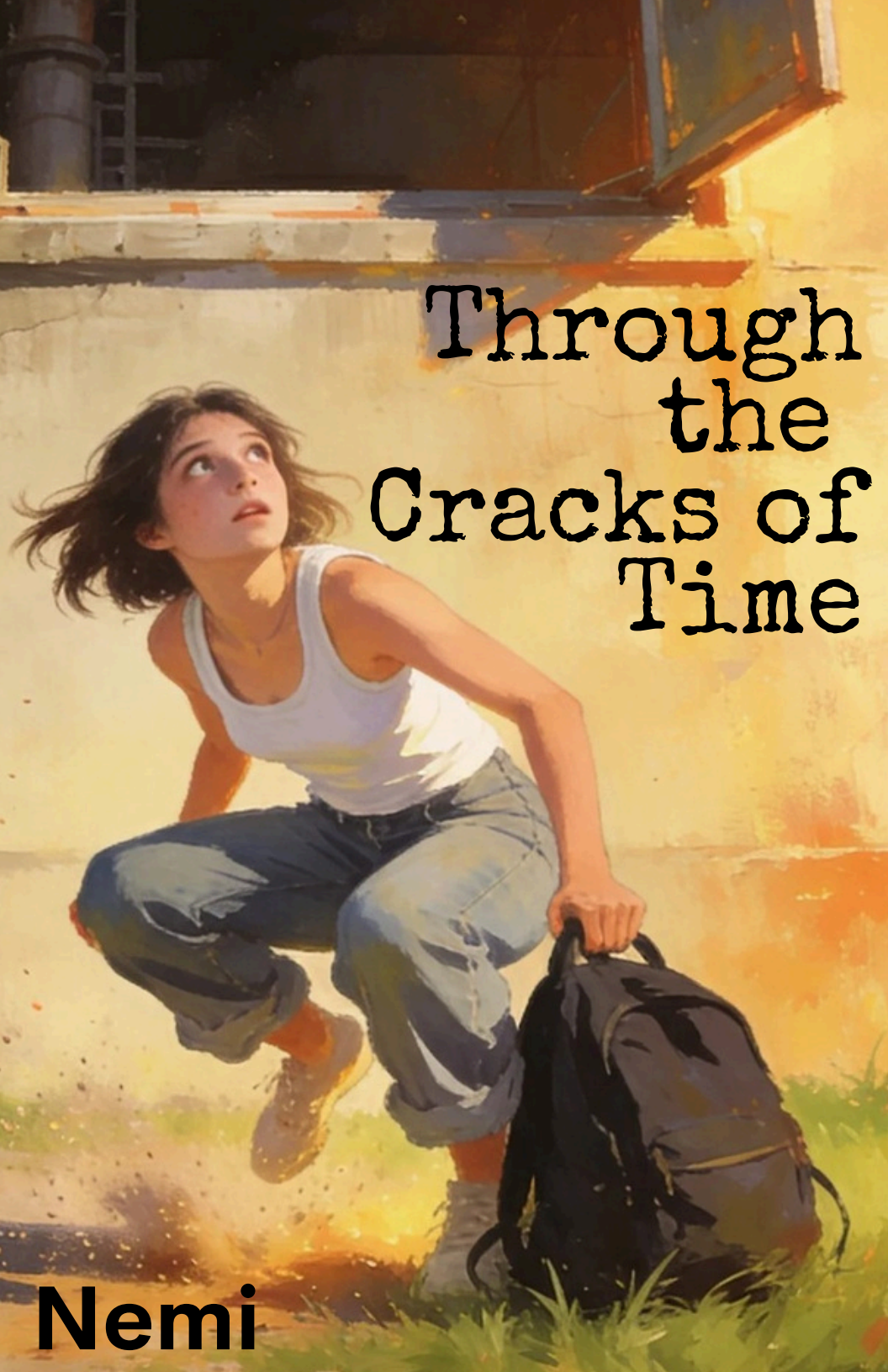
Through the Cracks of Time
Nemi

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Set in Times New Roman

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Chapter One

The factory had been abandoned for as long as I could remember, which was probably why I liked it so much. Nobody expected anything from an abandoned factory. Nobody asked it what it wanted to do when it grew up, or whether it had finished its homework, or why it spent so much time on its own. It just sat there, quietly falling apart, and everyone seemed perfectly happy to leave it alone.

I wished people would extend me the same courtesy.

It was Thursday afternoon, and I'd come straight from school, taking the longer route along the edge of town to avoid running into anyone I knew. Not that anyone was particularly likely to stop me for a chat.

I wasn't exactly the most popular person in Year Ten, although I wasn't unpopular either. I existed somewhere in the middle, which was a surprisingly comfortable

place to be. People knew my name, occasionally borrowed a pen, and generally forgot about me the moment I left the room.

The weather was doing that thing May weather does, where it can't quite decide whether to be spring or summer. The sun had been out during lunch, warm enough for a few optimistic people to sit on the grass behind the science block, but by the time I'd left school, clouds had rolled in from the sea and the wind had picked up. I'd put my jumper back on before reaching the end of the high street.

I didn't mind. I liked the cold when it wasn't properly cold. The sort that made you pull your sleeves over your hands without actually making you miserable.

The factory stood beyond the last proper row of houses, where the town began to give up and turn into scrubland, old industrial buildings and narrow roads leading towards the coast. There was a rusted chain-link fence around most of the property, although several sections had collapsed years ago. Someone had once attached a sign warning people to keep out, but the lettering had faded so badly that it might as well have been advertising something.

I slipped through the gap I'd been using since I was twelve.

I'd discovered the place by accident, during one of those afternoons when I'd told Mum I was going for a walk and then kept walking because I didn't particularly want to go home yet. I'd been curious about the broken windows and the enormous brick chimney, and curiosity had eventually won over the possibility of being murdered by a homeless person.

Nobody had murdered me, obviously.

Instead, I'd found a place that felt like it had been waiting for me.

The main building was enormous, with high windows, exposed steel beams and a concrete floor covered in dust and broken glass. There were strange metal fixtures bolted into the ground where machinery had once stood, and old electrical cables hanging from the ceiling like dead vines. I had no idea what they'd manufactured there. Dad had once mentioned something about packaging, but he'd said it in that vague way adults do when they don't actually know the answer and hope you won't ask any more questions.

My favourite room was at the back, beyond a narrow corridor and a door that had swollen so badly it needed a proper shove to open.

I thought it had probably been an office, although there was a serving hatch in one wall that suggested it might have been part of a canteen. Either way, someone had furnished it in the late nineties and apparently decided that brown, orange and a particularly unpleasant shade of green were the height of sophistication.

There were three desks, two filing cabinets, a noticeboard with nothing left on it except rusty drawing pins, and a row of plastic chairs with metal legs. The chairs were horrible, but I'd dragged one over to the least damaged desk and covered it with an old cushion I'd brought from home. I kept the cushion hidden in a filing cabinet when I wasn't there.

It was my little corner of the world.

I dropped my backpack onto the desk and pulled out my notebook.

I had several notebooks, all serving slightly different purposes. One was for poems, one was for stories, and one was for things I thought were interesting but didn't know what to do with yet. The last one was mostly full of overheard conversations, odd descriptions and random thoughts that probably made me look completely unhinged.

Today's notebook was the poetry one.

I'd been trying to write something about loneliness without actually using the word loneliness, which was proving annoyingly difficult. Every time I thought I'd found a clever way of describing it, I read it back and realised I'd basically written the same thing as before, only with more weather.

I chewed the end of my pen and looked towards the window.

Outside, the sky had turned a pale, watery grey. The window was filthy, with a crack running diagonally through one of the lower panes, and a spider had built an impressive web between the frame and the wall. Beyond it, I could see the tops of bushes moving in the wind.

I wrote a line.

Crossed it out.

Wrote another.

That one was worse.

"Brilliant," I muttered.

I leaned back in my chair and stared at the ceiling, trying to think of something profound. Nothing came. My brain was apparently closed for maintenance.

Then I heard something.

At first I thought it was the wind moving something in the main building, which happened quite often. Loose sheets of metal rattled, doors banged, and sometimes the entire place made strange creaking noises that sounded worryingly like it was considering falling down.

But this was different.

Voices.

I sat up.

There was a laugh, followed by the unmistakable sound of someone kicking something across the concrete floor.

"Mate, look at this!"

I recognised the voice immediately.

Callum Price.

Of course it was Callum Price.

He was in my year at school, one of those boys who seemed to consider every available surface an opportunity to make noise. He wasn't particularly horrible, just loud, and permanently surrounded by

other boys who found everything he said absolutely hilarious.

I heard another voice, then another.

At least three of them.

I stayed perfectly still, listening as their footsteps echoed around the main room. Someone shouted something about a dead rat, and the others burst into laughter.

Wonderful.

I'd managed to keep this place to myself for three years, and now half the school was apparently moving in.

I quietly closed my notebook and slipped it into my backpack. The sensible thing would have been to wait until they left, but there was a problem with that. If they started exploring the smaller rooms, they'd find me, and then they'd know I came here.

Worse, they'd probably tell everyone.

I could already imagine the conversations.

Freya sits in an abandoned factory writing poems.

That's so weird.

What does she write about?

And then, because people were people, someone would inevitably suggest I was writing about a boy, and the whole thing would become unbearable.

No, thank you.

I stood and looked towards the window.

It was one of the old metal-framed ones, with a section that opened outwards on hinges. I'd never actually opened it before, mostly because there hadn't been any reason to, but it wasn't very high off the ground. Perhaps a metre and a half. There were bushes and weeds beneath it, which would hopefully make the landing reasonably soft.

I went over and tested the handle.

It moved.

Barely.

I pulled harder, and something inside the frame gave a metallic click.

Then the window opened with a long, horrible screech.

I froze.

Out in the main room, the voices stopped.

"What's that?"

"I dunno."

"Sounded like a door."

I held my breath.

"Hello?" someone called.

Oh, brilliant.

I pushed the window a little further, trying to ignore the protesting hinges. It was just wide enough for me to squeeze through if I turned sideways.

"There's someone here," Callum said.

"No there isn't."

"Then what made that noise?"

"Probably the building, you idiot."

I climbed onto the windowsill, one knee scraping against the rough concrete. My backpack caught on the frame, and I had to twist awkwardly to pull it free.

For a moment, I was balanced half inside and half outside, looking down at a mess of nettles, long grass and what appeared to be an abandoned plastic bucket.

This was a terrible idea.

I lowered myself as far as I could, gripping the sill with both hands, then let go.

I landed badly.

My foot slipped on something, and I ended up sitting in the weeds with one hand pressed against the ground and the other still clutching my backpack strap.

"Ow."

I looked down at my knee, expecting blood, but there was only a faint red mark.

Then I noticed the heat.

It was such a strange thing to notice that I didn't immediately understand what was wrong. I'd been sitting inside a cold, draughty building, and now the air around me was warm. Properly warm. The kind of warmth that settled against your skin and made you feel as though you'd stepped into a greenhouse.

I looked up.

The sky was blue.

Not pale May blue with clouds drifting across it, but a deep, almost ridiculous blue, stretching above the factory roof without a single cloud in sight.

Sunlight poured over the weeds, catching on the edges of leaves and turning the long grass golden.

I blinked.

Had the weather changed while I was inside?

It must have. I'd been concentrating on my notebook for a while, and May could be unpredictable. Perhaps the clouds had cleared and the sun had come out.

Except it wasn't just the sun.

There was a smell in the air that hadn't been there before. Warm earth, flowers, dry grass and something sweet I couldn't identify. Beneath it was the familiar salty smell of the sea, only stronger somehow, carried on a breeze that felt almost tropical compared with the one I'd walked through half an hour earlier.

And there were insects.

Loads of them.

Something buzzed past my ear, and I flinched. A butterfly drifted over the grass, its wings catching the sunlight before it disappeared into a patch of flowers.

Flowers that definitely hadn't been there when I'd arrived.

I stood slowly.

"What the..."

The weeds around me were taller than I remembered, reaching almost to my waist in places. There were daisies, little purple flowers and thick patches of grass that had gone yellow at the tips. The whole area looked as though it had been left to grow through an entire summer.

I turned towards the factory.

And stopped.

The wall was wrong.

It took me a moment to work out why. The bricks were the same, and the window I'd just climbed through was still there, hanging open above the weeds, but the wall itself looked cleaner. The dark streaks of dirt beneath the guttering had disappeared, and the metal window

frames were painted a dull green rather than the flaky brown I'd grown used to.

I stared at them.

Perhaps someone had been doing repairs?

But that didn't make sense. The place had been abandoned for years. Nobody cared enough to repair anything.

I looked around again, suddenly aware of how quiet the factory was behind me.

No voices.

No Callum.

Nothing.

I considered climbing straight back through the window, but curiosity got the better of me. Something strange was happening, and I wanted to know what.

Besides, it was a beautiful afternoon.

I stepped away from the wall and made my way through the weeds towards the corner of the building.

The ground was uneven, and I had to watch where I put my feet. There were bits of old concrete half-hidden

beneath the grass, and a rusty length of pipe that looked perfectly positioned to break someone's ankle.

As I reached the corner, I heard traffic.

That made me stop again.

The road beyond the factory wasn't particularly busy these days. Most of the old industrial units had closed, and the only people who came this way were locals taking shortcuts or delivery drivers who'd followed their satnavs somewhere unfortunate.

But now I could hear several engines, the distant squeal of brakes and what sounded like a lorry changing gears.

I peered around the corner.

The factory looked completely different.

Not different in the sense that someone had knocked it down and built something else. It was still the same building, with the same roofline and the same enormous chimney rising above it.

But it was clean.

The windows were intact. The doors were painted. The yard had been cleared, and the cracked concrete was almost free of weeds.

There was even a sign above the main entrance.

A large rectangular sign with dark blue lettering on a white background, advertising a company whose name I didn't recognise.

I stared at it, trying to remember what had been there before.

Nothing, I was fairly sure. Just two rusted brackets where a sign had once hung.

A car went past on the road.

It was a small red hatchback, boxy and rather old-fashioned, with black plastic bumpers. I didn't think much of it until another car followed, this one equally boxy, and then a white van with a design on the side that looked like something from an old television advert.

I walked a little further, keeping close to the factory wall.

There was a bus stop across the road that I was certain hadn't existed before. Not a proper shelter, just a metal pole with a timetable attached and a small rectangular sign at the top.

I could hear music coming from somewhere too. Tinny and distant, as though someone had a radio playing through an open window.

Everything looked familiar, but not quite right.

It was like looking at a photograph of somewhere you'd visited as a child, recognising the buildings but wondering why all the details were different.

I reached the edge of the yard and stopped beside the road.

The heat was beginning to make me uncomfortable in my jumper. A trickle of sweat ran from my armpit. I pulled the sleeves up and looked towards town, where the rooftops were visible beyond a row of trees.

That was when I saw her.

She came out through a side entrance of the factory, pushing a bicycle.

At first, I barely paid attention. She was just someone leaving the building, probably heading home after doing something inside. But then she turned towards the road, and I found myself looking at her properly.

She was about my age, perhaps a little older, with hair that fell around her shoulders and caught the sunlight

when she moved. She wore a light summer dress with a small floral pattern, and her bicycle was one of those old-fashioned ones with curved handlebars and a basket on the front.

There was something wonderfully ordinary about her.

She wasn't doing anything particularly interesting. Just walking along with her bike, one hand resting on the handlebars while the other held a small bag. She looked completely comfortable in the heat, her bare arms lightly tanned, her dress moving around her knees in the breeze.

But she was smiling. Not at anyone. Not even at anything, as far as I could tell. Just smiling to herself.

I wondered what she was thinking about.

She looked up and noticed me standing there.

"Hi," she said.

It was such a normal, cheerful greeting that I almost forgot to answer.

"Oh. Hi."

She smiled a little wider and kept walking.

I watched her pass.

There was a faint smell of something sweet as she went by, perhaps perfume or shampoo, and I noticed a little silver bracelet around her wrist.

She glanced back over her shoulder.

I was still staring.

She raised her eyebrows slightly, looking amused rather than annoyed, and I quickly turned my attention to the road.

Excellent work, Freya.

Very subtle.

I waited a few seconds before looking again.

She'd reached a point where the road widened, and she was swinging one leg over the bicycle. She looked back once more, catching me for the second time, and gave a little wave.

I lifted my hand.

Then she pushed off, pedalling towards town with her dress fluttering in the warm breeze.

I stood there until she disappeared around the bend.

I couldn't have said why I'd been so fascinated by her. She was pretty, obviously, but I'd seen pretty girls before. There was something else about the way she'd looked at me, as though finding a stranger standing beside a factory on a Saturday afternoon was the most natural thing in the world.

Saturday.

The thought appeared in my head so suddenly that I almost laughed.

It wasn't Saturday.

It was Thursday.

I'd literally come straight from school.

Why had I thought it was Saturday?

I looked back towards the factory entrance.

The building was closed. There were no workers coming or going, no machinery running, and the gates at the far end of the yard were shut. It had that empty feeling industrial places get at weekends.

But I had no reason to think it was Saturday.

I took my phone out of my pocket.

The screen was black.

I pressed the side button.

Nothing happened.

I held it down for several seconds, wondering if the battery had somehow died. I'd had more than sixty per cent left when I'd checked it after school, but the screen refused to light up.

"Seriously?"

I tried again.

Still nothing.

I shoved it back into my pocket.

The whole afternoon was becoming increasingly strange, and for the first time since climbing through the window, I felt a little frightened.

Not properly frightened. More the sort of feeling you get when you wake from a dream and can't immediately remember where you are.

Everything was familiar, but something was terribly wrong.

I turned and hurried back along the side of the factory.

The weeds scratched against my legs as I pushed through them, and a cloud of tiny insects rose from the grass. The window was exactly where I'd left it, still open, its green frame catching the sunlight.

I stood beneath it for a moment.

Then I grabbed the sill, found a foothold in the brickwork and hauled myself up.

It wasn't graceful.

My backpack nearly pulled me backwards, and I scraped my elbow against the frame, but eventually I managed to swing one leg through and roll awkwardly onto the floor inside.

The first thing I noticed was the cold.

The second was the darkness.

Not complete darkness, obviously, but the dull grey light of an overcast afternoon, filtering through filthy windows and settling over dusty furniture.

I sat up.

The room was exactly as I'd left it.

The brown desks. The orange chairs. The filing cabinets. The old cushion on my chair.

And the smell.

Dust, damp plaster and something vaguely metallic.

No flowers.

No summer.

From the main room came a voice.

"I'm telling you, I heard something."

Callum.

I stared at the doorway.

"No, you didn't," someone answered.

"Yeah, I did. Like someone opening a door or something."

"Then go and look."

"You go and look."

There was a pause.

Then another boy said, "What if there's some weird bloke living here?"

"Exactly."

"Let's just go."

I heard footsteps moving across the concrete, followed by someone laughing nervously.

"You're actually scared."

"I'm not scared. This place is just creepy."

A few seconds later, a door slammed somewhere in the distance.

Then silence.

I remained sitting on the floor.

My heart was beating so hard I could feel it in my throat.

They'd been having the same conversation when I climbed out of the window.

Not a similar conversation.

The same one.

I'd been outside for at least ten minutes. Probably longer. I'd walked around the factory, looked at the road, watched the girl with the bicycle and stood there trying to work out why everything looked different.

And yet, in here, almost no time seemed to have passed.

I slowly got to my feet and went to the window.

Outside, the sky was grey again. The weeds were short and sparse, with patches of bare earth between them. The flowers had vanished, and the breeze moving through the grass looked cold.

I reached out and touched the window frame.

Flaky brown paint came away beneath my fingers.

I looked at the paint on my fingertip, then back at the window.

For a moment, I considered climbing out again.

Just to check.

Just to see whether the sun would return, whether the factory would change, whether that girl would still be riding her bicycle towards town.

But my hands were shaking.

I closed the window as carefully as I could, wincing when the hinges creaked, then went back to my desk and sat down.

My notebook was still inside my backpack.

I took it out, opened it to a fresh page and held my pen above the paper.

I had absolutely no idea what to write.

Eventually, I managed three words.

Something happened today.

I stared at them.

Then I crossed them out.

They sounded ridiculous. Everything that happened was technically something.

I tried again.

I think I went somewhere.

That was better.

I looked towards the window once more, trying to picture the sunlight on the grass, the clean factory walls and the girl who'd smiled at me.

I could still remember the warmth against my face.

The smell of flowers.

The sound of her voice.

"Hi."

One tiny word, and somehow it was the clearest thing in my head.

I put my pen down. Whatever had happened outside that window, I knew one thing for certain. I was coming back.

Chapter Two

I barely slept that night. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw the factory as it had been on the other side of the window, with its clean brickwork, freshly painted doors and weeds that smelled of summer.

I kept trying to find a reasonable explanation for what had happened, but the more I thought about it, the less sense any of it made. I'd considered everything from a very vivid hallucination to some sort of elaborate practical joke, although I couldn't imagine who would go to the trouble of restoring an entire factory just to confuse me.

The most obvious explanation was that I'd hit my head when I landed in the weeds, but I didn't have a headache, and apart from a small bruise on my knee, I felt perfectly normal. Well, normal for someone who might have accidentally fallen into a different version of the world.

By Friday morning, I'd decided there was only one sensible thing to do. I had to go back and see whether it happened again.

Unfortunately, before I could do that, I had to survive school, which seemed particularly unfair considering I might have discovered something that would completely change our understanding of the universe.

Maths felt rather pointless under the circumstances.

I spent most of the lesson staring at the clock above the whiteboard, watching the second hand make its painfully slow journey around the face. At one point, Mrs Palmer asked me to explain how I'd arrived at an answer, and I had to admit I hadn't actually arrived at anything. She gave me one of those disappointed looks teachers seem to practise in front of mirrors and told me to concentrate.

At break, I considered asking someone whether they'd noticed anything strange about the weather yesterday. It seemed like a harmless enough question, but I couldn't think of a way to phrase it without sounding completely mad. Did anyone else notice that Thursday briefly turned into the middle of summer? Probably not the best conversation starter.

Instead, I sat on a low wall behind the library, eating a cereal bar and watching a group of younger students kick a football around. My phone worked perfectly, which was another thing I couldn't explain. It had switched on as soon as I'd left the factory yesterday, showing fifty-eight per cent battery as though nothing had happened. I'd even restarted it before bed, just in case there was some strange software problem, but everything seemed fine.

Fridays were mercifully short. We finished at half one, and by the time the final bell rang, I'd already packed my bag and was halfway out of my chair. I hurried through the school gates, ignoring the usual groups gathering to discuss weekend plans, and headed towards the old industrial road.

The weather was much the same as yesterday, perhaps a little brighter, although the wind coming off the sea still had enough bite to make me grateful for my jumper. I walked quickly, almost breaking into a run when the factory chimney appeared above the rooftops.

The building looked exactly as it always had. Broken windows, rusted fencing, weeds struggling through cracks in the concrete. I slipped through my usual gap in the fence and made my way towards the back entrance, feeling strangely nervous. Yesterday, I'd been trying to escape from Callum and his friends.

Today, I was deliberately walking into something I didn't understand, and there was a small but persistent voice in my head suggesting that this might be an incredibly stupid thing to do.

My room was undisturbed. The cushion was still hidden in the filing cabinet, and the notebook I'd left on the desk was exactly where I'd put it. I picked it up and read the sentence I'd written yesterday.

I think I went somewhere.

"Well, let's find out," I whispered.

The window was harder to open this time. I had to put both hands against the frame and push until the hinges finally gave way with that horrible metallic screech. I waited a moment, half expecting the boys to shout from the main room again, but the factory remained silent.

Outside, the weeds moved gently in the cool breeze. Nothing looked unusual. I climbed onto the sill, turned around and lowered myself as far as I could before dropping into the grass.

The warmth hit me immediately.

It was almost exactly as I remembered. The same heavy summer air, the same smell of flowers and dry earth, the same brilliant sunlight spilling across the weeds.

I stood up and looked towards the sky, where not a single cloud interrupted the blue. A bee was working its way around a cluster of purple flowers beside my foot, and somewhere nearby, a bird was making a repetitive noise that sounded almost mechanical. Behind me, the factory wall was clean again, its window frames painted green.

I laughed.

Not because anything was particularly funny, but because I couldn't think of another way to react. I'd actually done it. Whatever it was.

I checked my phone. Dead again. I pressed the button twice, then gave up and put it away. There was something reassuring about that, strangely enough. At least one part of yesterday's experience had repeated itself.

I looked down at my watch, an ordinary little analogue one Mum had given me for my birthday, and noticed it was still ticking. Just after two. I hadn't thought to check the time yesterday, and now I wished I had.

I made my way towards the corner of the building, careful not to stumble over the same rusty pipe. The factory yard was clean, the sign above the entrance was back, and traffic moved along the road beyond the

gates. Everything looked exactly as it had yesterday. Even the red car parked across the road seemed familiar, although I couldn't be certain I'd seen it before.

Then the side door opened.

The girl came out with her bicycle.

I stopped so abruptly that I nearly tripped.

She was wearing the same dress. The same little silver bracelet caught the sunlight on her wrist, and she had the same bag hanging from one hand. She pushed her bicycle across the yard, adjusted something on the handlebars and headed towards the road.

For a moment, I thought she might look over and recognise me. After all, we'd spoken yesterday. Only briefly, admittedly, but surely she'd remember the strange girl standing beside the factory and staring at her like an idiot.

Except she didn't look towards me at all.

I was standing further back than yesterday, partly hidden by the corner of the building, and she simply continued towards the road. At the same place where she'd stopped before, she swung one leg over the bicycle, briefly flashing her knickers and then pushed off and began pedalling towards town.

I watched until she disappeared.

Then I looked at the factory door.

The same dress. The same bicycle. The same movements. Even the way she'd adjusted the handlebars seemed familiar.

A thought began forming in my head, so ridiculous that I almost dismissed it immediately.

What if yesterday hadn't been yesterday for her?

What if, somehow, I'd come back to the same afternoon?

I stood there for another minute, trying to remember everything I'd seen during my first visit. The sunshine, the traffic, the music drifting from somewhere beyond the road. The girl had emerged from the factory at roughly the same point in my exploration, and she'd ridden away in exactly the same direction. Of course, none of that proved anything. People followed routines. She might work here, or have some reason to visit the building every afternoon. Wearing the same dress two days in a row wasn't exactly impossible.

But the factory itself was a much bigger problem. Yesterday, it had looked freshly maintained. Today, it

looked exactly the same. And between those two visits, it had been abandoned for decades.

I turned and hurried back towards the window.

Climbing in was becoming easier, although I still managed to scrape my arm against the sill. The moment I rolled onto the floor, the heat disappeared, replaced by the familiar damp chill of the old office. I stood up, brushing dust from my jeans, and looked at the window. Outside, the weeds were short again, and the sky had returned to its ordinary May grey.

I grabbed my backpack from the desk, then stopped.

What if I went back immediately?

Would the girl still be riding towards town, or would she be back inside the factory?

There was only one way to find out.

I climbed onto the windowsill again, this time with my backpack over both shoulders, and lowered myself through the opening. The sunlight returned before my feet even touched the ground, and I landed in the warm weeds with a little more confidence than before. I hurried around the corner, keeping my eyes fixed on the side entrance.

The door opened.

The girl came out.

Same dress. Same bicycle. Same bag.

She adjusted something on the handlebars, then walked towards the road.

I stared.

"No way."

She reached the same spot, swung her leg over the bicycle and rode away.

I remained perfectly still, watching her disappear around the bend for the second time in less than ten minutes.

That wasn't a routine. It wasn't a coincidence.

It was a repeat.

I suddenly wanted to know what would happen if I stopped her. If I stood in front of the bicycle, would she remember me from the previous visit? Would she recognise that she'd already ridden down that road twice? Or would she look at me as though we'd never met?

I almost ran after her, but something held me back. There were too many things I didn't understand, and I didn't particularly fancy explaining any of them to a complete stranger.

Besides, I wasn't even certain what year I was in. The cars looked old, the factory looked newer, and everything had the slightly faded appearance of photographs from my parents' childhoods. But that could mean anything from the eighties to the early two thousands, as far as I knew.

I returned to the window and climbed inside.

Back in the office, I sat down at my desk and pulled out my journal. It was the notebook I used for observations, ideas and anything else that didn't fit neatly into a poem or story. Most of its pages were filled with scraps of dialogue and descriptions of people I'd seen around town, but today I turned to a completely blank page and wrote the date.

Friday, 22 May 2026.

Underneath, I wrote:

The window.

I stared at the words for a moment, then began listing everything I could remember. The sudden change in

temperature, the flowers, the factory's appearance, the dead phone, the girl with the bicycle. I described her clothes, the silver bracelet and the way she'd stopped at the road before riding towards town. I almost added that I had been able to see her knickers for a brief moment, then decided that wasn't scientifically interesting and didn't. Then I wrote down what had happened when I'd returned for the second time.

I drew a line across the page.

Every time I go out, everything starts again.

That seemed to be the most important part. It wasn't simply that the window led somewhere strange. It led somewhere that reset itself whenever I returned.

I tapped my pen against the paper, considering the possibilities. If this was some sort of time travel, then the factory might still be operating on the other side because I was visiting it before it closed. That would explain the old cars and the different signage. It would also explain why the girl hadn't recognised me. From her perspective, we'd never met.

But why summer? And why the same afternoon?

I wrote another question.

Does time pass here while I'm there?

Yesterday, the boys had barely moved on in their conversation while I'd been outside for at least ten minutes. Today, I hadn't checked. I looked at my watch, which now showed just after half two, and realised it wasn't going to help much unless I measured things properly. I'd need to make a note of the exact time before going through, then compare it when I returned. Perhaps I could even bring a stopwatch.

I paused.

My phone.

It had stopped working on the other side, but I hadn't tried taking anything else through deliberately. My backpack had made the journey without any problems, and so had my clothes and watch. Maybe the phone simply couldn't cope with whatever was happening. Or perhaps there was no mobile signal there and it was reacting in some strange way. That didn't explain why it wouldn't switch on, but I was running out of sensible explanations anyway.

I added another line to the page.

Try phone again. Check date. Find out what year it is.

I read through everything I'd written, feeling a mixture of excitement and something much closer to fear. If my observations were correct, I'd discovered a way to visit

another time, and not just any other time. A particular afternoon that seemed to begin again every time I stepped through the window.

I wondered how long I could stay there. Would evening come normally? Would the sun eventually set? Could I spend an entire day there and still return to Friday afternoon? And what would happen if I stayed until the following morning?

That last question made me uncomfortable.

I wasn't ready to find out.

I closed the journal and slipped it back into my backpack. Outside, the clouds had begun to break, allowing a little weak sunshine through the dirty glass. It looked nothing like the sunlight on the other side, but for once I didn't mind.

I had a thousand questions, and absolutely no idea where to start answering them.

But I had a window.

And tomorrow was Saturday.

I smiled to myself, thinking about the girl with the bicycle and the way she'd looked back at me yesterday.

Perhaps next time, I'd actually say something more interesting than hi.

Chapter Three

By the time I got home, I'd managed to convince myself that I was either the luckiest person alive or in urgent need of medical attention. There didn't seem to be much middle ground. I'd spent the walk back trying to think of explanations for the window, occasionally getting distracted by the possibility that I'd actually discovered time travel, then reminding myself that time travel was impossible.

At least, I was fairly sure it was. I wasn't particularly good at physics, but I felt that if people could climb through abandoned factory windows and end up in different decades, someone would probably have mentioned it by now.

Mum was in the kitchen when I came in, standing at the counter with a tea towel over one shoulder and a saucepan in her hand. She was wearing her usual Friday evening clothes, which consisted of leggings, an

oversized T-shirt and the expression of someone who'd decided she'd done enough for the week.

"There you are," she said. "I was beginning to think you'd moved out."

I dropped my backpack beside the stairs and went to the fridge. "Tempting, but I don't think I can afford it."

She laughed and pointed the saucepan at me.

"You can start paying rent whenever you like. I've got a lovely little room upstairs going for a very reasonable price."

I took out the orange juice and poured myself a glass. "Does it come with meals?"

"Occasionally."

"Laundry?"

"Absolutely not."

"I'll think about it."

She put the saucepan down and gave me a quick smile before turning back to the cooker.

Dad arrived home about twenty minutes later, bringing with him a gust of cool air and a carrier bag containing

bread, milk and a packet of chocolate biscuits that Mum immediately accused him of buying for himself.

He worked as a journalist for the local paper, which meant he spent a surprising amount of time driving around the area interviewing people about things I couldn't imagine anyone being interested in. Last week, he'd written a story about a dispute over a village car park. Before that, it had been a charity fundraiser involving a man who planned to walk twenty miles dressed as a giant carrot. Dad insisted local journalism was the backbone of democracy. Mum said it was mostly the backbone of people complaining about parking.

We ate at the kitchen table, which was just large enough for the three of us if nobody spread their elbows too far. Mum had made pasta with some sort of creamy sauce, mushrooms and chicken, and Dad spent the first five minutes trying to convince us that he'd once eaten something very similar in Italy.

"You went to Italy for four days," Mum reminded him. "And you ate pizza for three of them."

Dad nodded thoughtfully. "Which leaves one day unaccounted for."

I laughed, nearly choking on a piece of pasta, and Mum handed me my glass of water with a look that suggested she was reconsidering her choice of husband.

It was nice, sitting there with them. It usually was. We weren't one of those families who spent every evening arguing or barely speaking to each other. Mum and Dad got on well, apart from their ongoing disagreement about whether the dishwasher needed rinsed plates, and they were generally happy to let me get on with my own things.

Sometimes I wondered whether they worried about how much time I spent alone, but if they did, they rarely mentioned it. I think they assumed I was just one of those people who preferred books and notebooks to parties and shopping trips, which wasn't entirely wrong.

It was simply easier to be myself when there wasn't anyone around to notice.

Dad was telling us about a meeting he'd attended that afternoon concerning preparations for the tourist season. Apparently, the council was expecting more visitors than usual once June arrived, and several local businesses were already complaining about parking spaces, public toilets and the state of the seafront.

"You'd think people had never seen a tourist before," he said, winding pasta around his fork. "Every year it's the same. They want visitors to come and spend money, but preferably without bringing cars, making noise or actually being visible."

Mum nodded. "Sounds reasonable to me."

Dad grinned. "One woman suggested they should introduce a permit system for anyone entering the town during summer."

"I'd vote for that," Mum said.

I smiled, but my thoughts had already drifted elsewhere. July. Or August. The word had been sitting in the back of my mind all evening, waiting for an opportunity to interrupt. If the window really led into the past, then it was summer there.

Not just a particularly warm afternoon, but proper summer, with flowers, insects and that thick, golden sunlight that made everything look as though it belonged in a photograph. I wondered whether the town had been busy with tourists then too.

Perhaps the roads I'd seen were full of people visiting the coast. Perhaps the girl with the bicycle had been on her way to meet friends, or go shopping, or spend the afternoon at the beach. I tried to picture what the high

street would have looked like back then, before half the shops became charity shops and places selling mobile phone accessories.

"Freya?"

I looked up.

Mum was watching me from across the table.

"Sorry. What?"

"I asked if you wanted some more."

I looked down at my plate. I'd barely touched the last few mouthfuls. "Oh. No, thanks. I'm full."

Dad leaned back in his chair. "You've been very quiet tonight."

"Have I?"

"A bit," Mum said. "Everything all right at school?"

"Yeah. Fine."

"Anything happened?"

For one ridiculous moment, I considered telling them. I imagined putting down my fork and announcing that I'd discovered a window into another time, somewhere in

an abandoned factory they didn't even know I visited. Dad would probably start asking questions about exactly where it was, Mum would want to know whether the building was safe, and within half an hour I'd be sitting in the back of the car on my way to explain the whole thing to a doctor.

"Just thinking about something I'm writing," I said.

Mum's expression softened. "Another story?"

"Maybe. It's just an idea at the moment."

"What's it about?" Dad asked.

I hesitated. "A girl who finds a way to go somewhere else. Somewhere she isn't supposed to be."

Dad nodded appreciatively. "Sounds interesting. Fantasy?"

"Sort of."

"Does she meet a handsome prince?" Mum asked.

I rolled my eyes. "Why would she meet a prince?"

"Well, I don't know. You haven't told us where she's going."

"Maybe she meets a princess," Dad suggested.

I felt my face warm slightly and reached for my water. "Maybe she doesn't meet anyone."

"That would be a rather short book," Mum said.

"Not necessarily. She could spend the whole time exploring."

Dad considered that. "I'd read it."

"You read instruction manuals for fun," Mum reminded him.

"They're very informative."

I laughed and shook my head. "It's not even a proper story yet. I'm just working things out."

"Well, don't let us interrupt the creative process," Dad said, raising his glass towards me. "To the next great British novelist."

"Please don't."

He raised it higher.

Mum joined him, smiling.

I buried my face in my hands while they both laughed.

After dinner, I helped Mum clear the table and load the dishwasher while Dad went into the living room to find something for us to watch. Friday evenings usually involved a film, although we rarely managed to agree on one without spending half an hour scrolling through streaming services. Dad liked thrillers, Mum preferred comedies, and I generally wanted something that didn't involve people shouting at each other for two hours.

We eventually settled on a film none of us had seen before, which turned out to be so boring that Dad fell asleep halfway through. Mum and I watched the rest mostly because we'd already invested an hour in it and felt we deserved to know how it ended.

By the time I went upstairs, it was nearly eleven. I brushed my teeth, washed my face and changed into my pyjamas, then sat on the edge of my bed looking at my backpack.

My journal was inside, along with the notes I'd made at the factory. I wanted to take it out and read everything again, but I knew I'd only end up lying awake for another three hours thinking about the window.

I had schoolwork to catch up on over the weekend, and Mum had already mentioned that my room was beginning to resemble a recycling centre. Neither of those things seemed particularly important compared

with the possibility of travelling through time, but I suspected my parents would disagree.

I went to the bathroom before getting into bed. I needed a poo, which wasn't exactly how I'd imagined spending my evening after making a potentially world-changing discovery, but apparently my digestive system hadn't received the news.

I sat down and reached automatically towards the pocket of my pyjama bottoms, only to remember I'd left my phone on the bedside table. For a moment, I considered going back to get it, then decided I couldn't be bothered. I'd survived fifteen years without needing constant entertainment on the toilet. Surely I could manage another five minutes.

Without my phone, there was nothing to do except think. And naturally, I thought about the window.

I'd spent most of the afternoon concentrating on what happened outside, but there was something I'd barely considered.

My phone had stopped working both times I'd crossed over. Not just lost its signal, but completely died, as though someone had removed the battery. Yet the moment I returned, it worked normally again. That was strange, because everything else seemed perfectly fine.

My clothes didn't disappear, my backpack came with me, and my watch kept ticking. Even the pen I'd been carrying worked when I returned. So why was the phone different?

I frowned at the bathroom wall and stopped my legs from swinging. I wasn’t on the playground, after all.

Maybe it had something to do with electricity. Or technology. If I really was travelling backwards in time, perhaps the phone couldn't function because the networks it relied on hadn't been invented yet. That didn't explain the dead screen, of course.

A phone should still switch on without a signal. But what if the problem wasn't the network? What if something about crossing through the window affected electronic devices?

Then another thought occurred to me.

I'd never actually tried bringing the phone through while it was switched on and in my hand. Both times, it had been tucked away in my pocket, and I'd only checked it afterwards.

What if the phone was working when I crossed over but stopped at some point later? Or what if it switched itself off during the journey? I could try recording a video as I climbed through, or perhaps use the stopwatch to

measure how much time passed. If it survived, I might even be able to take photographs of the factory and compare them with the ones from my own time.

I was so absorbed in the possibilities that I barely noticed the bathroom door opening.

"Freya?"

I jumped.

"Mum!"

She stopped in the doorway, looking startled. "What?"

"I'm on the toilet!"

"Yes, I can see that."

"Then why are you coming in?"

"Because I thought you were brushing your teeth." She glanced at the sink, then back at me. "And because I need my face cream."

I stared at her.

She reached past me towards the cabinet above the toilet, retrieved a small jar and gave me an amused look. "Honestly, love, it's not as though I've never seen you sitting on a toilet before."

"That doesn't mean I want an audience."

"I'm hardly buying tickets."

"Mum!"

She laughed and backed towards the door. "All right, all right. I'll leave you to it."

"Thank you."

"Don't forget to flush."

I heard her laughing as she walked away.

I sat there for another moment, trying to recover my train of thought. Something about the phone. Recording. Taking photographs. Yes, that was it. I could bring it through deliberately and see exactly what happened.

Perhaps I could even leave it recording while I climbed through the window, although the thought of watching a video of myself falling into a patch of weeds wasn't particularly appealing.

Eventually, I finished, washed my hands and went back to my bedroom. The house had gone quiet, apart from the faint sound of the television downstairs. Dad had probably woken up and decided to watch the news

before bed. I switched off the main light and climbed beneath the duvet, pulling it up around my shoulders. The window beside my bed was slightly open, allowing a cool breeze to move the curtains.

I picked up my phone.

The screen lit immediately, showing the time and a collection of notifications I had absolutely no interest in reading. I opened the camera and pointed it towards the ceiling. Everything worked perfectly. I tried the stopwatch too, watching the numbers count upwards for a few seconds before stopping it.

Tomorrow, I'd take it through the window while it was running. I'd keep it in my hand so I could see exactly when it stopped working, assuming it stopped at all. I'd also take my journal and write down everything I noticed.

If I was going to investigate this properly, I needed to stop behaving like someone who'd wandered into a strange dream and start treating it like an experiment.

I put the phone on my bedside table and rolled onto my side.

Outside, a car passed along the street, its headlights briefly moving across the ceiling. Somewhere in the

house, a floorboard creaked. Everything was ordinary, familiar and exactly where it was supposed to be.

And yet, only a short walk away, there was a window that opened onto a summer afternoon that apparently never ended.

I thought about the girl with the bicycle again. Her floral dress, the silver bracelet, the way she'd looked over her shoulder and smiled at me. She was probably just an ordinary girl going about an ordinary Saturday, completely unaware that someone from another time had been watching her.

I wondered what her name was.

Then I wondered whether she'd be there tomorrow.

If my theory was right, she would be. She'd come out of the factory at exactly the same moment, push her bicycle towards the road and ride away without knowing she'd already done it several times.

I closed my eyes.

Tomorrow, I was going to find out what happened to my phone.

And perhaps, if I was feeling brave enough, I'd find out her name too.

Chapter Four

I woke up at six seventeen, which was completely ridiculous for a Saturday. Normally, getting me out of bed before nine required either a very good reason or Mum threatening to open the curtains, but apparently discovering a possible doorway into the past was enough to turn me into a morning person.

