

CHAPTER ONE

OUT OF CONTROL

Control is power. When we have a plan, we can tell ourselves that we are in charge of our lives. It's easy to be brave. We feel confident when we know what to expect. After all, things are locked down. Expectations are met. Everything is bright and shiny. But control is a funny thing. One minute unicorns roam the world, flowers fall from the sky, and cupcakes don't have calories. The next minute a thundering herd of rhinos trample all our delusions, and we are left vulnerable and afraid.

To be in control means believing you're directing your path and making the right choices. That's why many of us are, well, controlling. The best part of being a control freak? Everyone around you respects you and your decisions. They buy into the illusion that your life actually is the Pinterest board it looks like, and they eat your cupcakes without gaining a pound, because they believe you have control.

Isn't this the ideal we yearn for? Control over every aspect of our lives—our health, finances, kids, and marriages? Nothing bad would ever happen because we simply wouldn't allow it.

REALITY CHECK

But that isn't real life. Reality hits us when we pull out our daily planners full of careful lists and then are honestly surprised

when we can't cross anything off before we go to bed. We expect events to happen in our lives at a certain time and to unfold in a certain way that is predetermined by us. And when things don't happen that way—when we discover that the cupcakes have five hundred calories each—we just might feel as if we're twirling around naked in the middle of the street, screaming at the sky for an explanation.

The fact is that most of us get up every morning with the notion that we are basically in control. Then, on one of those mornings, something happens that shows us we never were. And if we're among those who hold the ideal of control in a death grip, an encounter with reality can leave us lonely, curled up, and crying in a corner (hopefully not in a dirty bathrobe, clutching a bottle of bourbon, and tearing into a bag of chips).

While we're in this self-pity-induced haze, we can't see clearly. The illusion of control steals our joy. Why? you may ask. Because this thief brings along with it two sidekicks known as expectations and comparison. Life brings you situations that are not what you wanted or expected, and it doesn't necessarily bring you what it brings to others. It's like when you order a big, juicy bacon cheeseburger and bite into it, only to discover that someone has substituted turkey bacon and tofu. Meanwhile, the friend you're having lunch with gets exactly what she ordered specifically the way she wanted it. It's just not fair.

Great expectations. We all have them, don't we? I know I did! I planned to get married in my twenties and start a family. I assumed, with extreme confidence, that my future husband and I would picket-fence our lives. We'd buy a charming house in a darling neighborhood and send our genius kids to private school. The kids would be incredibly smart, motivated, and very holy, and our marital relationship would put the greatest love stories to shame.

No, I wasn't a spoiled brat with a big entitlement problem. I just wanted the soaps to be real, except that Frisco would choose me over Felicia. Needless to say, I never met Frisco, and Port Charles was far from my reality. When my expectations were not met, I wasn't angry, just confused—I didn't understand why my plans weren't coming together. But I was still determined to eat the calorie-free cupcake, so I kept on making plans and building expectations and forging ahead. It wasn't until I was married with two children that life's hard truths began to chip away at my allegiance to control.

I guess, in a way, I'm lucky that things fell apart when I was younger, while I could still stay up past ten p.m. and get up at six a.m. without the urge to wear yoga pants all day. Since then, it's taken me a quarter century to come to a place of realistic self-awareness and reliance on the One who truly controls things. But it's not yet time to talk about God. Right now, this story is about me. (It's okay. He and I have chatted about this, and he's okay with it. He knows it's going to be all about him anyway.)

Let's get to the real story. Once upon a time, my husband, Jerry, and I were living out his dream to be a naval aviator. Although it meant long months apart, I happily followed him from duty station to duty station. It was a great adventure where he was the captain and I his first mate. We were a team with a plan. And a plan meant we were in control—until we weren't.

AT THE FONT

“I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” the priest said. “Amen.” For Christians, these holy words bring new life. On a crisp Sunday afternoon in September 1992, my non-Catholic husband; three-year-old son, Jonathan; and I stood around the font in the suburban Maryland church that I grew up in as a priest spoke these words over,

baptized, and anointed our one-month-old daughter, Courtney Elizabeth.

While the priest did his thing, I made lists in my mental daily planner. I hate to admit it, but this was a get-this-kid-baptized-quickly kind of ceremony. We had a few of my large extended family in attendance, but despite the fact that she wore the family baptismal gown, there would be no party. After the ceremony we were heading back to Maine. Why? Because the following week, the navy was moving us from Maine to Washington, DC. We had a schedule to keep, and there was no room for deviation. That came back to bite me in a big way.

Just as the priest poured holy water over our daughter's head, Courtney arched her back, and her face turned purple. She held her breath and her body jerked once, twice, and a third time. Her movements were so sudden that I almost dropped her. Then she turned into a spaghetti noodle, and I pulled her in close. *What was happening? Was the water too cold? Was it too loud in the church? What was going on?* I glanced at my father and then my husband. Had they seen that? My father, who was fighting cancer at the time, went pale, while my husband's gaze darted around the church like a sniper's on the hunt. My breath caught, and my vision blurred. Something *had* happened. Something was wrong.

