

WHERE  
TWO  
HEARTS  
MEET

A NOVEL

Liz Johnson



*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Liz Johnson, *Where Two Hearts Meet*  
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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

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Johnson, Liz, 1981– author.

Title: Where two hearts meet : a novel / Liz Johnson.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2016] | Series: Prince Edward Island dreams ; book 2

Identifiers: LCCN 2016018764 | ISBN 9780800724504 (pbk.)

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

Classification: LCC PS3610.O3633 W48 2016 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016018764>

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Published in association with Books & Such Literary Management.

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

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For Hannah  
on your \*mumble, mumble\* birthday.  
Thank you for always making the trek with me  
to find three o'clock snacks on the buffet.  
Thank you for being my sister, traveling  
companion, and friend.  
And most of all, thank you for not making me  
eat more than three bites of that lobster.

And for you, the reader.  
Thank you for traveling to PEI with me.  
May you find peace and hope and  
enough grace for every situation.

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# 1

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There was only one thing better than the smell of freshly baked cinnamon rolls in the morning. The *taste* of freshly baked cinnamon rolls in the morning.

Caden Holt pulled a pan of piping hot sweet rolls from the bottom of her double oven, breathing in the intoxicating aroma and patting the golden-crisp top of a roll to the rhythm of her favorite Broadway soundtrack. Her mouth watered and her toe tapped as she slathered a bun with her signature cream cheese icing. The white glaze oozed down the side of the treat, and she caught the errant drip with her knuckle. Closing her eyes, she licked her finger clean before tearing off a corner and popping it in her mouth.

A tremor swirled down her back as sweet, sweet sugar exploded in her mouth, everything good and right with the world.

It only took three more bites to finish off her usual morning treat—after all, she had to make sure breakfast for the guests was up to par—and she immediately regretted devouring it. All that was left was a drop of icing on the scalding pan. But

a chef didn't fear heat. She'd gotten second-degree burns from less worthy causes.

After peeking over her shoulder to make sure she was still alone in her sanctuary, only the morning sun for company, she touched her finger to the tip of her tongue, scooped up the dribble, and licked it clean.

The sweets this morning would certainly pass muster, but she hadn't even started on the main dish. While breakfast desserts were her favorite part of a meal, she didn't work at a bed-and-bakery. As the executive chef of Rose's Red Door Inn, she made a full meal to start every guest's day off right.

Muted footfalls and hushed voices trickled from the floor above, promising that said guests would soon be poking their noses into the dining room, looking to fill their empty stomachs.

But for the next thirty minutes, she had the kitchen all to herself. Utterly, entirely, blissfully to herself. And the original London cast of *Mamma Mia!*

Lisa Stokke belted out her solo through the speakers tucked into the corner of the counter between a fully equipped stand mixer and canisters of the essentials. As Lisa's voice swelled, Caden turned a wild pirouette that would have had her forever banned from the Great White Way—not that she'd ever been there, or on any stage, for that matter. She slammed into the kitchen island and bounced off the refrigerator, grabbing the edge of the counter to keep from tumbling all the way to the floor.

Her foot caught on the corner of a cabinet, and she laughed out loud as Lisa reached her high note and Caden hit her low point. Arms flailing as she fell, Caden scrambled for anything that would help her stay upright. She managed

to grab hold of a single sheet of white printer paper hanging from the silver clip on the refrigerator. As soon as she tugged it free, her rear end hit the floor and she lost her grip on the page, which—aided by the fan in the far corner—slithered between the fridge and the nearest cabinet.

“No. No. No.” She shifted to her knees and crawled toward the black hole that had swallowed that morning’s instructions.

Caden’s boss, Marie Sloane, always left a list of special guest instructions on that clip. Food allergies. Gluten sensitivities. Young guests with picky palates. It all seemed innocent enough until one guest the previous summer had failed to mention his peanut allergy upon registration. Caden’s famous peanut butter and jelly French toast had nearly sent him into anaphylactic shock. He was one forkful of deliciousness away from a serious emergency when his wife noticed his hives, and Marie called for an ambulance to rush him to the hospital in Charlottetown. He’d made a full recovery and joked later that he’d married his wife for her observational skills.

