

Chapter 1

Henrietta took a deep breath as the Rolls pulled up in front of Highbury. Teddy lay cuddled in her arms, thankfully asleep after the long drive up from Chicago.

The palatial mansion in Winnetka, Clive's boyhood home, looked just as she remembered it, and for a moment it seemed as if they had been gone only a few days and not over a year! She peered out the car window at the massive stone mansion, the front windows of which were now draped in lush evergreen roping in anticipation of Christmas, a bright-red bow in the middle of each. Despite the cheery décor, however, and the fact that she was not returning as Clive's formerly impoverished bride but rather as Lady Linley, it was hard not to feel at least a little intimidated.

"Do you want me to take him, miss?" Edna asked from where she sat perched across from her in a sort of interior rumble seat, British style, which was perfect for a child or, say, a servant. "Miss," of course, was not really the correct title with which to address Lady Linley, but Edna had a terrible habit of forgetting such things.

"No, I've got him," Henrietta said, though Teddy *was* getting a little bit heavy. She glanced over at Clive, who was looking at her appreciatively. He wouldn't say it, of course, but she knew he was eager to show off their little prince: Montague Alcott Linley Theodore, not only the future Lord Linley but also heir to Highbury and the Howard fortune.

"Well, then let me put a blanket over him," Edna said, producing one from somewhere on her person. "He's not used to this cold. Don't want him to freeze in this weather."

“I hardly think he’ll freeze from the car to the house.” Henrietta began shifting herself forward, as she could see Albert, the footman, already hurrying down the front steps to open the car doors. “Anyone would think you’ve lived in London your whole life, Edna.”

“Seems like it, though, don’t it, Pascal?” Edna asked of the young man seated in the front seat beside Fritz.

“Well, *non*, not *exactement*,” Pascal answered with only a slight turn of his head toward the backseat. His eyes were instead glued to the large house and grounds in front of them. It was a look the Howards were growing used to by now, as Pascal seemed amazed by almost everything they encountered from the moment they had disembarked in New York. Clive and Henrietta had first met the former groomsman on a case in Strasbourg, and he had stuck, becoming not only Clive’s valet, for lack of a better available position, but more importantly, Edna’s husband. He now held the rank of head butler in their London townhouse, though, in truth, he was much too young and inexperienced for such a role. But he was a fast learner and ridiculously faithful. Henrietta could only imagine what Billings would say about him in the servants’ hall.

The door of the Rolls opened then, letting in a gust of cold air. Edna hopped out and stood by eagerly while Albert held the car door for Henrietta, still carefully holding Teddy, as she began to inch out. Clive, meanwhile, having swiftly exited from his side, hurried over and put his arm sturdily around Henrietta, as if she and Teddy needed steadying—or, God forbid, protecting. His previous obsessive desire to protect her from, well, everything—criminal elements, illness, even the weather—had unfortunately expanded now to include his son.

Seeing her mistress secured, Edna joined Pascal and the flood of other servants swarming now from the house to unpack the bags from the trunk. Edna tucked one under each arm, picked up a third, and began shuffling toward the service entrance.

“Edna!” Henrietta called from halfway up the front stone steps. “Where are you going? This way.” She looked pointedly at Clive for support, who likewise called out.

“Yes, Pascal. This way.”

Edna hesitated, set her bags down, and scurried back. “If you please, miss, it will be better this way. If we don’t, we won’t half hear it from this lot the whole time we’re here.” She tilted her head toward the service entrance. “Give me two shakes, and I’ll be upstairs in a jiffy gettin’ all settled. Don’t you worry.”

Henrietta was about to protest further, but she was eager to get Teddy out of the biting wind. “All right, then, but remember what we talked about.”

Edna gave a brief nod and then hurried back to where Pascal was waiting, the collar of his coat turned up over his ears.

Together, Clive and Henrietta climbed the massive stone steps, Clive’s arm still protectively around her, though the steps weren’t the least bit slippery. Indeed, no snow had yet fallen, despite the proximity to Christmas, which was unusual for Chicago at this time of year. It rarely snowed in London, and it was one of the things that Henrietta was hoping to see on this trip back.

Billings stood, his face unmoving, at attention at the door. He gave a stiff bow. “Welcome home, your lordship, my lady,” he said in his slow, nasally way, though he did not look directly at them and instead fixed his droopy eyes on the opposite doorframe.

“Hello, Billings.” Clive clapped the butler on the shoulder. “You can drop all the lordship nonsense, though,” he said, unbuttoning his coat.

“Yes, m’lord.”

“Oh! You’ve arrived!” exclaimed Antonia. “Sidney!” she called behind her. “They’re here! Oh, let me see him!” Antonia Howard rushed forward and immediately peeled back Teddy’s blanket. The baby’s eyes flickered open and his little brow furrowed. Instinctively, he jerked a tiny fist toward his mouth.

