Diamond Willow

HELEN FROST

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Summary: In a remote area of Alaska, twelve-year-old Willow helps her father with their sled dogs when she is not at school, wishing she were more popular, all the while unaware that the animals surrounding her carry the spirits of ancestors who care for her.
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Twenty below zero,
ribbons of white and green and purple
dancing in the blue-black sky.

I’m up with Dad as usual, feeding our six dogs. I climb the ladder to the cache, toss four dried salmon out to Dad. He watches me as I back down: Be careful on that broken rung.

I pack snow into the dog pot; Dad gets a good fire going in the oil-drum stove. He loves these dogs like I do. We’re both out here on weekends, as much as we can be, and every day before and after school. He loves Roxy most. Willow, go get the pliers, he says, showing me a quill in Roxy’s foot. (It’s surprising that a porcupine is out this time of year.)

I bring the pliers; Dad pulls out the quill, rubs in salve; then we go from dog to dog, spreading fresh straw.

Hey, Magoo. Hey, Samson. Roxy, you stay off that foot today. Dad pats Prince on the head.

Lucky sniffs my hand—she smells salmon.

I find a bur in Cora’s ear and get it out.

The snow melts into water, simmers in the cooking pot. I drop in the salmon, add some cornmeal.

The dogs love that smell.

They start to howl and I howl back.
I was named after a stick.

The way Mom tells it, she couldn’t get Dad to agree on any names: Ellen, after Grandma? Sally, after Dad’s great-aunt in Michigan? No, he wanted something modern, something meaningful. *It will come to us*, Dad kept saying. *Let’s hope it comes before the baby learns to walk*, said Mom. *Always does*, said Dad. That’s how they argue, each knows what they want, but neither seems to think it matters much who wins. Since Mom gives in before Dad most of the time, Dad gets his way a lot. He told me that just before I was born, he found a small stand of diamond willow and brought home one stick.

*That’s it! Let’s name our baby Diamond Willow!* Mom had to think about it for a few days. I can see it now: They’re on the airplane flying to Anchorage. Mom’s in labor, she’ll agree to almost anything. *Okay*, she says. So Dad puts Diamond Willow on my birth certificate, and then Mom says, *We will call the baby Willow.*
If my parents had called me Diamond, would I have been one of those sparkly kinds of girls? I’m not sparkly. I’m definitely not a precious diamond—you know, the kind of person everyone looks at the minute she steps into a room. I’m the exact opposite: I’m skinny, average height, brown hair, and ordinary eyes. Good. I don’t want to sparkle like a jewel. I would much rather blend in than stick out. Also, I’m not one of those dog-obsessed kids who talk about nothing but racing in the Jr. Iditarod. I like being alone with my dogs on the trail. Just us, the trees, the snow, the stories I see in the animal tracks. No teachers, no parents, no sneak-up-on-you boys.
In
the
middle
of my family
in the middle of
a middle-size town
in the middle of Alaska,
you will find middle-size,
middle-kid, me. My father
teaches science in the middle
of my middle school. My mother
is usually in the middle of my house.
My brother, Marty, taller and smarter
than I ever hope to be, goes to college in
big-city Fairbanks. My sister, Zanna (short
for Suzanna), is six years younger and
twelve inches shorter than I am.
She follows me everywhere—
except for the dog yard.
I don’t know why
my little sister is
so scared of
dogs.
What
I love
about dogs:
They don’t talk
behind your back.
If they’re mad at you,
they bark a couple times
and get it over with. It’s true
they slobber on you sometimes.
(I’m glad people don’t do that.) They
jump out and scare you in the dark. (I know,
I should say me, not “you”—some people aren’t
afraid of anything.) But dogs don’t make fun
of you. They don’t hit you in the back
of your neck with an ice-covered
snowball, and if they did, and
it made you cry, all their
friends wouldn’t stand
there laughing
at you.
(Me.)
Three votes! Did they have to announce that? Why not just say, Congratulations to our new Student Council representative, Richard Olenka. Why say how many votes each person got (12, 7, 3)? I don’t know why I decided to run in the first place. A couple people said I should, and I thought, Why not? (I don’t like staying after school, and no one would listen to me even if I did have anything to say, which I don’t.)

Now here I am, home right after school, and as soon as we finish feeding the dogs, Dad says, Willow, could you help me clean out the woodshed? I say, Okay, but it feels like I’m getting punished for being a loser.
We’re

cleaning

the woodshed,

and I lift up a tarp.

An old gray stick falls out.

Just a stick. Why does it even catch

my eye? Dad, what is this? I turn it over in

my hands a few times; Dad studies it for a couple

minutes, and then he gets so excited he almost pops.

Willow, let me tell you about this! What you have

found is more than just an old stick. This is the

diamond willow stick I found that afternoon,

just before you were born! Can it be—

let’s see—twelve years ago already?

All this time, I thought it was lost.

He hands it back to me like it’s

studded with real diamonds.

This belongs to you now.

Use your sharpest knife

to skin off the bark.

Find the diamonds.

