The Stranger
I Married
ALSO BY SYLVIA DAY

Bad Boys Ahoyp

Ask for It

Passion for the Game

A Passion for Him

Don’t Tempt Me

Pride and Pleasure

Seven Years to Sin

SYLVIA DAY, WRITING AS LIVIA DARE

In the Flesh

ANTHOLOGIES

Perfect Kisses

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The Stranger
I Married

SYLVIA DAY
If you loved *The Stranger I Married*, don’t miss *Seven Years to Sin*, available now.
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Prologue

London, 1815

"Do you truly intend to steal your best friend's mistress?"

Gerard Faulkner, the sixth Marquess of Grayson, kept his eyes on the woman in question, and smiled. Those who knew him well also knew that look, and its wicked portent. "I certainly do."

"Dastardly," Bartley muttered. "Too low even for you, Gray. Is it not sufficient to cuckold Sinclair? You know how Markham feels about Pel. He's lost his head over her."

Gray studied Lady Pelham with a connoisseur's eye. There was no incertitude about her suitability for his needs. Beautiful and scandalous, he could not have designed a wife more suited to irritating his mother if he'd tried. Pel, as she was affectionately referred to, was of medium height, but stunningly curved, and built for a man's pleasure. The auburn-haired widow of the late Earl of Pelham had a brazen sultriness that was addicting, or so rumor said. Her former lover, Lord Pearson, had gone into a long decline after she ended their affair.

Gerard had no difficulty seeing how a man could mourn the loss of her attentions. Under the blazing lights of the mas-
sive chandeliers, Isabel Pelham glittered like a precious jewel, expensive and worth every shilling.

He watched as she smiled up at Markham with a wide curving of her lips, lips which were considered too full for conventional beauty, but just the right plumpness to rim a man’s cock. All around the room, covetous male eyes watched her, hoping for the day when she might turn those sherry-colored eyes upon them, and perhaps select one of them as her next lover. To Gerard, their longing was pitiable. The woman was extremely selective, and retained her lovers for years. She’d had Markham on a leash for nearly two now, and showed no signs of losing interest.

But that interest did not extend to matrimony.

On the few occasions when the viscount had begged for her hand, she refused him, declaring she had no interest in marrying a second time. Gray, on the other hand, had no doubts whatsoever that he could change her mind about that.

“Calm yourself, Bartley,” he murmured. “Things will work out. Trust me.”

“No one can trust you.”

“You can trust me to give you five hundred pounds if you drag Markham away from Pel and into the card room.”

“Well, then.” Bartley straightened his spine and his waistcoat, neither action capable of hiding his widening middle. “I am at your service.”

Grinning, Gerard bowed slightly to his greedy acquaintance who took off to the right, while he made his way to the left. He strolled without haste around the fringes of the ballroom, making his way toward the pivotal object of his plan. The journey was slow going, his way blocked by one mother-and-debutante pairing after another. Most bachelor peers similarly hounded would grimace with annoyance, but Gerard was known as much for his overabundance of charm, as he was for his penchant for mischief. So he flirted outrageously, kissed hands freely, and left every female in his wake certain he would be calling on her with a formal offer of marriage.
Casting the occasional glance toward Markham, he noted the exact moment Bartley lured him away, and then crossed the distance with purposeful strides, taking Pel’s gloved hand to his lips before the usual throng of avid admirers could encircle her.

As he lifted his head, he caught her eyes laughing at him. “Why, Lord Grayson. A woman cannot help but be flattered by such a single-minded approach.”

“Lovely Isabel, your beauty drew me like a moth to a flame.” He tucked her hand around his forearm, and led her away for a walk around the dance floor.

“Needed a respite from the ambitious mothers, I assume?” she asked in her throaty voice. “I’m afraid even my association will not be enough to make you less appealing. You are simply too delicious for words. You shall be the death of one of these poor girls.”

Gerard breathed a deep sigh of satisfaction, an action which inundated his senses with her lush scent of some exotic flower. They would rub along famously, he knew. He had come to know her well in the years she had been with Markham, and he had always liked her immensely. “I agree. None of these women will do.”

Pel gave a delicate shrug of her bare shoulders, her pale skin set off beautifully by her dark blue gown and sapphire necklace. “You are young yet, Grayson. Once you are my age, perhaps you will have settled down enough to not completely torment your bride with your appetites.”

“Or I can marry a mature woman, and save myself the effort of altering my habits.”

Arching a perfectly shaped brow, she said, “This conversation is leading somewhere, is it not, my lord?”

“I want you, Pel,” he said softly. “Desperately. Only an affair will not suffice. Marriage, however, will take care of it nicely.”

Soft, husky laughter drifted in the air between them. “Oh,
Gray. I do adore your humor, you know. It is hard to find men so deliciously unabashed in their wickedness.”

“And it is lamentably hard to find a creature as blatantly sexual as you, my dear Isabel. I’m afraid you are quite unique, and therefore irreplaceable for my needs.”

She shot him a sidelong glance. “I was under the impression you were keeping that actress, the pretty one who cannot remember her lines.”

Gerard smiled. “Yes, that’s true. All of it.” Anne could not act to save her life. Her talents lay in other, more carnal activities.

“And honestly, Gray. You are too young for me. I am six and twenty, you know. And you are...” She raked him with a narrowed glance. “Well, you are delectable, but—”

“I am two and twenty, and could ride you well, Pel, never doubt it. However, you misunderstand. I have a mistress. Two, in fact, and you have Markham—”

“Yes, and I am not quite finished with him.”

