

Salvia Sorority: Final Chapter

*A
Wrenn Grayson
Mystery*



Connie Chappell

*"Once again, Chappell delivers."
-The American Reporter*

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A Wrenn Grayson Mystery

Wrenn Grayson's first summer as archivist for the Foundling Historical Society and Museum begins as unsettlingly as the electrical storms that plague Havens, Ohio.

On her initial assignment, she investigates Madelaine Manor and its deceased owner, Hollis Bronwyn Jenner. Hollis blazed a trail in the late-1910s as a women's rights activist. Her past is shadowed by World War I and the belief she sheltered a German spy.

In truth, Wrenn isn't completely finished with a final obligation from her City Hall job. A worrisome woman who participates as a confederate Civil War reenactor threatens to invade Havens to recapture the spoils-of-war cannon she's convinced Mayor K.C. Tallmadge is harboring.

If fighting wars on two fronts isn't enough, Wrenn becomes rightfully overwhelmed when a small skirmish breaks out within the manor itself. Odd, unexplainable things occur. Wrenn senses the old place is revealing clues. Has she interpreted correctly? Do these clues solve a mysterious death that stretches back to Hollis's day?

Fitting Last Name

It wasn't a common occurrence for my day to be shot off course by a cannon, but on this first day of August, that was precisely what happened.

I was setting my empty juice glass in the kitchen sink at home when a text pinged my cellphone.

The phone lay on the nearby countertop. The screen lit with Mima's name. I picked it up. The text read: *Can you meet me at the shelter 15 minutes early?*

This raised an eyebrow. Arch still in place, I typed: *Sure. Why? Cannon.*

Her one-word answer sparked a memory. It wasn't easy to forget the day a cannon made its mark.

For the past six weeks, I've been training Mima Ludlow to take over my job at City Hall. After nine years as city recorder, I was leaving the employ of the city of Havens, Ohio.

This morning, she caught me just in time to make the earlier rendezvous. I live on the outskirts of town. The shelter's administrative offices were located on the other side of the downtown.

I locked up. My short dark hair lifted on the currents of air created when I hurried to the car. On my thin frame, I wore a short-sleeved cotton blouse and summer-weight slacks, appropriate attire for Mima's and my nine-thirty meeting at the Sunrise Women's Shelter. I settled behind the wheel of my midnight-blue PT Cruiser, turned over the engine, and flipped on the air conditioning. The day was already racing toward oppressive. It steeped like a jar of tea set out in the sun. The glare was blinding in its reflection off the glass. This was a repeat performance of the last ten days. If the heat wasn't enough punishment, we've endured angry thunderstorms, complete with ravaging winds.

While this was designed to be the first day at my new archivist's job, threads from my old job dangled. The Sunrise Shelter was one.

Other tasks assigned to the city recorder included acting as the mayor's personal assistant. One of Mayor K.C. Tallmadge's favorite nonprofit operations in town was the shelter. Both of us were fond of the shelter's director, Sandy Donohue. I wanted to introduce Mima to her in person, then the three of us would discuss the agenda for a fundraising event set for this weekend. The mayor accepted Sandy's invitation to attend the event. Trouble was, when I called last week to schedule an appointment for introductions, I learned she was vacationing. The first appointment available was not until today.

I can attest to the fact that the City Hall job came with its share of oddities. While the cannon issue was, yes, an oddity, I had considered it handled.

About four weeks ago, Mima opened a letter addressed to the mayor's office. I watched confusion gather on her face as she read. Without a word, she handed it to me. The story it recited was an interesting one. The tone, however, was aggressive. The sender was Wanda Vernon. She wrote on behalf of the local Civil War battle reenactment group she belonged to in Sadlier, West Virginia. I took the lead with the inquiry, Mima dutifully at my side.

I steered Midnight into the shelter's small parking lot at Kinsman and Ritter streets. Mima stood at the bumper of her car. She grasped a file folder. After weeks of working together, I recognized the grimace behind the feigned smile. I parked, and she bustled to my car door. I opened it, saying, "Morning, Mima."

"That woman called first thing this morning. She asked for you. Wrenn, I think she's lost it. She wouldn't talk to me. She only wants you."

"Did you tell her I took a new job?"

"Not really." The grimace returned. I heard shame in her words. "I told her you weren't in the office, but I would see you in an hour or so, and I'd ask you to call. I'm sorry. What a rude woman!"

"Okay. Don't worry. I said I would continue to help, and I will. This lady is not the one to lead off with on your true first day. Let me peek at the file. It was smart to bring it."

The compliment seemed to soothe her frayed nerves. I shifted through the few pieces of paper the folder contained, coming up with Wanda Vernon's letter.

