

# STORM PATH



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## **Storm Path**

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To my one-and-only Love—thanks for the ready, steady hand to hold in every storm we face.

Annie-Ran: you write the music that first-graders sing! Thanks.

To friends who've survived storms as harsh as what Helen faces in this novel: This story isn't *about* you, it's *for* you. I salute how you've never lost sight of *North*.



## C H A P T E R I

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With his nose brushing against the door's window, Bob Marshall peered into Joy Jenkins' first-grade classroom and murmured, "Hmmm." Throughout his career as school principal, *hmmm* had proven to be a useful word. When a child spun a tall tale of innocence in a schoolyard tussle, an abrupt *hmmm* meant *Yeah, right!* If parents fussed about a teacher's grading system, a drawn-out *hmmm* and slow nod said *I hear you*—yet made no promises. Repeated *hmmms* accompanied by eye contact in the school cafeteria allowed him to communicate—and still eat lunch.

Standing in the hallway, he employed the *Well, whaddya know?* sliding-scale version of *hmmm*. What he saw inside mystified him. A crazy quilt of mismatched bed sheets covered the entire mid-section of the sunlit room. Spring-type clothespins connected the expanse of fabric and books stacked on desktops anchored it in place. The billowing canopy rose and fell in random motions like a volcano churning below the earth's surface.

"That was quick!" Janeen Woods, the school secretary, said when Bob returned to the office.

"Whatever is going on in Room 112 is exactly why Fred Becker wants a last-day-of-school article on Joy for the *Prairie Rose Chronicle*."

"What's happening?" Janeen spun away from her computer.

"Not sure; desks are pushed against the walls and there's a whooshing sound beneath some tent-thing."

“That’s their hot-air balloon! I loaned Joy a couple of bed sheets for it.”

Bob’s eyebrows arched. “Hmmm?”

Having worked with Bob Marshall for over a decade, Janeen was no stranger to the *hmmm* lexicon. “The first graders have studied what Prairie Rose looks like from the ground and the sky. So their last-day-of-school activity is a hot-air balloon trip!”

Bob nodded thoughtfully. “Joy has been a marvelous teacher for twenty-two years. She leaves mighty big shoes for Amy Carter to fill. Give me a buzz when Fred gets here, okay?”

In Room 112, Joy sat cross-legged on a mat beneath the makeshift canopy. Several fans set at high speed created the requisite ballooning appearance Bob had observed. Appropriate sound effects from a cassette player provided a realistic experience for fifteen bright-eyed children.

Joy glanced around the circle and felt a pang of something between regret and relief. For nearly two decades, she had welcomed children to this room in the PRAIRIE ROSE PUBLIC SCHOOL. The crucial kindergarten year gave them a nudge past their initial fears; but first grade was the launching pad, the foundation, the linchpin.

The awesomeness of her responsibility to each incoming class always weighed heavily on her mind. For years, that realization had provided restless nights during the final weeks of summer. But once the bell rang on the first day of school, she was *home* and fully confident in her work.

Now it was ending. At the end of the day, Joy Jenkins would join the segment of humanity for whom the term *new year* meant January 1, not a floating day in early autumn.

“Missus Jenkins?” A familiar voice broke through her brief reverie.

“Yes, Sally?”

“I think we should sing *My Little Compass*.”

“That’s a good idea!” Joy smiled at the raven-haired girl.

“Missus Jenkins, will you tell your class next year that we wrote that song?” Todd blurted out.

“Todd, did you forget?” Sandy gasped. “Missus Jenkins is done teaching. We’re the last class she’ll ever have!” She turned to Joy. “That makes us special, doesn’t it, Missus Jenkins?”

“Every class is special in some way, Sandy, but you’re right, Todd—I’ll always remember this class wrote the compass song.”

Todd scowled at Sandy. “I know you aren’t going to be *our* teacher, Missus Jenkins, but who will be my little brother’s first-grade teacher?” His glower changed to confusion.

“Missus Carter will teach in this room, starting in September. She and her husband are moving here this summer. She has taught first-grade for several years in Rochester, Minnesota. Remember when we found Rochester on the map and wrote her a letter?”

“I thought she was going to be a substitute teacher,” Todd said morosely.

The door opened. From her place on the floor, Joy saw two sets of men’s shoes. To prevent the children’s distraction, she quickly said, “Sally had a good idea—let’s sing!” She pulled her pitch pipe out of her pocket and blew a note. Fifteen index fingers shot up in readiness to act out the song, and a chorus of young voices joined together in a simple melody:

*I use my little compass to help me find my way.  
If I get lost, I pull it out any time of day.  
When I see where the needle goes,  
That is where I’ll point my nose.  
Remember, north never moves!*

Bob whispered to Fred, “If you were a TV reporter instead of a newspaperman, you’d have a good sound-bite! I don’t want to interrupt them, so I’ll catch you later.”

