



And To My  
Granddaughter  
I Bequeath

*A Wrenn Grayson Short Story*

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**AUTHOR NOTE:**

**This Wrenn Grayson short story is not intended to fit, in any way, into the storyline for the Wrenn Grayson Mystery Series.**

**Please read *And To My Granddaughter I Bequeath* purely for enjoyment as a standalone story.**

# And To My Granddaughter I Bequeath

By Connie Chappell

“You have three days, ladies,” Elias Attlee said. The attorney pushed his cuffed sleeve back, revealing a platinum watch. “I can give you until two-thirty Friday and no later.”

My eyes made contact with Pamela’s, assessing blame for the shortened timeframe. Finally, her incessant fiddling stopped. The gold chain she twisted around an index finger and its French-manicured nail dropped to her white cashmere sweater.

“You can’t be serious,” she said, turning haughtily on Attlee. “That’s hardly enough time.”

“I’ll be back then for signatures on the initial paperwork,” Attlee said, searching his briefcase as if she hadn’t spoken. “That will get the will started through probate. The court closes at four-thirty. The papers must be filed by then.”

We were an informal gathering of four, seated around the living room’s coffee table, Pamela and Attlee in upholstered chairs at either end. He passed duplicates of my grandmother’s will to Imogene Throckmorton, who sat with me on a sectional sofa. She was Grams’ best friend and a regular in my life growing up. I know her as Mortie. The stapled pages were tagged with square yellow notes. I kept the one labeled Wrenn Grayson and handed Pamela Grayson’s off to her.

Pamela is my mother, although the title rarely passes my lips.

“Wrenn, the first responsibility is yours,” said Attlee, the original document again in his hand. “So, let’s go through it one more time just to

be sure you have a full understanding. Skip over the trust provisions and go to the top of page two.” A trio of pages flipped in unison, and he continued. “Items Five and Six speak to the specific bequests. The lady’s writing desk and the painting hanging over it are yours.”

My eyes strayed over his shoulder to the alcove. The cherrywood desk sat there, on the other side of the front door. Rising from the writing surface stood a warren of pigeon-holed compartments. The framed painting hung lengthwise above them.

“Pamela, your mother has bequeathed to you the old traveling trunk in the attic and the crate of newspapers next to it. Both bequests are in pairs. They may not be separated. You are to receive both or neither. You may not exchange your bequest with the other.” Attlee paused. His eyes appeared to rest on the rim of half glasses. They shifted between the two of us while we absorbed the take-it-or-leave-it proposition. “If you choose not to accept your bequest, it will be auctioned with the farmland, house, and all remaining personal property. The proceeds of that sale, adjusted for claims against the estate, are to be distributed to Wrenn.” He pointed his bulbous nose in my direction. “Now, Wrenn, your grandmother gives you the first opportunity to select any other items of her personal property for yourself. Simply start a list, set the items together, tag them, do something so that when I bring the appraiser through on Saturday, it’ll be readily apparent what’s to be parceled out.”

He then summarized Pamela’s right to choose from the remainder. Instead of nodding her comprehension as I had, she revived her argument for a few days’ grace. I can only imagine he thought Pamela’s learning curve was off the charts because he started the lesson all over again.

“I’ll admit this is unique, Pamela, with your mother’s letter of instruction controlling the circumstances under which her will would be read. I was not to tell you of the four-month timeline restriction until this point. And let’s keep in mind, these are her wishes, and we’ve followed them fully, even extending an invitation to Ms. Throckmorton here if she be living,” Attlee added in will-speak.

“And don’t let the bastards tell you otherwise,” the retired naval nurse suddenly piped up.

After a startled moment, he said, “Certainly not.” He must have felt obligated to reply since she gave him a snappy salute. He traced down his train of thought, then went on. “The probate judge wouldn’t overturn the will even if there were time to place it before him. Four months from the date of death, the window left open for you to sift through things

closes tight. Friday, the balance of the duties passes into my hands and those of the court's to settle her estate. I'm sure your mother thought giving you four months was ample time."

"Even if we'd known about the timeline restriction," I said, "it would probably have resulted in the same outcome, for the same reason."

This time, Pamela sent me a scorching look.

Attlee folded his papers back into his briefcase. Pamela, on stilted shoes, and Mortie, as stocky as a fireplug, walked him out into a glorious spring afternoon in Southwestern Ohio. I hung back, catching the screen door before it slapped closed, and took a few seconds to curl my lip at the loathsome painting.

I stepped out to the porch to hear Attlee extend his sympathies to Pamela for her loss as a means of farewell. The sentimentality only spurred her to bound down the steps after him, nipping at his heels like a puppy, still making her case for more time.

Pamela's and my relationship never blossomed. Keeping our time together short was fine with me.

