



LYNN HALL

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Summary: Growing up in a small Missouri town and feeling unloved at home, thirteen-year-old Marty is determined to find a way to keep a special greyhound puppy from the kennel where she works.

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WINDSONG



The night before Windsong's first trial, I lay awake all night feeling her fear. She was half a mile away, in the kennel with the rest of the pups, but when she was that scared she just purely broadcast it.

I was the only one she could broadcast to.

I don't know what it was between her and me, but it was there from the time she was born. I'd been holding newborn greyhounds over at Orland's since I was a little kid, and I'd always got a kick out of feeling their soft, warm bellies and tiny rat-toenails. But when Windsong was born last fall, and I picked her up, something happened.

She was pure white and only half the size of the other two pups in the litter. And she'd been crying since the minute she was born, crying like she was hurting somewhere.

"Might as well bucket that one," Orland had said.

But I wrapped my hands around her and held her up against my neck, and right away she got still. Orland thought she'd died, but no, she was pressing against me,

feeling the rhythm of my pulse, maybe hearing my heart-beat. It was what she needed.

It was what I needed, too. I was in one of my bad times then, with my family, and to have some living thing need me that way just plain saved me.

I made Orland promise not to bucket her. I said if she died on her own that was one thing, but if he drowned her like he did with puppies that were born bad, I'd never work in his kennels again. Since I worked for nothing, it was a pretty good threat.

School was on, then, so I had to leave the puppy part of the time, but every minute I could, I was with her. I carried her against my bare skin, under my shirt, while I worked around the kennels. I sat in the nest and held my hand under her while she nursed. Her first few days it was the only way she'd nurse at all, me making a mattress out of my palm and holding her up to her dam.

When the pups were six weeks old, Orland gave them their first shots. I held each puppy on the worktable while he pinched up a roll of skin over their shoulders and punched in the needle. The first two puppies flinched a little, and fussed after I set them down because the vaccine made a stinging bump under their skin. But Windsong screamed.

She screamed in fear more than pain, and her fear went right into my head like she was talking to me in words.

"Wasting my vaccine on that one," Orland muttered. "She ain't never going to turn out."

Turn out to be a racing dog was what he meant.

Orland was a big, fat man. Lots of people didn't like

him because he was so fat; they made fun of him. But he always treated me okay. Sure, he got a lot of free labor out of me. I knew that. I wasn't stupid. But it was work I wanted to do because I loved the dogs, so between him and me the situation was accepted as fair. I couldn't have my own dog because of my brother's allergies; Orland couldn't afford to hire kennel help and was too fat and wheezy to do the work. It was a fair trade-off.

We stood side by side, looking down into the pen that held the three weanling puppies. The two males were dark-marked, good-looking puppies, twice the size of Wind-song. She looked like a little ghost beside them. Although she was still mostly white, faint tracings of gray brindle-stripes were beginning to show on her face.

Orland said, "It was an inbreeding, you know. An accident."

I knew. The dam of the litter had been bred by her own sire, Prize Is Gold. Prize was a big, powerful dog who just plain threw himself at his gate till the latch broke and he got in with his daughter, Golden Earrings, when she was ready to breed. Orland was madder than blazes, because Earrings was supposed to have raced that season, and she was the fastest thing he had in the kennel. But it was nobody's fault but his own, for not having better latches.

I said, "What's so bad about inbreeding, anyhow? I mean, they're still purebred greyhounds, and both of the parents are good dogs. Good racers. So why is it so bad, them being related to each other?"

He knew I really wanted to learn dogs, so he took time to explain stuff like this when I asked.

“Because everything behind the dogs gets intensified. You take a litter from two dogs that aren’t related to each other, and in a four-generation pedigree you’ve got thirty different dogs contributing traits, sire and dam, grandsires and granddams, and so on, all different dogs with different good and bad points. But if you breed, say, a brother and sister, then they have the same parents and it cuts in half the number of contributing ancestors. See?”

“I guess. But . . .”

“So what that means is that a pup from a close breeding has that much more chance that bad faults in the background are going to show up. It has to do with genes and dominants and recessives and all that. But what it boils down to is that from an inbreeding like this, where the parents are closely related to each other, you might get something outstanding in the puppies, or total disaster. Because all the good and bad traits behind the dogs are concentrated. See?”

I didn’t really. I needed to study up on genetics, and I wanted to, but Orland wouldn’t lend me those books yet. He kept saying they were over my head.

Windsong had quit crying and digging at her sore shoulders, and she waddled over to the pen gate where I was. I scooped her up and let her nestle in my neck. She whimpered once, lightly, and slept.

Orland looked down at her, and at me. “Damn, I wish your folks would let you have a dog. I’d sure give you that one. She ain’t never going to turn out.”

He’d said that before, and every time he said it, it broke my heart.

On the morning of Windsong's trial, I got caught in the family breakfast. When I was lucky I got out of the house with just a handful of eat-and-run food, but sometimes they made me eat with them.

