

ON
LOVE'S
GENTLE
SHORE

A NOVEL

Liz Johnson



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Liz Johnson, *On Love's Gentle Shore*
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For my dad, who hasn't gotten
to visit the island with me yet.
No matter how far I travel,
I'm sure of your love.
Thanks.
I love you back.

1

She'd thought it was safe to come back to the island.
She'd thought it was safe to come home.
She'd been wrong.

It wasn't even safe to pick up lunch.

Natalie O'Ryan ran suddenly sweaty palms down the front of her crisp ankle pants and swallowed the lump that had settled at the base of her throat. The bell over the front door of Grady's Diner had barely finished its reckless cry when every head in the open room turned in her direction. She stared down the curious gazes, some in faces she'd known her whole life. They sported a few more sun spots, a handful of new wrinkles. Dark hair had turned gray, and cheeks had hollowed with age.

And every eye was sharp with assessment.

That hadn't changed a bit.

The tourists turned back to their fish and chips, clearly finding her unworthy of their distraction.

But the locals—the women of the ladies' auxiliary and the men of the Lions Club next door—continued their open-mouthed gapes.

She'd thought perhaps no one would recognize her. A foolish hope, maybe. But she'd carried it nonetheless. It had been in her pocket like the prayer stone Mama Kane had given her when she was eight. Whenever her heart had begun to pound on the long flight from Nashville to Toronto, she'd rubbed at that fantasy, her thumb wearing the skin on her index finger raw. Every time her breath caught in her throat as they soared over the island she'd called home for more than half her life, she'd hugged her neck pillow like it could conceal her from all of these knowing eyes.

It hadn't worked.

The flush-cheeked child inside her tugged on her arm, begging her to pull a 180 and disappear like she'd done all those years ago. But she shook her arm as though she could physically dislodge the urge to flee.

She wasn't entirely successful at that, but she also wasn't the same child she'd been. Managing to plaster a smile into place, she marched across the tile floor. Weaving between brown tabletops surrounded by matching chairs that looked like they'd been stolen from the church's basement, she grabbed for the lapels of her tailored jacket and tugged them together over her chest.

The nosy glances followed her every step. But they hadn't turned into behind-the-hand whispers.

Yet.

"Is that little Natalie O'Ryan?"

As if they'd all been waiting on the confirmation, tongues set off wagging, followed by stage whispers filling the air until even the children in booster seats craned their necks to get a look at North Rustico's very own prodigal daughter.

Natalie licked suddenly dry lips and forced herself to

search out the owner of the voice. She'd have known it anywhere. It was the last one she'd heard before leaving the island nearly fifteen years ago.

“Hello, Mrs. Burke.”

The matriarch was a fair bit older than Natalie's mom, even though her daughter, Bethany, had been a grade behind Natalie. In part because the Burkes hadn't had children until they were in their late thirties. But mostly because Natalie's mom had been barely seventeen when she gave birth.

Mrs. Burke nodded stiffly, an attempt at a smile elbowing its way across her face in fits and starts. It never reached the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, but she tipped her head in greeting, showing off box-blond hair and a style that hadn't changed in all the years Natalie had known her.

“This is quite a surprise.”

Like she had as a nine-year-old, Natalie moved to shove her hands into her pockets and hunch her shoulders against the intrusive stares, but she stopped halfway there. She wasn't a child anymore.

And her J.Crew pants didn't have pockets.

Squaring her shoulders, she schooled her features into what she hoped was a very pleasant expression, which she bestowed on all three women at the table. “It's good to see you again, Mrs. Burke.”

It wasn't.

But she'd learned to keep some things to herself.

“Natalie? Natalie!”

At the call, she spun toward the counter, where she was nearly blinded by a smile that reached ear to ear. “Aretha?”

The woman, Aretha Franklin—no relation to the singer, as she liked to remind folks—nodded as she scurried across

the floor, unashamedly bumping into chairs. But her eyes never wavered, and they felt like a warm embrace—a missed embrace. Reaching out both hands, Aretha swept Natalie into her grip and squeezed like this might be the fulfillment of her life's dream.

