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Opening extract from

Ghost Dog

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Chapter 1

Dog-gone



The first thing that struck Knitbone Pepper about death was that Heaven wasn't up to much.

There weren't any squirrels, or sausage sandwiches, or delicious bones, or even a single squeaky ball. Instead it seemed to be full of stripy socks, jumpers and the smell of washing powder. It was also quite dark. There were supposed to be sparkly lights, not spangly tights.

Knitbone was definitely dead, because he could remember the dying part quite clearly…

Yesterday, he had felt really old and tired and fed up. So fed up in fact, that he couldn't even get out of bed. Then the nice vet who smelled of cats and biscuits came, and everybody's eyes started leaking.

The Peppers sat in a small, sad circle, passing around tissues, wiping their eyes and blowing their noses – so much so that Knitbone hoped they weren't coming down with something.

Lord Pepper, sniffing loudly, carefully tucked Knitbone's favourite toy rabbit (Floppy Bernard) beneath his doggy chin and Lady Pepper gently squeezed his paw. Then Winnie – lovely Winnie – kneeled down and stroked his ears in the special way he liked. She came very close, her warm tears sploshing onto his nose, and whispered, "Thank you for being the best, most special, most perfect dog in all the world. Sleep tight, Knitbone Pepper.

We love you so much. Goodbye, goodbye…"

Then, SHAZAM! He was as dead as a doorknob. Actually it was surprisingly nice, because one minute everything hurt, and the next it didn't. In fact, he felt great, like a puppy again, all bendy and WOW!

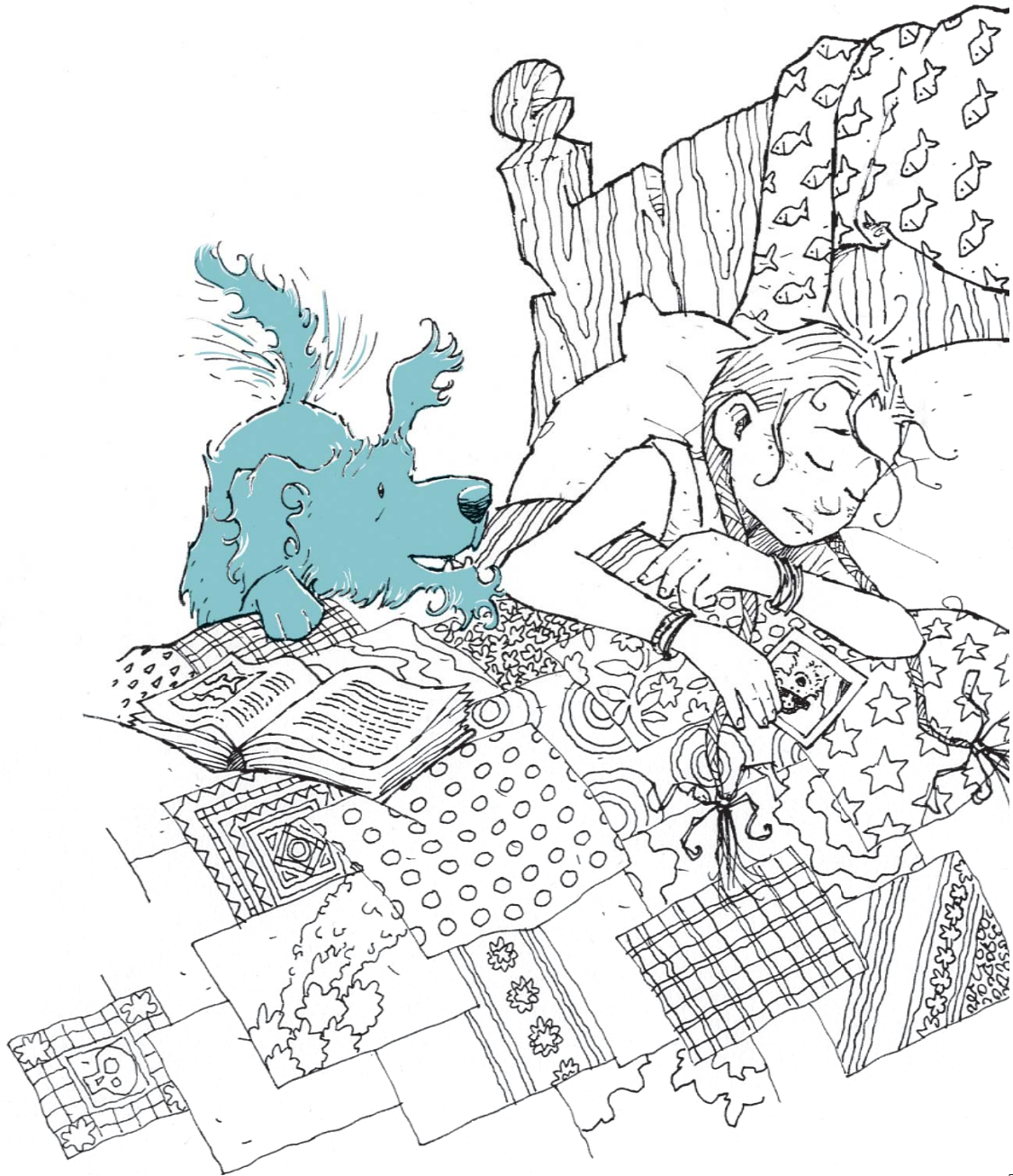
He had expected to go to Heaven straight away, via angel wings and twanging harps. He had seen it on those Saturday morning cartoons, sitting next to Winnie, as she crunched toast and he munched dog biscuits. It looked painless, well organized and quite straightforward.

