

ECHOES

AMONG

the

STONES

Christy Award-Winning Author

JAIME JO WRIGHT

ECHOES
AMONG
The
STONES

JAIME JO WRIGHT



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2019 by Jaime Sundsmo

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Wright, Jaime Jo, author.

Title: Echoes among the stones / Jaime Jo Wright.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2019]

Identifiers: LCCN 2019024905 | ISBN 9780764233883 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780764234798 (cloth) | ISBN 9781493421664 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Murder—Investigation—Fiction. | GSAFD: Mystery fiction. | Suspense fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3623.R5388 E24 2019 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019024905>

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Jennifer Parker

Cover photography by Roy Bishop/Arcangel

Author is represented by Books & Such Literary Agency.

19 20 21 22 23 24 25 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Gramma Lola . . .

*You taught me to be strong,
to embrace grief,
and to remember the ones we love
with our eyes lifted toward Hope.*

*I will always hear your voice.
It echoes in my heart every day.*

CHAPTER I

Imogene Grayson

MILL CREEK, WISCONSIN

JULY 1946

She should have paid more attention to her longtime neighbor, Oliver Schneider, when she passed him on the road at dawn. Her, hiking at an energetic, running-late march, and him strolling the lane, hands in his pockets, and overall straps over thin but strong shoulders. After all, they'd grown up together—albeit more acquaintances than friends—and Oliver rarely said anything that wasn't worth listening to. But, while Imogene had paused for a polite morning greeting, she hadn't taken his words and let them sink into her soul as perhaps they should have.

Oliver gave her his resigned smile—the smile the community of Mill Creek had grown used to since his return from overseas. A sad one, with ghosts in his eyes.

“Red in the mornin’,” he quoted, “sailors take warnin’. Red at night, sailors’ delight.”

Oliver pressed his lips together and raised his brows as if to add a silent apology for the brewing storm. He was an Army

boy, but he'd crossed the ocean of the Pacific. He'd experienced war. He knew if the adage was true or not.

Imogene should have listened. Instead, she tossed him a saucy smile, tilting her full lips. "Aw, Ollie. You know nothing is as red as my lips—cherry-apple with a kiss, if you want one. And no one ever sent a warning out ahead of my arrival!"

She glanced at the sky. The morning rays of deep reds and oranges. A thin line of clouds glowing pink and sparkling. The Schneiders' red barn rising above acres of knee-high corn like a marvelous crimson farm mascot.

Red was a color of beauty. Of joy. Of anticipation and excitement of home.

She should have listened to Oliver Schneider that morning on her way to work. But she didn't. The day passed uneventful. She returned home for dinner, for that perfect still evening on the front porch with a paperback as cows mooed and a cat scampered across the drive.

Instead, her day was ending with the beginning of a new war. A more personal one. This time it chose to visit her home. A place that should be secure, should be sacred, should be *safe*.

People hustled around her. Blurs and forms as Imogene stumbled past them. Her breaths were shallow, but they resonated in her ears like hollow echoes, drowning out the commanding voices. She pushed her way through the front door of her home and onto the front porch. An iron shoe scraper by the mat caught her eye. Shaped like a cricket. Bristles dirty with earth. Hazel loved that cricket. She said it was "*unseen but served a purpose.*"

Imogene tripped down the porch steps. She planted her feet in the yard, her dress hanging to her calves with its flirty bow tied at the waist. She lowered her head, staring down at her hands. They were turned palms up toward the sky, fingers curled as if cupping the air.

"Red in the mornin' . . ."

Imogene fixated on her hands.

“*Sailors take warnin’ . . .*”

A storm was coming. A storm *had* come. The scarlet stained Imogene’s skin, forever redefining the color red.

It was Hazel’s blood.

Her sister’s blood.

Yes. Yes, she should have listened to the war-weary GI that morning. He knew what red signified. Now Imogene understood it too.

It was the color of death.

CHAPTER 2

Aggie Dunkirk

MILL CREEK, WISCONSIN
PRESENT DAY

It was irony at its best that she stood over an open grave again, two years to the day that her mother’s grave had beckoned Aggie to join her. The chasm in the ground that swallowed the last physical remnants of the woman who had raised Aggie Dunkirk to be bold, to be courageous—to stare challenge in the eye and breathe a prayer for strength. None of that had helped the day her mother was buried.

