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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a.m.

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

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.

Ι

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.
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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 belet'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 lastminute warnings: Don't forget to call us when you get there! Watch where 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.

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