

The Ravenwood Heir

It was close to half past five when there came a rapping at the door of the apartments I kept in Grosvenor Square. Although I sat in the small parlor that the entryway led to and could have easily seen who my guest was, I had a disparaging view of most of the persons who wished to call on me uninvited, especially so close to suppertime. Instead, I simply turned the page of the latest issue of *The Mysteries of London*, my absolute favorite penny dreadful (the reading of which I was sure would be considered beneath a lady of my station, but I had a penchant for the cheap twists and turns provided within) and ignored the noise.

The rapping repeated itself, more insistent and now paired with a voice declaring, "Lot! I know you're in there!"

There was only a single person who called me Lot, so I carefully dog eared my page, setting it on the mahogany side table next to the brocaded red chair I had situated myself in and slipped into the entryway, stepping past the coat rack to open the undecorated front door. As expected, the person on the other side was Mx. Ivy Claremont, who pushed past me into my dwelling without so much as a hello, gesticulating wildly with a newspaper clutched in their hand. Without bothering to stop, they let themselves into the parlor, tracking a small amount of mud onto the Persian carpet that I had recently had installed, an issue I made note to report to my housekeeper at the earliest convenience.

Despite all of this behavior, I was still pleased to see Mx. Claremont. We had met at a rather boring gala a few years back, and we had been close friends ever since, as I appreciated having someone else around with a healthy level of disrespect for the society we found ourselves in. Mx. Claremont was an American, so they tended to be overly rude, since most would brush it away as a characteristic of their birth nation. They were all of six and twenty years of age, a short height with hair that was choppy and pale red, often tucked under a paperboy's cap. They were dressed tonight like they usually were, wide legged trousers and a slightly wrinkled collared shirt under a pinstripe vest.

Shaking my head fondly, I shut the front door and followed my friend into my sitting room, taking my seat once more as they grinned at me, paper in hand.

“Lot, have you seen the evening paper?” they asked, despite the fact that the copy they now held was almost certainly the one that had been dropped on my doorstep about an hour ago.

“I’ll admit, I’m curious to see what is in it that would garner such a reaction from you, dear Ivy,” I replied. “Won’t you take a seat?”

“You’ve no sense of drama, Lot.” Instead of taking the offered seat, Mx. Claremont tracked a few more spots of mud past my cleanly carved coffee table to hold the paper up for me, unfurling it slowly until I could read the headline on the front page.

LORD RAVENWOOD HAD AN HEIR, SAYS FORMER HOUSEMAID

Despite my penchant for dramatics in stories, I tend to think of myself as much more levelheaded in real life. However, I am not too proud to admit that when I read those fateful words, I let out a very loud gasp.

I fear that there is not a person living that could tell you how the feud between the Ravenwoods and the di Martellis started, for there is not a generation of either family that can remember a time at which the feud did not exist. So-and-so Ravenwood did this, and so-and-so di Martelli retaliated as such, and so on and so on until you hit Lord Edgar Ravenwood and Marchesa Isobella di Martelli. The Marchesa had two daughters, Contessa Paloma di Martelli and Contessa Carlotta di Martelli (yours truly). Lord Ravenwood, however, notably never married, and as far as anyone had known he had never sired children either.

When he had passed away a month ago (gossip on the streets was that it was from syphilis), I endured the long train journey to my sister’s country estate and we toasted the end of the long feud, both of us grateful that it would never become our problem, that we would not have to repeat the petty squabbles of our forebears.

And now, this article. I had skimmed it quickly as soon as Mx. Claremont relinquished the paper to my hold, after far too many seconds of dramatic posturing on their part. I was shocked to realize that the claims made in the article actually held some water, the aforementioned housemaid was an older woman who claimed that years ago, Lord Ravenwood had conducted an affair with a young painter, commissioned to paint his portrait.

Months afterward, the young painter had shown up at the manor, baby in her arms. She begged Lord Ravenwood for money. Not money every month, not

an acknowledgement that the child was his. Just a single payment, to help her get on her feet. The bastard refused, predictably.

According to the housemaid, the child would now be three and twenty years of age. She couldn't remember the painter's name, but apparently she was a fair haired, waifish woman. This would be more helpful if fair haired, waifish women weren't one of the most common sights in all of London.

