

*The*  
CURSE  
*of*  
MISTY  
WAYFAIR

JAIME JO WRIGHT



BETHANYHOUSE

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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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

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Wright, Jaime Jo, author.

Title: The curse of Misty Wayfair / Jaime Jo Wright.

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

Identifiers: LCCN 2018033948 | ISBN 9780764233227 (cloth) | ISBN 9780764230301  
(trade paper) | ISBN 9781493417285 (e-book)

Subjects: | GSAFD: Suspense fiction. | Christian fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3623.R5388 C87 2019 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018033948>

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 Joan Kocak / Trevillion Images

Author is represented by Books & Such Literary Agency.

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

*To my littles, CoCo and Peter Pan . . .*  
*May you find your identity not in your*  
*past, your present, or your future.*  
*May you find your purpose not in yourself,*  
*your family, or those who surround you.*  
*May you know you were designed by a*  
*Creator, with great attention to detail.*  
*May you know Him, and by doing so, know yourself.*

But here let me say one thing: From the moment I entered the insane ward on the Island, I made no attempt to keep up the assumed role of insanity. I talked and acted just as I do in ordinary life. Yet strange to say, the more sanely I talked and acted the crazier I was thought to be. . . .

Nellie Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*

## CHAPTER I

# Thea Reed

PLEASANT VALLEY  
NORTHWOODS OF WISCONSIN, 1908

Melancholy was a condition of the spirit and the soul, but also of the mind. Still, she'd never seen melancholy claim a life and be the cause of a body laid to rest in permanent sleep. At peace? One hoped. Prayed, if they were of that bent. Regardless, as she positioned herself beside the corpse, boxlike camera clutched to her chest, Thea Reed found melancholy fascinating. For its persistent grip and the power it held even unto death. That it could claim a life was a horrifying mystery.

*Memento mori* was becoming less prominent in the photographer's world, but the tradition still gripped those of sentimental pandering. Rose Coyle was one of those. A photograph to hold tight to as she posed beside her deceased sister, frozen in time as if they both still lived. Though tears welled in Rose's eyes, her shoulders remained stalwart.

Thea tucked away the ever-present nudge of guilt. The idea she benefited monetarily from others' grief. It was a morbid

career she'd fallen into as a girl. A traveling photographer and his wife needed a helper, the orphanage mistress had told Thea. A decade later, she was now the photographer while her benefactors were dead. But what choice did she have? Only a left-over letter with miniscule clues gave Thea any hint of her past. While the enticements of who Thea Reed might really be had brought her here, to this town, Thea knew dreams of a future were something women with roots and ancestry concocted. Orphans played the hand they were dealt, even if that hand was ghastly at its best.

Thea cast Rose a glance from the corner of her eye as she carefully collected her photographic equipment. Rose was not far in age from Thea, perhaps only a few years older. Well, if one surmised merely by the porcelain complexion, the unlined corners of the brilliant blue eyes, and the crow black hair that swooped into a lustrous silken crown on Rose's head. Thea shifted her gaze toward the other model, giving Rose her distance and allowing her the privacy to dab her eyes with a handkerchief bordered by purple tatting.

Thea flipped open the lid of the velvet-lined case that housed her camera. She paused before lowering her precious camera into its box. The deceased woman—Mary Coyle—was nowhere near as striking as her older sister. Mary was simple by comparison, and even in death, one could see that in life she'd been pasty next to Rose. Ash blond hair, dull due to the lack of life. Her lips a muted pink, her nose dotted with freckles that now had no hope of ever disappearing. Her body lay limp, propped into an upright position by the aid of Thea's metal hanger that cuffed to the corpse's arms and neck and helped her to stand like a mannequin one might see in Miss Flannahan's Boutique four towns over.

A sniffle jerked Thea's attention back to the living and squelched the thoughts that made her mind spin like five children's metal tops whirling across a wooden floor.

"I'm so sorry." Rose blinked quickly, yet the moisture on

her lashes only made her blue eyes larger and more iridescent. Thea engaged in a twinge of inadequacy herself, but then she ignored it like the little devil it was. Her brown eyes and honey brown hair might be uninspiring next to Rose, but she had life, whereas—Thea finally rested her camera in the box—whereas Rose had grief.

“There’s nothing to apologize for.” Thea had no struggle infusing empathy into her voice. The entire afternoon had been dreadful for Rose Coyle.

“But the photograph . . .” Rose’s voice dwindled in a muted whimper.

Thea buckled the camera case. “The photograph will be fine, I promise.”

She hoped. Rose had been so fidgety that keeping her expression stoic for the time it took for the lens to expose to light and capture the image made it almost definite the photograph would turn out blurry. But, compared to a corpse, any live human being would seem fidgety.

