



Beneath Crimson Clover

*A
Wrenn Grayson
Mystery*

Connie Chappell

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Historian Wrenn Grayson's decision to sell her grandmother's farmhouse brings unimagined consequences. It leads to the meeting of Foster Spears and Nate Edwards, uncanny lookalikes. Nate hires Wrenn to investigate. His question is: Are Foster and he family? Her first clue leads to derelict Langford Hospital, sitting on the edge of town, forgotten. The private women's hospital opened in 1940, but when it closed thirty years later, one enormously dark secret remained locked within the walls.

Selling the farmhouse also brings Wrenn's parents to town. Their relationship has been hard in the past, but this time, Pamela and Trent Grayson arrive with a plan to uproot Wrenn's life. She's stunned to learn the idea was drafted by her beloved grandmother years before her death and purposely kept from her.

In *Beneath Crimson Clover*, Wrenn must search her heart for one answer, but she believes the other answer waits inside Langford Hospital. Will the hospital give up its ghosts? Or will the mystery of Langford remain forever unsolved?

Shadows and Light

Tapping my finger on the steering wheel, I checked the dashboard clock. I had an appointment to meet Foster Spears at my grandmother's farmhouse. Foster probably wouldn't care one way or the other if I was a few minutes late, but I nurture a habit of punctuality.

I was stuck behind a mammoth-sized garbage truck and waiting for the driver to get the thing moving up Ascot Road. The hilly country road made it dangerous to pass vehicles. I also nurture a habit of not getting mowed down by the occasional farm tractor coming the other way.

These few moments to myself gave me time to reflect on two life-changing events I put into motion recently. They involved the farmhouse and my parents, who are North Carolina residents. I reside in Ohio.

The momentum behind both events was not stalled, like the garbage truck. In fact, there was no turning back. That was, unless I ventured into the oncoming lane and encountered the occasional tractor. I closed my eyes, wincing at that scene.

I was not that desperate. Still, my stomach told the tale of nerves.

Foster Spears worked as a property manager. He stepped into the position of tending to the needs of the farmhouse five years ago after I lost my beloved grandmother to age and an ailing heart. She was my mother's mother. Under the terms of her will, my mother and I inherited the property. I could still hear the attorney's voice the day he read the terms of her will: "To my daughter, Pamela Grayson, and my granddaughter, Wrenn Grayson, I bequeath..."

My heart ached with a moment of grief that still overwhelmed me all these years later. I looked up when I heard the truck's transmission grind into gear. Finally, I thought. The truck seemed

to shudder, then quickly got up a full head of steam. I pressed the gas pedal, but kept a measured distance behind the bouncing and swaying truck.

The skinny young man riding on the flat perch attached to the truck's side panel seemed quite comfortable there. Perhaps too comfortable. I watched him take one hand off the long rod he used as a handle, lean back to reach around behind him, groping for something. Instinctively, my foot lifted off the gas pedal. Riding the waves of Ascot Road required two hands, in my opinion. What if he slipped off?

There must be a hidey-hole designed into the truck's construction because he came back with a tubular-shaped something gripped in his hand. It was much smaller than a water bottle, which was what I expected him to retrieve.

With agility, he looped his arm around the handhold up to his elbow. Using both hands, he fiddled with the object. I watched him flip up a cap and reach finger and thumb inside. He came back with another something. I couldn't make out what it was, but he held it up over his head.

I felt my expression change to a grimace as indescribable things floated out from it. They were barely visible against the gaping dark opening at the rear of the truck. The truck pushed forward. Quickly, the things lifted into the sunlight of this June day and transformed into objects of delicate beauty. My mouth opened in wonder as I watched iridescent bubbles rise to the heavens, allowing me to drive under them.

I looked back at the man and smiled. Bravely, I took my hand off the steering wheel and saluted him. He would never know how he improved my disposition. The truck rounded the next corner.

I continued smiling on my way up Ascot. My head filled with happy memories of simple childhood days spent with Grams, a bottle of bubbles, and a wand. Life was full of the unexpected.

