



An
HONORABLE
DECEPTION

THE IMPOSTERS · 3

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BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
Minneapolis, Minnesota
BethanyHouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: White, Roseanna M., author.

Title: An Honorable Deception / Roseanna M. White.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, a division of Baker

Publishing Group, 2024. | Series: The Imposters ; 3

Identifiers: LCCN 2024008540 | ISBN 9780764240942 (paper) | ISBN 9780764244063
(casebound) | ISBN 9781493448166 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Private investigators—England—London—Fiction. | LCGFT:

Christian fiction. | Detective and mystery fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC P53623.H578785 H66 2024 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20240223

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024008540>

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Cover design by Dan Thornberg

Author is represented by The Steve Laube Agency.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and postconsumer waste whenever possible.

*In loving memory
of my grandmother, Helen Coker,
who lived a complicated, broken,
redeemed, and beautiful life,
and inspired so many others to do the same.*

Wrongdoing speaks to the ungodly within his heart;
There is no fear of God before his eyes.
For it flatters him in his own eyes
Concerning the discovery of his wrongful deed and the
hatred of it. . . .
Your mercy, LORD, extends to the heavens,
Your faithfulness reaches to the skies. . . .
For the fountain of life is with You;
In Your light we see light.
Prolong Your mercy to those who know You,
And Your righteousness to the upright of heart.
May the foot of pride not come upon me,
And may the hand of the wicked not drive me away.
Those who do injustice have fallen there;
They have been thrust down and cannot rise.

Psalm 36:1–2, 5, 9–12 NASB



ONE



15 August 1910
Fairfax House
London, England

Yates let the barbell clang back into its brackets and pushed up to sitting, his eyes searching for the utilitarian clock on the wall. Sweat dripped from his brow, forcing him to wipe it off before he could make sense of the time. Three in the afternoon. He had just enough time to bathe and dress before he had to get to James's church on the other side of the city for his appointment with a potential client.

If he didn't roast to death in the meantime.

He moved to the open window, but the breeze that trickled through did little to cool him. London was often miserable in the summer, but today it was doing a fair imitation of the pits of the netherworld. And it would only get worse once his sister and her husband left for their holiday in Northumberland tomorrow.

It was absolutely no fair that they got to escape the city while he was stuck here, voting on bills he scarcely cared

about in Sessions and working on business for their private investigation firm, the Imposters, Ltd.

Absolutely unfair. They'd already made him suffer two months of solitude after the wedding before they agreed to move back to Fairfax House and let Merritt's rented town-home go. It was cruel to subject him to his own company again now. Though at least Merritt would, after the first long weekend, be traveling regularly back to London for work. Misery did love its brother-in-law's company.

Lionfeathers, but it was hot. He mopped his face with a towel and charged from the room, ready to find Marigold wherever she was and let her know, yet again, what a horrible, horrible sister she was to abandon him like this and go back to the cool sea breezes and comforts of Fairfax Tower without him. Wasn't it bad enough that she only joined him in the gymnasium for half an hour a day lately, and then only to do the lightest, easiest of exercises?

He followed her voice to the drawing room, pausing when he caught tones that were neither hers nor Clementina's nor Gemma's. Did she have a guest? One who would be outraged if he barged in wearing only the leotard and pajama-style trousers he wore when taking his exercise?

He listened a moment more and then relaxed. It was only Lavinia. She might be as much a lady as his own sister, being the daughter of Lord Hemming as she was, but she was also their closest neighbor in Northumberland and had seen him in every possible mode of dress over the years.

He barreled through the door, perhaps with a bit more gusto than it really demanded. "Cruel creature," he pronounced upon entering, scowling at his sister.

She sat on the couch, her hair still done up in an elaborate braided coiffure, one of her magnificently ridiculous hats on the cushion beside her, and her dress looking straight

from the highest of haute couture boutiques in Paris, despite having come from their own attic. She was setting tongues ablaze, he knew, daring to wear fashionable ensembles when she was in a delicate condition.

Three more months, by the doctor's estimation, before she presented him with his first niece or nephew. He alternated between unbridled joy and unfettered panic at the thought.

Everything was going to change. Everything already had. No trapeze acts, no acrobatics that required two people in their investigations. What was worse, she looked so blasted *tired*, and her face was pale beneath her smile.

Marigold quirked a brow at him. "Are you still pouting about staying in London?"

"Of course I am." It was his sworn duty as her pesky little brother, after all, to complain to her. "It's hot as blazes."

She chuckled. But even that sounded tired. "So come with us."

