

Designs on Ivy's Locket

*A
Wrenn Grayson
Mystery*



Connie Chappell

*"Chappell spins a fast-paced ride that will have readers
hot on the heels of Grayson's leads."*

—Best Thrillers

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A Wrenn Grayson Mystery

Historian-for-hire Wrenn Grayson takes on a difficult client in Kerry St. John. Kerry seeks justice for his great-grandfather's lifelong heartache. Wrenn meets the renowned jeweler through words recorded in his tattered journal. The year is 1946. He writes from the tiny crossroads of Wyatt, Ohio, about the theft of a treasured locket and the identity of three possible suspects.

The cold case heats up when Lori Hammond arrives. The stolen locket was discovered among her mother's possessions after her death. Lori refuses to return it to the St. John family, so Wrenn sets out to follow the locket's path through history. Next, Lori is attacked and Kerry accused. If Kerry's not guilty, then who is? That question sends cold whispers from the past down Wrenn's spine.

In Designs on Ivy's Locket, Connie Chappell focuses on the theme of parents and children, separated by death, by theft, and by design.

Today, I loaded the Packard to head home. Just before I steered it around the bend, I glanced over. The side mirror gave me a last look at the tiny crossroads of Wyatt, Ohio. My few days there were enough. Wyatt is an angry town, fighting an unknown foe, its people being eaten alive from within. The tragedy of Wyatt has fallen upon the young. I could see it in the eyes of the seven-year old as he cradled his brother's sleeping form. The same thought I had then haunts me now: He held death in his arms.

—Dexter St. John's journal, April 28, 1946

Cold Whispers

First, tires screeched and my shoulders reflexively hunched up around my ears. Then, there was a long angry blast of a horn and I turned to face Gatling Street.

Neither the collision, nor the mangled sight I anticipated, materialized. Instead, it appeared a rail-thin man miraculously stopped a compact car through the use of his own strength and the laying on of hands. His. They rested on the hood of what had been an oncoming car, lawfully occupying the driving lane.

Car and man were stationed in front of the newspaper building on the other side of the street. Near the double doors that led inside the hallowed halls of the *Havens Messenger*, a woman stood open-mouthed. I knew exactly how she felt.

As I moved a few steps closer on the sidewalk, the driver rolled down his window and stuck out his head. “You’re a freaking nutcase,” he hollered. “This isn’t a crosswalk. You stepped right out into traffic.”

“I thought you’d cut me a break. The light was already red.” Said freaking nutcase pointed toward a string of traffic lights suspended across the nearby intersection. “I caught your eye. I put up a hand. What was the point of barreling full speed when you should have been slowing down anyway?”

While they picked at what constituted as substandard behavior patterns for drivers and jaywalkers—which I followed openly—I moseyed up the street toward the entrance to City Hall, my destination on this Monday morning.

“Get out of my way,” the driver shouted.

“Gladly,” the man returned, the word crusted with hatefulness.

Over my shoulder, I watched the man’s eyes cruise my side of the street as he jaywalked the rest of the way across Gatling. Happenstance left it traffic free.

I turned my attention toward the duties that awaited inside. I work for K.C. Tallmadge, mayor of Havens, Ohio. An emergency situation, family-related, arose this morning. It would take him out of town for several days. He called me at home with the news as soon as he learned. I shifted into high gear to meet him here so we could discuss rearranging his schedule before he left for Toledo.

Given the recent incident I witnessed, I was mentally patting myself on the back for obeying all traffic laws when a man’s voice called my name. “Hey, wait! Wrenn Grayson. Wait!”

Turning, I was surprised and less than enthusiastic to see the jaywalker rush my way. Now that he was safely docked on the sidewalk, I saw he was my age. Late twenties. His dark hair was flecked with early gray. I wanted to believe that meant wisdom lurked beneath the surface, but then I just witnessed his method of crossing a busy street and reserved judgment on that. He was definitely the kind insecure men would call a pretty boy. Being female, I fell into neither of those categories.

“You’re Wrenn, aren’t you? The woman at the newspaper pointed you out.”

