

UNGUARDED EDGE

Also by Hadley Hoover

- Miles Apart
- Uncharted Territory
- Rough Terrain
- Hidden Crossing
- Storm Path
- Prevailing Winds

UNGUARDED EDGE



Hadley Hoover

iUniverse, Inc.
New York Lincoln Shanghai

Unguarded Edge

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iUniverse, Inc.
2021 Pine Lake Road, Suite 100
Lincoln, NE 68512
www.iuniverse.com

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Cover credit:

www.kendalls-eye.com

ISBN: 0-595-31004-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 0-595-66239-0 (cloth)

Printed in the United States of America

To Kendall: Happy 25th anniversary, Buckwheat! June 2, 2004: Ain't love grand?

To Rudy & Jennifer who are like parents to me, and to David & Doris, who are!

To two matchless sisters: Ann and Mary Gail.

Special thanks to Mom, and Stanley & Lorna Olson for sharing personal memoirs of one-room schools, and to Marion Dunbar for her wonderful horse stories—and accurate information!

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Acknowledgments



This story would never have been born if not for ROUGH TERRAIN'S readers who let me know in no uncertain terms that *they* were not done with that story, though I thought I was! Is the story over when you turn the last page of this book? Time will tell, won't it?

Part One

Monday, September 9, 1929

Tucking a stubborn curl behind her ear, Lena wrote *Miss Stryker* in decisive strokes on the blackboard and stepped back two paces. First-day-of-school tradition required the teacher's name to be displayed in proper cursive letters, even if that name offered no surprise to the students who would soon fill the polished wooden desks. Seeing her name would help the students remember that the woman Dutchville knew as Tante Lena was now the teacher in charge of their one-room school.

Smiling, she added *Today is Monday, September 9, 1929* below her name. "My fourth year!" Despite the gap between her initial training for the classroom in 1900 and the belated beginnings of her teaching career in 1925, she truly was a teacher, at last.

During the intervening years, the borders of Lena's life had rarely extended beyond the realm of the parsonage standing in the shadow of the Dutchville Reformed Church. At the behest of her brother-in-law *Dominie* Gustave Ter Hoorn, Lena had rushed to the aid of her sister Hanna, when Brigetta was born in 1900.

As the welcomed and revered Tante in the Dutch minister's family, Lena had cooked and cleaned, soothed wounded pride and bandaged scratched elbows, and gardened and laundered throughout the years of her niece's childhood. Then, Brigetta had married Bram de Boer and the essence of Lena's responsibilities—though she had never considered helping to raise Brigetta to be a burden—shifted, freeing her to pursue long-dormant dreams.

Lena knew the power of words. All it had taken to bring her cross-country on the train to northwest Iowa was a telegram: *Come immediately? Hanna ill, baby healthy. Gustave.* She had promptly set aside her plans for teaching and

never looked back. Now, her name—written in flowing Palmer-style strokes on slate—set her on a different journey in this, her fourth decade of life. Now, chalked words confirmed to her students and herself, *I am in charge*.

Being in charge was not fearsome to Lena, not after all she had survived. What could be more terrifying than arriving, as a seventeen-year-old girl, in a strange town with little time to make new friends her own age? Or being handed custody of a busy household? Or finding her sister floundering in the seas of depression? Or learning, day-to-day, how to mother Brigetta without negating Hanna's mother-role? Those were fearsome things, but Lena had weathered them all. Preparing a full range of lesson plans across the spectrum of grades could seem overwhelming, but Lena faced this from the bedrock of confidence formed over years of meeting each successive challenge with courage and increasing insight.

Soon, Lena would walk out the door beneath the inscription *Dutch Valley School* to greet the arriving children. As if to remind her of approaching duties, the Royalton clock on the back wall struck the three-quarter hour. With shrieks and trills of children's voices gaining volume and number in the schoolyard, Lena gave the potted ivy a half-rotation on the teacher's desk and then quickly scanned the room with pride:

...desks bolted to tracks in three rows of five-four-five, with the pot-bellied stove squatting like a chubby uncle at the back of the middle row,

...the water cooler, a thin glaze of moisture already coating its porcelain curves,

...tall, thin windows, half-curtained to allow circulation while minimizing distraction from long-division, geography or spelling,

...the United States map concealing vocabulary words on the blackboard, and the smooth-faced globe on the table by the dictionary stand.

