

Whiskey Island by Emilie Richards
Excerpt

January 1880

Such a thing, to be a priest sworn to poverty, yet daily to witness among my flock more poverty and degradation than I shall ever encounter myself. And yet the families I serve come to me with cheerful smiles, with gifts and shy tokens of their respect. The women bring bread freshly baked on their simple hearths or wildflowers culled from soil putrid with factory ash. The men bring stories and sometimes a wee drop of the “creature” that dulls the sharp blade of despair piercing them to their very souls.

There are those who rail against the Whiskey Island saloons, of which there are far too many. I have shed tears over these places myself, yet how well I understand the temporary joys they bring. If heaven is the reward for the misery inflicted on so many of the men and women I serve, then sometimes I fear strong drink is the tonic that makes the heavenly journey possible.

I have been to the Whiskey Island saloons myself, to encourage men to return to their families, to stand between brothers who, on the morrow, will forget they quarreled. While there I have seen the warmth of friends, heard tales and ditties from our ancient past, dreamed dreams of a future when the Irishman comes into his own.

If St. Brigid’s is the haven of our soul, then perhaps the saloons of Whiskey Island are the havens of our heart. And even if the heart is a capricious master, we sometimes would do well, all of us, to listen to its call.

From the journal of Father Patrick McSweeney—St. Brigid’s Church, Cleveland, Ohio.

CHAPTER ONE
CLEVELAND, OHIO
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Niccolo Andreani did not frequent bars. When he drank he preferred a classic Chianti over dinner with friends, a dry Marsala on a solitary evening, his Tuscan grandfather’s own *vin santo* lifted in toast at family gatherings. He did not frequent bars, but he frequently walked past this one on his restless nightly prowls. Whiskey Island Saloon bedecked Lookout Avenue the way a faux ruby bedecked a rhinestone choker. It was the centerpiece of the street, a ramshackle, cheerfully rowdy establishment with a steady stream of patrons and a generous sidewalk that made it easy to avoid them.

Unfortunately, on this particular night, the whim to turn down Lookout and walk past the saloon had changed his life forever.

Niccolo registered this thought as he came to an abrupt halt, the leather soles of his hiking boots squealing against the asphalt leading into the saloon's narrow parking lot. A question followed. If he silently retraced his steps, could he find help before the situation confronting him exploded?

A shout from the back of the lot and a woman's terrified scream were his answers. The street was empty, and the saloon was sealed tightly against winter. A carjacking was in progress, and the only help available was one Niccolo Andreani.

With a grim sense of finality he entered the lot, raising his hands shoulder high to show he was unarmed. One of two men flanking a car at the back of the lot whirled and pointed a handgun directly at Niccolo's chest. "Where the fuck d'you come from?"

Niccolo raised his hands a little higher and stood perfectly still. "I was just cutting through," he lied.

"Bad choice." The man with the gun trained at Niccolo's sternum was dark-skinned, with a face like a jigsaw puzzle that had been inexpertly assembled. As if they had carefully discussed racial quotas and partnered accordingly, the other gunman was an anemic blond.

"Look," Niccolo said, feeling for words. "Why don't you two just get out of here? I'll count slowly to five hundred, and I'll keep them here, too," he said, nodding toward the people trapped helplessly inside the wine-colored Mazda. "But somebody inside that bar's going to hear the shouting and call the cops."

"You'd better hope they're deaf." The man leered at Niccolo, then motioned him closer to the Mazda. "That's *my* car now and I'm gonna drive it out of here."

As if to punctuate his partner's words, the blond banged his gun barrel against the driver's window. Niccolo heard a second muffled scream from inside.

Closer now, under the glow of a streetlamp he could see that there were two young women in the front seats of the car and a child in the back. Both women looked to be more or less in their twenties. The driver had a waving mass of copper-colored hair while the passenger's was dark and straight to her shoulders. He would have had to move closer to get a good look at the child, but he didn't have to move anywhere to know that all three of them must be terrified.

"I'll shoot right through it," the blond carjacker shouted at the driver.

Niccolo could feel himself sweating under protective layers of wool and Thermolite. His voice seemed to echo in the frostbitten air. "The driver's probably scared to move. Why don't you step back and give her some room? And give the other woman a moment to get the child out."

“You giving orders?” The blond leaned his elbows on the top of the car and sighted over it, taking aim at Niccolo. “Like you’re somebody?”

“Just a stranger.” Niccolo raised his hands higher. “Who doesn’t want to see anybody get hurt. Why don’t you let me talk them out of there.”

“Go on. Step back,” the black man shouted to his partner. “He’s right. Let’m out.”

The blond carjacker had worn an inappropriate grin since Niccolo’s first glimpse of him. It broadened farther as he waved the gun from side to side, weighing alternatives.

