



# Chapter 4

Bởi:  
unknown

As it turned out, I didn't see Robbie that afternoon after all. I slept through another visit. That was probably a good thing. While I don't think I could have survived without morphine helping me hide from the pain, the drug also had a tendency to reduce my conversational aptitude to that of a drunk in the gutter. Though I didn't see him that day, Robbie was very much in my dreams.

Shortly before Mark and I had left for dinner on our last night together, I'd suggested bringing Robbie along. Mark, ever the hopeless romantic, replied that intimate candlelight dinners and 14-year-old boys were mutually exclusive, and that in any event Robbie would rather be home with pizza and video games. In the chaos of my nightmare universe, though, Robbie somehow kept showing up in the backseat of the Cavalier. At the moment of impact, I would reach out to grab him as he went hurtling toward the windshield, but he'd always slip through my fingers. "Bye, Mom," I'd hear him say as he disintegrated into the maelstrom of flying glass and twisted metal. Then everything would go black.

"Hi, Mom." It was Saturday. A red letter day. They'd just elevated the back of my bed so that for the first time since the accident I could be in a semi-sitting position instead of flat on my back. And they'd reduced my morphine dosage, so it was the first time I was awake for the visit of my son.

"You've grown." I know, I should have come up with more eloquent words for the first time I'd seen my son in more than six weeks, but it was true. He had grown. And not just physically (though he did look an awful lot like his father). Six weeks ago we'd left a boy at home for the first time without a babysitter. Today, a young man was telling me how he and his uncle were remodeling the house to make it wheelchair accessible, and about the decisions they'd made on my behalf. He even told me that Cheri Marchant, the neighbor with whom he was staying, had taught him how to run the washing machine and how to iron a shirt.

I tried to concentrate as Robbie talked about insurance policies, legal papers, and loose ends at the bank, but mostly seeing him just made me think of how badly I missed Mark and how much I hated the man who had killed him. "There's one thing Uncle Randy

and I agree on,” Robbie said, crossing his arms the way Mark always did when he was about to draw some sort of line in the sand, “but you’re not going to like it.”

“What’s that, Robbie?” Now he had my attention.

“The lawyer gave us a copy of your living will. It says that the doctors aren’t supposed to do everything they can if you... You know, if you get in trouble.”

“You mean more trouble.”

Robbie looked at me sternly. “Yeah. We’re not willing to give up on you, and we don’t think you should ever give up on yourself.” *Just like his father.*

What do you say to a boy who’s already lost so much and is desperately trying to hold on to what’s left? “They have wonderful doctors here, Robbie, and they’re taking really good care of me. I’m going to be fine.” In the years to come, I would become a pro in the art of protective denial, but this early I’m afraid I didn’t sound very convincing.

Robbie frowned. “What’s the but? I can always tell when you’re going to tack a ‘but’ onto what you just said.” *Just like Mark.*

“But you have to respect my wishes about this. If things really get bad...” *Don’t cry, Carrie Anne. Be strong for your son.* “If things really get bad, I want to be the mother you always remember, not the burden you come to resent.” Robbie was about to protest, but I cut him off. “We don’t need to settle this right now, but I’ll make you a deal.” Robbie was big on deals.

“What deal?”

“They don’t think I’ll ever walk again. I’ll always be in a wheelchair. I can live with that. Lots of people do.”

“So what’s the deal?”

“I’d rather die than have them keep me alive on my back in a bed. That’s not living, it’s just existing, like a head of lettuce in the garden. If it gets to that point, Robbie, you have to let me go.”

Robbie’s eyes welled with tears. *Just like his mother.* He blinked hard and put on his tough guy face. “So what’s the deal? You said you’d make me a deal.”

“If it comes to that... I don’t believe it will, but if it comes to that, you and Uncle Randy talk to Dr. Paulson. You ask him to be precisely honest with you about what my prospects are. Then you put yourselves in my place. If you wouldn’t want to live that

way, then you have let me go. But if I have a fighting chance of having a real life – a real life, mind you, more than just having machines feed me and make me breathe while I take up a bed – then we’ll make a fight of it. Deal?”

Robbie stood there with his arms crossed and his tough guy face screwed firmly in place.

“Deal?” I extended my right hand. Finally, the tough guy face softened and Robbie shook my hand. “Deal.”

That was to be the first of many such discussions, and of many such deals. There was the discussion, and the deal, when Robbie thought I was taking too much morphine; when I wanted to cut back on the home nursing care service because I thought it was getting too expensive; when Robbie was going to apply to the local community college so he could be near me, and I insisted he attend a university that would prepare him to pursue his dream of medical school. So many discussions. So many deals.