I'd gone to sleep thinking about the factory and woken up doing exactly the same thing. For a few seconds, I lay there staring at the ceiling, wondering whether I should try to get another hour of sleep. Then I remembered the sunshine, the smell of flowers and the girl with the bicycle, and suddenly staying in bed seemed like a terrible waste of time.

The house was quiet. Mum and Dad were still asleep, and judging by the lack of movement downstairs, neither of them had any intention of getting up soon. I pulled on my jeans and a thick jumper, then stood by

the bedroom window for a moment, looking out at the street. The sky was a pale, washed-out grey, and the pavement was still damp from overnight rain. A blackbird was hopping around the neighbour's front garden, occasionally stopping to inspect something in the grass. It didn't look particularly inviting outside, but I wasn't planning to spend much time in May anyway.

I went downstairs as quietly as I could and put the kettle on. Breakfast was two slices of toast with butter and strawberry jam, accompanied by a mug of tea that was far too hot to drink properly.

I sat at the kitchen table, blowing across the surface of the tea while mentally going through everything I wanted to test.

The phone was the most important thing, but I also wanted to work out how much time passed at home while I was away. I'd brought my watch through before, and it had continued working, so perhaps I could use that. I could spend exactly an hour on the other side and compare it with the time on the kitchen clock when I got back. Although that would only work if I remembered what time I'd left, which was the sort of thing I had an unfortunate habit of forgetting when something interesting happened.

I finished my toast and rinsed the plate, then found a piece of paper and wrote a note for Mum and Dad.

Gone out to do some writing somewhere quiet. Got my phone. Back later. Love, Freya x

I considered adding that I was perfectly safe, but decided that might have the opposite effect. Mum had a habit of becoming suspicious whenever I went out of my way to reassure her about something. Instead, I left the note on the kitchen table, weighed down with the sugar bowl, and went upstairs to collect my things.

My backpack contained my journal, two pens, a bottle of water and a packet of biscuits I'd taken from the cupboard. I also added a small packet of tissues, because the factory was dusty and I'd learned the hard way that sneezing into your sleeve wasn't particularly pleasant.

My phone was fully charged, and before leaving, I opened the stopwatch and tested it again. The numbers counted upwards perfectly. I reset it to zero, switched the screen off and slipped the phone into my pocket.

Outside, the air was colder than I'd expected. I pulled my sleeves over my hands and walked briskly towards the industrial road, passing a few houses where the curtains were still drawn. The town had that peaceful

early-morning feeling it only seemed to have at weekends, when the shops hadn't opened and most people were still enjoying the luxury of not having anywhere to be.

A delivery van rattled past me near the high street, and an elderly man walking a small white dog gave me a polite nod. Otherwise, I barely saw anyone.

The factory looked particularly miserable in the morning light. The brickwork was dark with damp, and a puddle had formed beside the broken section of fence. I slipped through the gap and made my way across the yard, avoiding the larger patches of broken glass.

Somewhere inside, water was dripping steadily onto metal, making a hollow tapping sound that echoed through the empty building. I wondered whether the factory had sounded like this when it was still working, or whether the silence had made every little noise seem louder.

I reached my room and dropped my backpack onto the desk. The window was still closed, exactly as I'd left it yesterday, and for a moment I simply stood looking at it. There was something strange about knowing that an ordinary-looking piece of glass and metal might be the most extraordinary thing I'd ever encounter.

It wasn't glowing or humming. There were no strange symbols carved into the frame, no swirling lights or dramatic music. It was just an old window with peeling paint and a handle that needed a good shove.

I took out my journal and wrote down the date and time.

Saturday, 23 May 2026. 7:14 a.m.

Underneath, I added:

Experiment 1: Phone.

I put the journal back into my backpack, then took out my phone and opened the stopwatch. I watched it count for a few seconds before resetting it once more. This time, I left the screen on and held the phone firmly in my right hand.

"Right," I whispered. "Here goes."

Opening the window was becoming almost routine. I pushed against the frame until the hinges complained, then climbed onto the sill and turned around. The cool morning air brushed against my face as I lowered myself through the opening.

I kept my right hand raised, holding the phone where I could see it, while my left hand gripped the frame.

The screen was still working.

I pressed the start button on the stopwatch.

One second.

Two.

Three.

I lowered myself another few inches.

Then everything changed.

The cold air vanished, replaced by a wave of warmth so sudden that I gasped. Sunlight flooded across my arm, and the smell of damp earth gave way to flowers and dry grass. I felt the heat against my face before my feet had even touched the ground, as though I'd stepped through an invisible curtain separating two completely different seasons.

At the same moment, my phone went black.

Not gradually. There was no warning, no flicker and no little spinning symbol to suggest it was shutting down. One moment, the stopwatch was counting. The next, the screen was completely dead.

I landed in the weeds and immediately looked at it.

"Well, that's annoying."

I pressed the side button.

Nothing.

I held it down.

Still nothing.

I tried the combination of buttons that was supposed to force a restart, but the phone remained lifeless. It didn't even vibrate. I turned it over in my hand, checking for damage, although I couldn't imagine what might have happened to it during the two seconds it had taken to cross the window.

I slipped it into my pocket and looked around.

The contrast was even more dramatic than it had been on my previous visits. I'd left behind a cold, grey May morning, and now I was standing in the middle of a glorious summer afternoon.

The sky was an almost impossibly deep blue, and the sunlight made the tops of the weeds glow. Insects buzzed around the flowers, and somewhere beyond the factory, I could hear the steady movement of traffic along the road.

I was already far too warm.

My thick jumper, which had seemed perfectly sensible a few minutes earlier, now felt like something designed for an expedition to the Arctic.

I pulled the sleeves up, then tugged at the collar to let some air in. Underneath, I was only wearing a thin vest, and although there wasn't anything particularly wrong with taking the jumper off, I didn't feel comfortable wandering around in just that.

I wasn't exactly dressed for a summer afternoon, but I'd rather be hot than spend the whole time wondering whether people were staring at me.

I moved into the shade beside the factory wall and took a long drink from my water bottle. Even there, the air was warm, and I could feel sweat beginning to gather beneath my hair. It was strange to think that only a few seconds earlier, I'd been wishing I'd brought a jacket.

I checked my watch. It was still ticking, just as it had before. That was interesting. Whatever was happening to the phone didn't seem to affect ordinary mechanical things. I made a mental note to look into that later, although I wasn't entirely sure where to begin. Searching the internet for why does my phone stop

working when I travel through time probably wouldn't produce anything useful.

I took out my journal and wrote down what had happened.

Phone working before crossing. Screen went black at the exact moment the temperature changed. Won't restart. Watch still working.

I underlined exact moment twice.

Then I looked towards the corner of the building.

If everything was repeating, the girl should be coming out of the factory soon. I hadn't timed it precisely on my previous visits, but it had only been a few minutes between my arrival and seeing her. I closed the journal, slipped it into my backpack and walked towards the road, keeping close to the wall.

The yard was exactly as I remembered. Clean concrete, freshly painted doors, the large sign above the main entrance. A few cars were parked near the front of the building, and the red hatchback I'd noticed yesterday was still across the road. Or perhaps it was there again. I was beginning to realise that those were two very different things.

I stopped just before the corner, where I could see the side entrance without being particularly visible myself.

A minute passed.

Then another.

I began wondering whether I'd got the timing wrong, or whether my presence somehow affected when things happened. Perhaps the girl only came out when I walked towards the road. That would be a strange rule, but I wasn't exactly in a position to complain about strange rules.

Then the door opened.

There she was.

Same floral dress. Same bicycle. Same little bag in her hand.

She stepped into the sunlight, adjusted something on the handlebars and began walking towards the road. I watched her carefully, trying to remember every movement from my previous visits. She pushed the bicycle with her right hand, occasionally glancing down at the front wheel. Her hair moved gently in the breeze, and the silver bracelet around her wrist caught the light when she lifted her hand to brush a strand away from her face.

She didn't see me.

I was too far back, partly hidden by the building, and she continued towards the road without looking in my direction. At the same place as before, she swung one leg over the bicycle, pushed off and began pedalling towards town.

I watched until she disappeared around the bend.

It was exactly the same.

I felt a little thrill of excitement, followed almost immediately by something I couldn't quite identify. There was something unsettling about watching another person repeat the same actions without knowing they were doing it. She looked so alive, so completely absorbed in her own afternoon, and yet I'd now watched her leave that factory four times. To her, I supposed, it had only happened once.

I wondered what would happen if I followed her.

Not in a creepy way, obviously. I just wanted to know where she was going. Perhaps she lived nearby, or worked at the factory, or had been visiting someone.

The building was closed, as far as I could tell, but she'd come out of it every single time. Maybe she was the

daughter of someone who worked there. Maybe she'd been helping with something inside.

I looked towards the road, considering it.

Then I glanced back at the window.

I wasn't quite ready to wander too far from it. Not yet. There was still something reassuring about knowing I could climb back through and return to my own time whenever I wanted. I had no idea whether the window would stay open forever, or whether something might happen if I went too far away. For all I knew, I could walk into town and discover that the entire place was different, or that the window had vanished when I returned.

That thought was enough to make me stay where I was.

Instead, I found a patch of grass in the shade beside the factory and sat down, resting my back against the warm brickwork. The ground was dry, and although the weeds were a little scratchy, it was considerably more pleasant than sitting in the dusty office on the other side. I took out my journal and opened it across my knees.

Experiment 2: Repetition.

I wrote down everything I'd seen, starting with the girl leaving the factory. I described the dress, the bicycle,

the bag and the way she'd adjusted the handlebars before walking towards the road. Then I added a note about the red car, the traffic and the weather. I wanted to compare the details on future visits, just to make sure nothing was changing.

I paused, chewing the end of my pen.

There was one thing I still hadn't established.

The date.

I knew it was summer, and I was becoming increasingly certain that I'd travelled into the past, but I didn't know exactly when. The cars suggested the nineties, perhaps, although that was mostly based on films and photographs. The factory looked like it belonged in that decade too, with its bright signage and slightly old-fashioned appearance.

I could ask someone.

The thought was so obvious that I almost laughed. There were people here. Actual people. I could simply walk up to someone and ask what year it was.

Of course, that would make me look completely mad.

I imagined approaching the girl with the bicycle and saying, Hi, sorry to bother you, but could you tell me what year we're in?

She'd probably ride away as quickly as possible.

Perhaps I could find a newspaper instead. Or a shop with a calendar on the wall. Something that would tell me the date without requiring me to explain why I didn't already know it.

I added another note.

Find out the exact date. Newspaper? Calendar?

A butterfly landed on a flower beside my knee. I watched it open and close its wings, the sunlight catching the delicate patterns. It was such a small, ordinary thing, but I found myself smiling. Everything here seemed brighter somehow. Not just the colours, but the sounds and smells too. The world felt fuller, as though someone had turned up all the settings.

I wondered whether that was simply because it was summer.

Perhaps I'd forgotten how lovely summer could be after months of grey skies and cold mornings. Or perhaps the past really did feel different. Maybe there was less noise, less pollution, fewer people staring at phones. I

knew that was probably a romantic way of looking at it, but sitting there in the sunshine, it was difficult not to feel that I'd stumbled into somewhere better.

I took another sip of water and leaned my head back against the wall.

There was no rush.

That was the strangest part of all. Back home, it was barely half seven on a Saturday morning. Mum and Dad were probably still asleep, and the whole day was waiting for me. Here, it was the middle of a warm summer afternoon, and I could sit in the grass for as long as I liked.

Well, perhaps not forever.

I still needed to find out exactly how time worked between the two places. Yesterday, I'd spent several minutes outside, but hardly any time seemed to pass inside the factory. If that was always true, I might be able to spend hours here without anyone at home noticing.

The possibilities made my head spin.

I could explore the town, find out what it looked like years ago, visit shops that no longer existed and perhaps even see people who were much younger than they

were now. I could learn things nobody else knew, witness events before they happened, and maybe find out what had happened to the factory before it closed.

And I could meet the girl with the bicycle.

I looked towards the road, although she'd been gone for several minutes now.

There was something about her I couldn't quite get out of my head. Perhaps it was simply because she was the first person I'd seen here, or because she'd smiled at me on that first afternoon. I didn't know anything about her, not even her name, but somehow she already felt like part of the mystery.

I wondered whether she'd be friendly if I spoke to her properly.

Then I wondered what I'd say.

Hi, I'm Freya. I've watched you ride your bicycle down this road four times, and I think I'm from the future.

Probably not.

I laughed quietly to myself and looked back at my journal.

For now, I had enough to think about without adding another person to the equation. I needed to understand the window first. The date, the time difference, the strange effect on my phone. There were so many questions, and I was only beginning to work out how to ask them.

I turned to a fresh page and wrote a heading.

Things to find out.

Then I began making a list.

I was halfway through when a warm breeze moved through the weeds, carrying the smell of flowers and the distant sound of music from somewhere along the road. I stopped writing and looked up, letting the sunlight fall across my face.

Back home, it was a cold May morning.

Here, summer was already waiting.

And for the first time in ages, I wasn't particularly interested in going home.

Chapter Five

I must have spent another twenty minutes sitting beside the factory, although it was difficult to tell without constantly checking my watch. I'd filled two pages of my journal with observations, questions and increasingly ridiculous theories, none of which brought me any closer to understanding what was happening.

The most sensible explanation still seemed to be time travel, which was worrying because time travel was supposed to be the least sensible explanation for anything. Eventually, I decided that if I wanted answers, I'd have to stop sitting in the grass and actually go looking for them.

The first thing I needed was a date. Not an approximate year based on the shape of the cars or the terrible colours someone had chosen for the factory doors, but an actual date I could write down and be reasonably certain of. I'd considered asking someone, but there was

something embarrassing about admitting I didn't know what year it was. People would probably assume I was taking drugs, or had escaped from somewhere. A newspaper seemed like a much better option. Newspapers had dates printed on them, and unlike people, they didn't ask awkward questions.

I got up, brushed the grass from my jeans and put my journal away. My jumper was becoming unbearable, particularly around the neck, and I briefly considered leaving it beneath the window until I was ready to go home. Unfortunately, I didn't know whether things I'd left behind would still be there when I returned, and I wasn't prepared to sacrifice a perfectly good jumper for the sake of science. I pulled the sleeves up again and headed towards the road.

Walking away from the factory felt different from exploring its grounds. The window was still there, somewhere behind the building, but I couldn't see it any more, and every step towards town made me slightly more aware that I was somewhere I didn't belong. It was a strange feeling, because the road itself was familiar. I'd walked along it dozens of times, usually with my headphones on, and I knew exactly where it led.

Yet the hedges were taller, the road markings looked fresher, and the houses beyond the bend had little

details I didn't recognise. One had a wooden fence where I remembered a brick wall, and another had a large tree in its front garden that had disappeared long before I was old enough to remember it.

There were more cars than I was used to seeing on this road, and almost all of them looked old. Properly old, not just the sort of car Dad described as old because it didn't have a touchscreen. A dark green estate passed me with a dog looking out of the back window, followed by a little blue car with square headlights and a registration plate that looked completely different from the ones I was used to.

I watched them go, trying to remember when the modern number plates had been introduced. Dad had explained it once, during one of his occasional lectures about things nobody had asked him to explain, but I hadn't paid much attention.

I passed a telephone box that definitely wasn't there in 2026. It stood beside a low brick wall, bright red and slightly battered, with a little white sign above the door. I'd seen plenty of them before, of course, mostly converted into miniature libraries or decorative features for tourists, but this one was still a telephone box. There was an actual telephone inside, attached to the wall with a thick cord, and a small notice explaining how much calls cost. I stopped to look through the glass,

fascinated by something that would have seemed completely ordinary to my parents.

A woman walking past gave me a curious glance. I stepped away from the telephone box and continued towards town, suddenly conscious of my clothes. My jeans were ordinary enough, but my trainers were probably a little too modern, and my thick jumper looked completely ridiculous in the heat. Nobody seemed particularly interested, though.

People walked past carrying shopping bags, talking to one another, or simply enjoying the sunshine. A man in shorts and a football shirt was pushing a pram, while two girls a little younger than me hurried along the opposite pavement, laughing about something. Neither of them had a phone in her hand. That was one of the first things I noticed once I started paying attention. People were looking around, talking, reading things or just walking. It was strange how noticeable the absence of something could be.

The high street appeared around the next corner, and I stopped.

I knew it immediately, but it looked as though someone had taken the town I grew up in and rearranged all the little details. The buildings were mostly the same, with their old brick fronts and narrow upper windows, but

the shops were different. The charity shop near the corner was a travel agency, its window filled with brightly coloured posters advertising holidays in Spain and Greece. The little café Mum liked had become a shop selling televisions and video recorders, and the place where I usually bought stationery was a newsagent with racks of magazines displayed outside.

There were hanging baskets full of flowers along the pavement, and a banner stretched between two buildings advertising a summer event I didn't recognise.

I stood there for a while, taking it all in. It was like walking through a film set, except nobody was acting. People were carrying on with their lives, completely unaware that anything about their town was unusual. A bus rumbled past, its engine making considerably more noise than the ones I was used to, and somewhere nearby, a car radio was playing music I vaguely recognised from one of Mum's playlists.

I had to remind myself not to stare at everything. I was already attracting enough attention by standing in the middle of the pavement wearing a winter jumper.

The newsagent was exactly what I needed. Outside, beneath a striped awning, stood a metal rack filled with newspapers. I approached it slowly, feeling a little nervous, although I couldn't have explained why.

Perhaps because finding a date would make everything real in a way that sunshine and old cars hadn't. Until now, there was still a tiny part of me insisting that I was misunderstanding something, that the factory had somehow been restored overnight and everyone had decided to dress as though it were thirty years ago. A newspaper would make that explanation considerably harder to maintain.

I looked down at the first one.

The date was printed in small letters beneath the title.

Saturday, 16 August 1997.

I read it twice.

Then a third time.

1997.

I had travelled twenty-nine years into the past.

I stood staring at the newspaper, feeling something cold move through my stomach despite the heat. I'd suspected the nineties, but seeing the actual year printed there was completely different. It wasn't a vague possibility any more. It was a date. A real one. A Saturday afternoon in August 1997, when I hadn't even been born and my parents were still teenagers.

I looked at the other newspapers, just to make sure. They all carried the same date. Some had photographs of politicians I vaguely recognised from history lessons, while others were filled with stories about celebrities, football and the weather. There were advertisements for things I'd never heard of and prices that looked ridiculously cheap. I picked up one of the papers and turned it over, half expecting to discover a hidden camera or some sort of explanation printed on the back.

"Looking for something, love?"

I jumped.

An older man was standing in the doorway of the newsagent, wearing a short-sleeved shirt and holding a mug of tea. He had a friendly face and a pair of glasses hanging from a cord around his neck.

"Oh. Sorry. Just looking."

"Anything in particular?"

I glanced at the newspaper in my hands. "No. I was just checking the date."

He looked amused. "Saturday, last time I checked."

"Right. Yeah."

"Unless I've missed Sunday somehow."

I smiled awkwardly and put the paper back. "Thanks."

He nodded and disappeared into the shop, apparently satisfied that I wasn't planning to steal anything. I stood there for another moment, looking at the newspapers, then stepped away from the rack.

Saturday, 16 August 1997.

I repeated the date silently as I walked along the high street. It seemed important to remember it exactly, even though I'd already written down enough observations to fill several pages. I wondered what had happened on that day, whether anything important had taken place, whether there were events I might accidentally witness.

I knew a little about the nineties from Mum and Dad, mostly things they'd told me about music, school and how apparently wonderful everything had been before the internet ruined it. But 1997 itself meant very little to me. I couldn't have named the prime minister without thinking about it, and I had absolutely no idea what people did for entertainment when they couldn't spend half their lives scrolling through videos.

I passed a shop selling CDs and cassette tapes, its window covered in posters of bands I recognised from old photographs. There was a small crowd of teenagers

outside, most of them wearing baggy jeans and T-shirts, and I slowed down to listen to their conversation. They were discussing a concert, arguing about which band was better, and one of the boys was trying to convince the others that he'd met someone famous at a festival.

It was such an ordinary conversation that I almost laughed. I'd expected the past to feel different, somehow, but teenagers were apparently teenagers regardless of the century.

A little further along, I found a bench beneath a tree and sat down. My feet were beginning to ache, and I was desperately warm. I pulled my jumper away from my neck again and wished I'd brought something lighter. Across the road, a woman was standing outside a bakery, talking to someone through the open door. A little boy was eating an ice cream beside her, most of which seemed to be melting down his hand. Somewhere nearby, a church bell began to ring, and I counted the strikes without really meaning to.

Three.

It was three o'clock.

I checked my watch. It showed almost exactly the same time.

That was interesting. My watch had continued running normally since I'd crossed through the window, and now it seemed to agree with the town clock. Perhaps the two times were connected somehow, or perhaps I'd simply arrived at a convenient hour. I made a mental note to compare them properly when I returned home.

I took out my journal and wrote the date in large letters across a fresh page.

Saturday, 16 August 1997.

Underneath, I added:

Confirmed by newspapers. Town looks different but recognisable. Factory still operating, or at least maintained. People appear normal. No obvious sign that anything is wrong.

I paused, then added:

I am twenty-nine years in the past.

I stared at that sentence for a long time.

It was the sort of thing people wrote in science fiction novels, usually shortly before discovering that they'd accidentally changed history or become their own grandparents. I wondered whether that was possible. Could I change things here? If I moved something,

would it still be moved when I came back? If I told someone about the future, would they remember it? And if the day reset every time I returned, did any of those things actually matter?

The thought was unsettling. Everyone around me was living an ordinary Saturday, making plans, buying groceries and meeting friends, but if my theory was right, the whole afternoon would simply begin again the next time I climbed through the window. Whatever happened here might vanish as though it had never existed.

I looked up from my journal and watched the people passing.

For the first time, I wondered whether they were real.

Not real in the sense that they were imaginary. They certainly seemed real enough. But if the day kept repeating, what happened to them when I left? Did they continue living their lives somewhere, or did everything simply stop until I returned? I didn't like either possibility very much, so I decided not to think about it for now.

Instead, I closed the journal and looked towards the road leading back to the factory.

I should probably go home soon. Mum and Dad would be getting up, and although I'd left a note, I didn't want them worrying if I disappeared for hours. Then again, I had no idea how much time had passed in 2026. Perhaps I'd only been gone a few minutes. Perhaps the entire morning had slipped away. That was another thing I needed to test.

I stood and stretched, feeling the heat against my face.

As I turned towards the factory, something caught my eye.

A bicycle.

It was leaning against the wall outside a small shop on the opposite side of the street, its curved handlebars and front basket looking strangely familiar. I stopped walking and stared at it.

Surely not.

There must have been hundreds of bicycles like that in 1997. It wasn't exactly a rare design. But the little scratch on the front mudguard looked familiar, and there was a faded ribbon tied around one of the handlebars.

I looked towards the shop.

Through the window, I could see shelves of books and a display of postcards. A handwritten sign advertised second-hand paperbacks, and the door stood open to let in the summer air.

Then she appeared.

The girl from the factory.

She stepped out carrying a small paper bag, her floral dress moving around her knees as she turned to say something to someone inside. She was laughing, and for a moment I could hear the sound of it above the traffic. Then she looked towards the road, and her eyes met mine.

I froze.

She smiled.

Not the polite little smile she'd given me outside the factory, but something warmer, as though she found it amusing to see me standing there looking so surprised.

"All right?" she called.

I glanced behind me, stupidly wondering whether she was talking to someone else.

There was nobody there.

"Yeah," I called back. "You?"

"Can't complain."

She stepped towards her bicycle, then paused, looking at me with open curiosity.

"You're not from round here, are you?"

I felt my stomach tighten.

"Sort of."

She laughed. "Sort of?"

"I mean, I live here. Just not..." I stopped before I could finish that sentence in the worst possible way. "Not this part of town."

She nodded slowly, although I could tell she wasn't entirely convinced. "Right."

There was a brief silence.

I should have said something. Anything. I could have asked about the shop, or the weather, or where she was going. Instead, I stood there with my journal in one hand and my backpack hanging awkwardly from one shoulder, trying not to look like someone who'd just travelled twenty-nine years into the past.

She tilted her head slightly.

"You're a bit strange, aren't you?"

I stared at her.

Then, to my surprise, I laughed.

"Probably."

She grinned.

"Good. Normal people are boring."

I felt myself smiling back, and for a moment I forgot about the window, the factory and the fact that I wasn't supposed to exist for another thirteen years.

She shifted the paper bag into her bicycle basket and rested one hand on the handlebars.

"I'm Elsie, by the way."

I looked at her.

Elsie.

Of course she had a name. It was such an obvious thing, but somehow hearing it made her seem more real than anything else I'd encountered that afternoon.

"Freya," I said.

"Nice to meet you, Freya."

She said my name easily, as though it belonged here.

I wasn't sure why that mattered so much, but it did.

"Nice to meet you too."

She smiled again, then glanced towards the road.

"Well, I'd better get going. Mum'll have my head if I'm late."

"Oh. Right."

"See you around, maybe?"

I nodded.

"Yeah. Maybe."

She swung her leg over the bicycle, pushed off and began pedalling away. After a few metres, she looked back and lifted one hand in a little wave.

I waved back.

Then she disappeared around the corner.

I stood there for a moment, feeling oddly pleased with myself. I'd actually spoken to her. Properly, this time. I knew her name, and she knew mine, and for a few

minutes, I'd managed to have a completely normal conversation with someone who lived decades before I was born.

It was ridiculous.

It was wonderful.

And it was probably the most interesting thing that had ever happened to me.

I started walking back towards the factory, smiling to myself.

Then, halfway along the road, a thought occurred to me.

The next time I came through the window, Elsie wouldn't remember any of it.

Not my name.

Not our conversation.

Not even that she'd met me.

I stopped walking.

For some reason, that bothered me more than it should have.

I looked back towards town, where she'd disappeared, and wondered whether there was any way to change that.

Perhaps if I stayed longer, she'd remember.

Perhaps the day only reset because I kept leaving.

I didn't know.

But as I continued towards the factory, I found myself thinking less about the newspaper date and more about the way Elsie had smiled when she'd said my name.

And I knew, with a certainty that surprised me, that I wanted to hear her say it again.

Chapter Six

I walked back towards the factory with a stupid smile on my face, which was embarrassing considering nobody was there to see it. Every few minutes, I caught myself replaying the conversation with Elsie, trying to remember exactly what she'd said and how she'd said it.

It hadn't even been a particularly interesting conversation. We'd exchanged names, established that I was probably strange, and then she'd gone home. Hardly the beginning of an epic romance. Still, there was something about the way she'd spoken to me that I couldn't quite get over.

She'd been so easy about it, as though talking to a complete stranger was something she did every day. Perhaps it was. Perhaps I was just another person she'd met on an ordinary Saturday afternoon, and by the time she got home, she'd have forgotten all about me.

That thought made me feel slightly ridiculous. I'd known her for less than five minutes, and I was already worrying about whether she'd remember me. Besides, I had rather more important things to think about, such as the fact that I was currently walking through a town in 1997 when I was supposed to be at home in 2026.

I tried to concentrate on the practical side of things instead. I'd confirmed the date, established that my phone wouldn't work here, and discovered that the town was still recognisable despite being nearly thirty years younger. That was a fairly productive morning, considering I'd only set out to test a stopwatch.

The road became quieter as I left the high street behind. The houses grew further apart, and the familiar smell of the sea returned, mixing with warm grass and the occasional whiff of petrol from passing cars. I stopped beside the red telephone box again, wondering whether I should try making a call. Not that I knew anyone's telephone number from 1997, obviously.

Mum and Dad would have been teenagers, living in completely different places, and I wasn't even sure whether either of them had lived in this town back then. The idea of calling one of them was strangely tempting, though. I imagined hearing Mum's voice at sixteen, perhaps answering the telephone in her parents' house, completely unaware that the person on the other end

was her future daughter. I wondered what she'd sound like, whether she'd have the same laugh, and whether she'd believe me if I told her who I was.

Probably not.

I continued walking.

By the time the factory came into view, the heat had become almost unbearable. My jumper was sticking to my back, and I'd drunk most of my water. I considered taking it off again, but the thought of walking along the road in my thin vest made me uncomfortable, particularly when I was already attracting enough attention by looking as though I'd dressed for November.

I promised myself that next time I'd wear something more suitable. Something light, perhaps a T-shirt and shorts, although I'd need to remember that it was still May on the other side. Maybe I could keep a change of clothes in my backpack. That seemed sensible.

I slipped around the side of the factory and made my way through the weeds towards the window. It was still open, exactly where I'd left it, and for a moment I stood beneath it, looking up at the green-painted frame. The thought of leaving made me strangely reluctant. I'd only been here for a couple of hours, but the afternoon had

felt longer somehow, as though I'd managed to fit an entire day into a space that shouldn't have existed.

Back home, Mum and Dad were probably just getting up, and the weather would still be grey and miserable. Here, the sun was shining, the air smelled of flowers, and somewhere in town, Elsie was probably having tea with her family.

I wondered what would happen if I simply didn't go back.

The thought appeared so casually that it took me a moment to realise how strange it was. I could stay here. Not forever, obviously, because I'd need food and somewhere to sleep, but I could remain until evening. I could watch the sun set, see what the town looked like after dark, perhaps even find out whether Sunday arrived normally. There was nothing physically forcing me to return through the window.

But Mum and Dad were waiting for me.

Well, not exactly waiting. They probably hadn't even noticed I was gone yet, but they would eventually. And I had school on Monday, homework to finish, and an entire life that existed on the other side of that window. It wasn't a particularly exciting life, but it was mine.

I climbed onto the sill, took one last look at the bright summer sky and pulled myself through.

The change was immediate.

Cold air brushed against my face, and the sunlight vanished, replaced by the familiar grey light filtering through the dirty factory windows. I landed awkwardly on the dusty floor, caught myself against the wall and stood there for a moment, waiting for my eyes to adjust. The room smelled damp and stale, and the sudden silence made my ears feel strange. I'd become so used to the buzzing insects and distant traffic that the abandoned building seemed almost unnaturally quiet.

I checked my phone.

The screen lit up immediately.

Seven twenty-one.

I stared at it.

That couldn't be right.

I'd left home shortly before seven, reached the factory at about quarter past, and climbed through the window at seven fourteen. Since then, I'd spent time sitting in the grass, walked into town, explored the shops, found a newspaper, spoken to Elsie and walked all the way

back. It had taken at least two hours, probably closer to three.

And yet, according to my phone, only seven minutes had passed.

I opened the stopwatch.

It was still running.

Seven minutes and twelve seconds.

I sat down on the nearest chair.

"Oh, you've got to be joking."

I looked at my watch. It showed just after five in the afternoon, which made considerably more sense considering how long I'd been away. Apparently, the watch had continued measuring time normally while I was in 1997, but my phone had somehow recorded the time passing in 2026, despite being completely dead on the other side.

I stared at the two devices, trying to understand what that meant.

The phone wasn't simply switching off. It was doing something much stranger. It seemed to remain connected to my own time, even while I carried it into

the past. Or perhaps it was frozen in some way, only resuming when I returned. Either way, the difference was enormous. I'd spent hours in 1997, and only minutes had passed here.

I opened my journal and wrote down the numbers.

Left: 7:14 a.m.

Returned: 7:21 a.m.

Time spent in 1997: approximately 2 hours 45 minutes.

Time passed in 2026: 7 minutes.

I underlined the last line.

Seven minutes.

I could barely believe it.

If the difference was consistent, I could spend an entire day in 1997 and return before anyone noticed I was gone. I could explore the town properly, perhaps travel further, and still have time to do my homework afterwards. It was like having an entire second life hidden inside the ordinary one.

I paused, then looked at my watch again.

Five o'clock.

There was something else I hadn't considered.

My watch had moved forward by nearly three hours, but my phone had only moved forward by seven minutes. That meant the two devices were now showing completely different times.

I'd need to reset my watch before going home, otherwise Mum might notice if she happened to look at it. Not that she regularly inspected my watch, but it seemed like the sort of thing that could lead to awkward questions.

I adjusted the hands until they matched my phone.

Then I sat there for another minute, looking around the room.

Everything was exactly as I'd left it. The desks, the filing cabinets, the faded colours. Outside, the weather hadn't changed. It was still early morning, still May, and the world was continuing as though nothing extraordinary had happened.

I felt strangely disconnected from it.

I'd just spent an entire afternoon in another decade. I'd walked through a town that no longer existed in quite the same way, seen shops that had disappeared years ago, and spoken to a girl who was probably old enough

to be my mother in 2026. Yet here, barely seven minutes had passed, and nobody knew anything about it.

I wondered whether that was what loneliness really felt like. Not being alone, exactly, but having something enormous happen to you and knowing there was nobody you could tell.

I closed my journal and slipped it into my backpack.

There was one more thing I wanted to check before leaving.

I took out my phone and opened the camera. Then I went through the photographs I'd taken earlier in the week, making sure everything was still there. It was. My pictures from school, a photograph of Mum's terrible attempt at decorating a cake, and several screenshots of things I'd meant to read later. Nothing had changed.

I wondered what would happen if I took a photograph in 1997 using an ordinary camera. Would it come back with me? Would the image survive the journey? Perhaps I could find an old disposable camera somewhere, although I'd need money from the right decade to buy one. I made a note to look into that later.

Then I thought about Elsie.

I opened my contacts, almost laughing at myself.

Of course she wasn't there.

She didn't have a mobile phone, or at least not one I could call, and even if she did, her number wouldn't exist in my time. The idea of contacting her from 2026 was ridiculous.

Still, I found myself wondering whether I could learn more about her. If I knew her surname, perhaps I could search for her online. She'd be in her forties now, assuming she was still alive and living somewhere in the world. She might have a family, a job, children of her own. She might even still live in town.

The thought made me uncomfortable.

I didn't want to imagine Elsie as a middle-aged woman. Not because there was anything wrong with being middle-aged, but because the girl I'd met had been so completely part of that summer afternoon. Thinking of her growing older while I remained fifteen made everything feel strangely sad.

I put my phone away.

There would be time for that later.

For now, I had enough to think about.

I left the factory through the back entrance and stepped into the cool May morning. The sky was beginning to brighten, and a few birds were singing from the trees beyond the fence. Somewhere in the distance, a car door slammed, followed by the sound of someone starting an engine.

Ordinary sounds.

Ordinary life.

I walked home slowly, my backpack feeling heavier than it had that morning, although there was nothing new inside it except a few pages of writing.

When I reached our street, I could see that the curtains in Mum and Dad's bedroom were still closed.

I smiled.

They hadn't even got up yet.

I let myself into the house quietly, took off my shoes and went into the kitchen. My note was still sitting beneath the sugar bowl, exactly where I'd left it.

I picked it up and folded it into my pocket.

Then I made myself another cup of tea.

I sat at the kitchen table, listening to the kettle click as it cooled, and tried to imagine what I'd be doing if the window didn't exist. Probably lying in bed, scrolling through my phone, or complaining that there was nothing to do at the weekend.

Instead, I'd already lived through an entire summer afternoon.

I looked at the clock.

Seven forty-three.

The day had barely begun.

And somewhere, twenty-nine years ago, Elsie was still riding her bicycle through the sunshine.

I wondered whether she'd reached home yet.

Then I remembered.

For her, the afternoon would continue.

For me, it would begin again.

I took a sip of tea and smiled to myself.

I could get used to this.

Chapter Seven

By lunchtime, I'd already decided I was going back. I'd tried to behave normally for most of the morning, which involved helping Mum put some washing out, pretending to be interested in Dad's plans to reorganise the shed, and spending nearly an hour at my desk attempting to finish an English assignment.

None of it went particularly well. I kept finding myself looking towards the window, watching the clouds drift across the sky and thinking about the sunshine waiting for me at the factory. It was an odd feeling, knowing that somewhere less than twenty minutes away, summer was happening without me.

Except it wasn't happening without me, was it? That was the whole point. As far as I could tell, it wouldn't happen at all until I climbed through the window again.

Mum noticed my distraction when I put a clean tea towel in the rubbish bin instead of the drawer. She stood there watching me for a moment, then reached in and rescued it.

"Something on your mind, love?" I looked at the tea towel, then at her.

"Not really." She raised an eyebrow.

"Right. Because that's usually where we keep those." I laughed and took it from her, feeling slightly embarrassed.

"Sorry. I'm just thinking about my story." She nodded, apparently satisfied.

"Well, perhaps you should go and write some of it before you start putting the plates in the washing machine." I considered telling her that was exactly what I intended to do, but decided it was probably better not to mention how much time I'd already spent writing that morning.

I went upstairs and changed into a light T-shirt, keeping my jeans but swapping the thick jumper for a thin cardigan I could easily take off. The weather outside was still cool, but I knew I'd be grateful for the lighter clothes once I reached the other side. I also packed a sandwich, another bottle of water and the packet of

biscuits I'd barely touched earlier. My journal went into the front pocket of my backpack, along with a pen and a small amount of money. I wasn't entirely sure whether modern coins would be accepted in 1997, but I had a few older ones in a little tin on my bookshelf, collected over the years from change and things Dad had given me.

I tipped them onto my bed and sorted through them, looking for dates before 1997. Most were ordinary coins, but there were a few older pound coins and some fifty-pence pieces with unfamiliar designs. I chose several and put them in my pocket, feeling rather pleased with myself.

Dad was in the garden when I came downstairs, standing beside the shed with a screwdriver in one hand and a piece of wood in the other.

He looked up as I opened the back door. "Off somewhere?"

"Just going out to write for a bit."

He nodded towards my backpack. "Taking the entire library?"

"It's mostly food."

"Ah. A proper expedition, then."

I smiled and stepped onto the patio. "Something like that."

He examined the piece of wood in his hand, then looked at me again. "Don't be too late. Your mum's thinking about ordering a takeaway tonight."

"I won't."

He nodded and returned to his work, apparently unconcerned by the fact that his daughter was about to disappear into another century.

The walk to the factory felt shorter this time. Perhaps because I knew exactly where I was going, or perhaps because I was beginning to think of the place less as an abandoned building and more as an entrance to somewhere else. I slipped through the fence, crossed the yard and made my way to the back room without hesitation. The window was still closed, its brown paint flaking around the handle, and I stood in front of it for a moment, considering what I wanted to do differently this time.

I'd already established the date, and I knew the girl with the bicycle would come out of the factory shortly after I arrived. I'd also confirmed that the afternoon reset whenever I returned. That meant I could choose how to approach things. I could wait by the road and greet her

as I had on my first visit, or I could follow her into town and arrange to meet her outside the bookshop again.

But both options felt strangely dishonest now that I understood what was happening. She wouldn't remember me, and I'd be using things I'd learned from previous visits to make myself seem more familiar than I actually was.

Then again, wasn't that what everyone did when they got to know someone? You remembered what they'd said, learned what they liked, and used that knowledge the next time you met. The only difference was that Elsie wouldn't have the same memories.

I wasn't sure whether that made it wrong.

I opened the window and climbed through.

The heat greeted me like an old friend. Sunshine spread across the weeds, insects buzzed around the flowers, and the factory wall changed from dirty brown to clean green as I lowered myself to the ground. I stood for a moment, breathing in the warm air, then took off my cardigan and stuffed it into my backpack. The T-shirt was a much better choice, and for the first time, I could enjoy the weather without feeling as though I was slowly being cooked.

I checked my watch and made a note of the time. Then I walked towards the corner of the building.

Elsie hadn't appeared yet.

I waited in the shade, watching the side entrance. A few minutes later, the door opened, and she stepped out with her bicycle, exactly as she had every other time. The floral dress, the silver bracelet, the little bag. She adjusted the handlebars and began walking towards the road.

I took a breath and stepped forward.

"Hi."

She looked up.

For a moment, I wondered whether there might be some tiny flicker of recognition in her expression. Perhaps she'd remember me without knowing why, or feel that we'd met before. It was a ridiculous hope, but I couldn't quite help it.

Instead, she smiled politely.

"Hi."

Exactly the same as the first time.

I smiled back, trying not to feel disappointed.

"Nice day."

She glanced up at the sky. "Bit warm, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I'm not complaining, though."

"Neither am I." She grinned. "We've had enough rubbish weather this summer."

I nodded, although I had absolutely no idea what the weather had been like in 1997. "Definitely."

She continued walking, and I fell into step beside her, keeping a little distance so I wouldn't seem as though I was following her. For a few seconds, neither of us said anything. I could hear the soft rattle of her bicycle chain and the occasional crunch of gravel beneath our shoes.

"Do you work here?" I asked, nodding towards the factory.

She laughed. "Me? God, no."

"Oh."

"My dad does. I was just dropping something off for him."

"On a Saturday?"

"He's doing a bit of overtime. Says there's always something needs sorting." She rolled her eyes affectionately. "I'd rather be anywhere else, personally."

I glanced back at the building. That explained why she kept coming out of the factory, although it raised another question about why the place seemed closed. Perhaps only a few people were working inside.

"What about you?" she asked. "You work here?"

I nearly laughed. "No. Definitely not."

"Then what are you doing hanging about?"

That was a fair question.

"Just exploring," I said. "I like old buildings."

She looked back at the factory, then at me. "It's not that old."

"Well, no. I suppose not."

She gave me a curious look, but didn't press the point.

We reached the road, and she stopped beside the kerb. I recognised the exact spot where she'd climbed onto her bicycle during every previous visit. This time, though, she stayed standing beside it, one hand resting on the handlebars.

"Are you heading into town?" she asked.

"Yeah. I was thinking about it."

"Want to walk together?"

I felt a sudden little flutter in my stomach.

"Sure."

She smiled. "Good. I can't be bothered cycling in this heat anyway."

We started along the road, her bicycle rolling quietly beside us. I found myself relaxing almost immediately. Elsie was easy to talk to, partly because she seemed perfectly happy to fill any silence herself.

She told me about her dad's job at the factory, complained about how boring the summer holidays had become, and described an argument she'd had with her best friend earlier in the week.

I didn't know the people she was talking about, but that didn't seem to matter. She explained things as she went along, occasionally laughing at her own stories before she'd even reached the funny part.

I learned that she was sixteen, that she lived with her parents and younger brother, and that she was supposed to be starting college in September.

She wasn't particularly looking forward to it, although she admitted that getting away from school would probably be nice. When I told her I was fifteen, she nodded as though that explained something.

"Still got another year of school, then?"

"Yeah."

"Poor you."

I laughed. "Thanks."

"Don't worry. It'll go quick."

I wasn't sure about that. School had never felt particularly quick to me, especially when I spent most of it waiting for the day to end.

We passed the red telephone box, and Elsie noticed me looking at it.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You looked at it funny."

I smiled. "Did I?"

"Like you'd never seen a phone box before."

"Of course I've seen one."

"Right." She grinned. "Just checking."

I tried to think of something to say that wouldn't make me sound even stranger. "Do you use it much?"

"The phone box?"

"Yeah."

