

A romantic painting of a man and a woman in bed. The man is shirtless, with a small tattoo on his chest, and is looking down at the woman. The woman is wearing a white tank top and has her eyes closed, smiling slightly. They are both lying on a bed with a red headboard. The overall tone is warm and intimate.

CHRISTINE MERRILL

SEDUCING A
STRANGER

Undone!

Seducing a Stranger

Christine Merrill



HARLEQUIN®

TORONTO • NEW YORK • LONDON
AMSTERDAM • PARIS • SYDNEY • HAMBURG
STOCKHOLM • ATHENS • TOKYO • MILAN • MADRID
PRAGUE • WARSAW • BUDAPEST • AUCKLAND

Author Note

Since I like to think every new project is an adventure, it was a real treat to do my first Undone. My goal was to see how much story I could fit into a few thousand words, while keeping the relationship hot and still getting to the happy ending that we all love. It was a chance to take a break from plotting a full book, to let both my imagination and my characters run wild.

And since the electronic format will get my story into your hands more quickly than I can with my printed books, I get to see the results of my work in just a few months. If there were a press involved, this would be hot off of it.

I hope you have as much fun with it as I did.

Happy reading.

To Mohawk the cat, who gave selflessly of his time by teasing the dog to hysteria and sleeping on my keyboard. Without his help, I would never have been able to finish this story in August. I'd have been done in June.

CHAPTER ONE

The abbess met Victoria Paget at the door of the brothel welcoming her in without a word. She did not ask Victoria's name or her reason for seeking out a specific man. She showed no loyalty to her customer, nor did she seem to care overmuch what the strange lady on her doorstep wished to do with her time or her reputation. Victoria suspected that the Earl of Stanton had paid the woman well to insure her lack of curiosity.

And what did it matter, if she was forced to play the whore to discover the truth? It would be worth any sacrifice, if it meant that she could put her husband's death behind her. If a subordinate's betrayal had brought about his end and she knew, and yet she did nothing? Then she failed him as a widow, just as she feared she had as a wife. Until she was sure that poor Charles rested easy, she would have no peace herself.

The woman led her through the main salon and down a hall hung with red curtains and bawdy art, and opened one of the many rooms for her. "I know the man you seek, and I know his tastes." She turned a critical gaze on Victoria, as though she were inspecting merchandise before displaying it. "There will be no difficulty in getting him to come to you, if you have the nerve to meet him." She waited to see if Victoria expressed shock or hesitation. When she saw none, she said, "Tom Godfrey is known by the girls here to be clean and gentlemanly. You are in no danger, spending an evening in his company." The

woman gave a small satisfied smile. "In fact, there are those who would be jealous of your good fortune."

Victoria sincerely doubted it, but said nothing.

The abbess gestured her into the small bedroom before them. Then she turned to a silk curtain next to the door and pulled it aside to reveal a brass-bound peephole. The woman offered no further explanation, but Victoria could guess what was expected of her. Lieutenant Godfrey would be led down the hall, toward this room. The abbess would pull aside a portrait or a drapery to give him his first glimpse of the woman who awaited. She was to beguile him with her movements, allowing them both to pretend that she was unaware. She nodded to the abbess.

The woman nodded back. "Wait here and I will see to it that he finds you." Then she departed, closing the door behind her.

Victoria examined her surroundings, surprised that it was no different than a common bedroom. The walls were covered in cream silk, but there were no paintings or any sort of ornament. The room was empty but for a wardrobe, a small dressing table and mirror, and a great soft bed with virginal white sheets.

She wondered if this room had a specialized purpose: the loss of innocence. Surely this was not the place for her. She had lost that, long ago. And yet? As she hung up her cloak, a shiver went through her that had nothing to do with the temperature of the air.

When she had gone to see her husband's friend, the Earl of Stanton, with her unusual request, he had first dismissed her as foolish. Perhaps her husband had suspected that there was a spy in the midst of his company. His death did not prove the fact. Soldiers died. Surely she knew that. She had followed her husband to

the Peninsula and seen the results of battle, had she not?

She had argued that her Charles had died not in battle as he should but because of false intelligence. His men had been unprepared when they were ambushed on the road. Her husband had often remarked about the strange behavior of Lieutenant Godfrey and insisted there was something not quite right about him. It must be more than coincidence that the man who her husband suspected was the only one to escape unscathed from the massacre.

Stanton had argued that she had no real proof. That the man's reputation had been sterling, right up to that moment. And in any case, he was no longer the army's concern. He had been badly wounded in another engagement, retired from the service and returned to London. Then he had thought to tease her, and made the outrageous suggestion that she find the man and ask him herself.

When she had eagerly agreed to this, he had changed his tune and tried to frighten her. Godfrey did not inhabit the sorts of places that a respectable lady might go. Did she mean to frequent bawdy houses, looking for him?

She had squared her shoulders and said, "If necessary."

And necessity had brought her here.

Victoria reached behind her to undo the modest gown she wore. She had cast off her mourning before coming here. Though black might suit her mood, it did not fit her disguise. Red had seemed too obvious. So she had chosen a green dress. She favored the color, although she had worn nothing so frivolous since before her marriage. Now she removed it and hung it on a hook at the back of the wardrobe.

She stood in petticoats and shift, staring at her own

white face in the little mirror. It could not do to look frightened, when he came for her. Stanton had argued that she would be horrified at what was expected from a woman in such a place.

She lifted her chin, examining her reflection and pinching her cheeks to get some color back into them. She had informed Stanton that she was no longer a schoolgirl, and was not in the least frightened of a thing that she had done many times before.

Her frankness had made the poor man blush, and he'd pleaded with her to cry off and to forget everything he had said on the matter.

Of course, she had refused. Given the suspicious nature of his death, her husband would have expected her to act on what he had told her. Although Charles had been a good man, sometimes he had treated her no different than he treated his soldiers. He expected loyalty, obedience and courage, as well as her devotion. If the Earl of Stanton did not mean to pursue the matter, then she must. And she would be better off under his guidance than acting on her own.

When he had seen that she would not be swayed, he had shaken his head and given her the address of this place. He had promised that although it was against his better judgment, all would be arranged.

She froze. There was a whisper of air against her bare arms. It seemed to come from behind the draperies on the wall behind her. He was there, watching her.

She turned so that her back was to her supposed observer and touched her own neck, running a finger along the skin, and up to remove the pins from her hair. Then she took up the brush from the dressing table, combing out the curls as though she were preparing for

bed.

Her hair was her pride and joy, now that she was back in London. She'd cried when Charles had made her cut it, saying that if she was to follow him to Portugal there would be no time for feminine nonsense. But it had grown back as full and lustrous as it had been before her marriage. She wondered if the man who watched cared for it, or if he thought her foolish as well. She twisted the locks in her hands, spread them and let them fall down her back.

Victoria stared into the mirror again. If she took too much time with her clothes, he would know that she dawdled. She took a deep breath and undid her petticoats, letting them drop to the floor, stepping free of them and taking the time to brush away the wrinkles before hanging them beside her gown. She had not bothered with stays. They hardly seemed necessary, considering what she was likely to do tonight. Now, she wondered if they should have been present as part of the ceremony of undressing, or if he preferred the glimpses of her body through the thin shift she wore. The knowledge of an anonymous watcher and his opinion of her was like a bit of ice drawn slowly over her heated skin, bringing sensitivity wherever it touched.

She sat down upon the bed, ignoring the way the shift's hem rode high to reveal her legs. She removed her slippers, dropping them on the floor. And then she undid her garters and rolled her stockings down, pointing her toe and flexing her bare legs. She shifted on the mattress until her back was against the wall at the head of the bed and felt the hem creep almost to her waist as she did so. And for the first time that evening, real fear took hold of her. She felt exposed, vulnerable.

Then she banished the feeling with a false smile. She knew what she might have to do, when her quarry entered the room. In comparison, the task of the moment could hardly be considered frightening. She was still alone.

It was not as if, even when alone, she had allowed herself to behave with abandon. It was not proper. But she was in the last place in the world where she would have to concern herself with propriety.

She reached up, tentatively at first, and touched her own breasts through the lawn shift that covered them, shocked at how sensitive they felt. Her nipples tightened in response to the pleasure and the coldness of the room. She closed her eyes to hide herself from her circumstances and cupped her hands under them, pushing them tight to her body so that they almost spilled from the neckline of the shift, enjoying the weight of them.