If only he could. Were it only the Sessions, he might well choose to duck out of them. There was nothing really urgent up for vote—not that his vote mattered on, anyway. But if tonight's early-evening appointment resulted in a case, he'd have to be here to investigate it. Rarely did their cases allow for working from their own home county.

The last one that did had been anything but pleasant. Which reminded him to send a smile to Lavinia. "Hello, Vin."

Only when he glanced at her did he realize that she'd been looking at *him* ever since he barged in, an amused expression on her face. "Yates."

Lady Lavinia Hemming was, without question, beautiful. And he could admit—to his sister, anyway—that he'd been in love with her for most of his life. But that was before he realized his father had left him not so much as a shilling with

which to run the estate. Before they'd had to let most of their servants go and—*gasp*—learn to cook their own food and take on work to make ends meet.

He'd known, as he sat in the solicitor's office beside Mari-gold and heard that there was nothing left of the Fairfax fortune, that Lavinia was never going to be his wife. Then she had caught scarlet fever, nearly died, and been all but bedridden for years from the ensuing heart condition. Her parents hadn't been exactly keen on letting a young man into their daughter's bedroom, either, so he'd scarcely seen her for years.

And he'd had to focus on earning his family enough income to survive on.

Six years later, he'd learned to look at her without that punch to his gut. Which was good, since she'd been courted by no fewer than a half-dozen leading gentlemen once she finally came out last year after her recovery. Most of them this summer, when she returned to London after the first few horrible months of grief from learning her mother was a traitor and then mourning her death. There were those momentary twinges of jealousy as he watched her dance with other gentlemen, but that was natural. To be expected. And he shrugged them off after only a second, proving what he'd been saying to his sister for years now: He was over his infatuation.

Lavinia didn't appear to be exactly glowing after her societal success, though. If anything, she looked as weary as Marigold, and without the handy excuse. He frowned at her. "You look like a stout wind could blow you over. Have you been sleeping?"

Lavinia rolled her green eyes. "Yes, Father."

"Eating?"

"Yes."

“Exercising?”

At that, she let out a huff. “My physicians have cautioned me not to overexert myself. You know that.”

“*Over*, yes. But a bit of exertion is necessary for regaining one’s strength.”

The look she directed to his arms wasn’t exactly admiring. “I suppose you think yourself the expert, Mr. Strongman?”

His lips twitched upward. “That’s *Lord* Strongman to you. And I’ll have you know that after my devastating wound, which I took saving *your* life—”

“You did not!” It got her laughing, anyway. If they could laugh about it now, that surely meant her heart was recovering from the blow her mother had dealt it. “*I saved you!*”

He waved away that little detail. “While recuperating, I definitely found it of the utmost importance to push myself a little more each day, to truly recover.”

Lavinia rolled her eyes again. “It was barely a scratch.”

“I took a dagger to the leg! Eight stitches!” But he grinned and flopped down beside her on her sofa, leaning in and draping a sweaty arm around her just to watch her flinch away and wrinkle her nose. “Come on, my lady. Join me in the gymnasium. I’ll have your heart as healthy as Leonidas’s in a month.”

“Tempting as that is . . .” Lavinia nodded toward Mari-gold. “I’ve come today to beg your sister to let me go home with her and keep her company at the Tower until Papa decides to return to Northumberland. I’ve found I’ve had my fill of Town.”

It had tired her too quickly, she meant. The late nights, the rich foods, the stress of gossip—and there had been no shortage of that. The country air would restore her, though. As would his sister’s company.

Yates nodded, reclaimed his arm, and pushed back to

his feet. “Good. Any gents you want me to look into while you’re gone?”

She didn’t know about the Imposters. But she *did* know he was a friend and that he’d make sure anyone she was considering was deserving of her.

Lavinia shook her head. “No. They’re all . . . no.”

Leopard stripes. There was a world of meaning in the sigh she let out that he didn’t have time to explore right now. But Marigold would take care of it. He made certain of that with a glance her way, and then moved toward the door. “Well, I know you two will cry over my absence, but I have an appointment to keep. Enjoy your trip north tomorrow. Know you have my envy.”

Their laughter followed as he vaulted up the stairs, and he made quick work of his ablutions so that he could slide down the banister again and hurry out the door.

Hot, damp air swamped him the moment he stepped outside. The thermometer read ninety-five degrees, but the dratted uniform of the gentry—shirt, waistcoat, tie, jacket—made it feel about twice that. What he wouldn’t give to be able to leave the house in his exercise garb.

