TRUSTING GOD WITH THE TWISTS AND TURNS OF YOUR STORY

KRISTEN CLARK and BETHANY BEAL

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"If life has thrown you a curveball and your future feels hard and scary, *Not Part of the Plan* is the book for you. Kristen and Bethany have been there. In these pages, they share their deepest disappointments, heartbreaks, and fears. They are gifted storytellers. You'll laugh. You'll cry. But most of all, you'll appreciate the advice of these wise friends as they teach you how to walk through pain and uncertainty and lead you toward a hope-filled tomorrow."

> Mary A. Kassian, author of *Girls Gone Wise in a World Gone Wild*

"What do you do when your 'once upon a time' story doesn't seem to be heading in the direction of 'happily ever after'? In *Not Part of the Plan*, Bethany and Kristen address the struggles we face when life takes unwanted detours and show us through Scripture and experience that our ultimate hope is found in Christ. Even in life's disappointments, we can be completely confident in God's greater plan that is for our good and for His glory."

Gretchen Saffles, author of *The Well-Watered Woman*, founder of Well-Watered Women

"This hidden-behind-a-filter generation urgently needs a dose of reality that points them to the true source of hope. That is why Kristen and Bethany have taken a bold step to open their hearts in a raw and vulnerable way to meet you where you are. Take their hands as they guide you to the right path. Trust me; down the road you will find genuine joy. You'll find Jesus!"

Betsy Gómez, popular author, speaker, and blogger with a passion to help others savor the gospel

"Reading Not Part of the Plan challenged me to keep my life with an open hand to God. Kristen and Bethany have a beautiful gift for meshing theological truths with practical encouragement for any girl in any season. If you're looking to find hope in the fact that God's ways are better, this book is for you."

Tara Sun, host of the Truth Talks with Tara podcast

"Not Part of the Plan is a must-read for girls of all ages who want to understand God's will for their lives. This is another excellent book by Kristen and Bethany, who have a unique way of being authentic and biblical—something our culture desperately needs! You will be refreshed after reading this book and ready to trust God with your story. Highly recommend!"

Julia Jeffress Sadler, author of *Pray Big Things* and host of the *Unapologetic* show

"In a time when self-help books often replace solid biblical teaching, women in today's culture are taught your inner strength can help you become successful or 'manifest' your dreams to reality. The world's standard says the inability to overcome hard times and disappointments is because we did not work hard enough. Bethany and Kristen's book reiterates the truth of God: that He is the ultimate source of strength and our source of purpose and joy in the midst of difficult seasons. This book spoke deeply to a lot of wounds and 'letdowns' I have had over the years and even to difficulties I am currently dealing with. It points to Jesus over and over as our hope and source of contentment. I am so glad I do not have to handle failings or disappointment by trying to fix myself and 'do better' but instead am able to bring all of it to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith."

Emma Faye Rudkin, founder of Aid the Silent

"Plans are funny things. They can make us feel like we run the world one minute and then completely break our hearts the next! Kristen and Bethany know what it's like to see their plans fall through and are learning, along with the rest of us, how to entrust the unexpected to a loving God. These sisters will leave you laughing, crying, and falling more in love with Jesus, the One whose plan never fails!"

Naomi Vacaro, founder of Wholehearted Quiet Time

"Kristen and Bethany beautifully remind us that the gospel applies to any and every season of life. A much-needed reminder for women of all ages! Definitely a must-read."

Abby Houston, founder of Melodically Memorizing

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TRUSTING GOD WITH THE TWISTS AND TURNS OF YOUR STORY

KRISTEN CLARK and BETHANY BEAL



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chapter 1

When Dreams Don't Come True

(Bethany) have a confession to make. What I'm about to share with you was once a triple-top-secret, pinkypromise kind of thing. Nobody in my entire family knew about this secret except for my dad, my mom, and Kristen. I'd make you promise not to tell anyone, but the cat is out of the bag. You now have my permission to laugh or cringe. Ready for it? *I bought my dream wedding dress when I was twenty-two years old and completely single*.

No, I'm not kidding.

There are two types of people in this world. Those who thrive on risk, make plans as they go, and live completely outside the box, and then those who want to feel safe, have a plan, and live inside the box. I'm the first type. Kristen is the second. One isn't better than the other. They're just

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different. This will help you understand my crazy decision a little better.

