Coventry Building Society's Young Writer of the Year competition 2026

The last wish

People said the big tree was magical. And if you found a golden leaf under it, you could make a wish and it would come true... (cat th a b)

I used to laugh when I was younger. The "Wishing Tree" as Grandma called it, stood at the far end of the village – twisted and ancient, its roots crawling over the soil like veins. Kids would dare each other to go there at night, whisper a wish, and run back before the spirits caught them. But now, standing beneath its skeletal branches, I wasn't laughing. Not when mum was lying in the hospital barely holding on. The wind was cold, and carrying the scent of rain. I dropped to my knees and started brushing through the fallen leaves – brown, brittle, lifeless. "Come on," I muttered, my fingers shaking. "Just one golden leaf." I searched until my hands were raw, until I almost screamed at how stupid it was. There was no magic. There never had been. Then something glimmered. I had been. A single leaf as gold as sunlight. It was small and perfect, the veins shining like threads of fire. For a moment, I just stared at it, afraid to breathe in case it vanished. Then I whispered, "Please. Let her live." The wind howled – a deep, hollow sound that seemed to come from the tree itself. The golden leaf rose from my palm and disintegrated into sparks. I stumbled back, heart hammering. And just like

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Then, the world went quiet. Mum woke up the next morning. The doctors called it a miracle. She said she'd dreamt of a tree made of light, and someone whispering that the debt had been paid. That should've been the happy ending. But I kept thinking about what she'd said - the debt. A week later, I went back. The tree looked different - darker, its bark split like old scars. Beneath it lay another golden leaf. I didn't want to touch it. But something about it pulled me closer. The wind whispered my name. I froze. Then a figure stepped out from behind the trunk - a boy about my age, eyes bright like embers. "You made a wish," he said. "Now someone else must pay."

"I didn't know -"

"No one ever does" he said almost kindly. "The tree gives a balance. A life for a life."

I backed away, heart pounding. "You're lying."

He tilted his head. "Ask your Grandmother."

When I got home, Grandma was sitting by the window. I told her everything. She didn't look surprised "The tree gives & takes," she whispered. "It gave me your mother and took away your grandfather."

That night right I went back. The golden leaf was waiting beneath the tree "I wish," I whispered "That no one else ever has to pay" Now the tree is gone because I made The Last Wish