High Noon

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Published by Piatkus Books

Extract

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INITIAL PHASE

Do not forsake me, oh, my darlin'.

—"HIGH NOON"

1

JUMPING TO YOUR DEATH was a crappy way to spend St. Patrick's Day. Being called in on your day off to talk someone out of jumping to his death on St. Patrick's Day wasn't exactly green beer and bagpipes.

Phoebe weaved and dodged her way through the crowds of Savannahians and tourists thronging streets and sidewalks in celebration. Captain David McVee thought ahead, she noted. Even with a badge, it would've taken precious time and miserable effort to get through the barricades and mobs of people in her car. But a couple blocks east of Jones, the revelry thinned, and the booming music was only a throb and echo.

The uniformed officer waited as ordered. His gaze skimmed over her face, down to the badge she'd hooked on the pocket of her khakis. Cropped pants, sandals, shamrock-green T-shirt under a linen jacket, Phoebe thought. Not the professional look she worked to foster on the job.

But what could you do? She was supposed to be standing on the

terrace of MacNamara House, with her family, drinking lemonade and watching the parade.

"Lieutenant MacNamara?"

"That's right. Let's move." She slid in, flipping out her phone with one hand, dragging the seat belt on with the other. "Captain, I'm en route. Fill me in."

The siren screamed as the driver punched the gas. Phoebe yanked out her notebook, taking cursory notes.

Joseph (Joe) Ryder, suicidal. Jumper with gun. Twenty-seven, white, married/separated. Bartender/fired. No known religious affiliation. No family on scene.

WHY? Wife left, fired from job (sports bar), gambling debts.

No criminal, no previous suicide attempt on record.

Subject alternately weepy/belligerent. No shots fired.

"Okay." Phoebe let out a breath. She'd get to know Joe much better very soon. "Who's talking to him?"

"He's got his cell phone on him. The first on scene wasn't able to engage. Guy just kept clicking off. We've got his employer here—former employer, who's also his landlord. The subject's been talking to him off and on, but there's no progress."

"You?"

"I'd barely gotten here when I pulled you in. I didn't want to throw too many people at him."

"All right. My ETA's five minutes." She glanced at the driver, got a nod of affirmation. "Keep him alive for me."

Inside Joe Ryder's fourth-floor apartment, sweat rolled down Duncan Swift's back. A guy he knew, a guy he'd had beers with, joked with, had pissed with, for God's sake, in adjoining urinals, was sitting on the ledge of the roof overhead with a gun in his hand.

Because I fired him, Duncan thought. Because I gave him thirty days to get out of the apartment. Because I didn't pay attention.

Now, it was a very strong possibility that Joe was going to put a bullet in his own ear or take a header off the roof. Maybe both.

Not exactly the kind of entertainment the crowds expected on St. Patrick's Day. Not that it was keeping them away. The cops had barri-

caded the block, but from the window Duncan could see people pressed against the barriers, faces turned up.

He wondered if Joe was wearing green.

"Come on, Joe, we'll work it out." How many *times,* Duncan asked himself, would he have to repeat that same phrase the cop kept circling in his notebook. "Just put the gun down and come inside."

"You fucking fired me!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm sorry, Joe, I was pissed off." You stole from me, you stupid dick, Duncan thought. You screwed up, stole from me. You took a damn swing at me. "I didn't realize how upset you were, or what was going on. You come inside and we'll work it out."

"You know Lori left me."

"I . . ." No, not I, Duncan remembered. His head was pulsing with the mother of all headaches, but he struggled to remember the instructions Captain McVee had given him. "You must've been feeling upset."

Joe's answer was to start sobbing again.

"Just keep him talking," Dave murmured.

Duncan listened to Joe's sobbing complaints, tried to repeat key phrases as he'd been directed.

The redhead shot into the room like a sleek bullet. She shrugged out of a light jacket while she talked to the captain, then shrugged into a bulletproof vest. All her movements lightning quick.

Duncan couldn't hear what they were saying. And he couldn't take his eyes off her.

Purpose was the first term that came to his mind. Then energy. Then sexy, though the third was mixed into the first two in equal portions. She shook her head, looked toward Duncan—long, cool stare with cat-green eyes.

"It's got to be face-to-face, Captain. You knew that when you pulled me in."

"You can try to bring him in via the phone first."

"Been tried." She studied the man currently making soothing noises over the subject's weeping. Former employer and landlord, she deduced.

