending for him to shake it. Instead, he bent down and the brush of his lips on her bare skin stirred a flurry of goosebumps. Once again, she found herself breathless.

"It's *my* pleasure," he said. "And you are ... ?"

She hesitated, reluctant to surrender anonymity. "Miss Portia Crompton."

"Ah, the new arrival from India. I'm happy to discover the rumors of your beauty are no exaggeration." He playfully fingered the dainty gold bracelet on her wrist. "Is this the key to your heart?"

Startled, she jerked her hand free. If only he knew.

His silky tone and warm smile betrayed no surprise that he was conversing with the wealthiest heiress on the marriage mart. Had he known her identity all along? Had he lobbed that strawberry in order to draw her attention from his rivals?

The thought stirred a sharp disappointment in her. Lord Ratcliffe must be just another gentleman who lavished compliments in the hopes of claiming her rich dowry. She ought to take her leave, yet perversely she lingered. "Why did you call Mrs. Beardsley a hypocrite?"

"Because she was looking down her nose at you. It's rather ironic considering the dark secret in her past."

“Secret?”

“Not gossip, but an irrefutable fact.” Lord Ratcliffe aimed a roguish wink at her. “Come closer and I’ll tell you.”

Without thinking, Portia found herself taking a step toward him, rising slightly on tiptoes, inhaling the spicy scent of his cologne. Eagerness tingled in her. It was absurd to react as if he were a snake charmer playing his *pungi*. But he made her so ... so curious. “What is it?”

He bent down to whisper in her ear, his breath warm on her skin. “Mrs. Beardsley isn’t the blue blood she would have you believe. Her grandfather was a fishmonger at Billingsgate Market.”

The amusement Portia had been repressing all evening bubbled forth. “Truly? Oh, I shouldn’t laugh. My father is a merchant, too.”

“So he is. And I can only think highly of a man who has raised so lively a daughter.” Taking hold of her arm, Lord Ratcliffe said, “It’s far too noisy in here, don’t you agree? Come, let’s find a quiet corner and you can tell me all about yourself.”

Just like that, he steered her toward the arched doorway. His nearness invigorated her, and she felt a burning desire to talk about *him*. What were his favorite pursuits? Where was his home? Who were his family? How swiftly a sense of camaraderie had formed between them, yet Portia knew next to nothing about him.

Certainly she liked his sense of humor. He was clever and charming and handsome. If she had to endure a season in London society, she might as well

pass the time with amusing companions. The prospect filled her with giddy anticipation.

From the ballroom came the inharmonious sounds of the orchestra tuning their instruments. The high drama of Mrs. Beardsley's mishap had passed, and streams of guests were leaving the supper room to join the next set.

As the viscount guided her to the edge of the throng, Portia noticed people staring at them, gentlemen frowning and women whispering behind their fans. Lord Ratcliffe nodded at a few without stopping to talk. Somehow, she had the distinct impression it was he who had drawn their interest, not she.

Or was it just her imagination?

His hand firmed around her upper arm. Pulling her to an abrupt halt, he muttered under his breath, "*Blast.*"

"I beg your pardon?"

Then Portia spied her mother sailing toward them against the tidal flow of the crowd. A petite woman with a girlish figure untouched by time, Mrs. Edith Crompton wore a fashionable gown in a rich royal blue with a low-cut neck and short sleeves. A peacock feather bobbed and swayed in her upswept russet hair. She ruled the house with relentless vigor. Portia's father fondly referred to her as his little tigress, and at the moment, Portia could tell by the set expression on her face that she was perturbed. *Very* perturbed.

"It's my mother," she said, bracing herself for battle. "She'll want to meet you."

"Not if Albright has any say in the matter."

Only then did Portia notice the man at her mother's side. The sea of guests parted to allow him passage. A middle-aged man with silver at his temples, the duke was the epitome of sophistication in a gray silk coat, black waistcoat and breeches, and a diamond stickpin glinting in his white cravat. He strode forward with the authority of one who has known since birth of his exalted stature.

His alliance with her mother confused Portia. Upon her arrival in the vast entrance hall, she had made the obligatory curtsy to the duke in the long receiving line, a chore for her and a triumph for her parents. He had uttered a perfunctory greeting, hardly seeming even to notice the obeisance of yet another debutante.

Why did he look so intent on her now?

Lord Ratcliffe bent to whisper in her ear. The warmth of his breath sent a delicious shiver over her skin. "Meet me in Hyde Park at ten tomorrow morning," he said. "I'll be waiting in the small temple near the Serpentine. Do you know the place?"

"Yes, but—"

"Please, I must see you again. At least promise you'll try."

His urgent manner mystified her. "All right."

Then the duke and her mother stopped before them. The other guests gave them wide berth, while casting inquisitive glances their way.

Lord Ratcliffe seemed oblivious to any watchers. He radiated cool charisma as he inclined his head. "Albright. And Mrs. Crompton, I understand.

May I say you have a most charming daughter.”

“That’s enough, Ratcliffe,” Albright snapped. “I don’t recall seeing your name on the list of invitations.”

“An oversight, I’m sure.”

“Hardly. You aren’t wanted here. I won’t have my guests consorting with murderers.”

The breath seared Portia’s throat. Try as she might, she couldn’t draw air into her lungs. Several gasps and excited murmurs came from the onlookers. But her gaze remained fixed on Lord Ratcliffe. He was still smiling, though his lips now formed a tight line.

He arched an eyebrow. “You always knew how to spoil a party, Albright. I’ll see myself to the door.”

After bowing to the ladies, the viscount walked away, as casually as if he were going for a stroll in the park. Portia stood frozen, stunned that he had made no attempt to deny the duke’s outrageous statement.

A murderer?

It couldn’t possibly be true.

Edith Crompton looped her arm through Portia’s, her manner sweetly conciliatory. “Pray forgive my daughter, Your Grace. She had no notion of the man’s scandalous reputation.”

Albright gave a crisp nod. “She wouldn’t be the first to be taken in by that scoundrel. He’s a notorious philanderer.” He addressed Portia directly. “As your host, I must apologize for Ratcliffe’s intrusion here. I would advise that in the

future you stay far away from him.”

“I’ll make certain she does,” Mrs. Crompton said swiftly. “May I add, we are most grateful for your intervention. Aren’t we, my dear?”

Her mother applied subtle pressure to her arm, but Portia needed no prompting to speak. She craved answers to her burning questions. “If Lord Ratcliffe is guilty of murder, why is he not in prison?”

“The coward convinced the courts it was an accident – even though he had a powerful motive.”

“Who did he kill?”

“Shush, darling, we mustn’t upset His Grace any further—”

The duke silenced Mrs. Crompton with a wave of his beringed fingers. “It’s quite all right. It would benefit her to know.” He regarded Portia, his elegant features grave and unforgiving. “Ratcliffe had ruinous gaming debts. And to gain his inheritance, he shot his own father.”

Seducing the Heiress * Olivia Drake * St. Martin’s Press * December 2009