Technically, with the death of Lord Ravenwood, any stake my family had in the Ravenwoods died too. Even if this heir was found, they would not have been raised in the history of their inheritance, and therefore would have no reason to conduct a rivalry with our family. This I was certain of, although less certain that Paloma would agree, even less certain of Mamma's opinion.

Carefully, I folded the newspaper, placing it on my side table next to the penny dreadful I had been enjoying. There was something about the story that scratched an itch at the back of my mind, something almost familiar that I yearned to place. Seated across from me in the twin of my red brocade chair, leg folded up to their chest in a position that you would never see in polite company, Mx. Claremont beamed widely at me.

"What do you think?" they asked, the words tumbling out in a rush.

"I could believe it, certainly," I replied. "I wonder what you think my stake in the matter is, however."

"Don't play coy, Lot. Everyone knows the whole situation with your families. For Lord Ravenwood to have had an heir..."

"An heir not raised by him? Surely you don't think the rivalry is built on blood rather than upbringing." Mx. Claremont rolled their eyes. "Ivy, I am simply giving you the facts."

The clock chimed the hour on the mantelpiece, the sound echoing off the floral wallpaper and into the expectant silence of our conversation.

"I was hired by Ben Miller, the butler of the Ravenwood estate to find their heir. You should help me look for them."

"Why?"

Mx. Claremont was a private detective, a very successful one, to perhaps their social detriment. It was easy to tell whenever we attended the same events who was keeping secrets they wished to hide from the light of day, because those people would shy away from my friend, make excuses to leave conversations and to be in parts of the room where they would go unheard. Despite not being of a very high social class, Mx. Claremont's line of work meant that they had

connections to all sorts of people, made fast friends, and always seemed to know a bit more than they were supposed to. It was not unheard of that they would be hired to solve a puzzle such as this one, but it was unusual for them to request my assistance.

I had a sneaking suspicion that it had something to do with my current state of being rather withdrawn from society. After a rather embarrassing failed courtship with one Lady Sarah Kensington, I had thought it best to decline more invitations, instead staying in to read and practice my violin — I was greatly improved, if I said so myself. This wasn't to say I never left the house, I attended a select amount of gatherings in the past month and found them a little bit trite and boring. To be entirely candid, I didn't feel it was past Mx. Claremont to have orchestrated the entire affair out of a misguided desire to be a supportive friend.

Mx. Claremont shrugged in response to my inquiry. "Thought it'd be something fun to do. I've barely seen you in the past fortnight, and if you won't start attending more social gatherings, I will be forced to bring you along for my work. Besides, aren't you curious?"

"Not in the slightest," I replied. This was false. Of course I was curious, but with my pride so hurt by my friend's accusations, I was unwilling to admit to such.

Mx. Claremont huffed out a sigh, crossing their arms rather childishly. I picked my penny dreadful back up off the side table, signaling an end to this discussion.

"You're welcome to stay for dinner," I told Mx. Claremont.

No matter what, I wouldn't concede to them.

Two days later, the morning news ran a feature giving further details on the woman purported to be the mother of this heir. It explained how long the affair lasted, who else might have known that had conducted it, all those sort of trite details. I skimmed it but found it to not particularly hold my interest, so I was about to move on to the next article, which boasted a report of new discoveries in Artic exploration when a sentence caught my eye.

He gave her a family heirloom, an ornate silver necklace which featured three large sapphires and delicate leaves of silver.

The article went on to hypothesize that perhaps the painter had sold the necklace, and it could be traced back to her in that way. But that wasn't what interested me about it. Besides another twinge of familiarity, like this story may

be one I had heard before, there was something that I knew for certain. You see, the necklace being described here was a family heirloom, alright. Just not of the Ravenwood family. No, that was a di Martelli necklace, forged by an expert craftsman in Florence, a necklace that Mamma had been searching for these past thirty some-odd years. And if Lord Ravenwood had given it to his mistress...

