

Widow of Arbor Heights

A novel by Linda M. Scott

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JANE  
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Granite Nursing Home

The years go by faster than a fox chased by a bobcat. She stopped by several months ago, Madeline, Agnes Storm's daughter. After so many years, it was a pleasure to see her again. Matter of fact, I received more visitors that summer than the entire time I lived here—even Madeline's boy, Jason, popped in for a visit. He was no longer that unsure teenager I once knew, but a confident young man with a wife and two children.

Madeline explained that she had returned to her old homestead last year after taking an early retirement from her job as a social worker. I have to give her credit for picking up the remnants of her shattered life and moving forward. Sooner or later we must accept the cards we're dealt with, then embark on our next move.

After her release from Haverford Psychiatric Hospital, back in the eighties, she sold that monster of a house. She changed, for the better. It pleased me so, to witness the reunion with her mother even before the acquittal. Oh my, my...it was an awful time. However, that was so long ago and my memory feels like Swiss cheese.

Madeline still held her charm and told one of the helpers here, "Give me what Jane's drinking because I swear she must be aging backwards." We both had a good

chuckle and then chatted about what she had been doing after she left our town, until she abruptly changed the subject and pulled from her purse a faded book. It was her mother's diary. Agnes wrote with such flair. She was quite artistic, God bless her. That was, until disease ravaged her body and then her mind. Poor dear.

Many women at Granite remind me of dear Agnes. She might have been a different person if the doctors hadn't prescribed those modern drugs. I won't let anyone give me that poison. I've always been quite particular on what I put in my system. The ancient Greeks understood the healing power in herbs. Many can be stronger than today's synthetic drugs. One must be cautious and take into account an individual's physique, tolerance, and allergies. I've learned that the hard way.

When I arrived at Granite, I organized outdoor gardening projects for interested residents. We maintain vegetable and herb gardens and cultivate a variety of herbs: parsley, basil and lavender. I often infuse lavender in my teas for its calming effect. Years past, it helped with Agnes's blues. Many endeavors have been quite healing for those we wrangle into helping us. However, some of the more frail folks assist us in the greenhouse and with our semi-annual plant sale. As the scriptures have instructed: *Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and give light to all in the house - Matthew 5:14.* I always do my part to serve our Lord.

I'm the head supervisor in the greenhouse and instruct my assistants how to obtain near perfection with the plants. Just last year, several gals and I entered our finest specimens at the Philadelphia Flower Show and we won three blue ribbons. We call ourselves, *The Granite Rockers*. On the bulletin board I posted snapshots of our group holding the award-winning flowers. Our deep pink and mauve Saintpaulia's—most

layman refer to them as African violets, and our prized orchid, the *Brassavola nodosa*, best known as the Lady-of-the-Night. The flowers hold an alluring scent, like gardenias mixed with lemons. Last year, that orchid was a challenge to display because the blooms appear only from dusk until midnight. However, I had my lighting and fertilizer trick, and the *Rockers* received the highest honor.

I've always felt right at home here and certainly fortunate that I had the finances to afford this lovely place. Maybe when my money runs out, they'll still keep me around. My goodness, what would they do without me?

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Madeline explained that she was apprehensive about reading her mother's diary, but there was so much she never knew about her. In fact, I thought I knew everything about Aggie but there was plenty that she never revealed to me and I was her best friend. Many entries were difficult for Madeline to interpret because several pages were missing so that's why she tracked me down. The old memory is just not the same to fill in all of the blanks, however, some past events appear clear as a bell.

Agnes wrote about the time Bill Conway came to town. It was June 13, 1987. That man—I remember all too well.

It had been a peaceful summer night until he banged on her door. I thought, who in the blazes did that man think he was. Calling on Agnes at that hour! There were only a dozen pages left of my book and, as in any credible mystery, the passages were set to take the reader on an unexpected twist. I looked out my bedroom window and, sure enough, he was on her porch. A tall man with squared off shoulders, wearing a wide-brim hat. He was relentless and kept on banging. She must have been so afraid.

