



St. Aster's Grave Secret

*A
Wrenn Grayson
Mystery*

Connie Chappell

*"Masterful storytelling."
- L.A. Post Examiner*

St. Aster's Grave Secret

A Wrenn Grayson Mystery

Connie Chappell

4am
BOOKS™

St. Aster's Grave Secret

A Wrenn Grayson Mystery

In *St. Aster's Grave Secret*, historian Wrenn Grayson meets three men: a judge, a lawyer, and a minister. Within days, she attends funerals for two of the three.

The dying words of one of them draws her close. He presses a paper into her hands and begs her to carry out the obligations recorded there. Wrenn reads chilling words on the page: "We are bound to each other and the terrible knowledge we carry with us. One of us will tell the truth." Her promise to him sends her on the perilous trail of seven signed confessions.

Is the third man she met conspiring against Wrenn and responsible for the danger exploding around her?

Perhaps Wrenn should have been wary of a story that began on a dark, stormy night in a shadowy cemetery.

The Cemetery

Initially, I argued against being forced into a furlough, but I was beginning to think that two weeks off might work out. Eight months ago, I became archivist for the historical Foundling Museum in town. The mansion was currently undergoing a deep cleaning. My work area was next. I had to move out while the cleaners moved in.

The furlough was currently a mere three hours old, and I was sitting in an easy chair in a room lit solely by a crackling fire and listening to a man I just met tell a story about dragon bones in Gypsy Hills.

In truth, I was hearing the peculiar story as a tagalong guest. The man's original invitation had been issued to Dr. Gideon Douglas, a history professor at Eastwood University here in Havens, Ohio. For six years now, Gideon and I have lived in unwedded bliss. Earlier, we packed into his little red sports car and drove out of the city limits, crossing over from southeastern Havens and into an area known as Gypsy Hills.

Havens ranks as a medium-sized town in Ohio. Our population is just under eighty thousand, with nearly the same number of souls living in the townships around the city. Havens seems to be a barometer, accurately measuring all the country's ups and downs within its boundaries. We fall in line with economic downturns and mimic all the raging fads. Yet we manage to stand apart in times of revival by revealing our individuality to nurture and harness unique inroads that lead to our continued vibrancy. Such achievements require dedicated leadership at various levels, from government to our justice system, to our business and religious communities, as well as aggressive tourism and a progressive school system. It only works if we hold each other up.

It was late March in Havens, so daylight stayed with us until seven or better in the evenings. We were keeping a six-thirty appointment. It was a few minutes before that when Gideon steered through a set of wrought-iron gates flanked by fieldstone gateposts. The gates were fabricated with a complex design of decorative curlicues, horizontal bars, and a crosshatch pattern forming diamonds. The gates swung on massive hinges affixed to stone gateposts.

The gravel-and-dirt entry road was only wide enough for a single car.

We climbed a slight grade that eased to the left and continued upward until it leveled out. Now, on higher ground, the gray sky churned with serious intentions. Tonight's predicted thunderstorm provided a perfectly eerie setting for our first look at the small, private cemetery ahead of us, full of dancing shadows and tilted tombstones.

I happen to like cemeteries. The same thing can be said about thunderstorms. The supreme power of an advancing storm draws me outside. I want to experience it, feel its swirling omnipresence, while, around me, trees bow spectacularly and reverently, fully under the storm's commanding influence.

The cemetery's teamwork improved my outlook on the furlough. That was, of course, if Gideon accepted the job briefly proposed to him by telephone after the storm passed. We were here tonight to receive further details.

With the last curve of the lane, Gideon's headlights strafed a heavysset man standing near the front doors of St. Aster's, the quaint country church that acted as the centerpiece for the graveyard.

"Is that him, do you suppose?" I asked.

"Don't know. But this is where he said he would meet us," Gideon replied, cutting the wheel. The road widened, giving him a place to park that added a sketchy pattern of grass to the dirt and gravel. He shut down the engine, so we lost the additional illumination the headlights provided. He opened his door.

Through the side window, I watched the man who approached from twenty feet away. He appeared to be in his mid-sixties. He was balding. What hair he had gave new meaning to flyaway given the conditions. He wore dark-framed glasses. The sweater he'd buttoned over an open-necked shirt was thick and stretched out of shape by years of continued wear. His pant cuffs dragged his shoes.

