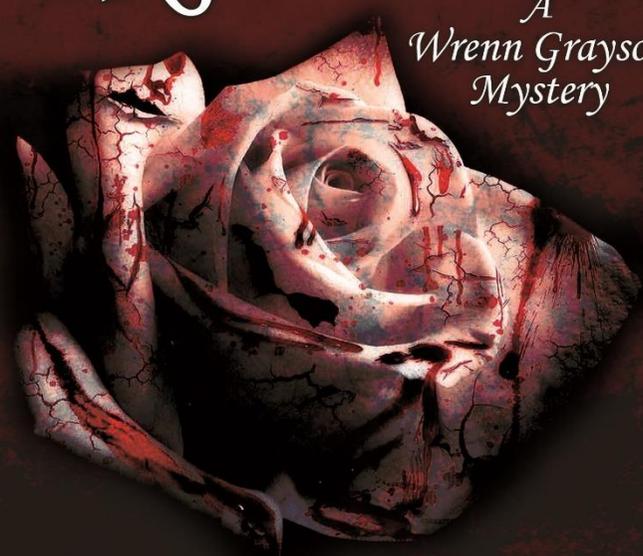


Deadly Homecoming at Rosemont

*A
Wrenn Grayson
Mystery*



Connie Chappell

"Historian Wrenn Grayson's intelligence, tenacity, and charm will have you hooked from the discovery of the first body to the very satisfying conclusion."

—Michael Giorgio, author of *Justice Comes Home*

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4am
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Deadly Homecoming at Rosemont

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Historian Wrenn Grayson arrives at the Rosemont mansion expecting to receive payment for her services from the mansion's new owner, Clay Addison. That expectation dies when she and Clay find Trey Rosemont murdered on the foyer floor. Across town, police officers race to Eastwood University. Priceless Egyptian artifacts were stolen from the history department safe. Wrenn's longtime love, Eastwood professor Gideon Douglas, heads the department. Only recovery of the artifacts will save his career.

Life in Havens, Ohio, doesn't stop for this crime spree. Wrenn works for Mayor K.C. Tallmadge. He wishes Wrenn would stop searching down clues ahead of the police and pacify temperamental playwright Barton Reed. Barton's play is just days away from opening in the town's historic Baxter Theater.

Amid murder, theft, or curtain calls, Wrenn's instincts prove sharp. But it's her stubborn one-woman approach that places her directly in the killer's path.

House Rules

I eased my midnight-blue PT Cruiser to a stop a few yards behind the driverless Cutlass. The silver-gray car missed the graveled parking pad altogether. It sat cockeyed on the edge of the lawn belonging to the 154-year old house built by Jonah Rosemont. The Cutlass's busted taillight and dented fender were probably caused by erratic parking practices just like this. Stretching my neck, I peered down Midnight's sloping hood to the other car's out-of-town Illinois plate.

Four months ago, at age twenty-nine and seriously needing additional income, I fulfilled a dream and put out my shingle: WRENN GRAYSON, HISTORIAN. My good friend, Clayton Addison, who owned the Rosemont estate—house, outbuildings, grounds, and woods—signed up as my first paying client. He hired me to uncover everything I could about the Rosemont family. Easy enough. Then he dangled the carrot: If I could locate someone to give him an eye to the past for an authentic restoration of the house, I'd be in line for a bonus. A glitch of some kind—perhaps an unexpected visitor from Illinois—prevented the aforementioned payment from changing hands yesterday in favor of the ungodly hour of six-thirty this morning.

He left a phone message, asking me to meet him here at Rosemont. A glance at the dashboard clock showed I was right on time.

Curiously, Clay wasn't.

In my two-piece suit and navy flats, I climbed out and closed Midnight's door softly against the stillness of a fine June morning in Havens, Ohio. A forested front entrance insulated the two-story stone mansion from traffic-worn Hattersfield Road. A quiet sun peeked over the distant treetops of Rosemont Woods. The diffused rays created a golden halo over the grounds, which bathed the meadow rolling out to the carriage house with a warm, welcoming glow.

The twenty-five acre estate Clay picked up at auction three months ago was extensively wooded. A lengthy list of repairs came with the house that stood empty for the last eight years. Believe me, it wasn't livable yet. Clay drove over most days to be carpenter, plumber, and general handyman from his bi-level across town. He had the time. Two years ago, at fifty-five, Clay retired as Havens' police chief. Retirement at that age is early, I know. That's a life-on-the-line benefit of police officers' pension plan.