My gaze glided across the street. The woman loitering in the shadows around the newspaper’s door pulled it open and disappeared inside. I realized now she was the receptionist. The connection between this man, the newspaper, and me remained clouded. To clear that up, I thought I would start with a basic inquiry. “And you are?”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry. I’m Kerry St. John.” His hand shot out and we shook. “I hear you’re a historian. I have a job for you.”

My chin rose with understanding. My position as Mayor

Tallmadge's personal assistant wasn't full-time. The country's economic doldrums took its toll on me, but I held it together with three part-time jobs. The most profitable was the steady paycheck from the mayor. After that were the one or two historical articles I wrote each month for the *Messenger*. What brought up the rear was the few dollars I pulled in as a historian-for-hire. "I'm sorry, but I really need to get inside. My boss is waiting." I pictured K.C. drumming his fingers on his appointment calendar, waiting for me to drop into the seat in front of his desk. "As simply as possible, what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to find Wyatt, Ohio. Can you do it?"

I gave him credit. That was a simplistic request and my answer matched. "I'm certainly willing."

"Great!"

"There is the matter of my fee."

"What do you charge?"

"I have a one-day fee. That's probably the smart way to go."

He narrowed a suspicious eye at me. "If you're working today, will you have time for my job?"

"Trust me. I'll have time once I get my boss packed and on the road. The sooner I get in there, the sooner I get to you."

"Oh. Okay. Then, how much?" He shifted the backpack on his shoulder in order to dig his wallet from a pants pocket. From the leather pouch, he pulled out an impressive number of hundreds and fifties and fanned them like playing cards.

I selected three bills. "This is a handshake deal then. You agree?"

"Yeah, I do." The required handshake followed. "A one-day fee. Twenty-four hours." He turned his wrist over to look at his watch. "At 8:45 tomorrow, I get your report. I want it in person. I'm staying at The Travelmate."

I tried not to make a face. The Travelmate was a seedy motel out on Hattersfield Road. Nevertheless, work was work, so I said, “Deal,” and pumped his hand again. “Now, I’ve got to get inside.”

“Fine. Tomorrow then.”

“8:45. Travelmate.”

“Room eight.”

“I’ll be there,” I said and was treated to a look at his even white teeth.

I assumed he would walk with me to the corner and a well-defined crosswalk, but he spun on his heel, gave a quick glance left, and angled across Gatling. Only one set of brake lights came on as he sprinted to his car parked at the opposite curb. I immediately pegged him as a man for whom lessons were hard learned.

Anyone monitoring my conversation with him would undoubtedly have frowned and wondered why—

I stopped short.

Oh, no!

Anyone walking by at the right moment would wonder why I just took money from a complete stranger on the street and agreed to meet him at a seedy motel. That made me grin, speaking of substandard behavior patterns.

Anyway, back to my original question: Why couldn’t Kerry St. John find Wyatt himself? After all, we lived in the day of the internet and Google maps.

It was all I could do not to perform a happy dance right there on the sidewalk when he identified the subject matter as the village of Wyatt. I knew about Wyatt, and what I knew I learned from my neighbor, Mae Hancock. Mae is a proud grandmother and great-grandmother. When she was a child, she lived in Wyatt.

Sadly, the little village dried to dust, to never become a pinpoint on a Google map. Residents moved away. Now, it's only a memory.

So, at 8:45 tomorrow, I will knock on Kerry's seedy motel room door, but not step inside. Instead, I will offer to drive him to Mae's house for a nice long talk about Wyatt—which I was sure Mae would agree to when I asked her later today.

Other than etching the time and date of my in-person report across the appointment calendar I keep in my head, that was the last thought given to the assignment. Once inside City Hall, I sat with K.C., then cycled my energy into canceling or rescheduling his meetings for the balance of the week and doing what I could to clean up sundry items on his desk. On my way home though, I stopped at the Hancock homestead to chat with Mae.