She let her hands drift lower, to catch the hem of the shift and draw it completely out of the way. She bit her lip as though in desire, and blocked the last of her fear in her mind. Then she let her legs fall open, exposing herself to anyone who might be watching from the hall.

From some hidden place, there was a sharp intake of breath, and the slow hiss as it was released again.

The sound sent a tremor of awareness through her. Was the man on the other side of the curtain the man she sought? Perhaps it was some other stranger. Whoever her audience might be, they were expecting her to continue.

And suddenly, her body trembled again, and she wished it as well. She spread herself with her fingers, and began to play.

Tom Godfrey looked at the woman sitting on the bed and tried to disguise his shock into something within the realm

of expectation or eagerness.

The abbess touched his arm, to silently ask if this was the sort of woman he had been looking for.

He placed a hand over hers and nodded. Not only was the chestnut hair just as he had wished, and the eyes bright green, but the shape of the face was the same as well. There was the short nose, the gently rounded cheeks and the small dimple in the chin.

He had not seen her body in the little miniature his captain had carried. But he had imagined it: the pale skin dusted with gold from the sun of Portugal, with long legs, high breasts and a trim waist flaring into soft round hips. His imagination did not do this woman justice.

The madam smiled and nodded, gesturing to the door at her right and pressing a key into his hand. He pressed a coin into hers in return. Then, she retreated.

He stood there for a while, staring into the little window, enjoying the clandestine view it provided. The woman was very like the one he longed for. And with his desire came the faint feeling of guilt.

Though why he should feel guilty about thoughts not expressed, he did not know. It was not as if he had ever bothered Victoria Paget with his opinions of her. He had never even met her. He had not even sent the briefest of condolences, along with her husband's personal effects, fearing that some stray comment in it would lead her guess to the truth. He had done nothing to be ashamed of.

But while his actions had been blameless, he regretted his uncontrollable thoughts. Captain Paget's descriptions of his wife's spirit, and her unfailing loyalty and courage had moved him to envy. The devotion of his own fiancée waiting in London for him had seemed ambivalent in comparison. And then, Paget had shared a glimpse of the

little portrait that he had so often admired himself.

Tom had felt the first stirrings of jealousy. Perhaps it was because he doubted that Paget deserved such a wife as the one he'd described. At times, he had spoken of her as he might of a particularly good soldier, and not a woman who was worthy of respect and tenderness. And though the captain had claimed to have a great fondness for her, when the war parted them he had shown no particular desire to be faithful to her in the way he swore she was to him.

Perhaps it was merely covetousness on Tom's part. He had seen the peace it brought Paget to look on the picture before a battle. And he had wanted some bit of that peace for himself. He had longed for reassurance that someone waited for him and cared for his survival. The few pitiful letters he'd received from his supposed love filled him with doubts about their future. And his fears had been proven true soon after his return to England.

But worst of all, there was lust. He had seen the picture, and wanted the woman in it. When the captain had died, Tom had searched his pockets for it, out of a sudden shameful desire to keep it for his own. That he could have it to gaze on each night, before he slept. And to imagine...

It had repelled him that he could have such thoughts about the widow, with the husband barely cool on the ground before him. So he had bundled the miniature up with the captain's few personal effects, tucked the lot into his haversack to keep it safe from the soldiers who were looting the battlefield, and sent it back to camp with the next courier.

When he had arrived there on a stretcher almost a month later after another skirmish had shattered his leg

and his career, he had wanted to meet with her and to explain the circumstances of her husband's death. But she was already gone back to London. Disappointment and relief had mingled with the pain of his wound.

Grief was an indulgence not always followed by the women in the camps. Although it was rare in officer's wives, there were some women who put greater store in being married than they did in the identity of their husband. An unfortunate death in battle meant that there would be a drumhead wedding to someone when the company returned.

If the opportunity presented itself, how would he have been able to resist an inquiry? He was not even free to make the offer. And worse yet, suppose she'd married someone else?

But, no. She would be brokenhearted, he was sure. She would have thought him coarse beyond words to suggest that she wed again so quickly. Now that he was free, perhaps he would seek her out, after a respectable period of time.

In the waiting for the opportunity, the desire for her had only grown in him. He had come to a brothel for relief. And now, he found himself peering into the boudoir of a woman who could easily be the double of the girl in the portrait.

But not in nature. Even in his wildest imaginings he had not dreamed of seeing her like this. She was touching herself. She cupped her breasts, and then sat back upon the bed and spread herself wide before him, letting her fingers sink into the curls of hair between her legs before settling into a rhythm against her own body.

Tom swallowed and tried to still his breathing. She must know that he watched. There was a sly smile upon

her lips as though she could imagine the effect that her play was having upon him. And then it was forgotten in a gasp as she shuddered and made a faint noise of pleasure released.

The effect was exquisite. He was hard for her, almost to the point of pain. He fingered the key in his hands for a moment, watching as she arched her neck and gave another shudder of satisfaction from her own touch.

Then he went to the door, opening it hurriedly, entering and locking it behind him again.

CHAPTER TWO

Victoria smiled in triumph as a man limped into the room, for it was obvious that she had been right. He had watched. She could see it in his eyes. And it was plain that she had aroused him with her behavior.

His cheeks were flushed as though from too much wine. But it was not drunkenness. Desire, of course. She had expected that. But embarrassment? Watching and knowing that she knew. She had been told he was no stranger to houses of ill fame. But perhaps he was not usually a voyeur. He was younger than she had expected, little older than herself, but ten years younger than Charles. And though the sight of him locking the door should have scared her, his appearance did not match the dark villain she had expected. Tom Godfrey's hair was brown, touched with gold from too much sun, and it fell in his eyes as he looked at her. He reached up and brushed it away.

"Do you fear interruption?" she asked, glancing at the locked door.

He dropped the key into his pocket. "I certainly do not wish it." His voice was pleasant, almost defying her to enjoy the sound of it. He approached the bed, and she resisted the urge to close her legs. Instead, she leaned back against the pillows, stretching her arms over her head and clasping her hands together. She could feel her breasts draw tight, straining against the chemise as she moved.

He shed his clothing quickly, as though there were little time to waste. And judging by the state of him, perhaps there was not. She felt an inappropriate frisson of desire at the sight of him. He was a soldier, body hardened and marked by battle. There was an angry red scar high on one leg, which explained the hitch in his gait as he walked.

But he seemed healthy enough. And aroused he was almost frighteningly large.

It had been a long time since she had been with a man, she reminded herself, trying not to stare. And while she had no reason to want this particular man, her body's reaction to his was normal, and not the least bit traitorous to her husband's memory. As long as she did not dwell on it.

He smiled at her, and climbed on to the bed, reaching for her. As he took her into his arms, she felt the tingling friction of his bare skin against hers, and dropped her arms to circle his neck. Heat rose in her at the contact, and she fought down her guilt. What was about to happen meant nothing. She must separate physical response from more tender emotions. She would lie back and close her eyes and it would be over in no time.

And then, his lips touched hers.

She shied away from his kiss, turning her head. The man might expect no more than a lack of struggle in the actual act, but there would be no way to hide what she felt for him if they kissed.

He pulled away as well. "I'm sorry." He glanced around the room. "Have I misunderstood? Because if you are unwilling..." He was hard against her leg, but very still, as though he awaited her permission to proceed.

The reaction surprised her. He was strong, and she'd

been afraid he would force her cooperation if she did not give it. "I am willing," she said softly. "But not to kiss. Not upon the lips, at least."

He smiled. "Why ever not?"

Why indeed? "There are some things best shared between true lovers. And I wish to save some small part of me, for that."

He seemed puzzled. And she wondered, did he need to fool himself that an encounter in such a place meant something more than it actually did? It was a sign of a romantic nature, a weakness that she had put long behind her after the hardships of even the happiest moments of the last few years. To reassure him, she said, "There are other things, very pleasant, I assure you, that I am quite willing to do." She ran a hand down his body, slowly over the chest, and followed the trail of hair on his belly lower, until she could take him in her hand.

The act was all it took to render him incapable of further questions. The confusion on his face was replaced with a dazed smile and he closed his eyes and sighed. She had imagined a coupling almost brutal in its suddenness. But it appeared that he was content to let her be the aggressor.

