



Never That Far

CAROL LYNCH WILLIAMS



It was 2:35 in the A.M. when Grampa woke me.

I took in a deep breath. Had his dying all been a dream?

Was I dreaming now?

I squeezed my eyes shut, then opened them wide

“YOU REALLY HERE?”

“Of course. The dead ain’t never that far from the living.”

“Pinky promise?” I held my little finger out to Grampa.

And just like when he was alive, he grabbed ahold of it

with his little finger and answered back,

“PINKIE PROMISE, LIBBY-GIRL.”



After her grampa dies, the last place Libby expects to see him is sitting on the edge of her bed. But that's what happens the night after the funeral.

Even more surprising is that Grampa has three important things to tell her: first, that she isn't alone or forgotten—"The dead ain't never that far from the living," he says; second, that she has "the Sight"—the ability to see family members who have died; and third, that there is something special just for her in the lake. Something that could help her and her father—if she can find it.

Libby and Grampa try to help her father heal from his grief, but it will take all of Libby's courage and her gift of Sight to convince her father that the dead are never truly gone.

Never That Far is set in the lush, rural landscape of central Florida and is a story that celebrates friendship, hope, and the power of family love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CAROL LYNCH WILLIAMS, who grew up in Florida and now lives in the West, is an award-winning novelist with five daughters and one grandson. She has an MFA in writing for children and young adults from Vermont College, and she won the prestigious PEN/Phyllis Naylor Working Writer Fellowship. *The Chosen One* was named one of the ALA's Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers and Best Books for Young Adult Readers and was featured on numerous lists of recommended YA fiction. Carol's other novels include *Messenger*, *Glimpse*, *Miles from Ordinary*, *The Haven*, *Waiting*, and the Just in Time series.

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**SHADOW
MOUNTAIN**

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To my daddy, Richard Thomas Lynch

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Chapter One

What you doing, girl?” Daddy said when the burying was done.

I stood on the unpainted block fence and looked off East.

The Lake Mary Church of Christ preacher, Melinda Burls, had said the dead go East. Couldn’t give me a reason when I asked her why.

“They just do, Libby,” she said, and with one finger, she touched the top of my head like she was baptizing me all over again. Then she tapped her stomach where a long string of fake pearl beads ended up. “I know it right here.”

“In your belly?” I squinched my eyes.

The beads swung over her scrawny self. I felt a little sorry for her. But not *too* much.

“In my heart,” she said.

I gave a nod and looked away from her face. I stared straight into the sun for as long as I could, just because. Then I glanced back at her. For a moment, she seemed to glow. “Your heart’s awful low,” I said, feeling mean on accounta the circumstances. “You might need a operation to get that fixed.”

“It’s Jesus’ heart,” she said, like she didn’t hear me. She looked off toward Daddy, who stood alone, staring at his shoe-tops. Then she licked her lips. “This is a day you won’t hardly forget, now will you? September third, in the year of our Lord, nineteen hundred and sixty-seven. No, sirree, you won’t be forgetting today.”

“No, ma’am,” I said. She was right about that.

I stomped off, mad. Didn’t want to hear another word about it. No more Jesus stuff. No more “in the year of our Lord” stuff. No more religion. Not right now.

“Don’t seem right,” I said, kicking through the dirt road on my way free of the morning. My sneakers was like tight red flowers. Behind me the funeral broke up. I could hear the high rise of bawling. Car doors slamming shut. Daddy, I knew, would be looking for me, Preacher Burls stuck close to his side.

I plowed on, my head bent so it led the way.

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“Don’t seem fair *she* got Jesus’ heart.” I kicked at an old Campbell’s soup can, rusted in the middle where it was bent. It flew into a high tangle of dried-out ditch weeds.

Life ain’t meant to be fair popped into my head. Preacher Burls’s words when Daddy asked “Why?” I could almost see his lips making them words. “Why now? Why us? Why again?”

It’s what he asked when we found Grampa. Almost gone, hanging on to life and to the yellow tablecloth from the kitchen.

“If there was hearts to spare,” I said, my cotton dress sticking to my back and under my arms, “Burls shouldn’t have got it.”

Especially seeing the way Grampa had died. His own heart giving up, puttering out. His last words to me from where he lay on the floor was about the lake. It seemed to me that if anybody needed Jesus’ heart, it would have been Grampa, the best man ever born this side of the Lamb.