Satisfied all was in order, Lena stepped onto the stoop she had swept while the first light of day nudged the treetops. She shaded her eyes against the now-bright sunshine and prepared to descend the steps. The toes of her *klompen* bumped against a basket, which Lena shifted to one side of the step. At her feet were an assortment of tin syrup pails, lard cans, knapsacks, and one cloth-lined basket—all containing lunches and school supplies that the students would reclaim when the bell rang. Lena's own lunch was packed in a tin bucket in the teacherage.

Teacherage—just thinking the word made Lena happy. Years back, a single male teacher coming from Michigan balked at boarding with strangers, so a storage area had been converted to private quarters, never to be returned to its

original purpose. To be hired to teach at Dutch Valley School held a measure of prestige for each successive teacher who did not need to impose on—or endure—school families for room and board.

Small and primitive, the room was Lena's abode from Sunday evenings through Friday afternoons throughout the school year. Weekends and the evenings when her monthly Sewing Circle met, she returned to the parsonage in Dutchville and slept again in the familiar bed. Hardly a week went by but what Hanna fussed, "I do not know why you insist on living in such Spartan conditions when you could be home with us!"

Though she would never tell her sister this, months before Lena had first applied for the teaching position she had begun to feel life's pinch like an accordion squeezing the joy of living right out of her. Here she was, a mature woman who had never had her own home, never been kissed by a man in a passionate manner, and never had her own child.

But when she applied and the school board offered Lena this teaching position, it was as if *hemel's* angels turned life's pinches into life's music, once again. She had felt her soul expand as if its bellows would burst, so wide was her bliss.

Spartan conditions? Yes, but it was home. She may not own it, but the room at the back of the school, despite all its inadequacies, satisfied a profound desire.

As for passion? Perhaps in the past she had longed for a man who possessed such deep feelings for Lena Stryker that he would be unable to express them in any manner other than pressing his lips against hers. But now, at age forty-six, she suspected her future—like her past and present—would require only a single bed. She had baked her share of Dutch Letter cookies for Dutchville brides—including Brigetta—but she doubted she would ever offer a groom an S pastry to signify giving herself to him.

The matter of children? Though Brigetta came close to satisfying most maternal instincts, Lena was always aware she was the tante, never the mother. But now, children of all shapes and sizes, ages and abilities filled her days and consumed her dreams. They, in turn, basked in her love and flourished under her creativity. Her zeal made even a lesson on fractions fairly hum. The way she explained the correct use of semi-colons gave punctuation a spin and sizzle. Under Lena's tutelage, every student in Dutch Valley School felt they had been part of Christopher Columbus' discovery of America when those lessons rolled around.

Two of three longings granted...to expect more would be greedy, Lena reminded herself. *I have a home and a respectable, exciting career that fills my life with children—I am rich!*

A faint clanging above the din of excited voices caught Lena's attention. She easily identified it as metallic echoes from an empty swing's chains. A sullen boy pushed the painted wooden seat away each time it returned to him; he did so with no visible enjoyment and even less purpose. "Good morning, Maas!" Lena called across the playground, though not expecting an answer. Maas held true to form; it would be Thanksgiving before more than a grudging smile reshaped his tight lips.

Third grade was the largest class this year and consisted of three girls—Katrien, Adda, and Giertje—and one disgruntled boy: Maas, the swing-pusher. In a few years, the unbalanced male-female ratio of his grade would not bother the lad, but his carry-over impression of school from first and second grades was clearly unchanged on this, his first day of third grade.

"Miss Stryker!" An excited voice drew Lena's attention to the opposite corner of the yard. "We're teaching Freek to drink from the pump instead of puddles!"

"Freek is a mighty smart puppy, Wim," she responded with a smile, noting the third-grade girls formed a rapt audience for boy and dog. Each girl longed for a dog of her own—not just her family's farm dog. Possessing Freek gave Wim hero-status in their eyes. Lena sighed at the contrast between the always-cloudy Maas and the predictably sunny Willem who was called Wim by all who knew him. She let her mind drift on this sunny September morning...