I went down behind them and stood in the corner, where the railed porch bulged wider than the steps. Mortie, still up top, leaned over both the banister and my shoulder. Together we watched Pamela, clad in London's latest fashions. She and I claimed opposite ends of the haberdashery scale. Getting her back here after Grams' funeral fell on my slight shoulders and proved a trying endeavor. The several times I tracked her down and urged her return, she continually put me off. Other business arrangements occupied her schedule. "How long can it possibly take to read a will?" was her response when I reiterated Attlee's dwindling-timeframe scenario.

"It isn't often she's told no," I said.

Pamela stared after Attlee's BMW through the dust it kicked up exiting the gravel drive.

Instead of answering, Mortie, who is uniquely fond of ball hats, dropped her Anchors Away cap on my head. Recently susceptible to childhood memories, I whirled to her round face wreathed in salt-and-pepper curls. "Are you staying, Mortie?"

"Nah, it's time for this drunken sailor to jump ship." I protested, but she drowned me out. "I'll come by tomorrow. See how you and Pamela are doing."

“I’m glad she asked you to be here for this.”

The look that passed between us said we both dearly missed Grams.

“Surprised the hell out of me when Attlee called. I always thought your Grams considered me a bad influence on you as a child. Christ, I’m sure she thought I was a bad influence on any child.”

Remembering the shy six-year-old who, for the first time, just received the ball cap with its mixing-bowl fit, I thought she was like no one I ever met.

Pamela’s return was mirrored in Mortie’s eyes. Arms folded, I turned Pamela’s way. “I wanted that trunk, Mortie, and the newspapers. Grams knew I loved them,” I said, suddenly desperate to express it before her departure.

Mortie’s response was to come to me with a hug. That given, she collected her hat, then said in her boisterous voice so Pamela could hear: “Shake ‘em up, Wrenn. Let the bastards know you’re here.”

These standard words of encouragement were possibly responsible for Grams’ bad-influence label. They did lure the return of my smile.

On wide black shoes, she marched off, spoke a few pleasantries to Pamela in passing, then scraped open her car door, metal on metal, and yelled back. “See ya in church, Wrenn.”

I laughed. Mortie had never been in church a day in her life.

I helped Pamela in with her Louis Vuitton luggage. She hadn’t planned on staying at the house. Neither had I. My own was fifteen minutes away. With the strict timeline before us, it just seemed prudent to make use of the available accommodations. I had a change or two of clothing and some toiletries already laid in. During Grams’ illness, I often stayed over to be close.

The cupboards were bare, so food became the next consideration. While Pamela settled in, I decided to make a run to Crowell’s for the absolute necessities and went to retrieve my car keys from the coffee table. A copy of Grams’ will covered them. I slid it over. My gaze fell on the line of type that triggered a memory earlier. Grams repeatedly drilled: “Accept people, Wrenn. Let them be who they are.” At odds with that was the will’s negative interpretation: “If you choose not to accept...”

I used the back door when I returned from Crowell’s, shelved the groceries, and found Pamela standing in front of the writing desk, lost in the oil painting.

The scene depicted was a study of an unhurried time in The South. Women in groups of twos and threes were gathered in a grove of flowering trees. Heads together, they shared secrets. A light breeze blew long white cotton dresses against their graceful figures. Under hats festooned with satin ribbons, their hairstyles were swept up with tiny curls silhouetting innocent faces.

My gaze went to the foreground as it always did—to the delicate fingers of a woman’s small hand. My focus was fixed on the crocheted handkerchief stilled halfway between her extended fingertips and a cushion of green lawn.

Pamela sensed my presence. She spoke without turning. “Your grandmother was up to something when she made out that will.”

“Clearly, she wanted us to spend time together.”

“There’s a message in all this.”

“I don’t think we’re going to find it stuffed in the sugar bowl or the flour canister.”

“I love this painting, Wrenn. I always have. It’s my best memory from this house.” Reining in her faraway look, she said, “Of course, the painting and desk will look nice at your place. You *will* find a spot to keep them both together?”

This backhanded compliment slammed my small living quarters. “I will as long as you don’t refuse the trunk and newspapers.”

“So that’s her game,” she said slyly, having snugly fit the two puzzle pieces together. “I would never go against Mother’s will. Although for the life of me, I can’t understand her purpose. What did she hope to prove?”

“That I’m super stubborn and you’re unbelievably self-important.”

Our combative eyes held for a second and a half. Then in true self-important fashion, she responded to her characterization, saying nothing of mine.

“Yes, I suppose you would think of me in those terms. Well, it’s patently obvious we’re not going to make any headway in the mother-daughter department. So,” she said, raising her nose in the air, “all her planning goes for naught.”

