

**BEHIND** *Charting new waters filled with hellfire*  
**TEAR-STAINED EYES**

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# Chapter 1

## DON'T WORRY BE HAPPY

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HELSEA GAZED OUT HER bathroom window, trying to erase the images of her dad lying dead. His skin a purplish-grey tint, reminiscent of clay. Whether asleep or awake, she would see his face frozen solid. He looked to her more like a statue than the man she knew as her dad. *It all happened so quickly. One moment he was out of surgery, and, the next, he was dead without warning,* she thought.

She was startled from her thoughts by singing. She looked over and saw one-year-old Carter playing with the singing balloon from his grandpa's surgery. *Carter is obsessed with that balloon, but if I have to hear the song, "Don't Worry Be Happy," one more time, I'm going to pop the damn thing.*

She grabbed the balloon and hid it from Carter. "It is nice to have something happy in our household right now, but I'm

tired of hearing that song,” Chelsea sighed as she distracted Carter with a new toy that he’d received for his birthday. She looked at the toy and smiled, grateful that Carter’s first birthday was the week before her dad’s death. It was a blessing. No one would have guessed a week later that her dad would be dead.

Chelsea was in full organization and productivity mode as she dealt with all of the funeral arrangements. Staying busy was a way to occupy her time and her thoughts while she was grieving. Chelsea wondered why she went into work mode to deal with the tragedy while those around her seemed to shut down.

As she was ordering flowers for the wake, her mind kept drifting to why she felt guilt for not shutting down while grieving like everyone else in her family. She finished up the order and added the arrival date to her planner.

She had recently attended her boss’s funeral, and now she was planning her dad’s funeral. She barely had time to think, let alone find time to organize her dad’s finances, and file the insurance claims for her mom.

Chelsea was walking to put laundry away but stopped at Carter’s room and found herself stuck in place, staring at it. The dump truck matched a stencil painting that Chelsea was about to paint on the wall of the bedroom, which would transform Carter’s baby room into a toddler room. Chelsea’s dad had finished it days before he died, and she had set it in Carter’s room when they got home. She hadn’t really thought about it before now. She had set it on the nightstand with little thought or care about placement. But now she wondered whether her dad knew that he would die. He finished so many things before

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his death: a clock, a will, and a few signs for the doors of her children's bedrooms. Clearly marking thirteen-year-old Tabby's space, nine-year-old Mace's space, and Carter's space.

She laughed as she reminisced the time that she had pointed out to her dad that he had forgotten to make one for Aaron, her husband, and he gave her an eye roll before he said that he'd "work on it." A day later, her dad had something for Aaron too.

She sat on Carter's bed, staring at the clock, folded laundry forgotten.

*Perhaps he knew, subconsciously,* she thought to herself. Tears filled her eyes, but she didn't notice them. She was still thinking about her dad and how much he left behind. Before the surgery, before his untimely death, he had changed as a person, for the better.

She was trying to recall whether she had ever forgiven him. She resented thinking about how selfish he had been most of her life, but the last year he'd changed—in his demeanor, in his willingness to take an interest and spend one-on-one time with her children. His words were more loving, as were his actions. There was no denying it. Was it the church that made him change? They had all started going to church when Tabby decided to get baptized. Or maybe he knew that his time was almost up? She couldn't say.

"But sixty-five years old is young, and to pass after a scope on his knee? It's all odd and makes absolutely no sense." She sighed to herself and stood back up, tears forgotten even as they dripped down her face.



CHELSEA TOSSED AND TURNED all night. She looked at the clock and sighed at how early she was awake. She decided that she should soak in the bathtub. “I’ll put Carter in my bed to sleep, and, that way, when he wakes up, I don’t have to jump out of the bathtub and run all the way to the opposite side of the house to get him,” she declared.

As she was running the bathwater, she caught a look at herself in the bathroom mirror. She looked tired. She felt it too. She submerged herself in the bathtub, trying to drown out the images of her life flashing before her eyes. She was so lost in thought that the simplest tasks were taking her forever, and she had a full day ahead of her at the funeral home. She allowed the water to swish around her sides as her mind faded into dullness and foggy illusion. The sensation of the steamy water calmed her.

She watched the steam blur her image in the mirror. Just then, she saw from the reflection in the mirror closest to the door the singing balloon floating in the corner, and she smiled. She had tried to figure out where to hide it earlier that week, but, every time she thought about how to get rid of it, she remembered Carter’s smile and the way her nine-year-old, Mace, had smiled when they picked it out for her dad. She couldn’t get rid of it yet. The balloon reminded her of her dad and of how happy her children were in the days before his death. The children wanted to give that balloon to their grandpa so bad, and, when he received it, he loved it and played the song over and over.

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Chelsea reminisced about her dad sitting in his chair. That was the last place she had seen him alive. Her dad's chair was his sacred space to unwind at the end of the day. He would plop himself down daily on the unattractive, mud-brown throne and immediately turn on the television. He would be glued to the box, with his eyes almost turning square as he sat entranced, watching sports—but that night was different. He turned down the volume on the TV and didn't yell as her children stood in the way of his view. Her dad sat holding Carter and watched Mace as he made the balloon sing. Carter would giggle every single time, which made everyone in the room giggle with him, her dad's booming laugh filling the room. It was such an entertaining last night, and she couldn't give up that balloon yet.

She sat lost in thought, staring at Carter asleep through the reflection in the mirror. His little sleeping face turned toward the open bathroom door. He looked peaceful—the opposite of how everyone else seemed to be sleeping in the house. It warmed her, and her smile grew a little wider.

Chelsea climbed out of the bath and began drying off. She stood staring at Carter when, out of the corner of her eyes, she saw the balloon move from the corner of the room. The balloon rolled under the vaulted ceiling to the non-vaulted ceiling. It continued through the ceiling fan blades and floated to just above Carter, where the ribbon string landed into his open palm. He felt the ribbon and was awoken by it. She rushed over, marveling at what she'd witnessed. She moved the balloon to the side so that she could pick up Carter, and it began to sing as she touched it.

*Well, why didn't it sing as it was bouncing across the ceiling?* she thought as Carter started to give his infectious giggle as it sang. She kissed his cheek hard and asked, "Did Grandpa come and play with you?"

Carter looked at her, smiled, and reached for the balloon.