

THE
RED
DOOR
INN

A NOVEL

Liz Johnson



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2016 by Liz Johnson

Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Johnson, Liz, 1981– author.

Title: The Red Door Inn : a novel / Liz Johnson.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016.

| ?2015 | Series: Prince Edward Island dreams ; book 1

Identifiers: LCCN 2015037052 | ISBN 9780800724023 (softcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Bed and breakfast accommodations—Fiction. | Man-woman relationships—Fiction. | GSAFD: Christian fiction. | Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3610.O3633 R43 2016 | DDC 813/.6—dc23 LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015037052>

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Published in association with Books & Such Literary Management.

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Twila, Hannah, and Julia,
who helped me uncover the hidden
treasures of the Gentle Island.



And for the people of PEI,
who so generously share the joy of the
island with visitors like me.

1

The change in Marie Carrington’s pocket wouldn’t pay for a ferry ride across the Northumberland Strait to Prince Edward Island, let alone a bus ticket to anywhere else in the world. As she cupped the Canadian dollar coins in her shaking hand, they clinked together, drawing the curious gaze of the man in the seat next to her.

Marie shifted on the painful plastic chair, putting her shoulder between all the money she had access to in the world and the gaze shrouded by bushy, white eyebrows.

Two. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Seven twenty-five.

The sign on the café attached to the ferry terminal announced a fish sandwich lunch special for \$6.99, but tax would be more than a quarter. Besides, that would completely wipe her out. And then she’d be penniless in a strange town.

“Which color do you like better?” The man with the eyebrows and more wrinkles than she’d ever seen on one face leaned forward, holding out four paint swatches.

Marie rotated farther away from him, shoving her coins back in her pocket, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“My wife liked the pale blue, but I think we need something brighter for the shutters of a bed-and-breakfast. Don’t you?”

She couldn’t fight the urge to survey the swatches, even if just out of the corner of her eye. With one finger she twisted the necklace at her throat, imagining each color on the front of a robust, two-story Maritime home.

He dipped his chin as though waiting for her answer. “Well? Don’t you think it’s too light?”

Finally she whispered, “Unless the house is a deep blue.” Keeping an eye on him, she scooted to the far edge of her seat, the armrest digging into her side as she bent to scoop her backpack into the safety of her lap.

“What?” His eyebrows nearly reached his hairline. Pulling his glasses from his front shirt pocket and planting them on his face, he held the color swatch in question to within an inch of his nose, mumbling her words over and over. “Deep blue. The house could be deep blue.”

After several seconds of peace, she decided he’d forgotten all about her until he flipped the same blue color swatch over her shoulder and pointed to the darkest hue on the row. “Is that dark enough?”

“No.”

“Then what would be?”

Shoulder still in place, she pointed with her other hand to the blue of his pants. “Maybe with a hint of gray mixed in.”

Holding the color card against a handful of jean fabric, he nodded slowly. “That might work. But not too much gray.” He scratched his chin, his whiskers rasping beneath aged fingers. “What about the trim? Would you do the same color as the shutters?”

“It depends.”

“On what?”

“Lots of things. What do the neighboring houses look like? Do you have other colors around the house?”

“Like what?”

She relaxed her back a fraction of an inch so that she didn’t have to strain her neck to watch his reactions. “Maybe a flower garden or water feature. If you already have several other colors, keep the trim and shutters the same color or the house can look disjointed and unappealing.”

“Never thought of having a flower garden.” He poked his tongue into his cheek, staring at the color cards as though they’d failed him. “Suppose women might like that.”

“Men too.”

He raised one of his bushy brows at her.

“Really.”

“Well, if I have to have flowers and a red door, I suppose the shutters and trim should be one color.”

“Why a red door?” Marie hadn’t asked a voluntary question in two months, but this one just slipped out before she could clamp her hand over her mouth.

The old man didn’t seem to notice her surprise. Instead, lost in the colors in his hands, he cleared his throat. “We visited the island for the first time fifteen years ago, and the red doors captured her imagination. She said we had to have a red door. There was no argument. No discussion, only—”

“The nine thirty ferry will begin boarding shortly.” The voice of the announcer echoed over the tinny intercom. “All passengers please make your way to the boarding area and have your ticket in hand.”

