
Ties that Blind

by Leigh Michaels

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CHAPTER ONE

JANICE STAFFORD was already in the big country kitchen when Abbey came down the stairs. She was standing by the long windows looking out over the garden at the back of the house, with a china cup and saucer in her hand. Her mind, however, was obviously elsewhere, for she didn't hear Abbey.

That her mother was up, dressed and drinking coffee at this hour was no real surprise, Abbey thought. Janice had never been the sort to loll around in her dressing gown till noon. But her trimly tailored blouse and crisp flared skirt were not quite what Abbey had expected, either. It was barely seven o'clock.

"High heels? At this time of the morning?" Abbey said, reaching for the coffeepot.

Janice's cup rattled and she turned hastily. "You startled me, Abbey. I expected you'd sleep till noon, after your long drive yesterday."

"I couldn't. The lilacs woke me." Abbey leaned against the sink and took a swallow of the pungent brew.

Janice smiled a little. "They were making too much noise, I suppose?"

"No. My bedroom windows were open, and the smell drifted in, cajoling me. Even burying my head under the pillow didn't help. I'm not used to that, you know. There aren't any lilacs within miles of my apartment. Here – well, how many did Dad plant, anyway?"

"Enough to make a forest." Janice had turned back to the window. "It's only the middle of May, and already the garden is looking ragged," she said almost to herself. "It just gets beyond me."

Abbey shrugged. "So call Frank Granger. He's still taking care of every squeaky closet door and clogged basement drain in the whole neighborhood, isn't he?"

Janice blinked, as if she hadn't thought of that option. "Yes, but—"

"So maybe he'd appreciate a few days of gardening, instead. At least he'd get some fresh air that way."

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A big-boned, gray-haired woman came in the back door and let it slam. “I made it,” she gasped. “I might be too old to remember what day the garbage is picked up, but I’m not yet so decrepit I can’t chase the truck down the street when I see it.”

“Too bad you weren’t still in slippers and your nightie, Norma.” Abbey grinned at the image, then sobered. Norma was showing her age; there was no denying that the wrinkles on her face were deeper than they had been at Christmas. It was at least twenty years since she had come to work for the Staffords, Abbey calculated.

And her mother was beginning to show the marks of age, too, Abbey realized with a whisper of dread. Janice’s figure was as trim as ever, but there were fine lines in her face and soft gray streaks in her light brown hair.

Abbey wagged a finger at her mother. “So what’s the occasion? Don’t tell me you’ve gone and got a real job, with a time clock to punch and everything.”

“No, it’s just a meeting of one of my committees again.”

“Too blasted many committees,” Norma muttered.

Janice ignored her. “I’m sorry, Abbey, I know it’s your first day at home. But it’s an important agenda today, and I don’t feel I can miss it. I honestly thought you’d sleep for hours yet.”

“Don’t worry about me, Mom. I’m sure Norma will baby-sit.”

Norma snorted. “I’ll send you out to play, that’s what I’ll do.”

“It’ll be just like old times. I think I’ll cut some of those lilacs, if you don’t mind, Mom.”

“The fragrance is too heavy to bring inside, darling.”

“I know. I’m going to take them up to the cemetery.” Abbey drained her coffee cup and set it down. “Do we still have some of those outdoor vases, Norma? You know the ones I mean—the metal cups with the spikes attached so they won’t blow away.”

Norma shot Janice a look. “Try the storage shelves in the basement.”

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“I’ll bet you know where everything in this whole house is,” Abbey said admiringly. “What would the Staffords ever do without you, Norma?”

The vases were precisely where the housekeeper had said they’d be, neatly stacked on a set of wooden shelves that ran along one wall of the storage room. Some of them were rusty, and Abbey sorted through the pile, choosing two of the best-looking containers. “Norma’s let her housekeeping standards slide a bit,” she murmured as she climbed the stairs again. “A few years ago those things wouldn’t have dared to rust.”

Norma was loading the dishwasher. “Don’t leave it too long,” she was saying to Janice as Abbey came in. “Something’s bound to break.”

“Norma, please, enough. I’ll take care of it. Trust me.” Janice handed over her cup and saucer. “I’d better run. I’ll be late as it is. Oh, I forgot to tell you, Abbey, we’re invited to cocktails at the Talbots tonight. I thought I’d ask Wayne Marshall to pick us up.”

