



IF YOU



TELL



A Thriller

ALIE

LUCINDA BERRY

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE BEST OF FRIENDS*



PRAISE FOR LUCINDA BERRY

Keep Your Friends Close

An Amazon Books Editors' pick for Best
Mystery, Thriller & Suspense

“Perfect reading for those who wonder: ‘If you couldn’t trust your best friend, could you really trust anyone?’”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

Off the Deep End

“As usual, Berry tightens the screws smartly in the opening pages and never lets up, and as usual, her ending is more intent on deepening the nightmare than providing a plausible explanation for it. Warning: the title applies as much to the audience as to the characters.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“As the suspense mounts, the action drives to a harrowing conclusion. Berry delivers the goods.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“A well-done mystery with a plausible yet surprising ending.”

—*Library Journal*

Under Her Care

“The action never wavers, and the surprises are unending. Berry is writing at the top of her game.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“[It’s] a humdinger . . . Perfect for suspense fans.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Lucinda delivers every time. Unputdownable.”

—Tarryn Fisher, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Lucinda Berry’s latest, *Under Her Care*, is her best thriller yet! A dark, riveting read that will keep you up late, racing to the chilling end.”

—Kaira Rouda, *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Next Wife* and *Somebody’s Home*

“Lucinda Berry’s *Under Her Care* is stunning, diabolical, and gripping, with one of the best and most gasp-worthy twists I have read in a very long time. Fast paced, fabulous, and enthralling, the pages practically turn themselves. Absolutely captivating.”

—Lisa Regan, *USA Today* and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author

“Creepy and chilling, *Under Her Care* is a tense page-turner that leaves you questioning everything you ever knew about motherhood and the family bond.”

—Tara Laskowski, award-winning author of *The Mother Next Door*

The Secrets of Us

“Those looking for an emotional roller-coaster ride will be rewarded.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Combine Lucinda Berry’s deep understanding of the complexities of the human mind with her immense talent for storytelling and you have *The Secrets of Us*, an intense psychological thriller that kept my heart racing until the shocking, jaw-dropping conclusion. Bravo!”

—T. R. Ragan, *New York Times* bestselling author

“*The Secrets of Us* is an unputdownable page-turner with two compelling female protagonists that will keep readers on their toes. Fantastic!”

—Cate Holahan, *USA Today* bestselling author of *One Little Secret*

“Lucinda Berry’s *The Secrets of Us* is a tense psychological thriller that explores the dark corners of the mind and turns a mind can take when it harbors secret guilt. The interplay between sisters Krystal and Nichole and their hidden past is gradually revealed, and in the end, the plot twists keep coming. Right and wrong can be ambivalent, and this story explores all shades of gray, from their dysfunctional family to an old childhood friend to a husband who may or may not be too good to be true. Berry’s background as a clinical psychologist shines in this novel with a character so disturbed they spend time in seclusion lockdown at a psychiatric ward. Don’t miss this one!”

—Debbie Herbert, *USA Today* and Amazon Charts bestselling author

“*The Secrets of Us* is an utterly gripping, raw, and heartbreaking story of two sisters. Berry’s flawlessly placed clues and psychological expertise grab you from the first word, not letting go until the last. Compelling, intricate, and shocking, this inventive thriller cleverly weaves from past to present with stunning precision. I was absolutely enthralled.”

—Samantha M. Bailey, *USA Today* and #1 national bestselling author of *Woman on the Edge*

“The past and present collide with explosive consequences in this addictive, twisty thriller from an author at the top of her game. *The Secrets of Us* grips from the first page and doesn’t let go until the final shocking twist.”

—Lisa Gray, bestselling author of *Dark Highway*

The Best of Friends

“A mother’s worst nightmare on the page. For those who dare.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“*The Best of Friends* gripped me from the stunning opening to the emotional, explosive ending. In this moving novel, Berry creates a beautifully crafted study of secrets and grief among a tight-knit group of

friends and of how far a mother will go to discover the truth and protect her children.”

—Heather Gudenkauf, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Weight of Silence* and *This Is How I Lied*

“In *The Best of Friends*, Berry starts with a heart-stopping bang—the dreaded middle-of-the-night phone call—and then delivers a dark and gritty tale that unfolds twist by devastating twist. Intense, terrifying, and at times utterly heartbreaking. Absolutely unputdownable.”