“So,” I said, anxious to change the subject. “Tell me about Maggie.” Robbie shrugged in the manner of a teenage boy still pretending that he hasn’t yet discovered girls. “Is she cute?”

Robbie shrugged again. “She’s old.”

“Oh.” For some reason I’d assumed Maggie to be a vivacious teenager. “How old is she?”

Another shrug. “I don’t know. Twenty-five. Something like that.”

“Oh. That is old. But is she cute?”

Robbie frowned and shook his head. “Not my type.” It was news to me that Robbie had a type. “Besides, she has cancer.”

“Oh no. I’m sorry to hear that.” I don’t know what I was expecting. Ever since Dr. Paulson had first mentioned Maggie, she’d been growing to larger-than-life proportions in my imagination. Now she turned out to be, at least in Robbie’s eyes, an old lady with cancer. “Well, Dr. Paulson told me she’s a poet. Has she written a poem for you?”

“No. But she said she’s working on one for you. I told her you like poetry.”

“What makes you think I like poetry?”

“When Uncle Randy and I were going through the attic, we found three boxes full of poetry books. They were all marked up and highlighted and stuff, like you were studying. So I figured you must like it.”

I closed my eyes for a moment and fought off a flood of old memories. “Yeah, but it was more of a love-hate relationship.”

“Well, anyway, I thought you might like something to read, so I brought a couple of them.” Robbie pointed to a small pile of books on my bedside table. “In case you get tired of watching TV or something.”

I didn’t turn the TV on after Robbie left. Instead, next time the nurse’s aide stopped by I asked her to choose a poetry book for me to read. She examined the covers, then laid one on my lap. “Looks like this one must have been your favorite,” she said as she raised the back of my bed a bit further so I could read, “the way all the pages been folded down like that.”

I thanked her, then waited until she’d left to pick up the book. I already knew which book she’d selected; the one I’d read so many times that virtually every page was dog-eared. But shortly after Robbie was born, I’d quit reading poetry. Every poem was just a painful reminder that in the ninth grade I had disowned a part of myself. My poetry books had all been interred in a box in the attic. Only now, they’d been resurrected by my well-meaning son. I brushed away a fine film of dust from the book on my lap and read the bold type announcing what was inside:

## RAGING SOULS

### Poems by Angry Women

I knew that if I opened those covers, I might fall in and never climb back out. But I could not stop. Like Eve eyeing the most tempting apple in the garden, like Pandora running greedy fingers across the top of the forbidden box, I was being inexorably pulled down into the vortex of that awful book, back into the sisterhood of those luminous women whose acceptance, whose companionship, whose love, I had once desired as nothing else.

I wandered through the pages of *Raging Souls* in the manner of a grown-up returned to the neighborhood of her childhood, seeing old and once-familiar places with new and older eyes, at one turn wondering how a verse that in memory was ornate and enchanting now seemed plain and quotidian, and beyond the next turn marveling at the subtle power of passages once dismissed the way a child bent upon getting to the playground would pass by a shoppe filled with ancient books and manuscripts. Once again, I rode the emotional roller coaster I’d first ridden while hidden away in the closet of my childhood bedroom: the myth of virginity and the reality of rape; loving life while longing for death; angry at the god I claimed to not believe in. And as I stepped back onto that roller coaster, I knew that this time the ride would be more violent.

Old poems took on new meanings as I meandered through the pages. I was in no hurry to reach the one that had been the source of so many nightmares – also knew I would have no choice but to go there. *The Death Baby*. Anne Sexton's ominous canto. I read the first two lines: *I was an ice baby. I turned to sky blue.*

And now, the nightmare had become my reality. From the violent wreckage of that accident, I had emerged reborn as the ice baby. Like a glacier flowing inexorably from the mountains, anger and hatred, grief and despair encased my heart in a shroud of blue ice that not even my son's smile could penetrate.

I closed the book and allowed myself a good cry. After a while, I opened it again to a page near the back, a neighborhood I hadn't really explored before packing the book away in the attic. My eye went right to an untitled poem by Anna Akhmatova, the indomitable Russian who had endured so much tragedy and written such beautiful poems in the face of it all. I was caught fast by the opening line: *As I die, I long for immortality*. I read the final stanza six times:

The deadly hour will offer me

Poison to drink – I won't have a choice

People will come, and help to bury

Both my body and my voice.

Though I had no way of knowing it at the time, the accident that destroyed my body – the poison I had to drink – was also the essential first step toward helping me find my voice.