

EDGE OF FREEDOM, BOOK ONE



# NO SAFE HARBOR



A NOVEL

ELIZABETH  
LUDWIG



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*To Peg and Seth*

*On this side, there was no safe harbor,  
and so God took you home.*

*We miss you every day. Looking forward to . . . someday.*



—ELLIS ISLAND, 1897—

A mischievous wind lifted the tips of Cara's hair and tossed them into her eyes. She brushed the strands away, then blew on her shaking fingers to warm them. The day was overcast, like every day before it for the past two weeks, but thankfully the snow had stopped and the sea had settled into something less than raging. She stood against the rail with no fear of being tossed over.

Few passengers crowded the rails of the ship *Servia*. Most were kept belowdecks by the frigid February temperature and the choppy Atlantic Ocean, but not Cara. Bad weather had lengthened the crossing, made her longing for her first glimpse of America sharper.

America. And Eoghan.

Just thinking of her twin brother brought a wash of hot tears to her cheeks. Eoghan was alive. After two years of bowing under the villagers' whispered condemnation, of bearing in silence the brand given her family name . . . finally . . . the chance to uncover the truth behind his disappearance. His letter in hand, she'd scrambled aboard the first ship to America she could find.

Her fingers crept inside her coat to press the precious scrap of paper against her chest.

*Soon, my sweet lad. I'll be at your side! And then we'll prove you were no traitor to your church or your country.*

Gently she caressed the twisted leather bracelet encircling her wrist. Eoghan wore one identical to it—a gift from their father on their sixteenth birthday.

“Ah, Miss Hamilton. You made it on deck, I see.”

Cara tucked the bracelet into her sleeve, then turned toward the boisterous voice. Douglas Healy was a kind man. A bit loud for her liking. Nonetheless, his generosity had rescued her from steerage—a fact for which she would be forever grateful, and his good-humored jokes had made the trip across the Atlantic bearable. His presence had also kept some of the more amorous lads at bay, since they'd assumed mistakenly that he was her father.

She greeted him with a smile. “And you, as well, Mr. Healy. Here to catch your first glimpse of America?”

He snorted, his full mustache stirred by the force. “I've seen it before. This is my fourth crossing. Business, you know.”

His gray eyebrows bunched as he claimed the spot next to her at the rail. Teased by the wind, the fedora on his head lifted slightly. He caught it with a gloved hand and jammed it firmly back in place. “You, however, have yet to reveal your reasons for making the journey. Still no hope of finagling the information?”

Her heart thrumming, she smiled and turned her face to the waves. Always the same question. Every night, at dinner, she was forced to hide the answer, even when he tempted her with treats he'd bribed from the steward.

“Ah, my coy Irish lass, that winsome grin will get you far in the New World.” He leaned forward to rest his thick forearms on the rail. “I only hope you do not undertake those challenges alone?”

Cara shook her head, though in truth she did not know what awaited her in New York. Her plan, like Eoghan's letter, was vague: find her brother, force him to tell her what he'd done, and then convince him to return home. "I . . . have kin in America. I hope to reunite with them when I arrive."

He clucked his tongue and dipped his head to peer at her over his spectacles. "The city is quite a large place for a mere hope."

"But 'tis more than I had a few weeks ago," she whispered, pressing her hand against the letter at her chest. A stiff breeze tore at her words and carried them away.

"I'm sorry?" Mr. Healy bent his ear toward her, out of the wind.

She cupped her hand around her mouth. "I said I'll be fine. Do not worry yourself, Mr. Healy."

He gave a satisfied nod and straightened. "All right, then. Still, you might be able to use this." He removed a piece of paper from a pocket of his woolen overcoat. "An old friend of mine runs a boardinghouse near Battery Park on Ashberry Street. Amelia Matheson is her name. I've listed the address there in case you need a place to stay." When she lifted her brows, he added, "Until your relatives arrive, or until I can check on you—see how you be faring."

Cara accepted the piece of paper and studied the unfamiliar handwriting. When she looked up, Mr. Healy watched her, his kind gaze dark with concern. She patted his hand, warmed by the compassion on the elderly gentleman's face.

A bright sheen filmed his pale blue eyes. "I had a daughter once, not quite your age. Did I tell you?"