It was strange and exciting to have such power. She could set the pace, and the action, and perhaps she could avoid joining with him at all.

Victoria pushed lightly upon his shoulder, rolling him onto his back. Then she knelt between his legs and slowly massaged his member, from shaft to tip and back, spreading his own moisture upon him, feeling him pulse beneath her hand, and an answering pulse in her own body.

He groaned, and covered her hand with his own.

“Darling, your touch is heaven.”

A wicked thought occurred to her. And as she stroked him, her curiosity grew to insatiability. What better place to give over to such a whim then here? She bent over him. “Then what shall you think of this?” And she gave him the kiss that no man could resist, taking him gently into her mouth, surrounding him with her lips and running her tongue along the tip of him, feeling smoothness, tasting salt.

His hands clutched the sheets on either side of her head, as though he were afraid to reach for her, lest she stop. She moved her mouth over him, taking him deeper, and his back arched as muscles tightened in growing excitement. His moan stopped suddenly, his teeth closing with a snap. “Please.” The word was shaky, little more than a gasp. “Oh, yes.” He trembled. She could feel his control slipping, and it caused an answering tremor in her own body, before she reminded herself that what was happening between them had no meaning.

“We have not been introduced,” he ground out, with a desperate laugh. “My name is Tom Godfrey.”

She withdrew slightly, and purred against his skin. “Thomas.”

He groaned as though the sound of his own name was as exciting as her kiss. Then, he reached out a hand and stroked her hair. The gesture was strangely tender. “Your name. Please. I must know...”

She gave one last whirl of her tongue against him, and said, “Victoria.”

He gave an almost convulsive shudder and rolled away from her, spilling his seed into the sheet beside them.

For a moment, she felt strangely bereft. She missed the feel of him against her cheek and in her mouth, and the

warmth of his body close to his. Had she really been alone so long that even the touch of an enemy was welcome?

He was curled over with his back to her. And his shoulders were shaking with what looked to be silent laughter.

It angered her to think that he found her performance so amusing. Was she really so unskilled that her actions were laughable? She buried the feeling, and reached out a hesitant hand to his shoulder, as though from concern. "Is something the matter?"

He was definitely laughing, for his words escaped after a chuckle. "An old gun does not usually have a hair trigger."

"Old?" At first it made no sense. Then, she realized he spoke of himself. "You are hardly thirty."

He rolled back to her, still smiling, and touched her cheek. "That is old enough to have learned control. But you quite overcame me. I embarrassed myself like a greenling on his first trip to a brothel. Unlike some, you are too kind to comment upon it."

Perhaps, if she had truly been a whore, she would have known the correct response to what had just happened. Should she have laughed at his joke, to put him at ease? She must do something quickly. If she wished information, she could not have him pulling on his boots and leaving her. "We could try again."

"My thoughts exactly." He leaned forward to kiss her.

Without thinking, she turned her head from him again, causing him to draw back.

"You are a most curious woman, Victoria." He was staring at her as though he was the one who had come to search for truths. "I cannot decide what arouses me more, what you will do, or what you won't."

“That was not my intent.”

He ran a thumb from her cheek to touch her lower lip, and then drew it slowly down to stroke her throat. “Liar. I think it is in your nature to drive men mad.” He leaned forward to kiss her throat at the spot where his thumb rested, and she felt a jolt of excitement.

“Please, do not.”

“You do not like it?”

It would do no good to lie. “Of course. But...”

He kissed her again. “It will be some few moments before I am ready again. If you will not spend it in kissing, then I must find another way to pass the time.”

Now he was ringing her throat with love bites, as though tracing the path of a necklace as his hands roamed over her breasts. His touch was hard, possessive, just as his kisses were. And it was not the only thing hardened, for she could feel his body growing eager to join with hers. She gave a weak laugh. “Dear sir, I think you are quite ready enough, now.”

“Do you?” He dipped his head to take the tip of her breast in his mouth through the cotton shift. “But I wish for you to be ready as well.”

“I do not require satisfaction.” She gasped, for his hands were between her legs, tugging at the curls there. “At least, not in that way.”

“You hurt me, darling, to make me think that it is my money that matters to you. You might not require this. But you certainly deserve it, after what you just did to me.” As his mouth slid down her body she had a fleeting fear that his actions were as much about control as hers had been.

And she could feel it slipping away as he moved closer and closer to where her body wanted him. She tried to

pull away, but he wrapped his arms around her waist, holding her fast. "Please sir, no."

"You will not let me kiss you on the lips." He sighed, but did not release her. "So you must allow me to imagine what it might be like." He dipped his tongue into her navel. "To whisper into your ear and touch it like so. To kiss my way along your cheek." He trailed the kisses along her belly. "Until my lips find yours." He settled himself carefully between her legs and barely touched her with his mouth. "Gently at first. Ever so gently. Just a touch."

The shock of it was too much, and she gave another shudder. What had the abbess said, about the jealousy of others working here? If this was how he was in the habit of treating them, then she understood. His kiss was rougher now. And as he thrust his tongue into her, his fingers crept up to stroke.

Victoria put her own fingers into her mouth and bit down, trying to stop the scream of pleasure that she knew was coming. But the feel of them, the intrusion and the sharp pain of her bite along with his repeated invasion of her body tipped her over the edge into another cascade of pleasure.

Yet, his kiss did not cease. She struggled against it for a moment. But it was all too much, too good, and she was unable to think for wanting more.

Only when she was sure that she must be spent did he obey and release her, to slide his body up hers. "And now, I think you are ready, are you not?" He hovered for a moment at the entrance to her body, before beginning a slow thrust into her. He stopped. "Unless you do not wish it."

His hesitation was almost painful, for she longed to be

filled. "Please." Later, she could regret asking him. But now she was so close to coming again that it was impossible to do other than beg for more. "Please. Oh yes. Please."

He pushed into her with a sudden, hard thrust and she gasped. She had not expected it to be so...

He withdrew and thrust again.

...different. The act was familiar and yet new, because her lover was different. The intense pleasure she felt was from the novelty, nothing more. Or so she told herself, as she dug her fingers into the muscles of his shoulders and moved her hips to match the strength of his thrusts, eager to feel him deep inside.

Sensing her need, he was not gentle. He raked his fingers down her back to clutch her bottom and pounded into her with a strength that demanded nothing less than her total surrender. Then he buried his face into the side of her neck, his teeth grazing her skin, and he licked hard at the muscle on her shoulder until she moaned in response.

At the sound, he rolled so that she could be on top of him and squeezed her hips to urge her on.

And she rode him, squeezing her legs together around him, tightening her muscles about him to feel how impossibly hard he was until she heard his answering groan and his body began to arch. As he lost control, he reached to the front of her, rubbing her with his thumb to bring her over the edge with him, shattering.

She collapsed on top of him, sprawling across his body, her cheek against his chest. It made her feel alive again to lie still for a moment, as passion receded and sense returned. He was taller than she had expected. His body big and solid under her, and still inside of her,

undeniably male.

It felt good to be wanted. To be desired. And not to be alone.

He wrapped a hand around her waist. His grip was weak at first, little more than the weight of his own arm, as though exhausted by his own climax. Then slowly, he curled it possessively around her, the hand angling up toward her shoulders in a caress.

She could not see his face, but could tell his smile was gone by the tone of his voice. "I know who you are," he said.

CHAPTER THREE

Victoria Paget was lying in his arms, spent from lovemaking, just as he had always imagined her. It should be a dream, but now that the act was done, it was set to turn to nightmare.

Why had he asked her name? The question tortured him. He should have remained in ignorance, convinced that he was with some nameless bit of muslin. Or perhaps he should have left at the first moment of suspicion, when he'd stood outside the room.

Of course, that would have left her at the mercy of the next man to come along, and the thought of that haunted him even more. She was the object of his desire. A desire that had bordered almost on obsession in the months he had spent recuperating from his injury. He had hoped to exorcise the demon of her memory in a harmless game of pretend. A woman of experience would have him without complaint, scars and all. And the madam had assured him that in dim light, the girl she'd found would pass for the one he dreamed of.

She lay still against him, as though waiting for him to speak. "I know who you are." There. It was out and said.

"Wh-what do you mean?" There was the barest hesitation in her words, before her face returned to tranquility. He had startled her, but she was pretending ignorance.

