



The Healing Tree

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Dedication

For Doug, born with the heart of a musician and the soul of a poet, who has always been a source of amazement and inspiration to his Dad.

Quote

“I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each...

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea.”

T.S. Eliot: *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

The greatest miracle of all is not something that happens to you, it's something that happens within you; this is the story of one such miracle.

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A

single dot in time.

Less than the time it takes for you to read this word – less than the time it takes to die.

In a flash, like a bolt of lightning in a bone-dry forest, fate roars through your life and it devours your future and it leaves you bare and barren and utterly desolate and nothing remains to sustain you. Nothing. Blue ice enshrouds your soul; no light penetrates to the dark depths where the pain tears you apart. Like the brutal sun circling a desert sky, this blistering agony never never never seems to end. And it seems to you that God, being busy elsewhere, is oblivious to your tears. But then, one day, a mermaid comes to you from a distant emerald sea – and she brings with her a seedling. And she nurtures you as she nurtures the tiny seedling that is to become the healing tree.

And she breaks your heart by her leaving but then she comes back and she invites you come and swim with her in the ancient seas. As the ongoing illumination unfolds you realize that the healing was not in the love that

the mermaid

gave to you but rather it was in the love she coaxed out of you. And that was the real miracle.

The money ball rolled to a dead stop in front of the pool table's corner pocket and perched there, like a fresh egg waiting for a short order cook to crack it open. Sammy DiMarco took a swig from his longneck Corona, set it down on the counter, and chalked up his custom pool cue. He walked slowly around the table, kissing the St. Pauli Girl poster for luck on the way, and positioned himself on the opposite end of the table from the nine ball. Yes indeed, this was his night.

"Deadeye." He repeated the affirmation to the rhythm of his breathing: Deadeye in, Deadeye out, Deadeye in, Deadeye out. "Words have power," his father had always told him, "so be careful what you call yourself." Sammy set the chalk down on the edge of the table and sprinkled baby powder on his left hand. Closing his eyes and taking a slow deep breath, he pushed out of his mind the memory of all the missed shots, of the many times he'd capped a brilliant run by choking on the money ball. Deadeye in, Deadeye out.

Sammy leaned over the table and peered across the seven feet of green felt that separated him from an easy two hundred bucks. He pumped his cue back and forth, slow and deliberate, and in his mind's eye visualized a taut black thread connecting the white cue ball with the yellow nine ball. The money ball. Slowly, Sammy pulled back the stick one last time, until his hand was parallel to the tobacco tin in his jeans pocket. The jukebox and the chatter of The Blue Room Bar faded into the distance as he zeroed in. The instant the chalked tip of his stick punched into the cue ball, Sammy knew he'd won the game. The nine ball slammed into the back of the corner pocket and disappeared down the rabbit hole.

After buying a round of drinks and giving the waitress an overgenerous tip, Sammy walked across the parking lot, oblivious to the cool night air and the full moon above. His classic Dodge Charger sparkled under the parking lot lights. He eased himself into the bucket seat and slid the key into the ignition. Sammy pressed down on the accelerator pedal and the Charger's fuel-injected hemi roared in response. "Life is good," Sammy crooned as he rammed the chrome stick shift into second gear and gunned it out of the parking lot.

Saturday night traffic was backed up all along Howard Street. As the Charger crawled in second gear past the First Guardian Bank building, Sammy looked at the clock and cursed. He was an hour late, and Sheila was not a patient woman. "Time for a shortcut, Deadeye," he said aloud. Sammy cut through the shopping mall parking lot and came out on Benson Boulevard.

"No lights, no law, no loitering."

As last words go, that pretty well captured all that Sammy DiMarco had ever wanted out of life. He put the Charger through the gears, pressing himself back against the leather seat.

Just past the Galapagos Restaurant, Sammy had to slam on the brakes to avoid rear-ending an 18-wheeler wheezing up the hill. He downshifted and jammed the gas pedal to the floor as he yanked the Charger into the opposing lane to pass.

The last thing Sammy DiMarco saw on this earth was the horrified faces of Mark and Carrie Anne Murphy the split second before they disappeared behind the airbags of their Chevy Cavalier.

A Simple Flip of the Switch

With the simple flip of a cosmic switch

your life goes from light to dark.

Who flipped that switch

you may never know.

Only one hand can turn the light back on.

But that hand must first

find its way to the switch

in the dark.

That hand will need a guide.

C.A.M.

Chapter 1

“WE’RE LOSING HER!”

The words caromed around inside my head like a housefly trapped in a Coke bottle. *We’re losing her, losing her, losing her.* Such a commotion – the urgent voices and the clang-a-bang bustle. I hid behind my eyes and followed the words as they rattled around in the darkness. *Weeeeeee’re looooooosing herrrrrrrrrr!*

I must surely have been smiling and tapping my feet to the rhythm as the lyrics ricocheted from wall-to-wall in the attic of my mind. *We-we-we (Bop!) loo-loo-loo (Oh Yeah!) we-loo, we-loo, we-loo-loo-loo her (Oh No!).* But I couldn’t tell. My body seemed somehow to have been misplaced. No tapping feet, no sing-along smile. Maybe they’d been lost, too, gone off with whoever it was those urgent voices were afraid of losing.

Curious now, I drifted up to the far corner of the room, free as a dandelion puff on a summer breeze. The room was awash in brilliant white light, and it made the people with the urgent voices sparkle like the teeth in a toothpaste commercial. Like angels without wings, they hovered over the broken lady on the narrow gurney in the middle of the room. The broken lady was white, too, but more like the white of curdled milk.

How funny. The broken lady was right there in the middle of the room where the angels without wings could see her and touch her, and still they were losing her. *We-we-we (Bop!) loo-loo-loo (Oh No!).*

Looking down from my perch up near the ceiling, I gradually began to comprehend why I couldn’t tap my feet or put on my smile. The broken lady had them.

The broken lady never did give me back my feet. And she kept my smile for a very long time. She might never have given that back either had it not been for Maggie. Maggie and The Healing Tree.

Chapter 2

The month after the accident was pretty eventful. My husband Mark was buried. My son Robbie moved in with one of our neighbors. Mark's brother Randy came up from Dallas to deal with the lawyers and the insurance companies. And with the doctors. I guess there were quite a few important decisions to be made. I slept through it all.

The doctors later told me I was lucky to have survived, though it would be a long time before I joined them in that judgment. The police estimated that the drunk who rammed into us was going at least 70. With our combined speeds, they said, it was like running into a brick wall at over 100 miles per hour. That image of smashing into an unyielding wall would haunt my dreams for the rest of my life. Mark's neck was fractured when his head bounced off the Cavalier's ceiling and then slammed into the side window. He died instantly, they told me.

In the split second during which Mark was dying, the passenger side airbag exploded from its cocoon behind the dash, and while that prevented me from flying into the windshield (or, more accurately, prevented the windshield from flying into me), it also fractured my nose and gave me a pretty severe whiplash. The drunk was driving a bigger car, and going a lot faster. At the moment of impact, his car's souped-up motor crashed into the space occupied by the much smaller engine of our Cavalier, forcing it back into the passenger compartment. This caused the frame to buckle upward and backward at the same time my momentum was carrying me forward and downward.

In a panicked reaction just before the collision, I'd braced my legs against the floorboard. Both legs were shattered in more places than the radiologists could count. As my legs were being crushed against my hips, my upper body was reeling from the violent impact with the airbag. Something had to give, and what gave was my lower spine. Two vertebrae were fractured and the spinal cord was damaged.

The driver of the other car was not wearing a seatbelt. He crashed through the windshield of his car, and apparently did a somersault across the roof of ours before hitting the pavement some twenty or so yards beyond the point of the crash.

He was also killed instantly. Except in the dark world of my fantasies, where he lived long enough to be castrated and mutilated, flogged and keelhauled, then stretched and broken on the rack and burned at the stake before being turned over to the mercies of the master of the underworld. It took a long time, but I eventually came to appreciate just how toxic and malignant was the hatred I harbored for the dead stranger who had killed my husband and broken my body. As it turned out, planting that hatred in the Healing

Garden was as much a part of my healing as was the medical treatment. Letting go was as much a part of my miracle as was hanging on.

Chapter 3

This should hurt. That was the first thought I had when I woke up. Somehow, even then, at the first dawning of my new existence, I knew that the absence of pain was not a good thing.

The sky above was filled with fluffy white clouds, but the clouds were not moving. Neither were the birds silhouetted against the unnaturally blue sky. Something else amiss here. *Where am I?* A surge of panic started in my belly and worked its way up toward my lungs. It stuck in my throat when I tried to scream. I closed my eyes and a chaotic montage of memories flashed through my consciousness. Robbie standing at the front door waving goodbye. That sudden blinding light. Trying to put my hands in front of my face, yet instinctively knowing it would be too late. Flashing red lights. Shouting voices. Screaming sirens. The broken lady and the wingless angels. Then, nothing.

I think a long time must have passed before I opened my eyes again. The clouds had not moved, and the birds were still frozen in place. The room gradually came into focus. My first realization was that the clouds and the birds weren't moving because they were painted on the ceiling. Off to my right side, I heard the soft beeping of some sort of machine. *Where am I?*

I tried to turn my head toward the noise and discovered that I *could* still feel pain. It felt like someone had run a hot iron from my neck down to my waist. My throat finally released its death grip on my vocal chords and something came out, but it hardly sounded human. More like the croak of a starving raven. I tried to sit up, but was rewarded only by a spastic flailing of one arm in front of my face.

To my left, I heard a loud crash. Without thinking, I twisted my head in that direction and suffered another jolt of searing pain. I closed my eyes and croaked again, the noise rubbing against the sandpaper dryness of my throat. I squinted my eyes open. Someone was standing there. One of the angels without wings. Her hand was over her mouth, her eyes wide.

Another wingless angel hurried into the room. She looked down at the spilled tray on the floor, then at the one with her hand over her mouth, then over at me. Now the second angel covered her mouth. "Oh my God. She's awake." I closed my eyes and drifted back into the velvet darkness.

When I woke up again, I was surrounded by wingless angels. They were all busy, fussing over me. The broken lady. *Oh No!*

“Mark?” I couldn’t make his name come out past the sandpaper in my throat. I tried again. “Mark?” Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked at the tall man in the long white lab coat standing next to my shoulder.

The tall man pinched his chin with this thumb and forefinger and stared at me for a very long minute. Then he looked at the others and said, “give us a few minutes here.” Everyone else filed quietly out of the room and I sensed the door whispering shut behind them.

The man in the long white coat turned off the beeping of the machine, then sat on the edge of the bed and put his hand on my forearm. He looked vaguely familiar. “Mrs. Murphy?” I blinked, and that seemed to be sufficient acknowledgment for him to proceed. “I’m Dr. Paulson, the chief trauma surgeon here at Memorial Hospital.” Now I remembered where I’d seen him before. *We’re losing her!* I closed my eyes, wishing that I’d stayed up in that corner and allowed the wingless angels to lose the broken lady. “Mark?” I mouthed his name again.

Dr. Paulson didn’t answer at once. He looked out the window, then back at me. His hand was still on my forearm. “When people ask what keeps me in medicine, with all the long hours and hard work,” he finally said, “I say that I get strength from my patients, from people who bear the unbearable and still go on. People who make the choice to go on, when it would be easy for them to quit. If I’m not mistaken, you’ve already made that choice once.”

Closing my eyes again, my thoughts drifted back to that moment when I first looked down upon the broken lady. Yes, I knew even then – the pain was going to be unbearable. And still, I had made the choice to go back.

“You know that you’re in the hospital?” I nodded – very slightly, for fear of bringing back that awful pain. Dr. Paulson looked at me like he was trying to see what was on the inside of my skin. “You’ve been here for almost five weeks.” He let that sink in, and I knew that worse was still to come. He shifted his weight on the bed, picked up my hand and held it in both of his, gently rubbing my palm with his thumbs. *How do they teach this in medical school? Breaking the News 101.*

“You were in an accident... Both your legs were severely fractured.” His eyes never left mine. “Your back was also broken. When you’ve regained your strength, the orthopedic docs will have to do more surgery, put in some pins and rods.” A picture of the broken lady came back to me, and in the image I saw something I hadn’t noticed before. She had a big foam collar around her neck, and was strapped onto a long wooden board. Dr. Paulson nodded, as if to say, *Yes, Carrie Anne, you are the broken lady, and I’m afraid that you’re broken beyond repair.* Then he simply said, “it will be a while before we can

know for certain, but I'm afraid that right now it looks like you might not walk again.”
We-we-we (bop!) loo-loo-loo (Oh No!).

“Mark?” I again mouthed my husband's name. I already knew the answer. And I knew that Dr. Paulson had been wrong about me. I would not have the strength to bear this pain.

“It was a head-on collision. It probably happened so fast that Mark never even saw the other car coming. I'm sorry.” At that moment I needed to be hugged more than I needed my next breath of air, but Dr. Paulson couldn't have made it past all the tubes and wires even if he'd tried. He set down my hand, stood up from the bed, and used a washcloth on my cheeks. “You need to cry, Carrie Anne, but I need to keep your stitches dry,” he said with a gentle smile. It was only later that I learned my nose had been broken and my facial lacerations had required more than 100 stitches, something he had considered hardly worth mentioning after all I'd just learned.

“Robbie?” Once more, no sound came out, but thankfully Dr. Paulson was adept at lip-reading. “He's been here every day. He's at school right now. Maggie will pick him up and bring him by this afternoon. Robbie is quite a young man, very mature for a 14-year-old. Told me he's thinking about medical school. I hope you don't mind, but I encouraged him. He'd make a fine doctor.”

Dr. Paulson looked at the clock on the wall, then back at me. “It's not quite noon, and Maggie will be bringing Robbie in at about four, so why don't you close your eyes for a while. We're pumping some high-powered painkillers into you, and you've had a pretty rough morning.”

I wanted desperately to lose myself behind a veil of sleep, but even more desperately wanted for it to already be afternoon so I could see my son, who evidently had made a new friend. “Maggie?”

Dr. Paulson smiled almost all the way into a laugh. “Maggie is the hospital's poetry therapist. She's sort of taken Robbie under her wing, appointed herself his official chauffer. You'll meet her before long. If you're a patient at Memorial Hospital, you can't escape meeting Maggie.”

I closed my eyes and drifted back into the void, into a dream I was to have many times in the months to come. I was back up in my corner, looking down on all the wingless angels as they scurried around the broken lady. The room grew suddenly very quiet, and Mark walked in. Everyone stepped aside to clear a path for him. He walked over to the broken lady, leaned over and wrapped his arms around her, lifting her up from the gurney. And just like that, the foam collar fell from her neck, and all the tubes and

wires dropped onto the floor. No longer broken, she got up and walked out of the room, hand-in-hand with Mark.

The wingless angels were astonished. All the broken lady had really needed was a hug.

Chapter 4

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.

Chapter 5

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.

Chapter 6

My son is a genius. While I was sleeping off the world's most gargantuan hangover, Robbie had gone through old scrapbooks, shoeboxes full of unsorted photos, and hundreds of videos, put it all together in a *Greatest Hits of Mark and Carrie Anne Murphy* movie, then loaded it onto a laptop computer for me. Mark and Carrie Anne hauling their backpacks through the Rockies; Mark and Carrie Anne picnicking under giant redwood trees; Mark and Carrie Anne cruising along the vibrant reefs of Cozumel. Mark and Carrie Anne carrying on for the little man who was always behind the camera. Mark and Carrie Anne doing the things together that Carrie Anne would never be able to do alone.

I'd been watching the movie all morning, sitting in bed with the laptop floating weightlessly on my thighs. It's funny how things that seem insignificant at the time later emerge as magnitudinous markers of an impending change perhaps known to God but as-yet unseen by those of us on earth. In the last vignette of Robbie's montage, I was videotaping Mark and Robbie as they strapped on their bicycle helmets, something they had done every Saturday morning for years. In the background were the three new bikes Mark bought after he'd gotten a raise – five weeks before the accident. The end was coming soon, I knew. Two of the bikes had already been sent to the Goodwill. From this point on, our movie would be filled only with partings, funerals, and sorrow.

There was a soft knock on the door. “Can I come in?” It was Maggie.

I turned off the computer and folded down the top. “Sure, Maggie. Are you out making your poetry rounds?”

Maggie took a tentative step into the room. “Sort of. Actually, it's not just me.” She looked back out into the hallway and waved for whoever was out there to come in. “This goes against the wall, under the clock,” she said, pointing to the space opposite the foot of my bed. Two men wearing uniforms of the hospital maintenance department came in pushing a 40-gallon aquarium that was mounted on some sort of stand with wheels. While one of them polished the glass, the other fiddled around with the plugs and filters. In no time it was bubbling a happy song.

“Perfect,” Maggie exclaimed as she admired the aquarium. It *was* beautiful – a saltwater tank populated by creatures that God must have created while in her most jovial mood. Maggie peered into the tank, pointed at something floating inside and said, “that's my favorite!” It was a petite plastic mermaid, blowing bubbles as she glided through her cozy little home under the indoor sea.

“Okay,” said Maggie, putting her hands on her hips, “that takes care of the ocean. Now, the mountain goes over here.” She removed the towels and the blue plastic water pitcher from my bedside table. The two maintenance guys went back out into the corridor, and returned pushing a utility cart.

The cart carried a wooden board that had been painted green, and apparently cut to be just the right size to fit atop my bedside table. There was a miniature papier-mâché mountain standing at one corner. A little blue stream had been painted coming down from the mountain and flowing across the painted board. A minuscule gravel path, complete with tiny cairns to mark the trail, traversed the green field toward the mountain. And in the middle of it all, dwarfing everything by its relative size, was a tree. A real live tree. The tiniest sycamore tree I’d ever seen.

“Why, Maggie, this is beautiful. Thank you.”

Maggie beamed. “I figured if Carrie Anne can’t go to the mountains or to the ocean, then we should bring the mountains and the ocean to Carrie Anne.”

“And the forests, too,” I replied. “This is the cutest little bonsai tree I’ve ever seen.”

“Yep, and it’s a very special bonsai tree. This is The Healing Tree. It’s full of magic healing powers.” Maggie bent over and looked closely at The Healing Tree, then took a deep breath, as if simply sharing its air would make her well.

“She is a beautiful tree, Maggie, but I’m afraid there’s no magic in the world that’s going to heal what’s wrong with me.” I noticed that the guys from maintenance had slipped out of the room, and instantly felt guilty for not having thanked them for bringing me the oceans and the mountains, and The Healing Tree, before they left.

Maggie let down the bedrail and sat on the side of my bed. “I’m really sorry that all this has happened, Carrie Anne. But don’t lose hope. Miracles do happen, you know. Maybe The Healing Tree’s magic really will help.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry too. We’re all sorry, aren’t we?” The darkness was closing round again. “You know, Maggie, I’m sick to death of hearing that word sorry. Aren’t you? Don’t you get tired of people looking at you with pity in their eyes? I know I do.”

