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on *The Longest Silence*

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USA TODAY bestselling author

**DEBRA
WEBB**

THE
SECRETS
WE
BURY



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ISBN-13: 978-0-7783-0830-0

The Secrets We Bury

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The Undertaker's Daughter
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THE UNDERTAKER'S DAUGHTER

"The Undertaker's Daughter" (novella)

The Secrets We Bury

Look for Debra Webb's next novel,

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available soon from MIRA Books.

For additional books by
USA TODAY bestselling author Debra Webb,
visit her website at www.debrawebb.com.

This book is dedicated to Donna England Boyd.

Thank you for being a dear, dear friend
and for being the sister of my heart. It's you who will
always make me call Huntland my second home.
May your life forever be filled with love and music and
your heart always rise to the next dance. Love you!

THE SECRETS WE BURY

RIP
Geneva Phillips
Beloved Wife and Mother
June 2, 1946–May 5, 2019

Geneva Phillips was born in Winchester, Tennessee, on June 2, 1946. She was a loving wife and mother, a consummate homemaker and a treasured member of the Ladies Civic Club, as well as a talented musician and a member of the choir at the Second Avenue Methodist Church. She died at home on Sunday, May 5, 2019. Geneva was predeceased by her beloved husband, Howard, and her only sibling, a brother, Gerald. She is survived by two daughters, Patricia Patterson of Winchester and Jennifer Brinkley of Louisville, Kentucky, and three grandchildren.

The family will receive friends on Tuesday, May 7, 5:00 to 7:00 p.m., at the DuPont Funeral Home.

One

Winchester, Tennessee
Monday, May 6, 7:15 a.m.

Mothers shouldn't die this close to Mother's Day.

Especially mothers whose daughters, despite being grown and having families of their own, still considered Mom to be their best friend. Rowan DuPont had spent the better part of last night consoling the daughters of Geneva Phillips. Geneva had failed to show at church on Sunday morning, and later that same afternoon she wasn't answering her cell. Her younger daughter entered her mother's home to check on her and found Geneva deceased in the bathtub.

Now the seventy-two-year-old woman's body waited in refrigeration for Rowan to begin the preparations for her final journey. The viewing wasn't until tomorrow evening, so there was no particular rush. The husband of one of the daughters was away on business in London and wouldn't arrive back home until late today. There was time for a short break, which turned into a morning

drive that had taken Rowan across town and to a place she hadn't visited in better than two decades.

Like death, some things were inevitable. Coming back to this place was one of those things. Perhaps it was the hours spent with the sisters last night that had prompted memories of Rowan's own sister. She and her twin had once been inseparable. Wasn't that generally the way with identical twins?

The breeze shifted, lifting a wisp of hair across her face. Rowan swiped it away and stared out over Tims Ford Lake. The dark, murky waters spread like sprawling arms some thirty-odd miles upstream from the nearby dam, enveloping the treacherous Elk River in its embrace. The water was deep and unforgiving. Even standing on the bank, at least ten feet from the edge, a chill crept up Rowan's spine. She hated this place. Hated the water. The ripples that broke the shadowy surface...the smell of fish and rotting plant life. She hated every little thing about it.

This was the spot where her sister's body had been found.

July 6, twenty-seven years ago. Rowan and Raven had turned twelve years old the previous fall. Rowan's gaze lingered on the decaying tree trunk and the cluster of newer branches and overgrowth stretching from the bank into the hungry water where her sister's lifeless body had snagged. The current had dragged her pale, thin body a good distance before depositing her at this spot. It had taken eight hours and twenty-three minutes for the search teams to find her.

Rowan had known her sister was dead before the call had come that Raven had gone missing. Her parents had rushed to help with the search, leaving a neighbor with

Rowan. She had stood at her bedroom window watching for their return. The house had felt completely empty and Rowan had understood that her life would never be the same after that day.

