



Wild Raspberries



"A story laced with humor that readers will carry with them after the last page has been turned." —Deborah A. Allen, author of *The Swinging Door*

Connie Chappell

Wild Raspberries

When Callie MacCallum sews her first quilt after the death of her lover Jack Sebring, she doesn't realize she'll be drawn into a Sebring family battle between wife and daughter-in-law. She simply wants to fulfill her promise to Jack to visit their cabin in the West Virginia mountains, where their long love affair was safely hidden.

Instead, her emotionally reminiscent trip becomes crowded with the two Sebring women, a grief counselor, and the massive role Callie assumes. She must speak for Jack in order to protect his four-year old grandson Chad from his stubbornly manipulative and blame-passing grandmother and his recently widowed and power-usurping mother. Callie understands both women grieve the loss of Chad's father. He died when a raging storm split the tree that crushed him.

Grief isn't the only common thread running between the four women. One by one, their secrets are revealed on the West Virginia mountaintop.

Unraveled

Callie McCallum looked up a split second before a black sedan, careening out of control, plowed through her street-side flowerbed. The front radial squashed daylilies flat and the bumper mowed plumed prairie grass down before the car stopped. A woman jumped out. She left the door open and the car running. It was Arnett Oldstone Sebring. When Jack Sebring, Callie's lover for twenty-two years, died eighteen months ago, it seemed reasonable to assume Callie was done with his wife. But she was there, red-faced, and charging across her front lawn. Instinctively, Callie tightened her grip on the banded newspaper she stepped out of the house to retrieve.

"Hey! What is this?" She thrust a fistful of quilt forward. "More handiwork from the Scottish Tart?"

Clearly, nothing about the older woman changed. Arnett hadn't missed the driveway; she never intended to use it. This was not the time to admit it, but Callie found Arnett's nickname for her clever and amusing. In a combo title, Arnett referred to Callie and Jack as the Tart and Tartan.

"First, you ruin my marriage," Arnett said. The curls arranged in her coarse gray hair shook with her voice. "Now, your fingerprints are all over my son's death. Why can't you stay the hell out of my life?"

"Dan? Those were Dan's clothes?" Callie was the quilt maker; no point in denying that. The quilt Arnett held was one of a pair, actually. Her revelation meant the clothing used to complete both belonged to Dan Sebring, Jack's younger son.

Weeks ago, Callie cut squares from half a dozen Hawaiian shirts, a stained football jersey, and a collection of worn jeans where the color supplied came from paint splatter. The squares were patched into a simple quilt pattern of six rows with six squares each. Its size would cover lap and legs. All of Callie's quilts were sewed anonymously for those who grieved the loss of a loved one; each was constructed from clothes the dear departed wore in life.

Callie's first quilt was sewed with Jack's clothes. Tears and pain competed fiercely with each other when she lost him to cancer; the pain went far beyond anything tears could ever hope to drown out. Callie was a golf professional by trade, not a quilter, but quilting supplied purpose to her life and got her through sleepless nights.

The incredulity Callie showed Arnett was genuine. She would not have recognized Dan's clothing. Jack's last three years were lived in Callie's house, but his two sons never accepted her in their father's life. The seething woman in the beige pantsuit hadn't allowed it. Three months ago, Callie was shocked to read Dan Sebring's obituary. Had Jack been living, his son's death would have destroyed him.

"Honest, Arnett," Callie said, her tone sympathetic, "I didn't know."

"Honest," Arnett repeated haughtily. "That's a laugh."

"How did you figure out I was the quilter?" Callie said, suddenly baffled.

Her new friend, Beebe Walker, worked as a grief counselor and was the motivation behind the therapeutic quilting. She and Beebe formulated a plan to maintain the privacy practiced in Beebe's counseling classes. Beebe reached out to certain class members with the idea of a quilt, but never mentioned Callie's name as quilt maker. This plan collapsed rather soundly in the hour since Beebe picked up the twin quilts for delivery.

