

*If you have not captured his attention in the first place,
how can you possibly hold it?*

—*the entire preface to Lady Rothburg's Advice,
published 1802*

The vestibule was full of well-dressed people milling like jeweled birds in their finery, just as she'd hoped. Brianna Northfield let her husband slip her velvet cloak from her shoulders and deliberately kept her back toward him, smiling and nodding at several acquaintances in the throng. Her husband handed the garment to a nearby attendant, greeted Lord Bassford, who was an old friend, while Brianna waited, still strategically turned away.

This was the first step in her plan and she certainly hoped it worked, for she felt exposed.

Very much so.

Colton finished his conversation and took her arm, his gaze thankfully intent on scanning the crowd for a way to proceed toward their private box. "This way, my dear. I think we can squeeze through over by where the Earl of Farrington is standing."

"That young woman with him is not someone I know," she murmured, noting the beautiful young lady's fiery hair and lush figure. "Goods heavens, he must be old enough to be her father."

"His latest mistress, I believe," her husband said coolly as they edged through the crowd. "I'm sure they are here at the opera together simply to annoy his wife. Discretion has never been Farrington's strong suit."

The note of disapproval in her husband's voice did not escape her, but at least it wasn't directed at her. That is, not

yet. Colton Northfield, the fifth Duke of Rolthven, did not believe in public displays of one's private life. She had learned that much in three months of marriage.

If he had a mistress, he certainly would not bring her out and flaunt the affair in front of all fashionable London society. Neither would he purposely hurt or humiliate his wife. Brianna simply prayed he *didn't* have a mistress, nor did she ever want him to feel he required one.

His touch on her arm was light as he guided her toward the carpeted stairs that led up to the elegant box overlooking center stage. Heads turned as they passed, other friends giving greetings, and Brianna noticed more than one gentlemen allowed his gaze to linger on her, and several ladies raised their brows.

Fine. After all, she wished to make an impression. If the length of the masculine stares was a good measure, she was certainly succeeding.

She felt the moment when Colton first noticed her gown. They were halfway up the stairs and he faltered, his fingers tightening. One foot on the next step, he stopped cold, his gaze riveted suddenly on her décolletage. "Good God, what are you wearing?"

"Should you really halt on the stairs and stare so pointedly at my bosom?" she asked with a calm she didn't particularly feel, taking another determined step past him. "This is Madame Ellen's latest creation and the neckline is a little daring, yes, but I am assured I have the proper figure to carry it off."

Her husband didn't move for a moment, his glittering gaze still intent on the ivory flesh that swelled above the material of her bodice, the entire upper curves exposed. He bit out in a low tone, "You certainly can carry it off, but perhaps you should have asked yourself if you *should* carry it off. Or better yet, have asked me."

Ask him about fashion? As if he normally cared. He dressed impeccably but he never commented on her clothing at all.

Perhaps that would change. It would be a nice beginning to know he actually looked at her.

Brianna murmured, "People are staring, Colton, wondering if we are actually arguing in public."

"We might be," he muttered. "Have you lost your mind?"

The Duke of Rolthven in an altercation with his wife on the stairs at the opera? Never. She had chosen this venue because she was confident of his ingrained sense of politesse. He would be horrified of making a scene. Brianna summoned a serene smile—utterly false, for she could feel the warmth in her cheeks and the beat of her pulse in her throat. "Not at all. Shall we take our seats?"

Uttering a low curse, he responded by almost dragging her up the rest of the way, his long fingers locked around her wrist as he ushered her down the gallery and into the balcony with their private seats. His expression was hard to read, but his mouth formed a tight line as he seated her and took the adjacent chair.

The theater was packed as always, the huge chandeliers glittering, the gilt boxes holding the buzz of hundreds of conversations. People attended not so much to see the performance but to be seen themselves and to observe others, something her husband knew full well.

"I suppose since we are already here, wrapping you up in your cloak and carrying you outside might be remarked upon," he said sardonically, extending his long legs. "I wondered why we garnered so much attention as we went through the lobby, but now I understand perfectly. I imagine more opera glasses will be directed toward your lavishly displayed breasts this evening than at the stage. Whatever possessed you, madam, to choose such an outrageous gown?"

Because I want to seduce you, she thought, gazing at him. He looked as devastatingly attractive as ever this evening, even with a frown on his handsome face and the sensual line of his mouth compressed in reproof. He was tall, with thick chestnut hair and a lean, athletic build, and on one of those rare occasions when Colton smiled, every woman in the

room felt a little flushed. High cheekbones gave his face an arrogant cast, his nose was straight, the line of his jaw and chin nicely chiseled. The first time Brianna had seen him she'd been dazzled by his flagrant good looks, and when he actually began to show some interest in her, she had tumbled head over heels in love like some maiden in a romantic fable.

But there were some aspects to her marriage she hadn't anticipated. As a mythical prince, Colton had a few flaws. And he had not married the meek little ingénue she suspected he thought he was going to get.

With as much composure as possible, Brianna answered, "There are many ladies in attendance this evening attired in gowns every bit as fashionably low-cut as mine. I thought you would like it."

