

## Chapter One

Hannah winced at the squeaking noise her shoe made on the polished floor outside the drawing room.

“But of course in Venice there were vistas to enrich the soul.”

That was her cousin Juliette speaking. She had no doubt heard the telltale squeak and knew Hannah was just about to enter the room. Her cousin always seemed to turn the conversation to Venice, or some other topic of which Hannah was ignorant, whenever she was about to join them. After all, they couldn't always be talking about their one trip to Venice, could they?

Not that she cared much what they talked of when she wasn't around. It only galled her that in her presence, her cousins' choice of conversational material seemed deliberately designed to expose her ignorance.

For a moment, she considered heading back up to her room. She could claim to have a headache, which would not, strictly speaking, be a lie, since her cousins were sure to give her one soon enough. But no, she did not want to eat her dinner cold and alone in a damp chamber with only the crackle of a small fire for company. Dinners at Dahlgren House were so much better than at school and even better than Mary cooked at home. So she would endure her cousins' snobbery for a time, then they would tire of her and she would fade back into anonymity, of no more notice than the pattern on the china plates. That suited her just fine.

She took a deep breath and stepped into the room.

“Oh, Hannah.” Juliette greeted her with a dazzling and totally insincere smile. She really was a lovely girl, petite with small, even features and raven hair that miraculously remained coifed in the latest fashion every moment of the day. Her sister, Louisa, shared her pretty countenance, but her straighter hair would not hold the curl of fashion and inevitably drooped into her eyes, so that she had developed a near constant habit of brushing hair out of her face.

Hannah liked Louisa better just for that reason.

But it was Juliette who came toward her now, arms outstretched in greeting. “You are just the person we wanted to see.”

*Have some insults ready, do you? Ready to show up the ill-bred Yankee?* But of course Hannah could not say what she was really thinking. That was the first rule of gentility, and if she ever wanted to escape her cousins' house and return to Maryland, she had no choice but to master all the rules to her aunt's satisfaction. Telling her Aunt Dahlgren that her daughters were a pair of two-faced harridans would result in a nasty letter to her stepmother and probably an extra year at Miss Baldwin's Academy for Young

Ladies. Maybe two years. The truth hurt, and Aunt Dahlgren had a low tolerance for pain.

So instead of telling Juliette that she'd really hoped she'd drowned in a pond somewhere, she only smiled. "If you wished to see me and then I appeared, then it must seem like magic."

"Magic?" Juliette exchanged a quick glance with Louisa, who was perched in her usual place on a settee by the fire. Juliette's smile widened into a chortle of polite laughter. "*C'est trop drôles*. Oh, my dear, you are so very quaint." She turned toward her sister. "You see, Charles, our cousin's expressions keep us quite entertained so that we've no need of theatre or professional amusements."

*Charles?*

At first Hannah wondered why Juliette was referring to her sister by a masculine name.

Then she remembered. *Two days after Boxing Day. They were to arrive two days after Boxing Day.*

Stifling a groan, she turned around to look at the man her cousin had been addressing.

That must be Charles Peniur standing on the other side of the fireplace, eyeing her with an aristocratic expression of bemusement. The elder son of an ancient family, he was somehow expected to inherit a title someday, and he was betrothed to Juliette, two facts which she took every reasonable opportunity of repeating. In fact, she took quite a few opportunities of questionable reasonableness and a number that were downright ludicrous.

As Hannah's gaze further scanned the room she saw another young man speaking to her Aunt Dahlgren near the window, and an older gentleman reading a newspaper in the corner.

And here she stood, wearing an old housegown of her mother's that was at least ten years out of fashion and had ink stains on the sleeves.

*Remember your engagements.* This was another of the rules of gentility. Another rule that she had forgotten to apply.

She had been reminded of the particulars every day since she arrived at Dahlgren house. Charles Peniur was to spend the end of the Christmas holidays with them, along with his father and younger brother, Phillip.

Phillip was destined to fall in love with Louisa.

They were to arrive two days after Boxing Day.

Which was today.

And her cousins, who had seen what she was wearing that morning at breakfast, had not reminded her that visitors would be arriving in the afternoon.

That, actually, did not surprise her at all. Her appearance would give them something else to gloat about.

They, of course, looked radiant in gowns they'd just had made up for the season.

Juliette took her by the hand and pulled her toward the fireplace. "If you will allow me..."