“Oh, Clive!” Antonia gushed. “He looks just like you!”

Sidney Bennett entered the room, smiling broadly, and held out his hand to Clive.

“You’ve made it, old boy. Well done. How was the voyage?”

“A little choppy at times, but overall fine.” Clive allowed Billings, who had obsequiously stepped forward, to peel off his coat. “I suppose congratulations are in order,” Clive said formally, looking from Sidney to his mother.

Clive had insisted often enough that his mother’s somewhat hasty marriage to his late father’s right-hand man of business was an arrangement that he approved of, but Henrietta wasn’t so sure. She and Clive had been too absorbed with their own affairs in England of late to care much at the time, but now that the two men were face-to-face in his father’s house, Clive seemed a bit cool. Henrietta shifted Teddy and hoped that Clive would set aside any ill will for the sake of Christmas. But one never knew.

“Thank you,” Sidney said genuinely, his smile broad. He gingerly approached Henrietta and kissed her on the cheek. “You’re looking well, Henrietta.” His voice was soft and kind, as Sidney had ever been. “And this must be the heir apparent.” He shifted his gaze to the little man in her arms.

Henrietta tried turning Teddy a bit so that they could see him better. His big blue eyes were large as he looked around the unfamiliar place, his gaze locking on the golden chandelier above them, his fist firmly in his mouth now.

“Yes, here he is!” Henrietta beamed. “Would you like to hold him, Antonia?”

“Hold him? Heavens, no! I’m sure he needs changing and feeding and cleaning and who knows what else. Bridget here will take him up to the nursery until your servants can get unpacked.” With a nod of her head toward a maid standing at attention in the corner, the young woman hurried forward and gave a light curtsy.

“Oh, no; that won’t be necessary,” Henrietta said, though the girl seemed unsure if she was referring to the curtsy or taking the baby. She took a step back and looked confusedly at Antonia.

Henrietta slightly twisted her body away from the maid and gripped Teddy tighter. “Do you have us in our old wing?” she asked Antonia.

“Yes, I’ve had the east wing reopened for you and Clive, but little Montague will of course be up in the nursery on the third floor. You needn’t worry,” she said in response to Henrietta’s instant frown. “Nanny will see to him.” She gave Bridget another stern nod, and the young woman again approached.

Henrietta gritted her teeth. She had known it was going to be this way; she and Clive had discussed it ahead of time and had agreed that they would stand together against what was sure to be Antonia’s tyranny regarding the baby and any number of other things. But this was an easier proposition for Clive, who was used to standing up to his mother and seemed unaffected by any guilt she tried to lob on him. Henrietta, on the other hand, found it difficult to so easily dismiss her. Though she was now Lady Linley and the head of her own household in London,

not to mention an officer on the boards of many worthy London charities, she still quaked a little in front of her one-time nemesis.

But that wasn't exactly true, Henrietta admitted, letting out a little sigh. Antonia had never really been a *nemesis*, though she *had* made things a little difficult for her when Clive had introduced her as his intended. To be fair, Henrietta knew that Antonia had since accepted her, even loved her, but she could still be rather trying in certain circumstances. She was used to getting her own way.

"Well, since I'm still nursing him, Antonia," Henrietta announced, her chin jutting out just a little, "it has to be me who feeds him. I'm sure you'll understand that. And also why he needs to be in the east wing with us. You needn't worry," she said hurriedly, noting Antonia's already-open mouth of protest. "We can just have a cradle brought down from the nursery and placed in our room."

Antonia's face darkened. "Nursing him! Dear me!" She looked accusatorily at Clive, as if this were *his* fault. "How very antiquated! And you call *me* the one stuck in the past!" She glanced at Sidney for confirmation, but he just smiled wanly. "I'd have thought the two of you would be more modern in your approach. In my day, we employed a wet nurse. Didn't seem to hurt Clive or Julia one bit," she tsked. "Have you not thought to wean him? He's already seven months!"

Henrietta threw a weary glance at Clive, who responded immediately. "Mother, we're still quite tired from the journey. Let us go upstairs and get settled and changed and then we'll join you and Sidney for a drink in the drawing room."

"Capital idea, Clive," Sidney agreed. "Do take your time."

“Yes, all right,” Antonia said disapprovingly. “But I don’t expect you’ll get a minute of sleep.”

Bridget gave her mistress a final questioning look, and Antonia dismissed her with a quick tilt of her head. Silently, the young woman retreated. Henrietta shifted Teddy onto one hip and crossed the black-and-white checkerboard tiles of the foyer toward the grand staircase, which was also bedecked with evergreen roping looped through the cherry spindles.

“The house looks beautiful, Mother.” Clive kissed Antonia on the cheek and followed Henrietta up the stairs. “Oh, and Mother, we call him Teddy,” Clive called down over the railing.

