

Miss Carlyle's Curricl

By Karen Harbaugh

Prologue

The horse screamed madly, going wild, and the sickening crash of the curricle's broken wood made Diana Carlyle freeze in horror where she sat on her horse, many yards away.

In the next moment she slipped off her own horse, hitting the ground in a run. She ran to the overturned curricle, reaching for her uncle, who was facedown on the ground. Others came with her—she did not know who, nor cared—and hands came together to turn over his lordship.

“A doctor,” she cried. “Someone fetch a doctor, immediately!” She swallowed down bile at the sight of her uncle's bloodied face. “Uncle . . . Uncle Charles . . .” *Please God, let him be well*, she prayed. *He is like a father to me*. The shouts of grooms and spectators roared in her ears, but she ignored them. “Oh, please. Oh, please—you will be well, I know you will be. Please be well.”

“Ain't likely, miss,” a groom said near her.

She turned fiercely to him. “He *will* be well, you shall see! He only needs a doctor.” She felt a touch on her hand, and she turned eagerly back to the man who had cared for her since she had been ten years old, had patched her knees, had taught her to ride and shoot as well as any man.

“Diana?” His voice was a whisper, and he stared at her, but seemed not to see her.

She clasped his hand. “I am here, Uncle.”

He gasped, then groaned. “Tell your mother not to worry. I have taken care of her—and you, too.”

“Yes, yes, I know, and I have been grateful for it, dear uncle. No one could have done better.”

He moved his head, a negative motion. “No. . . no, in the will. You are provided for. The heir . . . not. . . he is . . . Tell Cecelia. . .” His eyes closed, and the fitful rise and fall of his chest ceased.

“Uncle? Oh, no, please, no!” Diana frantically squeezed his hand, wanting to will her own life force into him. Impossible . . . Surely he was only resting? His hand was already lax in hers. It was not possible. She gazed at her uncle’s face, a kind and fatherly face, now seeming to be asleep.

Diana still held his hand and somehow could not let go, for her fear had frozen into incomprehension—how could it be? He had, just moments ago, been all vivid life, laughing as he touched his whip to his horses, as his curricule bowed down the road, swiftly, sure to win the race. She had seen him and had cheered him on. It had been minutes, only minutes ago. She watched for one more breath. One more breath . . .

“Miss—miss, it’s done, the good doctor is here—there’s nothing more for you to do.”

She turned at the voice . . . it was McKinney, the head groom. He had helped her up on her first pony, when she first came to Brisbane House. She stared at him, shaking her head slowly. “The doctor . . . he will make Uncle well, will he not?”

“Ah, miss . . . ah, miss.” The groom’s face creased in sorrow. “It’s best you go to your mother.”

She gazed at the doctor, who had lifted Lord Brisbane’s hand and felt his wrist, then felt for the pulse at the neck. He shook his head, and a heavy ache pressed into Diana’s heart. The doctor gazed back in return, looking grim.

“He . . . he is gone, Miss Carlyle,” he said.

“No . . . no.” A stubborn part of her did not want to believe him. She turned to the head groom. “The horses, McKinney, should you not be attending them?” Gunshot made her jerk back and drop her uncle’s hand.

A tear fell down McKinney’s weathered cheek. “There’s naught to attend, Miss Diana.” The sound of the gunfire and the sight of McKinney’s sorrow forced the truth into Diana’s mind at last, and she gasped as the dull ache in her heart twisted and turned sharp.

“McKinney’s right, Diana.”

She rose and turned—it was Sir James, her cousin. She hunched her shoulders against the familiar irritation she felt when he was about, and wished that they were not cousins so that he would have no cause to call her by her Christian name. He looked at her, a small crease between his brows, the rest of his face impassive. “I think your mother would want to hear the news regarding Lord Brisbane from you, rather than a servant.”

He was right, and this fact irritated Diana even more. “Of course,” she replied, and moved away. She gave a last glance at her uncle, and drew in a shuddering breath. “I will go, immediately.”

She ran to her horse, still standing obediently where she left him, though his ears were pricked forward and he shifted his feet uneasily. McKinney helped her up, and she urged the horse to a gallop back to Brisbane House.

Diana worried her lower lip as she left her horse in the stables and hurried up the stairs of Brisbane House. How would Mama react to the news? Surely in her calm, sensible way, although of course she would be sorely grieved, for both of them had been fond of Uncle Charles, her father’s brother. Mama had always been strong and full of good sense—she had been Diana’s anchor when Diana’s father had left them and eventually died, her father who had left them to starve until Uncle Charles had come to their rescue. Mama would know what to say, she would know how to deal with this terrible pain.

“Mama, it’s I,” Diana said when she knocked on the door of her mother’s room, and at her mother’s welcome, entered.

“Did your uncle win, Diana?” Mrs. Carlyle said cheerfully. She sat in her comfortable chair near the fire, setting a loop in her tatting. She looked up, then she frowned upon meeting Diana’s eyes. “What is the matter, my dear?”

“Mama . . . it is very bad. . . .”

Mrs. Carlyle smiled slightly. “Nothing is as bad as we first think, Diana.”

How was she to tell her? She stared, confused, at her mother, uncertain how to breach the

assurance her mother always had about her, and not wanting to breach it. “No, listen—it—Uncle Charles—”

Mrs. Carlyle’s smile disappeared, and she gazed steadily at Diana. “Yes? What is it?”

“There has been an accident—he was injured—the doctor said—”

Her mother paled. “He is hurt—but surely he will be better.”

Diana swallowed and looked away. “No, Mama.”

“The doctor cannot tell that in such a short time—”

She raised her eyes and stared at her mother, and her lip trembled. “Yes, Mama, he can.”

Silence, then: “He isn’t . . . he isn’t—”

“Yes, Mama,” Diana said, her voice a whisper.

The tatting dropped from Mrs. Carlyle’s hands and she gazed around the room, blindly, her face bewildered. “But he cannot—I must see him. The servants—they must fetch cold cloths—he must be injured, only injured, and he could become fevered—”

“No, Mama,” Diana said, making her voice louder though her closing throat tried to cut her off. “He—he is gone.”

Mrs. Carlyle rose from her chair, the lace and the tatting bobbin falling unheeded to the floor. “Dear God,” she said. Her eyes were wide, her face more pale than before, as if she looked at some horror in front of her, and not her own daughter. “I must see him. I shall change my dress and I shall see him, for . . . for it would never do for him to see me in this . . . this . . .” She took two trembling steps toward the bell rope, lifted her hand to pull it, then collapsed to the floor.

“Mama!” Diana screamed. She ran to her mother’s still form and fell to her knees, frantically feeling for a pulse—it was there. She breathed a sigh of relief and rose again to summon a servant. A sudden dizziness swept through her, but she clenched her teeth against it, pulling together all the self-discipline she had learned when she was a child and had felt the dizziness of hunger. She grasped the rope and tugged it.

Sitting down again, Diana carefully lifted her mother’s head to her lap, and smoothed away

the hair from her forehead. The dizziness had passed, and had turned into an iron wall around her heart. It seemed her life was crumbling, but she could not let it crumble her: her mother needed her, and no tears would help her or those she loved right now. She would cry later, when she had time, when her mother was well enough to put her arms around her and comfort her.

But somehow a line was crossed, a step taken on a journey. Diana took her mother's hand in hers and patted it, and remembered how her mother had done this to her, when she was hurt or sad. Mrs. Carlyle moaned softly, whispering Lord Brisbane's name, her voice sounding lost and lonely.

Diana sat up as straight as she could, while a rising sob lost the battle against the wall she had erected within herself—her numbness was firmly in place now.

A maid entered the room, cried out, and exclaimed, and helped get Mrs. Carlyle undressed and into her bed. Diana instructed the maid to find the doctor and have him come to her mother, then sat by the bed, still holding her mother's hand. When the doctor arrived, quickly, he assured her that Mrs. Carlyle merely needed rest.

Diana sighed and nodded, squeezed her mother's hand one more time, then went downstairs to call upon Mr. Southworthy, the vicar, to arrange the funeral.

Chapter 1

Diana Carlyle rode furiously through the fields and into the woods, her mare's hooves pounding the turf beneath her, pounding as hard as her heart. Cold needles of rain splashed her face, washing away tears of grief. She did not know how else to come to terms with the death of the man who had been, for all practical purposes, her father.

When she reached the wood, she more tumbled than descended from her horse, and leaned, gasping, against the old oak whose large, rambling roots she had often played amongst as a child. She had been happy that her Uncle Charles had brought her and her mother from London and from destitution after her own father had died. Her belly had been full after being empty for so long, and her mother's face had ceased being so pale and wan.

