

EDGE OF FREEDOM, BOOK THREE



# TIDE AND TEMPEST



A NOVEL

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LUDWIG



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*To Lee*  
*You're my husband and best friend,*  
*the hero of my dreams.*

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# 1

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“Captain Morgan? Sir?”

Keondric Morgan glared over his shoulder at the deckhand waving furiously at him from the bow of the *Caitriona Marie*. He slowed his steps, halting the rhythmic cadence of his feet against the gangplank. “What now, Donal?”

His fingers beat with irritation against the pouch strapped to his side. He had somewhere to be, and if he had to mind every move his crewmen made, he’d never get there.

“The doctor, sir.” Donal shifted from foot to foot and tugged at the collar of his shirt.

Blowing an impatient blast from his lips, Morgan lifted his cap, dragged his fingers through his hair, and gestured for him to continue. “Well? Go on, man, what about him?”

“What . . . uh . . .” Knuckles white as he gripped the rail, he glanced over his shoulder and back, then cupped a hand to his mouth and leaned out over the water. “What should we do with him, sir?”

“He’s dead, Donal,” Morgan shouted back, raising his voice to be heard above the flocks of sea gulls arguing overhead. “What do you think we should do with him? Contact his next of kin and see about getting him buried!”

Sighing, Donal grumbled, “’Twould have been easier if the man had died at sea.”

A lull in the noise clamoring from the vessels along the dock carried his words to Morgan’s ears. He paused mid-turn and narrowed his eyes. “What was that?”

Donal’s chin lowered. “Nothing, sir.”

“Good. See to it, then.” Jamming his hands into his pockets, Morgan hunched his shoulders, spun on his heel, and stormed down the gangplank. The doctor’s death disturbed him, but not nearly as much as did his dying words.

*“I did it, Morgan. God help me, I took the money.”*

He scowled as he stomped off the wooden slats of the dock onto solid ground. He’d been weeks at sea, but this time there was no pleasure in the earthy scents of soil and horses that filled his nostrils, no marveling at the road stretching before him, straight and sturdy, with no rolling pitch for his legs to adjust to. Instead there was just . . . irritation?

He mulled the thought like a sore tooth. When the truth finally hit him, he growled low in his throat, feeling as though he’d been blindsided.

Nay. It was guilt.

Swinging off the dirt road toward a line of carriages for hire, he withdrew a coin from his pocket and flagged the first driver he saw.

Just what did he have to feel guilty for? It wasn’t he who’d greased the doctor’s palm. He hadn’t even known about the plot until a few hours ago. He hunkered into his coat. Would that he’d remained oblivious.

He paid the driver, grumbling to himself as he climbed into the carriage. Not true. He knew everything that happened on his ship. It was the fact that the *good* doctor’s deed had been accomplished under his nose that made his blood boil.

“Captain! Wait up.” His first mate jogged down the dock toward him, his dark hair flopping over his brow. Panting, he skittered to a stop and gripped the side of the carriage. “Where you headed?” Before Morgan could answer, he vaulted onto the seat across from him. “You going to see the lass, eh? The one whose husband—”

“Quiet!”

Morgan’s low snarl sliced the words from Cass’s tongue. He glanced at the driver, then flushed red. “Sorry, Cap.”

Morgan waved for the driver to proceed and then settled back against the seat, his arms crossed over his chest. “You know I hate it when you call me Cap.”

“Right. Sorry, Ca . . . Morgan.”

Morgan glared at his younger brother. “That one was on purpose.”

A devilish twinkle lit Cass’s eyes, but he neither admitted nor denied Morgan’s charge. “So? What about it?”

Now that the rumbling carriage drowned their conversation, Morgan could relax. He shrugged. “Not sure yet. Guess we’ll see what happens when I find her.”

“Any idea where to look?”

He gave a curt nod. “Ashberry Street. That’s where I left her.”

“Do you really think she’s still there?”

“If not, my problem is easily solved, eh?”

Cass’s brow gathered in a skeptical frown. “I know you, dear brother. Remember? You’re hardly likely to let this thing go as simply as that.” He leaned forward and braced his elbows on his knees, his lithe body swaying with the rocking of the carriage. “I don’t like this, Morgan. I still think we ought to bury the doc and say nothing.”

Morgan’s thoughts flashed to their mother, back home in Dublin. He angled his chin with a grimace. “Aye, and what would Ma have to say about that? You think she’d approve?”

