



# APPETITE FOR INNOCENCE

Lucinda Berry

A DARK PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER

# APPETITE FOR INNOCENCE

**Lucinda Berry**

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RISE PRESS

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# SARAH (THEN)

I shove my earplugs in as far as they'll go to drown out the sounds of her cries. I hate the crying, and they always cry. In the beginning, I used to try to get them to be quiet. Calm them down, but nothing ever worked. They were as terrified of me as they were of him. They'd claw at me like wild animals, raking their nails across my arms and scraping my face if I tried to hold them. A few hit me. One even spit at me when I offered her a glass of water. I gave up trying to soothe them a long time ago. Now, I just let them cry.

The worst part is not knowing how long the wailing is going to last. I used to try to figure out a way to predict how long they'd carry on before being moved to Phase Two, but I was always wrong. The weak ones give up within a matter of hours because they succumb to shock or simply resign to their fate, but the fighters can go on for days. It's hard to tell the difference between the two, but I don't care as long as they stop crying. I want to yell at them to stop screaming—nobody can hear you. Sometimes I do, but it only makes them cry harder.

I hate the fighters. They make my days so much more difficult and throw me out of my routine. Things work best for me when I stick to my routine. They take away my sunshine and I need my sun.

I'm pretty sure this one is a fighter. He had to sedate her for the car ride which is never a good sign. The weak ones are paralyzed by their fear and keep quiet in the car. Not the strong ones. And this one is strong even though she's small.

Before I went to bed, Paige and I watched her on her cot, asleep out of protest with her arms and feet bound with zip ties, her mouth covered in duct tape. Not the gray kind. He never uses gray. This time, he used red with white stripes. Even in her drug-induced sleep, she didn't look peaceful. Her forehead was still lined with a fight.

Paige shook next to me even though she tried to hide it. Her eyes were filled with questions I couldn't answer.

"It's not fair," she'd whispered as I left her laying on her cot next to the new girl and retreated to the privacy of my own space.

A few years ago, I hung a sheet from the ceiling. I wish it was a real wall, but at least it separates me from them. I didn't bother to turn around as I walked away from her.



“There’s nothing fair about life,” I said.

The drugs wore off shortly after I laid down and she woke up. She started screaming—the tortured screams they make when their mouths are taped shut. It’s been over an hour now and she still hasn’t stopped. I put my headphones on over my earplugs and press play on the CD player he gave me last Christmas. I didn’t complain it was old-fashioned or that nobody listens to CDs anymore. I was just grateful to have music. Out of all the things from my old life, music is what I miss the most.

## ELLA (THEN)

Terror jolts me awake. My eyes snap open. There's water between my legs. A scream stuck in my throat. I want to rip off the gag but I can't because my hands are still tied, the skin torn from my movements. My legs are tucked underneath me, bound at the ankles. Every part of me aches.

My throat is raw.

In an instant, it all comes flooding back to me. The man. His baseball cap. Perfect, white smile. The way his eyes lit up when I told him my name. I never should've told him my name. The way his hand felt on my arm as he gripped it. The awful pain in my head. It still throbs in the same place.

My eyes can't adjust to the darkness and burn like a thousand pieces of sand are stuck on them. I want to rub them, but can't because my hands are too awkward in the way they're tied. I edge myself up slowly, my bones screaming in protest as I pull myself into sitting position, resting against a spongy wall behind me. I bring my legs up to my chest, wrapping my arms around them as best I can.

I furtively scan my surroundings. I can see every inch of the room from my bed. There's thick foam covering every surface. The walls, the ceiling, even the stairs. It's bumpy like if you threw yourself against it, you'd bounce off. Thick, gray shag carpet covers the floor. So thick you could comb it. There's no windows. Nothing that speaks of light. Some kind of wall to my left. A narrow staircase. An outline of a toilet in the far right corner. No sink. It smells musty like dirty socks.

"Hey, you're awake," a voice comes out of the darkness and startles me. Panic shoots through me.

My head snaps to the side—the outline of a body lying on a cot next to me.

"I can call Sarah to take the tape off your mouth, but you can't scream. She'll put it back on if you scream." Her voice sounds kind.

Who is she? Who's Sarah? What does she want with me? Why am I here? Do I know her? I squint into the darkness, but it's too dark to make out her face. I'm frozen. Can't move. Can't speak. I just stare. My heart pounds. I'm dripping in sweat.

"Do you want me to call her?"

I shake my head. I don't want her to call anyone. I want my mom. Hot tears move down my face. They run over my tape. I'm thirsty. I've never been so thirsty. How long have I been here? Where am I?