Burls seemed healthy enough without taking the extras for herself.

“But life ain’t fair,” I said. And when I heard cars coming up on me, I stepped into the weeds, down into that deep ditch, back up the other side, and into an orange grove, where the fruit was young and still just hard green balls.



I made my way home. Didn't nobody come looking for me. Not that I woulda took their help. Still, someone *mighta* had him some manners and come searching. It was Daddy's doing. He probably told them I needed my time. He probably said, "That girl is almost thirteen going on almost forty-four and she needs her time." He probably said, "That girl don't need no one."

And then, like all them people knew what he said was truth, everybody nodded. And left me to walk in the wet fire of the Florida day. Loneliness stretched out like a path in front of me.

Through the grove I went, hot. The late morning air was tired and rested on me like it needed a lift somewhere. The trees, waxy-leaved, hid the sun some. My shoes filled with sand.

"This all my grampa's," I said. 'Course there was no one to answer.

"No," I said. "Now, this all mine and Daddy's."

A mile or two more and I'd be back home. But I wouldn't stop there.

Not a lick of breeze stepped up to cool things off.

I paused and leaned into a Parson Brown orange tree. Squeezed my eyes shut and walked into the branches until I was to the narrow trunk. I breathed deep the smell of

oranges and dirt. The scent made me tear right up. Then I wrapped my arms around a limb and whispered so only the tree could hear, “You know Grampa thought Parson Browns was the sweetest orange of all. You do good this year. You give us lots of fruit to show you loved Grampa, too.”

A knot of tears clogged my throat. For a moment I thought *I* might die, my chest hurt so much. More heart business running in the Lochewood family. Broken hearts everywhere.

I let go of the tree and dropped to my knees. Three tears sneaked out and I wiped them away fast. My hands was dirty. Gray from my walk and the petting of this Parson Brown.

“Grampa,” I said, “you done me wrong.”



I hadn't been in the kitchen since that morning.

I remembered me and Daddy running into Grampa, who'd called out once, “Libby?”

My name—a question.

Then I'd heard this *thunk* from where I sat in my room, drawing a picture of me with one eye using an old purple crayon. Been bored up to that moment.

I'd run, my heart pounding so I felt it in the base of my skull. Met Daddy in the hall. We'd bumped into each

other—he'd knocked me into the golden pine wall on accident—but I'd caught ahold of my balance.

Funny, how we knew.

Grampa on the floor, clutching the tablecloth. Ice water spreading out in a puddle beside him. The glass right there by his ear, not even broke.

“Libby?”

Daddy and me, we both fell to our knees. Later I found the bruises from that kneeling.

“Pop? What is it?” Daddy's voice was like a girl's. Thin. Watery.

Grampa didn't answer. His eyes rolled back into his head till only the whites showed.

Daddy got up. Went running barefoot—*thump thump thump*—into the hall where the phone sat on the low table. I heard him dialing.

I took Grampa's free hand in my own. Big old fingers. Warm and knuckle-hard. Bent some.

“Get up,” I said, pulling. But he wouldn't budge. “Let me get you up.”

Daddy yelled for help in the other room.

Grampa said, “I left you something, Libby.” His eyes gone white.

“Did you bump yourself?” I said. But I knew all along it was worse than that. “Let me help you sit.”

“Listen to me good,” he said. “And believe.”

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I dipped my head till my face rested on his. “I’m listening.” That was the first time I cried, tears splatting on his neck.

“I left you something in the lake.”

“You didn’t need to do that,” I said.

But Grampa didn’t answer.



Now, on my knees again, in the heat of the funeral morning, I watched black ants crawl in the sand. And when I cried, I aimed my tears at them, hitting four. Then I got myself up and walked the rest of the way, right past our house, and deep into the property where the lake is.

I sat out there all day.

Took my dress off at one point and let the sun cook on my shoulders and down my back around my training bra. I edged my way to the water and then scooted in, soaking my undies to the waist. The minnows came to nibble at me, but I wouldn’t let them.

I was alone now.

All alone.

Daddy might be at home, but he wasn’t really there. And the truth was, I’d need someone now that my grandfather was gone.

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When the sun settled down for the night, and the mosquitoes came out for dinner, I got myself dressed again and went on up to the house.

To where my grampa wasn't.