She sounded almost hesitant, Abbey thought. That was strange; Wayne Marshall had been a friend of the family for years. “I haven’t seen Wayne in months. It’ll be fun.”

“I have to spend part of the afternoon with Dorothy,” Janice mused, “because the arrangements for the summer flower show have to be finished soon. Would you like to have lunch at the country club, Abbey?”

Abbey gave her mother a hug. “It sounds as if that’s the only time you have free. Don’t panic, all right? We’ve got the whole summer. Surely every day can’t be like this.”

“I’ll meet you at twelve, then.” Janice gathered up her handbag and a cardigan sweater. “Norma, you might tell Frank the faucet in my bathroom is dripping.”

“Am I likely to see him today?” Norma muttered. But Janice was already out the door.

Abbey leaned against the row of kitchen cabinets. “My mother is beginning to sound like a dizzy blonde.”

“Your mother is lonely.”

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“Right,” Abbey scoffed. “She has absolutely nothing to fill her time. No friends, no activities. . .”

“Staying busy isn’t always the same as being happy.”

“What do you mean?” Abbey followed Norma into the family room and watched as she began plumping pillows and gathering up newspapers.

But the housekeeper’s mouth was a tight line, as if nothing would make her utter another word.

Abbey studied her for a moment, then took a different approach. “What might break?” she asked.

“Hmm?”

“A little while ago, you told Mother that something might break and that it shouldn’t be left.”

Norma gave her a sidelong glance. “One of the oak trees at the back of the garden is dead. It’ll have to come out or branches will start falling all over the place every time the wind blows.” She switched on the vacuum cleaner.

Abbey relaxed. “And you don’t think Mom will remember? You could always call the tree people yourself,” she said over the roar of the motor. Then she turned to leave. “I’ll be back in an hour or so, Norma.”

The dew still hung heavily on the lilac bushes, and Abbey gently shook each branch as she cut it. Spring was further advanced here in the Midwest than it had been in Minnesota; the deep purple blossoms were almost completely opened, and the earliest of the blooms were starting to wither.

Lilacs were not really a spring flower at all, Abbey’s father had always said, but the first signal of summer. This year that signal was particularly welcome to Abbey, for she would have the whole summer at home. The whole summer free...

No, not *free* exactly, but the two long years of her teaching fellowship were over, and she could begin looking for a permanent position—one that wasn’t limited to instructing college freshmen on how to write paragraphs and topic sentences. And in the meantime, she had the whole summer to complete her research and finish writing her dissertation.

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The whole summer. She stretched in sheer delight. It would be a treat to set her own hours for a change.

It was likely to be the last summer she'd be able to spend at home, though, for a permanent university position meant that next year there would be other demands on her. It made the coming months even more precious to know that they'd probably not be repeated.

Her basket heavy with fragrance, Abbey opened the gate and let herself out of the garden, then started down the path. Little more than a depression in the thick grass, the walkway twisted through the middle of the block of houses where an alley would have been if this exclusive neighborhood had possessed anything so plebeian. It skirted the back lawns and flower beds, staying the maximum distance from the houses themselves but making neighborly visits easy. It had been that kind of neighborhood as long as Abbey could remember—full of people who were friendly without intruding on one another's privacy.

“And yet,” Abbey muttered, “they all know everyone's business as surely as if it was published in yesterday's newspaper!”

But she said it with fondness. This five-block stretch of Armitage Road, with its big expensive houses and well-to-do inhabitants, had become her world when she was five years old. She could barely remember the little bungalow on the other side of town where they had lived while Warren Stafford struggled to establish his law practice. It was from the big brick Tudor-style house on Armitage Road that she had gone off to school for the first time. It was here she had learned to ride a bicycle and where she had broken her arm the day she had tried to rescue the Campbells' Persian cat from the Austins' maple tree....

The Campbells had put in a swimming pool, she saw, and next door the Powells' colonial had a gleaming coat of fresh white paint. Abbey could judge precisely how fresh it was because the shutters hadn't yet been reinstalled and were stacked in piles on the brick terrace. One was balanced on a pair of sawhorses, and bending over it, whistling a tune, was the neighborhood handyman.