I heard those last words and realized Grams put a great deal of thought into the chapter that would close her life. I walked into the house

today, not wanting much of what Attlee defined as the legal disposition of assets. In simple terms, divvying up the goods. I still didn't. But I would give the search of closets and storage boxes the respect it was due, or I might regret forever having forsaken the opportunity.

The rest of the afternoon passed quickly. Pamela and I tackled the dining room and kitchen. I checked the flour and sugar containers, and then when Pamela thought of it, she did the same. We spent the bulk of our time unloading the china hutch. I wanted Grams' good dishes and glassware, both delicate and rimmed in gold. We stacked the heirlooms on the dining room table so Attlee's appraiser could complete the job easily.

Two separate and distinct childhoods had been lived in the bedrooms upstairs. Pamela and I depleted those rooms of important memorabilia years ago. From Grams' bedroom downstairs, I made one selection each from her jewelry box and cedar chest. Pamela ripped two sheets from a pad for shopping lists, penning my name at the top of one and hers on the other. On three lines under mine, she wrote: Writing desk and painting, dishes and glassware, then pearls and albums. Under hers, she wrote: Trunk and newspapers. Pamela would ship nothing from the downstairs to either of her homes in London or Atlanta.

Pamela, next, turned her nose up at my selections from Crowell's deli counter. To keep the peace, I accepted her offer of dinner from Mi Ling's instead. She ordered it delivered with both Chinese and American eating utensils.

Pamela sat on the couch. I pushed a forkful of sweet and sour pork into my mouth from a side chair.

Suddenly, she shouted, "Papá." She used the French pronunciation, as I'd always heard it, accenting the last syllable.

Unable to speak, I chewed madly while leaning out from my upholstered perch to look back at the screen door. Having never met Grams' father didn't prove a hindrance for identification purposes since no one stood there. Along with the pork, I swallowed a good measure of relief: I knew Papá to be long dead.

I turned back to see Pamela shove chopsticks into her spicy Mongolian beef. She exchanged the carton for two of the stacked photograph albums resting on the coffee table.

"Help me look," she said with an anxiety I didn't understand.

"What for?" I asked, abandoning my pork and sliding the third



album into my lap.

“There’s an old picture of Papá at fifteen, taken just before he left home. It would have been,” she said, squinting an eye in thought, “either 1908 or 1909. He was holding his valet.”

“His what?”

“A shoe valet. His father was a cobbler. You know this,” she said in a declaratory tone.

Not really, I thought. What I did know was, for some reason, I was never that fond of Papá.

“The family immigrated from a little town outside Paris,” she said, filling me in. “He made the valet himself, then went all over the country, hopping trains, earning money shining shoes.”

Ah, trains. That jogged a memory. “He worked for the railroad.”

“After he married, he did. The line that ran between Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Chicago, and St Louis. Papá loved his trains.” With her hunt momentarily halted, she looked into the alcove behind me. “You know Papá gave that painting to Mother when we moved into this house. I remember that and the stories he told about his travels down South.”

I watched her eyes linger on a father’s gift to his daughter, the daughter being the woman I called Grams.

We flipped pages in silence. Pamela moved to the other album by the time I found a five-by-seven picture of a handsome lad wearing a beret and a charming smile. His pant cuffs barely met scuffed boots. Over the shoulder of a short jacket hung a leather strap attached at two points to a wooden valet. He held the object proudly in both hands for the camera.

“There’s a shoe pedestal on top.” I pulled the picture from black corner tabs.

Pamela’s eyes flew wide. “You found it!”

Passing the photo, I said, “Grams kept that valet by the desk, but it hasn’t sat there in years.”

I watched her face crumple.

“But she wouldn’t get rid of it. It must be here somewhere.” A look of friendly coercion replaced the dread. “I’d love to have it, Wrenn.”

Pamela’s existence in the farmhouse suddenly held purpose. It possessed something she wanted.

Throughout my preparations for bed, my thoughts remained infected with Pamela's day-long show of indifference. Inspiration stirred but twice, and both hinged on her beloved Papá. Her eyes beamed when she spoke of his handmade shoe valet and his gift of the oil painting. I pictured a young Pamela, content on her grandfather's knee, listening to tales of wanderlust. The South portrayed in the painting—and by the storyteller—must have appeared a beckoning, far-off land to the youngster.

I yanked the bedspread away from the headboard, and the pillows came with it. With one knee pinned to the mattress, adding reach to my arm, I pinched the corner of a pillow lying cockeyed on the other side of the double bed. That's when realization dawned. I turned to stare through my open doorway to Pamela's closed door. Some primal understanding of all this must have leached into my psyche long ago. The fondness I could never marshal for Papá drew its lifeblood from his affection for the trains that continually carried him away from family. I stepped down, dragging the pillow with me. It had been Papá who sparked Pamela's globe-trotting lifestyle. For her, the valet embodied the essence of his wandering spirit.