And then I hear it. Gut-wrenching sobs. But they're not coming from me. My tears are silent. They're coming from the girl on the cot next to me. Why is she crying?

Terror rises in my throat.

## ELLA (NOW)

“Tell me about the basement.” He works his jaw as he talks. He has a closed face, the kind that reveals nothing. His white Oxford shirts stretches over his well-toned chest and is tucked into his navy blue pleated pants. A phone is clipped on his black belt.

He’s already asked me about the basement. Three times. They both keep asking me about the basement. I hate the basement. I don’t want to talk about it. I just want to go home. The medicine the doctors gave me makes it hard to think. I can’t remember how to breathe. My body is on fire. Everything hurts.

“When is my mom going to be here?” My voice cracks.

The other man speaks, the one with the crew cut. “Her flight should be in the air by now. We’re having one of our agents meet her at the gate and they’ll escort her here.” He checks his watch. A thick plastic one. “As long as traffic is okay, she should be here in about three hours.”

The nurse pipes up from the corner of the room. “Can I get you anything?”

I shake my head. I want everyone to leave me alone. I just want to sleep. I’m so tired.

“Are you in pain?”

She walks over to the bed to get a closer look at me. Her green eyes are kind, but I look away. She’s staring at me in a way nobody’s looked at me before. Is this how everyone is going to look at me now? I bow my head, refusing to meet her eyes and stare at my arm. It looks funny wrapped in a purple cast. I’ve never broken a bone before.

“What’s your favorite color?” the doctor asked after they’d set the bones back in place.

I said purple. Purple has always been my favorite color. I don’t know if it is anymore. I don’t know if my world still has room for color.

“Is the victim’s advocate here yet?” The serious man speaks again. His name is Brian or Blake. Something with a B. I can’t remember. He speaks around me like I’m not here. I wish I wasn’t. I want to disappear.

Their lips move, but the sound is turned off. I want to interrupt them and ask the question burning my lips, but I can’t. I’m too afraid of the answer. Maybe it’s better not to know.

## SARAH (THEN)

The alarm doesn't summon me awake. It's always strange to wake up without it. I hate Phase One. It has no order and I need order. He knows that but he doesn't care. I've been begging him for years to just let me stay upstairs until they're ready, but he refuses. Says he needs me. I'm the only one that can do it right. I wish he'd do it himself. But I do what he tells me to do. No argument. I know better than that.

I stretch lazily. Today will be a day without coffee. I don't make coffee in the basement. Coffee is for upstairs. It helps to keep the two separate even if it makes it harder on me. My head will be throbbing by noon.

Both the girls are already awake. Paige is curled up on her side crying and the new girl has flattened herself against the wall trying to make herself as small as possible like she might be able to make herself invisible. Paige pays me no attention but the new girl is glued to my every move. The whites in her eyes are visible even in the dark. I make my way over to the corner and use the toilet. I walk through the room, flicking the lamps on after I'm done and flood the room with dim light.

The new girl flinches and frantically looks around, checking everything out now that she can see. She surveys the padded walls, every inch of space covered in foam including the ceiling. She searches for a way out and her gaze rests on the stairs. It's what all the girls do. They think the stairs hold the key to their freedom but it doesn't take them long to figure out they're safer in the basement. She keeps scanning, back and forth and back and forth, as if she might be missing something or find a clue hidden in the walls somewhere.

I can see her heart beating through her blue t-shirt. Her face is lined with terror and sweat drips from it. She's small but muscular like she plays sports. She's still in her running shoes. Her shorts are black and short—the tight Nike ones I've seen on TV. Maybe that's what he liked about her.

I crouch down in front of her making sure not to get too close. Even though her legs are tied, she could still try to kick me if she wanted to. "Hi, my name is Sarah. I know you're totally freaking out, but I'm not going to hurt you. I promise." I keep my voice even, as neutral as possible.

The vein pulses in her forehead. She's working her jaw underneath the tape.

"I can take the tape off you, but you can't scream." I point around me. To the walls. The ceiling. The thick carpet underneath us. "Nobody can hear you if you scream. This place is completely soundproof. Do you understand?"

Her eyes are wide, unblinking. She just stares at me as if she hasn't registered what I've said. Maybe she's still in shock. It takes some of them

awhile to snap out of it. Some of them never do. I pull off her tape in one swift movement. It's easier that way, just like a Band-Aid.

"Get away from me!" she screams. "Help! Somebody help me! Please help me!"

