

Marge, Back On Track

by Jo-Brew

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CHAPTER ONE

Leaving the hot classroom and closing the door behind herself for the last time, Marge headed down the empty hallway toward the women's restroom. Her footsteps echoed in the deserted wing of Delight Valley School. She knew the other teachers had gone an hour ago. Packing everything permanently had taken her longer. Now she was almost late to meet her friends. She'd need to get moving.

The goodbye luncheon with the staff had been emotional. She'd need to stop long enough to clean up the mess the tears made of her makeup. See if there was anything else she could do to make herself look more presentable before she stopped in the office to turn in her room keys.

It was a good thing the lounge at the Riverview would be dark and shadowy. Not that dimmer lights would help much, Ruth and Anne Marie would both know she had problems the minute they saw her. They wouldn't ask. They'd be tactful, wait until she was ready to talk. The hard part would be to keep herself from saying outright how hopeless her situation seemed. The way things were going with Ben she didn't see how she was going to survive the next month, much less the rest of her life. She was trapped—again.

As much as she needed the support of her friends she wasn't ready to let

them know how frantic she was. Not today, when they were going to celebrate a job well done. Besides, if she tried to talk about it, after the regrets and stress of leaving the job she loved, she might lose control, not be able to pull herself back together. Later she'd bring it up, in a few weeks. There was a chance they could help her figure out ways to cope.

After freshening her makeup, she studied herself in the mirror. Better. She couldn't do anything about the grey roots showing in the smooth cap of almost black hair, or the dark shadows under her eyes. She tucked the tailored shirt back in her slacks and ran a comb through her hair. The shirt tucked in was neater but it probably showed she'd lost weight. With her small frame every pound counted. She gave a last glance in the mirror and left the room.

In the office she handed in her final paperwork, turned her keys and security card over to the principal and then went to the phone on the secretary's desk. She'd call home and make sure Betsy was there to give her father dinner.

It was Ben who answered so she explained, "I just called to make sure Betsy got there all right."

"She did. I can always count on her." He left the sentence dangling at the end to imply he couldn't count on his wife.

Marge forced herself not to react. "I'll see you later then." She put the receiver back on the base and swallowed hard, determined not to cry again. He was pushing for confrontation and she didn't know why.

She left the office and then the school that had been her second home. It was hard to take the steps toward her car. When she opened the door, the blast of heat caused her to pause. It was an oven after being in the sun all afternoon. She touched the steering wheel. As hot as she'd feared. She opened all the doors and tried a peek in the trunk but it was loaded with teaching materials she wanted to keep. The gifts for her friends were in a bag on the passenger seat, no help there. She found a rag she'd left under the seat weeks ago, closed the doors went to her spot with the rag as hand protection. In the car she pushed the buttons to roll down the windows and made herself turn the key in the ignition, ready to head toward a gathering that was supposed to be happy. With the windows down and the air conditioning on, it would be cooler right away. It was a good thing this unusual blast of heat had started after the kids were out of school. It would have been a nightmare trying to teach through this.

She sighed, as she turned her car onto the freeway and stepped on the gas. She loved the way the Mustang handled on the road. This summer she'd

probably need to trade it in for a van, something that could carry a wheelchair.

The drive wasn't long, but it was long enough to let her vent the comments she'd like to make, first to her husband. "*When have I ever let you down? I'm quitting the job I love to help you get better and you're not doing anything but giving me a hard time. You won't even do the exercises the doctor set up to help you.*"

Then to her stepdaughter. "*If you love your dad so much, why don't you show up more often to spend time with him. Where's all that wanting him to be happy when you're busy planning ways to be snotty to me?*" She made herself stop the vengeful thoughts and change her attitude before she got to the lounge but she felt a little better for having allowed them to surface. She'd managed to keep them bottled up through this last difficult day. No matter what, she'd hide the hurt and keep a smile going this afternoon. The rest of the drive, she concentrated on changing her attitude.

