

ONE

c. 1920s England

The short but nonetheless staid, grave sounding butler, whose name was Stevens, she remembered, intoned as she entered the enormous room, "Miss Wynne Hutchins, Your Grace."

She barely got past the butler before someone hit her like a ton of bricks, practically bowling her over in her enthusiasm.

"Oh, I am so glad you've come! I've wanted to have you for ages—thank you for finally agreeing to come all the way up here!"

Although she wasn't anywhere near as comfortable with public demonstrations of affection such as the one she was currently being subjected to, Wynne nonetheless forced herself to relax and hug her friend back. As she did that, it was impossible not to note the unmistakable difference between the expensive silk fabric Ivy was wearing as she rubbed her hand up and down that slim, willowy back in comparison to the much simpler—and much less expensive—frock she was wearing herself.

In some ways, each of them was the opposite of what was to

be expected within their cultures—Ivy was overtly, physically affectionate with her friends, whereas Wynne distinctly was not. But then, Ivy was the doted on daughter of a titled, British, moneyed family who lived in what looked to Wynne like Cinderella's castle, and she, well, she did not.

When Ivy finally released her, she didn't do so entirely, grabbing hold of her hand and pulling the other young woman along behind her.

And the man to whom she was being dragged—even he could see her obvious reluctance to meet him—noticed those glaring differences, too, she could tell.

He also saw that there was a tiny dog glued to her heel. He opened his mouth to object but was just as reluctant to admit that it seemed to be about as well trained as was possible for such a creature to be. It only had eyes for its mistress, and when she stopped, it immediately sat, gazing adoringly up at her.

"Lord Edenbridge, this is my friend, Wynne Hutchins. Wynne, this is my brother, the Duke of Edenbridge. Your Grace." Then she added, "Bruce."

That familiarity was apparently unwelcomed—on his end, anyway—because he gave his sister a distinctly scolding look as he corrected smoothly, as he didn't just shake her hand but brought the back of it to his lips, too. "Your Grace, Ivy," he corrected gently. "I am very glad to meet you, Miss Hutchins."

The dog growled softly, as if it was jealous that someone else was touching its owner—although he hadn't voiced an opinion about the way his sister had molested its mistress—but Bruce ignored the little baggage entirely, never once looking at it directly.

Trying not to smile at his snobbish response to his sister's less formal introduction, she responded quietly, "It's very nice to meet you, Your Grace."

There was no missing the surprised look on his face when

she addressed him correctly and without the curtsy she knew most Americans would offer anyone who seemed even slightly upper crust.

He'd obviously been told at least a few things about her by his sister, not the least of which, she was sure, was that she had committed the cardinal sin of being American. She wondered what he'd thought she was going to call him. An egotistical, overbearing snob came to mind, considering what she knew about him and had already experienced of him in these first few moments, but she managed not to do that.

Although he seemed inclined to linger, she removed her hand from his and gazed about the cavernous room.

One this size might well be expected to be bare and stark and cold, but nothing could have been further from the truth in regards to this place. It had warm wooden panels in a light color, mixed with some wallpaper that sported complimentary colors. It was artfully strewn with furniture, save for a seating arrangement in front of the largest fireplace she'd ever seen. The mantle itself had to be at least twelve feet long—probably longer—and it was decorated with a combination of what were likely mementos and pictures from places and eras both far and near.

One wall had floor to ceiling windows that had to be fifteen feet tall if they were a foot, with light, plain, but obviously dear celery green curtains, with gauzy, cream lace inserts that filtered just the right amount of sunlight.

The maroon and green brocade grouping in front of the fireplace looked well cared for and expensive, but somehow inviting at the same time, which was a trick that the entire place seemed to pull off effortlessly.

Wynne had the jaundiced, unkindly thought that it was wonderful what could be done with endless amounts of money and power and servants, then squelched it and the feelings it brought with it. She didn't want to be a Negative Nellie while

staying with her very generous friend. Money—the fact that she didn't have any and Ivy had bags of it—had never been an issue between them, and she didn't want it to become one now.

