

Honeysuckle Blue Revenge

A
Wrenn Grayson
Mystery

Connie Chappell 

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from beginning to end."
-South Florida Sun Sentinel

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Wrenn Grayson is hired to write the history behind Honeysuckle Blue Nursery. She digs into past generations of one family, the Hawthorn nurserymen. That research reveals the unsolved murders of four townspeople, collectively known as the lords, each poisoned by hemlock. Fifty years ago, the first lord poisoned was Commodore Theo Hawthorn. As Wrenn is pulled deeper into this old mystery, she struggles to understand other ancient secrets involving deadly nightshade, Socrates' patience, and the "telling of the bees" lore.

With nursery operations abandoned eight years ago, the land is being converted to a green cemetery, a place for natural burials amidst wildflowers and shade trees. Despite the cemetery's envisioned serenity, Wrenn learns it represents another dimension to take seriously. One night on the cemetery grounds, she stumbles onto a makeshift tombstone. The inscription reads, "Rest in peace, Wrenn Grayson."

Predicted death? Hemlock poisoning? Who's behind it?

The Rose City

At one time, my hometown, Springfield, Ohio, was nicknamed the Rose City because Springfield produced more roses than any other city in the world. From the late 19th century through the Great Depression, Springfield nurserymen nurtured approximately 20 million flowers a year. In 1919, records show that Springfield was home to 33 greenhouses.

A framed version of the 1913 catalog cover shown here hangs in my home and is a reminder of grand days in Springfield's history. The Innisfallen Greenhouses noted on the cover were established in 1877. A century later, they were registered as one of Springfield's historic landmarks. Sadly, the greenhouses were eventually demolished.

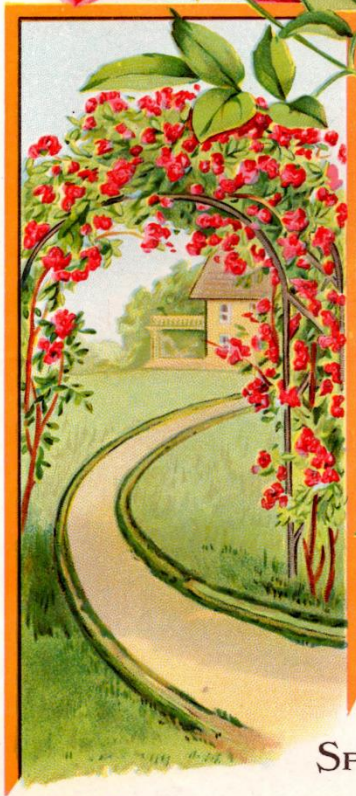
The eventual loss of a landmark and the remedy for such a loss are background stories in *Honeysuckle Blue Revenge*.

More catalog covers from the early 1900s are displayed on my website, ConnieChappell.com.

New Climbing Rose
EXCELSA

AN IMPROVED
CRIMSON RAMBLER

FOR DESCRIPTION AND PRICE
SEE PAGE 3.



THE GEO. H. MELLEN CO.

1913

INNISFALLEN GREENHOUSES

ESTABLISHED 1877

SPRINGFIELD, OHIO.

Hemlock

Today, a wheelchair came dangerously close to marring my favorite pair of white tennies.

With my car parked in the municipal lot downtown, I scrambled across the street to the newspaper building, seeing my clean tennies in my field of vision as I leaped over the curb.

I pushed through the double-entry doors. The *Havens Messenger* was housed in a turn-of-the-twentieth-century building. An impressive lobby rose to a twelve-foot ceiling. Three hallways ran off the lobby, like arteries funneling ink to the body and soul of the printed page. The presses only run at night, but their echo and vibration seemed to inhabit the building, no matter the time. A clock the size of a supermoon hung on the lobby's rear wall and told me it was a quarter till one.

I had my eye on the hallway coming up on my right when someone called my name. "Wrenn! Wrenn Grayson!" I turned to find the woman who handed out pay envelopes, waving one at me. I went back to meet her.

"Hi, Lisa," I said.

Lisa was very tall with thick dark hair that met her shoulders. "Glad I caught you."

"Me too. Thanks." The envelope changed hands and I folded it into my back jeans pocket.

I was a part-time employee for the *Messenger*, paid on a per-job basis. I write a column once or twice a month, retelling Havens' history. I need to remain diligent when it comes to income, which I receive from three sources and all part-time.