So, the year was 2011. Ancient, I know. Kristen was engaged to her now-husband, Zack, and we were in full wedding-planning mode. I say "we" because this wedding was a full-blown family affair. With five daughters in our family, you can imagine the ups, downs, tears, and cheers that followed us everywhere. Let's just say we didn't lack estrogen in our house. The highs were high and the lows were low. Our poor dad. Kristen was the first sister to get married, so this was a big deal. As Kristen's maid of honor, I was involved in pretty much every part of the wedding-planning process.

One day, we were out shopping for the perfect wedding dress. If you've ever been wedding dress shopping for yourself or with a friend, you know how it can be. It's not an activity that guarantees smiles or success. It can be stressful. Hard. Tiring. And sometimes downright tearful. There's so much pressure to find your "dream dress" that the whole process can be overwhelming for brides (and their sisters).

It was a little that way for us. We had hit up a few shops with nothing to show for it. Kristen was feeling discouraged. Our mom was trying to cheer her up. And I was trying to compliment everything she tried on. We walked into another shop, hoping for the best. Kristen began trying on dresses again. Our small crew gathered to watch. One by one the dresses went on, then off. After a few rounds, Kristen put on the most gorgeous dress I had ever laid eyes on. She looked like a modern-day Cinderella, fresh off the fairy godmother's wand. The top was filled with sparkles and faux diamonds. The bottom was elegant, full, and flowing with a beautiful chiffon fabric. She looked dreamy. Unfortunately, when Kristen looked in the mirror, she didn't quite see Cinderella. She thought the dress was lovely, but it wasn't *her*. She must have seen my glowing eyes, because she commented on how this dress looked more like me than her. I nodded my head in agreement.

"You should try it on!" Kristen said with a smile.

I'm not sure what happened inside me, but I lost all touch with reason.

Any normal sister would have kindly declined. But I guess I'm not any normal sister. Call me crazy, but I had never laid eyes on a dress that perfect in my entire life. And remember, I don't do anything inside the box.

I pushed back a little to see if Kristen was serious, and she was. Okay then, I thought. Let's do this thing. I must have shocked the sales clerk who was attending Kristen by asking if I could try on that same dress after her. Probably not an everyday occurrence. She awkwardly unlocked a new changing room for me, and I excitedly put on the dress.

Now hear me out. When I walked into the store that day with Kristen, I had zero intentions of buying a wedding dress for myself. That was the last thing on my radar. I was completely single. No wedding in sight. But I have no problem with getting my ducks out of line.

The minute I walked out of that room to show Kristen and our mom the dress, they both erupted in small cheers. "It's one hundred percent you!" Kristen said, shaking her head and smiling. "It's like you times a thousand, actually."

I had to agree with her. It was totally me. It fit perfectly too. Before I could talk any sense into myself, a wave of fear washed over me. What if this dress no longer exists when I get married someday? What if they discontinue it? What

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if I search for months and months and can't find anything even close to this?

That fear drove me to make a drastic and totally weird decision. I shared my thoughts with Kristen and our mom, and to my shock, they didn't even attempt to talk me out of it. In fact, Kristen encouraged me to snag the dress now if I truly loved it that much. What a sister.

The sales clerk was completely confused when we asked her to package up this dress for *me*. Imagine the scene: Kristen walks in to find a dress, and I walk out buying one. I'll never forget what the clerk asked me when I checked out. "So, when is your big day, dear?" With clammy hands, I answered her in the most honest way I could muster up: "Ohhh, I'm still working on that." She smiled, and didn't ask more.

As we walked away from that store, a thrilling sensation washed over me. Maybe my wedding day wouldn't be too far off after all. Little did I know that my perfect dress would hang in the back of my closet for many, many years to come. That little secret would remain hidden in the shadows of my life while my dreams to get married went unfulfilled.

As the years stretched on, I wondered when my Prince Charming would come to sweep me off my feet. Kristen was settled into married life and I longed for the same thing. But year after year I found myself still single. Every time I opened my closet and saw that dress hanging there, strategically disguised behind the rest of my clothes, I felt the pain of disappointment. Life wasn't turning out the way I had always imagined. This was not part of the plan—not even close. I had the fairy-tale dress but no handsome prince to go with it.

The Unexpected

When something in life doesn't turn out the way you expected, it can be really hard to accept. But I don't have to tell you that. You know what I'm talking about. Whether you're in your teens, in your twenties, or older, single or married you've faced unexpected twists and turns in your story too.