But now she felt an emptiness once again, and her mother's face was again pale and wan, but this time it was caused by a hunger in the heart, left bare and comfortless for the lack of Lord Brisbane's joyful presence.

It had happened so quickly—the accident, the funeral—that Diana felt as if she had gone through it in a disbelieving trance, holding both emotions and reality at bay to keep some semblance of self-control. She had managed to note her mother's bewildered gaze, and had held her hand through the funeral. But when the first shovelful of earth had been thrown upon the coffin, the sound of it had pierced the numbness that had covered her like a muffling shroud, and told her that her beloved uncle was indeed dead—suddenly, violently. She had drawn in a sharp gasp and shook her head in denial, and when the funeral was over, she had walked away as quickly as she could, running the last few steps to the house, and then up the stairs to her

bedroom.

She had no comfort in the silence of her room; it reminded her of her first day in Brisbane House, how lonely she had felt in an unfamiliar place, and how her uncle had greeted her with kindness and a gentle pat on her cheek. She wanted to howl her grief, but her gentlewoman's training forbade it.

She had borne the stillness and inactivity for more than a few days—until now. Today, the will would be read, and she could not stand one more reminder of her uncle's death. Her mother's mention of the will had brought on an inner wailing of sorrow, and Diana knew she had to leave before she humiliated herself with an outpouring of tears.

She had run to her room and stripped off her black gown and had pulled on her riding habit, then run into the stables, ordering, in a low, harsh voice, the startled stable boy to saddle her mare. She had had neither voice nor breath for thanks when the job was done; she had hoisted herself astride on the horse, for that was the only way to ride as hard and fast as she wanted, away from death, away from grief.

But here she was, leaning and sobbing against the old oak, for grief had followed her like a Greek Fury, making her want to wail and scream in protest against the snatching away of an important person in her life. She groaned instead, and pounded the bark of the tree with her fists, for the years of discipline she had imposed on herself would not allow the wildness within herself to burst forth as wildly as it wished.

The rain fell. It soaked her riding habit, and soon Diana's sobs ceased. Perhaps because of the rain—the drops falling around her felt almost like the world itself wept, and it was an oddly comforting thought. She still leaned against the tree, sighing and catching her breath from the ride and the weeping, when a sound made her turn quickly around.

It was a man. He held the reins of a fine gray horse, and had walked up behind her, probably while she had leaned her head against the tree trunk. She had not heard him until this moment, perhaps because she had been so caught up in weeping, and because the rush of rain upon the

leaves above had covered the sound of his approach. Hastily Diana wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand—a useless gesture, for the rain made them wet again.

“You seem troubled, ma’am. May I be of assistance?” he asked. His voice was low and husky, an intimate sound, and Diana blushed, feeling awkward at being caught in her grief.

She looked up at him. He was so tall that even though she was tall herself, she had to tip back her head. His brows were drawn together in apparent concern, and though she had opened her mouth to tell him to go away, a strong feeling of family likeness made her close her mouth again.

She narrowed her eyes, examining each feature. His hair was black and carefully combed from what she could see just beneath the brim of his beaver hat. It waved only slightly, unlike her own unruly yellow curls—Carlyle curls, her mother often said, for all the Carlyles had curly hair. His face was long and lean, with sharply cut cheekbones, unlike her own heart-shaped one. But perhaps he was related for all that, for the line of his jaw led down to a sharply cleft chin, his lips were fine and sensual, his nose straight and narrow, and he had the characteristic Carlyle eyebrows—thin and just a little slanted at the temples. Was he some relation? She did not remember ever meeting him, and she was certain she had met all of her cousins.

An amused expression flickered in his eyes. “I hope you approve?”

Diana glanced away, feeling her face grow warm, then gazed at him stiffly. “Not if you are trespassing, sir.”

“I was asked to come to Brisbane House,” the man said. “Lord Brisbane had some business to discuss with me.” He smiled slightly. “Gavin Sinclair at your service, ma’am.” He made an elegant bow, extending his booted leg at just the proper length from his greatcoat.

Unfortunately, the rain that had accumulated on the curled brim of his hat poured down and splashed upon his fawn pantaloons and into his boot. Diana hastily pressed her hand to her lips, smothering the giggle that threatened to burst out at his grimace. But then she recalled his words, that he wished to see Lord Brisbane, and her laugh died.

He sighed. "This is not a promising introduction, is it? One usually wishes to look one's best when presented to a lady, but I am afraid the weather prevents me from looking as I ought."

"I am not any better," Diana replied. She gestured at her sodden skirts. "Indeed, I must look like a bedraggled cat."

There was a short silence while Mr. Sinclair's gaze went over her. Then his eyes met hers, and she felt a slight shock—she had not expected his eyes to be so very green. None of her cousins had green eyes—they were brown, or hazel, or blue like her own. Mr. Sinclair had large green eyes, fringed with black lashes, but somehow they did not look girlish as they might have. No, they were heavy-lidded, sleepy, as if he had just arisen from bed—nonsense, of course.

As she continued to gaze at him, his eyes did not lose their heavy-lidded look, but became assessing instead, and his smile grew wide. She became uncomfortable—he was very tall, and she was not used to anyone towering over her, much less anyone smiling at her in such a way.

The chill of wet cloth against her skin suddenly made her conscious of how her riding habit must be clinging to her legs. She tried to pull her skirts away, fighting a rising blush. Stupid of her not to think sooner how indecent she must look!

"Not at all like a cat, bedraggled or otherwise, Miss—?" The smile was still on his face, and Diana wanted to remove it, quite forcefully. She disliked anyone looking at her like that.

"Diana Carlyle," she replied. "I live with—my mother at Brisbane House." She had almost said with her uncle; for one moment the memory of the funeral had left her while she talked to Mr. Sinclair.

Diana hunched one shoulder for a moment, a brief, protective gesture against the recent pain. She focused on the words he had just spoken; she felt no better. Perhaps he intended to imply some flattery, but she knew how false that could be. "I suppose you'd best be about your business, though you are too late if you wish to speak to Lord Brisbane," she said brusquely, knowing her voice sounded ill-mannered. She did not care at the moment, and a sudden resentment rose in her at his intrusion into her grief, even though she knew he no doubt meant it

kindly. “Both of us will catch our death of cold if we do not find some shelter.”

“Too late—?”

The words to tell him of her uncle’s death stuck in her throat. She could only shake her head, walking quickly to her mare. She mounted it astride again, ignoring Mr. Sinclair’s raised brows. “You may follow me if you wish,” she said. “My way is shorter, though perhaps more muddy than the road you were following.”

He gazed at her for a moment before he nodded, saying nothing, and mounted his horse as well.

Diana did not look back as she turned her horse toward Brisbane House once again. She relaxed her hold upon the reins, leaned forward in her saddle, and the mare leaped into a gallop across the fields. She wanted to be away from Gavin Sinclair, and his intrusiveness. Her conscience pricked her at the thought. The man had not really been intrusive, though his smile had been—well, she did not know what his smile had been, but she had not liked it. She wished to be alone, and she cared not whether Mr. Sinclair followed her or went by the road he had come upon. Indeed, she would be happy if his stay at Brisbane House was so short that she did not see him—or anyone for that matter.

Mr. Sinclair watched the young woman gallop away from him, but he only followed at a canter, avoiding as much mud as possible. She clearly did not want his company. His smile faded. It was just as well she did not. If all was as he hoped at Brisbane House, then he could go about his business as he wished. If it were not . . . His hand tightened on the reins, and his horse slowed to a walk. Well, he would find out soon enough.

Chapter 2

Diana carefully wiped the mud of the stables from her boots with a rag before she entered the house by a back door, but hesitated before going inside. She knew what she would find: no maids humming as they worked, no footmen whistling merry tunes as they fetched and carried, no smiles to accompany the quick curtsies or bows as she walked down the halls.

The house was silent, only her footsteps made any noise; the servants walked quietly and spoke in hushed whispers. Brisbane House was a house of mourning, after all. Diana shook with the sudden anguish she felt at the thought, and glanced at the black crepe draped almost everywhere. She wanted abruptly to tear it all down. Uncle Charles would have despised such displays.

If he were here, of course. Which he was not. Diana swallowed down the welling sob in her throat. No. She would not cry again. It would be better to think of her and her mother's possible futures. She could not be sure that the new Earl of Brisbane would be as good a man as her Uncle Charles, who saved her and her mother from hunger and want. And, she did not know if her uncle had made any provisions in his will! The will that would be read today, soon, this afternoon.

