

A woman with her hair in an updo, wearing a long, flowing gown with a blue and green floral pattern, stands with her back to the camera. She is positioned in a stone archway, looking out over a snowy landscape with mountains and a body of water. The scene is framed by the archway and a stone balustrade.

A
NOBLE
SCHEME

THE IMPOSTERS • 2

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To
Mike and LuAnn,
Justin and Karlene,
and too many others to count.
They're never forgotten.



ONE



4 December 1909
Fairfax Tower
Northumberland, England

The Wedding of the Decade. That’s what Gemma would call it when she wrote her column for *London Ladies Journal*. Or maybe “of the century”? Was it too presumptuous to call it that when the century was only nine years old?

Oh, it hardly mattered. G. M. Parker wasn’t known for her unbiased view of society and history. She was known for her clever turns of phrase and descriptions of exclusive events. She was known, mostly, for always “intuiting” where the fashion icon she’d dubbed Lady M would show up, and for writing up every detail of her latest *haute couture* ensemble.

Gemma sipped at her punch, smiling at Lady M now. It was really a wonder that no one had yet suspected that she did, in fact, know every place Lady Marigold Fairfax—now Livingstone, as of an hour ago—would show up, because she helped her plan her schedule.

And occasionally showed up in her place, decked out in her audacious and ostentatious frippery, head tilted down so

no one thought to look at the face beneath the hat or mask or headpiece. All so that Marigold would have an alibi while she did Imposters work, usually spying on the very people who lapped up news about her like overeager puppies.

“Well. I know *that* expression.” Aunt Priss planted her sturdy frame beside Gemma’s, leveling one of those all-seeing glances on her before turning her gaze—if not her attention—back on the bride and groom too. “Plotting out what phrases to use in your column?”

Gemma grinned. Though the world at large had no idea what face paired with her *nom de plume*, she’d not kept her career a secret from her family. “I am transparent.”

“You always have been.” Her aunt’s words sounded innocent enough, but Gemma’s ears pricked with the current of unspoken things.

Things she had no desire to delve into at her best friend’s wedding ball. She focused instead on Marigold and let out a sigh a few degrees happier than she really felt. As happy as she *should* feel. The fact that it was more imitation than truth was no fault of the bride or groom or their happy day. It was just . . . everything else. “She’s radiant, isn’t she?”

“Positively resplendent.” Aunt Priss, being Aunt Priss, said it with a frown. “I don’t know why she doesn’t *always* let herself look so beautiful and instead insists upon all those outlandish, overshadowing fashions.”

The overshadowing part was rather the point, but it was Imposters business that made it so. And while she’d told her family about her writing, she would never breathe a word about the investigative firm to anyone but her brother, James, who was stationed now in a corner, in deep conversation with Yates and Lord Hemming, their nearest neighbor.

If Aunt Priss ever got a whiff of it, she’d probably try to bully her way in and then try to solve all their cases by scowling at them. Gemma’s lips twitched at the thought.

Formidable was the word Yates always used for her aunt. And she was. But it was all out of love.

Mostly.

“The house looks lovely. It’s been too long since I’ve been here.” Her aunt cast a scrutinizing gaze over the ballroom, and Gemma knew she’d be seeing more than all the pretty decorations—she’d be seeing the wear and tear underneath them. Most of the guests wouldn’t, given the nonstop repairs that had been underway at the Tower ever since Marigold announced her engagement, but her aunt knew a bit of the difficult financial circumstances that had resulted from the previous Lord Fairfax’s unchecked spending on every frivolity and entertainment known to man.

It had made for an enchanted childhood for them all. Circuses, theater groups, acrobats, musicians—they’d all peopled the Tower as surely as she and Marigold, Yates, and the Fairfaxes’ distant cousin Graham had. Even now, the Romani circus family that had once wintered here wove in and out among the guests with serving trays in hand, playing the role of servants like it was one more performance.

By the time his lordship died, the estate had been on the brink of bankruptcy. The two siblings had been forced to dismiss all the staff, aside from the Caesars, who worked in exchange for retiring on the land—which meant that the stables now housed a lazy old lion, panther, and leopard in addition to the ancient horses.

