

The Widow's Blue Jar of Dreams



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“Anyone who saw me that night would label me a widow gone mad,” the Wednesday night speaker said.

What a great line, Lizbeth Sebring thought, chuckling with the others who listened. Lizbeth sat in the last folding chair on the right, at the tip of the half circle. She saw the advantage of madness. A triumphal madness would blot out her quiet suffering. Of course, widow was the operative word here in the carriage house behind Quincy Funeral Home, where grief-counseling sessions were held.

To get the evening's activities started, Beebe Walker, who led the Wednesday night sessions, introduced the speaker. Callie MacCallum waved off the heavy wooden lectern, outfitted with small rubber casters, so Beebe wheeled it to the back of the room and parked herself beside it.

Earlier in the day, Lizbeth's home phone rang. The caller was Beebe. “Make sure you're here tonight. The speaker was chosen especially for you.”

Lizbeth planned to attend, anyway. She used the sessions to measure herself against the other attendees. Quiet suffering in check, she did not collapse into tears over the death of her thirty-six year old husband, Dan, the victim of a cerebral hemorrhage. Although she loved him dearly and lost him without warning, she did not pander wantonly to grief. Some women, she thought, accepted grief like candy from a stranger.

As soon as Lizbeth stepped through the carriage house door that evening, heavyset Beebe scurried over on wide black shoes. She apologized. At the last minute, the scheduled speaker backed out. Callie MacCallum, the self-professed mad widow, substituted instead.

“I took my dressmaker’s shears into the bedroom, opened Jack’s closet door, and began cutting his clothes into seven-inch squares.” Callie’s tone shifted for a thoughtful aside. “I’ve tried on many occasions since to remember the actual moment when I conceived the idea to sew a quilt of his clothes, but nothing ever comes. Possession of a hazy memory must run parallel with grief.”

Murmurs of agreement eased through the crowd. Callie stood next to the finished product, draped over one of the folding chairs, and Lizbeth considered the outcome. The result of a few hours of madness was tamed, culled, and sewn into a quilt.

“That night, I succeeded in making a total wreck of the room. Jack’s clothing was pulled off hangers and out of bureau drawers. Empty hangers were tossed into a haphazard pile on the floor. In sharp contrast to the room, the remnants of Jack’s clothes were neatly folded and stacked on the bedspread. Bedspread and mattress had, of course, doubled as my cutting board. My scissored frenzy,” Callie said, rolling blue eyes and poking fun at herself in a way that brought up a laugh from her audience, “resulted in a collage of squares in various colors, prints, and fabrics lining the dresser top.” Callie paused while the quilt drew every eye for verification. “Next, I went to the hall closet, dragged out my sewing machine, and the race was on!”

In the next instant, though, Lizbeth sensed Callie’s exhaustion. Her presentation wore through her. All the emotion experienced during the quilting cycle compressed into Callie’s slow movement as she lifted the quilt off the chair back.

“I say race, but I had my job and household chores. The quilt was intended to fill spare time, and I took care with the work.” Her softened voice brought stillness to the room. Not a breath was

taken. No one stirred. Callie sat down on the chair and opened the quilt to fall across her lap. “It was very late the night I sat on the couch next to the floor lamp and knotted my last hand-stitch into the border.”

Lizbeth pictured the puddle of lamplight and the glinting needle piercing the strip of navy edging.

“I set the needle aside.” Callie’s thumb and finger pinched an imaginary object, her hand making the actual motion to a make-believe pincushion. Her eyes were cast to the patchwork when she said, “Then a miracle happened. I pulled Jack’s quilt up over bare arms and slept a sleep I hadn’t known in weeks.”

The quilt covered Callie. Lizbeth groaned silently. Suddenly, with an irrepressible ache, she longed to feel Dan holding her again, skin touching skin.

The moment Callie created lingered. Everyone was so caught up in her story that there was no applause for its exceptional telling. Beebe walked through Lizbeth’s peripheral vision to the front of the room. Widows rose almost simultaneously to gather around Callie and carefully examine the quilt. Beebe and Callie held the upper corners. Two sisters, grieving the lost of their mother, grabbed the lower ones, lifting them for a better display. The pattern was six rows of six squares each. Its size would cover lap and legs, or in Callie’s case for that first night, lap and arms.