At last he stepped back a few inches. Niccolo could feel his heart making up for beats suppressed. He raised his voice so the women would hear him. “I think you’d better come out right now. He’s going to give you the room you need. But he doesn’t have a lot of time.”

“Shit, man!” The blond took one more step backwards, colliding with an old Chevy wedged tightly beside the Mazda. “Get out!” he shouted at the driver. “Now. Right now!”

The parking lot was small and narrow. Two rows of cars and a middle aisle. A streetlamp at each end, crumbling asphalt, a Dumpster hiding what was probably a kitchen entrance into Whiskey Island Saloon. It was a Tuesday night just weeks into a new millennium, bitter cold and growing icy, too late for dinner, too early for a quick round before closing. The lot was only half full, and the street was still quiet.

Niccolo prayed silently. *Let the women do what they’re told. Let no one come by to upset the balance. Let the gunmen drive away with no one harmed.* For a moment he was afraid his prayers were unheard. Then the driver’s door opened and the driver, a tall woman whose pale coppery hair glowed in the lamplight, stepped out.

“You can’t have her.” She lifted her chin. You’ll have to kill me first.”

“You’re threatening me?” The blond was incredulous. “You think you got some special pull? I got a gun!”

“You can’t have her.”

The dark-skinned man turned his head. “Lady, it’s just a car. You gonna trade your life for a hunk of metal? He’ll shoot you, you don’t give him those keys.”

She hesitated. “Just the car? You just want the car?”

“Lady—”

“Please,” she said just loudly enough that Niccolo could hear. “Just don’t hurt anybody.”

“Gimme the keys.”

The driver stubbornly folded her arms over her chest to protect the keyring. “Not until everybody’s out. Peggy, get Ashley.”

The blond gunman leaped forward and pinned her against the side of the car, the gun nestled against the hollow of her throat.

The passenger door opened and the dark-haired woman--obviously Peggy--jumped to the ground. She was younger than Niccolo has guessed at first sight, slight, with dark chestnut hair and an oval, almost surreally beautiful face which was understandably contorted with fear. “Just let me get Ashley out of her seat. Please,” she pleaded.

“The carjacker holding the gun on Niccolo answered. “Get her and shut up!”

Peggy, who was a full head shorter than the driver, scurried sideways and flipped up the front seat, reaching for the little girl in the back. “Ashley, quick.”

Niccolo could see the little girl shrinking back against a booster seat. “No!”

“Do as I say, Ashley.”

The child wailed. “Don’t let them take me!”

Peggy leaned farther forward, untangling the child from her restraints and pulling her resisting body forward. “Stop it, Ashley!” she pleaded.

“No...” the child wailed as the young woman lifted her from the car. “I want my mommy!”

“Please. Just let the three of them come over here now,” Niccolo beseeched the gunman. “I’ll be sure they don’t do anything stupid.”

The dark-skinned carjacker, who seemed to be the more reasonable of the two, motioned the woman and child toward Niccolo. “Get over there.”

Clutching the child Peggy stumbled to Niccolo’s side. But he wasn’t watching. His eyes were on the blond carjacker, who still had his gun pressed against the driver’s throat. As Niccolo watched, the driver unfolded her arms and held out a keyring.

“Let her go, please. She’ll be out of your way over here,” Niccolo said, as calmly as he could. “We’re not going anywhere until you’ve driven away. Like your friend said, it’s just a car. Don’t hurt anybody.”

“Yeah, let her go,” the other carjacker echoed. “Let’s get going.”

“I don’t know,” the blond man said, running the barrel of his gun up and down the driver’s throat. “She’s kinda cute, don’t you think? Maybe we oughta bring her along for company.”

The little girl struggled in Peggy’s arms. “I don’t want to go back--”

“Hush, Ashley,” Peggy murmured. “Hush.”

Niccolo glanced sideways and caught the terror on the young woman’s face as she pressed the child’s against her shoulder. The child, who was too young to understand that she was in no immediate danger, began to moan.

“Ah, let the bitch go,” the black man said, louder this time. “Let’s get going.”

The blond gunman hesitated, then he stepped back to let the driver escape. For a moment Niccolo thought the worst might be over, that this random act of violence would end with nothing more than a stolen car. But before the driver could take two steps away, the blond slammed his palms against her shoulders and knocked her against the door again. Her head snapped back. “I tell you to do something, you do it,” he shouted in her face. “Got it?”

“Yes...” Her voice wavered.

“Next time I tell you to get outta the car, you get outta the car.”

“Sure.”

“Next time I tell you gimme the keys, you gimme the keys!”

“Whatever you say.”

“I say maybe you ought to come with us. Maybe we ought to see just how willing you are!”