And now she would be introduced. Hannah fought the urge to run. Two degradations so far—being ridiculed for her "quaint" speech and being caught wearing a gown that went out of fashion back while Napoleon still had hair on his forehead. Further mortifications would be sure to follow. She should just leave and pretend to be sick until the visit was over.

Juliette's pull on Hannah's arm became more insistent. She had no doubt sensed Hannah's reluctance, and now a triumphant smile began to spread across her pretty face.

If Hannah left now, Juliette would know it was because Hannah did not feel herself well-bred enough to associate with Juliette's intended husband and his family. Hannah would not give her that satisfaction.

She matched Juliette step for step until they stood directly in front of Charles Peniur. His close-set eyes gave him a very intense, serious expression, despite the fact that his nose had enough of an upturn to give him a slightly piggish appearance. He had only a small advantage over her in height, just sufficient to enable him to look down that piggish nose at her.

"Mr. Peniur," Juliette began in her musical voice, "may I introduce Miss Hannah Brown?"

Hannah struggled to remember what she'd been taught about introductions. The man did not have a title, so she did not have to address him as "My Lord" or "Your Grace".

But if he would one day inherit a title, did he then merit a special introduction?

She stayed down in a curtsy much longer than was necessary as she tried to decide what to say. Since she was not English, he would never be "*her* lord" and he looked far too stiff to be graceful. "Pleased to meet you, sir." She finally said as she rose.

"Miss Brown," Juliette continued with a wide smile—she'd either found the curtsy very amusing or Hannah had said the wrong thing—"may I present Mr. Charles Peniur?"

He bowed stiffly. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance," he said as if it were anything but. "I am told you are an American?" He looked her over as though he expected to find that she had an extra set of legs or wings growing out of her back.

"Yes. My family lives north of Baltimore."

"I can never remember if that is in New York or Pennsylvania."

"It is neither. Baltimore is in the state of Maryland."

Charles Peniur looked discomfited for a moment, but then shrugged it off. "I am sure it does not matter much."

"Indeed it does not," Juliette said with a laugh. "All the American states are so much the same and so *vers l'arrière* that you might as well say New York as East Carolina."

Louisa joined in the laughter. "And what use have we of *New York* when the original is so much closer at hand?"

Hannah twisted her mother's ring around her finger. *Ha ha*, her cousins were so very clever. It would do no good to point out that there was no "East" Carolina. Juliette would probably just say something about Americans not knowing how to use a compass. "*Never correct your cousin*" was not one of the actual rules of gentility, but it was an important enough rule nevertheless. And to that she would now add "*never correct your cousin's future husband*."

"I would say the original York could stand a bit of improvement."

It was not Charles who spoke this time.

Hannah looked up to see that the other young man had joined them, and her aunt was trailing behind him.

"Forgive me for interrupting." Phillip Peniur smiled and the rest of the room suddenly seemed very drab and dark by comparison. "I cannot help but overhear everything my dear brother says for he has reminded me often enough of the importance of his words." He turned that smile directly toward Hannah. "You must be the American cousin, Miss Brown?"

She felt for a moment as if she'd forgotten how to talk. Was this incredibly handsome gentleman speaking directly to her? If there was a special way that she was supposed to address him, she had quite forgotten what it was.

Juliette and Louisa exchanged glances of alarm. "Yes, this is our cousin," Juliette said before Hannah could answer. "I would have introduced you sooner but I did not wish to disturb your conversation with Mama."

"And I do not believe Hannah is out yet, in any case," Louisa added. "It would not be proper to bring her to your attention."

"Oh, I see." Phillip stepped back in surprise. "Forgive me, please."

Juliette put on a condescending smile. "Hannah is here in England to attend *school*, you understand."

"I did not let my girls come out until after they had finished school," Aunt Dahlgren explained.

"But I'm nineteen years old," Hannah sputtered indignantly. "I am older than both Juliette and Louisa. You cannot—"

A feminine sigh of horror from her cousins and aunt made her stop before she could finish. Obviously, she had breached another rule of gentility.

Her aunt beckoned her aside. "Might I have a word with you for a moment, dear? I need to consult another opinion about a change in the dinner menu."

Hannah reluctantly followed her aunt over toward the window on the far side of the room. As she stepped away from the others, Louisa favored her with a sullen glance and Juliette shook her head with a barely audible “tsk tsk” sound. A moment later she would have sworn she heard the sound of laughter, but she would not turn to look and see whether they were laughing at her or not.