“Keep him, I have no objections.”

“I’m relieved to have your approval,” she said dryly, and then she laughed again, a sound Gray had always enjoyed. “You are quite mad.”

“Over you, Pel, definitely. Have been from the first.”

“But you’ve no wish to bed me.”

He looked at her with pure male appreciation, taking in the ripe swell of her breasts above the low bodice. “Now, I did not say that. You are a beautiful woman, and I am an amorous man. However, since we are to be bound together, when we decide to fall into bed with one another is moot, yes? We shall have a lifetime to make that leap, if we decide it would be mutually enjoyable.”

“Are you in your cups?” she asked, frowning.

“No, Isabel.”

Pel stopped, forcing him to stop with her. She stared up at him, and then shook her head. “If you are serious—”

“There you are!” called a voice behind them.
Gerard bit back a curse at the sound of Markham’s voice, but he faced his friend with a careless smile. Isabel’s countenance was equally innocent. She truly was flawless.

“I must thank you for keeping the vultures at a distance, Gray,” Markham said jovially, his handsome face lit with pleasure at the sight of his paramour. “I was momentarily distracted by something that proved not to be worth my time.”

Relinquishing Pel’s hand with a flourish, Gerard said, “What are friends for?”

“Where have you been?” Gerard growled a few hours later, as a hooded figure entered his bedroom. He paused his pacing, his black silk robe swirling to a halt around his bare legs.

“You know I come when I can, Gray.”

The hood was thrown back revealing silvery blond hair and a beloved face. He crossed the room in two strides and took her mouth, lifting her feet from the floor. “It is not often enough, Em,” he breathed. “Not nearly.”

“I cannot drop everything to serve your needs. I am a married woman.”

“You’ve no need to remind me of that fact,” he grumbled. “I never forget it.”

He buried his face in the curve of her shoulder, and breathed her in. She was so soft and innocent, so sweet. “I’ve missed you.”

Emily, now Lady Sinclair, gave a breathless laugh, her lips swollen from his kisses. “Liar.” Her mouth turned down morosely. “You have been seen with that actress more than a few times in the fortnight since I saw you last.”

“You know she means nothing. It’s you I love.”

He could explain, but she would not understand his need for wild, unrestrained fucking, just as she had not understood Sinclair’s demands. She was too slight of frame, and genteel in sensibility, to enjoy such fervency. It was his respect for her which led him to seek such release elsewhere.
“Oh, Gray.” She sighed, her fingers curling into the hairs at his nape. “Sometimes I think you truly believe that. But perhaps you love me as much as a man like you is able.”

“Never doubt it,” he said ardently. “I love you more than anything, Em. I always have.” Taking a moment to divest her of the cape, he tossed it aside and carried her to the waiting bed.

As he undressed her with quiet efficiency, he seethed inside. Emily was supposed to have been his bride, but he had gone away on his Grand Tour, and returned to find his childhood love married. She said her heart had been broken when he left, and rumors of his affairs had reached her ears. She had reminded him that he had never written, which led her to believe he had forgotten her.

Gerard knew his mother had helped to plant the seeds of doubt, and then had watered them daily. Emily had not been worthy in the dowager’s eyes. She had wanted him to marry a bride of higher station, so he would do the opposite, to thwart her and pay her in kind.

If only Em had held on to her faith a little while longer, they could have been wed now. This could have been her bed, one she did not have to leave before the sun rose.

Naked, her pale skin glowing like ivory in the candlelight, Emily took his breath away, as she always had. He had loved her as long as he could remember. She was so beautiful. Not in the way Pel was. Pel had an earthy, carnal sensuality. Em was a different kind of beautiful, more fragile and understated. They were as opposite as a rose was to a daisy.

Gerard was very fond of daisies.

His large hand reached out and cupped the slight weight of her breast. “You are still maturing, Em,” he said, noting the new fullness.

She covered his hand with her own. “Gerard,” she said in her lilting voice.

He caught her gaze, and his heart swelled at the love he saw there. “Yes, my love?”
“I am enceinte.”

Gerard gaped. He had been careful, and made use of French letters. “Em, dear God!”

Her blue eyes, those lovely eyes the color of cornflowers, filled with tears. “Tell me you are happy. Please.”

“I . . .” He swallowed hard. “Of course, sweet.” He had to ask the obvious question. “What of Sinclair?”

Emily smiled sadly. “I do not believe there will be a doubt in anyone’s mind that the child is yours, but he will not refute it. He gave me his word. In a way, ’tis fitting. He released his last mistress due to pregnancy.”

His stomach clenched tight with shock, Gerard laid her down upon the mattress. She looked so tiny, so angelic against the blood red color of his velvet counterpane. He discarded his robe and climbed over her. “Come away with me.”

Gerard lowered his head, and sealed his lips over hers, moaning at the sweet taste of her. If only things were different. If only she had waited.

“Come away with me, Emily,” he begged again. “We can be happy together.”

Tears slid down her temples. “Gray, my love.” She cupped his face in her tiny hands. “You are such a passionate dreamer.”

He nuzzled the fragrant valley between her breasts, his hips grinding his erection into the mattress in an attempt to temper his desire. With an iron will, he controlled his baser demands. “You cannot deny me.”

