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Opening Extract from...

Not Dead Yet

Written by Peter James

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1

I am warning you, and I won't repeat this warning. Don't take the part. You'd better believe me. Take the part and you are dead. Bitch.

2

Gaia Lafayette was unaware of the man out in the dark, in the station wagon, who had come to kill her. And she was unaware of the email he had sent. She got hate mail all the time, mostly from religious nutters or folk upset by her swearing or her provocative costumes in some of her stage acts and music videos. Those emails were screened and kept from bothering her by her trusted head of security, Detroit-born Andrew Gulli, a tough ex-cop who'd spent most of his career on close protection work for vulnerable political figures.

He knew when to be worried enough to tell his boss, and this piece of trash that had come in, on an anonymous Hotmail account, was not something he figured had any substance. His employer got a dozen like this every week.

It was 10 p.m. and Gaia was trying to focus on the script she was reading, but she couldn't concentrate. She was focused even more on the fact that she had run out of cigarettes. The sweet, but oh so dim-witted Pratap, who did all her shopping, and who she hadn't the heart to fire because his wife had a brain tumour, had bought the wrong brand. She had her limit of four cigarettes a day, and didn't actually *need* any more, but old habits die hard. She used to mainline the damned things, claiming they were essential for her famed gravelly voice. Not so many years back she'd have one before she got out of bed, followed by one burning in the ashtray while she showered. Every action accompanied by a cigarette. Now she was kicking free, but she *had* to know they were in the house. Just in case she needed them.

Like so much else she needed in life. Starting with her adoring public. Checking the count of Twitter followers and Facebook *likes*. Both were substantially up again today, each nearly a million up in the past month alone, still keeping her well ahead of both the performers she viewed as her rivals, Madonna and Lady Gaga. And

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she now had nearly ten million subscribers to her monthly e-newsletter. And then there were her seven homes, of which this copy of a Tuscan palazzo, built five years ago to her specification on a three-acre lot, was the largest.

The walls, mirrored full length floor-to-ceiling to create the illusion of infinite space, were decorated with Aztec art interspersed with larger-than-life posters of herself. The house, like all her others, was a catalogue of her different incarnations. Gaia had reinvented herself constantly throughout her career as a rock star, and more recently, two years ago at thirty-five, had started reinventing herself again, this time as a movie actor.

Above her head was a huge, framed monochrome signed photo of herself in a black negligee, titled WORLD TOUR GAIA SAVING THE PLANET. Another, with her wearing a tank top and leather jeans, was captioned, GAIA REVELATIONS TOUR. Above the fireplace, in dramatic green was a close-up of her lips, nose and eyes – GAIA UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL.

Her agent and her manager phoned her daily, both men reassuring her just how much the world needed her. Just the way that her growing social networking base – all outsourced by her management company – reassured her, too. And at this moment, the one person in the world she cared about most – Roan, her six-year-old son – needed her just as much. He padded barefoot across the marble floor, in his Armani Junior pyjamas, his brown hair all mussed up, his face scrunched in a frown, and tapped her on the arm as she lay on the white sofa, propped against the purple velvet cushions. ‘Mama, you didn’t come and read me a story.’

She stretched out a hand and mussed up his hair some more. Then she put down the script and took him in her arms, hugging him. ‘I’m sorry, sweetie. It’s late, way past your bedtime, and Mama’s really busy tonight, learning her lines. She has a really big part – see? Mama’s playing Maria Fitzherbert, the mistress of an English king! King George the Fourth.’

Maria Fitzherbert was the diva of her day, in Regency England. Just like she herself was the diva of her day now, and they had something profound in common. Maria Fitzherbert spent most of her life in Brighton, in England. And she, Gaia, had been born in

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Brighton! She felt a connection to this woman, across time. She was born to play this role!

Her agent said this was the new *King's Speech*. An Oscar role, no question. And she wanted an Oscar oh so badly. The first two movies she had made were okay, but had not set the world on fire. In hindsight, she realized, it was because she hadn't chosen well and the scripts were – frankly – weak. This movie now could give her the critical acclaim she craved. She'd fought hard for this role. And she'd succeeded.

Hell, you had to fight in life. Fortune favoured the brave. Some people were born with silver spoons so far up their assholes they stuck in their gullets, and some, like herself, were born on the wrong side of the tracks. It had been a long journey to here, through her early days of waiting tables, and two husbands, to the place she was now at, and where she felt comfortable. Just herself, Roan and Todd, the fitness instructor who gave her great sex when she needed it and kept out of her face when she didn't, and her trusted entourage, Team Gaia.

She picked up the script and showed him the white and the blue pages. 'Mama has to learn all this before she flies to England.'

'You promised.'

'Didn't Steffie read to you tonight?' Steffie was the nanny.

He looked forlorn. 'You read better. I like it when you read.'

She looked at her watch. 'It's after ten o'clock. Way past your bedtime!'

'I can't sleep. I can't sleep unless you read to me, Mama.'

She tossed the script on to the glass coffee table, lifted him down and stood up. 'Okay, one quick story. Okay?'

