



A  
BEAUTIFUL  
DISGUISE

THE IMPOSTORS . 1

ROSEANNA M. WHITE

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THE IMPOSTERS

*A Beautiful Disguise*

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ROSEANNA M. WHITE



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*To the ladies of Patrons & Peers  
for the unending encouragement  
and support you provide.  
This one's for you, girls!*



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# ONE

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April 1909  
London, England

She narrow stone ledge beneath her bare toes, cold and sturdy, felt like bliss after three hours of wearing shoes that pinched. Lady Marigold Fairfax might have wiggled her toes in ecstasy if that wouldn't have meant losing her purchase and sending herself plummeting eighty feet down to the street below. No, better to keep her toe wiggles mental. She smiled into the building's façade, moved her fingers to the next hold between stone blocks, and scurried along the ledge toward the corner.

Yates was already there, leaping like a mountain goat to where the ledge continued on the adjacent wall. He glanced at her, the moonlight catching the brows he lifted in challenge. *What's taking you so long?* those arches said.

She stuck her tongue out at her brother and picked up her pace. The wind kicked up just as she was preparing for her own stretch between walls, which sent a shiver coursing through her. But it didn't hinder her confident transfer, nor slow her as she hurried straight into its chilly teeth. Her

leotard didn't provide much by way of insulation, but adrenaline warmed her from the inside out.

Yates held up for her at the next corner, just as planned. They navigated around that exposed corner together and then paused, now directly below the window they needed to access. Scaling the wall wouldn't have been a problem had the stone blocks of the other walls continued onto this one, but some genius had decided to go for a smoother look here, eliminating all the fingerholds and toeholds.

Tilting her head back, Marigold took in the window a floor above them. Soft light glowed from the panes, which meant the curtains were open. Not ideal, as they had to avoid crossing in front of the glass, but it was what they had planned for. This high up, and with no building of the same height nearby, the occupants wouldn't be expecting anyone to be able to see into the chamber.

More fools, them.

Marigold executed a quick about-face, putting the wall at her back, as her brother did the same.

"Ready?" Yates's whisper reached her ears even as his hands curled around her waist.

"Ready." She braced her hands on his wrists and coiled her muscles. They bounced together thrice to match rhythms, then he lifted as she jumped. Over, up, her feet finding their familiar places on his shoulders. Once she straightened her knees, arms held out for balance, they did another, slower about-face, putting the wall before them again.

Yates raised his arms, palms flat, and she stepped onto them, gripping the wall with her own palms as he raised his arms inch by inch, lifting her ever closer to the next ledge. After ten seconds that she knew were easier for her than for him—she could feel the quivering of his arms through her

feet—her fingers found the ledge. “Got it!” she whispered downward.

Another three bounces, and he gave her a good push—the momentum she needed to swing her body along the wall like a pendulum, hooking both knee and elbow on that other ledge.

Her silk stocking caught on the rough stone, the sound of it making her wince. That was the third pair this month. At this rate, she was going to have to increase her stocking budget. And from where would she borrow the funds? Her feather budget, perhaps. She would just have to make do with more peacock and ostrich feathers and forgo the ones they didn’t raise themselves. Or perhaps she could bring lion’s mane into vogue, if she could convince old Leonidas to give up a tuft or two of his proud beard.

Marigold grinned as she pulled herself fully onto the ledge and edged her way slowly to the window.

Not only were the curtains open, but the window itself was also cracked a bit too. Excellent. That meant that the voices of those within made their way to her ears without her needing to get any closer.

“I say, Adams, you know that’s not the case.”

Marigold closed her eyes to better recall the notes she’d studied earlier that evening. The likely players in the room were Lord Adams, Mr. Dormer, and the Swedish ambassador. She’d never heard any of them speak before, except Lord Adams, but the voice sounded far too British for it to belong to the Swede. Probably Mr. Dormer, then.

“Do I?” Lord Adams, no question. His distinctive whine set her teeth on edge. “I would put nothing past him, Dorm.”

Rather typical of him.