“Too true,” she gasped, caressing his back. “If I had been stronger, how different our lives would have been. But Sinclair . . . the dear man. I have shamed him enough.”

Gerard pressed loving kisses into her tight belly, and thought of his child who had taken root there. His heart raced in near panic. “What will you do then, if you will not have me?”

“I depart tomorrow for Northumberland.”

“Northumberland!” His head lifted in surprise. “Bloody hell, why so far away?”

“Because that is where Sinclair wishes to go.” With her
hands under his arms, she tugged him over her, her legs spreading wide in welcome. “Under the circumstances, how can I refuse?”

Feeling as if she were drifting away, Gerard rose over her, and slid his cock slowly into her, groaning his lust as she closed hot and tight around him. “But you will come back,” he said hoarsely.

Emily’s golden head thrashed softly in pleasure, her eyes squeezed shut. “God, yes, I will return.” Her depths fluttered along his shaft. “I cannot live without you. Without this.”

Holding her tightly to him, Gerard began to thrust gently. He stroked into her in the way he knew brought her the most pleasure, while restraining his own needs. “I love you, Em.”

“My love,” she gasped. And then she came apart in his arms.

*Tink.*
*Tink.*

Isabel awoke with a groan, knowing by the soft purplish color of the sky and her exhaustion that it must be just after dawn. She lay there a moment, her mind groggy, trying to determine what had disturbed her sleep.

*Tink.*

Running her hands over her eyes, Isabel sat up and reached for her night rail to cover her nakedness. She glanced at the large-faced clock on the mantel and realized Markham had departed only two hours before. She had hoped to sleep until late afternoon, and still intended to do so, once she dealt with her recalcitrant swain. Whoever he was.

She shivered as she made her way to the window, where tiny pebbles hitting the glass provided the annoying sound. Isabel pushed up the sash and looked down at her rear garden. She sighed. “I suppose if I must be disturbed,” she called out, “it is best that it be for a sight as handsome as you are.”

The Marquess of Grayson grinned up at her, his shiny brown hair disheveled and his deep blue eyes red-rimmed. He was
missing his cravat and the neck of his shirt gaped open, revealing a golden throat and a few strands of dark chest hair. He appeared to be lacking a waistcoat as well, and she could not help but smile back at him. Gray reminded her so much of Pelham when she had first met him nine years ago. Those had been happy times, short-lived as they were.

“O Romeo, Romeo!” she recited, taking a seat on the window bench. “Wherefore art thou—”

“Oh, please, Pel,” he groaned, cutting her off with that deep laugh of his. “Let me in, will you? It’s cold out here.”

“Gray.” She shook her head. “If I open my door to you, this incident will be all over London by supper time. Go away, before you are seen.”

He crossed his arms stubbornly, the material of his black jacket straining to contain his brawny arms and broad shoulders. Grayson was so young, his face as yet unlined. Still a boy in so many ways. Pelham had been the same age when he’d swept her off her seventeen-year-old feet.

“I am not leaving, Isabel. So you may as well invite me in, before I make a spectacle of myself.”

She could tell by the stubborn set of his jaw that he was serious. Well, as serious as a man such as him could be.

“Go to the front, then,” she relented. “Someone will be awake to admit you.”

Isabel rose from the window seat, and retrieved her white satin dressing robe. She left her bedroom and walked into her boudoir, where she opened the curtains to let in the now pale pink light. The room was her favorite, decorated in soft shades of ivory and burnished gold, with gilt-edged chairs and chaise, and tasseled drapes. But the soothing color scheme was not what most moved her. That distinction went to the only spot of obtrusive color in the space—the large portrait of Pelham that graced the far wall.

Every day she gazed upon that likeness, and allowed her heartbreak and loathing to rise to the surface. The earl was impervious, of course, his seductively etched mouth curved in
the smile that had won her hand in marriage. How she had loved him, and adored him, as only a young girl could. Pelham had been everything to her, until she had sat at Lady Warren’s musicale and heard two women behind her discussing her husband’s carnal prowess.

Her jaw clenched at the memory, all her old resentment rushing to the fore. Nearly five years had passed since Pelham met his reward in a duel over a paramour, but she still smarted from the sting of betrayal and humiliation.

A soft scratching came to the door. Isabel called out and the portal opened, revealing the frowning countenance of her hastily dressed butler.

“My lady, the Marquess of Grayson requests a moment of your time.” He cleared his throat. “From the service door.”

Isabel bit back a smile, her dark mood fleeing at the image she pictured of Grayson standing haughty and arrogant, as only he could be, while semi-dressed and at the delivery entrance. “I am at home.”

A slight twitching of a gray eyebrow was the only indication of surprise.

While the servant went to fetch Gray, she went around the room and lit the tapers. Lord, she was weary. She hoped he would be quick about whatever was so urgent. Thinking of their earlier odd conversation, she wondered if he might not need some help. He could be a bit touched in the head.

Certainly they had been unfailingly friendly with one another, and beyond mere acquaintances, but never more than that. Isabel had always rubbed along well with men. After all, she liked them quite well. But there had been a respectful distance between her and Lord Grayson, because of her ongoing affair with Markham, his closest friend. An affair she had ended just hours ago, when the handsome viscount had asked her to marry him for the third time.

In any case, despite Gray’s ability to arrest her brain processes for a moment with his uncommon beauty, she had no further interest in him. He was Pelham all over again—a
man too selfish and self-centered to set aside his own needs for another’s.