Aunt Dahlgren patted her gently on the arm. “My dear, I think we all forget sometimes how very much you still have to learn about the world.”

*Your world*, Hannah thought to herself. *None of this matters at home*. Or at least none of it had until her father remarried.

“You must remember that a lady never refers to her age before gentlemen. Or indeed before company of any sort.” Her aunt’s head bobbed as if to emphasize the words, and the movement set the lace at the edge of her cap shaking like a willow during a thunderstorm. “If too young,” her aunt continued primly, “a lady might be thought forward. If too old, well,” she smiled, “let us just say that ladies grow old far too soon and we’ve no need to bring that to a gentleman’s attention.”

“I am sure Juliette’s husband will not care how old I am,” Hannah muttered.

“Ah, but your discourse affected not only yourself but your cousins as well. It is one thing to speak uncouthly of yourself, it is quite another to carry that uncouth behavior forward so that it reflects on others.”

Now she understood her aunt’s sudden interest. Was she trying to pass Juliette off as older or younger? “But surely Juliette and Louisa have nothing to fear from me revealing their age.”

Aunt Dahlgren’s smile faltered. “At this time, no. But the day may come when they will regret that such knowledge ever became public.”

None of this made any sense. Juliette would be married in the spring and Louisa was barely seventeen and sure to become betrothed herself before too long, so what was there to fear? Especially from gentlemen who were soon to be of their own family?

Her aunt patted her arm again. “Now come along dear, it is time for us to dress for dinner.”

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Hannah chafed as her cousins’ maid Polly pulled on her hair.

“Sorrah, miss,” the girl apologized in an anxious voice. “The Miss Dahlgrens’ hair don’ tangle like this. I ain’ used to it.”

“Yes, I know.” At home Hannah would just braid the thick tangled strands herself and leave the queue hanging down her back. She knew she was too old to wear her hair down, so she was willing to pin it up when she was in company. But pinning it in a simple twist was not good enough for Dahlgren House. A lady must have her hair brushed and arranged in a fashionable style. Polly was clearly at the end of her patience trying to do hair and care for the clothing of an extra visitor.

Hannah put a hand on her arm to stop her. "I will finish it myself, Polly."

"I dunno..." Polly gave her a doubtful look. "I don't think Mrs. Dahlgren will like that overmuch."

Hannah smiled, guessing her meaning. "If you fear that I am not so good at dressing hair as you, you are right. But you must own that I can probably do it faster. So I will brush it and gather it. Then you can pin it where you will."

"Thank ye, miss, that'll save me a deal of time." Polly handed her the hairbrush.

"And," she started brushing, "at least you do not have to curl it. It does enough of that on its own." Hannah held up a strand as example. "Hmpf. It looks almost gray in this light. Miss Baldwin's Academy has aged me a score of years."

Polly laughed. "Oh, miss, you'll know for certain when yer hair looks gray. My older sister has the same shade of blonde as yerself and it was a quite definite change."

"I'm so glad I have that to look forward to, then." She brushed a few more times, then let the brush slip out of her fingers to clatter to the dressing table so she could gather her hair together at the crown of her head. "It is now your turn."

Polly took a pile of hairpins and within a few minutes had secured her hair in place. "Verra well." She nodded with satisfaction. "Mr. Phillip Peniur cannot help but notice ye now."

"M-Mr. Phillip Peniur?" Hannah felt heat rise in her face. Had her instant regard for him been so noticed throughout the household?

Polly flushed as well. "I'm sorry, 'tis forward of me. But he's a fine-looking man and we all know the Peniurs are a fine old family. And I can't get Miss Louisa's hair to look half so nice as yers."

"Thank you, Polly." Hannah smiled but felt like sighing at the same time. She was relieved that the assumption of her interest in Phillip was a general one, but not pleased with the assumption that she was already competing against her cousin for his attentions.

She turned to face her reflection in the mirror. "In any case, I believe matches are settled by more than coiffures."

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At dinner, she found herself seated next to her Uncle Dahlgren and across from the elder Mr. Peniur, while the younger Dahlgrens and Peniurs sat at the other end of the table. This was odd, usually her aunt seated her with her cousins.

She wondered if her aunt was afraid Hannah might expose her ignorance in conversation with Charles Peniur.

There was no danger that her lack of conversational skills might be revealed by dining in close proximity to Mr. Peniur. During the whole course of the long meal, he said only a few words, and those in response to her uncle's description of a wager he had placed on the anticipated length of the local vicar's next sermon.

