

Black Orchids Hotel



*A
Wrenn
Grayson
Mystery*

Connie Chappell

*"Chappell delivers a thrilling ride."
-Times of Chicago*

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The Foundling mansion is selected for an exclusive Lazarus Mystery Weekend excursion and masterfully converted to Black Orchids Hotel. Wrenn Grayson, the mansion's archivist, and eight other guests arrive shortly before noon and are shut inside the hotel. The guests are challenged to solve whatever mystery is placed before them.

As they meet each other one-on-one, the atmosphere turns thunderous, both inside the hotel and gusting past it outside on a driving rain. Before dinner is served, Wrenn discovers one of her fellow guests dead at the foot of the stairs. She is about to raise the alarm when the storm takes the lights. Power is restored moments later, but by then, the dead body has vanished.

For Wrenn, the mystery takes vivid shape when accusatory fingers are pointed at her. She must prove her innocence, and all before the clock strikes a quarter till midnight.

The Archives

Nina Glendenning and I stared down the gallery hallway of Foundling, Webster Bronwyn's nineteenth-century mansion.

"All the bedrooms need work," I said. "You pick. Where do you want to start?" Nina had volunteered to help me. Even with two brave souls, the project ahead of us felt daunting. Still, I wanted to keep her happy.

"The master suite, Wrenn. I'd really like to decorate it," she answered with certainty.

"Before the decorating comes the clearing out," I warned with equal aplomb. "I'm glad you volunteered to help. But don't feel you have to give me all of your days off."

"Not a problem. I'm going to enjoy this. For a while, it's felt like I should give more to the society and the museum than I have. I don't want to be labeled a slacker." Her eyes rolled up with a thought. "Then again, I don't want to break a nail, either. Somewhere in between." Along with her joke, she held out a hand. She recently received a French manicure. Her visits to the nail salon were frequent.

For our day of physical labor, we wore similar clothing: cotton tops, jeans, and tennis shoes. I knew Nina. I set out a pair of gloves yesterday to protect her nails.

I was relatively new to the post of archivist. This was June. In August, I would celebrate my one-year anniversary. Foundling was relatively new, too, in its life operating as a historic museum. Tours began just two months ago with a grand opening. I considered the mansion and me babes together in the wild world of historical enterprise.

In 1985, the last Bronwyn heiress to live in the house established the Foundling Historical Society and Museum. She transferred all Bronwyn properties and assets to the society via a preservation trust. What followed was many years of struggle, which was why actually seeing the museum open its doors felt like such a triumph.

Nina was my age, early thirties, with a bubbly and colorful personality. Today, her glasses rode on top of her head, holding back thick brunette hair. Years ago, I hung out a historian shingle. I received a decent amount of work in that line. Many times, my research took me to Avondale Cemetery, where I met Nina. She works in the office, running the computer system that identifies grave locations. When I moved into my position at Foundling, I learned she sat on Foundling's board of directors, which qualified her as a history buff.

Our footsteps were hushed on the carpeting as we headed down the gallery to the suite. The second-floor gallery received its name from the many family portraits that hung on the walls. The corridor also contained seven bedrooms that faced the front of the house. Across the hall and tucked into the corner at the far end was the master suite. These eight rooms awaited their return to their proper function, rather than operating as generic and deeply disorganized storage units.

Webster Bronwyn, the family's ruling patriarch and a millionaire industrialist in his time, prohibited the destruction of all family history, regardless of whether it was paper or a tangible object. His edict reached out to all the branches of the family tree. The Bronwyns were a line that was slowing dying off. The mansion received furniture and boxes of belongings whenever a family member died or a home was closed, resulting in overcrowded attics and bedrooms bursting with possessions. Selections from the overstocked furniture items would, however, ease the job of decorating the bedrooms as normal bedrooms again.

Once that was accomplished, once the love and the luxury were polished up, once everything was attractive, Foundling Society board members would announce its second-phase touring to the public. Patrons, who had visited the mansion and had mainly followed guides through the first floor, some of the second, and the top-floor ballroom, would return to immerse themselves in more of the elegance that was linked to the Bronwyn family name.

But first, by God, I mused, as I blew out a breath powerful enough to ruffle my bangs, these eight bedrooms had to be cleared of the accumulation of years past. That meant progress for the mansion as a historical site worthy of public touring, and, frankly, it would pay the bills. As archivist, I felt it was necessary that I oversee every step, so I had some idea of the contents. Were they useful or not? Was there an item that would bring the public to the mansion's door in droves?

I was learning to appreciate the promotional side of this venture.

"I like to check through what items are in the rooms first," I stated. "Anything that looks like it would furnish a bedroom stays in place; everything else goes up to the archives."

"Sounds like a plan."

"We'll move whatever can't be used out into the hall and then get some ideas for what we need. While we're carting things upstairs, we can look around for fixtures or furniture to give the suite some elegance."

"Good. Let's get started." Nina's voice was infused with energy.

I turned the suite's knob and let the door swing wide open.

The next sound she made was a groan. "Webster and his family were a bunch of pack rats," she declared.

"But they were wealthy pack rats, and that makes all the difference."

