



Chapter 5

Bởi:
unknown

You know the feeling you get when you're sitting in your car at a stoplight, eyes straight ahead, minding your own business, and you can somehow tell that the person in the adjacent car is staring at you? That's what it was like the first time I met Maggie. I'd been lying in my hospital bed staring at the clouds that never moved and the birds that didn't fly, wondering if Mark was really up there somewhere beyond that fake sky, waiting for me to join him. Her voice came to me as a whisper in the woods.

“Would you like to hear your poem?”

Who knows how long she'd been standing there at my bedside waiting for the right moment to ask me that question. Gingerly turning my head to the left, I tried to make my eyes refocus. She was thin as a darning needle and had the wildest mane of red hair I'd seen outside of the zoo or a Dr. Seuss book. A redheaded dandelion with mint green eyes and the smile of a two-year-old who's just been given an ice cream cone.

I squinted to see what was written on her T-shirt. *When was the last time you did something for the first time?* Looking at Maggie, I got the impression it was a struggle for her to stand in one place without vibrating, and that the last time she'd done something for the first time was about five minutes ago. “My poem?”

“Yeah. It's one of the benefits of being a patient at Memorial Hospital. Room service poetry readings.” She opened the pink journal that had been tucked under her arm and held it in front of her, like one of those carolers you see in the Christmas pictures.

“So, you must be Maggie.” I stated the obvious.

Maggie flushed crimson and put her hand over her mouth, then touched my arm. “Oh, I'm sorry! I should have introduced myself. I've been here so many times – but you were always asleep.” She laughed and her eyes sparkled and the room must have warmed up by ten degrees. “Yeah, I'm Maggie. I'm one of the volunteers here. I specialize in writing poems for patients.” She gave me a conspiratorial wink. “That's why I can get away without wearing one of those stuffy volunteer uniforms – they *expect* poets to be weird, you know.”

I shrugged. "I've never met a real poet before. So I guess I wouldn't know."

Maggie laughed again. "Oh, I'm not a real poet." She leaned closer and half-whispered, "I'm really a mermaid."

"A mermaid!" I didn't know whether to laugh or press the nurse call button, since the obvious option of running away was not open to me.

"Yes," she replied, evidently pleased with having elicited the desired reaction. "You know how mermaids rescue drowning sailors?"

I nodded, even though it was news to me that mermaids rescued drowning sailors. "Well," she continued, "I rescue drowning souls."

"You rescue drowning souls?"

"Yeah. There are lots of people drowning here. Drowning in pain and despair, drowning in hopelessness and self-pity. My poems are life preservers for drowning souls. Just a little something they can hang onto, something to keep them from sinking. You know, until they can swim on their own again." Maggie looked down into the pages of her pink journal, then back at me. "Do you want to hear your poem?" She said it as though meeting a real live mermaid in your hospital room was no big deal.

I nodded. "Sure, Maggie. Read me my poem."

She smiled, closed her eyes for a second as if composing herself, then said, "It's called Angels on Earth." She cleared her throat and tried to look serious. Then she read:

Make welcome the unwelcome guest.

Let her in through the hole in your heart.

Let go for a time what you cannot control.

Trust in God's time a new path will unfold.

When you're lost in the waves

you can't see the beach;

when your soul has been splintered

help seems beyond reach.

So open your heart to the terror and madness.

Give new wounds time to become ancient scars.

Sing for yourself the songs of your sadness, and

share with new friends the words of your hope.

The snow in the mountains

will melt in the spring;

and angels on earth fly

with invisible wings.

Maggie slowly closed her pink journal, without looking up at me. A memory flashed back, something I had not thought about in years and years. I was standing at the front of the room in my ninth grade English class. I'd just recited the poem we'd all had to compose as a homework assignment. I don't know what I was expecting when I'd finished. Fireworks and clanging church bells, maybe, or for God to come out of the whirlwind to congratulate me on my brilliance. Instead, it was the voice of Mr. Brightwood. *Thank you, Carrie Anne. Who wants to go next?* That's what I got instead of church bells and whirlwinds. I never wrote another poem.

I looked at this visiting mermaid poet through tear-filled eyes. At the time, I didn't know if I was crying for Maggie, who wore her heart on her sleeve, or if I was crying for little Carrie Anne, who had buried her heart underneath the linoleum floor of Mr. Brightwood's English classroom. It was only much later that I realized what Maggie had foreseen in her poem: losing my legs meant that I had to stop running away from something that had been chasing me since the ninth grade.