As Mr. Peniur revealed that he was not a gambling man, the conversation was of necessity quite brief.

Hannah thought that Mr. Peniur looked at her once, but then she soon determined that he was trying to catch the eye of the footman holding the decanter of claret.

Laughter and snippets of gay conversation from the other end of the table highlighted the silence around her.

At least the food was good, as always. She was sure she paid more attention to her fricassée and scalloped potatoes than could be reasonably considered genteel, but as her aunt kept her attention silently focused on the conversation of the young people to her left, she did not think she would notice Hannah's lapse in manners.

She wondered if her cousins were talking about Venice and whether Phillip smiled when he spoke to Louisa.

She hoped Juliette unknowingly had kale stuck in her teeth.

At long last, Aunt Dahlgren rose to signal that it was time for the ladies to leave the men to their port. Her aunt did finally look at her then, but only because Hannah bumped into the table as she stood up.

Her cousins left the room with obvious reluctance and settled down into their seats in the drawing room with audible sighs of discontent.

Juliette glanced out the window, where the sky still held traces of the deep purple of a winter twilight. "It will be an eternity until tea." She turned back to frown at her mother. "I don't know how we will pass the time."

Her mother stared at her intently for a moment, frowned, and turned to Louisa. "Why did you not tell your sister she had celery stuck in her teeth?"

"What?" Juliette fairly exploded with rage as she ran over to the fireplace and inspected her teeth in a mirrored scone.

Celery was not quite so noticeable as kale, but still good, nonetheless. Hannah felt the dinner had not been a total loss after all.

"Did she?" Louisa asked with poorly feigned innocence. "I confess I had not noticed."

Juliette turned to advance on her sister, eyes narrowed. "Oh, you just watch yourself, miss, else you might find ink in your tea or pepper in your pomatum."

"Mama!" Louisa wailed. "Don't let her start."

"Julie, enough!" her mother said sharply, casting a knowing look at Hannah. "You have gone far enough."

"But she left me to look foolish in front of..." Juliette's voice trailed off as if she were uncertain whom she feared would find her foolish.

Aunt Dahlgren reached into a basket to pull out her embroidery bag. "I daresay the man will not call off an engagement due to a bit of vegetable in your teeth."

"But I know her," Juliette insisted. "She did it on purpose."

“What?” Louisa protested. “I did not put celery in your teeth, purposefully or otherwise.”

Juliette stepped up to her sister and leaned over to speak right into her face. “I did not say you *put* celery in my teeth, but you could see that I *had* celery in my teeth and you deliberately refused to tell me that every time I opened my mouth I looked like a cow!”

No one made any answer. So, for a time, the angry words just hung in a room, Hannah rather fancied, like a bell around Juliette’s neck.

But after a while, Juliette’s rage kindled a sense of resentment in Hannah. What right did Juliette have to be so upset? “I suppose,” Hannah observed bitterly, “it is rather like finding out that you are wearing an old stained gown when guests are expected in the house.”

Juliette waved her away. “It is not the same at all. You knew what you looked like in that gown. I had no idea I had cow teeth.”

“Enough!” Aunt Dahlgren smacked her embroidery bag against the arm of the sofa. “You have all given me a tremendous headache. No one is to say another word until the gentlemen come in for tea.”

Hannah walked over to the bookcase, trying to bring her own growing anger back under control. That was all she ever did—bite back her own anger. Swallow it. Try to quench it in some manner. Juliette was able to air her every grievance and Hannah always had to hold back until she was ready to choke.

There had to be a way to get even.

Juliette had “suggested” staining her sister’s teeth with ink or polluting her face cream with peppercorns and while she liked the general idea of using her cousin’s own ideas against her, she would not stoop to copying.

Besides, such childish revenge would be duly censured by her aunt and very likely delay her return home.

She needed something much more subtle.

Revenge, revenge...her gaze roamed over the titles on the bookshelves as if she would find a book that would give instructions for the perfect vengeance against her cousins.

*The Whole Duty of Man, A Free Examination of Dr. Price’s and Dr. Priestley’s Sermons*—no, that shelf would provide little help.

*The Duchess of Malfi, The Revenger’s Tragedy?* Much better. She paused to consider the examples.