The door flew open behind her, startling her, and she spun about, only to be met head-on with over six feet of powerful male. Gray caught her around the waist and spun her about, laughing that rich laugh of his. A laugh that said he’d never once had a care in the world.

“Gray!” she protested, pushing at his shoulders. “Put me down.”

“Dear Pel,” he cried, his eyes alight. “I’ve had the most wondrous news told to me this morn. I’m to be a father!”

Isabel blinked, growing dizzy from lack of sleep and the spinning.

“You are the only person alive I could think of who might be happy for me. Everyone else will be horrified. Please smile, Pel. Congratulate me.”

“I will, if you put me down.”

The marquess set her on her feet and stepped back, waiting.

She laughed at his impatient expectation. “Congratulations, my lord. May I have the name of the fortunate woman who is to become your bride?”

Much of the joy in his blue eyes faded, but his charming smile remained. “Well, that would still be you, Isabel.”

Staring up at him, she tried to discern what he was about, and failed. She gestured to a nearby chair, and then sat herself.

“You really are quite lovely with sex-mussed hair,” Gray mused. “I can see why your lovers would mourn the loss of such a sight.”

“Lord Grayson!” Isabel ran a hand over the tangles in her long tresses. The present fashion was close-cropped curls, but she preferred a longer length, as did her paramours. “Please, I must hasten you to explain the purpose of your visit. It has been a long night and I am tired.”
“It has been a long night for me as well, I have yet to sleep. But—”

“Might I suggest you sleep on this wild idea of yours? Rested, I think you might see things differently.”

“I will not,” he said stubbornly, twisting to drape one arm over the back of the chair, a pose that was sultry in its sheer artlessness. “I’ve thought it through. There are so many reasons why we would be perfect for one another.”

She snorted. “Gray, you have no notion of how wrong you are.”

“Hear me out, Pel. I need a wife.”

“I do not need a husband.”

“Are you certain about that?” he asked, arching a brow at her. “I think you do.”

Isabel crossed her arms, and settled into the back of the chaise. Whether he was insane or not, he was interesting.

“Oh?”

“Think on it. I know you grow rather fond of your paramours, but you have to dismiss them eventually, and not due to boredom. You are not that type of woman. No, you have to release them because they fall in love with you, and then want more. You refuse to take married men to your bed, so all of your lovers are free and they all wish to marry you.”

He paused. “But if you were already married . . .” Gray let his words hang in the air.

She stared at him. And then blinked. “What the devil do you gain out of such a marriage?”

“I gain a great deal, Pel. A great deal. I would be free of the marriage-minded debutantes, my mistresses would understand that they will receive no more from me, my mother—”

He shuddered. “My mother would cease presenting marital prospects to me, and I shall have a wife who is not only charming and likeable, but one who doesn’t have any foolish notions of love and commitment and fidelity.”

For some strange, unaccountable reason, Isabel found her-
self liking Lord Grayson. Unlike Pelham, Gray wasn’t filling some poor child’s head with declarations of undying love and devotion. He wasn’t making a marital bargain with a girl who might grow to love him and be hurt by his indiscretions. And he was thrilled to have a bastard, which led her to believe he intended to provide for it.

“What of children, Gray? I am not young, and you must have an heir.”

His famous, heart-stopping grin burst forth. “No worries, Isabel. I have two younger brothers, one of whom is already wed. They will have children, should we neglect the task.”

Isabel choked out a half-crazed little laugh. That she would even consider the ridiculous notion . . .

But she had said good-bye to Markham, much as she regretted that end. He was mad for her, the foolish man, and she had selfishly tied him up for almost two years. It was time for him to find a woman worthy of him. One who could love him, as she could not. Her ability to experience that elevated emotion had died with Pelham on a field at dawn.

Looking at the earl’s portrait again, Isabel hated that she had inflicted pain on Markham. He was a good man, a tender lover, and a great friend. He was also the third man whose heart had been broken by her need for physical closeness and sexual release.

She often thought of Lord Pearson, and how emotionally destroyed he had been by her dismissal. She was weary of the hurt feelings, and often berated herself for causing them, but knew she would go on as she had been. The human need for companionship would not be denied.

Gray was right. Perhaps if she were already married, she could find and enjoy a true sexual friendship with a man without him hoping for more. And she would never have to worry about Gray falling in love with her, that much was certain. He had professed a deep love for one woman, but maintained a steady string of paramours. Like Pelham, constancy and the ability to deeply love was beyond him.
But could she engage in similar infidelity after experiencing the pain it could bring?

The marquess leaned forward, and caught up her hands. “Say yes, Pel.” His stunning blue eyes pleaded with her, and she knew Gray would never mind her affairs. He would be too occupied with his own, after all. This was a bargain, nothing more.

Perhaps it was exhaustion that stunted her ability to think properly, but within the space of two hours, Isabel found herself in the Grayson traveling coach on the way to Scotland.

Six months later . . .

“Isabel, a moment of your time, if you would, please.”

Gerard watched the empty open doorway until his wife’s curvaceous form, which had just passed by, filled it again.

“Yes, Gray?” Isabel stepped into his study with an inquisitively raised brow.

“Are you free Friday evening?”

She gave him a mock chastising look. “You know I am available whenever you need me.”

“Thank you, vixen.” He leaned back in his chair and smiled. “You are too good to me.”

Isabel moved to the settee and sat. “Where are we expected?”