POWERLESS

Within the hour, I found myself in an emergency room with our daughter actively seizing. Nurses buzzed around Courtney like bees around a sunflower. It was confusing, disorienting, and just plain scary. Minutes or hours later, a doctor gave our daughter a shot in the thigh, and she went limp in my arms. The doctor took her gently in his arms and disappeared without speaking a word. I didn't know that when he walked away with our daughter, our world would change forever.

The next few hours were hell. By the time we saw Courtney again, the sun had gone down, and the heavy weight of discontent had settled on both Jerry and me. Our tempers were short, and our fear hit the top of the charts. We wanted answers, and no one had them. We heard big, scary terms. Nurses took blood and placed an IV in our daughter's small hand, and doctors ordered an electroencephalogram (EEG) and a spinal tap. There were many tears, both Courtney's and mine.

Looking at her in the hospital crib, I couldn't get over how small she was. Courtney was just a little baby, only five weeks old. Her hand was all bandaged to keep the IV in place, and there were wires poking out from underneath a little hospital gown that had pink elephants on it. Machines hanging over her bed hummed and beeped with regularity. Every time she had a seizure, alarms rang out and an army of hospital staff came rushing into the room.

The whole thing was overwhelming, and I was losing my grip on my emotions. To make things even worse (because things can *always* get worse), it was well past Jonathan's bedtime. Jerry took our son back to my parents' house so he could leave in the morning to make it to Maine in time to meet the military movers. A terrifying realization set in: not only was I alone but I also had no control over this situation.

As they pushed Courtney's crib down the empty hall in the basement of the hospital, passing one hazardous material sign after another, I heard only silence. They wouldn't let me go back with her; once again I was relegated to the sidelines. I don't like the sidelines. I'm an all-in kind of girl. Since I couldn't participate, I paced the waiting room and prayed. All of my expectations had been doused with lighter fluid and set aflame. I wasn't happy.

And what does an unhappy Mary do? She yells at God: *Don't you dare let her die.*

Then Mary begs: *Please, don't let her die.*

And then Mary makes a deal: *I'll take her any way you wish to give her to me, just don't let her die.*

That night was the beginning of my seven-day vigil in the pediatric intensive care unit (PICU). I never left Courtney's side for one moment that week. I was too afraid something would happen while I was gone. If it had, I knew that I would never forgive myself. At the end of the week, with Courtney still seizing multiple times a day, this was all the doctors could tell me: "Ma'am? We have no idea why your daughter is having seizures." It's hard to describe the utter despair I felt in that moment. Jerry was still in Maine, my son was with my parents, and I was alone.

As the doctors apologized and promised to keep searching for answers, they handed me prescription drugs and gave me instructions on how to care for Courtney. All I could hear was my own internal shouts into an eternal silence. *God hadn't heard my screams and cries or taken me up on any of my bargains*, I thought. Once the doctors left, I fell to my knees and wept. I knew what was happening: God was punishing me.

PERFECT

I once heard it said that to have children is to allow your heart to walk outside your body. It's a vulnerable and trusting act to bring a child into the world, and Jerry and I had done that twice now. What we had not told anyone was that the week before this horrific turn of events, I'd had my tubes tied at the age of twenty-five. Despite the Church's teaching on being open to life, Jerry and I had decided that we were done having babies. There were too many variables at play—from my difficult pregnancies to his desire for a very small family—for us to take any chances. We wanted to be in control of our own destinies, and we were

happy with one boy and one girl. Two perfect children for our perfect life.

But our perfect life was circling the drain, and panicked questions taunted me. Was God angry? Was he taking revenge because we had closed ourselves to the future gift of children? Was Courtney going to die?

I felt terrified and confused and betrayed. In my mind, our situation confirmed that God was a tyrant. I felt just like I had in grade school when I was sent to the principal's office for breaking a rule, except now my daughter was paying the price. There isn't a word in the dictionary to define my anger that day. All my life I had been taught that Jesus had come to save us by suffering for us on the Cross. Yet now, he was allowing Courtney to suffer. What was *that* about?

I have to be honest: at this point in my life, I thought God was a bully. I had not felt his love or experienced his mercy. I was still determined to solve the problem, to find a way to fix all of this somehow. Surrender was not an option, just a sign of weakness—and I *had* to be strong. If God wouldn't help me, I'd do it myself.