FROM THE DOSSIER OF  
*Lord Thomas Adams, baron*

HEIGHT: 5'5"

WEIGHT: 13 stone

AGE: 57

HAIR: *Very little to speak of, and no doubt less still by the time anyone reviews these notes*

EYES: *Brown (and bespectacled)*

STYLE: *None Old-fashioned*

PRIMARY RESIDENCE: *Mayfair*

OBSERVANCES: *Lord Adams is a ninny man given to cowardice and suspicion. He is always quick to assume everyone is against him, no matter the circumstances. Despite that, he has a keen mind for business and has been ahead of his competitors and peers in investing in advances such as electricity and automobiles.*

IMPRESSIONS: *If one can avoid his company and simply follow his investment advice, one will be a happy man (or WOMAN, thank you).*

NOTES: *Bought stock in the company I overheard him giving instructions to his broker about. Have already doubled my investment. Must make it a point to listen in on his conversations whenever time permits. At this rate, we could undo Father's damage in a decade or two!*



From inside the room came Mr. Dormer's laborious sigh. "Really, my lord. You have no reason at all to suspect that he's trying to cut *you* out of anything."

The “he” was, she knew, Lord Emory—the one to have employed them—under the guise of their investigative firm, the Imposters, Ltd.—because *he* was convinced that Adams meant to cut *him* out of a deal they’d shaken on.

Adams snorted. “He would. I have no doubt of it, which is why we must act first. I say, where *is* that Swede?”

Shuffling footsteps, a squeaking door, a muffled question to someone in the corridor. Marigold wished they’d had the opportunity to rig up their mirrors so she could see into the room, but alas. The building hadn’t permitted it, despite their cousin Graham—architect and Imposter—scouring blueprints and his own hand-drawn schematics looking for any possible ways to mount them without being seen.

But no. Tonight they had only her ears. Praise God that He’d given her excellent hearing.

More squeaking of hinges, more distant footsteps—someone in the corridor?—the sloshing of a beverage being poured into a crystal tumbler. Cognac, if it was Adams. Scotch, if it was Dormer. And then came the sound of hurried footsteps, the door opening again, and then closing amidst a hastily gasped breath.

“Apologies! I fear I took a wrong turn at the top of the stairs.” Most definitely the Swedish ambassador.

Finally! Marigold dropped a foot off the ledge and turned it once, clockwise, to let Yates know the meeting was underway.

“Finally!” Adams, with his perpetual whine.

Marigold winced. Sounding like Lord Adams even in her mind was not to be borne. She’d make it a point to think more patient thoughts.

But self-improvement would have to wait. For now, she disengaged any creative parts of her brain and set it to pure memorization. Learning to do so had been a challenge at the start, but after five years of this work, it came naturally.

She soaked in the rest of the conversation, allowed herself a grin as the gentlemen said their farewells, and listened for all sets of feet to exit the room and the chamber door to close behind them. Their client would be impressed with the information they gave him, though heartily put out at Lord Adams.

“Coming down,” Marigold whispered.

“Ready for you.”

Down was always more difficult than up, in her opinion, but she’d long ago learned to calm the flutter of fear in her stomach. She crouched, gripped the ledge, and walked her feet down the wall, then straightened her arms out. With a stretch of her toes, she found the comfortable expanse of her brother’s palms. She settled her weight onto them slowly. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

He lowered her much as he’d raised her, widening her stance until she could step onto his shoulders. This time, she climbed down him rather than the about-face maneuver, and soon she was beside him on the ledge.

“Conversation recorded?” he asked as they slid back along the ledge the way they’d come.

“Ready for Gemma’s shorthand.” She really should have learned it herself before now—and she was working on it—but thus far it had worked best to have her best friend simply transcribe what she dictated.

Two minutes later, they were swinging back into the window of the room they’d staked out as their base. The key still stood in the lock, promising no one had come in and found their discarded evening attire, and the lamp was still burning low where they’d left it. Marigold turned her leg toward the light and clucked her tongue. Her new stockings had a run from knee to ankle—good thing her gown of the night would cover it. And the streaks of dirt too.

