

The Meeting

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The Meeting

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In the quiet, empty streets of London, the carriage sat outside the townhouse, as it had for...well, Cara knew not how long, but at the very least, knew it had been a good deal of time. Not that it mattered *how* much time had passed. There were more important matters to attend. She peeled the curtain back ever so faintly and peaked out the window then gulped and let it fall promptly into place.

“Er, you do realize we’ve been sitting here for almost fifteen minutes, love?”

“Hmm?” She swung her attention up to her husband who occupied the seat beside her on the bench. He was saying something. What was he saying? She tried to order her muddled thoughts. Cara swallowed hard and stole another look outside at the front façade of the Marquess of Waverly’s townhouse. Anxiety roiled through her. Then, it was not every day a lady went to make amends with the half-sister she’d so wronged in life. William settled his hand over hers and she took undeserved strength from that offering. “She hates me.”

“Perhaps,” he said with an honest directness she appreciated. “But you will hate yourself more if you do not attempt to make amends.”

Cara caught her lower lip and stared at the red velvet curtain covering the carriage window. Yes, her husband was indeed, correct. If she did not meet her sister and ask for her pardon, she’d not forgive herself, and yet... This was about something so much more than her own eased conscience.

This was about...two sisters who’d been shaped by their own experiences as the Duke of Ravenscourt’s unfortunate daughters, a bond that no one but those wronged children might understand. The woman she’d been at one time would have scoffed at the very idea of asking forgiveness of a woman who, through her efforts, had lost her position. But William was correct. She’d been changed. By him. By their time at the Fox and Hare Inn. And more, because love had flooded her life.

Aware of her husband’s gaze on her, she gave a slight nod and then drew in a breath. “It is time,” she said softly.

He quickly rapped on the carriage door and the driver pulled it open.

Her husband leapt to the ground and then held a hand up to assist her down. Cara’s gaze crept up the length of the townhouse and unease churned within her. *What if she does not wish to see me?* Then, why should she wish to? As all the doubts and indecision paraded through her mind, the wind pulled at her cloak. She touched the pendant about her neck for strength. “I am ready.”

William slid his fingers into hers and gave her hand a slight, reassuring squeeze. They reached the front door of the marquess’ townhouse and as though he feared she’d change her mind, William knocked once.

“What if she does not wish to see me?” the question slipped from her lips, followed by a stream of inquiries she could not hold back. “What if she has words of hate and loathing? What if she tells me she doesn’t care to ever speak to me again?”

“Then you will know.” He applied gentle pressure to her fingers once more. “I am here, Cara mia. You aren’t alone.”

With the surety of his love, her fear receded and she gave a nod. Cara let her breath out on a slow exhale as her unease faded. “I am ready,” she said softly. “As long as you are beside me.”

William raised her knuckles to his lips. “Always,” he pledged. “I will always be beside you.” Cara smiled up at him.

For the first time, she was not alone.

The door opened, and she swung her attention to the liveried butler at the entrance. “May I help you?” She opened her mouth, but no words came out. Wetting her lips, she tried again. It wasn’t every day that a woman came to plead forgiveness for the ugliest act of her life.

William handed over a card. “The Marquess and Marchioness of Grafton to see the Marchioness of Waverly.”

For a sliver of a moment, she believed this servant knew the ugliness in her soul that had seen his mistress thrown into the street, and for an even larger sliver, she prayed he did, and that he’d send her packing so then she’d not have to face her sister. If the man did know her crimes, he gave no indication.

“Please tell her that her sister, Lady Clarisse, has come to call,” her husband said quietly.

The servant flared his eyes, but otherwise he gave no indication of disdain or disgust for the person before him. He accepted the card, and motioned them into the foyer. “I will see whether Her Ladyship is receiving visitors.” With quick strides, the man turned on his heel and started down the hall.