The fact that she didn't give a damn for it and had never tried to lean on Ivy for a loan that inevitably became a gift, nor for any other kind of favor involving her wealth or influence, was one of the things she knew Ivy liked best about her. She'd said it was refreshing.

Wynne had been surprised, considering that Ivy was, she assumed, surrounded by people of her own rank, and they had their own money, power, and influence—didn't they?

But then, she was a poor American. What did she know about it, really? At the moment, she was busy trying not to be overawed by a house that was practically bigger than the small rural town she'd grown up in, as well as the physically—and otherwise—imposing man who had nowhere near as casual, friendly, or open demeanor as his little sister did.

Then he went and said something that made her reconsider how she felt about him, his voice deep and rich, making Wynne relax almost against her will.

"You must be tired after your trip up here. Would you like to have a rest before tea? You've missed lunch, but if you like, I could have Mrs. Henry fix you a tray and have it sent up to you?"

He sounded downright solicitous, and she couldn't discern whether he was sincere or just trying to get rid of her for a while.

Eyes black as coal settled on her expectantly, and her mouth became instantaneously as dry as the Sahara, and she couldn't seem to get the words—any coherent words—out of her mouth. "I, uh, I—"

Luckily, Ivy sensed her distress and linked her arm with her friend, turning her away from her brother and guiding her to the

door, where a footman waited to open it for them. "Thank you, Philip. I think that's a good idea, brother. We'll both have a bit of a lie down before tea, I think."

The little dog remained firmly attached to its mistress' side as they made their way out of the room, and he concluded with mild interest that Ivy was allowed to touch her without objection, even if he wasn't.

"It was very nice to meet you, Miss Hutchins," Bruce murmured, but easily loud enough for them to hear.

He could see that his sister's friend had opened her mouth to answer him, but nothing intelligible came out, even though he found himself listening quite keenly for it. When the door had closed behind them, he heard them giggling their way up the stairs, glad that Miss Hutchins hadn't been struck dumb.

He quite liked her American accent, and she seemed quieter than most Americans he'd known, which was definitely something in her favor. Bruce had heard a reasonable amount about her from his dear, sweet—but highly impressionable—sister, but had taken every bit of it with a grain of salt.

Still, he found himself intrigued by the girl, much more so than he wanted to be if he was inclined to admit that to himself.

And he most definitely wasn't.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, he was walking down the hallway that housed the family's bedrooms, which were contained in a separate wing of the house from the guest rooms. He could hear the very same giggles coming from Ivy's room and couldn't suppress a smile at their sheer happiness.

He knew he should just continue on his way to the master bedroom he'd occupied since the death of their father when

they were much younger, but he couldn't resist knocking on the door.

"Come in?"

The two of them were sitting—rather, lying—on Ivy's bed, and Miss Hutchins sat up immediately upon seeing him.

"I hear a lot more laughing than snoring going on in this room," he teased. "Do you two laugh in your sleep?"

"We got caught up walking down memory lane," Ivy confessed, rubbing the Morpheus' ears and making it look as if it was in Heaven.

"Well, there's still a bit before teatime. Why don't you both try to get a nap in, or you'll be asleep in your soup at dinner tonight."

Ivy immediately made as if to rise, saying, "We never got to Wynne's room—"

"I'll show her the way. You rest," Bruce offered, much to both of their surprise—Ivy that he was offering to show Wynne to her room, and Wynne because he seemed so unexpectedly caring about Ivy.

Miss Hutchins remained by the edge of the bed, where she was standing, dog at her side, looking hesitant to go with him.

Ivy could see that her friend was uncomfortable at the prospect of being alone with her brother and wished she didn't know that she was one of the reasons why that was true.

"Bruce will show you to your room. You really should try to rest. We eat dinner much later than you're accustomed, I think."

