

EDGE OF FREEDOM, BOOK TWO



# DARK ROAD HOME



A NOVEL

ELIZABETH  
LUDWIG



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*To Dylan . . . and all those like him  
searching for a way home.*



## PROLOGUE

The Celt's long strides sliced through the mist rising from the moor. Like waves the damp fog swirled and rolled from his legs. Overhead, gray clouds squeezed out one fat, icy raindrop that missed the brim of his brown derby and landed with a splat on the end of his nose. He slashed it away with the back of his hand.

A fitting morning to match his foul mood.

But beyond the next bend lay his destination—a modest manor, elegant but not sprawling, nestled on a choice piece of farmland. His feet devoured the remaining distance, carrying him to a wide staircase with stone steps and a curving banister.

His grip on a pearl-handled walking cane tightened as he lifted it to strike a matching set of oak doors. At the second knock, the doors parted and a pert housekeeper draped in black from head to foot poked her head out.

“Can I help you, sir?”

“The master of this house, is he in?”

Her eyebrow lifted. “Aye, sir, but Mr. McCleod does not take visitors at this hour—”

He cut the words from her mouth with a sharp glare. Voice

low, he lifted the cane and touched the handle to his forehead. “Tell him The Celt has come with business to discuss.”

Her firm chin dropped a finger’s span. She lowered her voice and spoke his name cautiously. “The Celt?”

Ah, good. An appropriate amount of fear. He nodded. “That’s what I said. Now, you will fetch him for me, aye? Dinna tarry. You understand my meaning?”

Eyes wide, she nodded, ruffling the edge of her cap. “Aye, sir.”

“Good.” He lowered the cane to thump against the floor, then motioned past her to a room that opened off the hall. “Is that the parlor?”

Again she nodded.

“I’ll wait there. Go on with you now.”

In answer she whirled and sped up the stairs. He followed suit, the tails of his overcoat flapping, and swept through the hall into the parlor. The woman was sufficiently cowed. She would not keep him waiting long.

Indeed, the hands of the mantel clock had only crept forward a few paces before the door behind him opened with a whoosh. Biting back a smile, The Celt turned from the cheery fire.

He and Brion McCleod had never met, but The Celt made it his business to know about men of power—their strengths and weaknesses. McCleod was impatient, brutish and loud, with a quick temper and perpetual scowl. He loomed in the entrance, his untucked shirt drooping sloppily over his trousers.

“Who are you, and what do you mean frightening my staff half to death?”

Arrogant fool. His identity was a well-guarded secret. Were he to answer McCleod, the man would be dead before nightfall.

The Celt savored the name on his tongue, anticipated how

the speaking of it would rip the self-assurance from the lout's bullish shoulders. "Lucy McCleod . . . your niece . . . is alive."

He could almost see the name rolling through the man's brain, feel the flush that crept over his cheeks as it was processed. Finally, McCleod's mouth opened and he gaped like a bass on a hook. "W-what did you say?"

Ah, disbelief mingled with dread. "Lucy McCleod," he repeated. "Daughter of Shamus and Adele McCleod. Sister named Brigid. Names sound familiar?"

"Of course they do. He was my brother—his wife and children, my family."

"Then you will be relieved to know that one of your family, the eldest child, is alive and well."

"You have proof of this?"

McCleod spoke slowly, formed each word carefully. The man would be an easy mark in a game of poker. "Would I have come if I didn't?"

To his credit, McCleod collected himself quickly. He strode to the door, closed it tight, and then turned on his heel and returned to the fireplace. His blue eyes, so pale as to almost appear gray, narrowed, and he drew himself up through his barrel chest until he stood nearly as tall as The Celt. "Forgive me. Your claim has set me back, for certain. If indeed the news be true, I would be most pleased. But due to the nature of the revelation, I must insist you tell me how you know of it and what proof you have that she is who you claim."

"Pleased?" The Celt scratched his chin. "Not the sentiment I expected you'd feel when you learned of Lucy's existence, what with the stakes as they are."

