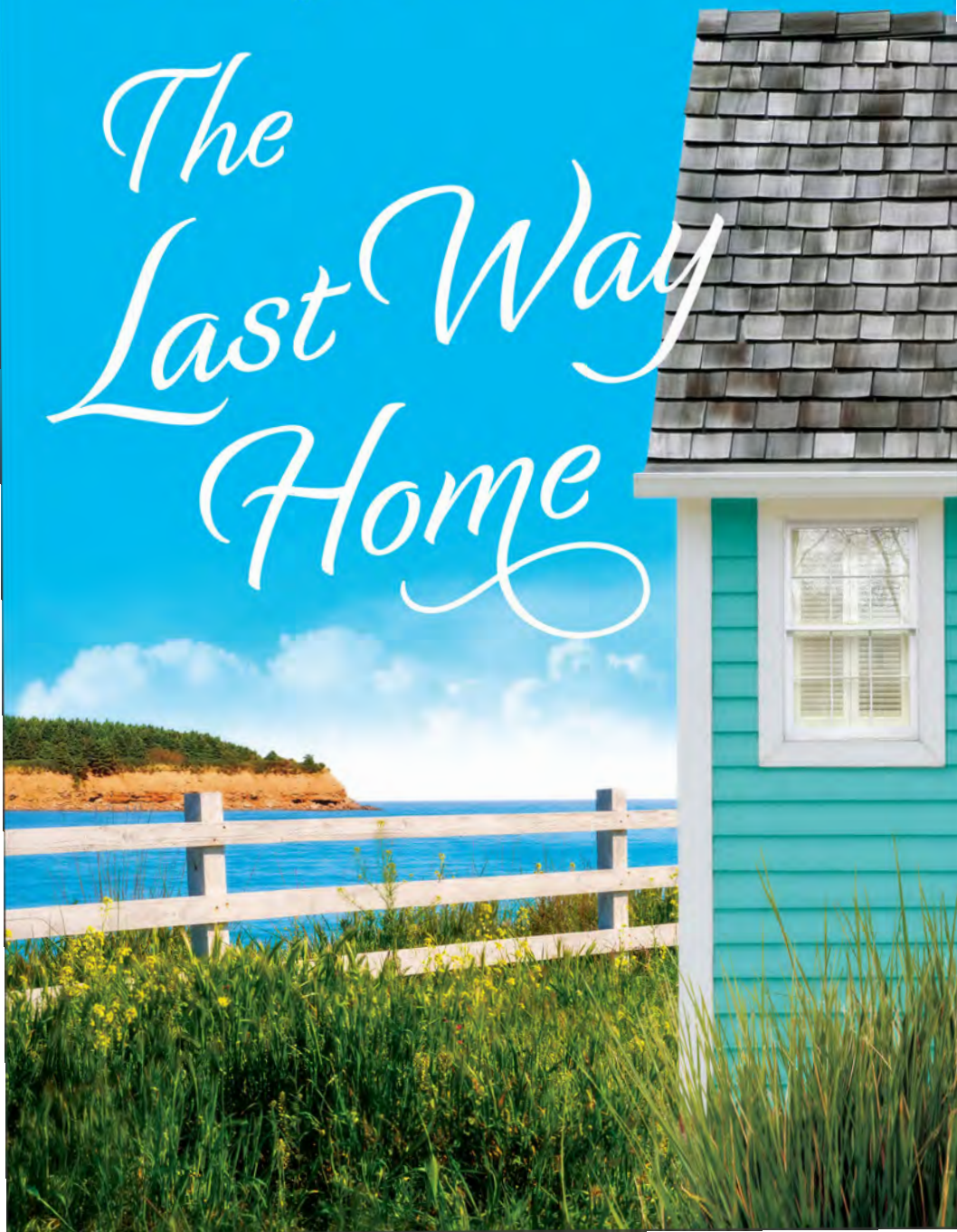


PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND SHORES

LIZ JOHNSON

*The
Last Way
Home*



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Last Way
Home

LIZ JOHNSON



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For Julia.
Go and chase your dreams.
You are always loved.
And you can always come home.