Yates shook his head. “We need to increase your stocking budget.”

“Feathers, I think.”

He made a show of considering. “We have enough peacock and ostrich feathers now, I suppose, with the new additions. And Zelda *did* enjoy dyeing the ostrich plumes.”

“Exactly what I was thinking. Time?”

Yates pulled his pocket watch from the slim pajama-style trousers he had on over his own leotard, his wave of dark hair flopping onto his forehead in a way that made her grin. It had been well pomaded at the start of the night, but the wind at great heights had a way of teasing it back into its natural state. He’d grumble about it when he checked his reflection before they rejoined the ball. “Two minutes until Gemma is due.”

Enough time to slip back into her gown, then. She hurried over to where she’d left it folded carefully under the cushion of a chair—just in case someone *did* break into the room—and nearly grunted at its weight. So many beads and sequins and pearls! The thing weighed half a ton, and her shoulders twitched at the thought of supporting it again.

There was no help for it, though. She stepped back into it, tugged it into place over her leotard, and did up what buttons she could manage on her own while her brother slid his tuxedo on over his own acrobatic costume.

When the soft tap came on the door, Yates was still at work on his bow tie, so Marigold dashed over to it. She tapped thrice, and when Gemma responded with the appropriate rhythm in response, she turned the key in the lock and swung the door inward.

Gemma, the fourth official member of the Imposters, swept in with a smile. She wore the grey-and-white uniform of the maids, a cap over her golden hair, but her notepad and pencil were in her pocket. “How did it go?”

“Perfectly.” Marigold spun for assistance with those last pesky buttons, which her oldest friend did up in a flash. “You?”

“Plenty of tidbits for my next column, and a few items for our general files besides. There. Are we ready to transcribe?”

“I am if you are.” Marigold hurried back over to the rest of her things: the ornate headpiece that weighed nearly as much as her gown—or so it seemed as she tried to anchor the thing to her hair—her “jewel”-encrusted slippers, and the oversized ostrich-feather fan, which was perfect for hiding her face behind when she wanted it to remain unseen.

“Just a moment.” Gemma sat at the small desk in the room, pulled out her ever-present notebook and pencil, and nodded. “Go on.”

It only took a few minutes to parrot back the conversation she’d overheard. She delivered it at a faster volume than the men had used, of course, and Gemma had no trouble keeping up with her shorthand. Yates grunted his opinion of the content as she went, and then grunted again when he looked in the mirror she’d pulled out of her small handbag.

Marigold and Gemma exchanged a grin. Yates was just as predictable as Lord Adams, though not quite as annoying. Most of the time. As younger brothers went, she was rather fond of him.

All right, so she couldn’t even begin to imagine life without him. And given that she was at this point destined to spend her life at his side, that was a good thing.

She finished her recitation as she slid the mirror back into her bag. “And that’s that. Seems Lord Emory was right to be worried. He is indeed being cut out of the business arrangements.”

Yates was trying to comb his hair back into place, using the window as a mirror. “I’ll get word to him tomorrow. And collect the balance of our fees when I do so.”

Gemma slid her pencil and paper back into her pocket as she stood. “I’ll alert James to your need of the confessional,” she said of her brother, who was not an official Imposter, but a rather handy supporter, nonetheless. “Eleven o’clock?”

“Presumably.” Yates spun back around and graced them with his wide, gleaming smile. “How do I look?”

“As dapper as you did at the start of the evening.” Marigold indulged in a straightening of his bow tie, not because it was askew, but because sometimes she just needed to pretend that he still needed her care.

He fussed with one of her curls, and she suspected it was for the same reason. Their eyes met, and they shared a grin, nodded their approval of each other, and turned for the door.

The fun part of the night was finished. Now for the true work: maneuvering through the ball.

