

And Grace Will Lead Us Home

Bibliophile Elizabeth Jane is terrified of libraries. Grace, a golden lab who survived Hurricane Katrina, is terrified of water. But journeyman and musician Will has the most devastating secret of all: he's illiterate, and goes to great lengths to conceal it. When these three characters meet in the heart of the Colorado Rockies, they're immediately set on a collision course that eventually forces each to face what they fear the most.



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a novel

By Janet Kay Jensen

Chapter One

Elizabeth Jane Morrow sat on her back porch and admired the first Rocky Mountain goldfinch of the spring. Whoever invented the upside-down finch feeder—as well as the people who bought them—she admitted to herself with a wry smile, must share a perverse sense of humor; the little birds had to land on the perch and then swung upside down, just like children hanging by their knees on monkey bars, in order to access feeding spouts. However, the finch seemed perfectly contented to nibble on the gourmet black thistle mix from his undignified position, its bright yellow plumage flashing among the graceful leaves of the English walnut tree.

The finch had arrived a week after the hummingbirds. Elizabeth Jane had counted at least half a dozen regular hummers this year, greedily swooping around the feeders, the more aggressive customers chasing the meeker diners away. She had hung three hummingbird feeders this year, though, and they couldn't all be policed by the bullies at the same time, so all the little creatures seemed to have their fill this morning.

The arrival of the finches and hummingbirds seemed in turn to signal the shy smoke tree to finally open its clove-shaped leaves, dusty dark violet with pink blossoms, the last tree in her back yard forest to join the spring riot of color. To Elizabeth Jane, the leafing-out of her smoke tree marked the official beginning of spring in her quiet hometown of Linden, nestled in the foothills of northwestern Colorado's Rocky Mountains. One of Linden's many advantages, she always thought, was that it was far away enough from Denver to escape the smog and other hassles of big city life, but

close enough to take advantage of its best attractions when she desired. Linden hadn't become a trendy mountain resort town, either, and threads of its unique personality had survived since the days of the old west.

From a branch of a maple tree, a bold bushy-tailed squirrel leaped onto the ledge of a traditional bird feeder and picked out the sunflowers, scattering the rest of the mix onto the grass. That didn't seem to bother the sparrows and robins, who munched on their breakfast from their soft perches on the grass.

A grumbling sensation in Elizabeth Jane's stomach reminded her that while the wild creatures in her yard were well-fed this morning, she was hungry, and the cool mountain breeze sighing through the aspens made her shiver, so she stood, turned and reached for the doorknob, but it refused to turn in either direction. She realized she was locked outside in her pajamas.

Fortunately, her next door neighbor Margaret had a spare key. Elizabeth Jane made her way through the dewy, tickly grass at the side of her home and peeked around the corner. The street was quiet, and she hoped none of the neighbors would notice her as she made her way stealthily across Margaret's front lawn to the porch and rang the doorbell.

The welcoming red door with its wreath of pine cones opened, but instead of Margaret, there stood a young sandy-haired man of average height clad in faded jeans and a clean white T-shirt. He regarded Elizabeth Jane for a moment and then gave her a bemused smile. "Can I help you?"

Elizabeth Jane suddenly realized the personal fashion statement she presented in her favorite oversized t-shirt proclaiming "She reads in bed!" The shirt skimmed the knees of her pajamas pants, baggy and dark blue with a cheerful sun, moon and stars motif. During the night, she'd gotten chilled, groped in her closet in the dark and pulled out what she now realized was a light green sweater to finish the ensemble.

"Is Margaret here? I live next door and I locked myself out. She has my spare key."

"No, Margaret isn't here. She'll be home tomorrow. I'm her nephew. Will you come in?"

"No, I'd better not. I've been walking in the grass. I'd track it all over the carpet."