Maybe you don't have an unworn wedding dress hanging in the back of your closet, but your parents got divorced when you were young and it left you rattled. Or maybe your boyfriend or fiancé suddenly broke up with you, leaving a painful void in your life. Maybe you received a health diagnosis that you never saw coming. Or maybe you find yourself trapped in a habitual sin, wondering how you'll ever break free. Or maybe you're the woman who looks happy on the outside but feels lonely and miserable on the inside. Maybe you experienced abuse at the hands of someone who should have protected

you. (Please see p. 110 regarding abuse.) Or, like me, you thought marriage would come knocking on your door a lot sooner than this.

Whatever it is you're facing now, have faced in the past, or will face in the future, one thing is clear life is unpredictable. And it's hard. Often disappointing. And most assuredly challenging. Whatever it is you're facing Now, have faced in the past, or will face in the fature, one thing is clear-life is unpredictable.

Ask anybody over the age of sixty if their life turned out exactly the way they imagined, and you'll be hard-pressed to find one person who says yes. Life rarely happens the way we plan it.

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I (Kristen) came face-to-face with this during the first few years of my marriage. Of course I had faced challenges before, but this was the hardest one by far. Growing up, I had always imagined my future with a handsome husband by my side and a houseful of kiddos running around. Well, I got the handsome husband part, but little did I know how heartwrenching the next decade would be in the kid department.

As a little girl, I loved playing house. It was one of my all-time favorite games. I'm actually not even sure it can technically be called a game, because there isn't a goal or a winner. You just play make-believe. Did you ever do that? This was long before smartphones and tablets were around. It was just good old-fashioned imagination. Of course, I loved being the mom and bossing my little siblings around. It was my right as the oldest girl. At least that's what I told myself. I'm not sure why it was so fun to play house, but it was. Maybe it was my God-given maternal drive kicking in. Anyway, I loved playing the role of mommy.

When my siblings weren't available to play my games, I would play with my very special baby doll named Kathryn. I loved this baby doll more than anything else. I got her as a birthday gift when I was two years old and still have her to this day. When I was a little girl, Kathryn went with me everywhere. I mean everywhere. Friends' birthday parties, family road trips, camping, reunions, field trips, you name it—Kathryn was in tow. If dolls could talk . . . oh, would she have the stories to tell. I was so attached to this doll that I began praying for God to turn her into a *real* baby. Weird, I know. I'll blame that on the Velveteen Rabbit.

For months, I prayed the same prayer every single night. But every morning, Kathryn looked back at me with those same unblinking blue eyes. Looking back, I'm so glad God didn't answer my prayer. Can you imagine? It would have been a horror movie come to life. Even though my prayers went unanswered, my desire for a real baby never left me.

Like most women, I assumed it would be easy to get pregnant. After Zack and I got married, we were open to having kids whenever it happened. Basically, we weren't preventing. After three years, all I had to hold were the painful memories of two back-to-back miscarriages. My heart felt shattered. What in the world was going on? I came from a long line of fertile women and robust birthers. My mom never had problems getting pregnant. In fact, she birthed nine babies. No epidurals. And six of them were home births. Mic drop. Yeah, she was a modern-day birthing pro. So you can see why I thought it would be easy for me too. But there I was, struggling to get pregnant and apparently unable to carry a pregnancy full term.

I'll share more of my story in the chapters to come, but as I write these words, I've now experienced three devastating miscarriages and many painful years of unexplained infertility in between.

This is not the story I would have written for my life. This is not what I expected. This was not part of the plan.

And before you think I handled those losses and disappointments like a rock star, I didn't. After my third miscarriage, I felt so angry toward God. My heart felt like it had been spiritually whiplashed. I struggled to believe that God was good when all I felt was pain.

The Bible told me that God was gracious and kind, but all I could see were grief and loss. Why would a loving God allow me to get pregnant, only to take away my babies each

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time? Why would a sovereign God choose to write my story this way? My heart struggled to make peace with this reality.

Life Isn't a Piece of Cake

Maybe you've felt a similar struggle in your heart. It's okay to admit it. You're among friends here. Maybe you've experienced the pain of a miscarriage too, and you're still grieving that loss. Or maybe it's not something quite as big and dramatic. Little losses can be really challenging too. Smaller unknowns can be difficult to handle.