I set off for the front door and had just cleared the PT's bumper when the sound of gravel being crushed under the weight of tires grabbed my attention. Two seconds later, Clay's faded red pickup shot out of the tree-lined lane and bore sharply to the left. With the small parking area overly cramped by the Cutlass, I thought Clay's truck would slam into Midnight. The racket of tires skidding and rocks flying covered the volley of bad language I read on his lips. He slid the gear shift up with a vengeance and propelled himself out of the old Chevy.

"Whose car?" I asked.

His response, "What the hell. Where'd that come from?" told me he didn't know.

The six-foot, two-inch man stormed forward. I was proud to know the side of him that was not the cop. On most occasions, he was a very kind man, a gentle man. He remained attractive yet with his dark hair and eyes and sunny smile. He was a divorcee who raised no children of his own, just the rookies on the force,

and now he adopted this monstrous house.

He made a complete circuit of the abandoned car, peering through windows and tugging at door handles. Scowling, he circled again. I went, too, close on the heels of his worn loafers.

“Well, whoever this guy is, he thinks he owns the place.” Clay seemed put off by the slipshod parking.

He scratched his head, then went to memorize the plate, having dialed into cop mode. Retirement doesn’t negate the training. With a step to the right, he squatted behind the rear tire. I followed suit. He pointed to the patchy dirt and grass under the Cutlass. “See how this is all dry. The car was parked here last night before the rain started. I wonder what time that was?”

“Two-oh-nine.”

He looked at me, deadpanned. “Two-oh-nine.”

“That’s when the French doors blew open and woke me up.”

“Well, I guess so.”

“I hadn’t latched them well enough. I opened them while Gideon watched baseball.” I live in unwedded bliss with my longtime love, Gideon Douglas.

“The Reds finally pulled one out,” Clay reported.

“Of course, Gideon slept soundly through the whole thing, while I tossed and turned the rest of the night.”

“You do look a little ragged.” He smiled both at my smirk and my clipped “Thanks,” then rose to survey the grounds. All appeared in good order.

With a head jerk toward the door, he said, “Let’s go in. I’ll call downtown. Get someone to run the plate. Georgie ought to be on duty.”

In step behind him, I grinned at the checkbook jammed in the

hip pocket of his unbelted jeans. Today was payday. “How long will it take to run the plate?” I asked.

“Not long. But the guys are just starting roll call, so we’ll get the coffee brewing first.”

“Coffee sounds good.” I came up alongside. “Hey, what kept you? I expected you here before me.”

His expression turned sheepish. “Sorry, kiddo. I lost track of time.”

“How can that happen at six in the morning?”

“I was getting in a few minutes of practice for the darting tournament Friday.”

A chuckle bubbled up inside. “You mean throwing darts? There are tournaments for that?”

“Hey, don’t laugh. I’m reigning champion at Night Sticks.” Clay referred to the local watering hole for cops.

We climbed the four portico steps. He looked around, checking for evidence of horseplay, I thought. The wide entry door was flanked by three sets of windows. They nearly met the portico flooring and were tall enough for Clay to have walked through without any threat of banging his head. He fit the key in the lock, turned it and the knob, and pushed through the door.

I crossed the sill plate and couldn’t quite place the metallic odor that wafted up my nose. Three steps ahead, Clay stopped dead in his tracks.

“What’s that smell?” I said. My question seemed to remind him I was there.

A warning arm shot out. “Don’t come in!”

His alert came too late. I identified the smell. It was blood. And I saw the body on the floor, the blood-soaked white shirt, and the thick crimson pool drying on the foyer’s marble tiles. I watched

Clay go with carefully chosen steps and bend low to the man. The sight of flies buzzing hungrily over the carnage brought up a bitter taste of bile, which did nothing to settle the unsteady whir inside my head. I stumbled back two steps, hit the wall, folded at the knees, and went down.

The next few moments blurred. My range of focus was limited to my linen-covered kneecaps. My arms felt like limp noodles at my sides.

“Wrenn? You okay?” I heard Clay ask, his feet rushing to me.

He squatted down, and I raised my chin off my breastbone. “Is he dead?”

“Oh yeah. I’ve seen dead before. This is it,” he quipped. The former police chief seemed to have found a measure of humor in the discovery of a felony. He was more upset about the car on the lawn than the dead body in his foyer, and I could only imagine his irrepressible smile had something to do with the green tinge that might be coloring my face.

“Help me up.”

“You sure?”

I took a fortifying breath and put out my hands. He pulled me straight up as he rose. He steadied me for a moment, but my legs weren’t wobbly. I gave him a reassuring nod, shuffled over to the open door, and sucked in good clean air. “Are you assuming he belongs to the car?” I wondered aloud.