More, Yates and Marigold had been forced to start the private investigating firm just to feed those animals and themselves.

Gemma chipped in too, from her earnings. As did Graham, though she had no desire to even think about him, much less search the room for his too-familiar face.

Things would improve a bit now that Marigold had married Merritt. One more income to help loosen the band.

His military pay wasn't exactly enough to rehire a household of servants, and he'd apparently refused the stipend his uncle—another earl, with considerably deeper coffers than Yates could boast just now—tried to give him. His argument was that he was only the heir *presumptive*, that Aunt Josie could yet present his uncle with a son, and Merritt couldn't abide anyone ever thinking he'd taken something that wasn't rightfully his.

That was fair. Even so, Gemma was grateful that he'd embraced the Tower as fully as the rest of them and was just as determined to see it through another year.

And until the Fairfaxes had well and truly righted their finances, the charade would continue. Lady M's applauded wardrobe would still come from the attic and be redesigned by the Gypsy seamstress who'd learned her trade in the circus. The Tower would still be run by the aristocrats themselves and those same retired circus folk. Yates would still attend the Sessions during the day and snoop on those same peers at night as an Imposter, solving their mysteries for them and taking a sizable chunk of their income for the favor. Gemma would still write about them in a way that made society *think* they knew them, providing the mask they could hide behind.

"I do adore a good wedding," Aunt Priss said. Yet another simple sentence with a world of complexity within it. The pointed look she sent to Gemma was superfluous. She might as well have shouted, "*How can you pretend you're not thinking about—*"

"Who doesn't?" Gemma took another sip of her punch and reached to pluck a cream puff from a circulating tray, smiling her thanks to Drina—an expert on acrobatics with silks but currently wearing the colorless uniform of a maid. Best to interrupt even her aunt's silent words. "I'm especially looking forward to describing what Lady M's attendant was wearing." She glanced down at her own gown, also remade

from one of Marigold's mother's collections. "It isn't every day I get to talk about myself as if I don't know me."

"No?" From Yates, the question would have been amused and sardonic. From her aunt, it was a challenge.

Gemma bit into the pastry. *This* was why she rarely stayed with her brother, James—not that she didn't love her aunt, but every conversation had a thousand layers to it, and nine hundred ninety-nine of them were variations on accusation and critique. Priscilla Parks seemed to think that people were like papier-mâché—that one had to rip them to shreds in order to wrap them into shape. She only bothered if she cared about you, of course.

"What must you tell me for my own good this time?" *Lionfeathers*. Gemma really needed to learn to obey her own wisdom. The trick was not to argue. Not to defend oneself. And certainly not to invite the commentary about to come.

Her aunt's expression shifted into a thunderhead of a scowl. "You'll not take that tone of voice with me, young lady. You may be a grown woman, but that's no excuse to give up respecting your elders. When I think how I abandoned my own life to come and care for you and James after your mother died . . ."

Gemma was fully prepared to tune out the familiar refrain and was in the process of scanning the ballroom for something to distract her thoughts when her aunt went still, then shifted her posture to one of welcome instead of lecture, and a beaming smile graced her lips.

Gemma's spine snapped straight, and she pulled away by a step. Any number of guests could have saved her from the quiet tirade, but that particular smile was reserved for only one person in the world—the person Gemma least wanted to see.

"Graham!" Her aunt was a wily one, though. She reached out a hand toward the man who must be approaching from

behind and to the side, but in such a way that she blocked Gemma's avenue of escape.

She half turned to try to escape in the direction from which Graham was coming, but she was too slow. Or he was too quick. He was already there, taking her aunt's fingers and giving her a warm smile.

"Aunt Priss! How it is possible that you're lovelier today than when last I saw you?"

Gemma rolled her eyes to fend off the warmth that always wanted to glow when Graham slathered flattery onto her usually immutable aunt. If anyone else tried such a thing, she'd cut them to the quick for the attempt. But for some reason, with Graham, her aunt laughed and flushed and patted the hair that was in the same utilitarian bun as it was every other day of her life.