Lizbeth, a tall woman, looked on from the back. The uniqueness of the squares were Callie’s tribute to Jack MacCallum. From what she could tell, he had two loves in his life: golf and, oddly, pockets. No, Lizbeth corrected, three. If the man had any brains at all, he deeply loved Callie MacCallum. She definitely worked her love for him into the quilted design. Embroidered golf course emblems cut from shirts were stitched alongside pockets. All kinds. Hip pockets, flapped pockets, buttoned and snapped pockets, riveted, watch, and cargo pockets. Every seam was exact; every corner perfect.

“I wish I’d saved his clothes now,” one widow commented.

“The first thing I did was pack up his closet,” said another.

“Such minute hand-sewing,” a third complimented.

One of the sisters spoke. “The quilt is lovely. Our mother could sew like this. I thought it was a lost art.”

“How easily you talked about your husband,” the group’s newest widow said. “I couldn’t have done that.”

“It’s been eighteen months. That’s about right. I’m through the worst, I think.” Callie smiled at the grief counselor. “Beebe wouldn’t have asked me if I wasn’t ready.”

The group disbursed, heading for the dessert table covered with a lace tablecloth.

The half dozen selections waiting on platters did not tempt Lizbeth. Her thoughts drifted back to the first counseling session she sat through. Beebe made a comment she considered another great line: “Don’t let the grief ghouls win.” Beebe went on to say: “Fight back. Fight a little. Fight more. Be aware of the stages of grief. Be aware of your place in what stage.”

Lizbeth cared more about the fight, than the stages.

The grieving process, Beebe taught, embodied three stages with three parts each:

Shock, denial, numbness.

Fear, anger, depression.

Understanding, acceptance, and moving on.

In the weeks before his death, Lizbeth and Dan made strides to secure a fantastic opportunity. This opportunity put Lizbeth and

Beebe at quick odds with one another.

Dan's high school years were lived at Fairchild Academy for the Fine Arts in Tucker, Georgia. In Dan's case, the academy produced an exceptionally fine landscape artist. He was thrilled when his former headmaster contacted him about a teaching position. By the time the called ended, the offer included Lizbeth, a teacher as well. Interview dates were set, and if Fairchild board members agreed, Lizbeth would teach mathematics and English to the academy's students while Dan coached them on composition, texture, and technique.

For weeks, Dan's enthusiasm mounted until Lizbeth was fully engulfed. He talked of his alma mater, his fondness for Headmaster Wallace, and his dorm room in beloved Everett Hall.

"Old Red was campus central," Dan said. Old Red was a gigantic red oak. Every accomplishment was memorialized with a photograph taken in front of Old Red.

Dan described how each school year began with the stark white walls of Milton Hall. As the weeks passed, the walls began to fill with the students' best artwork. He remembered hanging his first landscape. It was an honor, a rite of passage. Four years of honing his talent culminated into another honor. His graduating class decided on a gift for the school. Dan was chosen to paint the academy's crest on a floor-to-ceiling pane of glass to hang in the student commons. The paint for the crest was mixed to a Fairchild Blue.

Red, white, and blue. For Dan, Fairchild Academy equaled a patriotic cause.

Sadly, in June, a week after Dan's death, Lizbeth telephoned Headmaster Wallace with the news. He was shaken, but encouraged her to keep her August interview appointment. Since Dan's dream became her dream, she agreed. Fairchild Academy's next term took up in September.

One evening, two weeks after Lizbeth spoke with the headmaster, she got Beebe aside privately in the carriage house and relayed the plan. Lizbeth owned fight, an attribute Beebe praised. Lizbeth would pack herself into grief's final stage and move from Maryland to Georgia.

Beebe looked at Lizbeth through worried eyes. "We've talked in group about too much change too quickly. You can't just declare to jump to the moving-on stage. You've got to feel, Lizbeth. Reading the words assigned to the stages of grief, knowing their meaning in your head, is not feeling the emotion in your heart. That's not living through the process, which is two years at best."

"No, it will be easier someplace else, not where Dan died, but where he lived and laughed and studied, in the place that gave him such fond memories."