We might have looked like the all-American small town Midwest family. I don't know. We were a mess, under the surface, or else I was a total misfit and the rest of them were okay. I couldn't tell.

My mom was very pretty, very soft-spoken and sweet, except when she talked to my dad and then her voice just went tinny, like she could hardly stand the man. She had dark, soft hair that she wore long and kind of tied in at her neck, like an old-fashioned girl. I know for a fact that she was wild when she was young, and she was either trying to hide it or make up for it now. I'd heard from a couple of people around town that her parents more or less made her get married young, to steady, reliable Daddy, out of fear that her wildness would cause embarrassment to their family.

My daddy was a nice-looking man, square built, square faced, thick, wavy, reddish brown hair and good, strong features. He was such a quiet man, you had to be around him a good long time before you realized that the reason he never spoke out was that he never had a thought in his head. I know that's a disrespectful thing for a thirteen-year-old girl to say about her father; but it's true, anyhow.

I don't even know how to describe my brother, Matthew, I hate him so much. He's eighteen months younger than I; he looks like a carbon copy of Daddy; he is the child

they both adore; and he is the reason I can't have the one thing I want more than anything in life. Want and need.

They made me sit down at the table and eat my toast and sliced bananas and drink my V-8, but they never once asked me what my day held. It was a crucial day in my life, but they didn't know or care, and if I'd tried to tell them, they still wouldn't have known or cared. Mom's mind was already on her job at the Divine Word Book and Bible Store. Daddy and Matt were going off together trying to sell Fast-Gro. And they were actually excited about it.

Fast-Gro was a sore point between Daddy and me. It was his wonderful invention that he figured on getting rich off, and I refused to help, so he turned that against me.

Daddy ran the feed mill. It was a junky old place at the edge of town. I hated it. When Grampa was alive, it was fun to go down there and have all the farmers poke their fingers at me and say, "This your granddaughter, Bill? She's going to be a heartbreaker, ain't she? Look at them big brown eyes. Look at them dimples." I'd giggle and they'd hoist me up on the counter and give me salted peanuts in the shell, which Grampa always had sitting around in burlap bags.

Grampa loved me. Grampa thought I was something special and valuable. After he died and Daddy took over the business, I couldn't stand the place anymore. Daddy always had Matt with him, showing him off to the farmers, showing him what the levers did and how the grinders and hoppers worked. There was no point in my being there.

Then the last year or so, Daddy started working on his big idea.. Fast-Gro. It wasn't exactly dog food; it was just

little plastic bags of stuff that looked like sawdust but was mineral supplements, vitamins, things like that. According to Daddy, kennel owners could buy the cheapest dog food around, add Fast-Gro to it, have full nutrition, and still come out cheaper than buying expensive dog food.

His big plan was to sell Fast-Gro, plus the supercheap dog food he made at the mill, to big kennel owners like Orland and get rich. And what he wanted me to do was talk Orland into buying it. I wouldn't.

So family breakfasts were fast and silent.

As soon as I could, I got away.

My bike lived on the front porch, since we didn't have a garage. I bumped it down the steps, did a racing leg-over mount since it was a boy's bike, and pedaled as hard as I could down the road toward the kennel.

My town, which is Jackson Ridge, Missouri, is on Highway 76, south of Ava. That's about fifty miles due east of Springfield, in the Mark Twain National Forest. Seventy-six is a broken-edged old blacktop that winds along the valley floor. Jackson Ridge is two blocks of old falling-down stores along the highway, most of them empty, plus a few little side roads with tired-looking little old houses and weedy yards.

When we go in to Springfield to shop at the malls and at Sears and to have lunch at the Pizza Hut, it seems more like the real world than Jackson Ridge, because it's what life looks like on television.

But yet, I know Jackson Ridge is me. It's something wrong with me, I think. I should love malls and noise and cheap jewelry and pierced ears and clothes and all the rest of it. I don't, because it scares me. Even if I had the money

to buy that stuff, it still wouldn't make me beautiful, or confident around boys. I'd be ridiculous in that world.

They say Jackson Ridge is on the edge now. Springfield is growing all the time, and more people are buying up country land around it, building homes, nice homes, not like our little junky places. They say another ten years and Jackson Ridge will be a bedroom community full of yuppie families who commute to the city. Lord, I hope I can adjust when the time comes, because this is where I mean to live, all my life, right here working with Orland and his dogs.

My bike bumped off our rock road onto the smooth blacktop for the last part of the ride. The smoothness was a relief, but the uphill pull was hard. Three more years till I could drive! I got off and walked when I got to Orland's lane, and left the bike partway up his hill. Not only was his lane horribly steep, with hairpin switchbacks, it was also solid shale that split off in stairsteps of ragged rock. Orland's pickup went through tires every six months.

Coming up over the rim, I stopped to catch my breath and enjoy, as I always did. This was my place. Not my family's house in town. This. This was mine.

It was a green oval clearing surrounded by woods of jackpine and pin oak. Orland never mowed anything, but for some reason his place grew soft, pillowy grass that looked pretty without mowing. It had weeds, sure, but they were all flowering kinds of weeds. Up here, even though it was right above the town and the highway, everything was quiet and breezy and close to the sky.

