

# CHAPTER 1

## The Lie:

### SOMETHING ELSE WILL MAKE ME HAPPY

I peed my pants last week. Not full-on peed my pants, like that one time at summer camp when I was ten years old. We were playing capture the flag, and I couldn't hold it a second longer. I didn't want to admit that I'd just wet my pants, so I doused myself with a bottle of water. Imagine, if you will, that once all of my clothes were wet, no one—most especially Christian Clark, my camp crush—was the wiser. I was resourceful even then. Did others find it odd that I was suddenly soaking wet? Probably. But I'd rather be an oddball than a pants-wetter any day of the week. As for last week, this wasn't that level of peeing my pants. This was just your regular I've-pushed-three-babies-out-of-my-body dribbling. Giving birth to a baby is like a space shuttle launch. Everything gets destroyed on the way out, which means that sometimes, you guys, I pee my pants. If this knowledge hurts your tender sensibilities, then I'm going to assume you haven't had bladder-control problems—and I offer you my congratulations. However, if my experience makes sense to you, then you probably have this problem too—which means you just laughed a little, having experienced a similar predicament.

I was jumping with my boys out back, and somebody hollered for me to show off a midair toe touch. This is my only known skill on a trampoline, and if I'm going to work up the gumption to hoist myself onto that spring-loaded death trap, you'd better believe I'm going to give it my all. One second I was soaring through the air like one of the extra-tiny gals they launch into basket tosses during a cheerleading competition, and the next moment my pants were wet. Nobody noticed—unless you count my pride—but it happened just the same. I had to keep jumping so that the continuous wind rush would dry out my shorts. I'm resourceful, remember? The timing was perfection, too, because not thirty minutes later, a previously programmed Facebook post went up showing me trying on dresses for the Oscars.

Before you get the wrong impression, I am not fancy enough to go to the Academy Awards. I am, however, married to someone ultra hunky. He's not really fancy either, but his job certainly is. That means that sometimes I get to wear dresses like a princess and drink free wine in well-lit ballrooms. In these

instances, photos show up on Instagram or Facebook of us looking well coiffed and ultra glam, and the internet goes wild. This is prime real estate for people to write me notes about how glamorous my life is, how stylish and fashionable and perfect my world must be. And all I can think when I read those comments later is, I've just peed myself, in public, surrounded by other human beings. I've literally gone to the bathroom in the air while trying to force my hamstrings into unnatural gymnastic positions in order to impress my three-year-old.

Y'all, I'm about as unglamorous as you can get. And I don't mean that in a celebrity, stars-are-just-like-us kind of way. This is not like that time Gwyneth went makeup-free and, with her perfect skin and her angel-blond hair, tried to convince us she was just a regular gal even in her four-hundred-dollar T-shirt. No, I mean this literally. I am not glamorous. I am 1,000 percent one of the nerdiest people you're likely to meet. If I've somehow managed to convince you otherwise because I run a lifestyle website with pretty pictures, or because my hair looks extra shiny on Instagram sometimes, well, sister, let me set you straight. I am not a perfect wife, not a perfect mother, not a perfect friend or boss, and most definitely not a perfect Christian. Not. Even.

Close. I'm not perfect at anything I do—well, except for making and eating dishes that are primarily cheese-based—but the other stuff, the life stuff? Oh girl, I'm struggling. I feel like it's important to say that. Important enough to base an entire book around the idea, in fact, because I want to make sure you hear it. I am so incredibly flawed in big ways and small ways and sideways and beside ways, and I make a living telling other women how to better their lives. Me—of the workout regimens and DIY skin-brightening scrub.

Me— with the tips on cooking Thanksgiving dinner and the itemized list of how to parent your kids. Me—I am failing. All. The. Time. This is important because I want you to understand, my sweet, precious friend, that we're all falling short. Yet even though I fail over and over and over again, I don't let it deter me. I still wake up every day and try again to become a better version of myself. Some days I feel as if I'm getting closer to the best version of me. Other days I eat cream cheese for dinner. But the gift of life is that we get another chance tomorrow. Somewhere along the way women got the wrong information. Or, I should say, we got so much of the wrong information that we washed our hands of the whole thing. We live in an all-or-nothing society that says I need to look, act, think, and speak perfectly or just throw in the towel and stop trying altogether. That's what I worry about the most—that you've stopped trying.

I get notes from readers and see thousands of comments on my social media feeds. Some of you feel so overwhelmed by your life that you've given up. You're a piece of jetsam being tugged along with the tide. It feels too hard to keep up with the game, so you've quit playing. Oh sure, you're still here. You still show up for work, you still make dinner and take care of your kids, but you're always playing catch-up. You always feel behind and overwhelmed. Life is not supposed to overwhelm you at all times. Life isn't meant to be merely survived—it's meant to be lived. Seasons or instances will inevitably feel out of your control, but the moments when you feel like you're drowning are supposed to be brief. They should not be the whole of your existence! The precious life you've been given is like a ship navigating its way across the ocean, and you're meant to be the captain of the vessel.

Certainly there are times when storms toss you around or cover the deck with water or break the mast clean in half—but that's when you need to fight your way back, to throw all the water off the boat bucket by bucket. That's when you battle to get yourself back to the helm. This is your life. You are meant to be the hero of your own story. This doesn't mean you become selfish. This doesn't mean you discard your faith or quit believing in something greater than yourself. What it means is taking responsibility for your own life and your own happiness. Said another way—a harsher, more-likely-to-get-me-punched-in-the-face way—if you're unhappy, that's on you. When I say unhappy, I mean unhappy. I don't mean depressed. True depression has everything to do with your genetic makeup and the chemical balance in your body.