"But that's Dan's life, not yours."

"It was going to be ours. We talked endlessly about it. I feel like I visited the campus a hundred times through Dan's eyes, seeing his memories. This is what Dan would want me to do."

A moment passed while Beebe's eyes brightened and a smile rounded out her face even more. "You're going to be my boat rocker, aren't you?"

Lizbeth countered with, "I promise to keep myself centered and my feet dry."

"You've got my numbers. Call me if anything in here," Beebe said, tapping Lizbeth's heart, "goes haywire."

"It won't," Lizbeth said. No way would she hold off Dan's dream for fear of grief. She would fulfill his dream. In the meantime, Lizbeth promised Beebe she would continue the group sessions. At the time, she thought they would reinforce her decision as a good one.

And they did.

Now she stood with Beebe and Callie, admiring Callie's handiwork.

"Would you make one for me?" the boat rocker said suddenly. She desperately needed a quilt to keep Dan's dream warm and comfortable. "I have all of Dan's clothes. Dan's my husband," Lizbeth explained. "I lost him two months ago."

Callie was midstream into expressing her sympathies when Lizbeth noticed a look of enthusiasm fill Beebe's face. "Callie, you know, that's a great idea. You're going to the cabin tomorrow. That would give you something to do while you're there. You were worried the time on your hands would be too much. This is a perfect solution." To Lizbeth, Beebe said, "The cabin's in West Virginia."

Callie started to respond, but Lizbeth stepped in. "Oh, I don't think I could get everything together by tomorrow. I plan on leaving for Georgia Friday for my interview." Lizbeth chanced a glance at Beebe, knowing her feelings on the subject, but Beebe's concern was fully hitched to Callie's situation.

"But Lizbeth could stop by on the drive down. You could give her directions, and she could drop the clothing off." Beebe turned to Lizbeth. "You're not on a strict timeline, are you?"

"Actually, no. There's leeway. I didn't want to feel rushed. But if Callie wants some time to herself..." Lizbeth let her voice trail off, not wanting to be an interloper. Callie had not made the offer herself.

Callie waved Lizbeth's reluctance away. "You know, this might be a good idea. It's a backup plan at the very least. Getting there the day after I do gives me time and incentive to clean and spruce up. The cabin has sat empty for a while."

"Are you sure?" Lizbeth asked.

“Absolutely. The cabin is three hours into your trip. No concerns about arriving too early. I usually greet the dawn, especially in West Virginia.”

Lizbeth put off selecting Dan’s clothes until the next morning. It was difficult to think of his favorite shirts and jeans cut down to squares. She forced her mind to focus on the treasure those combined squares would create. She found two suitable boxes, then followed Callie’s lead. From Dan’s closet and bureau drawers, she chose garments unique to Dan’s character, clothing that would speak a tribute to him.

Later that day, Callie texted cabin directions to Lizbeth’s cell phone. Every turn came with an identifiable landmark. When Lizbeth set off on Friday, she had no difficulties finding the cabin on Old County Road A.

Up ahead, at a break in the trees, Lizbeth saw a low sign staked to the ground. It read: HEATHERWOOD. The professionally carved letters were embedded in a rectangular wood plank and inlaid with goldenrod paint. A vine with the season’s last red raspberry gripped the sign’s top edge. Lizbeth eased the car onto a gravel drive that widened to a parking pad.

Once past the initial border of trees, the property opened up. Heatherwood was just what Lizbeth expected. The cozy cabin was constructed of rough-hewn materials and faced a grassy clearing. The lawn rolled out and down to a small dock overlooking a rippling river. On either side of the yard and across the water, evergreen and deciduous trees created one of nature’s thick privacy fences.

Lizbeth climbed out. She enjoyed Heatherwood’s stillness for a moment before she heard the squeak of hinges. She looked over to the covered porch. Behind Callie, the screen door slapped shut.

“Hi,” Callie said. “You made it.”

Callie seemed genuinely pleased to see Lizbeth. After Callie and Lizbeth confirmed all the arrangements, Lizbeth began to fret that the intervening day would give Callie pause to reconsider and think of Lizbeth as an intruder. She was little more than a stranger.