Fred adjusted his camera to the classroom light. The newshound in him twitched his nose at the scent of a marvelous front-page shot for the next weekly issue of the local newspaper.

The song ended and Joy said, "Look, children, someone is floating up on the south side of our balloon. Hello, Mister Becker! Did you just parachute out of an airplane?"

Fred quickly got into the spirit. His knees cracked, but he gamely crawled in beside Todd. "Where am I? I'm all discombobulated!"

"Who can figure out what 'discombobulated' means?" Joy asked. Several attempted answers:

"Goofed up?"

"Lost?"

"Good job figuring out a new word! Petey, what could we tell Mister Becker to help him feel less dis-com-bob-u-la-ted?" The children carefully processed the dissected syllables.

Petey promptly replied, "You're in a hot-air balloon basket flying over Prairie Rose. That's in the northwest corner of North Dakota."

"Thanks, Petey," Fred said. "Back on earth, I'm a newspaperman. This seems like a good place to get a story. So, enjoy your trip and I'll ride along and do my job."

Todd studied him solemnly. "You could write about how Missus Jenkins won't ever be a teacher again."

"That's a good idea," Fred replied with matching somberness. "Tell me, did the whole class help build this?" He pointed at the sheet overhead.

The question stymied Todd, but Ellen leaned forward and said firmly, "No; it comes from the World-Famous Jenkins' Hot-Air Balloon Factory."

That's when Fred realized that for the children seated on mats, it wasn't merely bed sheets pinned together. They truly *were* in a basket floating in the clouds. When Joy ignited her students' imaginations, they blazed like any flame beneath an actual hot-air balloon.

The next hour kept Fred's pen and camera busy capturing how a gifted teacher incorporated the full range of lessons into one activity and yet gave it all the sizzle an end-of-the-year party deserved. Fred found himself caught up in the adventure.

When the children landed back in the classroom, Joy called the office on the intercom. As prearranged, Janeen escorted the group outside for recess. In their absence, Fred helped Joy dismantle the balloon and shift the desks back into place.

Returning with much teasing and giggling, the children began the last-day rituals of cleaning out desks, stacking books on shelves, and filling garbage cans with the scraps and accumulation of a year in Room 112. Conversation flowed freely:

"Missus Jenkins, here's my missing story about rabbits! It was on the last page of my tablet. Will you please grade it?"

"Hannah, you've *still* got all your valentines in your desk? Valentine's Day was *years* ago!"

"Ned, you give me back my compass! I earned it from Missus Jenkins' prize bucket."

"I'm going to leave this sucker for the kid who sits here next year. I only licked it on one side."

Joy's egg timer rang, signaling the end of the day. She raised a familiar basket high in the air and the children cheered. Room 112's traditional Friday dismissal pattern provided a fair way for each child to have a special moment with the teacher, rather than jostling to leave. The children squeezed their eyes closed and each removed a laminated numbered card before passing the basket along. "Who has number one today?" Joy asked.

That child picked up a backpack and made his way to the classroom door where Joy waited. "You'll have fun this summer with your new puppy, won't you, Joey? Come show me when he knows how to walk on a leash!" She gave the boy a quick hug and helped shift the straps on his backpack.

“Who drew number two?” Ellen picked up her bag and walked slowly to the door. Joy said, “In just a few days, I’ll have a piano at my house so come play your piano piece for me before your recital, okay?”

Ellen’s face lit up. *Even though Missus Jenkins won’t be my teacher anymore, I’ll still see her!* Relieved, the child flung her arms around her teacher and received a loving embrace in return.

Each successive student soaked up Joy’s personal words of encouragement or praise and comments about taking swimming lessons or visits to cousins or grandparents or upcoming fishing trips. The twelfth child received a slip of paper from Joy. “Here’s how to spell ‘discom-bobulated,’ Jillie. I could tell you liked that big word!”

“That does it!” Joy’s eyes were suspiciously bright in the vacated room. “Did you get enough for an article, Fred? There’s not much teaching on the last day.”

“More than enough for a good article. And I beg to differ with your assessment of today. I saw plenty of education in action, and evidence much occurred over the past nine months. Any second thoughts about retiring?” he asked nonchalantly.

Joy shook her head even before her words began. “No, I sense it’s time for me to leave the classroom, even though I’m only fifty. I’m not sure what lies ahead, but I am delighted to turn the keys to this room over to someone of Amy Carter’s caliber.”

“What are you going to do, Joy? In the fall, I mean. You’re used to summers out of the classroom, but when the first day of school rolls around, what will you do then?”