There was Orland's house, which was nothing. And

there were the kennels and all the pens and exercise yards for the dogs, and behind it all, in another little clearing just off the main one, was the training track.

There, on the training track, this morning, we would find out if Windsong was going to turn out.

She was standing upright against her gate, waiting for me. Every time I came she was standing that way. Orland said she'd get in position about five or ten minutes before I came in sight, every single time. I don't know if she could hear my bike on the rocks at the bottom of the lane or what, but I loved it.

She was nearly full grown now, her head as high as my waist. Standing upright against her fencing, she was the same height as me; we looked straight into each other's eyes. Her love and need for me burned in her black eyes.

She was still almost pure white, with just the faint shadings of gray markings on her face. Her body was soft muscled like a child's, and she was several inches smaller than she should have been at this age. Orland held out little hope for her as a runner, and I knew he was probably right. But my love and need for her was just as fierce as hers for me, and Orland knew it.

He met me by her gate and handed me her racing collar and muzzle. "Let's get going," he said. "You take her, I'll take Wally and Wonder. Get her muzzle on her here."

She hated the muzzle. It scared her. I'd been working with her for a month now, trying to get her to accept it, but she still hated it. Her brothers, Wallbanger and Wonderdog, were muzzled and eager to get going while I was still wrestling with Windsong's head.

Orland always named his litters alphabetically. This was his *W* litter. The next litter had all had *X* names, then *Y*, and so forth. He was on his third time through the alphabet. He'd let me choose a *W* name for Windsong. My mom thought I named her after the perfume, but I didn't. I got the name from a haiku we'd just learned in school. Well, I learned it because I loved it so much; we didn't have to learn it, but it was in the book. It went:

Need friends ever speak?

There's tea to taste and windsong
from the garden trees.

It was the most beautiful thing I ever read, not just the poem but the idea of having a friend who was so close, and loved me so much, that we didn't have to speak to understand each other. I guess that was what I wanted the puppy to be for me.

Finally she gave in about the muzzle and followed me across the grass toward the training track. It was an oval like a miniature horse-racing track, inside a high-wire fence. The track itself was about twelve feet wide, running between the outer fence and a steel rail, waist high. The track was made of sawdust several inches deep.

I'd had Windsong on the track lots of times through the spring, leading her around, getting her used to it, running with her chasing me, to try to give her a love for

running. But never before today had we tried her in the starting boxes, or with the lure. Or with other dogs. If she had what it took, she'd run. If not . . .

Orland handed me the boys' leashes while he wheeled out the starting boxes. They were a line of six cagelike boxes on a low, wheeled base. They had doors front and rear, so the dogs could be led in from the back and closed in. Then when Orland hit a button at the end of the rack, the front doors popped up, a bell jangled, and the mechanical lure on the rail took off.

It looked like a rabbit and smelled like a rabbit. In fact, Orland sewed fresh rabbit hides over it every few months to keep it smelling exciting to the dogs. All it was was a metal knob-thing that stuck out from the rail at about head height for the dogs. They chased it, and that made the race. Orland controlled the speed of the lure, so it was always just in front of the fastest dogs.

"Put her in the second box," he told me. "We'll put one on each side of her, see how that works."

Wally and Wonder had been in the boxes before. They knew what it was all about. Wally fought for a few seconds, then gave in, and Wonderdog just walked in and got into crouch position on his own.

I had to talk Windsong into the box, ease her in, reassure her till even I was starting to lose patience with her. She was terrified of the box. She shook so hard I could hear her teeth chatter.

"Stand clear," Orland commanded. He'd had enough of her, too.

I stood back behind the boxes and held my breath.

He hit the button. The bell jangled; the doors flew up; the lure jolted away up the rail.

Wally and Wonder leaped from the boxes and streaked after the lure, snarling at each other through their muzzles.

Windsong crouched within the box, her eyes glazed with terror.

Orland just looked at me and shook his head.

“Let’s try her again,” I pleaded. “I think the bell scared her. I think she has sharper hearing than most dogs, and the bell probably just scared her. Can you turn off the bell?”

Wally and Wonder came past, crossed the finish line, and got chunks of rabbit pelt to chew on for their reward. The rabbit was fresh-killed, with meat still on the pelt, and we had to hold them way apart from each other when we took off the muzzles, or they’d have fought for each other’s chunks.

Orland took them back to the kennel then, and brought out Golden Earrings, who was in serious training now for the July meets at St. Louis and Omaha. We put her in the inside box, next to Windsong, who seemed to relax in her dam’s presence.

Once again the boxes were closed, the button pushed.

This time Windsong exploded from her box a few leaps behind her dam, followed her for several strides, then slowed and turned to come back to me.

I sat in the sawdust and let her walk into my arms. Orland concentrated on Earrings till she’d finished her run and been put away. Windsong stood against me, leaning into me while I wrapped my arms around her and hid