All doubt disappeared when Callie and Lizbeth sat together on the couch in the cabin's great room, and Callie listened intently to the significance behind the clothing that made Dan the man Lizbeth loved. The two cardboard boxes they carried in from the car's back seat sat flapped open before them on the oaken floor.

"I kept the stories you told Wednesday night about Jack's clothing in mind when I picked through Dan's clothes. I want my best memories sewn in the quilt."

"Exactly," Callie said. "It's a keepsake."

From the box at Lizbeth's knee, she pulled out a sports jersey.

"Dan played baseball?" Callie guessed.

"He played on a park league. He loved the sport. God only knows how many times that dusty and stained uniform came through the wash."

"The fourteen ought to work perfectly," Callie said, using her two thumbs and forefingers to form a square over the jersey's numeral, gauging size.

"The jersey I could get clean," Lizbeth said, before dropping the baseball shirt in her lap. "This, I could not." She unfolded another sports-styled shirt from the box. The white shirt bore green trim, considerable age, and a red stain.

"Kool-Aid?"

Lizbeth nodded. "This was Dan's weekend-around-the-house shirt. That's what he called it. The shirt would not release the stain, and Dan would not release the shirt. He wore it anyway." Lizbeth

hoped Callie understood that Dan's possessiveness spoke to his laid-back, unpretentious nature.

"In that box," Lizbeth said, pointing to the carton at Callie's knee, "are several pairs of Levis."

Callie pulled a pair out. "Is that paint?" Callie said, scratching at raised beads of color.

"Afraid so. Dan was an artist. Landscapes. Paint splatters were everyday life." She smiled. Moments with Dan flashed through her mind. "Now that I talk about it, I guess most of Dan's favorite clothes were about stains. I didn't realize that until just now. Well, not this. This is really ancient." She dug into the second box and withdrew a gray sweatshirt. The fold fell out. Black imprinted words on the front read: World's Best Boyfriend. "This was a no-occasion gift I gave him when we were dating. This, he wore when *life* got dirty, when *he* messed up, or thought he really made me mad. He'd pull this on and come to cuddle." Lizbeth spent the next several heartbeats with conjured memories.

"It worked," Callie said, bringing her around.

"Every time. There was nothing between us this sweatshirt couldn't solve. My Dan had an irresistible side."

Callie reached into the second box. Dan's colorful collection of Hawaiian shirts seemed to catch her eye.

"Why he adored Hawaiian shirts, I don't know. I suppose being an artist, he was drawn to the splashes of color. He never wore them to paint."

"Of course not." Callie grinned. "The splatters would hardly show."

A growing bond drew Lizbeth to Callie as they shared these remembrances of Dan. "I know the quilt will be amazing. Thank you for doing this. I'll pay you for your time, whatever you ask."

“Absolutely not. Putting Jack’s quilt together saved me once. Dan’s will save me again.”

Lizabeth connected Dan’s good deed, performed in absentia, to the difficulty Callie associated with returning to the cabin.

Callie pulled on Lizabeth’s arm. “Come on, let’s get up and stretch our legs before you fold yourself back into the driver’s seat.” Callie laughed as Lizabeth stood. “You are a tall one. From the length on Dan’s Levis, so was he.”

“Guilty as charged, on both counts. But I’ve done all the talking. It’s your turn.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Well, first, let me say, this is a great place and a beautiful location.” Lizabeth absorbed the rustic feel created by the stone fireplace, hardwood floors, and log cabin walls. “You said Wednesday night the cabin sat empty for a while. After Jack died?”

The two women filed out the door, heading toward the porch steps, dock, and river.

“Jack had cancer. We visited Heatherwood as often as possible. There was a magic for us here. In the months before Jack got so dreadfully ill,” Callie went on, folding her arms, as if memories of her husband’s sickness created a passing chill, “we sat there on the dock. He made me promise to return. He knew it would be hard, but that’s what he wanted. He thought it would be best for me. Months clicked by, then a year and a half passed. Still the promise went unfulfilled. Soon, it became as haunting as the grief. Beebe knew the story. She understood the magic and the promise—and the pain of returning alone.”

Lizabeth pictured Beebe Walker, generally a happy soul. She suddenly understood the staggering magnitude of weight the grief

counselor bore on behalf of others.

