

"Wright is in a class by herself."—*Library Journal*

The
BELL
TOLLS
at
TRAEGER
HALL

JAIME JO WRIGHT

Author of The House on Foster Hill

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To my sister, Brooke

I love you more each day,
and I will never love you less.

WAVERLY

In an interview shortly before her death in 1950; memories from two weeks prior to the murders:

Darkness encased Traeger Hall like a shroud. The darkness never lifted either. It hadn't lifted since I arrived a year ago at the impressionable age of eighteen. It wasn't an altogether awful place, of course. In fact, it was a mansion in comparison to the surrounding farmhouses and cottages in its vicinity. But, even if the sun was shining, somehow Traeger Hall remained in the shadows, perched on the top of a hill overlooking the small town of Newton Creek. And it was that shadowy, secretive lordship that gave my spirit pause.

Leopold Traeger, my uncle by marriage, settled in Newton Creek decades earlier as a young man. He built his sawmill, soon realized great success, and as a result the town rose up around the creek that powered the mill. Besides owning and operating the sawmill, he eventually became owner of the Newton Creek Bank plus several other properties, a veritable lord of his own fiefdom, all nestled among the rolling farmland of the state of Wisconsin.

Uncle Leopold made sure everyone knew who owned the bulk of Newton Creek when he moved into what became known as Traeger Hall, erected on the area's highest hill and flanked by oak trees on its eastern and western ends. The great house was rectangular and crafted entirely of brick,

including a veranda that featured right angles only and a bell tower on its east side.

This bell tower—or so my aunt, who married Leopold five years prior to my arrival, told me—was added on to the house shortly before their wedding. Its massive bell had never been rung and was so heavy the wind couldn't budge it even in the fiercest of storms. It was quite certain, then, that human hands were ringing it when a person heard the Traeger Hall bell. However, I was told it would never be rung except in the event of an attack of a deadly foe, which was something Leopold Traeger predicted *would* happen sooner or later.

Because he'd lost his mind. At least that was my theory. The demons Greed and Ego had eaten his faculties—if I gave them names—leaving his mind riddled with decay. Why else would he run back and forth in the halls at all hours of the night, sneaking around in the shadows one moment and all but howling at the moon the next? I was convinced he was so consumed by himself that the ultimate stroke to his arrogance was to believe someone, somewhere, was devising his murder.

Oh, that we could all be so famous as to be first on the list for someone to kill!

On second thought, I preferred my anonymity, although even that was hard to come by now that I lived in Traeger Hall and put up with the pompous, heavy-handed dominance Uncle Leopold lorded over my aunt and myself as her ward.

"Remember your composure, Waverly." Uncle Leopold's stern voice raised goose pimples along my arms. I was not a mild-mannered niece by any stretch, and yet when it came to my uncle, he could silence me with a look from those steel-gray eyes of his—and a strike from the back of his hand, which had been executed a few times. I therefore learned my lesson: I listened—or seethed rather—in silence.

"I have given you respite here at Traeger Hall, and you are representative of our entire enterprise."

Uncle's gray sideburns twitched along with his jaw. His mustache covered his upper lip and hung down on either side of his mouth like inverted antlers. Under my quiet perusal, his face hardened.

"Have I made myself clear?" he added.

"Yes, Uncle." My meekness was not feigned. I quailed under his sour expression. There was a reason Uncle Leopold had been awarded such influence over Newton Creek. There was nothing so intimidating as a man with a heightened sense of omnipotence, especially when time and again he'd been proven to be in the right.

That was both the gift and the problem of Uncle Leopold. He only argued when he knew for a fact he was correct, and it seemed he was *always* correct. He was beyond mathematical equations of rational thought, common sense being his primary demand of others, and he reserved little space for unreasonable emotion. And yet I still believed he was verging on a state of insanity.

I, however, was not.

Still, Uncle Leopold was confronting my display of tears or, as he put it, my "irrational emotional outburst." For which there was little grace.