A few hours later, I received a telegraph from my sister, all “You must recover the necklace,” and “Mamma must not learn about this,” and “Employ any means necessary.” Paloma had a flair for the dramatic that was entertaining when it wasn’t directed at you, and even now I could imagine her curled hair bouncing as she paced the floors of her house nervously, her poor husband trying and failing to keep her calm. Upon receiving her telegram, I let out a deep sigh and went to put on my cloak and walking boots, venturing first to the telegraph office to write her a simple reply (I HAVE IT HANDLED STOP PLEASE SEND NO FURTHER MESSAGES STOP) and then hailing a cab to take me the rest of the way to Mx. Claremont’s apartment.

As the cab traveled on and I considered how I would concede that I had all along been curious to Mx. Claremont without losing too much of my dignity, I watched the smoggy cityscape of London pass by. The pungent smell of filth and sewage permeated the cab, and I wrinkled my nose although I was quite accustomed to it. Outside, people bustled around. Newsboys calling out headlines, shopkeepers shouting out their wares, and the general low roar of conversation, all familiar sounds, flooded my ears. As we passed the tall, close-together buildings I let out a long sigh.

Mx. Claremont lived in quite a nice neighborhood, made affordable by their great success in their employment, but it was still rather far away from my own, so I endured the journey rather impatiently. Finally, we pulled to a stop before their apartment and I paid the cab driver, hurrying up the steps to ring Mx. Claremont’s doorbell.

“It’s open!” I heard them call from inside. Carefully, in case there was a stack of books and papers nearby as there so often was, I swung open the front door and let myself in.

Mx. Claremont’s apartment was cluttered, stacked high with mistreated volumes and loose leaf sheets of papers. The walls of the sitting room were almost entirely blocked out with glass cabinets, which were haphazardly decorated with trinkets and oddities, everything from a small porcelain rabbit to an ornate hunting knife to a dead cephalopod in a small jar of brine.

“Ivy!” I called out, certain that they were in one of the other rooms and not hiding behind their decorations. Sure enough, they responded with their own call of “Dining room!” and I carefully traversed the small paths of empty floor to

enter the dining room, where Mx. Claremont sat at the foot of their small table, paper in one hand and late breakfast of a hard-boiled egg in the other. Upon seeing me, they grinned widely, lightly shaking their paper.

“Not particularly curious, you said?” they teased, and I rolled my eyes gently in response, settling into the only other chair not occupied by what looked to be stacks of legal documents, old newspaper, and the occasional decorative paper doily. Folding my hands in my lap, I inclined my head at Mx. Claremont.

“I’m sure you’re thrilled to tell me what you have discovered these past few days, so. Go ahead,” I spoke, after a moment’s silence indicated that Mx. Claremont would be smug and reticent until I admitted to some extent that they had been correct. At least it seemed that attaching myself to this investigation would be simpler than I had previously thought.

“I’m calling on someone for tea this afternoon who I believe may be able to give me some information,” Mx. Claremont relented. “Am I to presume you will be joining me?”

“So you don’t know anything yet?”

“I never said that.”

“Yes. I shall be joining you.”

“Good.” Mx. Claremont leaned back in their seat, dusting a few bits of salt off of their fingers. “The housemaid’s name is Jane Wilson. Apparently, she worked for Lord Ravenwood up until his death and was paid very handsomely to keep quiet about the affair. However, she has some sense of duty towards the child and believes they deserve to know of their parentage. None of the other servants of the Ravenwood Estate know any more than she does, and it kind of seems like she was nominated to step forward with this in some kind of way. Lord Ravenwood was a very vain man, so he commissioned a lot of portraits, which means identifying the mother from art style is a long shot, since no one’s sure which one is hers. And lots of people have started coming forward to claim that they’re the Ravenwood heir, apparently the Times has been screening them since they’re all trying to talk to the reporter who wrote the articles.”

“Which reporter?”

“Samuel Lee. Pencil mustache, suits are always a little too large on him?”

I was aware of the man who Mx. Claremont spoke of. I didn’t particularly care for him, but I didn’t particularly care for anyone who wrote primarily for the gossip papers, since they had a tendency to spin things wildly out of proportion. Honestly, with this revelation I was rather surprised that the story

of the Ravenwood Heir was seemingly factual, according to Mx. Claremont's research. I said as much, and Mx. Claremont laughed.

"Mr. Lee's a better man than you take him for, Lot." They chewed pensively on a bit of toast. "What does your sister think about all of this?"