Maggie scrunched her face like a child who’d just been given her first taste of kiwi fruit and was trying to decide if it was delicious or atrocious. Then she said, “Where there is beauty, there must also be pity, for the very reason that beauty must die. Vladimir Nabokov said that. So every time somebody looks at me with pity, I just assume they’re really trying to tell me that I’m beautiful, and I thank them! Try it – it will give you a whole new perspective.”

“Well, there’s a connection missing somewhere, Maggie, because for all the self-pity I have, I sure don’t feel beautiful.”

Maggie leaned over and kissed me on the forehead. “Don’t think of beautiful as an adjective. Think of it as a noun. Beautiful is not what you look like, it’s who you are. Real beauty is what’s reflected from the inside looking out, not what’s seen from the outside looking in.”

In my dreams after Maggie had left, I sat on a swing suspended from a branch of The Healing Tree. Mark and Robbie waved to me from the top of the mountain at the end of the trail. My wheelchair was parked by the edge of the stream, where it made a fine perch for the birds and butterflies. And I was beautiful.

Chapter 7

“How’d you sleep last night, Carrie Anne?” Dr. Paulson was the undocor – he always started out by asking human questions, and only after he’d processed the answers did he move on to medical matters.

I nodded and smiled. It hurt too much to talk, but I’d actually slept well for the first time since the latest surgery. I let my imagination take me on a stroll through the forest that I pictured surrounding The Healing Tree while Dr. Paulson read through the nurse’s notes. He closed the chart at last and laid it on the bed next to me. “What do you think,” he asked, “are you ready for some real food?”

Before I could answer (the answer would have been no), Maggie erupted into the room with a laugh. “Did I hear someone say food?”

Dr. Paulson rolled his eyes with mock exasperation. “Maggie, do the words ‘do not disturb’ mean anything to you?”

Maggie shot a quizzical glance at Dr. Paulson, then smiled and winked at me. “You mean, like those signs they have on hotel room doors?”

Dr. Paulson nodded, and Maggie went on. “Well, yeah, but Harriet Edwardson is going home today and I wanted your opinion on the poem I wrote for her to take with her.” She opened her omnipresent pink journal and handed it over. “Well, it’s not really a poem in the technical sense, but I think she’ll like it anyway.”

“Excuse me for a moment,” Dr. Paulson said to me as he accepted the journal, “it appears that I’ve been summoned to a STAT poetry review.” He slipped on a pair of reading glasses and read Maggie’s work, looked out the window for a moment, then read it once more. Handing the journal back, he said, “it’s a lovely poem, Maggie, one of your best. But Mrs. Edwardson has a very difficult prognosis. I’m afraid that a poem like this could be giving her false hope.”

Maggie frowned and set the journal on the bed, on top of my medical record. “False hope? You mean, as opposed to true despair? Seriously, Dr. Paulson, how can you give someone false hope? Like the poem says, there’s no such thing. It’s an oxymoron.” She looked from the aquarium to The Healing Tree, then glared defiantly back at Dr. Paulson. “So what if you’re right. What if she really doesn’t have much time. Does that mean she shouldn’t have a few rays of hope to brighten those last few days?”

Maggie reached up and grabbed a handful of her hair and then, with a flourish fit for Hollywood, she pulled it off. Her hair. All of it. She stood there bald as a cue ball glaring

at Dr. Paulson. "If it weren't for denial," she said, her voice a black panther on a leash, "I'd be dead. Look at me. I have no hair, the figure of a toothpick in tennis shoes, and I throw up every Wednesday at seven after chemo. What kind of guy is going to ask me out for a date? But you know what? My Prince Charming is out there looking for me. And he's going to find me. If that's denial with a capital D, well, I got no problem with that." Maggie stuck the wig back on her head, crooked, and gave it a tug. "Dreams are a whole lot better than reality, whatever that is. Dreams do come true, you know. But sometimes you've got to deny reality for the dream to happen."

Maggie kept tugging at her wig, trying to get it on reasonably straight, and looked over at me. "Live your dreams before they come true, just in case you never wake up. Now there's a poem for you, Carrie Anne," she said, wagging a finger at me. "McZen wrote it. And it's pretty darned good advice. Remember that." Now she returned her defiant glare to Dr. Paulson.

He picked up the pink journal from the bed. "Let me read it again." Maggie gave me another surreptitious wink. Dr. Paulson cleared his throat, and this time read Maggie's poem out loud.

The Hope Diamond

The most precious diamond in the world cannot be purchased, it can only be accepted.

The most precious diamond in the world cannot be seen, it can only be felt.

The most precious diamond in the world cannot be worn around your neck, it can only be kept safe in your heart.

The most precious diamond in the world cannot be taken away, it can only be given away.

The most precious diamond in the world is free for the asking, and you can have as many as you ask for.

The most precious diamond in the world is stronger than iron, but is more fragile than a dream.

The most precious diamond in the world is always genuine, because there's no such thing as false hope.

He tucked the journal under his arm and said, "let's get a second opinion." Then he turned to me. "What do you think, Carrie Anne? Should a doctor go along with giving a patient hope even when he thinks there is no hope?"

“There’s always hope,” I said, and even as I was saying it couldn’t believe that I was hearing myself say it.

Dr. Paulson read over the poem once more, silently this time, then handed the pink journal back to Maggie. “It’s perfect, Maggie. Harriet will love it. And now, if it’s alright with you, I’d like to get back to work here. Okay?”

Maggie gave me one last wink, then skipped toward the door. Before she stepped out of the room, Dr. Paulson called after her. “One more thing, Maggie. After you’ve printed it up, could you make copies for Carrie Anne and me? And make sure to autograph them. Someday, when you’re rich and famous, we’ll both be able to say that we were there at the first reading.”

“Hope flies on the silver wings of dawn,” Maggie chirped as she disappeared through the door.

Today Maggie was wearing a t-shirt that said *There’s More To Me Than What You See*. I sensed that I was just beginning to glimpse the depth of this young mermaid poet.

Chapter 8

“Bye, Mom. I love you.” Like the bitter-sweetness of salt poured on ice cream, Robbie’s parting words touched my soul and broke my heart. He was going to be gone for almost two weeks, on a fishing trip with his uncle. I wasn’t really listening to Maggie as she chattered away, sitting on the windowsill by The Healing Tree (my little patch of forest and mountain had been moved from the bedside table so it would get more sunshine). Rather, I was surrendering to the melancholic inner voice telling me that my son was a three-quarters orphan – no father and only half a mother – and the only remaining proof that I once was a woman.

“Poem is sort of a weak word, don’t you think?” Maggie had a special knack for discerning when I wasn’t paying attention to her, and forcing me back with an unanswerable question. I simply shrugged, which seemed to satisfy her that I was sufficiently attuned. “Kind of like dream or love, you know. The word is so wimpy, you hardly even think of it as being a noun. It doesn’t have real substance to it. Like, say, job. Or dollar bill. Words with meat on them. Of course, air doesn’t have any real substance to it either, but you can’t live without air. Same with love and dreams. Can’t live without them.” Maggie pulled off her wig and pulled at the wild hairs. Then she continued, “for you and me, Carrie Anne, it’s the same with poetry. We can’t live without it.”

“Well, I’m sure that’s true for you, Maggie, but I’ve managed to live without poetry for 38 years, and I’m sure I’ll get by without it for whatever years I have remaining.” As she usually did, Maggie had something printed on the front of her T-shirt. I squinted to read it: *I have lots of friends –you just can’t see them.* I pointed at her chest. “Your invisible friends – members of the Dead Poets Society?”

“Yeah. Except they’re not really dead, you know. As long as someone is reading their poems, a part of them is still alive. That’s why you’ve got to write, Carrie Anne. It’s like what Anne Frank said in her diary, that when you write it helps you live forever.”

“Well, writing in her diary sure didn’t help Anne Frank live forever.”

“Did you ever read her diary?”

“Back in high school.”

“So you see – through her diary she was still alive even then, alive enough to talk to you. The only question is, were you listening?”

I closed my eyes and thought back to that high school English class assignment. I couldn't remember a single thing that Anne Frank had written in her diary, but had a vivid recollection of the emotions I felt while reading about this young girl who could write of love and hope even when she was trapped in a tiny and fragile refuge surrounded by hate and despair. She had been no older than my Robbie. It was half a century too late, but I still wanted to reach out and hug that frail child, to protect her from the evil men who had dragged her away to die, leaving behind only the diary in which her words would live forever. "I was listening, Maggie, only it's taken a long time for me to really hear."

Chapter 9

Maggie and I were sitting in the patient sunroom in our wheelchairs. Her cancer had flared up again and they'd admitted her. With her fuzzy head and her toothpick figure, draped as she was in a hospital gown that would have accommodated three more of her, she looked like a little ragamuffin doll. When I told her that, she opened the omnipresent pink journal. "Note to self," she said aloud as she wrote in the journal, "write a poem about Maggie the Magamuffin." Most anyone at Memorial Hospital would have caught the double meaning in that poem, because many a morning you could catch the scent of Maggie's special muffin recipe (called, of course, Magamuffins) wafting through patient care unit corridors. Poems for the soul, muffins for the body, as Maggie would say.

Maggie made a quick note in her pink journal and closed it. "When I first got diagnosed, I was pretty bummed," she said. "I wasn't what you would call a model of positive thinking." Maggie cackled like a six-year-old laughing at the punch line of her own joke. "I started writing poems for the same reason that Saint Exupéry flew airplanes – you know, the guy who wrote *The Little Prince*? To free my mind from the tyranny of petty thoughts. I think it saved my life, back in those desperate lonely times, creating an imaginary sex life filled with romantic couplets and one-night stanzas." Another cackle. "So I thought if writing poems could be part of my healing, then maybe writing them for other people could be part of their healing. And you know what?"

"What?"

"Turns out that sharing poems has been even more important for my own healing than writing them has. Every time I write a poem for someone else, I'll bet I kill a million cancer cells."

"So how did you get a job as the hospital poetry therapist?"

Maggie shrugged. "Just asked for it. I went to see the director of the volunteer department with the idea, and she said yes. I suppose it helped that my application was in the form of a poem."

Maggie pulled her knees up to her chest and rested her chin on them. Without thinking, I tried to do the same, but of course the message got lost somewhere between my brain and my leg muscles. "You'd be surprised," Maggie said, "just how important a simple little poem can be in someone's healing."

“Yeah, I probably would be,” I replied. “Before I met you, I’d never even heard of a poetry therapist. In fact, I probably would have laughed at the idea.” If Maggie was offended by this comment, she didn’t show it.

“I’ll tell you about one,” Maggie said as she wiggled around in her wheelchair. “Several years ago, I wrote a poem for a mom who’d lost her baby. I said that a baby is like a mermaid on a moonbeam, breathing there inside you. It’s magic, and no matter what happens, some bit of that magic, the magic of the mermaid on the moonbeam, is always there.” Not for the last time, I marveled at how someone so young could have become so wise. Maggie continued: “A while later, I got a letter from that woman. She told me that of all the piles of paper she’d taken home from the hospital, my poem was the only thing she’d kept, that it was framed on the wall in her bedroom. So you see, even long after the doctors and nurses finished their work, my poem is still helping that mom to heal.”

My memory went back to the miscarriage I’d had before Robbie was born. I’d left the hospital more than merely grief-stricken; I’d felt that my baby’s death had somehow been my fault. How different might my emotions have been had Maggie been there to write me a poem?

“Want to know a secret?” Maggie asked. I nodded, and she said, “when the nurses take care of you, it’s not just them taking care of you – you’re also taking care of them. It’s a two-way relationship, whether the two of you know it or not.”

“How can I be taking care of my nurses when I’m flat on my back in bed?”

“That doesn’t matter. In fact, it might even help you empathize. You’ve seen how hard the nurses here work, and how stressful their jobs can be. They’ve got problems at work, they’ve got problems at home, and they’ve got to leave all those problems out in the hallway every time they walk into a patient’s room. And you know what? Some patients make their nurses sick, and I mean that literally. They don’t want to be in the hospital, and they go out of their way to let everyone know it.”

“So what can you do?” Even as I asked the question, I knew what the answer was going to be.

“Well, for one thing, you could write your nurse a poem. One of my nurses was going through a really tough time. You’d never have known it just watching her, but one of her kids had been busted for drugs and she was going through a nasty divorce. I wrote a poem for her, a poem about finding strength in adversity – how it’s like stumbling across an oasis in the desert. She cried when I gave it to her. Maybe this was the first time anyone had recognized that this caregiver also needed to be given some care. It was like my poem was the hug she needed, you know, a hug printed on paper.”

“I imagine she has your poem framed up on her wall, too,” I said.

Maggie nodded. “Maybe so.” We both looked out the window for a while, comfortable with the silence. At last, Maggie said, “You should do this, Carrie Anne. You’d make a great poetry therapist.”

I just laughed. “Oh, Maggie, you’ve got to be kidding! Why, I haven’t written a poem since the ninth grade. I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“It’s actually pretty easy,” she replied. “You just put yourself in the shoes of the person you’re writing for, then write a poem for yourself, the ‘you’ who’s in those shoes. It will come out perfect, every time. Guaranteed.”

I laughed again and shook my head. “I’m afraid I’m not creative like you are, Maggie. I don’t have a Poetry Muse.”

“Of course you do. Everyone has a Poetry Muse. You just need to wake her up. It’s a actually good thing you haven’t written a poem since ninth grade. That means you have bunches of them stored in your memory banks.”

“I doubt it, Maggie. When it comes to poetry, I’m afraid my memory banks are empty because I haven’t been making any deposits.”

“Then you’re going to have to steal some. There’s really only one master poem, you know. Everything else is just a variation. So if you don’t have a good idea yourself, just go out and steal one.”

“Steal one! You’re kidding, right?”

Maggie cackled in the way that only Maggie could cackle. “No I’m not. And actually, I even stole that advice – from T. S. Eliot. He said that good poets *borrow*, but great poets *steal*. And he should know, because he was a great poet.”

“You’re very persuasive, young lady,” I said, “but I’m afraid I’m too old to start writing poetry now, even if I were to steal ideas.”

“Too old?” Maggie cocked her head to the side and frowned. “How old do you have to be to be too old to write poetry?”

Before I could answer, Maggie’s nurse walked into the sunroom. She apologized for interrupting, but Maggie was scheduled for a procedure. After they’d left, I started doodling on the notepad I kept in the pouch on the side of my wheelchair. Though I didn’t want to admit it, Maggie was right. My memory banks *were* filled to overflowing

with poems waiting to be born. I could almost picture them as real physical things. I picked up the pen and started to write:

The Envelope, Please

My memory is an envelope

into which I place my thoughts

and experiences.

All those poems waiting to be written.

I address it to the Me I don't yet know.

Seal it with a first class kiss.

Drop it into the Big Blue Box.

And pray

that it doesn't get lost in the clouds.

It was the first poem I'd written since the ninth grade. I have no idea how many hours I spent writing, scratching out, and writing again, so totally did I give myself over to this maiden voyage back into the world of poetry.

Maggie, Maggie. The mermaid poet dispensing miracle poems, who herself was so desperately in need of a miracle. As it turned out, being a mermaid was no protection against being eaten by sharks.

Chapter 10

“So, what did you do before the accident?” I was back in the hospital recovering from yet another operation.

It’s funny how in the hospital, people get to know you from the inside out. Nurse Higgins (her nametag said Suzanne, but everyone on the ward called her Nurse Higgins) knew my potassium levels and the color of the butterfly tattooed on my left boob, but none of the things that any guy would have known five minutes into a blind date. Like what I did before the accident.

“Mark was a branch manager for Wells Fargo,” I answered. “I sold real estate part time.” Looking over at the wheelchair parked by the window, I again appreciated just what a Great Divide that accident would be in my life. Even the icebreaker questions would change. Instead of “what do you do?” it would forevermore be “what did you do before you were crippled?”

“Think you’ll go back to real estate?” Nurse Higgins had finished checking all the lines and tubes and was entering something into a keyboard. She’d probably started her nursing career when I was still in diapers, but still had to keep up with the computer revolution.

I shook my head. “Can you see me driving people around to look at houses in my handicapped van?” I put on my best *you’re going to love this cozy little fixer-upper* voice and said, “You two go on in and look around – I’ll just park my wheelchair out here at the front steps and wait for you.”

Nurse Higgins smiled. “I guess I should have thought of that. Most homes have lots of stairs, don’t they?” I shrugged and made a face. She said, “I guess that also means becoming a flight attendant is out of the question, doesn’t it?”

“Probably,” I replied, “but I might be able to get a job as a redcap. *Just put your bags here on my lap and give me a push.*”

She laughed, then asked, “Did you have any hobbies?”

“Yeah. I was a water aerobics instructor.” The ridiculous image of me bobbling around the pool in a wheelchair with water wings instead of wheels caused me to almost laugh. I closed my eyes for a moment to focus on that mental image of me in my water wheelchair, to see where it would take me. A fine mist began to build over my imagined swimming pool. Almost instantly, the mist turned dense, then corporeal. It was snowing. The water in the pool froze solid. I was trapped in the blue ice of a swimming pool that

had transmogrified into a glacier. I shivered and opened my eyes. “I also taught beginner ice-skating lessons, but I don’t think that’s in my future either. Not unless they come up with a new sport – wheelchair ice-skating.”

Nurse Higgins took the stethoscope from around her neck and dropped it into the wide pocket of her white dress. I knew she’d been on her feet all day, but if she ever complained, I never heard it (though I myself would have given every worldly possession to be able to complain about aching feet). “Wheelchair ice skating? That sounds like fun. Except it might turn into wheelchair bumper cars on ice!” Bless her heart, Nurse Higgins had a knack for saying just the right thing to stop me from spiraling back into the frigid gloom. Icebreakers of a different sort.

She opened my chart, read for a moment, then looked back at me. “I see you’re going to start working with the people from OT. They might even be able to design an ice-chair for you. Some of what they do is just plain magic.”

I shrugged and shook my head. “OT? Overtime?”

She laughed and said, “sorry, I sometimes forget that we hospital people have our own language. OT is Occupational Therapy. They’re going to help you learn new ways to deal with ADL. That’s hospital-speak for activities of daily living. Their work can end there, or they can push you harder, help you carve out a more productive path for yourself. It’s really up to you.”

“What do you mean, it’s up to me?”

The way she folded her arms, Nurse Higgins reminded me of an old-world schoolmarm trying to get through to a particularly slow student. “I went to nursing school because I wanted to be a caregiver. But unless my patients take an active role, I end up just a caretaker. You’ve reached the point where you have to decide – do you want to be an active participant in your recovery, even if it can’t be a full recovery, or do you want to be a passive recipient of my care?” Now the schoolmarm was lecturing the naughty girl who’d been caught skipping class. Not knowing what else to do, I started to cry.