Thea swallowed her observation. She was used to the morbid, the dead, but then the strange questions would come during heightened times of distress and mostly when she was disturbed. When ghosts lingered in the air, their skeletal-like fingers stroking the back of Thea’s neck. A taunt, mingling with a subtle dare to find them. Catch them. If only Thea could. Ghosts were never captured, or they would be entrapped in tombs with their bodies. No, their spirits roamed free, Thea had been taught. Some good, some desperate, and some—the worst sort—wicked and evil.

“Tea?”

“Pardon?” Thea’s head snapped up from her frozen state over her camera case. But her eyes didn’t meet with Rose’s. Instead, her gaze settled again on Mary Coyle, knowing she would need to detach her from the frame.

“I wondered if you would stay for tea?” Rose had summoned strength from deep within herself, it appeared. Tears

had dissipated, though every ounce of composure could not hide the shadows that lingered under her eyes.

Thea nodded before she could consider, sympathy gaining the better hand over sound judgment.

“Yes. Please.” She bit her tongue. *No. Thank you.* Never mingle with a customer. It had been her benefactor, Mr. Mendelsohn’s instruction, and his wife’s sternly supported conviction. Thea usually heeded it.

Rose had already exited the parlor with a murmur. It was too late and too rude to decline now. Thea should have finished here, laid the burdensome body back on its temporary cot before the undertaker came to prepare Mary Coyle for her final rest and position her in a coffin. But now, tea it would be, Thea supposed, which only meant squelching the curiosity of Mary, her life, and subsequently her death, would be more difficult.

It took time, but eventually Thea had freed Mary from the trap of the photographic frame that held her prisoner. Laid and covered, Thea stepped back.

“I’m sorry life was such despair,” Thea whispered.

Mary did not answer.

Drawing in a deep breath and then expelling it slowly between her lips, Thea gathered her equipment. She moved to the parlor door, but that niggling sense—that *feeling*—gave her pause. She looked over her shoulder. Mary hadn’t moved. Of course she hadn’t. Nor had she spoken.

But oddly the black crepe shroud that covered a photograph of Mary when she was very much alive had slipped down the piano, onto its bench, and gathered in a filmy pile on the floor. Thea stared at the photograph. Not one sibling but two flanked Mary Coyle. All three of them smiling. All three children in adolescence.

Thea nodded. She understood now.

Mary had been happy once.

Before death had come to play.





Rose was kind—and chatty. Likely to avoid the suffocating weight of grief. Thea tried to be vague in her answers.

Yes, she was new to town. Yes, traveling photographers sometimes knocked on doors to inquire if a service was needed. No, she wasn't here to visit any family. No, she'd never been this far north in Wisconsin before.

Thea cringed inwardly. It wasn't particularly true. She may have been. As a youngster, before memories became firm images in a person's mind. Just vague shadows. It was why she'd come north, wasn't it? To clear the fog away from those blurred recollections?

Of course, she'd not tell Rose that. Thea preferred anonymity. For no other reason than that she was used to it, it was comfortable, and if asked to define who she was, she really had nothing substantial to offer.

Thea dabbed the cloth napkin against her lips. Rose met her curious gaze over the rim of her teacup. Sadness still lingered there, but Rose's dark brow winged upward in question. Inviting and warm.

Thea accepted the unspoken invite. It was time to divert Rose's polite curiosity with some of her own.

"I couldn't help but wonder, I noticed you had a brother." She didn't reference the photograph she had re-shrouded before leaving the parlor.

Rose lowered her teacup. "We still have a brother."

*We.* Poor Rose. Like Mary were still alive. There was no past tense.

"Simeon." The name caressed from Rose's lips gently, with a deep fondness that Thea couldn't relate to.

Rose smiled one of those bittersweet smiles as she ran her fingertip around the edge of her teacup. "Simeon is my younger brother, between Mary and I. He is . . . special."

Her interest more than piqued; Thea was also equally as anticipatory of escaping the gloomy atmosphere and driving away on her horse-led box wagon. She shifted on the hard wooden chair. The lace tablecloth caught under her leg and drew taut, making the china rattle. Thea made it her excuse for escape.

“Thank you so much for the tea.” Thea summoned every manner Mrs. Mendelsohn had taught her in their short years together.

Rose drew a breath, shuddering only a tad. “And the photograph?”

Oh yes. Business. Thea gave Rose an approximate date. She would need to find a satisfactory place to develop the plates. Her wagon was equipped, but barely. Finding an established portrait studio she could partner with was a better option. She wasn’t certain if that was normal, but it had been Mr. Mendelsohn’s way of doing business, and Thea was well versed in it.