"She's beside herself with worry that it might get back to Mamma."

"Why?" Mx. Claremont leaned forward, eyes narrowing in curiosity. It was lucky that I didn't plan to keep the truth of the necklace from them, because they were like a dog with a bone when it came to secrets. It was impossible to keep anything hidden from them for very long.

"The necklace mentioned in the article is one of the di Martelli jewels. Lord Ravenwood must have purloined it from my mother many years ago."

"I see, so your curiosity lies with the jewel and not the child?"

I shrugged in acquiescence, although in truth my curiosity lay with the familiarity of the whole narrative. "Perhaps. Finding the mistress will with any luck find me the jewel, although I fear that it may mean your work shall end before mine in this particular case."

"Nonsense, if the jewel is what you seek, we shall see that endeavor through to the end as well." Mx. Claremont wiped their hands on their trousers and extended one to me to shake, a welcome gesture as I did not wish to get the residue of their breakfast on the lace gloves that I wore.

We shook hands, sealing the agreement that this mystery would be solved together, and Mx. Claremont reached into one of the teetering stacks and pulled out the latest volume of *The Mysteries of London*.

"To tide you over until teatime," they said.

Teatime found Mx. Claremont and I on High Street, standing in front of a rather plain storefront, the signage embossed with golden lettering.

Rhodes and Son Mechanisms

"Are we meeting with Rhodes or son?" I inquired, turning towards my companion. Curiously, I noted, they had removed their cap to comb through their hair and were checking their reflection in the glass of the window. Mx. Claremont didn't often care much about their appearance, so to see them trying to make themselves presentable to such a degree was rather strange.

“Son,” Mx. Claremont said, pulling away from their reflection. “Daedalus Rhodes was a dear friend of Lord Ravenwood who passed a few years before him. His son Icarus — ” Here I raised a brow, “ — I know, just don’t make any jokes to him about his name.”

“I would never,” I replied, which was a falsehood but not one Mx. Claremont needed to know about. They eyed me with suspicion regardless, then turned towards the door.

The shop bell dinged and we entered into a cramped space that was a stark contrast to the unadorned exterior. Everywhere the eye fell, there was a new mechanical wonder, mobiles whirring with small gears, music boxes with prim little metallic dancers, lights that blinked and twinkled like the stars. An entire shelf was covered in what looked like the most ornate puzzle boxes I had ever lain eyes upon, the type that one would gift to a friend if they held that friend’s intellect in high regard. There was even a complicated contraption that seemed to be dedicated to automating the process of brewing and serving tea, a system of pulleys and levers lifting a cracked teapot through the air as it splashed hot liquid into simple blue china teacups.

Behind a counter, bent over a mechanical toy elephant with a screwdriver in hand, was a tall black man, likely a few years my senior. His hair was cropped close to his skull, and he wore round glasses, which boasted a litany of smaller lenses to place in front of the eyes for a closer look at anything he worked on. His suit was modest, finely pressed although there was a smudge of oil on the collar that the canvas apron he wore hadn’t been able to protect from. As I took in the store with a bit of childish wonderment, Mx. Claremont approached the counter, rapping their knuckles lightly on the wooden surface a few inches front where the man whom I assumed was Mr. Rhodes worked. He jumped slightly, glancing up in annoyance which faded when he saw who exactly his guest was. This was not the reaction I was used to people having to Mx. Claremont, suffice to say. Usually they were a bringer of annoyance, not a balm against it. Perhaps this Mr. Rhodes and I had more in common than one would expect.

“Mx. Claremont. I wasn’t expecting you until teatime,” Mr. Rhodes said. In response, Mx. Claremont nodded towards a shelf of ticking clocks, which displayed the time as a quarter to four. Mr. Rhodes hummed curiously.

“Must have lost track of time,” he said, setting down the toy elephant and dusting off his hands. As he fiddled with something under the counter, the small sign hanging on the door flipped around, denoting the business as currently closed. Mr. Rhodes pulled off his apron and gestured to a small table next to the tea-pouring contraption. I now saw that in addition to a layer of scrap paper covered in a messy scrawl, the table also held a small selection of tea sandwiches and seed cake.