She went up to her room and changed her clothes, hesitating over the choice of colors. She should, of course, wear black as was proper, but her mind went back to the black already draped over almost everything in the house. No, not black. Brown. She would wear brown—it was dark enough for mourning, and should anyone eye her askance, she would stare them down. Diana smiled grimly, ignoring her maid's questioning look at her choice.

A pang of guilt went through her—she knew her mother would no doubt wear black for the

proper length of time and more. She shook her head at herself. She was a selfish wretch, to be sure! She should have seen to her mother, and not have dashed off as she had done. But the pain of loss had seized her suddenly like a white-hot fire, and she had run away in a blind panic.

Dismissing the maid, Diana hurried down the hall to her mother's room. Though she thought her mother ought to be there, she was not sure at first; no response came on her first knock. But then a faint "Yes?" beckoned her, and she opened the door.

Mrs. Carlyle was indeed arrayed in black; the only white she wore was her cap. She sat by the window, looking out at the gray skies that had brightened a little after the earlier downpour. Her eyes lightened when she saw Diana, but her daughter could see the shadows beneath them nevertheless. Mrs. Carlyle said nothing for a moment, only shading her eyes as she looked out of the chamber window, though there was clearly no sunshine.

"It's an odd thing, Diana," she said softly. "Charles should have died in the midst of winter, not in spring." She moved to look at her daughter, and made no noise except for the sighing slip of her dress against the sofa. "Although I suppose the rain is appropriate for this day. He detested rain, you know. I believe he must have been the sunniest man I have ever known." Her lips lifted briefly, but she looked ghost-pale and weary, as if she had not slept at all. A vague uneasiness made Diana look at her mother sharply. Her mother had always had an affection for Lord Brisbane, a sisterly one, Diana had always thought. But now she wondered if there might have been something more. Though she herself mourned her uncle, she had fallen into her bed from an almost depressive fatigue and slept more deeply than usual, and—Diana remembered her mother had eaten little if nothing since Lord Brisbane's death—Diana's appetite had only been a little affected.

Mrs. Carlyle raised her brows. "Is there something amiss?"

Diana shook her head, smiling slightly. "No, Mama, other than worry over you, You have eaten very little since Uncle Charles . . ." Her voice faded for a moment. "Come, Mama, shall we have something to eat? I believe Cook has prepared a roast chicken and sweetmeats." Diana rose,

still holding her mother's hand. "We can have it in the library, where it is quite bright and cheerful, and perhaps I can read to you from one of Mrs. Radcliffe's novels."

Mrs. Carlyle shook her head and smiled, gently pulling her hand away. "No, I am not hungry, my dear. Do you go down and eat, and I shall be with you later."

Diana squeezed her hand tightly. "No, Mama. You *must* eat something. Please. Dress yourself in black if you must, but . . . but if you die of starvation, I shall be very angry, for I don't think I can bear it if I lose you and Uncle Charles all in one week."

Mrs. Carlyle looked up at her and gave a reluctant laugh. "In which case, I will most certainly change my dress and come down. I can hardly wish you to become angry at me." She rose from the chair and touched Diana's cheek. "You are a dear—I am truly blessed that you are my daughter."

"Nonsense," Diana said, and smiled widely, and made her voice sound high and nasal. "I am a headstrong girl who will not find a rich husband and save both of us from abject poverty."

"Horrid girl!" Mrs. Carlyle said, emitting another reluctant laugh. "You could not help it that your Aunt Matchett is such a squeeze crab that she would outfit you in only the most drab colors and designs that did not suit your figure. And she did not even bother to try to get you into Almack's even though she was fully capable of it."

"Exactly. If I had been biddable, and less of a large lump of a girl, and less reluctant to leave you, she might have." Diana sobered. "I am sorry, Mama. First my lack of success during a London Season, and now this."

"You are not a lump!" Mrs. Carlyle said indignantly. "Indeed, I almost wish you had not gone to London, if that is the impression you received there. You are not to blame for your uncle's death—what nonsense! And, as to your Season, it's your Aunt Matchett's fault for not showing you off to advantage." She glanced at the clock, then waved at her daughter in a shooing motion. "I think if you are to eat Cook's meal when it is warm, you should go to the library now. I will follow shortly."

Diana met her mother's eyes, then nodded. Mrs. Carlyle wished to be alone. Though Diana was loath to allow it, she understood such needs, for she also valued solitude.

She reached the library at last, a well-lighted room with a warm southern exposure, heavy draperies at the window, and well-padded chairs and sofas—a comfortable place. It was one of her uncle's favorite refuges, for though he was an avid sportsman, he had loved books as well. She caught something, however—a movement, a sound—that made her stop at the threshold before stepping over. Her eyes scanned the room, and her brows drew together in a frown.

Feet. A pair of booted feet stuck out from one side of a sofa. It could be one of her cousins, but it was unlikely, for they always retired to their own rooms when they wished to rest—there was no reason for any of them to rest here. Certainly not one of the servants; the boots were gentlemen's boots, and besides, her mother had trained all the servants strictly. None of them would dare be caught sleeping in the library. Quietly, carefully, Diana walked around the sofa and sat down upon a chair opposite to it, staring at the man.

It was Mr. Sinclair. Her eyes scanned the clothes he wore, and she wrinkled her nose. He must be quite a distant relation—none of the Carlyles were dandies. Even in repose, the man's neckcloth was unrumped, his fine blue coat was stretched neatly across his shoulders (padded, no doubt), his waistcoat was elaborately embroidered, his fawn trousers hugged admittedly muscular legs—although she had heard some men enhanced them with sawdust—and his boots bore a bright shine that could only have come from some secret polish dandies always claimed they had.

His long, elegant fingers, neatly folded upon his stomach, wore two rings, one an elaborate signet ring, the other quite plain. Diana wrinkled her nose again. Most men she knew—the men she preferred—wore no rings, or if they did, favored only one plain one. If this man was indeed related to the Carlyles—and she supposed he was if his facial features were any indication—he was certainly not like them in manner. Carlyles were robust and hearty men, favoring sport and the countryside, not like this lean, citified creature. She gazed at his highly polished boots again. How he managed to have cleaned them so well after his ride through the rain, she did not know.

She cast a quick glance around the sofa—no, there was not even one drop of water on the rugs or the floor, much less the furniture.

“Alas, I still have not met with your approval,” said his deep, soft voice, startling her.

Heat flared into Diana’s cheeks, and she stood up abruptly, not able to look at him in embarrassment. “Please excuse me—I am not used to finding strangers lounging about in our house.”

“Quite understandable,” he replied, and rose with an easy grace from the sofa. “The servants had not quite made up my room yet. It seems my letter went astray, and I was not expected today. And I am afraid this sofa was much too tempting—I had a long journey, you see, and had become quite exhausted from it.”

She looked up at him, once again impressed by how tall he was. He had to be well over six feet, for she was tall herself, embarrassingly so, she found when she had gone to London. She almost grimaced, remembering how oxlike she had felt in London next to the fashionable sylphs and smaller women. Her Aunt Matchett had tried to corset tightly every part of Diana, but could do nothing about her height, and it had been with considerable relief—in more ways than one—that Diana had come home, thrown off her corsets, and put on her short stays instead. She felt awkward in the presence of this man, but not so very large. Indeed, even without his greatcoat, he looked broader of shoulder than she thought when she first saw him.

He took her hand and bowed over it. “I am pleased to see you again, Miss Carlyle.”

His hand was very warm upon hers—she realized suddenly that she wore no gloves, though why she should be conscious of such a thing when she rarely bothered with gloves at home, she did not know. Dismissing the thought of warm hands and the lack of gloves firmly from her mind, she looked into his eyes and found herself staring again. She felt suddenly that he was indeed quite pleased. It embarrassed her—well, he was still holding her hand, for one thing. She pulled away.

“May I ask what your business is, sir?” she asked abruptly. She sounded a little rude, and

this flustered her even more. What *was* it about this man that discomposed her so? Perhaps it was that she did not like dandies, and so did not like the thought of him being pleased to meet her. His brows rose, and she was glad that perhaps she had put him off by her manner, though her mother would not have approved.

“I came at the request of Lord Brisbane.” He looked at her intently for a moment. “Did he not tell you?”