As someone who's battled depression personally, I have the utmost compassion for anyone who's going through it. I also don't mean sadness. Sadness or grief brought on by circumstances outside of your control—like the soul-shredding loss of a loved one—is not something that can be walked through quickly or easily. Sadness and pain are things you have to sit with and get to know or you'll never be able to move on. When I say unhappy, I mean discontented, unsettled, frustrated, angry—any of a number of emotions that make us want to hide from our lives instead of embracing them with arms wide open like a Creed song. Because happy people—the ones who are enjoying their lives 90 percent of the time—do exist. You've seen them.

In fact, you're reading a book written by one right now. Ultimately, I think that's what people are commenting on in my photos. They're saying, "Your life looks so perfect," but what I think they mean is, "Your life seems happy. You look

content. You're always optimistic and grateful. You're always laughing." I want to explain why . . . I didn't have an easy start. Actually, if I am being honest, the word I would use to describe much of my childhood is traumatic. Our house was chaotic—the highest highs and the lowest lows. There were big parties filled with family and friends, followed by screaming and fighting and crying. Fist-sized holes would find their way into the walls, and plates would shatter against the kitchen floor.

My father handled stress with anger; my mother handled it by going to bed for weeks at a time. Like most children who grow up similarly, I didn't know there was any other way to be a family. Then, when I was fourteen years old, my big brother, Ryan, committed suicide. The things I saw and went through that day will haunt me forever, but they also changed me in a fundamental way. I was the baby of four children and had spent my life up until that point largely ignorant of the world outside my own home. But when Ryan died, our already turbulent and troubled home shattered. If life was difficult before he died, it was untenable afterward. I grew up in that single day. And amid the anguish and fear and confusion of his death, I recognized a great truth: if I wanted a better life than the one I'd been born into, it was up to me to create it.

The year he died I was a freshman in high school, and I immediately started taking as many classes as I could in order to graduate early. My junior year, I received my diploma and moved to Los Angeles, the closest major city to my small California hometown. To this country mouse, LA seemed like the kind of place where any dream could come true. I was seventeen years old, not even grown-up enough to get a phone line or sign the lease on my apartment without an adult signature, but all I could focus on was finally getting away. For years I'd lived within the chaos of my childhood home thinking, Someday I'll get out of here, and then I'll be happy. How could I not be happy in LA? I soaked up every inch of it from the second my feet hit the ground. I absorbed the frenetic energy of Hollywood and adapted to the rhythm of the waves rolling to shore along PCH. A multidimensional skyline made me feel worldly. I appreciated the kind of views that only an outsider would see. Most people don't notice the trees in Beverly Hills.

They're much too busy coveting the mansions that sit below them, but the trees were one of the first things I saw. I gloried in beauty for the sake of beauty, since that sort of thing hadn't existed in the place where I'd grown up. The thing is,

the trees all match in Beverly Hills. On any given street, around any given corner, and even amid the chaos of a bustling city, you will see row after row of perfect symmetry—a menagerie of Canary Island pines and camphor trees and date palms. They were laid out by the original landscape architect back at the beginning of the twentieth century. They hug the wide streets in meticulous rows, silent sentinels of one of the world's most affluent cities. After a lifetime of chaos, I delighted in the order. Finally, I thought to myself, I'm where I belong. Time passed and seasons changed, and my new city eventually taught me one of the most vital lessons I've ever learned. Moving or traveling or getting away? It's just geography. Moving doesn't change who you are. It only changes the view outside your window.

You must choose to be happy, grateful, and fulfilled. If you make that choice every single day, regardless of where you are or what's happening, you will be happy. I get to see my best friend, Amanda, a few times a year. Every time we hang out we talk until our throats are sore and laugh until our cheeks hurt. Amanda and I would have just as much fun hanging out in my living room as we would lying on a beach in Mexico. Now, granted, Mexico is prettier, the weather is nicer, and we'd have easier access to cocktails with little umbrellas in them . . . but we can have a great time whether we're in my backyard or behind the Dumpster at the local Walmart because we're so excited to hang out with each other. When you're engaged and involved and choosing to enjoy your own life, it doesn't matter where you are, or frankly, what negative things get hurled at you. You'll still find happiness because it's not about where you are but who you are.

#### THINGS THAT HELPED ME . . .

1. I stopped comparing myself. I stopped comparing myself to other people, and I also stopped comparing myself to whomever I thought I was supposed to be. Comparison is the death of joy, and the only person you need to be better than is the one you were yesterday
2. I surrounded myself with positivity. I cringe even writing that because it sounds like a poster you'd see taped to the wall of your eighth-grade gym class—but cheesy or not, it's gospel. You become who you surround yourself with. You become what you consume. If you find yourself in a slump or feel as though you're living in a negative space, take a good hard look at who and what you see every day.

3. I figured out what makes me happy and I do those things. This seems like the most obvious idea in the world, but at the end of the day, very few people intentionally choose the things that bring them joy. No, I don't mean that you can build a life around massages and lavish dinners (or maybe you can, fancy pants!). I mean that you should spend more time doing things that feed your spirit: more long walks with your dog, less volunteering for that thing you feel obligated to do but actually hate. You are in charge of your own life, sister, and there's not one thing in it that you're not allowing to be there. Think about it.