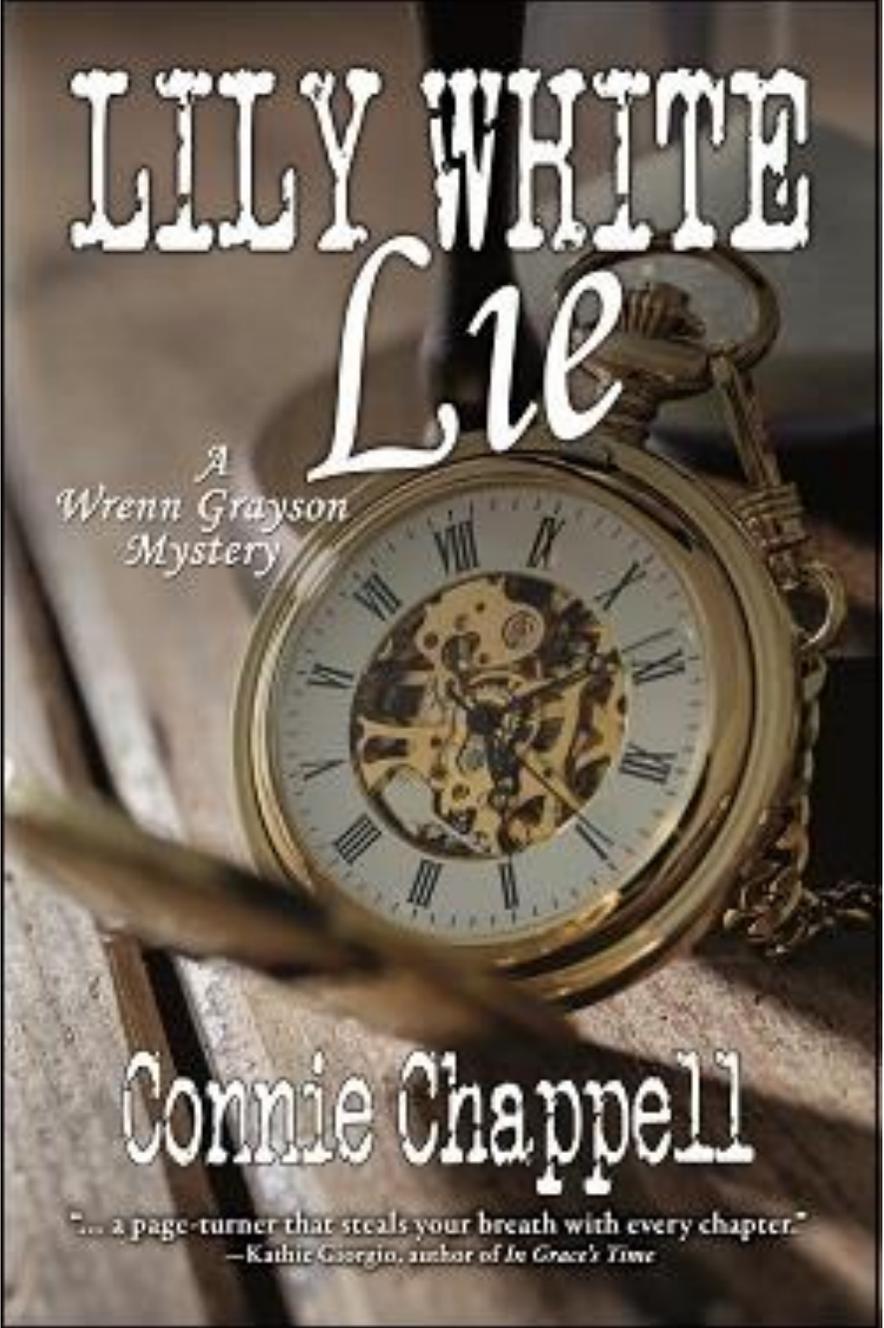


# LILY WHITE

# Lie



A  
*Wrenn Grayson*  
Mystery

Connie Chappell

"... a page-turner that steals your breath with every chapter."  
—Kathie Georgio, author of *In Grace's Time*

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*A Wrenn Grayson Mystery*

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# Lily White Lie

*A Wrenn Grayson Mystery*

In *Lily White Lie*, engravings on a pocketwatch, cryptic messages, Easter lilies, and sidelined spy Bret Kilmore combine to thrust historian Wrenn Grayson into the mysterious world of symbolism. A worried Wrenn connects the messages to her longtime love Gideon and his father. Contact is impossible. Gideon deer hunts deep in the West Virginia wilderness. His father, a prominent banker, vanished after he uncovered a money-laundering scheme.

