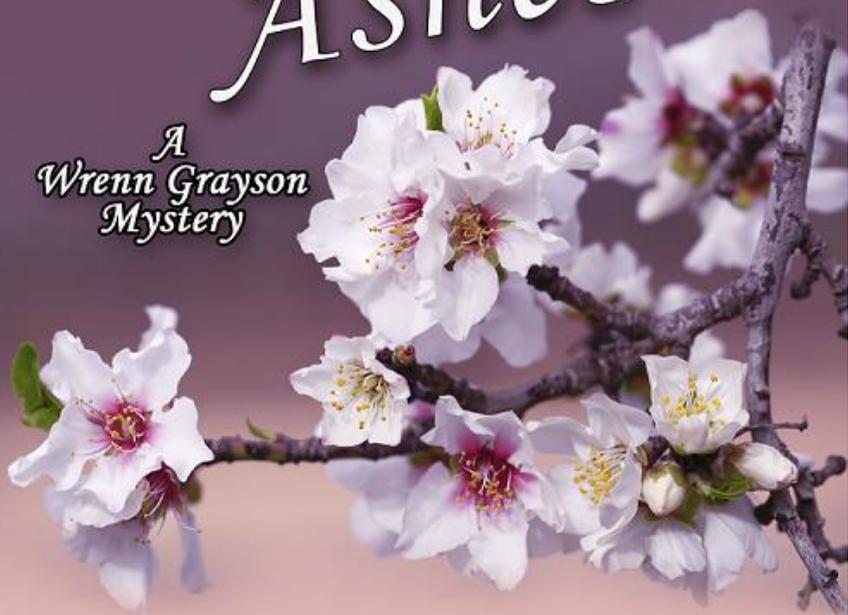


Almond City Ashes

*A
Wrenn Grayson
Mystery*



Connie Chappell

*"All the books in the Wrenn Grayson Mystery series are simply brilliant."
--The Baltimore Sun*

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Almond City Ashes

A Wrenn Grayson Mystery

Historian Wrenn Grayson is invited to the Foundling estate. She anticipates meeting the estate's heiress, Clotilde Bronwyn. Upon arrival, though, she learns of Clotilde's recent death and that the heiress left a letter addressed to Wrenn. Clotilde writes that she wishes to hire Wrenn to compose her memoriam. Wrenn accepts the challenge.

Clotilde's family mansion is now the home of the Foundling Historical Society. Society members agree to share memories of the adventurous woman for the memoriam. Another vein of activity at the mansion is the hunt for the long-missing Almond City gold. Bronwyn family ancestors are responsible for this fabled treasure.

The hunt stops when someone is found murdered on the estate grounds. The police suspect Wrenn when she cannot produce an alibi for the time of death. The situation worsens after she admits a dark history with the victim. Wrenn is left with no choice. She must pursue her own risky investigation.

Engraved Invitation

I buzzed out Hattersfield Road toward the city limits and the Rosemont estate. Clay Addison, my good friend, lived there.

He and I shared a few connections. We were both longtime residents of Havens, Ohio, and we both worked for city government. More accurately, Clay retired from his position as police chief over two years ago. At thirty, I was still employed as the mayor's assistant. I might have said gainfully employed, but the truth was, an economic crisis was responsible for cutting my hours in half. As a result, I sought supplemental income from two other sources, one of which was to hire out as a historian.

I slipped my historian shingle onto a nail about the time Clay took off the badge. A couple of months later, he purchased the Rosemont house and grounds at auction and asked me to complete historical research on the estate and past Rosemont generations.

Clay was drawn to the estate because its original owner, Jonah Rosemont, was Havens' first police chief back in the mid-1800s. Clay moved into the house earlier this summer after he completed enough renovations to make the place livable. During the eight years it sat vacant, deterioration had set up shop.

I put on my blinker and turned into the colonnade of trees that led to Rosemont. Overhead, tree branches intertwined, allowing very little light to seep through. After countless visits to Rosemont, I knew that illusion only fed the allure. A heartbeat later, I broke through the trees and feasted my eyes on the grand mansion, bathed in sunlight. Yet again, I was utterly awed by the sight and the history.

My foot came off the gas pedal, and the midnight-blue PT Cruiser I drove rolled to a delicate stop. I gazed out Midnight's windshield, across the expansive front yard, and up to the two-story

house with its stone façade.

Jonah Rosemont moved his family here in 1849. Still, it stands, tall and proud, with its angled roof and chimneys. A railed balcony was reached by French doors and set upon a portico, sheltering a wide porch constructed with four Corinthian columns.

Features associated with the fall season already put in their appearance throughout Rosemont Woods. Trees bordered the house, outbuildings, and sprawling meadow and were a stunning palate of golds, oranges, and crimsons.

