

MOLLY TAYLOR SANCHEZ

ELIZABETH KENNY



Contents

1. Elizabeth	1
2. Elizabeth	9
3. Billy	18
4. Elizabeth	29
5. Elizabeth	38
6. Amy	48
7. Elizabeth	51
8. Elizabeth	57
9. Oliver	67
10. Elizabeth	76
11. Elizabeth	85
12. Elsie	93
13. Elizabeth	103
14. Monique	113
15. Elizabeth	121
16. Phillip	131
17. Elizabeth	140

CHAPTER ONE

Elizabeth

“Ready! Set! GO!” I yelled.

Our horses dashed off at top speed, Douglas and I goading them on with our heels.

“No way you’re going to beat me this time, Elizabeth!”

I just smiled discreetly. Douglas didn’t know my secret. My faithful mare, Willow, and I had discovered a secret passage the previous week when I had been trying to reach the end of a rainbow. Although I’d been unsuccessful in finding the elusive treasure trove of gold—the vibrant arc seemed anchored in the middle of a swamp—what I had discovered instead was a secret trail. Well, it wasn’t secret to the cows who had forged the winding path. It ran alongside the swamp, through the eucalyptus forest, and ended just a stone’s throw from my grandparents’ house—but it was new to me, and it was a shortcut that Douglas didn’t know about.

We raced side by side up the dusty road, his dark bay stock horse and my dapple gray brumby as delighted for the race as we were. My brumby was one Father had captured in the wild and broke to help on the farm. Not

everyone thought brumbies made the best domesticated horses, but I loved her energy, and she wasn't afraid of splashing through a creek with exuberance, the way the stock horses often were.

Hooves pounded, determined heads pumped, nostrils flared, and tails and manes unfurled wildly in the warm Australian spring air as our horses covered significant ground toward the eucalyptus forest through which a road led to Grandpa and Gran's house.

My cousin, Douglas, lived only one and a half miles from our home. All of my mother's siblings, in fact, lived within twenty miles of their childhood home in New South Wales, deep in the Australian bush where my Irish grandparents had immigrated and raised eleven children. We always had cousins to play with and enjoyed abundant Sunday meals and celebrations together.

Landing in the middle of our pack of siblings, Douglas and I were often left to our own devices. My three older sisters helped Mother and Father with the animals and crops on the farm. The twins, just younger than me, helped with baby William. Douglas and I, for a time, were the messengers—too young to be a lot of help on the farm but reliable enough to make the ride to and fro on horseback. I had practically lived on horseback since the age of six.

As the family messenger, I was frequently sent into the nearby village to pick up the mail or to request the doctor's help when someone was ill. (That was rare, though, because Mother always had a way of fixing everyone right up with her herbal poultices and natural remedies.)

Father had taught me how to help corral the cattle in the evenings by riding back and forth in a zigzag pattern to move the livestock from one field to another.

Each time Douglas or I were to transport a message to our grandparents, or to an aunt or uncle, he or I went out to the porch, where there hung a wrought iron triangle and a matching heavy metal beater with which to make reverberating *gong* sounds. Our mothers used them to call family members back home, usually for meals. But Douglas and I had created our own communication system. Two gongs with three seconds in between meant “Come over.” That could be answered with three fast gongs that meant “I’m coming,” or just one gong that meant “I can’t come now.”

On this particular day, ten-year-old Douglas had struck two quick gongs with a three-second space, then two more quick gongs, which meant “Going to Grandpa and Gran’s.” My eight-year-old self answered his message with three fast gongs: “I’m coming.” We knew it would take us each about ten minutes to prepare our horses and that we would meet at the crossroads between our homes.

As we raced toward the forest, I pulled back slightly on Willow’s bridle, just enough to let Douglas move ahead.

“Haha!” he turned and shouted back. Then he leaned forward and dug in his heels, urging Jasper even faster. “I’ve got you now, Elizabeth!”

At the forest edge, I quickly deviated off course and into the brush as Douglas’s horse galloped down the dirt road, taking them into the forest. I followed the forest

right up to where the swamp began and steered Willow onto the cattle trail.

On a small pond to the left was a pair of black swans, their red bills glistening in the sunlight, lily pads jostling softly to their gentle movements. In the trees to my right, I admired spectacularly painted parrots. They made a squabbling ruckus as they flew limb to limb, consuming the gum tip blossoms of the eucalyptus. The air was filled with the honey-sweet scent of the blossoms that only came in spring.

We came to a creek that ran through the forest and into the swamp. Willow splashed across it without the slightest hesitation. As she did, a platypus was startled out of its hiding spot, from which it propelled itself swiftly downstream and out of sight. The path then led back into the cover of the forest.

By now Willow had slowed to a canter. (I didn't expect her to sprint the full hour's ride.) Having raced Douglas to Grandpa and Gran's cottage more times than I could count on one hand, I knew he and Jasper would be going about the same pace—but without the shortcut along the swamp.