Bret disagrees with Wrenn's assessment. He believes the messages threaten her. They both agree on the symbolism behind the lilies: Lilies signify death. But can Wrenn trust Bret, the man who coincidentally arrived in concert with the first message? The symbolism here is less clear: Bret is a man of intricacies, of light and dark, and lingering shadows.

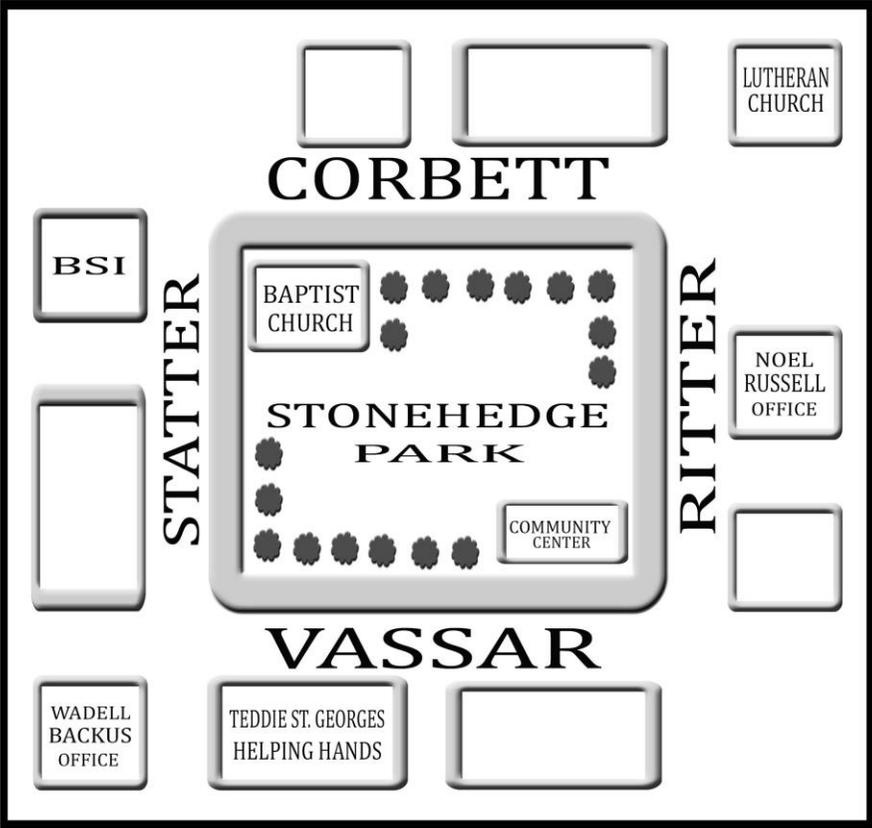
The pocketwatch ticks off the time Wrenn doesn't have. Danger mounts while every viable solution evaporates into mist.

Get your bearings in Havens, Ohio...

Shortly after I began writing the Wrenn Grayson Mysteries series, I realized I would quickly lose my mind if I didn't organize all the streets, buildings, areas of town, and notable landmarks created for Wrenn's hometown, Havens, Ohio. I found myself hand-drawing maps to keep things straight. Once I mastered the basics of a graphic design program, I decided to map out Havens itself.

Stonehedge Park is the section of town where *Lily White Lie* takes place. A map of the park and surrounding area follows. Other Havens maps are available on my website: [www.conniechappell.com](http://www.conniechappell.com). You'll find a handy list of characters there, too.

Enjoy your visit to Havens, Ohio!