Neither strangulation nor poisoning seemed likely options. They were not at all subtle, for starters and even if somehow her involvement could be concealed, both methods were a little excessive for the crimes being revenged. Humiliation merited another humiliation, not homicide.

So that meant no disembowelment, dismemberment, or, to be fair, disfigurement.

What was left?

Frankly, she couldn't think of anything more humiliating to Juliette and Louisa than the behavior they had exhibited just a few moments ago. But they were clever enough to not to be caught behaving so in front of the others.

She returned her attention to the books. *The Castle of Otranto*.

Perhaps she might frighten them into some girlish, embarrassing display.

That would work! Back at home she'd terrified her sisters with a snake on their pillow and even her brother had jumped at the sight of the big wolf spider she'd put on his breakfast plate.

All she had to do was find a snake and —

A snake in December? She'd be hard pressed to find much more than a flea this time of year.

Neither cousin was afraid of mice, they encountered them all the time near the stables when they went out to ride.

What else might they be frightened of?

Fire?

Staging a fire in the parlor would hardly sit well with her aunt.

Juliette had professed a great fear that they would be beset by highwaymen on their drive out from London, but Hannah suspected half of that had been uttered for dramatic effect. Of what was she truly afraid?

With a sigh, Hannah decided she would devote no more time to her cousin. Instead, she selected a book of Greek mythology and spent a glorious hour engrossed in her favorite story about Persephone's journey to the underworld.

Her escape into the story was at last interrupted by the sound of her cousin's voice. "I hear them," Louisa whispered hoarsely.

Hannah could hear nothing other than the low crackle of fire in the grate and the soft sound of embroidery thread as her aunt drew it through the cloth on her lap.

Then she heard a faint tap of footsteps in the passage, growing louder until at last the door opened. But it was just a footman with the tea furniture.

As soon as he'd quit the room, Louisa and Juliette sprang into action. While Louisa checked her hair in the wall sconce and straightened her pendant, Juliette pulled up her stockings, inspected her teeth using a teaspoon as a looking glass, and then wiped her lips with a napkin.

"Your hair looks much better than it usually does," she said to her sister.

"Thank you," Louisa snarled. "And so do your teeth. I'm sure the bad odors on your breath must have faded by now as well."

Juliette held up the teaspoon and breathed into it a few times. Then, dropping the spoon back on the tray, she stepped over to her mother and leaned down. "Mama, does my breath have a bad odor?" She breathed out a few times.

Her mother's face wrinkled in displeasure for a moment, but she quickly regained her composure. "You smell of dinner, dear, as do we all. I am sure it is nothing that will give offense if you refrain from exhaling directly into your guests' nostrils."

Hannah smothered a laugh. If only her cousins would continue to fight among themselves and ignore her, she could quite enjoy the remainder of the evening.

Soon they could all hear the sound of masculine voices, indicating that the dining room door had opened and the men would soon cross into the drawing room. Louisa assumed a reclining position on a sofa, looking for all the world as if she had not moved for the better part of the evening. Juliette first perched on the settee by the fire, but then she quickly changed her mind, grabbed a book from the bookcase and seated herself on a chair near the door, posed as if she had been engrossed in her reading for hours.

Hannah wondered whether she should point out that her cousin was holding her book upside down, but there was no time, for the door opened just then and her uncle sauntered into the room, followed closely by Charles and Phillip Peniur. Their father lagged somewhat behind as he paused to read the captions on the Hogarth prints hanging just outside the door.

"We've enough for two tables at whist, sirs, if that be your fancy," Uncle Dahlgren suggested as he eyed a decanter of brandy on a small table off to the side of the room. "We can split four and four." He held up his hand to indicate that the four people nearest the fire would make up one group and the four nearest the door the other.

"Oh, no, Papa," Juliette objected immediately. "You cannot split Louisa and me. We are always in agreement, you see, and cannot bear to be parted. We must be together in *everything*."

The emphasis she placed on this last word, as she looked at Charles and Phillip, could leave no mistake as to her meaning. She referred to far more than the imminent card game.

"Well Juliette must play with Charles, of course," her aunt added quickly, "and naturally if we pair the two sisters, we must pair the brothers as well."

Her uncle turned to the elder Mr. Peniur. "We shall play gentlemen against the ladies, then, if you see no objection?"

"Hmnm, what?" Mr. Peniur squinted as he looked up from the inscription he had been reading on an old family portrait.

"Whist, sir," Uncle Dahlgren explained. "We're to be partners."