When she pulled into the parking lot of the Riverview Inn, she spotted Anne Marie just getting out of her car. Ruth's car was already there, she must be inside. Marge parked in a shady slot, slid out and reached back for her bag of gifts to follow Anne Marie in.

She was going to be spending the afternoon with her two closest friends, that was enough to cheer her up. She let her thoughts drift to the pleasure she'd had with them over the years. They were a tight group in spite of differences in interest and abilities. She was the athlete, the lover of all life outdoors. Super feminine Anne Marie was the gourmet cook and master of organization, and reliable Ruth was the reticent gardener and thoughtful mainstay of their trio.

Ruth's welcoming balloons tied to the chairs and coolness of the dimly lit lounge spelled relief. The greeting hugs eased the tension she'd felt building all week. She could feel her friends' care before they said anything. After Anne Marie ordered champagne and they sat, there was a sudden silence. The murmur of two men conversing at the bar called attention to their own quiet.

Marge thought no one knew how to move on. The waitress appeared and they watched her pour, still without speaking.

Anne Marie was the first to lift her glass. "Here's to spending the winter on a sunny beach."

Ruth suggested, "Here's to sleeping as late as I want and being able to go to the bathroom whenever."

Marge sipped, "This is so good," and then joined in creating the list of future pleasures. After, she couldn't keep herself from expressing her need for something worthwhile in her future. "That doesn't leave a lot. If I don't have

any of those activities, I'm going to have a lot of empty hours in my day. I need more, lots more."

Anne Marie flashed her a questioning look. "What would you like to do? I've never heard you mention more than a few special trips. You and Ben have done most of those. You can probably do more as he gets stronger. Did you have goals you've never talked about?"

"Not really. Nothing specific, only dreams. I always wanted to go on in school, get my Masters Degree. I'd like to have adventures, travel, try new things. I pretty much gave those dreams up when I got married and started a family, but I still want to do more than sit at home. I'm not ever going to be content as a homebody woman."

Anne Marie agreed, "I know what you mean. I want to do more myself but my plans need to include Robert. We need to find things we can do together. We're talking about traveling, getting more active in the lodge, maybe starting a physical activity like golf."

Ruth nodded. "I know it's time for me to stop teaching, I'm ready. I haven't been eager the last year or two but I am losing a big part of my life. The most rewarding part. I'll need to find new interests but I want them to be different, exciting."

Marge asked, "What?" She could see Ruth's resentment building. Ruth didn't want to be pushed. It was time to ease off.

Ruth answered, "I don't know yet. I need time to look at possibilities."

Marge nodded. When Anne Marie and Ruth agreed their minds were on the future, too, she felt more of the tension slip away. She wasn't going to end up traveling this new road all alone, she'd have companions.

She went on, "Let's all try to come up with ideas. I don't want to be isolated. I've been thinking I could work part-time."

Ruth smiled at her, "I'm the kind who's slow to make changes, I need to feel things out."

Anne Marie nodded. "I plan to play this summer. Then we can talk about what we do next."

"I need catch up time, too. We can take a break," Marge agreed. "I admit I'm looking forward to turning off the alarm clock."

Changing direction, Anne Marie got out the Memory Book the P.T.A. put together as her retirement gift. The first few pages had pictures of the three of them as beginning teachers for the old Adams School, the first years together. The years before Ruth moved a half an hour north to Eugene so Will could go to law school.

Marge studied several taken when she'd put together a gymnastic program. It was the first formal P E unit she had been able to coax the older teachers into trying. She shook her head, "Remember how hard I had to talk to get them to let me do this."

"You practically had to bribe them but my class loved it," Anne Marie agreed.

Ruth grinned. "I had the one little girl who wanted to climb the rope all the way to the gym ceiling. Watching her scared me to death."

Marge went on, "Then the new custodian decided to turn the hose on the tumbling mats during the summer and they got all moldy inside.

"Boy, did they stink. The kids hated to get their faces close," Anne Marie remembered.