My steadiest paycheck paid for the duties I performed at City Hall. I hired in eight years ago as Mayor K.C. Tallmadge's assistant. I also act as the city of Havens' official record keeper. Finally, I could be engaged for historian services. I possess a passion for local history.

I have an office inside City Hall, but not the newspaper building. When I worked here, I was usually found in the archives. Today, I

pursued background for my next article.

I buzzed around the corner and down the back hallway. Mark Aldridge was the archivist in residence, although he signed all interoffice memos with his pen name, R. Kive. Which was clever. I wished I thought of it. No one got his attention by shouting R. Kive. Very few people used Mark. Most everyone called him Wheels.

He and I are similar in age. I'm thirty. He's two years older. His job and the recordkeeping part of mine were also similar in description. All city records and all newspaper records were organized and cross-referenced six ways from Sunday and through the second Tuesday of next week if possible. A record did no one any good if it couldn't be retrieved.

With downtime, Wheels read old newspapers. He devoured every column inch of every current newspaper too, then he performed his magic. As far as newspaper archives go, his job was mammoth compared to mine at City Hall. He was a real talent. He was born to enjoy the job no one wanted. And we almost lost him to a drunk driver.

I hadn't seen him tidying up around one of the microfilm readers when I hurried headlong into his office, so he startled me when he said, "So what happened? How was the bounty divided?"

"The bounty was divisible on Gideon's terms," I said, walking his way.

"And that means?" He rolled his wheelchair up to the other side of a long table.

A couple of days earlier, I brought him up to speed. He was partial to that turn of phrase because he can go at a pretty good clip in his GlideTrak 750. For Wheels, I summarized my dear sweet Gideon's upcoming excavation project and the related research I completed to get him grounded in the local history. Gideon Douglas and I have lived in unwedded bliss for four years. Hence, the familiarity. He's a history professor at Eastwood University, located here in Havens, Ohio. Eastwood formally hired me for my historian services. My report was placed into Gideon's hands weeks ago with an invoice, dutifully paid by the university.

"It's a simple division, really. Gideon has rights to everything underground. Me, I get everything aboveground."

"Does aboveground give you anything to write a column about?"

"Actually, yes. I thought the historic landmark sign would work. Not just the sign, but all the Hawthorn owners and operators. I have several

names already from the property maps I copied for Gideon's research." The property Gideon chose to excavate for his summer project was Honeysuckle Blue Nursery. The business passed from one Hawthorn to the next for 140 years. The nursery closed its greenhouse doors forever eight years back.

"So you're here to do your begots."

Begots was our lingo. It referred to obituaries. I had four names and hoped the obituaries would confirm that Isaac begot Luther, who begot Theo, who begot Gardner. Currently, two Hawthorn sisters-in-law remain, each of them eighty years old or better. They live at the homestead built by first-generation owner, Isaac Hawthorn. The homestead and nursery exist on neighboring properties.

Because I thought Wheels would sympathize, I pushed out a pouting lower lip. "After I did all the research, I really wanted to write about the stagecoach station." Back in 1809, a stagecoach station was located on a portion of property adjacent to nursery property. The station had an interesting history, but there was no way I could steal that from the six students who signed up for a summer of excavating. Telling the station's story now would undercut any find the student crew might uncover and the resulting press they rightfully deserved. "The station isn't aboveground. It was razed in the 1880s, so Gideon gets it."

"Come around here," Wheels said, gesturing. When I started to move, he tacked on, "Stick out your foot, so I can run over it."

I felt my mouth plop open and I squeaked to a stop on my tennies. The sympathy I played for hadn't come about. He forced me to look in the mirror instead.

"Do I really have to say this?" he said, sitting back in his chair. "If anything significant is found, if anything remotely close to stagecoach station days is unearthed, who do you think Gideon will want to write the story?"

My head came up. All this time, I imagined the story going to one of the full-time reporters. Gideon exemplified the good side of human nature. Shame on me for not seeing it. Smiling, I said, "You do know you have insightfulness to spare, don't you?"

"What I know is, you just need patience, lady. If nothing is found, he'll give the research back. You can write the column later. It's always good to have one in the hopper." With that, he rolled over to the work counter and slipped in behind it. I stood on my side. He slapped his microfilm request form down on the countertop. "Give me dates."

I laid the folder containing my research notes on the counter, then filled out the form. Wheels gave it a read, then spun the chair around and disappeared into the maze of interconnected aiseways. When he lost use of his legs as a result of the car accident three years ago, there was nothing to do, but strength-train his upper body. While he recovered, all the storage racks were retrofitted and lowered so he could reach them from his wheelchair. That was a tribute to the man we knew Mark Aldridge to be. In my opinion, it spoke highly of the old guard upstairs in day-to-day management of the newspaper too. Human nature burst through with such force when I learned about the retrofitting that it blew me back a few steps.

