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CHAPTER ONE

Hi, My Name Is Lizzie

*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord,
plans for your welfare and not for harm,
to give you a future with hope.*

Jeremiah 29:11

Hey, Lizzie, Mrs. Velasquez. It's almost show time!" CNN producer Dan Sterchele gave a welcoming smile from the doorway before disappearing back down the hall. After weeks of anticipation and planning, we were finally inside the huge CNN building in downtown Los Angeles. This was actually happening—and I was determined to enjoy every moment of it.

One day earlier I had been home in Austin, Texas, with my parents, and now Mom and I were sitting in the hair-and-makeup room getting ready for my next big TV interview. I closed my eyes and said a quick prayer asking God to be with me during the interview and to please calm my mom's nerves. She's always nervous enough for both of us when we do interviews.



Seconds later, my eyes flew open. The bright lights around the giant mirrors reminded me of a backstage dressing room on a Hollywood movie set. I watched as makeup-artist Aubrey airbrushed my face with the perfect shade of foundation. Since I'm blind in one eye and have only limited vision in the other, putting on makeup can be difficult, and I'm always worried about leaving the house looking like a clown. Aubrey was wonderful about answering my questions and giving me tips on how to put on the right amount of makeup without overdoing it.

My mother was being pampered in the chair next to mine. She looked like she was finally relaxing.

Minutes later and looking gorgeous, Mom and I were escorted back to the green room, where Dan was waiting to do the pre-interview questions. We sat on the long blue couch, and he told me to pretend we were on the set.

I took a deep breath, said OK, and sat up straight, ready to turn on my interview skills. We went through the questions one by one, often stopping to laugh at my answers.

"Definitely make sure you say that—that's really good!" Dan would suggest.

Minutes later, he said someone would be in to put microphones on Mom and me. As soon as he left, I jumped up. It was time to check my appearance.

Just like the one in the makeup room, the mirror in the green room (which, by the way, was light blue) had big, bright bulbs all around it to give off the perfect amount of movie-star lighting. I walked right up to it to get a closer look at my hair and makeup, and I loved them even more.

My dark skinny jeans were good to go. My deep-orange blouse



was just right, although I was a little worried because it was sleeveless, and studios are usually freezing. But at least I'd look cute! My long gold-circle necklace went perfectly with my big brown dangle earrings.

I'm not all that into shoes like pretty much every other girl my age is. Give me a pair of ballerina flats or boots, and I'm happy. But today I had on a new pair of cute brown leather boots. Since my legs are very thin, it's almost impossible to find boots that fit and aren't way too big at the top. Luckily, I had found a pair of size-two boots in the kids' department that were a perfect fit.

A man came into the room, clipped a tiny microphone to the front of my shirt, and did the usual count-to-ten test of the volume. I've worn microphones like this a hundred times, but this time there was something new. He gave me an earpiece—the exact earpiece I've seen singers wear during performances. Cool!

"OK, Lizzie, it's showtime!" I glanced at Mom as my heart started racing. I still wasn't nervous—it was more like I was about to take off on a crazy, fun, rollercoaster ride.

We walked down the hallway and stopped in front of a regular-looking door, but when Dan opened it, on the other side was another world.

The set was awesome. Giant cameras and headset-wearing men were ready and waiting. I stood at the entrance for a moment, looking at the brightly lit mini-stage. It was designed to look like a living room, with a coffee table, two smaller chairs grouped together, and one chair on the far left.

Mom and I were led to our seats. As soon as we sat down, Mom reached for my hand. I could feel my excitement soar as I scanned the room. The bright lights, cameras, teleprompters, and produc-



ers were only a few feet away, but my mind was already focused on the show.

"Lizzie?" With a welcoming smile, host Dr. Drew Pinsky shook my hand, then mom's. Like many people, I've been a fan of Dr. Drew's for a long time, and having the chance to meet him and be on his show was a dream come true.

I took a deep breath and gathered my thoughts as the producer counted down. Five, four, three, two. Instead of saying one, he pointed to Dr. Drew, and it was action.

We were on the air, and I was ready to tell my story.



