

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white sleeveless dress, is captured in a dynamic pose as if running or dancing through a doorway. She is looking back over her shoulder. The scene is bathed in a strong blue light, creating a dramatic and mysterious atmosphere. The background shows a glimpse of a room with a chair.

WHEN SHE RETURNED

LUCINDA BERRY

PRAISE FOR *THE PERFECT CHILD*

“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.”

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**WHEN
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RETURNED**

ALSO BY LUCINDA BERRY

The Perfect Child

WHEN SHE RETURNED

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. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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Published by Thomas & Mercer, Seattle
www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781542092920

ISBN-10: 1542092922

Cover design by Rex Bonomelli

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**WHEN
SHE
RETURNED**

PROLOGUE

Shiloh's screams pierced the air. I hoisted my nightgown and sprinted through the darkness. She writhed against me, getting instantly worked up and letting out another wail. Fear thrummed through me. I slapped my hand over her mouth. Her tiny body jerked with silent sobs. I dropped to the ground and shoved my thumb in her mouth, hoping it'd pacify her. She quieted immediately.

Thank God.

My heart pounded in my chest, lungs burning. I furtively scanned the forest. It felt like I'd been running in circles for hours. There was no way to tell where I was, which way I was going, if I'd been there before, but it didn't matter. I just had to keep moving.

I glanced down at Shiloh. Her eyes were wide open, staring back at me while she sucked on my thumb. She always woke starved. I kissed the top of her forehead, reminding myself that she was my reason. I would do anything for her.

"Just hold on, baby girl; hold on," I whispered.

The forest wasn't quiet, and every sound made me jump. I was sure any minute one of them would reach out and grab me. Or worse, snatch Shiloh. They'd take her to him. What if they left me here?

I stood, cradling her tightly against me. We had to keep moving. I tucked her head underneath my wrap and took off again. Weeds and branches tore into my legs like barbed wire. No matter. I pushed forward. Rocks cut into my bare feet. I just wanted to rest, but I couldn't stop. It was only a matter of time before she fussed again, and this time my thumb

wouldn't suffice. Her cries would lead them right to us. That couldn't happen. I wouldn't let it. I ran on, fighting through the exhaustion that came in waves throughout the night, making my head throb. Just when I thought I couldn't take another step, the trees thinned, and a wider space opened in front of us. My footsteps quickened, and adrenaline surged again, giving me the final burst of energy I needed to push through the clearing and make it to the road.

And then I saw it—the neon lights stretching into the sky.

I sprinted across the road to the gas station. Shiloh jerked awake and began crying, but it didn't matter anymore.

"You can scream now. Scream all you want," I cried.

Two gas pumps stood empty, but the lights inside the store were on. I rushed to the door, springing back when it didn't open. I pushed again.

Nothing.

It wouldn't budge. I smacked the glass.

"No!"

Shiloh's cries moved into terrified screams. I beat on the door, yelling wildly. All this way. I'd come all this way. Tears coursed down my cheeks. Snot dripped into my mouth. I crumpled into a pile in front of the store.

"Hey." A male voice startled me, making me jump. I gripped Shiloh closer to my chest and scuttled back against the wall. The man peered down at me through thick glasses. He reeked of smoke. His name tag said *Matt* underneath the Amoco logo.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked. "Are you okay?"

I scrambled to my feet and flung myself at him. "Please, please, you have to help me!" I clawed at his shirt. "Call the police! Please, you have to! I'm Kate Bennett."

ONE

ABBI

NOW

I nervously fingered the chain around my neck. The small locket held Mom's picture, and I'd been wearing it since she had disappeared. We had finally buried her five years ago, but it was hard to have a funeral when you didn't have a body. Dad had assured me it was okay and that families did it all the time, like there were other kids whose moms had gone shopping and had never come home. We had a beautiful memorial service instead of a formal funeral and had buried the important parts of her, like her violin and a video of her best performances, copies of letters she'd written to Dad, and pictures of the three of us together on vacations and other special occasions. Things like that. But now she'd come back to life. Nobody came back to life after they were dead. I still felt like I was at the end of a dream, waiting to wake up.