Cass grunted and threw himself against the seat, matching Morgan's crossed arms. "And why would we even tell her?"

"I wouldn't have to. She'd know something was up the moment she caught sight of our faces."

"Yours maybe," Cass sneered, then ducked Morgan's fist and threw his hands high in surrender. "What? You couldn't lie to save your life and you know it."

"Aye, but unfortunately you can. Ma never leaves the confessional, thanks to you. Probably has a candle with your name on it burning right now."

Cass's deep laugh was contagious. With his answering smile, a bit of the tension eased from Morgan's shoulders. Ach, but glad he was that his brother had finally abandoned the wiles of wine and women and joined him on the ship. Maybe he could finally start thinking about—

He cut short the idea of Cass supporting their mother. Nothing that happened after their father's death was his brother's fault. He was the eldest, not Cass. Providing for the family was his responsibility, just as following in his father's footsteps and captaining the ship had been his choice to make.

He eyed his brother, lounging casually against the back of the seat. "Cass, I . . . I'd rather you not get involved, if you don't mind."

Alarm sparked in his brother's blue eyes. "So, you are worried."

Morgan jerked his head to stare at the towering buildings rolling by—so different from their modest cottage in Dublin. "Haven't had time to be worried. I just found out a few hours ago, remember?"

Cass leaned forward and wagged his finger beneath Morgan's nose. "That's another thing. I thought nothing happened on board the ship . . ." Catching sight of the warning



glance Morgan shot at him, he broke off and muttered, “Never mind. By the saints, Cap—”

“Watch your mouth.”

“Fie! You’re as ornery as a goat in your old age.”

Morgan bristled. He was only thirty-one, though sitting beside a brother ten years younger tended to make a man feel ancient. “That’s beside the point. I promised Ma I wouldn’t let you swear.”

Cass roared with laughter. “Aye, and I’d like to hear what the other crewmen would say if you tried inflicting your old-maid ways on them.”

“The other crewmen aren’t my baby brother.”

His laughter quieted as a flush crept over Cass’s cheeks.

“Besides,” Morgan continued, softening the barb with a bit of teasing, “they all know better than to curse in front of me.”

Envy shone on Cass’s face as he eyed Morgan’s muscled torso. “Only because they’re afraid of having the life thrashed out of them.”

“A lesson you’d do well to learn.”

Cass smirked. “You can’t beat me to death. Ma won’t let you.”

Morgan fixed him with a menacing glower. “Doesn’t mean I kinna knock some sense into that thick skull of yours.”

“Whoa!” Cass held up his hands. “Calm yourself, big brother. I was just fooling.”

“Exactly. You’re always fooling, which is why I’d rather you steered clear of this mess with Doc, at least until I can figure out what he meant. A man lost his life, and if what Doc said is true . . .” He shook his head. “There be no room for trifling.”

The twinkle faded. Without it, Cass appeared contemplative, even solemn—a rarity that Morgan was glad to see happening more and more often.

Cass lowered his voice. “I’m worried about you, brother.

For sure, ain't no one more capable of looking after himself, but this . . . this has me troubled." After a moment, he grinned and quirked an eyebrow. "Just be careful, all right?"

Morgan knew exactly what he meant. He'd felt it too, the moment Doc started ranting about poison . . . and murder.

Avoiding his brother's gaze, he whistled at the driver and motioned for him to pull over.

"What—" Cass sat up and looked at the driver, then at Morgan. "What are you doing?"

"This is where you get off."

Frowning, Cass unfolded himself from the seat and leapt to the ground, keeping one hand braced on the side of the carriage. "Fine, I'll go back to the ship." He offered a salute before stepping away. "But I have to say, Cap, if I didn't know better, I'd think you had ulterior motives for preventing me from laying eyes on this lass of yours."

Tossing a glance heavenward, Morgan sighed and motioned the driver onward, Cass's bark of laughter ringing in his ears.

The cobbled street rumbling beneath him, Morgan raised his fingers and worried the bit of scruff growing along his jaw. His brother wasn't alone in thinking him tedious. Most of Dublin, his crew included, considered him a prude, but since Da died, he simply had no time for social pleasantries.

His thoughts flashed to Moira and the sad smile that had accompanied his last glimpse of her. Perhaps if Cass knew how often that look filled Morgan's thoughts, he wouldn't be so quick to mock.

No. Morgan plucked an extra coin from his pocket. His brother was never intentionally cruel. Reckless perhaps, or even a touch thoughtless, but never cruel.