The already deep creases on Mr. Peniur's forehead grew even deeper as he frowned.

"That is," Uncle Dahlgren cleared his throat, "if you have an objection, you are certainly free to take—"

Finally Mr. Peniur's voice rumbled to life. "I do indeed have an objection, sir. A gambling game is not to my taste at all."

"Understand sir," Aunt Dahlgren intervened in soothing tone, "we play only a penny a point. No serious wager is involved."

"That is not the issue! That there be a wager at all is a sin."

They all looked at each other uncertainly. Even Mr. Peniur's sons seemed surprised at his vehemence.

"We could play Loo or Vingt-et-Un," Louisa suggested.

Her mother, father and sister immediately shook their heads.

"Perhaps we might instead play a game that does not involve cards," Juliette proposed. "Such as blind man's buff?"

Mr. Peniur looked taken aback. "A children's game? I do not believe I remember how it is played."

"One player is blindfolded and the other players scatter about the room," Juliette elucidated. "Then the player who is blindfolded must find the others and guess their identities."

Mr. Peniur thought for a moment. "How would he do that?"

"Well," Juliette began to blush, "by touch. By feeling facial features..."

"No, no," Mr. Peniur scowled as he shook his head. "That sounds entirely inappropriate for mixed company."

"Right you are, Mr. Peniur," Aunt Dahlgren concurred with a sharp glance at her daughter.

"Very well, then," Phillip Peniur seated himself on an unoccupied sofa in the center of the room. "I propose that we sit and talk, which will involve neither wagering nor the touching of faces."

Louisa looked as if she wanted to move to sit next to him, but that would appear improperly forward when she was already seated elsewhere, so she remained where she was. Juliette, however, had been sitting so far from the center of the room that she could, with propriety, stand up to move to a closer seat.

Charles Peniur took a seat on the sofa opposite from the one on which his brother sat. Aunt Dahlgren, of course, seated herself by the tea table and started to pour. Uncle Dahlgren sat in a chair near her and Mr. Peniur apparently did not wish to sit at all. Instead, he wandered over to the bookcase and stared intently at the titles.

Hannah felt she was close enough where she was, on a chair next to the bookcase, so she made no move to get up.

That left Juliette standing, as if uncertain where she wanted to place herself.

"Miss Brown, do come and join us." Phillip Peniur smiled as he indicated the open space on the sofa next to him. "Anything you have to say will be quite lost coming from all the way over there."

"I'm going to be quite wicked and leave the scratchy sofa for you," Juliette said quickly as she plopped down next to Phillip. "This one is ever so much softer, should one's arm happen to brush against it."

*What was she about?* Juliette had bragged about her beloved Charles Peniur for months, and now that he was here, she was beginning to evince a preference for his brother.

It made no matter to Hannah, though she would have greatly preferred to sit next to Phillip since he had a pleasant face and a ready smile while Charles seemed to look down his nose with a perpetual half-sneer.

Trying to remember what she'd been drilled about posture and deportment, she stood slowly and carefully made her way to the center of the room.

The footman handing around teacups waited while she cautiously lowered herself to the sofa. Most of her life, she'd never given a thought to how she sat or stood or walked – she just moved. That was part of the problem apparently. Her stepmother said Miss Baldwin's Academy would teach her to comport herself as a lady. But even after nearly four months at the school, the proprietress still frowned at her whenever she passed, telling her she charged through a room with all the grace of a rhinoceros. When Hannah found a picture of the large ungainly animal in a geography book, she resolved to change her ways. But it wasn't until moments like this that she really tried to do anything about it.

"Have you been struck with a sudden bout of rheumatism, Hannah?" Juliette inquired in mock politeness.

"You'll need no milk to cool your tea at this rate," Louisa added with a small giggle.

When Hannah finally settled in place, she reached for the saucer with a sigh. So now they'd found something else to ridicule.

But to her relief, Phillip did not join in their game but instead defended her. "I think she does well to exercise caution around my brother. He's been known to remove chairs from behind unsuspecting guests who are about to sit."

"Only at the club," Charles insisted. "And I would never do that to a lady."

Phillip grinned. "You'd probably never do that to anyone but me."

"Very likely," Charles agreed.

Phillip turned to address the ladies. "He fears retribution, you see, from all others."

"Has he nothing to fear, then, from you?" Juliette asked playfully.