Nurse Higgins sat on the edge of the bed and brushed the hair off my forehead. “I know this is hard, Carrie Anne. And it’s always going to be hard. Things that you once took for granted, like going to the ladies room or reaching for a box of cereal on the top shelf, are going to take a lot more time and energy than they did before the accident. And that’s going to mean less time and energy for the things that really matter.” I pictured myself sitting in my wheelchair at the bagel shop, unseen by the girl behind the tall counter; the Great Divide loomed larger, casting its dark shadow across every facet of the rest of my life. An ice age without end.

Before she left, Nurse Higgins told me a bit more about what I could expect from the folks in Occupational Therapy. She made it clear that the sooner I learned how to cope with the ladies room and the bagel shop, the more time I would have for those things that really matter. “Who knows,” she’d said, “you could even wind up writing poetry like Maggie does. That’s how she got started, after all.”

The suspicion that Nurse Higgins and Maggie were somehow in cahoots was confirmed shortly when Maggie, the mermaid poet, waltzed into my room about an hour later. She’d been released from the hospital and was back to her usual bubbly self. Today’s t-shirt read: *Poetry – Jazz with Words*. I wondered if she meant for “Jazz” to be a verb or a noun, then realized that the one always leads to the other.

“Whatchya got there?” Maggie asked, craning her neck in the attempt to read the words I’d been scribbling on a notepad.

“It’s a lousy poem, if you must know, Miss Mermaid.”

“They’re all lousy at first,” she said as she lifted the pad from my lap before I could yank it away, “but they do get better if you keep working on them.” She giggled. “At least some of them do.” Maggie read over my poem, nodded thoughtfully, then read it again, her lips moving in sync with my written words:

Blue Ice

The snow fell and fell – year upon year

Melting, refreezing, condensing – year upon year

Relentlessly layering – year upon year

Ice harder than granite

Ice colder than Mars

Ice ancient as Hades

Glacier ice covering my heart

Trapping every wave of light

Except the blues

The cyanotic sapphire blues

Frozen blue tears break off and

Drift away doomed

To melt in some distant sea

“Keep writing,” Maggie said. “For mermaids like you and me, writing poems is the only way to crack the ice. Keep writing, Carrie Anne.” She tore off the page with my poem, folded it in half, and stuck it into the pages of her pink journal. “I’ll bring this back after I make a copy,” she said.

“What do you need a copy for?”

Maggie ignored my question, and instead exclaimed, “Man, I got busted today!”

“Busted? What happened? Is everything okay?”

“Oh, yeah, it’s really no big deal. I just got thrown out of Taco Bell.” She pulled off her wig and held it at her waist, the way a man might hold his cap when he’s just learned that he’s been laid off from his job.

“Thrown out of Taco Bell! What happened? What did you do?”

“Well, they had a sign out front, said ‘Days – \$7.50.’ That sounded like a pretty good deal to me, so I went in and tried to buy 365 of them. I even wrote out a check for two-thousand, seven-hundred and thirty-seven dollars and fifty cents. Made it out to Taco Bell and everything.” Maggie twisted the wig in her hands, then made a sad face as she rubbed her bald head. “I told the manager I didn’t have very many days of my own left, so I wanted to buy a year’s worth of his. He threw me out! Can you believe it? I thought he was going to call the cops.” Maggie pulled the wig down over her head again, not quite getting it straight. “Man, some people just really need to lighten up, huh?”

“Maybe you should write him a poem.”

“I already did,” she replied, “but I don’t think I’ll give it to him. He’d call the cops for sure!”

Maggie skipped out of my room swinging her pathetic excuse for hips and belting out her own off-key rendition of La Cucaracha. I doodled a little mermaid on the empty page of my notepad, then scribbled out a poem.

Busted!

Just when she was starting to get

the hang of it,

they revoked her poetic license.

That, they scolded, would teach her

not to go...

so fast.

I read over the new poem again and realized that another blue teardrop had just floated out to sea.

Chapter 11

How many weeks had it been since I'd been outside? Ten? Twelve? Maggie had pushed my wheelchair to the new Healing Garden on the west lawn of the hospital. I was certain that this little journey would be part of her relentless one-woman campaign to get me to write therapy poems, but I went anyway. I had to keep my eyes closed against the light for the first several minutes, but this only served to heighten the impression of my other senses that somehow a Caribbean breeze had lost its way and ended up in the Memorial Hospital Healing Garden.

Maggie parked the wheelchair and sat on the bench next to me. Well, Maggie never really just sat anywhere; she sort of vibrated in one spot for a while. I'm sure that on its very best day the Garden of Eden was never this lovely. The Healing Garden was green as Ireland, all a-riot with flowers that seemed to have been stolen from a July 4 fireworks display. For one precarious second I was almost happy, almost at peace with the world and with myself. Then it all came back. I was the broken lady who had lost her husband and who could not take care of her son.

I wrapped my arms around my shoulders, wishing it was Mark I was hugging, that it was Robbie, wishing that the broken lady would give me back my legs, give me back my life, and let me walk through this garden in love instead of sitting forlorn in this wheelchair. Maggie sat cross-legged on the bench scribbling in her journal, oblivious to my distress. At last, she closed her book. I could feel her staring at me, but didn't look back.

"Want to know the one word you most need right now?" From the corner of my eye I could see that Maggie was now perched on the edge of the bench, facing me. "The one word you must absolutely accept if you want to move on with your life? It'll be easy, because you already know the word."

"Sure," I sniffed, still keeping my eyes glued to my useless feet, "what's the word?"

"Was." That's all she said.

"Was?" I shot her a quick glance, then looked back at my feet. "Was? That's it? Was is the one word that will let me move on with my life?"

"Yep. The day you replace 'why me?' with 'was me,' you start to move from self-pity to acceptance. You need to do that, Carrie Anne, so you can stop crying about yesterday and start dreaming about tomorrow."

Any thoughts I might have had about being cried out were drowned in a fresh downpour. I suppose it was inevitable that sooner or later, someone was going to give me a tough love talk like this, but never in a million years would I have suspected that somebody would be Maggie.

“Isn’t a funny paradox,” she continued, “that the quintessential word of the past – was – is the one word that can free you from the past. It *was* you, Carrie Anne, sitting in the passenger seat of that car. It *was* you who survived when Mark did not. Every time you ask yourself the unanswerable why – why me? – you’re poking your hand into the steel trap of the dead past.” Maggie leaned closer, so that her nose almost brushed against my cheek. “Do you know what a coyote does when she gets her paw caught in a trap?”

“Chews it off?” I sniffled.

“That’s right.” She put a hand on my shoulder and whispered, “she knows it’s better to be a three-legged coyote than a four-legged fur coat.”

I had this sudden mental picture of a three-legged cartoon coyote on crutches. You know the kind of mess you can make when you cry and laugh at the same time? God help me, I couldn’t help myself. The image of that poor old coyote, hobbling around on three legs and a crutch, had me doubled over in my wheelchair. I hadn’t laughed in months, and until now hadn’t realized how badly I needed to laugh.

Who knows how many people were chased out of the Healing Garden with our cackling and howling. I’m sure we sounded like a couple of coyote mommas howling coyote hymns under the desert moon. I didn’t care. Something was happening in that garden, something as ancient as giving birth, something as defining as being a woman. Laughing through our tears, letting go even as we hung on, the three-legged coyote and I celebrated a secret sacrament known by every woman since Eve, each in her own time and in her own way. Embracing the pain, accepting the loss, chewing off a paw and moving on – limping, but free.

Maggie put an arm across my shoulder and kissed my cheek. “You’re a lot stronger than you think you are, you know.”

I wiped my nose on my sleeve, thankful for being in hospital garb. “I know,” I replied in a most unconvincing manner.

“And it’s going to be easier than you think it will be, especially when you look back on it from the future.”

“I know.” Even less convincing.

“You can’t do any more than all you can do, Carrie Anne. Sometimes all you can do isn’t very much. But even then, it’s enough. You just need to swim far enough to reach the next island, not across the whole ocean. And you’re lucky. You’ve got a mermaid to swim alongside you.”

This time I just nodded, and imagined that after she’d chewed off her paw, the three-legged coyote must have spent many days slinking around in misery before she would again revel in her freedom.

“Want to hear my latest poem?” Maggie was back cross-legged on the bench, facing me, journal in her lap.

“Sure, Maggie, I’d love to hear it.” *Anything to get my mind off these useless legs that I can’t chew off.*

“Okay. Only I won’t be able to finish it.”

“No? So who’s going to finish it if you don’t?” Even as I heard the words coming out of my mouth, I knew I’d just set myself up.

“You are.”

“Me? I can’t finish your poem, Maggie. And even if I did, people would just laugh at my amateur writing.”

“They always laugh at poets. At least, they laugh until they’re famous. Then they stroke their chins and say ‘my, that’s brilliant,’ like they always knew you’d be famous. The bad news is that poets usually don’t get famous until after they’ve been dead for a while.”

“So what’s the title of your new poem?”

“The Meaning of Life.”

“The Meaning of Life? You want me to finish your poem about the meaning of life?”

“Yeah. Want to hear what I have so far?”

“Sure, Maggie, read it to me.”

“Okay. Here goes.” She adjusted herself on the bench, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. Then she read. “The Meaning of Life, by Mermaid Maggie.”

Today is the day

The mayflies, newborn, must die

And in the dying light

Mosquitoes land and bite

Maggie closed her pink journal and looked up expectantly, saying nothing. “That’s it?” I asked. “That’s your poem about the meaning of life?”

“Well, it’s not finished yet, but yeah, that’s it. If you understand those two questions, you’ll solve the riddles philosophers have struggled with for more than two thousand years.”

I thought about what she’d just read to me, then said, “Sorry, Maggie, two questions? Were there questions in your poem?”

“Well, yeah! Like, if you knew why God created mosquitoes, then you’d know why evil exists in the world. Mosquitoes are evil creatures with no redeeming value at all. And if you knew why those cute little mayflies have to die on the same day they’re born, then you’d know why bad things happen to good people. What else is to know? Not even Socrates could answer those two questions.”

“And you want me to – to finish this poem of yours about mayflies and mosquitoes and the meaning of life?”

Maggie laughed and held the pink journal against her chest. “Sure I do, Carrie Anne. It’s easier than you think it will be. And you’re stronger than you think you are.”

Maggie had to leave to read a poem for a new patient, but said she’d come back for me in an hour.

I pulled my hospital gown up over my thighs. In ancient cultures the sun was thought to have magical life-giving powers. I contemplated the scarred and shriveled stalks that had once carried me to mountaintops, and prayed that the sun would return life to them. A mosquito landed on a spot just above my knee, sniffed around for a moment, then flew away without taking a bite.

Chapter 12

I felt like I was driving the wrong way down a one-way street. Everything was backwards. Robbie was my chauffeur, and I was going to visit Maggie, instead of Maggie chauffeuring Robbie to come visit me. She was in the outpatient cancer center for another round of chemo. Robbie had picked me up in my hospital room and was pushing my wheelchair through the hospital corridors. On our way, we stopped at the gift shop to buy Maggie a pack of wintergreen Lifesavers, which was just about the only thing she could hold down when she was going through chemo.

I waited out in the corridor watching people go by as Robbie went in. I could see from the entrance that maneuvering a wheelchair through the gift shop would be beyond his navigational aptitude. People walked by, pretending to not see me parked there by the door. Once more, I had a glimpse of the future I'd been trying so hard to not see. Since the accident, I'd been living in a cocoon. Everything was taken care of for me. I got fed (or at least they brought food and encouraged me to eat it). I had help getting to and from the bathroom. Someone always came when I woke up in a panic in the middle of the night and hit the nurse call button.

In rehab the other day, Amanda had said something about cars with special controls for paraplegics, but I'd parked that tidbit in the same mental compartment where I kept the Rings of Saturn and the Great Wall of China. Sitting there alone in the corridor, though, I understood in a very real way that when she'd said life would be different, she meant that *everything* would be different. Paying for an ice cream cone at Baskin Robbins, getting onto an airplane, everything. I knew I couldn't do it without Mark, also knew I wouldn't have that choice.

"Okay, Mom, ready to roll?" Robbie laid a bag that obviously contained more than a pack of Lifesavers on my lap, patted my shoulder, and started us moving down the corridor again.

"Mind if I look?" I asked as I opened the sack and peered inside. "What's this?" I reached in and pulled out one of those little stuffed animals that are a staple of hospital gift shops everywhere. Only it wasn't an animal. It was a mermaid. "Oh, Robbie. This is perfect! She'll love it!"

"I couldn't resist," Robbie replied. "You know Maggie and her thing for mermaids." For just a second, the wannabe grandmother in me imagined Robbie and Maggie – the two most important people in my life – finding each other the way Mark and I had found each other. *Let's see: Robbie's 14, Maggie's 26. Hmm. Might have to wait on that one.* At the bottom of the sack I noticed a folded piece of paper and started to pull it out.

“No. Not that,” Robbie said as he reached over my shoulder and took the bag out of my hands.

“Why, young Mr. Murphy, was that a little love note I was about to read?” I would have given anything to see the look on Robbie’s face, but couldn’t get my neck to twist around that far.

“Ah, Mom, you know I don’t have time for girls. At least not until I’m done with medical school.”

“Medical school? You’re getting pretty serious about that, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. Dr. Paulson’s been telling me about being a doctor, and I really think that’s what I want to do. I know it’s hard to get into medical school and all, but I think I can do it.”

“I know you can do it, Robbie.” I smiled on the outside and cried on the inside. “You’ve got too much of your father in you to let anyone tell you otherwise. But...” I bit my tongue. How could I tell Robbie, who really was his father’s son, that he could do anything he wanted to do – so long as he did it within driving distance of his crippled mom?

“But what?”

Instead of saying what was really on my mind – *you can do anything, Robbie, anything at all, except leave your poor mother alone in that house* – I said, “But if the right girl comes along, just remember that someday I would like to be a grandmother, okay?”

“Aw, Mom!”

As Robbie pushed me down the long corridor toward the outpatient cancer center, it struck me that everyone was either waiting somewhere or rushing to get somewhere else. Nobody seemed particularly happy.

When we reached the cancer center, Robbie walked right up to the counter and asked for Maggie. Cheerful and self-assured. Just like Mark. As he wheeled me into Maggie’s treatment room he said, “Hey, Maggie, how’s it going?” She smiled that big smile of hers and said it was going fine, but it was quite obviously not going fine. She was pale and gaunt, and could easily have hidden behind the IV pole that was strapped to the easy chair she was sitting in. Robbie leaned over to give her a hug, then laid the bag in her lap.

Maggie and I made small talk while Robbie zoned out with one of the magazines piled up on the little table by the window. She drummed her fingers a-tap a-tap across the

cover of the ever-present pink journal sitting on her lap. “You know they’re opening that new wing in April? The Women’s Center?”

I’d heard something about a construction project of some sort, but mostly from overhearing people complain about how hard it was to find a parking space. “So they’re building a center for just us girls? That’ll be nice.”

“Yeah,” Maggie replied, “and it’s going to mean more patients. And that means more poems.” She nodded solemnly. “Lots more poems.”

“Maggie, Maggie, never say die. But you are *not* going to talk me into writing poems with you. I don’t write poetry. I *can’t* write poetry.”

“Did I hear you utter that forbidden word? Can’t?” Maggie wagged a scolding finger at me.

“Yeah, Mom, you’re not supposed to say you can’t do something.” Robbie suspended his zombie impersonation long enough to inject himself into the debate. “You can do anything if you put your mind to it. At least, that’s what you and Dad always told me.”

“Alright,” I replied, “how’s this: I really don’t have time to write poetry. Give me another hundred years or so, though, and I might give it a try.” I crossed my arms to let them know that this conversation was over. But out of the corner of my eye I saw Robbie wink at Maggie.

Maggie reached into the gift shop bag and pulled out the stuffed mermaid. She was delighted, as we knew she would be. Then she retrieved the paper that Robbie hadn’t wanted me to see. The two of them exchanged an in-the-know glance. Unfolding it, she read it over with evident satisfaction, then smoothed it out across the cover of her pink journal. “Alright, Carrie Anne, just one question before we let it go.” She looked at me, then at Robbie, who was sitting there looking like the canary that ate the coyote. “I’m going to read a poem, and you guess who wrote it.” She winked at Robbie. “Okay?” She didn’t wait for my agreement, which I’m not sure I’d have given anyway. She just started to read:

Good Question – a poem

What was before

the beginning of time?

What happens after

she writes her last rhyme?

What lies beyond
the outside of space?
What's on the inside of
his innermost trace?
Who was the architect?
Who wound the clock?
What keeps it all going
when you'd think it should stop?
Is the infinite universe
more than it seems?
Awake I ask questions
that are answered in dreams.

When she'd finished, Maggie folded the page in half and slid it into the covers of her pink journal. "Who wrote that poem, Carrie Anne?"

I didn't need to answer. All three of us knew. Maggie had just read the poem I'd written for Mr. Brightwood's ninth grade English class. The first poem I'd ever written. Until quite recently, the last poem I'd ever written. And then, the strangest thing happened. Instead of remembering that awful silence in the classroom, I recalled the way I'd felt when I was actually working on that poem. Nothing else mattered. I couldn't have told you how many hours had flown by, what I'd missed on television, what the other kids were doing outside. It was just me and the words of my poem.

Maggie smiled and nodded and didn't need to say the words because I could see them in her eyes. *See, Carrie Anne. All these years you've forgotten the things that matter because you've been remembering things that don't matter. You don't write poetry to impress other people, you write it because it's in your heart and it needs to come out.*

I glared at Robbie, not doing a very good job of feigning anger. "So, you've become part of Maggie's little conspiracy, have you? And just where did you find that poem, young man?"

“When Uncle Randy and I were getting the house ready for a wheelchair, I found it up in the attic. Geez, Mom, it wasn’t even framed! So I made some copies and put the original in a frame. It’s up on the wall at home.”

“Made some copies? For who, other than Maggie?”

“Oh, you know, just all of our friends and relatives... And the newspaper.”

“You didn’t!”

Robbie didn’t answer. Both he and Maggie were laughing too hard to talk. And as I laughed along with them, I had this mental image of Mr. Brightwood’s linoleum floor cracking open the way the ground cracks open when a seedling is pushing its way up toward the sun.

Chapter 13

After Maggie's chemotherapy was finished, someone from the cancer center took me back to my room so Robbie could wheel Maggie down to the cafeteria; banana milkshakes had been added to wintergreen Lifesavers on the list of things she could hold down after her treatments. I asked to be parked in front of the window by The Healing Tree, where I could enjoy the warmth of the summer sun and the birds singing in her branches (at least they were there in my imagination). *What was before the beginning of time?* God only knows. Before she wrote her last rhyme, I had choices to make. But first, there was a demon to defeat.