"The pictures. The pictures in that album Lizbeth's counselor showed me." Arnett drew herself up to full height, a fearsome five-

three. "I know my husband's clothing when I see it."

Callie's memory flashed on the day Beebe came to the house with her camera. Just as Arnett described, Beebe wanted photographs depicting the detail sewn into Jack's quilt for the purpose of showing future prospects.

Out on the street, Arnett's trailing entourage arrived. Callie closed her eyes, trying to blot out the sight of Beebe's car pulling to a quick stop behind a silver Tahoe. Callie never confessed that the man she lived with and told Beebe stories about, the man she loved so completely, never divorced his wife.

What did it matter that her lost love was someone else's husband? What mattered was that Beebe realized the quality of Callie's love for Jack was equal to the depth of her grief. Now Callie feared the belated truth would ruin their friendship.

Lizbeth Sebring stepped out of the SUV and jogged across the drive. The tall brunette was Dan's widow. Behind her, Beebe sidled up to Arnett's car, turned off the engine, and closed the door. Beebe was forty-six to Callie's forty-four, brunette to Callie's blonde, brown-eyed to Callie's blue, and rather doughy compared to Callie's streamlined build.

"Arnett," Lizbeth breathed through clenched teeth when she was close enough. "What's wrong with you, coming over here like this?"

"Why do you even need to ask that?" Arnett said accusingly, then a thought registered on her face. "You were in on this, you and that woman!" She pointed in the general direction of an approaching Beebe.

Callie's moment of confusion cleared when she remembered a tidbit of information Beebe shared when she placed the twin quilt order: The dear departed's widow attended sessions; his mother adamantly declined.

"I didn't know Callie would sew the quilts," Lizbeth complained. "I didn't know Beebe even knew her. I didn't know any of it until I looked at the album to see what caused you to race out of

Beebe's office. I was just trying to do something nice. I thought you'd appreciate a quilt when I saw the finished one Beebe showed during class. I never saw that album."

Despite her daughter-in-law's denial, Arnett shook her head. "Makes no difference. I will not have this thing in my house. I never want to see it again." Arnett winged the quilt at Lizbeth.

Callie watched Lizbeth fumbled it. The quilt's bottom corner, where Callie's hand-embroidered raspberry logo was stitched, nearly scraped the ground.

"Lizbeth? Callie?" Beebe said, squinting up at them. "I don't understand."

Callie's face was hot when she and Beebe finally made eye contact. A scathing exposure of Callie's carefully tended secrets came next.

"Let me explain it to you," Arnett said to Beebe. "This woman and my husband screwed around for nineteen years before they screwed up and I kicked John out."

"Callie and John?" Beebe said, emphasizing the man's name.

"The son-of-a-bitch who was John to me was Jack to her." To Callie, Arnett said, "I've dreamed of this opportunity a long time. It's the minimum you deserve."

Lizbeth, quick and agile, caught Arnett's hand before it struck Callie's cheek and, in one motion, whirled her mother-in-law around to face her. "No. Not anymore." Lizbeth drilled the words.

Her grip surely hurt Arnett's arm, but neither woman broke off her glare. Finally, Arnett pushed the taller woman back with her captured arm, then twisted it free. Lips pressed tight, she turned on her heel. The other three women watched as she shifted the sedan into reverse. With dirt and sod flying, she whipped the car around and gunned it up the street.

After Arnett disappeared from view, Lizbeth sighed audibly. "I'm so sorry about this, Callie, but I need to go after her. We've

got to talk.”

Beebe touched her arm. “Should I go with you?”

Lizbeth shook her head. “Thanks, but I’ll handle it, and fill you in tomorrow.” She strode purposefully away, folding the quilt as she went.

Before Lizbeth reached her vehicle, Callie turned her back, eager to escape the public arena. From a shady garage across the street, three neighborhood men seated in lawn chairs stared, transfixed.