Tension thrummed inside her. Since the day she’d learned of her sister’s existence, she’d despised her. The young woman, not many years older than herself had served as a reminder of the ugly, unloving bastard of a father who’d broken her mother’s heart, and...shattered her own girlish dreams of what a father was and should be. Just as she’d hated her brother for being a remote, cold figure so very removed from her life. She’d wanted the reminder of neither of them; for what they represented. In her resentment of Jane and Cedric, she’d fostered years of bitterness that had destroyed the fabric of the hopeful, happy girl she’d once been. With that hatred that had caused her to so cruelly lash out, and cost her sister her employment, what right did she have to be here even now? *I cannot do this... I cannot—*

William slid his fingers into hers once more, and squeezed, restoring her courage. “Mayhap she won’t see me, after all?” she cast a hopeful glance up at her husband.

He gave a wry grin. “From the day I met you Cara, you were everything bold and proud and courageous.”

She sighed. In short, she was no coward.

In, truth. She was. She really didn’t wish to be here, now that she was.

Alas—

Mayhap Jane wouldn’t see her, after all.

Jane thought she’d heard her butler correctly. But seated on the leather button sofa in her husband’s office, she’d been attending the latest resumes of potential instructors for her finishing school, and so she hadn’t been truly attending him when he’d appeared in the doorway and yet it had sounded very much as though he’d said—

“Who?” Gabriel blurted from the spot he occupied behind his desk. His befuddlement creased his brow.

The butler, Joseph, shifted on his feet. “The Marquess and Marchioness of Grafton, my lord.” He held out the silver tray and she glanced down at the card on it. “And the gentleman insists that the lady is in fact Her Ladyship’s *sister*.”

The papers slipped from her fingers and sailed to the floor with a quiet thwack. Yes, she’d correctly heard the servant, after all. She opened and closed her mouth several times. Her sister. Lady Clarisse Falcot. Or it would seem the lady now found herself a marchioness, as well. Regardless of title or rank, Lady Clarisse remained the woman who’d seen her tossed out on her ear, and had brought about Jane’s desperate flight to London...and into her now-husband’s household. But still the terror of those uncertain moments stirred in her belly and she momentarily closed her eyes.

“What in blazes does she want?” Gabriel bit out, coming to his feet.

Joseph cleared his throat. “I am sure I do not know. I did not present questions.”

Husband and wife exchanged a look, and she shook her head. What could that woman want? Wholly merciless in sending her away, had she learned of Jane’s rise in position, and taken umbrage to her presence amongst London society?

“Tell her to go,” Gabriel called out in clipped tones. “Inform her that Her Ladyship is not receiving visitors.”

Joseph nodded, and turned to go.

“Wait!” Jane cried, climbing to her feet. For the better part of her life, she’d been battling the demons of her past; the mother who’d forsaken all for a ruthless duke; for acceptance among a world of which she’d never wholly belong.

“Jane?” her husband said questioningly.

She smoothed her palms along her skirt. “Show Her Ladyship to the Blue Parlor. We will be along shortly.” The older servant nodded, and hurried from the room.

With Joseph gone, Jane looked to Gabriel. “I have to see her,” she said quietly. “I’ll not hide from my past,” including the woman who’d seen her sacked with nowhere to go. “I’ll hear what she has come to say.” And stand proud in the face of her icy coldness.

Gabriel stared at her a long moment, and then with a curse, he started over. “I will throw her on her bloody arse if she dares insult you.”

As they made their way from the room, and down the corridor to the Blue Parlor, her heart warmed at Gabriel’s loving support and the icy chill that had invaded her veins since Joseph’s announcement had gone. How long had she been alone? Now, she had her husband at her side...and through him, and his siblings, additional family. A family who’d been kinder, more loving than the woman now waiting who shared her blood. They reached the parlor, and squaring her shoulders, Jane stepped inside ahead of her husband.

Smoothing her features into a cool mask, she immediately located her sister with her gaze.

The young woman, a model of flawless English beauty sat perched on the edge of a sofa, beside a tall, handsome gentleman with tanned features. He rose in one fluid movement and sketched a bow. “My lady.” He inclined his head to a coolly laconic Gabriel, who offered a barely polite bow in return.