The old man shuffled his cards and tucked them into his

pocket before slipping one arm into his oversized coat. He reached for and missed the other arm twice before Marie set her bag back on the floor, stood, and held the jacket open for him. “Thank you.”

She nodded and slipped back into her seat, fighting the urge to hug her knees to her chest and let the tears roll. She could sit here for hours, but it wouldn’t make the money she needed appear. She’d never have enough for the ferry traveling north. She couldn’t come up with the sixteen dollars to keep moving.

“Aren’t you going on the boat?”

He wasn’t from New England or the Canadian Maritimes. Any self-respecting man from that area would know it was a ship or a ferry, not a boat.

“No.” Her fingers brushed over her pocket and the outline of her meager funds pressing through the black corduroy.

His eyebrows pulled into a V that looked like a single angry caterpillar. “Have some more ideas to ask you about.”

She looked anywhere but into his ice-blue eyes, her gaze finally resting on the posted ferry schedule above the ticket counter. “I’m not going to Prince Edward Island today.” If she was honest with herself, she probably wasn’t ever going to make it to PEI. More than likely she’d have to call her father back in Boston and face him, no matter how much she hated that.

“Don’t you want to go to the island?”

Her laugh was more stinging than humorous, even to her own ears. Of course she wanted to go to the island. Of course she wanted to keep putting more and more distance between her and her past.

She’d grown up reading books set on the island, dream-

ing of finding a home there. She'd even managed to squeeze one of her favorites by the island's beloved author into her backpack. Of course, the corners were bent and the edges worn, but she'd never loved the book or the dream of the island any more than she did sitting just a few miles away.

Of course she wanted to go to the island.

But wanting wouldn't get her more than a toe in the icy water.

"I don't have a ticket."

"That all? I'll get you a ticket."

She shook her head, swallowing the hint of hope that was quickly coupled with certain disappointment. "Thank you, no. I can't accept."

But he was halfway to the counter already, spreading the mouth of his cracked wallet and pulling a colorful bill from within. He said something to the raven-haired ticket agent, who tipped her head to shoot a curious glance around his arm.

Grabbing her bag, Marie jumped to her feet. If she were lucky, a wave would crash into the building, sweeping her away. Away from prying eyes and inquiring stares. Away from old men who asked too many questions. Away from that ever-present emptiness.

But luck wasn't on her side.

A familiar tightness rose in her chest, and she gasped for even the shallowest breath.

Oh, not again! Not with an audience and no place to lie down.

She tried to fill her lungs as a band squeezed around them. The ground shifted, her whole world tilting as she stumbled toward the chair she had just vacated. Squeezing her eyes

shut against the black spots that danced in the edges of her line of sight, she leaned forward, fighting for a breath. Pain shot down the middle of her chest, but no amount of rubbing soothed the throbbing.

She was going to pass out in front of everyone.

A hand grabbed her forearm, and she jerked away from the searing touch. “You getting sick?”

The old man’s now familiar voice made his hand on her shoulder barely tolerable, but she couldn’t fight the blaze in her chest enough to get the air needed to reply. Finally, she wiggled her head, her hair swiping across her shoulders.

“You sure?” His hands guided her all the way into the chair, his breath warm on her face as he sat beside her. “You look a little green. And we’re not even on the water yet.”

Shaking her head again, she gasped, this time rewarded with a loosening in her lungs. They weren’t full, but the relief lessened the spinning in her head and the pain at her sternum. She arched her back and again managed a wheeze.

“Now boarding the nine thirty ferry to Wood Islands. All ticketed passengers should be in the boarding area.” They both turned toward the girl in the fleece vest holding the microphone.

“Can you make it to the boat?”

Marie blinked into the wrinkled face, pinning her gaze on a particularly deep crevice between the corner of his eye and his jawline. “Going to miss . . .”

“Well then, let’s get on there before they leave us behind.” He held out a ticket, the white slip contrasting his tanned, weathered fingers. “Take this.”

“Can’t.” The ticket didn’t budge. Had he not heard? Or had the words not passed her lips?