Shoving my aching feet into my moccasins, I tossed on my robe and went downstairs, all

the while praying that Agnes wouldn't dare answer. Not that I wasn't frightened of him, mind you. Besides, my trusted, loaded shotgun was right next to me in the hall closet. A lady living alone must take precautions. Opening my front door, I hollered through the screen, "Sir, you'll wake up the dead! What do you want?"

He turned, glancing left then right, not bothering to look straight across at my house. Our lane was isolated, with our two homes sharing a dead-end road. I turned on my front light so the fool could see me. He ambled over and introduced himself as Detective William Conway and said he was looking for Mrs. Storm's son, Peter. I knew that he wasn't the first, nor would he be the last law enforcement officer that came by looking for that rascal. That boy was always getting into hot water.

I wasn't the least bit intimidated by Mr. Conway. In my younger days, I carried a lot of spunk. "He left months ago. Mrs. Storm cannot help you. Sir, I suggest you leave her alone and be on your way!"

I slammed my front door so hard that my wind chimes spun long after he left. The frenzied clanging eventually diminishing to an airy, tinkling sound, lulling me fast to sleep. That melody always helped me fall asleep on those oppressive summer nights in the valley. And now, at Granite, as I lie in bed in my room, tossing and turning, memories of that pleasant tune return to me and I doze off like a baby. Funny, how little snippets, such as those, plant themselves in your mind. You soon discover how a fragment of something that was once pleasant to you helps you get through the periods when you can no longer find peace in the dark hours. In any case, that night, thankfully, Mr. Conway didn't linger but left in quite a hurry.

From across the lane, I noticed Agnes in her bedroom, watching through parted curtains. As though, together, we studied the stranger's car, as its' crimson taillights disappeared to cat-eye slits. Then, I telephoned her. It took several tries before she picked up. She didn't utter a word until I told her that it was me. "Jane, there was someone knocking on my door," she said, shaken.

I remained calm.

"Aggie, I had a little talk with the man and I can assure you that he won't be returning any time soon."

"What do you think he wanted?"

"Dear, he was given some misinformation. He's new to town and was just hired at the city hall as a public relations officer. Someone down there gave him your address. Of course, it was the wrong one."

I asked Aggie if she wanted me to stop by, but she refused and after we chatted a bit, her voice had relaxed considerably. I promised her that I'd visit her the next morning. She needed a good night's sleep. Looking back on that night, I often felt guilty that I didn't insist on going over. She probably had revisited her past and didn't sleep a wink. The stranger's attire resembled a law enforcement officer, with a blue shirt and trousers and matching hat. She confused easily and I've often wondered if she believed that he was the old sheriff, Robert Parker. It had been close to twenty years earlier when he had appeared at her door; such a horrible night, that one. However, Mr. Conway's car was an old junker, unlike the Sheriff's cruiser. Afterward, I thought to myself that it was a darn shame, that she hadn't been out of her home in ages, but so much had changed—

she had changed—then I settled back in my bed. I slammed the book shut. He ruined my story, all momentum lost.

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MADELINE  
2009

The familiarity of Arbor Heights, along with the nagging voices called to me the moment I left Philadelphia. I was hungry to return, even if it held a few ghosts.

Everyone in my family had fallen away like petals from a dried flower.

My childhood home was a wreck. The yellow paint had faded to ash. Ivy tentacles suffocated the house and snaked over the gravel. A mass of thistle, poison ivy and weeds, with anemic daisies, struggled towards the sun, replacing once-lush flowerbeds of bright roses and zinnias. Recent storms had uprooted a tree. It leaned against the house with a massive limb on the roof, its branches poking through an attic window.

The first night I spent in the house was a sleepless one. Scenes from my youth flickering past like a zoetrope. Each image held a myriad of emotions. There were delightful moments, but the heartbreaking ones smothered me, the ones I fought to keep at bay, the ones that took me to that bad place. Fragmented images flashed past: my father's warm smile, Peter in the tree, hammering nails on his tree house, me, retrieving wood scraps that he had tossed to the ground, grandma's steam-covered glasses while she poured scalded potatoes into a colander, the big-toothed grins of my girlfriends and Mom squeezing tubes of paint on a palette. Then—a puppet's head with a hazy face that flopped side to side—a sudden hard jerk—a bloom of bright red—a poppy, its black center spreading outwards.

It was only a matter of time before sleep became my enemy.