When Gideon cleared the front bumper, I pushed my door open and stepped out. The wind buffeted my short dark hair and caught my unzipped coat, billowing it out behind me. The sweater I wore was crew-necked; my jeans and athletic shoes, comfortable.

"Hello." Gideon's greeting was carried away in the wind. He extended a hand.

Taking it firmly, the man replied, "You must be Dr. Douglas. I'm Andrew Mead. Of course, we already met on the phone."

"Call me Gideon, please. May I introduce Wrenn Grayson?"

I stepped forward. "Pleasure meeting you."

He took the hand I offered, cradling it while he spoke, first to Gideon, then to me. "You said you'd bring your young lady. Very nice to meet

you. May I call you Wrenn?"

"Certainly."

"Capital! And I prefer to be called Mead. Just Mead. I'm the pastor here." With a slight tip of his head and a quick grimace, he rephrased, "Was the pastor here? St. Aster's has closed, I'm afraid. We're in transition." His voice dropped, sounding disconsolate. He obviously loved his work. I felt sympathetic. He immediately impressed me as a dear man. With his next breath, he revived himself, his shoulders rising some with the straightened backbone. "Come on. Let's get inside, out of the wind." A full-sized black umbrella leaned against the church wall near the double-door entry. He got it in hand.

In the haze of falling dusk, the building appeared a faded gray. Daylight would surely tell another story. Different-sized stones created the façade. They fitted together like a puzzle, giving it character. Generous Gothic windows flanked the wooden doors.

Before we went inside, I turned my face heavenward to enjoy the purplish clouds bumping into one another in their haste to travel north.

Inside the vestibule, I was finger-combing my hair when Mead flipped a switch and a half-light fled up the main aisleway to the altar. "There. That's enough to see by. Turn that lock, if you please." He pointed, and Gideon slipped the deadbolt into place. "We'll talk here for a minute, then we'll go out the back door."

We wandered a half-dozen steps away from the vestibule, moving into the church proper. All I could see, given the semi-darkness, were the basics. Heavy wooden pews aligned right and left. Four tall Gothic windows lined each of the side aisles. Hardwood flooring appeared to stretch out to the four walls. The lighting was such that I saw a large cross on the wall behind the impressive altar.

"I've pastored St. Aster's for the last ten years. The congregation is... was... always has been a little clannish. When the church opened in 1885, it was attended by the families—predominantly farming families—surrounding the church. They didn't have cars back then, so people came in carriages, on horseback, or just wagons, as you might imagine. Gypsy Hills would have received its name a few years before that. It was a colloquialism that stuck. The congregation waned under my pastorship. Whether that was because of me or just churchgoing in general, I really can't know. But the church has closed, and it's been decided what will happen next. The township will care for the cemetery, cutting the grass and performing necessary maintenance. That brings me to my concern and the reason I invited you here, Dr. Douglas."

"Gideon," the history professor reminded pleasantly.

Mead's lips twitched with a smile. "Yes. Gideon. The newspaper has carried articles about your local excavation successes, and this is what I need from you. And it's crucial that it happens before the township takes over. I can't let them have it until I know one way or the other," he paused, pursing his lips, "if there's a body buried in the cellar."

"Of the church?" Gideon raised his eyebrow quizzically.

"Yes, the church has a cellar. I'd like to show it to you. May I?" he said, vying for permission. His dark eyes flicked from Gideon to me when Gideon sent Mead's question my way.

I already felt both the weight of dread and the color drain from my face. Perhaps Mead wondered why we reacted to the cellar and not the body, not why a body was buried in the cellar when there was a perfectly good cemetery right outside the church. No, we reacted to the cellar. While I like cemeteries and thunderstorms, I do not like cellars. Cellars are, by nature, underground, dark, and dank affairs. They produce claustrophobia in me, which I have rightfully earned.

In my past, I've encountered unsavory people who have forced me to walk through narrow hidden passageways between the walls of an old mansion by lantern light; thrown me in a car trunk, closing the lid; and suckered me at night into an isolated area where I fell into a freshly dug grave. I shivered. On another occasion, I was trapped in a cellar. Come to think of it, that was under a church, too. The doorknob to the exit was broken. It just turned in my hand. Still, tonight, I bravely sucked it up, found Gideon's eyes, and gave him the slightest nod, meaning it was fine. I'd be okay. I'd manage.