I had dared to mourn my dead sparrow. A little feathered creature I had nursed along all summer after it had careened into the window of the front parlor. It had been a tiny ray of sunshine in this otherwise questionable world of Traeger Hall, and now it was dead. No gratitude was given to Mrs. Carp's cat who roamed Newton Creek as if equal in authority to Uncle Leopold, master of the house.

"God is aware of all His creatures, Uncle." It was my attempt to put him in his place.

Uncle Leopold was unimpressed.

"And He understands that when they die, such is the wages of sin."

Uncle's eyes bored into my own. I lifted my chin, then tilted it back down as his eyebrow raised. Where was my aunt when I needed her? She and I weren't particularly close, but she at least would take my side on occasion. Rarely, though, and probably not in defense of a dead bird.

"Am I not allowed to grieve?" I realized immediately that I should not have asked such a question.

Uncle Leopold cleared the space between us, his face pressing downward and terribly close to mine. He reached to grip my upper arm with a bruising effect that made every nurturing moment with my beloved sparrow a luxury not worth the price.

"It was a bird," he gritted out, far more furious than he should be over my show of emotion.

That my existence made him so angry confused me and, to be honest, frightened me as well.

"Birds come and go," he continued in a patronizing tone. "Crying about it is a ridiculous waste of time when we have more important things to attend to." Another raised eyebrow was the exclamation point at the end of my uncle's sentence.

In that moment—and not for the first time—I wished him dead.



WAVERLY PEMBROOKE

**NEWTON CREEK, WISCONSIN
SEPTEMBER 1890**

One would think coming upon the scene of one's uncle and aunt's brutal slaying would be enough to send one into a dead faint. Instead, it was the cut of the trocar into her uncle's corpse that caused Waverly Pembroke to slide off her seat and onto the floor in a pile of black mourning silk. She was brought to by smelling salts and the perturbed tapping of male fingertips against her cheek. First a blurry face with skin darker than most of the area's European descendants came into view, and then vivid blue eyes narrowed into irritated slits.

"As I said before you became one with the floor, Miss Pembroke, the embalming process is not for the faint of heart, let alone a female, and certainly not in one's own home."

Waverly blinked and tried to gather her senses. She wasn't fond of weakness and simpering and the poppycock that went along with it, perhaps because her aunt—her very murdered aunt who lay awaiting her own embalming—had always encouraged it.

"No man will ever feel needed if you laud yourself to be as intelligent and strong as they are."

Waverly struggled into a sitting position, batting off the undertaker's hands of assistance. That was precisely the point she *wanted* to make to men. She was as intelligent as they were, yet her body had betrayed her strength.

"I'm . . . I'm quite all right." Waverly reached for the chair she'd been sitting in and pulled herself up.

"You aren't." The undertaker's gravelly vocal cords grated on her nerves.

"You're not a doctor, Mr. Fitzgerald. You're merely an undertaker." Waverly hoped it would put the man, a mere ten years her senior, in his place. She had known him since her arrival at Traeger Hall a year ago. They were acquaintances, perhaps bordering on hesitant friendship. But now? This was quite embarrassing indeed.

His mustache quirked, and Waverly had no idea how to interpret the expression on his face. That her words seemed to have no effect irked her. "And yet here I am, applying the smelling salts." He shoved the cork back into its vial. "As I stated before, Miss Pembroke, you should take your leave during this process. It is unseemly at best. Your uncle is barely clothed at the moment, and the inappropriateness of your presence will be gossiped about for the next decade."

Her uncle. Waverly allowed her vision to rest again on his body. Wiry gray hair sprung from her uncle's chest that had been recently bathed from the crusted blood that had covered it. All fourteen stab wounds now seemed like small cuts in spongy flesh rather than the violent marks of death. His face

was gray in pallor. His arms lay by his sides, and a white sheet covered his nether regions.

“My uncle has no opinion at the moment,” Waverly muttered, swallowing the nausea she felt. “His requests prior to his death were very clear. His body was not to be removed from Traeger Hall, and a member of the Traeger family must be present with his body until lowered into the grave.”