In my ninth grade English class, we'd been assigned to write a villanelle. I couldn't do it. It was too overwhelming, trying to write a poem in which specific lines and rhymes had to be repeated in a prescribed structure. The thought of getting an F on the assignment was far less terrifying than the prospect of humiliating myself by reading childish claptrap in front of the class. The day before, I'd gone to Mr. Brightwood in tears, apologizing and asking to be excused from the homework. He told me not to worry, that I could still find a job as a clerk or a waitress without knowing anything about poetry.

Sitting in the warmth of the afternoon sun, I closed my eyes and watched old memories as they randomly popped up to demand my attention. I saw myself at the state swim meet, where I'd placed second in the distance freestyle event, and even now was not sure why I was crying when I received my medal. I saw myself on the lifeguard stand at the city swimming pool when Mark Murphy, one of the popular boys at school, did a cannonball right in front of me, provoking my wrath to get my attention. I recalled those two awful years when Mark was away at business school while I finished up my degree. The day he came home to stay. The day he proposed.

Then, a memory long frozen in the farthest reaches of mental Siberia crept out, an orphan child begging to finally be recognized. It was April of my senior year at the University, and I still didn't have a clue what should come next. So I'd made an appointment with the career counselor. At the end of our session, she'd asked me what I would do if every job paid the same and had the same social status. "I'd be a poet," I answered without thinking. She thought I was kidding. So did I.

And now, listening to the invisible birds chirping away in the branches of The Healing Tree, the question came back to me. Given that being a flight attendant or a water aerobics instructor weren't options anymore, what would I do if the only thing that mattered was doing something I really wanted to do?

As a real estate agent, my greatest joy had never been making the sale; it was visiting the new owners a month after the close and seeing how happy they were in their new homes. *What would I do if every job paid the same?* Be a poet? No, there was something missing in that answer. Be a poetry therapist?

Outside my window the sun was putting on a dazzling display for the end of the day. *Red sky at night, mermaid's delight.* In the aquamarine afterglow, I wheeled myself over to the bedside table and pulled out my pad and a pen. I knew I could never be a poet, or a poetry therapist, until I confronted the fears that had blocked me since the ninth grade. Until I put to rest the ghost of Mr. Brightwood. Until I composed my villanelle.

The nurse came by to give me my evening medications. I kept writing. My dinner sat untouched on the overbed table. I kept writing. The nurse's aide came in to check my water pitcher and close the shades. I kept writing. As the drafts progressed from hideous to awful to merely mediocre, I kept writing. What had started as a brand new pad of paper had been whittled down to its last few leaves when I finally stopped writing. I read over the final draft one more time. *Es freut mich.* One of the few phrases I'd remembered from German class. *It pleases me.* Didn't matter if it didn't please anyone else. Rest in Peace, ghost of Mr. Brightwood. I pulled the last page off the pad and read my villanelle aloud to the empty room.

Invisible Tears

Dying dreams cry invisible tears.

To mourn the dauntless child that was you

who, now grown, has failed to act in the face of her fears.

You accepted the low bid from fate's auctioneer,

only to find his account was past due,

while your dreams in their dying cried invisible tears.

Whatever happened to that brave pioneer,

the girl who dreamed of adventures in your oversized shoes,

in those days before you flinched in the face of your fear?

A once lovely future now stands in arrears –

but it's never too late for old dreams to renew –

when you decide to stop crying those invisible tears.

The terror you feel is just sham veneer,

a Potemkin storefront with a fraudulent view,

meant to keep you from acting in the face of your fear.

When you stand firm, fear (that coward) disappears.

So look in God's mirror, see the meant-to-be you.

Wipe from your cheeks those invisible tears

by choosing to act in the face of your fears.

When the evening nurses came in to move me from the wheelchair to my bed, I was crying. Crying real, visible, human tears. They were the tears of a dream that, having spent too many years sharing a tomb with Lazarus, was now ready for a rebirth of its own.

After the accident, some well-meaning people told me that everything happens for a reason, as if Mark's death and my paralysis were just part of God's master plan. I don't believe that for one second. Such things do not happen for a reason, and certainly not because God has willed them to happen. The meaning and purpose (the reason, if you will) only emerge long after the fact, and then only after you've chosen to follow your dreams, even if it means acting in the face of your fears.

Chapter 14

The Healing Tree was dying. I was trying to write a letter to Robbie, but all I could think about was dying. Outside, a hard rain beat against the window. Dying weather. The Healing Tree had been a symbol for what little hope I'd had. If those tiny roots could nourish that miniature tree, then perhaps someday my broken roots would sustain me. Now, The Healing Tree was dying, and it felt like I was too.

I wadded up my latest attempt at a letter and tossed it in the direction of the wastebasket. I wished that Maggie would stop by for a visit. She'd been admitted again, but even that didn't stop her from making her poetry rounds. In a few days, I was being transferred from the inpatient unit to the rehab hospital, and I was terrified. I felt like a baby bird about to be pushed out of the nest, even though she had a broken wing. I needed a Maggie-gram.

Whenever I got depressed, Maggie would tell me to write a poem about it. It's therapeutic, she would say. *A poem is a dance with your soul, in which you let your soul take the lead.* Maggie was big on soul stuff. I just wondered how you could dance with your soul when your legs didn't work.

What the heck, I finally thought. The letter to Robbie's not materializing. Why not scribble out a poem. I could barely see the parking lot through the rain, and noticed that The Healing Tree had lost another leaf. Too bad Edgar Allen Poe was dead. Now *he* could have written a poem to capture the spirit of this cold room.

Poe didn't show up, so I was on my own. I scribbled down a few words, scratched them out, then scribbled a few more. *Don't think too much.* I could almost hear Maggie's voice. *Just watch your hand move the pen and let yourself be surprised by what it writes.* Only later, after I'd seen some of the many drafts that Maggie's "simple" poems went through before they were ready for their intended audience of one special patient, did I appreciate how much painstaking work she'd put into watching her own hand move a pen. I scribbled a few more lines, then again scratched them out.

It's okay. Feel what you feel and write about that. Again, Maggie's voice from nowhere. I watched the rain, falling cold and hard on the outside of the window, and The Healing Tree, dying on the inside. Then I watched my hand start to move the pen across the page:

And the First Shall Become Last

You never forget the first time –

That honeydew morning of spring aborning,

When God takes you by the hand and
Shows you the splendor of the Garden.

You never expect the last time –

The basaltine darkness of a dying winter night

When God, being busy elsewhere,

Forgets to wake you up.

I read it over once, then the tears started. Tears for Mark, tears for Robbie, tears for Maggie, tears for the broken lady. My life was spiraling downward, out of control, circling the drain. I wanted to die so I could be with my husband, I needed to live so I could be with my son. And God was busy elsewhere.

“That’s a beautiful poem.” Maggie – the real flesh-and-blood Maggie – stood behind my wheelchair, and was gently rubbing my shoulders as she read the poem sitting in my lap.

“It’s not beautiful,” I said through my tears. “It’s ugly. And I meant it to be ugly.”

“It’s authentic. And that makes it beautiful. I’m sure that whatever God is doing, even if he’s busy elsewhere, he’ll hear this. God’s always listening, you know, and he knows that sometimes poems are cries for help.” Maggie went into the bathroom and came out with a wet face cloth. She wiped away the tear tracks, then put some lotion on my parched lips. “We’ve got company coming, so we need to make you presentable.”

“Company? Who’s coming?”

“Jerry Landerall. He’s the hospital groundskeeper. He’s going to take a look at The Healing Tree. I’m afraid this little tree can’t go to rehab with you next week. She needs some rehab of her own.”

There was a knock on the door.

“Come on in, Jerry,” Maggie chirped, as though it was her room, and not mine, into which she was inviting this man.

Jerry was tall, like Mark, with sandy hair and a bushy mustache. His handshake conveyed the rough gentleness of a man who’d planted many flowers. We chatted for a moment, then he turned his attention to The Healing Tree.

“Can you do it?” Maggie looked from The Healing Tree to Jerry and back again, bouncing on her toes the while. With her hospital gown trailing almost to the ground, she reminded me of one of those happy ghosts that haunt department store candy aisles in the weeks before Halloween.

Jerry stooped to one knee and inspected The Healing Tree, palpating each leaf, then gently pressing a finger into the soil. At length, he rose and stuffed his hands into his pockets. He addressed his answer to Maggie’s question directly to me. “We’ll put her in intensive care for a while – put her in a bigger pot and let her roots gain strength. At least six months, maybe more. Then we’ll plant her in the Healing Garden, out in the east courtyard. There’s a place been left for a tree, and I been waiting for just the right one.” He angled his head toward The Healing Tree. “She just might be the one.”

“Can a bonsai tree really go back to being a real tree?” Maggie looked from the tree to Jerry, then to me. He again addressed his response to me. “Hard telling. It’s gonna take some special care. But a tree’s like a person, you know. Never beyond helping and never beyond hoping. And never beyond caring. No guarantees, of course, but I do believe she’ll do just fine out there in the garden.”

Jerry took The Healing Tree with him to the intensive care unit for sick trees. Maggie went to deliver a poem to a newly-diagnosed cancer patient. It was still raining outside, more heavily than before. The heater clicked on, and the breeze from the vent blew one last little sycamore tree leaf onto the floor. “What’s the point,” I asked of no one in particular. “God’s busy elsewhere.”

Chapter 15

“Have you gotten the reality speech yet?” Maggie was perched in my wheelchair. I was propped up in my bed.

“The reality speech?”

“Yeah. The one where they tell you that you’re in denial, that sooner or later you’re going to have to accept the reality of your situation.”

“You mean the one that goes, ‘you’re never going to walk again, so deal with it’?”

“Yeah. Or the one that goes, ‘you’re 26 years old. Don’t you think it’s time for you to make up a will? Like, real soon.’ That one.”

It took a moment for Maggie’s words to sink in. “What do you mean, Maggie? Have you gotten that speech?”

Maggie pulled her knees up to her chest and I had the sudden panicky notion that this change in her center of gravity might tip the wheelchair over backwards. “What do you mean, Maggie? What have they told you?” My overprotective Momma glands had just kicked into high gear.

Maggie shrugged and laid her chin on her knees. “That I should make up my will. More or less.” She looked out the window, then back at me. “But they’re wrong. I mean, I’ll probably outlive all of them.” A mermaid in a riptide, desperately clutching at an invisible anchor. “Oh, Maggie.” That’s all I could say.

“Don’t worry.” She looked out the window and smiled, and I had the sudden overwhelming impression that she was looking out at a choir of angels who were at that very moment looking in at her. “They’ve told me that before, and I’ve always proved them wrong. And they’re wrong again this time. But, just in case, I did do a will.” She looked over at me with a frail smile. “I’ll be leaving you my pink journal. In case, you know, I don’t fill it all up. You can, like, finish it for me.” She returned her gaze to the window and the angels beyond. They were, I knew, calling to her.

“It’s going to be okay, Carrie Anne. Whatever happens, it’s going to be okay. I mean, how many girls get to live their dreams – get to spend their days writing poems for people who really appreciate getting them? My life has been blessed. Every minute is a blessing, whether I have one or a million of them left. It’s going to be okay.”

I closed my eyes and visualized myself getting up out of this bed and walking over to the window and closing the shades, to stop those wicked angels from calling to Maggie. They couldn't have her yet. Not for a long time. "It's going to be a while before I'm confident enough to write in your pink journal, Maggie, so you'd better stick around."

Maggie smiled but for the first time there were no dancing leprechauns in her eyes. "That's not going to be my decision, Carrie Anne. Some of us are born to be summer flowers." She opened her journal and thumbed through it until she found the page she was looking for. "Some things, I don't know how to talk about except by doing it in verse." She looked at her poem, then back at me. "Want to hear?" I knew that if I tried to say anything I'd cry, so I just bit my lip and nodded. She stared into the pink journal for a silent moment. Then she read:

The Reason Why

I've walked through deep dark forests

Climbed high up in tall trees

I've hiked through wild mountains

Watched condors kite the breeze

I've cruised blue seas with mermaids

Swum backward through the hours

I've wandered lovely meadows

Weaved crowns of summer flowers

Now I live with cancer

And know I must soon die

Then I'll go to heaven

And learn the reason why

Maggie closed the cover of the pink journal the way a parent might close the lid on a child's casket. "I was diagnosed with cancer when I was fifteen. In an earlier day, I wouldn't have seen my sixteenth birthday." Maggie smiled and there was a bit of the old impishness in her emerald eyes. "Robbie would have had to find another chauffer because I never would have gotten old enough to get a drivers license. I prayed for a

miracle, and the people of this hospital gave me one. More than one. Now I'm praying for another miracle, but whether I get it or not, I'm pretty darned lucky to have had the last ten years. I wouldn't trade the experiences that my cancer has given me, or the people I've met along the journey, for ten thousand years without cancer."

The realization hit me like an oversized wave crashing onto the beach just how much I'd been leaning on Maggie to help me cope with the loss of Mark. I wanted a tornado to blow away those terrible angels waiting outside the window. Maggie was at peace, it seemed, but I wanted to rage and rage against the dying of her light.

"Dylan Thomas didn't write that poem for his father, Carrie Anne," she said, somehow having read my thoughts. "He wrote it for himself. Because he wasn't ready to let go. But we have to. The doctors and the nurses, they're doing everything they can. It's not in our hands anymore. We have to let go."

I didn't cry until after Maggie left. Then I raged and I raged through a night that was anything but gentle.

Chapter 16

“One more try.” I’d spent the past twenty minutes immobilized and crying, and now Amanda was telling me to try again. Eight months ago, Mark and I had hiked to the top of Long’s Peak in Colorado, and now I couldn’t even pull myself from the wheelchair onto a hospital bed. “Just one more try, Carrie Anne, then I’ll take you back.”

“I can’t.” I started to cry again, only this time more from self-pity than from frustration. “I can’t.” Every day, it was the same thing. Amanda or one of the other physical therapists would take me down to the gym and then tell me to do something impossible. *Pull yourself onto the bed, Carrie Anne. Turn yourself into a fish, Carrie Anne.*

Amanda stepped behind the wheelchair and hooked her forearms under my armpits, lifting gently. “Come on, Carrie Anne. Grab onto the bedrails and pull. You’re going to have to master this before you can go back home. Before you can live on your own again.”

Live on my own? As in without Mark? I made another half-hearted attempt, then gave in to self-pity and collapsed back into the chair. “I can’t,” I whispered. “Please, just take me back to my room. I can’t do this.”

Amanda walked around to the side and nudged one of those big rubber exercise balls in my direction. She sat on it, keeping her balance as easily as an ordinary person sitting in an ordinary chair, and I was envious beyond all reason. She looked at me for a moment (I avoided her gaze by looking at my knees), then said, “That word is poison, Carrie Anne, that word ‘can’t.’ Even when it’s accurate, it’s usually not true.”

“How can something be accurate but not true?”

“It is accurate that right now, you seem to be unable to pull yourself up onto that bed, but it is not true that you can’t do it. The real truth is that you really *can* do this. But when you add the letter T to the end of the word can, it’s like putting an umbrella over a picnic table. It prevents the sunshine of possibility from shining in. Every time you cover can with T and turn it into can’t, you’re quitting before you’ve even tried.”

“But I really can’t.” I slapped the sides of my legs. “These legs really are dead, and all the positive thinking in the world’s not going to make them jump.”

“Well, maybe not.” Amanda was still giving me the stare that I could not return. “But I’ve seen miracles happen before, and I’m not going to rule one out for you, not as quickly as you seem to have.”

“Humph. God’s not going to raise Mark from the dead, and God’s not going to breathe life back into these legs. He’s busy elsewhere.”

“Okay,” Amanda said, “maybe you never will walk again. In fact, you probably won’t. I’ll give you that. So why don’t you start thinking about what you still can do?”

Defiance came back with a vengeance. I was not going to let go of the self-pity tar baby that easily. “Well, in case you didn’t know, Amanda, mountain trails are not handicapped accessible.” Hiking through the mountains with Mark had been much on my mind, and in my dreams, in recent days.

Amanda looked at me the way a rattlesnake might regard a mouse, without a trace of pity. “Carrie Anne. Every winter I take a handicapped accessible van full of people in wheelchairs to the mountains to go skiing. Some of them, I have a hard time keeping up with on the way down. You want to know what the difference is between them and you?”

At that moment, I did not want to know the difference between me and Amanda’s ski bums, and made sure that my body language conveyed the message. She told me anyway. “They’re survivors. Same circumstances you have, only a different way of looking at them.” Amanda’s expression never changed, she just sat there on her ball staring at me. At last, she asked me a question. “Would you like to hear the one simple word that will transform you from being a victim into being a survivor?”

“Sure,” I replied, wiping my nose and eyes on my sleeve, since there weren’t any Kleenex handy, and Amanda didn’t seem to be overly concerned about getting some for me.

“Yet.”

“Yet?”

“Yep. As soon as you add ‘yet’ to the words ‘I can’t,’ your mental focus will shift from the past to the future. I said I’ve seen miracles happen, and I have. And every single one of them had its roots in acceptance – acceptance of what had happened. Yeah, it was a tragic thing, that accident. But it happened. It’s not going to un-happen. So life goes on – or not – when you start thinking about what you still can do and stop whining about what you can no longer do.”

“Is this the tough love speech?”

“Don’t you think you need it?” Amanda replied without smiling.

I nodded. “I guess so.”

“Every time you hear yourself uttering those toxic and disempowering words – I can’t – just tack on the word yet. Like, I can’t pull myself onto this bed – yet. Like, I can’t go to the mountains – yet.” Amanda was rolling her exercise ball back and forth like a seal in the circus. “Think about it. The word yet is only one letter removed from the word yes. Add yet to I can’t and you change your assumptions, you change your expectations, and you change your outcomes. And eventually, you might even change No to Yes. Do that, and someday I’ll be telling some other patient about a miracle named Carrie Anne Murphy.”

“So that’s my prescription? Say yet, and expect a miracle?”

Amanda finally smiled. “That’s your prescription. Add yet to can’t, work hard, and expect a miracle. Just don’t give God a deadline.”

Chapter 17

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Chapter 18

Not even on his third day inside the belly of the great fish could Jonah have been in a darker or more miserable place than I was right now, once again back on my back in a hospital bed. They'd sent me from the Rehab unit back to the general hospital for another operation. Mark had deserted even my dreams, Maggie was dead, Robbie was on an Outward Bound adventure, and I was recuperating from this latest round of surgery. Maggie's prescription for depression was to write yourself out of it, but when I tried, I only dug myself deeper down into the abyss. Even the little squiggle of a mermaid I tried to draw in Maggie's memory looked more like a dead fish rotting on the beach than a finned angel cruising the ocean deeps.

