



*A Wrenn Grayson
Mini Mystery*

Rose Petal Haunt

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Newt Randall grumbled, but his long strides took him Wrenn Grayson's way, toward the old Baxter Opera House, closed now for years. It was nearly eight o'clock and already dark as dread on this late October evening in the downtown neighborhood of Havens, Ohio.

Newt remembered Wrenn's initial explanation when he answered her call, just a few minutes earlier, in his condominium at the other end of the block. Her professor approved her senior project: a historic retelling of the opera house's glory days. That would include the forty years around the turn of the twentieth century when it thrived. In 1906, it also played host to the mysterious death of Lillian Garrison Bethune, a popular diva.

He met the journalism major two weeks ago when he, a retired newspaper reporter, appeared as guest lecturer before her class. The calling card he handed her as a polite gesture, when she corralled him afterwards with questions, facilitated her ease of contact tonight.

No good deed, he thought.

Newt and Wrenn met up in front of the library. She told him about spending her evening reading Priscilla Baxter's journals until the library closed.

He knew Mrs. Baxter's journals documented daily life in the opera house. What Wrenn couldn't possibly know was that mention of the journals sparked an unpleasant memory about a story he wrote early in his career, one that his publisher refused to

print.

“Until today,” Wrenn said, “you were the last person to sign the journals out from the library’s historical archives. I signed my name beneath yours on the checkout registry card.”

“You signed a registry card? That’s old school.”

“Sure is, but, you know, in the archives section, it’s their nature to stick with the *old* ways.”

Back in 1966, he, like she, sat at a library table under the librarian’s watchful eye and devoured those journals. Sixty years prior, Mrs. Baxter sat to write her account of Lillian’s untimely death while performing at the opera house.

“Why did you read Mrs. B’s journals back then? Were you working on a story?”

“Before we launch into that,” he said, “let’s stick to the subject of what couldn’t wait until morning.” Apparently, there was a symbol etched in the opera house’s stone façade she wanted him to see.

“Sure,” she said, passing him her flashlight, so she could manipulate the fancy tablet taken from a coat pocket. “Look at this.”

Stored there were images of page after page of Mrs. Baxter’s journal. The journal itself couldn’t be checked out. Snapping images with her electronic doodad was the next best thing. At her touch, photos of Mrs. Baxter’s cursive slid across the screen. Wrenn paused in the chronology for Mrs. Baxter’s drawings. He gave little credence to the sketches years ago, thinking they were connected to a particular opera, like her drawings of costumes and settings for scenes.

“I did some research online, and I think Mrs. B believed these symbols have some power over spirits in the paranormal world.”

She hooked him quite smoothly with the word spirits. Mrs.

Baxter claimed Lillian's ghost haunted the opera house, the building they now faced. "What kind of power?" he asked.

"The kind that wards off spirits." Wrenn enlarged one of the tablet's images, took back her flashlight, and handed him the device.

From the lotus blossom image on the screen, his eyes jumped to a duplicate image caught in Wrenn's flashlight beam. A lotus blossom was carved into the opera house's dark stonework beside the entrance door.

"You saw the lotus blossom in the journal, then came down here and, by chance, in the dark, found it engraved?" His question dripped with skepticism for the wannabe investigative reporter.

"No. I took a careful walk around the building before dark, then I went to the library. My thought is, Mrs. B had this lotus blossom engraved after Lillian's death."

Newt's heart ached and his stomach with it. Back in '66, he thumbed past the symbols recorded in the journal. Christ, he hadn't even noticed the carvings. If he made the same argument to his editor Wrenn now made with some research behind it, his story probably would have seen print.

While he fumed with himself, Wrenn went on about the lotus blossom's meaning in the preternatural world. How she thought Mrs. Baxter used it to keep Lillian's ghost inside the theater, grounded and centered.

The obvious question was, why would anyone work this hard to keep a ghost captured? Newt challenged the opinionated woman with a variation on that theme. "Oh, you think you *know* what was in Mrs. Baxter's mind, do you?"