Though just a first-grader, Wim had walked the winding mile from his house to school nearly every weekday throughout August "to show Freek where I'll be all day," he explained solemnly to Lena, sticking his head in the open schoolhouse door on the first such morning.

Setting aside her lesson preparations for the moment, Lena had joined Wim on the bottom step, while a panting Freek sprawled on the ground between them, to discuss just how this dog-boy relationship would work, once school began.

"I don't suppose Freek could come inside and sit by my desk?" Wim had asked hopefully.

"No, he would not like that very much." Lena hid a grin. "Freek needs to chase squirrels and find rabbit holes, and you need to learn to read and write. But a smart dog like Freek could learn something very important."

“He can? I mean, sure he can...uh, what, exactly, can he learn?” Wim asked, floating between doubt and hope.

“Freek appears to be a dog who could learn what time you must awaken to be at school on time...”

“He already knows that,” Wim offered earnestly. “He sleeps right by my bed and sticks his nose in my face when Mother calls me.”

“Good! He can also learn to find his way home when you begin school. Then,” she paused dramatically, “Freek will learn what time school is dismissed and will be waiting outside the door for you. That part you can teach him, and you will always have a friend along for the walk home.”

Freek flailed his ear with his front paw to discourage a fly, and suddenly jerked upright and stared at a spot on the horizon that offered none of the action of the mule team pulling a wagon in the field across the road. Just as Lena had begun to wonder if she had misjudged the dog’s abilities, pride squared Wim’s chin. “Freek’s awfully smart.”

“Today, on your way home, you say, ‘Go home, Freek,’ and lead him home. Take the same path you want him to follow. If he wanders off, get him back beside you and repeat, ‘Go home, Freek.’ If you do this every day, on the first day of school all you will need to say is ‘Go home, Freek,’ and off he will go,” Lena said with bold confidence.

The boy studied his dog thoughtfully. His fingers scratched around one golden-haired floppy ear until Freek moaned with joy. “But how will he know when to come get me?” Wim had asked, suddenly suspicious.

“First, you teach him what *home* and *school* mean. Beginning tomorrow, after breakfast and your morning chores, you say, ‘Time to go to school, Freek,’ and bring him directly here. You could ask your mother to tell him, ‘Go to school, Freek,’ every afternoon, for a while.” Lena imagined Hilde Wynkoop rolling her eyes when Wim told of this plan, but could a mother deny such a simple request from a trusting lad? *Time will tell* was the only assurance Lena could give herself.

Throughout the days of August, Wim had approached his task with a diligence Lena hoped extended to his own education. She worked on lesson plans to the accompaniment of Wim’s constant conversations with his dog. “This is *school*, Freek. You take a nap while I swing and then we’ll go home. *Home* is where we live.”

But now, the true test of Lena’s daring promise would come at the end of the day: would Freek be waiting for Wim? “I hope so,” Lena muttered under

her breath. "I have fourteen students spread across eight grades—I cannot worry about what a dog has or has not learned."

From the stoop, she continued her head-count. Leaning against the fence, deep in conversation, were the year's oldest students, Elsje and Saartje. The two girls lived at opposite ends of the township, but were like sisters. Elsje's two older brothers attended high school in Dutchville, and Saartje was the only child still at home in her family. Knowing they had many summer tales to tell, Lena made a mental note to monitor the girls' whispers and inevitable note-passing until they slipped back into the groove of proper school behavior.

Lena's review skipped over seventh grade since no one occupied that position this year. Jaap, the lone sixth-grader, tossed a ball to Lucas, a fifth grader. Each boy had shot up several inches over the summer and would likely outgrow their new pants and shirts by spring.

Janneken, who to Lucas' disgust was his sole fifth-grade classmate, wandered the playground contentedly, tugging at the blouse whose tucks hinted at blossoming womanhood on her horizon. Like Maas, Janneken was a loner, but unlike Maas who stewed in a caldron of dismal thoughts, Janneken was a dreamer—fully content to be alone. Lena knew getting and keeping Janneken's attention would be a challenge.

