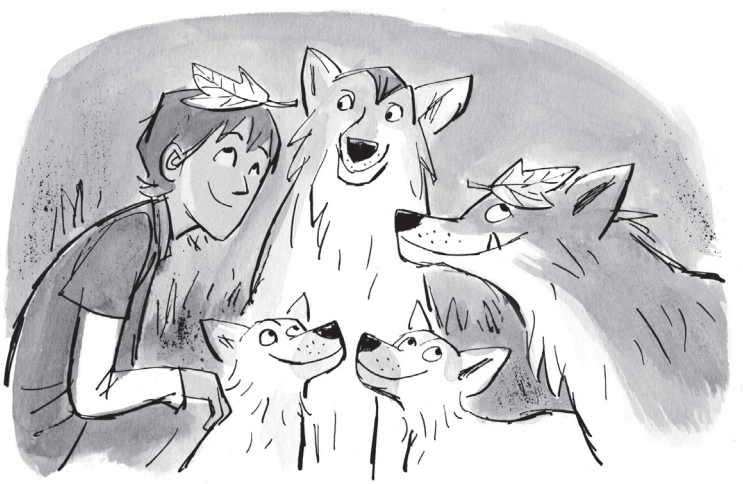
WILL WOLFHEART



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For Dan





Chapter One

Sunday afternoons were always the worst.

Will hated to say goodbye to Whisker.

Whisker hated to say goodbye to Will.

He would nuzzle his rumpled nose into Will's knees, and Will's eyes would get a bit shiny.

'Don't worry,' said Gran-Mishti, Will's grandma. 'He'll still be here next Friday. He won't forget you.'

It was never quite clear who she was talking to.

Will and Whisker were never normally quiet or shiny-eyed when they were together.

They'd normally be racing to the bottom of the stairs, finding things which had been carefully hidden, relentlessly throwing and retrieving balls, knocking things over, eating things up, occasionally being sick, putting two trails of muddy footprints over the kitchen floor,



bringing back exciting smells after an adventure in the bushes, rolling around in Will's bed, playing chase in the garden (fantastic) or round Gran-Mishti's small living room (less successful). They also spent a lot of time lying on the kitchen rug: Will's face and dark hair buried in Whisker's fur; his arms around him tight.

They did this every Friday night, and all day on Saturday and Sunday. Then the Sunday afternoon shiny-eyed moment would happen, and Will would have to leave Whisker and go home.

This was because Will's family – his mum, his dad, Will and his five-year-old sister Eva – had just moved from around-the-corner-from-Gran-Mishti in the countryside, to a third floor flat in the city. Mum had a new job at the hospital, and it had been too far for her to travel every day. The flat was in a good place for Dad's work at a charity too, and there was a new school nearby for Will and Eva. There was a big park a few minutes away, with trees and flowers and a place to run. It was a nice flat, in a pleasant place.

Will's insides still felt echoing and empty about living there, a bit like his old bedroom had sounded when they'd

left. Dad had assured him he'd feel less empty in time as the flat filled up with new memories. Will wasn't too sure about that.

Because there was a big snag about the new flat. It didn't allow pets.

'I'll look after Whisker,' Gran-Mishti had said. 'He'll be good company for me.'

So now Gran-Mishti looked after Whisker during the week, and Will – being ten years old and quite old enough for solo sleepovers – would come to stay with them both at the weekend. Sometimes Mum and Dad and Eva would come too, but Will came every weekend without fail, and he was going to come in the holidays, too.

Luckily, Gran-Mishti loved Will, and she loved Whisker. Whisker loved Gran-Mishti, but he loved Will more. Will loved Gran-Mishti, and he loved Whisker so much that he felt not quite whole when he wasn't with him. He loved him even though – or maybe because – he was an odd-looking sort of dog.



Whisker's fur was permanently creased and rumpled as if it had dried wrong in the wash. He had a long body with splayed,

awkward-looking legs, and a big, wide mouth which always made him look like he was grinning. He was caramel-coloured with haphazard patches of black, and his snout was covered in persistent, wiry whiskers which sprang up on end and almost hid his amber eyes.

This particular Sunday afternoon was a special one as it was Whisker's first birthday. To celebrate, Whisker had secretly hidden his favourite ball and not so secretly dug up Gran-Mishti's last pet, a budgie, which had been placed in a too-shallow grave in the flowerbed.

'Ah well,' said Gran-Mishti, 'serves me right for not burying Jeremy deeper. Or burning him perhaps. Have another slice of birthday cake, Will.' Nothing seemed to faze Gran-Mishti, which was probably just as well.