“Jack and I were like two people who really become one,” Callie said, looking off into the distance, nearly slowing to a stop. “The problem is, when one dies, what becomes of the other.”

Now, it was Callie Lizbeth pictured, Callie’s soul, stripped of substance, almost iridescent, nearly lifeless.

A passing wren chirped, and Callie clicked back to the present. As they neared the weathered dock, their presence hustled a soft gray bunny away from its dandelion lunch and back into the trees.

“So, you’re heading down to Georgia for an interview?” Callie asked.

“A job interview, yes. I’m a teacher.”

“Hmm,” was all Callie said. Lizbeth thought more words waited behind in Callie’s mind.

The women stepped up to the solid six-foot-by-ten dock. “Come on,” Callie said with an arm gesture. “Let’s sit down.”

Their footsteps on the planks sounded like hollow echoes. Lizbeth mimicked Callie’s actions once they traversed the span: Her sandals came off.

“Jack and I called this the dangling dock because it’s just high enough to dangle our feet,” Callie said, lowering herself to the platform.

The water was cold when Lizbeth’s toes tested it. She looked over at a thoughtful Callie. “You’re wondering if I’m thinking clearly.”

Callie studied her a moment. “If you’re talking about taking a job in Georgia just two months after Dan’s death, then yes. I’m in full agreement with all the grief handbooks on the subject. It’s your

decision, and I do give you credit for your courage, but I honestly feel it's too soon. I'd like to see more time pass. I'm sure Beebe told you the same thing."

"She has." Lizbeth's fingers tightened around the edge of the dock. "Beebe's timetable probably worked out for you. It won't for me. Dan and I had a dream. It includes Georgia and one particular school. This is my chance to teach there."

Callie said nothing.

Lizbeth's feet swished the water. "Look, you had your promise to Jack to come back to the cabin. I have Dan's dream to fulfill. I'm just able to move quicker. Maybe I'm stronger. I don't know. But this feels right."

"You're talking about a dream and a promise." Callie's voice was laced with concern. "They're nothing more substantial than a lick and a prayer if you fall apart emotionally once you're settled in Georgia with no support system in place. You're right, I was not strong enough to come back to Heatherwood two months after Jack died." Callie shivered with the thought. "You and this decision reminds me of going to the drugstore a week or two after Jack's death. I literally felt like I was living inside some kind of hazy bubble. I could only see about three feet ahead. I felt isolated from a world operating normally around me."

Lizbeth nodded her understanding. Callie may not believe it, but that same description illustrated how she stumbled around just after Dan died.

"I went in for another jar of Noxzema," Callie said. "I simply wanted a one-for-one replacement. I wanted the small size, exactly what I'd emptied. But instead of something a little larger than a golf ball, all the store stocked was a jar the size of a softball. I stood there for twenty minutes, trying to decide what to do. I needed the product, but I didn't want a jar that large. I just wanted the smaller size. That's what I came in for. Around and around, it went in my head," she said, raising her eyes to Lizbeth. "That

larger jar represented months and months of living and washing my face without Jack in my life. I didn't want to perceive that far into the future. In reality, I didn't want to think about living as long as it would take to use up that jar."

Lizbeth tried to read her eyes. Was Callie telling her she considered suicide?

"Georgia. Noxzema. Georgia. Noxzema," Callie said, hands operating like a balance scale. "You're truly not applying the principles Beebe preaches about grief if you're able to make that decision after this interview, so soon into the grieving process."

A tiny splinter of guilt pierced Lizbeth's heart. "I know you want to help, Callie. You wouldn't sew my quilt if you didn't. All I can say is, I'll take your words under advisement." As she made the statement, she knew her decision to teach at Fairchild Academy was a foregone conclusion. It took precedence over any other principle.

Lizbeth parted Callie's company on good terms and with an invitation to stop by on the return trip.

The following Monday morning, Lizbeth arrived at Fairchild Academy for the Fine Arts. She stepped inside the student commons and beheld the scene Dan described in great detail. She was greeted by a long glass panel bearing the school's double FA crest at eyelevel. The academy's full name circled the crest's outer perimeter. Lizbeth's fingertips touched the Fairchild Blue paint that Dan's talented hand brushed into the design.

