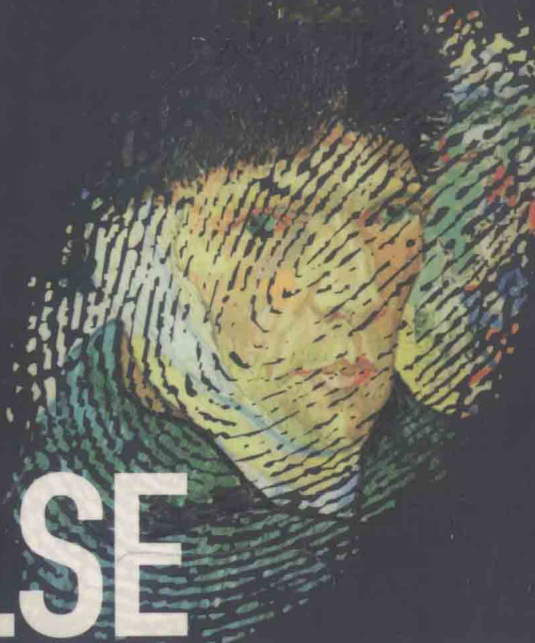


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FALSE IMPRESSION

JEFFREY ARCHER, whose novels and short stories include *Not a Penny More, Not a Penny Less*, *Kane & Abel* and *A Twist in the Tale*, has topped the bestseller lists around the world, with sales of over 120 million copies.

The author has served five years in the House of Commons, fourteen years in the House of Lords, and two in Her Majesty's prisons, which spawned three highly acclaimed *Prison Diaries*.

False Impression is his first novel since being released from prison, and he is currently working on a screenplay and a new volume of short stories, entitled *Cat o' Nine Tales*.

The author is married with two children, and lives in London and Cambridge.

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False Impression

TO TARA

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Jeffrey Archer

9/10

1

VICTORIA WENTWORTH sat alone at the table where Wellington had dined with sixteen of his field officers the night before he set out for Waterloo.

General Sir Harry Wentworth sat at the right hand of the Iron Duke that night, and was commanding his left flank when a defeated Napoleon rode off the battle-field and into exile. A grateful monarch bestowed on the general the title Earl of Wentworth, which the family had borne proudly since 1815.

These thoughts were running through Victoria's mind as she read Dr Petrescu's report for a second time. When she turned the last page, she let out a sigh of relief. A solution to all her problems had been found, quite literally at the eleventh hour.

The dining-room door opened noiselessly and Andrews, who from second footman to butler had served three generations of Wentworths, deftly removed her ladyship's dessert plate.

'Thank you,' Victoria said, and waited until he had reached the door before she added, 'and has everything been arranged for the removal of the painting?' She couldn't bring herself to mention the artist's name.

'Yes, m'lady,' Andrews replied, turning back to face his mistress. 'The picture will have been dispatched before you come down for breakfast.'

'And has everything been prepared for Dr Petrescu's visit?'

‘Yes, m’lady,’ repeated Andrews. ‘Dr Petrescu is expected around midday on Wednesday, and I have already informed cook that she will be joining you for lunch in the conservatory.’

‘Thank you, Andrews,’ said Victoria. The butler gave a slight bow and quietly closed the heavy oak door behind him.

By the time Dr Petrescu arrived, one of the family’s most treasured heirlooms would be on its way to America, and although the masterpiece would never be seen at Wentworth Hall again, no one outside the immediate family need be any the wiser.

Victoria folded her napkin and rose from the table. She picked up Dr Petrescu’s report and walked out of the dining room and into the hall. The sound of her shoes echoed in the marble hallway. She paused at the foot of the staircase to admire Gainsborough’s full-length portrait of Catherine, Lady Wentworth, who was dressed in a magnificent long silk and taffeta gown, set off by a diamond necklace and matching earrings. Victoria touched her ear and smiled at the thought that such an extravagant bauble must have been considered quite risqué at the time.

Victoria looked steadfastly ahead as she climbed the wide marble staircase to her bedroom on the first floor. She felt unable to look into the eyes of her ancestors, brought to life by Romney, Lawrence, Reynolds, Lely and Kneller, conscious of having let them all down. Victoria accepted that before she retired to bed she must finally write to her sister and let her know the decision she had come to.