“Be Al’s wife and Dave’s mom?” Joy suggested impishly. “Though after putting up with me in that role all summer and realizing it will now go on *forever*, they may beg me to return to teaching when summer ends!”

Fred laughed, but quickly turned serious again. “Seeing you in action today made me realize what a significant role teachers play. That’s what I hope to communicate in this article. You’ve touched a lot of lives, Joy.”

Joy shifted a half-packed box from a bookcase to her desktop. “Whatever a person’s occupation is, they owe it to themselves to do the best they can. It’s true of every job, but if teachers don’t live by that principle, kids suffer.”

After a few posed shots, Fred packed up his gear and left Joy to conduct her final tasks. She never liked the way a classroom looked on the last day of school. It always reminded her of Emily Dickinson’s poetic lines: *...the sweeping up the heart and putting love away...*

“Hey, teacher!” A deep masculine voice rumbled through the room. Al Jenkins lounged against the doorframe and snapped a picture, resting the camera against his broad chest as the flash faded.

“Hey, yourself, postmaster! I’m not sure how that picture will turn out. I’m a bit gloomy.”

“Tough day?”

“Emotional. I didn’t cry...yet...but I surely could have, several times.”

“Second thoughts?”

She tipped her head. “That’s what Fred asked. It’s always hard to say goodbye to the kids. Okay, I’m ready. I’m glad we took a load home earlier this week; we can easily carry what’s left.” Crosshatching the box flaps, she slid it across the desktop toward Al. “This is full of bed sheets, so it may be heavy; sorry. The two on top are Janeen’s; I’ll drop them off in the office when I turn in my keys.”

“Do you want any more pictures of your classroom?”

“Not looking so desolate—I have plenty from when it looked real.”

She picked up two canvas bags, the wicker basket holding the numbered cards, egg timer, and her purse. Scanning the room with a practiced glance, she flicked off the light with her elbow and smiled tremulously at Al. He shifted the box to his hip and leaned down to kiss the lips he knew so well after three decades of loving one woman. “Hold it, Missus Jenkins! My number from the Goodbye Basket was sixteen. Does it earn me a smooch with the teacher?” He waggled his eyebrows and puckered up in readiness for more.

Joy laughed. “Well, there’s smooching, and there’s *smooching*. Put that box down and I’ll teach you the difference, ol’ Number Sixteen!”

Ten minutes later, they walked down the echoing hallway bumping hips to the beat of Al whistling the Stylistics’ hit, *Let’s Put It All Together*. When they mentally reached the words *my lips are meant to kiss you*, tradition demanded a kiss. Despite being loaded to the gills, Al leaned in for a loud and lusty smacker.

From behind the office counter, Janeen noted lipstick on Al’s ear and what looked like a whisker burn on Joy’s chin, but accepted Joy’s ring of school keys and the return of the bed sheets without comment on these intimate details. “I’ll bet I don’t need to tell you to enjoy retirement, huh, Joy?” she teased as she checked Room 112 off the list. “But remember, just because you don’t teach anymore doesn’t mean you can’t drop in—you *know* you’ll miss the teachers’ lounge coffee!”

Joy laughed. “Oh, yeah, especially the days Bob makes it! If we ever need tar for our driveway, I’ll give you a buzz!”

The door to the schoolhouse closed behind them with a distinct *click*. Al intoned with seriousness befitting a world event, “This just in: at 4:30 PM on May 17, Joy Jenkins leaped over a giant hurdle in life. Tell us, what is behind your early retirement?”

Faking a wide-eyed and smiley expression, Joy drawled, “Ah *am* getting a *pee-yan-o* and *Ah* just *don’t* think it’s *right* to assume responsibility for something of *that* magnitude and then just *leave* it home all alone.” She batted her eyelashes furiously. “Ah plan to spend the *rest* of maw life giving maw sweet lil ol’ *pee-yan-o*—oh, and maw *handsome* husband and our *wonderful* son—all the *luuuu* and attention they deserve.”

“Whew, I’m glad Dave and I made it onto your list! About this piano...remember, it’s older than dirt and most likely not in tune.”

“The age is part of the charm—and I already have the phone number of Amber Larson’s piano tuner.”

Al revived his announcer persona. “There you have it, world! Stand back: Joy Jenkins is officially beginning retirement!”

## C H A P T E R 2



“Hey, Joy-Bells, your Piano Man’s home!” Al’s shout rolled up the driveway and into the house.

“Good, because I’m in the mood for a melody!” Joy called back, wiping her hands and tossing the towel over the oven door handle on her way to the garage. “I was getting worried when it took you so...” The looming contents of the pickup truck backed into the driveway immediately diverted her attention. “Good grief! Are we positive that thing will even fit in our living room?”