“I am afraid . . .” Diana paused, tamping down the rising grief. “Lord Brisbane has—he is dead.” It was a bald, bleak statement, but better she make herself face the fact now than pretend with sentimental words that it was not so.

A grim look flitted across Mr. Sinclair’s face. “So I understand, and I am sorry to hear it. However, my business with him still stands.”

For one moment there was silence, and Diana grew aware of an odd tension in the air. She looked at him and then . . . she could not say he changed precisely. The tension between them shifted and dissipated. Mr. Sinclair smiled at her, gave a little sigh, and his eyes caught sight of the mirror above the mantelpiece. He bowed slightly, walked to the mirror, then peered into it and frowned. “How inconvenient it is when one must choose between the set of one’s neckcloth and resting to recover from fatigue,” he said.

She barely refrained from wrinkling her nose again. “Of course,” she said, more politely this time. Her stomach twinged a little, and she remembered that she hadn’t requested breakfast yet. “Would you care for any refreshment? I am about to order my break—” She cast a glance at the clock on the mantelpiece. “Well, I suppose it’s luncheon.”

He turned and smiled widely now. “Yes, please, I would, and it is kind of you to offer.”

Heat crept into her cheeks again, and Diana let out an impatient breath—she was blushing again, and she hated it. It was as if a cloak of awkwardness had wrapped itself around her, and once again she felt lumpish and too large, as she had in London. It was the way he looked at her, perhaps, with more attention than she liked. She pulled the bell rope and ordered the maid to

bring luncheon—a substantial one, for she could not help thinking such a tall man would eat a great deal, even though he was quite lean.

Another glance at the clock made her wonder if her mother would come down for her meal. She bit back a sigh—she would very much like to go up to her mother, but manners dictated she not leave Mr. Sinclair alone to eat the luncheon she had just ordered, especially since she had already said she wished to have some. She had been abrupt and ungracious as it was.

When the luncheon arrived, Diana noted with a certain envy that Mr. Sinclair did indeed eat a great deal, and very precisely. She smiled slightly. He reminded her of the kitchen cat, Tom Mousekin, a large, sleek animal of impeccable elegance and finicky habits, who picked neatly at the scraps Cook would throw him, but never left any tiny sliver of food behind. That was the word for Mr. Sinclair, perhaps: sleek.

He was so even in his conversation: smooth, urbane, witty. He lounged upon the chair across from her with a dandy's negligent, lazy posture. He seemed to be familiar with most of the tales of the *ton*, or at least the ones she had heard when she had her come-out some years ago, and some others she had not heard—all frivolous, insignificant news. She glanced at him and for a moment her eyes met his. Yet, there was a *watching* manner about him, as if he were trying to search past the social smile she kept pinned on her face. Her polite smile turned wry. He was a cat, indeed, watching potential prey. Well, she was not prey, no mouse to be caught.

“Why are you here, Mr. Sinclair?” she said abruptly. This time she did not blush. Impatience rushed through her, wanting to be done with facades, for she felt suddenly sure that Mr. Sinclair was presenting just that. She had had little patience with pretense when she had been in London, and the relief she had felt in coming home was the relief of discarding the masks that society had placed upon her those torturous few months.

There was a short silence, while Mr. Sinclair continued to gaze at her. Then he straightened in his chair, and though his legs were still casually crossed, she could not feel that the word “frivolous” any longer applied to him. His hands slid to the edge of the arms of the chair and his

long fingers tapped out a short rhythm, but his eyes never left her.

“I assume the will is to be read soon?” he asked.

“Yes,” Diana replied. “This afternoon, in this room—” She glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. “In about a quarter of an hour.”

He nodded. “I am here for the reading of the will.”

“Yet, if I am not mistaken, you did not know of Lord Brisbane’s death until today.” She frowned. “Do not toy with me, Mr. Sinclair.”

He smiled widely. “I see it would be useless to do so.” He picked up a cup and drained it of tea. “But it is true. I was contacted some weeks ago by Lord Brisbane regarding his will.”

A maid entered the library to clear away the dishes, but Diana forestalled her when she reached for the tea tray and requested more hot water and tea. “More tea?” Diana asked Mr. Sinclair, managing to hide her skepticism. When he nodded, she poured the rest of the tea into his cup, then gestured the maid to take away the pot. “Are you a solicitor, then?”

“No, I am not. His lordship wished to bequeath something to me, and was insistent I come here to discuss it with him.”

“Then you *are* related to us.” She gazed at him curiously, and wondered why she had not heard of him before.

Mr. Sinclair smiled again. “I suppose I must be.”

Diana nodded. “So I thought. You have a look of the Carlyles.”

“Do I? I suppose you must have discerned it when you examined me an hour ago.”

She winced. “I . . . I was rude, I suppose.” She glanced away. “I apologize.”

“I did not mind it. Naturally, you were curious,” he replied, and his voice was gentle, giving her an excuse. She took the excuse, nodding, and felt relieved.

Diana was about to ask him more questions about his presence, but the door opened, and her mother entered, followed by her cousins, and then her uncle’s solicitor, Mr. Barrett.

She had two distant cousins, Sir James Rackbury and Mr. Lionel Southworthy, who looked

so very much alike that anyone would think them brothers. But there was a space of fifteen years between them, and they were unlike in nature as a stick from a stone. Sir James Rackbury cast her a smiling glance from his dark eyes, then his humor fled as he caught sight of Mr. Sinclair. Sir James's brows rose as he looked at Diana again—perhaps he wondered at this intrusion from a stranger. Certainly she did!

Mr. Southworthy gazed at Mr. Sinclair curiously, as if in recognition—and there, she was right to see a family resemblance for it was clear to her that the vicar did. She introduced Mr. Sinclair to them, and the vicar stared even harder, his face seeming to pale. But he was a studious man, more often than not within doors with his books, and so was naturally fair-skinned. She smiled at them, then sat down again.

Diana shifted uneasily in her chair. She had liked Sir James when she first met him—he had arrived at Brisbane House a year ago after long journeys elsewhere, and he was very much a Corinthian. She approved of this far more than Mr. Southworthy's occasional pious censure of her fondness for sport. She supposed Mr. Southworthy could not help it; he was the vicar, after all. Perhaps a vicar must disapprove of anything that might seem a threat to a virtuous woman, since the vulnerability of women to wickedness always seemed to be the point of the various religious tracts he gave her.

Sir James, however . . . she squashed her feelings of discomfort. He was an amiable fellow, to be sure, and most ladies in the area seemed very much to find his intense vitality attractive. Further, it was silly to judge a man by the way he handled a horse. Sir James was a superb sportsman overall; it was not his fault if he could not handle horses as easily as she did. Indeed, even Vicar Southworthy was a better horseman, though Diana would never tell either man so, since her mother had said it was not at all politic to mention it to them.

Diana allowed herself a small, rueful smile. Her mother once said that Diana judged people too harshly on their competence in sport, and it was true. She had tried very hard to rein in her judgments, but her sojourn in London during the Season had only reinforced her beliefs about

people's natures: that sporting people were much less prone to present a false face to society than those addicted to fashion. But Mrs. Carlyle was right, and Diana tried her best not to be so prejudiced.

It was with a good grace, then, that she took yet another tract from Mr. Southworthy, and nodded to Sir. James. The vicar flicked another curious glance at the newcomer, but Mr. Sinclair did nothing but smile and nod as they passed him.

Mr. Barrett went to the large table that had been set earlier near the library windows. The solicitor looked uneasy, and Diana felt a little sorry for him; he was a small, neat man, perhaps uncomfortable with what must be the most emotional and upsetting part of his duties. He took out a white pocket-handkerchief, and carefully polished his spectacles before putting them on his nose again, then drew out some papers from a small leather case. Slowly he spread them out, sighed, then looked at the black-clad company before him.

"I regret I must be present at such a sad occasion," he began, then cleared his throat. "But Lord Brisbane was meticulous and careful in all his estate matters, and of course it is my duty as his solicitor to carry out his wishes to the last detail." He ran a hand over the papers—a nervous gesture. "Unpleasant. Most unpleasant," he muttered. "I shall go through the smaller bequests first, and then we shall proceed to the, er, more important ones."

It took a long time. Diana was glad that she had ordered more tea, otherwise she would have fallen asleep at the tediousness of it all. She glanced at her mother, clearly abstracted and not paying attention to Mr. Barrett's droning voice, and then at Mr. Sinclair. She could not tell if his sleepy look was his natural expression, or if he felt indeed as drowsy as she. Sir James's usual intensity had an overlay of boredom, while Mr. Southworthy gazed dutifully at Mr. Barrett.

