

***The Parting Glass* by Emilie Richards**
Excerpt

*Of all the money ere I had,
I spent it in good company,
And all the harm I've ever done,
Alas was done to none but me
And all I've done for want of wit,
To memory now I can't recall
So fill to me the parting glass,
Goodnight and joy be with you all.*

*Of all the comrades ere I had,
They're sorry for my going away,
And all the sweethearts ere I had,
They wish me one more day to stay,
But since it falls unto my lot
That I should go and you should not,
I'll gently rise and softly call,
Goodnight and joy be with you all.*

(This is a traditional Irish ballad for singing at the end of an evening, a gathering or an event. One of Ireland's most popular, it is documented as far back as the 1770s.)

CHAPTER ONE

Peggy Donaghue avoided the parking lot of the Whiskey Island Saloon whenever she could, which wasn't easy since she lived directly above it. On days when there was no parking on the street, she reluctantly took the reserved spot closest to the back door and sprinted for the kitchen. She wasn't superstitious. She just didn't believe in tempting fate.

Not unless the circumstances were exceptional.

The young man standing just behind her cleared his throat. "It's real windy, Ms. D. You don't have to stay out here. Nothing's going to happen, I promise."

Peggy pulled her long chestnut hair into a temporary ponytail so it would stop whipping into her eyes. Over one shoulder she could see that Josh, tall, lanky and clearly uncomfortable, wasn't looking at her. That was understandable. Josh had just stolen his very first car. He was praying, just as Peggy was, that the owner wouldn't realize his brand new Honda Civic was missing.

"I trust you, Josh. And I even trust them." Peggy nodded to the group of four adolescent boys who were pouring over the car like melted butter on the saloon's Friday night pierogie special. "But I'll just stay here in case they need me."

“Nick was locked away in his study. When he gets like that, he doesn't know what's going on. He's not going to know.” Josh's tone was less certain than his words.

“He's probably got stuff to do before he leaves town.” Peggy saw a familiar figure coming up between the rows of cars. The willowy strawberry blonde was unmistakable--and related. “Uh oh, we've been nailed,” she said in her best Jimmy Cagney imitation. “It's the kalaboose for us now, Scarface.”

Josh's pale cheeks grew red. “I gotta go. Winston's gonna make sure it gets done right and stuff. I gotta go home in case Nick notices--”

Peggy waved him away. “You go on. I'll face the music alone.”

Josh looked properly grateful and took off, skirting Peggy's older sister by ducking behind the back row of cars. Plastic bags and newspaper skittered across the lot in his wake from somebody's blown over garbage can.

Casey Donaghue Kovats came up beside Peggy and stood for a moment watching the group of adolescents tape strings of firecrackers to the back bumper of Niccolo Andreani's car. The silver Civic was parked close to the back door of the saloon so that it would be out of sight from the road.

“You're letting those kids tape fireworks to the bumper? You worked in an emergency room. You know how dangerous those things are.”

“No hi, how are you, isn't this a windy day?”

“Peggy, have you lost your mind?”

“Fireworks are dangerous. These are firecrackers, and they're only slightly higher-tech than tin cans and old shoes.”

“Megan's going to have a fit.”

“I certainly hope so. We've gone to a lot of trouble.” Peggy motioned to one youth, a handsome young African-American with meticulously divided cornrows and a roll of duct tape adorning one arm. “Winston, will you please reassure Casey that Nick's car won't blow up?”

Winston abandoned his supervisory post to join the two sisters. “Yo, Ms. K. Nothing gonna happen here but a little noise.”

Casey still didn't look convinced. “I have great faith in your abilities, Winston, really I do, but what if--and I know this is a remote possibility--you're wrong?”

“Can't be wrong. We tried it out yesterday.”

“Yesterday?” Peggy was intrigued. This was new information.

“Yeah, at some wedding. Somebody got married down at the Baptist church.”

“Somebody you know?”