"Happy poems don't win prizes," Maggie once told me. Now there was a thought. I read over my latest funerario and patted myself on the back (figuratively speaking, of course). Maybe they'd give this one a prize after all (posthumously, of course). Here was something worthy of Plath or Sexton or Teasdale or one of those other women poets who had taken their own lives, after having written so many poems alerting their readers that they *really were* going to do it, by and by. A poem short and bitter, befitting the fate of a woman come late to poetry and destined to die young, so I thought.

Resting in Peace

I once was afraid of the dark
Of legion black molecules snaking
Into my body through every orifice
Freezing me in a coagulate of despair
I once was afraid of solitude
Of talking to the air and hearing no
Echo in reply to reaffirm my body and
Reify my existence
I once was afraid of confinement
Of tiny rooms where you can reach

Out and touch every wall and
Rub your nose on the velvet
I once was afraid of sleeping
Of the nightmare world that is more
Real than the office and the kitchen and
That holds you petrified against your will
I once was afraid of infinity
Of the distant reaches where space and
Time interpenetrate like a fertilized egg
In the womb of God
I once was afraid in the dark
Alone in a small room
Asleep
Forever

The sun must have been setting outside, though you couldn't tell through the gray curtain of autumn rain. My legs, the part of my body where pain would have been a welcome sign of progress, remained in a novocained deep freeze; from my waist up, though, I felt like a lava lamp, with hot globules of pain coursing through my body. Maggie had also said that poets wrote their best poems when they were in pain. So rather than waste the metaphor, I picked up the pen and started to scribble again.

Let's see. Death Valley. The Dead Sea. Dead Drunk, Dead Duck. Dead Serious, Dead Broke, and Dead Wrong. Dead Eye. Dead End. As the words came, I actually began to wish I could write myself into a coffin. That's when Maggie took matters into her own hands. There could be no other explanation for the train of events that transpired over the next several hours.

It started with the singing in the hallway. Lestelle, the housekeeper I'd seen coming out of Maggie's room in tears on that sad evening, had parked her bed-changing cart outside my room and was softly singing a gospel song. Not just any song, mind you – the one

that had touched my soul since I'd first heard it as a little girl. But not with the words I'd grown up with – Lestelle had made up her own lyrics and was (I now know) singing them for me – to me, from Maggie:

Amazing Grace, now Maggie's home

She's looking down on me

She gives me comfort through the pain

And sets my spirit free

I closed my eyes and allowed myself to fall into the song, and as I did the pain actually did seem to recede. The last words reverberated in my head, like an echo fading into the depths of a slot canyon. *Now Maggie's home at last.* I expected to hear a bring-the-house-down ovation, but there was just the silence of a hospital ward in the evening hours, and Lestelle working quietly at her cart.

And then... the most extravagant wolf whistle I've ever heard. Opening my eyes, I looked out into the corridor. Lestelle was obviously happy to see whoever was coming. "Well, look'a here – it's Mistuh Rufus Maximus!" I'd heard rumors of Rufus, the talking parrot who was part of the hospital's pet therapy program, but had never seen him myself.

A distinguished-looking older gentleman in one of those blue blazers that hospital volunteers wear came into view and stopped to talk with Lestelle. He had a parrot on his shoulder, pirate style, which I surmised to be Mistuh Rufus Maximus. The bird looked through the open door into my room and did another wolf whistle. The volunteer glanced at me, then looked at his bird. "What's that you say, Rufus? You want to meet the pretty lady in that room?" The bird whistled again. The volunteer said goodbye to Lestelle and stuck his head in my door. "Good evening. I'm Peter Graves, and this is Rufus. We're volunteers. Rufus is usually quite shy, but he's asked if he could meet you." Rufus was marching in place on Peter's shoulder. I shrugged. Why not?

Peter walked in. Rufus whistled, then squawked, "Hi, Cutie!"

"Now Rufus," Peter said, "don't be too forward. You'll scare her off." Rufus marched and flapped his wings. Peter stepped over to the side of the bed. "Rufus is an African gray parrot. They're the smartest birds in the world." Rufus nodded his agreement, and Peter laughed. "They're also not the least bit humble about it." Rufus whistled once more. "Hi, Cutie!"

I smiled despite myself. Other than Mark, no one had called me Cutie since Robbie was a toddler. Not even the plastic surgeon who'd patched up my face, and you'd have

thought that was part of his job description. Peter lifted Rufus from his shoulder onto his hand, then held the bird in front of his face and asked, “What’s that you say?” Rufus squawked a reply. “Well, old chap,” Peter said, “that’s awfully bold of you. But I’ll ask her.”

Peter looked down at me. “Rufus was wondering if he could perch on your hand for a bit.”

“On my hand? Well, I don’t know. I’ve never held a live bird before.” Rufus whistled and spread his wings. Peter laughed again. “Rufus says that previous experience is not required.” He held the bird out, and Rufus hopped onto my hand.

“Hello, pretty bird,” I said. Rufus cocked his head to the side. “What else does one say to an African gray parrot?” I asked Peter.

“Whatever’s on your mind. He is, after all, a member in good standing of the hospital’s pet therapy program. A therapist, you see, in his own right. Just be aware that whatever you do say is likely to be repeated.”

I brought Rufus up closer to my face. He leaned forward and gave my nose a gentle peck. “Rufus!” Peter scolded. “On the first date, a gentleman waits until the end of the evening for his kiss. Where are your manners?”

Rufus marched in place on my hand and gave me another wolf whistle. “Hi, Cutie!”

“Rufus,” humphed Peter, “you are hopeless!”

Rufus suddenly stood dead still and stared at me, the inquisitive gaze of a two-year-old at the zoo upon first seeing a giraffe. There was something so very human in that bird’s eyes. I swear he actually cleared his throat before speaking his next words. “Hell-ooooooo…” He hung onto the note like a soprano at the opera. Then… “Maaaaaggie.” There was no mistaking what he’d said. I blinked hard. Rufus whistled again.

Peter shook his head sadly. “Rufus loves everybody, but Maggie was his favorite. He still misses her.” Rufus nodded in agreement. “Hell-ooooooo Maaaaaggie.” Rufus gripped my hand for balance, leaned forward, and squawked out these words: “Be strong.” Clear as a bell. Then he gave my nose another gentle peck.

“Well, well, well. Where did that come from, Master Maximus?” Peter looked at me and said, “Rufus knows seventy-two words, but I’ve never heard him say that before. Be strong. He must have learned it specially for you.” Rufus nodded even more fervently than before. “Hell-ooooooo Maaaaaggie.”

Hello Maggie? Or was it hello *from* Maggie? I'd never know for sure. Not in this lifetime, anyway. But there was no doubt in my mind that had Maggie been able to deliver one single message to me through this parrot, those would have been her words. *Be strong, Carrie Anne. Be strong.*

Chapter 19

Peter and Rufus had left, but Maggie (I'm sure this was all Maggie's doing) wasn't done yet. I was sitting up in the bed with the journal open on my lap, trying (not very hard) to not fall back into the self-pity I'd been wallowing around in before their visit. I wanted to write a poem about Maggie and Rufus, pretty birds up in a tree – but this is what came out:

Pretty Bird

Tiny yellow goldfinch lying –

Dead on –

The side of the road.

Why is it that only the –

Pretty birds break –

Our hearts by their dying?

“May I come in?” I recognized the man at the door as being one of the hospital chaplains, though I did not know his name. I shrugged in a way intended to say “go away,” but that evidently conveyed “sure, why not.” And in he came.

“Hi, Carrie Anne, I'm Andy Brennan, one of the volunteer chaplains here at the hospital. I'm sorry it's taken me so long to come up, but your request somehow ended up under a pile of papers on my desk, and I just saw it this afternoon.”

“My request?”

“Yes. It's our policy, that we only visit patients who've requested it.”

I shook my head. “I didn't request any visits.”

Andy was visibly confused. “Carrie Anne Murphy?” I couldn't very well deny that, not even to get rid of a pesky priest, so I nodded. He rifled through some papers on his clipboard, and when he found what he was looking for, put it on top and showed it to me. Sure enough, my name was on the visitation request. As was a squiggly little mermaid swimming across the top of the page.

I could just picture Maggie up there in heaven, those green eyes all a-twinkle, quite pleased with herself for having this *keep Carrie Anne from getting depressed* club of hers carrying on the effort. I handed the clipboard back. “Well, my brain’s been in a fog since the surgery. I guess I forgot about making this request. But thanks for coming up.”

He set the clipboard down on the bedside table and put his hands in his pockets. “It’s my pleasure. That’s what I’m here for.” We endured the awkward silence for a moment, then he said, “here’s what I mean by that. I’m here because it’s not just the body that needs care in times of trouble; we also need to tend to our spiritual beings. That’s where, hopefully, I might be able to help.”

“You’re not going to give me that ‘patience of Job’ speech, are you?”

Andy didn’t laugh. He did pull up a chair and sat where I could see him without having to twist my neck. “No, I’m not going to give you that speech. For one thing, anyone who’s actually read the book of Job appreciates that Job was *not* a patient man. Faithful, yes. But Job was angry and anguished and anything but patient. If you’re interested, I will tell you something about the book of Job I think you’ll find helpful. After all, like you, Job lost both his health and members of his family.”

“Yeah, but unlike me, Job got it all back.” I started thumbing through the pink journal, hoping that Andy would take the hint and excuse himself. He didn’t.

“You say that as if the final chapter of your story has been written, Carrie Anne.” I didn’t reply, and Andy let the silence hang in the air. At last, he said, “You know, I’m pretty certain that in the months after he lost both his family and his health, Job didn’t see any path leading to a bright future either. How could he? How could anyone? But he kept walking, and eventually the path made itself visible. That path brought Job to a new place, but it could not bring him back what he had lost. In time, God blessed Job with a new family, but God could not erase the grief that Job would always carry from the loss of his first family.”

“So what’s that got to do with me?”

Andy shrugged. “As with most stories, it pretty much means what you want it to mean. But here’s what I think. While God cannot replace what you’ve lost, God can show you a new path, a path that will lead you to a wonderful place, perhaps a place you didn’t even know you wanted to go to.”

“Yeah, well, it’s been several thousand years since anyone’s seen God come out of a whirlwind. I think he must have lost interest or something. I’m certainly not banking on any such thing.”

Andy laughed. “Neither am I. I’d probably have a heart attack, to see God up close and angry! Frankly, I think God is more subtle than that. And there *is* a very subtle message buried in the book of Job, a message that’s often overlooked. It’s a message that just might help make your path visible.”

He leaned back in his chair and just sat there. Finally, I said, “well, are you going to tell me what the message is?”

“I will, but I’m not sure you’re ready to hear it.”

“You let me be the judge of that.”

“Okay. As you’ve just alluded, God came to Job out of the whirlwind and confronted him with his ignorance. But he did something else as well. God instructed Job to pray for the three friends who had accused him falsely. And the Bible is very specific in saying that it was *after* Job prayed for his friends that his wealth was restored and his family replaced. That’s the punch line, if you will.”

I shook my head. “I don’t get it.”

“If you consider the story of Job to be a metaphor, which I do, then that’s the most important lesson. Job was made whole when he stopped obsessing over his own problems and instead prayed for someone else. I don’t believe that God made a bet with the devil, using Job’s family, his health, and his possessions as chips on a celestial gambling table to be sacrificed in a test of Job’s faith. What kind of a god would do that? But I *do* believe that God was there for Job in his hour of darkest need. And God will be there for you, giving you strength when you are in need.”

Andy stood up and placed his clipboard under his arm. “I spend a lot of time working with support groups, Carrie Anne. And I always find that whatever problems people are faced with – addictions, cancer, whatever – the ones who can at least for a moment set their own problems aside and pray for others, in whatever way they pray, find the greatest measure of healing for themselves. *That* is the message of Job, I believe. Something to think about, isn’t it?”

Andy left, but the questions remained. And they multiplied. The notion of making a bet with the devil struck my fancy. Would God really have made a bet with the devil to test Job’s faith? Would Job still have passed that test had he known the whole truth – that it was God who gave Satan the go-ahead to slaughter his family and his servants? Where was God before he showed up in the whirlwind? Did Mark and I unwittingly make, and lose, a bet with the devil the night we thought we were going out to dinner but instead ran smack into a drunk driver who at that very moment might also have been losing his own bet with the devil? I opened the pink journal to the next blank page and started to write.

Castles in the Sand

The devil and I sat together on the beach
watching the children build castles in the sand
and he, being a betting man, said...

I'll bet you a dollar the next wave knocks them down
and I, being in my bathing suit, said...

I would, but I don't have a dollar with me
and he, being in a generous frame of mind, said...

I'll lend you a dollar if you should lose
and I, feeling particularly lucky, said...

You're on.

How was I to know that three hours ago
that sly devil had dropped a big stone into the water
far out on the ocean, at just the right spot
to cause an unusually large wave to hit the beach
at just the next moment
toppling over the sand castles
and washing the children out to sea?

You owe me a dollar, said the devil, and I, said he,
being the devil, am renegeing on my previous offer
of a loan...

But if you're unable to pay in cash

other arrangements can be made.

No, I decided as I reread my poem, Andy was right. God wasn't responsible for Job's tragedy, or mine. But God *was* standing there beside Job as he struggled to cope with it. And though God might not appear out of a windstorm for me, I knew that Andy had been right in saying that God would help me to bear that which otherwise would have been unbearable, and might help me find a new path, since the old path was forever closed to me. But first I had to pray for my friends.

Chapter 20

I closed the pink journal and closed my eyes. Then I started to think about all the people I could pray for. I started with Robbie, and prayed that he would make a good doctor – and that he would never make a bet with the devil. Then I prayed for Maggie, that she was safely in heaven writing poems for the other angels and mermaids. Then I prayed for Mark. And I got stuck there. God was not going to come to me from out of the whirlwind, and God was not going to bring Mark back into my life.

That was my state of mind when the new nurse came in making the final rounds of the evening. Her name was Evelyn – I could see that from her nametag – but I didn't recall having seen her before. She carried one of those blue plastic trays with the usual assortment of medications.

“Tough night?” She walked over and set the medication tray on the overbed table, then sat down on the edge of the bed. She pulled several Kleenex out of her pocket, used one to dry off my eyes, and placed the rest of them in my hand. I hadn't even realized I'd been crying.

We sat like that for a few minutes before I finally said, “One of the hospital chaplains stopped by tonight. Andy... Andy...”

“Andy Brennan?”

“Yes. He was trying to be helpful, but I'm afraid I wasn't very receptive. Or very appreciative. If you get a chance, could you thank him for me?”

“Sure, no problem. I'll make a point of it.” She pulled a little pad out of her pocket and made a note. “How's Robbie doing?”

“Uhm, he's doing just fine. How do you know Robbie?”

Evelyn laughed. “Everyone around here has gotten to know Robbie. You don't remember me, but I was one of your nurses when you were first admitted. I've been filling in on another unit for the past month or so. Robbie is quite an exceptional young man. I know this is hard on you both, but I don't think you need to worry about your son.”

“I know,” I said, thankful for the handful of Kleenex.

Evelyn picked up the book I'd been reading from the overbed table. "Emily Dickinson. I've never read much poetry, but I do remember the one where she compared hope to a bird. Or something like that."

I nodded at the book. "It's one of the dog-eared pages."

She thumbed through the pages and laughed. Almost every page had a bent-down corner. "Would you like me to read to you? A few of your favorites?"

Poems are meant to be heard, not just read. Maggie had told me that was why she always read her poems out loud before giving them to the recipient. I shook my head no. "That's really nice of you to offer, Evelyn, but I know how busy you are. I don't want to take too much of your time."

Evelyn continued thumbing through the book. "Whenever I'm faced with competing demands on my time, I ask this question: What would Florence do? Florence Nightingale founded the profession of nursing. She's my role model. And I think that tonight, Florence would have stopped to read Emily Dickinson for her patient."

I nodded toward the blue plastic tray full of pills. "What about all your other patients?"

Evelyn laughed again. "They aren't going anywhere, and frankly most of them will be perfectly happy to have an extra fifteen minutes before I shove pills down their throats." She looked up at the clock – it was 7:15 – then back at me. "One of my professors at the nursing college shared a secret that has stood me very well: Slow down on the inside and you can speed up on the outside."

"Sounds profound. What does it mean?"

"I think of it as the Principle of the Deep Breath. When I slow down and ask what Florence would do, it seems like I end up getting even more done. That's because it helps me stay focused on what really matters, on what's really important. Most of us have a lot more time than we'll admit to, if we would just pay better attention to how we use it. That's slowing down on the inside so you can speed up on the outside."

"Maggie told me that having cancer had been a blessing because it forced her to slow down. She said that even though she'd have fewer minutes than she'd once hoped, she was able to stretch out the minutes she did have, and pack more into each one of them. I suppose that's the same thing, isn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose that's the same thing." Evelyn was leafing through the Emily Dickinson book. "Now, here's a good one: *If I can ease one life the aching, or cool one pain, I shall not live in vain.* That could be a nurse's credo, couldn't it?" She turned a few more pages, then said, "Wow! What do you suppose she means by this: *A timid thing to drop*

a life into the purple well. Purple? Isn't purple the color of depression? I wish I could get that one across to some of my patients, who seem to have given up on themselves, already dropped their lives into that purple well."

Evelyn skimmed through the pages. "I've always thought poetry was, well, boring, you know, sort of priggish stuff. But this is pretty cool. Want me to read you a few?"

"Sure," I replied, "that would be nice. But I don't want you to get in trouble. I mean, reading poetry isn't in the nurse's job description, is it?"

Evelyn shrugged. "My philosophy has always been to proceed until apprehended. I figure if you're going fast enough, by the time they catch up, you've already done what you set out to do." She turned a few more pages. "Here it is, the hope poem." Marking her place with a Kleenex, she laid the book down on the overbed table. "Before I start, let's give you a little something to help you sleep tonight, okay? Doctor's orders." She handed me a pill and a cup of water. I swallowed the pill, shuddered, and gave Evelyn back the empty cup. Then she started to read:

Hope is the thing with feathers

That perches in the soul,

And sings the tune without the words,

And never stops at all.

As I drifted off to sleep, Evelyn's voice merged with Maggie's voice. I somehow knew that Maggie had picked out the poems for Evelyn to read. And as hope flew be-feathered around my room, Maggie and her mermaid sisters smiled from the other side of the aquarium glass that holds back the universal sea.