To show agreement, Gideon stepped to my side of the aisle, allowing Mead to pass. He indicated we should follow him toward the altar. Directly behind the altar stood a raised pulpit with curved railings. All of St. Aster's pastors would have stepped into the pulpit to address the congregation through their weekly sermons.

On our left, a narrow wall protruded. It screened a door. A low-wattage fixture above the door produced a yellowish puddle of light on a small woven rug. I took a steadying breath as Mead opened the door.

The next words were Gideon's. "We're going outside?" He and I were both confused, having assumed our intended destination was behind the door. Outside, the darkness was nearly complete, everything in shades of gray. We faced the side-yard portion of the graveyard.

"Yes, you'll see," the minister said. "The cellar has a separate entrance."

My queasiness started at precisely the same time I pictured storm doors lying prostrate on the ground, the kind used for tornado evacuation.

Half-rotted wooden steps would lead down into a murky chamber, smelling of old earth. Down there was the certainty of hairy, ugly creatures on short legs with beady eyes, scurrying around. I didn't even want to think about the size of the spiders that thrived in such a space. The real threat would be one of the overlapping doors caught by the wind, whipping it out of your hand, and slamming shut, cracking you soundly on the head.

Once Gideon and I were standing together on the pad of cement on the other side of the door, he took my hand, signaling his reassurance.

Mead closed the door and tested the knob. Locked. We followed silently behind him.

I noticed the lay of the land. The path went sharply downward.

Over his shoulder, Mead explained, "The cellar is built into the side of a hill. The hill is on the other side, so we're fortunate to have an easy entrance from this doorway. It's a real convenience for storing and retrieving things."

The side and back walls of the church were high above us now. Partway down the back wall, a roof angled out to cover the cellar. The cellar itself, which should have been underground, was not, at least not on this side.

Mead fished a ring of keys out of his pants pocket and unlocked the door. The definitive term might be a walk-in-walk-out cellar. No stairs. A distant thunderclap punctuated my pleasure about the setup. The storm was coming.

The door opened out. Mead pushed it flat against the outer wall, then used his foot to maneuver a rock the size of a half-loaf of bread into place to, once again, be called into service as a doorstep. The men went all the way inside. Mead turned on the lights. The darkness receded.

I lingered just a step over the threshold, wanting some guarantee I had my sea legs under me first. It was a well-lit space, I observed. During the day, with the door held by the doorstep for a visual of the wide-open outside world, it would make coming inside to watch Gideon work doable. I felt my stress level lessen, and I ventured a few small steps farther into the room.

To be honest, the cellar wasn't inviting. The ceiling was high enough at the center. It cleared Gideon's head by several inches, but it dipped down at both ends. The dirt floor appeared to be twelve feet on a side. Part of one side tumbled out from under the church. The footers that supported the church were exposed. There were two massive lengths of wood laid horizontally, one on top of the other. These eight-inch thick beams spanned from one wall of the church to the other. They also rested

on multiple pillars of stacked concrete blocks. Between the blocks, cement had oozed out and hardened. I supposed all looked secure.

Mead cleared his throat, then said, “I learned a story passed down from one St. Aster’s pastor to the next. I heard it from Old Man Mathers; he got it from Preacher Paul. The names don’t sound respectful, I know, but these two men kept their flock together for over one hundred years combined. And here I come, ten years in the pulpit, and it’s closing...well, it’s already closed. Both men started very young. I was probably past my prime when I took over from Mathers. He’d been taken gravely ill, and I was looking for a new church, so I took Aster on. Mather’s condition being what it was, I ministered to him in the end. One night, in a near fit of half-impatience, half-panic, he begged me to listen while he told me the story of dragon bones. I didn’t give it much credence. Well, not a lot at the time. Figured it was folklore, a legend, his mind going rogue, something. Nevertheless, it was a story I couldn’t forget. Then yesterday, I was in here, checking things out. You know, what would stay with the property, what I considered junk. I moved the lawn mower out of the way. I guess my push was too strong.” His arms were in play, reenacting the push while the mower itself remained stationary. “It kept rolling. I wasn’t quick enough to catch it before it rammed into this mound of dirt.”