Sometimes she envied Gemma for her roles, as she posed as one employee or another to observe those highest of caliber events to which Miss Gemma Parks had never received an invitation, given that she was a steward’s daughter. Her alter ego, journalist G. M. Parker, was invited all sorts of places, but Gemma had decided that she learned far more when cloaked in the invisible costume of a servant. Lady Marigold Fairfax always received those invitations too—and Lady Marigold Fairfax had certain expectations she had to meet.

Expectations she had cultivated carefully, yes. But choosing them didn’t mean they didn’t chafe now and then.

As her brother opened the door, Marigold slipped her fingers back into her satin gloves—the perfect way to cover the chip she’d acquired in one of her fingernails. Together, they exited the room. Gemma slipped away to the right, no doubt to find the servants’ stairs. Marigold and Yates strode instead to the left, toward the grand staircase that would lead them back to the ballroom.

The music reached them as they turned the corner, making it easy to slide back into the mask that society knew. Lady Marigold, faceless mannequin whose dress would be written up in the *London Ladies Journal* but whose personality never received a mention. Because—aside from the fact that Gemma was the one who did the write-ups and knew just what to say—no one here knew her. Not really. But they all *thought* they did.

And other people's preconceived notions had proven to be the best disguise.

"Back into the lion's den." Yates offered his elbow at the top of the stairs, along with a wink and a smile.

She snorted a quiet laugh. "Give me Leonidas over this any day."

"Don't worry. You'll be mucking his stall with Franco in a few weeks."

Not nearly soon enough. But for now, she pasted on the rapid little smile she always wore at social events—never full enough to be noteworthy, never serious enough to catch anyone's eye—and walked with her brother down the stairs and into the crowded ballroom once more.

With ostrich feathers waving away the heat and shielding her face, she cast her gaze around the room to catalogue who else may have arrived while they'd ducked out. Lady Abingdon and her sister-in-law. Lord and Lady Ramsey. And—could it be? Marigold's eyes went wide, even as the young lady on whom her gaze had fallen spotted her and lifted a hand, her green eyes going bright.

"Lavinia!" It came out far too happily. Had anyone been paying attention, they certainly would have noticed that it was genuine emotion in her tone, which she never revealed in public. Never.

But it was *Lavinia*. In London! She let go of her brother's arm and rushed forward, not much caring if anyone saw she

was actually excited as she met her friend on the edge of the room and embraced her. “Lavinia! You came!”

Lady Lavinia Hemming laughed and clutched her close for a long moment. When she pulled away, it gave Marigold the chance to sweep her gaze over her. Her cheeks looked full again, their color not the too-pink of rouge or the sallow shade they’d been too often over the last five years.

When Marigold had left Northumberland a month ago, Lavinia had been rallying, yes—but her parents hadn’t been convinced it would last enough for them to venture to London for any of the early Season. Lavinia had as much as said that they’d likely stay at home instead and continue to rest in the hopes of making the high Season in June.

What joy to see her here despite that prediction.

“Father sent word that he’d like us to come if we could. And I was feeling so well that—well, here we are!” Lavinia’s own gaze took in Marigold’s extravagant headpiece, the gown, the bag. “I knew you’d be here. And that you’d be easy to spot.”

Marigold had little choice but to laugh. “And you’ve found me!”

“I’m so glad. You must come and call on Mother and me tomorrow.” She leaned close, her eyes so bright that Marigold nearly worried she was feverish. “There will be gentlemen calling too—that was why Father sent for us, he wanted to make introductions. Two of them! I can’t possibly entertain them myself.”

*Gentlemen?* It took effort to keep her smile in place. If Marigold had learned anything over the last five years, it was that far too many of society’s gentlemen had secrets she’d rather not have known. Secrets that made her not at all sad that marriage was out of the question for her. The Imposters had dossiers on at least half of the gentlemen in this very room—perhaps more. None of them filled with things that equaled good husband material.

But she could hardly admit that to Lavinia. What she *could* do was say, “Of course! Eleven o’clock?” and silently promise her friend that whoever these gentlemen were, *they* had better have no secrets that would bring sorrow to Lavinia’s eyes.

Because if they did, she’d find out. And she’d make certain they never stepped foot in her friend’s drawing room again.