Rose led Thea to the front door, the wool carpet runner beneath her feet silencing the footsteps that would have otherwise echoed on the scuffed walnut floors. Always observant, Thea noted the wallpaper was more faded by the entryway than in the hall, which made sense considering the windows that flanked the front door. Sunlight was sure to drain color from the paper roses. Thea drew her attention back to her client. Life had drained color from Rose Coyle. Only the sapphire of her eyes and the coal black of her hair and lashes saved her from being ghostly.

“My brother will give you your partial payment.” Rose hesitated, and her voice dropped into a wispy tone. “He’s good with numbers.”

“And I shall find him where?” Thea ventured.

Rose’s fingers flew to her neckline, fidgeting with the lace at her throat. The only bit of adornment on her otherwise black silk mourning dress. She seemed taken aback by the question.

“Your brother—Simeon?” Thea pressed.

“Yes.” Rose gave her head a little shake, but her eyes grew dull and vacant. She dropped her hand from her throat. “Simeon will be in his workshop.”

An uneasy sensation coursed through Thea. Not unlike the one in the parlor. As if they were being watched—as if *Mary* watched them. A common superstition but one Thea found immensely hard to shake.

She nodded, grappling for the doorknob. She wished to leave now. She had no more courage left to cast a final glance into the parlor, where Mary Coyle lay, and no bravery to investigate Rose’s sorrowing face again.

Thea’s fingers brushed Rose’s as they’d already turned the knob and opened the door. She snatched her hand away and edged past Rose, catching a whiff of perfume. Thea turned to bid Rose farewell, but Rose was already closing the front door, her face slowly disappearing as the crack between the door and frame shut.

Tiny bumps raised on Thea’s arms. She observed her horse and wagon. She could just leave. Avoid the *special* Simeon Coyle—whatever that inferred—and be rid of this creepy house and its inhabitants. There had been a tiny glimpse of fear in Rose’s eyes just as the door closed. Fear of her brother perhaps? Or something greater and more threatening than the melancholy that had wasted away Mary Coyle?

She needed the money. With that determination, Thea made her way over a stone path through flower gardens of summer growth. Chives with bristly purple blossoms, lavender bushes lending a distinct scent in the air, both calming and pungent, and a mishmash of wildflowers waving in the slight breeze. The path passed through a gate and then it was gone. Only dirt and patchy grass led Thea to the door of the shed, Simeon Coyle’s workshop.

Thea knocked firmly on the door. A sparrow fluttered above her and landed on the peak of the roof. It cocked its head to the right and danced a fidgety little waltz across the ridgepole.

Thea met the beady eyes and didn't miss the sparrow's quick nod before it fluttered away.

Mr. Mendelsohn had believed spirits sometimes took the form of other creatures. Perhaps it was Mary Coyle giving her approval to stand before her brother's place of work. Or, Thea blinked as the door began to open, superstitions shouldn't be taken so far. Thea knew little of God, but Mrs. Mendelsohn had argued with her husband many times that a human simply did not return as an animal. It was ungodly and sacrilegious.

Much as Rose had closed the door, Simeon Coyle opened his. With a nervous suspicion in squinting gray eyes. Brown hair the color of tree bark straggled over his forehead in straight strands parted down the middle. He eyed Thea. Perhaps he'd not seen a stranger in his entire life? His eyes looked her up and down, until finally he opened the door enough for her to see his whole body.

Simeon Coyle did not step from his shed. Nor did he speak. His jaw was square, his shoulders lean with suspenders spanning over them, and he was only slightly taller than she. There was nothing remarkable about him. Nothing at all.

They stared at each other.

Simeon, waiting.

Thea, tongue-tied.

There was something about Simeon Coyle. His sharp, observant gaze conflicted with the hollow expression on his face.

She cleared her throat, trying to find her voice.

He blinked.

Thea stumbled back a step. She was losing her senses, surely! Yet she would vow there was an instant tugging of souls between her and Simeon Coyle, with inexplicable reason other than an innate comprehension that they shared something unspoken. Something yet to be defined—if they gave it opportunity.

"I've come only for money." Thea's words bridged the space between them. Words that eliminated the invisible thread between them that made no logical sense.

Simeon blinked, his face pulled into a scowl, making his one eye close like he was winking. But Thea was certain he wasn't. Just as quickly, his muscles relaxed, and his expression returned to a quiet study of her. A movement caught her attention, and Simeon's hand stretched forward. In his grip, a coin in half payment for the photograph. Thea reached for it, and he released the money.

Without another word, Simeon Coyle closed the door. The latch clicked quietly as he reentered his shed. But, Thea could not chase away the feeling that a door had also opened into the secret places inside of her, and Simeon Coyle had unassumingly walked right in.