It angered him that she thought she could still fool him with lies. "You are the widow of Captain Charles Paget,

are you not?"

She said nothing, but glanced quickly toward the door and back. Did she fear him enough to run?

"I recognized your name," he said, not caring about her fears. He tightened his hand on her back, still gentle, but enough to forestall an escape.

"It is a common name," she argued, making no move to leave. "And I gave you no surname."

"Perhaps. But it does not signify. You are Victoria Paget."

"I did not think that you...that anyone would realize." He could feel her budding resistance fade. Her eyes dropped, probably in shame of what she had become.

"I served under him. He spoke of you often, with much pride and affection." And yet, she had come to this. He made no attempt to hide his disappointment. "He showed me the miniature he kept with him. I was there on the road with him, when he died. It was I who gathered his effects and returned them to you."

"Why did you bother?" There was bitterness in her tone as well, to answer his.

"It was the least I could do. Not enough, I know. I could not save him. Nor could I help the others." And now, he was the one who felt shame. What sort of monster was he, to offer words of condolence on a brothel bed? He rolled to the side, so their bodies could part from each other. "If it gives you comfort to know it, his death was sudden. The pain was brief. If he had time for a final thought, it was of you. But I did not want to see his possessions taken by looters. They were rightfully yours."

"And much good they did me." She drew even farther from him, fumbling for the sheet as though it would be possible to hide from him, after what they had done.

“What brings you here?” Had Paget left her nothing but that damned picture, that she had been driven to this on her return to London? “The abbess said you were new to this place. But that is a common lie.”

“In this case, it is true. Just this night. For money,” she said simply, as though it explained all. And it did. After all his fine talk of his stalwart wife, he’d thought the captain would know enough to set a portion aside for his widow. But some men expected to live forever and sort out the finances after the war.

He reached out and clasped her hand. “I could not save Charles. But I will save you from this, if you let me.”

“How would you do that?” She looked at him with a slanted cat’s gaze, as though weighing his intentions.

“Come away with me. Now. Tonight. You need have no fear of the mistress of this house. She will not dare to cross me. Once you are settled in my rooms, you can send for anything you wish. Or I will purchase what you need.”

God knew how. He could little afford a ladybird, should her tastes prove extravagant.

She thought for a moment, and then nodded. “I have nothing but the clothes I came with. I will dress, and then we may go.” Her lack of expression surprised him. He had expected some display of emotion, either enthusiasm or argument, or perhaps an embarrassed speech about how this was not normally her way. But she did not seem overly bothered by what had happened between them. Nor was she relieved or upset by his offer, just as she’d not been bothered by the knowledge that a stranger had watched as she’d touched herself. Perhaps she had been seeking a protector, all along.

Fool that he was, he had imagined the captain’s widow wrapping herself in grief and propriety. But the true

Victoria Paget was mercenary, to an almost military degree. Her cold blood was almost as disturbing as the truth of her identity had been.

She was dressing as he waited. Strangely, the sight of her becoming clothed was more arousing than the sight of her naked had been. He wanted to peel the clothes away again, and touch her skin to assure himself that the event of the evening had truly happened. He turned his head, trying not to look at her. "You are sure you have no possessions?"

"There is nothing for me here." Her cloak hung on a peg in the corner of the room, and he reached out for it, dropping it over her shoulders, then he escorted her from the room. As they left, she did not look back.

They rode in silence toward his flat, and he wondered if her feelings toward him would warm, given time. Would her opinion change in regard to kissing him? It did not seem so. When the carriage door was closed he had touched her chin as a prelude to turning her mouth to his. And she had looked away again.

What did it matter that she felt no tenderness for him? She had agreed to come with him, knowing what it would mean. He could have her again, soon. Tonight perhaps. And as often as he liked hereafter.

Bought and paid for.

The words echoed in Tom's mind as the carriage stopped and he helped her from it and up the few steps to his apartment. His manservant looked up as he entered, with some small surprise that he was not alone. Tom gave the smallest shake of his head to indicate that he would explain in time, and the man went about his business as though there was nothing strange.

Then he said with some embarrassment, "I am sorry

that my quarters are so small. Just the sitting room and the bedroom. My servant, Toby, sleeps by the kitchen fire. I do not have even a cot to offer you. In time, you shall have your own room. Or an apartment, if you wish it."

How silly. Of course she would wish. What sort of idiot offered a *carte blanche* to a woman he could not afford to keep?

"You shall have a maid. Dresses. Anything you wish. But it is rather late. In the morning..." They were rash promises, and he had no idea how he would manage, but he would give her anything she desired, if it meant he could touch her again.

"Of course," she said. "I understand." And then she fell silent.

It worried him that he did not know what to say next, other than to repeat the pathetic offers he had just made. There was so much more to be said, so much that he wanted her to understand. And in turn, there was much he wanted her to answer for. But he doubted that either of them wanted to hear the truth. For now, he would let his body speak for him. He stepped forward and reached for her.

She took the slightest move away, as though his touch was unwelcome, now that she had what she wanted. And then she said, "When did you recognize me?"

The suddenness of it stunned him. Perhaps she wished to defend what was left of her honor, now that she had seen the humbleness of his quarters. It was a harsh thought, and he did not wish to believe it of her. But better not to act like a besotted fool, lest she announce that she had no wish to lie with a cripple if they would be forced to share the bed after.

He retreated to neutral hospitality, taking her cloak and

leading her to a chair by the fire, then signaling his man to bring them a brandy. Once the servant had retired to the kitchen he said, "I did not know you at first. Not until you said your name. If I had known, I would not have allowed you to do what you did."

Liar. He'd known in his heart exactly who she was from the moment he had laid eyes on her. But he had not been able to resist having her.

"Once I realized the truth, I could not stand by and leave you in that place, to God knows what fate. I owe it to a brother officer, to see to it that his family does not suffer. And that is why I brought you here."

"After the fact," she said, bluntly. And for a moment, there was a light in her eye that made him wonder if she sensed the truth of what had happened the day her husband died, and had come to him to exact punishment for it.

Or she might simply be expressing the obvious. His own guilt pricked sharp, like needles inside him. It had been so much easier to be angry and to blame her loose morals for what had happened tonight. But he had wanted her long before he had any right to, and he had taken her the first chance he'd got. Then he'd convinced himself that her desperation was a sign of unworthiness, and that his lust was somehow her fault. No wonder she was cold to him. He sighed. "What I did was unconscionable. But once things were begun, I did not know how to stop them, or how to explain myself." He bit his tongue, and began again. "That is not true. Once we had begun, I did not wish to stop. I was selfish, and thoughtless of all but my own needs. Because of my injury, pleasure has been infrequent, and to find myself in the company of such a beautiful woman?"

He shrugged as though it were possible to minimize his attraction to her. "But that is no excuse. Although it is too late to take back what I have done, I will not trouble you further with my attentions. I only wish to know that you are safe, and that you are not forced to debase yourself further because of misfortune."

"Oh." There was a crease in her forehead, as though she were puzzled. Or perhaps she was disappointed, although that hardly seemed likely. "Thank you for your kindness." She sipped from the drink she had been offered.

He thought for a moment that she meant to explain how she had come to the state she was in. But she said nothing and he had no right to inquire. Perhaps there was something even more horrible than what she currently experienced.

Then she looked up at him from over the rim of her glass. "But I cannot accept the terms you offer. If you wish to give me your protection, then I must give you something in return. It makes no sense to pretend modesty, and refuse you companionship." She touched the neckline of her gown.

He was mesmerized by her hands. How graceful they were. Long fingered. Supple. His body remembered how it had felt to be touched by them, and grew hard in response. And he knew that his attempt at nobility was for naught. She had offered. And he would take from her again.

It hurt him to know that what was about to happen would mean nothing to her, other than a bartering of services. She was not the woman he imagined her to be, and her husband's shining description was little more than the fondness of long association.

He set his drink aside and reached out to take her by the wrist, drawing her to her feet and toward the door to the bedroom. And as he did so, the glass shook in her hand, and spilled a few drops of brandy onto the silken flesh above her breasts. He took the glass from her and threw it onto the hearth, listening to the crystal shatter as he pulled her into his arms, burying his face against her throat, chasing the drop of liquor down to catch it on his tongue. When the bodice of her dress blocked him, he reached behind her and undid the fastenings, pushing it and her chemise out of the way until he could reach her breasts, taking the nipples by turn into his mouth to suckle them until the skin puckered and the tips grew hard.