Aye, that was subtle enough. McCleod was measuring him, struggling to gauge what he knew, and how he knew it. As if to confirm this, McCleod leaned forward, a large vein protruding on his neck.

“Who are you?”

He shrugged and unwound a long woolen scarf from around his neck. “Some questions are better left unanswered, aye? Sufficient for you to know that I am someone with a very long, very deep grasp of history.”

The Adam’s apple in McCleod’s neck bobbed, and his eyes, still gauging, swept The Celt from head to toe. “And what has that to do with me? What ill wind has brought you to my doorstep?”

Leaving the fire, The Celt circled a padded camelback settee, his cane dragging the floor with his left foot, thumping with his right. “I have a proposition for you, Brion McCleod, one that could prove mutually profitable, I think, considering the year which it be.”

McCleod dragged his fingers through his hair, looking suitably distraught, just as The Celt had hoped. Perhaps the old priest had been right all those years ago. He smothered a confident spark. Pride always preceded a fall. He’d learned that well enough.

McCleod’s hand cut through the air. “I dinna ken your meaning. Speak clear, man. What is it you want from me?”

The Celt lowered himself to the settee and folded both hands atop his cane. “Your question is ill-spoken. Better first to ask what I can do for you.”

McCleod’s brows formed peaks across his wrinkled forehead. “Aye? And what is that, pray?”

He took his time answering, relishing the look of dread that kindled in McCleod’s face as he listened. “Nine years ago, a *bairn* came into my care. A bonnie enough lass, though frightened and scarred. A fire, I think it was, that claimed her mother and sister but spared her. Her father, of course, died years earlier in some sort of farming accident. Aye . . . that’s it. If my figures are correct”—he tilted his chin and

pretended to count—“that would make her not quite nineteen. Am I right?”

McCleod swallowed, then opened his mouth to take a breath. “You are mistaken. Whoever this lass is, she is not Lucy McCleod. My niece is dead.”

The Celt pinned McCleod with an unblinking stare. “Is she now? And would you be willing to stake your name, your land”—he thumped the floor with his cane—“this house on that certainty?”

McCleod eased toward a writing desk next to the window. No doubt he had a weapon of some sort hidden in its drawers.

The Celt sighed and stood. “Killing me does you no good. Your niece will still be alive and of proper age to claim her inheritance, assuming she doesn’t ruin your reputation first—a very troubling concept with someone of your political aspirations, no?” He let the words sink in before lowering his voice to just above a whisper. “Only I can tell you where she is and how to find her before that happens.”

He quirked an eyebrow, measuring the desperate gleam in McCleod’s eyes with the distance of his twitching fingers to the desk drawer. He brought the cane up, running his palm over its smooth length until it settled on a notch just below the handle.

“Well? Do you care to hear my proposition or shall I be on my way?”

For a sliver of a second he thought he’d guessed wrong, that McCleod would reach for the drawer and his scheme would be foiled by an unpredictable Irishman. But then McCleod’s shoulders slumped. His hand fell to his side. He returned to the fireplace and sank onto a chair opposite the settee.

“Where is she?” he rasped through tight lips. “Where is Lucy McCleod?”

The Celt smiled. The lass’s name was no longer McCleod,

or Lucy for that matter, but that information would come later. For now, one bite of the pie at a time. “America. Your niece is alive and well and living in America.”

A scowl took shape on McCleod’s face. “America is a broad place. I assume it be the narrowing of it which will cost me.”

Finally the real purpose behind his visit. Laying aside his coat and cane, The Celt returned to his place on the settee. He and Brion McCleod had much to discuss.

Much to discuss, indeed.

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# 1

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Sometimes, in the unguarded moments just before she woke, Ana imagined she could once again feel the flames searing her flesh.

She dispelled the fiery images in two rapid blinks, but the bitter scent of smoke coiling through her singed hair made her heart race. She lifted her hand, holding her breath until her fingers closed around strong, healthy curls. Sagging into her pillow with relief, she drew clean smoke-free air into her lungs.

