

CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

JAIME JO WRIGHT



The
PREMONITION
at
WITHERS
FARM

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To the Poll family: Tim, Sue, Alex, Zach, Sylvia, and Izzy

I've never been more grateful for the internet,
for blogs, for friendship.

I realize, at first meeting, we both considered the
other's potential to be a serial killer.

This is also how we knew we were meant to be friends.
And once we discovered we had no intentions of enacting
violence toward the other, our friendship has only grown.

Here's to country life, mud, ATVs, homeschooling,
reading each other's minds, bad cooking,
and gut-splitting laughter.

Oh, and here's to cats and chickens.
Lots of them. Everywhere and always.

May 31, 1910

Darkness will be pivotal.
Expect her to scream.
Drink the sound into your soul.

What makes me like this?
The mind of a killer is a journey into chaos.

I do this only for you, sweet one.
For you, I walk with the dark.

1

Perliett Van Hilton

AUGUST 1910

When death came to visit, no one ever prepared tea and cookies. Still, Perliett Van Hilton sipped her tea and eyed the good doctor over the rim of the white china cup. She could read distaste for her in his eyes, but more than that, she could see that death had already begun its mission to etch lines into the corners of his eyes. Age lines. Though he couldn't yet be forty. Surely not. Still, Perliett had a personal theory that if one wasn't death's friend, then for certain they were its enemy. In which case, it aged them faster because they went to war against it rather than falling into death's inevitability, as one might fall onto a feather mattress.

"Did you hear me?" George Wasziak—*Dr. George Wasziak*—inquired of her, decidedly aggravated. Wasziak. He was also decidedly Polish, which meant her decidedly German roots would pit them against each other naturally merely because of their stubborn ancestral tendencies. And that didn't even consider that *Dr. Wasziak* was convinced she practiced quackery and her mother practiced—

“Miss Van Hilton.” He demanded her attention.

She took another sip of lavender tea instead.

His eyes were charcoal black. Remarkable. She could barely make out any brown, which meant he looked just shy of possessed. Which also meant George Wasziak was absolutely fascinating to her.

“You say she’s dead?” Perliett finally responded, to which George—she preferred to irritate him and so addressed him by his Christian name—raised a very dark eyebrow.

“Deceased,” he corrected.

“Departed,” Perliett countered, using terminology destined to get under his skin. And for certain it had, as she watched his chest lift in an almost imperceptible sigh. She bit the inside of her bottom lip. It was remarkably inappropriate to laugh considering the topic of conversation at hand.

“How?” Perliett managed to maintain her serious composure.

“How did she die?” George clarified.

“No, how did she brew her tea in the morning?” Perliett thinned her lips, masking a smile. “Of course I meant how did she die.”

George’s eyes narrowed. “She was . . .” He hesitated.

“Out with it, George.” Perliett held her teacup just below her chin to emphasize how casually one could face death if they really wanted to. Though it probably wasn’t the wisest or most sensitive of approaches. Were it anyone other than George bringing her this news, Perliett knew her reaction would have been far more weighted down by the gratuitousness of death.

“She received eight stab wounds to the abdomen, one of which severed the abdominal aorta.”

“She bled out?” Perliett lowered her cup a tad. She tempered her expression so as not to reveal the horror that raced through her, stilling her morbid sense of humor. To this point, George had not indicated murder. He had—well, he

had simply said the woman was deceased. A murder? Here? In this quiet farming community? The impact of such a thing was monumental.

George jerked his head in a nod. “Yes. She bled out.”

“I see.” Another sip, this time to disguise the emotion that welled in her throat. She didn’t need George Wasziak to see her weakness. He was already on the hunt for her vulnerabilities to discredit her medical services further. Contrary to George’s belief, Perliett was very empathetic toward those affiliated with death. Even if her view of the afterlife differed from his dramatically.

George stood on the front porch of her farmhouse that was nestled at the edge of the neighboring farm’s cornfield, across the road from a large barn that once held three stories’ worth of hay but now was empty. The floorboards beneath George’s feet were painted gray, the porch railing behind him white, and a massive willow tree rustled feathery yellow-green branches in the yard behind him. The remnants of her father’s work. All of it. Now the farm was ghostly in its quietness and yet welcoming all the same. It was beautifully barren of busy work, and home to Perliett and her mother.

Perliett stepped toward George.

George took a quick step backward.

Perliett motioned toward a wooden rocking chair. “Please, have a seat.”

“I prefer to stand.”