She led me into the living room. Our movement across carpeted floorboards caused them to groan. They had every right. Over the years, the aged Hancock farmhouse sheltered generations of its clan and was the family's iconic anchor amid a sea of tillable acreage. The spacious living room was as welcoming in appearance as its arched entryway was wide. Natural light easing through the shaded picture window added a softened glow. It was complemented by the sweet scent of honeysuckle that, on this breezy May afternoon in southwestern Ohio, found its way into the house.

Mae listened while I retold the tale of meeting Kerry St. John. I occupied the oversized wooden rocker. She sat opposite me on the couch.

"Why does he want to find Wyatt?" she asked. This straight-spined octogenarian was quite the dignified lady, despite the fact that a casted left wrist lay in her lap. The hardened plaster sported a splashy magenta-colored overwrap.

"We didn't get into why. I was in a hurry to get upstairs. K.C. was waiting."

"Any news on his mother-in-law?"

"Nothing yet."

“Poor Audrey.”

Audrey was K.C.’s wife. Her mother suffered a stroke early this morning. While K.C. and I dealt with city business, Audrey packed at home. They were on the road and heading north by late morning.

When I asked, Mae graciously agreed to sit with Kerry the next day. Mae was bonus material. No extra charge. This was an easy three-hundred dollar payday. No research required.

Later, when I let myself out of the farmhouse, I went with an odd sense of something tagging along. It walked in again with Kerry and me the next morning. I connected it to the bit of trickery history plays on me since I tend to stand with one foot in the present and one foot in the past most of the time. That precarious position has got to have some effect.

I took care of introductions. Mae and Kerry bubbled with the pleasure at meeting the other.

“Wrenn says you lived in Wyatt.” Kerry took the seat Mae indicated next to her on the couch.

“I suppose my family moved from Wyatt to Havens when I was ten or so,” Mae said.

“I brought a map,” Kerry said, digging it out of his backpack and spreading it out across the coffee table. “Can you show me where Wyatt was?”

I got out of the rocker for a closer look myself.

Mae set Wyatt’s boundaries through the use of existing landmarks on the map. Her finger followed the jagged blue line that was Wyatt Creek. It crossed under the bridge at Main Street, now a secondary state route, before slicing through the Stillwell farm. This tiny unincorporated ghost town lay a jog north and east of Havens.

“Wyatt was a wonderful place. Small, of course. I didn’t have

to go far to play down by the creek. All in all, a dozen families lived at the center of town with farmland all around. It seemed isolated from the rest of the world.” For a second, Mae appeared lost in the past. Ticking back, she said, “How did you learn about Wyatt since it died off years ago?”

“Through my great-grandfather, Dexter St. John. He drove though Wyatt in April of 1946. He wrote about it in his journal. I tried to locate the town once before, but...” He shrugged. “No luck.” His hand went to the flapped pocket of his corduroy sports coat.

My eyes locked onto the tattered leather-bound volume he pulled out the second it appeared. He balanced it on one knee while cold whispers from the past sent chills down my spine. This was an effect easily accomplished what with my one foot still planted in the shadows of history.

“What made you try to find Wyatt again?” Mae asked, sitting back. Absently, she slid a finger over her temple, gliding a few strands of gray hair back into place.

“A new clue. Roger, a buddy of mine, is an appraiser in New York. He was asked to appraise some jewelry in this woman’s estate. One of the items was a locket. It was wrapped in a piece of old newspaper. The masthead said *Havens Messenger*.”

So that was the connection, I thought. I was so rushed yesterday morning when I met Kerry that I didn’t take time to ask what brought him to Havens and straight to the *Messenger’s* offices when his interest was Wyatt. The answer was the masthead.

Kerry flicked a finger at the map and smiled. “I thought it would take days or weeks to get this far.”

“So what’s the rest of the story, Kerry? Why the interest in Wyatt all these years after your great-grandfather visited?” Mae’s entire demeanor brightened with the chance to talk about her childhood home.

“It’s the locket. Great-Granddad designed it. It was stolen

from him in Wyatt.” Just that quickly, anger percolated behind his eyes. “This locket is one of three. It’s a valuable family heirloom, and I want it back.”

