



# Longstretch and Lavender

*A  
Wrenn Grayson  
Mystery*

**Connie Chappell**

*"So many interesting aspects to snag  
the reader's imagination."*

*—The New York News Journal*

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Foundling Museum archivist Wrenn Grayson is called on to resolve two conspiracies.

The call from the first is closer to a fading whisper since it steps out of 1879. It revolves around a small temple-like structure, known as a folly, and Thomas Longstretch, the stained-glass artisan hired to design the folly's windows. Longstretch's extended stay on the Summoner Park estate coincides with the disappearance of a murderously sharp and ancient dagger.

Wrenn answers a second call from Yannick Devers, real estate developer. She and security consultant Bret Kilmore are asked to investigate an unconscionable act, but a much more fragrant one. This conspiracy grew from a battle over possession of lavender fields.

Both conspiracies present intriguing complexities and elusive clues. While years have passed on the first, time is painfully tightening down on the second. Lives are at stake.

## Trophy Room

Nothing in the room had changed since Webster Bronwyn died in 1931.

Emerald Maricott and I stood in the far corner, facing an empty section of hickory-paneled wall. I cast a glance around. The room hosted tributes to the successes the man achieved during his lifetime. Not many people would openly display examples of their failures, but he chose not to hide them away. Recognition of one amazing accomplishment in Webster's life was missing. Today, an illustration of that accomplishment was coming out of storage.

"This is the perfect place for it, Wrenn," remarked Emerald.

"I don't imagine Webster called this room the trophy room," I suggested.

"No, that wouldn't have been like him at all. It was the billiards room. My guess is, family and friends coined it as the trophy room." At sixty-two, Emerald had lived her entire life on the Foundling estate and, now, held the role of manager.

The room's size easily accommodated the billiards table, which acted as the centerpiece. A pair of low-hanging lights hovered over it. As it had been for decades, the table was draped with a white sheet, an effort, I assumed, to keep the felt dust-free. With no family members living in the house, the billiards room fell into disuse.

As the Foundling Museum's archivist, I was just getting started with the cataloging of items in this room. The Foundling Museum, built as Webster Bronwyn's 1881 mansion, is located in Havens, Ohio. Now that the museum has sufficient financial backing, it will open next spring for its first tour. This is October. Discounting the planning stage for the grand opening and accompanying community ceremony, I fully expected the next few months to be harried ones, and that was putting it mildly. Much of the prep work would fall on my shoulders, but that was what I signed up for when I took the job last August.

Emerald and I skirted two leather chairs with wooden armrests and the smoking stand sitting between them en route to the door.

“Is Bret still coming this morning?” Emerald asked of Bret Kilmore. In the multiple-choice categories of his multi-faceted career, today, he represented Breckenridge Security International as security consultant.

“He is. I’m looking forward to seeing the painting, now that it’s been professionally cleaned.” For months now, the painting was stored in Breckenridge’s high-security vault, but with the opening coming and my concentration on this room in particular, it felt like it was time to hang it.

“Say hello for me. I’ll let you get to work.” Emerald’s entire face lit when she smiled, and she graced me with one now.

I watched as she made her way down the hall. Her hair was gray with streaks of brown, cut on a straight edge just below her ears, and flyaway. She never dressed too casually, especially these days, when the needs of the museum brought contractors and vendors in with greater frequency. I, on the other hand, wore a long-sleeved cotton top, jeans, and tennis shoes, in anticipation of crawling around or sitting on the floor to go through the trophy room’s storage cupboards. When Emerald disappeared around the corner that led to her office in the kitchen wing, I heaved a sigh and faced my day’s work.

The point behind future tour groups stopping in this room was to give visitors an insight into the family man, industrialist, visionary, and risk-taker who was Webster Bronwyn, born in 1853.

As is more easily accomplished—nearly one hundred years after his death, rather than in his presence—docents can relay an honest portrayal of the man and his unlikely trophies. Visitors would learn his story with all the pluses and minuses that marked his varied business ventures.

Some cataloging has already been accomplished. At Foundling, Webster’s family and guests enjoyed a choice of pleasant pastimes, from cribbage to checkers. Inside one cupboard, I discovered two decks of cards, larger in size than today’s variety. The backs of the cards were colorfully decorated: one with a striking floral design, another with a variety of country flags. Chess enthusiasts used a nineteenth-century game table with ivory pieces. The most interesting game I found was the American-made walnut roulette wheel. I was certain gentlemen, as well as ladies, watched the blur of the white ball

and the spinning wheel, hopeful of the outcome.

I crossed the room to a length of cupboards constructed of the same hickory wood used on the walls. The waist-high cupboards protruded nearly two feet into the room, providing an ample countertop for the display of two pieces of farm machinery.