I ambled into the living room Thursday morning with a mug warmed by brewed coffee raised to my lips. Over its rim, I saw the framed gathering of Southern women. Eyelet lace and fitted bodices detailed their period costume.

Both hands were, fortunately, around the mug when Mortie's voice roared through the screen door. "Imogene Throckmorton to the rescue."

She let herself in as I moved that way, wiping a minor spill on old jeans.

Her hat took a lopsided seat on my head. She took in her surroundings. "Where's Pamela?"

"Cellar. I hate the cellar, so she went down to take inventory. There's not much. After that, we take on the attic."

Mortie lay the newspaper she retrieved from the roadside box on the desk. She ran her fingertips along the writing surface, obviously admiring the craftsmanship.

"Grams would sit me here to write thank-you notes to Pamela and Trent," I remembered aloud.

"How is your father, by the way?"

“Trent’s on an overseas project for the great Oliver Grayson and Grayson Electronics, so I’m sure he’s thriving.” I owned disdain for both my father and his.

Mortie poked her chin in the general direction of the painting and desk. “Your inheritance is bringing out the worst in you.”

I felt the punch of her criticism, but submitted to only the slightest softening in tone. “Perhaps I should explain that the gifts for which I wrote the notes rarely arrived on time. Most were out of my age group; others, just totally bizarre. I did prefer the gifts to the visits, though. Those were hard. I’d sit here for the longest time. Without fail, my eyes ran to that handkerchief. I always felt the sting of abandonment staring at it and writing those damn cards. When Pamela and Trent settled in The South, I only despised it more.” Blinking, I refocused. “It’s the angle of her wrist which makes me believe she purposely cast it aside. Caught in mid-air. Me and that handkerchief. Perpetually falling.”

“And now we’ve come full circle. Grams has abandoned you with me.”

I whirled on the bite of Pamela’s mockery, but the instant the words left her lips, the contempt was gone.

On an intake of breath, she smiled. “Hi, Mortie.”

I caught Mortie’s two-finger salute from the corner of my eye.

“Anything good in the cellar?” she asked.

“I couldn’t believe it. That old wringer washer is still down there.”

“I remember that. Maybe I’ll go have a look.” Mortie double-timed her departure. She didn’t look back when Pamela urged her to use care on the poorly lit stairs.

Throughout the exchange, Pamela’s focus remained on me, taking in Mortie’s hat. I hoped its bill did little to hide the defiant glare fixed on my face.

“Cheer up, sweetie,” she said, forming one of her best sarcastic smiles. “It’s only a few days. You know, I don’t think Mother would have gone this route if you’d made an effort earlier.”

“Me?” I said hotly.

“Well, you are the stubborn one. Remember, I’m self-important.”

“Tell me, what word would you use? You left me behind every chance you got. Always with Grams, thank God. Picture it: I get off the

school bus,” I said, flinging an arm out toward the road, “and Grams is waiting in the porch swing, prepared to tell me you and Trent are gone. I was six.”

My voice rose with the three short words in sharp contrast to Pamela’s matter-of-fact response.

“And Grams drove us to the bus station.”

That revelation whooshed past me, leaving me wavering in its after-draft. Before I recovered, repressed memories were fighting for the light. I saw a six-year-old me climbing into the swing next to her grandmother, the child’s thoughts aware and on target: Hmm, Grams is wearing the pretty blue outfit she always keeps back for trips into town. And her cheeks are extra pink today like mine get when I play too long in the sun.

Pamela’s voice brought me out of my reverie. “Yes, Grams suggested it. Insisted, in fact.”

Her hateful delivery spurred an immediate retaliation. “Why wouldn’t she? You never wanted me. And the great Oliver Grayson didn’t want his protégé saddled with a child. He had such plans for his son,” I spat.

“Your grandfather aside, you’re right. It was never a dream of mine to be a mother.”

“So with me in tow, you ran back here to Grams. Let me guess which bus she put you on: the one for Atlanta and Grayson Electronics, or straight to North Carolina because Duke’s classes were ready to start?” Pamela and I possess the same telling eyes. Hers deceived her instantly. “So, Oliver wouldn’t pay Trent’s tuition unless he returned without me.”

Pamela didn’t get a chance to respond. The cellar door closed more loudly than was necessary. I’d forgotten about Mortie. She eased into view, wisely avoiding any undo ripple of the air. The volatile atmosphere in the room had accelerated tenfold in her absence.

Seeing our eyes on her, she said, “Too bad the antique market’s down, or you’d haul in a pretty penny for that washer. I’m assuming neither of you wants it for a conversation piece or a one-of-a-kind flowerbox.” Polite smiles ringed the room. After a brief and particularly awkward silence, she said, “Well, I don’t want to keep you girls from making progress, so I’ll just sail off.”

