

1



Funny, he thought, the things that go through your mind when you know you're about to die. And talk about irony! The things you spend your days worrying about and the things that rob your sleep at night — none of those things even enter your mind in the moments just before death claims you.

Chuck Martin wasn't thinking about the stack of bills that he needed to pay. He wasn't thinking of the load of laundry he forgot to put in the dryer, or the fact that the clothes had surely mildewed by now. He wasn't thinking about his neglected lawn, the window he needed to replace, or the leaking pipe under the sink. He wasn't thinking about whether or not the Red Sox were going to the World Series or if they'd be able to break 'The Curse of the Bambino' if they did. He wasn't even thinking about how long it had been since he'd made love to a woman he really cared about.

Stranger still, Chuck thought, was how much of your life you can relive in those last few moments, and how clearly you see and hear and feel the memory of those snippets from the past. In those last few seconds of his life, Chuck found out you really do see your life flash before your eyes — the parts of life that matter anyway. He wasn't thinking of chores or bills or sports or sex.

All he could think of was Tara.



"Did I miss it?" Chuck whispered as he slipped into the bench beside Maggie, his late wife's mother.

"No," Maggie whispered back. "The kids are last."

Chuck smiled, relieved. The Children's Choir was singing for the congregation tonight. His little girl would be among them, and she would be heartbroken if she didn't see her Daddy watching her, beaming with pride. A few short years ago he never would have believed he could feel anything even remotely like happiness again, but Tara proved him wrong. She alone gave him joy and made life worth living.

Being a police officer was hard enough, but being a single father on top of that was often overwhelming. At times, the transition from badass cop to Prince Charming was surreal. One minute you're wrestling a piece of shit who beat his wife senseless in front of their little kids, or dodging a puking drunk, or watching paramedics pull a mangled body from a wreck. An hour or so later, you're

sitting at a tiny table on the patio, in a chair so small your knees are up by your shoulders. You're wearing a feather boa and cowboy hat, drinking pretend tea from a little pink cup and nibbling plastic food. Then, you're asked to babysit your daughter's cross-dressing teddy bears and assorted dolls, all having a perpetual bad hair day.

While she pours your pretend tea, you're wishing she could always be this innocent and carefree. You don't want to think about the day she'll learn how cruel life can sometimes be, so you bury your fears and visit her in her world, where a cookie and a hug can turn a bad day into the best day ever.

Chuck enjoyed being a police officer. It made him feel good to think he was making a real difference in the world, but that was just his job. Tara was his life.

When the pastor concluded his sermon, a group of frazzled women appeared, herding in a group of excited Kindergarteners. Once the children were lined up, the pianist starting playing and the children started singing. The girls, obviously taking this performance seriously, knew all the words and motions. Having been a little boy once himself, Chuck knew the boys had used choir practice as just another place to play. While the girls gave a flawless performance, the boys sang a few words here and there and tried to mimic the girls, their actions always a second or two behind.

Tara stood almost directly in front of Chuck and Maggie. He glanced at the other little girls in the choir. There were a lot of cute kids up there, but no one could hold a candle to his sweet, pretty Tara. She was perfect, simply perfect. She looked so much like her mother it sometimes made his chest ache.

When Tara's arms weren't flying about in carefully practiced choreography, her hands were in the pockets of her navy blue jumper. As Chuck looked from her to the other little girls, a wave of guilt washed over him, and he had to force himself to keep smiling. He had dressed her that morning and thought she couldn't have looked any cuter. He remembered how pleased he'd been when he'd bought her that dress. The plain navy jumper would hide any spills, and he thought the pink cotton shirt she wore underneath was very girlie. Durable and washable; a perfect combination.

Surveying the other little girls, he realized Tara was the only one up there not wearing a frilly dress with rows of ruffles, in bright, flowery prints. The other girls all had their hair fixed up with barrettes and bows and ribbons. Although Tara's long brown hair was clean and brushed, it was devoid of adornment, and looked plain by comparison. But it was her shoes that made his heart break. With the sole exception of Tara, all the girls had on dainty white anklets trimmed with lace, and shiny patent leather shoes. Tara wore plain, white knee socks and a pair of worn, stained sneakers.

Tara had lots of pretty dresses and fancy socks and shoes like the other girls, but Chuck was usually the one selecting what she would wear. He always chose the clothes he'd purchased. He considered them more functional. They were clothes she could run and play in. He always laid out sneakers for her footwear in lieu of patent leather dress shoes because he figured sneakers were more comfortable and better suited for the running and jumping he knew children would do at every opportunity. He couldn't fathom wearing clothing without pockets, so he only picked out dresses that had pockets, too. The simple navy jumper he had been so delighted to dress her in earlier looked not only like a man had picked it out, but that a man had designed it as well. Thinking about all the outfits he bought her, he realized he picked the most masculine items he could find. He selected clothing for his little girl as though he would be the one wearing them.