And that responsibility fell onto her shoulders, the only remaining heir—all gratitude given to her aunt—to the Traeger Estate, bank, sawmill, and subsequent authority earned by status over the town of Newton Creek, Wisconsin.

“That is hardly unusual, hence the term *wake*. But do you truly, Miss Pembroke, intend to sleep beside the corpses until a dead man’s wishes are appeased? I hardly imagine your uncle meant his words to be taken so literally as to deny you the privilege of leaving the room. It’s ungodly. A ridiculous request, if I may say so.” Mr. Fitzgerald retorted and returned to the side of the deceased Leopold Traeger.

“You may not.” Waverly folded her gloved hands in her lap and straightened her posture.

“And how long did your uncle say he was to remain unburied?” Mr. Fitzgerald’s voice was muffled as he bent over the body.

Waverly swallowed back another wave of nausea. “Seven days,” she answered, “to be certain of his state of death.”

“Seven days. Four, I understand, is traditional, but seven?” Mr. Fitzgerald jabbed the trocar into the abdominal cavity once again, intent on releasing the embalming fluid that contained a mixture of arsenic and herbs. “If this hasn’t killed him and he awakens in four, I will resign from my position as undertaker. We’d best double the request for floral arrangements. I would also advise you to consider obtaining incense and the like and burning it slowly.” He lifted his head and gave the spacious front parlor of Traeger Hall a once-over. “This room is going to be quite ripe by the end of seven days.”

“At which point *then* we shall rest,” Waverly added.

His oceanic blue eyes locked on to hers. “Miss Pembroke, only God rests on the seventh day. We, on the other hand, shall be busy burying the dead.”

2



JENNIE PHILLIPS

**NEWTON CREEK, WISCONSIN
SEPTEMBER—PRESENT DAY**

She had buried her dead—and that was okay. It was this mud, the flooding, and the earth beneath her feet making sucking sounds with each step that was overwhelming her. But wasn't that a lot like life? Just when you thought you were getting back on a path that was solid, more predictable, finally pursuing your passion, another catastrophic event derailed it all.

Jennie Phillips had spent her early twenties in France, the Louvre her playground, sending pics to her mom of the works of Delacroix and Jean Auguste Ingres and Rembrandt and, well, pick an artist who embodied their very soul on the canvas they painted and that was the unbreakable tie Jennie had experienced with her mother. But today? Today she was thirty, her mom's passing from cancer only months in her rearview mirror, she'd lost her ties to the art world in the last two years of caring for

Mom, and now she was still cleaning up after her dead father—a task she'd unwillingly inherited after Mom's death.

Dad had left an unending dossier of historical property investments throughout the United States. He'd left a lot of money too, so Jennie didn't have to work ever again if she didn't want to. Still, even five years after the heart attack ended his narcissistic reign of oppression, his lawyers were still trying to sift through all he'd left behind.

Jennie lifted her foot as her rain boot sank into the soggy earth. Water flooded the boot's imprint in the mud. The farmland of central Wisconsin was about as far away from Paris as she could get. The phone call she'd received from Dad's attorney had changed her plans—and her flight. Paris and reentry into her cocoon of classical studies had been shelved once again.

All because of this place.

Newton Creek.

Or more specifically, Traeger Hall.

Movement snagged Jennie from her internal musings. She scanned her surroundings as if just awakening to them. The land to the north rose in a steady slope leading to the hilltop, the highest point of the township of Newton Creek, all the way up to the imposing, boxlike edifice called Traeger Hall with its unusual bell tower. She had yet to visit the mansion because the unexpected and rare fall flooding hadn't affected the house and grounds like it had everything else.

A shadow slipped behind an oak tree in the path ahead of Jennie. The tree's bark had turned black from the rain, and its branches were already losing their leaves. Jennie tilted her head, narrowing her eyes as she peered at the small form behind the oak.

"Hello there!" Jennie called out, infusing a lighthearted warmth into her tone that she didn't feel inside. Beyond the tree, she saw more trees dotting the flatland and, in the distance, the dilapidated remains of Traeger Sawmill.