Which she did as rapidly as possible, risking spontaneous

combustion, and taking the hat I handed her when she passed. Her bid for freedom was marred by Pamela, who joined her, suddenly salivating, I guessed, for a respite from me. “Poor Mortie,” I said, walking my cup of cold coffee to the kitchen sink.

I climbed the last few steps to the attic, only slightly aware of my reversion to age six.

“Will we do this every night?” I asked, barefoot, in pajamas, stepping up to the house’s top floor, my hand in Grams’.

“Not every night. Not with every newspaper,” she said, reaching for the one I held in my other hand. “I like to keep the special ones.”

“Because of the stories? I like stories.” I looked around, enthralled with the room.

“Sometimes. But this one: because of the date.”

Puzzled, I pulled my eyes back to hers.

She tapped a finger to my nose, saying, “Because today, you came to stay with me.”

“So this paper is special?”

“Only because you are, dear. Only because you are.”

Once the memory ran its course, I found myself standing toe to slat with the wooden crate full of newspapers bequeathed to Pamela. The crate’s first life was advertised on its side panels. It protected fruits and vegetables hawked by Benton and Son, Crown Street, Havens, Ohio. At a height just inches below my knee, its dimensions were perfect for folded-over newspapers.

The second piece to the bequeathed set sat a step away. The traveling trunk’s rigid construction was overlaid with dark, smooth leather and dinged metal supports at the corners. Neither its keyed lock nor rough cowhide strapping secured it. Its hinged lid stood open.

I looked toward the doorway, hearing Pamela on the stairs. The room’s only clear path led from the door to the trunk. Pamela used it.

Peering inside, she said, “It’s empty.”

Except for a few water stains, it was.

“If Grams put anything in, I always took it out. Until I got too big, I would climb in and read the newspapers.”

“Why?”

“To figure out why she kept them,” I said, as if this were a common childhood game everyone knew and played. “Usually there was a special story. I read them all and learned a lot about the town. I love the older issues. They kicked off my enchantment with Havens and her history.”

“Nearly a physical attachment if you ask me. With the money you get from Grams, you might try traveling some.”

“This is my home,” I replied, feeling my anger reheat. Bending, I dug through the stack until I came to the paper I wanted, pulled it free, and showed her the date: June 15, 1971.

“What’s the story there?” she asked, stepping into my trap.

“She didn’t always keep a paper for a story. Sometimes, just for the date.”

Her shoulders shrugged her innocent question.

“This was the date you left home. Two weeks after high school graduation. No physical attachment for you. You and Papá. It’s like there’s some kind of perverse family curse,” I said of her and her grandfather.

“Well, apparently you’ve been spared.”

Even though Grams screamed inside my head, “Accept people, Wrenn,” I pushed my point further. “No, I might be wrong about that. Family probably doesn’t apply.” With that, I let the paper fall from waist height. It hit the crate with a whispered slap, and I shouldered past her.

She turned to face me. “Mother brought us here for a purpose, Wrenn.” She kept her tone controlled, not condescending as I’d earned.

“Yes, why did Grams bring us here? I’ve been thinking about that. And the will. And the reversed bequests.”

“We’ll probably never understand it. If she’d wanted us to know, she had every opportunity to spell it out. Let’s just get to the business of this attic. What’s up here? Anything you want?”

“Yes, but I can’t have it.”

She released a frustrated breath, then amended her question. “Is there anything else you want?”

For all intents and purposes, we drew an imaginary line down the attic and proceeded, each keeping to her own side. Grams was great about labeling boxes—and dating them, too. On one panel or the other, the contents were usually marked. That didn’t stop the vast majority of

them from being opened and inspected anyway.

I found a civil tongue about the time we made special finds. Two stacked boxes were identified with the names of Grams' nieces, both lived an hour north. Index cards taped to the boxes read: For Betty—1979, and For Donna—1980. Inside each, folded into tissue paper, were tablecloths with Grams' hand-crocheted trimming and a penned note: "Something to say I treasure you." It struck me that the note was written in present tense.

Pamela looked over my shoulder when I opened a dusty gift box tagged: For Wrenn—1978. Inside lay a yellow baby dress printed with tiny flowers, the smallest bangle bracelet I'd ever seen, and a tarnished silver rattle. I gave the rattle a shake and noticed the corner of something showing beneath the dress. I lifted it and found a color picture of a fat-cheeked me wearing the dress and bracelet.

Pamela said, "That was taken when you were two and a half."

I turned four in 1978, the same year Grams set aside this themed giftset for her granddaughter.

Time passed, and Pamela and I recognized a pattern: Grams hoarded a lot of Christmas decorations for both tree and house. I knew more were stored in the garage, so we decided to move all season-specific finds out there to a collection spot. Cleared floor space would make moving around in the attic easier. Always eager to escape, Pamela stepped in the role as designated mover.