The solicitor cleared his throat, catching Diana's attention once again. "And to my niece, Miss Diana Carlyle, the best sportswoman I have had the good fortune to know, I bequeath my racing curricula, for I know she will take care of it to the best of her abilities."

Diana's hand shook, spilling tea from the cup she held. She put down the cup, blindly,

almost upsetting it, before Mr. Sinclair gently took it from her hand and set it in the saucer. “The curricle?” she asked.

“Yes, Miss Carlyle.” The solicitor looked at her sympathetically. “It is to do with as you wish.”

She stood suddenly, the sensation of her wringing hands the only thing that kept her from total numbness. “Is it not wrecked? I had thought—since my uncle—” Her throat closed, and she could only stare at the solicitor, unable to speak, her legs shaking.

Mr. Barrett gazed at her kindly. “No, Miss Carlyle, it has only some slight damage to the body, and the wheel and axle need some repair, but it can be mended in a very short time. I understand it is an unusual vehicle—”

“Unusual? It is a scandal that such a vehicle be given to a young lady!” Mr. Southworthy cried. “A perch phaeton, at best, but a curricle?” His lips pursed together in disapproval. “Especially when the vehicle was the cause of such a tragedy.”

“What—I don’t—A scandal?” Diana’s numbness faded to bewildered pain as her gaze fell on Mr. Southworthy. The pain quickly gave rise to anger. “A scandal that my uncle has done me the honor of giving me his curricle? That the best sportsman in this county believed me to be worthy of it?”

“With all respect due to Lord Brisbane,” Sir James said, “I believe the speed at which he was going in the curricle and some unfortunate rut in the road caused his accident. An excellent whip, his lordship, but even excellence can fall before mischance.” There was an edge to his tone, as if he believed Lord Brisbane’s judgment to be faulty, or his abilities less than excellent.

Diana turned to Sir James and her hands turned into fists, and her voice rose. “Whatever you might think of Lord Brisbane or his abilities, I am honored—*greatly* honored—to have received this gift.”

“Diana!” her mother’s voice was sharp with reproof.

“I won’t—*won’t*—have them saying anything against Uncle Charles, Mama! Anything!”

Diana cried passionately.

“Diana!” her mother said again, frowning.

Diana felt her hand taken gently and she turned to find Mr. Sinclair standing near her and nodding sympathetically. “You must admit, Miss Carlyle, that it is a most unusual bequest. It is not many young ladies who are judged capable of driving a curricle, and even more unusual is the thought of a young lady owning one. Obviously your uncle knew differently. However, you cannot expect such a bequest not to startle anyone. Indeed, am I mistaken in thinking you, too, were surprised?”

Diana stared at him for a moment, caught by the look of understanding and command in his eyes. A glance at her mother made her feel ashamed at her loss of control. She shook her head slowly, her face heating. “No, you are right, Mr. Sinclair. I was not expecting it. I have been upset—I was fond of my uncle.” She turned to her mother. “I am sorry, Mama. My outburst was inexcusable.” She cast an embarrassed glance at Mr. Bartlett. “Please, sir, do go on. My apologies for the interruption.”

The solicitor nodded kindly. “Understandable, Miss Carlyle. This is a grievous time, to be sure.” He looked over his spectacles at Sir James and Mr. Southworthy, both of whom seemed to be looking elsewhere.

Diana looked at Mr. Sinclair gratefully. “Thank you, sir,” she murmured.

“It was nothing, I assure you,” he replied. “It must be difficult for both yourself and your mother.”

Her mother—shame overcame Diana, for in her outburst she had not thought of her mother, only of herself. She cast an apologetic look at Mrs. Carlyle across the room, and saw her mother nod in acceptance, then saw her smile slightly as she looked from Diana to Mr. Sinclair. Diana became conscious of his hand still holding hers, and she pulled away, sitting hastily on her chair.

Mr. Bartlett cleared his throat again and adjusted the spectacles on his nose. He peered at the papers before him. “There is an additional bequest, Miss Carlyle, one I am sure shows your

uncle's concern for your welfare." The solicitor smiled encouragingly at her. "It says, 'I also bequeath to Miss Diana Carlyle a stipend in the amount of seventy-five pounds per annum, and a dowry of an additional twenty thousand pounds per annum upon her marriage to the next Earl of Brisbane.'"

"What?!" Diana stared at Mr. Bartlett, amazement and horror hitting her at once. "But he said—I cannot—this is preposterous! How could he think—oh, no. Oh, dear heaven." The bequest was an incredible fortune, but the conditions felt like a prison. She groaned and briefly covered her face before bringing her hands down, clenched, into her lap.

Mr. Bartlett looked more uncomfortable than ever. "I am sure he meant it for the best, Miss Carlyle. He did mention the London Season you had, and how, er, none of the gentlemen seemed to be to your taste. I suppose he wished to secure your future before he departed this world."

She thought back to the words her uncle had spoken to her before he died, that he would provide for her. She had not thought on it until now, for she had always depended on her uncle to know what was best for her; had he not come to her and her mother's rescue so many years ago? She had never protested his directives before—having a governess instead of going off to school, for example, or learning how to polish tack and curry a horse, even though such things were normally left for servants; she had generally found his orders sensible if not always pleasant. She had expected she would have nothing to protest now, either.

But this! She cast a quick glance at Sir James and felt a little ill when he grinned at her. She thought of the stipend she'd been bequeathed—it would be enough to keep her in clothes if she were frugal enough and stayed at Brisbane House—but the dowry amounted to a fortune. It was very clear Uncle Charles wished her to marry and be the next Countess of Brisbane. He had been like a father to her . . . and she supposed this was the best way he could think of to give her the title, since he had no children of his own. She groaned again. She would refuse to marry, that was all there was to it. Glancing at Sir James, she saw his amused expression and she clenched her hands tighter—it was better than giving her tongue free rein to say what was on her mind.

Uncle Charles had provided for her mother as well, for Mrs. Carlyle also received a stipend of seven hundred pounds per annum, and a provision should she marry again as well. Neither bequest was a fortune, except for Diana's dowry. However, her and her mother's combined income was perhaps enough for them to live comfortably, if modestly. Indeed, Diana thought, casting another quick glance at Sir James, she would prefer to forego the fortune, for though she was sure that her uncle had meant well, she did not think Sir James would make a satisfactory husband, despite his popularity with the ladies. Indeed, it was precisely that popularity that would keep him from being an ideal husband. Attractive or not, she had no faith in the idea that a rake could make a good one, for old habits died hard. A fortune was not worth a lifetime of misery. And though Sir James was known to be a successful gamester of extraordinary luck, she did not believe such luck typically lasted a lifetime.

“And finally,” Mr. Bennett read, “I hereby bequeath to my heir, Gavin Sinclair, the grandson of my eldest aunt Mrs. Elizabeth Sinclair, she who was born Lady Elizabeth Carlyle, daughter of the Fifth Earl of Brisbane—”

“What?” Sir James rose swiftly from his chair, staring hard at the solicitor. “Who is this Gavin Sinclair? / have never heard of him before!”

Mr. Bennett looked at the man over his spectacles. “Mr. Gavin Sinclair,” he said patiently, “as the grandson of the late Mrs. Sinclair is the next Earl of Brisbane, since the title goes to ‘heirs male whatsoever.’ Unusual, I know, but the first earl was not known to have been particularly, er, prolific, and King Charles II wished to bestow a great honor upon him and his family for the great deal of work he did to help restore the King to the throne.” He frowned as he looked at each one of them. “Did not his lordship mention this to you?”

“So that's what he wanted to see me about,” Mr. Sinclair said softly, looking sleepier than ever and sinking deeper into the sofa cushions. “Well, well.”

Chapter 3

Diana turned and stared at Mr. Sinclair, who continued to lean back in his chair and regard Mr. Bennett with the same lazy expression he had worn throughout the reading of the will. Mr. Sinclair the heir, and not Sir James? She glanced at her mother, but Mrs. Carlyle only looked at her calmly before she turned her interested gaze to Mr. Bennett.

“No, he did not inform us,” Mr. Southworthy said, his face looking pinched, almost ill. “This is most irregular.”

“A pity,” Mr. Bennett replied. “However, his lordship was not one, usually, to reveal his intentions or his reasons to anyone regarding his estate.”

“A pity, indeed,” Sir James drawled. He turned to Mr. Sinclair. “Cousin, my congratulations.”

Mr. Sinclair inclined his head. “And to you, cousin, my condolences.”

