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THIS IS A STORY ABOUT THREE THINGS

1. A lot of people being very brave in very complicated times.
2. Ducks. *Mallardus Amazonica* to be precise, but you'll find out more about that side of things later. For now, just pay attention whenever that name pops up. Trust me, it'll pop up a lot. Elizabeth wanted it to pop up a lot more than it does, but Calla and I talked her out of it. You can thank me later.
3. Footnotes. I am very fond of footnotes, and nobody else ever uses them so I thought my story would have them. You might not actually know what a footnote is, so here's a demonstration.[1] Whenever you see that little number at the side of a word, it means that I've remembered something else I want to tell you and that something is at the bottom of the page. All you have to do is go to the bottom of the page, and make sure you're reading the

[1] You figured it out! Well done. Now go back up there and finish the rest of that paragraph. Off you pop. You'll be back here soon enough.

right numbered thing. Obviously you don't have to read the footnotes, but it's really a lot more fun if you do.

Now that I've told you all of that, we can begin.

INTRODUCING ELIZABETH

Elizabeth North is the first person you have to be introduced to. Of course there are other people in this book, and you shall meet them at the right time, but for now there is Elizabeth, for without Elizabeth there would not be a story at all. Elizabeth was a doctor. She was not one of those doctors who went around and helped people to get better. She was a very different kind of doctor—the type of doctor who knows an awful lot of things about one subject in particular, but very little about medicines or broken bones.

And the particular thing that Elizabeth knew a lot about was ducks.

Elizabeth could tell you what a duck meant when it quacked at you, why you shouldn't feed a wild duck bread,[1] why mallards are horrible fathers,[2] why ducks have such big feet,[3] and what is the best joke about ducks.[4]

[1] Bread makes their stomachs swell up.

[2] I don't want to give you details but trust me, they would not get a Father's Day card from any of their children.

[3] All the better to see you with, my dear.

[4] Did you hear about the duck who thought he was a squirrel? He was a tough nut to quack.

She also knew a lot about how to survive, but we shall come to this later. Elizabeth had a daughter, Calla Rose,[1] a girl with bright yellow hair and three freckles that resembled the precise outline of a mallard's tertial feather, and it was just the two of them against the world. In the brief moments she could think clearly enough to work, Elizabeth did it in the only way she knew how. She wrote articles and books and sold the clothes off her own back and kept the two of them together and afloat and alive.

It was not an easy life, and it was often one that took them away from the world. On the rare times that Elizabeth spoke to people, or that people spoke to her, they would think of her as a strange and eccentric woman and never talk to her again. Those people were—are—idiots.

Elizabeth North was one of the bravest and strongest women in the entire world.

And I am going to tell you why.

[1] Calla comes to play quite a substantial part in this story but right now, we must stay with Elizabeth. Trust me on this.

A TEMPORARILY WONDERFUL CHILDHOOD

The young Elizabeth lived with her parents in a big house in the countryside. Although she was an only child, she did not grow up alone. She had a dog that was so large and brown, that he really was more lion than dog. His name was Aslan and when Elizabeth went to school, he would sit quietly at the front door and not move until he saw her coming back up the drive.

Elizabeth's parents spoilt her deliberately and happily. They lived for the moment and her childhood was as perfectly formed as the diamonds on her mum's wedding ring. She would have chocolate cake for breakfast and ice cream for supper before going to bed at midnight and watching fireworks outside the window. And on the days when there were no fireworks and just the distant pink of a setting sun, Elizabeth would sit outside and think about how much she loved her life. It was a strange thing for a child to think, but Elizabeth North was a strange child who lived a strange life.

She went to school, of course, and mixed with other children, but the school was down in the village and not the sort of school that you and I might even recognize as a

school. It was two rooms, and the older children sat in one, and the younger children sat in the other, and Elizabeth was sent between the two rooms because there was nobody else her age. Sometimes when she was sent from one room to the other, she would wander outside instead and feed the birds with the spare crumbs from her pockets.

On one Friday in July, when it was almost the end of term and everybody was thinking about the school holidays, the little ones were allowed to do colouring in but the older ones had to do maths. Elizabeth didn't want to do either, so was on her way to slip outside. She had gone precisely three steps when Mrs Fraser, her tall and sensible teacher stopped her.