She shook her head, surprised by the waver in his voice. Not since stepping foot on board the *Servia* in Liverpool had she seen Mr. Healy without a smile creasing his wrinkled face. "What happened to her?"

A deep sigh seemed to rumble from the depths of his soul. He cast his gaze upon the sea, a vacant look in his eyes that said his thoughts, too, had gone adrift.

“She was only seventeen, and oh, so beautiful. She had red hair like her mother . . . and you.”

The wind snatched Cara’s hair again, sending coiled strands spiraling into the air. She caught them with one hand and jammed the tangled curls into the collar of her coat.

Mr. Healy watched, a sad smile curving his lips. “Olivia used to do that same thing, just so.”

A flock of sea gulls circled overhead, their mournful cries providing a fitting backdrop to the sorrow with which he spoke.

She slid her hands into the pockets of her coat. “Olivia. That was her name?”

He nodded. “After her mother.”

A lump formed in Cara’s throat. She, too, had been named after her mother, and she felt a strange affinity for this lass whose story mirrored hers. “How did she die?”

Surprise flitted across Mr. Healy’s face and as quickly disappeared. “Ah, ’tis a tragic tale, that. One I’ll not trouble you with today.” He mimicked her brogue in a gentle way that inspired no ire and turned toward the rail, his finger jutting out over the edge of the ship. “Look, there. Do you see?”

Her hand shading her eyes, Cara squinted toward the horizon, where a strange gray haze dipped in and out of the waves. “What is it?”

“Wait,” Mr. Healy said, patting her back.

Salt spray washed high on the side of the ship, but Cara remained welded to the deck, excitement building inside her chest as the haze thickened and took shape. “Is that . . .?”

“It’s what you’ve been watching for, me dear girl, the reason you made this voyage.”

Cara tipped her head back and searched his face. He smiled in the way her father used to when bestowing a gift. Faster and faster her heart raced, until the pulse pounding in her ears drowned out the roar of the ship's steam engines.

His broad mustache twitched, then parted to reveal even teeth and his hand swept over the rail. "Miss Hamilton, welcome to America."



"Welcome to America, Miss Hamilton."

For a second, Rourke Turner thought he'd heard wrong. After months of watching and listening, his senses had gone dull, though with the clamor of crying infants and shouted questions in myriad languages echoing from the ceiling, he was surprised he'd caught the name at all. He jerked his head up and scanned the crowded Great Hall. It was his cousin's turn to stake out the island. Rourke had swapped places with him reluctantly, and only after much haggling as to who would assume the duties the rest of the week. Could it be that today . . . ?

*There.*

His gaze locked on a tall redhead accepting her registration papers from a dour-faced inspector. Rourke eased through the press of people, stepping around baggage and parcels, until he could hear clearly.

"I am finished?"

The inspector shuffled a stack of papers. "Everything appears to be in order. You have money and a place to stay."

In the girl's hand was a scrap of paper. She gripped it until her knuckles turned white.

"You passed your medical exam proving your ability to work," the inspector continued, "and you have family who will be meeting you once you leave the island." He bobbed his

head once, twice, and then handed her a small card. “You’re free to go.”

“My thanks to you,” the redhead murmured, a distinct quiver in her voice. She looked to the right and then the left. In her other hand she clutched a leather valise whose worn edges testified to its age. The voyage had soiled and dampened the hem of her blue traveling skirt, and her curls lacked luster, but no one could dispute her beauty, even with worry lines marring her face.

Beautiful, yes . . . but was she the girl he sought? He rather hoped not. A pretty lass such as she could prove a welcome distraction. He forged closer, straining for a glimpse of her eyes.

The inspector did not react with impatience as expected. Rourke had spent enough time on Ellis Island and witnessed enough immigrants passing through the Great Hall to be surprised by the sudden change that came over the man’s face. His scowl disappeared, and with one finger he nudged the rim of his spectacles higher onto his bulbous nose.

“The Kissing Post,” he said gently.

The woman swung back to look at him, her fine brows lifted in surprise. “Your pardon, sir?”

Setting down his pen, he pointed toward a flight of stairs. “Go down those steps and to your right. You’ll see a row of benches near the exit for the steamer to Battery Park. The pillar by the door is where people usually wait for their loved ones to arrive. If you’re expecting someone, that’s likely where they’ll be.”