“Very well.” Her father had never been so stubborn. Perliett eyed George as she edged around him, still clutching her teacup, and settled herself into the chair. She preferred her father, who had also passed on. His gentleness. His kindness. His everything that George Wasziak didn’t seem to possess.

Perliett absolutely refused to be intimidated by the doctor’s six-foot-two frame, or by his skepticism of her and her mother’s trades, or by his Presbyterian upbringing, which was juxtaposed to her Methodist one. Did he pray the Rosary

or was that something only Catholics did? Perliett shook the thought from her head. It wasn't applicable to the moment. None of her thoughts were. They were simply a toy box of thoughts to distract her from the awfulness George had brought to her front porch.

George tipped his head to the left and stared down his nose. An *aquiline* nose. She'd read that description of a man's nose in a book once and had absolutely no clue what it meant. But Perliett assumed his was just that. Because it was straight and perfect.

"Miss Van Hilton—"

"Perliett," she corrected, then sipped her now-cold tea.

"Miss Van Hilton, Eunice Withers has been murdered."

"I would assume such. One doesn't fall onto one's own knife eight different times in succession." She hoped her flippancy hid the fact that her eyes were burning. Eunice Withers. The poor girl. The poor sweet girl . . .

George's face reddened. "I need your services."

"Truly?" Perliett set the teacup on a white wicker side table that also held a small potted fern. She folded her hands in her lap and rested them on top of her emerald-green skirt. "I cannot bring her back to life, you know."

"I didn't mean your *medical* services."

"So, you admit I provide those?"

"I admit nothing of the sort. I merely need your services to clean the body."

"I see. Eliminate the signs of violence before Miss Withers is given over to the undertaker?"

"Yes."

"Yes," Perliett echoed. "I suppose that would be unseemly for your . . . er, delicate sensibilities." She raised her eyes and knew her blue orbs were blinking in coquettish innocence at the man.

He opened his mouth to reply.

Perliett interrupted to spare him the effort of defending

himself. “Absolutely.” She pushed up from the chair, and this time Dr. George Wasziak didn’t have the opportunity to step back. She tapped the knot of his tie with her fingertip. “I would be more than honored to help prepare Miss Withers for the afterlife.”

“She’s already entered it,” George growled. “Her body needs no preparation for that.”

Oh, heavens. She simply *had* to poke at him one more time or she might burst into tears. To mask her emotion, Perliett jabbed at George’s tie again, and he stiffened. “My mother might beg to differ, but we’ll ask Miss Withers the next time we speak with her.”

George’s eyes darkened further—if that were possible.

For a moment, he unnerved Perliett. Then she recovered. She knew that most average Christian members of the small Michigan farmland community didn’t respond with welcome to the fact that her mother spoke to the dead. *Saw* the dead. Spiritualism, for many, was dabbling in a world one should leave very much alone. For Perliett’s mother, it was her livelihood—even her companionship. Especially now that the staying hand of Perliett’s father had dissipated with his passing. There was no further influence from the churchgoing man to temper her mother’s fascination with the afterlife.

Perliett? Oh, she accepted it. Because it was her mother, and because it was the only way she could stay in communication with her beloved father. The man whom death had stolen, and the only time Perliett had hated death for such an act.

Molly Wasziak

PRESENT DAY

Weep for the living, not the dead.

While she related to the sentiment, it did not thrill Molly that it was chiseled into the basement's stone foundation. A foundation made of broken sections of old gravestones. She offered her husband a side-eye. He wasn't looking at her, but instead was studying the old gas furnace.

"It's LP, right?" Trent asked of their real estate agent, Maynard Clapton.

The man dipped his bald head in response. "Oh yeah. No natural gas lines out this way. It's liquid propane all right."

"We'd need to work on insulating the house better." Trent reached overhead and swiped his callused palm along the edge where the joists met the wall.

"It is an old farmhouse, so yes, it's not going to be efficient. As you can see, the basement is more of a cellar." Maynard ducked as a string slapped his face, attached to the lone lightbulb that was screwed into a fixture in the middle of the ceiling. "It's solid, though." He slapped the stone wall,

his palm against the half-finished name of *Wilber Smy*—. “Farmers back in the day used fieldstone, but in order to recycle and be frugal, they also used castoff headstones, as you can see. The stone carver made an error, or something cracked, or what have you and the markers were worthless.”

“Granite is good in a foundation,” Trent acknowledged. He didn’t seem bothered by the idea that the farmhouse had been built on the lives of dead people. Their half names and epitaphs intermingling with stones from the fields as though they were insignificant.