“It better,” Al said ominously, “And if we ever sell this house, the lucky new owner gets a piano thrown in with the deal. No way am I ever going to move this thing again.” His sputtering reverted to whistling and soon the melody of *Piano Man* spun a web around them. He unwrapped the piano bench and jumped off the tailgate to lift it off the truck and place it carefully on the lawn.

Joy lifted the lid to the bench and exclaimed, “Look—there’s still sheet music in here!”

Al nodded, but his mind was stuck on his troubles. “Three muscular guys in Bismarck gave up a precious hour of Memorial Day weekend to help me load it, but if two small boys and an elephant would have walked by Aunt Lorene’s house at the right time, I would have drafted them, too. You can’t believe how heavy and awkward an upright piano can be.”

“But nothing keeps my favorite postman from delivering!” Joy teased, closing the bench’s lid carefully. She began to refold the blankets as Al discarded them.

“We removed the two pieces covering the soundboard to lighten it as much as we could,” Al nodded toward two long, flat sections still wrapped and tied against the truck’s sideboards, “but this is just one honking-big piece of furniture.”

“You’ll need more help than Dave and Frank to get it down, then,” Joy said practically.

“Two steps ahead of you, m’lady! I stopped by the grocery store, so Dave knows to come home and help. I also rounded up Hal and Fred and Rusty who were just shooting the breeze on Main Street, anyway. But where’s Frank?” Al arched back to unkink his muscles before climbing into the truck. Untying the ropes that secured the piano, he whistled his way through the song again, belting out words each time he reached...*I’m the piano man...*

“Haven’t seen hide nor hair of him. Want me to call THE CLIP AND CURL? They’re closing at noon for the holiday weekend, so maybe it got busy at the last minute. Helen could tell me if he’s on his way, at least.”

“Sure, give ’em a jingle. Hey, would you grab a screwdriver off my workbench? The bumpy ride home made these knots all the tighter and I need something to get them loosened. Once I get this thing off here and in place, I’m going to soak in the tub and not come out until every muscle in my body has forgiven me.”

“Poor baby!” Joy dodged the roll of rope Al lobbed at her, then picked it up and headed to the garage. She found a screwdriver and delivered it to Al who hunkered down in the truck bed. Reaching over the sidewall to tousle his hair, she said softly, “Thanks for all your hard work, Big Guy. I’m going to love having a piano!”

“Shucks, Missus Jenkins; it weren’t nuttin’ at all.” He aimed a noisy air-kiss at her that she caught and blew back to him across her opened palm.

She returned to the kitchen to make the call, tossing several sections of rope on Al's worktable as she passed by. His space was as neat as a pin. She knew that on his first trip to the garage, Al would stop and put the rope in its proper place. That was Al—a man who ranked neatness right up there with honesty, bravery, and diligence.

Leaning against the kitchen counter with the phone wedged between her ear and shoulder, she hummed along with Al's sporadic whistling and looked around the sunny room. In 1974, as newlyweds moving into a house already fifty years old, she and Al had peeled ancient ugly wallpaper off the walls and made a trip straight to the dump with four sets of droopy Venetian blinds. Summer weekends that year had disappeared like smoke in the wind as they stripped, scraped, puttied, painted and varnished—all the while listening endlessly to the Hit Parade. To this day, every time she heard *The Way We Were* she could swear she smelled paint.

A smile flitted across her face. The music of that decade was part of the fabric of their marriage, as evidenced by Al's *Piano Man* remark. No one was banging down their door begging the Jenkins to perform, but they both knew all the words to a hefty collection of songs that wove their way through daily conversations and dominated the Jenkins' music collection.

Twenty-eight years after that refurbishing marathon, here Joy stood with nearly every mixing bowl she owned either dripping in the drainer or soaking in the sink or still on the counter with dabs of batter drying to the edges. The kitchen had been her oasis all these years after hectic days as a first-grade teacher.

Except for updated appliances and the addition of a dishwasher and microwave, the room hadn't changed over the years. It was as comfortable as her marriage to that lovable guy in the driveway who was now booming "...play us a song..." Opposites in some ways, Al and Joy were compatible in all the right ones. She would no more change her husband's personality than she would her kitchen's decor.

Joy knew Al would roll his eyes when he set foot in the kitchen. They shared kitchen duties, but not cooking styles. Whereas Al cooked and cleaned as he went along, Joy's preferred method was to line up all the utensils and equipment and work her way down the line, leaving mayhem in her wake until the end of a recipe. They had agreed long ago to live-and-let-live; spats over neatness just weren't worth it to either of them.