No matter that nearly three decades has passed since that sultry summer day, she could still recall the horrifying feel of the final tug, and then the ominous release of her sister's physical presence.

She shifted her gaze from the water to the sky. Last night the temperature had taken an unseasonable plunge. Blackberry winter, the locals called it. Whether it held some glimmer of basis in botany or was merely rooted in folklore, blackberry bushes all over the county were in full bloom. Rowan pulled her sweater tight around her. Though today was the first time she had come to this place since returning home from Nashville, the dark water was never far from her thoughts. How could it be? The lake swelled and withdrew around Winchester like the rhythmic breath of a sleeping giant, at once harmless and menacing.

Rowan had sneaked away to this spot dozens of times after her sister was buried. Other times she had ridden her bike to the cemetery and visited her there or simply sat in Raven's room and stared at the bed where she had once laid her head. But Rowan felt closest to her sister here, near the water that had snatched her life away like the merciless talons of a hawk descending on a fleeing field mouse.

"You should have stayed home," Rowan murmured to herself. The ache, no matter the many years that had passed, twisted in her chest.

She had begged Raven not to go to the party. Her sister had been convinced that Rowan's behavior was

nothing more than jealousy since she hadn't been invited. The suggestion hadn't been entirely unjustified, but mostly Rowan had felt a smothering dread, a panic that had bordered on hysteria. She had needed her sister to stay home. Every adolescent instinct she possessed had been screaming and restless with that looming sense of trepidation.

But Raven had ignored her sister's pleas and attended the big barbecue and swim party with her best friend, Tessa Cardwell. Raven DuPont died that day, and Rowan had spent all the years since wondering what she could have done differently to change that outcome.

Nothing. She could not rewrite history any more than she was able to change her sister's mind.

Rowan exhaled a beleaguered breath. At moments like this she felt exactly as if her life was moving backward. She'd enjoyed a fulfilling career with the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department as an adviser for the Special Crimes Unit. As a psychiatrist, she had found her work immensely satisfying, and she had helped to solve numerous homicide cases. But then, not quite two months ago, everything had changed. The one case that Rowan didn't recognize had been happening right in front of her, shattering her life...and sending everything spiraling out of control.

The life she had built in Nashville had been comfortable, with enough intellectual challenge in her career to make it uniquely interesting. Though she had not possessed a gold shield, the detectives in the Special Crimes Unit had valued her opinion and treated her as if she was as much a member of the team as any of them. But that was before...*before* the man she admired and trusted proved to be a serial killer—a killer who'd murdered

her father and an MNPD officer as well as more than a hundred other victims over the past several decades.

A mere one month, twenty-two days and about fourteen hours ago, esteemed psychiatrist Dr. Julian Addington emerged from his cloak of secrecy and changed the way the world viewed serial killers. He was the first of his kind: incredibly prolific, cognitively brilliant and innately chameleonlike—able to change his MO at will. Far too clever to hunt among his own patients or social set, he had chosen his victims carefully, always ensuring he or she could never be traced back to him or his life.

Julian had fooled Rowan for the past two decades and then he'd taken her father, her only remaining family, from her. He'd devastated and humiliated her both personally and professionally.

Anger and loathing churned inside her. He wanted her to suffer. He wanted her to be defeated...to give up. But she would not. Determination solidified inside her. She would not allow him that victory or that level of control over her.

Her gaze drifted out over the water once more. Since her father's death and moving back to Winchester, people had asked her dozens of times why she'd returned to take over the funeral home after all these years. She always gave the same answer: *I'm a DuPont, it's what we do.*

Her father, of course, had always hoped Rowan would do so. It was the DuPont way. The funeral home had been in the family for a 150 years. The legacy had been passed from one generation to the next time and time again. When she'd graduated from college and chosen to go to medical school and become a psychiatrist rather than to return home and take over the family business, Edward DuPont had been devastated. For more than a

year after that decision, she and her father had been estranged. Now she mourned that lost year with an ache that was soul-deep.

