

OPERATION IMPOSTOR ©

**By
Christina Carlisle**

A Contemporary Romance

Writing Right

Australia

**Other books
By Christina Carlisle**

**Husband for Hire
Wade's Woman
Alaskan Fire
Outback Affair
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OPERATION IMPOSTOR

From the very get go, Carlisle crafts a smashing story filled with no holds barred verbal battles and positively sizzling sexual tensions. This tale offers the reader smartly written point to counterpoint, a few breathtaking backdrops, and sensual moments that radiate heat from each page. For plenty of snap, crackle, and oh so delicious pop, this book will definitely fit the bill.

Reviewed – Coffee Time Romance

"Explosively passionate, Operation Impostor will enflame your senses and makes your imagination quiver in excitement."

EcataRomance Reviews

CHAPTER ONE

"Honestly Sally, I can't believe any man can be that gorgeous. You've raved about the handsome Jackson Dalby for two days now." Meg laughed and clung perilously to the strap above her head as the train rattled its way towards central London.

"But Meg, he's out of this world - gorgeous! Wait 'til you meet him," her flat mate shouted, striving to be heard above the clattering, chattering noise of the early morning rush hour of workers travelling into the city.

Meg suddenly spied two empty seats and pushing Sally into one, she collapsed beside her. "Whew! I'd forgotten how chaotic this trip is," she said, taking off her heavy-rimmed glasses and brushing a hand across her tired eyes.

Sally grinned at her. "You will probably see him this morning because I happen to know he's called a planning meeting to discuss some major projects." She smiled slyly.

"Hmm, I suppose he must have come to the UK for something important," Meg said. "Particularly if he's here for a few weeks. Are you sure he's called a planning meeting? I didn't get an e-mail or any call."

Sally stretched her legs out in front of her. "Of course I'm sure! He's over from New York to sort out some big deals involving new building projects here and in Europe, I think. Imagine, Meg! You could be chosen to work with him. Oh ... I feel faint at the thought of it!" Sally rolled her eyes dramatically.

Glancing at her watch, Meg gave a wry smile. "We are running very late. Your whip-cracking Jackson Dalby will probably give us the sack."

"You should have rested up today, Meg - you look exhausted. You need a week off after the hours you've put in on that project."

Meg sighed. She did feel tired. This job meant she'd worked and lived in Manchester in the north of England, for the past two months. As project engineer in charge, she had pushed herself and the builders hard, working seven days a week to complete the shopping centre on time and within budget. The June weather had been oppressive, with everyone's tempers fraying at the edges - still, she'd done it and her chief engineer had been well pleased with her when he'd made a brief flying visit from the London office.

As they entered the massive building of Jackson Dalby and Associates, Meg and Sally parted company, with Meg making her way to the Engineering Department while Sally disappeared into the administration block. Meg knew it was going to be a different kind of day as soon as she saw her male colleagues dressed in smart suits, looking uncomfortably nervous as they tweaked their ties and brushed away imaginary specks from their jackets.

She glanced down at her faded jeans and voluminous blue shirt and shrugged. Stuff it! No big boss from New York is going to make me dress up.

An hour later Meg was in full flight at her computer, putting the finishing touches to a road-works diagram, when she heard voices from the next-door office. She craned her neck to look through the glass partition at what had to be the great Mr. Dalby's back view. Meg stared at his thick, collar-length hair. I didn't realize he was so old. His hair is quite white, Meg thought as she shrugged and dismissed him from her mind.

She was engrossed in her work when she became aware of someone standing at her office door. Her eyes widened with astonishment when she pushed her glasses back to get a better view. She was staring at the larger-than-life front view of the infamous Jackson Dalby.

"You must be Meg Davies." Strolling in, he held his hand open to shake hers. Meg stood up, aware that she was gaping.

"It's great to meet you. I've heard some good things about your work." His voice was deep and he spoke quickly with a strong American accent. Her small hand was enveloped in a cool, firm handshake. Her first thought was that Sally was right. Wow! This man is gorgeous! He can't be more than thirty-five. Meg took in his crisp white shirt, exquisitely tailored to his trim body, and grey silk tie, toning perfectly with his suit.

Realizing she was still holding his hand, she pulled abruptly away. "I'm pleased to meet you too, Mr. Dalby," she said, her voice slightly breathless.

"Call me Jackson. I don't stand on ceremony. I'll see you at the ten o'clock meeting, Meg." And with that he was gone.

Hell's bells! Meg sat down, her heart pounding. What a striking man. I bet his wife has to keep an eye on him.

The senior engineering staff was on full alert when they gathered in the boardroom at ten. Meg could feel the tension zinging through the air. As usual she was the only woman among them, but she didn't give it a thought as she placed herself well down the table between the chief draughtsman and one of the architects.

Jackson Dalby's energy and magnetism filled the room, his eyes flickering curiously over their faces as he opened the meeting.

"Congratulations on your hard work; you've had a great year. Things are going to be even bigger and better this year. We've six major projects, which is why I'm here for a few weeks to oversee them. It is extremely important they are conducted properly."

