

PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND SHORES

LIZ JOHNSON

*Summer  
in the  
Spotlight*



## *Praise for Beyond the Tides*

“*Beyond the Tides* by Liz Johnson is an amazing contemporary novel. . . . Johnson took me on a beautiful journey of forgiveness, love, loss, grief, and healing.”

*Urban Lit Magazine*

“An emotional and witty story, featuring flawed characters who must learn to reconcile their own shortcomings, *Beyond the Tides* is highly recommended.”

*Midwest Book Reviews*

“Johnson returns to PEI in her new series, and fans will not be disappointed!”

*Write-Read-Life*

“Readers will love this romantic return to Prince Edward Island, compliments of an author who knows how to design a love story that will linger sweetly in the memories of all those who read it.”

*Interviews & Reviews*

“Johnson kicks off her Prince Edward Island Shores series with this heartwarming romance. . . . Johnson’s fans will eagerly anticipate the next installment of this promising series.”

*Publishers Weekly*

## *Praise for **The Last Way Home***

“Johnson’s sweet, small-town romance filled with strong emotion continues her Prince Edward Island Shores series.”

*Booklist*

“Love going back to PEI and meeting new characters mixed with those readers have already grown to love!”

*Write-Read-Life*

“*The Last Way Home* is a transcendental experience of lost relationships, heartfelt pain, sorrow, and true unconditional love.”

*Romance Junkies*

“This testament to the power of family and God’s forgiveness will have readers eager to see what Johnson does next.”

*Publishers Weekly*

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To you, dear reader.  
Thank you for traveling back to  
the island for another story.  
And for falling in love with PEI all over again.

And to the people of Prince Edward Island,  
who have weathered terrible storms but remain  
stalwart and strong. You inspire me.



The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life,  
but the mouth of the wicked conceals  
violence.

Proverbs 10:11

## *one*

Meteorologists could not be trusted. At least as far as Levi Ross was concerned. Last winter the guy on the news in Charlottetown had forecasted a light dusting of precipitation. The snow had reached his knees.

So Levi could be forgiven if he didn't believe the perky blond weather girl who warned Prince Edward Island that an especially early hurricane was on its way. He seemed to be the only person on the south shore who hadn't heeded the advice, ransacked grocery store shelves, and burrowed in at home. Most evenings he saw—and successfully avoided—at least one or two teachers lingering over a test to be graded or a lesson plan to be finalized. Tonight the halls of the regional high school were empty, nothing but shadows to keep him company.

Just as he liked it.

He usually shared this time with the big orange sun, but the overcast day had given way to a gray sunset. The wide windows of the school's front hallway lacked their typical glow as he pushed a round blue trash bin across

the white-tiled hallway. One of the wheels squeaked, and he made a mental note to fix it for Amos, the usual janitor. Amos had called to say he was staying home because of the hurricane.

Levi didn't mind picking up a few extra hours—or the reflection of that on his paycheck. The house he'd dreamed of, the one he'd put an offer on, was gone. Sold to another buyer. Then again, the down payment he'd saved for was gone too. It had been used to rescue his eldest brother, Eli.

Levi barely missed the money. Especially since his brother was back in town to stay. Besides, he could always make more money. And there would be other houses—like the pretty gray two-story Victorian outside of town and right on the water's edge that had just sprouted a FOR SALE sign in the yard. So, yeah, he didn't mind putting in some overtime.

He glanced out the window again. Through the dim light he could just make out the trees lining the entrance, their arms bending and swaying to a song he couldn't hear. Maybe it was better he was at the school anyway, just in case there was trouble. Not that he expected any.

At least if he got stuck at the school, he'd be stuck on his own. Eli would be with their mom and Violet. Eli was always with Violet these days. And Oliver and Meg would be hunkered down in front of the fire in their bungalow.

Levi smirked to himself as he flung open the door to the first classroom on his left. Crooked rows of desks greeted him, crumpled papers a littered path weaving between the metal legs. He stooped to pick up the trash before shooting it across the room into the bin he'd parked at the far wall.

“Three points for the win.”

Levi froze, his hand still suspended above his head, his fingers following the arc the paper had taken. He'd recognize that sweet voice anywhere. He should. He'd heard her perform every single summer at the community theatre. From Maria in *The Sound of Music* to Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, she'd starred in them all. Shone in them all.

Even in the shadow of the doorway—a kilometer from center stage—Kelsey Ahern very nearly glowed.

He couldn't be any more awkward if he tried as he lowered his hands and offered a shrug and a half smile by way of greeting.

"I thought I had the place to myself," she said and flashed him her straight white teeth. She'd had braces for all of junior high and most of high school, and they'd been worth every minute.

With a nod to the waste bin by Mr. Sullivan's desk, he shrugged again.