With the few extra moments before her appointment, she wandered over to the bookstore in the near corner. Two women stocked shelves in preparation for the onslaught of students in two weeks. She found a journal there, filled with lined, white paper and the double FA crest stamped on its hard cover. She purchased it, letting her confidence in securing the teaching position zoom out of sight.

She would record her daily life at Fairchild in the journal, starting with the oddly nostalgic feeling of seeing a glass panel she had only ever visualized through Dan's eyes. Through journal entries, Dan could walk again beside her and across the grounds of Fairchild.

The man who strolled through the main door at precisely nine o'clock was not old enough to be Headmaster Wallace. He knew her name and introduced himself as Headmaster Hastings.

"I'm happy to meet you, but— I'm sorry," she said, confused. "I was expecting Headmaster Wallace?"

"He intended to write you note. Didn't you receive one?"

She shook her head.

"He decided to step down. It was somewhat sudden, you know, because of the medication."

She didn't know anything of the kind. Apparently, the former headmaster had an illness. His absence shook her. Her thoughts blurred as the current headmaster led her toward a conversation nook.

"Sit, sit, sit," he said.

She took the couch. He claimed the closer of two chairs and lay the brown envelope he carried on the coffee table.

"We are so pleased to have you. May I call you Lizbeth?"

"Certainly."

Neal Hastings unbuttoned his suit jacket and eased into the interview process. He spent the first ten minutes on his background and vision for Fairchild, which she was glad to learn. She felt firm ground return under her feet. Hastings' prior post placed him in Fairchild's financial office. He described his dedication to the

“enhancement of Fairchild,” to be accomplished through “several endowments,” which he secured, and “profitable investments,” which he oversaw. Then he switched gears, saying he personally checked her references and verified her certifications. “All in order there.”

After a question-and-answer period, he suggested a walk across campus. “I want you to see your classroom in Milton Hall.”

She inhaled a quick, electrifying breath. The reason was two-fold: Her soaring confidence appeared on target. It seemed a certainty she won the job. Hastings, himself, identified the second.

“You know Milton Hall. Yes, of course, through your husband. A dreadful thing to have lost him so young. I can’t help but think you’ll find happiness again with us at Fairchild.” His sincerity shone through with a blend of sympathy and encouragement, but the word *again* made all the difference.

“After I settle in. Adjust a little. I’m sure I will.”

“Good, good, good.” He steered her toward the back of the room. “I must apologize in advance for the state of the campus. That’s why I asked to meet you in the commons, since it’s right off the front gate. Beginning tomorrow, two work crews will finish things up. One will outfit the new dorm rooms; the other will demolish the old dormitory.” They swung out rear doors. “I couldn’t have this be your first impression of Fairchild. A terrific storm battered the grounds in June,” Hastings explained solemnly.

Lizbeth’s eyes were riveted to the scene across the lawn. She nearly stumbled down a curb. “Everett Hall and Old Red gone,” she mumbled.

She stood in awe of the maelstrom’s power. During its rant, it twisted the red oak out of the ground by its roots and sent its upper branches crashing through Dan’s former dorm. Remnants of the dormitory’s sign and its cockeyed posts lay beneath a camouflage of leaves, brown and curled. Yellow caution tape drooped around

the disaster area, seeming to mimic Lizbeth's despair.

Nothing was as it should be. Nothing. Each of Dan's perfectly preserved memories about headmaster, tree, and dorm was either sick or facing lingering death.

"Was anyone hurt?" Lizbeth stammered out the expected inquiry.

"Thank God, no. Graduation was over, and the dorm was empty. The new dorm was already underway and left untouched by the storm. Schaeffer Hall—that's the new dormitory—did its job. Higher enrollment speaks for itself. The new dorm is state-of-the-art with internet and satellite hookups. The entire campus is wireless, equipped with fiber optics." His announcement came with a marketing update that failed to make the desired impression. "We may have lost the oak, but this is a rebirth of sorts for Fairchild. A glorious new day."

Glorious was not the word Lizbeth would use. She struggled to keep up with high-stepping Hastings. Once inside the honey-colored brick of Milton Hall, she recovered her earlier jubilation. They walked the main hall to the crossing corridor. Every wall was bright white, just as Dan described. Empty tables sat against the walls.