The screen of trees that marked the southern portion of the farmhouse property came into view. I slowed and turned into the lane hidden behind the sugar maples. I followed it a hundred yards or so to the farmhouse. Foster's white van was parked there, its rear doors open, an inventory of miscellaneous maintenance equipment exposed. I parked my midnight-blue PT Cruiser beside the van. I

got out and walked around Midnight, studying the house.

The place looked great, ready to sell. Which was one of the life-changing decisions I distressed over. The house is constructed with a combination of clapboard siding and wood shingles. Its two stories are topped with an attic and dormer windows. The roof is new.

I stepped up to a wide covered porch, found the front door unlocked, and stepped over the threshold. Foster must have heard the door close because he poked his head around the kitchen doorway.

“It’s just me,” I said, crossing the living room. This room, as well as the rest of the house, was absent any furnishings. My mind automatically placed Grams’ tweed couch and chairs, tables and lamps, and her writing desk exactly where they sat when I was a child. The staircase to three upstairs bedrooms and a bath was off to the right.

“I’m nearly done in here. Just cleaning up. Come see.” With the wrench he held, he waved me into the large eat-in kitchen.

Foster Spears owned two outstanding characteristics that never failed to capture my attention every time we met: an engaging smile and a pair of brilliant blue eyes. He also owned a prematurely receding hairline. His hair was black with a thinning patch up front. I considered him quite responsible, given he was only twenty-five, six years younger than me.

He took the new faucet he installed at the sink through its paces, swinging the arched arm back and forth, then turning the water on and off. “Looks great,” I said. “Good job.”

“I really appreciate that you’re willing to help me out this way.” His tone changed with the subtle shift in subject matter.

“I’m happy to do it. I’m not sure how much weight I will carry with— What’s the guy’s name?”

“Nate Edwards,” Foster said, jogging my memory. “Nate said he’d be passing near Havens today and wanted to meet me and see one of the properties I maintain.” Havens is a mid-sized town in southwestern Ohio.

“I think it’s a good plan: bringing him here and asking me to be an in-person reference. I hope you get the job,” I said, wandering over to the back door. My gaze rolled out across the rear yard, past

the unattached garage to the cornfield on the other side of a fence. It was part and parcel of the farming conglomerate interested in purchasing Grams' house.

"I hope I get it, too," he said, and treated me to another look at the blue eyes that worked like homing devices.

As I understood it, the job Foster vied for was more of the same, but on a grander scale. Rather than putting his talents into houses scattered around town, he would learn, as an underling, the organizational needs of building an entire housing development. The position allowed for growth. I predicted he wouldn't be an underling for long. I was present to tout my knowledge of Foster's considerable abilities to the man who came to inspect and judge those abilities for himself. Grams' house was the testing grounds.

Foster and I worked together to clean up the kitchen. I closed the cabinet doors under the sink, then grabbed the old faucet and the empty box the new one came in. He collected the tools lying on the floor and returned them to his canvas tool-carrier. We hauled everything out to his van.

Slapping the back pocket of his jeans, he said, "I think I left my wire cutters upstairs. I replaced the hallway light."

"So, it was the light and not the switch." Foster kept my mother and me, co-owners of the farmhouse, informed of maintenance needs by email.

"Yeah. I'll just run upstairs. I don't want to be seen as a worker who leaves his tools behind on a job site. You be lookout." He grinned, then hurried off.

I glanced out to the road, but traffic was nil. In reality, Foster, my mother, and I couldn't have asked for better timing. With the loss of our tenant and the probable loss of Foster to new employment out of town, why not sell the property when an interested buyer came asking?

At the time of Grams' death, I couldn't bear the thought of parting with the house. My mother went along. Foster was hired to handle the tenants and maintenance. There'd been two tenants over the last five years.

When the real estate deal was proffered two weeks ago, my mother bowed to me for the final decision. Was I ready and capable of severing my emotional attachment to my childhood home?

My reverie was broken when I caught sight of a car turning into the lane. It made slow progress, coming to a stop behind Midnight.