“I didn't believe it when Marie said you'd be coming.”

Natalie returned the gentle grasp, careful of the paper-thin skin and the simple diamond on her left ring finger. Ever since Russell had proposed with a rock that rivaled Gibraltar, she'd become especially aware of every other ring.

But she couldn't ask about Aretha's rock, so she stumbled back to her last sentence. “Marie?”

“At the Red Door.”

Natalie's eyebrows bunched. Right. Marie and Seth, who owned the inn. The one that was new to her hometown. So were Marie and Seth, for that matter. But Russell hadn't known that. So he'd plowed forward, booking the inn for as many of their wedding guests as it would hold and hiring Marie to help make the final arrangements for the wedding.

A sharp pain in her chest sent her hand to her collarbone, and she tried to wipe away the discomfort.

But there was no wiping out the truth.

There were more than just final arrangements to make for the wedding.

The dress. Rings. Guest list. Groom. Those were all she had lined up.

Everything else—flowers, food, cake, decorations, and more—was going to have to fall into place in the next six weeks.

The unchecked items on her mental to-do list flashed like the neon sign of a Nashville honky-tonk, and her head

spun. The air thinned as though she'd hiked fifteen thousand feet, and a sudden rope around her chest rubbed her lungs raw.

Aretha pressed a hand to her wrist, the wrinkled fingers warm and softer than wedding dress satin. "Honey? Are you all right?"

Natalie forced a smiling mask across her features—one she'd donned a thousand times. It was the collected concierge, the proficient professional. No matter the situation, she could handle it. Sneaking a subtle breath that did little to fill her lungs, she nodded quickly. "Yes. Of course."

The wrinkles around Aretha's eyes crinkled, her gaze knowing, unbelieving.

Some things never changed.

Aretha had perfected that look long before the first time she used it on seven-year-old Natalie.

"I came over to pick up lunch for Russell." She flipped a hand over her shoulder in the direction of the inn. "He's checking into our rooms."

Eyes flashing with delight, Aretha followed the motion of her hand. "Of course, Adam's brother. We've all been so eager to meet him."

Right. Because everyone here knew and loved her soon-to-be brother-in-law, despite the fact that she'd met him exactly three times. And that she downright disliked him.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. He seemed a nice enough sort. Her grandma would have called him a good seed. Hard-working and not predisposed to finding trouble. In their three years together, she'd never seen Russell as happy as he'd been when he introduced his little brother—his long-lost brother. He hadn't offered her the details, and she hadn't pressed for

them. But there had been a rift between them until Adam showed up a year before.

Adam had been pleasant and jovial. And he was dating one of her former schoolmates, Caden Holt. He was also the reason she was back on the island.

Which put him at the bottom of her list.

“When Adam told us that Russ was going to have his wedding here and stay at the inn . . .” Aretha’s eyelashes fluttered like a teenager in love. “Well, it was more than we’d dared to hope for.”

Natalie leaned forward at the note of wistfulness in Aretha’s voice. It tugged at her heartstrings, as though there was some deeper meaning to Adam’s suggestion that they stay at Rose’s Red Door Inn for their wedding and Russell’s acquiescence to island vows.

Still, the ceremony could have been in a lovely country barn outside of Nashville. Several of the musicians Russell had worked with over the years had even offered their property. Middle Tennessee at its finest. Verdant green pastures. Stunning wooden beams. Colorful wildflowers.

And no unpleasant memories.

Yes, Nashville would have been better.

But Russell had been so pleased when he told her he’d agreed to have their wedding in North Rustico. He’d thought it would make her happy.

And rather than risk making a scene over his forty-dollar steak, she’d opted to plaster a smile into place and get through the rest of their date. After that he’d been too thrilled, too pleased with himself at doing such a thoughtful thing, for her to tell him she didn’t want to go back to the island. For

her to tell him there were more reasons for leaving than she'd hinted at early on in their relationship.