"Maths," said Mrs Fraser. "You need to brush up on your times tables."

"But that's not fair," said Elizabeth, folding her arms.

Mrs Fraser didn't look concerned in the slightest.[1] "Life isn't fair, Elizabeth. You'll be doing maths this afternoon and if you continue with this attitude, you'll be staying behind and doing extra. I am quite happy to do my knitting while you do some more sums. I imagine it will be educational for us both."

"You have no jurisdiction[2] on me after school," said Elizabeth.

[1] Mrs Fraser was EXCELLENT at appearing Unconcerned, and I think we can all learn something from her.

[2] This is a fancy word that means 'authority'. Elizabeth had learnt it only two days ago, after hearing it on the TV, and felt that this was the perfect time to practise it.

It was somewhat inevitable that Mrs Fraser thought the opposite.

She kept Elizabeth in detention that very day and, straight after the last little one had been picked up by their parents, spent the next hour drilling Elizabeth on why X+Y=Z. In all honesty it wasn't a very productive session because Elizabeth did not want to be there, and neither did Mrs Fraser.[1]

But then everything changed.

[1] She might be a teacher, but she was still human. Just.

HOW IT HAPPENED

It began with a telephone call. It was the sort of telephone call that made Mrs Fraser purse her lips and leave the room. She was gone for a delightfully long time during which Elizabeth took the opportunity to put her pen down, stare out of the window and consider how much she hated maths. Sometimes our happiest moments come before our saddest, and Elizabeth North was no exception. She was not doing maths. She was sitting in the sunshine. She was by herself. It was perfect.

The moment that followed it, however, was not.

Mrs Fraser came back into the room. She had her hand across her mouth, as though she was trying to yawn and hide it. She stood in the doorway for a moment, before walking into the room and even then she didn't look directly at Elizabeth. Her eyes went to the desk, the window, before coming to rest on Elizabeth's knees.

Elizabeth wriggled with discomfort. She couldn't help it.

"Elizabeth," said Mrs Fraser to her knees, "we're finished for today. I'm going to drive you home."

I suspect that if Elizabeth had been told there and then about what had happened things would have been a lot easier for everyone. But some people do not know what

to do when they are presented with the unexpected, and Mrs Fraser was one of those people. Her way of coping was to talk to Elizabeth's knees and to drive her home in silence and then to send her to her room.

"But it's not bedtime," said Elizabeth. This was a very reasonable point to make and one which was made very reasonably even though Elizabeth's stomach was starting to knot together with a strange other feeling that she thought might possibly be fear.

Mrs Fraser looked at the front door, the carpet, and the bottom of the stairs. "I need to use your telephone to make some calls. Can you tell me where it is?"

"It's just there," said Elizabeth. A shadow in the corner of the hall shifted when she spoke. It was Aslan and he looked as confused as Elizabeth felt. He padded his way across the floor and pushed his head into Elizabeth's hands, as though he was trying to convince himself that she was really there.

"I just need to make some calls," said Mrs Fraser again.

"Is everything all right?" said Elizabeth. She wrapped her fingers in her dog's thick brown fur, taking comfort from his presence.

"I just need you to be brave for me now, please."

Elizabeth nodded. She nodded because she knew that was what Mrs Fraser wanted her to do, but she was full of questions. She wanted to know what she should be brave about, she wanted to know where her parents were, and she wanted to know exactly who Mrs Fraser was telephoning and what she was doing in her house.

But she did not say any of this because Mrs Fraser was already walking towards the telephone and her shoulders were saying, as clearly as shoulders can say that sort of thing, that she should not be followed.

However, they were not saying that she should not be listened to.[1]

Elizabeth climbed the stairs with Aslan at her side, and when they reached the top step she sat down and so did he. She pushed her fingers under his collar, and he inched closer to her and the two of them listened with all their might to what Mrs Fraser was saying on the phone. I do not think either of them breathed. It was that sort of a moment.

[1] Under normal circumstances you should not listen to somebody on the phone. Their business is not your business, even if they are talking about interesting and scandalous things. However, there was a teacher in Elizabeth's house, and that was a most unusual circumstance, so Elizabeth decided that *normal* did not apply.