Sir James laughed lightly. “One does not care to be choused out of an inheritance, to be sure. But I am a gamester, Mr. Sinclair, and am familiar with the risks of play.”

“But this *is* an inheritance,” Mr. Sinclair said gently.

For a moment Diana thought Sir James had cast him a sharp look, but it was gone, and she was sure she had imagined it, for Sir James merely shrugged.

“All life is a game, sir, and has its risks,” he said.

“Of course you are right,” Mr. Sinclair replied genially. “Then, too, you are next in line, are you not? Who knows what card fate will turn, after all.”

“You are a gamester, then, too?” Sir James asked.

Mr. Sinclair shuddered. “No, indeed I am not. I don’t care to take risks with games of chance.”

Sir James smiled slightly, and if his expression held a little contempt, Diana could not blame him. Mr. Sinclair was clearly a fashionable fribble, slothful to the point of not even caring to put anything to the risk. Slothful at best—perhaps even afraid, although she would not hand out such a judgment as to call him coward unless she saw clear evidence of it.

But if Mr. Sinclair noticed Sir James’s contempt, he showed no sign of it. He merely sank further into the chair cushions, and his expression became more sleepy than ever as Mr. Bennett finished the reading of the will.

The door to Mrs. Carlyle’s dressing room burst open, and Diana hurried in. “Mama, you *must* tell me—did you know that Mr. Sinclair is Uncle Charles’s heir?”

Mrs. Carlyle sat on a chair near the window, her workbasket of tatting threads open beside her. She gazed at her daughter and raised an eyebrow disapprovingly. “I don’t think I said you could enter, my dear.”

Diana gave her mother a mischievous glance and sat on a chair near her. “I know, but you would have let me regardless, because you did see how curious I was, and I *know* you know something about the bequests, so of course you must have expected I would hound you until I found out.”

“Terrible girl! Where you learned your manners, I do not know.” But Mrs. Carlyle did not hide her smile when she looked down at the lace she was tatting on her lap. “Oh, very well, then! I knew there was a possibility that Sir James was not.”

“Did Uncle Charles tell you?”

Sorrow passed over her mother’s face, then she shook her head and made another loop with

the tatting bobbin. “Not precisely. I knew there was a possibility that Elizabeth Sinclair’s grandson was alive, but Charles did not know for certain. It was only in the last year or so that your uncle thought he had located him.”

“Thought?”

Mrs. Carlyle frowned slightly. “I had always believed your uncle should have investigated further a long time ago—I told him he should, ever since his wife died many years ago. I suppose he felt too . . . lost to have thought of it.” She pressed her hand upon Diana’s. “Charles did love Emily very dearly, and never, never blamed her for their lack of children. Not like—” Her voice faded and tears formed in her eyes. She brushed them away with the back of her hand, then gratefully took the handkerchief Diana gave her. Diana bit her lip—she well knew that had she been male, she would have been Uncle Charles’s heir, and it was something she remembered her father saying to her before he died. But she was not, and so the line would continue through the descendants of her great-aunt, Elizabeth Sinclair.

“He was a good man, love,” her mother continued. “He should have married again, but I think he did not have the . . . the heart to do so.” She bent her head to her tatting again, concentrating on a number of stitches and loops before she looked up again. “But I suppose my urging made him try to find his heir at last.”

Diana gazed at her mother, uneasiness filling her. Her mother looked at her calmly, tired and worn with grief, but there was nothing else in Mrs. Carlyle’s expression to explain the uneasiness. Diana gave herself a mental shake. Well, life had been uneasy and unsettling altogether—what else could she expect when someone so well liked as her uncle had just passed away?

“I am surprised Mr. Southworthy did not know of it,” Diana remarked.

Mrs. Carlyle smiled slightly. “You know how your uncle did not care to discuss his matters until they were dealt with. For all anyone knew, Mr. Sinclair was dead. Your great-aunt did not get along with the rest of our family, for she made a love-match with a gentleman far below her in rank, and your great-great-grandfather would not speak to her. There had been some mention of

her son—or was it the current Mr. Sinclair him-self?—being lost at sea. It clearly must have been the elder Mr. Sinclair.” She looked out the window for a moment. “I suppose no one thought to follow the course of their lives, since there had always been a direct male heir until now.”

“Poor Sir James! I think he must have been sorely disappointed to find he had not inherited,” Diana said. “But he comported himself well, I believe, considering the surprise.”

Mrs. Carlyle gave her a sharp look. “He is to be commended on his behavior, I suppose, for I am sure he was quite dismayed—he has been living on the expectation for years.”

“I do not see how he could have been,” Diana said. “He is a very good gamester and he has won wagers hand over fist for ages. They say he cannot lose.”

“Is that so?” Her mother raised her brows. “And where did you hear this? In the stables?”

“You must know that I could never have heard it from Aunt Matchett.” Diana grinned.

“Hmph. However, I am sure you listened to all the gossip in London when you were there, for I have commanded McKinney *not* to tell you stable gossip.”

“Yes, and the stableboys are more forthcoming than McKinney.”

Mrs. Carlyle burst out laughing. “Odious girl!”

“Well, Mama, I had nothing to do *but* listen to gossip in London, I assure you! It is the most tedious place in the world aside from the plays and the music.”

Her mother shook her head, smiling wryly, clearly not about to argue the point, and continued her tating. Diana gave her a sidewise look, frowning.

“Mama, did you also know that Uncle Charles wished me to marry Mr. Sinclair?” she asked abruptly.

Mrs. Carlyle sighed before looking up from her lacework. “I did know he considered you as close as a daughter, and had told me many times he wished you had been his son, so you could inherit the title. I suppose this was the closest he could come to do just that.”

“But Mr. Sinclair, a stranger . . .”

The corners of her mother’s lips turned upward for a moment. “Nothing says he must remain

a stranger, and for all we know he might not be averse to the idea.”

“Oh, Mama, do be serious! You *must* see how utterly impossible this is!”

“Your uncle did not think so.”

“With all due respect to Uncle Charles, I have recently determined he was either not in his right mind, or he was surely far more fallible than either of us gave him credit for.”

“Diana!” Mrs. Carlyle said reprovingly.

“Very well, he was in his right mind, but *very* fallible in that he did not foresee my justifiable consternation at finding he had arranged a marriage for me without even consulting me.”

Her mother glanced at her and shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “I did tell him that you might object—”

“Ha! So he *did* tell you!” Diana leaned forward in her chair. “Why did you not—”

Mrs. Carlyle held up her hand. “I wanted to tell you, but he pledged me to silence. I felt I had to keep his confidence, my dear. You know your uncle always had his reasons—very good ones—for his decisions. I trusted he had a good reason this time, as well.”

“Perhaps he did, but would it have been too much for him to reveal it to either of us?” Diana said bitterly. “I tell you, I shall not marry Mr. Sinclair—he is nothing but a fribble!”

“You say that as if it were some grave sin, Diana,” her mother said reprovingly. “It is not. You do not know the man at all, so you cannot know what virtues he has—”

“Or has not,” Diana said swiftly.

“Pshaw!” Mrs. Carlyle said, her voice impatient. “You have only just met the man; you judge too quickly.”

Diana gazed at her mother for a long moment, while the older woman bent her head over her lacework. “Why do you wish me to marry this man, Mama?”

Mrs. Carlyle raised her eyes to her daughter’s, gazing at her earnestly. “You will be safe, my love.”

“Safe? What do I have to fear?”

“Poverty. The chance that you will no longer be welcome at Brisbane House at some time, should the next Earl of Brisbane marry another. The chance that you will marry an irresponsible man, a wastrel.”

Diana stared at her mother. It had briefly occurred to her they might have their own place to stay, but now the idea had been spoken, it shook her to her bones to think she might no longer live in this house. “But . . . but how do I know this Mr. Sinclair is not a wastrel as well?”

“Your uncle would not have put him in his will if he thought he was,” Mrs. Carlyle said confidently. “He thought it best you marry the next earl, which is why the stipend he bequeathed you is so small, and the dowry such a fortune.”

Diana swallowed down the tight feeling in her throat, but it did no good: she felt as if her life were slowly being squeezed from her, or at least the freedom to which she was so accustomed. She did not wish to wed a stranger. But there was one hope, however, and she smiled grimly.

“What my uncle did not foresee was Mr. Sinclair could easily refuse to marry me. He seems to be well off and may not need my dowry to run the estate, despite the pittance bequeathed to him.”