Her face cleared of anxiety as she reached out to clasp the inspector’s hand.

“Bless you!” she breathed, then ducked out of the line and hurried in the direction the man pointed.

Rourke followed at a distance. The crowd on either side of

the aisle had become a living thing, swelling and undulating like a wave upon the sea. At any moment he expected them to part and release one of their number to greet the woman. Instead, she reached the place nicknamed the Kissing Post and whirled, her face hopeful as she searched the people bustling past.

So, she *was* looking for someone. Anticipation flared in Rourke's chest. Settling against another of the square pillars stretching toward the ceiling, he assumed the casual posture of the other men gathered to await the arrival of a loved one. One by one they were joined by wives, brothers, sisters, or fathers whose faces had been freshly bathed by tears. Excitement high, they showered one another in kisses and then made their way out of the Great Hall.

At first, the woman straightened every time a happy shout indicated another joyful reunion, but gradually the hopeful gleam faded from her eyes. A full hour passed before she reached for the valise at her feet and turned hesitantly for the exit.

She was leaving!

Rourke's heart raced. Likely he'd never find her again in a city the size of New York, if indeed that was where she was headed.

He shoved away from the pillar and cut a path toward her through a family shouting in loud Italian. Somehow he'd learn the truth. Somehow he'd find out if she was tied to the man he'd spent years looking for . . . the man he intended to kill.

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## 2

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With a roar of the engines, the last ferry of the day lurched away from Ellis Island. The ship rode low on the waves, her deck packed from bow to stern with sweaty, tired passengers. Cara hugged the small valise in her lap, glad for the comfort of something to hold after the trauma of health screenings and inspectors back on the island. Many around her clung to nothing but the hand of a person they loved. Still, she'd have traded everything she owned for one glimpse of Eoghan. Of their own will her fingers crept to the bracelet on her wrist.

A man hunched on the seat next to her elbow, his jaw clenched and face pale. With every roll and pitch of the boat, he groaned and bent lower, clutching the edges of the bench they sat on. Stirred with compassion, Cara wondered how he'd managed a voyage across the ocean. As though in answer, the man stumbled to his feet and staggered across the deck toward the lavatory. No doubt he'd remain there until they docked. Lucky for him it wouldn't be long. She'd heard an hour at most.

Once the steamer gathered speed, a stiff breeze lifted the cloying scent of unwashed bodies and swept it out to sea. Cara turned her nose into the wind and breathed deep. The

hint of fish on the salty air was not unlike Ireland. Different yet familiar.

As if conjured by the longing in her spirit, a man's voice thick with an Irish brogue pulled her attention from the waves.

"This seat be taken?"

Cara looked up into the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. Thick, dark lashes framed those eyes, and a friendly smile lit the man's face. He gestured to the seat next to her. "Would anyone be sitting there?" he repeated.

Cara glanced toward the lavatory. Green as the man had looked, it was unlikely he'd be returning soon. "No. Please, help yourself."

He lifted a dark eyebrow as he sat. "Irish?"

She nodded, her heart thumping. Eoghan's letter had warned against speaking to anyone until he'd had a chance to fill her in on who they could trust. But this man was only making conversation, she chided herself.

"Me too." He pointed to the tweed cap on his head and scarf around his neck and laughed. "In case you couldn't tell."

She returned his smile with a careful one of her own.

The boat pitched and the man reached out to steady her, then just as quickly pulled his hand away. "What part of Ireland are you from?"

"Derry." It was out before she could consider whether she should reply.

His head bobbed. "Ah, a northerner. I have kinfolk up that way."

Her fingers closed around the handle of her valise, but she forced her voice to remain light. "Really, now? So, what brings you to America?"

Despite his friendly demeanor, his eyes narrowed and Cara felt he was studying her. "I'm looking for someone. I thought perhaps I'd find them coming on a boat from England."

“You’re not . . .” She swallowed, hoping he’d missed the hitch in her voice. “You are not just arriving, then?”

“No. What about you?” He flashed a quick smile, and then his gaze fell to her clenched fists. “Your pardon, miss. I did not mean to unnerve you. It’s just, you looked a bit forlorn, and when I saw you sitting here alone, well, you reminded me of my sister, is all. I’ve not laid eyes on her in almost a year.”