Polish the whole

thing. It will

be beautiful,

Dad says.

You’ll

see.
I came out here to the mudroom so I could be alone and make a mess while I think my own thoughts and skin the bark off my stick. But it’s impossible to be alone in this house.

Mom: *Willow, don’t use that sharp knife when you’re mad.* I say, *I’m not mad, Mom, just leave me alone!* and she looks at me like I proved her point. Then, on my very next cut, the knife slips and I rip my jeans (not too bad; luckily, Mom doesn’t seem to notice). Maybe I should go live with Grandma. I bet she’d let me stay out there with her and Grandpa. She could homeschool me. I think I’d do better in math if I didn’t worry about how I’m going to get a bad grade while Kaylie gets her perfect grades on every test, then shows me her stupid paper, and asks how I did, and, if I show her, offers to help me figure out where I went wrong, “so you can do better next time, Willow.”
I want
to mush
the dogs out
to Grandma and
Grandpa's. By myself.
I know the way. I've been
there about a hundred times
with Dad and Mom, and once
with Marty when he lived at home.
Their cabin is close to the main trail.
I know I'm not going to get lost, and I
won't see a baby moose or any bears this
time of year. Even if I did, I'd know enough
to get out of the way, fast. But Mom and
Dad don't seem to see it this way. What
do they think will happen? Dad at least
thinks about it: She's twelve years old;
it's twelve miles. Maybe we could
let her try. Mom doesn't
even pause for half a
second before
she says,
No
!
Maybe
they’ll let me go
if I just take three dogs,
and leave three dogs here for Dad.
I’d take Roxy, of course—she’s smart
and fast and she thinks the same way I do.
Magoo is fun. He doesn’t have much experience,
but if I take Cora, she’d help Magoo settle down.
Dad would want one fast dog. I’ll leave Samson
here with him. Lucky might try to get loose
and follow me down the trail again, like
the last time we left her, but this time
Dad will be here to help Mom
get her back. Prince can be
hard to handle; it will be
easier without him.
If Dad sees how
carefully I’m
thinking this
through, he
might help
convince
Mom.
I beg
Mom:
Please!
I'd only take
three dogs. You know
I can handle them. You've
seen me. She won't listen. You
are not old enough, she says. Or
strong enough. I make a face (should
not have done that). Mom starts in: A moose
will charge at three dogs as fast as it will charge
at six. A three-dog team can lose the trail, or pull you
out onto thin ice. What if your sled turns over, or you lose
control of the team? (Mom really goes on and on once she gets
started.) Willow, you could be alone out there with a dog fight
on your hands. (Oh, right, Mom, like I've never stopped a
dog fight by myself.) When Mom finally stops talking
and starts thinking, I know enough to quit arguing.
She looks me up and down like we've just met,
then takes a deep breath. You really want to
do this, don't you, Willow? It takes me by
surprise, and I almost say, Never mind,
Mom, it doesn't matter. But it does
matter. I swallow hard and nod.
Mom says, I'll think about it
and decide tomorrow.
What if she says
yes?
You would trust her to take Roxy by herself? Mom questions Dad. They don’t know I’m listening.

I know my dogs, Dad answers, how they are with Willow. It’s more that I’d trust Roxy to take her. Honey, if it’s up to me, I say let’s let her do this. I slip away before they see me.

I’m pretty sure they’re going to say yes.

(Yes!)

I go out and talk to Roxy and Cora and Magoo.

I think they’re going to let us go to Grandma and Grandpa’s by ourselves!

I get out at noon on Friday—it’s the end of the quarter. We’ll leave by one, and be there before dark. We’ll have almost two days out there, and come home Sunday afternoon! Even as I let myself say it, I’m trying not to hope too hard.

I know all I can do now is wait. It will jinx it for sure if I keep on begging.
Yes,
I have a
wool sweater
under my jacket.
Extra socks, gloves,
and, yes, I have enough
booties for the dogs. I have
my sleeping bag and a blanket,
in case I get stranded somewhere
(which of course won’t happen). Yes,
I have matches, a headlamp, a hatchet.
Dad keeps adding things to his checklist.
Zanna comes up as close as she dares, keeping
her distance from the dogs, to give me a card she
made for Grandma. It’s cute, a picture of an otter
sliding down a riverbank. **Okay,** Dad says, *it looks
like you’re all set. I know you can do this. Take it slow.* He keeps on talking as I take my foot off
the brake and let the dogs **go.** He might still be talking even **now,** yelling out last-
minute warnings: *Don’t forget to call us when you get there!*
Watching the trail . . .
And I can picture Mom,
standing beside Dad,
her arms folded tight,
like she’s holding
me, wrapped
up inside
them.
Fox
tracks,
new snow,
red-streaked sky
and full moon rising.
I know this trail, know
where it gets scary. I know
where it sometimes floods and
freezes over. And I know Grandma
and Grandpa will love it when they hear
the dogs, knowing that it’s me mushing
out to see them. I’m almost there.
Can’t be more than half an hour
to go. Down this small
hill, past the burned
stumps. There—I
see the light
by their
door.