Ruth went on, "I think we had to use those mats two or three years before we finally could get them replaced. I wasn't there long enough to use the new mats."

Marge nodded. "I did get a real physical education program going before I left. It made me feel like I'd accomplished something special."

"You had." Anne Marie went on, "You were great in the classroom too. The whole school missed you—you and Ruth, both."

The snapshots brought laughter and pleasant memories. They didn't discuss what came after. Marge had gone next, to take care of Dick while he fought a hopeless battle with Lou Gehrig's Disease.

Her friends had stayed close during that time and helped as much as they could, even when seventeen year-old Kathy shot herself adding to the nightmare and nearly destroying her mother. It was their help and encouragement that kept her going through the horror of hospitalizing her paralyzed daughter and then through the phases of surviving Dick's decline and death. When she was finally able to pull herself together enough to return to her teaching career, she took the only local opening, in a rural school north of Cottage Grove. She had been there since.

The friendship hadn't changed except to grow stronger over the years. They had all been widowed early and walked the paths of mourning together. Anne Marie had moved forward to a new life with Robert, a long time friend. Then Marge married Ben. Ruth had stayed single, concentrating on trying to save her daughter from drug addiction. They still leaned on each other, cared about each other and shared both the good and bad parts of their lives.

When the conversation turned to activities for the summer, Marge listened to Anne Marie talk about a cruise, about helping Robert's mother get settled into a retirement center, and doing more with her vocal group. Ruth was

making plans to refurbish her house and rejuvenate her garden. She wanted to do more but hadn't come up with the right idea so far.

Anne Marie asked Ruth, "Are you going to get in touch with your mother? You haven't mentioned her for years. This might be a good time."

"I don't think so. I know we don't have anything in common." Ruth paused, "I've pretty much put her out of my mind. I only knew her a few hours and she didn't seem like she wanted to be involved."

Marge thought Ruth closed the door on that conversation too fast but didn't say anything before she headed into the restroom.

She came back as Ruth was continuing, "I would really like to find Rachel. I finally have enough money squirreled away to get her the treatment she needs. I want to let her know. When I saw her last spring, before the break, she didn't give me an opening and I didn't have everything arranged. I can't seem to get going with anything else until I get that taken care of. She paused, "Maybe it won't ever happen and I'll have to find a way past the need."

Neither Marge nor Anne Marie knew what to say so the conversation stopped. Marge was already worried about Ruth, the comment increased her concern. Ruth had already withdrawn a lot, spent most of the time she wasn't teaching in a futile search for Rachel or in the garden. There must be a way to keep her from sinking farther into isolation.

A few seconds later, Ruth turned to Marge, "I know you got to make one trip up to visit Kathy. Are you going to be able to go again?"

"I'm not sure when. I have to arrange help to stay with Ben."

Ruth asked, "What about your plans now?" They both waited to hear what she had in mind.

"About going to see Kathy or in general?"

"In general."

"It depends on Ben. I'm hoping to encourage him to be more active. The doctor said he should be doing therapy and using his walker but he won't. He won't go out of the house either. It seems like he must sit all day feeling like the world is against him. I'm guessing about that. He doesn't actually tell me what his thoughts are."

Anne Marie asked, "Is that normal after a stroke?"

"Not really. At least it shouldn't be according to everything I've been told. He's improved a lot already and the doctor says he can get back most of his normal functions if he'll try. Ben doesn't seem to believe it—or he doesn't want to get better. I can't tell."

Ruth frowned, "Do you think he'll make an effort if you're home with him?"

“I don’t know. I hope so. He’s so negative he’s hard to get along with.” She paused, “I didn’t mean to put a damper on our party. I wasn’t going to talk about it. That slipped out. I’ll find a way to work it out.” She shrugged her shoulders, “I haven’t had time to think about anything. It’s been a busy month for me.”