While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

Luke 15:20

one

Eli Ross had a black eye, a fractured wrist, and nothing else to his name. It was not the way he'd planned to come home.

Then again, he hadn't planned to come home at all. He hadn't planned a lot of things. Didn't mean they hadn't happened. So here he was, standing in front of the little green house he'd called home until he was nineteen. It had been repainted—at least, the chipped paint on the side facing the bay had been scraped and replaced. The house nearly gleamed in the morning sun.

It still made him feel a little seasick, the memories from the other side of the white door just as fresh as they had been more than a decade before. His father's empty closet. His mom's pinched features. His brother's face twisted with rage.

He shouldn't be here. There was a reason he hadn't been back in nearly eleven years. A reason he'd kept his distance. A reason he'd never settled down and made a home of his own.

He didn't need a home. But at the moment, he needed a *place*. Somewhere to rest his head, to regroup, to be still.

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If they would take him back.

He stabbed the fingers of his good hand through his short hair and flexed his other hand beneath the black wrist brace. The spring breeze off the bay carried the almost forgotten scent of salt water and sunshine, setting the clay wind chime on the house's white wooden porch singing. His mom had made that when he was seven or eight. She'd been inordinately proud of it, hanging it where all the neighbors could see it.

The other houses on the small block gleamed just as bright, the sunshine filtering through towering trees and dancing across two-story roofs. Lacy white curtains hung in kitchen windows, and bright welcome mats sat before front doors.

It would be better if he walked away. No uncovering of old sins or confessing new ones. No need for apologies and atonement. No fear that they might send him right back where he came from.

After all, Oliver had told him in no uncertain terms that he wouldn't be welcome back.

Leaving had been his choice. Returning, less so. He had nowhere else to go. And he'd spent his last loonie on the bus that had taken him over the Confederation Bridge and dropped him off along Route 1. He'd walked to Victoria by the Sea without the aid of a map, his feet sure of the way before his mind could be. They'd carried him past the white theater and Carrie's Café, both unchanged by time. They'd taken him down the old, paved street, the center line long faded.

He'd been standing in front of the old house for going on thirty minutes, and if he didn't make a move, one of his mom's neighbors was likely to report him for suspicious activity.

Although if the neighbor recognized him, he might be asked for an autograph—which would be much worse.

“They’re not there.”

Eli jumped, stumbling off the sidewalk and into the street, his gaze swinging toward a sprite of a woman who had snuck up on him. The top of her dark head didn’t quite reach his shoulder, but the angle of her sharp chin and the power of her gaze made it seem like she took up more space than her slender frame actually did.

“Excuse me?” He glanced around. Surely she couldn’t be speaking to him. But they were the only two people here.

“They’re. Not. There.” Her eyebrows rose higher on her forehead with each overly enunciated syllable.

“Who?” But his sinking stomach suggested he already knew. He just didn’t know how she did.

He hadn’t seen her before in his life. He was pretty sure. He squinted at her, studying the smooth lines of her fair cheeks, the button nose, and the plump pink lips set in a frown. But it was her eyes that convinced him. He’d have remembered that strange shade of brown—half intensity, half serenity, nearly amber.

“You’re Eli Ross, aren’t you?”

His entire body went rigid except for his hand, which ran down his face and over the early beard he’d hoped would mask his identity. “Have we met?”

She crossed her arms. “I know who you are.”

Was he supposed to know her too? He scratched his chin and offered a fake smile, the one the team publicist had coached him to give until it was second nature. Maybe they’d gone to high school together. Truthfully, he hadn’t paid much

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attention to anything beyond the ice. And the girls in the stands at every game.

“Good to see you again,” he said.

Her frown turned into a smirk. “Again?”

He swallowed thickly. “For the first time?”

She nodded, quick and sure.

He turned to face her fully. “Then you seem to have the advantage. How do you know me?”

“Oh, I don’t assume that I know you. I just recognize your face.”

She was talking in riddles that made him want to shake some truth out of her. “But you assume that you know who—or what—I’m looking for.” He nodded toward the house.

Her smirk turned sheepish, her nose flaring. “I suppose I do. Only because if I came home after eleven years, I’d probably be looking for my family too.”