“Dinner at the Middletons’. I agreed to speak to Lord Rupert there, but Bentley informed me today that Lady Middleton has also invited the Grimshaws.”

“Oh.” Isabel wrinkled her nose. “Devious of her to invite your inamorata and her husband to an event you are attending.”

“Quite,” Gerard said, rising and rounding the desk to take a seat next to her.

“That smile is so wicked, Gray. You really should not let it out.”
“I cannot restrain it.” He tossed his arm over her shoulders and pulled her close, breathing in the exotic floral scent that was both familiar and stirring. “I am the luckiest man alive, and I am smart enough to know it. Can you imagine how many peers wish they had a wife like mine?”

She laughed. “You remain deliciously, unabashedly shameless.”

“And you love it. Our marriage has made you a figure of some renown.”

“You mean ‘infamy,’” she said dryly. “The older woman starved for the stamina of a younger man.”

“Starved for me.” He fingered a loose tendril of fiery hair. “I do like the sound of that.”

A soft knock on the open door had them both looking over the back of the settee at the footman who waited there.

“Yes?” Gerard asked, put out to be interrupted during a rare quiet moment with his wife. She was so often occupied with political teas and other female nonsense that he was hardly ever afforded the opportunity to enjoy her sparkling discourse. Pel was infamous, yes, but she was also unfailingly charming and the Marchioness of Grayson. Society may speculate about her, but they would never shut their doors to her.

“A special post arrived, my lord.”

Gerard held out his hand and crooked his fingers impatiently. As soon as he held the missive, he grimaced at the familiar handwriting.

“Heavens, what a face,” Isabel said. “I should leave you to it.”

“No.” He held her down by tightening his arm on her shoulder. “It’s from the dowager, and by the time I am done reading it, I will need you to pull me out of the doldrums, as only you can.”

“As you wish. If you want me to stay, I will. I am not due out for hours yet.”
Smiling at the thought of hours to share with her, Gerard opened the letter.

“Shall we play chess?” she suggested, her smile mischievous.

He shuddered dramatically. “You know how much I detest that game. Think of something less likely to put me to sleep.”

Turning his attention to the letter, he skimmed. But as he came to a paragraph written as if it were an afterthought, but which he knew to be a calculated strike, his reading slowed and his hands began to shake. His mother never wrote without the intent to wound, and she remained furious that he had married the notorious Lady Pelham.

...a shame the infant did not survive the birthing. It was a boy child, I heard. Plump and well-formed with a dark mane of hair, unlike his two blond parents. Lady Sinclair was too slightly built, the doctor said, and the baby too large. She bled out over hours. A gruesome sight, I was told . . .

Gerard’s breathing faltered, and he grew dizzy. The beautifully handwritten horrors on the page blurred until he could no longer read them.

Emily.

His chest burned, and he started in surprise as Isabel thumped him on the back.

“Breathe, damn you!” she ordered, her voice worried, but filled with command. “What the devil does that say? Give it to me.”

His hand fell slack, the papers falling to flare out on the Aubusson rug.

He should have been with Em. When Sinclair had returned his letters unopened, he should have done more to support her than merely sending friends with secondhand greetings. He had known Em his whole life. She was the first girl he’d kissed, the first girl he had given flowers to, or wrote poetry
about. He could not remember a time when the golden-haired angel had not been in the periphery of his existence.

And now she was gone, forever, killed by his lust and selfishness. His darling, sweet Emily, who deserved so much better than he had given her.

Faintly, he heard a buzzing in his ears, and thought it could be Isabel, who held one of his hands so tightly within her own. He turned and leaned against her, his cheek to her bosom, and cried. Cried until her bodice was soaked, and the hands that stroked his back shook with worry. He cried until he could not cry anymore, and all the while he hated himself.

They never made it to the Middletons’. Later that night, Gerard packed his bags and headed north.

He did not return.
Chapter 1

Four years later

“His Lordship is at home, my lady.”

For a great many women such a statement was a common utterance and nothing of note, but for Isabel, Lady Grayson, it was so rarely heard, she could not remember the last time her butler had said the same to her.

She paused in the foyer, tugging off her gloves before handing them to the waiting footman. She took her time with the task, taking the extra brief moments to collect herself, and ascertain that her racing heart was not outwardly visible.

Grayson had returned.

Isabel could not help but wonder why. He’d rejected every missive she sent to his steward, and had sent none to her. Having read the dowager’s letter, she knew what had broken him that day he’d left both London and her. She could imagine his pain, having seen his initial excitement and subsequent pride at becoming a father. As his friend, she wished Gray had allowed her to provide him more than just that one hour of comfort, but he’d turned away from her, and years had passed.

She smoothed her muslin skirts, and touched a hand to her upswept hair. When she caught herself checking her appear-
ance, Isabel stopped with a muttered curse. This was Gray. He would not care how she looked. “The study?”

“Yes, my lady.”

The scene of that day.

She nodded, and squared her shoulders, shoring up her nerve. As ready as she would ever be, Isabel passed the curving staircase and turned into the first open door on the right. Despite her mental and physical preparations, the sight of her husband’s back struck her like a physical blow. He stood silhouetted in the window, appearing taller and definitely broader. His powerful torso tapered to a trim waist, beautifully curved ass, and long, muscular legs. Framed by the dark green velvet curtains, the perfect symmetry of his form stole her breath.

