

KRISTEN L. BERRY

WE DON'T TALK ABOUT CAROL

A Novel



KRISTEN L. BERRY



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<u>Acknowledgments</u>

About the Author

For the tens of thousands of Black Americans reported missing every year. For the thousands more who never stop looking.

PROLOGUE

Twenty-Six Years Ago

I couldn't sleep. My younger sister, Sasha, snored softly beside me, her exhales making little puff sounds as the breath escaped her lips. I'd lost the battle for equal space in the twin-size four-poster bed hours ago. Her limbs, surprisingly long for her nine years, were splayed; arms in a Y above her head, her legs a figure four. One of her knees pressed sharply into my thigh.

The North Carolina air snaking through the window reminded me of the weather inside our Jack and Jill bathroom back in L.A., when I'd futilely flatiron my stubborn curls ahead of school while Sasha showered.

All Grammy wanted for her sixty-fifth birthday was to have her only family—her son, daughter-in-law, and two grandchildren—under her roof for the week. It seemed like a reasonable ask before I realized that Grammy rarely ran her AC, and that I'd have to share a bed with my snoring, thrashing furnace of a sister.

I scanned the unfamiliar terrain of the smallest bedroom in Grammy's house. A slice of moonlight shone silver across a white dresser. Too restless to sleep, I decided to snoop. I slid from bed as quietly as I could. The old springs groaned as my weight left the mattress, but Sasha's breath kept its metronomic rhythm: *puff-puff-puff*.

I wrapped my fingers around the antique brass handle of the top dresser drawer and pulled it open slowly. It was filled with spools of thread, in various sizes and a Crayola box-worth of colors. The next drawer held paper clothing patterns, yellowed and brittle, tearing at their creases. The other drawers stored tea towels, loose buttons, extra table linens. The bottom drawer was filled with fabric. I picked up the top print, a faded sunny yellow

gingham, and unfurled it. It was a summer dress, probably Sasha's size. I frowned, wondering who it belonged to. Maybe Grammy purchased the dress for me or Sasha at some point, but forgot to send it?

I picked up the next bit of fabric. Another dress, this one even smaller, white and embroidered with tiny purple flowers. I was reaching to pick up the rest of the contents from the drawer when my fingers jammed into something hard. I swallowed a yelp, knelt beside the drawer, and felt gingerly around its contents until I found the offending object. It was a small picture frame, ornate and golden but badly tarnished. I shifted into the path of the moonlight to see the photo it held.

It was a sepia-tinged image of a girl around my age, thirteen or so. She appeared to stand on the steps of Grammy's front porch. She wore a dress with a nipped-in waist and a flared skirt that stopped just below her knees. There were similar photos of my father as a child in an old album back in California, posing on that very same porch, frozen in the same faded shades of amber. But I'd never seen this girl before. She had Grammy's coloring, several shades lighter than mine. Like the coffee my mother drank every morning, with a long pour of cream. But I also recognized details of her face in mine: the heavy-lidded stare that prompted my mom to accuse me of having an attitude. The half-cocked, knowing smile.

"Who are you?" I whispered to the photograph.

I carefully returned everything to the drawers, but I slipped the framed photo beneath my pillow before crawling back into bed. The questions swirling in my mind finally drowned out Sasha's snoring, lulling me into my first and only deep sleep of our visit.

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THE NEXT MORNING I FOUND Grammy in the kitchen preparing our breakfast: grits, pork sausage, and scrambled eggs.

"Good mornin', darlin'," she greeted me cheerfully, scattering cubes of sharp cheddar cheese into the eggs. The slight drawl in her speech reminded me of the honey my father added to the tea he made whenever I had a sore throat, its sticky sweetness dripping slowly from the spoon.

"Morning, Grammy," I said, shifting nervously as I pulled the picture frame from behind my back. "Grammy, who's this?"