I roll my eyes. I've been through this routine too many times. "Nobody can hear you. I already told you that. You can scream for days and nobody's going to come."

My words have no effect on her. She continues to scream. Her voice growing more and more frantic, filled with panic as her screams are absorbed by the foam.

Paige slowly moves over to her cot and sits next to her. The new girl jerks away, rolling off the cot and landing on the floor.

"Leave me alone!"

"We're not going to hurt you." Paige's voice is kinder than mine. She's always so sweet. She used to have younger siblings so she had lots of practice calming people down. "I get it. I was terrified too, but she's right. Nobody can hear you."

The new girl scuttles to the corner. Her body is shaking. Her eyes dart back and forth between us.

"Who are you?" Her voice quivers.

"I'm Paige." Then, she points to me. "That's Sarah. What's your name?" She looks back and forth between the two of us before deciding to answer. "Ella."

## ELLA (NOW)

"Is Paige okay?" I ask.

I can't take it anymore. I have to know.

The man and woman in my room exchange looks. She's wearing a dark blue uniform so there's no mistaking she's a police officer, but he's in plain clothes so I can't tell who he is. The woman nods toward him. He takes whatever cue she's just given him.

"There are officers on the premises now and we should know more soon." He glances down at his phone. He's been anxiously checking it since we got into the room. He may have been in the room during my examination. I'm not sure, though. I disappeared into the blank space in my mind once they spread my legs and inserted the metal inside of me.

My mind and body are separate now. I used to just be me. One person. But now I'm split. I have a body and a mind. I can go back and forth between

the two but they rarely ever meet. I can't help but wonder if I'll ever go back to just being one.

At least police officers are at the house. I want to pray to God that she's okay, but I quit praying after God stopped answering my prayers. I don't believe in God anymore. I wonder what Mom will think about that when she finds out.

"And Sarah? What about Sarah?" I ask. I'll never forget the look in her eyes when she figured out what I was planning.

"Don't do it," she'd begged. "You'll get us all killed."

I'd never seen her so desperate or afraid. She didn't like for us to see her afraid. What if she was right? What if I saved myself but got them killed? I start to sob.

The female officer moves toward me. She looks like she's going to hug me.

"Don't touch me!" I cry.

She steps back.

"Okay, okay." She retreats to the corner of the room. "I understand how hard this must be for you. You've been through something terrible and the FBI is going to send a victim's advocate to work with you. She'll help you get through all of this."

The FBI? I'm going to have to talk to the FBI? Am I going to be in trouble? But I didn't do anything wrong. I was just trying to get away. I don't know how to talk to the FBI. I don't know how to talk to any of these people. What if they're coming to talk to me because I'm a murderer?

My sobs come in hiccupping gasps. It feels like someone is shoving my head underwater. The female officer reaches over and presses a button on my hospital bed. A nurse appears in my doorway.

"I think she's hyperventilating," the officer says.

The nurse hurries to my side. She puts her hand on my back. I flinch. It only makes me gasp harder. Struggle more.

"Sweetie, you just need to try to relax. You're safe now. You're okay. Take some deep breathes. Just follow me. One." She takes a deep breath. "Two." She lets it out. "Three. Follow me if you can, sweetie."

I focus on her words. Her counting. Her breathing. I try to match mine to hers. I hiccup less and less until finally they've stilled. I can breathe again.

"There you go. Good job, sweetie. Now, I'm just going to have a few words with the officers, but I'm not going anywhere, okay?" I nod, too exhausted to speak.

She motions to both of them and they huddle in the corner of the room by the door. Her movements are stiff and robotic as she motions back and forth between them and me.

“I understand you have a job to do, but this girl has been through hell. You need to ease off on the questioning. You know that,” she hisses, trying to do it quietly, but I can still hear her.

“She was the one asking questions. We didn’t do anything to get her riled up,” the man says.

I cover my ears. His voice is too perfect. Too calm. Just like John’s. I don’t want to think about John.

## SARAH (NOW)

I rip out the cords they’re trying to attach to my body and pull the mask off my face.

“Where is he? Have you found him? Please tell me you’ve found him?”

The EMT tries to push me back onto the bed. “Just relax. You’re safe now. He can’t get you here. You’re safe now.”

I frantically shake my head back and forth. “No! No! No!” They don’t understand. They don’t know him.

“Please, you’ve got to let me go. You’ve got to let me out of here.” I struggle against his arms. “Please, let me go!”