Jennie could make out the form of a boy, maybe eight years old, hiding behind the tree, craning his neck to eye her with curiosity. She sloshed her way forward on the trail that ran around the base of the Traeger hill, toward what had once been the primary economic support for the community back in the 1800s: the sawmill.

All that was left of the sawmill were the skeletal remains of one of the buildings along with the mill wheel, still poised over Newton Creek. It was as if the wheel wanted to return to work, but its elderly and fragile condition prevented it from doing so.

“Hello?” she called again, and the boy stepped into full view but didn’t return her greeting. He stared at her with large brown eyes, framed by circular glasses that might have given him a Harry Potter vibe if he wasn’t so lanky and his hair so unruly with black curls. He wore a white Pokémon T-shirt with a Poké Ball at its center. His blue jeans were cuffed high, and his green rain boots sported Pikachu faces.

“Are you okay?” Jennie tried to engage the boy, wondering where the boy’s parents were and why he was roaming the countryside alone.

The boy motioned with his hand, waving toward himself. He looked over his shoulder at the sawmill and then back to her.

“Is something wrong?”

The boy didn’t seem to have any intention of responding. But as she came alongside him, he beckoned for her to follow. Curious and concerned about the boy’s welfare, Jennie pursued him, their feet slopping through the muck. It grew muddier and slicker as they neared the old sawmill.

Newton Creek had been blown out entirely by the flooding. What had once been a delightful small stream that fly fisherman could wade in and catch brown trout from its undercuts, was now a wide swath of clay muck. The rains had caused the creek to swell, overflowing its banks until the small, man-made

dam above the mill gave way, leaving Newton Pond to finish the job of destroying the landscape.

The flood had forever changed the creek. Now only a trickle of water remained, a few feet in width and shin-deep.

The boy hopped across the creek by stepping strategically on exposed flat stones, revealed by the draining of the creek. As Jennie struggled to keep up with the child, her foot slipped and landed with a splash. Her boot was barely tall enough to protect her jeans, and mud splattered over the front of the purple galoshes. The clay earth tried to swallow her foot like quicksand, but she tugged it free with a watery *squelch*.

“Wait up!” Jennie called after the boy.

Ignoring her, he continued on, scampering toward the mill wheel.

The ruins of Traeger Sawmill marred the otherwise natural surroundings of meadow and rocky earth. What had once been an area rife with workers, roads, wagons, and domestic animals was now nothing more than a demolished creek, bordered by a meadow on one side and a soybean field on the other.

Newton Creek had died right along with Leopold, Traeger Hall’s original owner, back at the turn of the century. What had supposedly been a burgeoning village and a growing economy was handed down to the few folks left behind, leaving them pieces of ghost-town memorabilia and not much else to speak of.

The boy balanced on a rock that was dotted with lichen the color of mint. Spring water gurgled past it as though trying to keep Newton Creek alive. He pointed toward the mill wheel.

Jennie stood on the bank and leaned out. “I don’t see anything.” She squinted. That wasn’t entirely true, as she saw rusted tin cans half buried in the mud of the former creek bed. And she saw scraps of wood and old iron spikes littering the area, with water trickling over and around everything. The worst part was the fish. A few small trout flopped and flipped in

puddles, trying to make their way to the deeper part of the water's flow to survive the demise of their creek.

It already stank of rotted dead things and algae mixed in a cocktail of amoebas and frogs.

The boy shook his finger as if to mime what his mouth could not voice. *There!* He pointed once more toward the base of the sawmill wheel that tilted precariously from its moorings and appeared ready to collapse alongside what remained of the mill's building.

Jennie craned her neck to better see what the boy was pointing at. Her breath caught in her throat. She focused on the five brownish-white *things* sticking up in the mud. A claw. A wild grasp, frozen in time as if reaching for the sky.

In a split second, Jennie grappled for the boy, twisting him toward her and away from what she hoped was not the grisly reality she imagined. She squatted in front of him, locking eyes with the boy and gripping his upper arms.

