

ARTFUL DECEPTIONS

LOVE AND LAUGHTER SERIES

Patricia Rice



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“Tell me now, Rainy!” Melanie clasped Arianne’s gloved hand and turned blue eyes burning with curiosity to her. “Tell me or I shall die of suspense. What is it that actually has you sending for me for a change? Usually it is I who must seek you out. Have you found a beau, Rainy, and wish to meet him secretly? Is Uncle Ross to become curator for the Regent? It must be something vastly exciting to stir you from your busy hearth and home.”

Arianne smiled at her cousin’s overindulgence in romantics. It was widely recognized among the family that Arianne was the practical one while Melanie was an incurable dreamer. Before the late Viscount Griffin’s untimely death, Arianne had been much in Melanie’s household simply as a balance against the younger girl’s high spirits. They had been tutored together until Arianne was too old for tutoring and was needed too much at home to be spared. It had been several years since she’d enjoyed the freedom of the Griffin household but Melanie hadn’t allowed their friendship to fade.

“How can I tell you my poor secrets after hearing those wild dreams? Art curator for the Regent! As if Prinny weren’t far enough in debt, my father would have the whole of the monarchy up the River Tick in no time.”

Melanie giggled at this cant from her solemn cousin. Arianne seldom smiled, and it was difficult for strangers to know whether she was serious or not, but Melanie knew her sharp wit well enough. “I should like to see that. Do you think they might sell the crown jewels, then? I rather have a fancy for that ruby coronet. Wouldn’t I look grand?” At Arianne’s lifted brow, she grinned again. “And you have not ruled out a beau, Rainy. I wish you had allowed my brother to bring you out with me. Some of these entertainments are deadly dull without you along to prick all those puffed self-esteems.”

Arianne shook off her annoying bonnet within the privacy of the carriage’s closed confines and smiled at the memory stirred by her cousin’s words. “The Puffed Self-Esteem, a rare bird, as I remember. One wouldn’t want to prick one, would one? Now, the Haughty Snuff-Snatcher, there’s a common one, put salt on his tail if you like. He’ll not likely know the difference.”

“He will if the salt lands in his snuffbox! Oh, I had forgotten that, Arianne. You should never have encouraged me so. I don’t think there was one of the twins’ friends who did not avoid us after that.”

“Oh, p’raps one or two. They weren’t all lofty fellows. I rather suspect some of them had a good

laugh at their clubs that night. 'Twas a pity I hadn't told you pepper worked better, but I had no notion you would take it into your head to salt our imaginary birds."

Melanie swallowed a chuckle. "I don't suppose the poor fellow ever figured out why I chose to salt him. But the stairwell wasn't a very good hiding place. Even if the lid of the salt cellar had not come loose, someone would have seen me as soon as he began choking on that awful snuff. I must have appeared quite the goose."

"Feather-Headed Guinea Hen," Arianne affirmed. "But by now I'm certain all is forgiven and you have bevvies of suitors at your doors."

"Straitlaced Sapsuckers and Peafowls by the dozen." Melanie dismissed them with a wave of her hand. "Now, what is it that you need my advice for? It is such an unusual occasion, that you cannot hope to distract me from your request for long. If you have not found a wealthy suitor, have you some notion of persuading Uncle Ross to part with his precious paintings?"

To Melanie, all of life was a game to be laughed at. Arianne had to smile at her wild assumptions. It was much easier to feel good about her decision when there was someone to urge her on. "In the absence of suitable beaux and the silver tongue required to persuade my father of anything, I have done something quite despicable. I have stolen a painting."

That startled the laughter from Melanie's lips, and she sent her a hasty look of concern. Realizing Arianne had made a joke, she sat back and joined in the game. "You have spirited his Gainsborough from above his desk and hidden it in the garden."

Arianne did laugh at this mad suggestion. "The house and grounds would have been leveled by now in his search had I done so. No, nothing nearly so dramatic or valuable. You know I have been helping him with cleaning paintings?"

Melanie made a face. "All those smelly oils and turpentines. I don't know how you abide it."