They had reconciled, she reminded herself, and other than the perpetual guilt she felt over not visiting often enough, things had been good between her and her father. Like all else in her life until recently, their relationship had been comfortable. They'd spoken by phone regularly. She missed those chats. He kept her up to speed on who married or moved or passed, and she would tell him as much as she could about her latest case. He had loved hearing about her work with Metro. As much as he'd wanted her to take over the family legacy, he had wanted her to be happy more than anything else.

"I miss you, Daddy," she murmured.

Looking back, Rowan deeply regretted having allowed Julian to become a part of her life all those years ago. She had shared her deepest, darkest secrets with him, including her previously strained relationship with her father. She had purged years of pent-up frustrations and anxieties to the bastard, first as his patient and then, later, as a colleague and friend.

Though logic told her otherwise, a part of her would always feel the weight of responsibility for her father's murder.

Due to her inability to see what Julian was, she could not possibly return to Metro, though they had assured her there would always be a place for her in the department. How could she dare to pretend some knowledge or insight the detectives themselves did not possess when she had unknowingly been a close friend to one of the most prolific serial killers the world had ever known?

She could not. *This* was her life now.

Would taking over the family business completely assuage the guilt she felt for letting her father down all those years ago? Certainly not. Never. But it was what she had to do. It was her destiny. In truth, she had started to regret her career decision well before her father's murder. Perhaps it was the approaching age milestone of forty or simply a midlife crisis. She had found herself pondering what might have been different if she'd made that choice and regretting, frankly, that she hadn't.

Since she and Raven were old enough to follow the simplest directions, they had been trained to prepare a body for its final journey. By the time they were twelve, they could carry out the necessary steps nearly as well as their father with little or no direction.

Growing up surrounded by death had, of course, left its mark. Her hyperawareness of death and all its ripples and aftershocks made putting so much stock into a relationship with another human being a less than attractive proposal. Why go out of her way to risk that level of pain in the event that person was lost? And with life came loss. To that end, she would likely never marry or have children. But she had her work and, like her father, she intended to do her very best. Both of them had always been workaholics. Taking care of the dead was a somber albeit important task, particularly for those left behind. The families of the loved ones who passed through the DuPont doors looked to her for support and guidance during their time of sorrow and emotional turmoil.

Speaking of which, she pulled her cell from her pocket and checked the time. She should get back to the funeral home. Mrs. Phillips was waiting. Rowan turned away from the part of her past that still felt fresh despite the passage of time.

Along this part of the shore, the landscape was thickly wooded and dense with undergrowth, which was the reason she'd worn her rubber boots and was slowly picking her way back to the road. As she attempted to slide her phone back into her hip pocket, a limb snagged her hair. Instinctively, she reached up to pull it loose, dropping her cell phone in the process.

"Damn it." Rowan reached down and felt through the thatch beneath the underbrush. More of her long blond strands caught in the brush. She should have taken the time to pull her hair back in a ponytail as she usually did. She tugged the hair loose, bundled the thick mass into her left hand and then crouched down to dig around with her right in search of her phone. Like most people, she felt utterly lost without the damn thing.

Where the hell had it fallen?

She would have left it in the car except that she never wanted a family member to call the funeral home and reach a machine. With that in mind, she forwarded calls to her cell when she was away. Eventually she hoped to trust her father's new assistant director enough to allow him to handle all incoming calls. Wouldn't have helped this morning, though, since he was on vacation.

New assistant director? She almost laughed at the idea. Woody Holder had been with her father for two years, but Herman Carter had been with him a lifetime before that. She supposed in comparison, *new* was a reasonable way of looking at Woody's tenure thus far. Her father had still referred to him as the new guy. Maybe it was his lackadaisical attitude. At forty-five, Woody appeared to possess absolutely no ambition and very little motivation. Rowan really should consider finding a new, more dependable assistant director and letting Woody go.