Winston shrugged. “Learned a lot. Like don't put balloons and firecrackers on the same bumper, unless you want a real mess.”

Peggy tried not to smile. “See? I told you we were in the hands of a master.”

Winston escaped back to his job as Casey rolled her eyes. “I can't believe Nick had the bad judgment to leave his car at the saloon in the first place,” Casey said.

“He didn't. Josh delivered it half an hour ago. Nick doesn't know it's gone.”

“Then how's he getting to the church?”

“I thought he could walk. He's only a few blocks away.”

A gust of wind pushed Peggy against Casey's hip and made nonsense of that plan. The sky was growing steadily darker and the wind was accelerating. That morning the official forecast for the spring day had been breezy, with the slight possibility of a shower. But this was Cleveland. Weather was the only guarantee. The particulars were in the hands of God.

“I'd give him my car, but I don't have a car anymore,” Peggy said.

“You need to remind me you're moving halfway around the world tomorrow? Like it's not on my mind?”

Peggy ignored her. “Jon can drive Nick to the church. Will you call him and ask?”

Jon was Casey's husband and nearly always willing to lend a hand. “I guess he won't mind. At least he won't get blown off the road in this wind. Jon can take care of himself.” Casey smiled. Peggy had noticed that Casey did a lot of that these days. Grinned when she had reason to, smiled mysteriously when she didn't. Marriage agreed with her. Casey and Jon had just celebrated their first wedding anniversary.

More than two years had passed since Peggy and Casey had come home to Cleveland, lost souls looking for a place to hide. Now Peggy was the mother of a son, Casey was married to her best friend, and Megan, who ran the family saloon, was about to celebrate her own wedding.

Of course, what sounded like a trio of happily-ever-afters weren't. Not quite. Each sister still faced considerable hurdles, but Peggy didn't want to think about her own. Not for the moment. Today was Megan's day.

“Remember the last time we stood around the parking lot like this?” Casey said, as if she knew what was going through Peggy's mind. Both Peggy's sisters had consistently read her thoughts since the day she was old enough to have any.

“We were at gun point,” Peggy said. “And Niccolo walked by and saved us. Now he's about to marry our sister. Odd how things happen, isn't it?”

“I peeked inside. I can't believe what they've done, can you?”

“They” was the Donaghue family--and everyone in Cleveland who was related to them or wanted to be. A veritable horde of friends and family had descended that morning to scrub and decorate the saloon where Megan and Niccolo's reception would be held after the ceremony at St. Brigid's.

Peggy checked her watch. “I still have a million things to do before Kieran wakes up.” The atomic clock had nothing on Peggy's toddler son for keeping life precisely on schedule.

“You're still planning to leave him upstairs with a babysitter?”

“He'll be happier. Everybody else will be happier.”

“The old place looks great. The way it did when we were kids and Mom was in charge of family wedding receptions. Megan's going to love it.”

Peggy knew better. Someday Megan, their oldest sister, would look back at this day with appreciation, even nostalgia. But today she wouldn't notice a thing. If all the signs were correct, Megan was going to walk through her own wedding ceremony and reception like a newly sentenced prisoner on her way to serving a lifetime behind bars.

Casey grinned. “Okay, maybe she's going to be a little jittery, and maybe she won't notice every little detail . . .”

“Come on, we'll be lucky if she's only comatose. I don't understand why she and Nick didn't elope.”

“She didn't want to set that kind of example.”

“For who?” Peggy realized “who” the moment she asked the question. “For me? Megan was afraid if she eloped, I'd copy her someday?”

“I think that's part of it.”

“Unbelievable.”

“And I think Nick wanted a real wedding,” Casey added, before Peggy could expound. “He wanted his kids to witness it. They take a lot of interest in this kind of thing, even though they’ll never admit it.”

The kids Casey referred to were a larger group of the teens and pre-teens who were so relentlessly decorating Niccolo's car. Altogether there were more than a dozen verging-on-delinquent and occasionally endearing adolescents who were part of an organization called One Brick At A Time. Niccolo Andreani was the director, founder, and jack of all trades who ran it.