“Teddy? Whatever for?”

“Well, Theodore *is* one of his names. The same, I might remind you, as your father’s.”

“Oh, Clive! But Teddy is so very common. If you must call him something, why not Monty?” she called up.

“We’ll be down shortly, Mother.”

Henrietta let out a little groan as they hurried down the upstairs hallway. Teddy was beginning to fuss now; he was surely hungry.

“Well, that went about as well as expected,” Clive said with a crimped grin as they passed various priceless portraits and landscapes that lined both walls. His father’s art collection was immense.

“Did it?” Henrietta asked wryly, shifting Teddy onto her shoulder now. He had started to cry. “I didn’t notice.”

“Darling, we knew it was going to be difficult. Give it time. And remember, it’s Christmas.”

“Funny. I was going to say the very same to you.”

“Oh? To what exactly are you referring?” Clive hurried ahead to open the large walnut pocket doors at the end of the hallway that marked the beginning of the east wing. “Please don’t tell me it’s regarding some imagined hurt toward Pascal. I can assure you, darling, he’s really more robust than you give him credit for.”

“I was referring, you rude thing, to your rather cool reception of poor Sidney,” she said over Teddy’s cries as she hurried through their private sitting room and on into her bedroom, which, of course, Clive shared, though he had his own on the other side of the wing.

Edna was already there, thankfully, unpacking the open cases strewn across the massive four-poster bed. She put down the gown she was holding. “Oh, there you are, miss! I was wondering when you’d get up here. I can’t believe he’s made it this long. Well past his feeding time.” Edna pulled a rocking chair out of the corner and took the now wailing Teddy while Henrietta shrugged out of her coat and let it drop onto the floor as she began to fumble with her buttons.

Clive cleared his throat. “I’ll see that Pascal brings the cradle down,” he said and quickly ducked back out of the room.

Henrietta sat down in the rocker near the fire and took Teddy back in her arms, arranging him at her breast until he latched on and began sucking hungrily. Clive, while trying to adopt modernity, still struggled with certain aspects of fatherhood, one of them being watching his son nurse, which he thought should be done in the strictest confines of privacy. Henrietta forgave him this peculiarity, knowing as she did that he was trying his hardest to be a good father. He made it a point, for example, to hold Teddy each day, which, he said, his father would never have dreamed of doing. Indeed, as loving as Alcott had been, in his own way, he had purportedly not touched Clive or Julia until they were fully two years old, claiming that he had been afraid he

would drop or damage them somehow in the process. Privately, Henrietta thought this a very weak excuse, but she had kept her opinion to herself and put it down to the staid Victorianism in which Alcott had been raised.

Henrietta brushed Teddy's plump cheek with her finger as he continued to suck and then looked back at Edna, who had resumed her unpacking.

"How are things below stairs, Edna? Everything okay? Lording it over them?"

Edna laughed a little but kept her eyes on her work. "Well, I wouldn't say that, miss, but I do enjoy outranking nearly everyone, except Mrs. Caldwell and Mr. Billings, of course, though, I suppose, as head of the house back in London, I'm on the same level as Mrs. Caldwell? Oh, who knows!" she said, tossing a pair of undergarments onto the bed. "I was offered a private room next to Mrs. Caldwell's, which is saying a lot, really, but I said no, I was needed upstairs. I'll take the room next door, shall I? I don't mind bunking with the little mister," she said, nodding at Teddy.

"Pascal won't be bothered?"

"Nah. It's not for very long. And anyway, it'll be like old times, eh?"

Henrietta watched the young woman as she removed more items from the cases and reflected at how confident Edna was now compared to when she had first met her—in this very house. Edna had been just a timid junior maid then, and Henrietta a somewhat unwelcome guest, who had more of a tendency to help Edna with her chores than to sit with Antonia in the morning room drinking tea and gossiping about the goings-on at her club.

Once Henrietta and Clive were married, Antonia, perhaps noting the closeness of the two young women, had promoted Edna to be Henrietta's personal lady's maid—a wedding gift, she had said. Henrietta had initially protested, saying that she was not in need of a personal maid, but

when she realized that as such, Edna's life would be much easier than it had been as a junior maid, she had reluctantly agreed. After their misadventures in Europe, however, Henrietta had seen fit to promote her once again—this time to head housekeeper, a position for which she, too, was much too young. But Henrietta didn't care; it was her house, and she delighted in the fact that she could do what she liked.

Both she and Clive had decided early on that they would try to operate their household with as few servants as possible, determined to do some of the work themselves, a vow that was proving a bit harder now that a lordship had been conferred upon Clive, which required, sadly, much more entertaining, not to mention travel. Up until now, however, they had managed in the London townhouse with only a shoestring staff, namely Edna, Pascal, a cook, and a chambermaid—Pascal at times doubling as a chauffeur and Edna as nanny. Edna seemed to truly love Teddy, and Pascal was proving to be as keen on luxury cars as Clive. And there were even times when the four of them sat down to play cards in the evening, a fact that would probably have caused poor Antonia, had she known, to faint.