Frank Granger was practically a natural resource on Armitage Road. If anyone needed a drainpipe cleaned, a load of junk hauled away, a shelf put up, an outlet rewired, a window unstuck, they called Frank. The man could do anything he

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turned his hand to, and there was no job he was too proud to take on. And he never, ever, breathed a word about anything he might see as he moved from house to house.

And if sometimes one had to wait days for Frank to come, well, what of it? There was no one else who could handle the kind of odd jobs he could, not for minimum pay and without complaint.

Abbey had been afraid of him when her family had first moved to Armitage Road. Frank Granger not only didn't gossip, he seldom spoke at all, and for a long time Abbey had almost believed the deliciously scary tales the older kids told about why Frank didn't talk.

She smiled at the reminder of her own innocence, as she cut across the grass toward the sawhorses. The Powells wouldn't mind if she trespassed for a minute; all the residents of Armitage Road took advantage of any opportunity to catch Frank when they needed something done.

He looked up as she approached, and his whistle died. But he didn't speak, just stood there quietly with a screwdriver in his hand. She wasn't surprised; it had always been his habit to wait till he was addressed.

"Hi, Frank. We've got a dripping faucet, whenever you've got time to look at it." She perched on the edge of a brick planter. It might take a few minutes to get a commitment from Frank; she might as well be comfortable while she waited.

He pushed the screw into the hole he had drilled and worked it deep into the wood. Once it was firm, he looked up again and said quietly, "Did your mother send you here to talk to me?"

Abbey shook her head. "Not exactly. I was on my way to the cemetery, and when I saw you, I thought I'd take care of it for her."

His gaze flicked over her; his eyes, deep-set in his heavily tanned face, were a startling shade of pale clear blue. Then he turned back to the shutter and picked up another screw. "I heard you were home," he said.

"That's Armitage Road for you. I just got in last night, but I imagine the whole neighborhood knows."

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“You’re going to take it easy for the summer?”

“It’s not a vacation, really. I’ll be doing research at Chandler College for my doctorate.” What had got into the man? she wondered. He was being positively chatty!

“You’re a teacher now.” It was not a question.

Abbey nodded. “English literature.”

“Shakespeare and all that? That’s interesting. I’ll have to tell Flynn.”

Abbey blinked, unable to imagine why Frank thought his son might be interested in anything Abbey Stafford was doing these days.

And I certainly don’t recall Flynn Granger taking any particular interest in literature, either, Abbey thought. At least not the kind that didn’t include centerfold pull-outs!

“What’s Flynn doing these days?” she asked. It was merely good manners. She hadn’t seen Flynn Granger since their high-school graduation ceremony, and it wasn’t likely their paths would cross again.

“Painting.” Frank lifted the shutter off the sawhorses and set it aside. He was a tall man, but there was nothing bulky about him, and it surprised Abbey a little that, despite the shutter’s size and obvious weight, he moved it without apparent effort. “Too bad he’s not around today.”

Abbey glanced at the gleaming white clapboards. Flynn wasn’t a bad painter, but then, he would have learned from his father; Frank must have painted every room in every house on Armitage Road over the years.

“I’m sure we’d enjoy talking about old times,” she agreed with only the barest hint of irony.

Frank looked up from the pile of shutters with a flicker of appraisal in his eyes. “I’d forgotten. You never did run around in the same crowd, did you?”

That, Abbey almost announced, was the champion understatement of the year. Abbey Stafford and Flynn Granger as bosom buddies? Hardly. She had been an honors scholar and president of the student council, while Flynn had been class clown, almost expelled once because of graffiti on the wall of the girls’ locker

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room. And why he'd chosen that particular location for his handiwork was anyone's guess.

"No, we didn't spend much time together," Abbey agreed. "But maybe I'll run into him while I'm home."

"No doubt." Frank didn't look up from his tape measure. "He's right in the neighborhood, you know. He lives at Mrs. Pembroke's place now."

"What?" Abbey's astonishment overrode her good manners. Flora Pembroke's stone manor house was one of the original mansions on Armitage Road, squarely in the center of the most desirable block. If Flynn Granger was in that sort of league all of a sudden...

The drill stopped whirring and Frank said, "He has the chauffeur's quarters over the garage."