Dear Mayor Tallmadge,

Recently, I found out something shocking. On June 16, 1862, the 44th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, led by Colonel Titus Crook, engaged in an hour-long skirmish to claim the confederate outpost of Sadlier, Virginia (now West Virginia). The battle ended in a Union victory. After the capture of the town, Colonel Crook (fitting last name) began helping himself to whatever he pleased, including a 100-year-old cannon taken from the British at the battle of Yorktown. The cannon was taken back to Havens. It has never been returned. Many letters were mailed to the address we have for the Crook and his descendants, a family home, I think. Each letter demanded our cannon back. For the most part, those letters go unanswered. The last one was returned as undeliverable by the post office. Where has the Crook got to?

I am very concerned over this injustice. I think it would benefit both your town and our town if you send us back our cannon. What kind of mayor wants to have a stolen cannon in his city? Please respond.

Wanda Vernon

Sadlier Battle Reenactment Association

With receipt of the letter, I completed what research I could. This was the first time I'd heard of a conflict over a cannon. Once I exhausted all avenues, I composed this response.

Dear Ms. Vernon:

I read your letter with interest. Despite the amount of time that has passed between the end of the Civil War and your inquiry, I began a logical search through the options available so that I might speak with some authority.

One easy option was to check the phonebook for the family name, Crook. There were no listings.

I contacted Avondale Cemetery. The cemetery maintains several soldiers' mounds dedicated to individual wars. It was possible someone donated the cannon there. The cemetery manager reported that there is no cannon displayed on the grounds. He also reported that Colonel Titus Crook is not buried at Avondale.

Our county historical society provides a searchable online

listing of its collection. I did not find a cannon among its possessions. Neither has City Hall taken ownership of a cannon. I realize this has proved fruitless, but short of searching every barn or garage, there is little else I can do.

Wrenn Grayson

City Recorder, Mayor Tallmadge's Office

I did not question the premise of Wanda Vernon's claim: that Colonel Titus Crook was a Havens resident, that he commanded the battle, or that he captured that particular piece of artillery. In truth, I was glad my search didn't turn up a cannon on municipal property. Neither I nor Mayor Tallmadge, I was sure, would want to broach a debate over the spoils of war. Such a debate was certain to raise bitter arguments, based on the haughty tone of Wanda Vernon's letter. Separate from hearing and understanding the term, I owned no expertise. Both sides entered a war, knowing what was at stake. Prizes extracted as a result of winning a war or other military action were regarded as legitimate, I'd always assumed. Everything would be so much better if we all got along.

That being wishful thinking, I pulled in a deep breath, hoping it produced some fortitude, then said, "Let's get this over with. What's the number?" Mima read it off, and I tapped it into my cellphone, the speaker function engaged.

Wanda Vernon growled a hello. I already assessed her as the type of person who worked herself into an agitated state that resulted in the loss of any semblance of common sense.

I introduced myself. She growled again. It rumbled into a sentence. "Our group met last night. I took your letter. All the Sadlier battle reenactors read it!"

In response to her exclamation, I went with an even, courteous tone. "Please, Ms. Vernon, don't raise your voice. I've interrupted another meeting to call you. What is the problem?"

"Here's the problem. And it's your problem. We put it to a vote. It was unanimous. We're going to do the ancestry on that Crook. We're going to find a relative. That person has *our* cannon. It's in Havens. I know it is. As soon as we get our lead, we're going to come and take our cannon back!"

She was borderline irrational. No wonder Mima backed off. One day on the job and this woman wanted to eat her alive. My God, I

thought, glancing her way, Mima wouldn't quit, would she? She looked at me through fearful eyes.

"Don't be all sweetly insincere with me, like you're the innocent party. You're not. You...you ...you aggrieved us!"

"Really? Aggrieved?" I mouthed to Mima's look of incredulity. "Look, Ms. Vernon, I have no connection to the cannon. I didn't capture it in 1862. I did do all the research I possibly could to help you."

"You did not. You're hiding it. You're no better than that... that looter, Captain Crook, who stole it. You think we don't have the capability of following his ancestry. We do. We have an expert. And when we find the name of his descendent, we're going to invade Havens and recapture our cannon."

My eyes latched onto Mima's. Was Wanda serious? Invade? How? On horseback? Maybe sneaking up on us in a mammoth RV filled with reenactors? In reality, she just jumped from borderline irrational to full-fledged absurdity. "Oh, I would caution against that. It would be a huge mistake."

"I caution you to prepare. We'll be coming."

The line went dead.

"Wow," Mima said, eyes round. "What do you think? What if she calls again?"