Young for it, she mused. Very cute guy who looked as if he was trying hard not to panic.

"He needs a face. He needs personal contact. Is that the employer?"

"Duncan Swift, owns the bar street level of the building. He called the nine-one-one after the subject contacted him and said he was going off the roof. He's—Swift's—been on scene since."

"All right. You're the commander on this one, but I'm the negotiator. I need to go up. Let's see how the subject feels about that."

She walked over to Duncan, gestured for him to pass her the phone. "Joe? This is Phoebe. I'm with the police department. How you doing out there, Joe?"

"Why?"

"I want to make sure you're okay. You hot out there, Joe? Sun's pretty strong today. I'm going to ask Duncan to get us a couple bottles of cold water. I'd like to bring them up, talk to you up there."

"I've got a gun!"

"I hear that. If I come up with a cold drink for you, are you going to shoot me, Joe?"

"No," he said after a long moment. "No, shit. Why would I do that? I don't even know you."

"I'll bring you out a bottle of water. Just me, Joe. I want you to promise you won't jump or fire that gun now. Will you promise to let me come on out, bring you a bottle of water?"

"Rather have a beer."

The wistful tone in his voice gave her a little edge. "What kind of beer would you like?"

"Got Harp in the bottle in the fridge."

"One cold beer coming up." She walked to the refrigerator, found there was little else but beer. Even as she took one out, Duncan moved beside her to open it. She nodded, pulled out the single Coke, popped the top. "I'm coming on up with the beer, all right?"

"Yeah, a beer'd be good."

"Joe?" Her voice was as cool as the bottles in her hand as one of the cops fitted her with a wire, removed her weapon. "Are you going to commit suicide?"

"That's the plan."

"Well now, if that's your plan, I don't know as it's a good one."

She followed one of the uniforms out of the apartment, then up the stairs to the roof.

"Got nothing better to do."

"Nothing better? You sound like you're feeling pretty low. I'm at the roof door now, Joe. Is it all right if I come on out?"

"Yeah, yeah, I said so, didn't I?"

She'd been right about the sun. It was strong enough to bounce off the roof like a red-hot ball. She looked to her immediate left, and saw him.

He was wearing nothing but what looked like black boxers. Sandy-haired guy with fair skin—and that skin had already turned a painfully bright pink. He squinted at her out of eyes swollen from crying.

"I guess I should've brought out some sunscreen along with the beer." She held the bottle up so he could see it. "You're getting toasted out here, Joe."

"Don't matter."

"I'd sure appreciate it if you'd put that gun down, Joe, so I could bring you your beer."

He shook his head. "You might try something."

"I promise not to try anything if you put the gun down while I bring you the beer. All I want to do is talk, Joe, you and me. Talking's thirsty work out here in the sun."

With his feet dangling over the roof ledge, he lowered the gun, laid it in his lap. "Just put it down there, then step back."

"All right." She kept her eyes on his as she walked over. She could smell him, sweat and despair; she could see the misery in his bloodshot brown eyes. She set the bottle down carefully on the ledge, stepped back. "Okay?"

"You try anything, I'm going off."

"I understand. What happened to make you feel so low?"

He picked up the beer and, closing his hand over the gun again, took a long pull. "Why'd they send you out here?"

"They didn't send me, I came. It's what I do."

"What? You a shrink or something?" He snorted on the idea, drank again.

"Not exactly. I talk to people, especially people in trouble, or who think they are. What happened to make you think you're in trouble, Joe?"

"I'm a fuck-up, that's all."

"What makes you think you're a fuck-up?"

"Wife walked out on me. We hadn't even been married six months and she walks. She told me she would, over and over. If I started betting again, she was out the door. I didn't listen; I didn't believe her."

"It sounds like that makes you feel awful sad."

"Best thing in my life, and I screw it up. I thought I could score—just a couple of good scores and that would be it. Didn't work out." He shrugged. "Never does."

"It's not enough to die for, Joe. It's hard, and it's painful when someone you love walks away. But dying means you can't ever make it right. What's your wife's name?"

"Lori," he mumbled as tears filled his eyes again.

"I don't think you want to hurt Lori. How do you think she'll feel if you do this?"

"Why should she care?"

"She cared enough to marry you. Do you mind if I sit here?" She tapped the ledge a few feet away from him. When he shrugged, she eased a hip onto it, sipped her drink. "I think we can figure this out, Joe. Figure out how to get you help, how to get you and Lori help. You sound like you want to find a way to fix things."