An embarrassed blush colored his cheeks. He braced his hands upon his knees and moved as if to rise. “If you’d rather I left . . .”

He had a sister. Was that the person he’d been looking for? Cara winged a prayer for direction heavenward.

The shock of finding out her brother lived, combined with his mysterious letter, kept her on edge. But despite Eoghan’s dire warning, the prospect of facing America alone birthed terror in her heart. She wouldn’t tell this man about the purpose behind her trip, but maybe she could ask a few questions. He had a kind face, after all, and he was bound to know more than she about the city looming in the distance.

She stayed the stranger with a light touch on his arm. “Forgive me. The voyage has robbed me of my manners. Please, stay.” She motioned around the crowded ship. “It’s unlikely you’ll find another seat.”

He hesitated, but then settled back on the bench. “True enough.”

“Cara Hamilton,” she said with a dip of her head.

“Rourke . . . Walsh,” he responded.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Walsh.”

“The pleasure’s mine, Miss Hamilton. Or is it Mrs.?”

Heat fanned her cold cheeks at the flirtatious gleam in his eyes. “I am not married.” Cara pulled the note Mr. Healy gave her from her pocket. “You said you have lived in New York a while?”

He nodded and looked at the paper curiously. “Almost a year. My family was hit hard by the famine a few years back. We had to sell much of our land. I came here looking for work.”

Cara took care opening the note and pressing it flat. “I . . . thought you were looking for someone?”

“I am. I have a cousin who is supposed to be joining me, but I’m not sure when. I went to the island hoping for word.”

He crossed his arms, his wool coat pulling at the shoulder seams. He was a big man, obviously fit and heavily muscled. Undoubtedly, he’d had no trouble finding work. Her heart fluttered. Maybe he knew Eoghan. Only how to ask without giving herself away? She couldn’t. Her gaze fell to the name on the note.

“What have you there?”

Cara held out the paper. “I wonder, would you be knowing this person?”

He took the note, glanced at the writing, then handed it back. “I’m afraid not.” His voice lowered, but he leaned forward so she still heard him clearly over the noise of the ferry’s engines. “Is she family? Was she supposed to meet you today?”

Her throat tightened. Too quickly his questions had turned to a topic rife with risk. Her fingers clutched the collar of her coat. “No . . . I . . . I do not have any family. My parents died years ago.”

That much, at least, was true. The rest? Up until a few weeks ago she’d believed that true, as well. She breathed a prayer for forgiveness at the half-truth and dropped her chin.

“But . . .” Hesitancy filled his voice. “The island?” His dark brows bunched as he peered at her.

“What?”

“Single women dinna often make it through registration alone.”

Shame flooded her. “I told them Amelia Matheson was my grandmother.”

“Forgive me. I should not have pried.”

Was that relief mixed with the compassion in his voice? Cara’s head, and her heart, lifted. “Thank you, Mr. Walsh.”

“You’re welcome, and please, call me Rourke.” His shoulder bumped hers. “We’re two Irishmen in a land of foreigners, after all.”

The gleam in Rourke Walsh’s eyes as he studied her left no doubt that he liked what he saw.

So did she. Her gaze drifted down the length of his strong jaw and settled on his mouth. Fortunately a stiff breeze blew up, and Cara used the motion of brushing the hair from her face to hide her embarrassment. “You have that wrong. Here, we be the foreigners.”

Rourke laughed and settled against the seat. “True. So? What will you do when you reach the city?” He caught the fluttering end of his scarf, then jammed his hands into his pockets and hunched deeper into his coat.

Cara shrugged. “Search for Mrs. Matheson, I suppose. See if she can offer me a place to stay. After that, I’ll need to find—” she glanced at him and away—“work.”

He extended his hand. “May I see the note again?”

She dropped the slip of paper into his palm and then blew on her stiff fingers. What she wouldn’t give to curl up someplace warm tonight, with the quilt her dear mother had sewn for her snuggled under her chin and a peat fire crackling in the hearth.

“Ashberry Street?” Rourke frowned and returned the paper to her. “I know the area. You say she runs a boardinghouse?”

She nodded. “That is my understanding. Mr. Healy said she’s an old friend. Though I only just met him, he seemed quite pleasant during the crossing.”