He nearly growled at her. “There you go again, making assumptions about my life. What makes you think I haven’t been back in eleven years?”

“Because your mom misses you.”

Her soft comment hit him harder than any opposing player checking him against the boards ever had, and he clenched his teeth, using everything inside him to keep from showing how much he hated those words.

And how much he’d longed for them.

Maybe he’d succeeded in keeping his face from reflecting his reaction. Or maybe he hadn’t.

Her lips twitched, and then her whole face softened. “I guess it’s really none of my business,” she said and turned to walk away.

His hand shot out to catch her elbow, and she spun easily on the uneven sidewalk. “Who are you? How do you know so much about my family?”

Eyes turning serious, she glanced down to where his hand was wrapped around her arm. Her pointed glance back up at him made him drop his grip, and the intensity in her eyes dimmed a fraction. “I don’t like seeing my friends hurt.”

And he definitely wasn’t one of her friends.

When she stepped away again, he didn’t try to stop her. Instead, he watched her stroll past the deep purple house with the white porch at the end of the block. Mrs. Dunwitty used to live there—back when the house was brown and Oliver had mowed the old woman’s lawn every other week.

She turned the corner and disappeared, and only then did he ask the question he should have from the start. “If my family isn’t here, where are they?”



By the time Violet Donaghy returned to Mama Potts’s Red Clay Shoppe from her midmorning walk, her pulse was racing, her head spinning. She slammed the front door and sank against the wall beside a two-meter wooden shelf. Rows of mugs made from the island’s famous red clay rattled in their places, and she reached out to still them.

“Vi? Is that you?” Mama Potts’s voice rang through the open door from the studio in the back. It carried a touch of worry, and Violet’s heart pounded even harder.

Did Mama Potts know already? Maybe she’d heard the news. Maybe Victoria by the Sea’s gossip mill had been hard at work spreading the word, ringing the church bells. Kill the

fattened calf. Prepare the family signet ring. The prodigal son had returned.

Eli Ross was back in town.

“Yes.” Violet’s voice cracked, and she cleared her throat to try again. “It’s me.” She wanted to ask what Mama Potts had already heard, but she could manage only silence. Something Mama Potts knew well. After all, they’d heard exactly nothing from Eli in the more than seven months since every sports reporter on the continent had announced that he’d been released from his contract with the Rangers and ejected from the National Hockey League.

Not that silence was unusual from him. It was all that Mama Potts, Oliver, and Levi had experienced since Eli took off for his chance at a career in the pros. Therefore, it was all that Violet had ever known from him. Well, silence and the aftermath of heartbreak.

But he was every bit flesh and blood. And piercing blue eyes—despite an impressive shiner. And unruly black hair. And more than a five o’clock shadow at ten in the morning. And broad shoulders.

Not that she’d noticed. Much.

She scowled at herself.

Okay, so he was a broader, handsomer version of his brothers. He was also a selfish, thoughtless—

“I think there’s something wrong.” Mama Potts had rarely raised her voice in the ten years Violet had known her, but there was an edge to it now, an urgency that sent Violet pushing off the wall.

She weaved between the rows of waist-high wooden bookshelves that displayed countless pieces glazed in bright

blues and greens and every other color of the rainbow. She whipped past a stack of purple platters, rattling them as her hip bumped the corner of the shelf. Pain shot toward her knee, but she didn't stop until she'd raced past the built-in counter and through the open door off to the left.

"Are you—" Violet's question and feet both stopped when she saw Mama Potts standing on the far side of their studio.

The older woman looked just fine, small but strong. Her fists were pressed against her hips, and her pretty features were pinched as she glared at the large round kiln in the corner.

Violet placed her hand over the thudding in her chest and tried for a smile. Whatever had made Mama Potts call out couldn't be that concerning. And most likely it did not involve any knowledge of Eli. She hoped.

Then again, that did leave her to share the news—the beans she was not eager to spill. These were family beans, and despite nearly a decade of mentorship and six years in business partnership, Mama Potts wasn't her mom, and Oliver and Levi weren't her brothers.

"What's wrong?" Violet finally asked.