"You read the journals. It's easy to get a sense of her. She was phenomenal. She followed the leads, spoke to people. She had an investigator's instinct. The fact that the crime was murder didn't stop her."

"She didn't solve the murder," he said, still terse over his

rookie mistake.

“We don’t know that. No one was arrested, tried, or convicted, but she may have solved it. The best part is, she wrote it all down.”

He still held the tablet. With his middle finger, he pushed through the pages. He remembered the evidence Mrs. Baxter laid out. Her version supported murder while Police Detective Winkler concluded that Lillian’s fall from the opera house balcony was suicide. The diva had, the day of her death, been ousted from her starring role in the Italian opera, *Lucia di Lammermoor*. The opera’s director called her temperamental, unusually nervous. Her distractions ruined one particular rehearsal when she saw a shadow at the back of the house and cried out in fear. The director reported to Mrs. Baxter that no one stood there, but still, the diva stamped out of rehearsal.

When an ear was needed, Mrs. Baxter lent hers to young Lillian. It seemed a handsome man named Oswald Stiller entered Lillian’s life in Havens. He charmed her with constant attention. Dozens and dozens of red roses were delivered to her dressing room throughout her first few days in town. By then, Lillian reported seeing a certain glint in Oswald’s eye and sensing a growing possessiveness. Her decision to withdraw from his company was met with ungentlemanly behavior. That was proven by bruises on Lillian’s wrist the next day. While the stripes of discoloration faded from purple to puce, the red roses continued in their delivery.

“So what’s your take on Oswald Stiller? Resident of Havens? Traveling businessman? Or asylum escapee?”

“Stalker,” Wrenn said.

“You believe the women’s version?”

“Mrs. B marched in and out of hotels, rooming houses, and the town’s half dozen greenhouses with the man’s description.”

The idea of marching took them on a tour around the opera house so Wrenn could show him the other engravings.

“As I recall,” Newt said, “she had no luck finding an address for Oswald, but she did find the greenhouse where he purchased the roses. Philpot’s.” It went out of business forty years ago. “No address for him there, either.”

“Which means Oswald wanted to go suspiciously undetected.”

“Philpot also told Mrs. Baxter he thought Oswald seemed sane.”

“Of course. Oswald’s mind was sick, but practiced. He knew how to fit into society. Then, after his sickness was fed, he knew how to vanish.”

She drew up to the building’s side door and trained the flashlight on an etching consisting of symmetrically curved lines, the circumference of which was oval-shaped and filled the large stone’s face.

“I researched this. It’s called a shou.” She spelled it. “I couldn’t find it in Webster’s or in an online dictionary, but I found the word was the name of a county in China. Not quite related, but interesting, because I believe all these ancient understandings have the same connection from an earlier day. Shou in Chinese means longevity. Longevity is one of the Five Blessings in Chinese teachings. The fifth blessing is a peaceful death. That seemed to link what Mrs. B tried to achieve for Lillian. Peace throughout eternity.”

Their walk around the building concluded at the alley door, beside which Newt saw another lotus blossom and gave in to curiosity. “Okay. What’s your theory?”

“I think Mrs. B had these symbols engraved at each door to keep Lillian’s spirit trapped inside.”

“Wouldn’t their placement outside the opera house keep spirits from entering?”

“But couldn’t the reverse be true? If the symbols keep

spirits from moving past them, then Lillian wouldn't be able to leave, keeping her spirit trapped. And who knows, maybe there are other engravings inside."

"And you think spirits are limited to using doors?"

"Several how-to websites on exorcisms tell the layperson to open all the doors to the—" She waved her hand, searching for words.

"Haunted house," he supplied.

"Okay. Haunted house, so the spirit can be flushed out. Again, why couldn't it work in reverse?"

"I don't know. I'm neither an expert nor a spiritual adviser."

"But don't you consider Mrs. B's logic flawless? She thought it would work, and she ventured to try. Take the order of Mrs. B's entries." She swapped the flashlight for the tablet, then scrolled through the pages. "She talks about Lillian, their growing friendship, Lillian's giddiness over her new suitor, then her fear. *After* Mrs. B's investigation, *after* she argued with the detective that it was murder, not suicide, then the symbols come up in the journal."