His face brightened. He nodded vigorously.

'Marla!' she shouted. 'Marla!'

Her assistant came into the room, cellphone pressed to her ear, arguing furiously with someone about what sounded like the seating arrangements on a plane. The one extravagance Gaia refused to have was a private jet, because of her concerns over her carbon footprint.

Marla was shouting. Didn't the fuckwit airline know who Gaia

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was? That she could fucking make or break them? She was wearing glittery Versace jeans tucked into black alligator boots, a thin black roll-neck and a gold neck chain carrying the flat gold globe engraved *Planet Gaia*. It was exactly the same way her boss was dressed tonight. Her hair mirrored her boss's, too: blonde, shoulder length, layered in a sharp razor cut with a carefully spaced and waxed fringe.

Gaia Lafayette insisted that all her staff had to dress the same way – following the daily emailed instructions of what she would be wearing, how her hair would be. They had, at all times, to be an inferior copy of herself.

Marla ended the call. 'Sorted!' she said. 'They've agreed to bump some people off the flight.' She gave Gaia an angelic smile. 'Because it's *you!*'

'I need cigarettes,' Gaia said. 'Wanna be an angel and go get me some?'

Marla shot a surreptitious glance at her watch. She had a date tonight and was already two hours late for him, thanks to Gaia's demands – nothing unusual. No previous personal assistant had lasted more than eighteen months before being fired, yet, amazingly, she was entering her third year. It was hard work and long hours, and the pay wasn't great, but the work experience was to die for, and although her boss was tough, she was kind. One day she'd be free of the chains, but not yet. 'Sure, no problem,' she said.

'Take the Merc.'

It was a balmy hot night. Gaia was smart enough to understand the small perks that went a long way.

'Cool! I'll be right back. Anything else?'

Gaia shook her head. 'You can keep the car for the night.'

'I can?'

'Sure, I'm not going anywhere.'

Marla coveted the silver SL55 AMG. She looked forward to driving the fast bends along Sunset to the convenience store. Then to picking up Jay in it afterwards. Who knew how the night might turn out? Every day working for Gaia was an adventure. Just as every night recently, since she had met Jay, was too! He was a budding

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actor, and she was determined to find a way, through her connection with Gaia, to help him get a break.

She did not know it, but as she walked out to the Mercedes, she was making a grave mistake.

3

Thirty minutes earlier, the valium had started kicking in as he set off from Santa Monica, calming him. The coke he had snorted in a brief pit stop in the grounds of UCLA in Brentwood, fifteen minutes ago, was giving him energy, and the swig of tequila he took now, from the bottle on the passenger seat beside him, gave him an extra boost of courage.

The '97 Chevy was a rust bucket, and he drove slowly because the muffler, which he couldn't afford to fix, was shot, and he didn't want to draw attention to himself with its rumbling blatter. In the darkness, with its freshly sprayed coat of paint, which he had applied last night in the lot of the deserted auto wash where he worked, no one would see quite how much of a wreck the car was, he figured.

The tyres were totally bald in parts, and he could barely afford the gas to get across town. Not that the rich folk around here, in Bel Air, would have any concept of what it meant or felt like to be poor. Behind the high hedges and electric gates were huge mansions, sitting way back, surrounded by manicured lawns and all the garden toys of the rich and successful. The *haves* of LA. Some contrast with the *have-nots*, like the decrepit rented bungalow in the skanky part of Santa Monica he shared with Dana. But that was about to change. Soon she was going to get the recognition she had long deserved. Then they might be rich enough to buy a place like the ones around here.

The occupants of half the homes he passed by were named on the copy of the *Star Maps*, so it was easy to figure out who was who. It sat, crumpled and well-thumbed, beside him, beneath the half-empty tequila bottle. And there was one sure way to cruise the streets of Bel Air without drawing attention to yourself from the infestation of police and private security patrols. Hey, he was an actor, and actors were chameleons, blending into their roles. Which was why he was dressed in a security guard uniform, driving right along the outside

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perimeter of Gaia Lafayette's estate, passing the dark, fortress-like gates in a gleaming Chevy station-wagon emblazoned with large blue and red letters: BEL-AIR-BEVERLY PRIVATE SECURITY SERVICES – ARMED RESPONSE. He had applied the wording, from decals, himself.

The arrogant bitch had totally ignored his email. It had been announced in all the Hollywood trade papers last week that she had boarded the project. She was going to be playing Maria Fitzherbert – or *Mrs* Fitzherbert as the woman had been known to the world – mistress of the Prince of Wales of England and secretly married to him. The marriage was never formally approved because she was a Catholic, and had the marriage been ratified, then her husband could never have become King George IV.

It was one of the greatest love stories in the British monarchy. And in the opinion of the showbiz gossip websites, one of the greatest screen roles ever to have been offered.

Every actress in the world, of the right age, was after it. It had *Oscar potential* written all over it. And Gaia was so not suitable, she would make a total screw-up. She was just a rock star, for God's sake! She wasn't an actress. She hadn't been to drama school. She hadn't struggled for years to get an agent, to get noticed by the players in this city who mattered. All she had done was sing second-rate songs, peel off her clothes, flaunt her body, and sleep with the right people. Suddenly she decides she's an actress!