"Lost my job."

"That's hard. What kind of work did you do?"

"Tending bar. Sports bar down below. Lori, she didn't want me to work in a sports bar, but I told her I could handle it. But I didn't. Couldn't. Started making bets on the side. And when I started losing, I shorted the till so Lori wouldn't find out. Bet more, lose more, steal more. Got caught, got fired. Behind on the rent, too."

He picked up the gun, turned it in his hand. Phoebe braced, and fought back the instinct to duck and cover. "What's the point? I got nothing."

"I understand how you might feel that way right now. But the fact

is, Joe, there are plenty of chances left. Everybody deserves more than one of them. If you kill yourself, it's just done. It's just over all the way. No coming back, no making it up to Lori, or to yourself. How would you make it up to her if you got the chance?"

"I don't know." He looked out over the city. "I can hear music. Must be from the parade."

"There's something to live for. What kind of music do you like?"

Inside the apartment, Duncan turned to Dave. "Music? What kind of music does he like? What the hell is she doing?"

"Keeping him talking. She's talking him down. He's telling her." Dave nodded toward the speaker. "As long as he's talking about Coldplay he's not going off the roof."

Duncan listened as they talked music for the next ten minutes, a conversation he might've heard in any bar or restaurant in the city. When he pictured Joe on the roof, it seemed surreal. When he pictured the redhead with her cat eyes and tight little body holding what smacked of small talk with a mostly naked, armed, suicidal bartender, it seemed impossible.

"Do you think I should call Lori?" Joe asked wistfully.

"Is that what you want to do?" She already knew they'd tried to reach Joe's estranged wife, without success.

"I want to tell her I'm sorry."

"That's good, telling her you're sorry. But you know what works better with women—and I know as I am one. Showing her. We believe it when you show us. You can show me right now if you give me the gun."

"I figured on shooting myself before I jumped. Or maybe on the way down."

"Look at me, Joe." When he turned his head, she kept her eyes straight on his. "Is that how you're going to show her you're sorry? By making it so she has to bury you, so she has to grieve? Are you punishing her?"

"No!" His face, his voice, registered shock at the idea. "It's my fault. It's all my fault."

"All your fault? I never believe anything is all one person's fault. But let's fix it. Let's find the way you can make it up to her."

"Phoebe, I owe almost five thousand gambling."

"Five thousand's hard. It sounds like it scares you to owe that much. I understand what it is to have money problems hanging over your head. Do you want Lori to have to pay your debt?"

"No. If I'm dead, nobody pays."

"Nobody? But she's your wife. She's your legal wife." Phoebe doubted there was any legal liability, but she could see the idea of it strike Joe. "She could be responsible for your debts."

"God. Oh God."

"I think I know how to help you with this, Joe. Joe? You know your boss is inside. He's inside there because he's worried about you."

"He's okay. Dunc's a good guy. I screwed him. Stole from him. I don't blame him for firing me."

"I hear you say that, and know you understand you're responsible for your mistakes. You're a responsible person, and you want to fix those mistakes. Dunc's a good guy, you tell me, then I'm going to believe he understands that, too. I'll talk to him for you if you want. I'm good at talking. If he'll give you an extension on paying back the money, that would help, wouldn't it?"

"I . . . I don't know."

"I'll talk to him for you."

"He's a nice guy. I stole from him."

"You were feeling desperate and scared, and you made a mistake. I sense you're sorry for that."

"I am sorry."

"I'll talk to him for you," she repeated. "You need to give me the gun, and come back off the ledge. You don't want to hurt Lori."

"I don't, but—"

"If you could talk to Lori right now, what would you say?"

"I . . . I guess that I don't know how it got this far, and I'm sorry. I love her. I don't want to lose her."

"If you don't want to lose her, if you love her, you have to give me the gun and come back off the ledge. Otherwise, Joe, all you're leaving her with is grief and blame."

"It's not her fault."

Phoebe eased off the ledge, held out a hand. "You're right, Joe. You're absolutely right. Now, show her."

He stared at the gun, stared as Phoebe slowly reached out to take it. It was slippery with his sweat as she flipped on the safety, secured it in her belt. "Come on off the ledge, Joe."

"What's going to happen?"

"Come on off the ledge and I'll explain it. I won't lie to you." Once again, she offered her hand. Shouldn't, she knew. Negotiators could be pulled off by a jumper. But she kept her eyes on his, then clasped her fingers tight on his hand.