With that, Wynne and her four footed appendage moved to stand near Bruce with ill-concealed reluctance.

"Tea is served in the library—the room you were just in—at four," Ivy informed her. "But go down any time you like if you awaken before that."

"Thank you. I will," she whispered.

The big man let her precede him through the door, closing it

after telling his sister to sleep well, and she remained a step or two behind him the entire, long way from one bedroom to the other—not because she didn't want to be next to him, but rather because he had incredibly long legs, and one of his strides equaled nearly three of hers. He didn't seem to notice that fact, or—more likely, she thought unkindly, again—he'd noticed but didn't care to be inconvenienced by shortening his strides.

"You've been to England before?" he asked, sounding surprisingly conversational.

"I have," she answered, glad that her speech impediment seemed to have cleared up. She was a very verbal person and had never reacted like that to anyone—male or female—and wasn't happy that it had happened for the first time with him. Showing this man any kind of weakness did not strike her as an intelligent thing to do.

She looked around at the sumptuously appointed hallways, with their occasional large painting of someone she assumed was an ancestor. Jeez, with the size of this place, she was going to lose weight just getting from one place to the other!

"I assume you liked it, or you wouldn't have returned?"

"I did."

Considering how he had heard the two of them chattering away before he knocked, he was surprised that talking to her was like pulling teeth. She was barely giving him more than one word answers, and he found himself undeniably—and annoyingly—unhappy that she was being so reticent with him. It wasn't a feeling he was used to, which caused him to be even more tense and less, well, not quite jovial. He'd never been the jovial sort. But he was usually much more glib around women in general.

But not her, apparently. He felt uncharacteristically tongue-tied when he was with her, and he hated it.

He stopped short in front of a door unexpectedly and she

very nearly barreled right into him. "This is your room. It's called the blue room, for reasons that will become clear to you when you've gone in." He tried to smile when he said that, but her haste to get away from him doused it.

"Thank you for bringing me here, Your Grace," she said, reaching for the doorknob and disappearing into the room before he could say anything else.

Bruce stood there for a long moment, looking at the closed door, which he had heard her lock behind herself, knowing he had a key to it and wondering what she would say if he used it.

That boorish thought startled him to the core, causing him to immediately turn on his heel and walk away, heading to his original destination—his own bedroom—not to sleep, as he'd cautioned the girls to, but rather to sit at the desk he maintained there, not working on any of the myriad things that demanded his attention, but rather staring out the window at nothing in particular and wondering what the hell was happening to him.

HE WASN'T AT TEA, for which Wynne was eternally grateful.

She'd had tea before, but not on this grand a scale. Ivy played Mother, pouring for the two of them from what looked like a beautiful set of Royal Albert Montrose Blue bone china. It wasn't Royal Copenhagen Flora Danica, but it was a damned expensive set, nonetheless—and pretty, too.

Ivy knew how she took her tea, which, while in England, she preferred to coffee, although it, too, was on offer, preparing it with a spoonful of sugar and a dollop of cream before handing it to her. "Bruce had work he couldn't put off, but he'll join us for dinner," she explained, sorry for her brother's absence. She desperately wanted them to get on but had a

feeling that there was something inexplicable going on between the two, even though they'd only known each other for a very short time.

"That's good," Wynne lied outright. She hadn't been looking forward to taking tea with the man, and if she was truthful with herself, she was even less excited about the idea of committing the inevitable multiple gaffes at dinner with him.

But she was trying to resign herself to the idea. She'd read up as much as she could on what a formal dinner on the scale that she was likely to encounter in a house like this and hoped she remembered what she'd learned. She knew they dressed for dinner, and she'd need to do something to distract from her clothing, which she knew wasn't going to be anywhere near up to the standards of either of her hosts. She felt like a poor relation, but she couldn't even lay claim to the "relation" part. She was just plain poor.

"What did you think of him?" Unlike most Brits, including her imposing brother, Ivy rarely tried to conceal her emotions, and her eagerness was on full display.