Mama Potts shook her head and kicked the front of the metal kiln. "Something's off. It's—" She stopped at the exact moment the room filled with the acrid scent of burning rubber.

Violet twisted her neck, looking for the source, and shrieked as sparks jumped from the wall beside Mama Potts. Violet raced across the room and had nearly reached her side when the socket kicked out another round of fireworks and the white wall around the plastic plate turned black and charred.

“It’s in the wall!” Mama Potts shrieked, grabbing Violet’s arm and tugging her back.

But the fire didn’t stay there. Flames suddenly burst from the electrical panel on the kiln and lit up the whole room. The morning sun shining through the open garage door made the flames disappear except for the blue at the center, which flickered in the wind.

Mama Potts’s hand beat on Violet’s shoulder. “Get the—get the—get the—”

Violet ran for the red fire extinguisher mounted below the wooden steps that led to her apartment on the second floor. She fumbled with the release, and when she finally got it open, she spun around just in time to see the flames jump to the wooden shelves that held pieces waiting for their turn to be fired.

Right beside the shelves sat a pile of rags atop a small pallet holding metal cans of glaze mixed with solvents. All with plastic lids.

Her stomach hit the cement slab floor. She tried to scream, but her throat closed.

The wind whipped the fire across the pallet, igniting the rags and melting the lids.

The explosion wasn’t like in the movies. Shrapnel didn’t go flying. The roof stayed firmly in place.

And the fire was manageable. Until it wasn’t. The blaze went from blue to towering orange flames in an instant, consuming everything in its path. Wooden racks filled with months of work burned and then tilted, mugs and plates crashing to the floor. An entire summer’s worth of inventory destroyed.

The shock weighed on Violet's shoulders, dozens of kilos pressing her arms to her sides. She couldn't even lift the extinguisher in her hands. Not that it would have helped.

Mama Potts scrambled back from the flames, her heel catching on a worktable and sending her sprawling on the ground. She cried out in pain, cradling her arm against her stomach.

Violet screamed, trying to check on Mama Potts, but her words were lost. She glanced at the extinguisher again but threw it down without any real consideration. The spray it held wouldn't stop the inferno devouring their studio. But at least she could get Mama Potts out safely.

Rushing toward the heat, she squinted into the light as sweat poured down her back. When she reached Mama Potts, she squatted next to her, bracing an arm behind her back. "Here. Get up. Come on."

But when the older woman, her arm still protected in front of her body, braced her foot against the floor and began to push herself upright, she cried out again.

Violet gasped, immediately choking on the smoke and chemicals filling the air. Her lungs burned, and tears rushed to her eyes. "Come on. You have to help me."

Mama Potts coughed, doing her best to scoot across the floor. She cringed with each centimeter, and Violet turned to see how far they had to go to reach the sunshine-covered yard.

Please, let us make it.

She didn't pray as often as she had as a child, but if ever there was an occasion, this was it. She hoped God heard even the desperate cries of those who had almost forgotten how to pray.

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Then there wasn't time to think about it. There was only a massive black silhouette in the open door, his arms pumping and his feet swallowing up the ground.

"Oliver!" Violet couldn't help the tremor in her voice as relief rushed through her. His dark head bowed over his mom, and he scooped her into his strong arms. Mama Potts rested her head against his shoulder, coughing into his shirt.

Free of the building and the suffocating smoke, Violet pressed her hands to her knees, savoring the salty tang of the fresh air. The wind dried her tears to her cheeks as she looked back at the building, half of their studio already consumed.

The metal cans glimmered among the flames near the kiln. Right where she knew better than to leave flammable solvents. Right where she'd left them anyway.

This was her fault.

Her stomach heaved, and she gasped for oxygen as sirens split the air. They were still a kilometer or more away, but they were coming. She hadn't called. Neither had Mama Potts. They hadn't had time.

Oliver. He must have called for the firefighters. When she turned to thank him, her insides twisted again. This time she really was going to be sick.

The man gently setting his mom on the ground wasn't Oliver Ross. Or even his little brother, Levi.

In the sunlight and free of the shadows, there was no denying the way his mom cupped his cheek and whispered his name with pure love.

"Eli."