Watching all of your friends move into the next season of life while you don't is hard. Seeing a photo on social media of a party that you weren't invited to is hard. Entering a new job with so many unknowns is hard. Noticing a godly guy who never seems to notice you back is hard.

I have a younger friend who had her heart set on going to a specific college after high school. She worked really hard to get good grades and did whatever she needed to do to qualify for this university. After applying, she waited on pins and needles for the acceptance letter to arrive. This was her dream. She prayed every day about it. But to her shock and disappointment, she didn't get accepted. The school said she wasn't qualified enough. This was devastating for her. She had been working toward this for years. Sure, it might not seem like the biggest deal to you, but to her it was earthshattering. She wrestled with God in her heart. She felt angry toward Him. Didn't He know how hard she had worked? Why would He allow this?

Or how about one of my other friends who received a health diagnosis that cut her life expectancy in half. *In half*.

Y'all, she's in her twenties. She's fighting for faith every single day. Like many of us, she has the head knowledge about God but is fighting for the heart belief to fully embrace these truths. From a human standpoint, her future is scary. Totally unknown. How does she press on with the weight of such devastating news? How does she trust in a God who allowed such an awful thing to happen?

And then there's my other friend, who met an amazing Christian guy and thought he was the one. He was everything she'd been praying for. Godly. Kind. Handsome. Smart. Funny. Disciplined. But after nine months of dating, his true colors started to show. He wasn't all he was cracked up to be. The facade he was wearing melted away like a popsicle on a hot summer day. She didn't want to face reality. It hurt too much. But she knew it would be foolish to stay in the relationship. With a broken heart and a tear-stained pillow, she decided to end things with him. She didn't feel better afterward but worse. Not only did she lose a good friend, but she also lost her dream of getting married. Her future felt bleak. Plain. Boring. How could she move on and find joy again? How could she trust God again?

These stories and struggles are real and they're hard. Life isn't a piece of cake. You've probably heard the old saying, "You're either coming out of a trial, walking into a trial, or in the middle of a trial." Comforting, right?

So how do we do this thing called life? How do we hold on to our faith and stay anchored in Christ when life doesn't turn out the way we'd planned? How do we find true peace when our emotions feel like a crazy roller coaster? How do we live with hope when our heart aches from unfulfilled

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longings? How do we embrace God's unique story for us when everyone else seems to be getting exactly what they want?

Twists and Turns

At the end of the day, it's as simple and as complicated as this: either God is 100 percent sovereign and good, or He's not. There's no in-between. God can't be mostly sovereign (which is a fancy word for saying that He is Lord over all). And He can't be mostly good. He's either all or nothing. To be mostly sovereign would mean that God is Lord over only some things in this universe but not others. To be mostly good would mean that God is good at certain times but not others. How would that work? How could God be God? He couldn't. And a real God couldn't function that way.

Bethany and I have found ourselves at the crossroads of this tension many times. As we've each wrestled with our own disappointments, unfulfilled longings, and pain, we've had to stare these questions straight in the eyes. Is God totally sovereign right now in this really hard moment, or isn't He? Is He actually good in this moment, even though I can't see past the pain I'm feeling? We're going to talk more about God's goodness in chapter 5.

As you face your own set of twists and turns on the mysterious road of life, you will have to step into this tension too. You can't ignore it. Because here's the reality: what you choose to believe about God in the deepest, darkest corners of your heart will drastically impact the way you respond to all of life. Especially the hard stuff. There's a tiny little verse in Psalm 138 that has been an anchor for both of us in recent years. It's a little promise that can easily go unnoticed, but it holds the key to all of life's craziness. Here it is:

> The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. (v. 8)

This verse gets everything right, where we get most everything wrong. It reminds us that the *Lord* has a plan. That He has a good purpose for our lives. He cares for us. He sees us. He's working in and through us for His glory. His love is steadfast and endures forever. Yes, His purposes might include suffering, pain, and trials, but they're not in vain. They're not random. They're not for nothing. His greatest aim in all of this is to draw us closer to Him and to shape our character to become more like Christ's (James 1:1–4; 2 Cor. 5:9; 1 Cor. 10:31).

He wants to work in our lives through our losses. He wants to deepen our faith through our grief. He wants to show us His love and comfort through our un-

fulfilled longings. He wants to use our lives as a testimony of His faithfulness. He wants to point our lost and broken world back to the Savior, Jesus Christ. He wants to use our disappointments to push us closer to Him.