From the recessed cubbyholes between the pillars, where the lawnmower, an old metal trashcan, more lawn care equipment, and a multitude of—well, Mead used the word first—junk were stored, our attention swung to the other side of the cellar, not that far away. On this side, there wasn’t much headroom. On the other side, next to an earthen wall, lay a mini embankment of sorts. It was oblong with rounded edges that fell off around its perimeter. The mounded area was probably ten feet long, perhaps two feet high. I would have pegged its purpose as stopping floodwaters if encountered outdoors.

It crossed my mind that Mead’s performance was a dramatic buildup to something fairly inconsequential. We were standing in a cellar hewn out of rock and dirt. A pile of it at one end didn’t look that out of place. The men who scooped out the cellar, no doubt, just got tired and gave up before the job met any high standards.

Mead turned, took a step, then stopped. “Oh, Wrenn, there you are. Would you bring me that flashlight?” He pointed at the shelf near the door, exactly where I still stood.

On the release of a deep and steadying inhale, I said, “Sure.”

I walked over and placed the flashlight in Mead’s outstretched hand. The metal casing was quite old and heavy. I heard a click when the on-

off switch was engaged.

He bent over and shone the light on an indentation just high enough off the ground to have been made by the mower's front deck or wheel. The impact must have dislodged some dirt. A small chunky pile lay on the ground.

Mead moved the light closer; the beam narrowed and fixed on a hole in the mound. It was only half an inch in diameter.

I watched Gideon slip into his element. He pushed the elastic wristbands on his nylon jacket up, then squatted down, balancing on the balls of his feet, tipping his head curiously. Other than that, his expression was emotionless, his eyes narrowed.

I always enjoyed watching him work. His fingers were long and so delicate for the work he was born to do. Beneath the jacket were muscular arms, broad shoulders, and a trim waist. In other words, he possessed an athletic build, partly because of genetics and partly because of being a lifelong left fielder. He was also talented with the bat. The season was due to open soon. Tomorrow is the team's first practice.

Mead continued his monologue. "I got the mower out of the way and noticed something sticking out of the dirt. Gently, I pulled it out." The light snapped off, and Gideon rose. "Here, Gideon, you take the flashlight."

Mead reached out, clasping something that sat on top of the mound. Dim light hovered on this side of the cellar, so I hadn't noticed it before.

Standing between the two men, I had a good view. Mead held a wooden box. It fit in his palm. He lifted its hinged lid. His hand reaching inside shadowed the interior.

He extracted a small item. "This was wrapped in this cloth. They came out of the dirt together." He moved it into the light, where he posed the question: "Is this what I think it is?"

I looked up inquiringly, my gaze meeting Gideon's. I wasn't an expert on the subject, but I didn't think it looked anywhere close to the size necessary to be called a dragon bone.

A reverberating boom of thunder, which seemed to shake our encapsulated world, punctuated our silence and made me jump. With shoulders hunched, I fully expected fine granules of dirt to sift out from between the ceiling boards. I was glad that didn't happen.

"We'd better finish this at the parsonage," Mead decided quickly. Just as quickly, he returned the bone and its shroud to the box he must have provided for storage, closing it with a loud tick. "I'll lock up. Wrenn, you open the umbrella."

Mead and I took a step. From behind us, Gideon spoke. "I'll carry

the box if you like.”

“Oh, certainly. Capital.” The exchange was made, flashlight for the box.

Mead shone the light across the room and out the open door. It was just beginning to rain. I waited outside under the umbrella while an out-of-beat patter of raindrops struck the nylon.

Gideon waited with me long enough to say, “I’ll run ahead. Shouldn’t get too wet.”

“Go on in when you get there. Door’s open,” Mead called after him.

He’d already taken off at a slow trot, the box clutched to his chest. He skirted the wider wet spots and jumped the smaller ones.

The shadow of the parsonage lurked in a grove of evergreens and deciduous trees. It was not an immediate neighbor of the cemetery. The lane we drove in on and a section of graves ran between them.

Mead’s task complete, he stepped under the umbrella with me. I thought I would continue to hold the umbrella, but he placed his meaty, warm, and moist hand over mine, and off we went.

