



Chapter 10

Bởi:
unknown

“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!”

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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.