Chapter 21

Sitting in the physical therapy department waiting room, waiting for my appointment, I noticed they'd put a new poster up on the wall. It had Leonardo Da Vinci's famous cruciform image of a blueprint figure, the one you see in medical offices everywhere that looks like a naked man doing jumping jacks without even mussing his hair. Then, in big bold print, the poster proclaimed:

We Repair the World's Most Complex Machine

With that in mind, I scribbled in the pink journal as I watched people come out of the gym: a teenage girl on crutches, a pot-bellied couch potato shuffling along on wobbly knees, a weekend warrior hobbling out with a cane, a frail little old lady leaning on a walker. And I would have traded places with any one of them if it would have meant I could walk again, or even feel pain in my legs again. The time of my appointment came and went – 5 minutes, then 10 minutes behind schedule. As seems to happen when I'm in a morose mood, the words came quickly, and by the time I was called in for my workout (or more accurately, my work-over), I'd completed a new poem:

A Most Complex Machine

I am the world's most complex machine

My heart has been broken, there's a hole my soul

My feelings are aching, my emotions stone cold

My funny bone is fractured and my

wish bone's been cracked

Bruised is my ego, wounded my pride

My gut issues warnings, my spirit has died

No doctor can fix me

No nurse ease the pain

I'm running on empty

And lost in the rain

Maggie used to say that she'd write her sorrows in the pink journal, then close the covers and leave them inside. More often than not, however, I found that my sorrows dragged me into the journal after them. Thus it was that my self-pity was churning itself into high gear when Amanda came for me. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Carrie Anne, we've been incredibly busy this morning. But now I'm ready for you if you're ready for me."

"I don't really have a choice," I replied, "since the transporter who brought me over won't be back for another hour." At that point, anything sounded better than exercising with Amanda – especially indulging myself in the poetry of woe. But she just laughed and wheeled me back into the little torture chamber she called her gym.

"Okay, today we're going to start working on your arm strength," Amanda said as she lifted two dumbbells from the farthest end of the weight rack. Laying my hands flat on my lap, she set one dumbbell in each palm and asked me to lift them in a curling motion. They looked like extra-long toothpicks with a marshmallow stuck on each end, but I could barely pick them up.

After a few feeble attempts, I let the dumbbells fall to the floor. They even sounded like marshmallows when they hit. "Look, Amanda," I said, "I've been thinking about this, and I've decided I'm going to get an electric wheelchair. I just don't think I'll ever have the strength to push myself around. At least not in anything approaching real time." I tried to cross my arms and was appalled to discover that I was already exhausted by what I'm sure Amanda had assumed would be a light warm-up. "I'll graduate to the manual model when I get stronger."

As she always did when she was about to give me a talking-to, Amanda rolled over the big green exercise ball and sat on it. "This is your decision, Carrie Anne, but please don't make it lightly. Electric wheelchairs can be a life-enhancing resource for people who really need them. But in all my years of physical therapy, I don't know that I've ever seen anyone graduate, as you put it, from an electric to a manual wheelchair."

"So what's wrong with just going electric? Seems a lot easier and more convenient."

Amanda rolled back and forth on her green exercise ball. "Two things. First, now more than ever you need to exercise and keep yourself as strong as possible. If for no other reason, scientists are doing some amazing research on spinal cord injuries. It's possible that, within your lifetime, they'll figure out how to help people walk again. You know as well as I do, the first patients they select will be the ones most likely to do well, and that means those who are strong. No guarantees, of course, but you want to be ready just in case."

"And the second reason?"

“You mean other than just the fact that you’ll feel better?” I nodded and she continued. “When you fall into that electric wheelchair lifestyle – and make no mistake, it is a lifestyle – you’ll profoundly change the way other people look at you, and place all sorts of restrictions on your own activities.”

“What sort of restrictions?”

“Well, for example, people in electric wheelchairs don’t ski or participate in marathons.”

“Marathons? You’ve got to be kidding. I can’t even wheel myself up the ramp to the main hospital.”

“Not yet. Never forget that word, yet. Some of the wheelchair athletes I work with today were once in the same shape you’re in now. They had to work hard, and were often tempted to quit, but to a person they’ll tell you it was worth the effort.”

Before I could respond, the receptionist stepped into the entryway and said, “Amanda, Bill Terry is here to see you, and also Faye Milliken is here for her 11 o’clock appointment.”

“Could you please tell Bill I’ll be right with him, and go ahead and bring Faye in? Thanks, Shirley.”

Faye appeared to be about 16 years old, with a smile that belied the obvious seriousness of her condition. Not only was she in a wheelchair, her head and neck were immobilized by a halo device. Amanda picked up the toothpick-and-marshmallow dumbbells from the floor and handed them to Faye. Then she walked over to the weight rack, picked up the next-larger set, and laid them in my hands. “Faye, this is Carrie Anne. She’s going to be your coach this morning.” Turning to me, Amanda said, “Carrie Anne, could you please start by showing Faye how to do the arm curls, and I’ll be right back.”

I tried to knock Amanda off her feet with my eyes, but she just laughed and said, “See one, do one, teach one. I’ll be back in a bit.”

For the next 15 minutes, Faye and I got to know each other. Her neck had been broken when she was thrown from her dirt bike, something she seemed to consider nothing more than a minor speed bump. I’m not sure whether it was from having been put in the position of being someone’s coach, or from having a workout buddy, but the new weights somehow seemed lighter than the marshmallow ones.

When Amanda returned, she was accompanied by a man in a wheelchair. It was one of those little three-wheeled buggy things that paraplegics race with. The shoulders peering through his tank-top t-shirt suggested that he was probably pretty good at it. “Carrie Anne and Faye, I’d like you to meet Bill Terry.”

After a bit of small talk, Amanda asked Bill to share some of the most important lessons he'd learned about life in a wheelchair. "The first thing I learned is to be careful what you pray for," he said with a hearty laugh. "Fifteen years ago, we were building a custom house and one of our laborers no-showed. So I had to fill in for the deadbeat. The last thing I remember saying to myself was 'Lord, I wish I didn't have to haul this lumber around anymore; I've got more important things to do.' Well, seven minutes later a pile of roofing shingles landed on top of me. I haven't hauled a stick of lumber since that day!" He laughed again, and it was yet one more variation on the sound of an icebreaker plowing through a frozen sea.

We talked for over an hour. Amanda canceled the transporter – said she'd wheel me back herself (which I knew really meant she'd try to make me push myself most of the way). Bill shared a few practical strategies for being what he called 'a wheelestrian' in a pedestrian world. But mostly, he spoke about the power of vision. "The book of Proverbs says that without vision, people perish. I know I'd have perished without new dreams to sustain me. I knew I'd never play golf again, so I took up wheelchair racing. Knew I'd never supervise a construction site, so I started my own business. You know, it's funny, but if it hadn't been for that accident, I never would have given myself permission to make a living following my heart's true passion."

"So, what your heart's true passion?" Faye asked the question.

Bill grabbed the rear wheels of his chair and leaned way back so the front wheel was suspended mid-air. Then he tipped to one side and while balanced on just one wheel, spun his wheelchair around in a complete 360-degree circle, then did another, then another. "I'm a wheelchair juggler," he exclaimed while still balancing on one wheel. "The only one in the world, as far as I know."

"You make a living juggling wheelchairs?" Faye asked.

"That's a great idea," Bill replied with a laugh, "maybe I'll try that someday. But I juggle just about anything else while sitting in a wheelchair. Hammers, bowling balls, ostrich feathers, pretty much anything. As far as making a living at it, technically I suppose you'd call me a motivational speaker. But the juggling opens doors into principals' offices and into the hearts and minds of students. First I juggle bowling balls, then I juggle words," he said with another of those icebreaker laughs. After planting all three wheels firmly on the ground (to my great relief) Bill said, "one of the most helpful things I learned was something Amanda taught me: bilateral visualization."

Bill looked over at Amanda, and she took her cue. "I'm a big believer in visualization. Like, if my patient will actually see herself doing an exercise in her mind, she always gets a better performance from her body. But I take that one step further. If I myself

also visualize my patient doing the exercise, we get an even greater range of motion. I don't know why it works, but every therapist I know agrees with me that it does work."

Bill nodded. "It's true. When I'm teaching someone to juggle, not only do I ask them to visualize themselves keeping the balls in the air, I also keep that picture in my own mind. It works every time." He looked from me to Faye and back to me, then said, "a few more weeks of weight-lifting, and you'll both be ready for juggling lessons." I don't know if it was the strength of Bill's mind, or the weakness of my own, but in that moment I actually had a mental picture of myself sitting in my wheelchair juggling three tennis balls.

I'd been correct in my assumption that Amanda would try to make me do all the work getting myself back to my room. I made it as far as the ramp that links the medical arts building to the hospital. "Someday I'll be able to do this, Amanda," I said, "but not yet." Still, it was the farthest I'd ever pushed my wheelchair, and the first time I knew with certainty that someday I *would* power myself up inclines like this. Sitting in my room that afternoon, I rewrote the poem I'd done in the waiting room.

A Most Complex Machine, Indeed!

I am the world's most complex machine

I can be cured by a word

Healed with a touch

Touched by a thought

I use love as a crutch

The things that most matter

You can't really see

It takes invisible tools to fix

The machine that is me

I liked the second poem much better.

Chapter 22

I'd spent the morning in my wheelchair in the sunroom reading the poems in Maggie's pink journal, sipping coffee that grew colder page by page. With every line that had been crossed out, rewritten, and crossed out again, I felt her frustration. With every squiggled smiley mermaid signifying that a poem had finally passed the test, I heard her jubilant giggle and smiled along with her.

In these pages I saw the hope and the courage that Maggie had shared with so many others whose own hope and courage had deserted them. And I saw the fears she'd kept to herself in poems of hopeless desperation, poems that were written in the depths of endless nights, words written from the eye of the nightmare storm that passes for slumber in the dark hours of one who is facing death. Unlike poems of hope and courage that were drafted, revised, and painstakingly rewritten for others, those she wrote for herself met the page on first draft, as if she wanted to get them out of her head and onto the paper, then turn the page as quickly as possible. No squiggled mermaids celebrated their completion. Turning another page, I saw the last poem that Maggie wrote in her incarnation as an earth-bound mermaid, a poem that would never be read by anyone but me.

And So It Ends...

with neither a bang nor a whimper –

closing the gate, setting the sun,

a sigh, a backward glance, the river bends

disappearing into the mysteries ahead.

I go willing into this dark night, and

would not trade an eternity of living

for having earned the right to be thus dead.

It broke my heart to think of sweet Maggie, who never hurt a mosquito or a mayfly, facing those desperate last hours beyond our reach. *Maggie Maggie all alone*. On the right hand side, opposite Maggie's last poem, a weak hand had scrawled two barely legible words. *There's more*. That was all. There's more. But there was no more. The remaining pages were blank.

“I left the empty pages there for you, Carrie Anne.” At some level of consciousness, I knew I was dreaming, that Maggie could not be sitting there in the sunroom with me, asking me to pick up the torch she could no longer carry. But at a deeper level – the level where apparent reality stretches out a tentative finger and touches the real thing – I also knew she *was* sitting right there beside me, and that this would be the last time we’d be together for a long time.

Not wanting to break the spell, I let go of my legs and floated up to the far corner of the window, where the late afternoon sun was warmest. Maggie was perched on the window sill, swinging her legs. She was wearing a t-shirt with the words, *If you can read this, you’re close enough for a hug*. The broken lady sat motionless in her wheelchair. There was something different about this otherworld Maggie. The nervous energy that had caused her to vibrate like an out-of-balance gyroscope had been replaced by an ethereal calm that suffused the space around her, like the air around The Healing Tree.

Maggie was giving the broken lady a poetry lesson. “Writing a poem is a matter of opening your heart and inviting someone else to come in for a visit. Just put yourself in their shoes, then write a poem for the you that’s in those shoes.”

The broken lady stared out the window, seemed to be looking for something she knew she would not find out there. “I’m afraid my heart’s not a place anyone else would want to visit. Not anymore.”

Maggie leaned forward, resting her forearms across her knees. “Yes. And that is precisely why you must invite them in. For both of you. See, you don’t write the whole poem. You only write half of it. The reader writes the other half. You give the gift, and the gift comes back to you.”

The broken lady opened the pink journal to a place past the middle and looked into the blank pages. “You gave so much, Maggie, to me and everyone else. But I really don’t have anything to give.”

“You don’t understand, Carrie Anne. Not yet. But you will. Poetry is like healing. Healing is not something you give. It’s something you share. You write a poem to invite someone else to share in your pain, and thus in your healing. Then you share in theirs. The poem isn’t whole until you give it away. It’s a paradox, isn’t it, that you can only freely give that which you don’t possess.” I could see that the broken lady was crying, and it struck me as being another paradox that healing so often begins with tears.

“They’re all one, you know,” Maggie said softly. She turned her head and looked up at me, hiding in my corner on the ceiling, then back at the broken lady in her wheelchair. “Sharing means both giving and receiving, both at the same time. Hurting and healing

are one, just different points on the journey. Like looking at snowflakes in a silver bowl, you can never tell where the hurting ends and the healing begins.”

The broken lady was alone now. Like the transition from hurting to healing, I couldn't really tell the exact moment when the broken lady and I again became one. I was simply back in my wheelchair, with Maggie's pink journal in my lap. It was my hand moving the pen, but I knew that I was only the medium through which Maggie was writing her death poem.

And when I die

I want to die

like a firefly

on the windshield...

An exploding efflorescence of Soul

...Escaping

All over again

If I had it to do all over again

And did it all over again

I'd still be here again

Wishing once again

I had it to do all over again

All over once again

C.A.M.

Chapter 23

“East or west? Should I go to Stanford or Duke?”

Robbie was talking about college. I was thinking about Mark and Maggie. No, actually I was thinking about loss. Mark and Maggie were gone, and now Robbie was getting ready to leave. But then I realized what I was really thinking about was loneliness. I’d finally gotten adjusted to my new life in the house that Robbie had worked so hard to make wheelchair-accessible, and now he was now getting ready to leave. And then I saw that under it all, I was really thinking about myself. Once again, despite my best efforts to rise above myself, when the last peel of the onion fell away, there was my own self right smack at the core. How can you lose yourself to find yourself if your self always finds a way to insinuate itself right back into the center of yourself? “How do you answer a question like that?”

The look on Robbie’s face told me that, without meaning to, I’d said the words out loud. “I don’t know, Mom. That’s why I asked you.”

“I’m sorry, Robbie, I guess I was sort of daydreaming.”

“Imagine that,” Robbie said with a bit of a chuckle.

“Imagine that,” I echoed. I had a memory flash of Andy Brennan telling me how Job’s healing process had started when he stopped thinking about his own problems, and instead prayed for his friends. Perhaps, I thought, you find yourself by losing yourself in the quest to help others find themselves. Or at least in helping your son figure out where he should go to college.

I pulled a yellow pad from the pouch on the side of my wheelchair and laid it on my lap. Then I drew a straight line across the top, and a vertical line down the center of the page, forming a big letter T. At the top of the page, in block letters, I printed the word “Duke” and underlined it twice. “Remember what Dad used to do when he had to make a difficult decision?”

“You mean the T-off?”

“Yes. Why don’t we do a T-off for the pluses and minuses of each coast?” As I was speaking, I wrote the words “plus” and “minus” on the left- and right-hand sides of the T. “Let’s start with Duke. What are the pluses? And leave out basketball. If you’re going to be a doctor, you won’t have time for that.”

“There’s always time for basketball,” Robbie said with a nod and a smile, “so put that down first in the plus column.” The T-off took the better part of the afternoon. When we’d finished, I handed both sheets of paper to Robbie. He studied the pages for a while, going back and forth between the two. Then he folded them up and put them into his shirt pocket.

“Mr. Foreman,” I asked, “has the jury reached a verdict?”

“We have, your honor,” he replied solemnly.

“Will you please share that verdict with the court?”

“Yes, ma’am, I will.” Robbie stood up, took a deep breath, then belted out *California Here We Come!* as he danced around the room. Stanford had won.

That evening, I made a cup of hot chocolate and parked my wheelchair on the back porch. It had become my late summer evening ritual, watching the afternoon fade away while waiting for the fireflies to make their appearance. I was reading one of the McZen books that Maggie had left me: *What Is the Sound of One Hand Praying?* Turning a page, I read:

The Lord works

In mysterious ways

And usually without

A sense of urgency

Setting the book down on my lap, I thought about the strange journey of life. Had it not been for that devastating accident, I would not have become a poetry therapist. Robbie might not have set his sights on becoming a doctor. Andy Brennan had been right. The path would unfold slowly, often torturously, and you would never see more than a step or two ahead. But if you just kept walking, why, you just might walk yourself right into a miracle. Or two.

One by one, the fireflies begin to claim their place in the backyard firmament. In ancient cultures, they might have been seen as the luminous souls of the departed. One by one, Mark, then Maggie, now Robbie – the three people I had most depended upon – had left me. And now, like fireflies in a meadow, one by one, new questions were intruding upon my consciousness.

When the mosquitoes started coming out in force, I wheeled myself back into the kitchen and reheated my hot chocolate in the microwave. As I waited for the chime, I

opened McZen's book to a random page, which Maggie had told me was the best way to read a book of poetry, because that way you'd never finish it. It was surprising, really, how often these poets seemed to be speaking directly to me through whatever poem I happened to chance upon. Here's what McZen had to say as the fireflies danced into the embers of evening:

If you don't have a question

You don't have a clue

If you aren't searching

You must really be lost

Chapter 24

It was a perfect day for a dedication. And for two funerals. We were dedicating the Memorial Hospital Healing Garden, but inevitably, the replanting of The Healing Tree in the space that Jerry Landerall had left for “just the right tree” took me back to the funerals for Mark and Maggie – funerals I’d missed because I was in a hospital bed. Over the past three years, Jerry’s magic had transformed The Healing Tree from a dying stump of a bonsai tree less than a foot tall into a strapping 12-foot sapling that already cast enough shade to shelter a family picnic. And today we were putting it in the ground.

Robbie was sitting in the folding chair next to me, reading over his notes. He’d been asked to say a few words about Maggie later in the program, when they unveiled a plaque commemorating her contributions to the soul of the hospital. For me, it was another salted ice cream moment, bitter and sweet. I couldn’t have been more proud of my son, who every day reminded me even more of his father. And who in a little over a month would be leaving for California to begin his pre-med studies at Stanford University, leaving me an empty-nester who still had a broken wing.

Since taking Maggie’s place as the hospital’s poetry therapist two years earlier, I’d found myself not only writing verse, but also thinking in verse. Trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, I retrieved the pink journal from the pouch on my wheelchair and scribbled a few notes for a poem about how Robbie the son was a reflection of Mark the father, and yet was also becoming his own man.

There was a man in the rearview mirror

I thought I’d lost him

But now I see him again

Up ahead

Running toward the horizon

Pat Franklin, the CEO whose vision it was to create sanctuaries like the Healing Garden around the hospital, was speaking but I was hardly listening to him. Instead, I was sedating the butterflies by visualizing myself propelling my wheelchair up the ramp to the stage and then speaking to the hundred-some friends and dignitaries arrayed in folding chairs around the garden. And reading them a poem. I missed Mark sorely and would have given almost anything to have my legs back, but still (though the realization evolved slowly) the accident had brought blessings in its wake. One of them, I smiled to think, was that my knees could no longer shake.