He felt her fingers in his hair, a gentle, almost fearful touch holding his mouth against her body. And then she pulled her hands away, and he could feel her arms go rigid at her sides.

He lifted his head and put his arms on her shoulders, pushing gently until her back was to the wall. Then he dropped his hands to cover her, rubbing his thumbs against the sensitive tips and watching her eyes widen in response. Perhaps she was not such a dispassionate schemer after all. Was it fear he saw on her face? Or could it be desire? He gave the flesh beneath his fingers a gentle pinch, and she gasped and bit her lower lip as though she could bite back the response.

He smiled and stared at her mouth. "If you truly do not wish me to kiss you, you must stop that immediately. You are tempting me beyond endurance."

"I did not mean to," she whispered.

He laughed and leaned forward to catch the lobe of her ear between his teeth, nipping it as she had her own lip. "Of course you did. From the first moment. Lying on that

bed, offering yourself to me. You are temptation itself.”

“No. Not that. I did not...” She gasped again as he bit harder, and wrenched the truth from her. “I did not mean to enjoy this.”

He could feel his body straining to pleasure her, just as hers strained to resist him. “Is that so?” He released her breasts and fumbled with the buttons on his trousers.

She glanced down, and then over her shoulder at the door behind them. Her mouth was a perfect O of shock. “The bedroom?”

He shook his head. “Here. Now. You do not wish to enjoy this. And I do not wish to wait.” He could see by the eager way that she lifted her skirt that his pretense at brutish behavior was as exciting to her as anything else they had tried. He touched her between her legs, spreading her with his fingers, stroking for a moment before pushing one inside of her. She was wet and ready, bracing her back against the wall, bearing down on his hand and shuddering with delight. He pulled his hand away and fitted his body to hers, pausing for just a moment before pushing slowly into that wonderful tightness.

The fear disappeared from her face. Now it shone with the light of pure bliss. And then she shut her eyes, as though she thought she could hide it from him.

He withdrew and thrust again, even slower than before, trying to ignore the dizzying rightness of being inside her. He pressed his body tight to hers, one of his hands trapped between them so that he could clutch her breast. With the other hand, he touched her face, running a thumb along her jawline to tip her face toward his. “Open your eyes.”

She blinked up at him, looking as dazed by what was

happening as he felt. Her lips were parted, swollen and red, and he longed to kiss them as he thrust again. "Tell me what you are feeling," he said, and rubbed his knuckles against them.

She touched his hand with her tongue, and he sucked in a breath, not wanting to lose control too quickly. She hesitated, and he thrust again.

She let out a little squeak of surprise that made him smile. So he kissed her cheek, tantalizingly close to those lovely lips, and said again, "Tell me."

At last, she murmured, "It has never been like this." And as he moved in her, her breathing became irregular, muddling her words. "I have never... more than once... and the way you look at me... and your body... it makes me... every time."

He could feel her losing control again, her body tightening on his. He squeezed her breast and felt her back arch, her hips rock forward into his, her arms wrap around to hold him as she began to tremble. So he enjoyed her perfect body and imagined her perfect lips, and spent himself in her again.

How many times had that been tonight? He smiled to himself, hugging her to him, trying not to lean too obviously upon her. Damn, but he was weak as a kitten. Standing had been a mistake. His leg was aching, and he must get the weight off it, or he would be too stiff to rise in the morning.

From his shoulder came a soft sob.

He lifted his head to find her face wet with tears. He reached to stroke her hair, wondering how he had ever thought her cold. "What is it, love? Tell me."

"I am a terrible wife," she whispered back.

He almost laughed. "Right now, you are no wife at

all.” Although perhaps she ought to be. At the rate they were going, there would be a babe soon. Surely a wife was easier to keep than a mistress.

And then the weight of her words hit him, and with it, the old guilt. He held her close, not wanting to let a ghost come between them. “He is gone. You are free.”

“But I should not behave in this way. And with a man I barely know. With you, of all people.”

So that was it. She’d given herself to a lesser man. He focused on the ache in his leg, for it was easier to deal with the physical hurt than the pain her words had caused. He straightened, taking back his own weight, pulling her gown up to shield her body, and offering her his arm.

“How you behaved this evening was little fault of your own. It is I who should be ashamed. I owe you reparation for my base behavior. You honor me by accepting my protection.” He swallowed his nerves, for he knew what he truly owed to a lady, even if his words were met with scorn. “And you would honor me still further, if you would agree to wed me.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Victoria gave a small, surprised laugh to cover her confusion, putting a hand to her throat to keep her gown from slipping again. "Marriage?"

"I dishonored you by my actions. As a gentleman, I wish to make it right again," he said, as though it were the most reasonable thing in the world to marry a woman that he had met in a brothel.

"But between us?" She had convinced herself that she should come home with him to gain time to search his possessions and question his servants. But he had so little. Suppose there was nothing to find?

What if Tom Godfrey was innocent? A part of her dearly wanted that to be true. If he was not, how was she to reconcile her feelings when he touched her with the suspicions she had held for so long? She stalled. "How shall I explain the suddenness of it to my friends?" And how would she explain to Lord Stanton? He thought her mad already. What would he think of this turn of events?

Tom smiled. "It will hardly be seen as a nine day's wonder if you marry a soldier. I am a cripple and of inferior rank to your late husband. But we share a common past, we have mutual friends, and I am sympathetic to your plight. Tell anyone who cares that we met in London. Our previous acquaintance led me to offer for you out of concern for your safety and a desire to know that you are well provided for."

"But marriage?" It did make sense, as he described it.

But suppose she had been right, and her second husband was hanged the murder of her first?

“For my part, my friends will congratulate me on my extreme good fortune in catching you. You are a very attractive woman, Victoria. And...” He seemed about to say something, and then muttered, “We do share a certain physical compatibility.”

He grinned at her. And the grin widened as he saw her blush. Then he grew serious, again. “I understand that you do not love me, and that what I suggest will seem as sudden to some as it does to you. But I would do everything in my power to bring you pleasure by night, and to make you happy by day. Please allow me to help you.”

Her intended victim was all but begging that she come close enough to betray him. But if she had been wrong, how could she ever explain to him? Or was there some way that she could avoid the truth? At last she said, “It is all too much for my poor mind to grasp. May I decide tomorrow? I am quite tired.” Perhaps in the morning, she could come up with an answer. She let her voice trail off as if to confirm her words, and glanced toward the bedroom door.

“Of course. It is late. Until then, will you accept my hospitality?”

She gave a slight nod, and he led her into the other room. He turned back the covers on his bed, offering his place to her. Then he went to sit on a small couch in the corner of the room. “Until you decide, I think it best that I sleep here.” He smiled and added, “To avoid temptation.” He took off his coat and boots, lay down and rolled his face to the wall.

As she prepared for bed, she stared across the room at

him. Despite her doubts, she could feel her body longing for his. She could not fool herself into thinking that her enthusiastic response to him had been caused by loneliness, or because she had forgotten how wonderful it felt to be with a man.

It had not been like this with Charles. Not ever. Her father had assured her that it was a good match, and that she had nothing to complain about. And he had been right. Charles Paget had been a good husband to her. And she had loved and respected him, and wished always to make him happy.

But he had never looked at her with the hungry intensity that Tom Godfrey did. She had certainly never been loved to completion multiple times in a night. And Charles, God rest his soul, would have told her to leave off with her nonsense and obey him immediately, had she ever dared to refuse him a kiss. From the moment she had said her vows, she had known that while it was important to love one's husband, to honor him was more so. And total obedience trumped them both.

But Tom had taken her refusal to kiss as a challenge. Her body burned hot at the memory of it. He had been a generous lover, more concerned with her pleasure than his own.

She could not remember the last time that her pleasure, her wants or her desires had been important to anyone. Not even herself. She had learned to ignore them, to postpone them or to do without. Perhaps that explained her sudden and extreme attraction to Tom Godfrey.

And with that, she felt an unexpected pang of guilt. She had insinuated herself into his life to spy upon him. Perhaps she was in the right, for she had done it for England and her husband's memory, instead of for French

gold.

But if she had accused an innocent man?

