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One Endless Summer

Written by Laurie Ellingham

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one endless summer

Laurie Ellingham



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES



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For Andy

PART I

CHAPTER 1

Day 1

Lizzie

The sweet unnatural fragrance of hairspray and deodorant clung to the air in the windowless dressing room. The scents clawed at the back of Lizzie's throat. She drew in a shallow breath and stared into the camera. 'My name is Lizzie Appleton, I'm twenty-nine years old, and I have three months to live.'

Lizzie's words hung in the silence, bringing the enormity of her situation crashing down on her, and with it a fusion of colours that blurred the edges of her vision; blobs of reds and blues floating next to purples and yellows as if she was looking down the barrel of a kaleidoscope. Her head began to pound. What was she doing? Three months. 90 days. It wasn't enough.

'That was great, Lizzie.' Caroline clasped her hands together from behind the camera tripod. 'Let's try it one more time with a bit more feeling, OK?' Caroline pushed her glasses further up her thin nose as she bent over to watch Lizzie through the small, digital screen poking out from one side of the camera. 'Remember that this is for the advert, so we *really* need to grab the viewers' attention.'

'More feeling? Are you serious?' Lizzie asked, pulling at the black wool of her dress where it prickled her skin and wondering, not the first time, how it had come to this.

'Just think of something that makes you sad,' Caroline said with her usual pursed lip smile.

'Because dying isn't sad enough?' Lizzie narrowed her dark-blue eyes and waited for the documentary producer to squirm inside her grey trouser suit. The producer had been an almost-permanent fixture in Lizzie's life for the past seven days, and Lizzie was looking forward to saying goodbye to her at the airport in a few hours' time. In the meantime, any payback Lizzie could give for the hours of listening to Caroline's voice – which was always a notch higher than it needed to be as she encouraged and chided all in one breath – was worth it. *Smile, but not at the camera. Be yourself, but without that sarcasm of yours. Wear comfortable clothes, but be presentable.*

But Caroline didn't squirm or flinch. Instead, she pushed her glasses onto the top of her nest of dark curls and returned the stare. 'The sooner we get this done, the sooner I'll be out of your way.'

Lizzie sighed. After their week together, her sarcasm no longer seemed to goad the producer. Lizzie tried to focus; she squared her shoulders, fixed her gaze on the camera, and stared at her reflection in the circular glass of the lens: the button nose and high cheek bones she'd inherited from her mother; the dark-blue eyes; and brown hair of her father, now cut short to accommodate the bare patch at the nape of her neck – a parting gift from the radiotherapy.

The throbbing in her head intensified. Images of her parents from the previous evening bombarded her thoughts. The shaking hand of her father, Peter, and the watery-grey eyes of her mother, Evelyn, which had begged the words her mum had been unable to voice: *Don't go, Lizzie. Stay here with us.*

Both her parents looked ten years older than their sixty-one years, and had the lines on their faces of people

who'd spent so much of their lives worrying. She'd done that to them. An ache spread across her chest. They deserved so much better than the hand they'd been dealt. But, then again, so did she.

'Ready?' Caroline asked, pulling her glasses back into place and brushing off an imaginary fleck of lint from her jacket.

Lizzie nodded. 'My name is Lizzie Appleton, I'm twenty-nine years old, and I have three months to live.'

'How does it make you feel?'

Lizzie's eyes shot to Caroline. 'I didn't know you were going to ask me that. We … we haven't practised that one.'

'I didn't want you to practise it,' Caroline said, raising her perfectly shaped eyebrows. 'I want to know how you feel. The viewers will want to know – how does it feel to know you only have three months to live?'

Panic swept through her body. What was she supposed to say? What did people want to hear?

'It's a mixture,' she said, making herself look into the camera once more. Her voice sounded echoey and strange over the drumming of her heartbeat in her ears. 'Relief and fear.'

Carline lifted her hand and drew circles with her index finger. 'Keep going,' she mouthed.