I stared at the back of Dad's head. The long hairs on his neck had curled from sweat, like they did when he worked out. Only this time it was nerves. He sat in the passenger seat while Meredith drove, nervously bouncing his right leg. She had insisted on driving, and normally Dad would've put up a fight, but he hadn't said anything. He hadn't said much since they'd broken the news to me.

I had known something was wrong from the minute they had walked into my room without knocking. Dad always knocked first. Meredith had been practically holding him up from behind and pushing him through the

doorway. Her hands were shaking, and her face was pale, but she looked good in comparison to him. His pupils were huge, so big they had overtaken the green of his eyes, and he held them open like he'd forgotten how to blink. I'd never seen him so wrecked. I jumped up from my bed, where I'd been working on my science homework.

"Dad, what's wrong?" I stood in front of him, but he looked past me like he wasn't seeing me, and he gazed out the window behind my desk like there was something important outside that he needed to see. "Dad?"

"I . . . it's . . ." His Adam's apple moved up and down as he wrestled with his emotions. His face was ashen and slick with sweat. "If we . . ."

Was he having a heart attack? A stroke? Why were they wasting time talking to me if something was wrong with him?

"What's happening?" I turned to Meredith. "What's going on, Meredith?"

"We just received some very shocking news." Her voice caught as she spoke. "Why don't we all take a minute and sit down on your bed?"

Maybe it was Caleb. Or Thad. Wouldn't they have texted me, though? But Meredith would have been in worse shape if something had happened to one of her sons, and she had been the one helping Dad to the bed like he had been injured, so it had to be him. Something was wrong with Dad. My worst fear was coming true. It'd been my greatest fear since I'd lost Mom—losing Dad. Anxiety rushed through me. I tried to steady my breath, pressing my toes against my shoes to stay present, like my therapist had taught me all those years ago. I sat next to him, twisting my hands on my lap and waiting for one of them to speak.

"Scott, you need to let Abbi know what's going on." Meredith cut into my panic.

Dad turned to me, his pupils still huge. He worked his jaw as he spoke. "They found your mother."

Mom.

I flattened into the bed like a balloon losing all its air. My limbs felt like they were coming loose. "Is she . . . is she . . ."

“She’s alive,” Dad said.

I didn’t catch much of what he said after—something about Montana—because my head was spinning with hamster-wheel thoughts. Now, as we sped down the highway, it was still spinning as I replayed my memories and tried to imagine how Dad felt. It’d been eleven years since Mom had gone missing from the Target parking lot. She’d disappeared like a ghost, with her keys in the ignition and her purse on the passenger seat—no sign of a struggle.

I was five when it happened, so most of my earliest memories were of going door to door in Arcata neighborhoods with Dad and handing out her missing person flyer. We knocked on every door, and if nobody answered, we left one for them, making sure we didn’t skip a house. Dad taped elaborate maps on our living room walls, keeping a color-coded record of where we’d been and where we still had to go. People criticized him for taking me with him on his searches, but they would’ve criticized him no matter what, since they found fault with everything he did back then. No one cared that he’d passed the polygraph. They still saw him as a suspect.

We knocked on doors for almost two years. Every year, on the day she went missing, they ran her story, airing some of the original footage of Dad pleading for her return. They talked about the grim statistics of missing people—how the longer they were gone, the less likely you were to find them alive. But Dad didn’t care about the statistics. He never had. Everyone said it was impossible that she was still alive. They obviously didn’t know as much as they thought, because we were headed to the hospital to meet her.

I leaned forward in the car and put my hand on his shoulder, wishing I could crawl into his lap and stay there. He squeezed my hand without turning around. “You okay, Pumpkin?” he asked.

“I’m fine, Dad,” I said.

Of course I wasn’t fine. We both knew that, but what was I supposed to say? I was on my way to meet a mother whose mythical legend had framed my childhood. There weren’t any words for that.