And there was the rub. His behavior toward her was—she struggled to find a word. It was gallant. She felt safe in his company, from the way he wished to rescue her from the brothel, to the foolish gesture of sleeping on a bench, when his own bed was just across the room. Would it not pain the wound in his leg and side to sleep in such a cramped way?

The Tom Godfrey she had imagined was a coward who had sacrificed all around him for personal gain. But from the first moment this stranger had touched her, she'd trusted him. She had given of herself and in ways that were new to her, sure that no matter what they tried, he would not hurt her. That trust had been at the heart of their lovemaking, and her response to it.

On the other side of the room, Tom let out a sigh, and rolled again, to face her. And in the barest whisper he said, "You are awake, aren't you?"

"Yes." She sat up in bed and stared across the room.

He sat up as well. "It is quite hopeless. I meant to bring you here, and to care for you, hoping that I could avoid what I must say. But I will not get a moment's sleep if I do not just admit the truth."

She bit her lip and gave a little nod, suddenly afraid that she might hear the very thing she had expected.

He took a deep breath. "The day Captain Paget died my horse was losing a shoe. He favored a leg, and I was lagging behind, trying to nurse him along. If I had been ahead on the road, as I should have been, they would have had warning. It would have been I and not he." His eyes grew vacant for a moment as he remembered it.

There had been no mention of this in any of the

accounts she had heard. But it explained how he had come to retreat, as the rest advanced to their doom. "What became of the horse?"

He looked at her as though it were the maddest question in the world. "Shot in the battle. Poor dumb beast. It was all for naught. In the end, I spared him nothing. I should have ridden forward with the rest and died."

He touched his wounded leg. "Until I met you, this wound seemed a sufficient punishment for any wrong I committed. But now?" He shook his head. "That day, I took your husband from you with my carelessness. And I took your honor tonight. If you will have me, I will do everything in my power to make this right."

Something inside her eased, as though a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. And without thinking of what had brought her to this place and this moment, she let out a sigh of relief. Then she patted the mattress beside her. "I do not think I need 'til dawn to make a decision, after all. Come to bed, Thomas."

CHAPTER FIVE

He reached for her again in the night, touching her skin and smiling in wonder as though her presence beside him was miraculous. She touched him in return, laying her hand against his cheek, tracing the planes of his shoulders and back, learning him in a way that was quite innocent, compared to their earlier coupling.

He paid attention to the details of her body, kissing the hollow of her shoulder, the crease of her elbow, her finger tips, and running his thumb along her spine to find a place on her back that was surprisingly sensitive. It made her gasp, and he smiled, continuing to stroke the spot as he bent his head forward to nip her throat and her breasts. Tom was setting a leisurely pace, as though they had all night to pleasure each other. He gave another flick of his finger, which he combined with a slow pull on her nipple that made her arch against him, clutching his hair to hold him tight to her, clawing with her other hand, down his side to search for him, stroke him and spread her legs for him. Her need grew more urgent the slower he moved. She could feel him laughing in triumph as she shuddered against him, so she pushed him onto his back and straddled him, impaling herself upon him, pressing his hand against her most sensitive place, forcing him to give her more pleasure as she bucked against him, her body clenching and releasing him, as she squeezed his hips between her thighs. She heard the moment when his laughter stopped and he relinquished control to her. His

breathing quickened, his body thrusting in response, until he whispered her name and lost control inside her again. The sensation was rare, and she closed her eyes as she savored it. The risk of children born while on campaign had been too great to allow such completion. Now, she might have it whenever she liked, and the children as well.

But when she looked into her lover's eyes, she saw pain as well as pleasure. "Your leg?" She pulled away so that he could withdraw.

He nodded, but laid a steadying hand on her arm. "It is all right." His eyes seemed to glaze for a moment, and then he smiled, and said through clenched teeth, "No. It was marvelous. Well worth a twinge or two."

But all the same, she disentangled herself carefully to lie beside him, careful not to stress the wound.

He put his arm around her shoulders, and kissed the top of her head. "That you would be willing to lie with me at all is pleasure enough. But that you have accepted my offer is quite amazing as well. There have been others who were not so generous."

She frowned. "How strange."

He laughed at her confusion. "My dear, I am not whole. It is quite obvious to you."

"But for the pain in your leg, you seem well enough." She had the temerity to blush, and he laughed again.

"In our case, perhaps it is better that you lie with me before you wed me. The woman I expected to take to wife on my return from the war was none too sure about me. Her father told her that the location of the wound might have rendered me unfit as a husband. And while his daughter had no qualms about my entering the military and was quite taken with the sight of the braid on my

uniform, there was something less than heroic about my homecoming, when it could not be made on two good legs.”

“But that is horrible. To have served your country is an honorable thing. And to have suffered as you did is a cause for increased respect and not rejection.”

“I knew you would understand. You of all women...” He said it reverently, as though she were precious beyond words to him. Tom reached out and touched her lips with his fingers with such gentleness that it startled her. If her eyes hadn’t been open, she’d have sworn that he’d kissed her.

And then, with a smile, he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Victoria wrapped her arms around him and laid her head close against his side, wishing she could take the pain away. She had been so very wrong about Thomas Godfrey. He had suffered at the hands of the French and from the faithless woman who would not take him back.

And he had suffered from her actions as well. She had defamed him to the Earl of Stanton, putting doubts in the man’s head that had no place there. Tomorrow, she would write a letter to Stanton, explaining what she had found, and the strange turn of events that things had taken.

And she would never speak of it again. For much as Tom Godfrey seemed to think he owed her happiness, she owed him a similar debt. She would make up for her lack of faith by being the wife that he longed for her to be.

When she awoke the next morning, Tom was already out of bed, washed and preparing to go out. As though he sensed her return to consciousness, he turned to look at her with an encouraging smile. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes.” Surprisingly, she had. Her decision had given her an easy rest.

“I have no female servant to assist you. If you wish to wait, I can have my valet send for someone. Perhaps there is a girl in a neighboring flat. Or I...” He broke off shyly, holding his open hands in front of him, to show that he was at her service.

“That is all right. I have learned to manage.” Her clothing was simple for just this reason. And compared to some of the places she’d stayed with Charles, this meager room was a luxury.

He nodded. “I must go out. And until more things are settled, it is hardly proper for us to be seen too much together. We will see if there is a way for your things to be sent for, discretely.”

“No!” She had forgotten that there were details of her life that could not be filed away and forgotten. It would not do for him to see how she lived. At least not just yet. How could she explain her presence, apparently downcast in a house of ill fame, once he saw that she lived better than he, with more space, more comfort and more servants? “I will take care of sending for what I need. I need no help.”

He looked surprised at her sudden denial. But then he shrugged as though he did not want to broach a topic that she might find embarrassing or painful. “Very well. I will trust to your own judgment in such matters. But be mindful of appearances, and take care not to be seen, should you leave.”

“Why is that?”

He raised an eyebrow, and smiled. “I should think it would be obvious. Your reputation is as precious to me as it is to you. I should hate to have to challenge some young

buck to a duel, should he see you creeping from my rooms with the dawn."

She colored. She had been so long married, and out of London society, that she had almost forgotten that anyone might care.

He grew serious again. "You do still wish to wed, do you not? For if you have had a change of heart?" He ran a hand through his tousled hair. "It quite changes my plans for the day. I had meant to procure a special license."

Again she felt the unfamiliar ripple of pleasure, to see him so eager to wed that he could not wait for the banns. "No, I have not changed my mind."

And now, he was smiling broadly at her, as though the reassurance had brought him immeasurable pleasure. He stepped forward, drew her up to sit, and kissed her on top of the head. "I am glad. And I will work to make you comfortable. And happy again, if you will let me."

Happy. What a curious idea. In her old life, she had been content, certainly. But had she been happy, traipsing about the Continent after Charles? Not really. She would have preferred her townhouse, the company of friends. A regular bed and regular meals. And perhaps a regular husband. "That would be nice. Thank you." She hoped he had not been expecting some declaration of love, for it seemed too soon to use that word. But to have a man to love, just an ordinary man, and not a soldier? And to have that man be as devoted to her as Tom Godfrey was? The possibility shimmered before her for a moment, like a beautiful dream.

"I had best get to it. If you are sure that you can manage?"

She gave him an encouraging smile in return. "I will be fine."

“Then I will go and make arrangements. And in no time at all, you will be Mrs. Godfrey.”