Fourth grade was next on the tally: *Where are the twins?* Lena's eyes automatically turned east. Raimund and Bartel came the greatest distance. Unlike those who rode bicycles or walked or whose older siblings stopped first at the country school on their way to high school in town, on nice days the Vande Veer boys rode a horse and tied it behind the school to graze throughout the day; in bad weather, they arrived in a buggy that offered the boys some protection. As if summoned by her thoughts, boys and horse crested the hill and soon cantered through the gate. "Good morning," Lena called out. "That's a different horse!"

"We have to ride ol' Midnight this year because he can't pull the plow anymore," Bartel tossed over his shoulder as his brother tugged the rope tied to the bridle and guided the aging horse behind the schoolhouse where hitching post and watering trough awaited. Lena knew their afternoon trip home would find Bartel holding the reins because the twins employed a precise system of fairness between themselves.

With the third graders fully occupied at the pump and swings, Lena continued her visual journey around the schoolyard until she reached the corner of the fence. Crowded like two lambs in a stall, Liesbeth (who was Wim's fellow first grader) linked arms with Sterre, who, though a second grader, was small

for her age and as fragile as the fine China doll her doting parents believed her to be. Each time the older boys' ball bounced anywhere near them, the girls squealed and clung to each other. Protected by the perceived security of distance, they observed the activity by the pump, both obviously enchanted by the scene, but clearly terrified of something.

The dog, Lena decided after watching for a moment. *Freek has them scared silly*. She shook her head, privately believing that Sterre's parents not only spoiled her shamelessly (hers was the fancy lunch basket at Lena's feet) but overly protected her from anything they deemed upsetting. Liesbeth had suffered a goat's nip several summers ago, all of which meant neither child had pleasant experiences with friendly animals.

The two girls spotted Lena and, after a whispered exchange, held hands, plotted a course that gave the pump wide berth, and ran toward her. But before they could reach the steps, Freek spotted their little legs moving like greased lightning and took off in pursuit. Squeals became screams and the two frightened lambs, clad in new cotton dresses with crisp Dutch collars and snow-white bibs, veered away from Lena and headed straight towards the ash pile—a mound that seemed certain safety to their frantic minds.

Unfortunately for all involved, the ash heap was hardly a stable retreat. At best, it was dirty; at worst, it was wet with morning dew. In one ear-piercing chorus, three children alternately sobbed and howled: two little girls from terror of dog and loathing of dirt, and one little boy from fear of retaliation against his beloved dog.

Remembering too late his mother's morning instructions to "watch out for your sister, Lucas," Liesbeth's brother appeared on the scene and blended scolding with comfort—an odd mix, with neither being effective. Meanwhile, Freek bounded around the circle of children, making frequent trips across the rapidly disintegrating pile of ashes and leaving charred footprints on trousers and skirts while Wim chased him. Mayhem ruled until the teacher was forced to bellow, "Children! Stand still and be quiet!"

Sobs sputtered into silence descending in spurts upon the disheartening situation. Lena gathered the girls around her and glanced at the fringe of gawking students. "Janneken, hurry inside and get two rags from the bag behind the cloakroom door, and wet them at the pump. Elsje and Saartje, take Liesbeth and Sterre to the swings and clean them with the wet rags." She turned to Wim. "Call Freek to follow you and go wash at the pump. Then, take Freek over by the gate and hold him there until I come."

Puppy and boy connected, at last, as Wim latched hold of Freek's collar. Gulping final sobs, the little girls accepted the older girls' proffered hands. Lena turned her attention to the other children. "Jaap, there's a rake in Midnight's shed. Try to get the ashes back in one heap without getting yourself mussed. Lucas, get the gunnysack from the fence and wet it in the horse trough. When Jaap finishes raking, put it carefully on top. The rest of you may play until opening ceremonies."

Grimly, Lena looked at her ash-smeared dress and sighed. She crossed the yard to where Wim and Freek presented a solemn picture of dejection. Today, Lena completely identified with The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe. In less than ten minutes, what should have been a happy day had crumbled into a regrettable beginning to a school year.

At the swings, the younger girls were calming beneath the older girls' ministrations. Wim, however, closely resembled a prisoner banished to a dark dungeon with no hope of release. Lena set aside her own frustrations and knelt on the grass beside the boy and dog. Freek's tail thumped a steady beat against a fence post; Wim's bottom lip quivered.