"Despite the fact she thinks an ancestry website will solve the cannon issue, I think it's a longshot."

"She has the colonel's old address. What if she and her band of reenactors go there?"

"That's a valid point. But the fact is, they've had that address for years, and they've never marched up to seize their property." The phrase, all bark and no bite, came to mind. Or, more on point, all muskets and no balls. I chuckled to myself. That was possibly not the better metaphor.

Mima shook her head, adding another. "As K.C. likes to say, there's no teeth in it."

After nine years of learning the mayor's ways, I knew he was never a proponent of passing new legislation that just gummed an issue to death. "When you get back, make notes in the file. Right now, we've got to get inside."

I checked the time on my phone. Our meeting with the shelter director should have started two minutes ago.

We had just stepped out onto the sidewalk when Mima decided to leave the cannon file in her car. She rushed back. I watched her. In motion, she had the physique of a swimmer, strength in her arms and legs, but she was timid. At twenty-five, dealing with confrontation was not her strong suit. With more experience in the job and in life, she would learn to handle it. What I liked about her was the fact that she went away to a big university, graduated, and then returned to her hometown with a degree in history. Of the handful of candidates interviewed, she seemed to know that much of the job she applied for revolved around the town's history. Recording Havens' history would come first for her, like it had for me, with day-to-day activities filling in the gaps. Her hair was the color of toast and probably enhanced the warm comforting air that surrounded her. The French braid she wore yesterday was freed today, allowing wavy remnants to hang down the back of her sleeveless cotton dress.

My mind slipped back to yesterday, my last day working for one of the finest men I know. K.C. and I cultivated an amazing friendship. I found a free moment and went into his office. I knew the standard party that was always planned for an employee's last day had been arranged for me. K.C. would attend to send me off with well-chosen and heartfelt words. That was my concern.

"K.C.," I begged him, "please, don't make me cry."

His brown eyes softened. "Would it change anything if I cried with you? We could be a couple of blubbering fools." He grinned.

Still, I wasn't sure how I would get through it.

The party was held in the city council's conference room on the first floor. Fellow coworkers from all over the building dropped in for cake and punch and to wish me well. That included Lucy Matthews. Lucy was a ten-year employee in the mayor's office and my very good friend.

Of course, Gideon was there. Gideon Douglas and I live in unwedded bliss. He teaches history at local Eastwood University. He was standing with me when K.C. walked to the front of the room. He wore a business suit, finely tailored to his stout stature. The mayor's eyes met mine. Gideon, with loving insight, chose that moment to take my hand.

What K.C. did surprised me. He called Mima out of the crowd to join him. A blushing confusion colored her face as she stepped forward. He addressed Mima with a variation of the words I knew he

planned to bestow on me. “Mima, I want you to know what I’ve learned over the years: We stand on the shoulders of those who went before us. They possessed integrity, intelligence, and passion.”

Standing on my other side, Lucy whispered, “He’s talking about you.” I nodded.

“It is our duty to continue in the way it was first begun, which is to say, with unflagging strength and dedication.” K.C.’s voice faltered here and his shoulders slumped an inch, but he pulled them back and went on. “Together, I think we can meet this challenge and succeed. Are you with me?” He thrust out his hand and without hesitation, she took it. They grinned at each other to the sound of applause.

I wasn’t in tears, but there was a lump in my throat so large, words would never have passed it.

“And now to Wrenn.”

My head jerked up. What? The sneaky man promised not to make me cry.

His almond eyes held mine. “Your work here was a job awfully well done. Best of luck at Foundling.” He put his hands together and the others clapped with him.

Slowly, everyone filed out of the room. I smiled and whispered my thanks for their kind wishes. Lastly, Gideon left with Lucy and Mima. He promised to carry down a box of my things from my desk. “I’ll meet you in the lobby,” he said.

I stared at K.C. I was more touched by his farewell to the job than I could ever express. And that was correct; it was only a farewell to the job. He and I would forever be tied to each other by fond heartstrings. I eased forward and his arms stretched out. We hugged and tears filled my eyes. “Thank you, K.C., for what you said.”

In a choked voice, he said, “This is silly. We’ll probably go two days, then see each other again.”

Sniffing, I stepped back. “I’ll see you Saturday. Remember, the shelter event is Saturday.”

He fished his handkerchief out of a pocket and handed it to me. “Right. See.” His eyes lit. “No. That’s too long. How about coffee later this week?”

“You’re on!” I checked his handkerchief. I’d managed to dab my eyes without marking the cloth with mascara. He fell into step beside me as we headed toward the doorway.