Will had been gazing at the pieces of glass which Gran-Mishti had hung up in her kitchen window. He loved the way they caught the light and cast rainbows around the room: some of them tiny, squashed and vivid; others a wash of colour like watercolour paint, spilling out over the white walls. He was trying to push the thought of the shiny-eyed moment to the back of his mind.

Whisker was now unsuccessfully chasing a butterfly

outside, his tail wagging excitedly like a torn flag. He kept coming back to check on Will and update him on progress by bursting into the kitchen, running round in circles, and barking loudly.

'I know, Whisker, I know!' Will said, ruffling up his wiry fur and giving him an extra good patting. Whisker placed his muzzle under Will's chin in the way they both loved, and quietly panted for a moment. Whisker made his special, grumbly purring noise and Will could feel it vibrating through his chest.

'You're so clever. It's so exciting!' said Will. 'Don't hurt the butterfly though! Just follow it again. You can do it!'

'RUFFF!' agreed Whisker. He tore away from Will and pelted outside again.

'He's so happy,' said Will to Gran-Mishti. The not-whole feeling was nagging away at him. It was a slippery sort of feeling which made him feel a bit sick and ashamed. As if without Whisker, he somehow wasn't quite Will. Or a Will worth talking to.

The feeling had got worse since they'd moved to the new flat and he'd started at the new school.

'D'you think he knows it's Sunday?'

Gran-Mishti pressed her warm, brown hand over Will's. 'I know he'll miss you, Will. And I know he'll be excited to see you on Friday afternoon.'

Wouldn't it be good, thought Will, *if you knew what a dog was thinking?* You could tell a dog how you were feeling, and dogs (Whisker, anyway) seemed to get that. But you couldn't ring up a dog and have a chat over the phone. Or send them a postcard and have them read it. You couldn't text a dog and have them reply, 'MISSING YOU TOO ❤'. You could only feel sad when they weren't there, and wonder if they were feeling sad too. Which made the not-whole feeling much worse, as you weren't sure whether you were the only one feeling it.

Will watched the glass spin round in the breeze and the rainbows follow it, like the gleam of a theatre glitterball.

'He'll be thinking of you when you think of him,' said Gran-Mishti. 'As will I. Come. Let's have some more birthday cake. I've got dog treats for Whisker. Let's take it all outside.'

With Will carrying the tea tray, they went out to the small table and chairs under Gran-Mishti's apple tree. Will gave the knobbly bark a pat. He'd known this tree since he was tiny. The branches gently dappled them in shade, like a cool, friendly hug.

Whisker was still busy running round the lawn in circles, having definitely not-caught the butterfly. Non-triumphant but in high spirits at his own cleverness, he found the perfect spot – right by the tree – to arrange himself to celebrate.

'Ooh nooo,' said Will. 'Get ready, Gran-Mishti!' He grabbed the tea cosy and put it on his head.

Whisker threw his ears back and his nose in the air, as he always did when he was super excited.

Gran-Mishti grabbed two empty plant pots, placing one over each ear. 'Even though I'm deaf,' she remarked, 'it's always best to—'



Whisker interrupted her.

'A A A A A A A A A A O O O O O O O A A A A AOOOHHH!'

Whisker had what you might kindly call a 'difficult' howl. It tore strips out

of your ear drums and screwed up your eyes.

It also took some time to finish.

When Whisker closed his jaws and looked expectantly at Will and Gran-Mishti for applause, he found them with the plant pots and tea cosy firmly in place and their eyes tight shut.

Undaunted, he dived at Will, knocked off the tea cosy and licked him all over his face.

'You're a crazy dog!' Will told him happily, falling off his chair with Whisker firmly attached. 'A CRAZY dog!' Midway between the chair and the ground, the dappled sunlight seemed to expand, and all Will could see was a blur of coloured light. He seemed to hear another howl somewhere in the breeze: a better, more tuneful one. His eyes dazzled with green and gold in shimmering patterns on his eyelids. He could hear Gran-Mishti laughing at them.

'Watch yourselves, now!'

Hadn't she once told him that all light was white? At that thought, the dazzle seemed to explode into a silver blaze.