"I tried to 'splain to him what he did wrong, but I don't know, myself, so..." Wim's uneven voice faded altogether and he blinked rapidly. When he rubbed his forearm across his eyes, he left an ashy trail behind.

Lena pulled handkerchief from her breast pocket and rubbed at the raccoon-eye pattern dirt and tears had painted on Wim's face. Such loving attention weakened his shaky hold on maturity and he threw himself on Lena, sobbing into the folds of her skirt, "I don't like school! I want to go home!"

"Shhh-shhh-shhh. This is *not* what school is usually like, you will see." He pulled back, only to look in horror at the dark circles he had left on Lena's dress. "Don't worry, Wim. It will all come out in the wash. Listen to me: Freek was just being a dog. Dogs like to run and chase things, and he saw the girls as something fun to chase, and one thing led to another. Some people are afraid of dogs."

"Afraid of Freek?" Wim asked, stunned. "Why, he's just the best dog in the whole world! He's nothing to be afraid of. Not like bulls or lions or..."

Lena gently cut short what promised to be a lengthy listing of every terrorizing thing a six-year-old boy could name. "We will try to help Liesbeth and Sterre learn what a wonderful dog Freek is, but now it is time for school to start, and time for Freek to go home."

Wim looked wistfully down the road where he must send his dog. "Maybe I should walk him a ways?"

“No, because then you would be tardy for school.”

Two skinny sun-bronzed arms hugged the dog’s neck. “Okay, boy; this is it.” Freek’s soft fur muffled Wim’s words. The boy rested his cheek against his dog—a picture of contentment that tugged at Lena’s heart. “You know what to do,” he said tremulously. “Go home now, Freek.” He pointed down the road. “Go on home,” he repeated with a bit more resolve.

“You know,” Lena said casually, “first graders have an important job on the first day of school.”

“What’s that?” His curiosity was strong enough to wrest his attention from his four-legged friend slowly meandering away.

“First grade boys are the bell-ringers and the girls are flag-raisers the first day. These are very important tasks.”

Wide-eyed at this news, Wim tucked his hand into hers. At the bottom step, he halted. “I can’t look. Is Freek going home?”

Lena glanced over her shoulder. “He is thinking about it. He wants to be sure you are inside, I imagine,” she admitted, realizing belatedly the dog’s summer’s training had never included the crucial step of actually *leaving* the young master at school. “When we come back outside after ringing the bell, Freek will have headed home.”

The bell-pull nearly lifted Wim off the floor, but with Lena’s help, he got sound from the old belfry. With melodious notes riding the breeze across the fields and along the creek bed, the thirteen other students gathered around the flagpole. To Lena’s relief, Freek was out of sight when she and Wim emerged from the building. The year’s flag-raiser looked a little worse for wear, and wetted down considerably more, perhaps, than was necessary, but at least Liesbeth’s tears had ceased.

Lena ruefully hoped no one on the nearby farms was setting clocks by the school bell this first day. *Surely, it is a quarter past eight, by now.* She mentally adjusted the day’s schedule to accommodate the late start even as she said cheerfully, “Good morning, students!” and slipped into the familiar rituals with relief.

“Good morning, Miss Stryker,” a chorus of voices responded.

“Woof!” Freek echoed happily in the distance. A cloud of dust visible only to Lena rose from the road as the dog put feet to his exuberant response to the children’s greetings. Rows of tall corn had hidden him from view, but he now loped back to the gate as if propelled by his wagging tail. Two little girls froze in the ranks and one little boy gulped.

“No one,” Lena ordered sternly, “is to give Freek the slightest indication we care one whit about him. He has been taught to go home after he walks with Wim to school. Liesbeth, will you help me raise the flag?”

Lena threaded the forty-eight star flag onto its lead and placed the chain in Liesbeth’s damp and shaking hands. With her glance alternating between Old Glory rising to the sky and Freek pacing on the road, the little girl somehow managed her task.

Right hands covered hearts while fifteen voices recited the Pledge of Allegiance, the youngest students chiming in sporadically as familiar sections came around. Then all marched around the flagpole, singing, “My Country, ‘tis of Thee” in loud, yet melodious tones. The 1929 school year had officially begun in the freshly painted building rising proudly from Iowa’s cornfields.