In taking this part, she had screwed a lot of genuinely talented actresses out of one of the best roles of the past decade.

Like Dana Lonsdale.

And she just did not have any right to do that. Gaia didn't need the money. She didn't need to be any more famous than she already was. All she was doing now was feeding her greed and vanity. Taking bread out of everyone else's mouth to do that. Someone had to stop her.

He patted the pistol jammed in his pocket, uneasily. He'd never fired a gun in his life. The goddamn things made him nervous. But sometimes you had to do what you believed was right.

It was his pop's gun. He'd found it beneath the bed in the old man's trailer, after he had died. A Glock. He didn't even know the

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calibre, but had managed to identify it, from comparisons on the internet, as a .38. It had a loaded magazine of eight bullets, and on the floor beside the gun he had found a small carton containing more.

At first, he had planned to try to sell the thing, or even just throw it away. And right now he wished he had binned it. But he couldn't. It was there, in his home, like an ever-present reminder from his father. That the only way to stop injustices was to do something about them.

And tonight the time had come. He was intending to stop a big injustice.

Oh yes.

4

Like many farmers, early morning was Keith Winter's favourite time of the day. He liked to be up before the rest of the world, and he particularly loved this time of year, early June, when the sun rose before 5 a.m.

Although, on this particular day, he walked out of his house with a heavy heart, and crossed the short distance to the chicken shed with leaden steps.

He considered Lohmann Browns to be the best layers, which was the reason he had 32,000 of this particular breed of hens. By looking after them and nurturing them carefully, free range, during their short lives, the way he did here at Stonery Farm, he could get their eggs to taste consistently better than any of his rivals.

He kept the birds in humane, healthy surroundings, gave them all the space they needed, and fed them on his secret diet of wheat, oil, soya, calcium, sodium and a programme of vitamins. Despite the fact that his hens were aggressive in nature, and cannibals if given the chance, he was fond of them in the way that all good farmers cared for the animals that gave them their livelihood.

He housed them in a dry, clean, modern single-storey building, with a large outdoor run, that stretched out for over one hundred yards across the remote East Sussex hilltop property. Alongside were shiny steel silos containing the grain feed. At the far end were two lorries that had arrived a short while ago, at this early hour. A tractor was parked near by and sundry agricultural equipment, a rusting shipping container, pallets and sections of railing lay haphazardly around. His Jack Russell bounded around in search of an early rabbit.

Despite the strong breeze coming in off the English Channel, five miles to the south, Keith could feel the approach of summer in the air. He could smell it in the dry grass and dusty soil and the pollen that gave him hay fever. But although he loved the summer

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months, the advent of June was always a time of mixed emotions for him, because all his cherished hens would be gone, to end up in markets, with their final destinations being as nuggets, or soup, or ready-to-eat chicken dishes.

Most farmer acquaintances he talked to considered their hens to be nothing more than egg-laying machines, and in truth his wife Linda thought he was a little nuts the way he became so fond of these dumb creatures. But he couldn't help it; he was a perfectionist, obsessive about the quality of his eggs and his birds, constantly experimenting with their diet and supplements, and forever working on their accommodation to make it as conducive as possible for laying. Some eggs were trundling out of the conveyor belt into the grading machine, as he entered. He picked one large sample up, checked it for blemishes and colour consistency, tapped the shell for thickness and set it down again, satisfied. It trundled on past a stack of empty egg-cartons and out of sight.

A tall, solidly built sixty-three-year-old, with the youthful face of a man who has retained all his enthusiasm for life, Keith Winter was dressed in an old white T-shirt, blue shorts, and stout shoes with grey socks. The airy interior of the shed was partitioned into two sections. He entered the right-hand section now, into an echoing cacophony of noise, like the incoherent babble of a thousand simultaneous cocktail parties. He had long got used to, and barely even noticed, the almost overpowering reek of ammonia from the hen droppings, which fell through slats in the gridded metal floor into the deep sump below.

As one particularly aggressive hen pecked, painfully, at the hairs on his leg, he stared along the length of the shed, at the sea of brown and white creatures with their red crests, all strutting around in a busy manner, as if they had important engagements awaiting them. The shed was already starting to thin out, and large areas of the gridding were visible. The catchers had started early this morning, nine workers from Eastern Europe, mostly Latvian and Lithuanian, in their protective clothing and face masks, grabbing the hens, carrying them out through the doors at the far end and placing them in specially designed cages in the lorries.

The process would take all day, at the end of which the shed

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would be empty, leaving just the bare grid. A team from a specialist company would then come in to lift up the grid slats and remove the year's four-foot-deep collection of droppings with a mechanical bobcat.

Suddenly, he heard a shout from the far end, and saw one of the workers running towards him, dodging through the hens, his face mask removed. 'Mr Boss!' he shouted urgently at Keith, in broken English, with a look of panic on his face. 'Mr Boss, sir! Something not right. Not good. Please you come have look!'