But there was a somber, oppressive air that surrounded him that was so distant from the carefree man she remembered. It forced her to take another deep breath before opening her mouth to speak.

As if he felt her presence, Gray turned before she managed a word. Her throat closed tight as a fist.

He was not at all the man she had married.

They stared at each other, both held motionless in the pregnant pause. Only a few years, and yet it seemed a lifetime had passed. Grayson was no longer a boy, not by any stretch of the imagination. His face had lost that faint remnant of youth, and time had etched its passing in the lines that bracketed his mouth and eyes. Not happy lines, she could see. Frown lines, lines of sorrow. The brilliant blue of his irises that had caused many women to fall in love with him were now a deeper, darker shade. They no longer smiled, and appeared to have seen far more than possible in only a four year span.

She raised a hand to her bodice, dismayed by the rapid lift and fall of her chest.

Gray had been beautiful before. Now, there were no words
to describe him. She forced her breathing to slow, and fought off a sudden, desperate flare of panic. She had known how to handle the boy, but this . . . this man was not tamable. Had she met him anew, she would know to stay far away.

“Hello, Isabel.”

Even his voice had changed. It was deeper now, slightly raspy.

Isabel had no notion of what to say to him.

“You have not changed at all,” he murmured, striding toward her. The previous cockiness of his bearing was gone, replaced by the type of confidence one gained from walking through hell and surviving it.

Sucking in a deep breath, she was inundated with the familiar scent of him. A little spicier, perhaps, but he smelled like Gray, nevertheless. Staring up at his impassive face, she could do no more than shrug helplessly.

“I should have written,” he said.

“Yes, you should have,” she agreed. “Not just to warn me of your intent to visit, but before, if only to say that you were well. I have been worried about you, Gray.”

He gestured with his hand toward a nearby chair, and she sank into it gratefully. As he moved to the settee across from her, Isabel noted his quaint garb. While he wore trousers with jacket and waistcoat, the garments were plain, and of common materials. Whatever he had been doing these last years, it apparently had not required the latest fashions.

“I apologize for your worry.” One side of his mouth curved upward in a ghost of his former smile. “But I could not tell you I was well, when I was far from it. I could not bear to look at letters, Pel. It was not because they were from you. For years I avoided any sight of correspondence. But now . . .”

He paused, and his jaw tightened, as if with determination. “I am not visiting.”

“Oh?” Her stomach fluttered. Their camaraderie was gone. Instead of the easy comfort she had once enjoyed with him, she now felt decidedly nervous.
“I have come here to live. If I can remember how to do that.”

“Gray—”

He shook his head, his slightly-longer-than-fashionable locks drifting about his neck. “No pity, Isabel. I do not deserve it. What’s more, I don’t want it.”

“What do you want?”

His met her gaze directly. “I want many things, but mostly I want companionship. And I want to be worthy of it.”

“Worthy?” She frowned.

“I was a dreadful friend, as are most selfish people.”

Isabel stared down at her hands and noted her gold wedding band—a symbol of her lifelong commitment to a veritable stranger. “Where have you been, Gray?”

“Taking stock.”

So he was not going to tell her. “Very well, then. What do you want from me?” She lifted her chin. “What service can I provide?”

“First, I will need to be made presentable.” Gray waved a careless hand down the length of his body. “Then I will need to hear the latest on dit. I have read the papers, but you and I both know that gossip is rarely the truth. Most importantly, I will require your escort.”

“I am not certain how much assistance I can offer you, Gray,” she said honestly.

“I am aware.” He stood and moved toward her. “The gossips have been unkind to you in my absence, which is why I have returned. How responsible can I be, truly, if I cannot take care of my own wife?” He dropped to a crouch beside her. “It is a great deal to ask of you, Pel, I know. It was not what you agreed to when we made our bargain. But things have changed.”

“You have changed.”

“God, I can only hope that’s true.”

Gray caught up her hands, and she felt calluses against her fingertips. She looked down, and saw his skin dark from the
sun and reddened from work. Next to her smaller, paler ones, the contrast was like night to day.

He gave a gentle squeeze. Isabel lifted her gaze, and was stunned again by the comeliness of his features.

“I will not coerce you, Pel. If you wish to live your life as you have been, I will respect that.” That faint hint of his remembered smile shined through again. “But I am not above begging, I warn you. I owe you much, and I am quite determined.”

It was that brief glimpse of the old Gray that soothed her. Yes, the outer shell had changed, perhaps even much of the interior, but there was still some of the scapegrace charmer she knew in there. For the moment, it was enough.

Isabel smiled back, and his relief was tangible. “I will cancel my engagements for this evening and we can strategize.”

Grayson shook his head. “I need to gather my bearings, and familiarize myself with being home again. Enjoy yourself tonight. You shall be burdened with me soon enough.”

“Perhaps you would agree to have tea with me, in an hour or so?” Maybe then she could compel him to tell her about his absence.

“I would enjoy that.”

She stood, and he rose with her.

Heavens, he was tall. Had he always been? She could not recall. Pushing aside her surprise, Isabel turned toward the door, and found one hand still caught in his.

Gray released it with a sheepish shrug. “See you in an hour, Pel.”

Gerard waited until Isabel departed the room before sinking onto the settee with a groan. During his absence, insomnia had been a recurring torment. Needing physical exhaustion to sleep, he’d worked the fields of his many properties and in doing so he had become accustomed to muscle aches and pains. Never had his body hurt in quite the manner it did now. He hadn’t realized how tense he was until he was alone and the
seductive floral fragrance that was his wife’s alone had dissipated.