“Stolen? No,” Mae said, shaking her head in disbelief.

Speaking up, I tackled the situation from another side, wanting to shave the tip of his melodrama at the same time. “Did you see the locket? You know it’s the right one?” First-hand knowledge was best when piecing together facts.

He held his answer until I maneuvered both feet into present times and reclaimed my seat in the rocker. “Well, no, but it’s the right one, all right. Roger saw the rendering Great-Granddad drew in his journal.” I nearly salivated when Kerry held up the small book, thinking he would show off the rendering, but he passed on the opportunity. “Roger recognized the craftsmanship right away and gave me a call. When it first turned up missing, Great-Granddad did a little investigating himself. All the details are here.” He tapped the journal. “I thought I might be able to match up the suspects.”

I watched Mae straighten. Kerry’s Wyatt, Ohio, suspects would have been her friends and neighbors.

“Somehow, the locket traveled from Wyatt to New York City. I’m going to need some help, Wrenn, and I’m willing to pay.”

What had been yesterday’s simple task of finding Wyatt now expanded monumentally. “Wait a minute. I’m confused. Have I got this right? Your great-grandfather designed three lockets. He had them with him when he traveled through Wyatt. Why was he traveling with valuable family heirlooms?”

“Back in 1946, they weren’t quite old enough to be considered heirlooms. They were examples of his work. He used them for display purposes.”

“Where are the other two now?”

“Back home in Pennsylvania.”

“But the stolen locket is in New York City. Does Roger have it?”

“No. The woman who died had it. Her daughter inherited. She has it now.”

“So Roger relayed our local newspaper’s name from the masthead.”

“Yeah, he knew I’d be interested.”

Okay, I thought, rocking the chair on its rails, while that clarified much of Kerry’s story, I had another question. “Why don’t you just buy the locket from the daughter?”

“She won’t sell. Roger gave me her address. I went to New York to talk with her. I wanted to see the locket for myself and find out how her mother acquired it, but the daughter nixed that idea. To reinforce her decision, she and her fireplace poker backed me out the door.”

“Oh my,” Mae exclaimed.

“Yeah, well, there’s no way she’d willingly give it back.” His eyes flared and I saw a little of the hatefulness the jaywalker displayed yesterday morning. “I don’t feel I should pay for something that rightfully belongs to my family. So I’ll have to find proof, something I can take into court. I told her I was going to do just that. It didn’t faze her, not even when I said she could be found guilty of possessing stolen property. An accessory-after-the-fact. That she might go to jail. Based on the value of the locket, it would be a felony. But, damn it, I’m not going to buy back Ivy’s locket.”

Mae and I exchanged glances. “Ivy’s locket?” we said in unison.

His grin appeared, instantly shelving his anger. While it was Mae Hancock who hosted us, from that point on, it was Kerry St. John who did the entertaining.

He began by flipping through the frayed journal. I couldn’t get

out of the rocker fast enough. By the time he found the page he wanted, I'd rounded the coffee table and stood at his side. Mae looked on too.

"Here's Great-Granddad's rendering."

Three pairs of eyes focused on the chalked impression. It was complimented by the maize overtone provided by aged paper. I studied the drawing and found Ivy's locket enchanting. The single ivy leaf was embossed with delicate curlicues rather than veins. Slightly upper left, where a heart might have been, Dexter sketched an emerald. By the inked lines crosshatching the jewel, it was designed to be multi-faceted.

"Beautiful. How horrible to have it stolen," Mae said.

The moment was a transcendental one for me, and Kerry as well, I thought, because when he spoke, his voice held a reminiscent quality. "Great-Granddad lived into his nineties. He was an amazing old coot. He told me the story more than once, then one day, produced this journal. I had no idea it existed. I wanted to find Wyatt while he was still alive to—I don't know—"

As I eased back to the rocker, I would have sworn he was going to say "impress him," but his mouth formed the words, "console him," instead.

