

The Dead Will Tell: A Kate Burkholder Novel (Kate Burkholder, 6)

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A Boston Globe Best Book of 2014

Everyone in Painters Mill knows the abandoned Hochstetler farm is haunted. But only a handful of the residents remember the terrible secrets lost in the muted/hushed whispers of time-and now death is stalking them, seemingly from the grave.

On a late-night shift, Chief of Police Kate Burkholder is called to the scene of an apparent suicide-an old man found hanging from the rafters in his dilapidated barn. But evidence quickly points to murder and Kate finds herself chasing a singularly difficult and elusive trail of evidence that somehow points back to the tragedy of that long ago incident.

Meanwhile, Kate has moved in with state agent John Tomasetti and for the first time in so long, they're both happy; a bliss quickly shattered when one of the men responsible for the murders of Tomasetti's family four years ago is found not guilty, and walks away a free man. Will Tomasetti be pulled back to his own haunted past?

When a second man is found dead-also seemingly by his own hand-Kate discovers a link in the case that sends the investigation in a direction no one could imagine and revealing the horrifying truth of what really happened that terrible night thirty-five years ago, when an Amish father and his four children perished-and his young wife disappeared without a trace.

And, as Kate knows-the past never truly dies . . . in *The Dead Will Tell* by Linda Castillo

Linda Castillo is the New York Times bestselling author of the Kate Burkholder novels, including *Sworn to Silence* which was recently was adapted into a Lifetime Original Movie titled *An Amish Murder* starring Neve Campbell as Kate Burkholder. Castillo is the recipient of numerous industry awards including a nomination by the International Thriller Writers for Best Hardcover, the Daphne du Maurier Award of Excellence, and a nomination for the RITA. In addition to writing, Castillo's other passion is horses. She lives in Texas with her husband and is currently at work on her next novel.

CHAPTER 1

Present day

It had been a long time since he'd closed down a bar, especially a dive like the Brass Rail Saloon. The music was too loud, the liquor was bottom-shelf, and the crowd was too young and rowdy to do anything but give him a headache. It was the last kind of place you'd find a man like him. The last kind of place he wanted to be. Tonight, it suited his needs to a T. The place was dark and anonymous-and no one would remember him.

He'd received four notes so far, each becoming progressively more disturbing. He discovered the first in his mailbox last week. I know what you did. The second was taped to the windshield of his Lexus. I know what all of you did. He found the third note lying on the threshold inside the storm door off the kitchen. Meet me or I go to the police. Each note was written in blue ink on a sheet of lined notebook paper that had been torn in half. He'd found the fourth note earlier this evening, taped to the front door. Hochstetler farm. 1 a.m.

Come alone.

At first he'd tried to convince himself he didn't understand the meaning of the messages. There were a lot of crazies out there. He was a successful man, after all. He had a nice home. Lived a comfortable lifestyle. Drove an expensive car. In the eyes of a few, that made him fair game. A target because someone else wanted what he had, and they were willing to do whatever it took to get it.

He'd crumpled the notes and tossed them in the trash. He'd done his best to forget about them. But he knew the problem wasn't going to go away.

I know what all of you did.

Someone knew things they shouldn't. About him. About the others. About that night. They knew things no one could possibly know.

Unless they'd been there, a little voice added.

He'd racked his brain, trying to figure out who. There was only one explanation: Someone was going to blackmail him. But who?

Then two nights ago, he saw her, walking alongside the road near his house. But when he'd stopped for a better look, she was gone, leaving him to wonder if he'd seen anything at all. Or maybe it was his conscience playing tricks on him.

It had been years since he spoke to the others. But after receiving the third note, he'd done his due diligence and made the calls. None of them admitted to having received any sort of suspicious correspondence, but promised to let him know if that changed. If any of them knew more than they were letting on, they didn't let it show.

After finding the latest note, he'd gone about his business as usual the rest of the evening. He'd ordered Chinese takeout and watched a movie. Afterwards, he'd broken the seal on the bottle of Macallan Scotch whisky his daughter gave him for Christmas two years ago. At eleven thirty, restless and edgy, he'd opened the gun cabinet, loaded the Walther .380 and dropped it into the inside pocket of his jacket. Grabbing the keys to his Lexus, he drove to the only place he knew of that was still open: the Brass Rail Saloon.

Now, sitting at a back booth with chain saw rock echoing in his ears and two shots of watered-down Scotch burning a hole in his gut, he stared at the clock on the wall and waited.

I know what all of you did.