But the memory still made Caden’s insides squirm.

Food had such a strange and wonderful power. Wielding it made her feel simultaneously significant and vulnerable, fearsome and fragile.

To do her job well she needed the piece of paper glaring at her from the depths of the crack between wooden cabinet and stainless steel appliance. The unmoving refrigerator stood like a sentinel, refusing to budge from its guard. She tried to reach the page anyway, poking her chubby fingers into the crevice, but they didn’t make it much beyond her second knuckle. If she could just slide the fridge over.

She leaned her shoulder into its side, but it only groaned, taunting her to try again.

She did and got the same result.

Kneeling between the cabinets and island, she put her hands on her hips and huffed a sigh that stirred a wisp of hair that had escaped her French braid. And sent it right back into her face.

She needed something long and narrow. With pinchers.  
Tongs.

She pulled herself up on the edge of the alternating black-and-white counter tiles before rifling through the middle drawer next to the dishwasher. Spatulas and spoons tumbled about as she dug for the tongs she usually used to flip bacon. The tangled utensils scraped together, nearly falling onto the floor as she stretched her fingers to find what she was looking for.

Finally she hooked a handle with the crook of her finger and yanked it—and a deformed whisk—free.

Caden arched her wrist and sent the whisk toward the trash can, its wire loops swishing down the plastic liner.

Just as the cast of *Mamma Mia* burst into the rousing show closer, she lowered herself back to the floor. The tip of her tongs clicked to the rhythm of the song as she hunched over her prey, eyeing it for the right angle. She moved in slowly, deliberately, trying not to disturb the sheet until it was safely in her grasp.

She just . . . had . . . to . . .

“Rats!”

Even as she bumped the corner of the paper, she recognized her mistake.

The paper fluttered, loosened by her miscalculation, and slid beneath the fridge, completely out of reach.

Perfect.

She scrubbed her hand down her cheek and scratched behind her ear. Maybe if she glared at the spot where the paper had vanished, it would miraculously reappear. That was about as likely as a lobster crawling into her boiling pot.

Two loud footfalls right above her head made Caden jump, and she spun in the direction of the clock on the microwave. Thirty minutes until breakfast time. Fifteen until Marie came to check in and began serving the first course, a fresh fruit salad Caden had prepared the night before.

She'd run out of time to whip up the seafood quiche she'd written on the large calendar hanging by the door to the dining room. At this point, scrambled eggs and roasted potatoes would have to do.

But first—the allergy list.

Marie sometimes left a copy of the manifest in her office, so Caden hurried down the hallway from the kitchen to the little room between the living quarters and the rest of the inn. Seth, Marie's husband, had built the nook into the restored home so his wife would have a place to manage the inn's daily goings-on.

Caden tried to step lightly—no easy feat on the seventy-five-year-old wooden floors. They seemed to creak and moan even when she hadn't taken a step. It wasn't until she had almost reached the door that she realized it was partly open, and soft voices echoed within.

"It can't be as bad as that." The deep voice belonged to Seth Sloane, but it didn't sound much like the contractor turned innkeeper who had swept Marie off her feet. It was as thick as the red clay that gave Prince Edward Island its famous color. He cleared his throat, but that didn't help much. "There has to be something left. We had a good

season last year. And you've put together a great marketing strategy."

"But most of what is left is going to the lawyer." Marie sighed, her voice as strained as her husband's. "And we're only half booked for this summer. After this week, we have at least two empty rooms all season."

"Maybe they'll fill. Maybe we'll get another guest for all of June and July. Maybe that princess bride will decide to uncancel her wedding and the whole party will rebook and stay an extra week . . ."

"That's a lot of maybes."

Caden held her breath, wishing she could somehow sneak back to the kitchen and ignore the tremor in Marie's tone or the way her voice hitched when she mentioned a lawyer. Marie hadn't said anything about a legal situation. Was she facing an immigration issue? Or worse, carryover from her case against the man who'd assaulted her? Marie had said that his conviction was final. Could it have resurfaced?