During her third or fourth absence, I uncovered a corrugated carton that didn't close properly. It was half again bigger than a toaster, its four flaps leaned inward onto a cushion of thin bath towel. I turned the container and found the anticipated label. It read, "For Pamela—1982."

I let nosiness get the best of me and lifted the old towel out. Inside sat the handmade valet a fifteen-year-old Papá—long before he'd been my great-grandfather—proudly displayed in last night's picture. The angle needed for shining shoes did not serve for trouble-free storage in the box Grams had available at the time. I recovered the valet in the same fashion, then turned the box's label toward me, and carried it down the attic stairs, riding on a slightly larger one prominently tagged Christmas lights.

At my open bedroom door, I heard Pamela's footfalls on the main stairs a few seconds before she appeared. She carried paper tags for the trunk and crate, boldly listing her name. I pulled my bundle into the

doorway, making room for her to pass and saying one more load remained. I watched her round the corner, then I spun toward my closet and closed the valet inside.

When I left the house, a swirling, almost angry wind waited to sweep me across the backyard and through the garage's side door, like I was a fussy baby being hustled out of church. I deposited my remaining box on the shorter of the two stacks Pamela created. My gaze strayed to the workbench and the gardening gloves lying there. Anyone watching would have sworn I'd come unhinged, answering an unheard voice.

"I don't know why I hid it there! I just did. I need time. More time. That's all. And because of her, we have three days instead of four months. She couldn't be bothered to come back after the funeral, just like she couldn't be bothered to raise me."

My tantrum drew me to the bench and the gloves. The fabric still held the bend of Grams' fingers. I half expected her to come in behind me. When she didn't, I picked them up, remembering the rough feel and the seamed fingertips as she slid her gloved hand over my little one the first time she walked me out to her flowerbeds.

Several emotions swarmed around me, anger and confusion being two of the strongest. Abandoned. My heart breaking. But Grams was there. In my mind's eye, she knelt in a flowerbed next to a skinny, freckled-faced little girl. Her soothing voice spoke of the nourishing sun, the dark rich soil, the sweet fragrances, and the need for bees to make it all work. Her gloved hand reached out to a spot in front of my scraped-up knee. Grams gave me a job. I pulled the weeds.

Tears filled my eyes as I looked up to my bedroom window, then down to the patch of daisies we planted together when I was seven. They were growing without her. Didn't they know she was gone?

I dropped to my knees before the first bloom of white petals encircling a sunburst. Chin to my chest, a roaring in my ears, a steady stream of tears rolling off my cheeks, I cleared away fall's leafy decay and a bit of chickweed at the bed's edge. It would become an infestation if not taken in hand now. With a discard pile growing beside me, I saw a pair of Gucci shoes step into my peripheral vision.

Pamela spoke softly. "You are so like her. Don't you see, you were the gift that made up for everything."

Experience told her not to attempt a consoling gesture. Instead, her shoes simply backed away.



For a long time, I wept.

When I returned to the house, I stopped at the dining room table. Pamela scratched an addition to my list. I stared down at the words: Garden gloves and daisies. With an imaginary tap, tap, tap, they eased a wedge between the twosome of Pamela and Papá, who I perceived as kindred spirits. An insight Grams possessed, which I do not, fills Pamela as well.

I sucked in a deep breath, and only then sensed the stillness inhabiting the farmhouse. It made me wonder if Pamela had given up on the situation. Clutching the gloves, I crossed to the coffee table. Papá's photograph lay next to my copy of the will. Pamela wouldn't have left without it. Movement on the other side of the front window confirmed this. She strolled toward the road and the mailbox. She must have gone out the front door when I came in the back.

Enclosed in my room, I sat at a raised window until I smelled night coming to Havens, then I closed out the chill and the crickets. Their incessant chirring only seemed to mock my inner turmoil, anyway. Pamela knocked at the door once. She had Trent on the phone. An obstinate spirit would not let me open the door to speak with him. I stood behind it, though, when she told him, "She's missing Grams. Maybe tomorrow."

Hours later, my eyes sprung awake. They were the only thing that moved as they searched the darkened room, then the nightstand for the clock. Two-oh-nine. I heard the noise again, sat up, and worked my cotton gown and myself out from under the sheet. I padded into the hall to see Pamela's door ajar and an anemic glow of moonlight falling on rumpled bed linens. A puddle of incandescent light lay at the foot of the attic steps.

I knew the creaky stairs would announce my approach. Stepping from the landing into the attic gave my first comical view of Pamela, silk-clad knees nearly up to her chin, stuffed into the trunk, the newspaper crate pulled alongside.

"What are you doing?" I asked, stifling a laugh.

"Getting acquainted with my hometown. I understand this is the way to do it," she said.