As the school year progressed, she pictured the change, like time-lapse photography: Selected artwork would begin to grace the walls; sculpture would fill the tables. By May's conclusion, the talent would nearly reach out and touch anyone who passed down the hallways. Today's plainness would be overrun with beauty. She anticipated an inspiring story to relate in her journal. Her first glimpse of Milton Hall came through Dan's eyes, his memories and impressions. Through the imagined display of new art, she felt Dan's eyes looking back.

"Your classroom is across from the main art room," Hastings said. "Of course Fairchild has three art rooms and four studios for the children to cultivate their talents."

The instant she passed into the classroom, she knew the deep heartache of Maryland would be left behind. At the very least, it would be eased. She was a teacher; her classroom, a home. The new location brought new focus. In this room, she would overwrite her loss in Maryland. The new beginning was her Georgia reward.

She ticked off the range of subjects she would teach: literature, creative writing, grammar, mathematics, algebra, and geometry. She knew the artist's life. She could wrap these other studies into the student's creative minds and enhance their talents. She wanted to make a difference. She said something very similar to the new headmaster.

Hastings walked her back to the student commons. "Here's our summer edition," he said, handing her a folded newspaper taken from a stack on a window ledge. He then retrieved the brown envelope he arrived with for the interview. His voice carried a certain lilt when he said, "Here's a draft copy of your teaching contract. Read it over. Call if you have questions. You are, indeed, an asset in Fairchild's future. The board meets in two days. The formal contract will be mailed by Friday." He reached out his hand and shook hers firmly. "Again, just glorious."

In the car heading north, Lizbeth could drive for hours and hours with summer's extended light. She planned to reach the motel she spotted on the way down, just off the southern tip of West Virginia. Her morning at Fairchild imitated a roller coaster ride. The high associated with the crest and journal was dashed by the tree and dorm. Somewhere in North Carolina, she decided the change in headmasters played in her favor. She wouldn't become fond of Headmaster Wallace, then be forced to make the change to Hastings.

She closed in on West Virginia, her long day nearing an end. She looked over to the passenger seat. The newspaper lay on top of the envelope containing the draft contract. She would read through both at the motel and over breakfast in the morning when today's activities and her decision to teach at Fairchild were a little more

distant and less daunting. Once entrenched in the school year, she would feed off the energy supplied by the students and survive Dan's loss while his memories surrounded her.

Keeping her eyes on the road, she pressed two buttons on the driver's door armrest to slide the windows up the few inches they'd been lowered. She pressed the wrong buttons, and the windows rushed down instead. A breeze bustled through the car. It caught the Fairchild newspaper and carried it to the floor mat. The pages ruffled noisily. The flight and landing flung the paper open, exposing the bold headline.

Tragedy: Old Red Lost June 3.

It felt like Lizbeth's eyes suctioned the first sentence out of the article: Sometime in the night, tragedy struck.

The world dimmed around her. Stop, stop, she had to stop. She steered wildly across a four-lane road and into a boarded-up gas station.

Longing, thick and unbearable, closed her throat. The feeling of suffocation came next. She slapped at the door handle and stumbled out. She gulped air, but the oxygen didn't prevent her head from spinning. She felt her existence ripped to ragged shreds.

She shot a look across the sea of cracked asphalt to the dingy, weather-beaten station that represented everything ugly about her life, and shouted, "Dan died the same night." She gulped a sob. "June third."

A furious rage seared through her. Lizbeth threw her head back and released an ancient groaning scream that ended with buckling knees. She fell back against the car's steel hull and sank to the ground. Submitting completely to grief's power, she wailed again. Neither would God be spared her fury. For she blamed Him.

She pictured an enormous hand reaching down and effortlessly pushing the tree over onto the dormitory. Then the deity chose to

explode a piece of a good man's mind and allow him to bleed to death in his own bed. The next morning, she woke to the ghastly sight.

She turned over to kiss Dan good morning. Instead, she screamed and screamed. She fumbled out of bed and escaped to the corner beside the dresser. Her hands shook violently in her face. She sank to the floor, just as she sank to the pavement. Rivulets of blood leaked from Dan's eyes, ears, nose, mouth.