Her smile stiffened as her eyes scanned the photo. "Oh, baby," she said, her tone as gentle as the touch she used to pull the frame from my fingers. She went over to the yellow refrigerator, stood on her tiptoes, and set the frame facedown on top.

Grammy didn't meet my eyes when she turned to face me, wiping her hands with a dish towel, as though the picture had soiled them. I couldn't be certain, but I thought I noticed a tremble in her fingers.

"Baby," she said finally, her voice kind but firm as the oak tree on her front lawn, "we don't talk about Carol."

ONE

Present Day

"You sure you're going to be able to pack up the house without killing each other?" my husband Malik asked, his warm, rich voice amplified by the rental car's surround sound system.

I snorted as I drove out of the hotel's garage and into sunny, leafy downtown Raleigh. "I can't make any promises."

"There's really no one there who can help?"

"You saw how it was at the funeral. Grammy didn't have any family left, just church friends as old as she was."

"She had family," Malik said. "She had you guys."

I shook my head and felt my springy shoulder-length curls exaggerate the movement. "Our relationship consisted of exchanging birthday cards and calls at Christmas. Not much of a family."

It had all happened so fast. Grammy had always been so spry and independent, it was easy to forget that she was ninety years old. And then last week we got a call that she'd had a stroke, and was in the hospital, unconscious. The next day, she was gone.

She'd told her dearest friends where she kept the folder with all the documents we'd need for this moment, including her will, life insurance policy, information on her prepaid cemetery plot, even a handwritten outline of what her funeral service should entail. All she asked was that my mother—her daughter-in-law, and the closest thing she had to a child now that my father was gone—oversee the process of clearing out and selling her home of over seventy years.

Recognizing what a gargantuan task this would be, and guilt-ridden from spending so little time with Grammy in the years leading up to her death, my sister Sasha and I immediately offered our help. And while I never would have asked him to, Malik, ever the doting and dutiful husband, rearranged his carefully constructed work schedule to join us on a red-eye from L.A. to Raleigh five days ago.

"I shouldn't have left." Malik sighed, the reverberation of the sound through the speakers sending goosebumps down my arms. "I can push my meeting and fly back out there."

Something swelled inside my chest. Malik had spent weeks preparing for the quarterly board meeting of Wealthmate, the financial services start-up he founded. But I knew if I asked him to, he'd reschedule the entire thing. I was staying another five days to help my mother and Sasha with Grammy's house; they'd book their return flights to L.A. when the house was officially on the market.

"Absolutely not," I said. "I know how important this meeting is. We'll be fine here."

"Will you ask Grace or Sasha to help you with your shots?"

"Nah, I've got it," I replied, though the tender flesh below my navel pulsed angrily at the thought.

"I know your mom can be a bit of a drill sergeant, but don't be afraid to take breaks, or to go for a walk around the block if they start getting on your nerves. You know what Dr. Tanaka said about avoiding stress."

My fingers tightened around the steering wheel. *Avoid stress*. What was I supposed to do, lock myself in a spa until one of these IVF cycles finally worked? "Malik," I said evenly, "I'm well aware. I was the one on the exam table, remember?"

"I know," Malik said in a small, pained way that instantly filled me with guilt for snapping at him. "You've got enough going on without having to listen to me lecture you. I'll let you go. Just promise to call if you need anything. I'll book a flight, hire professional packers, send a rescue team out to extricate you, whatever you need."

"I love that you actually mean that, even though you know I'd never take you up on it," I said, smiling.

"If I offer to take care of you enough, one of these days you might actually let me," he replied.

We hung up and the true crime podcast I was listening to resumed as I continued the drive to Grammy's. She'd lived in South Park, a neighborhood surrounding Shaw, the oldest of the many historically Black colleges and universities in the area. I marveled at how different the landscape looked from L.A. Giant swaths of verdant land appeared untouched, and the ancient trees that towered over homes were so lush they appeared capable of swallowing the structures whole. Unlike the belligerently cheerful L.A. sky, the atmosphere above Raleigh seemed moodier, richly layered, thick with history.