# Resurrection

I stepped inside my small cottage home. It was also known as the old caretaker's quarters, located on the historic Hancock farm. Across the great room on the breakfast bar, the answering machine's red light caught my eye.

I deposited my car keys in the glass dish on the entryway table. The plastic sack I carried went with me to play the messages. Inside the sack was a new answering machine. The old one recently adopted a crotchety nature. I pushed its play button and waited. Nothing. I punched it two more times. Finally, it accepted my command and performed.

I started to shrug out of my coat when the voice emanating from the machine stopped me. It rose from a two-year grave of silence. "This is God the father, calling God the son," it said. Initially, the recorded voice was vibrant and strong with its resurrection, then it began to falter. "I'm sending...few days..."

"No, no, no," I pleaded. "Don't do this. Not now."

It continued in the same vein, eating several words, then blurting a few as if nothing—not even a deity reference—could spur the antiquated contraption into full operation.

"...an addition...keep it...book I gave you...wish I could...your voice...when...if ever... love you, son."

After an anemic beep, strains of the father's voice segued into the recorded voice of the son's, who must have called just before I got home. "Wrenn, you promised to buy a new answering machine."

"I just did," I said, talking back to the machine on the counter and pulling the new purchase out of the sack. I knew he'd been clued in by hearing his voice instead of mine reciting the outgoing announcement. As the disjointed message played through to the end, his initially perturbed tone mellowed to gentle affection. He signed off with, "Miss you...little girl."

I threw off my coat. It went to the breakfast bar where we took the

majority of our meals. We being me and God the son.

These titles were purely coincidental. Consider it an insightful glimpse into the family's wit. The lofty designations, while self-proclaimed, were not wrought with any measure of conceit. The three-letter word was merely an acronym for their names. Both were Gideon Osborne Douglas. GOD. The joke was good for all time zones and won more than a sympathy laugh at parties. Both men were divine in appearance, which didn't hurt either.

Gideon Junior warned me cell phone reception in the mountainous Canaan Valley region of West Virginia was non-existent. In the last few hours, he left civilization, destined for a tumbledown hunting cabin. Now that his last-chance phone call had been made, we were cut off from each other for the seven days of Thanksgiving week. I had no means of informing him that the father who vanished two years ago just made contact.

The circumstances surrounding his disappearance were extraordinary and I desperately wanted to fix them. That's my nature. I'm a fixer, refusing to believe much exceeds my capabilities. There might be one exception. This was the first time I noticed Gideon's cell phone charger still lay on the countertop. I was not capable of breathing life into a cell phone battery, not from this distance anyway.

I pushed rewind on the haywire machine's flat control panel. There were no actual levers on this model. Pressure on the word rewind was supposed to cause it to snap into action and, actually, this time, it did.

I felt my lips curve in anticipation of the introductory line. Now that the initial shock was behind me, I could enjoy its easy familiarity. I just set the machine to replay, when a knock sounded at the front door. Quickly, I jabbed at pause, didn't get the corresponding light, and jabbed again with delayed success.

A few quick steps took me from dining nook to front door. I wondered who would call on a Sunday evening. I leveled one eye on the spyhole and peered through to the doorstep.

A stranger in his early forties stood in the security light's glow. His left shoulder was weighed down by a large duffel. He shifted on his feet. One hand was stuffed in the pocket of a jacket too light for November in Ohio. He abandoned blowing warm air into the fist of his other hand in order to lean in and rap again.

Stepping back for a better look at the door, he called out, "Come on, Gideon, I know you're in there. Open up. It's cold out here, man."

I opened the door and gave him an inquiring look.

“You’re Wrenn. Wrenn Grayson.” He pointed a finger at me, then back on himself. “I’m Bret Kilmore.”

I knew that name. He was one of Gideon’s Miami University classmates.

Looking beyond me into the cottage, he asked, “Where’s Gideon? Is he here?”

“Forgive me,” I said, finding my voice and inviting him in. “You must be frozen.” He stepped past me into the entry hall. I closed the door, then reached out to shake his icy hand.

Bret Kilmore was tall and trim at six-two and one-eighty. He owned rough-and-tumble good looks. His potent green eyes showed through a shaggy mop of sandy hair.