Inside, she stopped short. Two paper grocery bags greeted her. They were stuffed with articles of clothing for her next quilt. Beebe dropped them off earlier when she collected the Sebring quilts. Callie tossed the newspaper on the foyer table, wound past the staircase, and ducked through the first doorway.

She was leaning against the dining room table, her palms flat on the floral cloth that covered it, reliving the nightmare, when she heard Beebe’s shuffle stop behind her. She imagined the look of betrayal etched into Beebe’s face.

At long last, Beebe’s voice invaded the silence. “That was an ugly scene. Are you all right?”

Shoulders hunched, Callie nodded.

The quiet swelled and was again punctured by Beebe. “Are we going to talk, or do you want me to leave?”

Callie folded her arms as if to ward off a chill. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I bet not.”

Callie never heard Beebe speak in this superior tone. She spun, her arms falling to her sides, her blue eyes latching onto the other woman. The rationale behind her deception spewed from her mouth. “I couldn’t tell you, Beebe. I couldn’t. No one would want to hear my story about Jack if they knew he was married,

and not to me. If I told that, who would want to help? I was hurting when I came to you. I still am. But I'm not asking for forgiveness. I loved him. Jack and I protected that part of our lives. After he moved in with me, sure, people knew. They saw us together. But after he died, my instinct switched over to protection mode again. That's where I am," Callie said, patting her heart. "That's where I'll always be."

Beebe listened without releasing a glimmer of understanding, then her eyes narrowed. "How could you do that?"

Callie looked away under the weight of Beebe's condemnation.

Beebe moved a step closer. "No," she said. "Not how, on a moral level? How, on a survival level? What a deep love. Where did you find that kind of strength?"

The question surprised Callie. She stumbled around for an answer. "In Jack, I guess. In loving Jack."

Beebe's head shook the response away. "That kind of strength doesn't come from another person. I'm a bit envious of that quality in you, of its sheer concentration."

Callie absorbed Beebe's comment while her friend moved closer still.

"Let's go talk about Jack. I'd like to hear how he came into your life, again." Beebe winked. "Now that I know the full story."

Beebe's unflagging insight spoke to Callie's needs at this moment. The string that unraveled her secret about Jack now dangled. Another jerk, and it would be free.



Callie's twenty-four year love affair with Jack Sebring mimicked a three-act play. She and Jack successfully hid their affair for nineteen years; they lived together for three after he was diagnosed and while his illness progressed; during the last eighteen months, Callie coped with his death.

The two women filed through Callie's kitchen to the rear deck of her Cassel, Maryland, home. By late afternoon, the deck with its oval table and four cushioned chairs stood in solid shade created by the two-story house. Her secluded patch of yard was wedged between an unattached garage, its opposing raspberry arbor, and the woods that separated her home from Chesterfield Park Country Club. She worked at the club, managing the pro shop and hiring out for golf lessons.

Jack also kept an office at Chesterfield. He was the consummate overachiever, completely at home with larger-than-life projects. He poured his talent and creativity into golf course design.

Beebe pulled the nearest chair away from the glass-topped table, then angled it for a view of the wooded border. She brushed a brittle leaf from the cushion and sat.

Callie looked up to the wide August sky where birds chased sunshine and shadows, then walked to the wooden banister where Noodle's treat tin sat on the flat top rail. Noodle, her neighbor's English setter, routinely begged biscuits. In a cedar at the woods' edge, she watched a pair of bluebirds hop from branch to branch in a follow-the-leader game. Next to the cedar, a wide path entered the woods. Her golf cart was parked behind the garage, only its rear bumper visible. Callie's mode of transport to and from the country club was a winding cart ride through the woods.

Many said Callie was born to golf. Her greatest weapon was an assurance form-fitted to her skill. Out on the links, her focus closed around the shape of the fairway and the slope of the green. Yet it had been so easy to lay her life open to Jack: A glance said he read her thoughts; his touch absorbed her feelings. Every day, she ached to feel him touching her again.

Callie turned around when Beebe jump-started the story.