When his feet touched the roof, he simply slid down to the floor to sob again. She went with him, draped her arm around him, and shook her head fiercely at the cops who came through the door.

"It's going to be all right. Joe, you're going to have to go with the police. You're going to need to have an evaluation. But it's going to be all right."

"I'm sorry."

"I know you are. Now you come on with me. Come on with me now." She helped him up, took his weight as they walked to the door. "Let's get you some clothes on. No cuffs," she snapped. "Joe, one of the officers is going to go get you a shirt, some pants, shoes. Is that all right?" When he nodded, she gestured one of the officers toward the bedroom.

"Am I going to jail?"

"For a little while. But we're going to get started on that help right away."

"Will you call Lori? If she'd come I could . . . I could show her I'm sorry."

"I sure will. I want that sunburn treated, and he needs some water in him."

Joe kept his eyes downcast as he pulled on jeans. "Sorry, man," he mumbled to Duncan.

"Don't worry about it. Listen, I'll get you a lawyer." Duncan looked blankly at Phoebe. "Should I?"

"That would be between you and Joe. You hang in there." She gave Joe's arm a light squeeze.

He was led out, a cop on either arm.

"Nice job, Lieutenant."

Phoebe pulled out the gun, opened it. "One bullet. He was never going to shoot anyone but himself, and the odds are fifty-fifty he'd have done that." She handed the gun to her captain. "You figured he needed to talk to a woman."

"It leaned that way for me," Dave agreed.

"All in all, looks like you were right. Somebody needs to track down his wife. I'll talk to her if she balks at seeing him." She swiped at her sweaty brow. "Is there any water in this place?"

Duncan held out a bottle. "I had some brought up."

"Appreciate it." She drank deep as she studied him. Rich, dense brown hair, tousled around an angular face with a good, strong mouth and soft blue eyes that were currently pinched with worry. "Are you pressing charges?"

"For what?"

"For what he nipped out of the till."

"No." Duncan lowered himself to the arm of a chair. Closed his eyes. "Christ, no."

"How much was it?"

"A couple thousand, a little more, I guess. It doesn't matter."

"It does. He needs to pay it back, for his own self-respect. If you want to help him, you'll work that out."

"Sure. Fine."

"You're the landlord, too?"

"Yeah. Sort of."

Phoebe lifted her brows. "Aren't you the busy one? Can you manage to float the rent another month?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

"Good."

"Look . . . all I got was Phoebe."

"MacNamara. Lieutenant MacNamara."

"I like Joe. I don't want him to go to jail."

A good guy, Joe had said. He'd likely been right on that one. "I appreciate that, but there are consequences. Paying them will help him.

He was crying for help, and now he'll get it. If you know where he owes the five thousand, he needs to make that right, too."

"I didn't know he was gambling."

This time she let out a short laugh. "You own a sports bar, but don't know there's gambling going on in it?"

His back went up. His gut was already in knots, and now his back went up. "Hey, listen, Slam Dunc's a friendly place, not a mob den. I didn't know he had a problem, or he wouldn't have been working the stick there. Some of this was my fault, but—"

"No. No." She held up a hand, rubbed the cold bottle over her damp forehead. "I'm hot, I'm irritable. And none of this was your fault. I apologize. Circumstances put him out there on that ledge, and he's responsible for those circumstances and the choices he made. Do you know where to find his wife?"

"I expect she's at the parade like everyone else in Savannah, except us."

"Do you know where she's living?"

"Not exactly, but I gave your captain a couple numbers. Friends of theirs."

"We'll find her. Are you going to be all right now?"

"Well, I'm not going to go up on the roof and jump." He let out a long sigh, shook his head. "Can I buy you a drink, Phoebe?"

She held up the bottle of water. "You already did."

"I could do better."

Hmm, a quick flicker of charm now, she noted. "This'll be fine. You should go on home, Mr. Swift."

"Duncan."

"Mmm-hmm." She gave him a fleeting smile, then picked up her discarded jacket.

"Hey, Phoebe." He made a bead for the door when she walked out. "Can I call you if I feel suicidal?"

"Try the hotline," she called back without looking around. "Odds are they'll talk you down."

He moved to the rail to look down at her. Purpose, he thought again. He could acquire a strong taste for a woman with purpose.

Then he sat on the step, pulled out his phone. He called his closest friend—who was also his lawyer—to sweet-talk him into representing a suicidal bartender with a gambling addiction.