I didn't remember much about her, since I was so young when she had gone missing, but Dad was full of memories. He knew her almost as well as he knew himself, since they'd grown up together and been high school sweethearts. He shared his memories with me constantly, trying to make them my own. Over the years, she had become like my favorite character from a movie that I'd seen over ten times and studied until I knew every line by heart. I stared at her pictures until I'd memorized every inch of her face. Every curve. Each line. My favorite picture was in a yellow wooden frame on the nightstand next to my bed. She was standing underneath a sparkling waterfall and staring off into the distance, like she had a hilarious secret, a wide grin on her face and a twinkle in her eye. Dad always said she'd had an infectious laugh, and I could almost hear it when I looked at that picture. My heart quickened at the thought of hearing her laugh myself. Would she still laugh? A shiver went through me. The police had said she had a baby with her. That only meant one thing.

TWO

MEREDITH

NOW

Someone needed to say something. Anything. Scott hadn't spoken for over two hours. Not since we'd left California and crossed the Oregon state line. I had made some silly comment about how beautiful the mountains looked, but it had come out sounding like I was trying too hard, but I talked when I was upset. I couldn't help it. That was how I worked through problems. Usually Scott was the same way. It was one of the things I loved the most about him and what had drawn me to him at the bereavement support group where we'd met.

I'd been coming to the support group for over two months, and although I had expected it to be mostly women when I had gone the first time, I had been surprised to discover all the men in attendance too. They had an emotional depth that I'd never witnessed in other men, not even in my father, and he was an emotional man. Unfortunately, their emotional maturity had come at the expense of unimaginable heartache and loss. Most of the men had been in their late forties and had lost their wives to cancer, much like my own story.

I'd never expected to be a widow at such a young age. Nobody did. When I'd married my first husband, James, I'd had the same dream as everyone else—build a family together and grow old watching our grandchildren play, hopefully great-grandchildren, if we were lucky. Nobody was ever prepared to hear the word *cancer*, and it slapped us in the face, just

like it had everyone else after James went in for his physical that year. I envied the men and women whose spouses died quickly and with dignity. Brain cancer was a slow, debilitating death that stripped every part of his former self. It had been awful to watch, and as hard as my sons prayed for James's healing, in the end they prayed just as hard for his death. They were the ones who suggested I find a support group for widows. Cancer hadn't just sucked the life out of James—it'd sucked the life out of me, too, so I went even though I'd never been to any kind of support group before.

I'd already started settling into my new reality when Scott had shown up. I immediately recognized him when he walked into the church basement. Most of us did. You couldn't live in Arcata and not know about him. His face had been all over the news and media outlets. In a town as small as ours, something like that affected us all. Some of us were part of the teams that had combed the surrounding woods and riverbanks looking for any sign of her.

His brown hair had grayed at the roots, but he looked better than he'd looked all those years ago on TV when he'd been ravaged by grief and resembled a madman as he begged for anyone with information on his wife to come forward. He'd put on weight, and it'd filled out his face, making him appear friendlier and more relaxed. His full lips were closed, and he didn't look at any of us as he slid into one of the aluminum chairs in the circle. He kept his gaze fixed on the floor in front of him.

He was like that for months and didn't even speak other than to introduce himself during the beginning of the meeting, but he slowly opened up over time. We became friends and were strictly platonic for years, because he refused to believe Kate wasn't coming back. We started playing chess online late at night, since chronic insomnia was another thing we had in common, and, much like the other, it began when we'd lost our spouses. We instant messaged back and forth while we played. He spoke more in our online chats than he did in group, but then again so did I. Communicating online gave me a brazenness I wished I had in my interactions in the real world.

Have you been out with anyone since Kate?

I'd recently stepped into the dating world again. Dating in my late forties was even worse than it was in my twenties, and I didn't like it then.

His response was immediate.

Absolutely not.

Kate had been missing for over four years, so I assumed he'd been on at least a few awful dates and that we could swap stories. There were two types of people in group—those who didn't like to speak about their lost loved ones and kept their memories close to them, like carefully guarded secrets, and those who couldn't stop talking about them. Scott fell into the latter category, and he shared so many stories about Kate that I felt like I knew her personally. I knew more about her than I did about some of my closest friends.