"But Wyatt vanished right off the map. I told Roger the story, but when I couldn't find Wyatt, I'm sure he thought Great-Granddad was just dotty, or losing it. I'm sure he doesn't think that now. Ivy's locket was the third locket Great-Granddad designed. Each of the three corresponded with Great-Grandmother Sophia's pregnancies. She was an Italian immigrant. According to Great-Granddad, she lived her entire life convinced she had powers. With each pregnancy, she insisted she could feel the aura of the baby. 'Dexter,' she said with the first, 'we got ourselves a talented one here. I hear music all the time. A beautiful voice. A soprano. I see her on stage.' Great-Granddad, being an artist, became inspired by her insight. He designed and crafted a locket for the daughter Sophia was carrying. Melanie's locket. The soprano turned out to be my Great Uncle Albert."

Mae and I laughed with him.

“Sophia predicted a daughter again the second go-around. She felt strength of will. Perhaps a ruler. The first woman president. Wisdom. Great-Granddad, quite sensitive himself and again inspired, set to work on Constance’s locket.” He paused to give us a look. “Michael was born on Easter Sunday. And as you can guess, Sophia’s interpretive powers failed her again when Ivy, their petite, gentle spring flower, was none other than the bruiser they named Lawrence.”

I couldn’t help but grin.

“I can still remember the excitement on Great-Granddad’s face. His eyes shone when he told the story. He loved Sophia and those three daughters. She was his inspiration. She charged him up, and he designed expressive jewelry. These lockets became the essence of the three girls, from her heart to his hands. They existed for him. He said, ‘Kerry, while those babies grew in Sophia’s belly, they grew for me as well. In my workshop. In my mind. My heart.’” His eyes clouded while he put his great-grandfather’s voice away and came back with a softer version of his own. “He must have nearly died when Ivy’s locket was taken. You can imagine, like a parent with a lost child.” Kerry searched for a passage in Dexter’s journal. “He’d been traveling for business, coming through Ohio on his way home to Pennsylvania. He stopped at Wyatt’s diner for supper.”

Mae perked. “I remember the diner. It backed up to the creek.”

Kerry cleared his throat. “Here’s what he wrote: ‘Ivy’s locket is gone, and now I grieve with the townspeople and their losses. Tears sprang from my eyes without shame when it was not on the table where I left it to run and help put out the fire. Melanie’s and Constance’s—“

“Wait. The fire? What about the fire?” I said, looking from Kerry to Mae and back again.

Kerry took the question. “The church caught fire. He wrote more about that.”

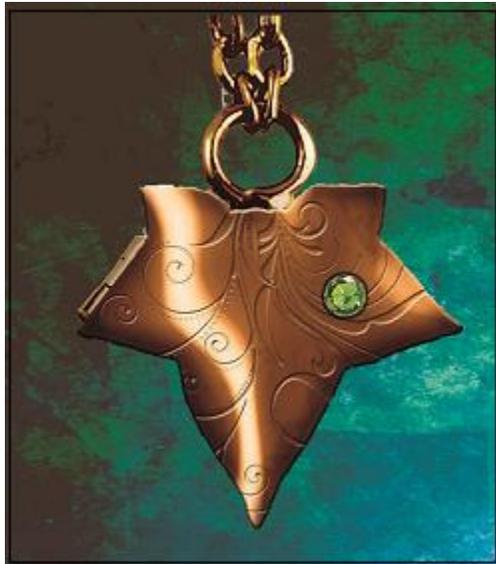
“Good. I’ll be patient then.” I glanced back at Mae. She seemed to stare past Kerry. Today was a day to become easily caught up in rekindled childhood memories, I thought.

He picked up with Dexter’s entry. “Melanie’s and Constance’s lockets are safe, left untouched, and I am truly thankful for this. Only Ivy’s was taken. Her loss has shaken me to my soul. After all, it means the loss of a daughter I have loved, but never known. I’d thought about her and imagined her, certain she’d be part of my life forever. She’d been given a name. She was frail, delicate, and precious to me. In her heart was a place for wishes and dreams and, perhaps, her daddy’s picture for a time.”

Under me, the rocker’s motion ceased.

I wanted a father like that.

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