Lizzie thought of *Little Women*, and Beth giving her dying speech to Jo. She'd read the book once, maybe twice, but it was the film Lizzie was thinking of. Claire Danes and her shaking voice telling Winona Ryder that she was doing something first for once. She was the one having the adventure. If Lizzie could remember that speech, then maybe she could say that, but her mind blanked.

'There's a relief in knowing you're going to die. Well, there is for me anyway,' Lizzie said after a pause. 'I've

been dodging death all my life. I've survived brain tumours I wasn't supposed to survive. It's felt kind of like I've been on borrowed time, and now that time is up. But I don't have to waste another second of my life in a hospital, or a waiting room. I don't have to have any more treatments. I can live my life, and there's a relief in that.

'But if you're asking me what it feels like to know that I'm never going to see another Christmas. That the trees are going to blossom this year, and I'm not going to see it. I'm never going to look out of another window and see a world of white and think it's a late snowstorm, before realising it's blossom flying off the trees. Or what it feels like to know that my brother is going to be competing in the next Olympics –' Lizzie's voice cracked, she swallowed hard '– the actual Olympics, and I'm not going to be there cheering him on. That fills me with a fear beyond words. So, I'm trying very hard not to think about that, and just to focus on the first part. The relief that I can live my life.'

Lizzie stopped talking and tried to smile. She glanced at Caroline and wished she'd been able to remember the speech in *Little Women*, rather than the jumble of confusion she'd just spoken. If Caroline asked her to do it again, she'd have to think of something better to say.

'That was perfect, Lizzie, well done,' Caroline said, flicking a switch on the camera and stepping out from behind the tripod.

Lizzie sighed and slouched against the back of the chair.

'Now onto the breakfast interview,' Caroline continued. 'In a few minutes, you'll be called into the studio and positioned on the sofa with Samantha and Jaddi. Try to remember some of the answers we've practised, and, I know I've said this before, but I'm

going to say it again anyway – please don't be sarcastic. It really doesn't play well on camera.'

'You do know it's not exact, don't you?' Lizzie asked. 'I might live longer. I might live three and a half months, or maybe even five.' Who was she trying to convince? Caroline, or herself?

Caroline exhaled through the small gap in her front teeth, creating a low whistling noise. The sound reminded Lizzie of the times she was little, sitting in the dips of the sand dunes near her house on the Suffolk coast, cushioned between her mum and dad, and Aaron just a bundle of blankets on her mum's lap. The wind had howled around the dunes and the North Sea had smashed on the shore below them.

Long days spent on the beach. Bonfires, barbeques and the sideways glances assessing her. Was she all right? Was she ill? Was that a limp in her run? A tremor in her hand? Followed by the forced cheer and smiles. 'Who needs to go abroad when we have so many treasures on our doorstep?' her mum liked to say in her chirping voice, glossing over the real reason for another year without a holiday – the infection risk, the hospital appointments, the cost. Her father losing his job as an engineer after the weeks, sometimes months, when she'd been in hospital.

Her life was like a large pebble thrown past the waves into the calm of the sea, dropping into the water with a plop and sending the ripples outwards, affecting those closest to her. She'd played along; she'd tried to make it easier for them. She'd always done as she was told, without question or complaint. Until now, anyway.

The whistling stopped and Caroline set her gaze on Lizzie. A decision had been made. 'Ninety days or under would be better.'

A sudden urge to laugh propelled its way up Lizzie's body, like the bubbles in a glass of Prosecco dancing to the top. The sound exploded out of her, alien and unwelcome, rebounding off of the dressing-room walls. 'Well, Caroline, I'll do my best.'

Caroline threw her hands to her mouth and shook her head. 'I'm so sorry, Lizzie, I didn't mean it like that. I just meant from an audience-viewing perspective. Obviously, nobody wants you to die; it's just that the documentary is called *The Girl with Three Months to Live*, and as you are going to …' Caroline's voice trailed off.