No pain. No blinding, scorching heat that baked her insides with each burning breath—just sweet fresh air.

The blankets fluttered from her shoulders as she sat up in the bed to devour with her eyes the pale papered walls dotted with small perfect rosebuds. Crisp cottage furniture, not darkened by soot or sullied by ash, glowed in the moonlight streaming from the floor-to-ceiling windows.

A choked laugh bubbled from her throat, oddly haunting in the quiet room. Reaching down, she clasped the coverlet and drew it to her chin. She wasn't in a burning cottage. She was in Amelia Matheson's boardinghouse on Ashberry Street in New York, far from the village in Ireland where she grew

up. And the keening wail that sent shudders coursing down her back was the wind outside her window, not a child's voice pleading for help that she was powerless to give.

Her fingers shook as she withdrew a match from the tin atop her dresser to light the oil lamp next to her bed. The match sputtered and then sparked to life, even that feeble flame creating uncomfortable heat against the red, puckered skin on Ana's hands. She lit the lamp quickly and waved the match out.

A pocket watch lay next to a book of poems on her bedside table. Ana flipped open its lid, directing her eyes away from the tiny portrait cradled opposite the watch face.

Four fifteen.

Dawn was still hours away, but she'd get no more sleep this night. Sighing heavily, she cast the covers aside and reached for the floor with her toes.

"Ah!"

Shivering, she drew them back, wrapped the blanket around herself, then lifted the lamp from the table and scooted from the bed. Out the door, past Cara's room—

Meg's room, she corrected silently. Cara and Rourke no longer lived at the boardinghouse. They owned a beautiful home across town close to Rourke's office. Breda, too, was gone, moved in with a family in need of a housekeeper and cook.

She crept past Meg's room before descending the stairs and winding down the hall to the library. The door opened with just a touch, and a candle flickered from the table nearest the window. Ana lingered on the threshold, her fingers curled about the edges of her makeshift robe.

Clearing her throat, she peeked inside. "Anyone in here?"

Tillie's head appeared around a tall wing chair, her unbound dark hair tumbling across her arm. "Ana? What are you doing awake and about at this hour?"

Ana pressed farther into the room, leaving the lamp on a desk near the door. "I could ask the same of you."

Tillie shrugged and disappeared behind the chair. Mindful of the fire burning brightly in the fireplace, Ana skirted the hearth and dropped into another chair a satisfactory distance from the blaze.

Small, petite Tillie looked even more waiflike with her legs drawn up beneath her nightdress and her long tresses splayed about her shoulders. Ana held up a corner of her blanket. "Cold?"

Tillie accepted the offer with a grateful nod. With just a small bit of wrangling they managed to spread the blanket over them both, a dip in the middle where it spanned the two chairs.

Once the room returned to stillness, Ana turned her attention to the crackling fire. Not liking how it whispered, she shivered and looked at Tillie. "How long have you been awake?"

"An hour. Maybe two."

"Bad dreams?"

Tillie nodded.

Ana shrank into her chair. "Me too."

The fire popped, spitting a burst of sparks up the chimney. Tillie slipped from her seat, grabbed a poker and prodded the logs into a pile, then adjusted the screen to keep stray ashes from escaping.

Ana released the tension from her shoulders and smiled through the gloom at her friend. "Thank you."

Rubbing her hands over her arms, Tillie nodded and scrambled back to her seat. "Have you plans for this Saturday?"

Ana shrugged. Saturdays were idle, so apart from her list of household chores, she had no plans.

Tillie hugged her blanket-draped knees, her teeth working

her bottom lip and her brow drawn in a frown. “Meg has me thinking,” she said at last.

“About?”

“The shelter at Our Lady of Deliverance. Father Ed runs it.”

“I know the place,” Ana said, prodding her with a nod.