"Not really. We've got a phone at home." She paused. "Why?"

"No reason."

She looked at me for a moment, then laughed. "You ask some weird questions."

"So I've been told."

"Good. I like weird."

I looked at her, wondering whether she meant it or was simply being polite. There was something so open about her expression that I found it difficult to imagine her saying things she didn't mean. She seemed to enjoy

talking to people, and she didn't appear particularly bothered by the fact that I was a complete stranger she'd met outside her dad's workplace.

When we reached the high street, she asked whether I wanted something to drink. I hesitated, thinking about the money in my pocket, then nodded. She led me to a little shop near the corner, where a refrigerator stood beside the counter filled with cans and bottles. I recognised some of the brands, although the packaging looked different. Elsie chose a lemonade and waited while I picked one too. I handed over an old pound coin, half expecting the shopkeeper to examine it suspiciously, but he simply gave me my change and turned to the next customer.

Outside, we sat on a low wall beneath a tree, drinking our lemonade and watching people pass. Elsie kicked her sandals off and stretched her legs out in front of her, resting her heels on the pavement. I noticed a tiny scar just above her left ankle, pale against her tanned skin, and wondered how she'd got it. It was such a small detail, but I found myself wanting to remember it.

"So," she said after a while, "what do you do when you're not lurking around factories?"

I nearly choked on my drink.

"Lurking?"

"Well, you were."

"I wasn't lurking."

"You were standing by a wall looking suspicious."

"I was exploring."

"Same thing."

I laughed and shook my head. "I write."

"Write what?"

"Stories. Poems. Stuff like that."

Her expression brightened. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"That's brilliant."

I shrugged, suddenly embarrassed. "It's just something I do."

"No, I mean it. I love reading, but I couldn't write a story to save my life." She took another sip of lemonade. "What's your favourite thing you've written?"

I thought about that. Most of my stories were unfinished, and the ones I'd completed usually made me cringe when I read them again. "I don't know. I wrote something about a girl who finds a hidden place where nobody can bother her."

Elsie smiled. "Sounds nice."

"It is. Until she realises she can't stay there forever."

"Why not?"

I looked at her.

For a moment, I almost told her.

Because the place doesn't belong to her. Because she's only visiting. Because everyone she meets there will forget her the moment she leaves.

Instead, I shrugged.

"Because she's got a life somewhere else."

Elsie considered that, turning the lemonade can slowly between her fingers. "Maybe she likes the hidden place better."

"Maybe."

"Then perhaps she should stay."

I smiled faintly. "It's not that simple."

"Things never are." She looked at me and grinned. "That's why people write books about them."

I laughed, but her words stayed with me.

We sat there for a while longer, talking about books, music and the strange things people did when they were bored. Elsie liked adventure stories and mysteries, although she admitted to reading the occasional romance when nobody was looking. I told her I liked anything with interesting characters, which was true, and that I sometimes wrote poems when I couldn't work out how to explain something properly. She asked whether I'd ever let anyone read them. I said no, and she immediately announced that she'd consider it a personal challenge to change my mind.

It was such an easy conversation that I almost forgot where I was.

Almost.

Every now and then, something reminded me. A car passing with an unfamiliar registration plate. A shop window full of cassette tapes. Someone mentioning a television programme that had ended years before I was born. I had to be careful with what I said, particularly when we talked about music. I recognised some of the

bands Elsie mentioned, but I couldn't always remember which songs had been released by 1997. At one point, I nearly mentioned a singer who wouldn't become famous for another decade, and had to disguise it as a cough.

Elsie didn't seem to notice.

Eventually, she checked her watch and made a face.

"Oh, I'd better go."

I felt a little drop of disappointment.

"Already?"

"Yeah. Mum asked me to pick something up, and I've spent the last hour sitting here talking rubbish." She stood and slipped her sandals back on. "She'll think I've fallen into the sea."

I laughed and got to my feet.

Elsie picked up her bicycle, then looked at me.

"You're all right, you know."

I blinked. "What?"

"You're nice. Bit odd, but nice."

"Thanks. I think."

She grinned. "It's a compliment."

"Right."

"Anyway, maybe I'll see you around."

I hesitated.

I knew what would happen if I said yes. I'd return to 2026, come back through the window, and she'd walk out of the factory without recognising me. Everything we'd talked about would be gone for her. The books, the jokes, the lemonade. All of it.

"Maybe," I said quietly.

She tilted her head. "You sound doubtful."

"No. It's just..." I searched for something that wouldn't sound ridiculous. "I'm not always around."

"Well, neither am I." She smiled. "That's how meeting people works."

I laughed despite myself.

She reached into her bag and pulled out a small piece of paper, then borrowed my pen to write something on it.

When she handed it back, I saw a telephone number beneath her name.

"There," she said. "Now you've got no excuse."

I stared at the paper.

"You can ring me if you fancy doing something. Just don't call too late, or Dad'll answer and give you the third degree."

I looked up at her.

"Thanks."

"No worries."

She swung her leg over the bicycle, then paused.

"And Freya?"

"Yeah?"

"Next time, bring one of your poems."

I smiled.

"I'll think about it."

"That's not a no."

Before I could answer, she pushed off and rode away, turning back once to wave.

I stood there holding the little piece of paper, watching until she disappeared into the traffic.

Then I looked down at the number.

It was written in blue ink, the digits slightly uneven, with a little star beside her name.

I folded it carefully and slipped it into the front pocket of my journal.

For a moment, I felt happier than I had in a very long time.

Then I remembered the window.

I walked back towards the factory more slowly than before, taking the longer route through the quieter streets. The afternoon was beginning to soften, the sunlight turning warmer as it fell across the rooftops. People were sitting outside pubs and cafés, and somewhere a radio was playing through an open window. It was all so ordinary, and that was what made it difficult. I'd spent the last couple of hours talking to Elsie as though we were simply two girls who'd met by chance on a summer afternoon. Nothing about it had felt impossible.

Except everything about it was.

When I reached the factory, I stopped beside the window and took out the piece of paper again.

Elsie.

Her handwriting was neat but slightly slanted, and the little star beside her name made me smile.

I wondered whether she'd written her number down for other people before. Perhaps she did it all the time. Perhaps she'd forgotten about me already and was sitting at home telling her mum about the strange girl she'd met near the factory.

But she wouldn't remember tomorrow.

Not if I went back.

I looked up at the window.

For the first time, I genuinely considered staying.

Not forever. Just until tomorrow morning. Long enough to see whether Sunday would arrive, whether Elsie would wake up remembering me, whether the world would continue normally if I didn't leave.

But I couldn't.

Mum and Dad were expecting me home for dinner, and I had no idea what would happen if I stayed away overnight. Besides, I didn't have anywhere to sleep, and the few coins in my pocket weren't going to get me very far.

I climbed through the window.

The warmth vanished, and the familiar cold air of May settled around me. I stood in the dusty office, listening to the silence, then checked my phone.

Only a few minutes had passed.

I should have been excited. I'd spent hours in 1997 and barely lost any time at home. It was exactly what I'd hoped for.

Instead, I felt strangely empty.

I took out my journal and unfolded the paper.

Elsie's name was still there.

So was her telephone number.

The ink hadn't faded. The paper hadn't vanished. It was a real thing, carried from one time to another, proof that our conversation had actually happened.

I sat down at the desk and looked at it for a long time.

Somewhere in 1997, Elsie had given me her number and asked me to bring a poem next time.

But the next time I saw her, she'd have no idea who I was.

I folded the paper again and placed it carefully between the pages of my journal.

Then I wrote a single sentence beneath the notes from today.

She won't remember me, but I remember everything.

I stared at it for a moment.

It was a strange thing to feel sad about, considering I'd only known her for a few hours.

But I did.

And as I packed my things and prepared to go home, I found myself wondering how many times I could meet someone for the first time before it started to hurt.

Chapter Eight

I didn't go back to the factory on Sunday. Not because I didn't want to, but because Mum had decided we were having a family day, which apparently meant driving twenty miles to look at a garden centre and then spending an unreasonable amount of money on plants that would probably die before July. Dad was enthusiastic about the whole thing, mostly because the garden centre had a café that served enormous slices of cake. I went along without complaining, although I spent most of the morning thinking about a completely different Saturday, one that was waiting for me behind a broken window.

It wasn't that I didn't enjoy being with my parents. I did. Mum and Dad were funny, and we usually had a good time together, even when we weren't doing anything particularly interesting. But lately, everything in my life had begun to feel a little predictable.

School, homework, dinner, bed. Weekends spent wandering around town or sitting in my room writing stories nobody would ever read. I'd never thought of myself as particularly unhappy, but since discovering the window, I'd started noticing how much of my time I spent waiting for something. Waiting for school to finish, waiting for the weekend, waiting to be older, waiting for my life to become something more interesting than it currently was.

At the garden centre, Mum spent nearly half an hour comparing two varieties of lavender while Dad and I sat on a bench outside the greenhouse. He was reading something on his phone, occasionally making little noises of disapproval, and I was watching a small child attempt to feed a biscuit to a decorative stone frog.

It occurred to me that in 1997, Dad would have been about seventeen. Only a year older than Elsie. The thought was so strange that I almost laughed. Somewhere in the past, there was a teenage version of my father walking around, probably listening to music and worrying about exams, completely unaware that one day he'd have a daughter who was secretly travelling through time.

"What's funny?" Dad asked without looking up.

"Nothing."

"That's suspicious."

"I was just thinking about what you were like when you were seventeen."

He lowered his phone and gave me a concerned look. "Why?"

"Just wondering."

"Well, I was devastatingly handsome, obviously."

"Obviously."

"And extremely popular."

"Right."

"Your mother was lucky to find me."

I smiled. "Didn't you meet Mum when you were twenty-four?"

"Yes, but she'd have been lucky to find me at seventeen too."

I laughed, and he went back to his phone, apparently satisfied with his contribution to the conversation.

I considered asking him what he'd been doing in August 1997. It would have been easy enough. Just a casual

question about his teenage years. But I was beginning to realise that every question I asked about the past carried the risk of revealing how interested I'd suddenly become in it. Dad was a journalist. Asking questions was practically his entire personality, and I didn't fancy being interviewed over dinner about why I'd developed an obsession with the late nineties.

Instead, I asked whether he'd ever owned a bicycle.

He looked up again.

"Of course."

"What kind?"

"A Raleigh, I think. Why?"

"No reason."

He stared at me for a moment, then shook his head. "You're a strange child."

"Genetics."

By Monday morning, I'd read through my journal so many times that I could practically recite the entries from memory. I'd also started a separate page devoted entirely to Elsie, which felt a little embarrassing even though nobody else was going to see it. I'd written

down everything I could remember about her. Her age, her father's job at the factory, her younger brother, the college she was starting in September. The books she liked, the way she laughed before finishing a story, the little scar above her ankle. I'd even tried to describe her voice, although that proved surprisingly difficult. It was bright and slightly husky when she laughed, with an easy way of speaking that made everything sound like a joke she was inviting you to share.

I kept taking out the piece of paper with her telephone number on it, turning it over between my fingers. It was such an ordinary thing. A scrap of paper with a name and some digits written in blue ink. Yet it felt more important than anything else I owned. I wondered whether the number would still work if I called it in 2026. The thought made me uncomfortable, so I put the paper away again.

School was particularly difficult that Monday. I wasn't tired, exactly, but I felt as though my brain was somewhere else. During English, we were discussing a novel about identity and belonging, and I found myself wondering whether the author had ever considered the possibility of someone belonging to a time rather than a place.

In history, we were covering the early twentieth century, which seemed almost laughably distant

compared with the decade I'd just visited. I wanted to ask our teacher whether history was still history if you could walk into it, but I suspected that would lead to a conversation I wasn't prepared to have.

At lunch, I sat with a few girls from my year, listening to them discuss a party someone was organising for the following weekend. They were debating who had been invited, who was likely to turn up, and whether a particular boy would finally admit he fancied someone. I contributed occasionally, mostly by nodding or laughing when everyone else did, but I couldn't make myself particularly interested. It wasn't that I disliked them.

They were perfectly nice, and I'd known most of them for years. I just never seemed to have much to say when we were together. They talked about people I barely knew, relationships I didn't understand and things that seemed terribly important until the following week, when everyone had forgotten about them.

"Freya, are you even listening?"

I looked up.

Sophie was watching me from across the table, one eyebrow raised.

"Yeah."

"What did I just say, then?"

I hesitated.

She laughed. "Exactly."

"Sorry. I've got something on my mind."

"Is it a boy?"

I nearly choked on my drink.

"No."

"Girl?"

I felt my face warm.

Sophie grinned. "Oh, it is!"

"It's not."

"Then why are you blushing?"

"Because you're being annoying."

She laughed again, apparently delighted with herself. "All right, keep your secrets."

I looked down at my lunch, trying to hide my smile.

If only she knew.

After school, I went straight to the factory.

I'd told myself I would wait until Tuesday, perhaps even Wednesday, to avoid becoming too dependent on the window. That seemed like a sensible rule, something that would help me keep my two lives separate. Unfortunately, sensible rules were proving difficult to follow when one of those lives involved double maths and the other involved sunshine and a girl who made me laugh.

The factory was quiet when I arrived. I went straight to the back room, opened the window and climbed through without hesitation. The warmth wrapped around me, and I smiled before my feet even touched the ground. I'd brought a light T-shirt again, along with my journal and a sandwich, and this time I didn't waste any time standing around admiring the weather. I knew exactly what I wanted to do.

I wanted to see Elsie.

I walked towards the corner of the building and waited.

A few minutes later, the side door opened.

She appeared with her bicycle, wearing the same floral dress, her hair moving gently in the breeze. She adjusted the handlebars, then started towards the road.

I stepped forward.

"Hi, Elsie."

She stopped.

For a moment, I saw confusion cross her face, and my stomach tightened.

"Hi," she said slowly. "Sorry, do I know you?"

There it was.

I'd known it would happen. I'd watched her repeat the same afternoon several times, and I'd already proved that she didn't remember our first meeting. But hearing her ask the question still hurt in a way I hadn't expected.

"No," I said quickly. "Sorry. I heard someone call your name earlier."

She looked over her shoulder towards the factory. "Oh. Right."

"I'm Freya."

Her expression softened into a smile.

"Nice to meet you, Freya."

I smiled back.

"Nice to meet you too."

It was the same words we'd exchanged on Saturday, but this time they felt different. For me, it wasn't the first time. I knew things about her that she hadn't told me yet, and I had to make a conscious effort not to use them. I wanted to ask about her brother, her college plans and the books she liked, but doing so would only make me seem strange.

Instead, I nodded towards her bicycle.

"Heading into town?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Same."

She smiled. "Want to walk together?"

I felt a little flutter of relief.

"Sure."

We started along the road, and for a while the conversation followed almost exactly the same pattern as before. She told me about her dad working at the factory, complained about the heat and mentioned how boring the summer holidays had become. I listened,

occasionally asking questions, but I couldn't shake the strange feeling that I was watching a film I'd already seen. I knew when she was about to laugh, when she'd roll her eyes, and when she'd pause to adjust the bicycle basket.

Then something changed.

We reached the telephone box, and instead of making a joke about me staring at it, Elsie stopped and looked at the small notice attached to the glass.

"Actually, hang on a second."

I blinked.

"What?"

"I need to ring Mum. I forgot."

She leaned her bicycle against the wall and rummaged through her bag for some coins.

I watched her, surprised.

That hadn't happened last time.

Of course, last time we'd been talking about something else when we passed the telephone box. Perhaps she'd simply forgotten about the call. Or perhaps my presence was changing things in small ways.

She stepped inside and picked up the receiver, feeding coins into the slot. I stood outside, looking at the road while she spoke. I couldn't hear much through the glass, but I caught a few words about being in town and coming home later. When she emerged, she looked pleased with herself.

"Sorted."

"Everything all right?"

"Yeah. Mum just wanted to know where I was."

I smiled. "Fair enough."

We continued towards town, and I found myself relaxing. The afternoon wasn't repeating perfectly after all. The starting point was the same, but what happened afterwards depended on what we did. That meant I wasn't simply watching a recording of someone else's life. I was part of it, at least for as long as I stayed.

When we reached the high street, Elsie suggested getting something to drink. I agreed, and we went to the same little shop as before. This time, I chose a different drink, partly because I wanted to see whether anything changed. Elsie picked the same lemonade, paid for it and led me outside.

We sat on the low wall beneath the tree, and she kicked off her sandals exactly as she had before.

"So," she said, turning towards me, "what do you do when you're not hanging around factories?"

I laughed.

She raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

"Nothing. It's just a funny way of putting it."

"Well, you were hanging around a factory."

"I suppose I was."

She grinned. "See? I'm right."

I smiled and took a sip of my drink.

"I write."

Her face brightened.

"Really? What sort of things?"

"Stories. Poems. Mostly things I never finish."

"That's brilliant."

I felt a strange warmth in my chest. I'd known she'd say something like that, but it was still nice to hear.

We talked about writing again, although this time I deliberately changed the subject before we reached the story about the girl who found a hidden place. I wanted to see what else Elsie might say, what other things she might tell me if I didn't guide the conversation towards familiar territory.

She told me about a book she'd read the previous week, one involving a missing girl and a mysterious house. She couldn't remember the title, which annoyed her enormously, and spent several minutes trying to describe the cover. I laughed at her frustration, and she threatened to drag me into the bookshop to help her find it.

"Maybe I should," she said suddenly.

"What?"

"Drag you into the bookshop. You might actually know what I'm talking about."

I smiled. "I doubt it."

"Come on. It'll only take a minute."

She stood, slipped her sandals back on and picked up her bicycle.

I followed her across the road, feeling oddly excited. This was new. We'd never gone into the bookshop together before. I'd seen her come out of it on my first proper visit, but I hadn't been inside.

The shop was small and pleasantly cluttered, with narrow shelves reaching almost to the ceiling and piles of second-hand books stacked on tables. The air smelled of paper, dust and something faintly sweet, perhaps from the little bowl of sweets beside the till. A bell rang as we entered, and an older woman behind the counter looked up from her magazine.

"Afternoon, Elsie."

"Hi, Mrs Carter."

"Looking for anything in particular?"

"Trying to remember a book I read. It's driving me mad."

Mrs Carter smiled. "That narrows it down."

Elsie laughed and began explaining the plot, gesturing enthusiastically while I wandered towards a shelf of paperbacks. I recognised several titles, although the

covers looked different from the editions I'd seen in school. There were books that had been popular when Mum was young, and others I'd never heard of. I ran my fingers along the spines, feeling strangely at home.

After a few minutes, Elsie appeared beside me holding a paperback triumphantly.

"Found it!"

I looked at the cover.

"Congratulations."

"Thank you. I'd like to thank my family, my friends and Mrs Carter for believing in me."

I laughed, and she gave an exaggerated little bow.

Then she looked at the book in my hand.

"What's that?"

I glanced down. I'd picked up a collection of poems without really thinking about it.

"Just poetry."

She smiled.

"You really do like writing, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"Do you ever let anyone read it?"

I hesitated.

"Not usually."

"Why not?"

I shrugged. "It's personal, I suppose."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Fair enough. But sometimes it's nice to let people see what's going on in your head."

I looked at her.

There was something unexpectedly gentle about the way she'd said it. She wasn't teasing me now, or trying to make a joke. She seemed genuinely interested.

"Maybe," I said.

She smiled. "Well, if you ever fancy showing someone, I promise not to laugh."

I laughed despite myself.

"That's reassuring."

"I might cry, though. Depends how sad it is."

I shook my head, smiling.

We spent another half hour in the bookshop, browsing shelves and talking about stories. Elsie was surprisingly opinionated about endings. She hated books where everything was wrapped up too neatly, but she also complained about stories that ended without explaining anything. I pointed out that those were slightly contradictory positions, and she informed me that readers were allowed to be unreasonable.

Eventually, Mrs Carter announced that she was closing early, and we reluctantly made our way outside. The afternoon had begun to soften, the sunlight turning warmer as it fell across the buildings. Elsie checked her watch and sighed.

"I really should get home."

I nodded.

"Yeah. Me too."

She looked at me for a moment.

"I've had a nice afternoon."

"Me too."

"You're easy to talk to, you know."

I felt my cheeks warm.

"Thanks."

She smiled.

"Maybe we'll do it again sometime."

I wanted to say yes. I wanted to tell her that we'd already done it before, that I could come back tomorrow and spend another afternoon with her, and that she'd never know how much I was beginning to look forward to it.

Instead, I nodded.

"I'd like that."

She reached into her bag, found a scrap of paper and borrowed my pen.

I watched her write her name and telephone number.

Again.

When she handed it to me, I almost laughed.

"There you go," she said. "Give me a ring sometime."

I took the paper.

"Thanks."

She grinned.

"And next time, bring something you've written."

I smiled.

"I'll think about it."

She laughed. "That's not a no."

Then she climbed onto her bicycle and rode away, turning back once to wave.

I stood there holding the paper, watching her disappear around the corner.

It was different this time. We'd spent longer together, talked about different things, and gone into the bookshop. She'd shown me a side of herself I hadn't seen before, something quieter beneath all the laughter.

And yet, the ending was almost exactly the same.

I unfolded the paper.

Her name. Her number. A little star.

The handwriting was slightly different from the first one, but the words were the same.

I took out my journal and found the original piece of paper tucked between the pages. I held them side by side, comparing the ink and the little stars beside her name.

Two pieces of paper.

Two afternoons.

One girl who remembered neither of them.

I folded both carefully and put them away.

On the walk back to the factory, I tried to work out how I felt about it. Part of me was delighted. I'd spent another lovely afternoon with Elsie, and I knew I could do it again whenever I wanted. But another part of me was beginning to understand something uncomfortable.

I was getting to know her.

She wasn't getting to know me.

Every time I returned, I'd remember more. Her jokes, her stories, her expressions, the little things she did without thinking. I'd learn how to make her laugh, what subjects she liked talking about, and what made her uncomfortable.

But for her, I'd always be a stranger she'd met that afternoon.

I reached the factory and stopped beneath the window.

The sunlight was still warm, and the weeds moved gently in the breeze. Somewhere in the distance, a bird called, and I could hear the faint hum of traffic along the road.

I looked down at the two pieces of paper in my hand.

It occurred to me that I could keep doing this for years.

I could visit Elsie every day, spend hours with her, learn everything about her, and become someone who knew her better than anyone else in the world.

And she'd never remember me the next morning.

I climbed through the window and returned to the cold, quiet office.

My phone lit up in my pocket.

Only a few minutes had passed.

I sat down at the desk and opened my journal.

For a long time, I didn't write anything.

Then I turned to a fresh page and wrote:

I think this could become a problem.

I stared at the sentence.

Then, underneath it, I added:

I don't think I care.

Chapter Nine

By Wednesday, I had started measuring my days according to how long it would be until I could see Elsie again. It wasn't something I'd deliberately decided to do. It just happened, quietly and without much warning, until ordinary things like school, homework and eating dinner had become the bits of my life I needed to get through before I could return to the factory.

I'd wake up thinking about what I might say to her, spend lessons imagining where we could go, and fall asleep replaying conversations that never actually happened. At least not in her world.

It was beginning to feel less like visiting the past and more like going somewhere I belonged, which was a dangerous way of thinking about a place I couldn't actually stay.

I'd gone back on Tuesday afternoon, although I hadn't written much about it in my journal.

We'd spent most of that visit walking through town, looking in shop windows and talking about nothing particularly important. Elsie had bought an ice lolly from a little shop near the church and insisted I try it, which had resulted in both of us laughing when a large piece broke off and landed on my shoe.

It was such a stupid little moment, but I'd thought about it several times since. I could remember the way she'd covered her mouth while laughing, the sticky orange mark on my trainer, and the fact that she'd apologised three times despite finding the whole thing hilarious. None of it mattered in any grand sense. It was just an ordinary afternoon with someone I liked.

Except it wasn't ordinary. It was asymmetrical. We were having fun, creating memories, and bonding. But that wasn't true. I was doing those things. Elsie wasn't bonding or creating memories. At least not lasting ones.

Wednesday morning was particularly miserable. Rain tapped against the classroom windows during registration, and by second lesson, the sky had become so dark that the lights were switched on. I sat through geography trying to concentrate on coastal erosion, which should probably have interested me considering

where we lived, but my thoughts kept drifting towards the factory.

I knew exactly what the weather would be like on the other side. I knew the sunlight would be falling across the weeds, that the insects would be buzzing around the flowers, and that Elsie would come out through the side door with her bicycle. The certainty of it was strangely comforting. Whatever happened in my own world, August 16 would always be waiting.

At lunch, Sophie sat down opposite me and immediately announced that I was becoming impossible to talk to.

"Am I?"

"Yes. You've been smiling at absolutely nothing all week."

I looked down at my sandwich. "Maybe I'm just happy."

She narrowed her eyes. "That's suspicious."

"Why?"

"Because nobody's that happy in geography."

I laughed, and she leaned forward, lowering her voice.

"Seriously, though. Who is it?"

"Who is what?"

"The person."

I felt my face warm.

"There isn't a person."

"Freya."

"What?"

"You've been wandering around looking like you're in some romantic film. There is definitely a person."

I considered denying it again, but there wasn't much point. Sophie had known me since Year Seven, and although we weren't particularly close, she was annoyingly good at noticing things.

"Maybe," I admitted.

Her eyes widened. "I knew it!"

"Keep your voice down."

"Who?"

"Nobody you know."

"From another school?"

"Sort of."

She stared at me. "How can someone sort of be from another school?"

I shrugged. "It's complicated."

"Is it a boy?"

"No."

"A girl?"

I looked at her.

She grinned.

"Oh, Freya."

"Don't."

"I'm not doing anything!"

"You're doing that face."

"What face?"

"That face."

She laughed and leaned back in her chair. "Fine. Keep your mysterious girlfriend to yourself."

"She's not my girlfriend."

"Yet."

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn't stop smiling.

That was the problem, really. I liked hearing someone talk about Elsie as though she belonged in my life. As though she was an ordinary girl I might be seeing after school, someone I could introduce to friends or mention over dinner. For a few seconds, sitting there with Sophie, it almost felt possible.

Then I remembered that Elsie was living in 1997.

And that she wouldn't know who I was when I saw her again.

After school, I went straight to the factory.

The rain had become heavier, and by the time I reached the broken fence, my hair was damp and my shoes were making unpleasant squelching noises. I hurried through the yard and into the building, shaking water from my sleeves as I walked towards the back room. The office was cold and smelled of wet plaster, and for a moment I

stood looking at the window, listening to the rain tapping against the glass.

Then I opened it.

The change was almost absurd.

One moment, I was standing in a damp, miserable room with rain dripping from my hair. The next, warm sunlight fell across my face, and the air smelled of dry grass and flowers. I lowered myself into the weeds, blinking against the brightness, and immediately felt the heat settling against my wet clothes.

I laughed.

It was impossible not to.

I took off my damp cardigan and stuffed it into my backpack, then stood for a moment with my arms slightly away from my sides, letting the warmth dry my T-shirt. Somewhere nearby, a bee was moving lazily between flowers, completely unconcerned by the fact that I'd just arrived from a rainy afternoon twenty-nine years in the future.

I checked my watch, made a note in my journal and headed towards the road.

Elsie appeared exactly when I expected her to.

She stepped out of the factory with her bicycle, adjusted the handlebars and began walking towards town. I watched her for a few seconds, feeling the familiar little flutter in my stomach. I knew the way she moved now. I knew she'd brush her hair away from her face in a moment, and that she'd glance towards the road before deciding whether to cycle or walk.

I stepped forward.

"Hi."

She looked up and smiled.

"Hi."

I smiled back.

"Going into town?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Same."

She nodded towards the road. "Fancy walking together?"

"Sure."

It was becoming almost too easy.

We started along the road, and Elsie began telling me about her dad's overtime at the factory. I'd heard the story before, of course, but this time I asked a different question, something about whether she liked visiting him at work. She laughed and said she didn't particularly, although she liked the people who worked there. Apparently, one of the older men always gave her sweets from a jar in his office, despite her being sixteen and perfectly capable of buying her own.

"He's lovely, though," she said. "Known me since I was little."

"What's his name?"

"Mr Bennett. Everyone calls him Benny."

I made a mental note of it.

I was doing that more often now. Collecting little details about her life, filing them away somewhere in my head. Names, places, stories, things she liked and disliked. I told myself it was because I was interested in her, which was true, but there was another reason too. Every detail made the next meeting easier. Every little thing I learned gave me another way to make her smile, another subject I could bring up, another chance to feel as though we were already friends.

We reached the telephone box, and Elsie glanced at it without stopping. I wondered whether she'd remember to call her mum this time, but she didn't. Instead, she asked me what sort of music I liked, and we spent the next ten minutes comparing tastes. I had to be careful, as usual, not to mention anything that hadn't been released yet, but there was enough music from the nineties that I recognised to keep the conversation going.

"You're into some old stuff," she said, looking impressed.

I laughed. "Old?"

"Well, yeah. Some of those songs came out ages ago."

I nearly said something about how she'd feel in twenty-nine years, but caught myself.

"Good music doesn't get old," I said instead.

She grinned. "That's what my dad says."

"Your dad sounds sensible."

"Don't tell him that. He'll be unbearable."

We laughed, and I felt that familiar warmth spreading through my chest. It was so easy to be with her. She

didn't seem to care that I was quiet sometimes, or that I occasionally said strange things. She simply accepted whatever I offered and carried the conversation along when I ran out of words.

When we reached the high street, Elsie suggested going to the bookshop again. I agreed immediately, although I knew she'd never remember our previous visit. Mrs Carter greeted her from behind the counter, and Elsie introduced me as someone she'd just met.

"This is Freya."

Mrs Carter smiled politely.

"Nice to meet you, dear."

"Nice to meet you too."

I looked at Elsie as she wandered towards the shelves, suddenly struck by how strange it was to hear her introduce me. She'd done it so casually, as though I was simply a new friend she'd picked up on the way into town. For a moment, I imagined what it would be like if she didn’t have to introduce me again. If we could build something that continued rather than beginning again.

I followed her between the shelves.

We spent a while browsing, and eventually Elsie found a book she wanted to buy. She held it up for me to see, a mystery with a dark cover and a title printed in large silver letters.

"Looks good, doesn't it?"

I nodded. "Very dramatic."

"Exactly. Someone's probably going to get murdered."

"That's usually how mysteries work."

She laughed and nudged my arm with her elbow.

It was such a small gesture that I almost missed it.

But I didn't.

I felt the warmth of her arm against mine for a second, and suddenly I was very aware of how close we were standing.

Elsie didn't seem to notice anything unusual. She simply turned back towards the shelf, reading the blurb on another book.

I looked away, pretending to examine a collection of poetry.

I was being ridiculous.

People nudged each other all the time. It didn't mean anything. Still, I found myself smiling at the book in my hands.

We left the shop about half an hour later and walked towards the little park near the edge of town. It was smaller than I remembered, with a few benches, a patch of grass and a children's play area surrounded by a low wooden fence. The swings were painted bright red, and there was a roundabout that had disappeared years before I was born. Elsie leaned her bicycle against a tree and sat down on the grass, stretching her legs out in front of her.

I sat beside her.

For a while, we watched a group of children playing near the swings. Their parents sat on benches nearby, talking and occasionally calling out warnings about climbing too high. The air smelled of cut grass, and somewhere behind us, a dog was barking enthusiastically at something.

"Do you ever get bored here?" I asked.

Elsie looked at me.

"In town?"

"Yeah."

"Sometimes." She picked a blade of grass and began twisting it between her fingers. "It's not exactly exciting, is it?"

I smiled. "Depends what you're comparing it to."

"Well, that's the thing. I don't really know what I'm comparing it to." She shrugged. "I've lived here all my life. Mum says I'll miss it when I leave, but I can't imagine that."

"Are you planning to leave?"

"Eventually."

"Where would you go?"

She considered that.

"London, maybe. Or Brighton. Somewhere with a bit more going on."

I nodded.

"Sounds nice."

"Doesn't it?" She smiled, then looked towards the children. "I just don't want to spend my whole life doing the same things."

I felt something twist inside me.

She had no idea.

She was sitting there talking about wanting a future, wanting new experiences and different places, while I was secretly bringing her back to the same afternoon over and over again.

Of course, I wasn't actually trapping her. At least, I didn't think I was. She'd continue living her life after I left, somewhere beyond my reach. Or perhaps the whole day would reset and nothing she'd done would matter. I still didn't know.

But sitting beside her, I suddenly felt uncomfortable with how much I enjoyed the repetition.

"Do you ever wish you could go back and do something again?" I asked.

She looked at me.

"Like what?"

"Anything. A really good day, maybe. Or a conversation you wish you'd handled differently."

She smiled faintly.

"Sometimes."

"What would you do differently?"

She thought for a moment.

"I dunno. Probably tell people things I didn't say."

"Like what?"

She looked down at the grass, twisting the blade between her fingers.

"Just things."

I waited, but she didn't elaborate.

For the first time since meeting her, Elsie seemed a little guarded. It wasn't dramatic. She didn't suddenly become upset or change the subject in an obvious way. She simply went quiet, looking towards the children in the playground.

I wanted to ask what she meant, but something told me not to. Instead, I leaned back on my hands and looked up at the sky.

"Well," I said, "if I could repeat a day, I'd probably spend it doing something completely different every time."

Elsie laughed softly.

"That sounds exhausting."

"Maybe." I nodded, while watching a group of birds passing.

"I think I'd just find a really good day and stay there."

I turned towards her.

She was smiling again, looking out across the park.

"Wouldn't that be nice?" she said. "A day where nothing bad happens, nobody expects anything from you, and you can just be happy."

I didn't answer immediately.

Because that was exactly what I'd found.

A day where the sun always shone, where school didn't exist, where nobody expected me to be anything other than the girl sitting beside Elsie in the grass.

"Yeah," I said quietly. "It would."

She looked at me and smiled.

For a moment, neither of us said anything.

Then she laughed and shook her head.

"Listen to us. We sound about eighty."

I laughed too, grateful for the change in mood.

We stayed in the park for another hour, talking about books, school and the sort of things we'd like to do when we were older. Elsie wanted to travel, although she admitted she was frightened of flying. I told her I wanted to write a novel, perhaps even get it published one day. She said she'd buy the first copy, and I promised to sign it for her.

It was such a simple promise.

And yet, I knew she'd never remember that I made it.

When the afternoon began to turn towards evening, Elsie checked her watch and sighed.

"I really should get home."

I nodded, although I didn't want her to go.

She stood and brushed the grass from her dress, then held out a hand to help me up.

I took it.

Her fingers were warm.

She pulled me to my feet, and for a moment we stood close enough that I could see the tiny freckles across her nose.

Then she let go.

"Thanks for today," she said.

I smiled.

"Thank you."

She grinned. "You're welcome, I suppose."

We walked back towards the high street together, and at the corner where our paths separated, she stopped beside her bicycle.

"Same time tomorrow?" she asked.

I felt my smile falter.

Tomorrow.

For her, tomorrow would be Sunday, 17 August 1997.

For me, tomorrow would still be another visit to Saturday.

I looked at her, trying to think of something to say.

"I'd like that," I answered eventually.

She smiled.

"Good. I'll be around."

Then she climbed onto her bicycle and rode away.

I watched her go, feeling a strange ache in my chest.

She'd asked to see me tomorrow. Not sometime. Not maybe. Tomorrow. And I couldn't.

Not without staying.

I walked back towards the factory slowly, the evening sunlight stretching long shadows across the road. The town was beginning to settle, shops closing and people heading home. It was beautiful in a way that made me feel almost angry. Everything was so alive, so full of possibility, and yet I was only allowed to borrow it for a few hours at a time.

When I reached the window, I stood beneath it for a long time.

I could stay.

The thought was becoming more familiar now, less frightening.

I could simply not climb through.

I could let the evening pass, find somewhere to sleep, and wake up tomorrow in a world where Elsie would remember me.

But I didn't have enough money. I didn't have anywhere to stay. And I had parents waiting for me in 2026, parents who loved me and would never understand why I'd disappeared.

I climbed through the window.

The cold air of May greeted me, and the factory returned to its familiar silence.

My phone lit up.

A few minutes had passed.

I sat down at the desk and opened my journal, intending to write about the afternoon. I wanted to record the conversation in the park, the things Elsie had said about leaving town, and the way she'd held my hand when helping me up.

But when I put my pen to the paper, I couldn't think of anything to write.

All I could hear was her voice.

Same time tomorrow?

I stared at the blank page.

Then I wrote:

She asked me to see her tomorrow.

I paused.

Underneath, I added:

I wish I could.

I closed the journal and rested my forehead against it.

For the first time since discovering the window, I didn't feel particularly lucky.

I felt as though I'd found something wonderful, only to discover that I wasn't allowed to keep it.

Chapter Ten

I lasted until Thursday before I did something I was properly ashamed of. Not the sort of ashamed where you accidentally say something embarrassing in front of the whole class and spend the rest of the day wishing the floor would swallow you. This was different.

It was the kind where you know perfectly well that what you're doing is wrong, but you do it anyway because you've already decided that what you want matters more.

I skipped school.

I'd never done it before. Not properly, anyway. There had been a couple of occasions when I'd convinced Mum I was too ill to go in, usually because I had a test I hadn't revised for or because the thought of spending another day surrounded by people made me want to hide under my duvet. But I'd always stayed home on

those days, feeling guilty and occasionally doing homework to make myself feel better. This time, I put on my uniform, ate breakfast with my parents, collected my bag and left the house at exactly the same time as usual. I even walked towards school, just in case Mum happened to look out of the window.

Then, at the corner by the little supermarket, I turned left instead of right.

It was a ridiculously small decision for something that felt so enormous. One turn, one street, and suddenly I was doing something I'd spent most of my life being too sensible to consider. I kept expecting someone to stop me. A teacher driving past, perhaps, or one of the neighbours asking why I wasn't at school. Nobody did. The town carried on around me, completely uninterested in the fact that Freya was having a minor rebellion.

I'd made the decision the night before, after spending nearly an hour staring at the ceiling and thinking about Elsie's invitation. Same time tomorrow? It had been such a simple thing for her to say, and I knew she hadn't meant anything extraordinary by it. She'd enjoyed spending the afternoon with me and wanted to do it again. That was how friendships worked. You met someone, got along, and arranged to see each other another day. Except I couldn't give Elsie another day.

All I could offer her was the same one, over and over, with slight variations depending on what I said and did.

I'd been wondering whether there was a way around that. Perhaps I could stay longer each visit, right up until midnight, and see whether the window behaved differently. Perhaps there was some other way of travelling between the two times that didn't reset everything. I'd written down several theories, most of them ridiculous, but none of them seemed impossible any more. Not after everything I'd already seen. The trouble was that testing any of them would take time, and I couldn't keep squeezing entire afternoons into the few hours between school and dinner.

So I'd decided to give myself a whole day.

The factory seemed even emptier than usual when I got there. Perhaps because I had gotten used to seeing it in its 1997 glory.

I went straight to the back room, changed out of my school shirt and into the T-shirt I'd packed, then folded my uniform and tucked it into my backpack. I'd brought enough food for the day, along with my journal, some money and a light cardigan for when I returned. My phone was fully charged, although I knew it wouldn't be much use once I crossed over. Before climbing through, I sent Mum a message saying I'd arrived at school. It

was a lie, obviously, and I felt a little sick as I watched the message disappear.

I stood looking at the screen for a moment, then put the phone away.

The window opened with its usual protest, and I climbed through into the sunshine.

By now, the change barely surprised me. The heat, the flowers, the clean factory walls and the sound of traffic had all become familiar. I knew where to put my feet to avoid the rusty pipe, which patch of weeds was least likely to scratch my legs, and exactly how far I needed to walk before I could see the side entrance. It was strange how quickly something impossible could become ordinary. A week ago, I'd been frightened by the whole thing. Now I was annoyed when the window stuck.

I waited for Elsie beside the corner of the building, leaning against the warm bricks and watching a butterfly work its way around a cluster of flowers. I'd decided not to approach her immediately this time. I wanted to see what she did when nobody interrupted her, and perhaps follow her into town to find out where she went before I usually caught up with her. That sounded a little creepy when I thought about it, but I

told myself it was only because I wanted to understand the day better.

She appeared a few minutes later, exactly as expected. Same dress, same bicycle, same little bag. She adjusted the handlebars, brushed her hair away from her face and started towards the road. I watched her go, waiting until she'd reached the bend before following at a distance. She cycled slowly, occasionally standing on the pedals when the road sloped upwards, and once she stopped to let a car pass before turning into a narrow side street. I followed on foot, keeping far enough behind that she wouldn't notice me.

After a few minutes, I lost sight of her.

I stopped at the corner, feeling rather foolish. I'd spent all that time worrying about following her without being noticed, and she'd simply ridden away because bicycles were faster than people. I considered heading towards the bookshop, where I'd seen her on previous visits, but decided to try something different. Instead, I walked through the older part of town, exploring streets I recognised from my own time but had never seen like this.

There was a little square near the church where a market had been set up. Several stalls sold fruit and vegetables, and one had a collection of second-hand

books arranged in wooden crates. I spent a while looking through them, enjoying the strange mixture of familiar titles and covers I'd never seen before. A woman selling flowers offered me a bunch of sweet peas for fifty pence, and I bought them without really thinking about it. They smelled lovely, and I liked the idea of bringing something back from 1997 that wasn't just a piece of paper.

I wandered around the market for another half hour, then sat on a bench beside the church to eat my sandwich. The square was busy with people carrying shopping bags, children running between stalls and older couples stopping to talk to practically everyone they passed. It felt different from the markets I'd seen in 2026, although I couldn't have said exactly why. Perhaps it was the absence of card machines and people photographing everything, or perhaps I was simply noticing details I usually ignored.

I was halfway through my sandwich when someone spoke behind me.

"Those are nice."

I turned.

Elsie was standing beside the bench, looking at the flowers in my lap.

For a moment, I couldn't speak.

She smiled.

"Sweet peas, aren't they?"

"Yeah."

"Love those. Mum grows them in the garden, but ours have gone all scraggly."

I looked at her, trying not to smile too widely.

"Do you want one?"

She blinked.

"What?"

"A flower. You can have one."

She laughed. "Oh, no, I wasn't hinting."

"I know."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

I pulled one of the pink flowers from the bunch and held it out.

She took it carefully, turning it between her fingers.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

She lifted it towards her face and breathed in.

"Lovely."

I watched her for a moment, feeling something warm and slightly embarrassing settle in my chest.

"I'm Elsie, by the way," she said.

"I know."

The words came out before I could stop them.

She looked up.

"You do?"

I felt my stomach drop.

"Oh. I mean, I've seen you around."

"Have you?"

"Yeah. Near the factory."

She nodded slowly, looking amused.

"Right. Well, that explains it."

I smiled awkwardly.

"I'm Freya."

"Nice to meet you, Freya."