Brilliant. He sounded like an imbecile. Or, rather, *didn't* sound like a well-read individual with an operational tongue.

Kelsey nodded as though he'd managed to get out a full thought. "Just ignore me," she chirped as she slipped toward the metal cabinet at the back of the room. "Mike said he had some extra copies of *The Count*." After flinging open the double doors, she practically disappeared into the closet, rummaged around, and reappeared with a short stack of paperbacks. Waving the top one at him, she smiled.

*The Count of Monte Cristo*. Sword fights and duels. Lost treasure and prison escapes. Betrayal and revenge. Levi had read it at least half a dozen times, and it only got better. Her class was in for a treat.

She glanced down at the stack of books now tucked under her arm, her eyebrows pinching together. “I was going to have them read *The Three Musketeers* over the summer, but the tenth years will be studying Napoleon in their history class. It’s the perfect tie-in, but I don’t have enough books for everyone in my class. And I’m having to change all my lesson plans, but I think it’s worth it. Do you think so?” She looked up, hope in her eyes.

Levi blinked at her, not sure if she was looking for confirmation or for someone to tell her to go back to her original plan. He wanted to tell her he thought it was a great idea, that he’d read a biography of Napoleon after reading *The Count* the first time, when he was just a few years older than her students would be when they started back to school in September.

He wanted to tell her that she couldn’t go wrong. That all she had to do was show her students she cared about them.

He wanted to tell her that her smile lit the hallways—long after the students went home for the day. That he looked forward to seeing her, hoped every evening that he’d stumble upon her singing to herself in the drama room.

But since he’d managed to say exactly five words to her since the start of the school year nine months before, he settled for lifting a single shoulder and picking up the trash can he’d come to empty.

“I’m sorry.” She shook her head but didn’t make a move toward the door. “I’m sure you have better things to think about than my lesson plans. It’s just that I doubt Mrs. Davis ever second-guessed herself when we were in school. I don’t want to fail these kids—I mean, do the wrong thing for them. Not that I want any of them to fail my class ei-

ther.” Her cheeks turned a pretty shade of pink as she scratched at the little mole on the edge of her left cheek, and she rolled her eyes—likely at herself. “I know. I know. I’m sure it’s just second-year jitters.” She readjusted the books in her arms, her shoulders rising and falling like she was letting out a deep breath.

But the sound of her sigh was drowned out by a rush of wind that shrieked past the building. Windows rattled and the floor shook. In that instant, rain hammered against the roof, angry and sullen.

Kelsey’s eyes flashed wide, and she hugged her books to her chest. “I guess maybe the weather girl was right,” she whispered, as though raising her voice might incite the wind again. “Should have gone home early today.”

Levi nodded, tearing his gaze from her and watching the torrents against the windows. The sky had been merely gray only a few minutes before. Now it was black, sinister. He couldn’t see to the parking lot beyond. He couldn’t even see to the trees he’d planted a few meters from the building three years ago.

A gust rattled the windows again like the storm wanted to be inside too.

His gut twisted. He took three cautious steps backward.

Kelsey let out a little peep, a sound of uncertainty mingled with something like fear. But when he turned to look at her, she was wrestling her features into something that he called *teacher face*. No nonsense. In charge. Unflappable.

Every teacher at the school had one. Hers just happened to make his skin tingle and his breath catch.

“Well.” She nodded toward the hallway and her classroom beyond. “I guess I better—”

“You’re not leaving.” He blurted it out like a command, not the question he’d intended. He didn’t know which of them was more surprised that he’d spoken.

Kelsey blinked quickly, her mouth opening and closing, but nothing came out.

He wanted to clarify. It wasn’t safe. She could be injured. The roads could be flooding, her car swept away. The best thing they could do was wait out the storm. Right here. Together.

Well, together-ish.

But now that he’d actually spoken—and so poorly at that—he wanted to disappear into his work and pretend she’d never walked into this classroom.

She blinked those big blue eyes again—slowly, thoughtfully, as though trying to pick from the glut of words she could unleash on him. Finally she said, “No.” She paused, then added, “I won’t. I’m going to go back to my classroom now.”

She left him to his trash bins and litter and enough self-chastising to rival the downpour outside.



Kelsey had read the same paragraph four times, and the sentences still didn’t make sense. Probably because the letters quivered and ran together, blurring words and sentences into a collage of lines that made absolutely no sense.

She rubbed the heels of her hands against her eyes and then blinked hard. It didn’t help.

Maybe the rain was too distracting. It had bypassed a simple pitter-patter and instead snapped and popped like

an angry fire. Just when she thought it might let up, the wind whipped through the courtyard on the other side of the windows to her back, roaring its displeasure.

She looked behind her into the darkness beyond. There wasn't much but the reflection of the classroom lights in the window, nothing but midnight blue on the other side. She pulled her sweater tighter around her shoulders, a shiver snaking its way down her spine.