Newt felt his jaw clench at his inattentiveness to essential information when he pored over the journals years ago.

"I don't think she paid for engravings on the oft-chance Lillian might become a ghost, might show herself. I think Mrs. B knew Lillian's spirit existed inside the opera house. Mrs. B didn't avenge her murder, so Lillian's spirit couldn't cross over."

He cocked his head toward the building. "Do you think Lillian's spirit is still in there?"

"That's what I intended to ask you."

As Wrenn circumvented his question, he stepped around hers. "I'll answer that, but not until tomorrow."

“Aw, come on. Please,” she begged.

“I’m what they call spry for being past seventy. Even at that, spry needs sleep. Meet me right here at two tomorrow.” He left her at her car, then traipsed on to his condo.

The next morning, he made a phone call to the man he happened to know owned the dilapidated opera house. That call produced a key. Wrenn already waited when he arrived at the alleyway door. This time, he brought the flashlights since the opera house boasted no electricity. Few windows would provide little daylight of their own accord.

Wrenn carried her unbridled excitement over the sill plate and into a dingy hallway behind the stage. The air inside was stale. Dust lived in every breath. He kicked something, then put the wooden doorstop to use, propping the outside door open for the wanted fresh air and sunlight.

“This way,” he said and led her around two stacks of boxes blocking the corridor. “I think these are the perfect surroundings to tell what I know about Lillian’s ghost.” Wrenn’s attention was rapt. “In 1966, I’d been on the paper two years. I worked late one night and stepped out to the street for a breather. It was around eleven. And the date was,” he paused dramatically, “March twenty-fifth.”

Wrenn gasped. “The same date Lillian was murdered.”

“Exactly sixty years later. While I used the night air to clear my head—I could go a little longer without sleep back then—a strange woman walked by. Her hair stuck out from beneath a knit cap. Her coat was tattered and dirty. But it was the small black iron cauldron she carried that prompted me to strike up a conversation.” From memory, he spoke the opening sentences from the article he wrote that was never pressed onto newsprint. “Maisie Sewell performed an incantation inside the historic opera house to free the spirit of Lillian Garrison Bethune from its entrapment between worlds. Why is unknown.”

When he realized Wrenn no longer walked beside him, he turned. From two steps back, she shone her flashlight’s beam

directly into his eyes. He raised a deflective hand.

“You are a despicable man.”

“Here it comes.”

“How could you just walk off last night and not tell me this?”

“I told you I needed sleep. I also need whatever’s left of my eyesight. Would you, please?”

She lowered the light. “Who’s Maisie Sewell?”

They walked on. “After that night, I made some inquiries. The general consensus said she was the town’s eccentric hermit and a bit off-center.” He used his flashlight to pull down a cobweb. “I followed her down here to the opera house. Along the way, she mumbled something about ‘Miss Bethune’s death’ and said she came to perform an exorcism.”

“An exorcism,” Wrenn said, enthralled. “Excellent.”

They stopped just outside the open balcony door.

“Most of the downtown workers I talked to heard stories about the opera house’s ghostly diva. It had been years since the unexplained death, but the stories didn’t fade away.” He shone his flashlight beam on the carpeted staircase. “Well, let’s go up.”

At the top, he led her down the main aisle to the front row. It would have been ludicrous to speak of Maisie now when they stood on the very floorboards where Lillian went over the balcony’s wide half-wall. As if choreographed, they shone their lights down to the auditorium. Lillian’s neck snapped when she struck the center aisle below. Newt already scanned the area around his and Wrenn’s feet and the wall’s edge. No rose petals, fresh or petrified.

Mrs. Baxter claimed Oswald Stiller somehow lured Lillian to the balcony, then “flung her over” the stone railing. Velvety red rose petals, Oswald’s trademark, were found along the top edge

of the balcony's wall. She insisted to Detective Winkler that the petals were scattered by Oswald after Lillian was pushed. Otherwise, how could two petals have ended up in Lillian's hair? Mrs. Baxter discovered Lillian's cold body the next morning. Detective Winkler asserted that a depressed Lillian could have scattered the petals herself. The two petals could have gone over with Lillian, whose greater weight found the floor first.