As I pulled into Grammy's driveway, I realized how much her house reminded me of photos I saw of her in her final years: aging yet elegantly kept. Grammy's uncle had built the home back in the 1940s, when it was rare for Black people to own property in the area. The single-story structure was flanked by two-story new-construction houses of a particular style sprinkled throughout the neighborhood. Color-blocked siding and dark fixtures gave them a modern look, but something about the columns and porches whispered hauntingly of plantation homes.

A loud knock on the driver's side window snatched me from my reverie.

"Oh my God, Sasha!" I paused the podcast and lowered the window, frowning at my sister as the still-soupy September air punctured my bubble of artificial cool. "You scared me half to death."

Sasha rested her elbows in the open window, peering at my phone in the cup holder.

"Those podcasts make you so jumpy," she said. "I thought you got out of journalism so you could get away from that shit."

It had been nearly ten years since I'd left the crime beat at the *San Francisco Chronicle*. With a decade of distance, and no responsibility to investigate the stories myself anymore, I found the podcasts oddly satisfying,

scratching a very specific itch by unraveling each mystery in forty-five minutes or less.

Rather than try to explain all of this to Sasha, I asked, "Why are you loitering in the yard?"

"Actually..." Sasha twisted one of her long dark braids around a finger, an annoyingly childlike gesture for a thirty-five-year-old. "I was hoping you'd let me borrow the car for a sec." I rolled my eyes. "Please? I've gotta get away from Mom for a minute. You don't know what it's like. You get to stay in a hotel; I've been with her this whole time."

"How is that different from living with her in L.A.?"

"Ugh, please?" Sasha whined. "I'll bring coffee when I come back."

"Fine," I said, getting out of the car and dropping the keys into her waiting hand. "But make mine an iced vanilla latte."

"Thanks, Sis!" Sasha cried, wrapping her arms around me. She pulled back, biting her lip. "Think I could borrow a few dollars for the coffee?"

"Oh my God, girl," I grumbled.

It was dark and cool inside Grammy's house, thanks to the shade of the oak trees surrounding the property. A bouquet of cooking oil, jasmine perfume, and Luster's Pink hair lotion lingered in the air. I felt a twinge of regret that I didn't remember if that was what Grammy had smelled like; it had been at least ten years since my last visit.

"Syd? That you?" My mother's voice rang out from the dining room. Large cardboard boxes stood in front of the long polished wooden table, their mouths hanging open. Mom looked chic in a crisp striped shirt tucked into black jeans, belted at the waist. Her sleek Angela Bassett–inspired pixie cut gleamed in the light of the chandelier.

"You look way too nice to be packing up this house," I said.

She shrugged. "Wanted to look presentable in case any more of Grammy's church friends stop by." Her eyes slid down my designer workout gear. "Are you going for a run or something?"

"No," I replied indignantly. I wanted to tell her I was so bloated from all the drugs pushing my ovaries into overdrive that athleisure was all I could stand to wear. "I could be going to brunch in L.A. in these clothes, Mom," I said instead.

"Yeah, well, this isn't L.A." It was true that I only saw my mother in workout clothes when she was on her way to or from a run, despite her having lived in activewear-loving L.A. for more than forty years. Maybe this was a holdover from her own proper Southern upbringing. Mom grew up in suburban Atlanta, the only child of a Morehouse-educated Baptist pastor and a Spelman-educated bookkeeper. They'd long given up on their dreams of having children before learning of my mother's pending arrival. I had vague memories of visiting them in the home my mother grew up in when I was small; they were stiffly loving and frail, and their house had the formal, frozen quality of a fancy dollhouse. They both died before I reached middle school.

My mother pushed a roll of garbage bags into my hands. "Can you take care of the guest room in the back? We've got three piles going here: trash, Goodwill, and keepsake. Don't be too precious about keepsakes, though. We don't want to ship too many things back home."