_Had Isabel always been so beautiful? _He could not re-
member. Certainly he had used the word “beautiful” to de-
scribe her in his thoughts, but the reality was beyond what
the mere utterance could convey. Her hair had more fire, her
eyes more sparkle, her skin more glow than he had remem-
bered.

Over the last few years he had said “my wife” hundreds of
times as he paid her accounts and handled other matters re-
lying to her. However, until today, he had never actually put
the appellation together with the face and body of Isabel
Grayson.

Gerard ran a hand through his hair, and wondered at his
sanity when he’d made this marriage bargain with her. When
Pel had walked into the room, all the oxygen had left. How
had he never noted that corollary before? He had not lied
when he said she looked the same. But for the first time, he
_saw_ her. Truly _saw_ her. Then again, during the last two years,
he had begun to see a great many things he had been blind to
before.

Like this room.

He glanced around and grimaced. Dark green with dark
walnut paneling. What in hell had he been thinking? A man
could not peruse accounts properly in this gloomy place. And
reading was out of the question.

_Who has time to read when there are drinks to be had, and
women to woo? _

The words of his youth came back to taunt him.

Rising to his feet, Gerard walked to the bookshelves and
withdrew random volumes. Every one he opened creaked in
protest at the bending of its bindings. None of them had ever
been read.

What kind of man surrounded himself with beauty and
life, and then never spared a moment to appreciate any of it?

Filled with self-disgust, he sat at his desk and began a list
of things he wanted changed. Before long he had filled several sheets.

“My lord?”

He lifted his head to see the lackey in the doorway. “Yes?”

“Her ladyship inquired after you. She wishes to know if you have decided against tea?”

Gerard glanced at the clock in surprise, and then pushed away from the desk and stood. “The dining room, or the parlor?”

“Her ladyship’s boudoir, my lord.”

Every muscle tensed again. How had he forgotten that, too? He had enjoyed sitting in that bastion of femininity and watching her prepare for her evenings out. As he climbed the stairs, he thought back on what time they’d spent together and admitted it had been filled with very little meaningful discourse. But he knew he had liked her, and that she had been a confidant to him.

He needed a friend now, since he no longer had any. He determined that he would rekindle the friendship he had once enjoyed with his wife, and with that expectation in mind, he lifted his hand and knocked on her door.

Isabel took a deep breath at the sound of the soft knock, and then called out permission to enter. Gray came in, pausing on the threshold, a telling moment of hesitation she had not seen from him before. Lord Grayson never waited. He leapt into action the moment he thought of something, which is how he often landed into mischief.

He stared at her, long and hard. Enough to make her regret the decision to receive him in her dressing gown. She had debated internally for almost half an hour, and in the end had decided to act as much as possible like she had before. Surely, the sooner they settled into their usual routine, the more comfortable they both would be.

“I believe the water is most likely cold by now,” she murmured, turning away from the gilded vanity to sit on the
nearby chaise. “But then I was always the one who drank tea.”
“I preferred brandy.”
He closed the door, giving her a brief moment to savor the sound of his voice. Why she should notice its slight rasp now, when she hadn’t before, puzzled her.
“I have it here.” She gestured toward the low table where a china tea set, brandy decanter, and goblet waited.
Gray’s mouth widened in a slow smile. “You are always thinking of me. Thank you.” He looked around. “I am pleased to find the space exactly as I remember it. With the walls and ceiling draped with white satin, I have always felt like I am standing in a tent when I am in here.”
“That was the effect I wanted,” she said, relaxing into the low back and curling her legs next to her.
“Is that so?”
He sat across from her, tossing his arm across the back of the settee. Isabel could not help but remember how he used to do the same to her shoulders. At that time, she had thought nothing of it. That version of Grayson had merely been exuberant.
He also hadn’t been quite so large.
“Why a tent, Pel?”
“You have no notion of how long I’ve waited for you to ask that,” she admitted with a soft chuckle.
“Why didn’t I ask before?”
“We did not talk about such things.”
“No?” His eyes laughed at her. “What did we talk about then?”
She moved to pour him a brandy, but he shook his head.
“Why, we talked about you, Gray.”
“Me?” he asked with raised brows. “Surely, not all the time.”
“Nearly all the time.”
“And when we weren’t talking about me?”
“Well, then we were talking about your inamoratas.”

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Gray grimaced, and she laughed, remembering how much fun she used to have in simple discourse with him. Then she noted how he looked at her, as if he could not quite put his finger on something about her. Her laughter faded away.

“How insufferable I was, Isabel. How did you ever tolerate me?”

“I quite liked you,” she said honestly. “There never was any guessing with you. You always said exactly what you meant.”

He looked past her shoulder. “You still hang Pelham’s portrait,” he mused. Gray returned his gaze to hers. “Did you love him so very much?”

Isabel turned, and looked at the painting behind her. She tried, truly tried to dredge up some remnant of the love she had once felt for him, but her bitter resentment was too deep. She could not reach below it. “I did. I cannot remember the feeling now, but once I loved him desperately.”

“Is that why you avoid commitment, Pel?”

She looked back at him with her lips pursed. “You and I did not discuss personal things either.”

Gray’s arm left the back of the chair and he leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. “Could we not be better friends now, than we were then?”