But it wasn't straightforward for Knitbone Pepper. It was dead complicated.

Knitbone carefully inspected a nurse's costume in a dark corner. It had a catapult in the pocket and chocolate down the front. He gave it a sniff and was relieved to discover he was shut inside Winnie's wardrobe, not in Heaven after all.

He picked his way through a forest of tangled wire coat hangers and nudged open the door with his nose. Outside, the air felt cool and still as his gaze fell onto the bed in the corner of the room. Hunched up beneath its rainbow patchwork cover was the outline of a familiar shape.

Immediately Knitbone's heart looped the loop and his tail began to whoosh like a windscreen wiper. Oh, MAD love! Wonderful, marvellous, amazing, *Winnie Pepper*. He loved her more than all the bicycle wheels, frisbees and cowpats in the world. They had made a promise to be BFFs: Best Friends Forever. Like tea and toast, fish and chips, strawberries and cream; Winnie and Knitbone were made for each other. He scampered over and watched her for a blissful moment, his head patiently resting on her bedcover as he thought about how pleased she was going to be when she saw him. It would be the best surprise EVER. There must have been some sort of mistake.



Maybe he wasn't dead after all or, at worst, only a *bit* dead. Whatever had happened, it didn't matter because any minute soon Winnie would wake up and smile and say, "*There* you are, Knitbone, you good boy!" and everything would be the same as before.

He licked her cheek. Normally her face tasted of peppermint toothpaste or bubblegum, but today she tasted different: strange and salty. He snuffled at her hair. It smelled sad. His gaze drifted down to her hand. In it rested a photograph of a knee-high dog with wonky ears and toffee-coloured, scrubbing-brush fur. He was wearing a pirate hat, perched at a cheeky angle. This dog certainly wasn't a pedigree, more of a doggy jumble, but his eyes twinkled like the brightest stars. "Ooh, look," Knitbone woofed cheerfully. "It's me!"

There was a knock at the door. Winnie's mum came in and sat on the bed. She looked sad and

her eyes were all puffy. Maybe she did have a cold after all. "Wake up, Winnie," she whispered. "It's time for school."

Normally Winnie was like a fizzing firework, springing out of bed. But not today. Today she just rolled over and faced the wall.

Knitbone bounded around madly at first, in case it was a game. He loved games. Then he realized it wasn't, so he stopped and did a bit of happy panting instead. Still Winnie continued to face the wall, ignoring her mother's coaxing. "Well, I can see this is a job for a dog," he sighed, squeezing in front of Winnie's mum. "Never fear, Knitbone's here! Come on now, Winnie, wake up. Stop messing about."

He plonked his paw heavily on Winnie's leg and nudged her with his wet nose. She didn't seem to notice, so he did it again, this time a little more firmly.

"Winnie, it's *me* – vitamin D! Geddit? D for

Dog? Ha ha! No? Oh. Come on. If you get up now there will be time to play a game before the school bus comes. I want to have a go at 'Jump the Piano' because, guess what? I'm feeling much better today, look!" He pranced about in front of her like a loon, trying to catch her eye. "WINNIE, LOOK!" But Winnie just curled into a ball and pulled a pillow over her head as if she hadn't heard a thing.

Knitbone had a peculiar feeling. It wasn't a very nice one. Then a Bad Thought occurred to him.

Knitbone Pepper wasn't very good at maths (he was, after all, a dog), but even he had to admit that:

Dead + still here = Ghost

He looked down at his paws. They *were* a bit see-through, now he came to think about it. If he had to describe them, he would say they looked as if they were made out of wispy cotton wool.

Standing next to Winnie's dressing table, he noticed that whilst the teddy bear, the piggybank and the alarm clock were reflected in the mirror, he wasn't. The reality of the situation hit him over the head like a saucepan – *CLAAAANG!*

Knitbone's tail drooped and panic began to rise in his chest. "No, no, NO*OOOOO!* NOT A GHOST! I can't be – this can't be happening!" He wailed and howled as loudly as he could. "PEPPERS, LOOK! IT'S ME, KNITBONE!"



Winnie was eventually persuaded out of bed in her nightdress and led downstairs, Knitbone following close behind. “LISTEN, I’M STILL HERE – I’M STILL PART OF THE FAMILY!” Winnie and Lady Pepper didn’t so much as glance backwards.

Down in the kitchen, Knitbone was in something of a panic. Dying had gone very badly wrong. He was neither here nor there – he was somewhere in-between. He hid under the big kitchen table for a while and tried to calm down by breathing deeply and thinking about safe things like tartan blankets and dog biscuits.

After a while he felt brave enough to come out. He sat next to Winnie’s chair, staring super-hard at her whilst tears plopped rhythmically into her cornflakes. His trusting doggy heart had to believe that Winnie would make everything alright again. Surely any moment now she would look up from her breakfast and announce, “Oh, THERE you are,

Knitbone!” After all, Winnie was the cleverest, most wonderful person in the world, so she was bound to figure it out, sooner or later.

But she didn’t look up. Not that day, nor the next, nor even the next.