His voice echoed around the room as he went through the details of each project and Meg wondered which one she would be assigned. The shopping centre in Rome sounded great. She shook her head as she concentrated on what Jackson was saying.

"Finally, we have two projects in Australia: a holiday resort on the outskirts of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory and one on Hayman Island off the coast of Queensland. These will involve about four weeks preparation time here and six weeks in Australia, linking up with the staff in our Melbourne office. I will handle these projects, assisted by Meg Davies and James Spicer."

There was a murmur around the table and several colleagues sitting near Meg congratulated her for obtaining these much-prized projects. Meg's face flushed with excitement as she lifted her head, her eyes reflecting the pride she felt.

Jackson concluded the meeting quickly, showing he was economical with both words and time. He invited everyone to join him for coffee to meet on an informal footing. Meg chatted enthusiastically with her workmates, her animated gestures and laughter causing quite a hot spot in the room until the group surrounding her went suddenly quiet. Glancing around she looked up into Jackson's handsome face.

"Meg, I want you in my office next Monday to start the Australian projects." There was no smile on his face this time, only a direct, forceful look.

Meg automatically nodded her head. "Yes sir," she said dutifully. Jackson

gave her a curt nod and moved away.

"I don't envy you working with him, Meg," one of the engineers whispered conspiratorially in her ear. "Why?"

"Because he is a rude, arrogant son of a bitch, that's why. I've worked for him before and no one could do anything right. He was absolutely impossible and drove everyone crazy with his need for perfection and you, poor girl, will have to spend the next few weeks practically living with him. Good luck, that's all I can say." He moved away, leaving Meg feeling very apprehensive.

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That evening at dinner she told an ecstatic Sally her news.

"That's wonderful, Meg!" she exclaimed. "It's not only great for your career, but it's giving you the chance to mix it with the most magnificent-looking man in London. Who knows? He could fall for you, if you could just do something about yourself," Sally finished, looking wistfully at her best friend.

Meg sighed. Sally was twenty-four, three years younger than Meg and engaged to be married to an up-and-coming young solicitor. They planned to marry at Christmas and because she was so happily in love, Sally wanted Meg to be happy too. She constantly harassed her about her appearance and nagged at every opportunity.

"Mike and I hate to think of you staying home alone, Meg. We keep setting up dates for you, which you absolutely refuse to go on. Look, I know you've had a bad experience with some guy, but not all men are monsters." Sally touched Meg's arm to emphasize her concern.

"I never said they were. I just prefer my own company, that's all." Meg blinked away sudden tears and cursed her vulnerability.

Sally continued relentlessly. "You are literally hiding yourself away. You don't bother with any make-up and you wear your hair in that awful, old-fashioned plait. You look like a school marm with those huge, heavy glasses. They make great light steel frames these days, in case you haven't noticed. And look at your clothes? Why do you think just because you work with men you have to wear trousers all the time and those cumbersome pullovers? You encourage men to treat you like one of them but you have a beautiful figure under that disguise. You have lovely skin and magnificent hazel eyes and even if your hair is mousy, we could put streaks in it. Please! Let me show you how great you could look?" Sally pleaded.

"Don't start that again, Sally. You know it's not my style to attract attention to myself. I'm quite happy with the way I dress. Besides, Dalby's probably married with three kids."

"Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!" Sally cried gleefully. "I have the low down on Jackson Dalby." She pulled a piece of paper from her bag. "Now, he is thirty-four and unmarried - ta dah! He's from New York and lives in an apartment in Manhattan and ... he's a real ladies man. So there!" Sally's expression was triumphant.

"Really, Sally, did you get this info for your P.R. work?"

"Yep. My boss asked me for a media release on Jackson so I sent for a whole lot of press cuttings from New York which showed him with a multitude of beautiful girls at social functions."

Meg nodded, knowing Sally's job, as the company's public relations officer,

would involve her researching this material. She pursed her lips. "I don't know why I'm listening to you. I'm only going to be working with him and we're more likely to be discussing sewerage systems than social soirees."

"Oh, very droll!" Sally laughed. "Anyhow, I wouldn't mind being you for the next few weeks literally rubbing shoulders with him."

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Meg had shrugged off Sally's enthusiastic comments. Nevertheless, her nerves were tightly strung and she was putting on a brave front when she arrived in Jackson's office the following Monday.

His secretary showed her into the imposing area. A huge mahogany desk dominated the room, and there was an area of soft lounges surrounding a coffee table on one side and a large drawing board and a workbench littered with drawings on the other.

"Hi Meg, how are you?" She jumped as Jackson walked past her. His glance took in her jeans and large over-shirt. He continued without waiting for her answer, "There's an empty office next to mine you can use. Get your things moved straight away, although a lot of your work will be done in here." Jackson indicated the workbench.

Meg hesitated, not sure what to do next. He was so abrupt!

"Come over here, I want to go through the brief before we meet up with the architect at eleven."

