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Tempting Evil

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Published by Piatkus Books

Extract

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PIATKUS

First published in 2008 by Piatkus Books
First published in the US in 2008 by Ballantine Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-7499-0973-4

Typeset in Times by Action Publishing Technology Ltd, Gloucester
Printed in Australia by Griffin Press, Salisbury, South Australia

Piatkus Books
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette Livre UK Company
www.hachettelivre.co.uk

www.piatkus.co.uk

PROLOGUE

Eighteen months ago

"I should have killed the bitch when I had the chance."

Aaron Doherty wanted to tell Linc to shut up. Instead, he ignored him. No confrontations until he was ready. He wasn't about to blow his only chance.

It was almost time.

August was the only time San Quentin State Prison lost its dank, musty drenched-dog odor. The hot, stagnant salty air couldn't mask the foul stench of old urine and sweat, but at least Aaron wasn't cold.

"Shit, Doherty, put the fucking book down."

He didn't respond. *Don't let him goad you*. He turned the page, wishing brick rather than bars separated the cells.

"I can't believe you're reading that crap. She's a bigger fucking bitch than her sister. You should have heard her on the stand. Like I hunted down Trix! We could have worked it out. We would have, if it wasn't for her."

"You killed her husband and son." Aaron hadn't

meant to say anything, but Linc was pissing him off.

"I *told* you how it was. I didn't mean to kill the kid. I have a kid of my own, I don't hurt kids. It's not like I'm a damn pervert like Monroe."

"Shut the fuck up!" Monroe shouted from the cell on the other side of Linc.

The buzzer rang loud in the prison, the announcement for dinner. Like trained rats, they lined up by their cell doors and waited for the electronic lock to be released.

Aaron's heart raced. *The time had come!*

Aaron walked behind Linc along the catwalk. He didn't look any of the other prisoners in the eye. They shuffled along, sweating, not talking. The slop they served was barely edible, but it was food and missing a meal was worse than eating the crap, so they stayed in order.

The shiv passed up through the line and landed in Aaron's hand. He'd had to call in favors and pay off a half-dozen people to set this up. What they'd do for a few smokes. They'd heard the rumor of a new directive coming down, that the prison authority was going to ban smoking. Everyone was hoarding, and Aaron had the best stash for now—he hid his allotment because he didn't smoke, couldn't stand the stuff.

Aaron hid the sharp, deadly, handmade wood shiv up his shirt. He waited for the signal. *Calm.*

It happened just as they were carrying their trays from the line to the table.

"Don't touch me, faggot!"

The ruckus came from across the room. Aaron didn't look, didn't comment, as he walked by Linc, tray balanced on one hand, and jammed the shiv just below Linc's sternum.

Aaron kept walking.

He learned later that he'd pierced Linc's lung. That was why the bastard couldn't scream.

No one noticed Linc lying there on the floor until after the confrontation on the far side of the dining hall had dissipated.

Then chaos.

By that time, Aaron was eating four tables away, mentally composing a letter to his one true love, a letter he would never write, much less mail.

Dearest Joanna:

Tonight I killed Lincoln Barnes for you. He was a vile man, trash, and I am saddened that his brutality hurt you.

Tonight, justice was served. In the name of love, I killed for you. You deserve nothing less.

We can't be together now, but I have at least one more appeal. Maybe you'll visit me. I love you and I miss you.

Love Always,
Aaron

CHAPTER ONE

Twenty-four hours ago

Aaron Doherty caressed the worn, full-page picture he'd cut from a magazine article more than a year ago.

Joanna.

His love was beautiful: blonde hair woven with gold, large, round chocolate eyes, and two deep dimples that he suspected revealed themselves even when she wasn't smiling. He couldn't wait to touch her, her smooth, fair skin, skim his fingers over her red lips, kiss her.

Joanna's beauty was just part of her attraction. She was the only woman in the world who truly understood him. And when they finally met in the flesh for the first time, she'd know instantly that Aaron was her true love.

Just like he knew when he first saw her picture two years ago. When he read her books. When he learned everything about her.

When he killed for her.

They were soul mates. Every word she wrote, she crafted for him. Every story she told, she told just

for him. Like in *Act Naturally.*

He pulled the battered book from his backpack. He'd stolen it from a library last week, shortly after the quake and their escape. It had physically pained him to leave all his Joanna Sutton books behind in his cell, but he didn't have a choice. The earthquake had hit when his cell block inmates were on the exercise yard at San Quentin State Prison. He'd been standing alone thinking (of course) about Joanna. Doug Chapman was only a couple of feet away sneaking a smoke—much easier when it was so cold you could see your breath—and then the ground shook. Aaron had lived in California for years, but never realized how loud earthquakes were when you were at the epicenter. He and Doug saw the breach in the wall and they went over it as soon as they could move. No looking back, no stopping when the guards shouted. Aaron watched one of his fellow prisoners, a cold bastard named Theodore Glenn, kill one of the injured guards. Still, he kept going.

Aaron knew immediately where he was headed. Montana. To be with Joanna.