"Where did Oswald go?" Wrenn asked. "None of Mrs. Baxter's entries spoke of confronting him, nor of Detective Winkler relaying the results of any contact."

"I wouldn't assume he disappeared from town. If he lived here and was never charged, his life would simply go on." He led her back downstairs. As they honed in on the light leaking through the alley door, Wrenn's beam searched the wall on either side of the opening. They stopped short when the faded outline of a lotus blossom appeared in her cone of light.

"Mrs. B hung an amulet there."

"Your theory is proving itself true, young lady." While the hair on his neck stood up, he laid out another piece of Maisie's story. "Things grew extremely weird when I followed Maisie around to this door. She muttered things like, 'Bewitch the spirit. Cast it out.' She let her hand hover over the door handle, like she summoned some magical power. The door should've been locked when she grabbed the handle, but it turned easily. Just inside, she pulled a leather pouch and a thin strip of what appeared to be animal fur out of her coat pocket. She hung the animal fur around her neck. She got a homemade candle lit and walked off into the dark corridor. I watched, trying to decide if I had nerve enough to follow."

"You were scared?"

"Hell, yes! There was something unearthly about the whole thing. But before I made a decision, the door slammed shut and locked." Wrenn's eyes bulged. "No one," he said, "that I saw...was there."

Her shoulders hunched with what he assumed was a

shiver.

“I waited around. Then, precisely at midnight, a blinding light shot through every window and door. It could only have taken seconds. After that, everything went dark.”

“I read about bright lights like that in some of my research books.”

He walked her outside. “I stood right here when the light and that pane of glass exploded.” He pointed up to an attic window. “Shards rained down. Cut me right here.” He turned his head to show her the scar that sat high on his cheek.

“What did you do?”

“I tried the door, and it opened. I searched thoroughly. Maisie was nowhere.”

Wrenn stared at him for a long moment. “But the place is big. She could have left while you were in another part of the building.”

He shrugged. “Back then, with blood on my cheek, I wasn’t convinced.”

Wrenn tilted her head up to the window, long ago repaired. “That’s how Lillian’s spirit got around the engravings at the doors.”

“I guess I thought Lillian crossed over. Somehow, Maisie got caught in the updraft and evaporated by her own dark magic.” He shook his head. “I don’t know. It was a weird night.” Newt used the borrowed key to relock the door. “I wrote the story and took it to my editor. He deemed it sensationalism and wouldn’t print it. That didn’t sit well since I was an eye-witness. A day or two later, I realized I hadn’t really witnessed the main event. I was outside.”

“You saw the light, the shards, an empty opera house.”

“None of that added up to a story the paper would print. All I had was a ghost no one at the paper believed in, in the first place. How do you prove an opera house is no longer haunted?”

Back out on the main street, Newt sighed. "A couple of weeks later, my editor told me he saw Maisie out south of town, heading down a lane into Compton Woods." The old foolishness Newt felt reared again. A cub reporter's folly made real by an editor's grin. "The word was she lived in a cabin in the woods."

"You went looking for her!" Wrenn's green eyes shone.

"Sure. I wanted the rest of the story."

She grabbed his arm. "So you know where the cabin is! What did she tell you?"

"I swear, I saw intelligence in her eyes." His reflective tone calmed Wrenn's ardor.

"You thought she faked madness?"

"Let's just say, I expected to hear the echoes of an unwell mind. The woman literally came out of the dark to exorcise a ghost!"

"Why did she take up this cause? Because it feels like a cause."

He considered the young woman. "You're the expert on women's feelings. Why?"

Quite poised, Wrenn said, "Given the fact she probably kept her own company for years, she built her confidence and convinced herself to do it. She heard and believed the stories about a ghost. She wanted to help, not unlike Mrs. B, whose sanity was never called into question. We don't know Maisie's upbringing, but it doesn't sound like the white-picket-fence variety. I mean, the real question is, did it work?" In the same breath, she shifted gears. "Newt, let's go out to the cabin. You know where it is. Please, take me to see it."