There it was again. My name, spoken as though it was the first time she'd ever said it. I wondered whether I'd ever get used to that.

She glanced at the empty space beside me.

"Mind if I sit?"

"Of course not."

She sat down, resting her bag beside her feet, and for a while we watched the market together. Elsie told me she'd been looking for a birthday present for her younger brother, who was apparently obsessed with anything involving dinosaurs. She'd considered buying him a book, but decided he'd probably prefer something he could break within twenty minutes. I laughed, and she launched into a story about the time he'd managed to get a toy dinosaur stuck inside the video recorder. Apparently, her dad had spent most of an evening taking the machine apart while her brother insisted the dinosaur had gone in there voluntarily.

I was beginning to recognise the way Elsie told stories. She always started with the most important detail, then wandered off into little explanations that somehow made everything funnier. She laughed at her own jokes, occasionally losing her place, and she had a habit of looking directly at me when she reached the best part, as though she wanted to make absolutely certain I was enjoying it.

I was.

More than I wanted to admit.

We spent the next hour wandering around the market, looking at things neither of us intended to buy. Elsie insisted on showing me a stall selling handmade jewellery, where she tried on an enormous pair of earrings and asked whether they made her look sophisticated. I told her she looked like she'd robbed a Christmas tree, which made her laugh so hard she had to press her hand against her lap to keep from wetting herself.

Later, we bought ice creams from a little van parked beside the church and sat on the low wall, watching people pass.

It was different from our previous afternoons. There was no bookshop, no long walk through town, and no

conversation about my writing. We were simply spending time together, letting one thing lead to another. I liked that. It felt less like I was trying to recreate something and more like we were discovering something new.

At one point, Elsie asked whether I had a boyfriend.

I nearly dropped my ice cream.

"What?"

She grinned. "A boyfriend. You know, one of those annoying creatures that follows you around and eats all your chips."

I laughed nervously.

"No."

"Girlfriend?"

I looked at her.

She was still smiling, but there was something curious in her expression now, as though she was waiting to see how I'd react.

"No," I said.

"Right."

She took another bite of her ice cream.

I hesitated.

"What about you?"

She shook her head.

"Nope."

"Not interested?"

She shrugged.

"Not in anyone I've met so far."

I smiled faintly.

"Fair enough."

She glanced at me.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You're smiling."

"Am I?"

"Yes."

I looked away, suddenly fascinated by a pigeon investigating a discarded crisp packet.

Elsie laughed softly.

"You're funny, you know."

"Funny strange or funny amusing?"

"Bit of both."

I laughed, and she nudged my shoulder with hers.

It was such a small thing, but this time I didn't look away.

We sat there for a while longer, finishing our ice creams and talking about school. Elsie complained about exams, teachers and the general unfairness of being expected to decide what she wanted to do with her life when she hadn't even worked out what she wanted for dinner most evenings. I told her I understood, which was perhaps the most truthful thing I'd said all day.

Eventually, she checked her watch.

"Oh, I've got to go."

I felt the familiar disappointment.

"Already?"

"Yeah. Promised Mum I'd be home before tea."

She stood and brushed the dust from her dress.

I got up too.

"Well, it was nice meeting you," she said.

I smiled.

"Yeah. You too."

She hesitated, then looked at the flowers I was still holding.

"Thanks for the sweet pea."

"You're welcome."

She smiled, lifting the little flower she'd tucked into the strap of her bag.

"I'll keep it."

I felt something tighten in my chest.

She wouldn't.

Not really.

She'd keep it until I climbed back through the window, and then it would be gone, along with every memory of me.

But I couldn't tell her that.

Instead, I smiled.

"Good."

She started to walk away, then turned back.

"Freya?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you doing anything tomorrow?"

I stared at her.

The question again.

Different words, same impossible answer.

"I don't know," I said.

"Well, if you're around, I might be in town. We could get another ice cream or something."

I'd have given almost anything to be able to say yes.

"Maybe."

She grinned.

"All right. See you, maybe."

Then she disappeared into the crowd.

I stood there for a moment, watching the place where she'd been.

I was beginning to hate that word.

Tomorrow.

It was such an ordinary thing for everyone else. A promise, a possibility, something waiting just beyond the end of the day. For Elsie, tomorrow would arrive whether she thought about it or not.

For me, it was a place I couldn't reach without giving up everything on the other side of the window.

I looked down at the remaining sweet peas.

They were already beginning to wilt in the heat.

I wondered whether they'd survive the journey home.

The walk back to the factory felt longer than usual. The sun was still high, and the streets were busy, but I barely noticed any of it. I kept thinking about the flower Elsie had tucked into her bag, and the way she'd said

she'd keep it. Such a small promise, made without hesitation, and one I knew would never be fulfilled.

When I reached the factory, I sat in the weeds beneath the window and took out my journal.

I wrote about the market, the flowers and the conversation about relationships. I tried to remember exactly how Elsie had asked whether I had a girlfriend, and whether there'd been something in her expression that meant more than simple curiosity. I knew I was probably overthinking it. Elsie seemed comfortable talking about almost anything, and perhaps she'd asked the same question of dozens of people before.

Still, I couldn't stop smiling when I remembered it.

I looked at my watch.

Nearly six.

I'd been in 1997 for hours, and back home it was probably still morning. I wondered whether Mum had received my message, whether school had noticed I wasn't there, and whether anyone had tried calling me. My phone was dead, of course, but I knew it would come back to life when I returned.

I should go.

Instead, I sat there for another ten minutes, watching the insects move through the flowers.

I didn't want to leave.

Not because anything particularly exciting was happening. Elsie had gone home, and I had no plans for the evening. I simply liked being here. The warmth, the sounds, the feeling that I was somewhere nobody expected anything from me.

Eventually, I stood and climbed through the window.

The cold air of May greeted me, and I landed on the dusty floor of the office.

My phone lit up.

There were three missed calls.

Two from Mum.

One from school.

I stared at the screen.

Then a message appeared.

Mum: Freya, school says you haven't been in today. Where are you? Please call me.

My stomach dropped.

I'd been so certain that hardly any time would pass while I was away that I hadn't considered the obvious problem. School didn't need to wait until the end of the day to notice I was missing. They'd probably marked me absent during registration, and Mum would have been contacted almost immediately.

I looked at the time.

Just after nine.

Only a little over half an hour had passed since I'd left home.

But it was enough.

I sat down on the dusty floor, holding my phone in both hands.

For the first time, the two worlds had collided.

And I had absolutely no idea what I was going to tell Mum.

Chapter Eleven

I considered pretending I'd been kidnapped. Not seriously, obviously, but for about three seconds it seemed like a reasonable alternative to explaining why I was sitting on the floor of an abandoned factory at nine in the morning when I was supposed to be in school. Then I remembered that kidnapping generally involved the police, worried parents and possibly being interviewed by someone with a very serious expression. Also, I wasn't entirely sure how I'd explain having my backpack, a half-eaten packet of biscuits and a bunch of wilted sweet peas.

I looked at Mum's message again.

Where are you? Please call me.

The words weren't angry. That was somehow worse. If she'd written something about being grounded until I was thirty, I could have prepared myself for an

argument. Instead, I could practically hear the worry in her voice, and I felt a horrible little twist in my stomach as I imagined her receiving a call from school to say I hadn't arrived.

I pressed her name before I could talk myself out of it.

She answered almost immediately.

"Freya?"

"Hi, Mum."

"Where are you?"

There was no hello, no joke, nothing. Just those three words, spoken so quickly that I knew she'd been holding her phone, waiting for me to call.

"I'm all right."

"That's not what I asked, love. Where are you?"

I looked around the office, at the dusty desks and the old filing cabinets.

"I'm in town."

"Where in town?"

"Near the old factory."

There was a pause.

"The abandoned one?"

"Yeah."

"Freya, what on earth are you doing there?"

I closed my eyes.

"I was going to do some writing."

"Instead of going to school?"

"Yeah."

Another pause, longer this time.

"Are you hurt?"

"No."

"Has somebody upset you?"

"No."

"Did something happen at school?"

I swallowed.

"No, Mum. Nothing happened."

"Then why aren't you there?"

I didn't have an answer that made sense. Not one I could give her, anyway. I could hardly say that I'd found a window into 1997 and had decided spending the day with a girl I'd met there was more important than attending double science.

"I just didn't want to go today."

Mum let out a slow breath.

"All right. I need you to come home now."

"Okay."

"Straight home, Freya. Not in half an hour, not after you've finished writing. Now."

"I will."

"And don't go wandering around that factory. It's dangerous."

I looked towards the window.

"Okay."

Her voice softened slightly.

"We'll talk when you get here."

"All right."

"And Freya?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad you're okay."

I stared at the floor.

"Sorry, Mum."

"I know, love. Come home."

The call ended, and I sat there for another moment, holding the phone against my knee. I felt awful. Not just because I'd been caught, although that was part of it, but because I'd heard how frightened Mum had been. She hadn't known where I was. For all she knew, something terrible had happened to me on the way to school.

And while she'd been worrying, I'd been sitting in the sunshine eating ice cream with Elsie.

I put my phone away and stood up.

The sweet peas were lying beside my backpack, their stems slightly bent and their petals beginning to droop. I picked them up carefully, surprised that they were still there. I'd half expected them to vanish when I crossed

back, like everything else from the afternoon. But they were real. The flowers, the coins in my pocket, the little scraps of paper with Elsie's telephone number. Things from 1997 could come home with me.

I wondered whether that meant other things could too.

Then I remembered Mum waiting at home and pushed the thought aside.

Outside, the morning was grey and damp. I walked quickly, keeping my head down and trying to work out what I was going to say. I could tell Mum I'd been feeling overwhelmed by school, which wasn't entirely untrue. I could say I needed some time alone, which was definitely true. But neither explanation seemed enough to justify what I'd done.

By the time I reached our street, I'd rehearsed about six different versions of the conversation, and all of them ended with Mum looking disappointed.

She was waiting in the kitchen when I came in.

Her laptop was open on the table, and a half-finished cup of tea sat beside it. She'd clearly been working, although I suspected she hadn't got much done since the school called. She looked up as I stepped through the doorway, and for a moment neither of us said anything.

Then she stood and came towards me.

I expected a lecture.

Instead, she hugged me.

It caught me completely off guard. I stood there awkwardly for a second before putting my arms around her. She held me tightly, one hand resting against the back of my head, and I felt my throat tighten.

"Don't do that to me again," she said quietly.

"I won't."

She pulled back and looked at me.

"Promise?"

I hesitated for just a fraction too long.

Her expression changed.

"Freya."

"I promise."

She studied my face, then nodded and stepped away.

"Right. Sit down."

I took a seat at the kitchen table while she returned to hers. For a moment, she simply looked at me, as though trying to work out where to begin.

"Would you like some tea?"

I blinked.

"What?"

"Tea. Would you like some?"

"Yeah. Please."

She got up and filled the kettle, and I watched her moving around the kitchen, doing all the ordinary little things I'd seen her do thousands of times before. Taking a mug from the cupboard, finding the tea bags, checking whether there was enough milk. It was strangely comforting, and I found myself wishing we could simply carry on like this without discussing anything else.

Unfortunately, Mum had other ideas.

"So," she said, sitting down again once the tea was made. "Would you like to tell me what's going on?"

I wrapped my hands around the mug.

"Nothing's going on."

She gave me a look.

"Freya, you told me you were going to school, then went somewhere else entirely. That's not nothing."

"I know."

"And you've been distracted for days. You've barely been eating breakfast, you're constantly disappearing off to write, and yesterday you looked as though you'd forgotten what planet you were on."

I smiled faintly.

"That's a bit dramatic."

"I'm your mother. I'm allowed to be dramatic."

I looked down at my tea.

She waited.

That was one of the things Mum was good at. She didn't rush to fill silences. She simply sat there, giving me enough time to find the words myself. Usually, it worked. If I'd had an argument with someone at school or was worried about a test, I'd eventually tell her. But this time, the truth was so enormous that I couldn't even imagine how to begin.

"I've just got a lot on my mind," I said.

"About what?"

"Stuff."

"Very informative."

She leaned forward slightly and continued.

"Love, I'm not asking because I want to pry into every little thing you think about. You're fifteen. You're allowed to have secrets, and you're allowed to want some privacy. But disappearing on your way to school isn't something I can ignore."

"I know."

"Is somebody bothering you?"

"No."

"Are you unhappy at school?"

I considered that.

"Not really."

"Not really?"

"It's just boring sometimes."

She nodded slowly.

"Well, yes. That's school for you. I don't think anybody's ever described double maths as the highlight of their week."

I laughed.

"But boredom doesn't usually make you skip an entire day."

I looked at the steam rising from my mug.

"I wanted to be somewhere else."

Mum was quiet for a moment.

"Somewhere else?"

"Yeah."

"Anywhere in particular?"

I hesitated.

"Just somewhere I like."

She nodded, although I could tell she was still trying to understand.

"Is that where you've been going to write?"

"Yeah."

"At the factory?"

"Sometimes."

She sighed.

"Freya, that building is falling apart."

"It's not as bad as it looks."

"That's what people say about things just before they fall on their heads."

I smiled.

"I'm careful."

"I'd rather you were careful somewhere that had a roof which wasn't trying to become part of the floor."

I looked down, feeling guilty again.

She reached across the table and rested her hand over mine.

"Listen. If you need somewhere quiet to write, we'll find somewhere. The library, perhaps, or a little café. We can even sort out your room so you've got a proper writing space. But I don't want you going into that building again."

My stomach tightened.

I looked up.

"Mum..."

"No, love. I'm serious."

"But it's where I write."

"You can write somewhere else."

"It's not the same."

She frowned slightly.

"Why not?"

I opened my mouth, then closed it again.

Because nowhere else had a window that led to a summer afternoon in 1997.

Because nowhere else had Elsie.

Because for the first time in my life, I'd found somewhere I didn't feel like I was waiting for something better to happen.

"I just like it there," I said quietly.

Mum looked at me for a long moment.

Then she sighed.

"I know you do. But liking somewhere doesn't make it safe."

I nodded, although I couldn't bring myself to agree.

She squeezed my hand.

"We'll talk to your dad tonight. Not because you're in terrible trouble, but because we need to work out what's going on and make sure you're all right."

I looked up sharply.

"Do we have to?"

"Yes."

"He's going to be angry."

"He'll be worried. There's a difference."

I wasn't entirely convinced.

Mum smiled faintly.

"Although he may also give you one of his speeches about responsibility. If he does, I'll try to keep it under twenty minutes."

I laughed, and she smiled properly for the first time since I'd arrived home.

"There she is."

"What?"

"My daughter. I was beginning to wonder where she'd gone."

The words made something ache inside me.

I wanted to tell her.

For a moment, I genuinely considered it. I imagined taking her to the factory, showing her the window, letting her feel the warm August air on the other side. She'd believe me then. She'd understand why I kept going back, why I'd been distracted, why everything else suddenly seemed less important.

But then I imagined what would happen afterwards.

She'd tell Dad. They'd want to investigate. They'd probably insist I never went through the window alone again, and perhaps they'd decide it was too dangerous altogether. They might contact someone, or try to have the building secured. The window could be boarded up, the factory demolished, the whole thing taken away from me before I'd even begun to understand it.

And Elsie would be gone.

I couldn't risk that.

So I smiled at Mum and took another sip of tea.

"I'm here."

She nodded.

"Good."

We spent the rest of the morning together. Mum had taken some time away from work after the school called, and although she eventually returned to her laptop, she insisted I stay downstairs where she could see me. I sat at the kitchen table with my journal, pretending to work on a story while she answered emails. Every now and then, she'd glance over at me and smile, and I'd smile back.

It should have felt reassuring.

Instead, I felt trapped.

Not because Mum was being unreasonable. She wasn't. She'd been frightened, and she wanted to make sure I was safe. I understood that. But every minute I spent sitting at the kitchen table was another minute I wasn't in 1997, another chance to see Elsie slipping away.

I knew that wasn't logical. The day would be waiting whenever I returned. Elsie would come out of the factory at the same time, wearing the same dress, and I'd be able to meet her all over again. There was no urgency, no reason to feel as though I was missing something.

And yet I did.

I kept thinking about the sweet pea she'd tucked into her bag.

She'd promised to keep it.

Somewhere in the version of the afternoon I'd just left, perhaps she had. Perhaps she'd gone home, put it in a glass of water and thought about the strange girl she'd met at the market. Perhaps she'd shown it to her mum, or pressed it between the pages of a book.

But if I went back tomorrow, none of that would have happened.

I looked at the flowers I'd brought home. They were standing in a little glass on the windowsill, where Mum had put them after noticing them sticking out of my backpack.

"Those are pretty," she'd said. "Where did you get them?"

"At the market."

She'd looked surprised.

"What market?"

I'd mumbled something about a stall in town, and she'd accepted it without further questions.

Now I sat looking at them, wondering whether I should feel guilty for taking something from the past. The flowers had existed in 1997, and now they existed here, nearly thirty years later. Did that mean there were two versions of them somewhere? Had I changed anything by bringing them home? Or did the entire afternoon simply reset, producing another bunch of flowers on the same stall, waiting for someone to buy them?

I didn't know.

There were so many things I didn't know.

And the more I thought about them, the more I realised that I was beginning to care less about understanding the window and more about what it allowed me to do.

I wanted to see Elsie.

That was all.

Dad came home shortly after six.

I heard his car pull into the drive, followed by the familiar sound of the front door opening and his keys landing in the little bowl by the stairs. He called hello, then appeared in the kitchen carrying a shopping bag and looking unusually serious.

"Evening."

"Hi, Dad."

He put the bag on the counter and looked at me.

"Your mum tells me you've been having an adventure."

I winced.

"Not really."

"Apparently, one involving a derelict factory and a rather worried school secretary."

I looked down at my hands.

"Sorry."

He pulled out a chair and sat opposite me.

"All right. Talk to me."

I repeated most of what I'd told Mum. That I'd been feeling restless, that I wanted somewhere quiet to write,

and that I hadn't really thought about what would happen when school noticed I was missing. Dad listened without interrupting, occasionally nodding or asking a question. He didn't raise his voice, which somehow made the whole thing more uncomfortable.

When I'd finished, he leaned back in his chair.

"Freya, I understand wanting some space. I really do. At your age, I spent half my time trying to get away from my parents."

I smiled faintly.

"Did you skip school?"

"Once."

I looked up.

"Really?"

"Yes. And I was caught almost immediately, because apparently walking past the headteacher's car while eating chips at eleven in the morning isn't the cleverest way to avoid attention."

I laughed.

He smiled, then became serious again.

"But here's the thing. When you tell us you're going somewhere, we need to be able to trust that you're actually going there. Not because we want to control every minute of your life, but because if something happens, we need to know where to look."

"I know."

"And that factory worries me."

I looked away.

"It's not that dangerous."

"Freya."

"What?"

"It's abandoned. The council's been trying to get the owners to secure it for years. There are broken windows, rotten floors and goodness knows what else."

I wanted to tell him that the floors were perfectly fine in 1997, but I suspected that wouldn't help my argument.

He leaned forward.

"I'm not going to give you a huge lecture. Your mum's already explained why we're worried, and I think you understand. But we need to agree on something."

I nodded reluctantly.

"No more going into the factory."

I felt my chest tighten.

"Dad..."

"No."

"But..."

"Freya, this isn't negotiable."

I stared at him.

He wasn't angry. That was the worst part. He was calm, reasonable and completely certain that he was doing the right thing.

Mum came into the kitchen carrying a basket of washing and paused when she saw us.

"Everything all right?"

Dad nodded.

"Just sorting things out."

She looked at me, then at him.

"Good."

I wanted to argue. I wanted to explain that the factory was important to me, that it wasn't just some stupid abandoned building where I went to scribble in a notebook. But every argument I could make without revealing the truth sounded childish.

So I nodded.

"Okay."

Dad studied my face.

"Okay?"

"Yeah."

He smiled slightly.

"Thank you."

I looked down.

I hated how relieved he sounded.

After dinner, I went upstairs and shut my bedroom door. I sat on the bed for a long time, staring at my journal. The two scraps of paper with Elsie's telephone number were still tucked between the pages, along with the notes from our afternoons together. I took them out and spread them across my duvet.

Two numbers.

Two little stars.

Two versions of the same moment.

I thought about Mum hugging me when I came home, and Dad sitting opposite me at the kitchen table, explaining why they were frightened. They loved me. I knew that. They weren't trying to make my life miserable or stop me doing something that made me happy.

They just didn't understand.

How could they?

I picked up one of the scraps of paper and ran my thumb over Elsie's name.

I could obey them. I could stop going to the factory, return to my ordinary life and eventually convince myself that the whole thing had been some strange adventure I'd been lucky enough to experience. I could finish school, go to college, perhaps write a novel one day. I could meet other people, make friends, maybe even fall in love with someone who lived in the same century.

It would be sensible.

It would be safe.

It would probably make Mum and Dad very happy.

I looked at the photograph of the three of us on my bedside table. It had been taken during a holiday a couple of years earlier, when we'd spent a week by the coast and Dad had insisted on taking a selfie in front of practically every remotely interesting building we passed. In the picture, Mum was laughing, Dad was pulling a ridiculous face, and I was caught somewhere between smiling and telling him to stop embarrassing me.

I loved them.

I loved our house, our stupid jokes, our Friday films and the way Mum always remembered to buy my favourite biscuits.

But I wanted to see Elsie again.

And that was the part I couldn't explain.

I put the photograph back on the bedside table and opened my journal.

For a while, I simply stared at the blank page.

Then I wrote:

They've told me not to go back.

I paused.

Underneath, I added:

I said I wouldn't.

I looked at the words, feeling a little sick.

Then, after a moment, I wrote one more sentence.

I don't know if I can keep that promise.

I closed the journal and lay back on my bed.

Outside, the rain had started again, tapping softly against the window. I watched the drops running down the glass, following their crooked paths until they disappeared beneath the frame.

Somewhere in 1997, the sun was shining.

And Elsie was waiting to meet me for the first time.

Chapter Twelve

I managed to keep my promise for exactly four days, although I spent most of them looking for reasons why it shouldn't count. Technically, Mum and Dad had told me not to go into the factory. They hadn't said anything about walking past it, or sitting outside, or looking at it from the road. I could probably have argued that climbing through a window didn't really count as going inside either, since I was mostly trying to get out. Unfortunately, I knew perfectly well what they'd meant, and I suspected Dad would be unimpressed by my interpretation.

Friday was awful. Not because anything particularly bad happened, but because everything seemed to take forever. Lessons dragged, people talked about things I couldn't make myself care about, and every time I looked at a clock, only a few minutes had passed. I tried to work on my writing during lunch, but the story I'd

been developing before discovering the window seemed completely uninteresting now. It was about a girl who found a hidden garden behind an old house, which had seemed like a lovely idea when I'd started it. Now I kept wanting to give her a broken window and a girl on a bicycle instead.

On Saturday, Mum suggested we go into town together. I agreed, partly because I wanted to prove I could behave normally and partly because I was tired of sitting in my room thinking about Elsie. We spent the morning wandering around the shops, and Mum bought a new pair of shoes after making me watch her try on approximately seventeen others. We had lunch in a little café near the high street, where she asked about school, my writing and whether I was still enjoying English. I answered everything honestly enough, although I carefully avoided mentioning the factory.

At one point, we walked past the bookshop.

Or rather, the place where the bookshop had been.

In 2026, it was a small shop selling handmade soaps, candles and things made from driftwood. I'd passed it hundreds of times without giving it much thought, but now I found myself stopping outside, staring at the window. There was no sign of Mrs Carter, no narrow shelves packed with second-hand books, and no little

bell above the door. The whole place smelled faintly of lavender even from outside.

Mum noticed me looking.

"Something caught your eye?"

I shook my head.

"Not really."

She glanced at the display.

"Those candles are lovely, actually."

I smiled faintly.

"Yeah."

She went inside to have a look, and I followed, trying not to think about the last time I'd stood in that room. The layout had changed completely, but I could still recognise the shape of the windows and the little alcove at the back where Elsie had found her mystery book. I stood there for a moment, remembering her ridiculous acceptance speech and the way she'd nudged my arm while laughing.

"Freya?"

I looked up.

Mum was holding two candles.

"Which one?"

I blinked.

"What?"

"Sea salt or vanilla?"

I looked at them.

"Sea salt."

"Good choice."

She put the vanilla one back and headed towards the counter.

I followed her, feeling strangely miserable.

It wasn't that I expected the bookshop to still be there. I knew perfectly well that twenty-nine years had passed. Shops closed, people moved away, buildings changed. That was normal. But seeing the place where I'd laughed with Elsie transformed into something completely different made the distance between us feel enormous.

For her, it was still a bookshop.

For me, it was already gone.

On Sunday, Dad decided we should have a proper family afternoon. He'd been working on an article about the council's plans to redevelop an old industrial site near town, and apparently he'd spent so much time looking at planning documents that he needed to get out of the house before his brain turned into a spreadsheet. We drove towards the coast, walked along the beach and stopped for fish and chips on the way home. It was nice. Really nice, actually. Dad told us about a man he'd interviewed who'd spent forty years collecting photographs of local buildings, and Mum spent most of the drive trying to convince him that nobody wanted to hear about the history of a car park while eating their dinner.

I laughed along with them, and for a while I almost forgot about the window.

Almost.

It was during the drive home that Dad mentioned the factory.

He was talking about the redevelopment article, explaining that several old buildings around town were being considered for demolition or conversion. Most were apparently too expensive to repair, and the council

wanted to encourage the owners to do something with them rather than leave them falling apart.

"That old factory near the railway line is one of them," he said casually.

I looked up so quickly that Mum noticed.

"What factory?" She inquired.

"The one Freya's been exploring."

My stomach tightened.

"Oh."

Dad glanced at me in the rear-view mirror.

"Don't worry. I'm not starting another lecture."

I tried to smile.

"Right."

"Apparently, the owners have been approached about selling it. Nothing decided yet, but it's been sitting empty for years. Wouldn't surprise me if somebody finally knocked it down."

I stared out of the window.

Knocked it down.

The words seemed to hang in the air.

Mum made a thoughtful noise.

"Wouldn't be the worst thing. It's an eyesore."

"Exactly," Dad said. "Although some of the old industrial buildings are worth preserving. Depends on the structure."

I barely heard the rest.

The factory could be demolished.

The window could disappear.

I knew it was possible. I'd seen enough abandoned buildings around town to understand that they didn't last forever. But until that moment, I'd treated the factory as something permanent, a place that would always be waiting whenever I needed it.

Now I wasn't so sure.

I wanted to ask Dad when the demolition might happen, whether there were plans, whether anyone had made a decision. But I couldn't without making it obvious how much I cared.

So I sat quietly in the back seat, watching the houses pass.

That night, I couldn't sleep.

I kept imagining arriving at the factory one afternoon to find a fence around it, or a digger parked in the yard, or the whole building reduced to a pile of bricks. I pictured the little back office disappearing beneath rubble, the window broken into pieces, the path to 1997 gone forever.

And Elsie with it.

By Monday morning, I'd made up my mind.

I wasn't going to skip school again. That would be stupid, particularly after what had happened on Thursday. But I could go to the factory afterwards, just for a little while. Mum and Dad wouldn't know, and I'd be home in time for dinner.

I told myself it was only because I wanted to check the building was still there.

That wasn't true, obviously.

I wanted to see Elsie.

School passed in a blur. I paid enough attention to avoid being asked awkward questions, completed most of my work and even managed to contribute something

sensible during English. But underneath it all, I was counting the hours until I could leave.

When the final bell rang, I practically flew out of the classroom.

I took the quieter streets to avoid anyone who might recognise me. I slipped through the broken fence, crossed the yard and hurried into the building. Everything looked exactly as it had before. The same dusty rooms, the same abandoned furniture, the same smell of damp plaster.

I reached the back office and stopped in front of the window.

For a moment, I thought about Mum and Dad.

They'd trusted me.

They'd believed me when I said I wouldn't come back.

I felt guilty, but the guilt was already losing its argument.

I opened the window.

The warm August air touched my face, and I climbed through.

Sunshine.

Flowers.

The distant hum of traffic.

I closed my eyes for a moment, breathing it all in.

Then I smiled.

I was back.

I waited beside the corner of the factory, watching the side entrance. A few minutes later, Elsie appeared with her bicycle, exactly as she always did. The familiar sight made something inside me relax. She was still here. The afternoon was still here. Whatever happened in 2026, this little piece of summer remained untouched.

I stepped forward.

"Hi."

She looked up.

"Hi."

I smiled.

"Going into town?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Same."

She nodded towards the road.

"Fancy walking together?"

"Sure."

We started along the road, and for a while everything felt wonderfully ordinary. Elsie complained about the heat, told me about her dad working overtime and asked whether I lived nearby. I answered as carefully as I could, avoiding anything that might reveal too much. By now, I'd become quite good at it. I knew which questions were safe, which subjects to avoid and how to steer the conversation away from anything that might require me to invent an entire life in 1997.

But that afternoon, something felt different.

Not about Elsie.

About me.

I was beginning to notice how much effort it took to pretend we were meeting for the first time.

Every time she told me something I'd already heard, I had to act surprised. Every time she made a joke I remembered, I had to laugh as though it was new. When

she asked my name, I answered, but part of me wanted to say, You know my name. You've said it dozens of times.

Of course, she hadn't.

Not from her point of view.

And that was the problem.

We reached the high street and wandered towards the market square. Elsie wanted to look at a little stall selling jewellery, and I followed her, remembering the enormous earrings she'd tried on during our previous visit. They were still there, hanging from the same little stand.

She picked them up.

"Look at these."

I smiled.

"Very sophisticated."

She laughed.

"Do you think?"

"Absolutely. You'd look like you'd robbed a Christmas tree."

She burst out laughing.

I smiled too, but the laughter caught somewhere in my chest.

I'd said it before.

Exactly the same joke.

And she'd laughed exactly the same way.

For a moment, I felt as though I was cheating.

Not in the sense of doing something forbidden, but in the sense of winning a game because I already knew the answers. I could make Elsie laugh whenever I wanted. I knew which stories she'd enjoy, which jokes would work and which little comments would make her smile.

But she didn't know any of that about me.

She was meeting a stranger.

I was meeting someone I was beginning to love.

The thought arrived so suddenly that I almost stopped walking.

Love.

I hadn't meant to think it.

I'd been careful not to use that word, even in my journal. I liked Elsie. I fancied her, probably. I enjoyed spending time with her and thought about her far more than was sensible. But love was something bigger, something people wrote songs about and cried over in films.

Surely you couldn't fall in love with someone who didn't remember you.

Could you?

"Freya?"

I looked up.

Elsie was watching me.

"You all right?"

"Yeah."

"You went quiet."

"Sorry. Just thinking."

"About what?"

I looked at her.

Her hair was moving gently in the breeze, and she had a tiny smudge of ice cream on her thumb from the lolly she'd bought earlier. She was looking at me with genuine curiosity, waiting for an answer.

"Nothing important," I said.

She smiled.

"Well, that's a waste of a good thought."

I laughed, and she grinned.

We spent the rest of the afternoon wandering through town. We went into the bookshop, sat on the wall beneath the tree and eventually ended up in the little park near the edge of town. Elsie told me about her plans for college, her younger brother and a holiday her family had taken to Cornwall the previous summer. I listened, occasionally asking questions, but I was quieter than usual.

She noticed.

"You're not much of a talker, are you?"

I smiled faintly.

"Not really."

"That's all right. I talk enough for about six people."

I laughed.

"Yeah, I've noticed."

She nudged my shoulder.

"Cheeky."

I looked at her, and for a moment I wanted to reach out and take her hand.

Not because I expected anything romantic to happen, but because I wanted something real. Something that didn't depend on remembering conversations she'd forgotten. Something I could carry back with me, like the sweet peas or the scraps of paper.

Instead, I kept my hands in my lap.

We sat quietly for a while, watching the children in the playground.

Then Elsie spoke.

"Can I ask you something?"

I turned towards her.

"Sure."

"Are you happy?"

The question caught me completely off guard.

"What?"

"Happy. You know. With things."

I looked at her.

She shrugged.

"You seem a bit sad. Not miserable or anything. Just like you've got something on your mind."

I stared at the grass.

I hadn't expected her to notice.

Most people didn't.

At school, I could sit through an entire day without anyone asking how I felt. At home, Mum and Dad noticed when something was wrong, but that was different. They were my parents. It was practically their job.

Elsie had known me for only a few hours.

And she'd noticed.

"I don't know," I admitted.

She nodded slowly.

"Fair enough."

I looked up.

"That's it?"

"What?"

"You're not going to ask why?"

She smiled.

"Only if you want to tell me."

I felt something tighten in my throat.

For a moment, I wanted to tell her everything. About the window, the repeated afternoons, the fact that I'd met her more times than she could imagine. About how I'd been thinking about her constantly, how I'd started lying to my parents, and how the thought of losing the factory frightened me more than anything else.

But I couldn't.

Not yet.

So I shook my head.

"Maybe another time."

She smiled.

"All right."

Then, after a moment, she reached over and took my hand.

It was such a simple movement that I almost didn't understand what was happening.

Her fingers slipped between mine, warm and slightly sticky from the ice cream, and she gave my hand a gentle squeeze.

"You don't have to be happy all the time, you know."

I looked at her.

She was still watching the playground, as though holding my hand was the most natural thing in the world.

I didn't move.

I barely breathed.

For a while, we sat like that, our hands resting between us on the grass. Neither of us said anything, and I was grateful for it. I didn't think I could have spoken without sounding ridiculous.

Eventually, Elsie turned towards me.

"Better?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She smiled.

"Good."

She didn't let go immediately.

Neither did I.

When she finally withdrew her hand, it was only because she needed to check her watch.

"Oh, blimey."

"What?"

"I really should get home."

I smiled faintly.

"Yeah."

She stood and brushed the grass from her dress.

I got up too, feeling strangely unsteady.

We walked back towards the high street together, talking about nothing particularly important. Elsie seemed perfectly normal, as though nothing unusual had happened. Perhaps it hadn't, from her point of view. Perhaps she held hands with friends all the time.

But I knew I would remember it.

I would remember the warmth of her fingers, the way she'd squeezed my hand, and the fact that she'd noticed I was unhappy without demanding an explanation.

At the corner where we usually separated, she stopped beside her bicycle.

"See you tomorrow?"

I felt the familiar ache.

"Maybe."

She smiled.

"You're very mysterious, Freya."

I laughed softly.

"So I've been told."

She grinned.

"Well, I like a mystery."

Then she climbed onto her bicycle and rode away.

I watched her disappear around the corner.

For a long time, I stood there without moving.

Then I looked down at my hand.

It felt ridiculous, but I could still imagine the warmth of her fingers against mine.

I walked back to the factory slowly, taking the longer route through the quiet streets. The afternoon was beginning to soften, and the shadows stretched across the pavement. I passed the market square, the little shop where we'd bought ice creams and the bookshop with its narrow shelves.

Everything was still there.

Everything would be there again next time.

Except the moments I'd shared with Elsie.

Those belonged only to me.

When I reached the factory, I sat beneath the window and opened my journal.

I wrote about the afternoon, about the jewellery stall and the conversation in the park. I described the way Elsie had asked whether I was happy, and how she'd taken my hand without making a fuss about it.

Then I stopped.

I looked at the words I'd written.

I think I'm falling in love with her.

I stared at the sentence for a long time.

Then I crossed out the first two words.

I closed the journal and held it against my chest.

I knew it was ridiculous.

I knew it was probably impossible.

But sitting there in the warm August sunshine, with the sound of insects buzzing around me and the memory of Elsie's hand in mine, I couldn't pretend any more.

I was falling in love with a girl who would never remember me.

And I had no idea what I was going to do about it.

Chapter Thirteen

The trouble with admitting you're in love with someone is that it doesn't actually solve anything. I'd half expected some sort of revelation, perhaps a sudden understanding of what I was supposed to do next, but all that happened was that I became even more distracted than before. I spent Tuesday morning remembering the feeling of Elsie's hand in mine, Tuesday afternoon trying to write a poem about it, and Tuesday evening deciding the poem was terrible and tearing the page out of my notebook. Then I spent most of Wednesday wondering whether she'd meant anything by it, which was particularly stupid considering she'd already forgotten it had happened.

I didn't go back to the factory on Tuesday. I'd wanted to, obviously, but Mum had arranged for me to help her clear out the cupboard beneath the stairs, a task she'd been threatening to undertake since Christmas.

Apparently, we'd reached the point where opening the door involved accepting the possibility of being buried beneath a collection of shoes, shopping bags and things nobody remembered buying. I spent two hours sitting on the hallway floor, sorting through old board games and trying to convince Mum that we didn't need to keep a broken umbrella just because it had once been expensive.

It was actually quite nice. We found a box of photographs from when I was little, and Mum insisted on showing me practically every single one. There were pictures of me with missing front teeth, me covered in chocolate, me wearing a ridiculous pink hat that I'd apparently refused to take off for three weeks. I laughed at most of them, although I drew the line at the photograph of me sitting naked in a paddling pool with a saucepan on my head.

"Why would you take that?"

Mum looked offended.

"Because you were adorable."

"I look like I'm preparing to cook myself."

"Well, you were a very imaginative child."

I shook my head, laughing, and she slipped the photograph back into the box.

Then she found one of the three of us sitting on a beach. I couldn't have been more than four, and Dad was holding me on his lap while Mum leaned against his shoulder. We were all smiling, and I had a fistful of sand in one hand.

Mum looked at it for a moment.

"That was a lovely holiday."

"Where was it?"

"Devon. You spent most of the week trying to bring the beach back to the cottage in your pockets."

I smiled.

"Sounds like me."

"It does."

She looked at the photograph again, then put it carefully aside.

"We should go away somewhere this summer."

I felt a little twist in my stomach.

"Maybe."

"Your dad was talking about taking a week off in August. We could rent a little cottage somewhere, just the three of us."

August.

I looked down at the photographs scattered across the floor.

"That would be nice."

Mum smiled.

"Good. I'll have a look at some places."

I nodded, although my thoughts had already wandered somewhere else. August meant something completely different to me now. It meant sunshine, the market square, the little bookshop and a girl with a bicycle. It was strange to think that Mum was talking about a holiday that hadn't happened yet, while I'd already spent several afternoons in an August that had ended nearly thirty years ago.

Wednesday was worse.

I woke up thinking about Elsie, which wasn't unusual, but this time I found myself wondering what she was

doing in 2026. Not the sixteen-year-old Elsie I knew, obviously, but the woman she'd become. She'd be forty-five now, assuming she was still alive. Perhaps she had a family. Perhaps she'd moved away, just as she'd talked about doing. She might have children, a partner, a job she loved or hated. She might have forgotten all about the town where she'd grown up.

The thought bothered me more than I wanted to admit.

I'd been so focused on the girl in 1997 that I'd barely considered the fact that she had an entire future beyond that Saturday. A future that had already happened in my world. Somewhere, there might be photographs of her as an adult, records of where she'd lived, perhaps even a social media profile. I could find out what had happened to her.

I could find out whether she was happy.

And that frightened me.

Because what if she wasn't?

What if something terrible had happened to her after 1997? What if she'd never made it to college, never travelled, never left town? What if she was dead?

I sat on the edge of my bed for a long time, staring at my phone.

Then I opened a search engine.

I typed her first name, followed by the name of the town.

Hundreds of results appeared.

Businesses, school records, local news articles, social media profiles. None of them meant anything without a surname. I tried adding the factory's name, but that didn't help much either. There were old planning documents, a few photographs and an article about the building closing in the early 2000s. I clicked through several pages, looking for anything that might connect to Elsie or her father, but found nothing useful.

I needed her surname.

It was such a simple thing. I'd spent hours talking to her, learned all sorts of little details about her life, and yet I'd never thought to ask something as basic as her full name. In a normal friendship, it wouldn't matter. You could ask whenever you liked. But for me, every question had to be asked again, every conversation started from nothing.

I closed the browser.

Perhaps it was better not to know.

Perhaps I should leave the future alone and enjoy the time I had with her.

But the thought stayed with me throughout the day.

After school, I went home first. Mum was working in the kitchen, and Dad had left a note saying he'd be late because of an interview. I made myself a sandwich, sat at the table for a while and pretended to work on my English assignment. Mum asked whether I wanted to help her choose somewhere for our summer holiday later, and I said yes. Then, once she'd gone upstairs for a work call, I packed my journal and slipped out through the back door.

I told myself I'd only be gone for an hour.

That was another lie.

The factory was quiet when I arrived. I went straight to the back room, opened the window and climbed through into the warm August afternoon. The familiar smells greeted me, and I felt my shoulders relax almost immediately. It was becoming a physical reaction now, as though my body recognised the place before my mind had time to catch up. The cold, grey world I'd left behind seemed to fall away, replaced by sunshine and the gentle hum of insects.

I waited for Elsie.

She appeared a few minutes later, pushing her bicycle towards the road. I watched her for a moment, feeling the usual little flutter in my stomach, then stepped forward.

"Hi."

She looked up.

"Hi."

I smiled.

"Going into town?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Same."

She nodded towards the road.

"Fancy walking together?"

I almost laughed.

"Sure."

We started along the road, and I found myself studying her more carefully than usual. The shape of her face, the way her hair moved when she turned her head, the little freckles across her nose. I tried to imagine her

older, perhaps with shorter hair or lines around her eyes, but I couldn't. She was so completely sixteen, so full of energy and plans and little complaints about her family, that the idea of her becoming someone else seemed impossible.

"You're a quiet one," she said after a while.

"Am I?"

"Bit."

"Sorry."

"Don't apologise. Just wondering if I've got something on my face."

I laughed.

"No."

"Good. Because I had toast with jam earlier, and I wouldn't put it past me."

I smiled, then looked away.

We walked into town, talking about school and summer holidays. Elsie mentioned that her family might go camping before she started college, although her dad hadn't decided whether he could get the time off work. I told her my parents were thinking about a holiday too,

which was true, although I carefully avoided mentioning that it would happen twenty-nine years later.

At the market square, we bought drinks and sat on a bench beneath a tree. Elsie kicked off her sandals and stretched her legs out in front of her, looking perfectly content.

I took a breath.

"Can I ask you something?"

She turned towards me.

"Sure."

"What's your surname?"

She blinked, then laughed.

"That's a bit formal, isn't it?"

I felt my face warm.

"Sorry. I just realised I didn't know it."

"Well, I don’t usually introduce myself by full name." She grinned and continued. "It's Whitmore."

I repeated it silently.

Whitmore.

Elsie Whitmore.

It felt strange to finally have the whole name, as though I'd discovered something important that had been hiding in plain sight.

"Why?" she asked. "Planning to send me a letter?"

I laughed.

"Maybe."

"Well, you'll need my address for that."

I hesitated.

She looked amused.

"You're not actually going to send me a letter, are you?"