Anne Marie said, “Don’t be sorry. We asked because we wanted to know. You need to share. That’s what friends are for.” She smiled at Marge, “We might not be able to help a lot but more people thinking can’t hurt. We can try to come up with ideas. I’ll give you a call after I’ve had more time to mull it over. You’re probably too close to think of different approaches.”

“Probably. I do try but I get frustrated.”

Anne Marie smiled at Marge, “I should have found a way to give you a membership to a gym where you could exercise. That’s how you dealt with frustration before. I remember seeing you run the track every time we had a bad day at school. Sometimes you’d be out there in the pouring rain.”

Marge smiled back, “I could use a track now. In my back yard.”

Anne Marie asked, “How can we help?”

“Without building a track? Maybe spring me for lunch once in awhile.”

Ruth agreed, “We can do that. It seems like we should be able to come up with more.”

“I’m for anything that gives me a break.” Marge added, “Something I can look forward to. Just give me a call”

Ruth went on, “You do need to find a way to get exercise. A good walk would fix you up so you could stand a grouchy husband.”

“If I had a track close by, I’d use it even if I had to push that darn wheelchair around ahead of me.”

That response brought smiles as they all remembered Marge running off her hard days. It was a good time to begin the gift exchange which brought up more discussion of things they’d done together. The pleasant time reliving stories of the past and talk about plans for the future strengthened Marge. Ruth even gave her a grandmother T shirt so she had an opening to share her snapshots of Kevin and Amy.

“I hope I get time with the kids this summer. They’re growing so fast I can hardly keep up. Ben doesn’t want them at the house and he won’t go visit them so I’m going to be looking for places I can take them.”

Anne Marie smiled. “That can be fun. We do that with Robert’s grandchildren every so often. Even the swimming pool can be exciting. Once in awhile we take all the grandkids out to Fern Ridge. Robert’s son belongs to the yacht club and his family has a sail boat out there.”

Marge nodded. "I think I'll be going a few places I haven't visited in years. I may even watch some baseball games."

The gift exchange brought up the plans for the next few weeks and had them all thinking about the luxury of sleeping late, slow morning coffee, and time to catch up on projects they'd each let go.

Marge was laughing when she said her goodbyes to her friends and challenged Ruth to come up with new goals for the future. She knew these women gave her life many of its best moments.

Feeling a little giddy Marge left the Inn carrying the gifts and balloon. She headed toward her car, cooler now. After a last wave goodbye she slid into the car wishing she'd taken the time to have her hair colored this week.

It was hard not to be a little jealous of Anne Marie's dark brown curls. A session with her hair stylist might have helped the way she looked. Probably the way she felt too. She knew the stress of trying to get Ben through these last few weeks showed in the dark circles under her eyes. Her friends must be worried about her. She'd wanted to avoid that for this gathering.

She'd said more than she'd meant to, probably enough they could tell things weren't going well. Nothing she could do about it now. She sat behind the wheel of the car without turning the key as she thought back to the pleasure they'd had together.

Anne Marie and Ruth had been right about one thing. She'd do a lot better if she had a good place to walk. She'd been dealing with her frustrations on the track since she'd been in high school. It had been these last few weeks with Ben's care and her job she'd had to go without exercise. She was missing the stimulation of good movement and she knew her emotions were raw with no physical release.

She hadn't told Ruth and Anne Marie the whole story of how hard it was getting with Ben. The worst was how he acted, just plain nasty. He didn't seem to feel anything for her any more, at least nothing but resentment. He acted like he blamed her for the stroke. Maybe he did. The last few months had been such a struggle, she could hardly remember back to the time when he'd been an eager suitor and the few years they'd been happy together.

With a sigh she started the engine, steering the car toward the road and away from the lounge and the river. She'd planned to have a nurse-aide come to serve Ben's dinner and visit with him this evening but Betsy had called him to chat and heard Marge would be gone. She'd decided she could serve him dinner instead of having someone else in. Marge knew she'd be going home to face a grumpy husband in a wheel chair and a step-daughter who resented her for marrying him. Not a homecoming to look forward to.