I angled between the two bumpers. He opened the driver's door and stepped out to the stone and dirt drive. His face instantly captured my attention. The radiant smile and pure-blue eyes were the culprits there. This man was deep in his sixties, so the familial receding hairline made greater progress. The black was there, but it was mixed with pewter gray. I thought familial because I'd never met two people with such a startling resemblance. Had Foster invited a relative here? Had he come of his own accord for some reason, knowing where Foster would be working this morning?

"Hi. I'm Wrenn Grayson. Foster's in the house," I said genially, putting out a hand, which he took.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Nate Edwards."

My head jerked back. "You're Nate Edwards? But...?" I turned my utter confusion toward the house, where the screen door slapped against the frame.

Foster trundled down the porch steps, slipping the wire cutters in a rear pocket. His smile stayed in place until he was ten feet away. That was where realization dawned hard, knocking him off-stride. The shock he felt showed on his face. His mouth opened, but he appeared incapable of speech. I was speechless myself. The men stared at each other. My eyes darted from one to the other. I noted other similar features. Both men were of medium height and build. There was no denying they were the same person at different stages in life.

The older man found his voice first. "Hello, Foster. I'm Nate Edwards. And I'm fairly certain we're related."

For a moment, the world paused.

The smile that started to form on Nate Edward's lips died in haste. We both witnessed the mirage of Foster Spears shrinking away from the other man, but Foster's feet never moved. Speaking slowly, Foster said, "What do you mean? How are we related?"

"My guess is, I'm your grandfather," Nate said on a cushioning tone. I sucked in a breath when he slipped his fingers into the back pocket of his chinos. How many times had I seen Foster take the same stance?

"Excuse me, but I have two grandfathers, or had. I don't

understand,” Foster’s voice trailed off, shifting from incredulous to something more than miffed. “Wait a minute. You came here to meet me, not because of the job interview, but to play yourself up as family. What kind of a game is this?” Foster backed away and went to sit on the van’s rear bed. Its doors were still flung wide. He was putting up a fierce front, but I suspected weak knees.

I held my place in the background, but Nate sidled over. “Trust me, Foster, I know what you’re going through. I really am the personnel consultant for Columbus Housing Developments. Part of my job is to investigate the applicants. In today’s world, that means social media searches. In the case of people with established businesses, it means looking at websites. That’s what I did. It gave me access to pictures you posted. I was just as shocked as you to be staring back at my face when I was your age. And your son’s.”

“There’s no need to bring my son into this because it’s all just a coincidence. We’re not related. We can’t be.” Despite his words, he used a wondering tone. Nate was correct. I’d met little Ike. He was not yet two, and he was the image of his father.

“I’m sorry, Foster, but we are related. Let’s just see if the part of my life I spent in Havens before I left for the army matches one or the other of your parents’ lives. One of them is my child, my flesh and blood. I was eighteen in 1969, and I had sexual relations with a young woman. As I said, I had an army hitch coming. We didn’t have any deep feelings for each other. I’d be gone for four years,” he said, shrugging, “so we parted company. No strings. Only I had no idea she was pregnant. So, let’s see, was one of your parents born in 1970, around this time of the year? That would make him or her fifty.”

Foster’s eyes lifted to Nate’s. After a moment, he said, “My mother. June 19. Her birthday’s in two weeks.”

In the silence that swarmed, I thought Foster might have met acceptance at least halfway. For Nate, his next words told a story of immeasurable loss. “I had no idea. No one told me.”

Foster rose to his feet. “No. You’re wrong, Mr. Edwards. You’re wrong about everything.” He thrust his chest out, as if deflecting the other man’s lies. Turning, he closed the van doors. “I hate to do this, Wrenn, but would you lock the house up for me, please? I’ll see you and your mother here tomorrow. I’m sorry about this.”

Foster's apology was directed toward me. Nate received his suspicious glare.

"Sure. No problem," I said.

"But Foster?" Nate pleaded.

Foster raised his hand and swatted Nate away like he was a pestering deerfly. He turned the van around and drove off.

That left Nate Edwards and me staring at each other, feeling as awkward as eighth-graders at a school dance.