—Kimberly Belle, international bestselling author of *Dear Wife* and *Stranger in the Lake*

The Perfect Child

“I am a compulsive reader of literary novels . . . but there was one book that kept me reading, the sort of novel I can’t put down . . . *The Perfect Child*, by Lucinda Berry. It speaks to the fear of every parent: What if your child was a psychopath? This novel takes it a step further. A couple, desperate for a child, has the chance to adopt a beautiful little girl who, they are told, has been abused. They’re told it might take a while for her to learn to behave and trust people. She can be sweet and loving, and in public she is adorable. But in private—well, I won’t give away what happens. But needless to say, it’s chilling.”

—Gina Kolata, *New York Times*

“A mesmerizing, unbearably tense thriller that will have you looking over your shoulder and sleeping with one eye open. This creepy, serpentine tale explores the darkest corners of parenthood and the profoundly unsettling lengths one will go to, to keep a family together—no matter the consequences. Electrifying and atmospheric, this dark gem of a novel is one I couldn’t put down.”

—Heather Gudenkauf, *New York Times* bestselling author

“A deep, dark, and dangerously addictive read. All-absorbing to the very end!”

—Minka Kent, *Washington Post* bestselling author

**IF YOU
TELL
A Novel
A LIE**

OTHER TITLES BY LUCINDA BERRY

Keep Your Friends Close

Off the Deep End

Under Her Care

The Secrets of Us

The Best of Friends

When She Returned

A Welcome Reunion

The Perfect Child

**IF YOU
TELL
A Novel
A LIE**

LUCINDA BERRY

 **THOMAS & MERCER**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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*To all the queer nineties kids who grew up in the rural
Midwest. Those of us who made it out and those of us who
didn't. Love always and forever.*

—LB

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PROLOGUE

Seven seconds.

That's how long it took him to slip his fingers down my pants and change my life forever.

Seven seconds.

That's all it took to change your life forever too.

My mom always warned me to keep my legs closed and watch out for the predators. But she told me they were out there. She never told me they were at home.

Seven seconds.

That's how long it took me to forget and exactly how long it took for me to remember when they told me what you'd done.

Seven seconds.

That's all it took to kill you.

CHAPTER ONE

NOW

THERA

It was just supposed to be a joke. Nobody was supposed to get hurt. Definitely nobody was supposed to die. We were just kids. Stupid teenagers. Everyone makes mistakes when they're young.

That's what I kept telling myself as I frantically pawed through the back of my closet, searching for my suitcase. It's the same thing I told myself the night it happened, and every single time the memories pushed their way to the surface over the last twenty-six years. That's how I forced them down. It hadn't been easy, but I did it.

We were just kids.

We didn't mean to do anything wrong.

We were just kids.

Over and over again. A steady mantra until I tricked myself into believing it was true. You could do anything if you put your mind to it. At least I could. That's what happens after your mom dies of breast cancer when you're seven years old. Your brain figures out all kinds of ways to cope. It doesn't have any other choice.

I couldn't believe I was going to see the girls again—Cabin Naomi strong—after all this time had passed. It was like a weird fever dream. To have suppressed any memory of them for so long and then, suddenly—bam! Just in your face again. I still hadn't caught my breath. My emotions were all over the place. I had barely left the house in six years.

Not since Dad's stroke. I shouldn't have been going now, but I didn't have any other choice.

Blakely started the group text and sent it out to everyone. How'd she get our contact information if none of us were supposed to be in touch? That was part of the plan. *Absolutely no contact no matter what. We never talk about this.* Blakely must've said it ten times before we left the bathroom that night. Have the others been in touch? I just figured everyone else followed the plan, same as me. It'd never occurred to me it might be otherwise. What if I was the only one that cut them all off and never looked back? Had they all gotten together without me? Were they setting me up? But I hadn't done anything wrong. Not anything worse than what they'd done.

Blakely had way more reason to keep quiet than me. Than anyone, really. Unless they'd gotten together and were trying to make me take the fall for what happened. But why would they do that? And why now? After all this time? My head spun and my stomach hurt. I couldn't think straight. I pushed the fears aside. These were my oldest and dearest friends. I was being silly. Totally illogical and paranoid. But it was hard not to be, given the situation.

"We never tell anyone what we did. Not tonight. Not tomorrow. Not ever. Do you understand me? We forget everything and pretend like we never knew each other when we leave here. This"—she pointed to all of us—"never happened." We were huddled in the bathroom together. Squished in one tiny stall. All the way in the back. Every camper's parent had been called to come pick up their child, and the ones that were close had already started arriving. "And this"—she pointed outside, in the direction of the main lodge, where all the emergency vehicles and police had gathered—"wasn't our fault."