At the mention of her feet, the man looked downward and another smile threatened to cross his face. He seemed especially interested in her footwear, or lack of it. Elizabeth Jane looked down, too, and wondered whose toes were connected to her feet, for each nail was painted a different color and decorated with a *Harry Potter* decal, the product of yesterday's play-date with her five year-old niece. She blushed and curled her toes under her feet and then crossed her right foot over her left, causing her to lose her balance and grasp the door jamb for support.

"Some party last night?" the man asked with a grin. In spite of her chagrin she had to admit that his smile was kind. And that his eyes were very blue.

She thought of Amber's tea party, attended by imaginary friends, dolls, stuffed animals and guest of honor Aunt Elizabeth Jane. Though the "tea" was watery orange juice, gnats had buzzed over the refreshments, and the cookies were on the soggy side,

she and Jane had dubbed it a grand occasion indeed, and had finished the afternoon with the colorful pedicures. "You could say that."

"I'm Will," he said, extending his hand.

"Elizabeth Jane."

"That's a pretty name."

"My mom's a big Thomas Hardy fan, so I was named after one of his characters."

"Oh."

"Elizabeth Jane Henchard from *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Mom loved the name."

"The mayor of where?"

"Casterbridge. In England."

He jammed his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth on his heels. "I'm afraid I haven't read it."

"It's a pretty tragic story. A man gets down on his luck, eats too much porridge laced with ale, and sells his wife and daughter to a sailor at a county fair. Then he spends the rest of his life trying to atone for it. Elizabeth Jane's the daughter. Personally, I think she could have had a little more spunk, but there's hope for her at the end."

The man seemed to mull this over for a moment. "I see. I was actually named after a real person."

"William Shakespeare?"

The man chuckled. "Nope."

"Sorry. I was an English major. Will who?"

"Rogers."

"Will Rogers? Really? That's a great namesake."

"He's my grandfather's hero. Grandpa always wanted to twirl a rope as well as Will did, and he never could, but not for lack of trying. He says if Will were only around today, and would keep an eye on Congress, our country might not be in such a mess. And we'd be all laughing a lot more, too."

"Your grandfather's got a point." Her toes were beginning to cramp, and she wasn't in the habit of visiting her neighbors or their nephews in her designer nightwear. "But about my key . . ."

Will ran his hand through his hair. "Uh, Aunt Margaret left me a note with instructions about the house and where to find everything . . . but I'm afraid I've misplaced my glasses, can't read a thing without them . . ."

"She hangs my key on a nail behind her washer."

"Oh. Then I'll get it."

He returned, key in hand. "You look familiar," he said as he handed it to her.

She shook her head and smiled. "It must be the pajamas. They're pretty generic."

Will grinned, and then a thoughtful expression replaced it as he looked at her intently. "No, it's not the pajamas, although they are quite fetching. But I never forget a face. I have seen you somewhere. I'll think of it."

Elizabeth Jane clenched the key in her hand. A small bead of sweat trickled down her spine. She forced another smile. "I don't think we've met. I mean, I

know *I'd* remember meeting someone named after Will Rogers. Anyway, thank you for the key. Nice to meet you, Will."

"You, too, Elizabeth Jane."

Standing on Margaret's porch as she visited with Will, perched on one leg like a stork as she tried to hide her technicolored toes, she had felt a familiar spasm grip her right thigh. She limped across her front lawn to her own porch and opened her front door with shaking fingers, locking it behind her. Then she tiptoed into the kitchen, sat on a cane-seated chair and cleaned her wet, grassy feet with a paper towel.

She stood and caught a glimpse of herself in the hall mirror and froze in horror. Not only was her morning ensemble less than flattering, but her sweater hung two inches longer on the right side than the left, as she'd mismatched the buttons and buttonholes in the darkness of night. But the final touch, besides her tousled dark hair, was the nasal strip still firmly stuck to the bridge of her nose, splaying across her nostrils, due to the onset of spring allergies.

"Oy," she sighed, hobbled back to bed and pulled her flannel quilt over her head.

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"You look familiar." How many times had she heard that remark in the last eight months?

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