'Ninety days or under would be better,' Lizzie finished for her as the desire to laugh evaporated, leaving a hollow void inside. She'd finally managed to rattle the producer, but had shaken herself up in the process. Lizzie stood up and stepped towards the door. The small room had an oppressive quality, clouding her thoughts so that she couldn't think straight.

Before she could reach it, the door swung open, bringing with it a fresh wave of fragrances: honeysuckle and roses, the scents that surrounded Jaddi like an aura.

Jaddi grinned as she stepped into the dressing room, flashing a row of perfect white teeth. Her sleek black hair brushed the middle of her back and shone under the bright bulbs surrounding the mirror in the centre of the room.

'Did you get what you needed?' Jaddi said.

'Yes. Perfect timing, Jaddi,' Caroline replied. 'I need to check everything is in place for our cameras. Where's Samantha?'

Jaddi stepped in front of the mirror and dabbed a finger along the sheen of gloss on her lips. 'In the toilet throwing up.'

A line formed on Caroline's brow. She caught Jaddi's eye in the reflection of the mirror. 'Is she going to be all right for the interview?'

'Don't worry –' Jaddi smiled '– she'll be fine. She was exactly the same before her final exams at uni, and that assessment-centre thing she did last year, wasn't she, Lizzie? And she aced them.'

'I'll tell the producer to make sure she isn't asked any direct questions, just to be on the safe side,' Caroline said, the crease on her forehead disappearing. 'Stay here and one of the production team will come to collect you in a few minutes.'

Caroline scooped up her leather organiser and smiled at Lizzie and Jaddi.

'You'll do fine this morning. Try to enjoy it.'

'Thanks.' Lizzie smiled. 'Not for this –' she waved her hand around the room '– but for making our dream happen.' The two words didn't seem enough, didn't seem right, either, but she felt like she should say them. 'Thank you.'

Caroline nodded. If Lizzie didn't know better, she would've sworn a tear glistened in the producer's eye. 'My pleasure,' Caroline said, before walking out of the room.

Jaddi turned to Lizzie with another wide grin. 'Ready?'

'No.' Lizzie shook her head and fiddled with the ends of her hair where it tickled the tops of her ears. She wasn't ready. She'd never be ready, for the interview, or for everything after it.

'You'll be fine, Lizzie. It's just two people talking to us on a sofa. It's no big deal.'

'It's OK for you, "Miss Beauty Pageant winner two years running".' She'd meant it to sound funny, but it

hadn't. That was one of the problems she'd discovered since her final round of radiotherapy, since Dr Habibi had sat her down and shown her the brain scans: the things she was supposed to find funny, the things other people laughed at with light-hearted ease, washed over her. And yet, she laughed all the time, maybe more than before, but always at inappropriate moments, always a hollow noise echoing in a silent room. It was the same for jokes. She'd lost whatever knack she'd had for telling them. 'Besides, those two people you mentioned are actually famous TV presenters, and you seem to be forgetting all the people who'll be watching.'

'You do realise that I haven't done beauty pageants since I was sixteen?' Jaddi said. 'My mum practically forced me to do them. It was just something to add to my Indian marriage CV.' Jaddi smoothed a wrinkle in her charcoal-grey dress.

Lizzie sighed. 'All I know is that you are so much better at all of this than I am.'

'You'll be fine, I promise. You look lovely, by the way.' Jaddi turned away from the mirror and took Lizzie's hand. 'Your hair really suits you that length.'

A pressure built inside Lizzie. She clamped her fingers around Jaddi's wrist. 'Seriously,' Lizzie said, dropping her voice to a whisper. 'What we're doing is … is insane.' A brief moment of relief washed over her. Finally, she began to voice the fears that had been haunting her for weeks.

Jaddi pulled her hand out from Lizzie's grip and touched her arm. 'It's a bit late to put the lid back on that can of worms, don't you think? I know it feels out of control, but if you think about it, nothing has really changed. You're worrying about the breakfast interview, that's all.'

'What about Samantha?'