The thresher and reaper were handmade, one-of-a-kind items, and downsized duplicates of the originals manufactured by the company Webster Bronwyn and several partners formed in 1878. The bulky duplicates were easily three-foot from stem to stern.

The purpose of the threshing machine—a complicated-looking thing with a chute—was to separate the wheat from the chaff. It was designed to beat the plant, causing the seeds to fall out. Webster's improved reaper included a self-raking feature, highly valued for the reduction of labor required to harvest the grain. I am not an expert on nineteenth-century agriculture equipment. I merely found a sales catalog behind one of the cupboard doors last week for the company's 1881 model year.

I brought my laptop down earlier from my second-floor office so I could continue cataloging the items in the room. I powered it up and entered my name, Wrenn Grayson, on the log-in line for the archival registry program I use.

That done, I carried it to the last of the cupboards on this side of the room and settled myself cross-legged on the floor before a set of double doors. With a hand on each knob, I swung the doors open and was immediately pelted by an avalanche of colorful billiard balls. "Ach!" I exclaimed, trying unsuccessfully to catch even one. They bounced and rolled, careening off each other and the walls with sharp smacking sounds.

I sort of waited for someone to jump out, laughing, and crying, "Gotcha!" This was the kind of practical joke a kid would instigate. I saw how it was accomplished. The jokester closed the left-hand door, keeping the door on the right open, so the balls could be loaded on the shelf behind the other door. Then the second door was closed, and another pastime began: the waiting game.

I spent the next fifteen minutes rounding them up from all over the room. Two balls rolled under the leather couch by the door. A pool cue helped me get those back. In fact, I used the couch as a holding station for those I retrieved. When I returned the cue to the standing rack next to the fireplace, I found the eight ball nestled next to an end

iron. This was like an Easter egg hunt. I was forced to crawl under the billiards table itself for the six and twelve. All along, my annoyance heated up. Who would have staged this? It felt like a juvenile prank, yes, but there hadn't been children in the house since...when? The early seventies, I guessed. Siblings, Micha and Becca, were Webster's great-grandchildren. The seventies was fifty years ago. So, not quite instant gratification.

I lined the balls up at the back of the couch cushion, arranging them in numerical order. I only found fifteen in all. I had the cue ball, but not the nine. Ah, well. It would turn up, I thought. Then again, I didn't know if there was a full set when the gag was perpetrated.

I had line-of-sight into the open cupboard from the couch. The deep dark recess looked empty from here. I went over to lay my hand on the shelf the balls fell from. It didn't feel level, tipped forward just a bit. Lifting it off its supports and out, I heard the barest tick of sound. Something fell from the shelf area to the base of the cabinet. When I looked, I saw three things on the bottom shelf: a millimeter of folded paper, a wooden box, and what appeared to be a rolled piece of sturdy fabric.

It was obvious which one produced the cascading-balls trick. Before I set the shelf down, the doorbell chimed out in the hall. Bret, I thought.

Quickly, I put the cupboard to rights, closed the doors, and set my computer up out of the way. Then, I turned on my heel and speed-walked down the mansion's great hall toward the door.

I passed several floor-to-ceiling fluted columns, spaced along both sides of the hall, each quite necessary to take the weight of the three-story stone mansion. Through the beveled glass cut into the top half of the wooden front door, I saw a blurry image that did indeed appear to be Bret Kilmore. Pulling the door open, I smiled at an in-focus Bret, carrying a wide wooden crate up in his arms. Breckenridge Security's white van was parked behind him under the porte-cochere.

"I love it when you call and order me to do things," Bret said without preamble.

"I did not order you. I asked...politely."

"I just perceive your wants and needs differently. We have a dance we do." He arched a knowing eyebrow.

"We do not dance. You're going to start this—" Well, now, the only word I could think of was...

“Dance,” he filled in.

“This *crap* all over again.” This man routinely stirred me up to half-annoyed within seconds of crossing paths. I met him a couple of years ago. At that time, he arrived in town as an old friend of Gideon Douglas’s. Gideon, a history professor at local Eastwood University, and I have lived in unwedded bliss for five years.

Bret grinned. “Hello, button nose. How’s life in the mansion?”

“Busy. Down here,” I said, pointing a finger, my irritation cooling.

He passed in front of me, then stopped. “Oh, wait. Carry my tools.”

A small canvas bag lay outside of the doorcase. I got it, then closed the door. “Been on any secret missions recently?” This was another selection off his multiple-choice career list.

“As a matter of fact, I’m responsible for a foreign diplomat’s kid still breathing and being back in his daddy’s loving arms.”

“The daddy hired BSI?” We moved at a leisurely pace along the carpeted hall.

“Need to know, button nose. Need to know.”

“Nothing ever changes with you.”