The driveway forked. To the right, it wound out to the carriage house. The wooden structure was topped with a cupola and the traditional weathervane.

I eased the PT Cruiser down the side lane used for parking. I got out, closed Midnight's door, and walked across the grass toward the front door. How I wished when I got there, it would open and I could step back in time, observe an earlier version of my hometown, witness people in their daily lives, and appreciate the past, firsthand.

I was within reach of the portico steps when I heard Clay's voice calling and was yanked into present day. I looked around and found him on the other side of the meadow, outside the carriage house. The double doors stood open. Clay waved one arm while the other arm held a cellphone to his ear. He and I split the distance between us.

He finished his call and stuffed the phone in a jeans pocket. When we were close enough to allow normal conversation to work, he said, "Sorry I wasn't up here to meet you."

"I just got here. Perfect timing, really." I raised up on my toes to receive his hug and reciprocate the gesture.

Clay Addison was over six foot. The afternoon sun shone on his handsome face and brown eyes. These days, a few strands of gray blended with his dark hair. "You look good. How's Gideon?"

"He's fine and deep into western civilizations." Gideon Douglas and I lived in unwedded bliss. He teaches history at Eastwood University, here in Havens.

"What about K.C. and the campaign?"

I locked eyes with Clay. "That levy has got to pass. K.C.'s out there every day, speaking with civic groups." Mayor K.C. Tallmadge, the man in charge of the city's budget, made the difficult decision to propose a property tax increase to the voters. Now, he was traipsing all over town, selling the idea to those who would foot

the bill. The voters rightfully demanded a return on their investment. They saw the mayor's face making claims for a better future. From K.C., they would demand accountability. In my opinion, there was no better man for the job.

“And the byproduct is, you'll get back to full-time.”

“Not right away, but I'm supposed to, along with enhanced street paving programs and additional personnel for emergency services.” I stopped to chuckle. “Listen to me, I've heard K.C.'s speech so many times, I'm beginning to sound like him. Although, it would be a relief to be full-time again. It feels like I'm testing thin ice without benefits.” My stint at part-time ran for three years now, which was why I had the luxury of visiting Clay on a Friday afternoon, instead of sitting behind my desk in City Hall.

“I hate to say it,” Clay said, giving me a forlorn look, “but I'm hearing comments around town about trying to get K.C. out of office when his term comes up next year.” K.C. was completing his fourth term as mayor. The results from Election Day, just two weeks away, would quite probably determine the parameters for next year's mayoral race.

“It scares me to death what will happen if this levy doesn't pass and another mayor gets in. I can't imagine working for someone else.”

“Just say it. You mean Noel Russell.”

I shook my head vehemently. That councilman rose to the level of nemesis in my book. In general terms, he didn't practice the aboveboard brand of politics that was best for our citizens. “I won't do it. I cannot work for Russell.” I could feel my blood starting a vicious churn through my veins, so I changed the subject. “Speaking of campaigns, you dug into a sprucing-up campaign. It's only been a month or so since I've been out, but look at this.” I pointed at a large pile of accumulated brush. Clay had trimmed the shrubbery from this side of the house. He'd also painted all the window frames. I was sure he'd reached the conclusion that with a house this size, he would never see the end of painting jobs.

“I finally got around to the spirea. I almost pulled it out.”

“No, you were right to keep it. You'll have nice blooms next spring.”

Clay cocked his head. “Is that a car?”

I listened and heard it, too. We walked back around front. The

generous yard was dissected by a sidewalk that led from the house to the winding entrance drive. What I saw pulling to a stop was not a car, but a shiny black limousine.

“Got a visitor,” Clay said.

“You expecting someone?”

Studying the scene, he said, “Let’s see what this is about.”

We went to stand at the top of the walkway. The limousine door opened, and a uniformed driver dropped his black-booted feet to the ground. He was clad in the traditional garb from a long-forgotten time. Immediately, I thought this was my wish come true, a chance to see history come to life. The driver’s cap, suit jacket, and pants were black. The pants legs ballooned out above the knees and were tucked inside the boots. His shirt and gloves were white. The new arrival carried himself with starch, chin high, shoulders back.

As he drew closer, I saw he held a white envelope in his hand. “Looks like a delivery of some kind,” I said.

“Guess so.” Louder, Clay said, “Afternoon.” His greeting resulted in a nod from the driver.

When I expected the envelope to be handed to Clay, the driver faced me. Hearing a woman’s voice was the next surprise. “Miss Wrenn Grayson?” she inquired with an air of staunch decorum. The woolen cap she wore with its short bill shaded her eyes, making it difficult to discern an age. A guess would be late fifties.

“Yes?” I said.