"It is great fun. You must persuade Gordon to bring in some of your family portraits sometime. All those years of dirt and grime from wood smoke hide so many of the true colors. I enjoy watching a musty old ancestor become a colorful rogue or dashing lady once the colors are revealed."

"I doubt that we have a single interesting ancestor between us, but what does any of this have to do with your stolen painting? Surely you have not stolen someone else's painting?"

The horror in Melanie's voice rang more with drama than anxiety. With some difficulty Arianne explained the discovery of the painting hidden inside her mother's portrait and her decision not to tell her father of its existence.

"For I know he will spend more money to have it framed and hung on a wall where no one but his clients will see it and where no good can come of it at all. But if it could be sold, even for a few pounds,

I might persuade Mama to spend a few days in country air. The physicians say she should spend time at Bath or Brighton, but the expense is enormously prohibitive. I hope that just a few days of quiet, out of the stench of belching chimneys and flowing sewers. . .”

Melanie wrinkled her nose. “Enough! I have never thought of London that way, but if Aunt Anne’s lungs are delicate, then I suppose you are right. We should remove her from the city at once. But why must you sell your musty old painting to do so? I’m certain Evan wouldn’t mind if she stayed at his place in Devon.”

Arianne had been afraid that would be the approach Melanie would take, and she stiffened her resolve. “If I remember rightly, the estate actually belongs to the earl, and he and my father have never been on the best of terms. It is better this way, without argument or damaged pride.”

A frown marred Melanie’s cheerful features, and she tapped her fingers as the carriage turned into the park drive. “I really cannot believe that Grandfather would care one way or another. It is your father who will not accept his help. They are both quite perverse in their pride, but I suppose you’re right. There would only come an argument of it. I don’t think Grandfather ever forgave my father for marrying into your family. Old people are quite silly sometimes.”

“The fact that my family has no particular title and certainly no amount of wealth could have something to do with your grandfather’s opinion,” Arianne replied wryly. “But that is neither here nor there. We would never suit in society, so we are happy as we are, were it not for Mama’s health. But I think the painting may be a solution.”

Melanie remained dubious. “If it was hidden behind another canvas, how could it be very valuable? Someone thought little enough of it to hide it like that.”

Arianne clenched her fingers. “The painting it was hidden behind was that terrible portrait of Mama, one of Lawrence’s very early works. I am almost certain it is another Lawrence, an even earlier one. No one could hope to duplicate his style, and just the fact that it is nailed behind one of his. . .”

Melanie’s eyes widened. “I heard his portraits cost a hundred guineas now. How much would one of his early portraits be worth?”

“I do not know. The style is not so polished as his current works. It is very lovely, though. It shows a woman and a little boy, and they look so incredibly happy. Her coloring is darker than most, but she is extremely handsome just the same. The landscape behind them is rugged, so I know it must be nearer Bristol than London. I would think it ought to bring a good price, but there is the problem. How would I go about getting the best price, and where? I daren’t take it to anyone who knows my father.”

Glancing out the window, Melanie gave a sudden start; then, bouncing merrily again, she pounded on the box and ordered the driver to pull over.

Arianne followed her cousin's glance and discovered to her surprise that they were already caught up in the fashionable crowds of Hyde Park. Donning her bonnet, she wondered what her cousin could be up to now. Elegant landaus and old-fashioned barouches vied for a place among the dashing thoroughbreds with their silk-hatted riders. Beside them strolled pedestrians showing off their fashionable walking attire, the ladies in their muslin gowns on the arms of gentlemen in padded coats and knee-high boots. Arianne had no desire to descend into that public arena, where the only purpose of existence was to see and be seen.

But Melanie had no such reservation. Tugging Arianne's arm, she indicated the footman opening the door, waiting for them to descend. "Hurry, or they will be gone. I should have brought an open carriage. Out!"

Bewildered, Arianne descended to the grass. People turned in curiosity, but finding nothing of interest in a tall woman in dowdy brown broadcloth and unadorned bonnet, they moved on. Melanie's appearance stirred interest, but she seemed to take no notice of it as she brashly caught Arianne's arm and brought her around the vehicle into view of the road.