He'd taken three of her paperback novels from the library because they didn't have the security sensors in the spine and he could easily hide them in his jacket. He wished he had more.

He opened it to one of the many underlined passages. He'd read the book twice since the escape last week. It made this time moving from one filthy motel room to another more bearable.

She swung her legs just enough to make the porch swing move, then tucked them beneath her, the easy rocking of the old chair comforting her. Was Garrett thinking of her? Thinking of her over thousands of

miles, in the desert, serving his country. Being the hero she'd always known he could be.

Grace took the newspaper article from her pocket. It was worn and torn from being carried everywhere, but she couldn't bear to part with it. Front-page headline: Hometown Hero Saves Three in Bombing.

She stared at the vast openness that was her home as tears clouded her vision. Her hand absently rested on the small swell of her stomach. How could she tell him over the phone about this new life they had created? Over e-mail? How could she act like everything was the same when her entire world had changed overnight?

"Come home safe, Garrett."

Garrett and Grace lived happily-ever-after, and so would Aaron and Joanna. She was thinking of him right now, he could feel it. Wondering when he was going to come for her. She'd recognize that he was her hero as soon as she saw him. She'd kiss him, touch him, love him. She'd stay with him forever.

I'm almost there, Joanna.

His dick hardened and he shifted uncomfortably in the motel's torn vinyl chair. He shoved his hand down his pants to alleviate the discomfort, but it only made his hard-on worse and he groaned.

Aaron let himself think about Joanna as he rubbed himself. They would get married in a quiet ceremony, then he'd take her to a secluded hideaway where they could be together. Maybe they'd never leave. He'd make love to her every night, and watch her write every day. They'd be inseparable.

He groaned again and looked at the picture of Joanna, on the verge of release.

Rebecca.

Joanna's face morphed into the woman who had once loved him. Who had hurt him. Who had made him kill her, the bitch.

"I love you, Rebecca. I know you love me."

"You know it's not like that between us. I don't love you, not like that. Please don't do this to me."

"What do you mean you don't love me? You tell me all the time you love me! Have you been lying to me? Playing with me?"

She stared at him as if he were a stranger. Was that fear in her eyes? Why would she be scared of him? He worshipped her. Her fear made him angry. More than anger, he panicked that she would leave him.

"Aaron, you need to go. Now."

"No!" They were in Rebecca's house. She'd invited him over. He'd been over many times.

(*Only twice, and because you made her invite you in.*)

Aaron stamped down the dark voice and grabbed Rebecca by the arms. "Did someone make you deny your feelings? That asshole you're working with on the set, Bruce Lawson?"

"Bruce?" She shook her head rapidly back and forth. "I don't know what you're talking about Aaron. You're scaring me. Please, please let me go."

He shook her and her hair came loose. "Don't you understand? We were meant to be together, Rebecca."

"Let me go!"

"Tell me you love me!"

Tears streamed down her face.

"You love me, I know you do, just last week you said, 'I cannot imagine living another day without you.' "

She blinked rapidly, confusion on her face. "What? That was a line from my movie. What are you saying?"

"We've known each other forever, Rebecca."

"We know each other because we're neighbors." She was sobbing, her voice becoming hysterical. "Please stop this!" She opened her mouth and he knew she was going to scream.

A vise gripped his heart, squeezing so hard he couldn't breathe, he couldn't think, blood pumped, louder, hotter, faster, the tightness in his chest blocking out everything.

He didn't know how the knife got into his hand. He didn't even remember bringing it to her house. Suddenly a long red slash cut open Rebecca's cheek and she was screaming, in pain and fear.

Aaron moaned, a pathetically weak sound, as he shook his head, ridding himself of the image of Rebecca's bloodied face. His dick had gone limp without relief. He crumbled Rebecca's picture and threw it against the wall.

Joanna. It wasn't Rebecca in the photograph, it was Joanna!

He rushed across the room and picked up the paper. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." He carefully smoothed the picture, trying to rub out the wrinkles, then refolded it, heart racing.

Joanna wasn't Rebecca. She wouldn't lie to him. Aaron had it figured out. Someone had told Rebecca to leave him. That Bruce Lawson. She hadn't wanted to, she'd been manipulated.

(*You killed her Aaron*.)

He didn't want to think about that day. It depressed him because he'd never wanted to hurt Rebecca. He'd loved her. But she lied, and he hated liars.

(*You don't deserve women like Rebecca. Or Joanna.*)

Aaron pushed the dark thoughts from his head, sat in the uneven chair and stared at the cigarette-scarred table until his pulse slowed to normal.

A key in the door made Aaron jump and look around for escape. If it were the cops, they'd burst in, or pound loudly, shouting their presence. Aaron swallowed his apprehension from being on the run for nearly a week.

It was Doug holding two large fast-food bags in clenched fists. Originally, after the earthquake, it seemed like a good idea to stick close to his cell neighbor Doug Chapman. He had great instincts, could hot-wire a car, and he got them a gun within twenty-four hours. But after living next to the guy in a six-by-nine-foot cell for eighteen months, and being practically tied at the hip this last week, Aaron was antsy. The last thirty minutes while Doug had been out getting food had been the first real peace he'd had in days.