Finally he squatted before her with an unusual agility for a man his age. “Why not?”

She couldn’t possibly repay him. She had no money. At least none that she could access without drawing undue attention. But she wasn’t so low that she had to accept charity.

Another pang seared her heart.

Well, maybe she was.

He shot a glance toward the entrance to the ferry boarding area. “If you don’t use this ticket, it’ll just go to waste.”

“I don’t even know your name.”

The lines around his mouth grew deeper, his eyes catching a shimmer from the ceiling lights. “Jack Sloane from . . . well, I suppose I’m from North Rustico, PEI, now.”

“Marie.” Twisting her hands into the hem of her sweater, she continued, the words barely making it to her own ears. “I can’t pay for it.”

“Didn’t ask you to, Marie.” He winked at her, adding in a conspiratorial whisper, “I’ll make you a trade. The ticket for your help in picking out paint colors.”

The attack had left her too weak to argue, but the trade was certainly in her favor. “All right.” She dismissed his outstretched hand, and they stood together, his knees creaking like the old screen door at her father’s beach house.

When she slipped her fingers around the ticket, it fluttered like a flag caught in an ocean breeze, and she clutched it to her chest, finally catching a full breath.

But could he really expect so little in return?



“What color would you call that?” Jack gestured to the point where the open sea met the roiling gray clouds.

Marie squinted in the direction of his finger, hugging that silly pink bag to her chest but finally breathing normally. He'd been afraid she wouldn't make it onto the ferry, the way she'd been gasping for air, but she'd refused his arm as they boarded. And the salty sea air turned her pale cheeks pink like his wife's favorite flower.

After several long seconds, she shrugged one shoulder. "I don't know."

"Sure is pretty." She nodded slowly, thoughtfully, as she leaned back against the railing, tucking her chin again into her chest, nearly hidden behind the bag that was just about half her size. The pack wasn't so big, really. She was just a wisp of a creature. "You think I could paint the house that color?"

Without turning toward the sky again, she whispered, "I think it'd be perfect."

"Even with a red door."

"Especially with a red door." She offered him a tiny lift of the corner of her mouth, an obligatory smile. But she didn't mean it. He had a hunch she'd be a stunner if she really smiled, which she hadn't all morning. Not even when he pointed out the Caribou Lighthouse as they headed into open water. Rose had always smiled at the little lighthouse, delighted by the red roof.

"Maybe we should buy a lighthouse and become light keepers," his Rose would muse, leaning into his embrace.

"And give up on the bed-and-breakfast?" He only said it to watch her forehead wrinkle in distaste. "I'd be happy to take up light keeping, if you really want."

Rose had laughed and smacked his arm. "No so fast, Mr. Sloane. You aren't getting off the hook that easy."

Even after forty-one years, he'd loved it when she called him Mr. Sloane. Without fail it was accompanied by a twinkle in her eyes that reminded him of the day they'd met. The day he'd fallen in love with her.

But there wasn't a twinkle in Marie's eyes. They eclipsed her face, blue and haunted, as she gazed at the deck. Free of humor and good spirits, they made his heart ache.

What between here and heaven had caused such a pretty little thing to be so sad?

"So what brings you to the island?"

She turned those anxious eyes on him and without a hint of irony said, "You."

She may not have meant it to be funny, but he couldn't keep the laughter inside, letting the mirth roll from deep in his belly. Marie's eyes remained fixed on him, but she didn't say anything more. "You're quick, aren't you?" One bony shoulder poked up, and she wrapped a finger around the gold chain at her neck, twirling it. "I meant, why are you headed to PEI?"

She turned away from him, putting her shrugging shoulder between them before whispering, "In the books I read as a child, it sounded like a magical place." Her head turned farther away from Jack, as though she were looking back at the gray horizon, but she'd closed her eyes, taking deep breaths through her nose and releasing them slowly through tight lips.

"Where are you staying?"

His gut flipped when she didn't answer him, and he knew. She didn't have sixteen dollars to buy a ferry ticket. She didn't have two pennies to rub together. She didn't have a soul to ask for help or anyplace to go.