“Mr. Icarus Rhodes, may I present my dear friend the Contessa Carlotta di Martelli?” Mx. Claremont said. Mr. Rhodes blinked at me like he was just now realizing there was a third person in the shop.

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Rhodes,” I said, extending a hand in greeting, allowing the mask I usually wore in the company of strangers come up, the poised and proper Contessa rather than the more casual version of myself I would let myself be in the seclusion of my own home. Mr. Rhodes shook my hand, his grip relatively firm but his expression still unsure.

“The Contessa is assisting me in my investigation,” Mx. Claremont explained, taking a seat at the small table. “I apologize for not telegramming, but I hoped you would not mind telling both of us what you know about the Ravenwood heir?”

“Certainly,” Mr. Rhodes agreed. “My apologies, Contessa. I was not entirely prepared to be attending extra company.” And indeed, I saw now that the table was only set for two. Mr. Rhodes gave me an awkward smile, gamely glancing around the shop to see if there were any other chairs empty of detritus (there weren’t).

“No matter,” I replied, feeling an awful intruder. “I am content to stand. Although I see your contraption there has poured more than two cups of tea. Might I trouble you for one of those?”

Mr. Rhodes agreed quickly, likely happy to do something that made him seem more welcoming to me and a cup of tea was placed in my hands as I took a spot behind Mx. Claremont, who leaned forward anticipatorily.

“So. You said your father was close with the late Lord Ravenwood?” they asked. Mr. Rhodes nodded.

“Lord Ravenwood was a very paranoid man, and through the course of his life, he hired my father regularly to add hidden passageways and rooms to his manor. Throughout this process, Lord Ravenwood grew to trust my father. Perhaps more than he trusted most anyone.”

“And did your father ever mention Lord Ravenwood having had a child?”

Mr. Rhodes shook his head. “No. My father was a very private man. I believe he held a sort of pleasure in keeping things from me.”

He paused, and Mx. Claremont raised a brow, gesturing for him to continue speaking. Mr. Rhodes took a long sip of tea, clearing considering.

“I saw the child once,” he finally said.

“When they were brought to Lord Ravenwood?” Mx. Claremont asked.

“Yes. My father used to bring me along with him to his on-site architecture work when I was a child. He hoped to instill a love for the work in me from a very young age. During one of these visits, a woman came by to see Lord Ravenwood, with a baby which she said he was the father to.”

“Any details you could give?”

“She was a blonde white woman, with dark eyes. Dressed...I think more working class. I believe the assumption is that she was quite poor, but I don’t know that I believe that.”

“And the child?”

“Unfortunately, I can’t really help you find the child based on description. Most infants look the exact same to me.”

“Did the woman give a name?” I interjected. Mr. Rhodes glanced up at me, as if once again remembering my presence.

“If she did, I can’t recall it. I followed her outside after Lord Ravenwood kicked her out and gave her an apple I had been saving for later. A child’s idea of charity, I suppose.”

Curious. At Mr. Rhodes’ words, that little itch at the back of my mind began once more, the feeling that this was a story I had heard before. Perhaps it was simply the emotion behind the described gesture, surely the type of thing that would have been used to tug at heartstrings if this had been a Penny Dreadful.

“I’m sorry I can’t be of more assistance,” Mr. Rhodes was telling Mx. Claremont, as he stood, reaching for something on one of the shelves with a remorseful look upon his face.

As I waited to hear how my friend would respond, the shop’s bell dinged, and all three of us turned to see who was interrupting this gathering.

The woman who had just stepped in the door was of average height, white with muted blonde hair and pale grey eyes. She dressed in the simple blouse and skirt of someone who made a modest living, and her hair was pulled back from her face in curls. She held in her hand a familiar volume, one of the *Mysteries of London* issues that I was so fond of. Upon sighting the three of us around the tea table, her mouth formed a perfect little O of surprise.

“Icarus, I’m so sorry! I didn’t realize you were entertaining company!” she said, her voice high and clear.

“No worries, we were just leaving,” Mx. Claremont said, a little coldly. Strange. I gave them a curious look as they stood, but they avoided catching my eye.