Her fingers raked through the leaves and decaying ground cover until she encountered something cool and hard but not metal or plastic. Definitely not her phone. She stilled, frowned in concentration as her sense of touch attempted to identify the object she couldn't see without sticking her head into the bushes. Not happening. She might have chalked the object up to being a limb or a rock if not for the familiar, tingling sensation rushing along every single nerve ending in her body. Her instincts were humming fiercely.

Assuredly not a rock.

Holding her breath, she reached back to the same spot and touched the object again. Her fingers dug into the soft earth around the object and curled instinctively.

Long. Narrow. Cylindrical.

She pulled it from the rich, soft dirt, the thriving moss and the tangle of rotting leaves.

Bone.

She frowned, studied it closely. *Human* bone.

Her pulse tripped into a faster rhythm. She placed the bone aside, reached back in with both hands and carefully scratched away more of the leaves.

Another bone...and then another. Bones that, judging by their condition, had been here for a very long time.

Meticulously sifting through the layers of leaves and plant life, she discovered that her cell phone had fallen into the rib cage. The *human* rib cage. Her mind racing with questions and conclusions, she cautiously fished out the phone. She took a breath, hit her contacts list and tapped the name of Winchester's chief of police.

When he picked up, rather than hello, she said, "I'm at the lake. There's something here you need to see and it can't wait. Better call Burt and send him in this di-

rection, as well.” Burt Johnston was a local veterinarian who had served as the county coroner for as long as Rowan could remember.

Chief of Police William “Billy” Brannigan’s first response was, “Are *you* okay?”

Billy and Rowan had been friends since grade school. He had made her transition back to life in Winchester so much more bearable. And there was Herman. He was more like an uncle than a mere friend of the family. Eventually, she hoped the two of them would stop worrying so about her. She wasn’t that fragile young girl who had left Winchester twenty-odd years ago. Recent events had rocked her, that was true, but she was completely capable of taking care of herself. She would never again allow herself to be vulnerable to anyone.

“I’m fine, but someone’s not. You should stop worrying about me and get over here, Billy.”

“I’m on my way.”

She ended the call. There had been no need for her to tell him precisely where she was at the lake. He would know. Rowan DuPont didn’t swim; she never came near the lake unless it was to visit her sister, and she hadn’t done that in a very, very long time.

Strange, all those times Rowan had come to visit Raven, she’d never realized there was someone else here, too.

Barely fifteen minutes passed before Chief of Police Billy—Bill to those who hadn’t grown up with him—Brannigan was tearing nosily through the woods. Rowan pushed away from the tree she’d been leaning against and waved. He spotted her and altered his course.

“Burt’s on his way.” Billy stopped next to her and

pushed his brown Stetson up his forehead. “You sure you’re okay?” He looked her up and down, his gaze pausing on the boots she wore. Pink, dotted with blue-and-yellow flowers. They were as old as dirt but she loved them. She’d had them since she was a teenager. Frankly, she couldn’t believe her father had kept them all those years.

Billy’s lips spread into a grin. “I like the boots.”

She rolled her eyes. “Thanks. And, yes, for the second time, I’m okay.” She pointed to the throng of bushes where she’d dropped her phone. “But the female hidden under those bushes is definitely not okay.”

He moved in the direction she indicated and crouched down to take a closer look. “You sure this is a female?”

Rowan squatted next to him. “You can see the pelvis.” She pointed to the exposed bones that were more or less in a pile. “Definitely female. I can’t determine the age—probably over fourteen. I tried not to disturb the positioning of the bones—other than the couple I pulled up before I recognized they were human remains.” She leaned in, studying the remains as best she could. “From what I see, it doesn’t appear the bones have been damaged by any larger animals.”

She indicated the smooth surfaces. “No visible teeth marks. Judging by the positioning, I’d say she was dumped here exactly the way you see. On her left side, knees bent toward her chest, arms flung forward. As tissue deteriorated, the bones settled into a sort of pile and the plant life swallowed them up.”