Finally, it registered that she was listening to an unanswered phone ringing in her ear. "That's odd." She stared at the phone as if expecting to find an answer inscribed on its surface. "Nobody's picking up," she called out to Al from the doorway. "I'll bet they closed up early and are on their way over."

"Try Frank's cell phone, just to be sure," Al suggested, coming into the garage.

Within a minute, Joy said, "It clicked over to voice-mail so I left the message that you're waiting for him. You're probably just one of many people asking for his time!"

Al chuckled. Incorporating words from old songs into everyday conversation was part of their special love language and he knew the rules—one person picked a song, the other responded from the same song—so he followed through with "But he's an old friend of mine!" as he stuck his head into the kitchen and inhaled dramatically. "Hey, whatever you're baking smells great."

"It's the reward for the piano movers, and if I don't keep my eye on the brownies, all I'll have to offer is a pan of soot." She heard voices in the driveway at the same time the oven timer buzzed. Setting the pan on a rack to cool, she went outside. Doing a quick head-count, she said, "Frank's still not here? And where's Dave?"

Hal stared at the pickup's ominous load and joked, "Frank probably saw Al hauling this monster through town and decided he had better things to do than spend Memorial Day weekend nursing a backache!"

"Yeah," Fred said, "he's the smart one of the bunch! I did see Dave, though; he was talking to Helen outside THE CLIP AND CURL."

“Good; if he ever gets here, my son can give us the story on Frank,” Al said.

The piano was rolled into launch-position on the edge of the pickup bed, and the neighbors were treated to a rowdy rendition of *Chopsticks*. Still, neither Frank nor Dave arrived. The men carried the piano pieces and bench into the living room. Still no new help on board.

“I’ve already done this job once today with only four guys, and it’s no picnic,” Al warned, “but I sure hate to have you standing around wasting time. Are you game to try it with just the four of us?”

Rusty joshed, “We’re a lot tougher than those Bismarck dudes! We can do it.” The others agreed.

“Okay,” Al said skeptically. “But when you’re moaning and groaning later, remember, I *had* lined up two more guys.”

The men took their positions and managed to unload the upright piano without mishap. Once it was on the ground, Rusty hooted, “Told you so! We can take on Bismarck any time.”

“We’re going to have to carry it in,” Fred said. “The ground’s pretty rough. So, once we get it off the ground and moving, we keep moving. If we lose our momentum, we’re sunk. Ready, set, hoist!”

Joy raced ahead to open the front door and pinned herself between the screen door and the porch wall to give the men maximum access. Grunting and straining, they called out directions to each other:

“Easy now!”

“Okay, watch it on the left, Hal,”

“Got it, Fred?”

“Almost there, guys!”

Once inside, Joy watched them navigate the path she had cleared earlier. With the piano rolled into position and the sections back in place over the soundboard, they joked about being able to haul the hefty piece this far, only now to struggle to lift each corner high enough to wedge a furniture caster under the wheels.

Mission accomplished, Al sighed and rotated his shoulders in their sockets. “Since you missed out on coffee and treats at the café today,

come out to the picnic table for some of Joy's good stuff, hot from the oven."

It didn't take long until the plate of sweets was half empty. Joy was refilling the men's glasses and cups when Dave rounded the side of the house. "Hey, son!" Al called out. "We really needed your help with the piano. Where'd you disappear to?" He had to ask the question, but Al managed to keep anger out of his voice. Anger confused Dave.

Twenty-six years old and a handsome merging of two ordinary gene pools, Dave was Al and Joy's only child. Physically an adult, his mind was locked in early adolescence. Dave was proud of his job at LARSON'S GROCERY. In hiring him, Luke had enraged several families whose sons were denied the employment given Prairie Rose's only mentally challenged citizen. But the uproar was short-lived, and Luke's actions had won him the town's respect and the Jenkins' unending appreciation.

Dave's face lit up. Leaning over Joy's shoulder to grab a fistful of treats, he paused long enough to peck her on the cheek. "Hi, Mom. Peanut butter cookies—my favorite!"

"Hey, those are for the guys who actually helped!" Al teased, his flash of irritation already past. "Fred says he saw you talking to Helen. Did she say where Frank is?"

Chewing and swallowing quickly, Dave swiped his forearm across his mouth as he processed facts for retelling. "Uncle Frank's gone. Aunt Helen asked me to help her get the sign off the shop. So I did. But I busted it 'cause it was stuck to the wall. Can I have the rest of your sun tea, Mom?" Dave asked, plucking up a brownie crumb from the plate.

Automatically, Joy handed the glass to her son. Bewildered looks all around the table indicated that even though Dave's account was obviously missing a few key details, there was just enough substance to cause concern.

