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Foreword

There are times in your life when you meet someone who you know, deep down inside, will make the world a better place. Who will do anything to make you feel happier and more hopeful and fill every day with joy. Deborah is one of those people. Deborah is my friend.

We first met when she was a guest on my radio show. It was clear to me that she had so much to offer, so I asked her if she would like to come on the programme as often as she could. She said that due to her bowel cancer she couldn't commit to anything, as she was living day to day not week to week. But aided by medical treatments, her zest for life and, of course, her fighting spirit, she came back again and again. She phoned in live from her 10ks and marathons, she brought her family along, she joined us at the men's singles final at Wimbledon, but, most importantly, we became friends.

Since then, we have had lots of memorable chats. One that I vividly remember is when she told me how joyous it was for her to have things written in her diary for future dates, as she never imagined she'd be able to do that again.

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How to Live When You Could Be Dead

We've often discussed her treatments, how she's coping, the different things she's being asked to do on TV and radio, but she's mostly wanted to talk about her family. They were, and continue to be, her life. They bring her joy, and she wants to make every single second with them count. For them and for herself. But despite her own problems, she never forgets to ask about my father, who has survived bowel cancer. She always tells me to send him her love.

Deborah loves to dance. She always wanted to be on *Strictly Come Dancing*, but she didn't need to do that to be able to show everyone that music and dance fill her with happiness and help her get through her treatments. It's never just been about her; it's always been about making sure that we all feel that hope and happiness too.

Since being diagnosed, Deborah has been desperate to get the word out about bowel cancer and to tell anyone who will listen that it can affect you at any age. She has openly discussed all the issues surrounding her illness, and she has helped lift some of the taboos around talking about bowel cancer. For far too many years, broadcasters would creep around the subject of bowels and poo and bottoms and symptoms, but not Deborah. She's loud and wants *everyone* to listen and take notice. She's changed awareness. She's changed perceptions. And she's changed people's thoughts and beliefs.

Deborah has also created a cancer community through her social media, which has helped people to feel that

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they are not alone. That they no longer need to feel so scared. That they can have ‘rebellious hope’ – and she has been the one holding everyone together.

The last phone call we had was on a beautiful sunny day. We laughed about trying to work out what song we would dance to together in one of our gardens in the sun to embarrass our husbands. She shared with me how ill she really was. I was heartbroken, yet she still made me feel hope. The fact that she has wrung every last ounce out of life is testament to her determination to make every second count – her fashion range, the rose being named after her and, of course, this book are all testament to that.

As someone who adores the bones of this magnificent woman, I cannot tell you how difficult this has been to write, but also what an honour it was to be asked by Deborah to do it. Her laughter and light will live on in us all for a very long time. Let none of us forget to keep hope in our hearts and joy in our days, because that’s what she has always wanted. So, Deborah, I promise I will always shout about you from the rooftops. In fact, who needs shouting? I am going to sing loudly and dance around with a huge smile on my face every time I think about my darling, beautiful friend.

Gaby Roslin

June 2022

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Author's Note

I started to write this book when I was still feeling relatively healthy and my cancer was progressing slowly. However, as I came to the end of the writing process, my health had deteriorated, and I realised that I probably wouldn't be around to see it published. Rather than go back and change what I've written, I've decided to leave things as they are. This means that, on occasion, what I say comes from the perspective of thinking that I still had a significant amount of time ahead of me. I have done this because I still believe in the lessons I learned and share in this book, even now when I know my time is coming to an end. I am, of course, incredibly sad that I likely won't be around when the book comes out, but I take great comfort in hoping that some of you might find it helpful.

Deborah James

June 2022

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introduction

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I'm alive when I should be dead. In another movie, I missed the sliding door and departed this wondrous life long ago. Like so many others living with an incurable condition, I've had to learn to live not knowing if I have a tomorrow, because, statistically, I shouldn't have.

At the age of 35, at the tail end of 2016 on a dark, rainy Friday evening just before Christmas, I was blindsided by

a diagnosis of incurable cancer. My change in bowel habits turned out to be a 6.5-cm tumour and, as each month progressed, so too did my cancer. Lung tumours, liver tumours, inoperable tumours – Tumour Whack-a-mole is the worst game ever invented.

I was initially given a less than 8 per cent chance of surviving five years. Writing this book, more than five years later, I have no choice but to live in the now. To value one day at a time, just one, because my tomorrows aren't guaranteed. And neither are yours.

**The way I approach
adversity is my
greatest weapon.**

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How to Live When You Could Be Dead

I'm a teacher. I always have been, both in my soul and in my career, which cancer has also taken from me. I've now been out of the classroom for more than five years since that life-changing, world-crumbling diagnosis, but, during that time, I have faced the steepest learning curve of my life. And the drive to learn, to educate, to inspire has become even stronger – it's now just via different platforms: my 'Bowelbabe' blog, national TV appearances, the BBC Radio 5 Live podcast *You, Me and the Big C*, a column in the *Sun*, charity work and, of course, all of the efforts I've made to raise awareness of bowel cancer via my social media channels.