By that, I referred to the heft and detail styled into the furniture. One look at the armoire, the bed's headboard and footboard, the dressing table, and the upholstered corner chair proved that statement. The corner chair carried an authentic heirloom character and was one of my favorite pieces. It featured hand-carved leaves and scrollwork in mahogany. Its four cabriole legs with carved ball-and-claw feet rose to support the square, honey floral cushioned seat. The master suite contained a private bath, a door out to the loggia, and one that opened to the family's lounge. The roofed loggia with its decorative archways overlooked the beautiful rear grounds. This floor doubled as the family's cloistered living space. The lounge provided a gathering place for chitchat or a quiet nook to read the newspapers of the day.

Nina rubbed her hands together. "Might as well grab a box." A lamp missing a shade protruded from the container she chose. Also packed inside were several small picture frames.

Since I'd done this before and found a process that worked, I said, "Hang on a minute." I crossed the gallery to the bedroom I'd been working in the day before. Inside, I found two necessary items. I rolled a heavy-duty cart over, saying to Nina, who stood in the suite's doorway, "This fits in the elevator. Once the cart is full, we'll take it up. And here are the gloves I promised."

Thanking me, she set the container on the cart and donned the gloves. "You really are the perfect hostess," she quipped.

From that point on, we chatted, combed through the room, and loaded the cart.

Following Nina's pronouncement that the cart could not accept one more item, we heard a female voice call out, "Wrenn! Wrenn Grayson! Are you up here?"

I steered the cart around the corner to the lounge and stopped, calling back, "Master suite, Emerald!"

Two seconds later, Emerald buzzed out of the back hall, wearing a printed shirt tucked into a belted pair of gabardine capris and leather sandals. She was getting up into her sixties, but since the opening of the museum, she thrived as never before, accepting her additional duties. She was a marvel and extremely dedicated to Foundling and the Bronwyn legacy.

Her family history lived on the mansion's grounds, too. The last five generations of Maricotts, including Emerald, reigned as Foundling's coachmen, from the horse-drawn carriages her grandfather's grandfather drove to the limousine she sat behind the wheel of. She stepped in to manage the estate when the last Bronwyn died, balanced it all on her shoulders, and look where we are now: a successfully operating museum. Holding the dual-position of museum director and board chair, she guides Nina, me, and twelve other members through the decisions and discussions necessary, many of them tough, nearly all of them with financial impact. Did I say she was a marvel?

"There you are." Emerald produced one of her infectious smiles. Seeing the stacked cart, she added, "My, you two have been busy." She shook a letter and envelope at us. "But, here. Take a break. Read this."

Nina and I shared a glance, aware that Emerald nearly percolated with enthusiasm. She passed me the letter. Nina reached up to the glasses that rode on her crown and flopped them onto her nose. She read over my shoulder.

Dear Ms. Maricott:

I must applaud your accomplishments. The renovation of Webster Bronwyn's nineteenth-century home into a touring museum was masterfully completed. I toured last weekend in a small group with one of your delightful docents. I freely admit I did so with ulterior motives in mind.

No doubt the name of my business caught your eye and stimulated a thought or two. I would like to schedule an appointment with you to discuss a mutually beneficial arrangement, one where the Foundling mansion would become center stage for a Lazarus mystery weekend.

Perhaps you aren't aware that membership-driven guilds exist for persons who choose to take part in solving "arranged" mysteries. Membership in the Lazarus Mystery Guild is a highly sought-after commodity. A Foundling mystery weekend would capture the interest and stir the sleuthing skills of my members, who demand distinctively exclusive locations.

I am happy to come to you, Ms. Maricott. My assistant will make contact and arrange a meeting.

*I very much look forward to meeting you in person.
Highest regards,
Peg Lazarus*

The other two followed me to the seating area. Emerald claimed a winged-back chair across from Nina and me on a couch.

"What do you think?" the museum director asked.

"It's definitely interesting," I said, looking at Nina.

"I agree. Worthy of a little thought."

"I think I'll make an appointment when the office calls. We won't be out anything by listening," Emerald said, inclining her head.

"A mystery guild? What a curious thing." My tone matched my words.

"The mansion and the tour must have been well-received if this Peg Lazarus made contact so quickly," Nina decided.

"I think we can interpret that as a pat on the back." I sent my words to Emerald.

"Well, good. Yes, I'll make an appointment when they call." Rising, Emerald sounded positive. "I'll let you two get back to work. Thanks, Nina, for helping."

"My pleasure."

"You and Wrenn make a good team." Giving us a fond look, Emerald collected the letter and returned the way she came.

Nina and I walked over to where the cart waited by the elevator. In addition to that amenity, the lounge also provided access to the

main staircase.

“I’m trying to imagine how those mystery weekends work. Members belong to a guild? I hope Emerald asks a lot of questions,” I said, pushing the up button.

“You’ve got to tell me what you learn.” She narrowed an eye. Thoughtfully, she shook her head. “No, I don’t think there’d be too many takers for a mystery weekend at a cemetery. Probably a mansion works better.”

I chuckled. “No, I don’t think a cemetery’s the ultimate venue. Although you could write to Peg Lazarus and make the pitch.”