From the second-floor balcony, Phoebe watched the green sheepdog prance. He seemed pretty damn proud of himself, matching his steps to the fife and drum played by a trio of leprechauns.

Joe was alive, and while she'd missed the curtain, she was right where she wanted to be for the second act.

Not such a crappy way to spend St. Patrick's Day after all.

Beside her, Phoebe's seven-year-old daughter bounced in her bright green sneakers. Carly had campaigned long and hard for those shoes, Phoebe recalled, whittling away at any and all resistance to the price or impracticality.

She wore them with green cropped pants with tiny dark pink dots, and a green shirt with pink piping—also a long and arduous campaign by the pint-sized fashion diva. But Phoebe had to admit, the kid looked unbelievably sweet.

Carly's sunset red hair came down from her grandmother, through her mother. The curls came from her grandmother, too—skipping a generation there, as Phoebe's was straight as a stick. The brilliant and bright blue eyes were from Essie as well. The middle generation, as Phoebe often thought of herself, settled for green.

All three had the pale, pale redhead's complexion, but Carly had inherited the dimples Phoebe had longed for as a child, and the pretty mouth with its dip deep in the top lip.

There were times Phoebe looked at her mother and her daughter, and through the impossible waves of love wondered how she could be the bridge between two such perfectly matched points.

Phoebe brushed a hand over Carly's shoulder, then bent to press a kiss on those wild red curls. In answer to the gesture, Carly shot out a mile-wide grin that showed the gap of two missing front teeth.

"Best seat in the house." From behind them, one short stride outside the door, Essie beamed.

"Did you see the dog, Gran?"

"I sure did."

Phoebe's brother turned to their mother. "You want a seat, Mama?"

"No, sweetie." Essie waved Carter off. "I'm just fine."

"You can come up to the rail again, Gran. I'll hold your hand the whole time. It's just like the courtyard."

"That's right. That's right." But Essie's smile was strained as she crossed the short distance to the rail.

"You can see better from here," Carly began. "Here comes another marching band! Isn't it great, Gran? Look how high they're stepping."

See how she soothes her Gran, Phoebe thought. How her little hand holds tight to give support. And Carter, look at him, moving to Mama's other side, running a hand down her back even as he points to the crowd.

Phoebe knew what her mother saw when she looked at Carter. Having a child of her own, she understood exactly that hard and stunning love. But it would be doubled for her, Phoebe thought. Mama had only to look at Carter, at the rich brown hair, those warm hazel eyes, the shape of his chin, his nose, his mouth, and she would see the husband she'd lost so young. And all the might-have-beens that died with him.

"Fresh lemonade!" Ava wheeled a cart to the doorway. "With plenty of mint so we've got the green."

"Ava, you didn't have to go to all that trouble."

"I certainly did." Ava laughed at Phoebe and flipped back her sassy swing of blond hair. At forty-three, Ava Vestry Dover remained the most beautiful woman of Phoebe's acquaintance. And perhaps the kindest.

When Ava lifted the pitcher, Phoebe hurried over. "No, I'll pour and serve. You go on and watch awhile. Mama'll feel better with you standing with her," Phoebe added quietly.

With a nod, Ava walked over, touched Essie on the shoulder, then moved to stand on Carly's other side.

There was her family, Phoebe thought. True, Ava's son was off in New York in college, and Carter's pretty wife was working, but this was the foundation, the bedrock. Without them, she wasn't sure she wouldn't just float off like a dust mote.

She poured lemonade, passed around the glasses, then stood beside Carter. Leaned her head on his shoulder. "I'm sorry Josie can't be here."

"Me, too. She'll be here for dinner if she can."

Her baby brother, she thought, a married man. "You two ought to stay the night, avoid the holiday traffic and the insanity of revelry."

"We like the insanity of revelry, but I'll see if she'd rather. Remember the first time we stood up here and watched the parade? That first spring after Reuben."

"I remember."

"Everything was so bright and loud and foolish. Everyone was so happy. I believe even Cousin Bess cracked a smile or two."

Probably just indigestion, Phoebe thought, with lingering bitterness.

"I felt, really felt, maybe everything would be all right. That he wasn't going to break out and come for us, wasn't going to kill us in our sleep. Christmas didn't do that for me, not that first year, or my birthday. But standing here all those years ago, I thought maybe everything was going to be all right after all."

"And it was."

She took his hand so they were linked, right down the line of the rail.