“Please line up by grades and follow me. When you reach the top step, pick up your lunch and wait there until I call your name. Then, I will direct you to your assigned seat.” Lifting her ankle-length skirt, Lena mounted the stairs.

Excited whispers and resonating nonhuman sounds behind her alerted Lena that their uninvited canine guest was no longer outside the gate. Battling frustration, Lena turned. “Jaap, since you are the boy nearest the back of the line, please ensure that Freek remains outside the building.”

“Yes, Miss Stryker.” The usually shy sixth grader strutted a bit as he moved into place to execute his duty.

Wim crept ahead of Liesbeth in line and tugged on Lena’s skirt. “Miss Stryker, maybe I better go home now.”

“No, Wim. I have prepared a great many things for you to do today—you do not want all my work to go to waste, do you?”

Wim frowned for a moment, released a deep sigh and ducked down to see past his classmates’ legs to where Jaap held a struggling dog by the collar. “Go home, Freek; don’t get us in any more trouble. Go home,” he pleaded, blinking fast against the threat of returning tears. Slowly he rose to his feet. “Okay, Miss Stryker; I will stay.”

“I knew I could count on you,” she said solemnly. “Now, first graders, follow me.” Soon, each student sat in the appointed seat. “You may take a few minutes to place your supplies inside your desk. Today, I will dismiss you row-by-row to take your lunches to the cloakroom. On future mornings, you will visit the cloakroom before taking your seats. Elsje, please lead the way and remain to help the first graders find the hooks assigned to them.”

With that accomplished, Lena walked to the blackboard, picked up her pointer and used its rubber tip to underscore her name. “I am Miss Stryker. As

you know, my given name is Lena, and though you may hear others call me Tante Lena, I expect you to call me Miss Stryker. All rise and we will sing *Psalmen 1*.”

Even the youngest were familiar with the Dutch language, having heard it since infancy from parents and grandparents. “*Welgelukzalig is de man, die niet wandelt in de raad der goddelozen, noch staat op den weg der zondaren, noch zit in het gestoelte der spotters...*” Living in the lap of all things Dutch and having been rocked to sleep to Dutch lullabies and raised to know and revere the Holy Scriptures, the children sang enthusiastically.

As the song ended, Lena thought she heard a sound outside, but rather than break the regained flow of the morning, she ignored it. “You may be seated. We begin this first day of lessons with a speaking exercise. We will concentrate on following instructions. As I call names, you will stand and clearly say your name and grade in school, and tell the others something about your summer. Elsjie, you may begin as soon as I am seated.”

Lena walked toward her desk. Since it was positioned at an angle in the corner opposite the door, her back was turned when the door creaked open. Irrational though it was, her first thought was *Freek?*

She pivoted on her heel and was startled to see two little girls tottering on the threshold as the closing door bumped them from behind. *Did I miscount my students? No, these are strangers.* Lena’s pleasant greeting revealed none of her confusion: “Good morning, girls.”

“Father is getting our lunch bags,” the younger one blurted out, her eyes as shiny as coal beneath a head capped by dark tumbling ringlets. “We forgot them by the gate when we picked thistles off our leggings.” A gap in her front teeth accounted for her sweet lisp. The girls looked enough alike to be twins, but the difference in size indicated a gap of one or two years between their ages.

A shuffle from behind distracted the girls from their furtive glances around the room. They looked up with evident relief into the hat-shadowed face of the man whose impressive bulk filled the doorway. He handed a cloth bag over each girl’s shoulder and bent to kiss her cheek as she accepted it. Then, he stood to his full height, tucked his hat under his arm, and let his hands rest on the girls’ heads. “These are my daughters. We arrived several days ago and I planned to return to Chicago after a short visit, but have decided to remain here for the school year.”

The other children gaped at the man so unlike their own fathers who, though toughened by the grueling taskmaster of farming, had none of this

man's presence or persona. *Charm*, Lena thought. *The man possesses a rough-hewn charm, made all the more enticing by his physical appearance.* She felt a blush heat up her cheeks and quickly looked away from the muscles that stretched the man's shirt and vest, though even diverting her eyes did not erase the memory of a trim waist that seemed at odds with his obvious strength. *What is wrong with me, acting like a schoolgirl?*

Schoolgirls: Disapproval tightened her forehead as she watched each girl in the room unconsciously lean forward like the tide following the moon. She did not imagine it: Elsjé's lips puckered ever so slightly.