I wheeled the cart inside the small paneled cubicle. Nina ran the controls. The elevator creaked into motion, rose, then jerkily came to a stop.

Webster designed the elevator to open on the ballroom side of the third floor to better accommodate arriving party guests. This was a wide-open space, as the name implies. Today, only the number of columns necessary to provide support for the roof occupied the dance floor. Ball guests at the turn-of-the-twentieth century would have stepped out of the cubicle, wearing their finery, while a group of musicians played in the corner and other guests danced.

The two of us in our work clothes pushed the cart in a semicircle. Facing a set of double doors, Nina did the honors while I eased the cart through and into the archives, which were half the size of the mansion’s footprint. I rolled the cart to a stop, my gaze riveted on Nina. I wanted to thoroughly enjoy her reaction. Her mouth dropped open in awe. Slowly, she lifted her glasses to the top of her head. And this rarely happened; Nina was speechless. This was exactly the bizarre look I would have expected if I announced igloos existed in Ohio, specifically in Havens, my hometown. But it was true.

Finally, she spoke. “I forgot. I forgot they’d be here.” Her words came out in a breathless rush.

The official name was not igloo. That was my adaptation. The company that designed and installed the igloos gave them the perfectly appropriate name of freestanding controlled-environment storage unit, a mouthful that lacked any hint of character.

I considered the storage units a modified version of the conventional imagery most people have of an igloo’s shape. Here, however, the dome was squashed flat across the top. Still, it reached a height of ten feet in a room built with fourteen-foot ceilings. The

traditional rounded shape was stretched out so that the overall appearance became spherical. The low crawl-through igloo entrance rose to an oversized doorway. Its facade was ice-crystal white. With interlocking prefab construction, it went up quickly.

“Just look at them.” Nina’s husky voice was operational again. Tall and slender, she looked down to my five-foot-five height and into my hazel eyes. “Have you got much organized yet?”

I shook my head. “Not much, no. But I’ve organized a plan in my head,” I added positively.

“There’s a good start.”

Three igloos took up all the space on the left side of the archives. The fourth igloo sat at the end of the aisleway, facing us. The endless sea of objects on the right represented my future. I was determined to inject some organization into the space. And yet today, Nina and I were adding to that mountain of work. The igloos had been constructed three months ago in March, but I’d had scant time to work with them.

“I’ll give you a tour of the igloos later. Promise.” We couldn’t get sidetracked. Getting the bedrooms ready for second-phase touring took precedence.

Nina helped me steer the cart down the room’s divide that was space-age on one side, cave dweller on the other. She gazed down the length of the room, wonderment riding on her face. “This isn’t the old attic I remember.”

The word *attic* grated on my nerves. “The name of this room is now the archives,” I corrected. “I’m trying to get everyone accustomed to the new term.”

Saluting with her left hand, she said, “Oh, yes, sir, captain. The archives.”

I responded to her teasing in kind, saying, “Stop it, and help me. Here’s a spot where this will fit.”

With everything offloaded, Nina looked around. “No offense, Wrenn, but you’ll be an old, old woman with gray hair and gnarly fingers before you finish,” she observed, as if she were revealing a kernel of knowledge of which I wasn’t aware.

Still, I agreed with her. “It is a little intimidating.”

Nina exclaimed, “A little?”

Heading toward the door, I caught sight of something and sped up. “Oh, look. I’ve had my eye on that mirror for the master suite

since the first time I saw it.”

“Oh, that’s a beautiful piece. It can go in the corner near the back doorway.”

“I did some research on this style of mirror. It’s a *cheval*. *Cheval* means horse in French.”

“I don’t get the connection,” she said, dumbfounded.

“My research says it’s because the mirror is mounted on four legs.”

The cheval was a free-standing, oval dressing mirror constructed of mahogany wood. The angle of the mirror could be adjusted within its frame. It was lodged six feet back among other pieces of furniture. This area also seemed to have attracted luggage and traveling trunks. They were intermingled with stacks of boxes, all kinds.

“Help me get it out of here.” I was already wading through, widening the walkway as I went

From the main aisle, an unmoving Nina looked at me like a dog abandoned by its owner. “How?”

“Come on.” Pointing, I said, “Set that box on top of that one.”

While the mirror itself was slim, the legs for the framework took up nearly two feet of space.

After I reached it, I slipped around it on my tiptoes to the back side. “Now, I can push. You can pull. But carefully.” We both gripped the frame. “Keep the mirror straight up and down. Don’t let it swing. It could knock something off.”

Nina walked backwards, keeping her eye on the narrow passageway to ensure the mirror’s legs didn’t collide with neighboring items. We had nearly reached the aisleway when she stopped suddenly. I stubbed my foot on one of the legs. Trying to get my forward momentum back under control, I put out a hand. It struck a carton. The carton wobbled.

“No, no, don’t fall!” A swear word followed that plea.

Wedge in as I was, I couldn’t catch it. All I could do was watch as the oblong box toppled over. The lid dislodged.

And a body fell out.





*Black Orchids Hotel, A Wrenn Grayson Mystery,
is available for purchase in paperback, eBook, and
audiobook through Amazon.*