Abbey started to breathe again. Fool, she told herself. If Flynn Granger had won the lottery and Flora Pembroke sold him her house, Janice would certainly have mentioned it. "That must be a great help for Mrs. Pembroke."

"Yes, Flynn's right there whenever she needs a hand. You're taking the flowers up to the cemetery, you said?"

Abbey glanced at her basket, which sat almost forgotten at her feet, and nodded. "Lilacs were my father's favorite." They were wilting a bit as the dew evaporated, she realized. She stood up.

"He's been gone a long time, now," Frank said.

Abbey didn't have to calculate. "Six years next fall. I was just starting my second year of college. It doesn't feel like that long, of course." She picked up the basket. "Oh, when you come to check out Mom's dripping faucet, Frank, you might take a look at the garden, too. She told me she'll be needing help with it, so you might want to give her an estimate."

"I'll think about it," he said. He didn't look up from the replacement slat he was fitting into position.

She shook her head ruefully as she walked on up the winding path. She'd forgotten how independent Frank Granger was. Once, a home owner new to

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Armitage Road had made the mistake of telling Frank she wouldn't trust him with a key. Not that Frank had fussed or made a scene. He just became too busy to help Mrs. Miller out ever again.

And Flynn was just like him, Abbey thought. She had never realized before that Flynn had inherited his irritating habit of shrugging off authority and going his own way, no matter what the consequences. It was too bad, really; that sort of attitude closed a lot of doors.

The sun had burned off the dew by the time she reached the cemetery. But the grass, newly washed, was brilliant emerald, a perfect foil for the soft gray and red and white of the tombstones scattered across it. Abbey filled her vases with water from the outdoor faucet and placed them carefully at the corners of the big white marble monument, then sat cross-legged on the grass as she arranged the lilac boughs.

It was peaceful here. By the faucet, a couple of blue jays squabbled over the water she'd spilled, and far off in the row of pines she heard the call of a blackbird.

It had not been so peaceful on that autumn day six years ago when she had first come up to this hillside. It had been threatening rain, and the wind had whipped Abbey's long blond hair and tugged at Janice's raincoat as they stood hand in hand, each holding a single red rose to be placed on Warren Stafford's grave. It was the only goodbye they could say. He had been barely fifty, and men that age were not supposed to drop dead in the middle of a summation to the jury, with no warning and no second chance.

His death had been a bitter blow to them both. It was years before Abbey could come here and sit calmly, accepting the reality that life went on even though her adored father was gone. And as for Janice, who had buried herself in committees and projects...

She's lonely, Norma had said this morning.

"Of course she is," Abbey muttered. "But if Norma is suggesting that the answer might be another man. . ."

Was that what Norma had been implying? Surely not. No one could replace Warren Stafford in Janice's life or heart.

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And yet, there had been that moment this morning when Janice had mentioned Wayne Marshall. She'd sounded odd, almost as if she was testing a new concept, tiptoeing around it until she could see how Abbey would react.

No, Abbey told herself. It was crazy even to think it. Wayne had been her father's longtime friend, that was all. There was certainly nothing romantic between him and Janice. And as for the idea of Wayne's escorting Janice to the Talbots' cocktail party, well, Wayne was the head of the psychology department at Chandler College, and Janice chaired the alumni fund-raising committee. There was nothing unusual about their going together to a cocktail party given by the college's president.

It certainly wasn't a date.

THE COUNTRY CLUB had been closed for a while that spring, Janice had written, so the dining room could be redecorated. But her mother's letters hadn't quite prepared Abbey for the change. The dark, club-room atmosphere was gone, and now the rooms were open and light and airy. The dining room hostess showed her to a small corner table, draped in green and ivory, and brought her a cup of coffee while she waited for her mother to arrive.

But it wasn't Janice who came across the room to greet her a few minutes later. It was Wayne Marshall. He gave her his usual enthusiastic hug—or was it more restrained than usual? Was it her imagination, or was there a question in his eyes?

“Will you join us?” she asked. “Mother will be along any moment now, I'm sure.”

“Oh, no, I've got a meeting with the manager. In any case, I'm sure your mother wants some time alone with you. You've got things to talk about and all that.”

Abbey said slowly, “Wayne, is my mother all right?”

“Healthy, you mean? Of course she is. She's just fine.”

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She shook her head. "I'm not sure what I mean. She seems different somehow than she was at Christmas. No, the change has come since then. She wasn't like this at spring break when she came to see me."