Springtime in the forest was awe-inspiring. All along the path and as far as I could see, buttercups the color of the sun and Australian bluebells to match the deep blue sky were sprinkled merrily together across the forest floor. Willow galloped past patches of white-and-pink clover. If I weren't racing Douglas, I'd have stopped, dismounted, clambered onto my hands and knees, sunk my face into the soft clover, and sniffed deeply. Its scent was enlivening.

But, as I was still cantering along, I also took in the beauty and sweet fragrance of the golden wattle interspersed throughout the forest. Sometimes it looked like a bush and sometimes a tree, but it was always covered in golden-yellow blossoms that resembled furry little pom-poms cheerfully dotting the green foliage.

As Willow and I emerged from the forest, I could see Grandpa and Gran's little wooden house with the single window in front and the rock path that led to the door. Next to the house was a giant blue gum tree with its smooth silvery-blue trunk. "That old tree has outlived me three times, I reckon," Grandpa had told me frequently. "The only one I've seen in these parts."

Grandpa lovingly cultivated the flower garden that adorned the front of the house on either side of the walkway. My favorites were always the boronia—the tiny bright pink flowers that pack a powerful punch of heavenly scent—and the hollyhocks, because my cousins and I loved to make flower dolls out of them: a full open blossom turned upside down for the skirt and a bud for the head, the sepals forming elegantly pointed arms.

By the time Douglas rode up, I had already unbridled Willow, removed the saddle, and set her to graze in the pasture where my grandparents used to raise cattle. Now it was home only to the horse that pulled their two-wheeled buggy, which is how they rode into the village or visited the homes of their children.

"What?! How . . . How did you . . .?" Douglas stumbled over his words when he saw me.

I enjoyed his confounded look.

“How did you get here so fast?” he finally sputtered, dismounting his horse.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” I teased.

“Lizzie! Dougie!” Gran called out heartily as she galumphed quickly up the walkway, arms outstretched. “Ya’d bettah come in and fill yer bellies! I’ve made ya some scones and potato-and-lamb stew,” Gran said with her gruff, sing-songy Irish lilt. Uncle Whip, my mother’s eldest brother, said Gran once had the voice of an angel, but years in the Australian bush had added a lot of grit to his mother in more ways than just her voice.

I always felt that Gran was the consummate combination of cowgirl, hostess, teacher, and comforter. She was tough, no doubt—still capable of riding her horse bareback when she wanted to. And with hardly a moment’s notice, she could use whatever she had on hand to improvise a meal fit for a king to feed all the children, grandchildren, and neighbors who showed up.

Before Douglas and I left, she always withdrew her large family Bible from its place on the shelf. “Now that yer bellies are full, har’s some words to feed yer soul.” Then we all took turns reading a few verses. The apple hadn’t fallen far from the tree: Mother loved her Bible just as much, and at home we always read a chapter after supper.

The ride home was always contemplative, never rushed. That day we went on the usual road through the forest. Douglas begged me to reveal how I beat him to Grandpa

and Gran's, which I stubbornly refused to divulge. My ego was riding high, harboring a secret over my older cousin.

"Look, Douglas!" I cried, pointing. "That tree trunk looks especially peely. Let's stop and help it along, shall we?"

"I'll never understand your fascination with peeling the gum trees, Elizabeth," Douglas said as he climbed off Jasper and let the reins fall to the ground. This kept the horses from cantering off but allowed them to graze on the clover, buttercups, and bluebells.

"Why don't you love it? I think sloughing the layers to show off the fresh orange bark under them is one of the gifts of the forest! It's so satisfying! Can't you just hear the tree thanking you for your help?" I said as I pulled off a long papery strip.

"A tree can't give thanks," Douglas said incredulously as he began pulling at a piece of shedding bark.

Just then it sounded like the tree squealed! Startled, we both looked up. Another squeal led our eyes to a baby koala high up in the tree, clinging to a branch a couple of feet below its mother. Unconcerned, the mother koala kept crunching leaves, dropping twigs and small branches, and even moving higher to reach the next bough full of leaves.

Douglas and I lay down in a patch of fluffy, fragrant pink-and-white clover and watched as the baby squawked and carried on until it reached its voracious mother. As she continued to feed, it wedged itself between her belly and the tree branch, clutching her sides.

Never lacking for entertainment in the wild, we kids always found something to do outdoors.

Spring soon merged into summer in December, dappling the land with fringed violets, which looked like they were dressed up for an elaborate party. The purple sarsaparilla brightened the landscape, as did the Christmas bells—red bell-shaped flowers with scalloped golden edges. There were countless other flowers in a myriad of colors, but those always stood out to me the most. As my cousins and I traipsed the two miles to school, we loved to gather flowers into a bouquet and take them to our teacher, brightening our little one-room schoolhouse.

ELIZABETH KENNY

In the early twentieth century, a mysterious and frightening disease spread through the world's population of children: polio. This illness stumped doctors, but nurse Elizabeth Kenny trusted her instincts and developed a way to help countless young patients formerly threatened by paralysis or even death. This compelling story follows Kenny's journey from humble beginnings as a "bush nurse" in Australia's backcountry to becoming the leading world expert in treating polio. Young readers will be inspired by her relentless compassion and determination to do the right thing, even when she stood alone.