He complied. Arguing would equal both a second folly and a losing proposition.

Newt and Wrenn emerged through tall evergreens into a

small clearing. Maisie's lifeless gray shack sat fifty yards away. In the late afternoon, the flashlights they carried remained off, although much of autumn's light was filtered and failing.

"Are we working on the probability that she's dead?" Wrenn asked.

"Long dead."

Underbrush crept from the woods toward the cabin. Newt's and Wrenn's progress proceeded at the same pace. Wrenn kept her eyes on the prize: a glimpse into Maisie's life. Hearing about the cauldron, animal fur, and incantations were not enough. Wrenn joked about the leather pouch containing eye of Newt. When they first walked down the muddy lane into the woods, he found levity in the quip. Now, it felt like an inescapable premonition as his eyes constantly searched the sidelines for predators.

"It was right here," Newt said, stopping, pointing toward a tree on his left. "The day I spoke with Maisie, I never got any closer to the cabin than this scraggly cypress."

"Why?"

"She came out to meet me. She dabbled in divination, crystal balls, fortunetelling, and such."

"She knew you were coming?"

"Yeah." He cocked a mischievous eyebrow. "I guess you didn't get a look at the name signed in above mine on the library's registry card? It was a scrawl."

"Whose was it?" Instantly, her mouth gaped. She reasoned the answer. "Maisie's? You're just telling me now?" Her questions came in a loud whisper.

"Timing in journalism is everything, my dear. Yes, we were standing right here when she put me on to the journals. She was not the nutcase everyone thought." Suddenly, a yellow light caught in his peripheral vision.

He turned toward the cabin. A porch light he hadn't noticed before hung next to the door on a cabin isolated from electrical service. The cabin door either unlatched itself, or someone inside stood in shadow. Newt felt inexplicably drawn toward the tumbledown shack. He took a step, but Wrenn held his arm.

"Did you see that?"

"I think it's an invitation."

"But from whom? Lillian, I'd guess, wouldn't you? By the time you found Maisie, did she let on that Lillian was with her?" Her tone said she figured he kept another fact under wraps.

"No, and I didn't think to ask." He layered his reply with sass.

"After you read the journals, did you come back to ask Maisie if she got the story from Lillian? Did Oswald push her? Was Mrs. B correct?"

He knocked lightly on her head. "Hello, Wrenn. I didn't know Lillian was here to relay the story, if it is, in fact, Lillian enticing us to visit."

"Someone or something is in there."

"So, do you want to go talk with a ghost?" he said, better defining their host.

Their elbows bumped as they eased toward the cabin. The door creaked open another few inches at the hand of a wispy breeze. They stepped up to the planked porch. Wrenn and a baffled Newt froze.

There, sprinkled where a welcome mat might lay, were fresh rose petals, one of them seemed to rock on a current of air. Newt read it as a warning.

Oswald Stiller. A possibility he hadn't considered. By now, Oswald would be a half-century past spry, so he must be dead.

But he had not intended to be forgotten.

Newt raised an eyebrow to Wrenn. She answered his question with a serious expression and a quiet nod. He swung the door open further and went inside. Wrenn followed, close on his heels.

When his pupils adjusted, it surprised him to find a distinct lack of clutter. Furnishings were sparse. A chair angled toward the cold hearth. A cot against the wall. A planked table. A stool beside it.

Wrenn sidled toward the cauldron on the drain board and looked inside. Her footprints trailed behind her in the dirt on the floor.

On one wall, a long shelf held apothecary and canning jars. He couldn't even hazard a guess as to the odd assortment of contents. Some held powders. It felt more like Maisie practiced medicine, not a dark art, then he spotted the crystal ball on the ledge. A small burlap bag leaned against it.