"I guess I should apologize, too. I didn't know you'd be here. You're the owner?" he inquired with a tip of his head toward the house.

"Foster asked me to come out and be a reference." I opened Midnight's passenger door, leaned in, and removed a key ring from the console.

"Since I'm here, do you mind if I look around? Foster is still in the running for the job."

"Sure. Fine with me." I closed the door. My guess was, our walk to the house was an introspective one for us both. I also produced a little skepticism. "So, nepotism is smiled upon at this place you represent?"

"I'm an outside consultant. My job is to narrow the field. Someone else interviews and makes hiring decisions."

I paused at the base of the porch steps. "That being said, you really don't go to job sites for all your applicants?"

His smile lit. "I don't. No. What can I say? I wanted to meet him face to face. Why wouldn't I?" I watched his expression sour. "I know every bit of what he's going through...from personal experience. You saw the resemblance. Your face gave it away. There was no easy way to do this. I'm not surprised he's angry, but I get to be a little angry, too. Father, grandfather, now great-grandfather. Somebody took a lot away from me."

He spoke of anger without showing it. If Foster and Nate were related, and I suspected they were, the difficulty of the situation turned lives inside out. I found the gentleness of his demeanor reassuring. It introduced me to the father he would have been.

I held the screen door open, and he walked in. I got a whiff of his cologne. It smelled pricey. "So, this is your house, but you rent it out," he said.

“I was raised here. It was my grandmother’s house. She passed away.”

“Sorry to hear that. You inherited?”

I watched his keen eye touch on all the areas where Foster’s craftsmanship shined. “My mother and I did. My parents live in North Carolina. They’re coming for a visit. Because of the house.”

“The house? How so?” he said, stepping momentarily into the TV room and bathroom off the living room.

“Since the last tenant moved out, we’re seriously considering selling it. One of the neighboring farmers wants to buy it.”

“Good luck. It’s in perfect shape.”

“Thanks to Foster.”

“I agree. He did a good job with the place.”

I led him through a doorway. “Back here are the kitchen, pantry, back porch, and the door to the cellar.” I went over to the back door to wiggle the knob. It was locked.

His scrutinizing continued, lower lip protruding. Significant upgrades were made in the kitchen and two bathrooms, plus general spackling and painting throughout. When he noticed me watching, he said, “Yes, I’m making mental notes. I hope the farmer doesn’t want to tear it down and farm the land.”

“No, he wants it for his foreman to live in.”

“Sounds like a big farm.”

“It is.” I chuckled. “I couldn’t tell you how many acres. Want to see the upstairs?”

“If I’m not keeping you from something more important.”

“I’m good. I don’t have to be at work until after lunch.” We retraced our steps to the front staircase. On the second-floor landing, I stepped aside. “There are three bedrooms up here.”

He moved past me into the hall. “What do you do?” he asked, keeping the conversation going.

“The economy sort of set me back a couple of years ago. My job at City Hall went to part-time. I’m hoping to get back to full-time soon.”

“The economy’s been tricky. Selling the house will help with finances, I expect.” He crossed the hall from Grams’ bedroom into my old room.

Up here, I noticed the echoing effect of our voices, caused by

the empty house. “I’m doing okay. I also write a historical column for the newspaper. That comes with research into the town’s history. I do love the research. Finished?” I said, when he stepped out of the guest bedroom.

“Yes. More of the same. Excellent workmanship.”

We descended the stairs in silence. At the front door, I picked through the keys for the right one.

“Wrenn, I’m wondering. I want to give Foster time for this to sink in.” Nate’s hands were in motion. The distance between them spoke to the immensity of the situation; the sincerity in his tone spoke of the importance. “I hope he’ll see me again. And I’ll meet his mother. But if he or they don’t come around, would you do some research for me? Discreetly?”

I felt my shoulders rise on an intake of air. “Oh, I don’t know,” I said, reluctant.

“I understand that you’re friends with Foster, but I want some answers. I deserve answers, don’t you think?”

“I wouldn’t know where to start with something like this.”