"No," Charles' answer was quick and brusque. "My little brother is all talk, nothing more." He turned to Hannah's uncle. "I understand, Mr. Dahlgren, that your park affords some adequate shooting opportunities?"

"Absolutely." Her uncle nodded. "Yes, shooting, quite."

"That would be my preference for the morrow, then. After we inspect the estates."

So he made no pretense of the fact that the upcoming marriage was first and foremost a business transaction. For a moment, Hannah felt a slight pang of sympathy for Juliette.

Juliette leaned toward her. "Oh, do you not find men so *efficace* at times?"

All traces of sympathy immediately vanished. Juliette knew that Hannah understood very little French. Her cousins frequently turned to the language when they wished to conceal something from her. Or simply make her feel inadequate.

Louisa sat up and took a sip of her tea. "Shooting and riding all are very well, but I wish to settle whether we shall have a proper Twelfth Night this year. May we have a ball, even if it be a small one?" She turned to Phillip. "Our neighborhood has grown so wretched that we've hardly anyone to invite. The last few years we've held nothing at all. But this year, we shall have enough partners for dancing since we have three extra gentlemen."

"And one lady," Phillip added, with a nod toward Hannah.

Louisa eyed him quizzically.

"I was told your cousin only arrived in the country at the end of the summer," Phillip continued. "So naturally she would not have been in residence during Christmases past."

"But Hannah does not dance," Louisa explained flatly. "They have no proper dancing where she comes from."

"No dancing in the States?" he answered in surprise. "I have read that the cities in the States take their fashions in clothing and dance directly from Paris and are quite as current as London."

Juliette laughed. "You must have read some propaganda from those cities, then. Tell, them, Hannah. When you arrived, you knew none of our dances and not even what the steps are called."

Hannah stared at her teacup. "I did not live in a city. Girls in the city might know how to dance properly."

Juliette's musical laughter trilled forth again. "Do you hear how she calls them girls? They do not even consider *themselves* ladies."

All at once, Phillip grew serious. "It is not whether *they* consider themselves ladies, but whether *others* perceive them to be."

That put an end to the laughter and smiles for a moment, but it also put an end to conversation, too.

After a few moments, Charles cleared his throat. "Miss Louisa said the neighborhood had grown wretched?"

"Due to age and infirmity only, Mr. Peniur," Aunt Dahlgren explained with a quick smile. "There has been no decline in the quality of the families, only a decline in the number of members willing or able to attend balls."

"Oh. I see."

Conversation languished again.

Hannah wished she could retire to her room, but some rule somewhere stated that, in the absence of illness, it was improper for a host to retire before guests.

She almost wished Juliette would start talking about Venice again.

"Perhaps we might sing some Christmas carols," Phillip suggested. "All young ladies sing and play, whether they wish to or no."

"A splendid idea, but I am afraid the pianoforte is dreadfully out of tune," Aunt Dahlgren said with false regret.

Hannah knew it was false because she also knew that no one in the family had a shred of musical talent and they fully realized the shortcoming.

"Christmas stories, then," Phillip continued. "Does anyone know a good Christmas story? Something scary for a dark winter night?"

*Something scary.* This could be her chance to frighten her cousins and thoroughly embarrass them.

The problem was that she did not know any Christmas stories, scary or otherwise.

Phillip looked at each of them in turn. "Surely one of us must have heard a good ghost story."

"Is there such a thing as a *good* ghost story?" Charles said languidly.

Juliette turned to Hannah with the winning smile Hannah had come to totally distrust. "I think my cousin should tell us a story. She must know some tales from America that we've never heard."

"An excellent idea. Will you not share a story with us, Miss Brown?" Phillip turned to her with a pleading expression that was even harder to resist than his usual smile. Her little brother could use that expression too, it was like looking in the eyes of a lost puppy.

Should she do it? Her storytelling might prove twice as embarrassing as anything her cousins could say or do to her.

But if she could scare them... It would be worth the risk.

Besides, how could she say "no" to those lost puppy eyes?

"Very—" she coughed on the end of the word and had to clear her throat, "well. But if it is to be a scary story, we must put out all the candles." Stories were always told by firelight at home. They seldom burned candles after dinner unless someone needed to read or write.

"Yes," Juliette agreed. "It will create the perfect *l'atmosphère mélodramatique*." She hurried over to the mantel, picked up the extinguisher, and dispensed darkness throughout the room.

"What are you about?" Mr. Peniur asked as he looked up from the book he was no longer able to read.