“Mx. Ivy Claremont, Contessa Carlotta di Martelli — may I present Miss Alice Holmes?” Mr. Rhodes said, gesturing to the woman who gave a polite little wave. “Miss Holmes, I was just telling Mx. Claremont and the Contessa about my encounter with the Ravenwood heir. Mx. Claremont is investigating the case.”

“I would prefer your subtlety on this matter, Mr. Rhodes,” Mx. Claremont said loudly, a glare of annoyance crossing their features. Mr. Rhodes gave a apologetic smile to them, muttering his apologies, but Miss Holmes gave a wide-eyed look.

“Oh!” she said. “Please don’t worry, I shan’t tell anyone. It’s all so mysterious, like something right out of a Penny Dreadful. I would never want to spoil that.”

“You would know,” Mr. Rhodes said, and that was all the encouragement I needed to voice my theory.

“You write for *The Mysteries of London*,” I said. “Alice Holmes, I’ve seen that name in bylines.”

Miss Holmes flushed prettily, and nodded. “I do, yes.”

“I loved the story you penned in last month’s edition, *The Hangman’s Love*. I hung on every word, and the ending was so unexpected.”

“I appreciate you saying so, Contessa. Actually, I have a story in the latest issue, that’s what I was bringing — Mr. Rhodes.”

“Well, I shall have to pick up a copy.”

Miss Holmes giggled, and Mx. Claremont sharply ground their heel into the toe of my shoe.

“The Contessa and I must be going,” they announced. “Thank you for the tea and the information, Mr. Rhodes.”

“If I can recall anything else, I shall send you a telegram,” Mr. Rhodes said. “And please. Stop by the shop anytime.”

Mx. Claremont smiled at this, a little catlike. “Perhaps I shall.”

I quickly exchanged pleasantries with Mr. Rhodes and Miss Holmes as Mx. Claremont dragged me from the shop, back out onto the high street.

“What, pray tell, is your issue?” I hissed at them, as soon as we were far away enough from the shop that its inhabitants could no longer hear the argument I was sure we were about to have.

“We had overstayed our welcome. Why were you bothering that poor Miss Holmes with your flattery?”

“I doubt she was bothered. Most people enjoy compliments on their work.”

“Most people with nothing to hide don’t signal a friend outside to interrupt their conversation with a detective.”

“Are you implying —”

“Those two know more than they’re letting on.”

“Then wouldn’t it be good for me to get in Miss Holmes’ good graces?”

“Sure, Lot. Unless she’s willing to take drastic measures to keep her secrets secret. You’re not experienced in the field, and you’ve always had a weakness for pretty women.”

“Oh, please. Don’t think I didn’t notice you laying the charm on thick with Mr. Rhodes. I’m not the only one here finding suspicious people prettier than it might be safe to.”

“I do not —” Mx. Claremont cut themselves off angrily, huffing out a sigh. Unbuttoning their left shirtsleeve, they rolled it up and brandished the small, circular scar on their forearm.

“How’d I get this?” they asked, as if I hadn’t heard the story hundreds of times, as if they didn’t absolutely adore showing off their scars like it was the town’s most fascinating gossip column.

“You were shot, but —”

Mx. Claremont reached for the neckline of their shirt, before thinking better of doing that out on the street.

“And on my collarbone?”

“Knife scar, you were stabbed —”

“Right leg?”

“Rebar! Is there a point to all this?”

“The point is that this job is dangerous, Carlotta. The point is that I don’t want anything bad happening to you. The point is that it very well could!”

“Well, who asked me to help with this? Why did you invite me on this job if you didn’t want me here?”

“I never said —” Mx. Claremont cut themselves off, pinching the bridge of their nose. “I shouldn’t have brought you along today. I wanted your help with society gossip, no one will tell me anything on that front anymore. I just...got excited that you actually wanted to assist.”

“You don’t think I’m up to the task? Of questioning people?”

“I don’t want you in danger.”

“Or interfering with your love life?” It was a rude thing to say, I knew that, especially because Mx. Claremont was a professional who wouldn’t have let a silly thing like feelings get in their way. But maybe I was angry that it could be true and my dearest friend could be keeping their personal life from me. And it seemed I had touched a nerve, as Mx. Claremont scoffed.