After he returned to work, Wheels put in long hours when necessary. He accomplished his job, relying solely on his own fortitude. He doesn't want help. I think that's a characteristic of people who survive similar life-rocking experiences. Someday, when he does need help and was willing to ask, I hoped he reached out to me.

That thought tickled a memory. On one rare occasion when he telephoned City Hall, asking for me, the secretary inquired, "Who's calling, please?"

He answered, "Tell Wrenn her conscience is calling."

In many ways, a conversation with Wheels was just like talking with your conscience.

Less than a minute later, he ground to a stop at the counter, then pulled two boxes of microfilm from a saddlebag-type accessory the GlideTrak offered. The boxes were approximately four inches square and one inch deep. Inside each box, a plastic cartridge housed a roll of microfilm. One cartridge coincided with Gardner's March death nine years ago; the other with Theo's June death an even fifty years back. I hadn't bothered requesting all four cartridges at once. R. Kive had rules. One was clearly imprinted at the bottom of the form: Limit Of Two Cartridges Per Request.

I stacked the two cartridges on top of my folder and carried everything over to one of the microfilm readers, where I sat and rolled up my sleeves. Deciding to start with Gardner's obituary, I inserted the corresponding cartridge. I rolled the film forward, scanning for mid-March. Gardner died on the sixteenth. Typically, his obituary should have hit the paper within one to three days. Right on time, it turned up on the eighteenth and confirmed that Theo and Letitia Hawthorn were his parents. His wife was Caroline Hawthorn. Other than that, the

obituary provided scant information. No funeral home was mentioned. Services would be held at the family's convenience. I studied the screen a minute longer, then completed the steps necessary to print the obituary on the printer up front, near Wheels' desk.

After switching cartridges, I opened the file to glance at my notes. Theo Hawthorn died on June 6, 1968. I spun the microfilm forward. When it stopped, the newspaper for June 10 slid onto my screen. My hand still hung on the take-up wheel while the day's headline gelled in my brain. It read: *Hemlock Poisoning*. A photograph of a man was inset into the article. He was identified as "Commodore" Theo Hawthorn.

The few days that were normally needed to make arrangements after a death were apparently used to determine that Theo had not died of natural causes. I scratched my head. He drank poison? Hemlock?

Not much else was known. A police investigation was underway. A downsized obituary was included at the end of the article. His wife Letitia predeceased him by many years. Gardner and Hortense were his children. His father and mother were Luther and Mary. No arrangements for burial were known.

I backed the microfilm up to June 6. Nothing. But June 8 featured an article and a photograph. It was a wide-angle view that captured a police cruiser with its trunk lid open. An officer faced the trunk. Three other men stood together. They were identified as the sheriff, coroner, and a judge. All elected officials, I thought. I squinted at a sliver of a structure in the photo's background. It appeared to be the Hawthorn homestead. I saw it this morning when I dropped Gideon off for some preliminary fieldwork since his car was in the shop.

I moved the film forward. An article published on June 12 stated that the police were stymied. No one was arrested, but the investigation continued. Instead of mentioning suspects, the article made reference to Socrates. I only gave a second's thought to his part in the story. A sudden eagerness churned through my veins. I worked quickly, queuing the articles to the printer and returning the cartridges to their respective boxes. I wanted to get to Gideon to share another layer of history. This meant I would leave Isaac's and Luther's obituaries for another day.

Microfilm in hand, folder under my arm, I hurried to the counter.

Wheels looked up. "That was fast."

I set the boxes down. "May I have my copies, please?"

He gave me a scrutinizing look before he grabbed the printed articles from the receiving tray. The scrutinizing look returned after he read the

words, *Hemlock Poisoning*.

“You’re a priest,” I said pointedly, taking the pages. “Tell no one.”

“Yes, my child,” he said with feigned sincerity, then his whole face brightened. “Hey! Newspaper articles. They’re aboveground.”

“They are, aren’t they?” I fed him a grin, one that stayed with me all the way outside.

It was mid-May. The days were finally warming. The temperature inside my midnight-blue PT Cruiser eked up a few degrees in my absence. After I turned the engine over, I pressed the button that lowered the driver’s window.

With Midnight in gear, I drove up to the parking lot’s exit. My stomach rumbled so loudly, I thought the man walking by must have heard it out the window. I glanced at the dashboard clock. It read 1:28. Way past lunchtime.