She rubbed at a sudden throbbing at her temple and squinted against the fluorescent reflection off the pale tile flooring.

In her old stomping grounds, there would be no ignoring the childhood that had chased her off the island, across the border, and all the way to Music City.

Suddenly a ruffled shock of white hair appeared at Aretha's side. It belonged to a man with a map of wrinkles that would take a lifetime to navigate, but his eyes were kind, the easy line of his mouth hinting at a smile that was never far gone.

Aretha grabbed his hand, her fingers sliding between his easily. "This is my husband, Jack Sloane. Jack, this is Natalie O'Ryan."

Natalie's stomach gave a good bounce. "Husband? You got married?"

"Three years ago this October."

Jack added his silent nod, his grin no less satisfied than his bride's.

So the ring wasn't for show.

Natalie couldn't wrap her mind around the announcement, and she managed only a slow series of blinks. Her hands were more frantic, suddenly too big, fluttering about at her sides and searching for those nonexistent pockets.

Aretha had been alone since forever. Her antiques store was off-limits to most of the area's teenagers, but her story was well known. If Natalie's family had been the most popular topic for gossips in the Crick—North Rustico to outsiders—twenty-five years ago, then they'd only inherited the title from Aretha, whose husband had taken off for parts

unknown long before Natalie's dad took to the bottle. And other women's bedrooms.

Natalie cringed at the memories, the ones that seemed to trail her wherever she went.

But Aretha and Jack didn't seem to notice. Their sly glances and the subtle brush of their elbows kept them both distracted by something infinitely sweeter than the bitterness rising at the back of her throat.

After a long moment of silence, another voice interrupted them.

"Natalie O'Ryan! Pickup!"

The familiar face at the pickup window was topped with a white hat that looked like it hadn't been washed since she'd made her first trip to this counter.

Some things never changed.

"We'll see you soon, honey," Aretha said.

Natalie turned to the counter and leaned her forearms along the smooth grain of the pine. A white sack with two matching Styrofoam containers appeared at her elbow beside a matching bag as she looked under the overhang.

Harrison Grady stared back at her with his one good eye, the patch on the other nearly as worn as his hat and apron. His brown gaze was almost too intent for just the one eye, and she shivered under its weight. When he finally spoke, his voice was filled with as much gravel as ever. "I saw your name and said, 'It can't be our little Natalie. Back from away.'"

She tried for a smile at the words she was sure were supposed to be endearing, but it refused to show up.

If she'd really been their little Natalie . . .

Well, no one had loved her half as much as they loved talking about her parents. Except maybe the Kanes, who

owned the local dairy and invited her into their home for more meals than she could count.

She'd spent a fair bit of the flight praying she wouldn't see them this summer. Any of them.

"Harrison." She tipped her head in greeting. "Still frying up the burgers, I see."

He crossed his meaty arms over a barrel chest and nodded. "What else would I be doing?"

Because no one in this town ever did anything except what they were expected to do. Little boys grew up to be fishermen like their dads. And little girls married those little boys.

But not Natalie.

Her path was about 1,500 miles away, and she'd get back to it as soon as the wedding was over.

Harrison sucked on his front tooth before adjusting his eye patch, and she couldn't keep her mind from straying to all the ways she'd imagined he'd lost his eye. No one seemed to know. But it hadn't stopped her and little Justin Kane from speculating.

"How long you in town?"

"Six weeks and four days."

"That's awfully specific."

She snatched one of the white bags on the counter. "Just long enough for the wedding."

"Wedding? You're getting married?"

Apparently Aretha hadn't blabbed about her plans to the whole town. Not that she'd ever been one to pass tales over the back fence. But old suspicions died hard.

When Natalie didn't respond to Harrison, he just kept the questions coming. "Why didn't you say you were getting

hitched? Who you marrying?" He gave her a half smile. "I always figured you'd end up with Justin."

She nearly choked on her own tongue, the cough rattling her shoulders and beating up on her lungs.