“For you, miss.” She lay the square envelope in my outstretched hand. With the click of her heels, she turned to retrace her steps.

“Me?” I stared at the envelope. The fancy calligraphy on the front confirmed I was indeed the intended recipient. The words penned there were: *Wrenn Grayson, Historian*. “What is this?”

Sounding amused, Clay said, “Well, open it.”

Frowning with the bafflement I felt, I flipped the envelope over and worked the flap free. The stiff card I pulled out read like an invitation. It said: *The honor of your presence is requested on Sunday at the Foundling mansion at the hour of 2 p.m.*

It was signed: *Foundling Historical Society and Museum*.

Out in the lane, the limousine’s engine sparked to life. It rolled backwards into the side drive, then the driver maneuvered the long sedan into a right-hand turn. It disappeared into the trees.

My eyes rolled up to Clay. I saw his Cheshire-cat grin, and all

the pieces behind this peculiar scene fell into place. How had the driver known where to find me? Clay orchestrated that. Earlier in the week, we supposedly ran into each other downtown by accident. “Come out Friday, after you get off,” he said. “We’ll catch up.” The final puzzle piece was the phone call he made the minute he knew I was on the premises. Not long after, the limousine drove in from the wings, and the performance played out.

“All right, Clay Addison, you didn’t bring me out here to look at a pile of brush and painted window frames.”

“I painted the portico columns and the balcony railing, too,” he said, turning a shoulder to admire his handiwork.

I wasn’t going to let him pretend to miss the point. “You knew about this.” I flipped the invitation at him.

He shrugged. “We needed a place where it could be delivered.”

“So you tricked me into coming out here. It was all a set-up.”

“Trick? Set-up? Don’t think like that.” His tone said he enjoyed the mischief-making. “We wanted a private setting. Rosemont made more sense. I never know when you’re at home.”

“Wait a minute. You said we. Are you part of this Foundling Historical Society?”

“I am.”

“Since when?”

“Couple months now. I made a donation, and they asked me if I wanted to join. Right now, it’s a private society, but we’re getting closer to establishing the museum side of things.”

“For public viewing?”

“Yeah.”

“So what’s this about?” I said, slipping the invitation back inside the envelope.

“I can’t talk about it, not until after the meeting.” With that, he sent me his sunny smile.

That won me over. I grinned, too. “An engraved invitation. That’s better than K.C. yelling through the door. I’m impressed. A chauffeur.”

“Actually, at Foundling, the term is coachman.”

“You’ve learned a lot in a few months,” I said. He rocked on his heels, exhibiting pride. “Will you be there Sunday?”

“I will. Two o’clock.”

Winding up for a second try, I pleaded, “Tell me *something*.”

Please!”

“Do you have a cursory knowledge of Foundling?” It sounded like he intended to divulge a clue.

“Of course I do.” Foundling first stood alone as a settlement separate from Havens. Havens grew, but Foundling did not. Eventually, the settlement was taken inside Havens’ boundaries. Today, the name Foundling referred to an estate that originally represented the centerpiece of the settlement.

“That’s all you need.”

Disappointed with the hint, I raised a judgmental eyebrow.

“Come on, Wrenn, you know I wouldn’t lead you astray.”

He was right. I did know that, but I wasn’t quite ready to let him off the hook so easily. “You’re being sneaky. I won’t forget this.”

“But you will forgive me.”

“Will I?” I asked with sincerity. This invitation was beginning to take on the weight of true importance.

“There’s no doubt.”

“Okay. I’m trusting you.” Tapping the sleeve of his gray sweatshirt, I said, “See you Sunday.”

“Sunday,” he repeated.

Another moment from history came to me gently as I angled back across the lawn. A scene very similar to the one I witnessed this afternoon took place once before. I started the car and backed it around while the memory tugged at my heart.

Four years ago, I stood on the porch of my grandmother’s farmhouse and watched a woman make the long trek my way. Behind her, a coachman waited beside a black limousine. The limousine belonged to the Foundling estate. The woman, Clotilde Bronwyn, was a member of the family who lived on the historical estate built in the 1880s. She and my grandmother, Virginia Reston, remained incredibly close lifelong friends.

In this memory, Clotilde was tall and slender, her clothing impeccably tailored. I admired the one aspect of her personae that served to define her—the way she moved with oiled grace.

We were both aware of the reason for the visit.

My grandmother was dying.

After waving out the car’s window to Clay, I allowed Midnight to creep down the leaf-covered lane and made the short drive home. Gideon Douglas and I live in the former caretaker’s quarters on the

Hancock farm. We had access to our cottage abode from a separate road. This was quiet country living at its finest.