"*Like* having every man in London ogle my wife's bare bosom?" His brow lifted, but his gaze strayed downward again. "Think again, my dear."

"Actually," she answered, a flicker of hope stirring because, though he sounded annoyed, he couldn't seem to stop staring, "I thought *you* might like the way I look in this gown."

For a moment he seemed surprised, his eyes, a vivid azure shade, narrowing a fraction. "You are stunningly beautiful, Brianna, and I always admire the way you look. Why do you think I married you?"

That wasn't what she wanted to hear. It was exactly what she *didn't* want to hear. Shaking out her fan, Brianna said furiously, "I hope you didn't wed me, Your Grace, simply to have as an ornament on your arm at functions like this. I am a person, and a woman, and your wife."

Her retort caused an uncharacteristically disconcerted look to cross his face. "Perhaps that wasn't well put. I meant you are always attractive to me. You do not have to be half naked for me to think so."

"Then prove it."

"I beg your pardon?" His arched eyebrows shot up and he stared at her, obviously mystified.

Good. She truly had his attention. All too often he seemed only absently aware of her presence. He was a busy man and she understood and accepted that the responsibilities of title and fortune consumed a great deal of his time. But when they were together, she wanted to know her husband enjoyed her company. They were both still adjusting to marriage—or at least she was, for she didn't notice his changing much about his routine now that he had a wife. He still worked most of the day, still went to his club, still spent more time in the gaming rooms at balls and soirees than with her. Many society couples lived very separate lives. But it wasn't what she wanted for herself, and to change his attitude about it, she was determined to make him truly *notice* her.

The orchestra began to stir. Raising her voice so he could hear her words, not caring about the inhabitants of the boxes all around them, Brianna said clearly, "Tonight I want you to prove to me that you find me attractive."

"What the devil are you talking about?"

Brianna gazed at her husband and gave a small sigh. "I worried you might say something exactly like that."

Women were such unpredictable, irrational, and emotional creatures, Colton Northfield pondered darkly, only half listening to Herr Mozart's creation, his gaze idly resting on the stage, where a brightly clad troupe danced to the same lively melodies he had heard so many times before. Next to him, his lovely wife sat in rapt audience, her fan waving in languid sweeps against the closeness of the huge room. Tendrils of silky pale gold hair brushed her slender neck, and her delicate face was slightly flushed from the heat.

He hadn't lied; she was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen, and from the first moment of their introduction, nearly a year ago, he had wanted her intensely. Courtship, the necessary engagement, and wedded life had not changed that one bit. Even now, the quiver of her opulent flesh as it swelled above the bodice of an ivory gown that—no matter what she said—bordered on scandalous,

made his erection swell uncomfortably against the confinement of his fitted breeches.

What exactly was percolating through her pretty head? If asked before this evening, Colton would have said that Brianna was the last young woman of his acquaintance he would expect to wear something so outrageous. Usually she was a proper young lady. Sometimes too proper, but then again, she was innocent and inexperienced still. He had curbed his lust as much as possible and kept lovemaking between them a subdued experience, trying to familiarize her with the intimacy of the act and loosen her understandable inhibitions.

There was certainly nothing inhibited about her tonight.

She leaned forward and lifted the gold opera glasses in her hand to get a better look at the stage. The mounded flesh barely contained by the bodice of her dress severely tested the material, and he could swear he saw the edge of one pink, perfect nipple.

Maybe he'd been going about things in the wrong way, he mused. Not that he approved in any way of her appearing in public half naked, but he did admire the view. She certainly had lovely breasts, full and pliant, and the virginal color of the gown offset by the sinfully low neckline did some interesting things to the area below his waist.

Very interesting things.

"The soprano is spectacular, isn't she?" The glasses lowered and his wife smiled, her dark blue eyes, framed by long lashes, still focused on the performance.

Since he wasn't really paying attention, it was hard for him to comment.

You are spectacular.

In a noncommittal tone, he mumbled a less than brilliant response, "Yes. Very talented."

"That last aria was breathtaking."

What was breathtaking was the graceful curve of Brianna's bared shoulder and the flawless perfection of her skin. Not to mention the alluring soft rose of her mouth, and

the contrast of the darker color of her eyebrows to the golden luster of her hair.

Good God, Colton thought with amused self-disgust. What was he doing? Poetic comparisons and lascivious thoughts while sitting in his private box at the opera were not at all in his character.

He forced his attention to the stage. Or at least he tried.

It seemed like forever before the music ended, the applause ceased, and the chaotic exodus from the theater began. Taking advantage of his superior height to spot the appropriate opening, Colton escorted his wife outside as fast as possible to avoid both gossip over her attire and—if he were honest with himself—any other males having the chance to feel similar appreciation for her undeniable charms. The usual after-performance pleasantries to friends they did encounter were administered as expediently as possible, and he waited impatiently to retrieve her cloak. He swirled it around her shoulders with a deep sense of relief.

“My carriage, please,” he said in a clipped tone to a footman who bowed and apparently caught the urgency in his voice, for the young man practically ran to order it.

“Are you in a hurry?” Brianna asked.