They don’t have any idea what they’ve done. I told Ella not to do it. Told her not to try. She didn’t listen. She should’ve listened to me.

I’m screaming now. I can’t help myself, but I don’t recognize the sound of my voice. It’s someone else. Someone who doesn’t belong to me. There’s too much movement. This space is too close.

“John!” I scream just as I feel a sharp sting on my arm. I fall back onto the bed. My head is swimming. Swirling. I can’t catch my thoughts. My lids are so heavy. I can’t fall asleep. But the darkness is so powerful. I have no choice, I give in.

When I open my eyes, I’m in a hospital room. There’s a police officer sitting in a chair next to my bed. A needle taped into my arm attached to an IV bag. This is all wrong. It’s not supposed to be happening.

“Where’s John?” I search the room as if he might be hiding somewhere out of my sight, waiting for the perfect moment to grab me.

They have to know he’ll find me. He’s not going to just let me go. Not like this. He won’t stand for it.

“I’m Officer Malone.” The police officer stands and walks to my bed. He has to be at least forty. Maybe older. His dark hair threaded with slivers of



gray is cropped close to his head. “And you must be Sarah?” He sticks out his hand.

I cling to it. “Please, you don’t understand. You have to let me go. I can’t be here.”

His brown eyes fill with tears. “Look, I have two daughters of my own. Right about your age too. And if either of them had been stolen by that monster, they’d be terrified too. I want you to know that I’ll protect you like you’re one of my own. He’s not getting into this room.”

“So, you haven’t found him? You don’t know where he is? He’s still out there?” My voice raises a pitch with each word.

He shakes his head. “Unfortunately, he did a pretty great job destroying the crime scene, but we’re going to find him. He couldn’t have gotten far.” He grabs my other hand. He leans in close, holding tightly to both of my hands. He has a broad nose. Full lips. “I can promise you one thing. We will find him and make sure he’s punished for what he did to you girls.”

He knows there’s others? Ella made it? I can’t believe she made it. How did she get over the gate? The sound of the alarms still rings in my ears. I’m not sure it will ever stop. I’ve never been as afraid as I was when she pushed through the door and the alarm went off, not even the first night I stayed with him and I didn’t think I could ever be more scared than I was that night.

“The others?” I ask.

“Yes, your friend Ella is two doors down.”

I wouldn’t call her my friend, but I want to see her. I have to talk to her.

“Can I go to her room? Can I stay with her?”

“For now, we’re keeping each of you in your own rooms. I’m not exactly sure why the hospital set it up that way, but I can definitely talk to my boss about getting both of you in the same room. Would that make you feel better?” I nod.

“Are you sure you’ll find him?” I ask.

“Honey, I’m not going to quit until I find the man that did this to you.” I wish I believed him, but he doesn’t know John. Nobody knows John. Not like I do.

## ELLA (THEN)

I exhaust myself screaming. I think the girl, Sarah, is right. Nobody can hear me down here. When I woke up, the other girl, Paige, was sitting on her bed reading a book. She’s reading a book in this dungeon like it’s perfectly normal. Why aren’t the other girls tied up? How come I’m the only one?

I try to sleep, but it's impossible to sleep when your limbs are melded together. There's no comfortable spot. Every time I move, another part of my body cries out in pain.

I am so thirsty. My throat is on fire. I'm afraid to ask them for something to drink, though. What if they put something in it? But I don't know how much longer I can hold out. My mouth is so dry my lips are sticking to my teeth. My tongue is taking over my entire mouth. Eventually, I'm going to have to drink. The body can't survive without water. That much I know. I don't know how long I've been down here. It's hard to tell when there's no light. I've never lived without light.

And it's so quiet. Painfully still. I strain my ears for sounds. A voice. A car. Train whistle. The sounds of traffic. Any clue as to where I am. There's nothing. I listen so hard it makes my head hurt.

Am I still in the city? The same country? Did he put me on a plane?

My brain is foggy.

I remember everything right up until the car. The car is where it gets fuzzy. The images blur together. The fabric over my head. Heavy and rough. It made me itch. I couldn't breathe. I puked. I might have peed myself too. I'm not sure.

My smells permeate the air around me. It makes me want to gag.

I moan through the thick tape covering my mouth. Sarah put it on again after I wouldn't stop screaming. Paige begged her not to, but she wouldn't listen.

"She's giving me a headache," she said. "Help me hold her down."

"I'm sorry," Paige said as she sat on top of my legs while I bucked.