Marie said something else, too low for Caden to hear, and her stomach twisted. This clearly wasn't a conversation she was meant to hear. But she couldn't leave until she had her instructions. She raised her hand to knock right as Seth spoke.

"Maybe if we talk to your—"

"No." Marie lost all hint of uncertainty, her tone sharper than Caden had ever heard before. "We're not—"

Caden spun toward the kitchen at Marie's outburst, the floor shrieking like a never-ending fireworks display.

"Morning, Caden." Seth sounded both surprised and relieved at her sudden presence.

She turned back, an apologetic smile slipping into place as she pushed the door open a few inches more. "I'm sorry

to interrupt. It's just that the instructions fell under the refrigerator, and I need to get breakfast going."

The tightness in Marie's jaw didn't release, even as she shot a glare at her husband, who managed an unrepentant shrug. Then she turned to the computer and printed out another page with the guests' details. Her motions were sharp and controlled, her frown fixed in place.

"Here you go." Marie's voice held none of the strain that seemed to permeate the room, but there was a sadness in her eyes that turned Caden's mind into a battlefield. She wanted to ask, but Marie clearly didn't want to share. So she backpedaled as fast as she could.

Marie and Seth remained silent as she hurried down the hall, and when the door swung shut behind her, Caden let out a whoosh of air.

Whatever was going on in there was intense. And it didn't involve her.

Except that Marie was her best friend.

And what she'd heard sounded like the Red Door might be in trouble.

Which meant they were all in trouble.

A slamming door on the second floor jolted her into action. Scanning the page in her hand, she made note of two lactose sensitivities and one pineapple allergy. No cheese on the eggs for some of those guests. And the fruit salad was a simple peach and berry concoction. No problem there.

As she whisked a dozen eggs in a glass mixing bowl, she glanced out the kitchen window, enjoying the view of her herb garden and a corner of the bay beyond their neighbor's back porch and a narrow field of wildflowers.

She'd spent her whole life staring at that same patch of

rippling blue. And though the kitchen had changed, the window over the sink was always the same. The morning sun caught the tip of a wave, and it sparkled like a diamond.

Forcing herself away from the view she'd always loved, she sprayed the bottom of the pan and poured the beaten eggs into it, bubbles immediately forming in the yellow mixture.

As she stirred the eggs, she risked another glance out the window.

A man stood between the inn and the water. He was far enough away that she couldn't make out his features or even tell if she recognized him. He certainly wasn't one of their neighbors, all of whom had a distinct stoop and slow stroll. But there was an appealing easiness to his gait, and she watched him walk the shoreline. As he bent to pick up a small duffel bag, his shoulders pushed at the fabric of his leather jacket. A gust of wind fluttered his dark hair, and he ran his fingers through the loose strands in an infinitely male move.

Nope. She didn't know him.

She'd have noticed a guy like that walking around town. North Rustico wasn't big enough to hide in.

After all, she'd been trying to hide here for years.

It never worked.

She stirred the fluffy eggs, giving them another dash of salt and pepper. And just a hint of garlic for good measure.

The door between the kitchen and dining room swung in, sweeping Marie's chipper greeting to the waiting guests with it. "Breakfast will be right out."

Caden turned and raised her eyebrows in question.

"Breakfast will be right out. Won't it?" Marie's brown curls had crossed the line from fun to frazzled, and the apron

she looped over her head didn't help the situation. Whatever she and Seth had been talking about that morning had left her in a knot, so Caden squelched the urge to tease her boss.

"Fruit is in serving dishes in the fridge."

Marie already had half of them loaded on the silver tray, so she scooped them up and whisked back through the swinging door.

Oohs and aahs over the crystal goblets of mixed fruit carried from the dining room, and Caden couldn't help the rush of pride through her middle as she plated scrambled eggs and roasted red potatoes, adding a cinnamon roll platter for each table.

With each swish of the door, Marie scooped up more plates, the lines around her mouth easing until an actual smile fell into place.

"This is so good," one guest mumbled around a mouthful of food. "What's in these eggs?"