I can hear your laughter from here. Yes, I had much to learn. I got on my knees deeply angry with God. I unleashed my fear and anxiety and gave him my complete and honest opinion of the current situation. Because Jerry wasn't Catholic and had a very loose relationship with God, I felt utterly alone in this. I knew that if either of us was going to pray, it would have to be me and me alone. Luckily, God is as gracious as he is loving, and he didn't give up on me. In the midst of my silent screams, I felt a slight shift in my heart, like a hiccup of time, a moment of calm in the middle of one hell of a storm. I took a breath and God spoke words into my heart. I'll be forever grateful to the Holy Spirit for allowing me to hear them: *I love her. She belongs to me. And she's perfect just as she is.*

God saw Courtney and loved her just as she was. In the midst of the chaos and the suffering, he saw perfection and claimed our daughter for his own.

AN INVITATION

I've been a Catholic all my life. In my early years, I thought Jesus was a superhero, better than Superman. When I became a teenager, God became a rule maker and stern disciplinarian, just like Sr. Mercita ("Looks like a cheetah and growls like one too," we used to say about the nun at our school). God's voice was not merciful but full of judgment. My relationship with God had never matured beyond that between Almighty Creator and whiny, entitled teenager.

As I traveled through those seven endless days yelling at, begging, and bargaining with God, I realized that he was inviting me to grow up and form a new relationship with him. I kept running across the Bible verse from Jeremiah that stated, "For I know well the plans I have in mind for you—oracle of the LORD—plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope" (29:11). Friends had quoted that scripture to me all week long, it was on the parish bulletin my mom gave me when she brought Jonathan to visit us that week, and it was even engraved on a bracelet one of the PICU nurses was wearing. God was desperately trying to get my attention—I could not escape it. He wasn't punishing me or Jerry; he was allowing a situation that was somehow going to bring "a future of hope." He was asking me to trust him with my beautiful newborn daughter.

That's bananas. Crazy town. Insanity.

I'm not a big fan of suffering or pain and not particularly willing to accept misery and sorrow. And trusting in someone or something makes us vulnerable. In the past, every time I'd ever laid my vulnerability on the table, things had worsened. I

felt like I was playing *Frogger*: fulfilling God's ask was like trying to cross a superhighway, dodging and weaving through the speeding cars. It was too much, and I couldn't do it.

Then I remembered the desperate deal I'd offered: *I'll take her any way you wish to give her to me, just don't let her die.* See where this is going? God had allowed Courtney to live. Awesome. He'd also allowed her to seize uncontrollably for no apparent reason. (Insert bad word here.) That's when I figured it out: if God was going to hold up his end of the "deal," then I had to keep mine. That meant that I'd have to trust him with my daughter's life and, as a bonus with purchase, my own.

It was seven days and nights before I managed to accept the deal I thought I was making. (I've since learned that things don't work this way when you're dealing with an almighty divinity who loves you eternally. God keeps his word, even when we don't.) God wasn't interested in extracting anything from me; he wanted me to trust him and to embrace his plan for our family, especially regarding my daughter. Once we dip a toe into this pond of trust and enter into a deeper relationship, God will ask a lot from us. He does this because he knows what we are capable of even when we don't. He wants us to trust him completely, not because it's good for him but because it's best for us. Trust gives us the grace we need to walk in faith that all shall be well. And when we don't trust, the lessons get harder and longer. Just ask me how I know.

I went all in with no idea where it would lead. In hindsight, this was a good thing. I had no idea what God would ask of me, but it hurt less to trust and surrender than to reach for control and be fearful. Some say (mothers and nuns, mostly) that a person will change only when the pain of staying in the same situation is greater than the perceived pain of change. I can attest to this truth. In that moment, I told God "enough" and laid down my heart, trusting, briefly, that he wouldn't crush it. At times,

I still struggle with trust; I am not who I was, but God is not finished with me yet.

HEART WORK

What about you? We all suffer. We all have struggles in our life, events that strip away our sense of control. But since control is an illusion, seeking it is essentially a giant neon sign saying you don't trust God to do what's best for you. I'm not talking about a menu plan for the week or your daily carpool schedule, although God can speak into those things as well.

When the big ask comes and you find yourself on your knees, completely unsure of what will happen with your next breath, your heart shattering into a million pieces and seized by indecision over the right thing to do, you have St. Paul's assurance that God will work all things together for the good of those who love him (see Romans 8:28). That doesn't mean that every last thing will be good. It means that as God works all things together, he will bring about what is good for you. And it won't necessarily be "good" the way you see it, but it will be the way God sees it.

How do we trust God? Hard work, my friend, and a little bit of heart work as well.

Have you ever had an experience where you felt helpless, alone, and scared that nothing would ever be the same? Take out your journal, the notes app on your phone, a napkin (preferably not one from a bar), or use the next page in this book. Start writing. Get it out of your head and in front of your heart. Ask yourself:

- *How is God allowing me to break today?*
- *What is he asking of me?*
- *What do I need to lay down at the foot of the Cross and allow his mercy and grace to seep into?*