And so, discussing next Saturday’s Sunrise Women’s Shelter

event lay before Mima and me. The sign out front noted this location as the shelter's administrative offices. The shelter owned other offsite locations. Secrecy was maintained on those addresses for the safety of the women and children harbored by Sunrise's efforts.

We entered a ten-foot square room, nicely decorated. "Good morning. We have a meeting with Sandy," I said to the receptionist.

"Yes, you're Wrenn Grayson, and this must be Mima Ludlow," she said.

"You're on top of things," I praised, glancing down at the desk nameplate. She was Hennie Randall, new to the job since I was last here.

Behind her, Sandy Donohue walked through her office doorway to join us. "Hello. Good to see you again."

I went through another round of introductions. "Sandy's been the shelter's director for what, four years now?"

"Good memory. You've got big shoes to fill, Mima."

"I know. A pleasure," Mima said, her hand in Sandy's.

"Well, come on in." Sandy waved us forward. "I'm so pleased the mayor has consented to be our ceremonial grand marshal for our first bike rally."

Mima spoke up. "He said he'd be happy to participate as long as he wasn't required to get on a bicycle."

We laughed. Our plump mayor on a bike with skinny tires did present an amusing picture.

"K.C. did like the idea of a starter pistol," Mima joked. She was going to fit in nicely when it came to the public-relations side of the job.

We were all settled in chairs around a small round table in one corner of Sandy's office. "Let me go over the plan. We have four teams, and each team is made up of four riders. With it being a rally-style race, the teams will leave the start-line at fifteen-minute intervals. There are three check-in points along the route." Sandy wore her dark hair long and parted to one side. She was a tall woman and heavily boned. Her pale blue blouse was tucked into a belted pair of navy slacks.

"How long is the course?" I asked out of general curiosity.

Chuckling, Sandy said, "Actually, I don't know the length of the course, but the estimate is that the course can be covered in an hour. It's timed. The team with the fastest time wins. The event should keep

moving. With teams going off every fifteen minutes and teams arriving, generally fifteen minutes apart, there won't be much down time."

"So that's it. That's how it works," I said, marveling at the simplicity.

"The only caveat is that all the team members must cross the finish-line together. If one of them has bike trouble, the other three can't continue without him or her."

"Can they help get the other member going again?" Mima inquired.

"No problem there. But if they can't, then the whole team must withdraw. If one of the members is exceptionally fast, he or she can't race ahead to improve their overall time at the finish. So, all together. A team effort. That's our slogan: Sunrise: A team effort."

"How does this raise money for the shelter? Was the rally race concept your idea?" I asked, finding the rally technique unique.

"Na-huh. Not mine. It was Chris McCready's. He's the minister across the street at All Souls. He's a bike rider, and the church has taken on the shelter for its community outreach project. He's very dedicated. He found the four groups. Well, he only had to enlist three groups. The church has a riding group of its own. To participate, each group had to raise the \$2,000 entry fee. So, that's a healthy profit for the shelter."

Mima and I traded approving looks. "Nice," I said. "I know one of the groups is manned by the police department's bike patrol officers. Georgie Crandall took the lead. Of course, their entry fee was not paid for with tax dollars."

"Oh, no. The officers raised the money separately." Sandy chuckled. "Georgie is such a delight. In fact, he and Chris are out right now, riding the route, making sure everything is in good order. They checked in before they left." Her cellphone lay on the table. She swiped it to light the screen. After a glance, she said, "They should be back fairly soon with a report."

"Who are the other two groups?" asked Mima.

"Tidwell's Sporting Goods and Hilltop Riders. That's another local bike group. Any more questions for me?"

I sent the question to Mima. She shook her head. We were already aware of the nine o'clock arrival time for the mayor and the starting location off Crooked Creek Road, so I shrugged my shoulders.

“Nothing else, I guess.”

“Good. Now,” Sandy said, laying her hands flat on the tabletop, “Hennie has something interesting to tell you.” Getting to our feet, Mima and I looked questioningly at each other, then followed Sandy out front. “When you called for the appointment, I told her you took a post at Foundling, and—” She broke off. “Well, I’ll let her tell you.” An afterthought arrived. “You’ve got time, I hope?”

“Sure,” I said, speaking for Mima, too.

In the context of Sandy’s reference to my post at Foundling, she meant my new archivist’s job. Foundling is the name of Webster Bronwyn’s estate. Webster built his mansion back in 1881. The Foundling Historical Society and Museum was formed in the hopes of opening the mansion as a tourist attraction. My job is to move that goal toward fruition.

Hennie Randall turned in her chair when we walked single-file from Sandy’s office. “I’ve primed them about your research, Hennie. You take it from here,” said Sandy.



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