She hadn't slept in that bed since. She used the guest room now. If he cried out when the hemorrhage struck, she slept through it. She hadn't comforted him while he lay dying. She beat down the guilt by raising her voice. She barbed sarcasm into her words. "I should stay in Maryland where *that* happened. That's the advice I get after what You did to me."

Mouth open, primed to say more, the distant hovel suddenly lost its magnetism. Her gaze rebounded. Emotions governed her every action. They lured her to a lonely spot with the intent to harm. She hustled herself back inside the car. It fishtailed off the property on a layer of dirt and loose stones. She raced north on adrenaline and found the motel.

Sometime during that sleepless night, she smiled to herself. She'd risen to the rank of a widow gone mad. By morning, her determination resurfaced: She would not let the grief ghouls win. Credit for the great lines that carried her through went to Callie and Beebe.

Lizbeth made one stop on the way to Heatherwood. She picked up something for Callie.

When she arrived at the cabin, Callie was walking back from the dock. "You're early," she said, hurrying over, "and you're smiling. What happened? Did it go well? Were you offered the job? What did you decide? Say something."

From Lizbeth's tote-bag-sized purse, she dug out a jar of

Noxzema, her recent purchase.

Callie's eyes glittered. "You're staying in Maryland."

"No," Lizbeth said, correcting Callie's misinterpretation.

"I don't understand."

The two women used the planks of the raised porch for a seat. Lizbeth took Callie through the entire Fairchild ordeal: the change in headmaster, the tree, the dorm, and a fourth strike, June third. She described her meltdown at the abandoned gas station. She admitted to an overnight realization that she needed support. She always thought herself stronger than the Wednesday widows. She was really not stronger, but her weaknesses were different. In the same regard, her support must be styled differently.

"I'm taking the teaching job," she said in conclusion. Callie's brows drew together. "I know it'll be tough. I get that. But if I know you'll be with me..." She let her sentence trail off.

"How can I?"

"You can. It won't take much. Every time you scoop out two fingers of Noxzema, that's a vote for me. That helps me succeed. Every night, night after night, promise me. You promised Jack; you can promise me."

"I will. I do. Certainly."

"And I'll do the same."

Comprehension lit on Callie's face. "There's cohesion there. A connection. And strength."

"You can expand on the cohesion concept," Lizbeth said.

"You mean Beebe."

"At a minimum." As Lizbeth spoke, gears turned in her mind.

Callie's balance-scales imagery was replaced with a pyramid. What spoke better of strength?

It was the Wednesday before Labor Day. Fairchild Academy took up classes the Tuesday after. Lizbeth stood at the podium in the carriage house behind Quincy Funeral Home. The Wednesday widows sat in a half circle. Beebe was there, and Callie. The quilt was not finished, but close. Everyone knew Lizbeth was leaving for Georgia, and they gave her their quiet attention.

"I freely admit, I was bested by grief. I got my comeuppance in a lonely place by the side of the road, shouting at God. It's scary to think about now. I was exposed. Vulnerable. And not just then, at that moment, but through all these months since Dan died. In the end, that roadside layover did me good. We could say, it tipped the scales." Lizbeth looked at Callie, who smiled.

"An analogy was recently made," Lizbeth said, her gaze scanning the audience, "using a jar of Noxzema as a balance for grief." Confused grumblings rustled through the widows. "Well, I guess you'd have to be there, but the analogy was a good one. It came shortly after I'd been deemed a boat rocker." Lizbeth stole a glance at a grinning Beebe. "So I understand balance is important, and I want to build on the Noxzema analogy."

Lizbeth walked to the dessert table and removed the white cloth that covered a pyramid of blue jars, all stacked on a silver cookie tray.

"Tomorrow, I drive to Georgia and a new job," she said, holding the cloth in both hands in front of her. "Tonight, I wonder if, on a nightly basis, I might impose on all of you. It would help if I knew I could count on you to protect my newfound strength."

Lizbeth's gaze drifted from face to face—from the group's newest widow, to the sisters who lost their mother, to Beebe, and finally Callie. Protectors all. She would survive the loss of a love.