Garbed in a rich yellow silk topped by a white eyelet spencer and wearing a matching bonnet trimmed in roses, Melanie rivaled the rarest bird in this aviary of peacocks. Her wave at two gentlemen setting an irresponsible pace in a shining new high-perch phaeton seemed reckless. Arianne gasped at her cousin's behavior, but the phaeton slowed, and its occupants looked more than pleased at being thus signaled.

As the driver of the other vehicle steered his horses from the road, Arianne tried not to stare, but she was very much reminded of the god Apollo steering his chariot across the skies. Tall and golden-haired, the driver had a smile remarkably similar to Melanie's, but she knew he was not one of her cousins. The resemblance failed to go beyond the smile and hair coloring. Whereas Melanie was petite and small-boned, this gentleman towered well over six feet and his large frame made languid elegance an impossibility, although the excellent cut of his coat showed off his broad shoulders to perfection. The smiling eyes were clear gray and direct, taking in not only Melanie but also Arianne's angular and awkward figure.

"I don't suppose I may do anything so dashing as rescue a lady in distress, may I?" The golden-haired driver dropped to the ground beside them.

The man with him did not remove from the carriage with the same physical swiftness, but at a leisurely pace that belied the sturdiness of his frame. When he crossed the grass, Arianne could see that he limped, but the quiet darkness of his eyes and the wide intelligence of his brow endeared him to her without a word being exchanged.

Here was a man who could defy society, everything about him said. His clothes were not of the first fashion, and he wore them with a casualness that proved he did not care. Closer, he could be seen to have worn spots on his cuffs, but his linen was as immaculate as his companion's. His gaze, however, fell only on Melanie.

"Yes, you most certainly may rescue us, but not in the manner in which you are thinking," Melanie said in reply to the driver's question.

The large gentleman slipped Melanie's hand through his arm with an insouciance that contained as much amusement as pleasure, then turned questioningly to Arianne. "My lady, will you join us also? It's a lovely day for a stroll, and I can see Melanie means to bend our ears for a while."

Melanie's laughter pealed. "Galen, don't you remember Arianne? Honestly, we have been in and out of each other's houses forever. Surely you have come upon each other before."

With surprise, Galen swept his gaze from Melanie's pert face to the solemn young woman in a spinster's rags. Eyes of a deeper blue than her cousin's met his gaze gravely, and Galen fought a twitch of his lips as he remembered just exactly where he had seen those eyes last.

"Let us pretend to ignore her, Miss Richards," he replied, slipping Arianne's hand through his other arm. "Melanie is spoiled beyond redemption and fails to remember that she has not deemed London worthy of her presence for these last two years or more. And even then, if I remember rightly, she was but a schoolroom miss not worthy of my attention. But you, Miss Richards, I do remember. You had a decided propensity for showing up in your cousin's library at the most awkward of times."

Arianne was not accustomed to blushing, but she felt a warmth in her cheeks now as she remembered the identity of this imposing man. It had been years, when she and Melanie were but girls hiding from Melanie's governess, since she had last encountered him, and he had been little more than a gangly Oxford student. The heat in her cheeks increased as she remembered what he had been doing then.

"I trust the maidservants have learned to stand out of your way since then, my lord," she managed to retort, before removing her hand and turning to the unsmiling gentleman watching this tableau.

Melanie gave her tormentor a triumphant smile and made the introductions. "Arianne, may I introduce you to Rhys Llewellyn, a dear friend of my brothers. Mr. Llewellyn, this is my cousin Arianne Richards. You and she will have much in common, and cutting Galen will be the least of it."

Mr. Llewellyn made a perfunctory bow, but a twinkle could be discerned beneath his indecently long lashes. "A pleasure to meet someone who is not overpowered and tongue-tied by Galen's imposing visage, Miss Richards. Have you been saving that retort for him ever since his juvenile infraction?"

“He all but boxed my ears when I informed him the maid would almost certainly be put off if he continued what he was doing.” Arianne glanced at the man who had grown from the irate youngster, and noting he only grinned, she dared smile. “And since he and Melanie are so very much alike, I cannot be terribly impressed. I know Melanie’s foibles too well to expect Lord Locke to be of any better character.”