“It’s so dark. Maybe we should have brought the flashlight,” I suggested belatedly.

“No, I think we can do it.” His words were positive, though he sounded tired.

“Have you decided what you’ll do next? Will you retire?”

“I’m not sure I want to retire. I have the parsonage until the end of the year. After that, I don’t know what will happen to the house. That decision is for others to make.”

We were crossing the lane now, where a dozen rivulets were on the move toward lower ground.

I lifted my gaze. “You’ll probably miss it. It looks roomy enough.”

“It’s a stacked four-by-four—four rooms down, four rooms up.”

Mead’s hand on mine controlled our speed. We were slowing down. His breaths had become audible. I chanced a look, but in the darkness, I couldn’t tell if he was showing any other signs of distress.

“Gideon made it,” I noted. Up ahead, he leaped onto the porch. He set the box down in a rocking chair beside the door. Next, he removed his jacket to shake off the wet.

Mead squeezed my hand so tightly, it began to hurt. As we approached the porch steps, I called out to Gideon. When he looked up, I waved him over urgently. He crossed the planks in a few long strides. Just then, Mead’s wet foot slipped off the first step. We both stumbled backward. In a second, Gideon was there on the minister’s other side, his arm under Mead’s.

"Be careful, Wrenn," Mead said with a heavy breath. "These steps are slippery tonight."

Gideon and I eyeballed each other, understanding Mead's deflective tactic.

Once on the porch, I said quietly, "Let me have the umbrella now."

He peeled his hand off mine. I peeled my hand off the wooden handle and flexed it while my other hand held the dripping umbrella. Gideon remained at his side, angling him toward the door.

"I'm fine. I am. I can walk on my own. You're both too kind." He tried to lace artificial cheer into his words, but he still sounded worn out.

I unlatched the door. The three of us filed into a small foyer. A lamp sat on the table behind the door. Although switched on, the lamp barely lit the area.

I carried the two items Gideon left outside in the rocking chair: his wet jacket and the box. Mead wanted to leave his sweater on, so he and Gideon went into the living room. I noticed a woman's coat hanging on a peg on the foyer wall. That surprised me. Was Mead married?

I left our jackets there and propped the umbrella against the wall, with its tip on a plastic shoe mat. That prompted me to glance down. I'd traversed the mostly gravel lane, coming away with damp, but clean shoes. Outside, the rain cut loose. It poured now over the small parsonage. Box in hand, I entered the living room and found it overcrowded with furniture. The men gravitated to the side of the room where the fireplace was located. One lamp lit this room. Again, the bulb's wattage was not up to the task.

I picked my way over to the loveseat where our host sat, feet crossed at the ankles, knees apart. I wondered how I might best approach the woman's coat. Deciding not to mention the coat, I asked instead, "Is anyone else here, Mead?"

He easily satisfied my growing curiosity. "No. Not right now. My housekeeper is out tonight, catching up with a relative."

Now seated, his breathing had improved. In the poor lighting, I wasn't certain if his face was flushed.

At the same time that I noticed the chill in the room, Mead complained, "Oh, drat, the fire has died."

Gideon immediately busied himself at the hearth, setting the fire screen aside. First, he attempted to rouse the fire to life with the poker. The old embers glowed enough that I could read the time of the mantel clock. It read seven-thirty. Six or seven hefty pieces of firewood lay in a nearby brass carrier. Gideon picked one up and chucked it onto the grate, then loaded on two more.

“Those are oak and beautifully seasoned. Thank you, Gideon,” Mead praised.

Gideon smiled up at me when I moved closer. His sandy-blond hair curled when it was wet. His gray-blue eyes had changeable irises. Tonight, they picked out the gloom in the room.

He and I took armchairs facing each other. We were closest to the fire. Gideon had possession of the box now. He opened it and removed the bone. The piece of fabric came out with it; the two were a unit. He returned the thing to its box and leaned forward to pass what I had begun to think of as the tiny coffin to me. I looked inside but did not lift out the contents. The scrap of material either carried a stain or was two different colors. It had a canvas or burlap look. The size of the disembodied bone appeared to be appropriate for a man’s finger. The three sections were melded onto the fabric. I gave an involuntary shudder.