Chuck, a barrel-chested, brawny, athletic man, didn't have a feminine bone in his body. Things like ribbons, lace, and ruffles were as foreign to him as menstrual cramps and crying over sappy

commercials. He was woefully ill prepared to anticipate the things a little girl's heart desired.

At the age of five, Tara was probably too young to notice, but it broke his heart to see his little girl dressed so differently than the other girls were. It was time to hand over the fashion reigns to someone who could dress her more appropriately, and it saddened him to know that this was just the first of many things someone else would have to do for his daughter.



Tara looked adorable in her ballerina outfit. Dressed head to toe in pink, dozens of little girl's pirouetted and pliéed on the other side of the glass, while the parents watched from the uncomfortable bleachers set up for their viewing pleasure. Chuck was the only father present, the sole source of testosterone in a sea of estrogen.

He wasn't there to meet women; he was there to watch Tara. And, he noted with pride, she was getting pretty good at this ballerina stuff. She wasn't the best one, but she wasn't the worst, not by a long shot. Chuck actually felt sorry for a few of the clumsiest girls, who danced as though they were in need a medical assistance. If those girls' parents were aware of their daughters' lack of grace, they certainly didn't show it.

The woman sitting next to Chuck was openly flirting with him, but he pretended not to notice. Tall, strong, and tanned from hours fishing and skiing at nearby lakes and rivers, Chuck routinely caught the eye of women. He might not be there to meet women, but he noticed them. It was hard to ignore the plunging neckline of the tight sweater stretched across the surgically enhanced assets of the woman next to him. Although she was pretty, and the man in him appreciated the display of flesh, he thought she was dressed a little too provocatively for a Saturday morning ballet class for six-year-old girls. He found her presence distracting. She did everything she could think of to turn his attention to her, but she was beating a dead horse. The female who owned Chuck's heart was flat chested and missing her two front teeth.



Chuck's sister, Bonnie, stopped in the doorway as she was leaving. "Oh, I almost forgot, Tara said to tell you to go out back. She has a surprise for you."

"A surprise?" Chuck asked. "What is it?"

"No idea. With that child, there's no telling! Good luck," she called out over her shoulder as the screen door slammed behind her.

"Drive safe," Chuck said. He shut the door, then headed out to the backyard. Tara had a surprise for him? Bonnie was right, with an imagination like Tara's, there's no telling what she had cooked up.

Outside, Chuck spotted Tara lying on her back on a blanket in the middle of the backyard.

"What's up, buttercup?" he asked, plopping down beside her. "Where's my surprise?"

"I saved you a popsicle," she answered, never taking her eyes off the night sky.

He looked around. "You did! Where is it?" The only evidence of a popsicle was the red on Tara's lips.

"I ate it."

“You ate it? You ate my surprise?”

“Yup. I had to.” She propped herself up on her elbows and looked at him. “You took forever getting out here and it was getting all drippy and stuff.”

“Getting all drippy and stuff, huh? Well, it sounds like you didn’t have a choice.”

She lay back down, gazing up at the sky again, and Chuck followed suit.

“You snooze, you lose,” she said, crossing her legs at the ankle and resting her head on her hands. “Sorry, Charlie.”

He laughed and tickled her. If you ever want to know what goofy things you say, Chuck thought, all you have to do is listen to your child.

Tara lay beside him quietly for a few minutes. He reached over and held her hand.

“Daddy?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you know the names of the stars?”

“Some of them, but there are millions of stars in the galaxy.”

“The galaxy?”

“Yeah, the Milky Way Galaxy.”

He expected her to ask the names of the stars, but Tara fell silent. A few minutes later he heard her soft voice, barely above a whisper.

“Daddy?”

“Yeah?”

“If you don’t know, it’s okay. You don’t have to make stuff up.”

Chuck sat up and looked down at her, laughing. “I’m not making anything up. What makes you think that?”

She looked over at her father, rolling her eyes. “Daddy, everyone knows the Milky Way is a candy bar.”



“It’s a girl,” the doctor proclaimed, holding up a screaming infant. “A healthy baby girl.”

A rush of joy like nothing Chuck had ever experienced before flooded over him. This feeling, he thought, must be the euphoria drug users sought. Beaming with pride, he kissed his wife, Annie.

“You did it, baby. You did it.” Even though his new daughter looked like she’d been dipped in red Jell-O and rolled in flour, he’d never seen a more beautiful baby. “She’s beautiful, Annie. She’s perfect.”

When they were finally alone, Chuck sat on the edge of Annie’s bed, marveling at the tiny miracle in his arms.

Annie looked at Chuck, rubbing his leg with her fingertips. “You’re not disappointed, are you?”