“This garden represents our commitment to healing for the whole person.” Pat looked up from his notes and scanned the audience, including a reassuring nod in my direction, probably imperceptible to anyone but me. “True healing recognizes not only our physical needs, but also our emotional and spiritual needs. It is not enough for us to cure the body, important as that is. We must also care for the soul.” Pat went on to recount some of the things the hospital had done, and was planning to do, for what he called the softer side of a healing environment. I went on visualizing strength flowing into my arms so I wouldn’t humiliate myself by rolling backwards down that ramp after being introduced.

“Let me say one more thing before we bring up Carrie Anne Murphy, our poetry therapist.” Hearing the CEO say my name instantly woke up all those sleeping butterflies. “It’s probably not something you’d expect a CEO to say, but our patients aren’t the only ones who are in need of healing. It’s all of us. I am painfully aware of the pain our people must leave in the parking lot every day when they come to work. Family problems, financial difficulties, emotional stress – these things demand care every bit as much as a broken leg or a virus. That’s why we are redoubling our commitment to care for each other. Earlier, you heard our chief nurse executive Donna Westfall ask, ‘who cares for the caregiver?’ Well, the answer to that question has to be us. All of us. That’s why I’ve asked Carrie Anne to expand our successful poetry therapy program to bring in staff as well as patients.”

With one ear I heard Pat reading my introduction. With the other, I listened for the whisper of Maggie’s voice reminding me that I could do this. As Pat lowered the microphone to my level, I wheeled myself up the ramp. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Amanda give me a thumbs-up when I reached the stage.

Who would have thought that the journey which began in a high corner of the emergency trauma room would have brought me to this point? I thanked Pat, then began. “The formula for spiritual health is the same as the formula for physical health. Avoid things that are harmful, and do things that are beneficial. It’s just that simple. Simple, though not always easy. One of the poems Maggie shared with me early in my hospital stay was about turning every complaint into either a blessing or a solution. Now, instead of being bitter about being paralyzed, I’m grateful for living at a time when so much can be done for paraplegics. And I’m privileged to be part of the effort to find new ways that we can do a better job of making this hospital, and our world, more accessible to people with physical limitations.”

I had not cleared my speech with the CEO, nor had he asked me to, but I was still apprehensive about the challenge I was going to issue to my hospital colleagues. *Proceed until apprehended.* I proceeded. “Maggie was right. I’ve come to realize just how emotionally toxic complaining is – not just for those who do the complaining, but for everyone around them. Many years ago, we made this a smoke-free hospital. We

did this for the *physical* health of our patients and our employees. For the same reason, I challenge us to eliminate the emotional toxicity that is so harmful to our *spiritual* health.”

I paused to read my audience. So far, so good. “It’s been said that pain is mandatory, but misery is optional. As I sit in this wheelchair, I tell you that truer words were never spoken. There is, of course, a lot of pain in our hospital, and as Pat mentioned, it’s not only our patients. But there’s also a lot of misery, much of it petty misery, so petty we don’t even notice it unless we’re paying attention. But all that petty misery accumulates, and it affects our ability to be the best caregivers we can be, to be the best parents we can be. The sad thing is, most of that misery is self-inflicted. And it is unnecessary.”

I took a sip of water from the bottle that I always kept on the side of the wheelchair and smiled at another mini-blessing: a wheelchair is handy for hauling around a daily supply of groceries. Then I continued. “What if I could wave a magic wand and for one month erase all the emotional toxicity in this hospital, the way we eliminated toxic cigarette smoke? Instead of whining about how far away they had to park, people would thank God they had legs to enjoy the walk in from the parking lot. Instead of moaning about the food, they would give Pat suggestions for how the cafeteria could make more money selling the sort of food they like... I guarantee he would listen.” Pat nodded his emphatic agreement, earning laughter and scattered requests for swordfish, tacos, and Krispy Kreme doughnuts. “And instead of complaining about the patient in Bed 238, they would imagine themselves in that bed, and give the kind of care that they would want to receive.”

At his point, I departed from my prepared remarks. “That was my room. I spent so many months in Bed 238 that I almost put roots down into the mattress. You know, our patients can tell right away who really cares and who’s just going through the motions for a paycheck. And I’ll tell you this. You can’t be what Maggie called a bitter pickle-sucker out in the corridor and somehow transform yourself into a genuinely compassionate caregiver when you walk into a patient’s room. Patients see right through the fraud.”

I surveyed the audience, then returned to my planned speech. “What do you think would happen at the end of that month, the first time someone started to whine about the parking, moan about the food, or complain about the patients?” No answers. I continued. “I’ll tell you what would happen. The same thing that would happen if someone were to light a cigarette today – they’d be shown to the next county.” Everyone laughed, and no one louder than Bill Morton, the only member of the administrative team who still smoked.

“I challenge us to make Memorial the world’s first misery-free hospital. That doesn’t mean we won’t have pain, it just means that we will no longer complain about our pain.

We'll no longer inflict misery upon ourselves, and upon each other. It's a paradox that by refusing to allow the misery, we'll do a much better job of easing the pain. I learned that from a nurse right here at Memorial, the night she took a bit of extra time to read Emily Dickinson to me, and to tell me about Florence Nightingale." I waved to Evelyn Foster, who was seated in a folding chair parked next to the fountain, and she blushed. "Florence never complained," I continued, "and she had to endure a lot more than any of us ever do." Evelyn smiled and nodded in agreement.

"I know some of you are thinking it would take a miracle, and you're probably right, but one thing I've learned since becoming paralyzed is that miracles do happen. In fact, I now routinely expect them. And before you call me a Pollyanna, you should go back and read that story, or watch the movie, because that little girl Pollyanna, *despite* being paralyzed, did for her community precisely what I am prescribing for Memorial Hospital – she made a miracle happen. And we can too."

I looked down at Bill Terry, whose Indy 500 wheelchair was parked at the end of the front row, and saw him mouth the word "amen," possibly referring to the fact that he'd finally taught me how to juggle. I winked at him, then continued. "Something else I've learned through my experience is that a healthy soul requires exercise every bit as much as a healthy body does. And poetry is a wonderful soul-building exercise. It's my pleasure to announce that over the next year, we will be inviting guest poets to give readings here at Memorial Hospital. We'll also be holding workshops for employees who would like to learn more about poetry as a means of self-exploration and self-expression."

I paused for a moment to reassure the butterflies, then retrieved the pink journal from the pouch on my wheelchair. "I'll close with a poem for the caregivers, and point out that we all have the opportunity to be caregivers, caring for each other. It's called Growing Soul." I took a deep breath, then commenced my first public poetry reading since the ninth grade.

Growing Soul

Take care of your garden, caregiver

Don't plant it with brambles and weeds

You won't grow orchids and roses

If in spring you plant dandelion seeds

Take care of your garden, caregiver

Nurture it with kindness and care

Help delicate buds become lovely flowers

With water and sunshine and prayer

Take care of your garden, caregiver

Protect it from bugs and from blight

Walk daily the rows with a vigilant eye

Shelter it from frost in the night

Take care of your garden, caregiver

At its heart erect a maypole

Then dance and sing as twilight falls round

Cultivate this home for your soul

I acknowledged the polite applause and closed the pink journal. “Way to go, Carrie Anne!” The raucous shout came from the far corner of the Healing Garden. Maggie was jumping up and down on the wooden bench, waving her arms like a cheerleader with pom-poms. Nobody else seemed to see or hear her. I blinked hard, and when I reopened my eyes, she had returned to the sea.

Chapter 25

“The most dangerous point in a newly-paralyzed person’s life is not when they realize how badly they’ve been hurt; it’s when they start to make real progress in their recovery. That’s when they begin to appreciate just how long it’s going to take, how hard it’s going to be, and how limited their ultimate potential probably is. It’s at that point they’re most likely to become discouraged and depressed. I keep a very close eye on my patients at precisely the point where it seems like the worst is behind them. We’ve all worked too hard through a long and painful night only to lose everything just as the sun is coming up.”

Amanda’s words came back to me full-force as I read the poem that Bryan Hammerman had written as his latest poetry workshop assignment. He’d been paralyzed in a motorcycle accident almost a year ago, and had indeed made great progress. He’d recovered full use of his arms and hands. But he was increasingly discouraged that his progress had run into a brick wall at the beltline. I never knew which Bryan would show up at our poetry workshop – the one showing off the barbed wire tattoo on his bicep or the one drowning in self-pity because his legs couldn’t tread water. The last lines of his latest poem froze my heart:

I can still move my finger.

I can still pull a trigger.

It was 6:30 on Tuesday evening. I was in the conference room where the Para-Quad Support Group would be gathering at 7:00. Bryan had agreed to meet me there at 6:00. He hadn’t shown up. Nobody was answering the phone at his apartment. I was on the narrow cusp that separates merely worried from truly frantic. Bryan perfectly fit Amanda’s profile of a high suicide risk: a young man who one minute has the world at his fingertips and an unlimited future at his feet, and a minute later – after flying over the handlebars of a motorcycle, diving from the top of a bridge, or tackling another football player – faces the prospect of life in a wheelchair.

At 6:37 Bryan wheeled himself into the room. “Sorry I’m late. I had to check something out.”

“No problem,” I replied, trying my best not to sound like a distraught mom whose boy had come home hours after his curfew. “What were you checking out?”

The chairs had been removed from around the conference table for our group. Bryan parked his wheelchair on the other side and laid a folder on the table. “My homework,” he said as he slid it over to me.

“Thank you. What were you checking out?”

Bryan closed his eyes and puckered his face. Then he said, “When the radiologist showed me the x-rays, he said there was no way I’d ever walk again, that I was paralyzed and would just have to deal with it.” He shifted his weight in the wheelchair, looked down at his feet, then back at me. “Today...” He smiled like a kid who’d just stepped through the gates to Disneyland. “Today I wiggled my big toe. So I guess I’m dealing with it, huh?”

You know, there just aren’t enough different words in the English language to describe the act of crying. I cry at weddings and I cry at funerals. And I cry when a young man whose hope had been taken away from him wiggles his big toe.

Caleb Johnson, the hospital social worker who specializes in working with people who have spinal cord injuries, facilitated our group. “Is everything okay?” he asked when he came into the room and saw me in tears. I nodded, but before Caleb could question me, other members began filing in.

As always, we began the meeting by going around the room, with each group member having the opportunity to share something, or to take a pass. The way seating was arranged, it happened that Bryan would go first and I would go last. Caleb gave Bryan a nod. “Last week, you expressed your anger at people who have legs but don’t use them. Any new thoughts you’d like to share this evening?”

At the previous meeting, Bryan had gone off on a rant about obese people who drive around shopping mall parking lots trying to find a space closest to the front door, waddle to the nearest escalator, then go in and stuff their fat faces with the all the fast food they can eat (Bryan’s words, not mine). “People who abuse their bodies like that don’t deserve to have legs,” he’d said, “when I would give anything to be able to run up a flight of stairs or pick an apple from a tree.” Most of that meeting had been focused on trying to help Bryan (and through him, the rest of us) transform his anger at the outer world into energy to tame the inner world. Caleb obviously wanted us to pick up tonight where we’d left off last week.

Bryan just smiled and shrugged. “I wiggled my big toe.”

For a moment there was a stunned sort of silence in the room. *Did he say he juggled his yo-yo? He jiggled in deep snow?* Then the room was filled with clapping and a round of the awkward sort of hugs that people in wheelchairs give one another. It took Caleb ten minutes to get things back on track. When he finally did, he asked Bryan to say more about his feelings, and about what this meant to him, now that he could wiggle his big toe.

“I really haven’t sorted it all out yet,” Bryan replied. “At first I was really excited – I’d have done back flips if I still could. But then...” He closed his eyes and bit his lower lip. Part of Caleb’s genius as a group facilitator was knowing when to press the conversation and when to keep his mouth shut. He kept his mouth shut. We all filled the silence in our own ways – watching Bryan, watching anything but Bryan – but in our own ways we were sending him the power of our prayers.

“This is going to be really hard,” he finally said. “You all know me. I’m not a patient guy – I can’t even stand to wait in line at McDonald’s!” Everyone laughed; you didn’t have to know Bryan for more than about five minutes to appreciate that he didn’t just have attention deficit disorder – he had what he called the RBADD version – Really Bad!

“Well,” he continued, “last week I didn’t have anything to wait for because I didn’t have any hope of something worth waiting for. I was going to spend my life in a wheelchair. Period. End of story. But now, I can wiggle my big toe.” He pushed his wheelchair away from the table and looked down at his feet, then pulled himself back in. “Does that mean that someday I’ll walk again? Or does it just mean that today I can wiggle my big toe? It’s going to be a long time before I know, and the uncertainty is killing me.”

I must have frowned at Bryan without meaning to, because he immediately smiled and said, “Okay, Carrie Anne keeps telling us to be careful about the words we choose. The uncertainty really isn’t killing me, it just feels like it. I want to know right now – will I walk again? I want to know if I’ll ever stroll along the beach, feeling the sand between my toes and holding hands with my girlfriend. The uncertainty is torture.”

“The problem with instant gratification is that it takes too long,” Greta Faber interjected. She’d been a member of the group more than ten years, and could always be counted upon to inject a little note of humor at just the right moment.

We continued around the room, with each member sharing their thoughts on the torture of doubt and the power of hope. I tried to listen with half an ear, but mostly I concentrated on what I was writing in the pink journal. When it was finally my turn, Caleb said, “Carrie Anne, you’ve been awful busy over there. Have you created something to share with the rest of us?”

I nodded. I’d long since stopped being shy or apologetic about reading unpolished poems that were written straight from the heart. “I’ve been thinking about the paradox that the miracle of healing often requires an incredible sense of urgency, and at the same time unbelievable patience.” I turned toward Bryan and spoke directly to him. “You need to work on strengthening that big toe, and getting the toe next to it to wiggle, with the urgency of putting out a fire. But you also need to leave walking on the beach with

your girlfriend in the hands of God, and trust that whatever happens will be for the best. That's what this poem is about." I took a slow breath and said my prayer. Then I read:

Waiting

I am patient

As nighttime peering toward the eastern sky

As an acorn sensing the fertile ground

As low tide feeling for the pull of the moon

Silence answers: not now but soon

I am patient

As an eaglet knocking on the door of her shell

As a sleeping bear on a thawing day

As a lioness brooding over unfed cubs

Silence answers: it's on the way

I am patient

As ocean surf pounding sandy shore

As a mountain stream racing down bouldered slopes

As an August fire roaring through prairie grass

Silence answers: just a bit more

I am patient

As lightning on a summer night

As a funnel cloud dropping from a low black sky

As a hole dug six feet in the ground

Silence answers: you better slow down

“There’s only one real finish line in life,” I said after I’d closed the pink journal, “and you want to make lots of detours before you reach it. That six-foot hole is waiting for all of us, Bryan. Don’t be in too big a hurry to get there.”

Chapter 26

What do you write into a poem for a woman who no longer feels like a woman? I wadded up yet another page from my yellow pad and pitched it in the general direction of the wastebasket, missing by a car length. Thus far, I hadn't scratched out anything worthy of being entered into the pink journal, even as a draft, much less to be presented to Carol Mullins tomorrow afternoon.

I'd fallen into a pattern of writing poems for my patients while sitting in Mark's favorite easy chair in the den (not only was it the most comfortable spot in the house, I could tell Amanda that I got a workout every time I climbed in and out of it from my wheelchair). Chewing on the end of my pen, I contemplated the picture of snow-capped Mount Iliamna, a photograph Mark had taken from a kayak when we'd vacationed in Alaska. It was beautiful, it was forbidding. Like the challenge, and the privilege, of writing a poem for a woman who had lost her breast, and then lost her hair, in the fight to save her life.

I scribbled a few lines to the effect that if God covered a volcano with snow, it didn't make it any the less a volcano, that its volcaneness was held in the fiery rumblings deep inside, not in the decorative smoky plume an artist would have us see coming from out the top. But the more I tried to draw the metaphorical bridge between volcaneness and womanness, the more trite and banal my poem became.

After an hour of littering the floor with yellow poet droppings, I finally set aside the pen. What would Maggie have written? Maggie could always find words to give hope even if there was no hope. Maggie once told me that, though she regretted not having had more years to live and to write more poems, she was thankful for having had cancer. If it hadn't been for the disease, she'd said, she never would have given herself permission to become a poet. She would never have known what to say without first having been in the shoes, or in the wheelchairs, of the people for whom she was writing.

What would Maggie have written? She would have written about how adversity is just part of the journey. That how we choose to deal with that adversity is what makes us become who we are in the process of our journey. She would have said that things which break you down can ultimately make you stronger. That's what Maggie would have told Carol. This is the part of the journey that requires strength. So be strong.

I closed my eyes and let myself drift into the wilderness of sleep. I dreamed I was hiking alone in the mountains. Walking through the pinewood forest, squirrels skittered about at my feet and songbirds celebrated the day in the branches, which sheltered us from the furious winds howling down the mountainside. I wanted to stay forever in this arboreal womb, but something impelled me upward. As I climbed, the trail grew steep and rocky;

pine trees gave way to stunted shrubs. I had to crawl on hands and knees into the teeth of the relentless gale barreling down the slope.

As I continued to climb, the wind pelted me with sleet and snow. The force of the gale tore away my clothing. Wretched and freezing, I pulled myself across the ground, hanging on to each rocky handhold with the desperation of a drowning person. Howling like Satan, the wind ripped out my hair by the roots. The rocks tore into my hands and my knees, and still I crawled on, trying to ignore the pain. In one murderous gust, the wind pried open my mouth and yanked out my teeth, and in the next, gouged out my eyes.

Frantic now, I blindly clawed my way onward, hand over hand, having lost my legs to the cleaving of razor sharp stones. My screams for help were sucked out of my lungs before they could even take shape in my mouth. I was at the end of my strength, at the end of the world. I let go my grasp of the last stone anchor and waited for the gale to blow me off the mountain all the way to hell. Instead, a warm and loving hand lifted me from the wreckage of my body. "Welcome home," said a voice that was neither male nor female, yet somehow both. In that instant I knew that though I'd lost everything in the climb, I'd gained everything in the ascent.

The warmth of that loving hand remained with me in those drowsy moments when you can't tell whether it's dawn or evening, whether you are asleep or awake, or even which is your real and natural state. I luxuriated in the fuzzy glow until it had completely evaporated. Then it was time to get back to work. I had an appointment to keep. Maggie had been so right. Perhaps I could not give Carol Mullins hope, or healing, but I could share with her my own hope, my own healing.

Back in my wheelchair, I lit the spice candles on my desk and turned off the overhead light. I said my prayer, then opened the pink journal. After writing several drafts in the journal, I pulled out my calligraphy pen set and some deluxe parchment paper. It took the better part of the evening to get it right, but I finally got it right.

Above the Tree Line

Above the tree line there are no green woods

to shelter you against howling winds and flying snow.

Footing is treacherous, handholds tenuous.

It is stark, it is beautiful, it is

unforgiving of the careless traveler.