"Probably not."

"Shame. I like getting post."

I smiled.

"Noted."

She laughed.

"You're a funny one, Freya."

We spent the rest of the afternoon wandering through town, eventually ending up near the little park. Elsie told me about her favourite teacher at school, a woman who'd encouraged her to apply for college even though she wasn't sure what she wanted to study. I listened, asking questions and occasionally making her laugh. But part of my mind was elsewhere, repeating her surname over and over so I wouldn't forget it.

Whitmore.

It was a key.

A way of finding out what had happened to her.

And I wasn't sure whether I wanted to use it.

When Elsie finally had to leave, she smiled and asked whether I'd be around tomorrow. I gave my usual uncertain answer, and she laughed, calling me mysterious before cycling away.

I watched her disappear around the corner.

Then I walked back to the factory, climbed through the window and returned to 2026.

My phone lit up.

Only a few minutes had passed.

I sat down at the dusty desk, opened my journal and wrote her full name at the top of a fresh page.

Elsie Whitmore.

I stared at it.

Then I took out my phone.

I typed the name into the search engine, followed by the town.

The results appeared almost immediately.

There were several people with the same name, but one result caught my attention. It was an old article from a local newspaper, published years earlier, about a community project involving former residents of the town. I opened it and scrolled through the photographs.

And there she was.

Not sixteen any more.

Not wearing a floral dress or standing beside a bicycle.

But unmistakably Elsie.

She looked older, of course. Her hair was shorter, and there were little lines around her eyes when she smiled. But it was the same smile, the same bright expression, the same way of looking directly at the camera as though she was sharing a joke with whoever stood behind it.

I stared at the photograph for a long time.

She was real.

Not just a girl trapped in a repeating afternoon.

She'd grown up.

She'd lived an entire life.

And somewhere, perhaps not very far away, she might still be living it.

I scrolled down to read the article.

It mentioned that Elsie had moved away from town after finishing college, spent several years working abroad and eventually returned to the area. She'd been involved in a local arts project, helping young people develop creative skills through workshops and community events.

I smiled.

Of course she had.

It sounded exactly like something she'd do.

There was no mention of a husband or children, no obvious clue about her personal life. Just a photograph and a few paragraphs about the project.

I searched again, adding details from the article.

More results appeared.

A professional profile. A few mentions in local newsletters. An old photograph from a community event.

I clicked through them, feeling increasingly strange.

It was like looking at the future of someone I knew intimately, except she had no idea I existed.

I found a more recent photograph, taken only a couple of years earlier. Elsie was standing beside a group of young people holding paintings, smiling proudly at the camera. Her hair was beginning to show a little grey at the temples, and she wore glasses now, but there was something wonderfully familiar about her expression.

I felt tears prick at my eyes.

I hadn't expected that.

I wasn't sad, exactly.

I was relieved.

She'd made it.

She'd grown older, travelled, found something meaningful to do. She hadn't disappeared after that Saturday in August. She'd gone on to live a life, one that looked full and interesting and real.

I sat there for a long time, looking at the photograph.

Then I noticed something.

In the background, partly hidden behind the group, was a large noticeboard covered in photographs from previous projects. One of them showed a younger Elsie, perhaps in her twenties, standing beside another woman. They were smiling at each other, their arms around one another's shoulders.

I zoomed in.

The photograph was too small to make out much, but something about the way they stood together made me pause.

I wondered who she was.

A friend? A colleague? Someone she'd loved?

The thought gave me an unexpected little sting of jealousy, which was ridiculous. Elsie had lived nearly thirty years since the afternoon I kept visiting. Of course she'd met people. Of course she'd fallen in love, perhaps more than once.

I had no right to feel anything about it.

But I did.

I closed the photograph and leaned back in the chair.

For the first time, I understood that the girl I was falling in love with wasn't simply waiting in 1997 for me to find her. She had a future. A whole life that continued beyond the summer afternoon I kept borrowing.

And I was beginning to wonder what right I had to interfere with it.

I opened my journal and looked at the page where I'd written her name.

Elsie Whitmore.

Underneath, I wrote:

She's alive. She's happy. She made it.

I paused.

Then I added:

And none of it includes me.

I stared at the words until they blurred slightly.

I didn't know whether that made me feel better or worse.

Because now I knew something I hadn't known before.

Elsie had a future.

And if I ever found a way to stay with her, I might change it.

Chapter Fourteen

I spent most of Thursday trying not to look at photographs of a forty-five-year-old woman I'd never met. Which was a strange way to describe Elsie, considering I'd spent more time with her over the past couple of weeks than with practically anyone outside my family. But that was the problem. The woman in the photographs wasn't the Elsie I knew. She had a different haircut, wore glasses and apparently knew how to organise community art projects. She'd travelled, worked, made friends and done all sorts of things I couldn't begin to imagine. Meanwhile, the Elsie I knew was still sixteen, still riding her bicycle through town on a Saturday afternoon, still complaining about her younger brother putting dinosaurs in the video recorder.

I'd saved one of the photographs to my phone, although I wasn't entirely sure why. It felt wrong somehow, as though I'd taken something private without asking. The

photograph was publicly available, obviously, and it wasn't as though Elsie knew me in 2026. But I kept thinking about how strange it would be if someone I'd met for a few hours somehow knew what I would look like in thirty years. They'd know things about me that I hadn't even experienced yet. They might know where I'd live, what job I'd have, whether I'd been happy. And if they told me, would I still make the same decisions?

That was what bothered me most.

I knew Elsie would grow up. I'd seen proof of it. I knew she'd leave town, travel abroad and eventually return to work with young people. It sounded like a lovely life, at least from the little I'd managed to find. But what would happen if I stayed in 1997 and became part of it? Would she still go to college? Would she still travel? Would she still meet the people who'd become important to her?

Would she even be the same person?

I thought about asking Dad. Not about Elsie specifically, obviously, but about whether knowing the future would change the way someone lived. He was always interested in strange questions, particularly when they gave him an excuse to explain something he'd read. Unfortunately, I couldn't think of a way to bring it up without sounding suspicious, and after the

factory incident, I was trying very hard not to give him any more reasons to worry.

So I asked Mum instead.

We were in the kitchen after dinner, and she was standing at the sink washing a saucepan while I dried the plates. Dad had gone upstairs to finish an article, and the radio was playing quietly in the background.

"Mum?"

"Mm?"

"If you could go back and change something, would you?"

She looked over her shoulder.

"Depends what it was."

"Anything. Something from when you were younger."

She considered that while rinsing the saucepan.

"I'd probably tell myself not to get that awful haircut when I was nineteen."

I laughed.

"Seriously."

"I am serious. It was dreadful."

"Mum."

She smiled and put the saucepan on the draining board.

"All right. I don't know. There are things I'd do differently, I suppose. Everyone has regrets."

"Like what?"

She gave me a suspicious look.

"Are you collecting material for one of your stories?"

"Maybe."

"Right." She handed me a plate. "Well, I suppose there were opportunities I didn't take. People I lost touch with. Things I worried about that turned out not to matter."

"Would you change them?"

She thought for a moment.

"Probably not."

"Why?"

"Because I like where I ended up."

I looked at her.

She smiled.

"I met your dad. We had you. We've got a nice life. If I'd done things differently, perhaps none of that would've happened."

I dried the plate slowly.

"But what if changing something made your life better?"

"Better how?"

"I don't know. Happier."

Mum leaned against the counter, considering the question.

"That's the trouble, isn't it? You wouldn't know."

I frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you might think you're making something better, but you can't know what you'd lose along the way. Perhaps you'd get something wonderful, but miss something else entirely."

I looked down at the tea towel in my hands.

She smiled gently.

"Why? Is your character thinking about changing the past?"

"Sort of."

"Sounds complicated."

"It is."

"Good. Complicated stories are usually the interesting ones."

I laughed faintly.

She turned back to the sink, apparently satisfied.

I stood there for a moment, thinking about what she'd said.

You can't know what you'd lose along the way.

I wondered whether that was true for Elsie too.

Friday afternoon, I went back to the factory.

I'd told Mum I was going to the library, which was technically where I intended to go afterwards if I had enough time. I felt guilty about lying again, but the guilt had become strangely familiar, like a little ache I could ignore if I concentrated on something else. I knew that wasn't a good sign. I'd always been a fairly honest person, mostly because lying made me nervous and I was terrible at remembering what I'd said. Now I was doing it almost automatically.

I took the usual route through the quieter streets, slipped through the broken fence and made my way to the back office. The window was still there, although I noticed that one of the hinges had become looser. It creaked when I opened it, and a little flake of paint fell onto the sill.

I stopped and examined it.

The wood around the hinge was soft, and the screws looked rusty. I tried moving the frame gently, watching the metal shift against the wood.

It wasn't going to last forever.

I knew that already, but seeing the damage made it feel more real. The window wasn't some magical doorway

built to survive centuries. It was an old, broken thing in a building that might soon be demolished.

I wondered what would happen if it broke completely.

Would the connection disappear?

Would I be trapped on whichever side I happened to be on?

I didn't like either possibility.

I climbed through before I could think about it any further.

The warmth of August settled around me, and I stood for a moment beneath the clear sky, breathing in the familiar smell of flowers and dry grass.

For the first time, I found myself wondering whether the people working there had any idea what would happen to the building. Whether they knew it would eventually close, that the walls would crumble and the windows would break. Perhaps some of them would lose their jobs. Perhaps others would move away. The future I'd come from was full of things they couldn't possibly imagine.

I waited for Elsie beside the corner.

She appeared exactly as expected.

The same dress. The same bicycle. The same smile when she noticed me.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Going into town?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Same."

She grinned.

"Fancy walking together?"

I smiled.

"Sure."

We started along the road, and for a while I let the conversation happen naturally. Elsie told me about her dad's overtime, complained about the heat and asked whether I lived nearby. I answered carefully, occasionally asking questions of my own, but I found myself watching her with a different sort of curiosity.

I knew what she would become.

Not everything, obviously. I didn't know the details of her life, the people she'd loved or the things she'd struggled with. But I'd seen enough to know that she would grow older, leave town and eventually return. She'd survive the awkwardness of being sixteen, the uncertainty about college and whatever else the next twenty-nine years had waiting for her.

It made her seem both more real and more fragile.

"You're looking at me funny," she said suddenly.

I blinked.

"Am I?"

"Yeah."

"Sorry."

She laughed.

"Have I got something on my face?"

"No."

"Good. Because if I've been walking around with jam on my chin all afternoon, I'm blaming you."

I smiled.

"Your face is fine."

She grinned.

"Well, thank you very much."

We reached the high street, and Elsie suggested getting something to drink. I agreed, and we went to the little shop near the corner. She chose lemonade, as usual, and I picked a bottle of water. We sat on the low wall beneath the tree, watching people pass.

For a while, we talked about ordinary things. School, music, books. Elsie told me about a film she'd seen recently and insisted I should watch it, although I had to pretend I hadn't already heard her describe the entire plot on a previous visit. I laughed at the right moments and asked questions, but part of me was beginning to feel uncomfortable with how easily I could guide the conversation.

I knew what she'd say if I mentioned writing.

I knew which jokes would make her laugh.

I knew how to make her feel comfortable around me.

And she knew almost nothing about me.

I looked down at my hands.

"Can I ask you something?"

Elsie turned towards me.

"Sure."

"Do you ever worry about the future?"

She laughed.

"All the time."

"Really?"

"Of course. College, exams, jobs, all that rubbish." She took a sip of lemonade. "Why?"

"I was just wondering."

She looked at me thoughtfully.

"Do you?"

"Yeah."

"What about?"

I hesitated.

"Making the wrong choices, I suppose."

She nodded.

"That's fair."

"What if you made a choice that changed everything?"

She grinned.

"Like becoming a famous singer?"

I laughed.

"Something like that."

"Well, I'd probably be terrible at it. Can't sing to save my life."

I smiled, then looked away.

Elsie was quiet for a moment.

"Seriously, though," she said, "I think you've just got to do what feels right."

I looked at her.

"Even if it changes things for other people?"

She considered that.

"Depends what you're changing, doesn't it?"

"Yeah."

"If you're hurting someone, that's different. But you can't spend your whole life worrying about what everyone else wants."

I looked down at my bottle.

She smiled faintly.

"My mum says I'm too selfish sometimes."

I looked at her. "Are you?"

"Probably." She laughed. "But I don't think wanting things for yourself is always bad."

I nodded slowly.

"No."

She leaned back on her hands.

"Anyway, if you spend all your time worrying about what might happen, you'll never do anything."

I looked at her again.

There was something almost painfully ironic about hearing Elsie say that. She was talking about the future as something uncertain, something full of possibilities and risks. But I knew parts of it already. I'd seen her

older, smiling in photographs, living a life that seemed full of meaning.

And I was sitting beside her, wondering whether I had the right to become part of it.

We stayed on the wall for a while longer, then wandered towards the park. Elsie wanted to show me a little path behind the playground that led towards the river, and I followed her through a gap in the trees. The path was narrow and slightly overgrown, with tall grass brushing against our legs and little white flowers growing along the edges.

The river was shallow here, moving slowly between muddy banks. A few ducks drifted near the reeds, and the water reflected the bright sky in broken patches. Elsie leaned her bicycle against a tree and sat down on the grass, patting the ground beside her.

I sat.

For a while, neither of us said anything.

It was nice.

I'd become so used to talking with Elsie that I'd almost forgotten how comfortable silence could be. She didn't seem bothered by it. She simply watched the water,

occasionally picking at the grass or adjusting the bracelet around her wrist.

I looked at the bracelet.

"That's pretty."

She glanced down.

"This?"

"Yeah."

She smiled.

"My gran gave it to me."

I leaned a little closer.

It was a simple silver chain with a tiny charm shaped like a star.

"I've had it since I was little," she said. "She said it was for luck."

"Do you believe in luck?"

Elsie considered that.

"Sometimes."

"Only sometimes?"

"Well, when something good happens, obviously." She grinned. "When something bad happens, I blame somebody else."

I laughed.

She turned the bracelet around her wrist, looking at the little star.

"Gran died last year."

My smile faded.

"Oh. I'm sorry."

She shrugged slightly.

"It's all right. I miss her, but she was poorly for a long time."

I nodded.

She looked towards the river.

"She used to take me here when I was little. We'd feed the ducks and she'd tell me stories about when she was young."

I listened quietly.

"She was always saying how quickly life goes," Elsie continued. "I used to think that was a bit daft, because everything seemed to take forever when I was little."

I smiled faintly.

"And now?"

She laughed softly.

"Now I'm sixteen and apparently supposed to know what I'm doing with my life. So maybe she had a point."

I looked at her.

She was smiling, but there was something sad beneath it.

I wanted to take her hand.

Instead, I rested mine on the grass beside her.

After a moment, she looked down.

Then she moved her hand closer.

Our fingers touched.

Neither of us said anything.

She slipped her hand into mine, and I felt that familiar warmth spread through my chest.

This time, I didn't freeze.

I gently squeezed her fingers.

She squeezed back.

We sat like that for a while, watching the ducks move through the water. The sun was warm against my face, and a light breeze stirred the grass around us. I could hear distant traffic, the occasional bird calling and the soft movement of the river against the bank.

It felt perfect.

And that frightened me.

Because I knew how easily I could become addicted to moments like this. I could return tomorrow, or the day after, and find another way to sit beside Elsie, another conversation that led us here, another chance to hold her hand.

I could collect hundreds of these moments.

Thousands, perhaps.

And none of them would exist for her after I left.

I looked down at our hands.

"Elsie?"

"Mm?"

"Do you ever think about how people remember things differently?"

She turned towards me.

"What do you mean?"

"Like, you can have a really important moment with someone, but maybe they don't remember it the same way you do."

She considered that.

"Yeah. I suppose."

"Does that bother you?"

"Sometimes."

I looked at her.

She smiled faintly.

"But I think that's just how people are. You can't make someone remember something the way you do."

I swallowed.

"No."

She squeezed my hand.

"Doesn't mean it wasn't important."

I looked at her.

For a moment, I couldn't speak.

She smiled.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You're doing that thing again."

"What thing?"

"Looking like you're about to cry."

I laughed shakily.

"I'm not."

"All right."

She didn't sound convinced.

I looked away, blinking quickly.

I didn't want to cry. Not here, not in front of her, and certainly not when I couldn't explain why. But something about what she'd said had reached a part of me I'd been trying very hard to ignore.

Doesn't mean it wasn't important.

I wanted to believe that.

I wanted to believe our afternoons mattered, even if I was the only one who remembered them.

But I was beginning to understand that remembering something alone could be a very lonely way to love someone.

We stayed by the river until Elsie checked her watch and announced that she really ought to go home. We walked back towards town together, our hands occasionally brushing as we pushed through the narrow path. Neither of us mentioned holding hands, and I was grateful for that. It felt like something we didn't need to explain.

At the corner where we usually separated, Elsie stopped beside her bicycle.

"I've had a lovely afternoon," she said.

I smiled.

"Me too."

She hesitated.

Then she stepped closer and gave me a quick hug.

It lasted only a second or two, but I felt her arms around my shoulders and the warmth of her cheek against mine.

When she stepped back, she was smiling.

"See you tomorrow?"

I looked at her.

The familiar ache returned.

"Maybe."

She laughed softly.

"You're impossible."

"I know."

She grinned.

"Well, I hope you do come."

Then she climbed onto her bicycle and rode away.

I watched her disappear around the corner, feeling strangely hollow.

I'd spent hours with her. We'd laughed, talked, held hands and shared things that felt personal and important. She'd told me about her gran, about the bracelet and the river. She'd trusted me with a little piece of her life.

And tomorrow, she wouldn't remember any of it.

I walked back to the factory slowly, thinking about the photograph of older Elsie on my phone. The woman who'd travelled, worked with young people and lived an entire life without me. I wondered whether she'd ever returned to the river, whether she still wore the bracelet, whether she remembered sitting there as a teenager and talking about her gran.

Perhaps she did.

Perhaps that little place was still important to her.

I reached the factory and stopped beneath the window.

The frame looked worse than it had earlier. One of the screws had shifted, and the wood around the hinge had

split slightly. I touched it carefully, feeling the softness beneath the paint.

I should probably tell someone.

But who?

Mum and Dad would have the building secured. The council might decide to board it up. Anyone else would probably think I was mad.

I climbed through carefully, trying not to put too much weight on the frame.

The cold air of May greeted me, and I landed on the dusty floor.

My phone lit up.

A few minutes had passed.

I sat down at the desk and opened my journal.

I wrote about the afternoon, about Elsie's gran and the little silver bracelet. I described the river, the ducks and the way she'd taken my hand.

Then I paused.

There was something I hadn't written about yet.

Something that had been bothering me for days.

I looked at the date at the top of the page.

Friday, 5 June 2026.

Then I looked at the list of visits I'd made.

I'd been going back to 1997 for more than two weeks now. Not every day, but often enough that the afternoons were beginning to blur together. I'd spent hours there each time, sometimes most of the day, while only minutes passed in 2026.

I took out my watch and compared it with my phone.

The watch was several hours ahead, as usual. I'd reset it after every visit, but this time I left it alone for a moment, staring at the difference.

Then I opened my journal to the first page.

Thursday, 21 May.

That was when I'd first found the window.

I counted the visits, estimating how long I'd spent in 1997 each time. Some had been short, barely an hour. Others had lasted most of an afternoon. I added the numbers together, checking them twice because I couldn't quite believe the result.

I'd spent more than thirty hours in 1997.

Thirty hours that hadn't really passed in 2026.

Thirty hours of walking, talking, eating, laughing and simply existing.

I sat back in the chair.

It was more than a full day.

An entire day of my life that nobody else in 2026 had experienced.

I thought about the photographs Mum had shown me, the little girl on the beach with sand in her hands. I'd grown older every day since then, one ordinary day at a time, just like everyone else.

But now I was doing something different.

I was adding hours to my life that didn't belong to the world I'd come from.

I looked down at my hands.

They looked exactly the same.

Of course they did. Thirty hours wasn't going to make any visible difference. But the thought wouldn't leave me alone.

If I kept going back, kept spending hours and days in 1997 while only minutes passed at home, what would happen to me?

Would I keep ageing normally?

Would I eventually become older than I was supposed to be?

I imagined turning sixteen while everyone at school still thought I was fifteen. Then seventeen, eighteen, perhaps even older, while Mum and Dad continued living through ordinary days.

It sounded ridiculous.

But so did travelling through time.

I opened my journal to a fresh page and wrote:

Question: Does my body age while I'm in 1997?

I stared at it.

Then I added:

If it does, how much time can I afford to spend there?

I looked towards the window.

For the first time, I realised that the danger might not simply be getting trapped in the past.

It might be what happened to me while I kept coming back.

Chapter Fifteen

By Saturday morning, I'd worked out that I was either ageing at a completely normal rate or had discovered the world's least practical way of becoming immortal. Unfortunately, there wasn't much I could do to find out which one it was. I couldn't exactly walk into a doctor's surgery and ask whether I'd aged an extra thirty hours without explaining where those hours had come from. I considered measuring my height every day, but I hadn't grown noticeably in months, and I suspected the difference would be too small to tell anyway. I even looked up whether fingernails grew at a predictable rate, which led me down a particularly boring collection of websites about keratin.

Eventually, I decided the simplest answer was probably the correct one. My body experienced time normally in 1997. I got hungry, tired and thirsty. My hair still needed washing, my feet hurt after walking for hours,

and I'd developed a small blister on my heel from wearing the wrong shoes on one of my longer visits. It seemed reasonable to assume I was ageing too.

The problem was that I didn't know how much it mattered.

Thirty hours sounded like a lot when I wrote it down, but it was barely more than a day. If I spent another thirty hours there, I'd be two days older than everyone thought. Another three hundred, and I'd be nearly two weeks ahead. I tried calculating how much time I could spend in 1997 before the difference became noticeable, but the numbers quickly got depressing.

A thousand hours was more than forty days.

Ten thousand was over a year.

I stared at the calculator on my phone, feeling slightly sick.

I could become sixteen while my birth certificate still said I was fifteen. If I kept going back, I could eventually become old enough to leave school, get a job and live on my own, while Mum and Dad were still expecting me to finish my GCSEs.

Of course, that would require spending an enormous amount of time in 1997, and I wasn't sure I could

manage it even if I wanted to. I had to come home eventually. I needed clean clothes, proper meals and a place to sleep. More importantly, I had parents who noticed when I disappeared, even if the clock insisted I'd only been gone for a few minutes.

Still, the possibility bothered me.

I wondered whether there was a way to stop myself ageing while I was there.

Then I realised how ridiculous that sounded and put my phone down.

Mum knocked on my bedroom door just before ten.

"Morning, love. You awake?"

"Yeah."

She opened the door and looked at me sitting cross-legged on the bed, surrounded by notebooks.

"Planning world domination?"

"Something like that."

"Excellent. Could you schedule it around the washing? I've got a load that needs hanging out."

I laughed.

"Sure."

She came in and sat on the edge of the bed, glancing at the papers.

"How's the writing going?"

"All right."

"Still working on that story about the girl who finds somewhere she shouldn't?"

I smiled faintly.

"Yeah."

"Sounds like she's causing you a lot of trouble."

"You have no idea."

Mum laughed.

"Well, perhaps that's a good sign. If she was sensible and stayed home doing her homework, it wouldn't be much of a story."

I looked at her.

"Wouldn't it?"

"Probably not. Although I'd quite like her as a daughter."

I laughed, and Mum smiled.

Then she became a little more serious.

"Your dad and I were talking last night."

My stomach tightened.

"About what?"

"You."

"Oh."

"Don't look so worried. You're not being sent away to a convent."

I smiled weakly.

"We just wanted to check you're all right. You've been a bit distant lately, and after what happened with school..."

She let the sentence trail off.

I looked down at my notebook.

"I'm fine."

"I know you keep saying that."

"Because I am."

Mum studied me for a moment.

"All right. But if there's something bothering you, you can tell us."

I nodded.

She reached over and brushed a strand of hair away from my face, the way she used to when I was little.

"You're allowed to have your own life, Freya. We know that. We just don't want you disappearing from ours."

The words caught me off guard.

I looked up.

Mum smiled gently.

"That's all."

I swallowed.

"Okay."

She stood.

"Now, if you've finished planning your evil empire, there's a basket of washing downstairs."

I laughed.

"Coming."

She left the room, and I sat there for a moment, staring at the doorway.

We just don't want you disappearing from ours.

I wondered whether she'd meant it as anything more than a little joke.

Probably not.

But I couldn't stop thinking about it.

I spent most of Saturday at home. Mum and Dad had decided we should have a quiet weekend, which apparently involved cleaning the house, doing the shopping and finally sorting out the cupboard in the kitchen where we'd been keeping approximately twelve thousand plastic containers with no matching lids. I helped, partly because I felt guilty about lying to them and partly because I needed something to do that didn't involve thinking about Elsie.

It didn't work particularly well.

Every time I found myself alone, my thoughts drifted back to 1997. I wondered what Elsie would be doing at that exact moment, then remembered that there wasn't really an exact moment for her. She was always waiting

in the same Saturday afternoon, and I could return whenever I wanted.

I wondered whether she'd be surprised if I told her I'd spent the morning cleaning out a cupboard in 2026.

Probably.

She'd probably laugh and ask why the future hadn’t invented cupboards that cleaned themselves.

I smiled at the thought.

Then I felt sad.

It was becoming exhausting, missing someone who wasn't technically gone.

On Sunday afternoon, I finally told Dad I wanted to go for a walk.

He was sitting in the living room with his laptop balanced on his knees, reading through something for work. Mum had gone to visit a friend, and the house was quiet.

"Where to?" he asked without looking up.

"Just around town."

He glanced at me.

"Anywhere particular?"

"Not really."

He studied me for a moment.

"Not the factory?"

I hesitated.

"No."

He nodded.

"All right. Take your phone."

"I will."

"And be back for dinner."

"Okay."

He smiled.

"Have fun."

I went upstairs, changed into comfortable clothes and packed my journal. I stood in front of the mirror for a moment, looking at myself. I didn't look any different from the girl who'd discovered the window. Same hair, same face, same slightly tired expression.

But I felt different.

Older, perhaps.

Not physically, although I was beginning to wonder about that too. Just different in a way I couldn't explain.

I left the house and walked towards town.

At the corner by the supermarket, I stopped.

Right would take me towards the high street.

Left would take me towards the factory.

I stood there for a moment, watching the traffic pass.

Then I turned left.

I knew I was breaking my promise again. I knew Mum and Dad would be upset if they found out. But I also knew that if I didn't go, I'd spend the rest of the afternoon thinking about Elsie and wishing I had.

The factory was quiet when I arrived. It always was. I slipped through the broken fence and made my way to the back office, careful to avoid the loose boards near the entrance. The window was still there, although the damaged hinge looked worse than before.

I touched the frame gently.

It shifted beneath my fingers.

I frowned.

The wood around the hinge had split further, and one of the screws was almost completely loose. I tried lifting the frame slightly, but it sagged to one side.

That was new.

I stood there for a moment, considering what to do.

I could probably fix it. Dad had a toolbox in the garage, and I knew enough about basic repairs to tighten a screw or replace a hinge. But bringing tools into the factory would be difficult, and I wasn't sure whether repairing the window might somehow affect whatever made it special.

Still, leaving it like this seemed worse.

I made a note in my journal.

Window hinge getting worse. Need to repair before it breaks.

Then I climbed through carefully, trying not to put any weight on the frame.

The warm air greeted me, and I stepped down into the grass.

For a moment, everything felt normal.

Then I noticed something strange.

The factory yard was quieter than usual.

I could still hear distant machinery, but the familiar sound of someone moving around inside the building was missing. The side entrance was closed, and there was no sign of Elsie.

I looked at my watch.

She should have appeared by now.

I waited.

A minute passed.

Then another.

I frowned.

Perhaps I'd arrived slightly earlier than usual. I wasn't entirely sure how the timing worked, and my watch wasn't reliable until I checked it against the church clock. I walked towards the corner of the building and looked down the road.

Nothing.

I waited another five minutes.

Still nothing.

A cold feeling settled in my stomach.

Elsie had always appeared.

Every single time I'd come through the window, she'd emerged from the factory with her bicycle a few minutes later. Sometimes I'd spoken to her immediately, sometimes I'd followed her into town, but the beginning had always been the same.

Now she wasn't there.

I looked back towards the side entrance.

Had something changed?

I walked towards the door, listening for voices inside. The building was quiet, although I could hear a faint mechanical hum somewhere deeper within it.

I tried the handle.

Locked.

I stepped back, feeling increasingly uneasy.

Perhaps she was simply late.

People were late sometimes.

But not in a day that always began the same way.

I returned to the corner and waited another ten minutes.

Then I heard a bicycle bell.

I turned so quickly that I nearly tripped over my own feet.

Elsie was coming down the road from the direction of town.

Not out of the factory.

Towards it.

She was cycling slowly, one hand resting on the handlebars while the other held a small paper bag. When she noticed me, she slowed and looked curious.

"Hi."

I stared at her.

"Hi."

She stopped beside me.

"Everything all right?"

"Yeah."

She glanced towards the factory.

"Waiting for someone?"

I hesitated.

"Sort of."

She smiled.

"Well, don't let me interrupt."

I looked at her.

"Where have you been?"

She blinked.

"What?"

I realised how strange the question sounded.

"Sorry. I just... I thought you worked here."

She laughed.

"Me? No. My dad does."

"Oh."

"I just popped into town to get something for him."

She lifted the paper bag.

"Forgot his lunch, didn't he? Again."

I smiled weakly.

"Right."

She looked at me for a moment.

"Have we met?"

My stomach tightened.

"No."

She grinned.

"Didn't think so. I'm Elsie."

I swallowed.

"Freya."

"Nice to meet you, Freya."

She smiled, then glanced towards the factory entrance.

"Anyway, I'd better get this to Dad before he starts eating the paperwork."

I laughed faintly.

"Yeah."

She climbed off her bicycle and pushed it towards the side door. This time, she took a key from her bag and unlocked it.

I watched her disappear inside.

Then I stood very still.

Something had changed.

Not a small variation caused by something I'd said or done. I hadn't spoken to Elsie before she appeared. I hadn't gone into town or interfered with anything. I'd simply arrived through the window, exactly as I always did.

And the day had begun differently.

I looked at my watch.

The hands were moving normally.

The sun was shining.

The factory stood around me, solid and familiar.

But Elsie had come from the wrong direction.

I waited beside the building, trying to understand what that meant.

Perhaps the window wasn't resetting the day as perfectly as I'd thought.

Perhaps the changes I'd made during previous visits were beginning to carry over.

Or perhaps something else was happening.

I didn't know.

And for the first time since discovering the window, I wasn't sure what would happen next.

I sat down in the grass and opened my journal.

At the top of a fresh page, I wrote:

Sunday, 7 June 2026.

Then, underneath:

Something is different.

I stared at the words for a moment.

Then I looked towards the factory door.

Elsie was inside.

The afternoon was still warm and bright.

But the rules I'd been relying on were beginning to change.

And I had no idea whether that was a good thing.

Chapter Sixteen

I waited another twenty minutes before admitting that sitting in the grass wasn't going to tell me anything. During that time, a man came out of the factory carrying a crate, a delivery van pulled into the yard and someone inside shouted something about a missing set of keys. All perfectly ordinary things for a factory on a Saturday afternoon, apparently. The only extraordinary thing was that Elsie hadn't come back out, and I was beginning to feel rather stupid for watching a door as though it might explain itself.

I checked my watch again. It was approaching four, although I still wasn't entirely sure how the watch managed to behave when I crossed over. I'd reset it so many times that I'd given up expecting it to tell me anything useful beyond how long I'd been walking around. What I did know was that Elsie usually

appeared within minutes of my arrival, and I'd now been waiting nearly half an hour.

The obvious explanation was that I'd somehow arrived at a different point in the afternoon. Perhaps the window didn't always take me to exactly the same moment. Perhaps the time on the other side moved forward a little each time I visited, so slowly that I hadn't noticed until now.

But that didn't explain why Elsie had come from town instead of leaving the factory.

Unless I'd been wrong about her routine all along.

I opened my journal and looked back through my notes. On my first visit, Elsie had emerged from the side door and ridden towards town. The same thing had happened on every subsequent visit, except the times I'd intercepted her before she reached the road. I'd never actually seen what she did before coming outside, and I'd never asked why she'd been in the factory.

I'd simply assumed she was visiting her dad.

Which, now that I thought about it, was a fairly reasonable assumption.

Still, it didn't explain the change.

I was considering going into town to look for something to eat when the side door opened.

Elsie appeared, pushing her bicycle with one hand and carrying the empty paper bag in the other. She looked slightly annoyed, although the expression disappeared when she noticed me.

"Oh, you're still here."

I stood up.

"Yeah."

She smiled.

"Find whoever you were waiting for?"

"Not yet."

"That's a shame."

She leaned her bicycle against the wall and brushed her hair away from her face.

"Are you all right? You look a bit lost."

I laughed weakly.

"Something like that."

She studied me for a moment.

"Well, I'm heading into town. Fancy coming?"

I looked at her.

The invitation was so familiar that it almost made me laugh. Different wording though, but same result. Elsie asking me to walk with her, as though the universe had decided that whatever else changed, we were still supposed to end up together.

"Sure."

She grinned.

"Good. You can help me decide what to buy my brother for his birthday."

We started towards the road, and I tried to behave normally. Elsie chatted about her brother, her dad and the heat, while I listened and occasionally asked questions. But I couldn't stop thinking about the change in her routine. Every time she mentioned something I'd heard before, I wondered whether it was exactly the same or slightly different. I found myself paying attention to tiny details, as though I could somehow solve the mystery by noticing which words she used.

After a while, Elsie looked at me.

"You're a very quiet girl."

"Sorry."

"Don't apologise. Just wondering if I'm boring you."

I laughed.

"No."

"Good. Because I can get much worse."

I smiled.

She grinned.

"There she is."

The words made me think of Mum.

I looked away.

We reached the high street and wandered towards the market square. Elsie wanted to look at the little stall selling jewellery, and I followed her, half expecting her to pick up the enormous earrings she'd tried on during previous visits. She didn't. Instead, she stopped beside a display of small silver charms and examined a little pendant shaped like a moon.

"That's nice," she said.

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She turned it over in her fingers.

"My brother would hate it."

I laughed.

"Probably."

"Shame. I quite like it."

She put it back and moved on.

I stood there for a moment, staring at the pendant.

Another difference.

Not a huge one, but enough to make me uneasy.

I hurried after her.

We spent the next hour wandering around town, eventually buying a small plastic dinosaur from a toy shop near the square. Elsie seemed pleased with her choice, although she admitted her brother would probably lose it within a week. We stopped for drinks afterwards and sat on a bench beneath a tree, watching people pass.

I tried to enjoy myself.

And for a while, I did.

Elsie told me a ridiculous story about her brother trying to teach their dog to fetch his slippers, which apparently ended with the dog chewing one of them and refusing to give it back. I laughed, and she laughed too, leaning against my shoulder for a moment as she tried to catch her breath.

It felt wonderful.

Then I remembered that she hadn't done that before.

I looked at her.

She was still smiling, completely unaware of the thoughts racing through my head.

"Can I ask you something?"

She turned towards me.

"Sure."

"Have you been into town already today?"

She blinked.

"Yeah."

"Before you went to the factory?"

"Yeah. Why?"

I hesitated.

"Just wondering."

She laughed.

"You're a curious one, aren't you?"

"Sometimes."

She took a sip of lemonade.

"Had to get Dad's lunch. He forgot it this morning, so Mum sent me down with it."

I nodded.

"Right."

"Why?"

I looked at her.

"Does that happen often?"

"What, Dad forgetting his lunch?"

"Yeah."

She laughed.

"All the time. He's hopeless."

I smiled faintly.

"But usually you bring it from home?"

"Usually."

"And today you went into town first?"

She nodded.

"Yeah. Mum was busy, so I had to pick something up from the bakery."

I stared at her.

That explained part of it.

But not all.

On previous visits, Elsie had emerged from the factory carrying nothing. Today she'd arrived with a paper bag, gone inside and come back out again. Perhaps her dad had forgotten his lunch on every version of the day, but she'd simply brought it from home before I arrived. Perhaps the timing had shifted, or perhaps she'd taken a different route because of something else.

I didn't know.

And I was beginning to realise that I couldn't know.

I only ever saw a tiny part of Elsie's day.

Everything else was happening beyond my view, whether I was there to witness it or not.

The thought was strangely comforting.

It meant Elsie wasn't simply a collection of repeated conversations and predictable movements. She had a whole life, even within the boundaries of that Saturday. Things happened before I met her, and things would happen after I left. She made decisions, changed her mind, forgot things and did all the ordinary little things people did.

She was real.

Of course she was real.

But sometimes, with all the repetition, I'd almost forgotten that.

"Freya?"

I looked up.

Elsie was watching me.

"You're doing it again."

"What?"

"Looking like you've wandered off somewhere."

I laughed.

"Sorry."

She smiled.

"Don't be. Just tell me if you're bored."

"I'm not."

"Good."

She leaned back on the bench, stretching her legs out in front of her.

"Because I've got a question."

I turned towards her.

"Okay."

She hesitated.

Then she smiled slightly.

"Are you always this mysterious, or is it just me?"

I laughed.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you ask loads of questions about me, but you don't tell me much about yourself."

I felt my stomach tighten.

"Do I?"

"Bit."

I looked down at my hands.

She wasn't wrong.

I'd spent so much time learning about Elsie that I'd barely considered what she might want to know about me. I knew her favourite books, her family, her plans for college and the little scar above her ankle. I knew she hated flying, loved the idea of travelling and thought most people took themselves far too seriously.

But what did she know about me?

That I liked writing. That I was quiet. That I sometimes looked sad. Not much else. Only what she had learned in the last couple of hours. Not in the last many Saturday Afternoons.

I smiled faintly.

"Sorry."

She laughed.

"Stop apologising."

"Sorry."

She gave me a look.

I laughed.

"Right. Sorry."

She shook her head, grinning.

"Hopeless."

We sat quietly for a moment.

Then she turned towards me.

"Tell me something."

"Like what?"

"Anything. Something about you."

I considered that.

It should have been easy. I had fifteen years of memories, a family, a school, a house and all sorts of

ordinary experiences I could talk about. But almost everything I thought of belonged to a world Elsie didn't know.

I couldn't tell her about the films I'd watched last weekend, the music I listened to or the things I did on my phone. I couldn't mention school without worrying about saying something that didn't fit. Even talking about my parents felt complicated, because they were teenagers in her time.

So I chose something simple.

"I like the sea."

She smiled.

"That's a start."

I laughed.

"Okay. I like the sea, I hate mushrooms, and I've never been on a plane."

She looked surprised.

"Never?"

"No."

"Me neither."

"I know."

She blinked.

I froze.

"You know?"

I laughed awkwardly.

"I mean, you said you didn't like flying."

She frowned slightly.

"Did I?"

I felt my stomach drop.

"Earlier."

She thought for a moment.

Then she shrugged.

"Oh. Must've done."

I smiled weakly.

That had been close.

She leaned back against the bench.

"All right. What else?"

I thought for a moment.

"I like writing stories."

She smiled.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"What sort?"

"Mostly things about people. Sometimes mysteries."

"Sounds good."

I looked at her.

"I've been writing one about a girl who finds a way into another time."

Elsie laughed.

"Like time travel?"

"Yeah."

"Brilliant. Does she go into the future or the past?"

"The past."

"Why?"

I hesitated.

"She meets someone there."

Elsie smiled.

"Someone interesting?"

"Very."

"Ah."

She looked amused.

"Romance, then?"

I felt my face warm.

"Maybe."

She laughed.

"Nothing wrong with a bit of romance."

I smiled.

"Yeah."

She leaned closer.

"So what happens?"

I looked at her.

"I don't know yet."

"Well, that's no good. You're the writer."

I laughed.

"Still working it out."

She considered that.

"Does she want to stay in the past?"

I swallowed.

"Yeah."

"Why doesn't she?"

"Because she'd have to leave her family."

Elsie's smile faded slightly.

"Oh."

I nodded.

"And she doesn't know whether the person she meets would want her to stay."

Elsie looked thoughtful.

"Well, has she asked?"

I stared at her.

"What?"

"Has she asked the person?"

I shook my head.

"No."

"Then how's she supposed to know?"

I looked down at my hands.

"I suppose she isn't."

Elsie smiled.

"Seems like a fairly important question."

I laughed faintly.

"Yeah."

She leaned back.

"Well, I think she should ask."

I looked at her.

"What if the answer changes everything?"

She shrugged.

"Then at least she'd know."

I stared at her for a moment.

She smiled.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You're doing the mysterious thing again."

I laughed.

"Sorry."

She shook her head, grinning.

We sat there for a while longer, talking about stories and books. Elsie told me she'd always wanted to write something herself, although she never managed to get beyond the first few pages. She liked inventing characters and imagining what they'd do, but apparently got bored when she had to make them actually do anything.

"That's the hard part," I said.

"Exactly."

She smiled.

"Maybe you could help me sometime."

I looked at her.

"Yeah. Maybe."

She grinned.

"Good. We'll write something brilliant."

I smiled.

For a moment, I let myself imagine it.

The two of us sitting together somewhere, notebooks spread across a table, arguing about characters and laughing at ridiculous ideas. Perhaps we'd write a story together, something silly and wonderful that belonged to both of us.

Then I remembered.

Tomorrow, she wouldn't remember the suggestion.

I looked away.

Elsie noticed.

"Everything all right?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She studied me for a moment, then reached over and took my hand.

I looked at her.

She smiled gently.

"You know, you don't have to tell me everything."

I swallowed.

"I know."

"But you can tell me things."

I nodded.

She squeezed my fingers.

"Even if they're complicated."

I looked at her for a long moment.

Then I smiled.

"Okay."

We stayed like that until she had to go home.

When we finally said goodbye, Elsie hugged me again, a little longer than before. I held her carefully, trying to memorise the feeling of her arms around me, the warmth of her hair against my cheek and the way she smelled faintly of soap and sunshine.

Then she stepped back.

"See you tomorrow?"

I looked at her.

"Maybe."

She laughed.

"You're impossible."

"I know."

She smiled.

"Well, I hope you do."

Then she climbed onto her bicycle and rode away.

I watched her disappear around the corner.

For a moment, I considered following her.

Not to spy on her, but because I wanted to know where she went. I wanted to see her house, meet her family and understand the life she lived beyond our afternoons together.

But I didn't.

Instead, I walked back towards the factory.

The sun was beginning to lower, and the shadows stretched across the road. I passed the little market square, the bookshop and the park where we'd sat together so many times. Everything looked familiar, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something had shifted.

Perhaps the day wasn't changing.

Perhaps I was.