Billy held out his arms in front of him. “Like she was carried to this spot, one arm behind her back, one under her legs—the way a man might carry a woman—and dumped or placed on the ground in that same position.”

“That’s the way it looks,” Rowan agreed.

“You think she was dead when she was left here?”

She made a face, scrutinized what she could see of the skull. “It’s difficult to say. There’s no obvious indication of cause of death. No visible fractures to the skull or missing pieces, but there’s a lot of it I can’t see without disturbing the scene.”

He hummed a note of indecision. “How long you think she’s been here?”

“A while. Years.” Rowan shrugged. “Maybe decades. There’s a total lack of tissue. The bones I picked up are dry, almost flaky. If there was any clothing, it’s gone. To disappear so completely, it would certainly have had to be an organic material of some sort. Maybe when they dig around they’ll find a zipper or buttons—something to suggest what she was wearing.” She looked to her old friend. “But I’m no medical examiner or anthropologist. I’m merely speculating based on a small amount of knowledge and a very preliminary examination.”

“I appreciate your insights.” Billy shook his head. “Damn. I can’t believe she’s been here that long and no one discovered her before now.”

“It’s a remote, overgrown area.” Rowan looked around. “No reason for anyone to come through here.” She kept the *except me* to herself. “I suppose it’s a good thing I dropped my phone.”

When she’d left the funeral home this morning, she’d tucked her phone into the pocket of her jeans. She hadn’t bothered with her purse or even her driver’s license. Just her phone and, of course, the pepper spray she carried everywhere. The drive to the lake was only a few miles. She had a handgun but she hadn’t bothered with it this morning—not for coming here.

But then, she hadn't expected to stumble upon human remains.

In fact, she hadn't expected to see anyone. If she'd had any idea she would be running into Billy and the half a dozen other official folks who would now descend on what was in all likelihood a crime scene, she would have dressed more appropriately. She spent most of her free time in jeans and Ts nowadays. The cotton material was breathable. Perfect for wearing under all that protective gear when working in the mortuary room and easy to launder afterward. She wouldn't be winning any awards for her fashion sense, but she was comfortable.

When working with the dead, it was always better to be as comfortable as possible.

Most of her time on the job in Nashville had been spent in heels and business suits. It was a nice perk not to have to dress up anymore. Since taking over the family business, she'd discovered that she preferred a ponytail to a French twist or a chignon any day of the week. And sneakers rather than heels were always a good thing.

Or maybe she'd grown lazy since returning home. She gave herself grace since she was still adjusting to the loss of her father. Of course, she dressed suitably for meeting the families of lost loved ones, for the viewings and the services. The business suits from her years with Metro came in handy for just those purposes. As her father always said, there were certain expectations when overseeing such a somber occasion.

"I'll need an official statement from you." Billy stood and offered his hand. "I can come by the funeral home later and take care of the statement if that works better for you."

She took his hand and pushed to her feet. "That would

be my preference, yes.” She glanced toward the road. “Does that mean I can go?” Rowan really did not want to be here when the media showed up. And the media would show up. As soon as word about finding human remains spread through the police department, someone would give the local newspaper a heads-up. It was the natural course of things. The possibility of a homicide was a secret hardly anyone could keep. Rowan had endured enough of the spotlight after the release of her book, *The Language of Death*, and then the very public unmasking of her friend and colleague, Julian Addington, as a new breed of prolific serial killer.

Not to mention this was the second set of human bones to be found in Winchester in as many months. The other bones had been identified and the old case solved. Still, a steady stream of homicide cases was never a good thing for the chief of police.

He glanced around. “I don’t see any reason for you to stay.” He studied her a moment, those dark brown eyes of his searching hers. “If you’re sure you’re okay?”