I thought about Gideon, out at Honeysuckle Blue, and smiled. I knew Gideon. He would get caught up in his summer of excavation and that would produce many days when he would simply forget to eat. With his car in the shop, he had no transportation, not even a stagecoach.

So where to for food?

My head bobbed both ways. I could drive up to Hattersfield, Havens’ new business district. A full complement of fast food restaurants had moved in. Or, I could drop down two streets to Nelson, the old business district. The plus there was that it was on a direct line to the nursery. Restaurant choices on Nelson were limited, but there was a McDonald’s. I chose the direct line, waited for a break in traffic, and then executed a left-hand turn. At the light at Nelson, I turned right.

I made it through the drive-thru in record time since I missed the lunch crowd. I witnessed the attendant putting napkins in the sack with the two quarter-pounders and fries I ordered before she handed it out. Two drinks already sat in the car’s cup carriers. I was off and back onto Nelson.

Nelson was the main drag into Havens back when teams of horses pulled stagecoaches down dirt roads. Now, Honeysuckle Blue anchored Havens’ western edge. Even at that, it was no more than a twenty-minute drive from downtown. The community was self-contained with no dissecting highways to contend with. Our population was hanging in at the 60,000 mark.

I slowed my speed when Hawthorn Road came up. There was no one behind me so, after I turned, I eased to a stop across from the sign I told

Wheels about earlier. It was cast bronze atop a sturdy post and read:

Honeysuckle Blue Nursery, established 1878.

Founder, Isaac Hawthorn.

Designated historic landmark 1988.

The Hawthorn family and Honeysuckle Blue Nursery
are recognized icons in Havens, Ohio's history.

I sat there a moment longer while a honeybee circled the sign before buzzing down to the host of nectar and pollen offerings around the base. I noticed tall wildflowers, common-variety weeds, and spiky grass, but the bee chose a cheery dandelion.

As I drove off, I thought a picture of the sign would reproduce well in the newspaper, provided my crusty old editor, Irv Hammer, approved my historic landmark storyline. Today, reporters often take their own photographs since the cameras in our cellphones were of such high quality. But the old newspapers I used for research attributed credit for a picture to the staff photographer. Years ago, the *Messenger* had two or three photographers. Not today. Just one.

Up a ways on the left, I pulled into a wide gravel driveway and steered Midnight off into the grass. Two other cars occupied the drive that cut in next to the homestead.

If Gideon and I were being intrusive on the ladies, this would be the last day. Come Monday, Gideon said, the ladies would provide a key to the gate at the Nelson Avenue entrance. He and the students would come and go from there every day.

I slipped Midnight into park and climbed out. I rounded the front bumper, studying the house. It was painted a rich cream with cranberry trim. My mind, though, flashed on the sliver of the structure shown in the newspaper photo from 1968. That photo was taken the day Commodore Theo Hawthorn's body was discovered on the grounds.

With the passenger door open, I sifted through the papers in my file until I found the photograph. Facing the house, I held it up. The police cruiser was parked further up, but in this drive and next to this house.

The homestead was a three-story affair with many small rectangular windows ringing the attic. During Ohio's hot summer months, opening those windows along with doors and windows on the other floors would bring a refreshing breath of air up through the house. Chimneys told of the presence of three fireplaces, but my favorite characteristic was the

roofed and railed front porch that wrapped two sides of the home. Nothing was more inviting. A variety of seating arrangements was scattered around. A generous front yard separated the home from the road bearing the family's name.

I slipped the news article back in the file, then tucked it under my arm. I got a good hold on the drinks in that hand before I ducked back into the car for the sack. Sitting it on the roof, I closed the door as quietly as possible. Food sack swinging at my side, I strode out onto the grounds. My research told me the lay of the land.

From the intersection out at the landmark sign, Honeysuckle Blue property traveled down past the width of the old greenhouse business to the homestead and its adjacent tree line. The property turned there and the tree line ran behind the house and a rear yard to become a large wooded area at the back of the parcel.

I turned left when a swath of grass came up. This main concourse separated seven greenhouses into two sets of three with a straggler greenhouse offset between the two groups.

Like a live feed in my mind, I imagined the nursery when employees scooted around here and there. The oldest set of greenhouses was vintage 1886. The newer models came into being prior to 1975. Out front, facing Nelson Avenue, was the gated entrance between the nursery's office building and a small plot of vacant land. It was there, that in 1809, the stagecoach station first took up residency.

