

He frowned at her. “Come now, Cilla. Of course you believe it exists. You married for love, didn’t you?”

“I did.” She reached for the bottle, but he grabbed it before she could. She almost protested—until he tipped some wine into her glass. “I married for love. Embarrassed my family, left my friends and the only life I ever knew behind, all because I fell in love.” She leaned forward and fixed him with a fierce stare. “I was stupid.”

“Don’t say that, Cilla. All women know how to love—at least what they think love is. There are many women who do the same thing you did, every day.”

“Then we’re all stupid to believe a man’s lies. All Edward wanted was the money he thought I had. But he didn’t expect my father to disown me, did he? All I had when we ran off together were the jewels I had inherited from my grandmother. And he took them, every one, and sold them for cash that he lost at the gaming tables.” She leaned back in her chair, suddenly exhausted. “That was my love, Samuel.”

“Is that why you don’t want to marry again? Certainly a romantic woman like you longs for a lover.”

“Ha! A lover? Who would fill the position, Samuel? You?”

“I believe you have had enough wine.” He took her glass away and placed it on his other side, beyond her reach, then moved a goblet of water in front of her. “Drink this. It will steady you.”

She took up the glass and drank, then set it down and looked at him with her mouth set in defiance.

“As for me being your lover—” he began.

“I was not suggesting that!”

“Weren’t you?” He fixed her with a knowing stare that made her heart skip beats. “I admit, the thought has crossed my mind. You are a very attractive woman. I’ve been tempted since the first moment I saw you.”

The breath left her lungs. “What—”

“And I do know how to make love to a woman. To take her breath away with a kiss. Melt her knees with a touch.” He raised her fingers to his lips. “To bring her pleasure that will make her scream my name.”

“Then why—”

“I think you want a lover, Cilla, but it can’t be me. Not if we’re going to work together.”

Stung, she snatched her tingling hand away. “Nonsense. I do *not* want a lover. Why would I? Women were created to endure men’s lusts, not enjoy them.”

“Surely you don’t believe that.”

“Surely, I do.”

“That’s a pity, Cilla. Not to speak ill of the dead, but I’m sorry your husband did properly not see to your needs.”

“My needs? I do not know what you are talking about.”

“My, my. Do realize the challenge you pose with those words? I’m almost tempted to show you myself.”

“I doubt you could show me anything new, Captain.”

He chuckled. “Well then, how about a wager?”

The gleam in his eye made him appear a little too pleased with himself. She regarded him with suspicion. “What type of woman to you take me for?”

“The type to engage in a harmless wager between friends.”

“And are we friends?”

“We’re certainly not enemies.”

“True.” She nibbled her lower lip. “What type of wager?”

“I will wager that I can make you cry out my name in pleasure—without me removing a single piece of your clothing.”

Her common sense urged her to deny his claim, to slap his face in outrage, but she hesitated. Part of her was intrigued by his boast. Certainly it was impossible. How could a man do such a thing if she remained fully clothed? But his seductive words of moments before had sent her blood thundering to unmentionable places, and she found herself ensnared by the idea that he just might be able to do what he claimed. “Are you mad?”

“Not mad,” he said. “Confident.”

Oh, she wanted to wipe the smirk right off his face. “What would we wager?”

“A guinea,” he said.

“How can you have a guinea when the highwayman stole your purse?”

“I have John’s purse. How else did you think I was paying for the inn?” He produced the purse and took out a guinea, laying it on the table. “If you win, you get the guinea.”

“And if you win? What do you get, Captain?”

“A kiss,” he decided. “And not one of those little pecks on the cheek. A real woman’s kiss.”

The thought of kissing him left her breathless. “This is probably not a good idea.”

“What are you afraid of?”

She eyed him for a long moment. She did not truly believe he could do as he claimed, however exciting the fantasy, but she did have to admit to a certain curiosity. Her attraction to him had bubbled steadily from the moment she had first seen him.

Dear God, how long had it been since anyone had touched her?

“I accept your wager,” she said. “And I will be pleased to accept your guinea when you lose.”

He gave her a slow smile that sent a streak of heat straight to her woman’s parts. “I have no intention of losing.”