Usually he’d walk to a tube station farther from home so he could stretch his legs, but today he opted for the Underground as quickly as possible, and he thanked the good Lord for the coolness of the cavernous cathedral when he stepped inside its back door twenty minutes later. Voices from James’s office said he might be with a parishioner, which was too bad—Yates always enjoyed popping in and chatting with their former steward’s son whenever he could. James didn’t know *precisely* what they did, just that they did it. He knew why, and he knew they focused on truth and justice, so he lent them the old confessional for their meetings whenever Yates needed it.

He slipped into the confessor's side of the booth, indulging in a long breath and loosening of his necktie. Though he pulled a slender tome of poetry from his pocket, he didn't open it yet. He closed his eyes. He breathed out a prayer. And he looked deep into himself.

Ever since he started meeting potential clients in this booth, he'd made a habit of examining his own conscience first. To make certain he was always working for the good, that he didn't fall into judgment as he investigated truths that were too often ugly. And to ensure that though every other foundation he ever took for granted shook, his faith didn't.

Today, he looked back over his life of the past week and had to purse his lips. Had his complaining moved from joking to truth? Probably. And Gemma hadn't taken it well when he jested about how she seemed bent on catching Marigold up with the size of her stomach, though her own pregnancy was a month behind. He ought to apologize for that. He'd fallen into worry again on Friday when he was reviewing their accounts, which he knew was a lack of trust in God's provision.

And they weren't doing *badly* . . . but they weren't doing as well as he'd hoped they'd be. Cases always slowed down as the weather cooled and society left London for their country homes, and he'd hoped to have a bit more of a cushion for the winter this year, what with his sister and Gemma both with child. What if they needed a doctor? Hospital? Medicine?

He gave that again to the Lord and said a prayer, while he was at it, for the health of both mothers and babies. For his sister, especially . . . but then for Gemma, especially. She and Graham had lost Jamie when he was only nine months old. If anything were to happen to this babe—it didn't bear thinking about.

Another few minutes of prayer, and then he cracked open

his Tennyson and read until he heard the large front doors squeak open. He glanced at his watch. It must be the potential client, who had signed the note the urchins had delivered to him simply as *A. B.* Not exactly a lot to go on, that, but the hand had been feminine.

Which was not exactly *unusual*. But not the most common. The cards he placed at the Marlborough brought far more clients their way than the ones his sister and Gemma left at the ladies' clubs—a fact that he rubbed their noses in regularly, out of brotherly duty. And when women *did* hire them, all too often it was to investigate a spouse they suspected of infidelity. Not his favorite task—because far too often they proved exactly what the ladies feared.

He didn't know if he had another such investigation in him when he wouldn't have Marigold on hand to keep his spirits up. But then, winter was coming, and he'd prefer it not be too lean.

The steps were definitely feminine—but quick. He heard a few moments of hesitation as the woman searched the massive chamber for the confessional, but once she spotted it, her stride became as sure as it was fast. The door to the penitent's side opened, shut again, and someone sat on the bench, nothing but a vaguely girlish silhouette through the screen.

“We are such stuff . . .” she said, as he'd instructed her to.

Yates smiled and pulled forward the accent he'd decided on today—a Scottish burr. “. . . as dreams are made on.' Good day . . . miss?”

Her voice sounded young—not childish, but certainly not matronly. Were he to guess, he'd have put her somewhere in the general range of his own twenty-three years, give or take a few. But he'd always found it wisest to err on the side

of youth when addressing women he didn't know. Give a *madam* to the wrong one and you'd earn quite a scowl.

"Miss will suffice. Miss B."

A cagey one, then. He could understand that, on the one hand. But if she really thought she could hire a PI without her own identity becoming known, she was in for a surprise. "All right, then. Mr. A. How can I help you today, Miss B?"

The woman drew in a deep breath and let it slowly out. "I would like to hire you to find someone."

He frowned. The last time they'd been hired to find someone, it had been a kidnapped boy, and it had turned challenging in a hurry. "Missing person?"

"I think so, yes. Some have assured me she isn't . . . but she *is*."

"Uh-huh." That clarified things. Yates leaned back against the wall of the booth, imagining himself a Scottish laird of centuries gone by. "I'd love to say I ken what you mean, Miss B, but a bit more information wouldn't go awry, aye?"

Another sigh. "All right. It's my *ayah*, from when I was a girl."

Yates sat up again, his brows furrowing even though his guest wouldn't see it. "You grew up in India?"

"I did, yes, until I was twelve. When we came back to England, my childhood ayah opted to travel with us, rather than my parents hiring a stranger for the task. She left us once we reached London and hired on with another family returning to India. I believe at this point she's made the journey five or six times, round trip."