I found Gideon kneeling at the base of the offset greenhouse. A painted sign over the door labeled it Greenhouse No. 4. Gideon was engaged in the discovery process today.

He dressed this morning in a shirt and pants the color of sandstone and a pair of battered black boots. These items of clothing were not exactly in the same condition now. His sleeves were rolled up to mismatched levels. His boots were dusty and there was a patch of dried mud on the knee of one pants leg. Spears of sunlight shone on his back. By September, the sun would bleach streaks into his hair.

What amazed me most about Gideon when I saw him work like this, luring history from the ground, were his fingers. So perfect. So delicate as they spanned the archeology brush, using its soft bristles to gently sweep traces of the earth's ageless soil away from the foundation laid in the late 1800s.

Quietly, I approached him, anticipating those half-dozen heartbeats when I looked upon his handsome face and knew he lived in a world of

his own. As deftly as he used the archeology tool, his eyes lifted, brushed mine, and then returned to work. His head bowed, his hand made two sweeps before his mind severed its connection with the past and, quite literally, allowed recognition to register. The next time his antique blue eyes focused on me, he lived in present day.

“Hi,” he said, smiling. Setting the brush aside, he rose. “What’s up?”

“Two things. First, I’m hungry and so are you.”

His chin came up. “You’re right.”

“And second, this...”

I went around to an old park-style bench sitting against the greenhouse’s glass wall to set the sandwiches and drinks down. Getting the folder in hand, I dug out the page that held the 1968 headline, *Hemlock Poisoning*, and handed it to him. Reading it, his eyes bulged. Oh yeah, he fully inhabited my world now.

“Commodore Theo Hawthorn. Really.” His baritone voice expressed awe. Taking the file, he shuffled through the rest of the pages. “My god, he was murdered by poison.”

“It was never solved. He died on the grounds.” My gaze raked the landscape. “Somewhere.”

Gideon’s knees bent slowly and he sank to the bench. A songbird twittered while he paused to assimilate the facts. A moment later, he skimmed the papers again.

I sat, too, and began laying out lunch. It was an odd feeling we experienced, like learning someone was murdered in the house you lived in. The past could become a living breathing sensation very quickly when violent death was the back story. “I just wanted you to know. This doesn’t really change anything,” I said.

He shrugged a shoulder. “Right. I’ll still start the excavation on Monday. You’ll still write about the landmark designation.”

“You’re belowground. I’m aboveground.”

He agreed.

I turned my head toward the house.

“The ladies on your mind?” he asked.

“Aren’t they on yours?”

“What a nightmare that must have been.” Several times over the past few weeks, Gideon met with them to obtain their permission for his students’ summer excavating project.

“Gideon. Honestly. The hemlock murder makes my story feel small.”

He fixed me with a reproachful look. “No. You don’t really want to

write about the hemlock, do you?”

I pointed my little finger at the folder on the bench between us. It was all I dared risk, needing my other digits to keep the delicious sandwich corralled. “Back then, the newspaper’s coverage showed no mercy for the ladies. If I pitch this story to Hammer—and I’m not saying I will, but if I do—I would take a softer tack and he would have to agree to it. You know the ladies. What do you think?”

Swallowing, he said, “I think it’s too soon to decide. The hemlock story was sprung on you. Do what you like to do. Let it stew.”

I knew Gideon was not a patron of rehashing things, which I tended to do. A better process for me was to pour this spicy story into a lidded pot where it would sit while I attended to life’s other sundry messes. I set my sandwich in its cardboard container and snatched up a napkin. At the same time, my nosiness surfaced again. “I would love to know more, but what else is there?”

“If you got to the end of the newspaper coverage, then there’s nothing more to know.” He fed a few fries into his mouth.

“The last article said there were no suspects.”

A bee began pestering us, so Gideon downed his last bite of sandwich. He waved the bee away, then took the napkin I handed him.

The hemlock appeared to be a dead end. But since he was a professor who enjoyed educating and I lacked a certain knowledge, I said, “There is one other thing. Tell me about Socrates. What’s that reference about?”

Gideon rolled his napkin into a ball and dropped it in the sack I held out. Our sandwich trays went in next, then a few uneaten fries. Folding down the sack, I closed off the bee’s temptation, only to have Gideon conjure up some of his own.

“Hmm,” he said, so temptingly. “Socrates is a very long story.”





*Honeysuckle Blue Revenge, A Wrenn Grayson Mystery,
is available for purchase in paperback and eBook
through Amazon.*