“You were just walking along and Helen called you over and asked you to take the CLIP AND CURL sign off the front of the building?” Rusty queried.

“Yeah. She had a ladder out but she gets dizzy up high, so I said I don’t get dizzy. And she said I should just climb up there and take it down. But the sign busted in two and one piece fell off. And Aunt Helen started laughing really hard. And she told me to just leave it exactly the way it was. It looks weird, but Aunt Helen says she likes it.”

An uneasy silence settled like fog over the picnic table. Rusty finally said, “I’d better get going.”

“Work is callin’ my name, too,” Hal said. “With the size crowd I’ve seen around the SATURDAY STORE so far today, I know we’ll see a lot of traffic this afternoon.”

“Thanks, guys,” Al said. “I owe you. Collect anytime.”

Fred hung back and pulled Al to one side. “I’ll give you a call in a few minutes, once I see what’s what going on.”

“Thanks, Fred. Dave could be confused.” Even though Fred was editor of the *Prairie Rose Chronicle*, Al knew he wasn’t searching for front-page news. Fred fully appreciated that the friendship between Al and Joy Jenkins and Frank and Helen Wilson stretched long and deep. Attendants for each other’s weddings, they often vacationed together, and it was a rare Friday night that they didn’t spend at one house or the other. Since both couples’ parents had relocated to warmer climates, the Wilsons and Jenkins had filled the roles of family for many holidays and celebrations.

“Come see our piano, Dave, before you go back to work.” Joy loaded glasses on the tray as she spoke.

The three Jenkins were admiring the addition to their living room when the phone rang. “That’ll be Fred.” Relief coated Al’s voice as he headed for the kitchen. He was back in an instant. “Come on, Dave. Your mom and I will walk you back to work.” He shot Joy a look she knew well: *Don’t ask; not with Dave here.*

“Good idea,” she said lightly. “We want Dave to keep his reputation as a good employee.”

“Luke likes me,” Dave said proudly. “He says pretty soon I’ll be as good on the new cash register as I was on the old one. Then I can check groceries again, not just stock shelves and clean. I like to check groceries. I’m sick of dusting.”

Chatting all the way to LARSON’S GROCERY, Dave didn’t notice if his parents’ pace was faster than usual and their farewell was brief. As soon as Dave had entered the store, Joy tugged Al’s sleeve. “What is it?” she said, matching his stride.

“Trouble. I don’t know what kind, but Fred thinks we should check it out.” Half a block later, the front of THE CLIP AND CURL came into view.

At least the front of what used to be THE CLIP AND CURL couldn’t be missed.

A jagged-edge sign above the door now simply read D CURL with no evidence of THE CLIP AN in sight.

Joy clutched Al’s arm and gasped a wordless sound. They took off running, the echo of their feet slapping the sidewalk rang like distant gunshots.

Al reached the combined barber and beauty shops first and flung open the door. He stopped so abruptly on the threshold that Joy collided with him. “Hello, Helen,” he said evenly, noticing the two customers just in time. He met Sadie’s piercing gaze knowingly. Her choice of the chair closest to the beauty shop side ensured she wouldn’t miss a single word from Helen’s lips. Al expelled an audible puff of air. *It can’t be good to have the town’s worst gossip already on the scene.*

Helen worked at the sink shampooing Rachel Lindquist’s hair; that woman’s requisite wheelchair was parked against the wall. Al pursed his lips. *Rachel would have come up the ramp by the back door so she may not know about the sign. But it’s a sure thing Sadie does.*

“Hi, guys,” Helen said a little too brightly. She had refreshed her make-up and only a discerning friend would know she had been crying.

Joy was that friend. She noticed.

“Hello, Helen; ’lo, Sadie; hi, Rachel,” Joy’s eyes never left Helen’s flushed face.

“No customers for Frank today?” Al asked offhandedly. Not only was Frank not working, his side of the business showed no signs of any activity that day—no stray papers or magazines, no barbering tools scattered around, and the ultimate give-away: a perfectly clean floor. The only human touch was somebody’s forgotten seed cap dangling from the hook on the wall where it had hung for months. The joke was, if the owner ever showed up, Frank planned to charge him storage fees. But that memory didn’t spawn a flicker of a smile today.

The waiting area spanned the two sections and was empty except for Widow O’Dell who studied a seed catalog with all the interest of a zealous farmer—which she was not. The town’s seamstress hadn’t even managed to grow a respectable geranium since her husband—a true green thumb—had died twenty years ago. Joy turned a suspicious eye toward Sadie. “Didn’t you just have a permanent last week?” she asked in her don’t-mess-with-me teacher voice.