Even rain had a double-edged blade. It could be comforting and cozy on a crisp autumn day like today, or it could be the omen of all things destructive. A thunderstorm. A hurricane. Or, as in this cemetery, a flood.

“This is what I call Fifteen Puzzle Row.” Mr. Richardson’s stooped shoulders, covered in a wool sweater, hitched up just a bit as he caught Aggie’s attempt to conceal a sniff of confused laughter at the nickname. He waved his hand over the expanse of land. “Well? Look at it? Back in the day, when these folks

were breathin', anythin' that was confusin' was a fifteen puzzle. And I'd say we're not far from that now."

No. No, they weren't. Aggie adjusted her footing in the soggy grass, not for the last time, cursing the fact she wore red heels that sank into the sod like a knife through butter.

"Any-whose-a-whats-un." Mr. Richardson's brown loafer landed just shy of an overturned headstone that lay half buried in mud. He toed it with the tip of his shoe. Respectful. Gentle. But with an element of resignation. "We were tryin' to map out the plots in this section before the rain came. What with the floodin' two weeks ago, most of this was underwater. Who knew it was a floodplain? But then all them houses that had water in their basements? No flood insurance either. They're callin' it the hundred-year flood for these here parts."

Aggie pulled her heel from the grass and tried to reposition herself. Her pencil skirt was keeping her legs limited as to their movement. Her tailored red jacket was perhaps the only bright spot in the Victorian section of the Mill Creek Cemetery. She stifled a sigh. She hated cemeteries. Hated death. Hated the gloom and the pallor that always settled in places like this. Yet here she was.

Washed up—no pun intended—in her own career, with circumstances thrusting her back into the one community she'd avoided. Her grandmother's hometown. Mumsie with her silly little Midwestern quirks, her persnickety tongue, and her eccentric ideas.

"So, ya up for it?" Mr. Richardson turned, the ground beneath him saturated with moisture, squishing brown bubbles around his heels.

Aggie tried not to grimace, tried not to give the appearance of being too good for Mill Creek Cemetery. Oh, but she was. She really, *really* was!

"I always appreciate a challenge." Aggie gave a quick nod and pushed her long, blunt-cut black hair over her shoulder. Yes. A

challenge. Like selling an upscale home in Chicago's Lincoln Park community. Oddly, Lincoln Park had its origins as a cemetery for smallpox and cholera patients who'd succumbed to the tentacles of death. It'd claimed the death of her real estate career too, when she'd failed to make sure the agents under her kept their licenses up to date. Being terminated for something *she* did was one thing, but being given the ax for something those underneath her *hadn't* done . . . well, it was the pitfall of being in leadership. Ultimately it was her fault.

"Good." Mr. Richardson's nod and gravelly voice yanked Aggie from her thoughts. He waved his arm over the muddy earth, the upended gravestones, the plots where the earth had washed away, revealing old wooden encasements and the edges of coffins that held the remains of people who'd passed away before the century had turned 1900, let alone 2000.

"And what is my official job description then?" Aggie ventured.

She'd come here before visiting Mumsie. Before facing the ninety-two-year-old tigress in her dusty, antiquated house. Secure employment. Finances. It was her priority. But Mill Creek's employment opportunities were like looking for groceries in a dumpster. It was this or waitressing.

"Cemetery Secretary," Mr. Richardson barked out. His jowly cheeks tipped in a slight smile, and there was a knowing look in his eye when he said it. "We're not worried about all those highfalutin titles here. You're a secretary. We got a small office in the west corner of the cemetery where you can work. We just got Wi-Fi put in."

Aggie managed a smile.

Mr. Richardson motioned to the asphalt drive that paved its way through the cemetery. "Let's head back. No need to hang around Fifteen Puzzle Row. They're not goin' anywhere, for now anyway. And land's sake, it'll be a trick to figure out who's who and what's what. We're gonna hafta get you to pull records and

the old maps. I'll have you work with the archaeologist. He can help figure it all out."

"Archaeologist?"

If they were going to literally exhume the coffins and use paintbrushes to figure out the plots' occupants, Aggie would have to rethink that waitressing job.