“It’s good to finally meet you,” he said, taking in his surroundings. The feel of the old caretaker’s quarters leaned toward rustic. His gaze skittered across hardwood floors on their way to the stone fireplace that dominated the room, then to the French doors and outlying kitchen. He tipped his head up to the exposed wooden beams overhead, before looking down the short hall across from the front door to the bath evident at the end and a doorway into a guestroom. Lastly, his gaze ascended the darkened staircase to an open loft. “Nice place.”

“Thanks. You know, we came close to meeting at the Columbus airport.”

He fixed me with a look that said he couldn’t dig out that memory.

“The Atlanta trip. Several years back. You and Gideon went for a long weekend to meet a college buddy.” Atlanta was a central location for the threesome.

“I remember that, but we almost met, how?” he asked, his eyebrows knitted.

“Actually, we were separated by all the security equipment.” Laughing, I added, “And a mob of passengers.” Gideon followed the queue toward metal detectors and security guards waving magic wands. “I watched to see that Gideon got through. You were already in the airport. I don’t remember where you flew in from, but you waited for him on the other side.” I remembered their back-slapping hug of greeting, then they flew together to Atlanta.

“I don’t think Gideon knew you were still there. He didn’t point you out. You must have driven him over.”

“I did.”

“Now, we’re meeting for real,” he said, adding a practiced smile.

Another memory clicked in and I said, "Gideon's told some stories about you."

"He's forewarned you about me? That's not fair." Then he leaned in, amused. "What did he say?"

"He called you a tease of the first order."

"Did he include wildly flirtatious?"

"That too. He said no woman is exempt. I got the impression that included me."

"I would never exclude you," he said, playing along.

"He said you could be crass and charming and that you're a study in diversionary tactics."

"He said charming?" His tone indicated a certain hopefulness in the compliment.

I waved him off. I wasn't finished. "He spoke as if you were a legend." Bret nodded and rocked on his heels, pleased with the descriptors. "Then it became clear he considered you notorious by all accounts, but your rough edges didn't blemish you in the slightest in his eyes."

"A bit rough, yes. I agree. Just like diamonds. Polish them up and they can still cut glass. But that's enough about me." He grinned. "Let's talk about Gideon. Is he here?"

I shook my head. "Sorry. You missed him. He left around noon for West Virginia. A deer hunting trip."

"Deer hunting? That doesn't sound like Gideon."

"No, it doesn't," I said. "But he promised some friends last year he'd go the next time around, so he felt committed."

"That sounds like Gideon."

"He's gone till Sunday."

"No problem. I can—" At that moment, the answering machine barged into being, announcing itself as God. "Whoa," he said, spinning toward the sound.

I rushed to silence it, explaining age had taken its toll.

"That's Gideon's father," Bret said, coming with me.

From the breakfast bar, I wheeled around, stunned. "You know Dad?" I'd been invited by Gideon's father to use the moniker.

"I've known him for years. And the acronym."

We listened through to the end of the clipped message. When the beep sounded, I stopped the tape on the first try before Gideon's grumpy voice

came on.

“Too bad it’s all chewed up. That’s a tough break for Gideon,” he said, a ring of sincerity in the words.

I stared at him. More telling than his sincerity was the inference to Dad. He understood more than the broken message could have relayed. Testing the waters, I said, “You know Dad’s story then.”

“Most of it.”

He seemed to almost slough off the topic, switching from sincerity to indifference. How much did he know or not know? I took a breath to speak, but let it escape and dropped my gaze. It came to rest on a ceramic pot of African violets sitting on the countertop. Automatically, I slipped into a standard routine. I slid the plant over and frowned when the saucer beneath the pot contained no water.

I uncapped the water bottle that hitched an all-day ride in my coat pocket and lined it up with the saucer. I gave the violets the last good swallow and felt reasonably confident Bret was aware of Dad’s situation. Perhaps he was going through the shock stage, as I had. The problem was that now, I teetered on betrayal.