“And how's Pascal getting on? Is Billings being kind?”

“Seems okay. Carter's a bit bent out of shape, seeing as he thinks *he's* Mr. Clive's valet. Wish I could tell the old bugger that Mr. Clive's never liked him, but that would be unkind, wouldn't it, miss?”

“A bit, yes.”

Carter had been Alcott's valet since he—Alcott, that is—was just sixteen years old, and had traversed the ocean with him when the young gentleman had bravely sailed across to marry the fabulously rich young debutante Antonia Hewitt, a girl he had never even met. Since Alcott's untimely death, Carter had assumed he would begin assisting the young master of the house,

though, technically, at thirty-eight, Clive wasn't exactly *young*, but Clive had refused to employ a valet. Until Pascal had come along, that is, but that had been a sort of accident and a much longer story.

Henrietta sat Teddy up on her lap and began rubbing his back in an attempt to burp him. He looked curiously around the darkened bedroom and smiled when he caught sight of Edna, who had begun playing peek-a-boo from behind one of Henrietta's skirts that she was in the process of folding.

"First Christmas for you!" She poked her head out from behind the skirt. "Wonder if Santa will come?" She popped out again, causing Teddy to gurgle with delight.

"Da da da da!" he cooed.

"Not 'Da-da,'" Edna said, tickling his wet chin. "Say 'Pa-pa!'"

Teddy gurgled again.

Henrietta gave him a little kiss on the head, breathing in the delicious smell of him. It still made her smile when she remembered the look of shock on Clive's face when she had first referred to him as "Papa," knowing as she did that he had assumed he would be addressed by Teddy and all subsequent children as "Father."

"Can you not be Papa until they are at least able to stand on two legs in short pants in front of you?" Henrietta had said with a little laugh and a kiss on Clive's cheek.

"Only if you are to be Mama," he had acquiesced with a smile.

Edna took Teddy. "Your Papa will be here in a moment. Which is why Mama needs to dress." She shifted Teddy onto her hip. "I've laid out the burgundy in the dressing room, miss. Do you need help?"

“No, take him through, though, would you, Edna? I’ll call you when I need buttoning. Or I’ll ring for someone.”

“Don’t you dare!” Edna darted into the adjoining room, Teddy still on her hip, a tendril of Edna’s hair gripped tightly in his little fist.

With a sigh, Henrietta rose. She was very tired, but she knew she had to get dressed for cocktails below. She wandered over to the Christmas tree, a miniature Scotch pine in the corner, decorated, she noticed ruefully, with all of the ornaments she had made last year—her and Clive’s first Christmas together. She fingered a tiny star she had cut out of paper. That seemed so long ago.

She let out a little groan at the memory of her gift to him, a wooden sign with *Howard Detective Agency* carved into it and painted in gold. How ridiculous! She was so innocent then. Those days were long gone, as was her idea for Clive to form a detective agency. They had much bigger responsibilities and cares now.

She heard Clive enter the room, but before she could turn, she felt his arms go around her from behind.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked gently, resting his chin between her neck and her shoulder. He must have already washed and changed, because the smell of his cologne was divine.

“Oh, I don’t know. That it was nice of your mother to have a tree put up for us, since I was so insistent about it last year. She even kept the ornaments I made. We just need to make a new popcorn string.”

“She can be kind when she wants to be.”

Henrietta turned to him. "I know. It's just . . . I somehow feel like nothing's changed, that I'm just little Henrietta Von Harmon, still trying to impress your mother."

Clive laughed out loud. "Don't let her get to you. She adores you. Especially now that you've produced an heir. *And* that you're Lady Linley. She can't wait to show you off at the club."

Henrietta sighed deeply. "Not the club. I don't think I can bear it. And, also, you make me sound like a breeding mare. I *am* capable of more than that, you know."

"Oh, don't I?" Clive said with a grin and kissed her.

Henrietta responded in kind, wrapping her arms behind his neck and fingering his hair. He was utterly handsome in his black-tie tuxedo. He had a few more gray hairs along his temples than when she had first met him, but she still found him supremely attractive. "What do you want for Christmas?" she asked huskily, finally breaking their kiss.

"You," he said, kissing her cheek and then her neck and then her chest.

"Be serious!" she laughed.

"I *am* serious. There's not a single thing I want." He rested his forehead against hers.

Henrietta allowed herself a few moments to stare into his warm hazel eyes. "I recognize that naughty look, Inspector, but we don't have time." She pulled away, but a seductive smile was still on her lips. "Come along." She tugged his lapels. "Duty calls."