"Yep. One of the cemetery board members had some golly-waggled idea that we needed an archaeologist to bring their *expertise*." The way he said the word made Mr. Richardson sound as though he thought archaeologists knew less than he did about dead people.

"I see." Aggie's response was minimal. Best to keep it so. Her heels met with the paved ground, and she glanced down at them. Mud up to the hilt. Aggie squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, collecting herself.

She'd fallen from a lucrative career to this—identifying and plotting out graves in a cemetery. Oddly, one could even argue she wasn't qualified for it, if they cared to. But wasn't that just indicative of her own life?

No one alive really cared.

Aggie was used to that.

Now that her mother was dead.



It took all her courage and then some to knock on the door of her grandmother's house. It'd been eight years. Eight. The last time she'd seen Mumsie, Aggie was a delightfully innocent twenty-four years old. Two years out of business school, already firmly planted with a reputable realty company and ready to conquer the world of residential and maybe, eventually, commercial sales. The world seemed so within her grasp then. Until Mumsie critiqued her dreams to the point of making Aggie question herself. Distance had been her escape, which had turned into a permanent separation.

She could see a person's argument for divorce. Removing negative voices from one's life. Granted, a grandmother was different from a marriage partner, but c'mon. For the sake of the argument, Aggie was going with it. Coming back was like returning to those old, nasty influences that only made her feel small. Insignificant. No. Stupid. Less than. Returning to Mumsie was like returning to an old ex, because you were still tied to them somehow. It was uncomfortable, undesired but circumstantially obligatory.

Aggie held out her hand, poised to knock on the green front door. She glanced up at the roof of the portico. It was triangular, a small shelter, miniaturized by the two-story rise of the old Victorian house with its gables and many crooks.

She was headed for a future of grave plotting and grandmother babysitting. She'd give anything—*anything*—to talk to Mom one more time.

Mumsie sent a letter, Mom. Said she broke her hip and needs assistance. I don't want to go. I tried calling Dad, but he's off in Germany with brunette-headed wife number four. I know what he'd say anyway. Mumsie isn't his mother.

Aggie could imagine her mother's response. Gentle. Calm. Stable.

She doesn't bite, Aggie. She just snaps. Love her. I always did.

And Mom had. She had loved Mumsie with every ounce of her being. Aggie might have separated herself from Mumsie eight calendars ago, but Mom hadn't. Not until she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Not until she had been through so much radiation and chemotherapy, seeing Mumsie would have been a miracle, let alone living another month. And she hadn't lived. She had died, leaving Aggie alone to pick up the pieces of her heart and pack them away someplace where she could piece them together later.

An absentee father. A dead mother. A crotchety grandmother.

Her family tree was enough to make anyone cry—only Aggie hadn't. Not a tear. Not once.

Aggie brought her knuckles down on the door with a firm rap. “There’s a doorbell, you know.”

The voice behind Aggie wobbled with age, and Aggie spun on her muddy heels. Mumsie’s petite, bent frame came around the corner of the old house. Her walker had tennis balls attached to its back legs, so Mumsie lifted it a bit to maneuver through the grass. Her elastic-waisted pants were navy with pleats down the front, and her flowered blouse brought out the lively green of her eyes.

“I didn’t see it,” Aggie answered lamely. What a way to say hello to someone’s own grandmother after eight years! Yet she couldn’t help the tang of bitter she tasted as she noticed the obvious fact that Mumsie’s hip wasn’t broken. The obligation to come to Mumsie’s aid was apparently, as Mumsie herself would have put it, a “falsehood.”

Mumsie’s face was powder soft, wrinkles lining blushed cheeks, and cheekbones that hinted of faraway beauty. Her gray curls sat on her forehead, permed and poised. She was ninety-two years of perfection, and Mumsie knew it.

The old woman tapped the glasses that hung around her neck on a gold chain. “I’ve found eyewear to be quite useful for seeing things like doorbells,” she quipped, waving her finger at the bell Aggie hadn’t seen. “Never mind. It’s about time you’re here. Come inside.”

Mumsie shuffled past Aggie, who sidestepped out of the way of the walker-hoisting artifact that was Mumsie. She watched with a bewildered fascination as Mumsie reached out and opened her front door, then shot Aggie a look over her shoulder as she moved inside.

“You’ve let yourself go, Agnes. We must fix that.”

