

*Whisper
of
Footsteps*

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A Wrenn Grayson Mystery

Whisper of Footsteps

By Connie Chappell

I waited a safe distance away. The casual observer might assume I spied an old acquaintance among the trio descending the front porch steps. In truth, my old acquaintance was the manor house itself. Our intimacy felt fresh, familiar, as if a decade had not passed since our last conversation.

This house always speaks to me, I thought, as spears of sunlight warmed my back and I stepped over the curb to a grassy strip.

My hand rested on a cast-iron hitching post in the shape of a horse's head. I read the oversized FOR SALE sign wired high to bars of iron fencing. An OPEN HOUSE invitation was staked to the ground beneath. Happenstance brought me by on Sunday between the hours of one and three.

The fencing broke for the front walk. The old cement was cracked and pock-marked, darkened by age and weather, stained by wet leaves and countless footsteps, from horsemen's boots and dainty satin slippers to the many deliverymen's rubber soles and now my navy flats.

Previous visits never took me farther than the tree inside the front gate. Back then, I was a young, impressionable coed when I stepped off a square of cement and into the shade of a neighboring maple. I found an artist there, sitting on a stool, her canvas before her on an easel.

Introductions were merely a formality. Penny and I possessed

instant rapport. And both, it seemed, on assignment. Where she'd been commissioned by the owners to paint their Italian Renaissance home, I'd been encouraged by my architectural arts professor to write a paper for extra credit. In his opinion, my participation in class lacked enthusiasm, which my final grade would dully reflect.

The extra assignment evoked more disinterest. He expected me to make a cold, dry comparison of the style beyond the fence with the tone a tourist would read in a pamphlet supplied by the chamber of commerce for a walking tour through the town's historic district. My professor would flunk me for sure if I added a speck of warmth or sentiment.

The historic district was filled with two- and three-story structures, built in the last quarter of the eighteen-hundreds. The dignified mansions sat back a good distance from the street on magnificently tailored lawns. They shared an unblemished view of the world passing by, seeing a century turn, then, incredibly, another.

Every afternoon for a week, I sped off campus and found Penny perched on the same spot, the house bathed in the same light. We talked, and I watched her paint. With her delicate brushstrokes, the premise of my assignment clouded and changed. I became inspired to blend in an artist's perspective. Penny's viewpoint would add a human touch.

While I sat cross-legged on the lawn, while discussion of painting techniques turned personal, the house repeatedly made contact.

I mistook the buzzing around my head, appearing like snippets of home movies on brittle celluloid, for a mental reminder of my looming deadline. The imaginings became inextricably mixed with the heartfelt story I heard by week's end: Penny, a bride of two years, quietly revealed that twelve months earlier, she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Surgery followed swiftly. For one grieving heartbeat, the artist's brush quelled. By the time healing

strokes sought canvas again, a tear slipped off my cheek, a mournful track laid for the babies she would never know.

The house competed with the moment, and I looked up. A curtain fluttered behind an open, second-story window. One that would be blessed with morning light. Somehow, I understood the house had known sadness and loss. Not like Penny's. But the birth and death of a child.

Penny touched angular bristles to her palette, breathed a reminiscent sigh, and surprised me by talking of her dream for a family. She omitted great detail, but painted with wide strokes of teasing boys and shy girls. For my benefit, the house overlaid Penny's dream with particulars. It spun yarns of daily life, of chimney sweeps and spilled milk. The change of seasons ran by, and a smaller version of today's maple dropped leaves the color of sunbursts into a sharp wind. The house painted a picture of rowdy sons in knickers and daughters with their heads together, sharing secrets, their hairstyles swept up with tiny curls silhouetting innocent faces.

I was pulled back to the present by a questioning voice. I approached the real estate agent. She moved down the front steps ahead of the middle-aged couple. Behind them, the richly stained mahogany door stood wide. I reciprocated her polite invitation to step inside and look around by insisting she not rush away from the perspective buyers. If truth be told, I preferred time alone with the house since we were such old friends.

I passed slowly into the entry hall and looked from a polished floor up to a railed landing where my imagination played with scurrying sounds tempted to descend the staircase. When they shied away, I moved toward the doorway on my right. It opened to an empty expanse of hardwood floor. I crossed the hall and found its twin also divested of furniture. It was well lit, with draperies tied back.

That's when I saw it.

Of course, I thought, it would be sold with the house. The new owners would treasure Penny's painting.

I tiptoed to the landscape. It hung lengthwise over the fireplace, its mantelpiece made of chiseled marble, oak, and brick. I studied the familiar brushstrokes, then tracked the honey-stained frame to the corner signature. Penny's talented hand layered the acrylics, dabbing soft sunlight across the flowerbeds, hinting at a shadow behind the lamp post, and adding a myriad of finishing touches.

In the end, the paper I presented my professor wended an imagined history with architectural style. My infused enthusiasm made the mark. The paper was neither written with the house's view of the world, nor an artist's eye for detail. Even the human touch seemed somewhat abstract. The story became intertwined with the balance of hues from Penny's palette and memories supplied by the house.

I tried to breathe life into the whisper of little footsteps dancing along the garden path and the echo of a child's laughter spinning through the eaves. I told a charming tale about the heartthrob of anticipation waiting just beyond the threshold. And I prayed I did justice to the memory of bittersweet tears spilling over the sash of the nursery's window in the quiet of a September dawn. All that would never be for the artist mending her heart under the towering maple.

I heard a sound behind me and assumed the real estate agent would pounce on my captivation with the painting. Reluctantly, I turned toward the doorway.

My mind's eye stood Penny there, not looking a day older. Her gaze traveled to the ceiling. She tipped an ear upward as a loving mother might, straining to hear the sleeping breaths of a child.

"Listen," she said.