Above the tree line yesterday and tomorrow fade into forever
and molehills of the valley disappear in the distance.

Above the tree line no one cares if you are beautiful –
Only that you are strong.

Above the tree line the air is cold and rare.

The climb will challenge your faith, it will test your courage.

If you pass that test you will see the world
as through the eyes of God.

Don't be afraid to travel above the tree line
where the earth makes love to the sky.

I'd made a sufficient number of circuits from coma to consciousness, from anesthesia to awareness, to know that there is a huge gray area in between the waking and sleeping worlds. This *not-yes* and *not-no* space betwixt these separate realities is the seedbed for miracles; it's where the impossible dream of today takes root, and becomes hope for the miraculous new world of tomorrow.

I sealed this new poem into an envelope and prayed that as Carol Mullins traveled above the tree line, she would discover the meaning in her difficult journey, and that from that frigid bare peak she would, indeed, see the world as through the eyes of God.

The Great Divide

Clocks run faster on the distant side

of the Great Divide;

and you never know when the sun might decide

to set itself down without fair warning.

On the distant side of the Great Divide

killing time is a capital crime.

Space contracts on the distant side

of the Great Divide;

there's less room for error so you'd better

get it right the first time.

On the distant side of the Great Divide

the wrong turn can descend to a precipitous dead end.

The air is clear on the distant side

of the Great Divide;

You begin to see the trail that leads to the place

you are meant to be. Walk fast.

The distant side of the Great Divide might be

closer than you think.

C.A.M.

Chapter 27

“If you ain’t scared, you ain’t skiing!” The words were stenciled on the t-shirt of a deeply-tanned young man who didn’t look like much of anything would scare him. I scribbled the phrase down in my journal, grist for a future poem.

Nine years ago, Amanda had talked me out of an electric wheelchair. Now she’d talked me into joining her *Bum-Legged Ski Bums Club* on their annual spring trip to Lake Tahoe. Even better, Robbie and his wife Molly would be joining us. Robbie had just finished his third year of medical school. Molly taught math at the local community college, but – and this was the best part! – she was taking a year off to care for their new baby Margaret Anne (who, we had already decided, would go by Maggie).

Before the accident, Mark and I had raced each other down double black diamond ski slopes. But nothing in my previous experience had come close to the terror, and the exhilaration, of having been strapped onto a ski-sled that was custom-designed for paraplegics, and set loose to fly down the bunny hill. By the end of the week, I was skiing with Robbie down some of Tahoe’s milder intermediate slopes. I knew I was skiing, because I was plenty scared!

The highlight of each day came in the afternoons, when I got to baby-sit little Maggie so that Molly could ski with Robbie. We sat in front of the lodge fireplace, we two, I with my hot chocolate and Maggie with her pacifier, and I read poems to her. Classic and contemporary, she loved them all – even the ones I’d written. Don’t ask me how I know this, I just do, but her favorite was the one I completed right there, sitting in front of the fireplace with little Maggie on my lap:

Old Ladies

I love watching people on their journeys

Through airports.

Inventing make-up lives, romantic and mysterious,

To match

The strange faces and costumes that skitted by like

Exotic birds;

Especially the babies –

Babies on shoulders, babies on hips, babies in strollers;
Babies slapping the hard floors with their exuberant little feet;
Babies leading their parents on a merry chase down the
Delicious new world of an airport concourse;
Babies running open-armed and wide-eyed to welcome their
Beloved Grandmothers.

Grandmothers make us special.

Grandmothers make us human.

We're not just old ladies.

We're Grandmas!

One bleak day long ago, seemingly in another lifetime, I looked down from a high corner of a frantic room. I'd almost let the angels without wings lose the broken lady they were trying so hard to save. There were many days afterward that I'd wished I had let them lose her. Sitting in front of the fireplace with little Maggie, I knew why I'd come back.

MacGuffin

I've given my wheelchair a name:

MacGuffin.

The accident that brought MacGuffin

into my life

wasn't about being paralyzed,

wasn't about being a widow,

wasn't about being a poet.

It was a slowly-emerging illumination

in a long conversation with God.

A MacGuffin is “a particular event, object, factor, etc., initially presented as being of great significance to the story, but often having little actual importance for the plot as it develops” (Oxford English Dictionary).

C.A.M.

Chapter 28

It had been thirty years since we'd planted The Healing Tree in the garden. Now I was coming back for what I knew would be my last visit. Robbie picked me up at the care center. He'd pushed my wheelchair slowly through the hospital corridors, solicitous of the memories – painful and beautiful – that inhabited this place of healing, which for a deeply-etched fragment of time had been my home.

We paused for a long time at the hallway leading back into the oncology unit. Even after all these years, they'd maintained the display featuring some of Maggie's best poems, the Maggie-grams that had touched so many lives in the course of her own too-short life. I smiled at the picture of my little mermaid's impish face with the dazzling green eyes and the wild red hair that only I knew was the only thing about her that wasn't real.

A young hospital volunteer in a blue polo shirt held the door open for us. It was a lovely September day, and a faintly exotic breeze drifted across the garden, inspiring the wind chimes to make their music. The Healing Tree – which had been no more than ten inches high when Maggie first brought her into my room – now towered over the rest of the garden. Robbie pushed my wheelchair up to the brick-lined border and I heard the long-familiar click of the wheels being locked. We sat in silence, Robbie's hands resting on my shoulders.

Something was moving under the tree, something vague and fuzzy. *These old eyes are playing tricks on me.* I shut my eyes and felt the breeze play across my face and sing softly in my ears. It was a familiar song, long unheard but never forgotten. *An angel in the window, a mermaid on a moonbeam.* When I opened my eyes again, the image under the tree had become more distinct. There was a little girl on a swing. Her long red hair flowed wild in the wind, her emerald eyes twinkled.

The girl in the swing looked back over her shoulder at the man pushing her. A man I had not seen in over thirty years. The only man I had ever loved.

They were waiting for me.

I put my hands on the arms of the wheelchair and slowly pushed myself up. Like an old sailor standing on dry land after a long voyage, it took me a while to regain my balance. I rocked back and forth a few times, then took a tentative first step. Then another. Mark and Maggie encouraged me on. A few more steps.

I looked back over my shoulder one last time. Robbie was still standing there, his hands on the shoulders of the lady who had once been broken. I smiled and waved, though I

knew I'd stepped into a world that my son could not yet see. Then, hand-in-hand with the man I'd always loved and the daughter I'd always longed for, I walked into forever.

Questions for discussion

These questions will help you think about how the story in *The Healing Tree* can relate to your own life story. They will also give you ideas for discussing the book with friends and family, coworkers, and members of a book club.

Carrie Anne's is a fictional story, but in a larger sense it is also the story of millions of people who have transformed a shattering adversity into the platform for a future miracle. But people don't, and can't, bring about these transforming miracles without help – lots of help. What is our collective responsibility – within our families and within society – to help those who have suffered serious misfortune? What is our individual responsibility to devote some of our resources (time as well as money) to helping others?

Patrick Franklin, the CEO of Memorial Hospital, commented on the fact that there was a lot of pain in the organization, including the daily pain experienced by employees. He could have been speaking about any organization anywhere, couldn't he? Combining his comments with those of Pastor Andy Brennan, about how people who actively participate in support groups can heal more quickly, consider this question: what can any of us do to give our workplaces more of the qualities of a support group, in which members are there for each other, help each other, and when appropriate, pray for each other?

In her speech in the Healing Garden, Carrie Anne challenged her coworkers to make Memorial the world's first "misery-free hospital" by transforming every complaint into either a blessing or a solution. She acknowledged that this would probably take a miracle, but added that in the years since her accident she had grown to routinely expect miracles. Discuss the climate of your own workplace – how much toxic emotional negativity is there, and what is the impact on morale, productivity, and even people's health? What would it take to mount such a challenge in your organization?

At a time when Carrie Anne's dreams had been shattered, several people played key roles in helping her find new dreams – Maggie, Amanda, Evelyn, and others. What is our collective responsibility to help people find new dreams from the ashes of their nightmares, and what techniques can we use to do so?

The Gallup organization has conducted studies showing that many people have strengths that they are never called upon to use at work. This could include, for example, a nurse who likes to write poetry, which is not part of the nursing job description. Should managers encourage people to find a way to bring a strength to work? Should employees look for ways to see their job description as a floor – the basic requirements upon which

they add their own special touch – rather than as a ceiling – an absolute limit on what they are willing or able to do on the job?

In *The Healing Tree*, Dr. Paulson encourages Robbie to think about becoming a doctor. Yet in the world of today, many doctors are telling young people to avoid medicine because of the bureaucratic hindrances and income limitations. What is the responsibility of the professional (in any profession) to promote his or her profession, and/or to promote his or her organization?

Maggie told Carrie Anne that writing poems for others was as much a part of her own healing as it was the healing of the person for whom she was writing. One of the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous is that of “mutuality.” The relationship between the recovering alcoholic and his or her sponsor is a two-way street. *Being* a sponsor is as important for the recovery process as *having* a sponsor. How could adopting this philosophy of mutuality help any of us be more effective as parents, as managers, as coworkers, and as caregivers? Discuss how this philosophy pertains to your relationships – at home, at work, and in your community.

In her poem *The Hope Diamond*, Maggie makes the distinction between false hope and true despair. In our roles as parents, as managers, and as caregivers, how do we make the judgment as to when to encourage people to pursue their “impossible” dreams, and when to tell them to face reality? How do we strike the best balance, for ourselves and for those we are seeking to help in their own journeys through life? In discussing this question, it is useful to consider the distinction between positive thinking and wishful thinking: *Positive thinking is expecting something and working to make it happen; wishful thinking is hoping for something and waiting for someone else to make it happen.*

At one point, Carrie Anne uses the term “protective denial.” In his book *Blindsided*, Richard M. Cohen describes his experience in dealing with a devastating illness. He said that for him, “denial has been the linchpin of the determination to cope and to hope... Denial encourages anyone to test perceived limits and, as a consequence, to postpone concessions. There is nothing wrong with that.” Do you agree, and if so, what is your responsibility to allow someone else to engage in “protective denial,” even if you think they are being delusional?

For a long time, Carrie Anne rides on an emotional roller coaster. In poems like *Blue Ice* and *Resting in Peace*, she is in the pit of despair. Yet by story’s end, Carrie Anne has started a new career as a poetry therapist, learned how to ski with special paraplegic equipment, and become a grandmother. How do people find the strength and the courage to stay on the roller coaster without falling off, and what can we do to help out when it hits a downturn?

“Where was God? Why didn’t God do something?” These are inevitable questions after any sort of tragedy. They are certainly questions that Carrie Anne asked (and which Andy Brennan did his best to answer). What do you think? Where was God in this story? Where is God any time that war, natural disaster, or other tragedy strikes?

In discussing her living will with her son Robbie, Carrie Anne draws a line between life in a wheelchair, which she was willing to live with and fight for, and life as a brain-diminished human vegetable being kept alive by machines. This is a hugely controversial issue in our world today, which has enormous implications for the allocation of limited medical resources, not to mention human health and dignity. Where should the line be drawn, why should it be drawn there, and what will it take to gain public support for that line?

When Carrie Anne suggested that she would begin with an electric wheelchair, Amanda the physical therapist commented on how it would totally change the way others looked at her. To what extent has our society stigmatized people with disabilities, and what else can be done to remind all of us that these fellow human beings deserve to be treated with equal dignity?

What do you make of Bryan Hammerman’s “rant” about obese people waddling into shopping malls to stuff their faces with fast food? What do the various dramas in *The Healing Tree* tell us about personal responsibility and accountability in our world today?

Thank God Ahead of Time is the title of a book by Father Michael Crosby. It is also an excellent mindset for dealing with adversity, real or apparent. Many people look back on adversity as having been a blessing, in the way that Bill Terry (the wheelchair juggler) did. What can *you* do to internalize the “Thank God Ahead of Time” philosophy yourself – before you need it? How can you help others do the same?

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This book might not have come into being but for my long association with the Planetree Alliance. I have unbounded respect for the vision of Planetree, and the highest admiration for the people behind the effort, including Patrick Charmel, Susan Frampton, Laura Gilpin, Randy Carter, and the rest of the incredible staff. In *The Healing Tree*, Maggie quotes T.S. Eliot in saying that “great poets steal.” I admit to having been sorely tempted to do just that when I read Laura’s brilliant book of poetry, *The Hocus-Pocus of the Universe*.

I also appreciate the support and encouragement for my work on *The Twelve Core Action Values* from hospitals across the country. In addition to Pat Charmel, CEO of Griffin Hospital, I wish to recognize Dave Gilbreath of Central Peninsula General Hospital, Charlie Franz of South Peninsula Hospital, Mimi Roberson of Presbyterian/St. Luke’s Medical Center, Todd Linden of Grinnell Regional Medical Center, Sandy Haryasz of Page Hospital, Leigh Cox of Navapache Regional Medical Center, Les Donahue of Sentara Virginia Beach General Hospital, Steve Carlson of Flagstaff Medical Center, Don Patterson of Washington County Hospital and Clinic, Genny Maroc of Marengo Memorial Hospital, Linda Shearer of Immanuel Lutheran Corporation, Heidi Gil of United Methodist Homes, and Kathleen Allman of the Millennium Surgery Center.

I hope that anyone who reads *The Healing Tree* will see that the healing principles of care-giving apply to every organization, not just hospitals. In that regard, I’m grateful for the support of Jeff Stoburg and the incredible team at West Central, Kurt and Mari Stocker and the good folks of Broken Arrow, Paul Cox and all of the Rangers of Grand Canyon National Park, and Jim “Gymbeaux” Brown of Keller Williams Realty. I’m especially thankful for the support and friendship of CEO Roger Looyenga and the rest of the crew at Auto-Owners Insurance Company, a Fortune 500 corporation filled with “No Problem” people for whom customer service and care-giving are one and the same.

I wish I could mention all the people who have been a personal inspiration. Sally Kletzky’s angel sits side-by-side with Maggie’s angel on my bookshelf and in my heart. Nick Yutzy is a real-world Bill Terry. Professional speakers W. Mitchell and the late Art Berg showed that, to quote the title of Mitchell’s book, it’s not what happens to you, it’s what you do about it. Speaking of speaking, I am grateful to the speakers bureaus that have helped me share *The Twelve Core Action Values* with their clients across the country.

Dick Schwab has been an outstanding role model and counselor, as have the other members of my Accountability Advisory Board. Every time I found myself stuck or

blocked, I would re-read Steven Pressfield's masterful *The War of Art: Winning the Inner Creative Battle* and get back to work. Al Weber, Dave Popelka, Tony Thrush, and the other creative and hardworking folks at the Sigler Companies transformed the book from mere manuscript into finished product on time and on budget. Elena Barabashova is the net genius who designed my web sites. I suppose I owe a tip of the hat to the neighbor's hound whose incessant barking reminded me that the world will not keep quiet so you can think – you have to teach yourself to think despite the noise.

I am thankful to the many poets, living and dead, who (without knowing they had done so) took me under their literary wings in the same way that Maggie adopted Carrie Anne. At the top of the list is Billy Collins, who showed me that poems don't have to be stuffy and stilted to be considered real poetry. Carrie Anne's poem *The Envelope, Please* is based on one written by Annie Tye when she was in the second grade, and the Vladimir Nabokov quote that Maggie shared with Carrie Anne was lifted from Doug Tye's Honors Thesis at The University of Iowa, where he is now a graduate assistant in the English Department. Special thanks to McZen for allowing me to quote several of his poems in this book (you can see more of his work at www.McZenPoems.com). And to Dr. Ellen Cram for that long-ago post-it note: "If this can sell..."

With every word of this book, I was reminded of how important family is, and how lucky I am to have mine. For Mom and Dad, I hope I haven't fallen far from the tree under which you sheltered us kids. For Steven, Nancy, and Allen, I couldn't be prouder of how quickly and how far you have moved out from under the shadow of big brother. Above all, *The Healing Tree* was inspired by, and is a reflection of, my eternal love for Sally, Annie, and Doug. You are my miracle!

About the Author

As America's Values Coach, Joe Tye helps individuals and organizations achieve their goals by more effectively living their values. He is creator of *The Twelve Core Action Values*, a comprehensive and systematic curriculum of values-based life and leadership skills.

Joe is also the author of more than a dozen books and audio programs on personal, professional, and business success, including the international bestseller *Never Fear, Never Quit: A Story of Courage and Perseverance*.

Joe is a nationally-acclaimed speaker with a unique and compelling message. He has worked with a wide variety of hospitals, associations, businesses, and Fortune 500 companies across North America. He provides practical tools and solutions to help client organizations cultivate a more positive and productive workplace environment and corporate culture.

The Values Coach e-mail newsletter *Spark Plug* has a large and growing worldwide readership. This unique e-publication gives readers a regular infusion of great information and ideas, and the inspiration to put them into practice. To subscribe, visit Joe's web site at www.JoeTye.com.

Joe lives with his family on a small farmstead in Iowa, and his second home is at tent in the backcountry of the Grand Canyon.

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The Vietnam Open Educational Resources

Hanoi Spring is an advanced technology platform designed to allow the public to share teaching and learning materials and curriculum development. It is based on the concept of open educational resources (OER). This revolutionary concept of knowledge sharing was pioneered by MIT University and Rice University in the U.S. more than a decade ago. Since then, there has been a growing OER movement globally, and UNESCO has embraced OER as an official program in many countries around the world.

The Vietnam Foundation and its technology team in Hanoi play a leading role in the development, technology and framework for global OER. Vietnamese OER experts have been invited to Paris to advise UNESCO on its OER policy recommendations, and they have traveled to other countries to help educational institutions implement OER programs.

Under the management of the Vietnam Foundation, the Vietnam Open Educational Resources (VOER) has become a major portal for students and teachers inside and outside of Vietnam. Every day, thousands visitors access VOER (www.voer.edu.vn) to research and download materials. There are more than 21,000 knowledge modules from nearly 4,000 contributing authors; among them are well-known scientists living inside Vietnam such as Dr. Nguyen Van Hieu (Physics), Dr. Nguyen Lan Dung (Biology), and Dr. Pham Phu (Mathematics), as well as Vietnamese scholars living abroad such as Dr. Minh Do (Electrical Engineering); Dr. Thanh Truong (Chemistry) and Dr. John Vu (Information Technology).

Dr. Ray Gamble of the U.S. National Academies, and also the founding chairman of the Vietnam Foundation, observes “The participation and support of the best scholastic minds of Vietnam is a testament to the success of VOER. Now we can offer Hanoi Spring to the global OER community to further advance educational opportunity. It is a gift from the Vietnamese people to the world.”

Hanoi Spring was designed and developed over the last two years by a team of Vietnamese software experts and volunteers located in Hanoi, working with the support and direction of the Vietnam Foundation. The platform is robust; it is easy to install, manage and use. It can handle thousands of concurrent users and supports different national languages.