It was a bit ironic, really, that Gemma earned a living describing fashions when she'd been raised largely by a woman who decried them all.

"How good to see you, Graham," her aunt said. *Gushed.* Her aunt gushed the words, sending another of her reprimanding gazes into Gemma. "It's been far too long."

Was it Gemma's fault she went stiff? After all, it's what papier-mâché did over time. The only way to hold its shape—to get dry and brittle and stiff.

"That it has. Though I've told you, haven't I, that you're welcome to drop by any time?" He'd always been good at *that* too—at spinning things around on Aunt Priss to remind her that the fault never rested solely on one person.

Except in this case, when it *did*.

Gemma cleared her throat, ready to mutter an "excuse me" and dart away the very second Graham released her aunt's fingers, which was about to happen. She could read them both as easily as she did the *London Ladies Journal*.

But unfortunately, they could both read her just as well.

Before Gemma could open her mouth, her aunt gave Graham's fingers a squeeze, told him to save a dance for her, and hustled off. The very moment she created that empty space, Graham shifted to fill it.

She could have—*should have*—spun and retreated to the rear instead of the front. But he had that soft smile on his face that took her instantly back to when he'd first arrived at Fairfax Tower as a lad, orphaned and terrified and trying not to show it to the distant cousins who had taken him in. Desperate to be independent . . . and yet to find someone to lean on. Brave but trembling. The exact sort of jumbled contradictions that made her heart go soft, both then and now.

"You look beautiful tonight, Gem." He'd given her more effusive compliments before, countless times. But he knew she'd turn away from the extravagant ones now. Knew that simplicity would stay her. His gaze swept over her hair. "I've never seen your hair like that. It suits you."

She'd tried a new style, one she'd seen in a magazine from Paris, for the wedding. And Graham had *always* been the first to notice the details. She was pretty sure the first moment she considered him a true friend had been when she was seven, he nine, and he'd sat down beside her in the schoolroom and said, "*A new hair ribbon! And look how perfectly it matches your eyes.*"

No other boys she knew noticed such things. But Graham always had. Anything that had to do with color and shape and lines, be it on a person or in a building, caught his eye. Paired with her own predilection for fashion and story, they soon found they made a perfect pair. They'd wander about the countryside for hours together while his cousins practiced on the trapeze, him drawing and her weaving stories to match every ruin and landscape.

Then they'd rejoin Marigold and Yates, and they'd turn their attention to serious matters—like deciding on a name

for their circus and deciding who would take what act. Gemma still had countless mock posters they'd created together. Graham had done the artwork, Gemma had written the copy, with the Fairfax siblings outlining all the spectacles they'd put on. The two of them on the trapeze. Marigold on the highwire, Yates as the strongman. They would stage a play that Gemma wrote and Graham designed the set for, but much like the Caesars' dramas, it would feature live animals playing some of the roles.

The Circus of Imposters, they'd called themselves then. Aristocrats posing as circus performers had been too much fun to dream up. A far cry, in some ways, from who the Imposters had become.

And not so far at all in others. The siblings still used their acrobatics. They all still played the roles Gemma wrote for them. Graham still took charge of their sets. It was just that their sets were real buildings and their costumes real clothes and the audience didn't know they were witnessing a performance as the four of them all gathered details to put into their files so that they could close cases and solve mysteries and collect tidy sums to feed their retired lion and provide shelter to their retired circus friends.

And while she was reminiscing, Graham had shifted to put himself at her side—the same side he always took, angled a bit so that his shoulder was behind her, their faces pointed the same way, yet he could speak into her ear without his voice traveling to the crowds.

“You all really got the old place looking shipshape again. Like it did in their father's day. I'm sorry I wasn't able to help more with the restoration.”

He was just as deft at speaking to her as to her aunt—both praising their efforts and chiding her for being the one who'd forbidden him to help. Making it sound as though that “not able” was due to his own schedule instead of her command.

“It was a lot of work.” A safe enough statement. “But rewarding.” And a much-needed distraction as December loomed ever closer. As it arrived. As that date on the calendar, which so many looked forward to, made every bone in her body double in weight.