It required no special skills to read Bartel's lips whispering to Raimund: "Charles Atlas!" Each boy heard the magic name and, like a sponge, absorbed first-hand what he had previously witnessed only in comic books. Their expressions trumpeted their wild hopes: *Will he flex his muscles? Or lift Miss Stryker's desk right off the floor? Golly-gee-whizzicles—that would be something!*

Lena sighed. *Familiar voice?* she mused, scanning the stranger's face for a clue to his identity. *Something about him rings a bell, but what? Chicago, he says?*

The man's eyes drifted across Lena's maltreated dress, but he seemingly didn't think it odd the teacher's dress at the beginning of the first day of school resembled a dirty dust rag. Rather, he cleared his throat—*nervously?* Lena noted with surprise—and tapped the older girl's hair with his right index finger. "This is Annie...I mean, Antje; second grade." The left hand repeated the action on the other girl's head. "This is Mary...that is, Maartje; first grade." He shuffled, clearly wanting to be on his way.

Lena's attention drifted from the man to his children who seemed weighed down beneath a melancholy mantle. *Not fear of something new*, she mused, *but sadness.* The syncopated rhythm of her *klompen* on the varnished floor matched her heartbeat as she walked over and knelt by the sisters. They clutched their lunches as if to prevent someone from snatching them, pulling back unconsciously even from Lena. The older girl visibly trembled and the younger child's earlier burst of confidence had waned. "Welcome to Dutch Valley School, Antje and Maartje," Lena said gently. "Or do you prefer to be called by your English names?"

Both girls looked up questioningly at their restless father.

"What is your other name?" Lena asked.

Antje whispered, "de Boer."

Her sister answered more boldly, "I'm Maartje de Boer. I'm five, and Annie...Antje is seven."

Sought-for hints emerged as facts that scorched Lena's mind and sucked her breath away like a fire consuming a prairie. Slowly she rose to her feet and let her eyes take the measure of the man. "Cornelis. Cornelis de Boer," she said in flat tones.

His eyes met hers fleetingly as he dropped his hands protectively to his daughters' shoulders. "Yes, that's who I am, Tante Lena."

Like a voice echoing in a cave, Wim's stage whisper reached Lena's ears. "He called her Tante Lena—not Miss Stryker like she said!"

A flood of memories crested a dam. "I will have desks ready for you tomorrow, but for today," Lena turned numbly to the students who soaked up the scene like towels left on a clothesline in a summer rain, "Sterre, you may share Liesbeth's desk, and Maartje and Antje will sit together in your seat."

The instructions—so clear and concise—surfaced from the churning pool of thoughts that had little to do with seating arrangements. *So I am to teach Cornelis de Boer's children, am I?*

"It is my fault they are late," the man was saying. "I walked with them this morning to show them the way and it took longer than I remembered, even though we cut through Aalberts' field. They will be on time from now on." His daughters turned and snuggled against him. He swept them both off the floor in an embrace and nuzzled their cheeks with his nose. With a whispered word intended only for their ears, he lowered them and left.

The room stilled as if a persistent hum had finally been silenced. Each person breathed deeply for the first time since the door had opened. *He loves them.* Three words saturated Lena's consciousness like melting snow seeping into the banks of the Floyd River after a spring thaw.

Two little girls watched the door close, separating them from all that was familiar in their lives. All other eyes shifted from an unblinking focus on the closed door to the curly-headed children. Antje put her arm around her sister and the girls blinked back tears and gravely looked at Lena. Even though each desk was adequate for two children to share, there was room for yet a third child in their seat, so close did the sisters sit.

Lena's voice seemed as loud as a bugle. "We were preparing to have the students tell us something about their summer, Maartje and Antje. This activity will help you get to know your classmates. Elsjie, you were to be the first." Lena wanted nothing more than to lower her head to her desktop and wait until the world steadied around her—no, actually, she wished the day were over. But *Miss Stryker* on the blackboard meant she was in charge, so even though her world had just turned topsy-turvy, she must not only maintain her dignity and