“I have been acquainted with Icarus Rhodes for about a month, and I have greatly enjoyed this acquaintance but I am able to separate my work from my personal life.” My friend stormed forward, knocking angrily on the door of a nearby cab to acquire transport home, but I was coming to a realization and didn’t follow immediately.

“Is Mr. Rhodes the handsome gentleman you met at Duchess Mowbray’s garden party? That’s the man you’ve been talking about?”

“It doesn’t matter!”

Catching up to my friend, I stepped into the cab, reaching a hand down to them. “Of course it matters.” Mx. Claremont pushed their own way into the cab, refusing my hand and crossing their arms in annoyance as they gave their address to the cab driver. While the cab began to move and we sat without speaking, I started to feel guilty for my part in our argument, knowing that Mx. Claremont was much more sensitive than they tended to let on. Perhaps I was being too pushy. After all, they were very generous to be bringing me along on their work, especially since it seemed like people weren’t really supposed to know about this assignment.

“He is that man,” they said, after a few more moments of irritated silence.

“Don’t blow this out of proportion, Lot.”

“I shan’t. But there’s no shame in letting a pretty face turn your head.”

“You would say that.”

“Listen. We’re working together. I’ll watch your back, and you watch mine, and then we can find as many people pretty as we wish.”

I put out my hand for Mx. Claremont to shake, and after a disbelieving snort, they took it, sealing the agreement.

“I’m holding you to that,” they said.

“I don’t doubt it. Now, please, Ivy. I must hear more about your acquaintance with Mr. Rhodes.”

The next opportunity I had to help Mx. Claremont with the case was a few days later. In the interim, I had allowed myself some time to reflect, but came no closer to puzzling out what felt so familiar about the situation as a whole. It was frustrating, but couldn’t be helped, I supposed. In the next *Mysteries of London*, I searched for Miss Holmes’ byline and quickly found a heart-pounding tale of vampiric brothers, doomed to be each other’s destruction. I contemplated going to find her but settled on sending a praise-filled letter to the editor, in the hopes it would make its way to her.

I fielded another telegram or two from Paloma, who was still desperate to see that I recovered the mentioned necklace from the mysterious heir. Used to my sister’s hysterics, I reassured her that it would be settled before long. The more difficult questions to field were people I knew from parties, luncheons, and the rare times I went out and about in town. It seemed every person I had ever encountered had deigned to crawl out of the woodwork and inquire as to how I felt about the Ravenwood heir.

To those who I was mere acquaintances with, I performed the practiced disregard I gave to any society gossip, although usually this behavior was so people would feel unworried talking freely in front of me since they were under the impression I didn’t care. This was useful when it came to hearing and staying up to date with everything going on around me, which I actually did care a good deal about. Those visitors left disappointed, but unsurprised — after all, they knew the Contessa Carlotta di Martelli considered herself above all that.

To those I was friendly with, I showed a bit more of my hand. Of course I was curious about the heir, who wouldn’t be? But whoever they were, they were a Ravenwood in blood only. I was curious no more than the average person, for as far as I was concerned, the Ravenwood line and our families’ feud was ended whether or not the heir was found. This was again, believable to those who heard it, even if it wasn’t the drama they were wishing to find upon their visit to my apartments.

There was a single person that I told anything in the neighborhood of the full truth, and this was Lord Ambrose Haskell, the brother of Paloma’s husband. He

was a pleasant man, one and twenty with a inquisitive mind. He studied law at Oxford and luck at whatever gambling halls would still let him in. There was many a young person in society who was head over heels for him but he had rejected all offers. As a fellow unmarried and uninterested (at least for now) younger sibling, I felt a sort of kinship with him. Also, he was the only one of my uninvited guests whose information could possibly make it back to Paloma, so perhaps I had some ulterior motives for being more honest.

Lord Haskell swanned by at teatime on Thursday, with a rather fetching new hat to hang upon the hat rack in my entryway. After we settled in the parlor with sponge cake and a pleasant earl grey, Lord Haskell leaned towards me as if to exchange secrets, despite the fact that we were alone in the room.

“So. You must have something to say about the whole Ravenwood heir business. My brother informs me that your dear neurotic sister is in a complete tizzy over it,” he said.

“Yes, well. Paloma will take any opportunity to work herself into a tizzy.” I took a slow, deliberate sip of my tea, watching Lord Haskell’s expression grow impatient. “Don’t you think it all feels a bit...strange, though?”