Chin jutting, the woman replied defiantly, “Yes, but Helen didn’t trim around my neck as much as I like. And I won’t be paying for this, either,” she added, scowling across the room. Helen massaged conditioner through Rachel’s hair and offered no response.

Rachel’s words floated upwards from her position at the sink, “Helen and I have been chatting about those fancy tomato cages Hal has at THE GENERAL STORE. We both have always used stakes and ties, but we’re ready to try something new.”

In spite of the moment’s underlying concerns, Al smiled to himself. *Bless her.* Unerringly, Rachel had chosen one topic to which Sadie had nothing to contribute and one that constituted valid beauty shop conversation but allowed for no juicy tidbits. “We’ll leave you to your dis-

cussion, ladies, and head over to the café for a cup of coffee,” Al said. “Why don’t you call there when Frank gets back?”

“Frank is...” Helen straightened her back and turned toward them with an unreadable expression, “...at home. But I can take care of you, Al, in about half an hour, or so.”

“Okay. We’ll be back, Helen.” Joy steered Al toward the door.

Outside, they let their eyes drift up to the mutilated sign: D CURL. “There’s trouble, all right.” Joy’s voice quivered. “Oh, Al—I’m scared and I don’t know why.”

“Let’s find Frank and get some answers,” Al said grimly.

No words were spoken until they knocked on the Wilson’s side door before opening it—a privilege based on many years of friendship—and Al called out, “Frank? You home?”

A distant thud and then “In the bedroom” floated down the steps. It didn’t sound like an invitation, but this was no time to stand on ceremony.

Al sucked in his breath and grabbed Joy’s hand. They climbed the steps with pounding hearts. Even though the four of them had been friends for nearly thirty years, Jenkins’ trips to the Wilson’s bedroom weren’t the norm.

Thumps and bumps assured them they would find Frank in the second room on the left. By pushing an already-ajar door completely open, they gained a view of what had thudded, thumped and bumped. Drawers hung haphazardly open. Hangers lay strewn around the room. T-shirts, slacks, socks and shaving items littered the chair and bed and spilled onto the cedar chest. “You taking a trip, Frank?” Al asked with forced casualness.

One incongruous thought flitted through Joy’s mind: *Frank never planned to go to work today, not dressed like that.*

Wearing faded jeans that rode his hips and a polo shirt that had seen the inside of the washing machine many times and was now tucked haphazardly into a beltless waistband, Frank studiously avoided Al’s eye. “Yeah.”

“This came up awfully fast. We just saw you and Helen last night and you didn’t mention a trip. Is she going, too?” Joy asked, fear throbbing in her temples.

“No.” Frank’s lips tightened.

“Where you headed?” Al asked, bending to catch a pair of swimming trunks just before they slithered off the bed.

“California.”

“Any place special?” Al’s questions persisted, despite Frank’s obvious disinclination to talk.

“The Bay Area, okay?” Frank’s voice had a razor’s edge.

“San Francisco? That’s quite a trip. Are you planning to fly?”

“Jeez, enough with the questions!” Frank was clearly miffed to have Al on the offensive.

“Oh, I don’t think so. Not at all. I’ve got plenty more I think deserve an answer,” Al’s voice rose in pitch and volume. Joy squeezed his hand in their standard *Careful!* signal. He took a calming breath. “For starters, why isn’t Helen going with you? It’s been your shared dream for years to see California.”

Joy added, “When Luke and Cate came back from their honeymoon in Mendocino last November, you and Helen really started talking about it again. In fact, right around Christmas you mentioned you were doing research on the Internet for a trip to the West Coast.”

“Hey, back off, you two! I’ve got a lot of packing to do and I don’t need you preaching at me. Do you mind?”

Al stepped back as if struck. “*Preaching?* What on earth could be misconstrued as preaching? Good grief, man! You and I have been friends since college and our wives grew up together. But now all of a sudden I can’t get ten words of explanation from you? You and Helen are obviously having some kind of a tiff. At least let us try to help you guys work through whatever’s going on.”

Frank shrugged. “Nothing will get better if I stay.” He turned his back to dig through a drawer of underwear, tossing several pairs of briefs across the room to the bed.

*This is no fairytale.* Joy felt an icy hand squeeze her heart. *How could Al and I have missed seeing our best friends were in trouble?* “You have the right to choose the path you take, Frank...” She choked and blinked back tears and shot a look at Al.

“...but this one appears to be pretty rocky.” Al thrust his hands through his short-cropped hair.

Frank snorted. “As usual, you two can drag out an old song to fit every possible situation,” he said sarcastically, sweeping a handful of change off the dresser. “This doesn’t concern you two. This is between Helen and me.” One coin escaped his efforts to stuff the money into his pocket and rolled under the dresser.

“Of course it concerns us—we’re all friends!” Joy protested.