Chuck was shocked. “Disappointed? No! Why would I be disappointed?”

“Well, I figured you were secretly hoping for a boy.”

He looked down at his daughter, completely in love with everything about her. A few hours ago, Tara was a wiggling lump under her mother’s shirt, more of a concept than a real person. Now, he’d give his life for her without thinking. Chuck shook his head and answered truthfully. “Nope. She’s

exactly what I prayed for.”



“Well?” Tara asked shyly, “Do you like it?”

Chuck looked up from the paper he was reading, and his mouth fell open. Bonnie had taken Tara shopping for a dress to wear to her eighth grade dance. He’d warned both Tara and Bonnie not to cut the tags off the dress until he gave it his fatherly stamp of approval. He made sure they both knew he had full veto power.

“Nothing too sexy,” he had told them sternly. “Nothing too short, or too low cut. Or too tight. Or too sexy. Nothing too grown up. She’s only thirteen.”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t worry, old man,” Bonnie teased. “We’re going to Amish-R-Us and we’ll pick up a lovely milking frock.”

“What’s a milking frock?”

“I have no idea,” Bonnie said, rolling her eyes. “I was joking. Lighten up! I have daughters, too, you know. I know what’s appropriate and what’s not. Trust me.”

Now, Tara was standing before him in the dress they had chosen. The dress looked as though it had been made especially for her. It was a very pale orange, and Chuck was sure the official color of the dress was some wistfully named color most men had never heard of. It respectfully fell to just above her knees and covered everything to his satisfaction. The only provocative thing about the dress was the way it accentuated her curves. Curves? How long had Tara had curves? He knew she wore a bra, but where did all the curves come from? Chuck smiled mournfully at his beautiful daughter. The dress was perfect. It wasn’t childish, nor was it revealing. It was very feminine, yet not overtly sexy.

Bonnie had twisted Tara’s hair up into a loose bun and had tastefully applied just a touch of makeup. Chuck was unaccustomed to seeing Tara wearing makeup, and was taken aback by how mature she looked. He didn’t really want her wearing makeup and to his pleasure, she’d never shown much interest in it. Standing before him in that dress, wearing high heels and makeup, she looked very grown up. She looked like her mother had at that age. She looked stunning. Chuck swallowed hard. His little girl wasn’t a little girl anymore.

“Well?” Tara and Bonnie asked in unison.

“Do you like it, Daddy?” she asked cautiously. “Do you approve? Can I keep it?”

He looked at her a moment, then nodded. “You look amazing, honey. You look beautiful.”

Tara squealed with delight, then hugged and thanked Bonnie before running upstairs to change, and most likely, to call everyone she knew and describe the dress in excruciating detail.

“Thank you, Bonnie. She sure looked pretty.”

“She did, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, she did. Too pretty. So,” Chuck paused a moment before adding, “I’m going to be wearing my uniform and cleaning my gun when that boy comes to fetch her.”



The closer he got to death, the shorter the memories became. They were no longer entire

conversations, but disjointed bits and pieces from his life. Hundreds of memories, mere moments, ran through his mind one after the other in no discernible order.

Maggie, telling Chuck she was moving to Ocracoke, that having his dead wife's mother living with him wasn't helping him find a wife for himself and a mother for Tara.

Tara at five, learning to ride a bike without training wheels.

Tara at three, laughing as she ran through the sprinklers in the backyard.

Annie, in high school, standing by her locker in bright yellow bell-bottoms, a daisy tucked behind one ear.

Tara at nine, helping him build a tree house in the apple tree in the backyard.

Tara at seven, coloring pictures for him at the kitchen table.

Annie on their wedding day, looking so beautiful it took his breath away.

Tara at two, coming to him in the middle of the night because she was afraid to sleep in her new big girl bed.

Annie in third grade, sticking out her tongue at him as their teacher chastised him for pulling her hair.

As the memories became more and more fragmented, Chuck struggled to free himself, even though he knew it was useless. He was hopelessly pinned and losing consciousness. His lungs were burning and he needed air. Desperation enveloped him as he twisted and turned in a futile effort to extricate himself.

He could see Annie now, looking ethereal in a white dress, smiling that beautiful smile of hers as she floated near him, yet too far away to touch. Annie, healthy and strong, not like the last time he saw her, pale and emaciated as the cancer stole her from him. She was reaching out her hand to him.

Without warning, his panic gave way to peace. His time, he knew, was up, and Chuck quit struggling. He had no choice. He had made his peace with God and begged Him to watch over Tara, then inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with water. He wasn't afraid anymore, and he wished he had some way of letting everyone know the end was painless.

He reached out to Annie, the only woman he had ever loved.

As Annie looked on, she knew exactly what he was thinking, for it had been her last thought, too.

Tara.