As if sitting on his other side, Rose whispered in his ear,

“It’s a fine how-do-you-do when you can’t help someone in need, Jack. Give the poor girl a place to stay.”

Of course, Rose didn’t bother with any particulars. She never had. Always a big-picture thinker, she wasn’t concerned with the details. But Marie wasn’t going to accept anything else for free. She’d fought him on the ferry ticket. What would she say about a room at his inn?

“They sure don’t make these benches for seventy-two-year-old backsides.” He shifted, relieving pressure from a sore spot and, in the meantime, leaning closer to her.

Marie nodded, but her shoulder dipped enough that he could see her whole face.

Apparently, if he wanted more of a response from her, he was going to have to ask direct questions. “How’d you get to know so much about colors and paint and stuff?”

Several seconds ticked by, the only sounds the hum of the ferry’s motor and the squawking of a lone gull. “I took—” Her voice broke, and she had to clear her throat before she could continue. “I took a few art classes in college after a friend showed me a few things.”

“You must have been pretty talented. Ever consider a career in it?”

“That wasn’t really an option.”

“Why not?” That barrier jumped into place again, and he tossed a less invasive question her way. “Do you know anything about decorating?”

“A bit.”

He scrubbed his chin, rasping his fingernails over his whiskers, and let his eyes grow bigger as though just thinking of something. “Say, you wouldn’t be available to help me with a project, would you?”

The girl could teach a college course in shrugging. One for every occasion, but this one most likely meant she wasn't going to commit to anything without more information. She might be broke, but she wasn't desperate.

Jack nodded slowly, rubbing his hands together, for the first time realizing that the kid didn't have more than a light jacket to ward off the damp chill of the late winter air. Maybe that's why she hugged that bag so tight.

"Don't know how long you're planning to stay in the area, but I need some help. I'm renovatin' a home in North Rustico, turning it into an inn along the harbor."

"Sounds beautiful."

"Oh, it is. The core renovations are almost done, but it's missing something."

Marie shot him a look and leaned in just enough to ask her question without having to speak.

"It's missing a woman's touch." He waved toward the sky. "That certain something from someone who knows what color the clouds are. It's missing the details that will make it a home."

Her forehead wrinkled. "I don't understand."

Over her shoulder, the green pine trees on the shoreline quickly approached. Soon they'd be on the island. Soon he'd miss his chance to help her. And to get her help.

"My inn opens in a couple months, and I need help getting it ready for guests. I have beds but no sheets. I have a little furniture but no decorations. I have rooms with no soul. And I could use a woman with an eye for color and details."

Marie's eyebrows lifted as she bit her lower lip. "Really?" His hands jumped into the air, warding off too much hope.

“I can’t pay much, but you can stay in the basement apartment until we open the first of May.”

A flicker of hope disappeared almost before he noticed it was there. “What’s the catch?”

“No catch. I need help turning this house into a home.” And as he said the words, he knew they were true. He did need help.

Rose would have called this meeting positively providential, and she’d have been right. The big guy upstairs clearly knew that Jack needed a hand before Jack even knew it.

Marie’s eyelids drooped, and she turned away from him again. He had to do something to get her on board before the ferry landed and he was left with the ugliest bed-and-breakfast on the island.

“I could pay you four hundred dollars a month, and I’ll cover all your living expenses.”

The terse shake of her head made his stomach churn.

“Fine! Six hundred for the month, the best room in the house, and a bonus when the inn is done.”

“I can’t take your money.”

“But you’ll be earning it.”

“Ladies and gentleman, please prepare for arrival at Wood Islands, Prince Edward Island.” The disembodied voice sent both Jack and Marie turning toward the overhead speakers. The humming motor suddenly went silent as they floated to the dock, but Jack’s heart revved. It was now or never.

“I’ve owned three auto shops, and I’ve always paid a fair wage. I won’t start shorting employees now.”

“Employee?” Chin still tucked, she looked up, her eyes glistening. It could be the wind making them water, but he had a feeling it was something else.

“Until the inn is ready.”

“What’s its name?”

“The inn?” She nodded, and he scratched at his hairline.
“Well now, I haven’t quite decided on that yet, but I’m thinking about the North Rustico Red Door.”