“Doesn’t it just? Like something right out of those sensationalist little booklets you have such an affinity for.” Lord Haskell leaned back, seemingly having gotten what he wanted to hear out of me. “You know, I’ve heard rumors that the case is being professionally investigated. Would your Mx. Claremont know anything about that?”

“Perhaps. But if they were to say anything, it wouldn’t make them a very good private investigator, would it now?”

Lord Haskell laughed. “Fair enough. Am I to assume you’re doing your own personal investigation, then?”

“Assume what you’d like. But if you hear anything...”

“My dear Carlotta! If I hear anything I shall rush to your side to deliver the news. No power of heaven or earth could stop me.” Lord Haskell pressed a hand to his heart, swooning dramatically. I grinned, rolling my eyes.

“You know, I hear the mother was from a working class family originally. Not the destitute artist everyone is currently assuming.”

“Well, that is good information indeed! I hope you have the chance to collect more soon.”

I would have the chance, but unfortunately, it concerned some relations of the Lord Ravenwood that I despised rather more than I had ever held any distaste

for the man himself. Lady Edith Copeland and her son Lord Simon were everything that I hated about society in London, two snobbish aristocrats who believed that everyone should venerate them simply because of the blood they had been born with. Lady Edith fancied herself a trendsetter when it came to fashion, sporting the most garish patterns and gaudy hats she could force some poor seamstress to assemble for her. She herself was even louder than her clothes, letting her more often than not trite and cruel opinion be known to whatever poor souls were within fifty feet of her. Lord Copeland was the type of man who believed that being a prolific hunter would make up for the unfortunate combed-over hair and rotten breath that put off most every potential match he might encounter. Both of them, in my opinion, could benefit from a swift kick to the pants.

However, they were important people to speak to about the case, as Lord Simon was poised to inherit the entirety of Lord Ravenwood's estate if the heir did not make himself known. Therefore, he and his mother had a vested interest in keeping information about the heir secret. This meant that throwing a public ball at their townhouse was a truly unintelligent idea, especially when it involved sending an invitation to yours truly, who RSVP'd with a plus one who was rather excited to spend the event riffling through the various potential hiding spots of the house for anything that might point to the Copelands knowing more than they were letting on about the heir.

To be clear, when the invitation first arrived, I was of half a mind to toss it in the garbage and be done with it. After all, I was still a little steamed from my argument with Mx. Claremont, and partially worried they were right. I was a curious woman, with no actual skill as a private investigator. I was likely throwing myself deep into danger by pursuing any of this, especially when it included snooping around at the house of a gun obsessed jerk like Lord Copeland. And they were odious people, and after all, what business did I have looking into this just because it sounded oh so familiar?

But then, before I could toss the invitation and wash my hands of the whole affair, I recalled the secondary reason I was involved in the first place. True, I didn't care about the necklace half as much as my sister (and my mama, upon the unfortunate event she cracked open a newspaper long enough to discover this scandal). But I cared what my family thought of me. And right now? It wasn't much. Paloma disapproved of my lifestyle, she felt I never took anything seriously. After all, I wasn't settled, I didn't have great aspirations, I lived in a city apartment and devoted my time to reading. And my mama, although very much a woman with her head in the clouds believed I wasn't "fulfilling my potential" whatever that meant in her mind, likely something to do with interpreting dreams. She didn't think I was happy, surely, but what did she know?

If I could retrieve the necklace, Paloma would likely have all good things to say about me for once, since being responsible and helping my family wasn't exactly something she could criticize. And my mama would be thrilled to regain a family heirloom, especially one with this history. It would be a thrilling story for her to tell, and one starring her daughter. Perhaps my natural curiosity couldn't carry me far enough to attend this party. But the potential to finally impress my family? That might carry me just a little further.

And so it was I found myself exiting a cab outside the Copeland house on Friday evening, dressed in a olive green gown, very simple compared to what Lady Edith and her sycophants would be wearing. Beside me, Mx. Claremont had cleaned up well, sporting a navy suit and slicked back hair.

"Ready to face the wolves?" they asked me.

"You better find something worth me facing them," I replied, linking my arm with theirs.