Billy Brannigan was a true hometown hero, always had been. First on the football field and in the local charity rodeo circuit, then for more than a decade and a half as a cop and eventually as the chief of police in Winchester. Folks swore Billy was born wearing a Stetson and cowboy boots. He was a year older than Rowan and he’d made it his mission to take her under his wing after her sister’s death. Rowan had been totally lost without her twin, and at twelve she’d had enough insanity in her life with adolescence anyway. Billy had watched over her, threatened to pound anyone who wasn’t nice to her. And when her mother died only a few months after her sister, Billy had taken care of Rowan again. He was the

only other person on the planet who knew her deepest, darkest secrets.

He and the bastard who'd murdered her father.

"I'm fine. Really. I'll see you later." The sound of traffic on the road warned that she needed to get moving.

"Hey." His fingers curled around her upper arm when she would have walked past him. "Next time you come out here, bring that big old dog of yours and your handgun or ask me to come. You shouldn't be in a remote area like this alone. We both know *he* is still out there."

He. Rowan pushed the image of Julian from her head. She patted her other pocket. "I have my pepper spray." She glanced around again. "And somewhere nearby there might even be a special agent from the FBI's special joint task force keeping an eye on me to make sure I don't aid and abet Julian."

Though at this point the FBI had stopped surveilling her, the very idea made her feel ill. But the Bureau had its reasons in the beginning for suspecting her—all of which were circumstantial and utterly misleading—but nothing she said or did was going to change their minds completely. Her name and the possibilities of her involvement with Julian on a sexual level as well as the suggestion that she might have been part of his extracurricular activities had been smeared across every news channel, every newspaper and online news source. How could she be so close to the man and not see what he was? Particularly considering her formal education and training?

The taint of suspicion would likely follow her the rest of her life. This ugly reality no doubt pleased Julian immensely. At least the folks in her hometown had ignored the rampant rumors for the most part. Business hadn't dropped off and no one looked at her any differ-

ently than they ever had. Then again, she'd always been considered strange.

Basically, not much had changed.

Billy nodded, a sad smile on his lips—lips she had fantasized about kissing when she was fourteen years old. So very long ago. A sigh slipped from her. Life would never again be that simple.

“The pepper spray is good, but you should bring your weapon next time,” he said, “and Freud, okay?”

She drew in a big breath and let it out dramatically to show him that she was indulging his protective instincts. “*Okay*, Billy, I will not go to any other remote locations alone and without my dog and my handgun. No matter that I’m a grown woman and completely capable of taking care of myself.”

For the past six weeks she had worked diligently at honing her self-defense skills. For the first time in her life she owned a handgun and, more important, she knew how to use it. Billy had insisted on giving her lessons. Maybe she was a fool, but she was not afraid of running into Julian. She was prepared for that encounter... looked forward to it, actually. Killing him wasn’t her goal—at least not at first. She wanted answers. Then she wanted him to spend the rest of his days in solitary confinement being prodded and poked and tested by forensic psychiatrists.

Billy dipped his head in acknowledgment. “I’m aware, but do it for me.”

She rolled her eyes. “For you. Okay.”

She gave him a salute, then moved cautiously through the dense bushes until she reached the road, where she’d left her car. In truth, rather than acquiesce to his wishes, she would have loved to tell Billy he was overreacting,

being overprotective. Overdoing the big brother thing. But that would be a lie. Julian had murdered all those people, some in ways so heinous that it shocked even seasoned homicide detectives. He had promised Rowan that before he was done, she would want to end the agony of living with all the guilt.

He wasn't the sort of man to make idle threats.

But Rowan intended to see that *he* was the one who wanted the agony to end. She wasn't the only one who had shared secrets during their lengthy friendship. It was true that she hadn't suspected for a moment that he was a killer, but she did know many, many of his most personal thoughts. He had worries just like any other person. He had hopes and dreams. Obviously it was possible he had made up much of what he had told her. Psychopaths oftentimes lied when the truth would serve them better. Still, he was a mere human with human frailties.

She climbed into her car, started the engine. Let him come.

The sooner, the better.

She was ready to show him all she'd learned.