MARGE, BACK ON TRACK

Noticing the paved path from the edge of the parking lot toward the river, she stopped the car and looked to see where it went. To the riverbank, in a circle around the property and the putting green. She backed the car up and took a parking place close to the path. She'd take a few minutes for a good walk before she drove home. The tasty appetizers: cheesy potato skins, onion rings, and zucchini sticks had taken care of her food needs for awhile. A few minutes of delay would make her evening a whole lot better.

While she started down the path she told herself, things would get easier now that she wouldn't be working; Ben would have company for most of the day. Besides she could do more to encourage him with the therapy he was supposed to work on. She didn't think he'd been doing any. The therapist who came every week left her notes saying Ben should be using the walker more by now. As far as Marge knew, he'd never tried unless the therapist was there. Every time Marge suggested she would help him with it or even brought up the subject he gave her an indignant glare and wouldn't respond to anything she said for hours.

Her thoughts got sidetracked by the view of the river, fast and narrow through here. Then her attention turned to the scattering of golfers on the putting green. She wondered if they enjoyed the game. They must. It was one sport she'd never tried. It impressed her as lacking the high of physical exertion. That high was her craving.

She let her mind wander back to the celebration. Anne Marie's casual suggestion that Ruth contact her mother and Ruth's dismissal of the idea caused her to think of her own mother. She and her father married right out of high school, right as he'd been drafted to serve in the army after World War II. He'd served his time as part of the occupying force in Germany while her mother waited, staying on with her parents and saving her allotment. He'd come home to take a job as a furniture salesman and stayed on, enjoying the work.

Marge's mother hadn't been strong after an early childhood bout with rheumatic fever left her with a damaged heart. She'd been happy to limit herself to her husband's goals, turning her efforts toward the house and staying secure under his care. She was in her mid thirties before Marge was born and she'd had no other children.

Marge had been an obedient child around the house but she spent a lot of energy on outdoor activities her mother didn't know about. She climbed trees, raced anyone who challenged her and played ball with the boys. More than once she'd had to slip in the back door and to the bathroom to clean up before she faced her mother.

The distance between mother and daughter grew when Marge wanted more than marriage and housekeeping in her life. Marge worked hard for college scholarships and grants, then finally took a part time job to pay her way. College increased the separation of values. Mother and daughter were limited to brief visits and little conversation when Marge was planning a teaching career.

By the time Marge graduated, her mother's health had begun to fail. Marge decided to stay at home to help with her mother's care. Even that concession wasn't enough to add warmth to the relationship.

Since there wasn't an open teaching position, she'd taken a part-time job as a library assistant leaving her time to handle the shopping and heavier housework. She kept that routine after she met Dick, a cheerful and outgoing mechanic, working at a Ford dealership. He flirted, took her to dinner and the movies, made her laugh and understood her desire for a different life. When the library chore ended, she and Dick married and she took on the job of managing a new household in addition to helping with the care of her mother.

Two years after Marge and Dick were married, Marge's father died of a sudden heart attack. Her mother only lived a few months longer. Those few months Dick had helped her mother more than Marge could, pregnant with Jim and occupied with a crawling and active Kathy. She hadn't started her teaching career for another two years, when Kathy could go into day care with a pre school program.

Marge still regretted she didn't have the ability to put more love into the relationship between her mother and herself, even the grandchild didn't help. She couldn't remember an honest, two way connection after she started college preparatory classes in high school. Maybe there had never been one.

Back to the parking lot too soon, Marge decided on another quick trip around before she started home. This time she concentrated on the pleasure of using her body. By the time she got back to the parking lot the second time, she was feeling pleasantly exhilarated. It was time to go. She climbed in and restarted the car. While she drove, she tried to make herself concentrate on pleasant thoughts: the great class she'd had this year, the goodbye from her staff, and even the celebration with her friends. When she pulled up and stopped in her own driveway, she was in a better frame of mind.

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