Wynne was surprised she'd had to wait that long for Ivy to ask that question. "He seems nice," she lied. "But I hardly spent any time with him at all, so I don't have much to go on for an impression of him."

"Yes," her friend agreed, rising to go to the sideboard, where there were several decorative plates of nibbly-bits, as well as two types of cake.

"Can I bring you anything?" she asked solicitously.

Wynne leaned around her friend. "Is that a Victoria Sandwich cake I see there?"

Ivy laughed. "I asked Mrs. Henry to prepare one for you particularly, since I knew you liked it. Shall I bring you a slice?"

"Or cut a slice for yourself and bring me the rest of the cake," Wynne suggested, only half kidding but enjoying the way her

friend laughed. "I'm not kidding, you know. I could eat that entire cake and still have enough room for dinner."

She'd become addicted to the confection on her very first visit—within the first few hours, even—thoroughly enjoying the light sponge cake, with its jam and "double cream" filling and a light sprinkling of powdered sugar on top.

"No, you couldn't," the younger woman informed her. "I know you don't have a very good impression of English food, but Mrs. Henry is an amazing cook, and I'm hoping you'll find dinner more palatable than you usually do." She handed Wynne a large slab of cake and sat down with her own smaller one. "I remember that you always used to fill up on tea cakes at school, because you said dinner was inedible."

"I shall reserve judgment," Wynne announced, but then she ruined the effect by taking an enormous bite of cake, which had her friend laughing again.

"I know you don't have the best impression of him—"

"Him who?" she asked, carefully waiting until her mouth was empty before doing so.

"Bruce. And I'm sorry that I created that in you," she lowered her voice, "that I told you about how he... takes care of me."

Wynne was intrigued that she could still characterize the punishments she'd told her about in that manner.

"He really is a very nice man, but he is the serious type. But it's no wonder. He's got so much riding on him, so many responsibilities, that he's not a very... free man, you know? Certainly not as much as an American guy."

"Like dinner, I'll reserve my judgment." Damn, there was little better than a British tea. "Can we have clotted cream and scones next time?"

"Absolutely. I've put in a request for that, too. I want you to like it here; I'd like you to come visit more often."

Wynne put her plate, with the slice nearly untouched but for one bite, and her cup and saucer on the coffee table and cleared her throat. "I've said this to you before, Ivy, but I don't think that's possible. I don't make enough money to come over here but once every few years or so, if that, and I'm not exaggerating. If I wasn't staying with you, I couldn't afford this trip at all."

"I know, and I wish you'd let me help you with that—I'd love to see you much more often. You're such a tonic for me. I never laugh as much as I do when I'm with you."

"What about Lord Whatszizname? The one you're so keen about, who you think might feel the same way about you?"

Ivy sank onto her seat on the couch opposite Wynne, sighing wistfully, "Oh, from your lips to God's ears."

Her friend looked crestfallen, and Wynne perked up. "Has something happened?"

"No, not really, except that Bruce doesn't really like him."

Wynne had a hard time not rolling her eyes at that pronouncement. "Then Bruce doesn't have to marry him."

Ivy frowned. "If only it were that easy."

"But it is that easy, Ivy," Wynne pressed.

"You don't understand how things work over here. And he's my brother—he should have some say in who I marry, shouldn't he?"

"You know me well enough to know what my response is going to be to that idea."

"Yes, well, you're an American and more independent as a result."

Wynne snorted softly, making Ivy giggle. "American society is less formal than yours, I'll give you that, especially among us poor people. I think that's because we—I've—had to fight for everything I've gotten so far. I had to fight to go to school and finish it, I had to fight to go to college and get my teaching

certificate, I had to fight to get my first job, I have to fight to keep the job—and keep the principal's hands from wandering down the front or slipping up from the bottom of my dress during what was supposed to be an administrative meeting."

"Really?"

"Really. There are male teachers on staff who every adult female in the school knows with whom she should never get caught alone in the room."