But it wasn't the weather keeping her from the book in her hands. This was perfect reading weather—even if she wasn't curled up in front of a fire with her favorite Shakespearean-insults mug filled to the brim with hot cocoa. She couldn't blame her lack of concentration on the time either, although a quick glance at the clock above the whiteboard confirmed that it was well past her pajama hour.

The words on the page weren't making any sense because every time she tried to read them, three little words echoed louder.

*“You're not leaving.”*

Levi Ross hadn't said so many words to her in a row since they were kids. And certainly never with such conviction. His voice was deeper than she'd remembered, more resonant.

If only he could teach a few guys in her drama class to project so well. But that would require him to speak. Publicly.

Maybe he did speak—privately. But that begged the whole if-a-tree-falls-in-the-forest question.

She was supposed to be working on vocab and comprehension questions from *The Count* for next term's grade tens. She was not supposed to be daydreaming about Levi

and his soft smile and deep dimples and rich voice. She had more important—

Her world exploded with a crash of shattering glass. There was no time to investigate before something shoved her to the floor, pressing her face against the icy tiles and pinning her arms beneath her. She gasped for air and only managed to choke on the water pelting her. Whatever had pinned her snagged her cotton sweater as she tried to wiggle free. But she stopped on a scream as something cold and sharp sliced into her back.

“Help.” She gasped and sputtered and tried again. “Help me.” But she couldn’t make her voice any louder. Not without air.

*Breathe.* Just catch her breath. That was all she needed. Then she’d be able to get up.

She tried to capture a full breath, but an elephant had taken a seat on her back.

All right. She’d get up, then she’d breathe.

Pressing her palms flat against the floor, she pushed with everything inside her. Every muscle, every cell in her body trembled. Hopeless.

The classroom lights flickered high above. Once. Twice. Then everything went black.

There was nothing except the unending pinpricks of rain as they bit into her legs and the painful shriek of the wind rustling leaves. Right next to her ear.

All the pieces rushed together then. The tree outside her classroom had come down and crashed through the window. That was what had pinned her down. Was still pinning her down.

She was in a fight with a tree.

She was pretty sure one of her drama professors had made her act out this exact scenario in an improv class. The tree had definitely not weighed this much. And her legs hadn't gone numb, which they most definitely were at the moment. Probably from the cold. Maybe from paralysis.

That was ridiculous. She was not paralyzed. She was—as her mom had once said—imaginative.

A sudden rush of footfalls echoed down the hall outside her classroom, and she tried to call out.

“Ms. Ahern? Are you still here?”

Six words. In a row.

She'd never heard anything sweeter.

“Help.” It wasn't more than a strangled whisper, but a beam of light immediately broke the darkness, sweeping across the floor. Blinking against its brilliance, she tried to wave at Levi but couldn't get her arm free.

It didn't matter. He was there in a moment, coaxing the elephant off her back until she could gather a whole breath. Sweet oxygen. Sweet air. Sweet life.

Levi grunted, and she twisted just enough to see that he was still holding the tree above her. She should crawl free. As long as she wasn't paralyzed.

A few quick scoots confirmed that she had full use of her chilled extremities, and she untangled herself from the twigs and branches. The tree collapsed behind her, and then suddenly she was scooped up, held against his chest, surrounded by his warmth. Levi Ross was better than a heater, and she shivered as she curled beneath his chin.

In a blink she was being set down on the sofa in the teachers' lounge, carefully deposited in an upright position. Two electric lanterns magically appeared, bathing them in

a soft glow. Levi flipped his wet hair out of his face as he squatted before her, his bright eyes filled with worry.

“Blank-ket?” She couldn’t keep her teeth from chattering.

He nodded quickly and disappeared outside the circle of light, then returned moments later with a throw that looked scratchy but warm. When he squatted again to tuck it around her legs, she stopped him with a hand on his forearm. “I want to wrap up in it.”

The muscles of his face twitched, and he shook his head slowly, pressing a hand to the outside of her left shoulder. Maybe it was his heat that made pain shoot down her back, but she wasn’t holding out hope. A twist and a glance confirmed her doubts. A jagged piece of glass jutted out from her shoulder, a red smear slashed across it.

So, she was impaled and bleeding. And she was probably going to pass out.

Perfect.

A tree with a nefarious agenda? She’d survived.

Possible paralysis? She’d figure it out.

A single drop of blood? Nope. Just nope.

She squeezed her eyes closed and sagged into Levi’s shoulder. His flannel shirt was soft against her forehead and smelled like rain and wood shavings.

“Ms. Ahern?” He spoke in a quiet tone, his voice flush with concern but still calm, as he slipped an arm around her side to hold her up.

Her head spun, her stomach on a roller coaster without end.

This was going to get embarrassing. Fast.