Welcome home, Aggie sighed inwardly. But it was then she heard her mother’s voice deep in her soul.

It is home, Aggie love. She’s all you have left.

Those weren’t the words Aggie ever wanted to hear, let

alone acknowledge. That it was just her and Mumsie left to function through life together. They had nothing in common. Nothing. Except for a family deceased, a runaway father and son-in-law, and a way of eyeing each other with censure that affirmed the other had reached a conclusion and they'd been found wanting.

Aggie pulled the door shut behind her and followed her grandmother through a dimly lit hall into a front room that housed a recliner, a television, and an end table. The table was cluttered with a tissue box, a pair of cuticle trimmers, a bottle of wine-colored nail polish, and a TV remote.

She sniffed. The place smelled musty. The antique architecture was lost to the modernized elements of Mumsie's makeshift living space. Wood paneling wainscot dressed up the walls of the room, the trim an ornate walnut. Aggie reached out and touched the fine wood, recalling how beautiful she'd always thought this old home to be. Dusty and unkempt, with some TLC this place could be transformed into a charming bed-and-breakfast or sold to homeowners who understood classic beauty.

Now? Aggie brought her attention back to Mumsie, who was easing herself into her recliner. Now the house was simply an extension of an old woman waiting for the clock to cease ticking. For time to stand still. Until then, Mumsie would make sure both the house and Aggie had her indifference.

"I was weeding the flower bed in the backyard." Mumsie adjusted herself in the chair, reaching for a tissue to wipe her nose. She did so, then stuffed it in the cuff of her sleeve. She gave Aggie a curious look. "Well? Are you going to just stand there?"

Aggie bit back a sigh. She tugged the hem of her red jacket for something to do rather than to straighten it. Moving to the side, she slid an antique wing-back chair with a worn green velvet seat near Mumsie and sat down. Crossing her legs at the ankles the way Mumsie had taught her to so many years ago. It was what ladies did. No knee-crossing or bouncing a foot like

a nonchalant hussy. Crossed ankles, skirt tucked tight against one's legs, and hands folded in one's lap.

She hated to admit it, but the posture had served Aggie well. In sales. Until she'd lost her license, that is. And her career.

Dang. It always came back to remind her with the vicious taunt of failure.

"You don't have a job, then?" Mumsie's hands were folded in her own lap as she gave Aggie a sharp look.

"You don't have a broken hip?" Aggie shot back, then bit her tongue.

"Oh, that." Mumsie waved her hand. "What's an old woman to do to get any help? Stretch the truth a bit, I suppose. I did pull something, I believe, a few weeks ago going up the stairs."

Mumsie gave Aggie such a pathetic look, Aggie couldn't help her instinctual grimace of empathy. Then she straightened her features. No. No! Mumsie had lied. Aggie had been duped into coming, into planning to care for a bedridden, hip-broken grandmother.

Aggie shifted in her seat and uncrossed her ankles.

Mumsie's gaze flitted across them.

Yes. Yes, I did just flip my leg over my knee. Aggie bounced it for good measure too.

They sized each other up.

Green eyes of age.

Brown eyes of a father who'd left when Aggie was eight.

Stubborn. Willful. Strong.

"You didn't come after your mother died." Mumsie went straight for the jugular.

"No." There was no use denying the obvious, but Aggie didn't offer any justification for her actions either. There wasn't any justification anyway, outside of the fact she simply did not want to come.

Mumsie noticed. Her eyes narrowed. "And yet you came to care for me now?"

“You said you broke your hip.”

Mumsie waved her hand nonchalantly. “Well, you’re here now.”

“For now.” Aggie gave a curt nod, strands of straight black hair falling over her shoulder.

Mumsie offered a small smile that transformed her from being censorious to downright adorable. And she knew it too. Aggie could tell.

“We’ve much to catch up on.” Mumsie reached for the nail polish on the table next to her. “But I’ll need your assistance when I’m finished with my nails.”

“My assistance?” Aggie was having difficulty following her grandmother’s cavalier attitude.

Mumsie looked up. Their eyes met. This time, Aggie saw something flicker in her grandmother’s before it hurried away into the shadows of her irises.

“Yes. There’s a body in the backyard. We need to bury it or something—before I’m accused of murder and incarcerated for a hundred years to life.”