“Meg says there are over forty women living there, some of them sick, or running from abuse and in desperate need of a place to hide.” Her eyes gleamed as she twisted a lock of her hair round and round on her finger. “A lot of them are simply alone in the world and looking to start a new life.”

Ana smiled indulgently. “That be a weighty topic for this hour of the morning, don’t you think? Wouldn’t that be something better discussed when we’re both more alert?”

Tillie’s gaze, so direct as to be piercing, fastened onto Ana. She felt a twinge inside her chest—similar to the uncomfortable pricking of conscience she used to feel as a lass after she’d spent time in the confessional. “Sorry. Go on.”

“I’m thinking I’d like to help, maybe volunteer an hour or so after I leave the milliner and on the weekends.”

“Doing what?” Ana’s heart raced faster with each word Tillie uttered.

She lifted her hand in a wave. “Dishes, laundry, cooking . . . whatever they need.” Reaching across the span between their two chairs, she grasped Ana’s fingers tightly. “I’d like you to come with me. Will you?”

There it was—the question she’d been dreading. Ana pulled her hand free and jerked up from her chair. The blanket rippled to the floor, but neither she nor Tillie bothered picking it up. Ana skirted the heap and flitted to the window.

“Why is it my help you ask for, Tillie? Why not Amelia, or Meg? You know I . . . I do not attend church.”

“I’ll not be asking you to.” Her lips bunched in a pout as she uncrossed her legs and joined Ana at the window. “These

women need our help. So what if the shelter be housed in a church? It's a building, Ana. Nothing more. Surely you wouldn't mind helping now and again."

Tillie didn't . . . couldn't . . . understand. And why would she? It wasn't as though Ana had ever bothered to explain her reluctance about attending Sunday services. She rested her hand against the frosted windowpane, letting the cool glass soothe her scarred flesh, and closed her eyes. A moment later, Tillie's warm fingers squeezed her shoulder.

"Ana, the reason you refuse to attend mass with us, why you won't set foot inside a church . . ."

She hesitated and Ana shivered.

Her voice lowered to a whisper. "Is it because of the nightmares?"

Searing, screaming flames. Her mother's pale face. Droned prayers falling from the lips of a faceless priest—

Ana jerked her eyes open and wrenched from Tillie's grasp. "I-It's complicated, Tillie." With each step across the library floor she avoided the flapping terror that closed her throat, but it wasn't far enough. Never far enough to take her beyond its clawed reach.

Tillie snagged her arm, forcing Ana to meet her gaze. "Complicated or no, have you never wondered why, after all these years, they still haunt you? Maybe if you talked to Father Ed—"

Anger straightened her spine, sped her breathing. "I know why they still haunt me, Tillie. Because what happened to my family was horrible—something no child should ever have to live through. And afterward I was alone! No priest, no . . . *God* to hear or answer my prayers. Just a stranger the priest paid to put me on a ship and escort me to an orphanage a thousand miles from home. Have you any idea what it feels like to be that alone?"

Pain shimmered in the tears falling from her friend's eyes, cutting the wretched words from Ana's tongue. At her mid-section, Tillie's hands wrung the wide, wasted folds of her nightdress.

Ana took one step toward her and stopped, horrified by her arrogance and self-pity. "I'm so sorry, Tillie. I didn't mean—"

Tillie gave a low sigh and let her hands slide to her sides. "We both have things we need to let go of, Ana. Maybe finding time to help another—maybe it'll help us move on. My Braedon . . . he would not have wanted me to spend my life pining for him and our child. Neither would your mother or sister want you looking back and missing them."

But she had moved on . . . hadn't she? An entire ocean, in fact. Ana swallowed the lump in her throat and pulled her hands close to her body, hiding the scars beneath her crossed arms. "Maybe you're right. I'll . . . think on it."

"Promise?"

Though her insides trembled and her knees felt weak, Ana smiled. "Aye."

Tillie's hand, so small compared to Ana's, moved in a pat. "I'll stop by there tomorrow—" she glanced out the window, where the sky had just begun to glow a light pink—"today actually, after I leave the milliner shop, and see what work they have to be done."