CHAPTER SIX

Tom smiled through clenched teeth as he climbed the steps to his final destination. The pain in his leg had not been so very bad as he had gone about the tortuous process of applying for the special license. But he did not wish to show weakness before the Earl of Stanton at the Home Office. He tried not to lean too heavily on his cane as he spoke to the clerk in the front room, and politely insisted that he had served under the earl when he had been simple Captain St John Radwell. Surely, a brief visit from an old comrade would not be unwelcome.

He heard a bark of affirmation from the door behind him, and words of welcome. But when he turned to face his old superior, the look in the man's eyes was wary. It seemed, after the disaster that had befallen his last captain, Tom would have to prove himself again to this one.

Stanton reached out and grasped his hand, pulling him into the office, but did not bother to shut the door behind him. "What brings you here, Tom? Are you doing well since your return? How is the leg, man?"

He shifted his weight to prove its strength. "As well as can be expected. It will never be right. But slowly, it improves. But other things?" He could not help the grin that spread on his face. "I suppose they are both very good, and most difficult."

"How so?"

"I have it in my mind to marry."

The earl looked startled quite beyond what he'd expected. "Marry? I had not heard..."

"That is because the decision is sudden. Fast as lightening, some might think."

"Do I...know the woman involved?"

The question stopped him. Perhaps Victoria's fears were justified. "I do not see why you should. She is the widow of a friend of mine. I hesitate to mention the name until the announcement is made. It is as sudden for her as it is for me. If she has people, they should hear of it before I go trumpeting my good fortune about the town, tempting though it may be to brag."

Stanton nodded, although there was strange hesitation in his reply. "That is probably wise. If there is a reason to cry off, it will save embarrassment."

And how little confidence in him did such a strange comment betray? "I am not worried on that account. We are in total agreement."

"But you spoke of a difficulty?"

"Simply that I had not thought to marry so soon. While I can manage to provide for her, it will not be as easy as I might like. I seek employment. I wondered if perhaps there might be some use you could find for a man who has already proven his loyalty to the crown."

And just as he feared it might, a shadow flickered behind the other man's eyes. He must have heard the rumors. Tom had no wish to deny the charges before they were spoken. When half a company died around a man, there were bound to be those who thought him responsible, through negligence or connivance.

Stanton shook his head. "I am sorry, Tom. But I have nothing to offer you. I will keep you in mind, of course. And if the occasion arises, I will be in touch. Leave your

direction with my man. But now, there is simply no need of another body."

Tom nodded, and tried to keep the bitterness from his voice. "I understand. Better than you think, perhaps. What you believe about me is not true. If I can find a way to prove it to you, I shall. And then, God help whoever has put these foul rumors in your head. I shall see they pay for their lies."

The earl shook his head. "Then God help you, Tom. For I cannot. Good day to you."

With that dismissal, Tom exited the office, back stiff with shame and the pain of fruitless exertion. Stanton shut the door behind him with a snap. And as he proceeded to the outer room, the little man who had tried to prevent his entrance now moved to block his exit. Tom raised his head to look and the clerk gestured to him, with a barest crook of the finger. "You seek employment?"

Tom nodded.

"And he turned you away, did he not?"

Tom nodded again.

The clerk gave a grim smile and whispered, "There is work enough here, should he chose to take you on. But he does not trust you. It is a shame. But I know of someone who is seeking men with knowledge that they would share. And although you are not as valuable as you might be, if you could return quietly to this office while still in his service, there are some tasks that would suit your abilities."

"Might suit me?" Tom said, a little dumbly.

"I heard, just now, that you wished to take back some of your own against those who have put you in this unenviable position. You are crippled for doing what you thought was right. And now you have been discarded by

those in whom you put your trust. I offer you the opportunity for revenge." The man smiled. "And profit as well." He scribbled a few words on paper and pushed them hurriedly into Tom's hand just as the door to the earl's office opened again. Stanton looked at him with only the mildest curiosity, and turned his attention to the clerk.

While they were both distracted, Tom slipped quietly from the room.

Victoria sat in the little chair by the fire, awaiting her lover's return. Tom's manservant would not leave her alone, since he'd caught her going through the drawers of the little desk in the front room. He'd enquired if there was anything he might get for her. And asked again if she wished to send for her possessions.

She'd shaken her head, smiled and assured him that there was nothing she needed. And still, he watched her with sharp dark eyes that said his master might be easily gulled by his feelings for a beautiful woman, but the servant was nobody's fool.

She had wanted pen and ink to write to Stanton, and enough privacy to do it unobserved. With the servant hovering behind her, how would that be possible? And she could still find no way to explain the comfortable life she had been leading just a few short miles across town.

The more she had seen of Tom's civilian life the more guilty she felt for suspecting him. He lived simply, just short of poverty. If he had turned coat for the French, than they would have rewarded him in some way. There was no sign of the zealot in him that might make her think he'd done it out of loyalty to Boney.

And now that she had seen the scars on his body, she

could not convince herself that he had staged a minor injury to disguise his perfidy. What kind of fool would come near to sacrificing his leg just to throw the hounds from his trail? It had rendered him unfit for duty, and for many forms of employment.

She had wanted to believe him innocent last night, as he'd held her and slept. But in the morning she had viewed the problem from all angles, lest her judgment had been swayed by sweet words and soft touches. As she weighed the bits of evidence against each other, no matter how she looked at it, it appeared that she had been wrong.

If only she could have come to the conclusion a few hours sooner, she might have slipped away from him last night, and avoided the painful admission she might have to make today.

But she had not left because she had not wanted to, just as he had not stopped himself in the brothel. When he learned the truth he would turn her out, and she would be well punished for her playacting and foolish suspicions, because she would never again feel as she did when he held her in his arms.

As she worried on it, Tom burst in through the door of his room, tossing his hat and gloves aside, but keeping his stick as he dropped into the chair beside hers. "Toby," he called to his servant, "paper and ink. Immediately. Sharpen a pen, and bring the writing table closer to the fire for me. Then, prepare yourself to deliver a message to the home of the Earl of Stanton. You are not to leave until you see the man. Put the paper I give you into his hands and no other's. He will hear me out on this, damn him, if he cares for his country."

"Tom, what are you about? What has happened?" The mention of the earl made her mouth go dry. But Tom

seemed more elated than angry. Proof that whatever he had learned it was not the whole truth.

He flexed his bad leg and sighed. "It has been a most curious day. I procured the license, or at least set things in motion to make the damned thing procurable. And then, I went to visit an old friend in the Home Office. The Earl of Stanton was my captain, before your husband. If we are to make a go of it, I cannot lay about here, mooning over the past. I need employment." He was grinning at her as though he thought it the most wonderful thing in the world to toil for her, and she could feel her heart breaking a little.

He shook his head. "But he would not have me. It seems I am not trusted. There were rumors, you know, after the incident. Some thought me a coward, and others a traitor for my damned luck on that day."

She cringed at his casual mention of the very thing that had preyed on her mind. "Perhaps the people who doubted did not know you as I do now." And she would find a way to make it right, now that she had seen the truth.

He smiled and gave another shake of his head, this time in amazement. "No matter. Today, I think it has all happened for a reason. Stanton's secretary was quick to take note of the cold reception, and made me a most unusual offer. I think he hoped that there was some bit of information that I might wish to sell, or that the enemy had some use for a desperate and angry man."

"No." She almost moaned the word. It would be a sad thing if her presence had made him the very traitor she hoped to catch.

He placed a hand on hers. "Do not worry. I am not tempted. But I kept mum about the fact. And now, it

seems I have information that would be most valuable to Stanton, and he will be forced to apologize for turning me out." His eyes narrowed. "As if I would turn so easily to help the lot that gave me this gamey leg." His hand tightened on hers, as though he could shield her from the pain of the past. "I know we are barely met. And this all must seem most curious to you. But if asked, I will spy for Stanton and meet with these men to divine their purpose. Perhaps I can lead them to reveal others. If I can deliver them into the very hands of those they seek to betray, it will be most satisfying. I will lie if I must, and appear to be a rogue and traitor. But you must believe that I am as true to my country as I will be to you." He brushed the hair out of her eyes. "I will make an excellent spy, since it is so easy for most to believe wrong of me."

"Don't." The proof of his innocence hurt almost as much as the fear of his guilt.