I listened to her. So did the others. Because you listened to Blakely. You didn't question her. She'd always been the natural leader of our group, and that night wasn't any different. We walked out of the bathroom in silence, and nobody spoke while we hurriedly shoved our things into suitcases. The only sounds in the cabin besides our own breathing were the crickets chirping outside the window, punctuated by Grace's quiet sobs in the background. She hadn't quit crying since we'd heard the news. But we didn't stop what we were doing to comfort her like we normally would. We didn't even look at each other. We just kept

our heads down and packed. I walked out of Cabin Naomi, the screen door slamming shut behind me, without even saying goodbye. I'd known at the beginning of the summer that it would be the last time we'd all be together. We'd be off to college the following year and moving on to the next phase of our lives. But it wasn't supposed to end like that. It was supposed to be the best summer of our lives.

None of it had felt real. That's what I remembered the most about those final moments with my friends. The last few hours at Camp Pendleton were just like when my mom died. *This doesn't feel real. It isn't happening.* That's all I could think about then, too, as I lay next to her on her hospital bed in our living room, listening to her wheeze as she took her last breaths, struggling with each one. Even as she hovered with one foot in this world and her other foot in the afterlife, I felt nothing. Completely detached, because it truly didn't feel possible that it was my life. My mom was supposed to live. She wasn't supposed to die. What about all our prayers? *This isn't happening.*

All my therapists asked what I was feeling in that moment with her, and I never told them the truth. Because that's not what you're supposed to be thinking about when the greatest woman in the world dies. The day you lose your heart. Part of your soul. You're supposed to have something profound to say about that. Except I didn't.

Just like the day my mom died, my dad swooped in to save me from camp in the same way. He was always my center of gravity when the world flipped upside down. My hero. He ran to me as soon as he spotted me coming down the hill, grabbing me and scooping me up the moment he got near. His familiar muscular arms wrapped around me, and he held me close to him for the longest time, his heart racing against mine. He finally pulled back and cupped my face in his hands.

"Are you okay, bug?" His big brown eyes peered into mine. Filled with nothing but concern and love. He was doing his best not to cry. Fiercely working his jaw as he tucked my hair behind my ears.

I nodded. Too scared to speak. Did I still have blood on my face? I still felt like I did even though we'd washed it off in the sink.

"Let's get you out of here," he said, grabbing my bag with one arm and throwing his other arm around me. He paused for a second and looked up at the sky. "God, help us through this moment." He took a deep breath, then turned his gaze back to me. "Now, you just close your

eyes and keep 'em shut, bug. Don't look at anything when we walk through all the commotion down there, you hear me? There's a ton of people. Lots of things going on, and you don't need to see any of that. You understand?"

I nodded. I understood it was a crime scene. A brutal massacre on campus, and he didn't need to tell me to close my eyes. I'd already squeezed them shut and buried my face in his chest, wishing he could protect me from the images. But it was too late. I'd already seen too much. The police scanners crackled. The air smelled metallic. Almost like it smelled after it rained. Except it wasn't rain—it was blood. I didn't look at anyone or anything else while we walked through the masses of law enforcement, people multiplying by the second and crawling around the property like ants. I kept my head buried in Dad's chest all the way to the car.

The memories made me shudder. I didn't want to remember the car ride or what the first few days back home had been like. I was so sick and scared. Mostly from anxiety. The images. What we'd done. The part we played. I kept waiting for the phone to ring or a police officer to knock at my front door and take me down to the station, but nobody ever called. Nobody ever came. I watched the story from afar, and eventually, I stopped worrying about it. I didn't have any other choice if I wanted to go on with my life. You couldn't stay stuck in trauma forever. That's what my mom made me promise when she died: "Don't you dare use this as a reason to throw your life away, Thera. You hear me?"

So, that's what I'd done with that last summer of camp. Same as I'd done with my mom. Moved forward. But now everything had come to a screeching halt.

I'd never looked up any of my cabinmates once you could do things like that on social media. It'd been hard in the beginning, but they'd been dead to me for years now. Decades, really. What would it be like to see Blakely after all this time? To this day, she was the best friend I ever had. Would she still snort when she laughed? Did she ever have the mole on her cheek removed, like she swore she'd do when she was an adult? Was she still the same person? Was I? Were any of us?

So many questions. But I didn't let myself think about the most important one—the one that mattered the most. Were we finally going to tell someone what we'd done? Make things right after all this time?