When I reached the factory, I stopped beneath the window and looked at the damaged hinge. It had shifted again, and the frame hung slightly crooked. I touched the wood carefully, feeling it move beneath my fingers.

I would have to repair it soon.

I climbed through, trying not to put too much weight on the frame, and landed on the dusty floor of the back office.

My phone lit up.

Only a few minutes had passed.

I sat down at the desk and opened my journal.

I wrote about Elsie's different arrival, the paper bag, the market and the conversation about my story. I tried to make sense of the changes, but the more I wrote, the less certain I became.

Perhaps the window wasn't resetting perfectly.

Perhaps I'd simply misunderstood the timing.

Or perhaps the day was changing because I was changing.

I didn't know.

But one thing Elsie had said kept returning to me.

Has she asked?

I stared at the words I'd written.

She'd been talking about a fictional girl in a fictional story, unaware that she was practically giving advice about her own life.

I looked towards the window.

I'd been so frightened of telling Elsie the truth that I'd never seriously considered what might happen if I did. I'd assumed she'd think I was mad, or laugh, or simply refuse to believe me. And perhaps she would.

But perhaps she wouldn't.

Perhaps she'd listen.

Perhaps she'd understand.

I opened my journal to a fresh page and wrote:

What happens if I tell Elsie?

I stared at the question for a long time.

Then I added:

What happens if she believes me?

I closed the journal and slipped it into my bag.

For the first time, I realised that the biggest question wasn't whether I could stay in 1997.

It was whether Elsie would want me to.

Chapter Seventeen

I spent Monday trying to work out how you were supposed to tell someone you came from the future without sounding completely mad. It wasn't the sort of conversation you could ease into naturally. I couldn't exactly wait until Elsie asked what I'd done at the weekend and casually mention that I'd spent it in 2026, helping Mum sort through a cupboard and watching Dad fall asleep halfway through a film. Even if she believed me, there would be questions. Hundreds of them, probably. And I wasn't sure I had answers to even half.

I tried writing down what I wanted to say, but everything sounded ridiculous. Hello, Elsie. I'm from twenty-nine years in the future. Too dramatic. You know that story I told you about the girl who travels through time? Oh, no, you don’t. That was in another timeline. Or another loop. Well, funny thing... Too

much like a joke. I've met you before, but you don't remember because every time I leave, the day starts again. That one was closer to the truth, but it made me sound like someone who'd been watching far too many science-fiction films.

Eventually, I stopped trying.

There was another problem anyway. If I told Elsie the truth and she believed me, what happened afterwards? I'd still have to return home, and the next time I came through the window, she'd forget everything. I'd have to explain it all again, perhaps with photographs or notes to prove I wasn't making it up. I could spend an entire afternoon convincing her, only to lose all that progress the moment I climbed back into 2026.

Unless I stayed.

I looked at the sentence I'd written in my journal.

What happens if she believes me?

Then, underneath it, I wrote something else.

What happens if I don't leave?

I stared at the words for a long time.

It was the first time I'd written the possibility down so plainly. I'd thought about staying before, of course, but usually in a vague, romantic sort of way. I'd imagined waking up in 1997, going to see Elsie and spending the day with her without worrying about the window. I'd pictured us walking around town, laughing and talking, perhaps holding hands again. But I'd never seriously considered what staying would mean beyond that.

Where would I sleep?

How would I get money?

What would I tell people about where I'd come from?

And what would happen to Mum and Dad?

That last question was the one I kept avoiding.

I could imagine leaving school. I could imagine giving up my phone, the internet and all the little conveniences I'd grown up with. I could even imagine living without knowing what was happening in the world I'd left behind.

But I couldn't imagine never seeing my parents again.

Not properly.

Whenever I tried, my mind seemed to stop before reaching the worst part.

I thought about Mum making tea in the kitchen, Dad calling up the stairs to ask whether I wanted anything from the shop, the three of us sitting together on Friday evenings arguing about what to watch. They were such ordinary things that I'd never considered the possibility of losing them.

Now I was.

And I hated myself a little for it.

At school, Sophie noticed something was wrong almost immediately.

"You look terrible."

I looked up from my notebook.

"Thanks."

"No, seriously. Have you slept?"

"Some."

"How much is some?"

"Enough."

She gave me a look.

"That's not an answer."

I smiled faintly.

We were sitting outside during lunch, on the low wall beside the sports hall. The weather had finally improved, and the sun was warm enough that people had started abandoning their jackets. A group of boys were kicking a football around nearby, occasionally shouting at one another, while two girls from our year sat on the grass taking photographs.

Sophie leaned closer.

"Is it the mysterious girl?"

I looked at her.

"What?"

"The girl you won't tell me about."

I felt my face warm.

"There's no mysterious girl."

She grinned.

"Oh, there absolutely is."

I looked away.

She laughed.

"Freya, you practically glow whenever someone mentions relationships, then immediately look like you've remembered something tragic. It's not exactly subtle."

I couldn’t help smiling.

"Maybe I'm just tired."

"Maybe you're in love."

I stared at her.

She stopped smiling.

"Oh."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Sophie."

She looked at me carefully.

"Are you?"

I opened my mouth, then closed it again.

I could have lied.

I'd become rather good at that lately.

But Sophie wasn't asking where I'd been or whether I'd done something dangerous. She was asking about how I felt, and suddenly I didn't want to lie about that too.

"I don't know," I said.

She raised an eyebrow.

"That's a yes."

I laughed weakly.

"Maybe."

Her expression softened.

"Does she know?"

I looked down at my hands.

"No."

"Well, have you told her?"

"No."

"Why not?"

I hesitated.

"Complicated."

Sophie rolled her eyes.

"Everything's complicated with you."

I smiled.

"Yeah."

She nudged my shoulder.

"Does she like you?"

I thought about Elsie taking my hand beside the river, about the way she'd hugged me and smiled when she asked whether I'd see her tomorrow.

"I think so."

"Then what's the problem?"

I looked at her.

How could I explain that the problem was twenty-nine years, a broken window and a girl who forgot me every time I left?

A girl who liked me because I knew her well, and knew exactly what to say, where to stand, what to do at the

very right moment to elicit responses like holding hands or hugging.

"I don't know if it would work," I said.

Sophie considered that.

"Well, you won't know unless you try."

I laughed softly.

"That's what she said."

"Smart girl."

I smiled.

"Yeah."

Sophie watched me for a moment.

"Look, I don't know what's going on, and you're obviously not ready to tell me. That's fine. But don't spend so much time worrying about what might happen that you forget to enjoy what's actually happening."

I looked at her.

She shrugged.

"That's my advice. Free of charge."

I laughed.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. Now, are you going to tell me her name?"

I hesitated.

Then I smiled.

"Elsie."

Sophie grinned.

"Elsie. That's cute."

I looked down, smiling.

"Yeah."

"How old is she?"

"Sixteen."

"Older woman. Very sophisticated."

I laughed.

"Shut up."

She nudged me again.

"Does she go to our school?"

"No."

"Where'd you meet?"

I looked away.

"Near town."

Sophie studied me.

"You're not making her up, are you?"

I laughed.

"No."

"Good. Because I was starting to worry you'd fallen in love with one of your fictional characters."

I smiled faintly.

"Wouldn't be the strangest thing."

She laughed, and we sat together until the bell rang.

For the rest of the afternoon, I kept thinking about what she'd said.

You won't know unless you try.

It sounded so simple.

Perhaps it was.

Perhaps I'd spent so long worrying about the consequences that I'd forgotten the obvious first step.

I needed to tell Elsie.

Not everything at once, perhaps. I could start with something small, something she could see for herself. I could show her the window, explain how it worked and let her decide what to believe.

The thought made me nervous.

But it also made me feel strangely hopeful.

After school, I went home first. Mum was in the kitchen, working at her laptop, and Dad would be late because of a council meeting. I made myself a sandwich and sat at the table, trying to behave normally.

Mum looked up.

"How was school?"

"All right."

"Anything interesting?"

"Not really."

She smiled.

"Sounds thrilling."

I laughed.

She watched me for a moment.

"You're in a better mood today."

"Am I?"

"Bit."

I shrugged.

"Maybe."

She smiled and returned to her work.

I finished my sandwich, went upstairs and changed into a T-shirt and shorts. Then I packed my journal, a bottle of water and the little collection of things I'd brought back from 1997.

The two scraps of paper with Elsie's telephone number.

The coins.

A dried sweet pea I'd pressed between the pages of a book.

I wasn't sure whether any of them would help, but I wanted to have something I could show her.

Before leaving, I looked at the photograph of Mum, Dad and me on my bedside table.

For a moment, I considered staying home.

Then I picked up my bag.

I told Mum I was going to the library to work on my story.

She nodded.

"All right, love. Back before dinner?"

"Yeah."

"And text me if you're going anywhere else."

"I will."

I felt the familiar guilt as I left the house, but I pushed it aside.

I needed to do this.

The factory was quiet when I arrived. I slipped through the fence, crossed the yard and made my way to the back office. The window was still hanging crookedly, its damaged hinge barely holding the frame in place. I examined it for a moment, then carefully opened it.

The warm August air touched my face.

I climbed through.

The familiar sunshine greeted me, and I stood for a moment in the grass, listening to the distant sounds of the factory. Everything looked normal, but after the previous visit, I wasn't sure what to expect.

I checked my watch.

Then I waited.

A few minutes passed.

The side door opened.

Elsie appeared with her bicycle.

I felt a wave of relief.

She was back to her usual routine.

Whatever had happened last time, the day seemed to have returned to normal.

I stepped forward.

"Hi."

She looked up.

"Hi."

I smiled.

"Going into town?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Same."

She nodded towards the road.

"Fancy walking together?"

I laughed softly.

"Sure."

We started along the road, and for a while I let the conversation happen as it always did. Elsie told me about her dad's overtime, complained about the heat and asked whether I lived nearby. I answered carefully, trying not to sound distracted.

But my heart was beating faster than usual.

I knew what I was going to do.

I just didn't know how.

We reached the high street and wandered towards the market square. Elsie wanted to look at a stall selling jewellery, and I followed her, laughing when she tried on an enormous pair of earrings. We bought drinks and sat on the low wall beneath the tree, watching people pass.

It was familiar.

Comfortable.

And suddenly, I couldn't bear the thought of repeating it all again without telling her.

"Elsie?"

She turned towards me.

"Yeah?"

"Can I tell you something?"

She smiled.

"Of course."

I looked down at my hands.

"It's going to sound strange."

She leaned back on her hands.

"Go on, then."

I took a breath.

"I'm not from here."

She blinked.

"Right."

"I mean, I am. Sort of. But not from... now."

She looked confused.

"Now?"

I nodded.

She studied me for a moment.

"Freya, are you all right?"

"Yeah. I just... I need you to listen."

Her expression softened.

"Okay."

I looked at her.

"I'm from the future."

For a moment, neither of us said anything.

Then Elsie laughed.

Not cruelly. Just a surprised little laugh, as though she thought I'd made a joke she hadn't quite understood.

"The future?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She grinned.

"How far?"

"Twenty-nine years."

Her smile faded slightly.

"You're serious."

"Yeah."

She looked at me for a long moment.

Then she laughed again, although this time it sounded uncertain.

"Right. Okay."

I swallowed.

"I know how it sounds."

"Well, it sounds completely mad."

"I know."

She studied my face.

"Are you taking the mickey?"

"No."

"Because if this is some elaborate joke, I'm going to be very disappointed when you tell me the punchline."

I smiled faintly.

"It's not a joke."

She looked down at her lemonade, then back at me.

"All right. Suppose I believe you. How did you get here?"

I hesitated.

"Through a window."

She stared at me.

Then she burst out laughing.

I couldn't help it. I laughed too.

"Sorry," she said, trying to stop. "I'm sorry. It's just... a window?"

"Yeah."

"Not a spaceship?"

"No."

"Not a magic wardrobe?"

"No."

"A window."

"Yeah."

She shook her head, still smiling.

"Well, that's a bit disappointing."

I laughed.

"Sorry."

She studied me for a moment, then her expression became more serious.

"You're not joking, are you?"

I shook my head.

"No."

She looked towards the high street.

"All right."

I waited.

She turned back to me.

"Prove it."

My stomach tightened.

"What?"

"Prove you're from the future."

I looked at her.

"How?"

She shrugged.

"Tell me something that hasn't happened yet."

I hesitated.

There were plenty of things I could tell her. Things about technology, music, films, politics. But most of them wouldn't happen for years, and she had no way of knowing whether I was telling the truth.

"I could show you something."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Like what?"

"My phone."

I took it out of my bag.

The screen was black, as always.

Elsie leaned closer.

"What's that?"

"A mobile phone."

She frowned.

"That's a phone?"

"Yeah."

"Where's the aerial?"

I smiled.

"It doesn't have one."

She took it carefully, turning it over in her hands.

"Blimey. It's tiny."

I laughed.

"Not really."

She looked up.

"Does it work?"

"Not here."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Convenient."

I smiled weakly.

"I know."

She handed it back.

"Anything else?"

I opened my journal and took out one of the scraps of paper.

She looked at it.

"What's that?"

"You wrote it."

She frowned.

"I did?"

I nodded.

"Your name and telephone number."

She took the paper, examining the handwriting.

"That is my writing."

I watched her.

"And that's my number."

"Yeah."

She looked up.

"When did I give you this?"

I swallowed.

"Another time."

She stared at me.

"What does that mean?"

I took a breath.

"Every time I come here, it's the same day."

She frowned.

"The same day?"

"Saturday, 16 August 1997."

She looked at me.

"That's today."

"I know."

I nodded towards the paper.

"You've given me your number before. We've met before. Loads of times."

Elsie was quiet.

Then she laughed nervously.

"Right."

"I know you don't remember."

She looked down at the paper again.

"Well, I wouldn't, would I? If it's the same day."

I stared at her.

She looked up.

"What?"

"Nothing."

She smiled faintly.

"I'm trying to keep up."

I laughed softly.

She studied the paper for another moment.

"How many times have we met?"

I hesitated.

"I don't know exactly."

"More than twice?"

"Yeah."

"More than ten?"

I looked at her.

"Probably."

She stared at me.

"Blimey."

I smiled weakly.

She looked down at the paper again, then handed it back.

"All right. Suppose you're telling the truth."

I waited.

"What happens when you leave?"

I swallowed.

"You forget me."

She looked at me.

"Completely?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She was quiet for a moment.

Then she looked away.

"That's a bit sad."

I felt my throat tighten.

"Yeah."

She looked back at me.

"And you remember?"

"Everything."

She studied my face for a long moment.

Then she smiled faintly.

"Well, no wonder you look at me like that sometimes."

I laughed nervously.

"Like what?"

"Like you know me."

I looked down.

She was quiet for a moment.

Then she stood.

"Come on."

I blinked.

"What?"

"Show me."

I looked up.

"The window?"

"Yeah."

I stared at her.

She grinned.

"Well, I'm not going to believe you just because you've got a funny little telephone and a piece of paper with my handwriting on it."

I laughed.

"Fair enough."

She picked up her bag.

"Besides, I've always wanted to see something impossible."

I stood, feeling my heart racing.

We started walking back towards the factory.

For the first time, I wasn't going alone.

And I had absolutely no idea what would happen when Elsie saw the window.

Chapter Eighteen

For the first few minutes, Elsie treated the whole thing like an adventure. She pushed her bicycle beside me, occasionally glancing over with a grin, and asked whether she was going to see flying cars or robots when we reached the future. I told her I wasn't planning on taking her anywhere just yet, which apparently wasn't the answer she'd been hoping for.

"That's a bit unfair," she said. "You've been coming to my time for ages, and I don't even get a look at yours?"

"You haven't actually believed me yet."

"Well, no. But I'm willing to be impressed."

I laughed.

"That's very generous."

"I thought so."

She smiled at me, and for a moment I almost forgot how nervous I was. It was easy to do that around Elsie. She had a way of making even the strangest things seem ordinary, as though finding out someone claimed to be from the future was only slightly more interesting than discovering they had an unusual hobby.

But I knew that wouldn't last.

Once we reached the factory, I would have to show her something real. Something she couldn't laugh off or explain away. And then she'd have to decide what to do with the knowledge.

I wasn't sure I was ready for that.

We passed the little row of shops near the high street, then turned towards the quieter streets leading to the industrial estate.

It felt different knowing she was about to learn the truth.

Perhaps because, for the first time, I wasn't trying to make her like me. I wasn't carefully choosing subjects I knew she'd enjoy or pretending to be surprised by things I'd heard before. I was simply walking beside her, waiting to find out whether she'd still want to know me once she understood how we'd met.

At the corner near the factory, Elsie stopped.

"Right. Before we go any further, I've got a question."

I looked at her.

"Okay."

"If you're from the future, how old are you?"

"Fifteen."

She frowned.

"Fifteen?"

"Yeah."

"But you said you're from twenty-nine years in the future."

"I am."

She considered that.

"So were you born in the future?"

I laughed nervously.

"Yes."

She stared at me.

"That's properly strange."

"I know."

She shook her head, smiling.

"Right. Carry on."

We reached the factory yard a few minutes later. Elsie leaned her bicycle against the wall near the side entrance and looked towards the building.

"So this is where your magic window is?"

"Yeah."

She glanced at the windows.

"Which one?"

"Round the back."

She nodded, then looked at me.

"Can we actually go through it?"

I hesitated.

"I can."

"What about me?"

"I don't know."

She raised an eyebrow.

"You don't know?"

"I've never tried taking anyone with me."

She looked thoughtful.

"Well, there's a first time for everything."

I felt my stomach tighten.

"Elsie, I don't think we should."

She looked surprised.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know what would happen."

She studied my face for a moment, then nodded.

"All right."

I blinked.

"That's it?"

"Well, yes. If you're frightened, I'm not going to make you do it."

I smiled faintly.

"Thanks."

She grinned.

"Besides, I haven't seen the thing yet. Might turn out to be a perfectly ordinary window."

I laughed.

"Come on."

I led her around the back of the factory, past the loading area and towards the little patch of grass where I'd first arrived. The sun was still warm, and I could hear machinery humming somewhere inside the building. A couple of men were talking near one of the loading doors, but they didn't seem interested in us.

Elsie followed me towards the back office.

"You're sure we're allowed round here?"

"Not really."

She laughed.

"Brilliant."

I stopped beneath the window.

There it was.

The same little opening I'd climbed through so many times, set into the brick wall of the back office. From this side, it looked completely ordinary. The frame was freshly painted, the glass was slightly dirty, and the metal latch was old-fashioned but intact.

Of course, in 2026, it was broken and hanging crookedly from a rotten hinge.

Elsie looked at it.

Then she looked at me.

"That's it?"

"Yeah."

She stared at the window again.

"You're having me on."

"I'm not."

She folded her arms.

"Freya, that's a window."

"I know."

"A perfectly normal window."

"I know."

She looked at me for a moment, then laughed.

"Right. Show me."

I stepped closer.

The window was shut.

That wasn't unusual. I'd always opened it from whichever side I was on, although I'd never really thought about how strange that was. In 2026, the latch barely worked and the frame was damaged. Here, it was solid, clean and properly fitted.

I reached for the handle.

Then stopped.

Elsie noticed.

"What?"

I looked at her.

"I need you to promise me something."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Sounds serious."

"It is."

Her smile faded slightly.

"All right."

"Whatever happens, don't follow me through."

She looked at the window.

"Why?"

"Because I don't know if you'd be able to come back."

She studied my face.

For a moment, she seemed about to make a joke.

Then she nodded.

"Okay."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

I took a breath.

Then I opened the window.

The familiar resistance was there, although the frame moved smoothly on this side. I lifted it far enough to climb through and looked into the little office beyond.

Dusty desks.

Broken furniture.

Grey light.

The abandoned factory of 2026.

I felt a wave of relief.

The connection was still there.

Elsie leaned closer.

"What's wrong with the room?"

I looked at her.

"What?"

She frowned.

"Why's it all filthy?"

I stepped aside.

She moved towards the opening, peering through the glassless gap.

For a moment, she said nothing.

Then she looked back at me.

"Freya?"

"Yeah?"

"What's happened in there?"

I swallowed.

"That's what it looks like in my time."

She stared at the room.

Then she looked around at the factory yard, the clean brickwork and the open loading doors.

Then back through the window.

Her expression changed.

Not dramatically. She didn't scream or stumble backwards. She simply went very still, as though her mind had reached something it couldn't quite understand.

"That's not possible," she said quietly.

"I know."

She leaned closer again.

I caught her arm.

"Don't."

She stopped.

"Sorry."

I let go.

She looked at me.

"Is that really the future?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She stared through the window.

"Twenty-nine years?"

"Yeah."

She was quiet for a long moment.

Then she whispered, "Blimey."

I almost laughed, but something in her voice stopped me.

She wasn't joking now.

She looked frightened.

I hadn't expected that. I'd imagined her being excited, perhaps asking a hundred questions or demanding to see more. But standing in front of the window, looking into the abandoned factory, she seemed suddenly very young.

I wanted to take her hand.

Instead, I waited.

After a while, she stepped back.

"Can you go through?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

"Right now?"

"Yeah."

She looked at me.

"Will you come back?"

The question caught me off guard.

"Of course."

She studied my face.

"Promise?"

I smiled faintly.

"Promise."

She nodded.

"All right."

I climbed onto the sill, carefully avoiding the damaged edge on the other side. For a moment, I sat there between the two worlds, one leg in 1997 and the other in 2026.

Then I stepped through.

The cold air hit me immediately.

I landed on the dusty floor and turned back towards the window.

Elsie was still standing outside, staring at me.

For a moment, neither of us moved.

Then she laughed.

Not because it was funny.

Because she couldn't quite believe what she'd seen.

"Oh my God."

I smiled.

"Yeah."

She stepped closer.

"You're really there."

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She looked around the yard behind her, then back at the office.

"That's mad."

I laughed softly.

"Pretty much."

She leaned towards the opening.

"Can you hear me?"

"Perfectly."

She grinned suddenly.

"Can you see me?"

I laughed.

"Yes, Elsie."

"Right. Just checking."

I smiled.

Then she looked past me, towards the broken desks and the dark doorway leading into the rest of the building.

"What happened to the factory?"

I hesitated.

"It closed."

She frowned.

"When?"

"Years ago."

She looked troubled.

"But my dad works here."

"I know."

She stared at me.

"Does he lose his job?"

I felt my stomach tighten.

"I don't know."

She looked down.

For the first time, I realised how careless I'd been. I'd thought about showing her the future as proof of something extraordinary, but I hadn't considered what it would mean for her to see the place where her dad worked reduced to a ruin.

To me, the factory had always been abandoned.

To Elsie, it was part of her life.

I leaned towards the window.

"Elsie, I'm sorry."

She looked up.

"For what?"

"I didn't think about how it would feel."

She was quiet for a moment.

Then she smiled faintly.

"It's all right."

But she didn't sound entirely convinced.

I climbed back through the window, returning to the warm afternoon.

Elsie stepped aside to give me room.

When my feet touched the grass, she reached out and took my hand.

I looked at her.

She was staring at my fingers, turning my hand over as though checking whether I'd changed.

"You're warm," she said.

I laughed softly.

"Yeah."

She looked up.

"But you were cold a second ago."

"I know."

She shook her head.

"That's unbelievable."

I smiled.

"You're telling me."

She let go of my hand and looked towards the window again.

"So every time you go through there, you end up in the future?"

"Yeah."

"And when you come back, it's the same day?"

I nodded.

"Usually."

She frowned.

"Usually?"

I hesitated.

"Something was different last time."

"What?"

"You came to the factory from town instead of leaving it."

She stared at me.

"That's it?"

I laughed.

"It sounds silly, I know."

"A bit."

"But it had never happened before."

She considered that.

"Maybe you just arrived at a different time."

"Maybe."

She looked at the window again.

"How many times have you been here?"

I hesitated.

"A lot."

"How many?"

I looked down.

"More than ten."

She stared at me.

"And every time, you met me?"

I nodded.

"Most times."

She was quiet.

Then she asked, "Why?"

The question was so simple that I didn't know how to answer.

I looked at her.

She wasn't smiling now.

"Why do you keep coming back?"

I swallowed.

"Because I like being here."

She looked around at the factory yard.

"Here?"

I shook my head.

"Not just here."

She watched me.

I felt my face grow warm.

"Because of you."

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

Then Elsie looked down at our hands.

"Oh."

I laughed nervously.

"Yeah."

She was quiet for a moment.

Then she looked up.

"Do I like you?"

I stared at her.

"What?"

"In the other times. When we've met before."

I swallowed.

"I think so."

She smiled faintly.

"How do you know?"

I looked away.

"We've spent a lot of time together."

She nodded.

"Right."

"We've talked. Walked around town. Sat by the river."

She smiled.

"That sounds nice."

"It was."

She studied my face.

"Anything else?"

I hesitated.

Then I nodded.

"You've held my hand."

Her expression softened.

"Have I?"

"Yeah."

She looked down at our hands again.

Then she reached over and slipped her fingers between mine.

"Like this?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She smiled.

"Well, that seems sensible."

I laughed shakily.

She squeezed my hand.

For a while, we stood there beside the window, holding hands in the warm afternoon. I could hear the factory humming behind us, the distant sound of traffic and the soft movement of grass in the breeze.

It felt strangely peaceful.

Then Elsie spoke.

"Freya?"

"Yeah?"

"If I forget you every time you leave..."

I looked at her.

She hesitated.

"Doesn't that hurt?"

I swallowed.

"Yeah."

She looked down.

"Sorry."

"It's not your fault."

She smiled faintly.

"Still."

I squeezed her hand.

"It's okay."

She shook her head.

"No, it isn't."

I stared at her.

She looked up.

"That sounds horrible."

I felt my throat tighten.

"It can be."

She was quiet for a moment.

Then she stepped closer.

"Why do you keep doing it?"

I looked at her.

"Because I don't want to stop seeing you."

Her expression changed.

She looked surprised, then something softer.

"Oh, Freya."

I laughed nervously.

"Sorry. That probably sounds a bit much."

She shook her head.

"No."

She moved closer.

"Not really."

For a moment, I thought she might kiss me.

My heart started beating so hard that I was sure she could hear it.

But she didn't.

Instead, she wrapped her arms around me.

I hugged her back.

We stood there for a long time, holding each other beside the window. I could feel her breathing against my shoulder, the warmth of her body and the gentle pressure of her hands against my back.

I closed my eyes.

For the first time, Elsie knew.

She knew where I came from.

She knew what happened when I left.

And she was still holding me.

Eventually, she stepped back.

"Can I ask you something?"

I smiled faintly.

"Of course."

She looked towards the window.

"What happens if you don't go back?"

I felt my stomach tighten.

"I don't know."

She frowned.

"You've never tried?"

I shook my head.

"No."

"Why not?"

I looked at her.

"Because I've got a family."

Her expression softened.

"Oh."

I nodded.

"Mum and Dad. They're waiting for me."

She was quiet.

Then she looked down at our hands.

"Right."

I swallowed.

"I can't just disappear."

She nodded slowly.

"No."

We stood there for a moment.

Then she looked up.

"But you could stay until tomorrow, couldn't you?"

I stared at her.

"I don't know."

She frowned.

"Why?"

"Because every time I leave, the day starts again. I don't know what happens if I stay past midnight."

She considered that.

"Well, I imagine Sunday happens."

I smiled. "Probably. Perhaps."

She smiled.

Then she looked at me more seriously.

"Freya, if you stayed until tomorrow..."

I waited.

"Would I remember you?"

I felt my throat tighten.

"I think so."

She was quiet for a long moment.

Then she smiled faintly.

"That would be nice."

I stared at her.

She looked down, suddenly shy.

"I mean, I don't like the idea of forgetting you."

I swallowed.

"Neither do I."

She looked up.

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

Then she squeezed my hand.

"Well, perhaps you should find out."

I looked at her.

"Find out what?"

"Whether Sunday happens."

I laughed softly.

She smiled.

"Not today, obviously. You've got people waiting for you."

I nodded.

"But maybe one day."

I stared at her.

She looked towards the window, then back at me.

"Maybe one day you could stay."

The words settled between us.

I wanted to say yes.

I wanted to tell her I'd been thinking about exactly that, that I'd imagined waking up in 1997 and seeing her again without having to explain everything. I wanted to ask whether she'd still want me there once she understood what it would mean.

But I couldn't.

Not yet.

So I smiled faintly.

"Maybe."

Elsie grinned.

"You're always saying that."

I laughed.

"I know."

She squeezed my hand once more.

Then she let go.

"I should get home."

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She picked up her bicycle and started towards the road, then stopped.

"Freya?"

I looked up.

"Yeah?"

She smiled.

"I'm glad you told me."

I felt my throat tighten.

"Me too."

She grinned.

"And next time, bring something from the future that actually works."

I laughed.

"I'll try."

"Good. Because that telephone of yours is rubbish."

I laughed again, and she waved before cycling away.

I watched her disappear around the corner.

For a long time, I stood beside the window, looking at the place where she'd been.

Then I climbed back through into 2026.

My phone lit up.

About half an hour had passed. Not just a few minutes. But I didn’t know what that meant.

I sat down at the dusty desk and opened my journal.

I wrote everything I could remember. The way Elsie had looked through the window, the questions she'd asked, the way she'd held my hand and hugged me after learning the truth.

Then I reached the part where she'd suggested staying until Sunday.

I stopped writing.

I stared at the page for a long time.

Then I wrote:

She knows.

Underneath, I added:

And she wants to remember me.

I looked towards the window.

For the first time, staying in 1997 didn't feel like something I'd invented in my own head.

It felt like a possibility.

A real one.

And that frightened me more than anything else.

Chapter Nineteen

I didn't go back the next day.

It wasn't because I didn't want to. Of course not. Quite the opposite. I wanted to go so badly that I spent most of Tuesday thinking about excuses, checking the time and wondering whether I could get away with another visit before dinner. But something had changed when Elsie saw the window.

Until then, going to 1997 had been something I did because it made me happy, even when it made me miserable afterwards. Now it felt as though I was working towards something. There was a decision waiting somewhere ahead of me, and every visit brought me a little closer to it.

I wasn't ready to make that decision.

I also had a maths test on Wednesday, which seemed particularly unfair considering the circumstances.

I sat at my desk that evening, trying to revise quadratic equations while occasionally looking at the photograph of Elsie on my phone. Not the sixteen-year-old Elsie, because I didn't have a photograph of her. The older one, standing beside a group of young people holding paintings. I'd saved it from the article I'd found, and I kept returning to it whenever I needed reminding that she was real.

That was a strange thing to need reminding of.

I knew she was real. I'd held her hand, hugged her and watched her stare through a window into the future. But the photograph was proof of something else. It showed that Elsie existed beyond the Saturday afternoon I'd been visiting. She had a life that continued when I wasn't there, even if I couldn't see it.

I zoomed in on her face.

She was smiling, although it wasn't quite the same smile I knew. There was something calmer about it, something that made me wonder what she'd experienced in the years between sixteen and forty-five. Had she been happy? Had she fallen in love? Had she ever thought about the girl who'd appeared beside the

factory one summer afternoon and claimed to be from the future?

Of course she hadn't.

Not in the version of her life that existed in 2026.

That was the part I kept forgetting.

The Elsie in the photograph had never met me.

Or at least, she'd never met me in a way that lasted.

I put the phone down and looked at my maths book.

The equations were still there, completely unimpressed by my romantic crisis.

I tried to concentrate.

It didn't work.

By the time Dad knocked on my door, I'd managed to complete three questions and had spent twenty minutes staring at a fourth.

"Everything all right?"

I looked up.

"Yeah."

He leaned against the doorframe, holding a mug of tea.

"Your mum says you've got a test tomorrow."

"Unfortunately."

He smiled.

"Need any help?"

I glanced at the book.

"Do you remember quadratic equations?"

He considered that.

"I remember they exist."

I laughed.

"Helpful."

"Always."

He came in and sat on the edge of my bed, looking at the papers spread across my desk.

"How's the writing?"

I hesitated.

"All right."

"Still working on the time-travel story?"

I looked at him.

"Yeah."

He smiled.

"Any progress?"

"Some."

"Good."

He took a sip of tea, then looked at me more carefully.

"Can I ask you something?"

I felt my stomach tighten.

"Sure."

"Are you happy?"

The question caught me off guard.

It was almost exactly what Elsie had asked beside the river.

I looked down at my hands.

"Yeah."

Dad nodded slowly.

"Good."

He didn't sound entirely convinced.

I glanced at him.

"Why?"

He shrugged.

"Just wondering."

I smiled faintly.

"That's not like you."

He laughed.

"No, I suppose not."

He set his mug on the bedside table and leaned forward slightly.

"Your mum and I have noticed you've been a bit distant lately. Not in a terrible way, but you're quieter than usual. You disappear into your room, you're constantly writing, and sometimes you look as though you're a thousand miles away."

I looked down.

"Sorry."

"Don't apologise. You're allowed to have things on your mind."

I nodded.

He smiled.

"I just want to make sure they're good things."

I looked at him.

For a moment, I considered telling him.

Not everything, obviously. I couldn't imagine explaining the window without him thinking I'd lost my mind. But I could tell him about Elsie. I could say I'd met someone, that I liked her, that I was confused and frightened because I didn't know whether anything could come of it.

That much was true.

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"Have you ever liked someone you knew you couldn't be with?"

He blinked.

Then he smiled slightly.

"Ah."

I felt my face warm.

"Don't."

"I haven't said anything."

"You're doing the face."

"What face?"

"The dad face."

He laughed.

"Right. Sorry."

I smiled despite myself.

He considered my question for a moment.

"Yes, I suppose I have."

I looked up.

"Really?"

"Of course. Most people have at some point."

"What happened?"

He shrugged.

"Nothing particularly dramatic. I liked someone, she didn't feel the same way, and eventually I got over it."

I looked down.

"What if she did feel the same way?"

He thought about that.

"Well, then I suppose it depends on why you can't be together."

I nodded slowly.

He studied me.

"Is this about someone?"

I hesitated.

Then I nodded. "Maybe."

He smiled. "Right." Then he leaned back.

"Well, I won't interrogate you. But if you want my advice, don't make yourself miserable trying to solve a problem that might not actually exist."

I looked at him.

"What do you mean?"

"Sometimes we convince ourselves something is impossible before we've even tried. We imagine all the reasons it won't work, all the things that could go wrong, and then we never give it a chance."

I thought about Elsie.

About her standing beside the window, holding my hand and saying perhaps I should stay until Sunday.

"What if it really is impossible?"

Dad considered that.

"Then you'll have to decide whether it's worth trying anyway."

I stared at him.

He smiled gently.

"But whatever happens, Freya, don't forget you've got people who love you already."

I felt my throat tighten.

"I know."

He reached over and squeezed my shoulder.

"Good."

Then he stood, picked up his tea and headed towards the door.

"Oh, and one more thing."

I looked up.

"Yeah?"

"If this mysterious person turns out to be a girl, that's absolutely fine. Your mum and I don't care about that."

I laughed, feeling my face burn.

"Dad!"

He grinned.

"Just saying."

"Go away."

He laughed and disappeared down the hallway.

I sat there for a moment, smiling despite myself.

Then I looked at the photograph of Elsie on my phone.

Dad was right about one thing.

I did have people who loved me already.

And I was beginning to realise how much it would hurt to leave them.

On Wednesday, I passed my maths test.

Or at least, I thought I did. I managed to answer most of the questions, and Mrs Palmer didn't give me the disappointed look she usually reserved for people who'd clearly forgotten everything she'd taught them. Sophie asked whether I'd finally sorted things out with Elsie, and I told her I was working on it. She grinned and said that sounded promising, then spent the rest of lunch trying to convince me that I should ask her out properly.

I didn't explain that asking Elsie out was the easy part.

The difficult part was finding a way to exist in the same century.

After school, I went to the library.

The actual library this time.

I wanted to find out more about the factory, particularly whether there were any plans to demolish it. Dad had mentioned redevelopment, but he hadn't said when anything might happen, and I didn't want to ask too many questions. I also wanted to see whether there were old maps or photographs showing the building in 1997. Perhaps there was something about its history that explained the window.

I spent nearly an hour looking through local history books and newspaper archives. Most of what I found was fairly ordinary. The factory had opened decades earlier, employed several hundred people at its busiest and gradually declined before closing in the early 2000s. There were photographs of workers standing outside the main entrance, articles about production changes and a few stories about local families who'd worked there for generations.

I looked carefully at the photographs.

I wondered whether Elsie's dad was in any of them.

There were too many faces to tell.

Eventually, I found an article about the factory's closure. It described the loss of jobs, the impact on the town and the uncertainty facing workers. There was a

photograph of a small group standing outside the gates, looking tired and unhappy.

I stared at it for a long time.

I'd been so focused on Elsie that I'd barely thought about the people around her. Her dad, her mum, her brother, the men who worked in the factory and the woman who sold flowers at the market. They all had futures too. Some would be happy, some wouldn't. Some would leave town, some would stay, and some would probably die before I was even born.

It made the whole thing feel enormous.

I closed the article and sat back.

Then I noticed something else.

A smaller piece about the factory's proposed redevelopment had been published only a few weeks earlier. I opened it, expecting the usual vague statements about investment and planning permission.

Instead, I found a date.

The owners were due to meet with the council later in June to discuss the building's future. One of the options being considered was demolition, although no decision had been made.

I stared at the screen.

Later in June.

That was only a couple of weeks away.

I read the article twice, looking for anything more specific. There was no mention of when work might begin, and the language was full of words like potential and subject to approval. But the possibility was real.

The factory might not be there much longer.

I copied the article's details into my journal.

Then I looked at the time.

Nearly four.

I could still go to the factory before dinner.

I closed my laptop, packed my things and left the library.

The walk took about fifteen minutes. I followed the familiar streets, crossed the little bridge near the industrial estate and slipped through the broken fence. The building looked exactly as it always did, but now I found myself noticing every crack in the brickwork, every broken window and every patch of weeds pushing through the concrete.

It was falling apart.

I reached the back office and stopped in front of the window.

The damaged hinge had become worse again. The frame hung crookedly, and one of the screws had almost completely pulled free from the rotten wood. I touched it carefully, feeling the whole thing shift beneath my fingers.

I frowned.

If it broke, I might not be able to open it again.

I considered going home to get tools, but I didn't have time. Instead, I carefully lifted the frame, supporting its weight as I climbed through.

The warm August air greeted me.

I stepped down into the grass and looked around.

Everything seemed normal.

The factory was clean and busy, the sky was bright, and the familiar sounds of machinery drifted from inside.

I waited for Elsie.

She appeared a few minutes later, pushing her bicycle towards the road.

I smiled.

"Hi."

She looked up.

"Hi."

I took a breath.

"Can I ask you something?"

She laughed.

"Blimey. Straight to the questions, are we?"

I smiled.

"Sorry."

"Don't be. Go on."

I looked at her.

"Would you mind helping me with something?"

She raised an eyebrow.

"Depends what it is."

I hesitated.

"There's something I want to show you."

She grinned.

"Sounds mysterious."

I smiled faintly.

"Yeah."

She leaned her bicycle against the wall.

"All right. Lead the way."

I took her around the back of the factory, towards the window.

She looked at it. Then at me.

"What's this?"

I swallowed.

"It's going to sound strange."

She smiled.

"Try me."

I looked at the window. Then back at her.

"I've been here before."

She laughed.

"Well, yes. So have I."

I smiled nervously.

"No. I mean, I've met you before."

She frowned.

"Have you?"

I nodded.

"Lots of times."

She studied my face.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah."

I took a breath.

"I'm from the future."

For a moment, she simply stared at me.

Then she laughed.

Not cruelly.

Just surprised. Definitely not believing me.

"The future?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She grinned.

"How far?"

"Twenty-nine years."

Her smile faded slightly.

"You're serious."

"Yeah."

She looked at the window.

Then back at me.

"Prove it."

I smiled faintly.

"I was hoping you'd say that."

I opened the window.

The abandoned office of 2026 waited on the other side.

Elsie leaned closer.

Her expression changed.

She stared at the dusty desks, the broken furniture and the grey light.

Then she looked at me.

"Oh my God."

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She stepped closer, peering through the opening.

"That's..."

She stopped.

I waited.

She looked around at the clean factory yard, then back through the window.

"That's impossible."

"I know."

She stared for a long moment.

Then she looked at me.

"Can you go through?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

"Will you come back?"

I smiled faintly.

"Of course."

She hesitated.

Then she nodded.

"All right."

I climbed through carefully, supporting the damaged frame as I went.

The cold air hit me.

I landed on the dusty floor and turned back towards her.

Elsie stared.

Then she laughed.

"Oh, blimey."

I smiled.

"Yeah."

She stepped closer.

"You're really there."

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She looked around the office.

"What happened to the factory?"

"It closed."

She frowned.

"When?"

"Years ago."

She looked troubled.

"But my dad works here."

"I know."

I hesitated.

Then I added, "I don't know exactly what happens to him."

She looked at me.

"Right."

I could see the worry in her expression. I hated that I'd caused it.

I climbed back through the window. Elsie stepped aside, watching me carefully. When my feet touched the grass, she reached out and took my hand.

I looked at her.

She was staring at my fingers, turning my hand over as though checking whether I'd changed.

"You're cold."

I smiled.

"Yeah."

She looked up.

"But you were warm before?"

"Yeah."

She shook her head.

"That's mad."

I laughed softly. She looked towards the window again.

"So every time you go through there, you end up in the future?"

"Yeah."

"And when you come back, it's the same day?"

I nodded.

"Usually."

She frowned.

"Usually?"

I hesitated.

"Something was different once."

"What?"

"You came to the factory from town instead of leaving it."

She stared at me.

"That's it?"

I laughed.

"I know it sounds silly."

"A bit."

"But it had never happened before."

She considered that.

"Maybe you just arrived at a different time."

"Maybe."

She looked at the window again.

"How many times have you been here?"

I hesitated.

"A lot."

"How many?"

"More than ten."

She stared at me.

"And every time, you met me?"

I nodded.

"Most times."

She was quiet.

Then she asked, "Why?"

I looked at her. The question was familiar. I'd heard it before. But this time, I knew what I wanted to say.

"Because I like you."

Her expression changed. She looked surprised, then smiled faintly.

"Oh."

I laughed nervously.

"Yeah."

She looked down at our hands.

Then she squeezed mine.

"Well, that's nice."

I smiled.

She looked up.

"Do I like you?"

I stared at her.

"What?"

"In the other times. When we've met before."

I swallowed.

"I think so."

She smiled.

"How do you know?"

I hesitated.

"We've spent a lot of time together."

She nodded.

"Right."

"We've talked, walked around town, sat by the river."

She smiled.

"That sounds lovely."

"It was."

She looked at me for a moment.

Then she stepped closer.

"Anything else?"

I felt my face warm.

"You've held my hand."

She glanced down at our fingers.

"Well, I'm doing that now."

I laughed.

"Yeah."