“That’d be my guess.” Clay studied the body.

From a distance, I did, too, avoiding the bloody torso, taking in the nondescript dark trousers and spit-shined, rubber-soled shoes. Knees bent, the body lay awkwardly on its left arm, facing me. It had fallen just outside the drawing room doors, nearly missing a tall wooden ladder stationed there.

Rosemont’s receiving hall presented three impressive features: the grand staircase rising majestically to the second

floor, the stained-glass transoms above the doorways leading off the foyer, and the four-foot square panels of marble lining the floor in curls of rich cream and light butterscotch.

Clay stepped closer, cocked his head at the dead man, and asked rhetorically, "Who do you suppose he is?"

I stared at the lifeless face in profile, its one dark pupil fixed for all time, when something clicked in the back of my mind. Forgetting my queasiness, I moved over. "I think the courts jumped the gun."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's Trey Rosemont. Remember, right before you bought this place, he had to be declared legally dead so the auction could be held." This tidbit was a byproduct of the research I provided Clay.

"Trey Rosemont? Are you sure?"

"He looks just like his father. And see the birthmark in his hair," I said, pointing. "It's the same as in the pictures I gave you. He'd be," pausing to do the math, "forty-seven now, about the same age his father was in the Princeton picture."

I recited facts from the research report I provided Clay last week. It included two photographs. Trey's high school yearbook picture clearly showed the silver-dollar birthmark at his right temple, standing out against muddy brown hair. While shaggy hairstyles prevailed back then, the occasion demanded a jacket and tie. To that, he added his boyish smile. A family photo snapped on Princeton's campus captured Trey in cap and gown. He and his father, Bentley Westchester Rosemont, II, purported to be an easy-going man, flanked Trey's frail mother, Caroline. Her lifelong companion was Ruby Griswold. Ruby tended to her ill health and the family home. She also provided the photographs.

Clay looked up from the corpse, stunned. "I think you're right. It is Trey. But how did he get in? I'm sure I locked all the doors." Even as he spoke, he was in motion. The distance from the front door to the base of the stairs equaled a good twenty paces. Anyone with a modicum of decorating talent would place a highly

polished round mahogany table at the midpoint, not the red highboy mechanic's tool chest Clay wheeled there and left.

"He probably had an old key." I suggested the obvious.

"Not likely. I had new locks installed a month ago." He pulled open the tool chest's top right-hand drawer and retrieved a weighty object wrapped in a clean work rag. Unfolding the corners, he revealed a nine-millimeter automatic.

The significance of this dawned instantly. "You can't believe the killer's still here? Why would anyone stay locked in with a dead body?" While I disagreed with him, I also moved closer, the hairs at my nape prickling.

"Still, it would be prudent to check." He lay the rag across the open drawer.

Like everyone else, I watch crime shows on TV. We all know police procedure at this point. But if anyone thinks a cop, even a retired chief, would not walk through his own home given the circumstances we found this morning, then that armchair detective is not living in reality. I know cops. I know this one.

My historian shingle aside, I gained this knowledge by spending my days answering to Mayor K.C. Tallmadge. I sat through enough meetings with the mayor, the current police chief, and, before that, Clay Addison, to understand a cop's ego. I heard stories about everything from officers' career-ending misdeeds to their gutsy heroism. I registered no surprise that Clay kept a gun at Rosemont. That behavior portrays a cop through and through. Doing a preliminary walk-through, gun in hand, on his own property, that didn't surprise me, either. *Not* walking through, *not* hiding a loaded gun within arm's reach, that would cause me worry. Did I say, I know cops?

On the other hand, something else did bother me. "Shouldn't we call this in first, Clay? Even I know that's a rule."

"Five minutes won't make any difference. I'll clear the structure, then I'll call."

“But—”

“My house, Wrenn. My rules. And as I said, everyone’s in roll call. Wait by the door,” Clay said, fully focused and back on duty.

I said I’d wait, then ran into the back of him three times when he stopped to peer into rooms. Notwithstanding the presence of a retired chief and his brandished firearm, the atmosphere was spooky: big old house, dead body, locked doors.

We started with the library on the other side of the foyer. Jonah Rosemont’s mammoth desk remained in residence. I could almost picture the estate’s first owner ensconced behind it, amidst the mingling smells of wet hunting dogs, their woolen blankets, and stale cigar smoke. Beyond the library sat the morning room. Long casement windows on two sides gave a panoramic view of the grounds. All the rooms downstairs had double entry doors, except for the tiny bath under the stairs. The bath was added after indoor plumbing became popular. Its shaved-off door matched the angle of the stairs overhead. Partway up, the wall inside kicked inward, too, at that perfect head-knocking height.