There was something comforting about seeing Mom return to her characteristically unsentimental form; she'd wept silently throughout Grammy's funeral, one of the few times I'd seen her cry. Mom had been the closest to Grammy of all of us; they'd had a standing monthly phone date since my father died. I was never sure if it was out of a sense of familial duty, or out of longing for her own mother, or if she simply enjoyed their monthly chats.

I carried the roll of garbage bags down the dimly lit hallway to the guest room. It was just as I remembered it from the occasional visits of my childhood—the tiny four-poster bed and matching dresser, the yellowing lace curtains hanging slack against a milky window, like a cataract-clouded eye. The air in the room was thick. I tugged the window open after a brief struggle, feeling layers of paint separate like the parting of parched lips.

I blasted a Stevie Wonder playlist from the tinny speakers of my phone and got to work unpacking the dresser, which seemed largely devoted to sewing supplies. I wondered if sewing was something Grammy had done regularly in recent years, or if the materials were relics from an earlier time. Another pang of guilt hit me. After my father died while I was in college, I came out to see Grammy only a handful of times. There was so much I didn't know about her.

I had just begun emptying the bottom drawer when I spotted a swatch of faded lemon-yellow gingham. Gingerly, I picked up and unfolded the little dress. I'd forgotten all about what I found here when I was a child. My heart thrummed as I slid my fingers to the bottom of the pile and found the hard corner of something rectangular.

I pulled the frame free and stared down at the photo of the girl. I was struck again by the similarity of our features. That wise, sly smile, so much like my own. *Baby*, Grammy had drawled, *we don't talk about Carol*.

I'd known better than to bring up a forbidden topic in my family. I never asked about the girl in the photograph again. Before long, I'd forgotten about her entirely.

The doorbell rang and the eight-note Westminster chime vibrated through the house like a church organ.

"Syd?" My mother's voice was strained, as though she were struggling under the weight of something heavy. "Can you get that?"

"Sure," I called, heading down the creaky wooden hallway. I found a woman around Grammy's age standing on the porch. Her silver hair was pulled back into a neat bun. She wore a peach-colored tunic and matching pants, and a string of gray pearls circled her throat. There was a glass casserole dish in her slim hands. I couldn't help but notice how her crepey skin mirrored the material of her clothes.

"Oh, hi, doll. I didn't interrupt your workout, did I?"

If my skin were capable of blushing, it would have. "You're not interrupting anything. Come in, we're just cleaning up a bit."

I held open the screen door and she walked inside. "You must be one of Effie's grandbabies. Got those same pretty brown eyes." Her accent reminded me of Grammy's, sweet and stretched, the way caramel pulls apart when you break a Twix in half. It was a drawl I seemed to notice only among older folks in Raleigh, as if the accent was slowly fading into memory.

"Thank you, ma'am. I'm Sydney. Let me take that for you." I shifted the picture frame beneath my arm and took the dish from her hands, placing it on the credenza.

"I'm Eloise, an old friend of your gramma's. What you got there?" she asked, pointing at the frame.

"Oh." I looked down at the picture for a moment before handing it to her. "I just found this in the room I'm clearing out."

Eloise inhaled sharply. "Oh lord. Well, that's Carol now, ain't it?"

My heart stuttered. "You knew her?"

She nodded. "I remember the first time I held Carol, just a few days after she was born." Eloise stroked the photograph, as though Carol could feel her touch and be comforted.

"Wait. Carol was Grammy's daughter?" The pieces clicked in my mind—the fact that Carol was posing on Grammy's porch in the picture. The striking similarities in our appearances. The way Grammy had lovingly held on to those tiny dresses. It was so obvious. My kid brain just hadn't put it together.

Eloise nodded solemnly, still staring at the photo.

"Grammy wouldn't talk about her. My father never mentioned her either. What happened to her?"

Eloise gave me a pained look. "Effie wouldn't want me to get into this."