“I don’t know.” He shook his head slightly. “There be many unsavory people in the city. Are you certain this Mr. Healy can be trusted?”

Cara laughed, surprised to admit his concern ignited an excited tickle in her belly. “I’ve only just met you, too. How do I know you can be trusted?”

A roguish smile curled his lips. “A fair question.” Instead of answering, he shrugged. “I’ll help you find the place. Check it out, perhaps, just to make sure it’s safe.”

Suddenly Eoghan’s warning rang clear in her mind.

*“Trust no one. Speak to no one until I come for you.”*

Rourke dashed the cap from his head and laid it across his chest, then followed with a wide smile. “Upon my honor, miss, no harm will befall you so long as you be under my care.”

Cara laughed outright. Good or bad, the exaggerated concern on his face put her apprehension to rest. Eoghan used to tease her in a similar manner, before his new friends pulled him farther and farther away from the family and home. Aware of Rourke’s steady gaze, she resisted the urge to touch her bracelet.

“Very well, sir. Ashberry Street it is. Are you certain you know the way?”

“If I didn’t, I wouldn’t admit it now and risk losing my chance to escort a pretty woman.”

She hid a smile and narrowed her eyes. “Fie. I’m sensing a bit of the blarney in ya.”

“More than a bit.”

They laughed, and for the first time Cara allowed herself to relax against the back of the bench. It felt good to let go her guard, if only for a moment. She hadn’t done so since receiving Eoghan’s message.

She gave a quick lift of her chin. “So, what about you?”

“Me?” Rourke slapped the cap back on his head. “I’m as boring as a milk bucket. Not much to tell.”

“But you work in the city?”

“I do. Odd jobs mostly, and whatever I can wrangle at the wharf. They always be looking for a bit of muscle unloading the ships that come into the harbor.”

Cara cast a longing glance at the shore growing larger in the distance. That had to be how Eoghan intended to find her. Perhaps he’d be waiting when she arrived, his bonnie eyes welcoming, his arms spread wide to wrap her in a hug as he’d done when they were children. She clasped her hands in her lap, afraid Rourke would see their trembling and know there was more she wasn’t telling.

A quiet murmur rose from the other passengers, and almost as one they shuffled toward the rail, rocking and bobbing in rhythm with the boat, pointing at something Cara couldn’t see.

“What is it?” She craned her neck to look over Rourke’s shoulder.

He smiled, his eyes sparkling. “You haven’t seen it, then?”

“Seen what?”

“The statue.”

She nodded. “From afar. We caught a glimpse as the ship was docking, another as the barge carried us back to the island.”

“It’s different up close.” He rose and held out his hand, then guided her to a spot near the stern. “The ferry always passes by so that those coming to America for the first time can get a glimpse of her.”

Looking up into the Lady’s earnest face, Cara gasped. She’d seen a tintype of her features cast in stark relief, but this close . . . Never had she imagined the way the sight would make her feel. No wonder people who intended to make their home in America were filled with such hope. Like the

passengers gathered around her, Cara fixed her eyes on the glowing torch splitting the overcast sky.

“Beautiful, isn’t she?”

Tears filmed Cara’s eyes. Clutching the edges of her coat shut, she managed a weak “She is indeed.”

In fact, the image impacted her so, it burned onto her memory. Long after they passed, she pictured the spires of Lady Liberty’s crown piercing the air, like the points of a star reaching toward the sky. Among the folds of her robe, Cara imagined the souls of foreign lands taking shelter—orphaned children yearning for a mother. Was that why Eoghan had chosen to hide in America?

Rustling stirred among the passengers as the ferry docked, the excitement in the air almost tangible. Cara rose, but before she could reach for her valise, Rourke hefted it for her.

“Ready?” He smiled as he motioned toward the gangplank.

A tremor weakened Cara’s knees. Departing here was different from the landing on Ellis Island. Here, the land was vast, the city stretching farther than her eyes could see. She had not the means to return to Ireland alone. If Eoghan wasn’t waiting on the dock, if she couldn’t find him . . .

Drawing a deep breath, she shook the melancholy from her limbs and walked forward, down the wooden gangplank that rumbled with the footsteps of many passengers, onto the dock. From this moment forward, her feet would seek a new path. Which way it wound, she couldn’t guess, but for better or worse it led through American soil.