“Shit, man,” the other gunman said, “you trying to get us caught? There ain’t gonna be a next time. Let’s get outta here!” He backed up slowly toward the Mazda, aiming alternately at Niccolo and the females beside him in warning.

Niccolo gritted his teeth, but he knew better than to utter another word. The blond carjacker was on a power trip and the next logical step was to kill somebody to prove what a big man he was. Even the child seemed to sense the import of the moment and ceased her moaning.

“Oh, go on!” The blond grabbed the driver’s arm and flung her roughly in the direction of the hood. “Get over there.”

Niccolo saw relief flit across the other carjacker's features. The Mazda's driver stumbled across the lot to join Niccolo and the others. Niccolo's own relief was short-lived. The quiet of the street was split by the banshee wail of a siren, and the night was tinged with swirling ruby light.

"Deliver us from evil..." Niccolo whispered.

"Fuck it all! We gotta get out of here. Grab the kid," the blond shouted, waving his gun at his partner.

"Are you crazy?" The second carjacker looked terrified now.

"Get the kid! They won't let us out of here if you don't!"

Niccolo stepped sideways to shield Peggy and the child in her arms. "No! Just get going. I'll tell the police you didn't hurt anybody. I'll keep them here while you--"

For the second time that night the black man whirled and pointed his gun at Niccolo's chest, then he started toward him, covering the ground in long steps. "Get outta my way!"

Fired at close range Niccolo knew that a bullet would pass right through his own body and probably hit the little girl or one of the two women behind him. He had no doubt that if he stood his ground, a bullet *would* be fired. As the gunman drew closer Niccolo could see the frantic twist of his asymmetrical features. The man was desperate. He would shoot anybody who got in his way.

Niccolo stepped aside, his decision made. The blond had already planted himself behind the Mazda's steering wheel. In a moment the other gunman would wrench the child from Peggy's arms. By then the Mazda would be pulling toward them. Niccolo knew he could not let the men take the child.

"I'll come with you instead..." Peggy was sobbing now. "Take me..."

At the same moment that the car should have roared to life the black gunman stretched out one arm to grab the child, but the only audible sound was another blast of the siren followed by the blare of a police radio.

Niccolo waited for the second when the gunman would be off balance and his aim askew. "Down!" he shouted to the women as the gunman leaned forward. At the same moment, with all his considerable strength, Niccolo slammed his fist against the gunman's wrist.

The gunman spun with the force, but didn't lose his balance. As the copper haired driver threw herself against Peggy and the child to knock them to the ground, the gunman swung his gun at Niccolo and fired.

Niccolo didn't have time for a better plan. He lowered his head and charged, using his head like a battering ram. The gunman fell backward under the impact of Niccolo's blow just as the police cruiser pulled into the lot.

Doors slammed. Someone grabbed Niccolo's elbow, and he staggered upright. "There's another one in the car." He was surprised to hear himself. His voice seemed to have lost power. "Another carjacker. He's got a gun..."

He pointed at the Mazda, which surprisingly hadn't moved from its parking space. As he tried to focus on the car he saw a shadowy figure disappear behind the Dumpster, glimpsing only enough detail to see that the figure seemed to be wrapped in layers of clothing.

The night's events had clouded his thinking. For a moment he wondered where the blond carjacker had found clothes to disguise himself and why he was escaping unnoticed.

One cop handcuffed the man at Niccolo's feet. The second, gun drawn, started toward the Mazda.

"He already got away..." Niccolo's head was filling with gray fog. "He ran away."

"You've been shot."

Niccolo recognized the driver's voice and felt her hand on his shoulder. He realized that his right arm burned, and that this, like the buzzing in his head, wasn't normal.

He heard the driver's voice again. This time she was shouting. "Megan... Oh God, Megan, help this man inside! He's been shot."

The cop at their feet rose unceremoniously, dragging his prisoner with him. "Better not move him, miss. Sir, please sit down. We'll call for help."

"Everybody get out of my way!"

This time Niccolo heard a different female voice. Not the pale-haired driver, not dark-haired Peggy who was sobbing somewhere behind them, and certainly not the child Ashley. This voice was new and husky, a musical and temporarily booming alto. He lifted his head and was certain he glimpsed Joan of Arc, thundering into battle, her fists clenched and the light of righteousness blazing in her eyes.

Saint Joan took charge. "You go ahead and call anybody you want, but I'm going to take care of this man myself! The rest of you clean up the damned mess in my parking lot!"

The ground seemed to rise to meet Niccolo, and he felt arms attempting to break his fall. As his eyes closed he wondered why the illustrated book of saints he'd received at his first communion had portrayed Joan of Arc as a blonde.

Saint Joan was a sturdy little woman with hair the color of the flames that had devoured her.