She smiled.

"Seems I must be rather fond of you."

I swallowed.

"Maybe."

She laughed softly.

Then she looked towards the window again.

"What happens if you don't go back?"

I felt my stomach tighten.

"I don't know."

She frowned.

"You've never tried?"

I shook my head.

"No."

"Why not?"

I looked at her.

"Because I've got a family."

Her expression softened.

"Oh."

I nodded.

"Mum and Dad. They're waiting for me."

She was quiet.

Then she looked down at our hands.

"Right."

I swallowed.

"I can't just disappear."

She nodded slowly.

"No."

We stood there for a moment.

Then she looked up.

"But you could stay until tomorrow, couldn't you?"

I stared at her.

"I don't know."

She frowned.

"Why?"

"Because every time I leave, the day starts again. I don't know what happens if I stay past midnight."

She considered that.

"Well, I imagine Sunday happens."

I laughed despite myself.

"Probably."

She smiled.

Then she looked at me more seriously.

"If you stayed until tomorrow..."

I waited.

"Would I remember you?"

I felt my throat tighten.

"I think so."

She was quiet for a long moment.

Then she smiled faintly.

"That would be nice."

I stared at her.

She looked down, suddenly shy.

"I mean, I don't like the idea of forgetting you."

I swallowed.

"Neither do I."

She looked up.

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

Then she squeezed my hand.

"Well, perhaps you should find out."

I looked at her.

"Find out what?"

"Whether Sunday happens."

I laughed softly.

She smiled.

"Not today, obviously. You've got people waiting for you."

I nodded.

"But maybe one day."

I stared at her.

She looked towards the window, then back at me.

"Maybe one day you could stay."

The words settled between us.

I wanted to say yes.

I wanted to tell her I'd been thinking about exactly that, that I'd imagined waking up in 1997 and seeing her again without having to explain everything.

But I couldn't. Not yet. So I smiled faintly.

"Maybe."

She squeezed my hand once more.

Then she let go.

"I should get home."

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She picked up her bicycle and started towards the road, then stopped.

"Oi?"

I looked up.

"Yeah?"

She smiled.

"I'm glad you told me."

I felt my throat tighten.

"Me too."

She started walking towards the road. She turned around once and waved before cycling away. I watched her disappear around the corner.

For a long time, I stood beside the window, looking at the place where she'd been.

Then I climbed back through into 2026.

My phone lit up.

Only a few minutes had passed.

I sat down at the dusty desk and opened my journal.

I wrote everything I could remember. The way Elsie had looked through the window, the questions she'd asked, the way she'd held my hand after learning the truth.

Then I reached the part where she'd suggested staying until Sunday.

I stopped writing.

I stared at the page for a long time.

Then I wrote:

She knows.

Underneath, I added:

And she wants to remember me.

I looked towards the window.

For the first time, staying in 1997 didn't feel like something I'd invented in my own head.

It felt like a possibility.

A real one.

And that frightened me more than anything else.

Chapter Twenty

By Thursday morning, I'd decided that I needed to stop going to 1997 for a while.

I lasted until Thursday afternoon.

In my defence, I'd made the decision before breakfast, when everything seemed reasonably straightforward. I'd stay away from the factory, concentrate on school, spend more time with Mum and Dad and give myself a chance to think properly. It was a sensible plan, and I was quite proud of myself for coming up with it.

Unfortunately, sensible plans had a habit of becoming less appealing once I actually had to follow them.

I was sitting in English, pretending to listen to Mrs Palmer talk about character motivation, when I found myself wondering whether Elsie would still be wearing her floral dress if I went back that afternoon. She

always was, of course. It was the same Saturday, and she had no reason to change her clothes. But I wondered whether she'd do something different if I approached her in a different way. Whether she'd still laugh at the same jokes, still take my hand, still look at me with that expression I'd started to recognise.

Then I wondered whether she would kiss me if I asked.

That thought occupied most of the remaining lesson.

"Freya?"

I looked up.

Mrs Palmer was watching me.

"Would you like to share your thoughts?"

I blinked.

"Sorry?"

"About the character's decision."

I looked down at the page in front of me.

I had absolutely no idea what character we were discussing.

"Erm."

Someone behind me laughed.

Mrs Palmer raised an eyebrow.

"Perhaps you'd like to pay a little more attention."

"Sorry, Miss."

She smiled faintly and returned to the board.

I stared at my book.

Character motivation.

I almost laughed.

If anyone had asked me to explain my own motivation lately, I wouldn't have known where to start.

After school, I went home and found Mum in the garden, trying to persuade a climbing rose to grow in the direction she wanted. She had a pair of gardening gloves on and was muttering something about stubborn plants when I came through the back door.

"Hello, love."

"Hi."

She glanced over her shoulder.

"Good day?"

"Yeah. Mostly."

"Mostly?"

"Got caught not listening in English."

She laughed.

"That's unlike you."

"I know."

"Thinking about your story again?"

I hesitated.

"Something like that."

She smiled.

"Well, at least you're consistent."

I put my bag down and went over to help her. For the next half hour, I held branches out of the way while Mum tied them to the trellis, and we talked about school, the weather and whether Dad would remember to buy milk on his way home. It was such an ordinary conversation that I found myself paying attention to every detail.

The little crease between Mum's eyebrows when she concentrated.

The way she tucked loose hair behind her ear with the back of her wrist because her gloves were dirty.

The ridiculous running commentary she gave the rose whenever it refused to cooperate.

"Honestly," she told it, "you'd think I was asking you to solve world hunger. It's a trellis. Just grow up it."

I laughed.

Mum looked at me.

"What?"

"Nothing."

She smiled.

"You're laughing at me."

"A bit."

"Good. Someone should."

We finished just before Dad came home, carrying two shopping bags and looking pleased with himself.

"Milk," he announced, holding up a carton.

Mum looked impressed.

"Without being reminded?"

"I am a responsible adult."

"That's a bold claim."

He grinned.

I laughed, and for a little while everything felt normal.

We made dinner together, or rather Mum cooked while Dad and I chopped vegetables and occasionally got in her way. Afterwards, we sat in the living room watching a programme about people renovating old houses. Dad kept pointing out structural problems, despite having no qualifications whatsoever, and Mum threatened to send him outside to inspect the shed if he didn't stop.

And then, halfway through the programme, I looked at them both and felt something awful.

Not sadness exactly.

Something closer to grief.

They were sitting right there, perfectly happy, arguing about whether a kitchen extension was worth the

money. Nothing had happened to them. Nothing was wrong.

But I was looking at them as though I might never see them again.

I hated it.

I hated that I was even considering a future where they weren't part of my life.

I looked away before either of them noticed.

Later, when I went upstairs, I stood in the doorway of my room for a long time. My bed was unmade, my schoolbooks scattered across the desk and there was a half-finished glass of water beside my laptop. Everything was exactly as I'd left it that morning.

My life.

My actual life.

I sat on the bed and opened my journal.

For a while, I just stared at the pages.

Then I wrote:

If I go back, I lose them.

I stopped.

It looked horrible written down.

I turned the page and tried again.

If I stay, I lose Elsie.

That wasn't quite true. I could keep visiting her, at least while the window survived. I could spend hours with her, learn more about her and perhaps even kiss her. But every time I returned home, she'd forget. I'd have to start again, introducing myself and watching her become fond of me all over again.

It wasn't a relationship. Not really.

It was a collection of beginnings.

I put the journal down and lay back on the bed.

For the first time, I wondered whether loving someone could be a selfish thing.

Not because I wanted Elsie to love me back. That seemed normal enough. But because I wanted her to remember me, even if it meant changing everything.

I turned onto my side and looked at the photograph on my bedside table.

Mum, Dad and me at the seaside, all three of us laughing.

I picked it up.

I remembered that day. The wind had been ridiculous, Mum's hair had kept blowing into her face, and we'd spent ages trying to find somewhere that sold decent chips. Dad had insisted on taking photographs even though I complained about every single one.

I'd been happy.

I still was happy, in lots of ways.

That was what made everything so difficult.

If my life had been awful, perhaps leaving would have been easy.

But it wasn't. I loved my parents.

I loved my room, my school, my friends and all the little things that made up my days.

And I loved Elsie.

I closed my eyes.

I wished, more than anything, that I could have both.

On Friday, I didn't go to the factory.

I went to school, came home, helped Dad wash the car and spent the evening watching a film with Mum. Sophie sent me a message asking whether I'd finally asked Elsie out, and I replied that I was still working on it.

She sent back a string of dramatic crying emojis.

I put my phone down and tried not to think about 1997. It didn't work particularly well, but I managed.

Saturday was harder.

The weather was warm, and Mum suggested we go into town for lunch. Dad agreed, mostly because he wanted to visit a second-hand bookshop he'd discovered, and we spent the afternoon wandering around the high street. We bought sandwiches, sat outside a café and watched people pass.

At one point, we walked past the little street leading towards the old factory.

I stopped.

Mum looked back.

"Everything all right?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She followed my gaze.

"Still interested in that place?"

I hesitated.

"A bit."

Dad glanced towards the industrial estate.

"Funny you should mention it."

I looked at him.

"Why?"

"Had a chat with someone at the council yesterday."

My stomach tightened.

"About the factory?"

He nodded.

"Among other things."

I tried to sound casual.

"What did they say?"

"Nothing definite yet. The owners are pushing for redevelopment, but there are some complications."

I looked at him.

"What sort?"

"Planning, mostly. There are concerns about contamination, and a few people want parts of the building preserved."

I felt a small wave of relief.

"So they might not demolish it?"

Dad shrugged.

"Possibly. But I wouldn't count on it."

I looked away but I could sense that he studied me.

"Why the interest?"

I hesitated.

"Just curious."

He smiled.

"Well, if you're curious about the history, I can probably find you some old photographs."

I looked at him.

"Really?"

"Of course."

I smiled.

"That'd be nice."

Mum glanced between us.

"Just remember you're not going exploring inside."

I felt my stomach tighten.

"I know."

She gave me a look.

"Freya."

"I know, Mum."

She nodded.

"Good."

We carried on walking.

I tried to enjoy the afternoon, but my thoughts kept returning to the factory. The window was already damaged, and the possibility of demolition made everything feel more urgent. Even if the building survived, the hinge might not.

I needed to do something about it.

Not because I'd decided to stay.

But because I wasn't ready to lose the choice.

On Sunday morning, I went to the hardware shop.

I told Mum I needed a few things for a school project, which wasn't entirely true but sounded believable enough. I bought a small screwdriver, a packet of screws, a metal bracket and a tube of wood filler. The man behind the counter asked whether I was fixing something, and I told him it was an old window.

He looked at the bracket.

"That'll help if the wood's still sound."

I hesitated.

"What if it isn't?"

He shrugged.

"Then you're better off replacing the rotten bit. No point screwing into something that's falling apart."

I nodded.

"Right."

He smiled.

"Good luck."

I thanked him and left.

The factory was quiet when I arrived. I slipped through the fence and made my way to the back office, carrying the little bag of tools. The window looked worse than ever. The frame hung crookedly, and the lower hinge was barely attached.

I set the tools down and examined it carefully.

The wood around the screws was soft and crumbly. I pressed my thumb against it, and a small piece broke away.

I frowned.

The man at the hardware shop had been right.

There wasn't much left to fix.

Still, I tried.

I removed the loose screws, cleaned away the worst of the rotten wood and fitted the metal bracket across the damaged section. It took ages, partly because I didn't really know what I was doing and partly because I was terrified of breaking the frame completely. Every time the wood creaked, I stopped and held my breath.

Eventually, I managed to secure the bracket.

I stepped back.

The window was still crooked, but it looked slightly more stable.

I tested it carefully.

It opened.

I smiled.

Then I closed it again.

The frame shifted.

There was a sharp cracking sound.

I froze.

A thin split had appeared along the lower edge of the wood.

I stared at it.

"Oh, brilliant."

I touched the crack carefully.

It was worse than before.

I'd managed to make the window more secure in one place and weaker in another.

I sat down on the dusty floor, feeling thoroughly defeated. For a while, I just stared at the frame.

Then I laughed. Not because it was funny. Because the whole thing was ridiculous.

I'd found a window that could take me twenty-nine years into the past, and I was apparently going to lose it because I couldn't repair a hinge.

I looked at the tools scattered beside me. Then at the window. I could still open it. For now. But I didn't know how many more times.

I stood up.

Carefully, I lifted the frame and climbed through.

The warm August air touched my face.

I stepped down into the grass and looked around. The factory was busy, as always and the sun was bright.

And a few minutes later, Elsie appeared with her bicycle.

I smiled.

"Hi."

She looked up.

"Hi."

I took a breath.

"Can I ask you something?"

She laughed.

"Blimey. Straight to the questions, are we?"

I smiled faintly.

"Yeah."

She leaned her bicycle against the wall.

"All right. Go on."

I looked at her.

"Do you believe in impossible things?"

She raised an eyebrow.

"Depends what sort."

I glanced towards the window.

"Time travel."

She laughed.

"That's a bit specific."

I smiled.

"Yeah."

She studied me.

"Why?"

I hesitated. Then I looked at her.

"Because I need to tell you something."

She smiled.

"Sounds serious."

"It is."

She leaned against the wall, watching me.

"All right."

I took a breath.

"I'm from the future."

For a moment, she stared at me.

Then she laughed.

"The future?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She grinned.

"How far?"

"Twenty-nine years."

Her smile faded slightly.

"You're serious."

"Yeah."

She brushed a tuft of hair away from her face. Then looked at me.

"Prove it."

I smiled faintly.

"Come on."

I led her around the back of the factory.

The window was waiting.

I opened it carefully, supporting the damaged frame as I lifted it.

The abandoned office of 2026 appeared beyond.

Elsie leaned closer.

Her expression changed.

She stared.

Then she looked at me.

"Oh my God."

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She stepped closer.

"That's impossible."

"I know."

She looked through the opening again.

Then back at me.

"Can you go through?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

"Will you come back?"

I smiled.

"Of course."

She hesitated.

Then she nodded.

"All right."

I climbed through carefully, supporting the frame as I went.

The cold air hit me.

I landed on the dusty floor and turned back towards her.

Elsie stared.

Then she laughed.

"Blimey."

I smiled.

"Yeah."

She looked around the office.

"What happened to the factory?"

"It closed."

She frowned.

"When?"

"Years ago."

She looked troubled.

"But my dad works here."

"I know."

I hesitated.

Then I added, "I don't know exactly what happens to him."

She nodded slowly.

"Right."

I climbed back through the window.

Elsie stepped aside, watching me carefully.

When my feet touched the grass, she reached out and took my hand.

I looked at her.

She was staring at my fingers.

"You're cold."

I smiled.

"Yeah."

She looked up.

"But you were warm before?"

"Yeah."

She shook her head.

"That's mad."

I laughed softly.

She looked towards the window again.

"So every time you go through there, you end up in the future?"

"Yeah."

"And when you come back, it's the same day?"

I nodded.

"Usually."

She frowned.

"Usually?"

I hesitated.

"Something was different once."

"What?"

"You came to the factory from town instead of leaving it."

She stared at me.

"That's it?"

I laughed.

"I know it sounds silly."

"A bit."

"But it had never happened before."

She considered that.

"Maybe you just arrived at a different time."

"Maybe."

She looked at the window again.

"How many times have you been here?"

I hesitated.

"A lot."

"How many?"

"More than ten."

She stared at me.

"And every time, you met me?"

I nodded.

"Most times."

She was quiet.

Then she asked, "Why?"

I looked at her. The question was familiar. I'd heard it before. But this time, I knew what I wanted to say.

"Because I like you."

Her expression changed.

She looked surprised, then smiled faintly.

"Oh."

I laughed nervously.

"Yeah."

She looked down at our hands.

Then she squeezed mine.

"Well, that's nice."

I smiled. She looked up.

"Do I like you?"

I stared at her.

"What?"

"In the other times. When we've met before."

I swallowed.

"I think so."

She smiled.

"How do you know?"

I hesitated.

"We've spent a lot of time together."

She nodded.

"Right."

"We've talked, walked around town, sat by the river."

She smiled.

"That sounds lovely."

"It was."

She looked at me for a moment.

Then she stepped closer.

"Anything else?"

I felt my face warm.

"You've held my hand."

She glanced down at our fingers.

"Well, I'm doing that now."

I laughed.

"Yeah."

She smiled.

"Seems I must be rather fond of you."

I swallowed.

"Maybe."

She laughed softly.

Then she looked towards the window again.

"What happens if you don't go back?"

I felt my stomach tighten.

"I don't know."

She frowned.

"You've never tried?"

I shook my head.

"No."

"Why not?"

I looked at her.

"Because I've got a family."

Her expression softened.

"Oh."

I nodded.

"Mum and Dad. They're waiting for me."

She was quiet.

Then she looked down at our hands.

"Right."

I swallowed.

"I can't just disappear."

She nodded slowly.

"No."

We stood there for a moment.

Then she looked up.

"But you could stay until tomorrow, couldn't you?"

I stared at her.

"I don't know."

She frowned.

"Why?"

"Because every time I leave, the day starts again. I don't know what happens if I stay past midnight."

She considered that.

"Well, I imagine Sunday happens."

I laughed despite myself.

"Probably. Perhaps."

She smiled.

Then she looked at me more seriously.

"Freya, if you stayed until tomorrow..."

I waited.

"Would I remember you?"

I felt my throat tighten.

"I think so."

She was quiet for a long moment.

Then she smiled faintly.

"That would be nice."

I stared at her. She looked down, suddenly shy.

"I mean, I don't like the idea of forgetting you."

I swallowed.

"Neither do I."

She looked up. For a moment, neither of us spoke. Then she squeezed my hand.

"Well, perhaps you should find out."

I looked at her.

"Find out what?"

"Whether Sunday happens."

I laughed softly.

She smiled.

"Not today, obviously. You've got people waiting for you."

I nodded.

"But maybe one day."

I stared at her.

She looked towards the window, then back at me.

"Maybe one day you could stay."

The words settled between us.

I wanted to say yes.

I wanted to tell her I'd been thinking about exactly that, that I'd imagined waking up in 1997 and seeing her again without having to explain everything.

But I couldn't. Not yet. So I smiled faintly.

"Maybe."

Elsie grinned.

"Are you're always saying that."

I laughed.

"I am."

She squeezed my hand once more.

Then she let go.

"I should get home."

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She picked up her bicycle and started towards the road, then stopped.

"Oi?"

I looked up.

"Yeah?"

She smiled.

"I'm glad you told me."

I felt my throat tighten.

"Me too."

She walked towards the road, got on her bicycle, then she turned around and waved before cycling away.

I watched her disappear around the corner.

For a long time, I stood beside the window, looking at the place where she'd been.

Then I climbed back through into 2026.

My phone lit up.

Only a few minutes had passed.

I sat down at the dusty desk and opened my journal.

I wrote everything I could remember. The way Elsie had looked through the window, the questions she'd asked, the way she'd held my hand after learning the truth.

Then I reached the part where she'd suggested staying until Sunday.

I stopped writing.

I stared at the page for a long time.

Then I wrote:

She knows.

Underneath, I added:

And she wants to remember me.

I looked towards the window.

For the first time, staying in 1997 didn't feel like something I'd invented in my own head.

It felt like a possibility.

A real one.

And that frightened me more than anything else.

Chapter Twenty-One

By Monday morning, I'd made a list of everything I would need if I stayed in 1997.

It was a terrible list.

Not because there was anything particularly wrong with it, but because the more I wrote, the more I realised how little I understood about living in a different time. I'd started with the obvious things, like clothes, money and somewhere to sleep. Then I'd added food, identification, a way of contacting people and some explanation for why a fifteen-year-old girl was wandering around town without her parents.

That last one was proving especially difficult.

I couldn't exactly tell people I'd come from the future. Elsie had believed me because I'd shown her the

window, but I doubted the woman running a bed and breakfast would be quite so understanding.

I sat at my desk, chewing the end of my pen.

Money, I'd written.

Underneath, I'd added:

More money.

Then:

Probably quite a lot of money.

I sighed.

I'd looked up the prices of things in 1997, and although everything seemed ridiculously cheap compared with 2026, that didn't help much when I had almost nothing to spend. I had a few old coins and notes I'd managed to collect, but nowhere near enough to live on. And I couldn't simply use my bank card, because the account wouldn't exist for another twenty-something years.

There was the possibility of using something I knew about the future. Lottery numbers, perhaps, or the result of a football match. I'd thought about it before, but it had always felt like cheating.

Now it felt like a practical problem.

Unfortunately, knowing that something would happen wasn't the same as knowing exactly what would happen. I couldn't remember the winning lottery numbers from August 1997, and I certainly didn't know enough about football to predict anything useful.

I opened my laptop and started searching.

After twenty minutes, I had a page full of notes about old lottery draws, football results and newspaper headlines. It was surprisingly easy to find information about things that had already happened. I copied down a few dates and numbers, then stopped.

There was something horrible about planning it.

I'd spent weeks telling myself that staying in 1997 was only a possibility, something I might consider one day if I became brave enough. But now I was researching how to survive there.

It made the whole thing feel real.

I looked at the photograph of Mum and Dad on my desk. Then I closed the laptop.

At school, I barely spoke.

Sophie noticed, of course. She always did.

We were sitting together at lunch when she nudged my shoulder.

"All right. What's happened?"

I looked up.

"Nothing."

She gave me a look.

"Freya."

I smiled faintly.

"What?"

"You've been staring at your sandwich for ten minutes."

I looked down. She was right. I hadn't taken a bite.

"Not hungry."

She frowned.

"Is it Elsie?"

I hesitated.

"Sort of."

Sophie leaned closer.

"Did something happen?"

I looked at her. I wanted to tell her.

Not about the window, necessarily, but about the decision I was facing. I wanted someone to tell me what to do, someone who could look at the whole situation and somehow find a way for everyone to be happy.

But there wasn't a way.

At least, not one I could see.

"I think I might have to choose between two things," I said.

Sophie frowned.

"What things?"

I hesitated.

"Two people I care about."

She studied me.

"Like, Elsie and someone else?"

I shook my head.

"Not exactly."

She looked confused.

I laughed weakly.

"Sorry. It's complicated."

She rolled her eyes.

"Everything's complicated with you."

I smiled.

"Yeah."

She was quiet for a moment.

Then she said, "Well, if you have to choose, maybe think about which choice you'd regret more."

I looked at her.

"That's not very helpful."

She laughed.

"I know. Sorry."

I smiled faintly.

She nudged me again.

"But seriously, Freya. Don't make yourself miserable trying to keep everyone happy. Sometimes you can't."

I looked down at my sandwich.

"Yeah."

She watched me for a moment.

"You're not planning on doing something stupid, are you?"

I looked up.

"What?"

She shrugged.

"Running away or something."

My stomach tightened.

I laughed nervously.

"No."

She studied my face.

"Promise?"

I hesitated.

Then I nodded.

"Yeah."

She smiled.

"Good."

I looked away. Another promise. Another lie.

I was becoming frighteningly good at both.

That evening, Dad came home with a folder of old photographs.

He placed it on the kitchen table while Mum was making dinner.

"Found something for you."

I looked up.

"What?"

"Factory pictures."

My stomach tightened.

He smiled.

"Thought you might be interested."

I opened the folder.

Inside were several photocopies of old newspaper photographs, along with a few articles about the factory's history. There was a picture of the building in the 1960s, another showing workers outside the gates in the 1980s and a more recent one from the late 1990s.

I stared at that last photograph.

The factory looked exactly as it did when I visited Elsie.

Clean brickwork.

Open gates.

Cars parked in the yard.

People standing outside in summer clothes.

I leaned closer.

There were several men in the picture, smiling towards the camera. One of them looked vaguely familiar, although I couldn't place him.

Dad noticed.

"Recognise anyone?"

I shook my head.

"No."

He smiled.

"Probably not. It's nearly thirty years old."

I nodded.

He pointed to the photograph.

"That one's from August 1997, apparently. Some sort of staff event."

I felt my heart jump.

"August?"

"Yeah."

I looked closer.

There was a date printed beneath the photograph.

Saturday, 16 August 1997.

I stared at it.

The same day.

The same Saturday I'd been visiting over and over again.

I looked at the faces.

Then I saw her.

Not clearly.

Not at first.

She was standing near the edge of the photograph, partly hidden behind a man in a short-sleeved shirt. Only her face and one shoulder were visible, but I recognised the hair, the freckles and the familiar expression.

Elsie.

My breath caught.

Dad looked at me.

"Everything all right?"

I nodded quickly.

"Yeah."

I looked back at the photograph.

Elsie was smiling.

And beside her, just outside the factory gates, stood a bicycle with a basket on the front.

I stared at it.

There was no mistaking her.

She was there.

On the exact day.

In the exact place.

I looked at the date again.

Then at the photograph.

Something about it bothered me.

I leaned closer.

Elsie was standing beside a man who might have been her dad, smiling towards the camera. But her expression looked slightly different from the one I knew. She wasn't grinning or laughing. She looked distracted, as though something had caught her attention just before the photograph was taken.

I followed the direction of her gaze.

Towards the edge of the picture.

Towards someone outside the frame.

I felt my stomach tighten.

Was she looking at me?

It was ridiculous.

I knew that.

The photograph had been taken almost thirty years before I was born, and whatever version of that Saturday it showed, I had no reason to believe I'd been standing there.

But I couldn't stop staring.

Dad leaned over my shoulder.

"Interesting, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

He smiled.

"There's a little story attached to that one."

I looked at him.

"What story?"

He pointed to the article beneath the photograph.

"Apparently, they had some sort of open day. Families came along, there was a raffle, food, that sort of thing."

I looked at the picture again.

An open day. No. It was a normal Saturday. A few people at work. Elsie’s dad one of them. I shook my head in disbelief.

Dad continued.

"Funny thing is, there's a note in the archive about a girl who turned up that afternoon and caused a bit of confusion."

I froze.

"What?"

He looked at me.

"Nothing dramatic. Apparently, someone reported seeing a girl wandering around the factory who didn't seem to belong there."

My heart started beating faster.

I stared at him.

"What girl?"

Dad shrugged.

"Doesn't say. Just some teenager, apparently."

I looked down at the article.

There it was, a short paragraph near the bottom.

Staff reported an unidentified young visitor near the rear offices during the afternoon. No further action was taken.

I read it twice.

Then a third time.

The rear offices.

The window.

Me.

It had to be me.

I looked at Dad.

"Did they find out who she was?"

He shook his head.

"Doesn't seem so."

I stared at the photograph.

For the first time, I had evidence that my visits might have left something behind.

Not just objects I'd carried back.

Not just memories.

A record.

Something that existed in 2026 because of something I'd done in 1997. But not something I knew I'd done. There had never been a crowd. Never been a photographer. Nothing like that.

I felt cold.

Dad looked at me.

"Freya?"

I blinked.

"Yeah?"

"You all right?"

I nodded.

"Yeah. Just... interesting."

He smiled.

"Thought you'd like it."

I looked down at the photograph again.

Elsie was still smiling.

Still looking towards the edge of the frame.

And suddenly, I wasn't sure whether the past was resetting at all.

Later that night, I sat at my desk with the photocopy spread in front of me.

Dad had let me keep it, along with the article.

I examined every detail.

The cars.

The people.

The shadows.

The little bicycle near the gates.

I tried to remember whether I'd ever seen an open day during my visits. There had been people around the

factory, certainly, but I'd never paid much attention to what was happening beyond the back office and the side door.

Perhaps the event had taken place later in the afternoon.

Perhaps I'd always left before it started.

Or perhaps the photograph showed a version of the day that was different from the ones I'd experienced.

I looked at the note about the unidentified girl.

It could have been anyone.

A teenager wandering around a factory wasn't exactly impossible.

But the mention of the rear offices was too close to ignore.

I opened my journal.

What if the past remembers, even when Elsie doesn't?

I stared at the words.

Then I looked at the photograph again.

If my visits were leaving traces, what would happen if I stayed?

Would the future change?

Would the photograph change?

Would Elsie's life change?

I thought about the older Elsie I'd found online, smiling beside the young people she'd helped.

I thought about the possibility that she had someone she loved, a life she'd built and memories I'd never be part of.

Then I thought about the sixteen-year-old Elsie, standing beside the window, holding my hand and telling me she wanted to remember me.

For the first time, I understood that staying wasn't just about choosing between Elsie and my parents.

It was about choosing between two versions of Elsie's life.

One where she grew older without me.

And one where she might not.

I closed my journal.

Then I looked at the photograph one last time.

The girl at the edge of the frame was smiling towards something I couldn't see.

I wondered whether, somewhere in that afternoon, she was waiting for me.

And whether I had already changed more than I knew.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The photograph was still on my desk when I woke up.

I'd left it beside my journal, partly because I wanted to look at it again in the morning and partly because I hadn't been able to make myself put it away. The sunlight coming through my curtains fell across the factory gates, leaving Elsie's face in shadow. I sat up, reached for the photograph and held it closer to the window.

There she was.

Sixteen years old, standing beside a man who might have been her dad, smiling at something beyond the edge of the picture. I recognised the floral dress, the shape of her face and the way she stood with one shoulder slightly raised. I could even make out the little star bracelet around her wrist, although that might have been my imagination. Probably was.

I turned the photograph over.

Nothing.

Just the date Dad had written in pencil.

16 August 1997.

I looked at it for a long time.

Then I picked up my phone and opened the photograph of the older Elsie.

The two pictures couldn't have been more different. In one, she was a teenager standing outside a busy factory on a summer afternoon. In the other, she was a grown woman with glasses and a few grey hairs, smiling beside a group of young people holding paintings.

Twenty-nine years.

An entire life between them.

I wondered what had happened during those years. The places she'd visited, the people she'd loved, the things she'd lost and gained. I wondered whether she'd ever thought about that summer Saturday again, or whether it had disappeared into the thousands of ordinary days that followed.

And I wondered whether I had any right to change it.

I put the photographs side by side.

For the first time, I wasn't simply frightened of losing Elsie. I was frightened of what keeping her might cost.

At school, I tried to concentrate.

It was Tuesday, and we had a double science lesson followed by English. Mrs Palmer was talking about unreliable narrators, which seemed particularly appropriate considering how many lies I'd told lately. I spent most of the lesson wondering whether I was an unreliable narrator in my own life.

Probably.

I hadn't told anyone the whole truth. Not Mum. Not Dad. Not Sophie. Not even Elsie, really.

She knew I came from the future, and she knew I'd visited her before, but she didn't know about the photograph of her older self. She knew. Or had known? Or had knew?

She didn't know I'd found evidence of the life she was supposed to have. She didn't know I was sitting in a classroom twenty-nine years later, trying to decide whether to interfere with it.

I felt horrible.

Not because I'd done something deliberately cruel, but because I'd been making decisions about her future without giving her the chance to understand them.

That wasn't fair.

If I was going to ask Elsie whether she wanted me to stay, I needed to tell her everything.

Even the parts that might make her say no.

At lunch, Sophie found me sitting on the low wall beside the sports hall.

She sat down next to me and opened a packet of crisps.

"All right?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She gave me a look.

"That's your favourite answer lately."

I smiled faintly.

"Sorry."

She offered me a crisp.

I took one.

For a while, we sat quietly, watching people cross the playground. A couple of boys were arguing about football, and someone nearby was playing music through a phone speaker.

Sophie looked at me.

"Have you told Elsie yet?"

I hesitated.

"Some things."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Some things?"

I nodded.

She sighed dramatically.

"Freya, you're exhausting."

I laughed.

"I know."

She smiled, then looked at me more seriously.

"Is she nice to you?"

I blinked.

"What?"

"Elsie. Is she nice?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

"Properly nice? Not just when she wants something?"

"Yeah."

Sophie smiled.

"Good."

I looked down at my hands.

"She's lovely."

Sophie grinned.

"Oh, you are so gone."

I laughed, feeling my face warm.

"Shut up."

She nudged my shoulder.

"Just saying."

I smiled.

Then she looked at me again.

"Does she make you happy?"

I thought about Elsie laughing beside the river, about her holding my hand and asking whether I wanted to stay until Sunday.

"Yeah."

Sophie nodded. "Then that's something."

I looked at her. "Is it enough?"

She considered that. "I don't know."

I stared at her.

She shrugged.

"Depends what you're giving up, doesn't it?"

I looked away.

"Yeah."

She was quiet for a moment.

Then she said, "Just don't forget you're allowed to be happy too."

I looked at her.

She smiled.

"Whatever you decide."

I nodded.

"Thanks."

She grinned.

"You're welcome. Now eat something before you fall over."

I laughed and took another crisp.

After school, I went straight home.

Mum was in the kitchen, making tea, and Dad was sitting at the table with his laptop open. They both looked up when I came in.

"Hello, love," Mum said.

"Hi."

Dad smiled.

"How was school?"

"All right."

He raised an eyebrow.

"That's very detailed."

I laughed.

"Sorry."

Mum poured hot water into a mug.

"Want tea?"

"Yeah, please."

I sat down at the table.

For a while, we talked about ordinary things. Dad complained about a council meeting he'd attended, Mum told us about a neighbour's cat that had apparently decided our garden belonged to it, and I mentioned the science test we'd had that morning.

It was nice. Painfully nice.

I kept looking at them, wondering how I could possibly leave.

At one point, Mum caught me staring.

"What?"

I smiled faintly.

"Nothing."

She studied me.

"Freya."

I looked down.

She set her mug on the table.

"Are you all right?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She didn't look convinced.

Dad closed his laptop.

"Love, you've been saying that for weeks."

I looked at him.

He smiled gently.

"We're not trying to interrogate you. We're just worried."

I felt my throat tighten.

"Sorry."

Mum shook her head.

"Don't apologise."

I looked down at my hands.

For a long moment, I said nothing.

Then I asked, "If I told you something really strange, would you believe me?"

Mum and Dad exchanged a glance.

Dad smiled slightly.

"Depends how strange."

I laughed weakly.

"Really strange."

Mum pulled out the chair opposite me and sat down.

"Well, try us."

I looked at them.

I wanted to tell them.

More than anything.

I wanted to explain the window, the summer afternoon, Elsie and the impossible choice I'd been carrying around for weeks. I wanted Dad to find some clever solution, Mum to tell me everything would be all right, and the three of us to work out what to do.

But I couldn't imagine how they'd react.

They'd think I was ill. Or lying. Or both.

And even if they believed me, they'd never let me go back. I knew that.

I looked down.

"There's someone."

Mum blinked.

"Someone?"

I nodded.

"A girl."

Dad smiled faintly.

"Ah."

I felt my face warm.

"Don't."

He raised his hands.

"Not saying anything."

Mum smiled gently.

"What's her name?"

"Elsie."

She nodded.

"That's a lovely name."

I smiled.

"Yeah."

Mum leaned forward slightly.

"Do you like her?"

I nodded.

"A lot."

Dad smiled.

"Does she like you?"

"I think so."

Mum looked pleased.

"Well, that's good."

I looked down at my hands.

"But it's complicated."

Dad laughed softly.

"Of course it is."

I smiled weakly. I could sense Mum study me.

"What's complicated about it?"

I hesitated.

"We can't really be together."

Her expression softened.

"Why not?"

I looked at her.

"Because... we live in different places."

It wasn't exactly a lie.

Mum nodded.

"How far apart?"

I swallowed.

"Far."

Dad leaned back.

"Well, people manage long-distance relationships."

I looked at him.

"Not like this."

He studied my face.

"Is she moving away?"

I hesitated.

"Something like that."

Mum reached across the table and took my hand.

"Freya, whatever's going on, you don't have to sort it out on your own."

I felt my throat tighten.

"I know."

She squeezed my fingers.

"And you don't have to tell us everything today."

I nodded.

"But promise us something."

I looked at her.

"What?"

"Don't disappear on us."

I stared at her. She smiled sadly.

"I don't mean physically. I mean don't shut us out completely. We love you, and we want to be part of your life, even when it's difficult."

I felt tears prick my eyes.

"I know."

Dad leaned forward.

"And if there's something you're frightened to tell us, remember that we're on your side."

I looked at him.

He smiled.

"Always."

I swallowed.

"Okay."

Mum squeezed my hand again.

For a moment, I thought I might cry.

Instead, I smiled. A shaky smile, but still a smile.

"Thanks."

She smiled back.

"You're welcome, love."

That evening, I sat on my bed with my journal open.

I wrote down everything I could remember about the conversation with Mum and Dad. The way Mum had held my hand, the way Dad had smiled and told me they were on my side.

Then I wrote:

They deserve to know.

I stared at the sentence. It was true. They deserved to know what was happening to their daughter.

They deserved to know why I'd been disappearing, why I'd been lying and why I was considering leaving them.

But I still didn't know how to tell them.

I turned the page.

Elsie deserves to know too.

I looked at the photograph of her older self. Then at the picture from 1997. Two versions of the same girl. Two possible futures. I couldn't keep pretending that the only thing that mattered was whether Elsie wanted me to stay. She needed to know what staying might mean.

I needed to know whether she'd still want me there once she understood.

And Mum and Dad needed to know what I was considering before I did something I could never undo.

I closed the journal.

For the first time, the decision felt less like choosing between two lives and more like finding the courage to be honest with the people I loved.

I looked towards the window.

Not the one at the factory.

The ordinary one in my bedroom.

Outside, the sky was turning dark, and the streetlights were coming on.

I wondered what Elsie was doing in 1997.

Probably nothing. Probably everything.

I smiled faintly. Tomorrow, I would go back.

And this time, I wouldn't leave anything out.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I woke up on Wednesday with the uncomfortable feeling that I'd promised myself something I wasn't sure I could do. Telling Elsie about her future was one thing. Telling Mum and Dad that I'd been travelling backwards through time, and that I was considering staying there, was something else entirely.

I'd spent half the night imagining how that conversation might go, and none of the versions ended particularly well.

In one, Dad laughed and asked whether I'd been reading too much science fiction. In another, Mum cried. In the worst one, they believed me immediately, which somehow made everything even more frightening.

By breakfast, I'd decided that I would tell Elsie first. Not because she mattered more, but because I needed to understand what I was asking of her before I could

explain it to anyone else. If she didn't want me to stay, there wouldn't be a decision to make. I'd come home, stop visiting the factory and eventually get over her.

That was what people did, wasn't it? They fell in love with someone they couldn't have, felt miserable for a while and then carried on with their lives. I wasn't sure how long it would take to get over someone who lived twenty-nine years in the past, but I supposed I'd find out.

Mum was making toast when I came downstairs. Dad had already left for work, and the kitchen smelled of coffee and the slightly burnt bread Mum always insisted was perfectly edible. She looked up when I came in and smiled.

"Morning, love. Sleep all right?"

"Mostly."

She gave me a look. "That's not a particularly convincing answer."

I smiled and sat down. Mum put a plate of toast in front of me, then joined me at the table with her coffee. For a while, we talked about school and whether it was going to rain later. It was the sort of conversation we'd had hundreds of times, and I found myself wondering how many more there might be. I hated that thought. It made

every ordinary moment feel like something I was supposed to remember, and I didn't want to spend the rest of my life collecting memories of my parents as though they were already gone.

"Freya?"

I looked up.

Mum was watching me. "You've gone quiet again."

"Sorry."

She smiled faintly. "You don't have to apologise every time you think about something."

I looked down at my toast, then back at her. "Mum, can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Do you think people can change the future?"

She considered that for a moment. "Well, yes. I suppose we do it all the time, don't we? Every decision changes what happens next."

"I mean something bigger. Like if you knew what was going to happen to someone, and you could stop it."

Mum frowned slightly. "Depends what you're stopping."

"What if it wasn't something bad? What if you just knew how someone's life was going to turn out, and you had the chance to make it different?"

She leaned back in her chair, thinking. "I suppose I'd want to know whether different meant better."

I nodded slowly.

"And whether the person actually wanted me interfering," she added.

I looked at her.

Mum smiled. "You can't make everyone's decisions for them, love. Even when you think you know what's best."

I stared at my plate. It was annoyingly close to what I'd been thinking myself, although I wasn't sure whether that made me feel better or worse.

"Why?" she asked. "Something for your story?"

I hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah."

"Sounds complicated."

I laughed softly. "It is."

"Well, good stories usually are."

She reached over and stole a piece of my toast, despite having an entire plate of her own. I complained, she told me mine looked nicer, and for a moment everything was normal again.

I wished I could stay in that moment.

Not forever. Just long enough to stop being frightened of what came next.

I didn't pay much attention at school. Sophie spent lunch telling me about an argument she'd had with her older sister, and I nodded in what I hoped were the appropriate places while trying to work out how to explain the photograph to Elsie. I could show her the older version of herself on my phone, but the phone wouldn't work in 1997. I could print the photograph, except I didn't have access to a printer at home without someone asking questions. And even if I managed that, how was Elsie supposed to know it was genuine? It would be easy enough to claim I'd found a picture of someone who looked like her.

Then I remembered the factory photograph Dad had given me.

I could bring that.

It wouldn't prove anything about Elsie's future, but it would show her that I knew about the open day. More importantly, I could explain where I'd found it and let her decide what she thought.

By the time the final bell rang, I'd made up my mind.

I went home, changed out of my uniform and took the two photographs from my desk. I slipped the factory picture into my journal and checked that the photograph of older Elsie was still saved on my phone. Then I stood in the middle of my bedroom, looking around at everything.

My books.

My clothes.

The ridiculous little ceramic cat Sophie had given me for my birthday.

The photograph of Mum, Dad and me beside my bed.

I wasn't planning to stay today. I knew that. I'd promised myself I wouldn't make a decision until I'd spoken to everyone, and I meant to keep that promise. But standing there with my bag over my shoulder, I felt

the same strange sadness I'd been carrying around for weeks.

I picked up the photograph of my parents and looked at it for a moment before putting it back.

Then I went downstairs.

Mum was in the living room, reading.

"I'm going out for a bit," I said.

She looked up. "Where?"

I hesitated. "To see someone."

Her expression changed slightly. "Elsie?"

I nodded.

Mum smiled. "All right."

I blinked. I'd expected more questions.

She seemed to notice. "What?"

"Nothing."

"Freya, you're fifteen. You're allowed to have friends without filing a formal application."

I laughed.

"Although," she added, "I would appreciate knowing where you'll be."

I looked down. There it was. The question I'd been dreading.

"Near the industrial estate," I said.

Mum's smile faded.

"The factory?"

"Near it."

She put her book down. "Freya."

"I know."

"You're not going inside, are you?"

I looked at her.

For a moment, I nearly told her everything.

Instead, I said, "I won't go exploring."

It was a horrible answer, and we both knew it wasn't quite the same as what she'd asked.

Mum studied me for a long moment. "I need you to be careful."

"I will."

"And I need you to be honest with me."

I swallowed.

"I know."

She nodded slowly. "Home before dinner, please."

"Okay."

I left before she could ask anything else.