I moved closer and saw she read about the annual community beautification contest. Grams' and my landscaping of the house the year I turned fourteen won us a ribbon, news coverage, and, therefore, crate

rights. A spray of other papers lay on the floor, apparently already read by the lady in the trunk. I noted the dates under the masthead, all when I was young.

“What do you think?” I asked, studying the color-photo insets depicting long-ago flowerbeds.

“I’m going to make it home more often, Wrenn.”

My eyes shot to hers. I read absolute sincerity there. She’d reached out yet again. My thoughts and emotions spun at such a dizzying pace, I was unable to process them.

“Hey, why don’t you go back to bed. I’ll be down soon,” she said, breaking the lengthening lapse in conversation.

I looked away. She misinterpreted my silence. And, strangely enough, I didn’t know how I felt about being dismissed. “Can you get out without help?” I offered after a beat, with hopes for a reason to stay.

Her response, “I’ll be fine,” trounced them.

At the attic’s threshold, her voice, somewhat pensive, stopped me.

“Why don’t we go out for breakfast in the morning? We’d be back in time to finish up before Attlee arrives.”

“Sure. Sounds good,” I said.

I awoke to morning’s light streaming into the room. Out in the hall, Pamela’s door was closed. I didn’t hear her moving around. We’d both been on our way to oversleeping.

At the bottom of the stairs, I followed a jagged path through the living room between couch and chair, shagging the will from the coffee table and a crocheted afghan out of a corner rocker as I went. I carried them out to the porch swing. I settled myself inside a cocoon of zigzagged colors and pushed my wooden seat into motion, suddenly glad to have spent one last night in this soon-to-be-auctioned house. In truth, knowledge of this fate did create a small tug at my heartstrings. I looked down at the will I held in my lap and thought Grams used her turned-around bequests to keep me distracted from this reality.

The gently swinging glider stirred the sweet morning air. I flipped absently through the typed pages, only truly seeing the handwritten section at the end. Inked entries filled lines for month and day with Grams’ signature scrawled on another. Mortie and Attlee, both witnesses, validated the document. All at once, the date blinked wildly in my brain,

like a pulsing neon sign. My feet brought the swing to a stop.

“April, 1985,” I said, barely above a whisper. “My birthday’s in April.” Counting back, it would have been my eleventh. My God, it all made sense.

I lifted my eyes to my bedroom’s second-story window. I could almost see the door closeting the hidden box. The 1982 date marking the year Grams stored her father’s shoe valet had been three years before she drew up her will. What happened three years later, when I turned eleven—the very day, in fact—marked a division in time for me, and for her as well. Before signing her will, she openly promised her possessions rightfully to the one who’d appreciate them: Betty, Donna, Pamela, and me. Everything stored after she made out her will bore nothing but a generic inventory label: date and contents. For instance, the attic held boxes marked: silver tea service—1988, and leaded-glass cake safe—1990. These were valuable family heirlooms. Surely she had someone in mind to take possession.

I didn’t doubt I was the cause of Grams’ change of heart or, at least, her change in tactics. She asked so little of me. Grams’ voice sounded off in my head, “Accept your mother, Wrenn. Let her be who she is.”

But I hadn’t accepted Pamela for who she was. Had this—had I—been the cause of the backward bequests? Now, I could easily recognize her letter of instruction with its four-month timeframe as her last hope for reconciliation. After her will was in place, there was no reason to designate on the box who was to receive what. Through the same instrument, she assigned that job to Pamela and me.

I heard a rattle of machinery. Mortie’s four-door boat drifted into the drive. She dropped anchor and climbed out.

Pushing up the porch steps, she took me in. “Well, I see you’re in one piece, and the house is still standing. Pamela alive in there?”

“Did Grams ask you to come by every day, or something?” I said, surprised to see her again. “It’s sweet—don’t get me wrong—but...”

“No, she didn’t. But I know she would have if she’d given it a minute’s thought. Just makes sense to check on you two, to see if my services as military nurse extraordinaire are required.”

Smiling at her weird sense of duty, I made room for her to sit. “I figured out the will, Mortie. I know why Grams wrote it the way she did. She signed it one week after my eleventh birthday.”

“And your birthday is significant because...?”

I didn't go into the labeling clue. What I told her was more important. “That's the day I stopped calling my parents Mom and Dad.”

“Yeah, I remember thinking that was just a bunch of preteen bilge seeping through. It got a rise out of your Grams, though.”

“They'd come for my birthday. That was one of the rare occasions when they were actually here the day of. Pamela and I were in my room. She wanted me to come to Atlanta for the summer. I didn't want to. I went when I was nine. I became inconsolable after I got there, so Pamela met Grams somewhere in Tennessee to hand off the damaged goods. Pamela seemed angry that day in my room, disappointed that I wouldn't give summer in Georgia another chance. Trying to build my courage, or out of spite for Havens—I didn't know which—she admitted that she named me Wrenn so that someday, I would fly away from here. From ‘this place’ was how she put it.”