“So Megan's doing this wedding for everybody else?” Peggy said.

“She won't talk about it, so I'm just guessing. But you know she's been a wreck ever since she agreed to marry Nick. She adores him, so it can't be regret. I just think she hates being the center of attention. She's happiest when she's running everybody else's lives from the sidelines.”

“Well, it's about time she had her day, whether she wants it or not.” Peggy glanced at her watch. It was ten, and the wedding was at one. “What's on your list for the rest of the morning?”

“About a million things before I help Megan dress, including a hair appointment.”

“Well, I have about a dozen more on mine. Then I have to get dressed, get Kieran set up--”

“And pack.”

“I have everything ready to go. Aunt Dee came and got our suitcases early this morning so I can clean up tonight after the reception and they won't be in the way. Megan's already advertising the apartment.” Peggy tried to stave off another discussion of her impending departure. There had been dozens such conversations since she had announced she was moving to Ireland for a year, all of them fruitless. “Right now I'd better get busy. Because Kieran really is due to wake up--”

A gust of wind nearly lifted her off her feet and this time it sent her smashing into Casey. Peggy's shriek was eclipsed by a bombastic crack. For a moment she was so disoriented the sound didn't register. Then in horror she turned her head toward the car and saw disaster swaying just above it.

“Get away from the car! Everybody! Now!” She extricated herself from her sister and almost as one body they hurled themselves forward. “The tree--”

Winston and his crew were tough guys, but they were also survivors. Instinctively they scattered like the leaves that were raining from the big maple tree positioned just over Niccolo's new Civic. A horrifying screech, like ten giant fingernails on a heavenly

blackboard rent the air. Then, as Peggy watched in horror, the tree wobbled uncertainly and split in two.

With a thunderous roar, followed by the scream and crunch of metal, the half closer to the saloon fell on Niccolo's car flattening the roof and hood. The other half of the tree remained awkwardly, tentatively erect. Nick's car looked like a week old sandwich fished out of a teenager's bookbag.

Peggy did a frantic head count and assessment. The tree had fallen just slowly enough to give the kids time to get away. They looked shaken, but unharmed.

"Everybody's okay," Peggy said. She repeated it as a question and got satisfactory answers from all the kids. Winston herded them to the other end of the lot where they shouted and pointed excitedly.

"It missed the saloon," Casey said, her voice shaky. "But, lord, Peggy, that door into the kitchen isn't going to open again until we get a crew out here. It opens out and the tree's smack against it."

Peggy raised her voice over the intensifying wind. "Who cares about the door? What about Nick's car? How are we going to tell him and what are he and Megan going to use on their honeymoon?"

"They--they can take mine on the trip. Jon and I can make do with one car until they get back."

"We still have to tell Nick."

"Yeah? Exactly when?"

Peggy was still trying to process this disaster. She was the most analytical of the sisters, but analysis was beyond her at the moment. "How would you like to know something like that right before you head off for your wedding?"

"Wouldn't."

"Can we keep the kids quiet?"

Casey glanced over her shoulder and the wind whipped her hair over her eyes. "Winston can. Besides, it was probably his idea to have Josh bring the car over. He'll want to take as much time as he can owning up."

Family and friends began pouring out the front doors of the saloon.

"St. Patrick and all the saints! Better call a tree service," somebody shouted.

Another voice chimed in. "Get a wrecker."

Casey documented the obvious. “Any sane person would cancel the reception.”

Peggy was trembling now, a delayed reaction that grew more ferocious as she realized just how lucky everyone had been. “You said it yourself. We have a blocked exit. Legally we have to lock our doors.”

Casey put her arm around Peggy's shoulders. “That's the good thing about the Donaghues. Not a soul who's invited to the reception will report us.”

“Casey, do you think maybe we could deed this parking lot to the city and get it out of the family once and for all?”