"Fuck, Aaron, we should have gone south for the winter. I should never have listened to you." Doug dropped the food on the table.

"You're free to leave," Aaron said, lips tight. "I'll give you half the money."

"Chill, man. We agreed we were in this together, that two is better than one and all that crap."

"Where's O'Brien?"

"Coming," Doug said. He pulled off his jacket and tore open the bags. "We caught the news while we were waiting. They caught Blackie and his gang over in San Francisco yesterday. I think O'Brien got a little freaked someone would recognize us." Doug nervously ran his hands over his buzz cut, frazzled

for the first time since they'd escaped five days ago. "*That guy* got them all."

"Two guys drowned in the bay the night of the quake," Aaron answered. "Your *ghost* didn't get everyone."

"I don't give a fuck about them, *Blackie* was caught. I thought he'd be smart, sure thing."

Aaron shrugged. Doug had a theory about everything, Aaron had learned since Lincoln Barnes died and Doug moved into his cell. Doug's current theory was that someone was tracking all the escapees—a ghost or some avenging angel.

"We gotta get the hell out of here."

"We're already a thousand miles from Quentin," Aaron said. "We got new clothes, some money, we're laying low. I have a place for us. And Blackie was a brute. He was stupid, robbing stores right and left. Aren't you glad I stopped you from joining their gang?"

Doug shrugged, talking with his mouth full. "Guess so. But I swear, I'm gonna go down to fucking Mexico as soon as it's safe. Somewhere where there's no snow. It's twenty degrees out there! *Twenty!*" He slurped his soda.

"Why do we have to go in separate?" Doug continued to complain, shoving fries into his mouth, his face low to the table as if someone would snatch his food at any moment.

"If—and this is a big if—the Feds come up this way, they might be looking for the three of us. So I'll go in alone first, then you and O'Brien come up later. Say you have car trouble. Went off the road or something." Aaron unwrapped his burger and took a bite. *Where was O'Brien?*

"Are you sure?" Doug asked.

"We can feel out the situation when we get to the lodge." His true love Joanna waited for him at the Moosehead Lodge. He didn't want Doug anywhere around Joanna, at least not at first. Aaron needed to assess the situation, make a plan, and decide exactly what they should do. Doug may or may not be part of the bigger picture. Right now, Aaron needed him. But later, when he and Joanna were together? Probably not.

Aaron added, "Maybe there's something else—"

They were interrupted by a knock on the door. Doug pulled out the gun they'd stolen yesterday. Aaron waved him back. "It's probably O'Brien." He opened the door, cautious. He didn't trust the guy. He didn't know him well, he'd transferred into the East Block of San Quentin from the North Seg only a week before the quake. All they knew about the guy was that he was in for popping his wife and her lover, and was out of appeals. He'd been scheduled to walk the long mile in six months, but the Western Innocence Project had taken an interest.

Innocent. They all had reasons—damn good reasons in Aaron's case—for murder. And it didn't look like the Project had been able to do anything for O'Brien—why would he have gone through the wall if he'd be getting out on some technicality in a few months?

Aaron and Doug still had time and appeals, and neither had a death wish. Would O'Brien take dangerous chances because it didn't matter one way or the other—dead now in a gunfight, or dead this summer by lethal injection? Aaron didn't want to risk it. He had a future—a life with Joanna—and wasn't about to get himself killed.

But O'Brien seemed dead earnest about wanting

to make amends with his daughter, who hadn't written or spoken to him since he'd been convicted fifteen years ago.

Aaron asked O'Brien, "Where've you been?"

He held up a ski jacket. "I saw an unlocked car and thought I could use better clothes. I'm freezing." He pulled several pairs of socks from his pockets, tossed a pair at both Aaron and Doug.

"You can say that again," Doug mumbled. "Thanks, man."

"So, are you coming with us to Montana or going back to see your kid?"

O'Brien frowned. "I can't go back yet. The cops are all over the place, I need to lay low, let the heat die down, then go back for my daughter."

"Just so you understand that this is my girl, my rules."

O'Brien nodded. "Absolutely. When do we head out?" He sat down and unwrapped his food.

"Tomorrow morning. Before dawn." Aaron kept his face blank. During his nine years in prison, he'd learned a lot—and something about Tom O'Brien wasn't right. He just couldn't put his finger on it.

"What about the storm they were talking about on the news?" Doug asked.

Aaron waved off his concern. "We'll be ahead of it. Besides, it may be cold, but it's clear."

He listened to O'Brien and Doug bitch about the cold. Something about O'Brien's eyes. They were familiar, and Aaron didn't know why. He'd never met the guy, not until he transferred last week and then not more than two words until the quake.

It was best not to talk to strangers in prison.

But . . . the sense of something predatory lingered.

Aaron wasn't going to turn his back on O'Brien.

In less than twenty-four hours, you'll be with Joanna. And finally, at peace.