Just mentioning the incident itched terribly. I made a promise to Gideon to speak of it to no one. Perhaps Bret took the same oath and that fed his reluctance. Yes, I said to myself, amending my conclusion. He showed reluctance, not indifference. I pushed the violets back, ready to push Bret as well.

“You heard the message. I’ve heard it twice. It sounds pretty innocuous. It’s hard to tell with words missing, but I get the impression he wants Gideon to know he’s sending something that will obviously arrive in a few days. Given the situation,” I said, passing him a knowing look, “that puzzles me. It’s odd. What would he send? It’s been two years and nothing.” Bret remained expressionless, attentively focused on me, and silent. “Aren’t you the least bit curious?”

He must have considered my question rhetorical. He merely wrestled the duffel from his shoulder and lowered it carefully to the floor. “Here, I’ll help you with this.” He nodded toward the new machine, but hesitated, not reaching for the box. “As a matter of fact, uh, Gideon said anytime I was in town, he’d put me up. And, well, I’m here, you know, in town,” he said, hopeful.

His meaning dawned immediately. “Oh. I don’t know.”

“I know you’re thinking motel, but here’s the rub. I don’t have a car.”

“What? How did you get here?”

“Caught a ride with someone at the airport. He was heading this way.”

That was a pretty nice guy, I thought, to drive him all the way west from the Port of Columbus or east from Dayton International. The next question was, would I be a nice guy and let him stay? There was propriety to consider, the two of us here without Gideon. But still, if Gideon offered... Then again, it would be a full week before he got home. “Well,” I said, my waffling still not under control.

“You don’t understand.”

“What do you mean?”

He looked back at the old answering machine, then found my eyes again. “He sent me,” Bret said, pointing up. “God the father.”

Everything slowed while I searched his hypnotic eyes. Somehow, I knew he told the truth. But why not tell me right away? Was he testing me and my knowledge of Senior’s situation? “You know where he is? You’ve seen him?”

“It was purely accidental, but yeah. I spent the last few days with him.”

“How is he?”

“Seems happy, except for missing Gideon.” Then the look in his eyes intensified. “And before you ask, I won’t tell you—or Gideon, for that matter—where he is.”

I pulled that question off my lips and decided that since Bret knew Dad’s location, it now felt safe to consider Bret a qualified confidant.

Breaking into my thoughts, he said, “I was with Gideon in Florida when he came to tend to his father’s things. And to meet with the FBI. I wasn’t sure he told you that.”

“No, he didn’t,” I said, lowering my eyes. “Why you?”

“I have a certain expertise that—as it turned out—was useful.”

“And that expertise is?”

“On a need-to-know basis.”

“Sounds like you’re a spy,” I retorted, releasing a bleep of laughter.

“That glorifies it a bit.” He slipped the machine free of the cardboard packaging and traced down the electrical outlet. “Let’s get this operational in case he calls back.”

“You don’t believe that. This was Gideon’s chance and I ruined it. He’ll never forgive me.” I paced a few steps into the room. My eyes were pinned to Bret’s back while he worked at the counter. I thought he might speak the

empty consolation one typically gives another in these situations, touting Gideon's capacity for forgiveness.

Instead, I heard Gideon's recorded voice, scolding me again. "Wrenn, you promised to buy a new machine."

"Hey! What are you doing?" I demanded, springing into action and nearly tripping over the duffel. Having Bret hear Gideon's message was tantamount to being chewed out in public.

"I thought the tape might play better in the new one."

"Give me that. Gideon will want it."

Of course, by now, Gideon's message played through to the final beep and Bret correctly filled in the gaps. If first impressions count in his life, I apparently possessed a lackadaisical attitude with regard to fulfilling promises. He expressed that in different terms. "Hmm. Gideon sounds, in a word, pissed." He popped the cassette tape and passed it over.

I stared down at the tape in my hand. When the old answering machine seemed like it was jinxed, I pushed Gideon toward converting to voicemail. Gideon was not keen on the idea. It wasn't that he isn't acclimated toward change. It was that two years ago, after the mystery behind his father's whereabouts began, Gideon realized an old message from his father hadn't been erased. Gideon saved that tape as I would save this second one and give it to him when he returned home.