My name is Lizzie Velasquez, and I'm twenty-three years old. I study communications at Texas State University. I adore small dogs, listening to music, hanging out with my friends, shopping for clothes, going to the movies with my family, and just being lazy. I'm also a reality-show junkie.

I'm a lot like any girl my age, but I'm also different. I have a rare genetic disorder that prevents me from gaining weight. I'm blind in one eye and have limited vision in the other. In high school I had two major surgeries, complete with blood transfusions. A simple cold can put me in bed for two weeks.

My condition has yet to be understood by the medical community. It's so rare that only two other people in the world have it. We're not sure what the future holds or how long we'll live.

Right now there's no cure. When I was thirteen, I joined a University of Texas genetic study directed by Dr. Abhimanyu Garg. He believes I have a form of neonatal progeroid syndrome, which



causes accelerated aging, fat loss from my face and body, and tissue degeneration. Someday I'd like this medical mystery to be called The Lizzie Syndrome.

There's no hiding my condition—or hiding from it. You only have to look at me to know I'm different, because even though I eat small meals all day, I'm probably the thinnest person you'll ever see.

A lot has been written about me. Some of it's true, and some of it isn't. No, I don't have an eating disorder. My parents do not starve me. Yes, I weigh the same as a second grader. If I gain even one pound I get really excited. I've been called the world's slimmest woman. I can't imagine what being overweight feels like, but I can tell you my weight has been an issue my whole life.

Being stared at and singled out is something I've had to deal with my whole life. People who don't know me have targeted me with hateful, hurtful remarks. Imagine being hated or laughed at because you can't gain weight. But I have an amazing family and great friends who love and support me and are always there for me. They stand up for me when I'm singled out and love me unconditionally.

We are each unique—from the color of our hair to the tone of our voice, we're different from one another. Even identical twins have some differences. The trouble is, our differences are all some people see, which is kind of funny, because I think we're more alike than we're different.

I've spent years wanting to look like everyone else, but it didn't happen. Instead, I had to learn to love and accept myself just as I am. I stopped listening to what other people said and started making a life for *myself*. I've discovered what it means to find my



purpose in life, my passion. Each new day is an opportunity I'm grateful for.

My life is exciting. I share my story in person with hundreds of teens and young adults across the country. I do guest appearances on TV: *The Today Show*, *Inside Edition*, Australia's *Sunday Night*, Germany's *Explosiv*, and now *Dr. Drew*. Sharing my story is my calling, the way I help others.

If I had never looked past the anger and hurt and embraced who I really am, I would have missed these opportunities. As I look back over my struggles, I can see that God was present. I just didn't always understand that.

My faith in God has helped me in every aspect of my life, but I promise not to preach at you or tell you what to believe. That's up to you. I can only tell my story truthfully, and because God has had a huge starring role, I talk about him a lot. Without him, I can't imagine that you would be interested in hearing much about me.

Each day we're given an opportunity to discover our purpose and to prepare to live as best we can. As long as I have faith in God, a smile on my face, and genuine pride in who I am, everything else will happen on schedule. The same is true for you. If you haven't yet discovered your purpose, that's OK—it will come.

During my really dark days, I could never have imagined being as happy as I am today. No, my life isn't perfect. And yes, others' opinions matter. But what matters most is that I'm living my destiny. The secret to my success is that I recognize and embrace my own God-given uniqueness. Life isn't always easy, but this is the only life I've known. I've learned a lot along the way, and I want to share what I've learned.

I hope you stick around.



Reflections

- ♥ *Do you spend time thinking about what your life is like now and how you hope it will be?*
- ♥ *Do you wish your life was different? How?*
- ♥ *Do you have a special dream?*

A Prayer to Share

Dear God,

I'm so excited! Today I get to share my story with some pretty special people, and I have so much to tell them. I know in my heart that you're right here with us. Help us see and appreciate our many blessings!

Thank you,

Lizzie



CHAPTER TWO

Why Me?

God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

1 Corinthians 10:13

My aunt calls me Sunshine because I always have a smile on my face. Often I'm asked if something wonderful just happened. My answer is yes! Something wonderful happens every day, even when we're not paying attention.

I love to laugh. One of the things I get from my dad is my sense of humor. He has the timing of a professional comedian. Being able to tell a joke and appreciate good humor has taught me to be quick on my feet and to laugh at myself and my situation. But it isn't always easy to remember to laugh or even smile when life is hard.