I spend most of my life wanting to escape my incurable bowel cancer, yet there isn't a day that goes by when it's not on my mind. I have loved harder and lost harder than I ever knew possible. I have said goodbye to too many loved ones I've met on this journey – those who wanted just one more second, like Rachael Bland, my wonderful co-host on the podcast who became a true friend and someone I cherished, even though I wish it wasn't cancer that brought us together. It is in their names that I choose to be positive when it would be so easy to give up, and it is because of this that I feel totally alive. I live knowing they would give anything for more life. And so would I.

Every day, I stand at a crossroads: down one path is depression, mind-fuckery, fear of the unknown, heart-break and mourning – all out of my control; down the

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other, the one I choose to travel the most (though not always), is positivity and agency. I can't change what's happened or what will happen, but what I am in control of is how I react to my circumstances – that's 100 per cent in my control. Like all of us, I have the ability to make my feelings about my situation, right now, today, anything I want them to be, regardless of the final outcome. The way I approach adversity is my greatest weapon. It's a game changer, and it's all I need – it's all any of us really need.

Each of us faces challenges, large and small, on a daily basis: from relationships ending, moving house or starting new jobs to incurable diagnoses, bereavements or severe traumas. These challenges are, for the most part, out of our control – life seldom unfolds according to a neat and straightforward plan. But what we *can* change is how we approach the difficulties we face, and in this book I'll show you how I have managed not just to cope with adversity but to live with purpose and laughter and a sense of fulfilment that I did not think was possible when I was first diagnosed.

To begin with, we need to stop focusing on 'Why me?' and realise that 'Why not me?' is just as valid a question. How we learn to respond to any given situation empowers us or destroys us – it's how we react to the things on our journey that makes or breaks us. That's why I want to encourage you to question your life as if you

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How to Live When You Could Be Dead

didn't have a tomorrow and live it in the way you want today. Being positive isn't keeping me alive, but it's helping me to pick myself up and put myself back together over and over and over again. And the way I have learned to deal with my illness has helped me to live a life full of joy and purpose when I could indeed be dead.

I understand that we are all different, and the things I have found to help me carry on when I am in danger of becoming overwhelmed won't work for everyone, but I hope that sharing some of the more practical things I do might be useful and inspiring for some. I'll explain how instead of admitting defeat in the face of supposedly insurmountable odds, I've embraced positivity. I'll show you how I've harnessed the power of hope even when it seemed like there was nothing to be hopeful about, and how I've learned to value my time and use it more wisely by refining the goals in my life and continuing to create new ones, then implementing the structure and routines to help make them happen. I'll show you how reframing your thoughts can change the prism through which you see things, and that every single thing that happens to you has a lesson in it if you're willing to look for it. I'll demonstrate that grit is a key ingredient of coping with adversity and that we are all more courageous than we realise. Throughout my illness, I've continued to laugh and find the joy in life, and I'll show why this has been so beneficial too. And I'll remind you that, when push comes

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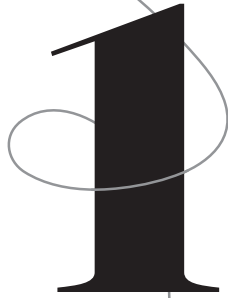
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to shove, it is the little things in life that we are most grateful for.

Whether you've bought this book because you've undergone a traumatic life event, such as an incurable diagnosis, or whether you want to live the life you really want and change the way you respond to challenges, I hope that some of the lessons I've learned will help you to deal with all that life throws at you. I'm living life to the full because I could be dead, and I know you can live your best life too, whatever you might be facing.

**The way I have
learned to deal
with my illness has
helped me to live a
life full of joy and
purpose when I
could indeed be
dead.**

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**how hope
can help you
sleep at night**



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**‘We must accept finite
disappointment, but never
lose infinite hope’**

Martin Luther King, Jr

I hope. I hope a lot. I hope cancer won't shorten my life. I hope I continue to be successful and happy in my work. I hope a cure for cancer comes in my lifetime. These are some of my big hopes, but I also hope my kids tidy their rooms and get their homework done. Hope comes in all shapes and sizes, but if you can hold on to it tightly, it will help you to face adversity and even make you more likely to succeed at the things you try. Every time you hit the mat or a bump in the road, hope will help you to pick yourself up again.

Hope is one of the most powerful human emotions we have. When we hear tales of people who have survived being lost in the jungle after a plane crash or adrift in a boat in the middle of the ocean, the survivors often say they never gave up hope – in such extreme situations, it can literally be the difference between living and dying. But it applies to all aspects of life.

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