Jaddi's shoulders dropped. For a moment, the bravado her friend wore like perfume was gone. 'You know as well as I do that this was the only way we—'

The door to the dressing room flew open.

'Only way we what?' Samantha asked.

CHAPTER 2

Samantha

Samantha's mobile buzzed in her hand, almost slipping out of her grip as it vibrated against the layer of sweat forming on her palms.

Jaddi mumbled a reply to her question, but Samantha didn't hear the words. The dressing room and her friends fell away as her concentration fixed on the incoming message and its sender.

My flat. 1pm. We're all set xxx

The words so simple, so normal, but there was nothing normal about it.

'Sam? Are you OK?' Lizzie said, tugging Samantha's thoughts back. 'You look sort of pale, honey. Maybe you should sit down.' Lizzie pulled out a stool from under the make-up counter and motioned for Samantha to sit.

Samantha stared at her friends as they waited for her response. She wanted to tell them everything, but how could she? How could she tell them what David, the love of her life, and the only man that had ever made her feel smart and beautiful, had planned for her later that day, when she couldn't contemplate it herself? She forced David and his message to the back of her mind. There were so many other things to worry about before 1pm.

'Why am I the only one being sick?' Samantha asked instead. 'This is national television.' She turned to the mirror, raking her fingers through her limp, blonde

hair and pulling a face at her reflection. No amount of make-up could mask the grey sheen that seeped out from every pore. She didn't like having her photo taken let alone being filmed for a documentary for the next three months. And before she even got to that, she had to take part in a television interview, which had an average of 950,000 viewers every day. She'd looked it up at 4am when she'd been unable to sleep. Almost a million people would be watching her, listening to her, judging her. Nausea burnt at the back of her throat. This is their dream, Samantha reminded herself, willing the sickness to pass.

'Hey, don't worry,' Jaddi said, her face appearing behind Samantha's in the mirror. 'It will be over before you know it, and we'll be right there next to you. We're in this together, remember?'

Samantha nodded and fiddled with the fabric clinging to the curve of her hips. 'I should have gone for the green dress,' she said, trying to block the reflection of Jaddi's figure from view. Comparing her curves and wobbly bingo wings to Jaddi's beauty, not to mention Jaddi's svelte figure, was the quickest way into a pit of misery and crash dieting.

Samantha sighed. 'How did I not realise that my dress is the exact same colour as the sofa? No one will see me. I'll be a floating head.'

Lizzie's smiling face appeared behind her in the mirror. 'When,' Lizzie asked, resting her head on Samantha's shoulder, 'are you going to see how gorgeous you are? Not to mention intelligent. You will not be a floating head, you'll be perfect.'

Samantha smiled at Lizzie's pale face and the dark smudges under her eyes. The unfairness of it all washed over her just like the nausea had done an hour ago. Why

did it have to be Lizzie? Of all the millions of people in the world who smoked, took drugs, lived life on the edge, who killed, and hurt others, the millions of people that, without question, deserved to die, why did it have to be kind, loving Lizzie going through this? It was a question Samantha had asked herself at least once a day for the past few months, more than once on the nights she couldn't sleep, mulling the question over in her mind with dozens of others she didn't have the answers to.

Jaddi stepped away from the mirror. 'So,' she said, placing her hands on her hips as Samantha and Lizzie turned to face her, 'you know I love you, don't you? We're like family. So you know when I say things, I say them for your own good, right? Well, I need to tell you that the two of you need to pull yourselves together. It's natural to feel nervous, but this is our chance. We've talked about travelling the world since university. I know it's scary, but we can't focus on how we got here or why we're doing it, or it'll make it too hard. We have to live in the here and now.'

Samantha listened for a quiver in Jaddi's voice, any sign of the fear and sadness that clouded Samantha's head, but there wasn't any. Jaddi sounded just like Caroline, forthright and self-assured in a way that only people confident with their own place in the world could be. No amount of education, elocution, or expensive clothes could make a person that way. It was in the way Jaddi and Lizzie were raised, something middle-class that Samantha tried to emulate, but so often failed.