"Do you live nearby?" She searched his face, hoping he'd finally speak to her.

The boy nodded instead.

"Okay." Jennie tried to steady her nerves by sucking in a deep breath. Bones. Was she overreacting? Was that really a hand, unearthed and clawing the air? She glanced over the boy's shoulder. It would be hard to tell for certain until she got closer, but there was no way she wanted the kid to see it any more than he already had. "Can you run home and get help? Your mom or dad? I'd like them to come and help me." She applauded herself for the calm in her voice.

Again, the boy nodded.

Jennie released him and gave him a reassuring fist bump. "All right then. Why don't you—?"

Before she could finish, the boy skirted around her and sprinted off as though the earth was made of granite and the slippery mud not an obstacle.

Jennie straightened, rubbing her sweaty palms on her jeans. She scanned the old sawmill, the creek, the land on each side, and Traeger Hall on the hilltop in the distance—all of this was hers now. Dad had purchased the Traeger Estate, which included hundreds of acres. The township of Newton Creek, now just a patchwork quilt of farmland and private homes that met in the middle of the tiny village, sat in the shadows of everything Traeger.

As the new custodian in charge here, it was Jennie's responsibility to investigate the potential appendage sticking up from the sawmill's ground. She might not be a Traeger by ancestry, but she was the rightful owner of this place. And she didn't want to call the cops just yet. If it turned out the appendage was only sticks, then she'd feel like an idiot.

Jennie was nowhere near as adept at maneuvering around the obstacles as the boy. She attempted to balance on a log that was slimy from years of being underwater. Her foot slipped, and she yelped as she sank ankle-deep in the mud. She tugged at her leg, the clay from the creek bed pulling determinedly at her boot. Crying out, Jennie lost her balance, her captive foot sinking deeper into the muck. Her hands splashed into the cold stream of water. Mud painted her chest and face as she finished her downward trajectory with a *splat*.

She lay prostrate in the creek bed for a moment, considering her options. Traeger Hall and its legacy was as murky as this creek bed—ruined and marring anything and everything that encountered it. She hadn't even had time yet to reconcile why she was here at Newton Creek, let alone deal with Traeger Hall's burdensome history.

She lifted her face . . . and froze.

Not far away, the five protruding *things* still scraped the air. Jennie recognized the unmistakable shape of knuckles and joints, stretching, palm upward, from the mire of the creek bed, as if the unfortunate soul had, with a last breath, frantically raked at the air above.

Jennie winced but forced herself not to look away this time. It seemed the thick mud was the only thing holding the skeletal hand in place, and whatever else remained of the unfortunate one beneath the mud was completely out of sight. She changed her mind then, deciding it was time to call the authorities. Meanwhile, she'd be careful not to disturb the scene.

Thank God she'd sent the boy to get help—not because anyone he returned with could help her so much as this vision would have etched itself into the child's mind for life. The innocence in his eyes having communicated he'd discovered something out of place was enough. He didn't need to know he'd identified a dead body.

Jennie's hands sank deeper into the mud as she pushed herself up from the creek bed, away from the offensive appendage. Her ankle twisted in the clay, her knees sinking down and scraping against buried rocks. Scrambling to extricate herself caused clay to squish between her hands and release the stench of rotting earth.

"I gotta get out of here," she muttered to herself. She twisted, grappling for a wooden beam that had broken off the mill and was stuck halfway out of the creek. Wrapping her hand around it, Jennie hoisted herself to her feet. As she did, more mud and silt slid from beneath the mill wheel nearby. The skeletal hand moved as if it still had life within it. The index finger and thumb curled inward.

She gasped as more horror was revealed.

Turned toward her, half buried in the clay, a hollow eye socket stared back at her, and she recognized the unmistakable breadth of a skull's temple.

A scream echoed across the meadow, resonating in her ears as a shrill siren of terror. It was her own scream. And now she screamed again for the corpse—for the human remains whose own screams had long been silenced by the creek.