“Unfair!” the maligned lord complained. “To be tarred with the same brush as Melanie is patently ridiculous. You must give me time to redeem my character, Miss Richards.”

Melanie tugged the crook of his elbow and steered him from the road. “We do not have eternity, dear Galen. You may salvage what you may by giving us some aid with your expertise.” She cast a look back to Arianne. “Despite appearances, Galen is an expert in the field of art. He apparently means to rival the collection of the Duke of Devonshire in his old age.”

Galen caught the look of interest in the eyes of the prim-and-proper Miss Richards. He remembered her as a beanpole of a girl with a thick braid and a frown of disapproval, but circumstances might have influenced his memory. From what he could see beneath her long-brimmed bonnet, she wasn’t frowning now, and the long braid had become an abundance of rich chestnut. Beside Melanie, she was awkwardly tall, and the unadorned brown round gown she wore did little to enhance this impression, but he knew the difficulties of height himself, and he disregarded society’s opinion. She certainly wasn’t a *beanpole* any longer.

“Undoubtedly that old age is just around the corner in Melanie’s eyes. Will you lend me your shoulders for support, Miss Richards, so I might dodder over to yonder bench?”

Melanie beat his arm with her fist, but with much laughter and teasing they achieved the bench. Melanie appropriated the seat and placed her cousin beside her so that the gentlemen must stand and admire them while they spoke.

“Do be serious for a minute, Galen. We have very important business to discuss. Arianne has a painting she wishes to sell. How does one go about selling paintings? And how can she be certain to receive the best price?”

“Pretty ladies have no business worrying over such things. I’m certain Miss Richards’ brothers or father will be able to take care of it. I will be happy to give them what little advice at my disposal. But in the meantime, you must tell me if you mean to attend the Rawdons’ soiree tomorrow. For you, I will attend, but otherwise I would rather dine at White’s than be subject to those minuscule inedible objects that pass for food on Rawdon’s table.”

Head held high, Arianne rose from her seat. “Melanie, I must be on my way. Mother will need me. Gentlemen, if you will excuse me. . .” She sketched a brief curtsy and started down the path.

“Arianne, don’t be a goose!” Melanie called after her. “Galen can be made to be sensible when he wants. Come back here right now. You can’t walk home from here. Rhys, stop her, will you? She has a terrible temper sometimes, but I must say, she’s justified this time.”

She turned a scathing look to the indolent lord lounging before her. “Galen, when will you grow up? Arianne’s brothers are barely out of knee breeches and her father must never learn that she means to sell one of his precious paintings. You *know* my Uncle Ross. He is a positive miser when it comes to his collection. He would give away his last penny, but he could not be parted from those wicked pieces of canvas for love or money.”

Galen leaned against a tree and crossed his legs lazily as he watched Rhys catch up with the wayward miss and talk her back to reason. Rhys had a way with words, mostly written, but he could make use of his tongue when required. Within seconds the dark pair were returning to the bench, Arianne’s face turned eagerly to watch the intensity of the Welshman’s eyes as he spoke about some subject that obviously fascinated them both.

Galen tapped his shining black boots with his stick and addressed Melanie. “I had forgotten Mr. Richards. Forgive me, my dear. She definitely has a problem if she means to pry one of those oils from his hands. How does she suggest to do it?”

By this time the other pair had returned. Arianne gave Galen a cold nod, then seated herself beside her cousin. Melanie squeezed her fingers and explained the situation as hastily as she could, before Arianne could freeze Galen to death.

Melanie regretted that it was too late now to remember that Galen and Uncle Ross had had words over the authenticity of one of Galen’s artworks. She only prayed that Galen was too much the gentleman to allow an old argument to influence his reaction to a lady’s need for help.

She held her breath when she was done explaining, waiting while Galen frowned at his boots. When he finally looked up, the smile was back on his face, and he held out his hand to help Melanie up.

“Where can we see this fine painting?”