“You should find that reassuring.”

“Yes, I should, but oddly...” I shot him a sideways glance and condescended to change my tack. Sometimes, with him, it was just easier. “You’re right. I find it reassuring.”

“Ah, minds and hearts melding as one. I knew this day would come,” he said, turning his vivid green eyes on me.

I shook my head. Why does being in his company always feel like I’m trying to bust my way out of a paper sack? Just as I’m working on escape through one corner, he unfolds the top.

Bret is mid-forties and fighting fit at six-two and one-eighty. His sandy-blond hair is neatly trimmed. He’s dressed in olive drab today, his cargo pants several shades darker than his long-sleeved polo shirt open at the neck. I suspected he ordered his shoes, a nice pair of brown tie-ups, from The Spy’s Clothing Store. They were guaranteed to provide the wearer the ability to squeaklessly creep up on the bad guy.

The last room on the right was fully lit and inviting. Despite that, I said with a flourish, “Welcome to Webster Bronwyn’s trophy room.”

A moment of silence prevailed while Bret took in the unique furnishings. The wooden crate he carried slipped slowly from his grip and was left to lean against the nearby couch. I set down the tool kit



beside it.

The mood fizzled when he saw the line of pool balls along the back of the couch. “The nine is missing.”

“I do know that. It’s around here somewhere.”

“If you play with them on the table, you won’t have to round them up afterwards.”

“I wasn’t playing with them.” I told him what happened when I opened the doors.

“Booby-trapped,” he declared, with the same mischievous gleam in his eyes I imagined the Bronwyn kids, who were kids no longer, might have had.

When Bret set the mansion up with a security system, he paid the most attention to the outside doors. This interior room, like a few others in the mansion, has no outside access, not even a window. So, this was his first glimpse. Forgetting about the missing ball, he made a circuit of the room with me in tow.

On the wall across from the display of agricultural equipment was a similar setup. Contained on the cupboard’s surface over here were three miniature railroad cars. They were truly miniatures, given the size of the actual cars, but they were far larger than the toy-train variety. When Bret bent over to look inside the engine compartment, the car was longer still, by a few inches, than the breadth of his shoulders. Webster’s engine was complete with a long, pointed cowcatcher, designed to deflect obstacles on the track. Bret studied the drawing room car, then the model caboose.

“Webster Bronwyn invested in railroads in 1890. That investment is one of the mainstays for the estate today,” I reported, following him past the smoking-stand area in the corner.

On the back wall, he took in the massive fireplace with its elaborately etched mantelpiece and stonework spreading out from the hearth until it met hunter-green carpeting. The pool cue rack and a set of standard fireplace tools bracketed the fireplace. We moved past another seating nook before pulling up to an ornately designed trolley made of glass and a dark metal framework. This was a portable bar on eight-inch spoked wheels with a push handle.

“May I?” he asked. I nodded. He picked up one of the three amber bottles still filled with Webster’s brew and examined the old-time white swing-top cap with its red rubber gasket. He read from the label, “Brewed and Bottled by Bronwyn Brewery Company, Foundling,

Ohio.”

“The brewery was founded in 1910. By 1920, it was closed by the country’s prohibition laws.”

“He didn’t go back into business afterwards?” Bret inquired.

I wagged my head. “Many small brewers didn’t.”

He pointed at a door in the corner with a questioning look. “Goes out to the back hallway,” I said.

“There it is,” he said, stepping in front of me. Nestled in the dark corner lay the missing billiard ball. Stooping, he retrieved it. “Set complete,” he said, handing it over.

That mystery solved, I gave him a short tutorial on the thresher and reaper.

“What happened to Webster’s investment here?” he asked, moving his studious examination to the reaper.

“His holdings were bought out for a tidy sum before his death.”

“Nice,” he said, then his face brightened. “I missed this.”

We walked over to a painted and framed replication of the long and narrow sign that hung outside Bronwyn’s Department Store in downtown Havens. “The store opened in 1903. It closed in 1998. I was nine at the time. My grandmother brought me downtown to watch crane workers remove the sign. Webster was deceased by then, but I think it’s safe to say, he was disappointed in this undertaking. He’d boasted that he would open stores nationally.”

“Never happened?”

“Nope. Just hometown.”

“Where’s the original sign?”

“I haven’t come across it yet. Of course, it must have been ten or fifteen feet in length.” *Bronwyn’s* had been spelled out, one letter beneath the other.

I took a step and placed the nine ball on the couch.

He tipped his head to the nearby crate. “Let’s get this out of the packaging over here since there’s more room.” He’d loosened the top panel before he arrived, so now a screwdriver made quick work of the rest of the job.