He was holding her hand almost painfully tight, as though he feared she would leave. "If we are to be together, you will hear what people say of me. But know that it is all lies. For you, I have nothing but truth. If there was any sin I was guilty of, in all the time on the Peninsula, it was of envy. For Charles told me of you, and I..." He took a breath. "I loved you long before I met you. But I never meant to act on it. At that time, I thought I had a future of my own, even if it was not so bright as his. I would never have hurt him, for doing so would hurt you. And I never could. Not in all the world."

So his last secret was that he loved her better than she knew. And he did not want her to think him dishonorable, should he resort to spying. She could feel the tears welling up behind her eyes. For how was what he was planning any different than what she had done to him?

Other than that she had been wrong.

“What is it?” The concern for her was echoed in his eyes, his voice, and every line of his body, as though he strained from his very soul to put her at ease. It only made her betrayal of him worse. She could feel the sob breaking, and was powerless to stop it.

His arms were around her. “There, there. I have upset you.”

“No. It is I who was false to you. You will hate me when you know.”

He stroked her hair, letting her cry. “What could you ever do that would make me love you less?”

“The rumors about your disloyalty came from me. I went to the Earl of Stanton. It was I who put the doubts about you into his head. I hoped that I could trick you with my body into revealing the truth.”

There was a horrible pause before he spoke. He went still and his face became blank. “And so you have. After less than a day, there is not a secret left in me that you do not know.”

“I hate myself for what I have done.”

“For giving yourself to me?” His hand moved ever so slightly on her.

“No. That was...” What good did it do to lie and protect the feelings of the dead, when it would further wrong the man who held her? “Perfect. When we are alone? It is unlike anything I have known and I do not regret a moment. But I wronged you with my words, and I lied to you, even after I knew I had been mistaken about your guilt.”

“You never needed my help. Not even from the first?” He gave an incredulous laugh.

“I was in the brothel only to trap you. I would never...

I do not need money, or the protection of any man. I could have lived out my days alone in comfort. But I had to know....”

“And now you do.” His back stiffened, but he did not release her. “Charles was right. Your loyalty to him knew no bounds. Not even those of propriety, if you were willing to lie with me just to prove my guilt.”

She opened her eyes and looked up into his. “All I found was that you were a better man, and more honest and noble than I could possibly imagine.”

“And now, I am vindicated?” He said it as though it were a small comfort. “And when you accepted my offer of marriage?” There was no rancor in his voice, only a gentle prodding to get to the truth.

“I knew in my heart that it would all end once you realized what I had done. But I could not manage to say no.”

He released her and leaned back in his chair, rubbing his hand over his eyes as though befuddled by her answer. “If I had behaved as a man of honor when we met, we would not be in this muddle. I should have walked from the room as soon as I suspected the truth of your identity. But I wanted you, even when I thought you would sell your body to any who would have it. I thought you a common whore, who would leave as soon as she saw how little I had to offer. But I could not let you go.”

“You offered yourself. And it was more than I deserved.”

“And what you did to me was done out of loyalty to your country, and to your husband. What sense would there be to punish you for believing what everyone else thought true?” He sighed again.

“You do not mean to cast me off, then?” she asked in a

small voice, fearing what his answer would be.

He gave her a wan smile. "You must know, Victoria, that it is up to you to decide whether to keep me or cut me loose. A gentleman does not cry off of an engagement."

Without meaning to, she laughed, and then gulped to swallow the sound and covered her mouth with her hand. There was nothing funny about the predicament they were in. He had not been a gentleman, nor had she acted like a lady. She was a spy and wished she wasn't. He was ready to become one to earn money that she did not need. And nothing she'd assumed about him was true. He was sweet and kind and he had loved her before she'd even known him. And perhaps, there was a chance she might love him as well.

"Money does not matter," she whispered, afraid that she might offend him. "I have enough for both of us. But I will be happy without, if you wish me to."

He gave a dry chuckle. "I am not so great a fool as to wish for poverty to salve my pride. You may keep your money, and I will not be as useless as I have been, once Stanton gets my letter. I am sure we can find a happy medium, and live quite comfortably." He paused. "If you still wish to make a go of it."

"If I wish it?" She scarcely dared breathe. For after all she had told him, he still spoke as if a promise made in the dark was an unbreakable oath. "If I did not want to release you?" she whispered. "If I wished, with all my heart, that there was a way to take back the terrible things I said and thought?"

"Then you know what you must do." He was staring at her as though it should be perfectly obvious what he expected.

Was it an apology he wanted? It was his. "I am so

sorry. So very sorry, that I hurt you. That I did not take the time to understand, or to know you for who you truly are.”

Still he stared at her, unmoving and expectant. There was something else.

And then she realized. There was a way that he would know that it was truth. She leaned forward and reached for him, putting her arms about his neck and her mouth on his. “Let me begin again,” she whispered against his parted lips. She slipped her tongue between them, beginning with barely a touch. It was one more thing about him that was different. He tasted...

“Mmm.” She smiled to herself as her tongue touched his. For without thinking, she’d made a noise of satisfaction before delving deeper into the kiss.

Suddenly his hands caught her by the waist and dragged her body close and into the chair with him to sit on his lap. She wrapped her arms even tighter around his neck as he kissed her in return. And she decided, if there had been a secret he was hiding from the world, it had nothing to do with loyalty and betrayal, and everything to do with the skill of his kisses.

He broke from her and muttered, “Now I know why you denied me that, when we first met. How could I leave your bed, after such a kiss?”

She laid a hand on his shoulder, tracing the seam of his coat with her finger. “It would not have been like that, at first. I did not want you to know the contents of my heart.”

“But now you do?”

“I would like nothing more.” And she kissed him again.

If you liked this story by Christine Merrill, check out her other historical romances always available in eBook format:

AN UNLADYLIKE OFFER
THE MISTLETOE WAGER
A WICKED LIAISON
HALLOWE'EN HUSBANDS—"Master of
Penlowen"

And watch for her next full-length book MISS
WINTHORPE'S ELOPEMENT in March 2010 from
Harlequin Historical.

Enjoy more passion through the ages with the sensual
Harlequin Historical **UNDONE** titles on sale now:

THE CAPTAIN'S WICKED WAGER by Marguerite Kaye

THE WELSH LORD'S MISTRESS by Margaret Moore

THE WARRIOR'S FORBIDDEN VIRGIN by Michelle
Willingham

AT THE DUKE'S SERVICE by Carole Mortimer

HIS SILKEN SEDUCTION by Joanna Maitland

A NIGHT FOR HER PLEASURE by Terri Brisbin

DISROBED AND DISHONORED by Louise Allen

THE UNLACING OF MISS LEIGH by Diane Gaston

A NIGHT OF WICKED DELIGHT by Joanne Rock

PLEASURED BY THE ENGLISH SPY by Bronwyn Scott

THE RAKE'S INTIMATE ENCOUNTER by Ann
Lethbridge

NOTORIOUS LORD, COMPROMISED MISS by Annie
Burrows

THE UNMASKING OF LADY LOVELESS by Nicola
Cornick

LIBERTINE LORD, PICKPOCKET MISS by Bronwyn
Scott

THE VIKING'S FORBIDDEN LOVE-SLAVE by Christine
Merrill

SHIPWRECKED AND SEDUCED by Amanda McCabe

Craving something a little longer? Find more historical
romantic adventure from Harlequin Historical at
www.eHarlequin.com or your local bookstore.

Interested in writing for Harlequin Historical **UNDONE**?
Send your submission to undone@harlequin.ca.

Christine Merrill lives on a farm in Wisconsin with her husband, two sons and too many pets—all of whom would like her to get off the computer so they can check their e-mail. She has worked in theater costuming, where she was paid to play with period ballgowns, and as a librarian, where she spent the day surrounded by books. Writing historical romance combines her love of good stories and fancy dress with her ability to stare out the window and make stuff up. You can visit her Web site at www.christine-merrill.com

ISBN: 978-1-4268-4535-2

Seducing a Stranger

Copyright © 2009 by Christine Merrill

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher, Harlequin Enterprises Limited, 225 Duncan Mill Road, Don Mills, Ontario, Canada M3B 3K9.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text November be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of publisher.

All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

This edition published by arrangement with Harlequin Books S.A.

® and ™ are trademarks of the publisher. Trademarks indicated with ® are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the Canadian Trade Marks Office and in other countries.

www.eHarlequin.com