She'd seen the looks from her peers at the Home Office. They knew just by looking at her that she was different. The first-class degree, the hours she spent at her desk long after everyone else had made their way to a back-street pub or home, how she knew parts of the

law inside and out; none of it wiped out her upbringing in their eyes.

'It was nine years ago that we first planned this trip,' Jaddi continued. '*Nine years*. That's almost a decade. And we're finally doing it.'

'Easy for you to say,' Samantha said. 'Having a cameraman tagging along is all well and good when you're tall, thin and drop-dead gorgeous. I, personally, don't relish the thought of half of Britain seeing my gigantic bottom climbing up a mountain. Not to mention –' a lump lodged in Samantha's throat forcing her voice into a whisper '– Lizzie's tumour.'

Just then, a woman wearing a headset appeared in the doorway. 'We've gone to adverts. Three minutes and you're on,' she said before disappearing again.

'Was she talking to us?' Samantha turned to Lizzie as wasp-like panic swarmed in her stomach.

'Who else?' Jaddi grinned.

'I … I can't do this. Lizzie, I'm so, so sorry. I've tried to hold it together. I love you so much and I've tried to support you through this …' Samantha could hear the rupture in her voice, but she couldn't stop now. 'You're dying.'

'We're all going to die at some point,' Lizzie shrugged, a weak smile touching her face.

'But not in three months. We can't just up and leave as if everything is normal.' Tears spilled from Samantha's eyes. 'Everything is not normal. What about your parents? They're devastated, we all are. And what if you get ill whilst we're in the middle of nowhere? Then what? We can't go, we just can't.' A sob escaped Samantha's mouth.

Silence grew between them. Samantha tried to read Lizzie's wide-eyed stare, but all she could see was

her own fear reflected back in her friend's face. Then Lizzie's gaze turned to Jaddi, causing frustration to surge inside Samantha. Sometimes, just sometimes, she hated how they both deferred to Jaddi, as if they were still standing in the kitchen of their houseshare, total strangers on their first day at university. Jaddi had oozed self-assurance. She'd chosen the pubs they'd gone to, the boys they'd spoken to, the clubs they'd joined. Back then it had seemed as if Jaddi had had a magic wand that could alter the course of their destinies.

Samantha let the thought go. This wasn't another one of Jaddi's daredevil plans. This trip belonged to all of them. It was a shared dream that had kept them going through exams and dissertations, and long days slugging it at work followed by evenings in the dingy one-bed flat they had shared in East London. Their reasons for travelling might be different – Jaddi wanted adventure; Lizzie wanted new experiences; and Samantha had wanted to escape (or she had once anyway) – but the dream was the same and they'd clung to that. Just not like this.

Jaddi stepped towards Samantha and pulled her into a tight embrace. Part of Samantha wanted to push Jaddi away, but she didn't. Jaddi's cool confidence had a way of rubbing off on the people around her, Samantha included. The knots in her stomach began to unravel.

'I'm scared too, Sam. But Lizzie can't stay here waiting for it to happen,' Jaddi said. 'There is so much she hasn't seen or done. There is nothing anyone can do for her here. It shouldn't end like that for anyone, especially not Lizzie.'

Samantha nodded, dabbing her fingers under her eyes in an attempt to wipe away the tears without smearing any more of her make-up. 'I know. I'm sorry, you're

right.' She drew in a long breath. 'I'm panicking about this interview, but I'll keep it together.'

Lizzie's arms wrapped around them. 'I don't think I've said thank you to both of you, for doing this with me,' she said. 'I couldn't do it without you.'

'You don't need to say thanks, Lizzie,' Samantha said. 'You know we'd follow you anywhere. Except off a cliff, of course.'

'You two had better not be getting tears on my dress,' Jaddi said a moment later, making them all laugh in a shaky uncertain sort of way and releasing the sadness that hovered over them.

Jaddi squeezed Samantha a little tighter before letting go and spinning on the points of her heels. 'Let's go then.'