Leopard stripes. Papier-mâché wouldn’t be enough to get her through this month. That’s why she’d been carefully building a stone wall around not only her heart but also her memories.

“Well, everyone’s efforts have paid off. The wedding is beautiful, as is the bride—nearly as beautiful as her attendant. I can’t help but remember—”

“Stop.” She’d meant it to come out as a command, brisk and brusque as if it had fallen from Aunt Priss’s lips. Instead, it emerged as a squeak, desperate and thin.

He was going to bring it up. The very thing Aunt Priss had silently accused her of with a pointed look instead of words. *Of course* he would.

“What?” He leaned a little closer. “I was only going to say it reminded me of that first ball we snuck down to watch. Don’t you remember? We were, what, eight and ten? We thought we were being so sneaky but were bored to tears within fifteen minutes.”

Her shoulders relaxed. They’d snuck back out and had run with the wild abandon of children down to the shore—strictly forbidden to them after dark—and dipped their toes into the ice-cold water of the North Sea until they were shivering and laughing and convinced that the adults had it all wrong. Why choose a stuffy ballroom when they could choose a moonlight caper instead?

And this—*this*—was why she avoided him. Because this was what happened if she didn’t. He slid too close, reminded her too quickly of what once had been, made her want to remember all the wrong things. More dangerous things, even,

than the memories she was tiptoeing around. Happiness and hope and innocence and love songs.

That wasn't real. What was real was broken hearts and despair, betrayal and dirges.

She took a step away. "I don't want to remember. Not that. Not . . . anything." She couldn't. Couldn't let herself. Because calling one sweet memory to mind would bring more, and then she'd end up right back in the place she never wanted to be again.

Graham moved with her. "Darling, please. It's been nearly a year—"

She couldn't have said which of his words brought the fury rushing back, filling her veins and pushing her past him in one sweeping motion. The endearment? The plea? The reminder of those full twelve pages of the calendar that had flipped by since the world came to a screeching, shattering halt?

"You think I don't know how long it's been?" She hissed the words when she wanted to shout them, clenched her fist when she wanted to pound it into his chest. "You think I haven't counted every month, every week, every day, every hour?"

His face shifted from earnest and pleading to as cold and hard as the granite he favored in his work. "You think I haven't too? If you would just talk to me—"

"Why? You never listen. Had you listened a year ago—"

"You think I don't know that?" Somehow he managed to whisper his own shout, but the volume certainly didn't mute the fire in the words. "You think I haven't replayed that conversation in my head a million times? You think I haven't regretted it every single minute of every single day?"

Of course he did. But regret changed nothing. Sorrow changed nothing. A million apologies couldn't undo the damage his arrogance and pride had caused.

And if she didn't escape this ballroom right this minute, she'd ruin her best friend's wedding ball with a fit of weeping that was sure to garner the attention she wanted to avoid at all costs. With a shake of her head, she stormed away, out of the conversation, out of his presence, out of the ballroom.

She didn't stop until she'd walked directly out into the courtyard. They'd taken the trapeze down for the wedding so that Merritt's family and friends wouldn't wonder at it. Gemma had never had the skill on it that Marigold and Yates had, but tonight she could have done with swinging from the bar and letting the wind chase away the tears. Let it ruin her hair and replace the warmth of Graham's nearness. Let the rush of gravity and air pull her out of her head and away from the memories always lingering right below the surface.

Another rush of wind as the borrowed car spun out of control. Another squeak, not of guidewires, but of body panels.

No. *No.* The memories had gotten even heavier as the weather cooled again. When her foot crunched through the layer of ice on top of a puddle, she very nearly shattered too. But she wouldn't let herself fall into that. Not here. Not now. Not while *he* was right inside, when he might chase her out here.

"Gemma?"

At least it wasn't Aunt Priss. Gemma sniffed, telling herself her nose was running from the cold air and not from the tears burning her eyes. She pasted on a smile and turned back to the door from which she'd just run. The happy friend. The well-wisher. *Imposter.* "The bride shouldn't be sneaking away from her own wedding ball, Marigold. Get back inside."

She didn't. She came to Gemma's side instead, not even shivering in her gown of silk and lace, though Gemma was,