Al’s temper flared, “I thought it was bad enough when you blew off helping me move the piano. But then we have to learn from Dave that Helen has taken the sign off the shop, and now we find you packing for California and leaving your wife behind.”

Frank straightened up. “She’s taken the sign down? That bitch!” He kicked a shoebox across the floor and loose papers flew out of it.

Joy crossed the room in three strides and slapped him across the cheek. “That’s uncalled for, Frank! I don’t know what happened between you and Helen, but calling her nasty names doesn’t fly with me. She’s been your wife for twenty-eight years and is the mother of your two wonderful daughters and the best friend you’ll ever have besides the two of us. I *will not* allow you to talk about her like that, especially when she’s not here to defend herself.”

Frank rubbed his cheek gingerly. “Call off your woman, Al,” he said, half-heartedly faking a cowering stance. “She’s got a wicked right-hook!”

“I’m not sure I want to,” Al said darkly. “If Joy hadn’t lit into you, I might have and then you’d be sporting more than a red cheek. Want to talk about what’s going on?”

“Nah, I’m sure Helen will fill you in. She’s got a list of grievances a mile long and is dying to air them.”

“And you’re going to California.” Al watched Frank roll several pairs of jeans and walking shorts and stuff them into the suitcase. He appeared to be packing up everything he owned. “How long you planning to be gone, anyway?”

“Ask Helen,” Frank said succinctly. Looking around the room, he grabbed up a paperback book and a pair of reading glasses from one bedside table, knelt to gather up the scattered papers and jammed them haphazardly back into the shoe box. “I’ll call you when I get there and let you know how to reach me in case the girls need me, or something.”

“Downright generous of you, Frank,” Al drawled acerbically. “Good to know you’re thinking of your girls in some fashion. I’d actually rather sit down and talk right now than wait for a phone call that may never come—which is a good possibility if your promises are as solid as the way you honor all the years of our friendship.”

Frank’s color heightened. “I have nothing to say you’d like to hear. Trust me on that one.” He disappeared into the bathroom and came back with a toothbrush and a rolled-up tube of toothpaste that he added to a shaving kit. Snapping the locking tabs on one suitcase and zipping up another, he kicked a dresser drawer shut. He plunged one foot into a nearby shoe and knelt beside the bed, lifting the spread in search of its mate.

Numbly, Joy swept up the pile of hangers off the bed and walked into the closet. *The last thing Helen needs is to come home to face Frank’s mess.* The stark reality of what was happening hit hard when Joy stood inside the closet. Blinking back tears, she carefully replaced hangers on the half-empty bar. Helen’s workday blouses and slacks, Sunday dresses and casual clothes hung on one side. On the other side, only Frank’s winter suit and wool slacks and yard-work clothes remained. Half the shoe rack was vacant. Half the shelves were bare. The closet looked like a freak storm had blown through, leaving an odd mixture of *untouched* mingled with *demolished* in its path.

Joy choked on tears she could no longer control and backed blindly from the closet, closing the door on the agonizing scene. Hands thrust

into his pants pockets, Al stared at the man he felt he no longer knew. Pointedly ignoring them, Frank collected the bags he had packed and attempted to load himself up for one trip.

Any other time, Al and Joy would have gladly helped him, teasing about his penchant for saving time versus saving his back. Not today. Today, they followed Frank down the steps, cringing each time a suitcase banged against the wall he and Helen had so carefully wallpapered. Frank led their sad parade down the hall, through the kitchen and out to the detached garage where he piled the luggage into the passenger seat of his pickup.

Al and Joy stood off to one side, dazed and confused. Frank went back into the house, returning with his summer straw hat riding cockily on his head. An obviously heavy cooler bumped against his leg—more evidence Frank had been very busy that morning. He also carried his summer jacket, a baseball cap, a bag of potato chips and the small case both Al and Joy recognized as his portable barbershop. But Frank wasn't responding to calls from shaggy-headed homebound men today.

Al scraped the bottom of his dwindling supply of civility; one sad song from the past surfaced. "So, you're gonna be traveling on?" It was a rhetorical question. The responding phrase *if I stayed here, things just couldn't be the same* bugled so clearly in his mind that he flinched as if Frank had shouted the words back at him.

Frank's face hardened. "Get this into your head: I'm leaving." He climbed into the truck, shut the door and inserted his key in the ignition. The engine roared. Rolling down the window, he stuck his head out the window. "Take it easy." He put the truck in reverse. Gravel spit out from beneath the tires as he backed out the driveway.

"Take it easy?" Joy repeated incredulously. "Frank's leaving Helen and we don't know why, and we're supposed to take it easy?" A combination of fury, sadness and alarm sickened her.