Meg obediently followed him to the workbench. I'm behaving like a pet dog, she decided, as she perched on a stool beside him. Jackson removed his suit jacket and loosened his tie, giving him a rakish air. Meg surreptitiously stared at his hands as he unrolled the brief papers. They were elegant and artistically shaped with long, brown fingers and well-kept nails. He really was the most attractive man she had ever seen.

For the next few minutes Jackson explained the concept for the Alice Springs resort and Meg tried to concentrate, but her eyes kept drifting to study his classic profile and tanned, unlined face and the way his white hair curled at the nape of his neck and....

"What do you think?"

Meg started as she realized Jackson had asked her a question. She felt a rare blush rise in her cheeks as he stared at her, waiting for a reply.

"I - I'm sorry, sir. Could you explain that again?" Meg stuttered, swallowing hard.

Jackson gave a snort of impatience. "For God's sake! I don't think you've heard a word I've said. What's with you?" he asked rudely, his accent pronounced. "You've come to me highly recommended as a brilliant young engineer who will excel at this work and on the first day you sit there like a zombie. Either you get your act together or I'll throw you off the project."

Meg bristled at his rudeness.

"And don't call me sir! My name is Jackson," he exploded.

Meg found her voice at last. "I am perfectly capable of working on this project," she said, her voice tight. "I think ... I think I'm getting a migraine attack, that's all." She gasped as the lie popped out of her mouth. How could she have said that? She never lied! He made her so nervous.

Jackson peered at her more closely. "Where's the migraine?"

"Err ... here," she said, indicating the base of her skull.

"Are you subject to migraines?"

"Yes, but not often." Meg was relieved that she could at least answer this truthfully. "Only an occasional one," she added lamely.

"Hmm." His dark brown eyes appeared warmer as he continued to stare at her. "Are you nervous of me?"

Meg drew a deep breath. She had never met anyone so outspoken - so direct. "I'm a bit nervous this morning," she admitted, and glanced away from his piercing gaze.

"Give me your hand, Meg." As he spoke he reached out and grasped her right hand. Meg's face grew hot with embarrassment as he held it in both of his. Her body tingled with the strangest sensations. "I suffer from migraine attacks and one way that sometimes gets rid of them is to press the particular nerve-ending just here," he said, and with gentle fingers pressed a point between her finger and thumb and held it for a few seconds.

Meg stared at her small hand encompassed in his large ones.

"Now, come and sit here." He drew her over to sit in one of the lounges, then she felt his fingers massaging the back of her neck as he stood behind her. She shut her eyes, scarcely believing what was happening, and tried to close her mind to the feelings his hands unwittingly provoked. After a few minutes he stopped and sat beside her.

"Better?" He gave her a lopsided smile and her stomach did a neat somersault.

"Thank you, yes."

"Good. Now, go and make yourself a coffee and be back here at eleven and we'll go through everything again."

Jackson turned away and Meg realized she'd been dismissed. She made her way to the restroom and bathed her burning face with a damp towel. What a fool I am to be affected like this. I've mixed with important people before and not been fazed.

She had a coffee in the staff cafeteria, all the time berating herself for being so stupid. No man had rattled her as much since her nightmare affair with David. Would she ever be able to forget the agony of that disastrous time? She frowned into her coffee cup, her thoughts sombre as she recognized that what had happened between David and her was the reason she so skilfully avoided getting involved with another man. It was also why she dressed as she did, she admitted. Anything rather than have men notice her femininity and attract unwelcome and perhaps ugly attentions.

She made her way back to the first floor, arriving at Jackson's office just before eleven. He wasn't there but she could hear his voice in the office next door talking with the general manager. Meg hesitated. She had never felt comfortable with the GM who, although polite to her, didn't bother to hide the fact that he had little time for women in the workforce.

Meg froze as the GM's gruff voiced boomed, "I can't imagine you spending six weeks in Australia with that frump, Jackson. Rather you than me."

Meg's fingers gripped the door handle as she listened.

"It's hardly that bad," she heard Jackson say. "Besides, I could do with a rest from glamorous females for a few weeks."

"Well, that's one thing you won't have to worry about. With the way young Meg looks, you wouldn't be tempted to touch her if she was the last woman on

earth!" The GM's laughter rang out again as Meg moved away. She literally ran to the ladies room and leaned against the sink, her heart racing and her stomach churning.

Those bastards! She looked in the mirror. Her mouth trembled and tears threatened to fall. They were both arrogant bastards. Chauvinistic pigs! How dare they say those terrible things about her? She looked at her pale face and skimmed-back hair and then at her ugly clothes. I can't be girlish and giggly or slinky and sexy, she thought. I can't be how men want me to be and I won't allow any man to take advantage of me, ever again. That does it! I don't deserve to be treated like this. Jackson Dalby should know better. He's a spoilt womaniser and I can't work for him. I'll never be able to work with him, she thought, panic rising within her.

She glanced at her watch. It was eleven now. She must pull herself together as if nothing had happened and concentrate on the job at hand. Replacing her glasses, she took a deep breath. She was a top engineer and to hell with what Jackson thought. She would show him!

As she returned to Jackson's office, she made a promise to herself. I'll pay you back somehow for what you said about me, she vowed, opening the door.