Have you thought about it?

His response wasn't so quick that time. I felt the weight of his guilt while he typed.

A couple times . . .

Over the next few months, Scott opened up more and more about the difficulties he had with moving on. I reassured him that it was okay again and again, gently nudging him in the direction of letting go. He was so young, too young to spend the rest of his life alone. Then one night I just finally came out and said it.

Maybe it would help you let Kate go if you had her declared dead.

It had been another two years before he had. Another year before our first date.

And now here we were.

Newlyweds.

It'd been ten months since we'd made it official down at the courthouse, with our children as our witnesses—my two boys, Thad and Caleb, and Abbi. Both of us had already done it the traditional way and hadn't wanted to do it that way again. Besides, those spots were reserved for our lost spouses. We respected each other's memories in that way. Instead of

a big reception, we had gone out to dinner to celebrate, but it hadn't been all that different from our monthly family dinners. Blending our families had always been important to us. It was why we moved in together long before we got married. We weren't fools. We knew it might not work out, and both of us were willing to walk away from our relationship if it didn't work with our children. They'd been through too much already.

The transition with Thad and Caleb went smoothly. Thad only had the summer before he left for college, and Caleb was starting his sophomore year at Drake, so they were too busy getting started with their own lives to care that much about our relationship. Abbi was a different story. She was almost thirteen when Scott and I started living together and had never shared her dad with anyone. She only knew a life with her and Scott, and she wasn't so willing to let it go. My boys were the ones who broke her down, because they adored her and doted on her constantly. It didn't take long for her to return the feelings. They had never missed a violin recital when they were home from college, and all her friends had swooned over them.

I glanced at Abbi in the rearview mirror. Her eyes were closed, but I doubted she was sleeping. She never slept when she was upset. She was the perfect combination of Scott's and Kate's genes. She had Kate's slender build, which, coupled with Scott's angles, gave her an athletic frame even though she hated sports. There was something wholesome and endearing about her despite everything she'd been through.

My head reeled as it replayed scenes from this morning. The knock at the door had surprised me, since we hadn't been expecting anyone. I had looked out the kitchen window and had called for Scott. I saw two police officers on our front steps. A loud sigh escaped his mouth when he spotted them as he came down the stairs into the foyer. He had been imagining the moment for years, and he couldn't hide his relief that it was finally over.

"Are you Scott Bennett?" the officer asked.

Scott nodded, too nervous to speak.

"Sir, Kate Bennett has been found alive in Rittsberg, Montana," his partner announced.

Scott stumbled backward like he was drunk. I guided him onto the bench lining the entryway wall.

“Lean forward and put your head between your knees,” the officer said in the commanding way all service members spoke.

Scott’s color was off. Pasty. Gray. His labored breathing made me nervous. He leaned over and put his head between his legs. I rubbed his back, trying to get his shoulders to relax. It took a few minutes before his breathing slowed, but it finally did.

“Told you it helps,” the officer said, even though Scott hadn’t said anything.

He must have been in lots of these situations before to be so arrogant. Did you have to get specialized training to shatter people’s lives? Even though he was telling us Kate was alive, I felt the shock waves splinter our former existence. We’d forever live in a distinct before-and-after sequence now.

Questions had been chasing each other ever since. I couldn’t turn them off. I rubbed my forehead, tired of the endless loop. I moved my neck from side to side, trying to release the tension that’d been building in my stress spot since this morning.

“How are you feeling?” I whispered to Scott, just in case Abbi really was asleep.

He shrugged.

I flicked my head backward, motioning to Abbi, and mouthed, “*What about her?*”

He shrugged again.

“Do you want me to turn on music?”

“Sure,” he said. His voice was strained and hoarse, like it got after he’d been up all night or at the end of a baseball game. His color was still off.

I needed my phone to navigate, so I flicked on the radio. All my preprogrammed stations from back home were filled with static. I flipped through until I found something clear. Classic rock music filled the car. He shook his head. Country music was next, and he hated country.