“I am not sure that would be wise,” she murmured, once again glancing at her wedding band.

“Why not?”

Isabel rose and stood at the window, needing to put distance between herself and his new intensity.

“Why not?” he asked again, following her. “Do you have other, closer friends who you share things with?”

He set his hands atop her shoulders, and it took only a moment for his touch to heat her skin, and his scent to reach her nostrils. When next he spoke, his voice came close to her ear. “Is it too much to ask that you add your husband to your list of trusted friends?”

“Gray,” she breathed, her heart racing with her distress.
Her restless fingers brushed the satin billowing beside the window frame. “I do not have friends such as you describe. And you say the word ‘husband’ with an import we never gave to it.”

“How about your lover, then?” he pressed. “Does he hear your thoughts?”

Isabel attempted to pull away, but he held her fast.

“Why a tent, Pel? Can you tell me that, at least?”

She shivered at the feel of his exhale against her nape. “I like to imagine it is a part of a caravan.”

“A fantasy?” Gray’s large hands slid down her arms. “Is there a sheik who occupies this fantasy? Does he ravish you?”

“My lord!” she protested, thoroughly alarmed by the way her skin was prickling with sensual awareness. There was no way to ignore the hard male body that bracketed hers.

“What do you want, Gray?” she asked, her mouth dry.

“Have you suddenly decided to change the rules?”

“And if I have?”

“We would end up apart, our friendship ruined. You and I are not the type of people who find love ever after.”

“How would you know what type of man I am?”

“I know you kept a mistress while professing to love another.”

His hot, open mouth pressed against the side of her throat, and her eyes slid closed at the seductive touch.

“You said I have changed, Isabel.”

“No man changes that much. Regardless, I . . . I have someone.”

Gray turned her to face him. His hands around her wrists were hot, his gaze hotter. Lord, she knew that look. It was the look Pelham had brought her to heel with, the look she made certain none of her lovers gave to her. Passion, desire—she welcomed those. But carnal hunger was something to be avoided at all costs.

That famished gaze swept over her body from head to toe and back again. Her nipples ached and tightened as his
heated examination passed them, until she knew they must be visible even through her gown. His perusal paused there on the upward journey, and a low growl rumbled in his throat. Her lips parted on a panting breath.

“Isabel,” he rasped, his hand lifting to cup her breast, his thumb brushing across the tight peak. “Could you not give me a chance to prove my worth?”

She heard her own needy moan, felt her blood heat and grow sluggish. His mouth lowered to hers, and she tilted her head back, waiting.

And wanting.

A soft scratching at the door broke the moment. She stumbled backward, breaking free of his slackened hold. Her fingers covered her lips, pressing hard to hide their quivering.

“My lady?” came the soft query of her abigail from the hallway. “Should I return later?”

Gray waited, his breathing harsh, the crests of his cheekbones flushed. There was no doubt in Isabel’s mind that if she sent her maid away, she would be flat on her back and mounted within moments.

“Come in,” she called, wincing at the note of panic that she could not hide.

Damn him. He’d made her want him, this new spouse of hers. Want him with the type of need that made her ache, a need she had thought herself too old and too wise to ever feel again.

It was her worst nightmare come to life.

Her husband closed his eyes a moment, collecting himself, as Mary swept in and went straight to the armoire.

“Shopping tomorrow, Pel?” he asked, his voice maddeningly calm. “I do need new garments.”

The most she could manage was a jerky nod.

Grayson sketched an elegant bow and retreated, but his presence lingered in her mind long after he had gone.

* * *

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Gerard made it to the hallway that led to his rooms before pausing to rest against the damask-covered wall. He closed his eyes and cursed himself. His plan to renew relations with his wife had gone horribly awry the moment he had opened the door.

He should have been prepared, he should have known how his body would react to the sight of Pel draped in black satin, one creamy shoulder bared as she lounged on a chaise. But how could he have known? He had never felt that way about her before. At least, not that he could recollect. But during those previous meetings in her boudoir, he had been so in love with Em. Perhaps that was what had granted him immunity from his wife’s abundant charms.

Banging the back of his head lightly against the wall, Gerard could only hope that it would knock some sense into him. To lust for one’s wife. He groaned. For most men, that would be so convenient. Not for him. Isabel had been frightened by his interest.

_Though not uninterested_, a voice whispered in his mind.

Yes, his seduction skills were a bit dusty, but he hadn’t completely forgotten everything. He knew the signals a woman’s body gave when she lusted in return.

Isabel may be correct in saying they were not the type of people who found love ever after. Lord knows they had both stumbled badly in that pursuit before. But perhaps it did not have to be a grand love affair. Perhaps it could simply be an affair of indefinite duration. A marriage of friendship, and a shared bed. As much as he liked Pel, they had the foundation. He loved the sound of her laugh—that rich, throaty purr that warmed a man from the inside. And her smile, with its teasing hint of wickedness. The sexual attraction was there in bushels. Besides, they were married, after all. Surely that gave him a leg up.

Gerard pushed away from the wall, and went to his rooms. Garments tomorrow, then a slow reintroduction to Society, and a heated seduction of his wife.
Of course, there was her paramour to attend to.

He grimaced. That would be the most difficult part. Isabel did not love her amours, but she cared a great deal for them, and was fiercely loyal. Winning her would take cunning and time, the latter being something he was not accustomed to investing in the pursuit of women.

But this was Pel, and as many would attest, she was worth the wait.