Sarah planted herself on my stomach, pinning my arms above my head. She peered down at me. "It doesn't have to be this hard," she said through gritted teeth, her face lined with exertion. "We're not trying to hurt you, but you have to listen."

"Then, get off me! Let me go! Please! What are you doing?" I thrashed back and forth, but they held tight.

"Just calm down."

I heaved my legs up, throwing Paige off me. She tumbled onto the floor next to my bed. Sarah wrestled on top of me. Paige scrambled back up.

"Stop, please!" Paige yelled. "She'll call him and he'll come down here. You don't want him to come down here. He'll chain you up." Her eyes filled with the same terror that surged through my body.

I let myself go limp. Sarah quickly slapped another piece of thick tape across my mouth.

“There,” she huffed. “Be quiet or we’re all going to end up in trouble.”

I sat on my cot out of breath like I’d just one run of my cross country races.

Sarah is still behind the curtain. I think she works for him, but I can’t tell. Who are these girls?

I study Paige as she reads. She looks younger than me, but it might just be because she’s so tiny. She’s wearing a pair of black sweat pants and a plain white t-shirt. Her hair is cut short, a cute pixie bob framing her petite face. She has a cute button nose, pointing up at the end. Her fingernails are painted pink. She looks innocent, but a few hours ago, she was pinning me down so she can’t be all that innocent.

I need water. I think I’m going to die if I don’t get something to drink and I can’t die. I have to stay alive long enough to figure out a way out of here or someone to find me. Mom has to be frantically searching for me by now. She probably put together one of those crews they do when a child goes missing. I can’t imagine how worried she is. I always come home on time. I don’t break rules. It will destroy her if I don’t make it out of this.

All I have to do is hold on until she finds me.

I make an exaggerated coughing sound to get Paige’s attention. She turns to look at me. Her eyes are green and covered by dark lashes. Her skin is soft and clear. She looks like a doll.

I try to communicate with my eyes that I want her to take my gag off. I promise to be quiet, but my words come out muffled.

“Sarah?” Paige calls.

Sarah sticks her head out from behind her curtain. Unlike Paige, her hair is long, tucked up into a messy bun on the top of her head. Her face is square and angular with perfect cheekbones like the ones you see on models in magazines.

“What?” she asks, clearly annoyed.

“I think we should try again,” Paige says.

Sarah walks over to me. She’s taller than I thought. She’s long and lean with a confident and poised strut. She’s wearing the same black sweatpants and white t-shirt as Paige. She towers over my cot where I lay curled up.

“Are you ready to be quiet now?” she asks.

I nod my head and try to look compliant.

She tears off my tape. I don’t even flinch this time. She doesn’t move from her spot. Her hands are on her hips.

“We aren’t the enemy,” she says.

I’m not sure I believe her.

“Can I have some water?” It hurts to talk.

She walks back behind her curtain. This space is tiny. It’s smaller than my bedroom at home. When she returns, she’s holding a water bottle.

“Can you untie me?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “Not yet. We have to be sure you’re not going to hurt us.”

They’re smart. I’ve already tried to figure out how to overtake them.

She brings the bottle to my lips and pours. I gulp it up hungrily. Some of it spills out of my mouth and onto my shirt, but I don’t care. I’m just so thirsty.

“Can I feed her?” Paige asks.

“I don’t care,” Sarah says.

She hands her the water bottle. She goes behind her curtain and comes back carrying a box of crackers. They’re the Saltine kind Mom feeds me whenever I have the stomach flu. She tosses them to Paige and then leaves us alone except it’s not as if we’re really alone because her sheet is so close to Paige’s cot she could reach out and touch it if she wanted to.

“Do you want a cracker?” Paige holds one up tentatively.

I shake my head. My stomach is too twisted to eat. It’s coiled in on itself.

She munches on a few herself, taking a few dainty bites. She brushes off the crumbs that fall on her bed.

“I’ve been where you are,” she says. “I know how it feels.”

She has? Really? Or is she trying to trick me? But the fear in her eyes was real when she mentioned his name. Whoever he is. I’d never seen him before last night. Can she help me? Maybe we can help each other.

“How old are you?” I ask.

“Fifteen.”

I would’ve guessed thirteen but she’s only a year younger than me.

“How did you get here?” I ask.

“Same way you did.”

She was running too? Did he ask her about his lost dog?

“Did he ask you if you’d seen his dog?” She shakes her head.

Of course he doesn’t have a dog. None of his story was real.

“He asked me if I knew his daughter.” She stares at the wall as if she’s seeing something I can’t. Her gaze is faraway. “I was walking home from the library when he took me.”