Watching two young girls who didn't look old enough to drink head toward the dance floor, he tugged his iPhone from his pocket and scrolled down to the number he wanted. It was too late to call, especially a man who was little more than a stranger to him these days, so

he drafted a text instead.

Meet is on. Will call 2 let you know outcome.

He sat there for a moment before pressing Send, staring at the phone, assuring himself there was no way anyone could know what he'd done. It had been thirty-five years. A lifetime. He'd married, built a successful real estate firm, raised four children, and gone through a divorce. He was semi-retired now. A grandfather and respected member of the community. He'd put that night behind him. Forgotten it had ever happened. Or tried to.

Someone knows.

A knife-stab of dread sank deep into his gut. Sighing, he dropped the phone back into his pocket and glanced up at the clock again. Almost 1 A.M. Time to go. Finishing his drink, he grabbed his keys off the table and then made for the door.

Ten minutes later he was heading north on Old Germantown Road. Around him the rain was coming down so hard, he could barely see the dividing lines.

"Keep it between the beacons," he muttered, taking comfort in the sound of his own voice.

All these years, he'd believed the past no longer had a hold on him. Sometimes he almost convinced himself that night had never really happened. That it was a recurring nightmare and an overactive imagination run amok. But on nights like this, the truth had a way of sneaking up on you, like a garrote slipping over your head. And he knew—he'd always known—somewhere inside the beating, cancerous mass that was his conscience, that some sins could never be forgiven. He owed penance for what he'd done. And he'd always known that someday fate or God—or maybe Satan himself—would see to it that he paid his debt.

Gripping the steering wheel, he leaned forward so that his nose was just a few inches from the windshield. The rain drumming against the roof was as loud as a hail of bullets against tin siding. On the stereo Jim Morrison's haunting voice rose above the roar. There was something reassuring about music on nights like this. It was a sign of life and reminded him there were other people out there and made him feel less isolated and a little less alone. Tonight, he swore to God that was the same song that had been playing that night.

Glancing away from the road, he reached down and punched the button for another station. When he looked up, she was there, on the road, scant yards from his bumper. He stomped the brake hard. The Lexus skidded sideways. The headlights played crazily against the curtain of rain, the black trunks of the trees. The car spun 180 degrees before jolting to a halt, facing the wrong direction.

For the span of several heartbeats, he sat there, breathing heavily, gripping the wheel hard enough to make his knuckles ache. He'd never believed in ghosts, but he knew there was no way in hell he could have seen what his eyes were telling him. Wanetta Hochstetler had been dead for thirty-five years. It had to be the booze playing tricks on him.

Fearing a cop would happen by and find him sitting in his car in the dead of night with his hands shaking and the smell of rotgut whiskey on his breath, he turned the vehicle around. But he couldn't leave. Not without making sure. He squinted through the windshield, but his headlight beams revealed nothing on the road or shoulder. A quiver of uneasiness went through him when he spotted the old mailbox. The thing had been bashed in a dozen times over the decades-by teenagers with beer bottles or baseball bats-and even peppered with holes from shotgun pellets. But he could still make out the name: HOCHSTETLER.

He didn't have a slicker or flashlight, but there was no avoiding getting out of the vehicle. He was aware of the pistol in his pocket, but it didn't comfort him, didn't make him feel any safer. Leaving the engine running, he turned up the collar of his jacket and swung open the door. Rain lashed his face as he stepped into the night. Water poured down his collar, the cold clenching the back of his neck like cadaver fingers.

"Who's there?" he called out.

He went around to the front of the vehicle and checked the bumper and hood. No dents. No blood. Just to be sure, he rounded the front end and ran his hands over the quarter panel on the passenger side, too. Not so much as a scratch. He hadn't hit anything, human or otherwise. Just his tired eyes playing tricks …

He was standing outside the passenger door when she stepped out of the darkness and fog. The sight of her paralyzed him with fear. With something worse than fear. The knowledge that he'd been wrong. That time never forgot, no matter how badly you wanted it to-and the reckoning had finally come.

Her dress clung to a body that was still slender and strong and supple. The pouring rain and darkness obscured the details of her face. But she still had that rose-petal mouth and full lips. Long hair that had yet to go gray. He knew it was impossible for her to be standing there, unchanged, after all these years. After what happened to her. After what they did to her.

"It can't be you." The voice that squeezed from his throat was the sound of an old man on his deathbed, gagging on his own sputum, begging for a miracle that wasn't going to come.

Her mouth pulled into a smile that turned his skin to ice. "You look surprised to see me."