"I remember you met Jack during your junior year at Duke when you came home to play in a golf tournament." Beebe crossed her legs. "April, right?"

“Good memory, Beebe. It was the club’s charity tournament. In the two prior classics, Mark and I were partners.” Callie said, speaking of her older brother and propping a hip on the railing. “But that year, I pulled into the driveway to another surprise. This house was posted for sale.”

“This house?” A surprised Beebe pointed a finger toward the decking. “Another detail I didn’t know. You lived here as a child?”

Callie nodded. “This was my parents’ house. Mark was being transferred. I got that news in January. His house over in Bremerton sold, so his company moved everything up. When I arrived home, Mark, Cheryl, and the kids were gone. My parents decided to follow Mark later that summer.”

“I forget. Where did Mark move?”

“Macon.”

“That’s right. Then club officials substituted Jack.”

Callie nodded. At the time, Mark told the former golf pro, Bill Franks, about his change in plans, but she always suspected Bill asked Mark not to tell her. Bill didn’t want her to back out. She was the draw for the event. Having more members coming out meant more money pledged for the children’s home. The club’s roster of members knew she owned quite a few wins in junior tournaments and was ranked first at Duke. Around town, she was considered Chesterfield’s protégé.

Callie wandered through the woods and onto the course when she was ten. The McCallums weren’t members, but Bill saw her interest, then her talent. He talked to club directors and received permission to give her lessons. He sold them on his dream that she’d become big in the game and that would bring attention to the club.

“Was it love at first sight when you were teamed with Jack?” Beebe asked.

The tone and sincerity of Beebe’s question touched Callie’s

heart. “Honestly, it wasn’t quite love. It was a strong connection, though. We became instant friends.” She remembered everything about that first day with Jack. His athleticism and humor melded with hers as deliciously as warm syrup and butter settled comfortably in the wells of Sunday morning waffles.

“There were two occasions in May when Jack turned up on Duke’s home course during matches. He didn’t announce his intentions. I simply sensed his presence, perhaps due to the fact that he was wandering through my mind with increasing frequency.”

“And obviously, you were wandering through his.”

Callie smiled. Her spirit drifted back to the college course, finding Jack in the crowd, his blue eyes lighting a path between them. “He claimed his presence had been job-related coincidences.” She gave Beebe a devilish look. “Neither one of us believed that.”

“Did the relationship progress at that point?”

Now that Beebe knew Jack was married, she wanted to pinpoint precisely when sex entered the picture. Callie left off the introductory phrase, “Sorry to disappoint you,” and said instead, “No, just dinner and conversation. I didn’t see Jack again until my golf obligations for Duke ended in early August and I came home.” Still, no sale pended on the house.

“That was the fateful summer you fell of the bike and broke your wrist.”

Callie’s left wrist went up. “This one. Fixing it required the insertion of four stainless-steel pins, followed by seven weeks of inactivity, and three months more given to physical therapy.”

“Ouch. Didn’t need to hear that again.”

“My parents knew all that would predictably install me in this house for the duration. So the week after surgery, they trailed off to Macon, pining for the grandchildren. They said the real estate agent would deal with any nibbles and never looked back. Never

came back either.”

Beebe sat expectant, an elbow pinned to the armrest, one finger pressed to her lips. Beebe knew Callie well enough, now. This time, Callie pulled the string that unraveled her change in mood.

“You know, throughout my entire childhood, I felt neglected. I went on winning one golf tournament after another, being written up on the sports page, and Mark got all the attention. I never understood that. But in the end, my family’s estrangement worked out.” She curled a lip. “After Chesterfield hired me, I bought the house. Jack had private access through the woods, and family didn’t show up at odd times. My family’s disregard played an important role.” Her gaze dropped. “It allowed me to realize the greatest love I will ever know.” She gave herself a moment, then blinked back to Beebe. “That summer, I decided not to turn pro and let the world think the reason was the wrist injury.”