He wants to use our disappointments to push us closer to Him.

When you look at your life right now, you can't see beyond today. All you can see is what happened in the past and what is happening right now. You don't have the full picture. You don't know what God is doing. As one

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pastor said, "God will either give us what we ask for in prayer or give us what we would have asked for if we knew everything he knows."¹

Imagine you're holding up a straw and trying to look through it. How much would you be able to see? Not much. That's your view of life. How much does God see? Everything. But instead of trusting the all-knowing God, we tend to look through that tiny straw opening and declare that God is unloving, unkind, and unfaithful. Funny, isn't it?

But here's the reality: The more you get to know God's character, the more confident you will be to trust Him with your unknown future. The more you discover that your life isn't about getting what you want but about walking in an intimate relationship with your Creator, the more you will discover true joy.

Sure, it's tempting to run away from our pain and disappointment when life gets hard. You don't have to tell me twice where the dark chocolate is when I'm sad. And let's be honest: we've all hidden in our rooms with a carton of ice cream in hand while our favorite show distracted us from our pain. (Ummm, guilty.) Yeah, it feels really good in the moment. But all it does is make our middle region a little squishier and our emotional pain a few hours delayed. God wants so much more for us than that.

Hang with us, sis. Don't lose heart. Don't get stuck in that moment of seeing your unworn wedding dress hanging in the back of your closet or never seeing that positive pregnancy test. Look beyond the pain of that moment. The valleys are real and they're hard, but there's so much more God is doing.

Let's learn how to see life through a lens of hope.

Whether you're new in your faith, are a church pewwarming regular, or are still skeptical about God altogether, this book is for you. Join us on a real and raw journey as we share the nitty-gritty places of our lives with you and show you what God has done. We're just regular girls. Texans, in fact. But we've seen God do a mighty work in our hearts, and we can't wait to share it with you. Come laugh with us and cry with us as we uncover these life-changing truths together. Life is unexpected. We need grace for this journey. But more than anything, we need gospel hope.

Let's discover together what it means to thrive in this life, no matter where the journey takes us.

Ponder IT

The more you get to know God's character, the more confident you will be to trust Him with your unknown future.

Remember

- ★ Life is hard and unpredictable, and you can't control the future.
- ★ What you choose to believe about God in the deepest, darkest corners of your heart will drastically impact the way you respond to all of life.

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- ★ God has a purpose for your life, and His love is steadfast (Ps. 138:8).
- ✗ God wants to use your trials, disappointments, longings, and pain to draw you into a deeper, more satisfying relationship with Him.
- The valleys are real and they're hard, but there's so much more God is doing.

SHARE YOUR HEART

Dear lord,

I confess that my faith is small and weak sometimes. When I face disappointments and struggles, I'm not as quick as I should be to take these burdens to You in prayer. I often worry about them and give in to fear. Help me to believe that You are who You say You are. Help me to trust in Your character, even when I can't see You working. Grow me in my understanding of Your love. I don't want to love You when life is easy, then reject You when life is hard. I want to faithfully serve You no matter what happens in my life. Please help me. I can't do this without You. As I read this book, I pray that You'll use it to powerfully work in my life! I want to know You more.

Amen.

When Dreams Don't Come True

Consider

Psalm 138 -

I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word. On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased. All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O LORD, for they have heard the words of your mouth, and they shall sing of the ways of the LORD, for great is the glory of the LORD. For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your right hand delivers me. The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.



1 Corinthians 10:31 2 Corinthians 5:9 James 1:1-4

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WHAT ABOUT YOU?

- **1.** Do you have a "wedding dress purchase" story from your past?
- 2. What unexpected twists and turns has your life taken?
- **3.** Do you tend to turn away from God or toward God when you face disappointment? Describe what this looks like.
- 4. How does Psalm 138:8 encourage your heart?
- **5.** What's one area you hope to grow in by reading this book?

FOR IT As you begin your journey through the pages of this book, we pray God uses it to breathe life and hope back into your veins. Take a moment right now to write your own prayer to God. Make it deeply personal. Don't hold anything back. Pour out your heart, and ask Him to do a work in your life like never before. Be specific in your wording, and ask God to strengthen your faith in particular areas. Remember, He loves you and cares deeply for you. He wants to hear your prayers.