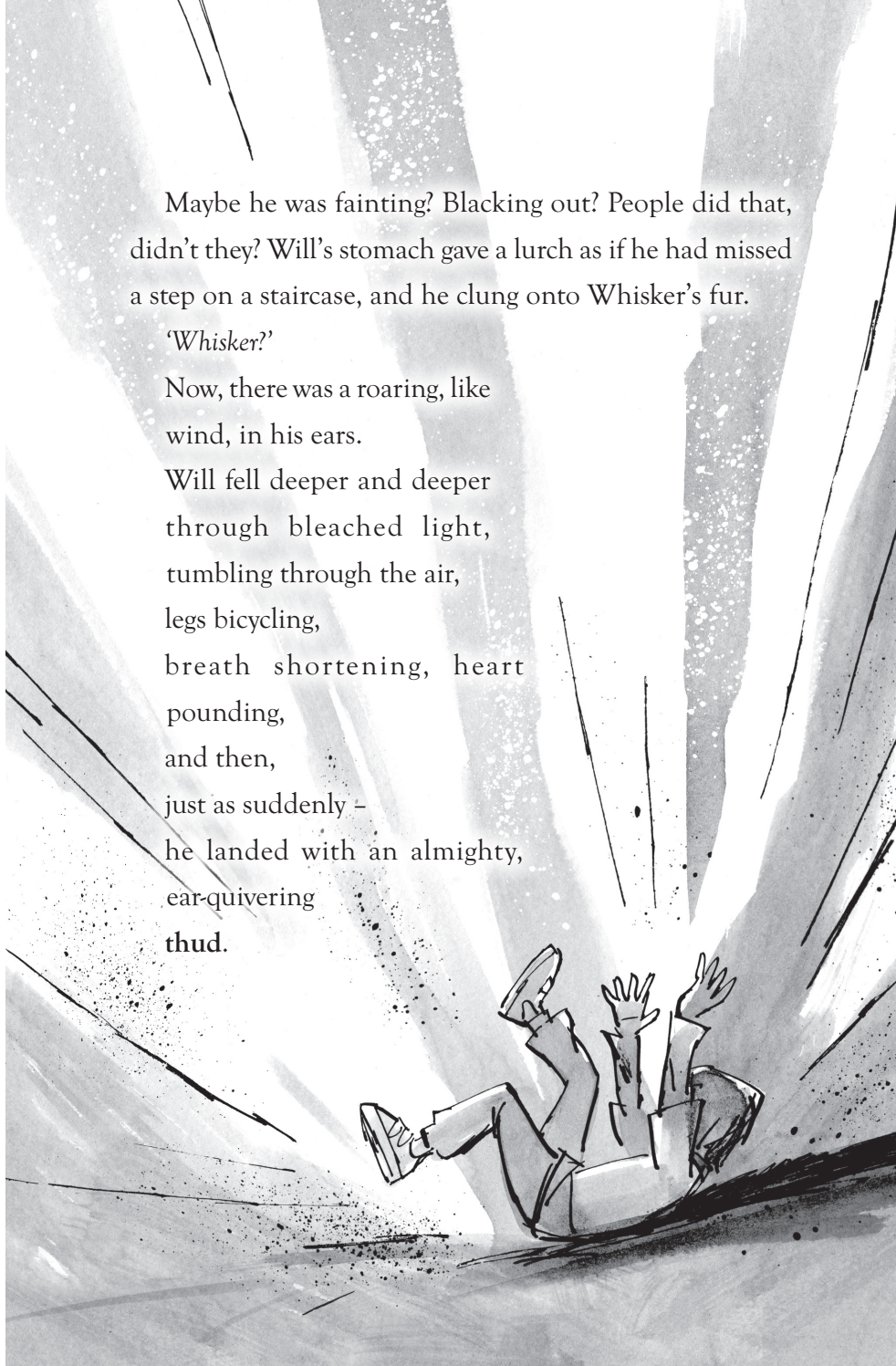
But, suddenly, that wasn't what was bothering Will.

What was bothering Will was that he hadn't reached the ground yet.

Maybe he was fainting? Blacking out? People did that, didn't they? Will's stomach gave a lurch as if he had missed a step on a staircase, and he clung onto Whisker's fur.

'Whisker?'

Now, there was a roaring, like
wind, in his ears.
Will fell deeper and deeper
through bleached light,
tumbling through the air,
legs bicycling,
breath shortening, heart
pounding,
and then,
just as suddenly –
he landed with an almighty,
ear-quivering
thud.



Not on Gran-Mishti's neatly cut lawn

but onto thick, wet grass.

The wetness was coming from an enormous quantity of rain. It was accompanied by a bone-shaking clap of thunder.

Will was drenched almost instantly.

'Wha . . . ?'

He looked up hastily to find a tree next to him. He scuttled, crab-like, underneath it. The tree had a broad pink-grey trunk and wide arches of three-pronged leaves that sheltered him as he looked out. There was a smoking, ragged trench in the ground next to it.

Gran-Mishti wasn't there any more. Nor was her garden.

Will blinked.

An enormous eye peered down at him from a violently cloudy sky.

Will's belly grabbed all his breath and refused to let it go.

'WHAA . . . ?'

The iris of the eye was a glittering turquoise. One edge was a thick purple. The pupil was a slim slice of silver. It dipped the great hill on which Will was standing in shades of lavender and black velvet.

It looked ferociously angry. It didn't blink. Even when