He made his first move toward the heart of the cabin. Behind him, the door moaned. He watched. It seemed to waver, undecided. He thought back to alleyway door, so long ago, that slammed shut on its hinges. Across the cabin, Wrenn whispered his name. He saw a look of awe on her face. She raised a tentative hand. It pointed toward the opposite corner. Even as he turned, rotisserie slow, he sensed the chill of a presence. That sensation presented itself as a sphere lit from within and hanging in the shadows about shoulder height.

Over the eerie course of several breathless seconds, the bubble of light stretched. It formed a woman wearing a gown that met the floor. Long curls draped her shoulders.

Newt's heart jumped and he muffled a shout when something touched his arm. "Christ, Wrenn!" She stood beside him now, having made the trip with uncanny stealth.

"Sorry," she breathed. "It's Lillian. Do you see—?"

“Yes, I see the rose petals.” Dried rose petals appeared to be caught in her hair. The crimson was visible against the spirit’s iridescence.

Newt stepped away from Wrenn. “Lillian, this is Wrenn, and I’m Newt. Do you remember me? Maisie and I talked outside, shortly after you came here. We’re not here to frighten you.”

That was a switch. He thought about his words. The humans scaring the ghost. But it seemed to him, the essence of Lillian covered. In death, she feared the same thing she feared in life: Oswald Stiller.

Realizing that, Newt became the man very few people knew. Rarely in his career, and only when facing a most trembling of victims, did the gravelly reporter soften to the caring person who spoke to Lillian.

“We know Oswald’s been here,” he said. “We saw the rose petals. We can only imagine how long this stalking has gone on. But you don’t need to stay here. You’re making it too easy for him. I can only hope that Maisie shielded you for as long as she could. Lillian, you can fight back. At least, leave the cabin. Locate another place for yourself. Dig deep. Find your strength. Promise me.”

Throughout Newt’s pep talk, he observed Lillian closely. When he nicked comments about Oswald, rose petals, and stalking, Lillian’s translucence dulled. His strummed words of encouragement caused the being’s embodiment to brighten.

By this method of gauging her translucence, he thought they could distinguish an answer to the age’s-old question: Was she pushed, or had she jumped over the balcony wall? But that was no longer the issue, not in his mind. The issue was the terror this woman suffered for decades at the hands of a stalker. That crime deserved a fitting punishment. If Newt ventured a guess, he’d deduce that Lillian jumped, though. Oswald would never have pushed her. He’d want her alive. For around her, he could harness his vile sociopathic power.

A long moment passed. There was no change in the

spirit's aura by which to discern her feelings and, therefore, her willingness to adopt his plan. He urged Lillian again. "Promise me."

Newt stared hard. Still, her illumination remained steady. Two pulse beats later, the door hinges groaned. "I guess we're leaving," he said.

"Do you think you got through?"

"Don't know."

They both gave Lillian one last look, then stepped through the portal.

Once outside, Wrenn rushed to grab an ancient broom that leaned against the porch railing, its wooden handle bleached a weathered grayish white. Each brushing motion that swept the rose petals out of sight intensified more than Wrenn's last; so did her contempt for Oswald Stiller. "It's a sickness. A sickness that doesn't die with death. How did that man escape hell?"

Newt agreed wholeheartedly with her sentiment.

Her task complete, they stepped down to the forest's floor and out into the clearing. Suddenly, the most beautifully melodic voice bade them farewell.

They spun to see a figure framed in the cabin's doorway. More human than ghost for her performance, Lillian appeared composed of a thin pearly layer. Newt, not a patron of the arts, suspected she sang a scene from *Lucia*.

Wrenn and he stood as still as statues while the image bowed deeply, then crystalized into something resembling digital pixels, and dissolved.

"Where did she go?" Wrenn said, inching forward.

Newt held her back. In front of them, he saw a rippling current of air coming. It hit him. His arms billowed out.

“What happened?” Wrenn spoke with sober concern.

“She passed right through me.”

“It doesn’t feel like she’s inside you? Permanent like?”

He didn’t believe that was the case. “No. She stayed just long enough to make a promise.”

Up at the cabin, the ghostly porch light went out, but his heart was charged with the epic the storyteller within would write.

The End