Mrs. Carlyle’s expression was for a moment uncertain, but she shook her head. “I am sure your uncle has accounted for it.”

Diana gazed at her mother, wondering how she could be so certain . . . perhaps her mother had always relied this heavily on Uncle Charles’s opinions and decisions, and Diana had not, until now, seen it. Certainly, she had had absolute trust in her uncle’s decisions—until now, now that it was so contrary to her wishes. She watched her mother set yet another loop in her tatting, a quick and sure movement, her head bent over her work. She could not see her mother’s face or the

expression on it. Diana felt suddenly that perhaps her mother did not want her to see. Anger rose in her—it was no use talking to her mother, for it was clear that she would tell her nothing . . . for now.

Diana gazed in silence out the window while she tried to quell her anger. It was still cloudy, but had not rained for a few hours. Perhaps she could go out on her horse again, or in a carriage. . . .

Her thoughts came immediately to the curricle she had inherited, and she shuddered. It was hers now. She had driven it before . . . before her uncle died, and he had told her that she was the best whip he had ever seen. He had been proud of her, and she had wished then that he had been her father. It could not be, however, but there was one thing she could do: have the curricle repaired and drive it as he had taught her. It mattered not that it was unusual for a woman to drive such a vehicle. Her uncle had given it to her, and he had meant her to drive it.

She stood up abruptly. “Mama, I am going down to the stables to look at the curricle.”

Mrs. Carlyle looked up from her work, her eyes widening.

“Is this wise?”

Diana gazed at her quizzically. “I am not afraid, Mama. There is nothing it can do to me, after all.”

“But it needs repair . . .”

Diana smiled slightly. “Of course I’ll not drive it! I am merely going to look at it. Perhaps I shall talk to McKinney about the repairs it needs.”

Mrs. Carlyle looked worried. “I do not know what seized Charles to bequeath it to you. It is not proper or safe.”

Diana rolled her eyes. “Oh, Mama! How is it you don’t question Uncle’s judgment where my marriage is concerned, but you question this? You know I have driven it any number of times. And what do you think will happen to me in the stables? That the carriage will somehow fall upon me? It can do nothing while it is sitting there in the stables, I assure you!”

Her mother still looked worried, and Diana took her hands and pressed them. "What, do you think Uncle Charles might be haunting it in some way? I would welcome seeing him again, I believe."

Mrs. Carlyle smiled slightly. "As would I, for I am sure if he were a ghost he would be caring for us still. No . . . I am a silly woman to be sure. It must be as you say. Do go, then, and see what you can find out from McKinney."

Diana turned to leave, but her mother's hand stayed her. "Did you see where Mr. Sinclair went before we left the library?"

"No, why?"

"We cannot be sure he will let us stay here at Brisbane House, you know, and I think it best to find out whether he means for us to stay or go."

"So soon?" Diana asked. Her mother merely looked at her gravely and said nothing, and Diana knew it was necessary. "I . . . I don't remember. I suppose he might be in his room—certainly he looked as if he might fall asleep where he sat during the reading of the will."

Her mother nodded. "I will find him and ask."

"Will you need me, do you think?"

Mrs. Carlyle smiled. "No, it is not necessary. Do go to see the curricule. Mr. Sinclair seems a kind gentleman, perhaps enough to house us while we find a place to settle, at least."

Diana nodded slowly, and with a kiss on her mother's cheek, proceeded down to the stables.

When Diana reached the stables, she saw that they had a new stablehand. She smiled at him briefly before saying, "Where is Bob Staples?"

The thin, awkward youth smiled shyly and took off his hat, ducking his head. "'E got ill, miss, did Bob. Started squeaking about 'is blinkers, and McKinney sent 'im 'ome, and Bob sent me to take 'is place—I'm 'is cousin, miss, beggin' yer pardon."

"His eyes?" Diana frowned. "I am sorry to hear it—is a doctor seeing to him? I hope it is not serious."

The stablehand rubbed his forehead in thought. “I dunno, miss. But me aunt ‘as got summat to fix it.”

Diana fished in her pocket for some coins and pressed them into the youth’s hand. “Here—please give this to your aunt, in case Bob needs to see a doctor. Bob’s a good young man, and I would like to have him return.” The youth’s face fell, and she continued hastily: “Though I’m sure you’ll do good work and prove yourself capable—” She paused, for she realized she did not know his name.

“Nate, miss, Nate Staples,” he said.

“Nate, then. I am sure the new Lord Brisbane will need more servants, and if you show yourself to be a hard worker, I can recommend you,” she said, recklessly committing Mr. Sinclair’s—she bit her lip—the new earl’s resources to the upkeep of the stables. But she had continued supervising them as she had when her uncle was alive, and the earl must know of it by now. However, he had said nothing to stop her.

Nate’s face brightened and he bobbed his head in a respectful bow. “I’d be grateful if you could, thank you, miss.”

Diana smiled, then proceeded into the carriage house just behind the stables.

The curricule sat propped up and leaning to the side, a little like a boat that had been tossed ashore against rocks after a storm. The fine wood of the carriage body was marred from the overturning that day of the accident; she could see the clawlike scars where it had been dragged for a short distance after it fell.

Fell . . . She closed her eyes, blocking out the sight of the damage, but it only brought horror-tinged images of how the horse had gone wild, and how the carriage had overturned—slowly, it seemed in her memory, though she knew it must have been too quick to let her uncle jump free.

Tentatively, she put her hand out as if the curricule were a wild creature with fur and teeth. Silly, of course. She pressed her hand firmly on it. The wood was smooth and cool to the touch,

rough where it had been scored by the rocks in the road. It is just a curricule, Diana thought, a carriage. Not a deadly monster ready with gaping jaws to tear and destroy. Her mother clearly felt as if it were, and for that reason would not go near the carriage house, at least for now.

Diana could understand her mother's feelings; the accident had torn a hole in the fabric of their lives and it was not a thing so easily stitched up. But she had other memories: memories of her uncle handing her the reins, and how nervous she had been, yet happy and proud that he had such confidence in her; the first tentative lurch of the carriage; and finally after several practice drives, the thrill of increasing speed over the newly macadamcd road.

She could not look upon the curricule with horror when she also remembered so much joy. Her uncle had felt confident enough in her abilities to bequeath it to her. She would have it repaired immediately, perhaps try it out a few times to make sure it drove as well as it used to, and out of respect for her mother's grief, sell it. Perhaps, if she and her mother could still stay at Brisbane House, she could use the money to buy a less expensive and more sedate carriage. A gig, for example. She grimaced at the thought of "sedate" then grinned. A high-perch phaeton, perhaps. Not as sporting as a curricule, but certainly not sedate, and certainly quite fashionable. There! That should keep her family from criticizing, and she could turn her thoughts to other matters.

Such as the very annoying and embarrassing stipulation in the will regarding her *possible* marriage to Mr. Sinclair—or rather, Lord Brisbane. She thought of the man who wore the title, and it sat ill on her tongue. Such a frivolous man could not be worthy of it, or at least not as worthy of it as her uncle had been.

"Miss Carlyle—"

Diana jumped, then gasped as she quickly turned, for her hand caught hard on a large splinter of broken wood. It hurt, even with the strong kid riding glove she wore, and she cradled it in her other hand.

It was Mr. Sinclair—Lord Brisbane. He raised his brows. "You have injured yourself . . .

because I have startled you, I am sure.” He took her hand and bowed over it, but did not release it.

“May I look at it?”

“You are not a physician,” Diana said, then gasped again at the pain as she tried to pull away.

“True, but I know something of injuries and of healing.” A grim look settled about his mouth for a moment, and Diana wondered how he had come to know of such things. She relaxed and allowed her hand to remain in his.

He took off his gloves, then slowly, carefully, her glove, his head bent a little, his eyes concentrating on her hand. Diana glanced at him, glad he was not looking at her, for she felt . . . a strange unease, a shiver that should have made her want to pull away from him, but did not. If he had looked at her she did not know what he would have seen on her face—embarrassment, perhaps, but not exactly that. She pressed her lips together firmly—how silly she was!

The earl turned over her hand and pressed it gently, then looked at her questioningly. “Does it hurt?” he asked.

“A little.”

He slid his thumb a bit, a caressing movement, catching on her skin; his thumb seemed slightly callused. He pressed down, a little harder.

“Ah!”