Arabella was so wise and sensible. If only her beloved twin had been born a few minutes earlier rather than a few minutes later, then *she* would have inherited the estate, and undoubtedly handled the problem with con-

siderably more panache. And worse, when Arabella learned the news, she would neither complain nor remonstrate, just continue to display the family's stiff upper lip.

Victoria closed the bedroom door, walked across the room and placed Dr Petrescu's report on her desk. She undid her bun, allowing the hair to cascade onto her shoulders. She spent the next few minutes brushing her hair, before taking off her clothes and slipping on a silk nightgown, which a maid had laid out on the end of the bed. Finally she stepped into her bedroom slippers. Unable to avoid the responsibility any longer, she sat down at her writing desk and picked up her fountain pen.

WENTWORTH HALL

September 10th, 2001

My dearest Arabella,

I have put off writing this letter for far too long, as you are the last person who deserves to learn such distressing news.

When dear Papa died and I inherited the estate, it was some time before I appreciated the full extent of the debts he had run up. I fear my lack of business experience, coupled with crippling death duties, only exacerbated the problem.

I thought the answer was to borrow even more, but that has simply made matters worse. At one point I feared that because of my naivety we might even end up having to sell our family's estate. But I am pleased to tell you that a solution has been found.

On Wednesday, I will be seeing—

Victoria thought she heard the bedroom door open. She wondered which of her servants would have considered entering the room without knocking.

By the time Victoria had turned to find out who it was, she was already standing by her side.

Victoria stared up at a woman she had never seen before. She was young, slim, and even shorter than Victoria. She smiled sweetly, which made her appear vulnerable. Victoria returned her smile, and then noticed she was carrying a kitchen knife in her right hand.

'Who—' began Victoria as a hand shot out, grabbed her by the hair and snapped her head back against the chair. Victoria felt the thin, razor-sharp blade as it touched the skin of her neck. In one swift movement the knife sliced open her throat as if she were a lamb being sent to slaughter.

Moments before Victoria died, the young woman cut off her left ear.

9/11

2

ANNA PETRESCU touched the button on the top of her bedside clock. It glowed 5.56am. Another four minutes and it would have woken her with the early morning news. But not today. Her mind had been racing all through the night, only allowing her intermittent patches of sleep. By the time she finally woke, Anna had decided exactly what she must do if the chairman was unwilling to go along with her recommendations. She switched off the automatic alarm, avoiding any news that might distract her, jumped out of bed and headed straight for the bathroom. Anna remained under the cold shower a little longer than usual, hoping it would fully wake her. Her last lover – heaven knows how long ago that must have been – thought it amusing that she always showered *before* going out for her morning run.

Once she had dried herself, Anna slipped on a white T-shirt and blue running shorts. Although the sun had not yet risen, she didn't need to open the bedroom curtains of her little room to know that it was going to be another clear, sunny day. She zipped up her tracksuit top, which still displayed a faded 'P' where the bold blue letter had been unstitched. Anna didn't want to advertise the fact that she had once been a member of the University of Pennsylvania track team. After all, that was nine years ago. Anna finally pulled on her Nike training shoes and tied the laces very tight. Nothing annoyed her more than having to stop in the middle of her morning

run to retie her laces. The only other thing she wore that morning was her front-door key, attached to a thin silver chain that hung around her neck.

Anna double-locked the front door of her four-room apartment, walked across the corridor and pressed the elevator button. While she waited for the little cubicle to travel grudgingly up to the tenth floor, she began a series of stretching exercises that would be completed before the elevator returned to the ground floor.

Anna stepped out into the lobby and smiled at her favourite doorman, who quickly opened the front door so that she didn't have to stop in her tracks.

'Morning, Sam,' Anna said, as she jogged out of Thornton House onto East 54th Street and headed towards Central Park.

Every weekday she ran the Southern Loop. On the weekends she would tackle the longer six-mile loop, when it didn't matter if she was a few minutes late. It mattered today.



Bryce Fenston also rose before six o'clock that morning, as he too had an early appointment. While he showered, Fenston listened to the morning news: a suicide bomber who had blown himself up on the West Bank – an event that had become as commonplace as the weather forecast, or the latest currency fluctuation – didn't cause him to raise the volume.

'Another clear, sunny day, with a gentle breeze heading south-east, highs of 77, lows of 65,' announced a chirpy weather girl as Fenston stepped out of the shower. A more serious voice replaced hers, to inform him that the Nikkei in Tokyo was up fourteen points, and Hong Kong's Hang Seng down one. London's FTSE hadn't yet made up its mind in which direction to go.