Wayne sighed. "Give her a chance, Abbey. She's got a lot on her mind."

"Like what?" Abbey asked baldly.

He hesitated, and in that instant Janice Stafford called from across the room, "Wayne! You came, after all."

He turned to her with a smile. "Not really, dear. I just stopped to say hello to Abbey."

Why should that simple statement sound almost like a warning? Abbey wondered.

"I'll see you later tonight, all right?" He glanced at Abbey, kissed Janice's cheek and said softly, "I'll be at home this afternoon if you need me."

Janice nodded. He pulled out her chair, let his hands rest for a moment on her shoulders, then left.

"I presume he meant in case you want his help with the plans for the flower show." Abbey picked up the menu and stared at it.

Janice laughed. "Heavens, Wayne doesn't know a gladiolus from a peony, Abbey. The taco salads have been wonderful lately, and they've got a new sandwich, too. Here it is." She pointed to the menu. "It's like a chef's special, a little of everything, but he calls it 'debris on rye.' It's delicious."

"Then that's what I'll have." Abbey handed her menu to the waitress and leaned back. "These chairs are wonderful. The whole place is terrific, as a matter of fact. Have you been seeing a lot of Wayne?"

Janice shrugged. "A fair amount, I suppose. We've been on a couple of committees together lately."

"Do they meet in the afternoons at his house?"

"Abbey!"

"Mother, you must admit that sounded like an assignation."

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“It’s nothing of the kind. Wayne is a very helpful person when one needs advice—or comfort.”

She sounded almost like a lost child, in desperate need of counsel and consolation. Abbey let her eyebrows raise slightly, but stayed silent.

Janice toyed with her soup spoon and studied the single iris in the centerpiece. Then she took a deep breath and said, “There’s no easy way to tell you, I suppose. All right, full speed ahead and damn the torpedoes, just as Wayne advised. I’m going to be married, Abbey.”

Abbey had just picked up her water glass; it tipped sideways from her suddenly nerveless hand, and icy liquid splashed across the linen tablecloth and onto the deep plush carpet. Two waitresses and the hostess converged with cloths and towels; it was all Abbey could do to mutter an apology.

Still, the fuss gave her half a minute to compose herself. Why should it be such a shock? she asked herself. She herself had been wondering, no more than an hour ago, if Janice might be thinking about dating again.

But that’s different from marriage, Abbey thought helplessly. To have already decided... To break it to me like this... To do it so suddenly!

But perhaps it wasn’t altogether sudden from Janice’s point of view, she reflected. Perhaps she had deliberately kept quiet until she knew that this new relationship was serious.

Or perhaps it wasn’t sudden at all. Wayne Marshall had been Warren Stafford’s friend forever, and Janice’s from the day of her wedding. Perhaps he had fallen in love with her then, and waited patiently for her. He had certainly never found any other woman to his liking, or he’d have married long ago.

If this was what Janice wanted, well, it wasn’t the end of the world, was it? Six years was a long time, and of course Janice was lonely. If she could find happiness once more with Warren Stafford’s good friend, who was Abbey to tell her she shouldn’t?

She gathered her shattered composure. “I can’t say I’m exactly thrilled, Mother, but I’m sure I’ll get used to the idea.”

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Janice reached across the table and squeezed Abbey's hand so tightly it was almost painful.

"Now I know why Wayne didn't tell me himself," Abbey murmured.

Janice smiled. "He knew it would be a shock to you. He said to tell you that if you wanted to talk it over.. ."

Abbey nodded. "Of course. That's why he's staying home this afternoon. It's a shock, yes. But I like Wayne, so I'm sure it won't be hard to get used to him being around all the time."

Stop babbling, Abbey told herself. It's not as if you're twelve years old and acquiring a full-time stepfather, for heaven's sake.

Janice's quiet voice cut across her thoughts. "I'm sorry, Abbey, but you've misunderstood. It's not Wayne I'm marrying."

Abbey swallowed hard. "Not Wayne?"

"No. He merely meant if you needed to talk to some one, as a friend—"

Abbey interrupted ruthlessly. "Then who?"

Janice's smile was uncertain, almost wobbly. "Frank," she said softly. "I'm marrying Frank Granger."