Justin.

She hadn't heard his name in a while.

Had almost hoped she wouldn't hear it again. At least not here on the island. Certainly not in relation to her pending nuptials.

After all, he was the Kane she most wanted to avoid.

"You've got his lunch there anyway."

Her fingers suddenly forgot how to work, and she dropped Justin's lunch to the floor. The rustle of the bag and crack of Styrofoam against linoleum pierced the room. Every head in the restaurant spun in her direction. Again.

She cringed as she ducked to pick up the bag. If the sloshing bottom of the plastic was any indication, something had spilled. And would be all over her if she wasn't careful.

Holding it out by the twin loops, she shot him an apologetic look. "I'm sorry. I'll pay for the replacement."

Harrison took the remains of the lunch and shook his head. "No problem. I've got it covered." With a nod he indicated the sack that had been closest to her elbow. "That's yours."

Flames licked at her neck, and she swiped a hand over them in a vain attempt to settle her nerves. Trying for a low chuckle, she settled for a too-high laugh as she snuck a peek at the diners. Most had returned to their meals, although there was still a tourist family staring a little too hard, a little too long.

Squaring her shoulders, she turned a tight smile back to Harrison. "I insist."

His squint suggested that he remembered a time when she couldn't afford to buy one meal, let alone two. So she flashed two colorful twenties in his direction, which brought just the wide-eyed glimmer of recognition she'd been hoping for.

"Maybe you don't need to tell Justin that I ruined his lunch."

"Who ruined my lunch?"

The voice was deeper than she remembered, thick like honey over almonds. Like the years had taken something from him too. But it couldn't steal the island lilt and the touch of humor she'd always known.

Yet no amount of levity in his tone could keep his words from wrapping around her chest and squeezing until there wasn't enough fresh oxygen in the world to keep her breathing.

With a shaky hand, she dropped the money on the counter and grabbed her lunch. No matter how long she stared at Harrison, his gaze never wavered from a spot over her shoulder.

There would be no curling up and rolling out of the restaurant unnoticed. She hunched her shoulders just to make sure.

The weight of the gaze on her back didn't shift.

Nope. She was stuck. And she was going to have to face him.

It had been a ridiculous dream that she could dodge him all summer in a town the size of a postage stamp.

Even more so when she considered that anyone who remembered her would remember *them*. There hadn't been a Natalie without Justin. Or a Justin without Natalie.

Not until he'd stayed. Not until he'd let her leave. Alone.

Irritation burned in her stomach, and she tried to physically push it down. But no amount of smoothing her blouse

was going to calm the tumult inside. No amount of anything could save her from this moment.

Might as well get it over with.

Squeezing her eyes closed, she turned as Justin let out an audible gasp. When she blinked, he was frozen, his jaw hanging slack, dark and foreboding like the whiskers on his chin.

“Natalie?” There was a judgment in the single word, a condemnation that sounded like it tasted of not-yet-ripe raspberries. Maybe he was angry.

Even if he had no reason to be. After all, he was the one who had changed their plans.

He was the one who hadn't followed through.

He was the one who'd left her alone.

So he had no reason to be mad at her.

The force of his steamed breathing grated on her, shredding her nerves and binding her up until her own breathing turned hard, furious. The rush of anger gave her the courage to meet his eyes.

Blue. So blue they still put the sky to shame.

If time had aged his voice, his face hadn't been dealt the same hand. His skin was as smooth and tan as ever, the five o'clock shadow darker, coarser now. And his black hair was longer, pulled back into a short ponytail.

He'd asked his mom to cut it every other week when they were kids.

The memory must have flickered across her face in the form of a smile because he flinched at the same time, his glower turning fiercer.

“Natalie?” He seemed to need to confirm her identity before lashing into her.

And she had no doubt he would lay out all of his grievances.

Only it wasn't her fault. He could be as mad as an un-milked dairy cow. It didn't change the facts of the past.

But now, face-to-face with that past, she did the same thing she'd done fifteen years ago.

She ran.