Marie giggled, and Caden's heart gave a little leap of joy. She could easily imagine her boss sidling up to a table and giving everyone there a saucy wink. *Our chef only makes the best.*

Except Marie didn't say that. She didn't say anything about how Caden hunted out fresh eggs three times a week from the hens at Kane Dairy. She didn't say that Caden started her day at five each morning to make sure every guest was full and happy before leaving to explore the island. And she didn't say that Caden had a knack for serving up the best sweet rolls in town.

In fact, Marie didn't say a word about Caden at all.

"That's our little secret." And she left it at that.

A fist in her stomach sent Caden bending over the sink, head hanging low and heart even lower.

She loved this job. She loved this kitchen. She loved Marie. But lately it felt like they might not love her back.

“Excuse me.”

Caden’s head snapped up at the unfamiliar voice, but she had to duck into the laundry room to find the source.

Face-to-face with the man from the beach, she yanked on the strings of her apron as she stared unblinking into his gray eyes. But the bow at her waist caught in a knot. Her fingers suddenly forgetful, she fumbled with the fabric.

He poked his head through the back door, holding the screen with one hand and his leather jacket in the other, one foot on the ground and the other on the outside step.

The planes of his face didn’t shift, and the muscles at his throat stood in sharp relief to his otherwise relaxed pose. Which she only just realized blocked the bag she’d seen him carrying earlier. His deep brown hair was disheveled, standing on end above his right temple like he’d fallen asleep with his fingers combed through it and his head resting in his hand. His jaw boasted at least a day’s worth of beard.

“Are you Marie Carrington Sloane?”

Caden glanced over her shoulder, half expecting to see Marie materialize, but she remained alone. Alone with a man who knew Marie’s maiden name. No one used Marie’s maiden name.

Especially not Marie.

“No.” She dragged the word out, still jerking at the knot at the back of her waist, desperate to be free of her apron. “Can I help you with something?”

“This is Rose’s Red Door Inn.” And then, like he wasn’t quite sure, “Isn’t it? They said it was the big blue house between the boardwalk and the water.”

She nodded slowly. “The one with the red front door. And a sign out front.”

That earned a quarter smile as he let go of the door, holding it in place with his shoulder—a rather broad shoulder at that—and grabbed a brown leather journal from the back pocket of his jeans. It wasn’t much bigger than his palm, but as he thumbed through several pages, she could see that tiny scribbles filled every crevice and corner. Folding the notebook at its spine, his finger ran the lines until he nodded and looked up. “Rose’s Red Door Inn. North Rustico, Prince Edward Island. Marie Carrington Sloane, proprietor.”

He offered only the facts and no commentary. Who talked like that?

“And Seth too.” The words popped out before she’d really considered them, but something about the way he kept saying Marie’s full name made her insides churn and the hair on the back of her neck jump to attention.

He wouldn’t be a guest. They only arrived between three and seven. They never used the back door. And they most certainly never invaded her territory.

His forehead wrinkled as he gave his book another once-over, so she expounded. “Seth Sloane. Marie’s husband. Co-owner.”

Squinting harder at the page in his hand, he shook his head.

Well, he could shake it all he wanted. That didn’t make Seth’s presence any less real. Or Caden any more inclined to let this guy loiter on her back stoop. She pressed her hands to her waist and pulled herself up to her full height. Which wasn’t considerable. But what she lacked in height, she made up for in breadth. And she used all the generous width of

her hips as she marched toward him, praying that he would just back away.

Then she could go tell Marie about this strange visitor.

But he didn't budge. He just closed one eye in an almost wink and stared up at her. "Sorry. I didn't get that note. My editor—Garrett de Root—he made the arrangements."

"What arrangements?"

His gaze suddenly jumped over her shoulder, and she followed it.

"Caden? Is everything all right?" Marie's hands were full of empty breakfast dishes, which she carried like she'd spent her college years in the service industry. Although that was far from the truth.

"This guy . . ." She flung a hand at the mystery man, who promptly stepped inside and reached out his hand.

"Adam Jacobs."

Marie looked at the stacks in her arms and managed only a shrug. "Adam?"

"Yes, ma'am. I believe Garrett de Root contacted you about reserving a room for me."

Marie's half smile turned into a frown. "I wasn't expecting you until tomorrow. I don't have an open room tonight."