The farmhouses are separated by acres of crop fields. On this third weekend in October, those fields are dormant. The cornstalks have been cut down to nubs, and clods of soil lay everywhere. The Hancock farm is blessed with a wide swatch of woods that added further distance between it and the next farm to the north. Our cottage is nestled into a crook of those woods.

With Midnight parked in the gravel drive, I got out, crossed the flagstone walkway, and let myself in the front door. The compact cottage was warm and welcoming at the end of the day. I stepped into the short entrance hall that opened to the great room. A stone fireplace occupied one corner of the living space. The kitchen was visible at the back. A stairway led to the loft. Our bedroom was up there and a room we called the stacks. Much of the room was lined with bookcases, so the library term fit.

I set my keys in the glass dish on the entryway table and put the engraved invitation down next to it. I shrugged out of my jacket and hung it on a hook behind the door.

I stepped back to the table and studied my name written in calligraphy on the fine linen weave. Clay said I should trust him, so I did. If he said I would forgive his subterfuge, then I probably would. What Clay couldn't know was how my rekindled memory of Clotilde Bronwyn became superimposed over the mysterious rendezvous he set up at his place. The last time I saw Clotilde, we hugged each other at Grams' funeral.

When Gideon swung through the front door a couple of hours later, I was in the kitchen, staring into the freezer.

"You're home," I said. "Good. How does fish sound for supper?" I worked a package of beer-battered cod loose from the recesses of the freezer.

"Fine. What else?"

I heard his keys hit the dish on the table. "I can do frozen French fries," I said, my eyes on an unopened sack in the door compartment. "Or, I can cut a couple of potatoes into strips and bake them."

"Since you offered, baked." His baritone voice came back with, "Hey, what's this?"

I was already making my way to him. Behind me, the freezer door tapped closed. "Read it," I said, angling out of the kitchen,

passing the breakfast bar and dining nook.

Gideon Douglas moved into the cottage with me four years ago after a long courtship. We celebrated his forty-fourth birthday in April, making him fourteen years older. I studied his chiseled features in profile, head tipped to the invitation. His sandy hair was still streaked blond from the summer he spent in the sun with a handful of students on an excavation project. Where his hair curled a bit, mine stubbornly would not. It was short, dark, and untalented. Fortunately, I found a beautician who gives me an excellent cut.

In addition to Gideon's teaching duties at Eastwood University, he chaired the history department. This weekend, he brought work home. I knew this because the black carrying case for his laptop computer lay against the back of the couch.

He looked up, handing me the invitation. "Foundling Historical Society and Museum. Never heard of it. You?" His question was followed with a kiss on my cheek.

"I know about the Foundling estate. In fact, it's a couple of blocks east of the college. Clay says the society is currently private, and the museum is just getting off the ground." He followed me around the couch and sat down. I sank into one of the armchairs. "Clay's a member, apparently. He arranged for the invitation to be delivered out at his place this afternoon." I described the limousine service and the preferred term of coachman. "It all seemed a source of fun for him."

"So what's the reason for the invitation?"

"He was mum about that."

"I bet he wants you to join."

"You remember Grams' best friend was Clotilde Bronwyn. She's the heiress of Foundling."

"Then she probably wants you to join."

"That could be part of it, but I suspect there's more, just by the way Clay was acting. You know him. He liked perpetuating the mystery. Said to trust him."

With a hand gesture and a nod, Gideon accepted this. "Upside is, you'll get to see Clotilde again. Grams would like that."

"She would."

"If you don't mind, I'm going to get a start on grading some essays." He pulled his laptop over and got to his feet. "I don't want it all hanging over me with the game Saturday." My dear sweet

Gideon was extremely disciplined. His reward for an assignment completed was Eastwood's football game. We always attended, rain or shine. A brisk fall afternoon was expected, so great football weather.

Gideon came down from the stacks when dinner was ready, then retreated back upstairs to shift through more student papers. I took care of kitchen chores, then planted myself on the couch to read. My concentration was off though. The invitation lay on the coffee table now and in my line of sight.

I raised two considerations with regard to the reason behind the invitation. Perhaps society members were planning a surprise party for Clotilde. Perhaps her birthday was Sunday. But birthday or otherwise, it wasn't necessary to keep the idea of a surprise from me. I thought I could be counted on not to blab the secret. My other thought was, Clotilde invited me to an afternoon tea. The oddity there was that Clay said he would be present. Clay with a teacup on his knee didn't seem like anything he'd agree to. The more viable rationale was that I would be extended an invitation to join the membership, which was precisely why the invitation was issued formally and in the full name of the group.

On Saturday, hundreds of people crammed into the stadium to cheer for the home team. That did the trick because the Eastwood Eagles pulled one out. To celebrate, Gideon and I went out to dinner.

~*~*~



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