"You're dead." He scraped unsteady fingers over his face, blinked water from his eyes. But when he opened them, she was still there, as alive and familiar as the woman who'd been visiting his nightmares for thirty-five years. "How-?"

Never taking her eyes from his, she opened the driver's-side door, and killed the engine. Keys in hand, she went to the rear of the vehicle and pressed the trunk release. The latch clicked and the trunk sprang open.

"Get in," she said.

When he didn't move she produced a revolver and leveled it at his chest. He thought of the Walther in his pocket, wondered if he could get to it before she shot him dead.

He raised his hands. "What do you want?"

Stepping closer, she jabbed the revolver at him so that the muzzle was just two feet from his forehead. Her arm was steady, her finger inside the guard, snug against the trigger. "Do it."

Shaking uncontrollably, he climbed into the trunk and looked up at her. "We didn't mean it. I swear we didn't mean it."

He didn't hear the shot.

* * *

Belinda Harrington stood on the porch of her father's house and knocked on the door hard enough to rattle the frame. "Dad?" She waited a minute and then used the heel of her hand and gave the wood a dozen hard whacks. "Dad? You home?"

She'd been trying to reach him for two days now, but he hadn't returned her calls. That wasn't unusual; the man was independent to a fault. He'd been known to ignore calls when it suited him. Still, two days was a long time. Even for Dale Michaels.

Wishing she'd remembered to bring her umbrella, she scanned the driveway through the cascade of water coming off the roof. His Lexus was parked in its usual spot; he had to be here somewhere. She wondered if he'd found himself a lady friend and they were holed up at her place or a hotel up in Wooster. Belinda wouldn't put it past him. Mom hadn't come right out and said it, but she let Belinda know in no uncertain terms that fidelity had never been one of Dale Michaels's strong points.

Cupping her hands on either side of her mouth, she called for him. "Dad!"

Her eyes wandered to the barn twenty yards away, and for the first time, she noticed the sliding door standing open a couple of feet. Though he'd never been burglarized, her father was a stickler about security. He wouldn't leave the barn door open, especially if he wasn't home. The initial fingers of worry kneaded the back of her neck. Had he gone out to feed the chickens and fallen? Was he lying there, unable to get up and waiting for help? He wasn't accident prone, but she supposed something could've happened. What if he'd had a heart attack?

Tenting her jacket over her head, she jogged across the gravel. The rain was really coming down, and by the time she reached the barn, her shoes and the hem of her pants were

soaked. Shoving open the barn door another foot, Belinda stepped inside and shook rain from her jacket. The interior was dark and smelled of chicken poop and moldy hay. A few feet away, three bantam hens scratched and pecked at the floor. Stupid things. She wondered why her father kept them. Half the time, they didn't lay eggs and spent their days tearing up the petunias she'd planted for him last spring. Pulling her jacket closed against the cold, she flipped the light switch, but the single bulb didn't help much.

"Dad? You out here?"

Belinda listened for a response, but it was difficult to hear anything above the incessant pound of rain against the tin shingles. There were a dozen or so places where water dripped down from the leaky roof to form puddles on the dirt floor. At least the chickens had plenty to drink.

The barn was a massive structure with falling-down horse stalls and high rafters laced with cobwebs. As kids, she and her brother had played out here; they'd even had a pony once. But neither she nor her brother had been interested in animals, and once her father had gotten his real estate company up and running, the place became a workshop where he tinkered with cars. The workbench with the Peg-Board back was still there, but the tools were covered with dust. A dozen or so boards were stacked haphazardly against the wall. The old rototiller stood in silhouette against the window where dingy light bled in. When her brother was twelve years old, he'd nearly taken his foot off with that thing.

The loose dirt from the floor stuck to her shoes as she crossed to the workbench. Belinda called out for him one final time and started for the door. She was midway there when something to her right, on the other side of a fat beam caught her attention. Cautiously, she moved closer and looked up, found herself staring at the leather soles of shoes and the hems of slacks. She stumbled back, her eyes taking in legs and then the torso of a man. One arm hanging down. Neck bent at an unnatural angle.

A sound she didn't recognize tore from her throat. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew that thing hanging from the rafters was her father. That he was dead and she was sad his life had ended this way, and without so much as a good-bye. But the shock of seeing his lifeless body, so grotesque in death, overrode any impending sense of grief or loss.

"Dad! Oh my God! Dad! What did you do?"

Screaming, Belinda Harrington turned and sprinted through the door and into the pouring rain.

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