"Please," I said, my curiosity teetering toward desperation. "She was my aunt. You're probably the last person who can tell me anything about her."

Eloise sighed. "Well. I guess I don't really see the harm at this point." She handed the frame back to me. "Effie and Carol had a bad falling out when the girl was around sixteen or seventeen. Carol was a talented singer. Voice like a songbird. She got it in her head she was gonna go to Detroit, get herself signed to Motown. But education was everything to Effie. She was the third generation in her family to get a college education at Shaw. Her great-granddaddy'd been born a slave! But Carol didn't have the patience for

school. Effie caught on that Carol was trying to leave high school early and planned to book it to Detroit to try her luck at getting a record deal. They fought about it, and I guess Carol ran off." Eloise shook her head. "That's what your gramma figured anyway."

She murmured that last sentence in the telltale manner of someone eager to share a secret, if only the listener would ask them to.

"Do you have another theory?"

"I don't know. You see, Carol wasn't the only girl that went missing around that time."

"What do you mean?"

Eloise's face clouded over. "There were a couple years back in the sixties when a handful of teenage girls in the neighborhood just vanished. All the missing girls came from houses down by the creek that runs behind this house. Folks in the neighborhood got to calling whoever did it the Creek Killer 'cause of that, even though we never knew for sure they were killed. 'Cause they were never found. But what else could've happened? Folks don't just go disappearing into thin air."

I would have been surprised by her easy candor if it had been the first time someone from Grammy's circle had confided in me in this manner. Thanks to numerous uncomfortably intimate confidences at the repast following Grammy's funeral, I was familiar with the children's marriage troubles, goiter symptoms, and sump pump installation nightmares of people whose last names I didn't know.

"Did they ever catch whoever took them?" I asked.

Eloise sucked her teeth. "Child, please. Police didn't care about a bunch of little Black girls gone missing. They dismissed them, said they must've run away, or were caught up in shady things. But these were good girls. College girls, some of them. I kinda think it might've been easier for Effie to imagine her little girl out in the world pursuing her dreams than think that something awful might've happened to her."

She shook her head as if breaking from a trance. "Listen to me, going on about these old, dark stories. Your gramma would have a fit if she could hear me. Truth is, Carol had talked about running to Detroit, so it's just as possible that's what happened."

Eloise glanced at her delicate silver watch. "I better get back home and stop talking your ear off. I know y'all got work to do. Give my love to your family. Just reheat that casserole for about twenty-five minutes at 350, okay? I wrote my address on that sticky note. Y'all can just bring the dish back over to me when you're finished with it." She gave my arm a squeeze. "You take care now, doll."

Sasha pulled into the driveway as Eloise was leaving, the old woman's steps slow but sure. I watched Sasha greet her with her infectious, toothy smile. She folded Eloise into a warm, tight hug. Sasha had always been that way with strangers, even when we were little, grinning like a maniac in photos with Santa while I appraised him skeptically from the opposite knee.

You could tell we were sisters by looking at us. We had the same rich brown skin, the same strong nose, the same slightly heart-shaped faces, our jaws tapering in toward our chins. But there was a bright openness to Sasha's face when she smiled, compared to my measured, secretive expression. And there was a supple, generous curve to her body, while mine was angular and sinewy. I'd been furious when, despite my nightly prayers, she'd needed to shop for a size DD bra in middle school while I was barely filling my A cups in the tenth grade.

"Um, how cute is she?" Sasha said, breezing past me into the house, a tray of coffees and pastries balanced in her hands. I trailed her to the kitchen.

"There you are, Sash. I was wondering where you'd run off to," Mom said, accepting a cup of coffee from my sister.

"I thought I'd get provisions," Sasha said, passing me my latte. "The shop had this amazing-looking sweet potato coffee cake, so I grabbed a few slices, too."

"That's so sweet of you," Mom said. I bit my tongue to keep from pointing out that my car and money had made Sasha's generosity possible.