Having turned up no killers, we crept back across the foyer, skirting the body. The drawing room functioned as Clay’s center of operations. A worktable was fashioned on matching saw horses. Tools were strewn about. A collection of white plastic pipe leaned into one corner with electrical wiring coiled next to it. We eased down the hall to the dining room. Here, Clay did the right thing and covered the enormous table inside with several quilted pads of the type used by furniture movers. The short drape of the pads provided no hiding place under the table.

Each room was topped with well-crafted crown molding and graced with a fireplace unique unto itself. Every surface was covered in sawdust, plaster dust, and regular dust. Half-started renovation projects abounded. Overall, the place looked like a satellite store for Home Depot. Clay seemed particularly adept at starting projects, then losing interest long before finishing.

Still behind him, I spoke softly, directing my words to his ear. “I think you need a little stick-to-it-tive-ness.”

From over his shoulder came this reply: "I think you need to remember who has the gun."

I followed him into the roomy kitchen at the end of the hall. It appeared to still have all the original furnishings. The workspace, appliances, and eating quarters were arranged to the right of the door. On the left, I saw the narrow broom closet and cellar door. Across the way, an opening led to the mudroom. We went there first.

A chest-style freezer rested against the wall on my right, its mouse-nibbled cord thrown over the top. I saw a rare empty spot in the corner beyond the freezer. Two small windows and a row of coat hooks shared the back wall. Clay tried the door. Locked. He twisted the deadbolt out of the framing and stepped out to the porch to look around. He came back in, shaking his head, and re-bolted the door.

Moving back into the kitchen, he noted the security chain in place on the cellar door. "I keep this chained as a reminder not to go flying down the steps. The three or four near the top are rotten. Too much pressure and they'll snap."

We eased up the back stairs, found the connecting hall to the rest of the second floor, and repeated the process. We scoured the servants' quarters, then the bedrooms. With less junk and hardly any furniture, the upstairs held a cavernous quality. Neither of us spoke. My footsteps echoed on the oak flooring. I tapped down the front staircase on my toes.

Clay returned the gun to the tool chest, lifted his cell phone from his belt, and called in the crime: male, Caucasian, two bullet wounds, small caliber, point blank. He relayed the information as casually as ordering pizza. For pickup only. No delivery, please. There's been a murder here.

A peculiar sensation overcame me. I felt bad somehow about leaving Trey alone. After first gulping a lungful of cool morning air to steel myself, I stepped away from the open front door and went to look at Trey. I couldn't get used to the flies. The scent of blood called them in from all points: off window screens, out of trashcans, away from the tropical warmth of the bare bulb in the

back hall.

Something caught my eye. It worked to counteract the rise of returning squeamishness. His shirt was sewn with two breast pockets. Blood completely soaked the lower one as gravity pulled the oozing red liquid to the floor. The upper pocket, only partially covered with the flowering stain, contained a small object. I bent closer.

Clay ended his call and came over. "What do you see?"

"He has a matchbook in his pocket. Can you read what it says?"

Hands on knees and squinting at the square of cardboard, he said, "Yeah. Dooley's Bar."

"Dooley's?" I repeated quizzically. We straightened.

"Well, that's a fine howdy-do."

"What?"

"The man comes back to town after a quarter of a century and downs a cold one before he comes out to see the old homestead," Clay complained, feigning brief disappointment at being bested by the rundown establishment south of the interstate. "Well, we'd better be outside when Homicide arrives," he said, moving me across the foyer. "There will already be hell to pay for walking all over their crime scene."

"They couldn't truly expect anything else?" After all, he was a trained officer with years of experience.

"They could, of course. The rule book's one thing. Reality's something else. I'll just describe our actions to whoever gets the call. My grimy paw prints are all over everything, anyway. You didn't touch anything, so all we added are your footprints. You did make note of the dust?" He raised an eyebrow with his question, but he knew I had.

That's when it hit me. "Oh, god, Clay. My butt-print's front and

center!" I pointed to the spot. Two spots, really. Not quite circles. But clearly visible. Two of my cheeks flushed while I brushed violently at the other two.

Clay cackled and pushed me out to the stoop, where we waited, our backs to the closed door.

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Deadly Homecoming at Rosemont, A Wrenn Grayson Mystery, is available for purchase in paperback, eBook, and hardcover through Amazon.