Clarisse, popped to her feet. “Cara,” she blurted.

Jane cocked her head.

“Please, call me Cara,” she repeated, ringing her hands together.

Taking in that slight, telling gesture that hinted at the woman’s unease, Jane frowned. Never once had the girl demonstrated anything less than regal poise and calm. What accounted for that change?

Cara followed her gaze to her interlocked fingers, and swiftly dropped her arms to her side. She darted a gaze over to Gabriel and then dropped her stare to the tips of her slippers. The muscles of the young woman's throat worked. The man at her side, slipped his hand into the young lady's, in a quiet, unspoken show of support, and she lifted her head, meeting Jane's gaze once more. "I expect you wonder why I've come," she said, her voice whisper soft...so at odds with the sharp-toned lady who'd made her teaching days at Mrs. Belden's a veritable hell.

Jane hesitated; the part of her that had been the tortured terrified woman on her own wanted to lash out at her. But if she did that, she would, with that coldness descend to a level of which Cara had dwelled. "Won't you please sit?" she said stiffly, motioning to the previous seats the couple had vacated.

The young marquess and marchioness seated, Jane, and Gabriel claimed chairs directly opposite the pair.

A long pall of silence descended over the room. Cara devoted her attention to her lap a moment and then looked to Jane. "I of course have no right to be here. I expect you wish to throw me out."

Yes, actually she did. Or she had, when she'd entered this room. Now, she sought to make sense of this...seeming transformation. A creature once icier than a winter freeze, now before her...hesitant; with eyes glinting with more emotion than she'd ever believed the girl capable of. "Why do you not say what it is that has brought you here," she said quietly.

The young woman was brave. For despite Jane and Gabriel's chilly reception, she squared her shoulder and continued. "What I did to you," her husband covered her hand and Cara looked down at their joined hands. Did she find comfort in that solidarity the way Jane did her own husband? The lady drew in a slow breath. "What I did to you is unpardonable. It was an act born of meanness and hatred, when you were never the one deserving of my hatred." Tears glimmered in the young woman's eyes, and she averted her gaze. Proud as she'd always been, did she now see those drops as signs of weakness? "I allowed my feelings for my father and his treatment of me and my mother to affect how I treated you, and for that I am so very sorry."

Jane's heart pulled. How odd to find this woman she'd spent months resenting, was in fact, a person she could so dearly connect with. She'd spent years despising all noblemen, believing them all possessed of the same treachery and ruthlessness. Gabriel had proven the lie in that.

Cara ran her palms along her skirts once again. "I do not expect your forgiveness, but I do come to you, and offer my deepest regret for how I treated you." She looked up at her husband, and he favored her with a gentle smile, so full of pride and love, that Jane's heart tugged again.

Her sister had found love. It had transformed her. Not unlike Jane's life had been forever altered by Gabriel. "What you did was horrid, and I hated you for that act," she said, and the young woman's smile died. "But we are shaped by our circumstances, are we not, Cara? You are clearly not the same woman you were, and I..." She looked to Gabriel, who sat stiffly in his King Louis XIV chair; tension dripping from his stiffly held person. "well, I am not the same woman I was. But because of what you did that day," Cara stiffened. "I met my husband. And I would have never if it hadn't been for your unkindness that day. Though your act was born of a place of hate and meanness, good came of it. And I believe we must focus on the good that exists, because that is far more important, far more beautiful than all the ugly, hate." Jane leaned forward, and stretched her hand across the rose-inlaid table between them.

Cara glanced at her fingers, and then placed her smaller, gloved hand in her own.

"Thank you," Cara whispered.

"Do not thank me." Jane gave her a slow, tremulous smile. "We are, after all, sisters."

If you enjoyed Cara and Jane's meeting, be looking for "The Lure of a Rake", where Cara and Jane's brother, the notorious rake, Cedric Falcot, the Marquess of St. Albans meets his match!

"The Lure of a Rake" is NOW available!