Ivy actually shuddered at the idea of what Wynne dealt with every day. "Golly. That sounds awful."

"It is. But the ability to teach makes it more than worth it—it's certainly not the pay. I love teaching."

"You know I get all confused about the school system in America, because it seems to be the direct opposite of ours. You teach in a public school, right?"

Wynne smiled. "Yes."

"But wouldn't you make more money teaching in a private school?"

"You'd think, but no. There's more prestige, but I'd have to live on campus, which I do not want to do. I love my students, but I don't want to run into them on my off time, frankly, which is why I live a couple towns away from my school. And private schools—unless you get into a really snobby one, like Exeter Academy—pay even worse than public schools. So no." She shrugged. "I know I don't make much money, but I'm all right with that. I really love what I'm doing. If I can get just one farmer or mill worker's kid a year interested in reading, then I consider that I've had a great year, and I usually have a much better average than that, although sometimes it's hard to convince the parents it's something they need to do."

"Your life is so... I don't know. Worthy. Worthwhile, unlike mine," Ivy sighed. "I envy you."

Wynne grinned. "Thank you, but you wouldn't envy me all

of the time, I'd bet. You wouldn't want to have to get up at five thirty to be at school by seven, or to drive through blizzards in the winter to get to school or get back home, or teaching in the heat of the early summer, sometimes, or dealing with unruly children. It has its downsides, definitely. But I have time off in the summers, which lets me come here to visit you—on a shoe-string, but I'm here."

"Yes, well, I definitely wouldn't like the daily schedule and obligation, but your life has such purpose. All I do is go to teas and balls, looking pretty and behaving in the expected fashion, in hopes that someone I can tolerate offers for me."

"But it sounds like it's not whether you can tolerate him—even though you're the one who's going to be married to the guy—but whether or not your brother can tolerate him."

Ivy looked distinctly defeated at that, sinking low in her chair, limbs sprawled every which way, which Wynne knew would not be acceptable in front of anyone but her. "I know!"

"Well, you don't have to take that, you know. Tell your brother you'll only marry for love, and that's that."

The out and out snort that came out of her mouth was so utterly uncharacteristic of her friend that it had Wynne laughing so hard, she nearly choked on her tea. "Oh dear. I can see I'm a worse influence on you than I thought!"

The other young woman's grin was crooked but a little wistful, too. "You know what he's like with me, and now you've even met him—can you imagine me saying something like that to him and getting away with it? I wouldn't be able to sit down for a week—or more!"

She blushed when she said it, and her friend blushed when she heard it, even though it was one of the things about Ivy that she found the most intriguing. She'd never met—that she knew of—anyone who was an adult who was still subjected to corporal punishment by a parental figure of any kind. Almost everyone

she knew had been physically chastised by their parents, yes, when they were children, but that stopped at some point around the time they were eleven or twelve or so, at least for the girls, and might have gone on a little longer for boys, who were likely more headstrong.

Wynne didn't know anyone else who was disciplined by their brother, either. But then, their mother had died when they were young, and Bruce had assumed the parental role for his sister, and she just realized that it could not have been an easy thing for him to do, on any level.

She knew that Ivy was four when her mother had died and that despite the British tradition of marrying for money or political advantage, her parents had been a true love match. And as a result of losing his wife, their father had largely abdicated the role of parent—as well as all of the responsibilities inherent in his title—such that a very young Bruce had had to step into both roles and had done so with a vengeance on both fronts. He was only six years older than Ivy, but that had not mattered a whit to him in regards to her upbringing.

And their father had died shortly thereafter, so he had been forced to grow up much sooner than he might have. He didn't have the carefree youth and young manhood that most men of privilege in British society had, because their fathers ran things for them until they died, which was often when the heir was already grown and even married.