"Tillie," Ana warned, grabbing her wrist before she could dash out of reach, "I said I'd think on it."

Thankfully her eyes were brimming not with tears but with merriment. "I know you did, dearie."

"I may decide that volunteering at the shelter is not for me."

"Of course."

Ana frowned, the sleeves of her nightdress billowing over her arms as she propped her fists on her hips. "And you will be disappointed if I decide not to go?"

Tillie leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Ana's cheek. "Good night, dearie. I'll see you in the morning."

Ana gestured out the window toward the lightening sky. "It's morning already."

"Aye, but if we're going to work extra hours at the shelter, we'd best try to wrangle a few more winks before breakfast."

"Tillie—" Ana protested, too late.

She whirled, her nightdress swirling about her heels as she darted from the library. In seconds, her tapping footsteps faded to silence on the stairs.

Moving to the window, Ana freed the sigh trapped in her lungs, her breath forming a crystal cloud on the glass.

Tillie was right about letting go, but some things were dug in too deep, and entering a church . . . she hadn't done that since she was a young lass. True, Tillie carried a grievous burden of her own, and Ana had no desire to see her friend pained further. But why should it matter if she exposed her wounds to a priest or if she chose to bear her anguish in silence?

Both fists curled, she banged the library window so hard the glass rattled. She wouldn't do it. No matter what Tillie said or how she pleaded, Ana would never again set foot inside a church.

Ever.



The sun peeking over the rooftops of Canal Street pried at Eoghan's eyelids, dragging him from his liquor-induced slumber on tearing, tenacious fingers. Groaning, he rolled from his stomach onto his back, gradually becoming aware of the cold, hard steps where he'd lain awkwardly through the night.

Blinking, he peered up, up, up . . . past ivy-covered walls to a gleaming silver steeple that pierced the sky like a sword.

A church?

A derisive snort blasted from his cracked lips. This had to be Kilarny's doing, with his twisted sense of humor.

He rocked to a sitting position, taking a moment to brace his throbbing head between his palms. Normally he avoided the taverns, avoided the danger of dulled senses, but last night . . .

Last night he'd hoped tipping back a few mugs would soften the Fenians' resolve against him, maybe even convince Kilarny to remember Ireland and better times—when all that mattered to either of them was helping the Fenians achieve Irish independence from England. . . .

And when he wasn't viewed as a traitor.

His hand slid to cover his aching jaw. At least they hadn't killed him. That was something.

Behind him, the door creaked open, followed by a decidedly feminine gasp. "Wha—? Father Ed, come quick!"

The woman's strident voice hit him broadside. Eoghan screwed his eyes shut and clutched his head against a wave of renewed pounding.

"Father Ed!"

Twisting, Eoghan lifted a pleading hand toward the dour-faced woman. "Madam, please."

Her eyes narrowed as she stared at him. She blew out a "humph" and folded her ample forearms over her black-clad bosom. "My name is Sister Mary, lad, not madam."

"Sister Mary, then," Eoghan said, stifling another snort as he went back to cradling his head.

"Are you drunk?"

"What?"

Her booted feet pounded the steps as she circled to stand in front of him. Leaning down, she braced her hands against her hips and looked him square in the eyes. "I said—" she

paused, punctuating her next words with an ever sharper glare—“have . . . you . . . been . . . drinking!”

“Aye!” Eoghan exclaimed, hoping the admission might somehow convince her to stop talking, then grimaced. Shouting was definitely a bad idea.

She straightened, disapproval etched in the creases ringing her stern lips. “Humph. Better the son of a gambler than a drinker, me ma always said.”

“And neither one very fitting for a child of God,” a deeper voice added firmly.

The hostility melted from Sister Mary’s shoulders faster than butter on a hot biscuit. “Father Ed . . . of course . . . it’s just . . .”

She pointed at Eoghan, her finger traveling with her gaze over the stains on his shirt. “Well, see for yourself.”