Molly looked down at her shoes, now covered in a layer of basement dust. The floor was hard-packed with earth and stone. She didn’t dare look up, because between the wooden rafters were so many spiderwebs, Molly was sure you could throw a tennis ball up there and it’d get trapped. Spiders were the spawn of Satan, plain and simple.

Maynard looked between them. Molly knew what he saw without even needing to think about it. A couple in their early thirties, married straight out of high school, and about as close now as two buddies living in a dorm together. Molly called Trent her *roommate*. He hated it, but never said—or did—anything to change it. Maynard was probably wondering why they were bothering to buy an over one-hundred-year-old farmstead as a hobby farm instead of using the money to file for divorce.

She wondered about it too. Not that she wanted a divorce. It was just . . . the next logical step? Isn’t that what people did when they coexisted? What once had thrived as two best friends had diminished into an unargumentative silence. It didn’t help that she knew a lot of it was her fault. But it also didn’t help that Trent had about as many emotions as one of the fieldstones in the basement foundation.

Yet that was Trent. She blamed it on too many hours alone on the tractor, working someone else’s fields while wishing he had his own. Not to mention, he was a Wasziak. Wasziak

men were known for their aloofness, even their gruffness at times. Men with hearts of gold, but as sentimental as a cement garden gnome.

Still, Molly could see this house through Trent's eyes. A place like this, with an old farmhouse, a barn, a chicken coop, and miscellaneous outbuildings, not excluding a half-falling-down outhouse, and Molly knew Trent was sold. The place was theirs. Even if she hated it.

Molly buried her dreams of marble countertops and white trim work in every room. Instead, the kitchen upstairs was a galley style with enough counter space for a toaster and maybe a kitchen mixer. The appliances were white and old. And a master en suite that was a must-have for all those house-hunting couples on HGTV? Yeah, she was going to get a square bedroom on the suffocating second floor of the non-air-conditioned farmhouse, with a blue shag carpet from the eighties. She didn't even like blue. Oh yeah, and no bathroom connected. She'd have to traipse down the tilted floor to get to that.

Molly tried to still her tempestuous, almost bitter thoughts. It wasn't fair to Trent. It wasn't fair to her.

"So, what do you both think?" Maynard crossed his arms over his polo-shirt-clad chest. He looked from one to the other.

Trent shot a searching glance at Molly. He said nothing except with his eyes. Clear blue-gray. His *Clapton Bros. Farms* baseball cap was flipped backward, and his longish, light brown curls looked like they were trying to escape the confines.

"It's fine," Molly agreed. Yay! She got to make the life-changing decision to buy their first home in a basement made of gravestones.

Maynard ping-ponged a glance between them.

Trent gave a brief nod.

The real-estate agent clapped his hands together. "Great!

Let's head upstairs. We'll discuss the offer you'd like to make and get this baby turned over to you as fast as we can."

The men moved past Molly. It was possible for feet to become permanently attached to the floor, right? Because she couldn't move. Couldn't process.

Her first house.

Their first house.

Built in 1867, added onto at the turn of the century, and updated in 1992.

She should be excited, grateful, overjoyed that Trent was realizing his dream, and that she could be by his side as she'd wanted to be so badly when they were in high school. Back then, her dreams were of marriage, home, and family. She now had the first two—it was the latter that spiraled her into this darkness. This place that was impossible to crawl out of. It was the word *family* that crushed every speck of hope, stole joy like a hole in a bucket, and made grief her constant companion.

The stairs leading up to the ground floor were nothing but bare wooden steps. Molly eyed them even as Maynard and Trent reached the top and moved toward the kitchen without her. Trent didn't need her for this. This was his thing—his place—his dream.

Molly cast a resigned smile toward poor William Smy—'s gravestone. "Guess you and I are going to get better acquainted, Willie."

Great. She was already talking to dead people. The thought made her breath hitch and her foot pause as it hovered over the bottom step.

Dead people.

The room tilted, making Molly stumble and reach for the railing. She felt the icy whisper of air on the back of her neck. Taking a breath was like trying to draw in air while having the house settle its full weight on her chest. She wasn't alone. She could sense it. Feel it. Everything but *see* it.

“Go away,” she whispered.

The basement lightbulb flickered.

An electrical buzz crinkled in the air.

The basement went dark.

Molly barreled up the stairs, her feet clomping on the wood boards. She would have to give that dream up as well. The dream that she wouldn't be haunted in a new place. Followed. By people just beyond who wanted her to listen, to give them her attention. People who were restless, anxious, and persistent. People who were dead.



I killed her.

It came out from inside of me, and I could not
condemn it.

Someday, someone will find this. They will read it.

And they will discard it when they realize they have
touched words written in blood.