Not uncommon, he knew. Families coming from India were happy to hire cheap nannies to keep track of their children on the journey, but rarely were they interested in keeping such unfashionable help while they were in England. And if the women couldn't find journeys home, they were often

left to fend for themselves in London. It had been enough of a problem a decade or two ago that charities had sprung up to house them and manage funding to send them to and from England—the most famous being the Ayahs' Home.

This was the first he'd heard of a grown child wanting to find her ayah again, though. "And . . . you wish to reconnect? After how many years?" He'd have to determine if the woman was even in England, or back in India, or somewhere on a steamer in between.

"It isn't like that." Her words came out in a snap, then she sucked in a breath. "Forgive me. My parents . . . wouldn't exactly encourage this search."

Unmarried then, most likely, if she was worrying about her parents' opinion and not a husband's. He hadn't been willing to accept as much by the "Miss B" bit. "No forgiveness necessary. But if you could answer the question?"

"We've kept in touch through letters. And whenever she's back in London, I've managed to visit her. Only this time, when I went to the Ayahs' Home, she wasn't there—or so they said. Even though it's where she said she'd be. I've contacted the others, too, and no one reports seeing her. One acquaintance who serves on the Ladies Auxiliary of the Ayahs' Home said she had information about Samira for me, only to not show up at our luncheon date today. It isn't exactly something I can take to the police, though, is it?"

"Mm. I see your point." Scotland Yard rarely wanted to bother with transients from India, especially when all they'd have to go on here was one young lady's concern. "Aye, then. What can you tell me about her?"

"She's twenty-seven years old—"

"So young?" He couldn't keep the surprise from his tone. Even if Miss B was only eighteen, that would have been six years since her first transit, which would have put the nanny

in her early-to-mid-twenties when she worked for the B family. Unusual indeed. Most ayahs were middle-aged or older.

“She is only eight years my elder. It was why we were so close.” Defensiveness colored her tone, yes. And something more.

Fear. Genuine, heartbroken fear.

Noted. This wasn’t idle curiosity. This was a young woman seeking one of her dearest friends. He nodded. “Go on.”

“I went to the Ayahs’ Home on Mare Street, in Hackney, when my luncheon date failed to show up today, thinking perhaps she meant to meet me there instead. But when I got there, they—”

The front doors creaked open again—but not just a creak. They banged against the wall, startling Yates off his bench. Doors that size didn’t swing about in a breeze like a bedroom door at the Tower. To hit the wall with such volume, they’d have had to be thrown with considerable force.

Footsteps—at least two sets of them. Heavy. Running.

Lionfeathers. What was going on? He held his breath, hoping that no one would think to look in the old, abandoned confessional if they were searching for someone. If hiding were necessary, this was the best place to do it.

But James was likely in his office, and the parishioner could still be with him. Was *he* in danger? Yates sent a prayer heavenward.

Miss B apparently didn’t work through his same logic. She drew in a startled breath, and he saw her lurch toward her door.

No! He didn’t dare scream it, though he willed it at her as loudly as he could and reached toward the screen separating them.

Too late. She was already out, already screaming, “You!”

Yates clenched his teeth and his hands, trying to peer

through the grate without giving himself away. He couldn't burst out to see what was going on—he had no disguise on, and no one could know that Mr. A of the Imposters was in fact Lord Yates Fairfax, ninth Earl Fairfax. Anonymity was the key to their entire success.

Which mattered for exactly three more seconds. And then the unthinkable sounded—gunshots, there in James's church.

The next moments were a blur. He burst out, but only in time to see two men running for the doors again. He made note of their relative heights, their clothing, the color of hair he could see under their hats, but he didn't run after them—not given the moan from the floor.

He fell to his knees beside the young woman. Her eyes were closed, blood staining her clothes in three places. He checked for her pulse, found it present, and took stock of the wounds as he noted more footsteps coming from the direction of the office.

One bullet in her shoulder—through and through. One in her side—he prayed it had missed any vital organs. One in her leg. Whoever those men had been, they either had lousy aim or hadn't meant to kill her, only to wound her.

“Yates!”

“Blast it, James.” His friend knew better than to call him by name in the presence of a client. But then, he was understandably in shock. And Yates was out here in the open, face undisguised, so what did it matter? Besides, the girl was unconscious, despite that the gunshots shouldn't have made her so. He'd need to examine her head, see if she'd struck it on the stone of the floor as she fell. “I'm fine. It's the girl.”

He looked down at her again, and two things struck him. First, that she was beautiful—beyond beautiful. And second, that it was a thought he'd had about her before—when he'd

seen her in the society columns, next to photographs of his sister.

She wasn't *Miss* anything. She was Lady Alethia Barre-more, daughter of the previous viceroy of India.

And if she opened her eyes, she'd know his deepest secret.