Mead attempted to speak. His voice was raspy, so he cleared his throat and tried again. “I fear you two think I’m a dotty old man. Well, the funny thing is, I’m not.” When he smiled, his chubby cheeks caused his glasses to rise a few noticeable millimeters. “But let me get back to the reason I invited you here. Mathers, sadly, had become increasingly eccentric in his old age, repeating himself in sermons and falling asleep during committee meetings. The doctors said it was an intracranial neoplasm. I suppose you know what that is.” In follow-up, he supplied, “A mouthful for a brain tumor. The story Old Man Mathers told me, and Preacher Paul told him, goes back quite a way, as I said.” At that point, his story took on a fairytale quality. “There was once a man who lived in Gypsy Hills named Dragon Bones. You two are better educated socially and politically, so you know that the term *gypsy* is derogatory. It was the locals who tagged the area Gypsy Hills.”

“Roma is the proper term,” Gideon supplied, while the fire snapped smartly in the grate.

“See, I knew you were a finer class of people.” Mead’s face brightened. “Now, to get straight to the point—all the filler history can come later—Dragon Bones was a medicine man in the Roma community. He knew about herbs and such. While he lived in Gypsy Hills and made and sold his remedies, the world concerning the pharmaceutical industry was changing. Laws had been enacted that made what Dragon Bones did illegal. Law enforcement—police and sheriff—continually hounded the Roma. They knew about Dragon Bones and showed up repeatedly, looking for any sign he was brewing up his own stuff and, therefore, in breach of the law. In today’s terms, he was being targeted. From what Mathers told me, the Roma people and Dragon

Bones knew it was in their best interest if he stopped brewing. The Romani came to a very young Preacher Paul and asked a favor. They wanted to clear out all the paraphernalia Dragon Bones used. They feared if they buried it, and during one of the sheriff's searches, the officers found some freshly turned soil, they would dig it up. Yes, I see you've arrived at what happened." His eyes danced from Gideon to me. "Paul agreed to let the Romani bury all of Dragon Bones' equipment and utensils in the cellar. They figured the sheriff would never search there."

"It sounds like the Roma and the church were on good terms," said Gideon.

"Absolutely. That's the story. The Roma were a fairly self-sufficient community and large landowners, which might surprise you. They gave land for the church and attended regularly. Paul and Mathers thought half of that was merely to fit in. All the landowners around the church attended. It was a local congregation." His eyeballs flicked up. "I think I already told you that. Yes, I did."

Grinning at his antics, I said, "So, that mound of dirt in the cellar..."

Mead completed my sentence. "Has been there for over a hundred years. I've never disturbed it. No one did. But you see, with the church closed, and as I mentioned, the cemetery is to be moved into the township's hands for maintenance. When I found the bone yesterday, I thought I had better learn what is really buried down there before someone else takes over, finds it, and digs. So, Dr. Douglas." He shot up a peremptory hand of apology. "I mean, Gideon, will you excavate that mound and see what we have?"

"You're thinking Dragon Bones may be buried there."

"Dragon Bones or someone else. That's the question: Is it a grave?" His wiry eyebrows arched, adding further import to his inquiry.

I pulled up a mental picture of the mound. Its length and breadth looked right for the burial of a man's body.

"The property is still in the church's hands?" Gideon asked, double-checking.

"End of April, it transfers." The timeframe allowed Gideon more than a month.

"How long will it take?" I'd already assumed he'd accept the job.

"Not that long. I've got spring break. I do have some essays to grade, ball practice, but, yes, I'm happy to make plenty of time for the excavation."

Mead worked himself off the loveseat. The man possessed a spryness I hadn't thought possible. In two steps, he was leaning over Gideon, holding out his hand. "Thank you. Thank you." He pumped Gideon's

hand fiercely. “I’ll sleep better tonight. Thank you.”

Before we left, Gideon wanted it understood that he would record the excavation, note his findings, and prepare a report to be archived in the university’s library. This was standard practice.

Pastor Andrew Mead agreed to the terms, adding a caveat. “You must work on your own. No students. Dear Wrenn is fine, but no one else. This must remain just between us.” He passed us a solemn look. Both Gideon and I nodded.



*St. Aster's Grave Secret, A Wrenn Grayson Mystery,
is available for purchase in paperback, eBook, and
audiobook through Amazon.*