“Thought you’d live life inside a huge glass golf ball, huh?” Beebe smiled. “With television coverage, the onset of social media, and cameras everywhere, questions would naturally rise about that one particular guy always in the crowd. You couldn’t give up Jack.”

Callie matched Beebe’s affirmative statement with another. “So I gave up pro golf. I never regretted it.” She raised an eyebrow. “My coach did. After the surgery, I notified him of my— Well, mishap. Duke issued a press release. An account of the accident was reported in Sunday’s sports section, so Jack was aware of my injury when, insanely bored, I trolled over to the club the next day.” Beebe’s eyes flicked to the golf cart and path. Callie continued her retelling. “Jack was just coming off the course. He showed concern and invited me to lunch at the club’s restaurant, I think more to lift my spirits than anything. We lunched there every day that week and had plans to meet again on Friday. That morning, I was out back here with the hose, watering Mother’s orphaned geraniums.”

Beebe’s eyes sidestepped Callie to an oval patch out in the yard that grew the same red flowers. Before her gaze returned, Callie went inside herself.

“I will always remember how my heart suddenly pumped hard. I waited a half-second, then turned.” She smiled. “Jack stood there, looking tanned, broad shouldered, his soul bared. I distinctly remember the want in his eyes. It pulled me inescapably into love with a man who was twenty-two years older, twice my age. I never felt too young. I’d been relying on my own instincts for years on the golf course. I took risks.” Callie’s eyes aligned with Beebe’s. “Jack Sebring was a risk to take. I don’t know how my heart contained our love. It was all fire and wind. Any man deserves to have the woman who loves him like that at his bedside when...” She swallowed the rest. Starting again, she said, “Caring for Jack after he got sick, that was the first time I made a difference. That was the first time I did something that mattered.”

“The first time?” Beebe said soothingly. “Surely that’s an exaggeration. You were what, forty, forty-one when Jack got sick?”

Callie understood Beebe’s intention. She thought Callie was undervaluing herself. Callie shook her head and pressed her point. “No. Nothing compares. Not when you look at the full picture.” Callie tugged at her sports skirt, then kicked up a golf shoe. “I played a game my whole life. Jack’s illness, terminal cancer, the care he needed— I promised to provide that care to keep him at home. That was not a game. That was a blind promise. I didn’t know what was coming. Yes, hospice nurses came and went. They gave me hands-on, during-the-crisis training. He was bedridden. That meant bedsores. One, I swear, as big as a grapefruit.”

Beebe winced.

“I dispensed narcotics. Tens of thousands of dollars worth of drugs ran through this house. His pain was severe. His medication was given every two hours. That meant no sleep for me. For weeks, no real sleep. I set an alarm to keep the schedule, to wake me up. Then the coma came. He died in our bed. I watched the funeral director carry his body out. It had stiffened.” Her voice was barely a whisper. “Caring for Jack was something that mattered. It’s been the only thing that’s mattered.”

For no reason, Callie reached for Noodle's treat tin. Her hand shook; she felt herself sway. She had yet to learn how to talk about Jack's death without reliving it.

"Here, Callie. Sit down." As Beebe scooted a chair away from the table, the doorbell rang.

Beebe looked around. Callie set the tin down. She welcomed the interruption. It would give her the opportunity to walk off the emotional threads that still clung. "I'll see who that is, then, why don't you stay for dinner?"

Callie hoped she would. Earlier in the day, she arranged to spend a week at Heatherwood, the West Virginia cabin she and Jack visited as often as possible. There was a magic about Heatherwood. Callie's last promise to Jack pledged her return. In recent months, the unfulfilled promise became as haunting as the grief. Beebe knew the story. She understood the magic and the promise. Callie was sure she would back her decision with words of encouragement. Perhaps a kernel of that encouragement would ride in the car with her to fight the pain of returning alone.

~*~*~



Wild Raspberries is available for purchase in paperback, eBook, hardcover, and audiobook through Amazon and other online booksellers.