Mortie's eyebrows drew down with incomprehension.

“Don't you get it? I was born in Seattle. Trent was still in his defiant stage, jumping around the country, following his dream to become a successful musician, symbolically flipping off Oliver.”

“There's a lot of your father in you.”

I gave her a look and kept going. “I knew at that moment that she never intended to raise me. If what she said were true, she named me Wrenn, knowing at birth she was going to dump me off here. How else could I fly away from Havens? She'd been willing to give me up before she even knew me. I hated her for that. We've been the warring Grayson women ever since. That war prompted Grams to make out her will the way she did.”

The eyes Mortie hung on me were like a sailor's spyglass into my soul: focused, searching, and making me wonder if there hadn't been just a little spying for the other side. “What did you and Pamela talk about yesterday when she followed you outside?”

She cleared her throat. “She wants a better relationship. She asked me how to handle you.”

So, it had been Mortie's counsel that brought about the midnight trunk escapade and finagling a mother-daughter breakfast out of me. “And you said?” My tone was an accusing one.

“I said, you wouldn't like being handled.” She saw the wind fall out

of my sails and turned in the seat, knees angled toward mine. “I promised myself I’d stay clear of the fray, but I don’t mind sharing some sage advice an old artillery buddy gave me once, just before he drank me under the table.” Punching me lightly in the arm for effect, she deepened her voice. “He said, Christ, Mortie, first the powder, then the shot.”

Thinking Mortie’s inebriated memory had screwed up the quote, I asked, “Are you sure? What does that means?”

“It means, take care with how you accomplish things. Otherwise, life will blow up in your face.”

Long after Mortie was gone, I sat in contemplation, the swing on a slow glide, until I thought I’d absorbed the state of things. In Grams’ view, I had certainly not been damaged goods, but Pamela’s gift, and as such, a cherished and constant tether to her daughter there in the background, even if it was oceans away. Grams’ foresight reduced her last thoughts and desires for me to paper. It had been a sluggish, ambling journey, but they wound their way into my heart. They would still need to fight for comfort there. And somewhat harder for acceptance.

I went inside and closed the door. The nearby painting tugged at me. From their stretched-canvas world of fine brushstrokes, these Southern belles watched and whispered about the women of this house for years: insightful Grams, ambitious Pamela, and me—frozen in time like that perpetually falling handkerchief.

“What a bunch of bilge, Grayson,” I chided in Mortie’s high style.

The closet’s glass knob remained in my hand as I looked down at Papá’s boxed valet, sitting center stage on hardwood flooring. I debated simply returning it to the attic, then feigning surprise when I stumbled upon it later in Pamela’s presence. Thanks to Mortie’s powder and shot analogy, that idea evaporated in a puff of black smoke. Pamela had plenty of time yesterday afternoon and last night to explore the attic fully without me. She would know what had been there and what had not.

I squatted to rescue the box from its shadowy prison, then carried it to my bed where the wooden valet was retrieved from beneath its terry coverlet, and the carton set aside. On a thread of courage, I pinned the valet under my arm and crossed the hall. My fist was poised to knock when that same thread yanked me back. I tramped across my bedroom’s threshold, not on the wings of procrastination as I would have predicted at the outset, but with an inexplicable awareness that I should repack the box. Part of the treasure for Pamela would be in learning that her mother tagged it for her and when.

I performed the simple task. The more challenging hurdle came next. I took a fortifying breath and cradled the box against my heart, which suddenly ached for Grams. I felt my chin quaver, a preface to the onslaught of tears, and steered myself to Pamela's closed door.

Appropriately, the paneled wood symbolized the emotional barrier between us, and the box, old prejudices I held. I stood in the gray hall light, confident either of two words would open the door. I shifted the awkward carton in my grasp before stepping away to drag a finger across wet lashes. As I dried the damp on my gown, I sensed a loving nudge turn my bare feet toward the door again. I stepped up, rapped twice, and heard a sleepy reply.

I will always remember the taste of this foreign word comingled with salty tears on my tongue. "Mother," I choked out, "may I come in?"

From behind me, something I can only describe as a warm embrace reached around to balance the box while I took one hand to swing the door wide. Mother's smile lit the room. I padded to her bedside, leaving the vaguely noticed scent of shoe polish and freight cars lingering in the hall.



If you enjoyed this short story, you'll also enjoy the author's other works of literary fiction: *Every Cloud*, *Wild Raspberries*, *Proper Goodbye*, and *Summers Only*. They are available on Amazon in paperback and eBook editions. Thank you for reading.