“It hurts there, then.” He took her hand between his, rubbing lightly. “Bruised, I believe, but not badly.” His rubbing became more firm, and Diana could not help staring at how the long, elegant fingers of one hand smoothed over the palm of hers, while his other cradled the back of her hand like an egg in a nest. The strokes of his fingers were hypnotic, moving over the hollow of her palm, up and around the pads just at the base of her fingers and her thumb. She closed her eyes, letting out a slight breath, her hand relaxing, limp, at last.

“Is that better?”

Her eyes shot open. “Yes, of course—that is, yes,” she stammered. He still held her hand;

she quickly pulled it away.

He smiled widely, then grew somber, but she could not help thinking he was smiling still, somehow. She felt heat rise in her face and she turned away to the curricle. “Thank you,” she said, remembering her manners.

“You are welcome,” Lord Brisbane replied. He tapped the curricle with a finger. “It must have been a magnificent carriage. I can see, here, how it was joined.” He ran his fingers over a seam of the carriage body, and Diana thought of how those fingers had moved over the palm of her hand. “This is very fine workmanship.”

She drew in a resolute breath and let it out, determined to banish the odd, unsettled sensation that had seized her. “Yes,” she replied. “My uncle always went to the finest carriage makers in London. To buy anything less, he believed, was a false economy. A carriage made with the best workmanship and parts will last at least twice as long as one of the inferior make—” Her breath caught. Except for this one, she thought.

“Except for this one,” he said quietly, and her eyes flew to his, startled that his words had echoed her thoughts. His expression was kind and held, she thought, a measure of pity.

She did not want his pity. She lifted her chin and said, “This shall last as long as a new one, for I intend to have it repaired.”

Lord Brisbane nodded. “It is not badly damaged, true, and I am sure once it is back to its fine form it will bring in a pretty penny.”

This was precisely what Diana had intended to do, but somehow it irritated her to have *him* say it. It was *hers*, her uncle had given it to her, and it was the only thing she had of him except for memories. She would not even have a home, only if this Lord Brisbane so decreed. Rebellion rose: the curricle was *hers* and *she* would say what would be done with it, not him.

She smiled grimly. “I shall repair it—and then *drive* it.”

Lord Brisbane’s brows rose, in skepticism, she thought. “I believe that is not wise.”

Diana looked him in the eyes, her chin tilting a fraction higher. “I am very experienced in

driving it, believe me. My uncle taught me, and he was confident in my abilities.”

“And yet,” Lord Brisbane said gently, “he met his end with this carriage.”

“Are you saying my uncle had his accident because *he* was at fault?” Diana demanded. His lordship merely gazed at her, his eyes half closed, looking down his nose at her as if again in skepticism. It infuriated her. “His lordship was a superior horseman and whip. He belonged to the Four-in-Hand Club. No one, *no one*, can say he could not handle his horses.” “And yet, this time, he did not.”

“I do not expect you to understand such things,” she said, looking him up and down, barely able to conceal her anger, and squashing down a growing dread. “Perhaps there was some fault with the carriage, the way it was made, that did not appear until that moment. I don’t know, but whatever it was, I intend to have it repaired. But it was *not* Uncle Charles’s fault.”

“If your uncle was such a good driver, how was it that he did not notice anything awry from the outset?”

“If there was anything awry with the carriage he most certainly would have noticed it, and if not he, then McKinney, our head groom.”

“But the groom noticed nothing as well?”

“No.”

Lord Brisbane ran his hand over a curve of the carriage in a contemplative manner. He glanced at her. “I understand this McKinney has been in your uncle’s employ for many years.” It was a statement, but with just a hint of a question in it.

Diana frowned. She had heard of landlords who, upon inheriting an estate, proceeded to rid themselves of all the old servants and replace them with their own handpicked ones. It was a stupid practice, inefficient, and bound to cause ill will in the surrounding neighborhood. “If you are thinking of blaming McKinney for the accident or of discharging him from his post, I would advise against it. The man has been employed here since my uncle was a very young man, and his service has been loyal and faultless. Indeed, he felt most deeply regarding the accident and

proffered his resignation, which I refused to consider.”

“You?”

Diana blushed lightly; it was not her place to accept or decline a servant’s employment unless it was her own, personal, servant. “McKinney was distraught, and Uncle Charles had said more than a few times that my word was as good as his when it came to the stables,” she said stiffly. “If you must know, I directed him to Sir James, thinking he would be the heir.”

“Ah.”

That was all he said, an unassuming sound, but it made her very conscious that she had presumed, and presumed wrongly. “Sir James will not have discharged him, I am sure,” she said.

“Mmm hmm,” he said, gazing at her thoughtfully.

Diana shifted her feet uncomfortably. “I am sure McKinney is about somewhere. You may speak to him yourself.”

“Is he?”

“But of course. I saw him—” She stopped and realized she had not seen McKinney lately. “Surely Sir James did not . . .”

“There may be some other explanation for why McKinney is not here,” Lord Brisbane said.

Diana made herself look at him, but she could not hold his gaze long, for remorse hit her hard. “I have presumed a great deal,” she said. “And I was wrong to do so. I . . .I apologize.”

“Yes,” he replied, but there was no censure in his voice. She felt a finger under her chin and she stared at him. He smiled slightly. “Come, cousin, it is no tragedy. Let us be frank: I well know that your uncle’s wish that we wed was unexpected, and highly unusual. Would it be less awkward for you to know that I had no knowledge of it? I met your uncle only a year ago, when he first found me, and because of business our subsequent meetings were infrequent. Had I known of the conditions, I would have protested, of course. I am not certain why he decided we should suit, but he did, and made it nearly impossible for you not to comply.”

“Mama said it was perhaps the closest he could come to giving me the estate . . . he thought

of me as a daughter, almost a son, I think.” His hand left her chin, and she looked down at her hands, then up at the earl again. “Then, too, perhaps he thought it the best way to take care of me and my mother.”

“I wonder, then, that he did not give you a larger annuity.”

She shook her head. “Uncle Charles was never one to reveal his reasons, and we had never real cause to ask, for our lives had always run smoothly while he was with us. I am sure everyone on the estate thought so.”

“Which makes me seem very much the interloper, I see,” Lord Brisbane said, smiling wryly. “Making it even more difficult to see me as a prospective husband and heir to the estate.”

Diana felt definitely guilty now, but made herself look directly at him. “Yes, that is true, and I am sorry for it. My uncle was held in highest esteem by everyone; it would be difficult to accept the presence of any heir, but to have a complete stranger makes it even more difficult.”

“Held in esteem by everyone? He had no enemies? No detractors?” Lord Brisbane shook his head and put on a morose expression. “I have a great deal to live up to, indeed. Most certainly I shall fail, and the estates will fall to ruin.”

Diana cast him a suspicious look, then laughed reluctantly. “You need not try to pull the wool over my eyes, my lord. I suspect you are quite capable of managing this estate, and it is no doubt one reason my uncle saw fit to want you to marry me.”

He raised his brows in question. “And how do you know?”

“I am honest enough to admit you are more perceptive than I had given you credit for. You talked of business—I suppose you were not precisely an idle man, for your hands are not as smooth as I suppose a dandy’s might be. Since your clothes are of a fine cut, I imagine your business endeavors were successful. I suspect you were in trade; you seem to be familiar with the making of carriages, or at least woodworking of some kind. Then you mention you were familiar with illnesses and healing.” She smiled slightly. “I imagine you must be engaged in some sort of merchant shipping. Such a business would at once give a man the opportunity for making a

fortune”—she gestured at his Bath superfine coat—“thus enabling him to buy whatever he wishes in clothes, and give him the opportunities to learn of ships and their construction. The illnesses and healing—one would have to be more self-reliant regarding these things if one had to travel to foreign lands.”

“Well, well.” Lord Brisbane rocked back on his heels, then smiled widely. “I congratulate you, cousin; you are correct on all points. *Very* perceptive. I see it would not do to underestimate you.”

Diana grinned. “You are correct, my lord, it would not. Be warned!”

“I am grateful for the warning. You are a formidable woman, to be sure. It is a good thing I had not the intention of asking you to marry me; I had a distinct feeling it would displease you.” His voice was solemn, but she thought she saw his lips turn up for a moment.

“*Very* wise of you not to wish to propose to me, for you would be living under the sign of the cat’s foot, and no man could wish a marriage like that.” She shrugged off the feeling of discontent. She had never had a proposal before, why shouldn’t she have one now, even if it had been dictated by Uncle Charles? She turned to leave the carriage house and Lord Brisbane moved in step with her.

“Now there, cousin, your perception has failed you.” He gave her a small, crooked smile. “I wanted to marry you the moment I saw you, and have no fear at all of being henpecked.”