She didn't know if it was overcompensation because he was so young, but Bruce was stricter with her than either of her parents had been, and to Wynne's horror—and secret delight—had not stepped back from that role much, regardless of the fact that his sister was now an adult. She knew these things about her relationship with her brother because she'd gotten Ivy to talk about it on more than one occasion when she was in her cups—and she had even admitted, again, in a recent letter—the

horribly embarrassing fact that he continued to correct any behavior in her that he found objectionable, so the spankings to which she was subject had not abated very much.

Ivy, like Wynne, was twenty-four and still being put over her brother's knee and spanked like the four year old she'd been when he'd stepped into their absentee father's shoes.

But she'd allowed as he'd stopped doing that—using the over the knee position. Instead, she'd confessed in a letter that Wynne hid under the mattress of her bed for middle of the night reading, even though she lived alone and had no one to hide it from—that since she'd begun to develop as a young woman, he'd switched to having her bend over a chair. He still bared her bottom, although as circumspectly as he possibly could.

Regardless, Wynne had never found any information quite so titillating in her life. She didn't know why she hungered for any tidbit of that kind of information she could squeeze out of Ivy, but—to her great shame—she did. And she had to make herself be careful not to press her friend too much about the subject, lest she get wind of the idea that this was more than her friend's casual interest.

Perhaps she was so obsessed with the intimate details because her parents subscribed to a much more relaxed method of childrearing. Relaxed wasn't even the right word for it—nonexistent was better. Her parents had loved her, of that she had no doubt. But she was their only child, and they doted on her. They might not have been rich, but they strived to give her everything she wanted. As a result, she had grown up quite spoiled, but once her mother had passed—her father having preceded her—there was no one in the world who was particularly interested in indulging her every whim.

And Lord knows, that on a teacher's salary, she certainly couldn't afford to indulge her own whims.

No man had stepped forward—when she was younger or now—to take her parents' place, either. Oh, she'd had quite a few dates and had even retained a few male friends as a result of them. One young man had even proposed, but even the relatively sheltered Wynne could see that women weren't his priority. Instead, Lester Peabody had become a good friend and had even found a man he loved, who he euphemistically maintained was his "roommate".

So Wynne had long since resigned herself to living and dying as an "old maid schoolteacher", and she quite liked the independence she was afforded because of it. She had even gotten to the point where she really didn't care whether anyone else found the way she lived to be unnatural—and more than a few people had actually called it that. Females should not live alone, without a man to guide them, they'd stated emphatically.

Wynne had taken to laughing in their face when they made such outrageous statements, which either set them back on their heels to bluster and utter further ridiculous opinions, or confused them into silence. Either way, she won.

Having never really been disciplined in any way, except that she was so close to her parents that the idea of their disapproval had at least stopped her from getting into big trouble, although she certainly had gotten into enough little scrapes to keep them on their toes, Wynne had found herself, from an early age, quite intrigued by the idea of being subjected to regular, strict—if over-achingly loving—discipline, as Ivy was.

Although she was under the impression that Ivy was missing the "loving" part of that equation, based on what she had been able to wheedle out of her friend about how her brother treated her.

It was rare for Ivy to speak to her about such things when she wasn't thoroughly blotto, and when she did, her blushes told Wynne just how embarrassed she was about it, especially now.

As eager as she was for any tidbit of information, Wynne endeavored to keep such conversations as casual and undemanding as she could, and she always sympathized with her friend about how humiliating it must be to be treated so.

"I hadn't thought of your brother's response," she lied. Wynne didn't make a habit out of being a liar, but she wasn't about to admit to her friend that she had most definitely considered the possibility that she might get spanked as a result of trying to stand up to Bruce. Nor was she likely to admit that she would be utterly thrilled if that—or anything else—happened while she was here that resulted in Ivy being spanked.

She'd be perfectly happy to hear about it after the fact. She didn't have to see it with her own two eyes.

That wasn't something she ever expected to be able to be privy to, as much as she really wanted to be a fly on the wall. She never considered that to be a possibility in the least—until it happened, although it went considerably askew, ending up in a place she could never, ever have fantasized it would.