Through the saved tapes, Gideon could hear his father's voice. The answering machine and the tapes were objects Gideon could see and hold in his hand. They owned substance and weight. Voicemail was out there in the ether, a reminder of where Senior had gone.

"I'm sure Gideon will understand. You got tied up with something." This was the consolation I expected earlier.

"I had to work."

"On a Sunday? What do you do again?"

"I work part-time for the mayor. He's got me on an organizing committee for our holiday carnival. It comes up this Friday. The chairman called an emergency meeting."

"You see, it was an emergency. He'll understand. What do you do with the rest of your time?" He slid the new machine into the spot the old one had occupied on the counter, then stacked the outgoing machine on top of the now-empty box and sack.

"I write historical articles for the newspaper. What about you? I'm not

clear what it is you do.”

“That makes two of us,” he said in motion to the duffel. “So, where do I sleep? Upstairs?”

Belongings in hand, he reached the foregone conclusion that he would be staying. And at this point, how could I refuse? He was, after all, a messenger from God the father. For Gideon’s sake, I would take Bret Kilmore in.

How could I face Gideon if I learned Bret checked out of a motel just half a mile away and left town before Gideon returned? I couldn’t risk Bret just drifting away in the ether when Senior’s message was gibberish. For Gideon, that would be one disappointment mounded on another. And besides, we almost met “over the crowd” at the Columbus airport.

In that moment, a memory stirred. Gideon had just finished telling me a story about Bret. The details eluded me, but not my response. I said, “Sounds like a hero complex.”

Gideon shook his head. “Complex hero.”

Having met Bret, I felt the complexities were indeed there. That left hero. When Gideon stepped through the door and found Bret with news about his father, yes, hero would apply.

I studied the man who stood before me. Bret Kilmore was a man of intricacies, of light and dark and lingering shadows. Lingering seemed to nail my decision.

“I sleep upstairs,” I informed him.

His white teeth gleamed and his eyes twinkled bright. “Alone?”

“Yes, alone. Don’t you ever stop?” I grinned, his acclaimed flirtatiousness unleashed.

“I need the practice. I must. I’m making no headway here.”

“And you never will.”

“I can accept that, but do me the honor of attempting to refine my skills. They’re lacking.”

I let that hang and led him down the hall off the foyer. “In here,” I said, opening the guestroom door and pawing the light switch on. “The bath’s next door. The sheets are clean. No one’s been here since Dad two years ago.” From the corner of my eye, I saw him cock his head at that. He knew it was shortly after that visit that Gideon called him to Miami in response to Dad’s disappearance. “This bureau drawer is empty. There’s room in the closet. Hangers if you need them.” While I tested the nightstand light, which worked, I got to the heart of the matter. “Why did he send you?”

“What?”

I faced him. “You said Dad sent you. Why?”

“He gave me something to deliver to Gideon.”

“What? Where is it?” I said excitedly. My eyes latched onto the duffel at his side.

“I don’t know what it is,” he said with the slight sting of a disapproving tone. “It’s not for me.”

I accepted his symbolic hand-slapping with grace and recapped the cookie jar.

Bret’s duffel went to the bed without a bounce, followed by his tan jacket.

“Are you hungry?” I asked, approaching my hostess duties. “I have leftover beef stew.”

“You cook?”

“Gideon made it.”

“Sounds good.”

“Wine?”

“Beer.”

“Light?”

“No.”

I left him to his unpacking and went to reheat the stew.

This man, my houseguest, had not been forthcoming with much personal information. I learned nothing new, except that he was sent by God the father. That in itself was a priceless gift. And I reminded myself that Gideon trusted and relied on him in serious situations. He asked Bret to step in with the FBI after Dad’s disappearance.

I pulled two soup bowls from the cupboard and Gideon’s description of his friend resurfaced. I couldn’t say I witnessed any crass behavior. I’d been treated to charming with a side serving of flirtatious. Somewhere in the middle, he was a study in diversionary tactics. With Gideon Senior’s continued freedom on the line, I would study Bret for his diversionary tactics and see what I could learn.





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is available for purchase in paperback and eBook  
through Amazon.