Some distance later, the carriage rolled to a stop. Tossing another coin to the driver, Morgan disembarked and stood

before a three-story structure with stone steps that led to a brightly painted door. Flowers cheered both sides of the walk—uncommon for most boardinghouses, but not unexpected from this one, considering the kind woman who owned it. She'd opened her door when none of the other proprietors along this street would, a fact that had burned the address, and her name, indelibly on his brain.

It wasn't Amelia Matheson he'd come to see, however. Morgan climbed the boardinghouse steps and raised his fist to knock. No, the person he'd come seeking was much younger, and possibly in far more danger.

And her name was Tillie McKillop.



Her fingers tingling with excitement, Tillie counted the last of the coins from a worn leather pouch she kept hidden beneath a floorboard under her bed. Combined with the money she and Braedon had saved before crossing over to America, and what she'd netted from selling her jewelry and a string of pearls left her by her grandmother, she had just about enough.

Grabbing the pouch from the bottom, she gave it one last shake, just in case any more coins lay tucked inside its folds. Instead, a slender gold ring fell out and rolled onto the floor with a thump. Braedon's ring.

As she'd done often in the past, Tillie lifted the ring to examine it more closely. Though the metal was worn with age, two clasped hands were clearly visible—one larger and obviously masculine, the other smaller and more delicate. Female. Twisting slightly, Tillie dislodged the two clasped hands, spreading the ring so it became two distinct bands, and beneath them a third band upon which a glittering ruby shaped like a heart lay hidden. The sight never failed to rob

her of her breath. Where Braedon had come by the ring or how much it was worth, she didn't know, but it belonged to him, and she'd vowed never to part with it.

Guilt pricked her conscience, which she brushed aside with a toss of her curls. Braedon would understand why she'd abandoned the idea of moving to far-off Kansas to buy a farm. There was so much need here in New York.

Her heart fluttered as she replaced the money and ring inside the pouch and returned it to its hiding place. To date, she'd breathed not a word of her plan, not even to Father Ed. But now that she was so near her goal, she'd make mention of it. Perhaps he would be able to steer her toward the perfect spot for—

“Tillie?” Amelia's voice floated up the stairs, but it wasn't her usual lighthearted tone. A troubled edge sharpened her words. “Are you up there, dear? There's someone here to see you.”

Tillie pushed her bed back into place, catching her skirt on one of the legs and pulling it free only after three attempts. She scowled at the ruffled hem. At least she hadn't torn it. Again.

Frowning, she marched to the door and stuck her head into the hall. “I'll be right down, Amelia.”

She crossed to the vanity and eyed her disheveled reflection critically. It was early, and Saturday. Who could be visiting her at this hour? Hastily she withdrew a couple of pins from her hair and replaced them in almost the same spot. How she wished she'd acquired a bit of the practiced ease with which Ana styled her curls. Maybe then she wouldn't always look so tousled.

A couple more pats and a smoothing of her skirt did little to improve the situation. She sighed. Whoever waited downstairs would likely be more affronted by her tardiness than her appearance.

Relinquishing the attempt at propriety, she made her way from her bedroom to the parlor. A low voice, gruff and vaguely familiar, drew her as she neared.

A gentleman caller? The only male she knew who might pay a visit would be Father Ed, and then only if an emergency at the church required her attention.

Her thoughts winged to the two aging nuns who helped run the shelter. Could one of them have taken ill? She quickened her steps.

The pocket doors leading to the parlor had been slid closed—only a slight crack let sight and sound through. As Tillie gave a knock, she glimpsed the hem of Amelia’s embroidered gown and the dark blue sleeve of her guest.

Amelia’s gown rustled as she rose. “Come in, dear.”

Curious now that she knew the visitor was not Father Ed, for he seldom wore anything but black, she slid open the doors and entered. Amelia stretched out her hands, one toward Tillie, the other toward the man who, once standing, towered over them both.

Lassoed by his steel-gray gaze, Tillie faltered on the threshold. Once before she’d felt herself snared by those eyes. A hint of compassion had softened them then, so she did not quake. Not so today.

Today, he stared with an intensity that sent shivers coursing over her flesh. Instinctively she rubbed her hands over her arms.

“Tillie”—Amelia glanced hesitantly at her and then at their guest—“you remember Captain Morgan?”

She swallowed on reflex. Aye, she remembered him. The question was, what was he doing at the boardinghouse?

And what could he possibly want from her?