A lighter step scraped the stairs behind Eoghan, and then a kind-faced man with red hair ruffled by the wind squatted in front of him, his hand extended. “Hello, lad. Welcome to Our Lady of Deliverance. My name is Edward Murphy—Father Ed to my parishioners.”

“Oh . . . en Hamilton,” Eoghan said, changing the oath he’d been about to mutter into a strangled pronunciation of his name when he saw the priest’s eyebrows lift. He took Father Ed’s hand and gave it a reluctant shake, wincing as the movement sent fresh pain charging through his temples.

“Looks like you’ve had quite a night.” He pointed at Eoghan’s jaw, which by the feel of it bore a rather ugly bruise.

“To put it mildly.”

“And you slept out here, on the church steps?”

Eoghan nodded, not that he could remember.

“Lucky you didn’t freeze to death,” Sister Mary chimed, her frown returning. “It’s cold for October.”

“Come now, Sister. A kind word never broke anyone’s

mouth.” Father Ed rose to his feet and offered his hand to help Eoghan. “Besides, weren’t you about to head for the market?”

The ill-tempered nun gave a grunt that jiggled the rolls on her hips. “Aye, that I was.”

“I doubt Sister Agnes will be pleased if she’s forced to wait on the potatoes for her stew.”

Whoever Sister Agnes was, the mere mention of her name was enough to drive the frown from Sister Mary’s lips. Swaying in his shoes, Eoghan bit back a groan. Another nun worse than this one?

Sister Mary’s head bobbed once, twice, and then she barreled down the steps. “I’ll be back in an hour,” she called over her shoulder, moments before she disappeared around the wrought-iron fence surrounding the church. Bolted to the hinges was a wooden sign that bore the name *Our Lady of Deliverance* in faded yellow letters.

Squinting to make out the smaller words scrolled beneath the name, Eoghan leaned forward and nearly toppled down the steps.

Father Ed caught him by the elbow. “Easy there, lad.” He tapped his fiery red head and grinned. “No sense adding to the bruises on your nugget, or another tear to your coat.”

Eoghan tugged on the tattered hem of his tweed jacket, shame heating his cheeks. “No, I guess not.” He cleared his throat. “Well, it was nice to meet you and . . . her.” He motioned in the direction Sister Mary had taken.

Father Ed smiled kindly.

“I guess I should be going now.” He turned to move down the steps.

Father Ed stretched his hand toward the church door. “Are you hungry?”

“What?”

“I dinna suppose you’ve had a chance to break the fast?”

Eoghan's stomach rumbled in response. In fact, he'd missed far more than just breakfast. He didn't know what kind of cook Sister Agnes might be, but the thought of a hearty meat-and-potato stew was enough to make his mouth water. He shoved his hands into his pockets, reminded by the lint that clung to his fingernails of his plight.

He lowered his gaze, surprising himself with his honesty. "I do not have any money."

*Or clothes, or a place to stay.*

Father Ed clapped Eoghan on the shoulder. "Ach, then 'tis lucky for you that I have plenty of work needing to be done around the church. You're a godsend, for sure and for certain."

"I'm anything but a godsend, Father." Again, Eoghan was startled by his own honesty. What was it about this priest that lured the truth from him before he could even think?

Father Ed shrugged and climbed the steps to push open the door. "I suppose that remains to be seen, eh, lad? In the meantime, what say you come inside? We'll work out the details of your employment after we've put some meat in your belly."

Eoghan licked his lips, tempted almost beyond reason by the offer to staunch the quivering in his limbs brought on by hunger.

"Well?" Father Ed tipped his head toward the entrance. "You coming?"

Throwing his head back, Eoghan narrowed his eyes and stared at the steeple piercing the sky. So, it was a church. What did it matter if it meant earning enough sustenance to carry him through another day?

"Aye, I'm coming." Feet dragging, he followed Father Ed to the door. A moment later, he did the one thing he swore he'd never do again.

He set foot inside a church.