It's common to feel we have to understand everything. We



want to know why bad things happen, what we did to “deserve” them. At one time or another we’ve each wondered, *Why me? Why do bad things always happen to me? Why must I have another disappointment?*

⚙ *It’s spring break and all my friends are going on vacation. Well, except me. I have to stay home.*

⚙ *I can’t believe I have curly hair. I hate it. I want my hair to be long and straight.*

⚙ *I can’t believe I have straight hair. I hate it. I want my hair to be curly.*

⚙ *Why does my brother have autism? It’s so not fair to me.*

⚙ *Why does my mother have to work?*

⚙ *Why doesn’t our family have more money?*

⚙ *Why does my life have to be so boring?*

Or, in my case, *why can’t I look more like the other girls? Why can’t I be healthier? If I have to look so different and have this syndrome, then why isn’t my immune system stronger? Why is it so easy for me to get sick? Why do I have to be blind in one eye?*

In high school I watched other people seem to effortlessly sail through their days. It just seemed so unfair. No matter how carefully I planned my life, something unexpected would get in the way.

It could be something small and annoying like running out of time to study for a test, hating the way my hair looks, or losing my



favorite bracelet—again. Or it could be something huge and scary, something I couldn't control. While others were rushing around having fun, I was stuck in the doctor's office or the emergency department.

I often found myself wondering where God was in all of this. Was he even paying attention? Did he know how hard life was for me? What was the purpose behind this pain and uncertainty? I didn't *want* to give up on God, but sometimes I secretly wondered if he had given up on me.

Everyone seemed happier than I was. They certainly were healthier. Being so sick on top of looking so different was a huge recurring *why me?*

I wondered whether my life would ever make sense. I was filled with sadness and unanswered questions. I resented my fragile health, and I was angry because people judged me without knowing me or giving me a chance.

Everyone has problems, so you've probably felt all of those things on at least one occasion. Think about the things that bother you, things you can and can't control. Now write them down in the space below:



Some *why mes* are significant; others, not so much. Either way, what's on your *why me* list is important. Maybe your father died and you miss him, or maybe your family moved to Florida and you miss your friends in Maryland, or maybe your older brother left home to go to college. These kinds of things are not your fault. They're situations you have no control over. You didn't cause them, and you can't change them.

Other things you do have control of. Maybe you've been experimenting with alcohol or are considering doing drugs. Maybe you've made some bad decisions.

No life is perfect. If you don't believe me, well, ask around: "Hey, is your life perfect?" Guaranteed, if the person feels like venting or sharing, you'll get an earful. Maybe his little brother is driving him crazy. Or she failed her driving test. Or he ran out of time to finish last night's homework because he had to clean the kitchen.

They'll tell you that not only is life not perfect—heck, it isn't even fair. They'll assure you that no one can imagine how many problems they have, and that those problems are nothing to joke about.

"The World's Ugliest Woman" Video

I used to wake up dreading the routine stares and whispers from strangers. Having to deal with all of that on a regular basis was tough in itself, but little did I know, it was about to get a lot worse—and all in the blink of an eye.

One day while I was in high school, I was playing around on YouTube instead of doing my homework. I was looking for some good music, but instead I stumbled on a video of a very familiar



young girl. In what would turn out to be one of the biggest turning points of my life, I clicked on a link to open the eight-second video.

To my utter surprise and horror, the video—which had over 4 million hits, thousands of comments, and no sound—was called “The World’s Ugliest Woman.”

They were talking about me.

The pain I felt is indescribable. Imagine someone posting your picture on the Internet and labeling you the world’s ugliest person. Now add thousands strangers giving you tips on how to hurt yourself because of your appearance. How would that make you feel?

I kept asking myself, how dare they? How dare they tell me to put a bag over my head so people wouldn’t have to see my ugly face? How dare they ask why my parents didn’t abort such an ugly monster? How dare they offer tips on how to kill myself?

There was no way to remove the video. The mere thought of someone having those thoughts sickened me. I thought about punishing them. I wanted them to know how much they had hurt me, to feel the pain I felt. Then I decided that, rather than sink to their level, I’d fight the video with my accomplishments.

