

ONE

Joani Freeman had finally gotten around to going through the drawers of her husband's desk in his home office.

"It's about time," she muttered.

She calculated in her head. Three years had passed since her husband David had died. It happened the summer before their son Jackson went into ninth grade. It was now the summer before his senior year at Wheaton North High School.

It wasn't that she'd avoided the work she needed to undertake to move on with her life. She'd attended grief counseling sessions, by herself, with Jackson, and even in a group setting. She'd read books and articles about the subject and watched videos that well-meaning friends had suggested to her. She felt like she knew the answers to her dilemma, but she longed for a breakthrough of Biblical proportions to get back to some semblance of joy that she greeted life with when David was alive. She frequently found herself crying to God, "Why aren't you helping me?"

Today, she took another step in the grieving process by finally opening up the drawers in David's desk.

The top drawers on each side held the reminders of a working public school teacher/family man who brought home papers to be graded, primarily so he could be close to his wife and son. Pencils, pens, paper clips, a stapler, a small dictionary, and a ruler were the common items that David, a *common* man, would have on hand, of course. An ink pad and several stamps, index cards, two pairs of scissors, and a referee's whistle were the more exotic items.

Why would he have a whistle in his desk? He probably brought it home with him when he went on disability leave.

The cancer took David a little over a year after he went on disability. Going through his things would not be a happy reminder, and that's probably why she'd put it off for so long. But the time had finally come, and she needed to take another big step in moving on with her life. Deciding what she should keep and what she should throw away in David's desk was a positive step.

"David is *gone*, and I'm still here. Why can't I get that through my head?"

Gone were the days when they held each other in the storms. Gone were the times when they took walks or sat together and watched the sun set. Gone, like her aunt and uncle's farm near Springfield, Missouri where she'd spent summers growing up. She and David had inherited the farm from June and Herb and lived there after they'd first gotten married, when David was taking classes at a nearby college to get a law enforcement degree.

Her breath caught.

His badge?

She lifted the item from one of the drawers. He'd gotten it from the Tuscola, Illinois police department.

He never turned it in. Why would he keep it?

It symbolized some really tough days for him. But that was typical of David. He took the bad with the good and used each of them as teaching tools for his own soul. "Don't get too high on the highs, and don't get too low on the lows," he would say.

She dug around in the second drawer on the left side and found the reminders of his days as a regional sales rep for Jay Tools in St. Louis. That was when they first met, almost thirty-five years ago. A pocket protector with two Jay Tools pens in it. A Jay Tools' notepad. A hand-held cassette tape recorder.

She fingered the thing. "I wonder if it still works?"

She kept digging and found a stack of business cards and... "There's that Vince Gill CD. I wondered where that was."

As she dug deeper, she came across a John Grisham novel.

Why is that in here?

Papers, papers and more papers. Little scraps with names and numbers scribbled on them. Sales receipts from the hardware stores he frequented. *Why would he keep those?* His day timer. Back then, the always organized and efficient David lived by his day timer.

She tossed the day timer on the desk, but then realized it might just be the one from the year they met. Sure enough. The year was stamped plainly on the front cover. She grabbed it and enthusiastically paged through it in hopes he'd written some notes about their first meeting, possibly some new inside revelation of what he was thinking those first few days.

It was spring. We met in the spring.

She paged through March and got into April. *Nothing.* Then May. Sure enough. On a Monday in May, he wrote:

Drive to Springfield.

Crazy meeting at Gas Stop

JOANI GIVENS

Auburn hair. Pretty smile. Crazy.

Took her to farm near Fair Grove

Lodging: Springfield Super 8

Tears welled up in her eyes. That was the day he'd rescued her like a knight in shining armor. The day of their chance meeting at a gas station near Waynesville and her frantic plea for help in escaping the life she'd messed up so badly.

On Tuesday, he wrote:

a.m. Springfield

p.m. Joplin

drive to Tulsa (ballgame?)

Lodging: Tulsa Super 8

For Wednesday and Thursday, David wrote much the same. However, on Friday, he wrote:

p.m. Fair Grove. JOANI GIVENS

Why not!!!

She wanted to laugh out loud but caught herself when she remembered how badly she had treated him the second time they got together. Reluctantly, she turned the page and her heart sank as she read Saturday's entry. David's boldly written words stabbed deep.

LOVE SUCKS.

Tears of sadness streamed down her face. “I was drunk, David!” she screamed at the pages as if he could hear her.

“A pitiful drunk, heading no where,” she mumbled.

She tossed aside the day timer and sobbed. A moment of sweet relief took hold when she forwarded the story in her mind. “But you’re not a drunk now, Joani. And David was the one who rescued you. David and God.” She took a deep breath and wiped the tears from her face.

She needed to quit rummaging through the desk drawers for the time being, especially when she opened the third drawer on the left side and saw the stack of papers.

I don’t have enough time to get through all of those.

A single file folder toward the top of the pile caught her eye, and she pulled it out from the stack. Curious, she opened it to the first page which read:

Home Is A Distant Fire

a novel by David Freeman

David wrote a novel?

She knew he’d been working on something, but not this...”

The manuscript was double-spaced and numbered, words printed on only one side of each page. She suddenly had all the time in the world to spend... reading David’s novel.