This was a moment I’d lived before. Wm Salazar, a Foundling society board member, and I discovered this crate and the oil painting inside a year ago. Shortly thereafter, Wm relocated. Bret helped with those details.

I knew Bret stayed in touch. “How’s—”

“He’s fine.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

My security-conscious friend was capable of setting up new identities. Wm had gotten himself involved with a very bad man. I asked Bret to step in. I was grateful he did, but the deed was not to be rehashed, ever, at any length.

I held the crate while Bret lifted out the oil painting. He set it upright on the couch. We studied it. I would see that a small nameplate was affixed to the wall next to it and etched with the words, “Almond City Streets of Gold.” This painting, commissioned by Webster Bronwyn, was over 130 years old. Originally, the artist used gold foil to enhance the piece. The foil had flaked off by the time Wm and I found it.

One of Webster Bronwyn’s most ambitious dreams was to create his own lakeside city in Michigan. He paired it with his railroad business and saw that tracks were laid nearly to the vacation resort’s front door. He built a first-class hotel. It opened in 1892. He worked in partnership with his brother Hayden. Just as the brothers made plans to expand resort accommodations to include the souvenir shops, cottages, boardwalks, and tree-lined parks painted on the canvas, disaster struck. The hotel caught fire in 1894 before the season opened. It burned to the ground. Sadly, Hayden perished in the flames. Devastated and bereft, Webster never displayed the painting.

“Ready?” said Bret, getting a firm grip on the hand-carved frame with a scalloped edge.

“Yeah. Let’s do it,” I replied, grabbing the toolkit and leading him to the back wall.

After some measurements were taken and a look around at the height other paintings were hung, he found a spot on the dark paneling. He held the painting up, and I looked at the effect. We switched places, and I held it up.

“It doesn’t seem like you should get the final say,” he teased.

“That’s where you’re wrong. I should. I have the eye.”

“A devilish eye.”

“Be quiet and get this done,” I said, ending the squabbling. Once hung, I straightened the frame while he collected his tools. I told him he could leave the crate behind. I would take care of it.

Then, at the front door, he asked, “What about the crest?” Webster

Bronwyn also commissioned a gold crest for the Almond City Summer Colony. Quite, quite valuable, it remained locked down in Breckenridge's vault.

"No decision on that yet. We're still sweating the small stuff for the opening."

"I'm happy to add my worthwhile advice when the time comes."

"Figured. By the way, Emerald says hello."

"The lovely Emerald. We have a security conference coming up."

"I didn't know you two had conferences."

"Need to know."

"Yeah, sure. Get out of here. I have work to do."

His gaze moved over my face. We were back to the dance.

"You may kiss my cheek." The words came out on a sigh.

He gave me a peck. "Tell Gideon I said hi."

"We'll have to find a night for dinner," I called after him.

"Just you and me?"

"No! Idiot! Get out of here," I ordered. The man was ever diligent in his pursuit, but my complete commitment to Gideon and the men's long friendship stood in his way. In reality, I did enjoy the dance. He waltzed through my day, then he was gone.

The Almond City painting caught my eye instantly when I stepped through the doorway. I presumed that would be the case over the next several weeks. I walked as far as the billiards table, tipped my head, and admired it, satisfied it was hung in its rightful place in Webster Bronwyn's trophy room.

I looked over my shoulder to the corner cupboard. It was time to get back to the inventory of the two items on the bottom shelf.

Kneeling, I got my hands around the box. The wood grain was decorative with a hinged lid, a simple clasp closure in brass, and eight brass corner caps. The box was expertly constructed, probably twelve inches long, five wide, and a little more than that deep. I opened the lid to find tan-colored velvet lining the base. Oddly, I found two old-time postcards inside. The box's dimension suggested it was designed to hold something else.

I rose to my feet to set the box on the countertop. The preprinting on the front of the cards was the same: "Postal Card" on the left and an imprint of a one-cent stamp on the right. Beneath was the same handwritten, three-line address: Mr. Amos Hastings, Summoner Park, Foundling, Ohio. One card had been hand-canceled on October 10,

1879, at the Havens post office. Cancellation of the other one took place in Portsmouth, Ohio, on October 14, 1879.

I turned the first card over. The message on the back read, *Moonlight*. What? I thought. Quickly, I flipped the other one over. It read, *Her Eyes*. Not only were the messages extremely strange, in my opinion, but they were ostentatiously written. Each word nearly filled the back of its card. The style of print was similar to an Old English font with many flourishes. They were written in the same black ink used for the address and came quite close to being considered works of art. I wondered what the messages meant to Amos Hastings. And, by the way, who was Amos Hastings?

I reread the address. What puzzled me there were the words, Summoner Park. Recently, a condominium community opened in Havens. I raised an eyebrow. It was named Summoner Park. What did any of this have to do with the Bronwyn family?



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