“We don’t need to talk about it now. Just think about it. You’ll see him tomorrow. Here, take my card.” He pulled a business card out of his shirt pocket. “Let me know how he’s doing. That’s all I want to know right now.”

I took the card. Reading it gave me time to consider. The card provided his full name, Nathan Edwards, a telephone number, and an email address. Because I believed him to be a grandfather truly interested in his grandson’s wellbeing, I said, “Okay. I’ll do that much.”

I closed and locked the front door. He waited at the bottom of the steps. “He probably went straight to his mother. Do you know her?” His question was dusted with hopefulness for insight.

I shook my head. “I only know Foster.” I chose not to volunteer the fact that I ran into Foster playing with his son, Ike, at the park a month ago.

We strolled to the cars. “I wouldn’t want my relationship with him tainted by today’s circumstances. I hope we can grow something better,” he said. “But you know what they say: A drawing isn’t lifelike without shadows. He and I are starting out in the shadows. I pray the light comes soon.” A thoughtful beat later,

he extended his hand. “Well, nice to meet you.”

I took it. “Same here.” I was liking Nate Edwards more and more. The depth of his sensitivity and intellect spoke well of him.

I watched him put his car in reverse and back around. Thirty seconds later, he disappeared behind one of the hills on Ascot Road.

My thoughts about Foster Spears and Nate Edwards didn’t vanish so quickly. Lodged between these two men was Foster’s mother, the daughter Nate didn’t know.

I knew something of tainted circumstances, shadows and light, and the danger of how ill feelings might become fossilized if left to lay too long. A fossil doesn’t form overnight. For twenty-five years, I blocked my parents’ involvement in my life. For fifteen years, I lived in my grandmother’s house. She raised me, not my parents. From the time I was six until she died, Grams asked me repeatedly to set my feelings aside and begin again. My parents made the same request. I declined. Why? Because they abandoned me, bowing to the edict of Oliver Grayson, my father’s father. In my view, Oliver was purely looking out for himself and his business interests when he ordered my father back to Duke University to complete his degree. I expected more to be said on the subject after my parents arrived.

A breeze blew. Behind me, I heard the porch swing squeak with movement. I turned to face the house.

Two weeks ago, when Foster sent an email to my mother and me about the farmer’s purchase offer, I came out to the farmhouse. I knew the tenants had moved, and I wanted to walk through the place alone. I was still ambivalent about selling at the time. There was no avoiding the cascade of memories that went with me from room to room. When I reached the bottom of the stairs, my hand on the newel post, I swear I heard my grandmother’s voice. “There’s a point in maturity when it’s no longer so necessary to be right, Wrenn. Draw a line under it and move on.”

I stood there a moment, then my knees bent of their own accord and my hand slipped free. I sat down on a stair step and put the last pearl of wisdom I would ever hear in this house into effect.

Why was it other people seemed to possess the qualities of forgiveness and insight? I must have it pounded into me. By the

time I locked the front door, my decision was made. I decided to sell, knowing full well that would provide my parents a viable excuse for coming to town.

My mother, co-owner and successful businesswoman, volunteered to broker the property to the conglomerate farmer. Good, I thought, and bowed to her plan.

Today, as I climbed the porch steps to sit in the swing one more time, I did not regret my decision, but did find it rather bizarre that this farmhouse was, again, the stage for a drama about a fractured family: one side begging for healing, the other side firmly resisting.

Thoughts of Foster caused me to pull my cellphone from my pants pocket. I tapped in a text: *Nate complimentary of upgrades. House locked. See you tomorrow.*

I pondered what else I might write: Enjoy your evening. Let me know if there's anything I can do. Hope you're feeling better. Sorry for how it turned out. Call if you want to talk.

Foster and I were friends, but this situation with Nate felt too new. I thought it was best to stay neutral at this point. I went back, deleted the reference to Nate, and sent the text.

I would see him tomorrow. And my mother. The fluttering I felt in my stomach as I walked to the car was caused more by thinking about the latter than the former.



Beneath Crimson Clover, A Wrenn Grayson Mystery, is available for purchase in paperback and eBook through Amazon.