Her question sounded innocent enough, he thought warily as he stood waiting for the vehicle to be brought around, but he wasn’t sure it was. “I don’t care to wait in an endless queue,” he lied.

“It does get tedious,” she agreed, slipping the wrap from her shoulders just enough to expose the view he wanted covered. “My, it is a warm evening, isn’t it?”

He was certainly sweating, and he wasn’t completely sure it was the temperature outside causing the discomfort.

Once their carriage arrived, Colton helped Brianna in and then settled himself on the opposite seat, rapping sharply on the roof to signal the driver.

In the shadowed interior of the coach, with her cloak open so the sumptuous flesh that nearly spilled from the front of her gown glimmered pale, Brianna looked more tempting

than ever. Clearing his throat, he said, "Did you enjoy the production, my dear?"

"Yes." Her voice was hushed and she gazed at him from under her long lashes in a provocative way he'd never seen before. With every breath she took, her breasts threatened to burst free from the inadequate confines of her gown. "Did you like it?"

He had been riveted. Was still riveted. Oh, hell, hadn't she just asked him a question?

It was only polite to answer it.

"The view was glorious," he said dryly, giving up any attempt to hide his salacious interest. "And, yes, I thought the opera itself diverting."

She smiled, looking nothing like the young ingénue he had married, but instead every inch an alluring, sensual woman. "If I can divert you in any way, please, fell free to indulge yourself. *Now* would be fine."

In some deep part of his mind it was irksome that she knew how she had unsettled him, but that part was not in control at the moment. Another part of his body was now in charge.

He didn't intend to move. After all, engaging in an indiscretion in a carriage was most undignified, but suddenly Colton did not care in the least. He reached over and scooped Brianna into his arms, settling back into his seat with her body draped across his lap. Lowering his head, he kissed her hungrily, his tongue exploring her mouth, tasting every sweet corner. She responded with equal abandon, her arms wrapping around his neck, her slender, voluptuous body pressing against him. Not releasing her mouth, he eased the cloth from one shapely shoulder and her bared breast filled his hand with a soft, supple weight.

Perfect.

Everything faded. The clattering of the wheels of the vehicle as it rolled along the cobbled street, the warm evening . . . everything except the hard throbbing of his cock. He could hear her erratic breathing when he finally broke the kiss and slid his mouth down the graceful length of

her neck, his lips lingering for a moment at the point where her pulse beat fast and light. Brianna made a small sound as his thumb circled the luscious crest of her pink nipple, her head falling back against his shoulder. "Colton . . . oh, yes."

Her skin was soft, smooth, and infinitely female. His fingers deftly found the fastenings at the back of her gown, and it was around her waist in moments. Licking the enticing valley between her breasts, kissing her mounded flesh, sucking on her nipples until they were erect and tight, he could feel his lovely wife's arousal in the way she clung to him and whispered his name.

The ducal carriage had nice wide seats, something he hadn't particularly appreciated before. "I cannot believe I am doing this but God help me, Brianna, I have to have you now," he said raggedly, laying her down on the seat.

"I want you too." Her hair had loosened and it framed her face in a silken tumble, her shoulders ivory in the dim light, her naked breasts tight and quivering with the motion of the vehicle. He thought he would cease to breathe when she reached down to pull up her skirts above her waist, baring long, lovely legs in their silk stockings and garters. Her pubic hair was a small golden triangle between her white thighs, and as he discarded his coat and unfastened his breeches, she parted her legs in graphic erotic invitation.

So hot with urgent need that he felt like he might combust at any moment, Colton accepted gladly, jerking at the fastenings of his breeches. Freeing his pulsing erection, he lowered himself over his wife's sprawled, half-dressed body, adjusting himself between her open thighs. One hand braced on the upholstered seat, he guided his rigid cock to her entrance, finding her wet and accommodating to his penetration. Brianna clutched his shoulders as he thrust inside her body, a low moan coming from her throat.

It was so good, he thought in feverish pleasure, not even bothering to caution her to be quiet. The idea of his driver overhearing them make love would normally have appalled him, but at that moment, he just didn't care. Withdrawing, he pushed back inside her tight passage with long strokes,

the pumping of his lower body matching the swaying motion of the carriage.

Brianna arched to meet him, her hips lifting for each penetration, her eyes shut, long lashes dark against her flushed cheeks. The sharp bite of her fingernails through the fine lawn of his shirt increased as the rhythm escalated, and Colton was startled to realize she was going to climax so quickly, without any other stimulation. A muffled scream rang out as she arched frantically and her inner muscles began to ripple and tighten.

It sent him right over the edge. Pushing deep, he erupted with such intensity that his body shook even though he held himself still, the rapture taking him prisoner, holding him as he flooded her with his seed and groaned her name.

When he could finally breathe again, he registered two things: The first was that his gorgeous wife smiled up at him in a way that could be described only as triumphant. The second was that the vehicle they occupied in a state of scandalous near-undress was coming to a halt.

“Damnation,” Colton muttered in disbelief. Had he actually just ravished his wife in a moving carriage like some randy adolescent?