Before I did anything else, though, I had to tell my parents. I didn’t want to—I wanted to protect them from the video more than I wanted to protect myself from it. I was afraid it would hurt them even more than it hurt me.

And yes, they were very upset, but they automatically went into parent mode and tried to get the video removed. But ironically, as bad as it was, the video brought us closer: We decided as a family to use this situation as motivation to work harder. This was just another bump in the road, and together we would fight through it without retaliating.

What's the Point of Pain?

Why must we go through so many painful experiences?

Actually, I'm not sure. No matter how you look at it, some situations just don't seem fair. Some days life doesn't make sense and you just have to ask for help, change what you can, and pray about the rest. But while you're doing all that, how do you get through it emotionally? Here are some things you can do while you're working your way through any situation:

⚙ ***Don't focus on your pain.*** It's OK to feel pain and grieve a loss, but don't focus on the tears. My dad has always told me I'm allowed to have one good cry, and then I have to look for the positive side. My mom has a similar method of helping me move forward. She gives me a few days of feeling sorry for myself and having her help me, and then I need to get out of bed and start making myself feel better.

⚙ ***Be around people.*** Sometimes when we're really feeling down, people bring us happiness by making us laugh or just letting us know they care. But they can't do that if you're locked away in your room. Find people to be around, and let them embrace you.

⚙ ***Find something to laugh about.*** Did you know that laughing reduces stress hormones and increases and releases endorphins? Endorphins are hormones that reduce pain and cheer us up. It turns out that old saying is true—laughter really is the best medicine. It's important to laugh no matter what kind of day you're having, but it



can be really hard to laugh when you're stressed out. So force yourself. You heard me: When you least feel like it, force yourself to laugh for at least fifteen minutes every day. You don't have to wait for something funny to happen. Just smile and go, "Ha, ha, ha." Research has shown that fake laughing sort of tricks the body into releasing the same endorphins it would if you were really laughing, which makes you feel better. No matter what you're going through, resisting the urge to laugh isn't going to make you feel better.

☀ ***No one can (or should) handle everything alone.*** Ask for help. Choose a compassionate and thoughtful person who cares about you, someone whose advice you can respect even if it isn't what you want to hear. I'm lucky to have two wonderful parents, and I hope you do too. I pray you have at least one person you trust, someone who loves you no matter what.

Maybe you're afraid your mom or dad won't welcome what you have to say. I hope you're wrong. I hope they surprise you when the time comes. But if you're right, or if you feel you have no one to turn to, perhaps a teacher or an aunt or a friend's mother or father is ready to welcome you with compassion and love. All you have to do is ask.

☀ ***Cultivate a grateful heart.*** Count your blessings—pretty much every situation could be worse, so be grateful it's not.

Not all problems are created equal, but they're all meaningful. I can't tell you why bad things happen to good people or that the bad things have a purpose. I *can* tell you that some problems can be better understood if we accept responsibility where we should.

Pain forces you to make the time and effort to know yourself and to learn how to deal with problems when what you really want to do is stay in bed. All problems aren't the same, but some things are true about all of them: It's what you do with your struggles that matters. If you're involved in a situation that needs attention, ignoring it won't make it go away. Neither will filling yourself with anger and frustration or blaming others and feeling sorry for yourself. But loving yourself *does* work. Accepting yourself and making a plan *does* work.

I hope you never have to go through what I did, but remember, God never promised life would be easy. He did promise that his grace will transform the meaning and direction of your life. Believing he loves you will change your life as it has changed the lives of others through the centuries. His message is constant, his love unwavering.



Reflections

- ♥ *Do you think others' lives are better than yours? Why?*
- ♥ *Think about the last time something went wrong. How did you handle it? Did you accept responsibility where you should? Did you make a plan for next time?*
- ♥ *Whom do you trust with your secrets?*

A Prayer to Share

Dear God,

Thank you for all you give us. Today could be a great day, but I've been feeling a little down. I'm sort of worrying about everything. I know I take my blessings for granted—I forget just how much I have to be grateful for.

I promise to do better. I know I can trust you and that I have a lot to be thankful for. Thanks for listening.

Love,

Lizzie