Outside, the air was cool and slightly damp, and the sky looked as though it couldn't decide whether to rain. I walked quickly towards the industrial estate, feeling worse with every step. I'd told myself I was going to be honest with everyone, yet I'd barely made it out of the house without lying again.

I wondered whether there was a point where telling the truth stopped making up for all the lies that came before it.

The factory was empty when I arrived. I slipped through the fence and made my way towards the back office, expecting to find the window hanging at its usual crooked angle. It was still there, but something about it looked different. The metal bracket I'd fitted on

Sunday had shifted, and the split in the lower frame had widened. A thin piece of wood hung loose beneath the hinge, held in place by little more than a strip of old paint.

I touched it carefully.

It moved.

I felt my stomach drop.

The window wasn't going to survive much longer.

I stood there for a moment, looking at the damaged frame, then carefully lifted it. The wood creaked beneath my fingers, and I stopped, waiting for it to settle. When nothing else happened, I climbed through as gently as I could.

The warm August air greeted me.

I stepped down into the grass and looked back.

From this side, the window was perfect. White paint, solid hinges, clean glass. It looked as though it would last another hundred years.

I wished the other side felt the same.

I closed it carefully and turned towards the yard.

A few minutes later, Elsie appeared with her bicycle.

She was wearing the floral dress, just as I'd imagined in English the previous week, and her hair was slightly messy from the heat. She stopped when she saw me, smiled and pushed the bicycle towards the road.

"Hi."

"Hi."

She glanced at my bag. "Off somewhere?"

"Not really."

She grinned. "Very mysterious."

I smiled faintly. "I've been told."

She laughed. "Well, I'm going into town. Fancy coming?"

I looked at her. Not verbatim. Still the same meaning. I shook my head trying to clear my thoughts.

I could have started explaining everything there and then. I could have told her about the window, shown her the future and brought out the photographs before we'd even left the factory. But I wanted one more ordinary moment with her first.

"Yeah," I said. "I'd like that."

We walked towards town, talking about nothing particularly important. Elsie told me about her brother's latest attempt to put the dinosaur in the VCR, and I laughed when she described him explaining how it was something the dinosaur itself had done.

She asked what sort of books I liked, and I told her about a mystery I'd been reading. For a little while, I let myself enjoy the conversation without worrying about what came next.

We stopped at the small shop and bought lemonade, then walked towards the river. It was quieter there, away from the high street, and we found a place beneath a tree where the grass was dry enough to sit on. I had never figured out what caused us to some times go to the park and other times to the river, and other times again, to here. Elsie leaned her bicycle against the trunk and dropped onto the ground with a dramatic sigh.

"That's better."

I sat beside her.

She stretched her legs out and looked towards the water. "I could stay here all afternoon."

I smiled. "Yeah."

She glanced at me. "You're a quiet one."

"Sorry."

She laughed. "Don't apologise. Just wondering."

I looked down at my hands. The journal was still in my bag, along with the photograph.

"Elsie?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I tell you something?"

She turned towards me, smiling. "Course."

I took a breath.

"It's going to sound impossible."

She raised an eyebrow. "That's a promising start."

I looked at her for a moment, then said it.

"I'm from the future."

Her smile faded slightly.

I didn't wait for her to laugh.

"I know it sounds mad, and I know you don't have any reason to believe me. But there's a window at the factory. When I climb through it, I end up here. When I go back, I'm in 2026."

Elsie stared at me.

Then she laughed nervously. "Right."

"I can show you."

She looked at my face, perhaps searching for some sign that I was joking.

"You're serious."

I nodded.

She was quiet for a moment, then smiled faintly. "Well, I suppose we'd better have a look at this window."

I laughed softly, mostly from relief.

We finished our drinks and walked back towards the factory. This time, I didn't try to make the conversation sound casual. I explained how I'd first found the window, how the day seemed to reset whenever I returned and how I'd met her so many times that I knew things about her she hadn't told me yet.

Elsie listened carefully, occasionally asking questions. She wanted to know whether people could fly in the future, whether there were robots and whether she'd ever get a car. I answered what I could, trying not to say too much about her actual life.

When we reached the back office, I opened the window.

Elsie leaned closer.

I watched her expression change as she looked into the abandoned room.

She stared at the dusty desks, the broken furniture and the grey light coming through the windows.

Then she looked at me.

"That's not possible."

"I know."

She looked again.

"Can you go through?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She hesitated. "Will you come back?"

I smiled. "Of course."

I climbed through carefully, supporting the damaged frame as I went. The cold air hit me, and I turned back towards her.

Elsie stared.

Then she laughed, shaking her head.

"Blimey."

I smiled. "Yeah."

She leaned closer, looking around the abandoned office.

"What happened to the factory?"

"It closed."

She frowned. "When?"

"Years ago."

She looked troubled, and I remembered how she'd reacted before. This time, I didn't let the question hang between us.

"I don't know exactly what happens to your dad," I said. "I'm sorry."

She looked at me, surprised.

Then she nodded slowly.

"Right."

I climbed back through.

Elsie watched me carefully, then reached out and touched my arm, as though checking I was still real.

"You're cold."

I smiled faintly. "Yeah."

She shook her head.

"That's absolutely mad."

We stood there for a moment, looking at the window.

Then I took a breath.

"There's something else."

Elsie looked at me.

"What?"

I opened my bag and took out the factory photograph.

She leaned closer.

"What's that?"

"A photograph from today."

She frowned. "Today?"

I nodded.

"It was taken here, at the factory."

She took it carefully and studied it.

For a moment, she looked confused.

Then she smiled.

"That's Dad."

I looked at her. She pointed to the man beside herself.

"And that's me."

I nodded.

She laughed.

"Well, that's a bit strange."

She looked at the photograph again.

"Where did you get this?"

"From the future."

She stared at me.

I nodded.

"My dad found it in an old newspaper archive."

She looked down at the photograph.

"That's today?"

"Yeah."

She frowned.

"But I don't remember having it taken."

I swallowed.

"Maybe it hasn't happened yet."

She looked at me.

Then back at the photograph.

"Right."

She studied it for a moment longer, then smiled faintly.

"That's a nice picture."

I looked at her.

She seemed pleased by it, almost amused. I wondered whether she was thinking about how strange it was to see a photograph of something that hadn't happened yet.

Then she handed it back.

"Anything else?"

I hesitated.

"Yeah."

She waited.

I looked at her.

"Elsie, I found you."

She frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"In the future."

She stared at me.

I took a breath.

"I looked you up. Your name, where you lived, what you did."

She was quiet.

Then she smiled slightly.

"Am I famous?"

I laughed nervously.

"Not exactly."

"Shame."

I smiled.

She looked at me more seriously.

"What did you find?"

I hesitated.

"You're alive."

She blinked.

"Well, I'd hope so."

I laughed weakly.

"I mean, in 2026. You're forty-five."

Her expression changed.

"Forty-five?"

I nodded.

She stared at me.

"That's ancient."

I couldn’t help laughing.

She grinned briefly, then looked thoughtful.

"What am I like?"

I swallowed.

"You're... happy, I think."

She looked at me.

"You think?"

"I found some photographs and an article about you. You work with young people, helping them with art and creative things. You've travelled, and you came back here."

Elsie stared at me.

Then she smiled slowly.

"I travelled?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

"Where?"

"I don't know everywhere. But you've been abroad."

She laughed softly.

"Blimey."

I smiled.

She looked away, towards the factory yard.

For a moment, she seemed lost in thought.

Then she looked back.

"Did I do all right?"

The question caught me off guard.

"What?"

"In life. Did I do all right?"

I felt my throat tighten.

I thought about the photograph of older Elsie, smiling beside the young people she'd helped. I thought about the article describing her work, the places she'd visited and the life she'd built.

"Yeah," I said softly. "I think you did."

She smiled.

"Good."

I looked down at my hands.

There was still more to tell her.

The part I'd been avoiding.

"Elsie?"

"Yeah?"

"If I stay here, things might change."

She frowned.

"What things?"

"Your future."

She looked at me.

I swallowed.

"If I stay, you might not do all those things. You might not travel, or work with those people, or have the life you're supposed to have."

She was quiet for a moment.

Then she looked towards the window.

"Why?"

"Because I'd be here."

She turned back to me.

I felt my face grow warm.

"And that might change what you decide to do."

Elsie considered that.

Then she smiled faintly.

"Well, I suppose it might."

I stared at her.

She looked at me.

"What?"

"Doesn't that bother you?"

She shrugged slightly.

"Of course it does. A bit."

I nodded.

"But I don't know what I'm going to do with my life yet, Freya. Nobody does."

I looked at her.

She continued, "Maybe I'll travel. Maybe I won't. Maybe I'll work with young people, or maybe I'll end up doing something completely different. That's how life works, isn't it?"

I swallowed.

"Yeah."

She smiled.

"And just because something happens in one version of the future doesn't mean it's the only good thing that could happen."

I stared at her.

She looked down at the photograph in my hands.

"Besides, if I'm happy in the future, that's lovely. But I don't want to spend my whole life trying to become someone in a photograph."

I felt my throat tighten.

She looked up.

"I want to make my own choices."

I nodded slowly.

"Yeah."

She smiled gently.

"And if you were here, that would be one of them."

I looked at her.

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

Then she reached over and took my hand.

"Do you want to stay?"

I swallowed.

I could have said yes.

It was the easiest answer in the world.

Instead, I looked towards the window.

"I don't know."

She nodded.

"Because of your family?"

"Yeah."

She squeezed my hand.

"Then don't decide yet."

I looked at her.

She smiled.

"Talk to them."

I felt my stomach tighten.

"I don't know how."

She considered that.

"Well, you managed to tell me."

I laughed weakly.

"You're different."

"Am I?"

I nodded.

She smiled.

"Well, they're your parents. They love you, don't they?"

I felt tears prick my eyes.

"Yeah."

"Then give them a chance."

I looked down.

She squeezed my hand again.

"I don't want you to stay here because you're frightened of losing me."

I looked up.

She smiled sadly.

"I'd rather you stayed because you really wanted to. Because you'd thought about it properly and decided it was right."

I swallowed.

"And if I don't?"

She was quiet for a moment.

Then she smiled faintly.

"Then I suppose I'll have to be glad I met you today."

I stared at her.

She looked down at our hands.

"Even if I don't remember."

My throat tightened.

I wanted to say something, but I couldn't find the words.

So I moved closer and hugged her.

She wrapped her arms around me without hesitation.

For a long time, we stood there beside the window, holding each other. I could hear the factory humming behind us and the distant sound of traffic on the road. Her hair brushed against my cheek, and I closed my eyes, trying to remember every detail.

Eventually, she stepped back.

I looked at her. She smiled faintly.

"Whatever you decide, promise me something."

I swallowed.

"What?"

"Don't disappear without telling the people who love you."

I stared at her.

She squeezed my hand.

"All right?"

I nodded slowly.

"All right."

She smiled.

"Good."

We stood there for a moment longer.

Then she looked towards the road.

"I should get home."

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She picked up her bicycle, then stopped.

"I hope I see you again."

I felt my throat tighten.

"Me too."

She grinned faintly.

"And if you do come back, perhaps you could bring a photograph of forty-five-year-old me. I'd quite like to see whether I've got terrible hair."

I laughed.

"I'll try."

She smiled, waved and cycled away.

I watched until she disappeared around the corner.

Then I turned towards the window.

For the first time, I didn't feel desperate to follow her.

I felt something else.

Something quieter.

Elsie knew.

She understood what staying might mean.

And she'd told me to go home and talk to my parents.

I climbed back through the window, carefully supporting the damaged frame. The cold air of 2026 greeted me, and my phone lit up almost immediately.

I sat down at the dusty desk and opened my journal.

I wrote about the photograph, about Elsie's future and about what she'd said.

Then I stopped.

I looked towards the window.

The frame was hanging crookedly again, and the crack beneath the hinge seemed wider than before.

I didn't know how many more times I could go through it.

But I knew what I had to do next.

I closed the journal, packed my bag and stood.

I was going home.

And this time, I was going to tell Mum and Dad everything.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I stood outside our front door for nearly five minutes before going in.

It wasn't that I'd changed my mind. I'd spent the entire walk home rehearsing what I wanted to say, and I knew I couldn't put it off any longer. But standing there with my hand on the door handle, I found myself wishing I could have one more ordinary evening. Just one. Mum cooking dinner, Dad complaining about something he'd seen on the news, the three of us watching television until someone fell asleep. I wanted to sit at the kitchen table and be fifteen, with nothing more serious to worry about than homework and whether Sophie was annoyed with me.

Instead, I was about to tell my parents that I'd been travelling to 1997 through a broken factory window.

I could practically hear Dad asking whether I'd hit my head.

I opened the door.

"Hello?" I called.

"In here, love."

Mum was in the kitchen, chopping carrots. She looked up when I came in, smiling automatically, then glanced at the clock.

"You're early."

"Yeah."

"Everything all right?"

I put my bag on the table.

"Can we talk?"

She stopped chopping.

There must have been something in my voice, because her expression changed immediately.

"Of course. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I mean, something. But nobody's hurt or anything."

Mum put the knife down.

"Freya, you're frightening me."

"Sorry."

She wiped her hands on a tea towel and pulled out a chair.

"Come and sit down."

I sat opposite her. The kitchen smelled of onions and garlic, and there was a saucepan bubbling quietly on the hob. Mum had switched it off before sitting down, which somehow made everything feel even more serious.

"What's happened?" she asked.

I looked at my hands.

"I need Dad here too."

She studied me for a moment, then reached for her phone.

"All right."

Dad was still at work. Mum called him, and I listened while she explained that I needed to talk to both of

them. She didn't make it sound like an emergency, but she didn't sound casual either.

When she hung up, she looked at me.

"He'll be about twenty minutes."

I nodded.

"Okay."

She reached across the table and took my hand.

"Are you in trouble?"

I shook my head.

"Not exactly."

"Has someone hurt you?"

"No."

"Is it about Elsie?"

I looked up.

Mum's expression softened. "All right."

I swallowed. "It's about her. And something else."

She nodded slowly.

"Would you like to tell me a little bit while we wait?"

I hesitated. Then I shook my head.

"I think I need to do it all at once."

Mum looked worried, but she didn't push.

"Okay, love."

We sat there for a while, neither of us saying much. Mum made tea, although I barely touched mine, and eventually she went back to preparing dinner. I watched her move around the kitchen, opening cupboards and checking the oven, and felt increasingly sick.

Twenty minutes had never seemed so long.

When Dad finally came through the front door, I nearly jumped out of my chair.

"Hello?"

"In the kitchen," Mum called.

He appeared a moment later, still wearing his work jacket.

"Everything all right?"

Mum looked at me.

I swallowed.

"Can you sit down?"

Dad's expression changed.

"Of course."

He took off his jacket and sat beside Mum.

For a moment, all three of us were quiet.

Then Dad leaned forward.

"Right. What's going on?"

I took a breath.

"I've been lying to you."

Neither of them said anything.

I looked down.

"About where I've been going."

Mum closed her eyes briefly.

"The factory."

I nodded.

"Yeah."

Dad sighed.

"Freya."

"I know."

"We've talked about this."

"I know."

Mum looked at me.

"Have you been going inside?"

I hesitated.

"Yes."

She looked away.

Dad rubbed his forehead.

"Why?"

I swallowed.

"Because there's something there."

He frowned.

"What sort of something?"

I looked at them both.

Then I said it.

"A window."

Dad blinked.

"A window?"

I nodded.

"In the back office."

Mum looked confused.

"Freya, what are you talking about?"

I took another breath.

"When I climb through it, I go somewhere else."

Dad stared at me.

"Somewhere else?"

I nodded.

"To the past."

For a moment, neither of them moved.

Then Dad gave a small, uncertain laugh.

"Sorry?"

I looked at him.

"1997."

The kitchen went very quiet.

Mum stared at me.

Dad looked towards her, then back at me.

"Freya, are you joking?"

I shook my head.

"No."

He studied my face.

"Because if this is some elaborate story you've come up with..."

"It's not."

Mum leaned forward.

"Love, what do you mean, you go to the past?"

I swallowed.

"There's a window in the factory. It's broken on this side, but when I open it, there's another place on the other side. The factory's still working, and it's August 1997."

Dad stared at me.

I could see him trying to work out what to say.

"That's not possible."

"I know how it sounds."

Mum reached across the table.

"Have you been feeling all right?"

I looked at her.

"Yeah."

"Any headaches? Dizziness?"

"No."

Dad frowned.

"Have you taken anything?"

I stared at him.

"What?"

"Anything someone gave you? Pills, something to smoke?"

"No!"

He held up a hand.

"All right. I'm just asking."

I felt tears prick my eyes.

"I'm telling you the truth."

Mum looked at Dad, then back at me.

"Love, we're not saying you're lying. We're trying to understand."

I shook my head.

"You don't believe me."

Dad sighed.

"Freya, you're telling us you've been travelling backwards through time. That's rather a lot to take in."

"I know."

He leaned back.

"All right. Let's say, for a moment, that what you're telling us is true. How does it work?"

I took a breath.

I explained everything.

The first time I'd found the window, when I'd been hiding from the boys at the factory. The warm air, the working building, the newspaper showing the date. I told them about my phone dying when I crossed through, about the way only a few minutes passed here while hours went by there, and about how the same Saturday seemed to start again whenever I returned.

I told them about Elsie.

Not everything. I couldn't bring myself to describe holding her hand or the way she'd hugged me, not yet. But I told them how we'd met, how she'd forgotten me every time and how I'd kept going back because I wanted to see her.

Mum listened without interrupting.

Dad asked questions.

Lots of questions.

Some were sensible, like whether I'd checked the date properly and whether anyone else had seen the window. Others were things I couldn't answer, like why it existed or what would happen if the building was demolished.

I told them what I knew.

And when I didn't know, I said so.

Eventually, I opened my bag and took out the photograph of the factory.

Dad recognised it immediately.

"That's the one I gave you."

I nodded.

"Yeah."

I pointed to Elsie.

"That's her."

He leaned closer.

"The girl?"

"Yeah."

Mum looked at the photograph.

"She's lovely."

I smiled faintly.

Dad studied it for a moment.

"All right. But this doesn't prove anything. You could have found her in the picture and built a story around it."

I nodded.

"I know."

He looked at me.

"I don't mean that unkindly."

"I know."

I took out the scraps of paper with Elsie's telephone number and laid them on the table.

"She gave me these. On different visits."

Mum picked one up.

She looked at the handwriting, then at the little star drawn beside the number.

"These could have come from anywhere," Dad said gently.

"I know."

I looked at them both.

"That's why I need to show you."

Mum went still.

"Show us what?"

"The window."

Dad stared at me.

"You want us to go to the factory?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

He looked at Mum.

Then back at me.

"Absolutely not."

I felt my stomach drop.

"Dad."

"No, Freya. We've already told you to stay away from that building. I'm certainly not taking you there so you can demonstrate some dangerous trick."

"It's not a trick."

"Then what is it?"

"I've told you!"

My voice came out louder than I'd intended.

Mum flinched slightly.

I looked down.

"Sorry."

Dad took a breath.

"Look, I understand that this feels very real to you."

I stared at him.

"It is real."

He nodded slowly.

"All right."

But I could hear that he didn't believe me.

I felt tears sliding down my cheeks.

Mum moved her chair closer.

"Oh, love."

She put an arm around me.

I tried not to cry, but it was useless.

"I knew you wouldn't believe me."

She held me.

"Freya, listen. We love you. We're not going anywhere. Whatever's happening, we'll work it out."

I shook my head.

"You don't understand."

"Then help us understand."

I pulled away slightly and wiped my face.

"There's something else."

Dad looked at me.

"What?"

I swallowed.

"I've been thinking about staying there."

The words seemed to stop everything.

Mum's arm went still around my shoulders.

Dad stared at me.

"Staying where?"

"In 1997."

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Then Mum said quietly, "No."

I looked at her.

She shook her head.

"No, Freya."

I felt my throat tighten.

"Mum..."

"No."

Her voice broke slightly.

Dad leaned forward.

"You're talking about running away." He said. Quietly.

I shook my head.

"It's not like that."

"You're talking about leaving home and not coming back." He said. Which was the truth.

I looked down.

He waited.

I couldn't answer.

Mum stood abruptly and walked to the kitchen counter. She put both hands on the edge and stared at the wall for a moment.

I watched her.

I'd never seen her look like that.

Dad's voice was quieter when he spoke again.

"Freya, why would you even consider doing that?"

I swallowed.

"Because I love her."

The words came out before I could stop them.

Mum turned around.

Dad stared at me.

I looked down at my hands.

"I love Elsie."

For a long moment, nobody said anything.

Then Mum came back to the table and sat down.

"Oh, love."

I looked at her.

She had tears in her eyes.

"You're fifteen."

"I know."

"You've got your whole life ahead of you."

"I know."

She shook her head.

"You can't throw it away for someone you've only just met."

I felt something twist inside me.

"I haven't only just met her."

Mum looked at me.

"I've spent hours with her. Days, if you put them all together. I know her."

Dad leaned forward.

"But she doesn't know you?"

I stared at him.

He looked sad.

"Not in the same way."

I swallowed. "I know."

He nodded. "And you said she forgets you every time."

"Yeah."

"Then how can you know what she'd want?"

I looked at him. "Because I told her."

He frowned. "What?"

"I told her about the window. I showed her. She believed me."

Mum stared at me.

"And what did she say?"

I swallowed.

"She said she wanted to remember me."

Mum closed her eyes.

I continued.

"But she also told me to talk to you. She said I shouldn't disappear without telling the people who love me."

Dad looked surprised.

I nodded.

"She's not trying to make me stay. She told me not to decide until I'd thought about everything."

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Then Mum wiped her eyes.

"Well, at least she's got some sense."

I smiled faintly. Sadly.

Dad leaned back in his chair.

"All right."

I looked at him.

He took a breath.

"Tomorrow, we'll go to the factory."

Mum turned towards him.

"What?"

He held up a hand.

"Together. In daylight. We won't go inside unless it's safe."

I stared at him.

"Really?"

He nodded.

"If there's something there, I want to see it."

Mum looked frightened.

Dad reached for her hand.

"And if there isn't, then we need to find out what's going on."

I swallowed.

"Okay."

He looked at me.

"But Freya, until then, you are not going back there. Do you understand?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

"And no more lies."

I looked down.

"I promise."

Mum squeezed my hand.

I looked at her.

She was crying again, quietly this time.

"I'm frightened," she said.

My throat tightened.

"I know."

She shook her head.

"No, love. I don't think you do."

I stared at her.

She looked at me.

"You're talking about leaving us forever."

I felt tears sliding down my face.

"I don't want to."

"Then don't."

Her voice broke.

I looked down.

For a long time, none of us said anything.

The kitchen had gone cold, and the dinner Mum had been making sat forgotten on the hob.

Eventually, Dad stood and switched it back on.

"We should eat something," he said quietly.

Nobody moved.

He looked at us, then smiled faintly.

"Well, at least one of us should pretend to be sensible."

Mum laughed through her tears. I smiled weakly. And somehow, that made me cry even harder.

We didn't talk much during dinner.

Mum asked whether I wanted more potatoes, Dad complained that he'd overcooked the carrots, and I tried to eat despite feeling as though there was a stone in my stomach. Nobody mentioned the window. Nobody mentioned Elsie.

Afterwards, Dad washed up while Mum and I sat in the living room. She put her arm around me, and I leaned against her shoulder like I used to when I was little.

For a while, we watched television without really paying attention.

Then Mum kissed the top of my head.

"Freya?"

"Yeah?"

"Whatever happens tomorrow, you're coming home with us."

I closed my eyes.

I wanted to promise.

I wanted to tell her there was nothing to worry about, that I'd never leave and that everything would go back to normal.

But I couldn't.

So I said, "I know."

She held me a little tighter.

I didn't move.

Later, when I went upstairs, I found Dad standing outside my room.

He smiled faintly. "All right?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

He looked at me for a moment.

Then he said, "You know, when you were little, you used to tell me you were going to live on the moon."

I laughed softly.

"Did I?"

"Absolutely. You had a whole plan. Apparently, you were going to build a house out of cheese."

I smiled.

"Sounds practical."

"Very."

He leaned against the doorframe.

"I used to tell you that you could go anywhere you wanted, as long as you came home for Christmas."

I looked at him.

He smiled sadly.

"I never thought I'd have to worry about you taking that literally."

My throat tightened.

"Dad..."

He shook his head.

"I'm not trying to make you feel guilty."

I looked down.

"Bit late."

He sighed.

"Fair enough."

We stood there for a moment.

Then he stepped closer and hugged me.

I wrapped my arms around him.

He held me tightly.

"I love you, Freya."

I closed my eyes.

"Love you too."

He kissed the top of my head.

"Get some sleep."

I nodded.

He went downstairs.

I closed my bedroom door and sat on the bed.

For a long time, I didn't move.

Then I opened my journal.

I wrote about the conversation, about Mum crying and Dad agreeing to see the window. I wrote about how horrible it had felt to tell them I was considering

leaving, and how much worse it had been when they understood what that meant.

Then I stopped.

I looked at the photograph on my bedside table.

Mum, Dad and me.

All three of us laughing.

I picked it up and held it for a long time.

Then I wrote one more sentence.

Tomorrow, they'll see.

I closed the journal.

Outside, the streetlights were glowing, and somewhere downstairs I could hear Mum and Dad talking quietly.

I couldn't make out the words.

I wasn't sure I wanted to.

For the first time since finding the window, I wasn't frightened of losing my way back.

I was frightened of what would happen when the people I loved finally saw where it led.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I knew Mum and Dad hadn't slept properly because neither of them made any effort to pretend otherwise.

Dad was already in the kitchen when I came downstairs on Thursday morning, sitting at the table with a mug of coffee and his laptop open. Mum stood by the window in her dressing gown, looking out at the garden. She had her arms folded, and her hair was still messy from bed. Usually, by that time of the morning, she'd have been dressed and making some comment about how I was going to be late for school.

Instead, she turned when she heard me and said, "Morning, love," in a voice that sounded as though she'd been crying.

I wanted to go straight back upstairs.

Dad closed his laptop. "I've emailed the school. You're staying home today."

I stopped in the doorway. "What did you tell them?"

"Family matter."

"Oh."

Mum came over and put her arms around me. She held me for a little longer than usual, then stepped back and brushed a strand of hair away from my face.

"Have some breakfast," she said. "We'll go afterwards."

I looked between them. "You're still coming?"

Dad nodded. "We said we would."

I sat down and poured some cereal into a bowl, although I wasn't particularly hungry. Mum made toast, and Dad tried to talk about the weather, but none of us managed to keep the conversation going for very long. Every so often, I caught one of them looking at me, and I knew they were wondering what they'd find at the factory.

I wondered too.

Not because I doubted the window existed. I'd been through it too many times for that. But I'd never tried to

take anyone else. I didn't know whether it would work for Mum and Dad, whether they'd see what I saw, or whether the whole thing would somehow disappear the moment I brought them there.

And if it did, I had no idea what would happen to me.

We left just after nine.

Dad drove, even though the factory wasn't particularly far away. Mum sat in the passenger seat, and I sat behind her with my bag on my lap. I'd brought my journal, the old photograph and the little screwdriver I'd used to repair the window. I didn't know why I'd packed the screwdriver. It wasn't as though another screw would make much difference now, but leaving it behind had felt wrong.

Nobody spoke much during the drive. Dad asked me to explain where we needed to go, and I directed him towards the industrial estate. When we reached the old factory gates, he pulled into a small parking area and switched off the engine.

For a moment, we all sat looking at the building.

In the grey morning light, it looked worse than usual. The roof sagged in places, weeds grew through the cracks in the yard and several windows had been

boarded over. A faded warning sign hung crookedly on the fence.

Dad stared at it.

"Good grief, Freya."

I looked down.

Mum turned in her seat. "You've been going in there?"

I nodded.

She closed her eyes.

Dad rubbed his forehead. "Right. Well, we're here now."

He got out of the car, and Mum followed. I climbed out more slowly, feeling like a child who'd been caught doing something much worse than she'd admitted.

Dad walked towards the fence and examined the gap I'd been using.

"That's how you get in?"

"Yeah."

He looked at me.

"Freya, there's broken metal sticking out of that."

"I know."

He shook his head, then carefully moved part of the loose fencing aside. Mum went through first, followed by me, and Dad came last. He kept looking around as we crossed the yard, checking the ground and the walls above us.

I led them towards the back office.

The closer we got, the faster my heart beat.

When we reached the doorway, I stopped.

Dad looked inside.

"Well, that's cheerful."

Mum didn't smile.

The room was exactly as I'd left it. Dust covered the desks, broken chairs lay against the wall and the old filing cabinet stood with one drawer hanging open. The window was on the far side, its damaged frame hanging slightly away from the wall.

I pointed.

"That's it."

Dad looked at the window, then at me.

"That?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

He walked over and examined it carefully.

"Freya, this thing's barely attached."

"I know."

He touched the metal bracket I'd fitted.

"Did you do this?"

I nodded.

He sighed.

"Well, at least you tried."

Mum stood beside the doorway, watching us.

"Can we just see whatever it is and leave?"

I looked at her.

"Yeah."

I went to the window and carefully lifted the frame.

The wood creaked.

I stopped, adjusted my grip and raised it a little further.

Then the warm air touched my face.

I smiled faintly.

"There."

Dad leaned closer.

He stopped.

For a moment, he didn't move.

Then he looked at me.

"What on earth..."

Mum came over.

She looked through the opening.

And went completely still.

Beyond the window, the factory yard was bright with sunshine. The brickwork was clean, the grass was neatly cut and the distant sound of machinery carried through the warm air. Somewhere nearby, a car door slammed.

Mum stared.

Dad leaned closer, then pulled back and looked around the abandoned office as though trying to understand how the two places could possibly exist beside each other.

"That's not possible," he whispered.

I swallowed.

"I know."

Mum reached for the windowsill.

Dad caught her hand.

"Careful."

She looked at him.

He was pale.

I watched them both, feeling a strange mixture of relief and fear.

They could see it.

It was real.

And now there was no way to pretend otherwise.

Dad looked at me.

"Have you been climbing through this?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

He stared at the opening again.

"Every time?"

"Yeah."

He let out a slow breath.

Mum looked at me.

"Can you go through now?"

I hesitated.

"Yeah."

She shook her head.

"I don't want you to."

I looked down.

Dad studied the window.

"Could I?"

I looked at him.

"I don't know."

He nodded slowly.

"Right."

For a moment, none of us moved.

Then Dad said, "Well, I suppose there's only one way to find out."

Mum turned towards him.

"Absolutely not."

He looked at her.

"I'm not suggesting we all go for a stroll."

"You're not climbing through that thing."

He smiled faintly.

"Wasn't planning to."

I looked at him. I was sure he lied.

"What are you going to do?"

He reached into his jacket pocket and took out his phone.

"Something slightly less dramatic."

He held it towards the opening.

The screen went black.

Dad stared.

He pulled it back.

The screen lit up again.

He looked at me.

I nodded.

"Mine does that too."

He tried again.

The phone went dark.

Then came back on when he pulled it away.

Mum made a small sound beside him.

Dad stared at the screen.

"Good Lord."

He looked through the window again, then picked up a small stone from the dusty floor.

"Can I?"

I nodded.

He tossed it gently through the opening.

It landed in the grass on the other side.

We watched it.

Nothing happened.

Then he reached his hand through the opening.

I watched his expression change.

He pulled it back almost immediately.

"Warm."

I smiled faintly.

"Yeah."

He stared at his hand.

Then at the window.

For a long time, he said nothing.

Finally, he looked at Mum.

"It's real."

She nodded.

There were tears in her eyes.

"I can see that."

We stayed in the office for nearly an hour.

Dad examined the window, took photographs of the frame and asked me everything he could think of about how it worked. Mum sat on an old chair after Dad checked it was safe, watching the opening with an expression I couldn't read. Every so often, she'd look at me, as though reminding herself I was still there.

I explained the reset again, the difference in how time passed and the way Elsie forgot me whenever I returned. Dad listened carefully, occasionally writing things down in a notebook he'd brought from work.

At one point, he looked at the window and said, "If you stayed there until Sunday, what would happen here?"

I shook my head.

"I don't know."

He nodded.

"Would time keep moving?"

"Probably."

"Would you be able to come back?"

"I don't know."

He looked at me.

"And you were considering finding out by simply not returning?"

I swallowed.

"Yeah."

Dad closed his notebook.

"Freya."

I looked down.

He sighed.

"Love, do you understand how dangerous that is?"

"I know."

"No, I don't think you do."

I looked up.

He gestured towards the window.

"We don't know what this is. We don't know why it works, whether it's stable or whether it could disappear at any moment. We don't even know if you'd be able to return if something went wrong."

I nodded.

He continued, "And that's before we get to the fact that you'd be fifteen years old, alone in a world where you don't legally exist."

"I know."

"Do you?"

I felt tears prick my eyes.

"I've been thinking about it."

Dad looked at me.

"Thinking isn't the same as having a plan."

I looked away.

He softened his voice.

"I'm not trying to be cruel."

"I know."

Mum stood and came over.

"Freya, love, where would you live?"

I hesitated.

"I don't know yet."

"How would you eat?"

"I've looked into money."

She stared at me.

"What money?"

I swallowed.

"I thought maybe I could use something I know about the future. Lottery numbers or something."

Dad closed his eyes.

"Oh, Freya."

I felt my face burn.

"I know it sounds stupid."

"It doesn't sound stupid," he said quietly. "It sounds like a frightened girl trying to solve a problem she shouldn't have to solve."

I looked down.

Mum put her arms around me.

I leaned against her.

For a long time, we stood there beside the window.

Then Mum whispered, "Please don't leave us."

I closed my eyes.

"I don't want to."

She held me tighter.

"Then come home."

I swallowed.

"I'm here."

She shook her head.

"I mean properly. Come home and stay."

I couldn't answer.

Dad looked away.

Eventually, we went outside and sat on a low wall in the yard. Dad had brought a flask of tea from the car, and Mum poured it into three plastic cups.

It was still cool and overcast, but the rain had held off. From where we sat, we could see the boarded windows and the old chimney rising above the roof.

Dad looked towards the building.

"I've spent years writing about places like this," he said quietly. "Old factories, empty shops, buildings people want to knock down. I never imagined one of them would have a door into another century."

I smiled faintly.

He looked at me.

"Have you told anyone else?"

"Just Elsie."

He nodded.

"Good."

Mum looked at him.

"Good?"

He shrugged.

"Well, imagine trying to explain this to the council."

Despite everything, I laughed.

Dad smiled briefly, then looked serious again.

"We need to keep this quiet. At least until we understand it better."

I nodded.

Mum looked towards the office.

"What about the demolition?"

Dad sighed.

"That's the other problem."

He took out his phone and checked something.

"The council meeting's later this month, but the owners have already applied for permission to carry out some preliminary work. Surveys, clearing unsafe sections, that sort of thing."

I felt my stomach tighten.

"When?"

He hesitated.

"Could be any time."

I looked towards the window.

Dad followed my gaze.

"Freya."

I looked at him.

He shook his head.

"Don't."

I swallowed. "I wasn't going to say anything."

He sighed.

"I know what you're thinking."

I looked away.

The possibility of losing the window had been frightening when it was just mine. Now that Mum and Dad had seen it, the fear felt different. I wasn't only afraid of losing Elsie. I was afraid of losing something impossible, something that had changed the way I understood the world.

And I was afraid that the choice I'd been struggling with might be taken away before I made it.

Dad stood.

"Come on. Let's go home."

I looked at him.

"Can I just check something first?"

He hesitated.

"What?"

"The frame. I want to make sure it's closed properly."

He looked towards the office.

Then nodded.

"All right. But we're coming with you."

The window was still open when we returned.

I'd left it that way so Mum and Dad could see the other side while we talked, and now the warm air from 1997 drifted into the cold office. I walked towards it, intending to lower the frame carefully.

Then I noticed something.

The crack beneath the hinge had widened again.

A small piece of wood lay on the floor.

I stopped.

Dad came beside me.

"What?"

I pointed.

He leaned closer.

"Oh."

Mum looked at us.

"What is it?"

Dad touched the frame gently.

The wood shifted.

He pulled his hand away.

"That's not good."

I felt my stomach drop.

"Can you fix it?"

He looked at me.

"I don't know."

He examined the hinge, the bracket and the rotten wood around it. Then he stepped back.

"Not properly. Not without replacing part of the frame."

I looked at the opening.

"But if you replace it..."

He nodded.

"We don't know whether the window would still work."

Mum stared at us.

"Then leave it alone."

Dad looked at her.

"We can't leave it hanging open."

"Why not?"

He gestured towards the frame.

"Because if it falls, it could bring the whole thing down."

I looked at the window.

For a moment, I imagined it collapsing completely, the glass shattering and the warm August afternoon disappearing behind a pile of rotten wood.

I felt sick.

Dad put a hand on my shoulder.

"Freya, listen to me. We don't know that the window itself is what makes this happen. It could be the opening, or the building, or something else entirely."

I nodded.

"But we don't know," I whispered.

"No."

He looked at me.

"And that's why we need to be careful."

I stared at the opening.

Then I looked at him.

"Can we leave it open?"

Dad hesitated.

Mum looked frightened.

"Please," I said.

He studied the frame for a moment, then nodded slowly.

"For now. But we need to keep people away from it."

I swallowed.

"Okay."

He looked at me.

"And you're not coming here alone again."

I nodded.

"Okay."

Mum took my hand.

"Come on, love."

I looked through the window one last time.

The sun was shining.

Somewhere beyond the yard, Elsie was probably getting ready to ride her bicycle into town. She had no idea that three people were standing in a ruined office

twenty-nine years later, looking towards the world she lived in.

I wanted to call her name.

I wanted to climb through, run to her and tell her that Mum and Dad knew everything now.

Instead, I stepped back.

We left the window open.

And went home.

That evening, Mum and Dad spent a long time talking in the kitchen.

I could hear their voices from upstairs, although I couldn't make out most of what they were saying. Occasionally, Dad's voice rose, then Mum's, and then there would be a long silence. I knew they were frightened. I knew they were trying to work out what to do.

I sat on my bed with my journal open, but I couldn't write.

Every time I tried, I ended up staring at the same sentence.

The window is breaking.

I thought about the warm air, the working factory and Elsie's smile. I thought about Mum crying beside the window, and Dad trying to make sense of something that shouldn't exist.

Then I thought about the way we'd left it.

Open.

Hanging from a damaged frame.

A doorway between two worlds that might not survive another day.

I closed my journal.

A few minutes later, Dad knocked on my door.

"Come in."

He stepped inside, carrying a mug of tea.

"Thought you might want this."

I smiled faintly.

"Thanks."

He put it on my desk and sat on the edge of the bed.

For a while, neither of us spoke.

Then he looked at me.

"Freya, I've been thinking."

I swallowed.

"Yeah?"

He nodded.

"About the window. About what you told us."

I waited.

He looked down at his hands.

"I can't pretend I understand any of it."

I smiled faintly.

"Neither can I."

He smiled, then he looked at me more seriously.

"But I do understand that you're frightened of losing someone you love."

I felt my throat tighten.

He continued, "And I understand that if we simply tell you never to go back, you'll spend the rest of your life wondering what might have happened."

I stared at him.

He sighed.

"Your mum and I have been talking."

I swallowed.

"About what?"

He looked at me.

"About whether there's a way to give you some time to say goodbye."

The words hit me harder than I'd expected.

"Goodbye?"

He nodded slowly.

"If that's what you decide."

I looked down.

He reached for my hand.

"Freya, we can't let you disappear into the past. We can't. You're our daughter, and we have a responsibility to keep you safe."

I nodded, tears prickling my eyes.

"But we also know that Elsie matters to you. And we don't want to pretend she doesn't."

I looked at him.

"So perhaps we can find a way for you to see her once more, properly. Spend some time together. Say the things you need to say."

I swallowed.

"And then?"

He looked at me.

"Then you come home."

I stared at him.

He squeezed my hand.

"We'll help you. Whatever happens afterwards, we'll help you."

I looked down.

I wanted to say yes.

I wanted to promise that one more afternoon would be enough.

But I knew it wouldn't.

Not really.

Still, I nodded.

"Okay."

Dad smiled faintly.

"Okay."

He stood, kissed the top of my head and went towards the door.

Then he stopped.

"Freya?"

I looked up.

"Yeah?"

He hesitated.

"Your mum asked me to tell you something."

I waited.

He smiled sadly.

"She said she doesn't want to be the reason you spend your life unhappy."

My throat tightened.

He continued, "But she also doesn't want to lose you."

I looked down.

"Yeah."

Dad nodded.

"Neither do I."

He left quietly.

I sat on the bed for a long time after he'd gone.

Then I opened my journal.

I wrote about the window, about Mum and Dad seeing it, about Dad's offer to let me say goodbye.

I wrote about how grateful I was.

And how frightened.

Then I stopped.

I looked at the photograph of Elsie from 1997.

She was smiling towards something outside the frame.

I wondered whether it was me.

I wondered whether she'd ever know how much I'd loved her.

Then I wrote one last sentence.

One more afternoon.

I stared at it.

It sounded so simple.

But I knew it wouldn't be.

Because if the window was breaking, and I only had one more chance to see Elsie, I wasn't sure I could make myself come back.

Chapter Twenty-Six

On Friday morning, Dad went back to the factory without me.

He told us over breakfast, as casually as if he were announcing a trip to the supermarket. He wanted to look at the window again, take some measurements and see whether there was anything he could do to stop the frame falling apart. Mum immediately said she was coming with him, which meant I was left at home with instructions to finish my schoolwork and stay away from the industrial estate.

I didn't argue. I was too tired, and there was something reassuring about knowing they were trying to help, even if none of us knew what helping was supposed to look like. Dad had spent most of Thursday evening searching for information about old timber windows, while Mum had been reading articles about time travel on her laptop. At one point, she'd asked whether I

thought the window might be a wormhole, and Dad had said he wasn't sure a wormhole would have hinges. It was the first time I'd heard them joke about it, and I'd laughed so hard that Mum had started laughing too.

Now, sitting alone at the kitchen table, I found myself wishing they were still there.

I opened my school laptop and tried to concentrate on an assignment about coastal erosion. It seemed almost deliberately cruel. I was supposed to write about how the sea gradually wore away cliffs and buildings, while somewhere across town a rotten window frame was slowly destroying the only way I knew to reach the girl I loved. I managed two paragraphs before giving up.

Instead, I opened my journal and read back through the entries I'd written since finding the window. There were descriptions of the first time I'd seen Elsie, little details about her voice and her laugh, and pages of conversations I'd tried to remember as accurately as possible. Some of the early entries were almost embarrassingly enthusiastic. I'd written about the way she'd tucked her hair behind her ear, how she'd smiled when I told her I liked writing stories and how pleased I'd been when she remembered my name during a single afternoon.

I smiled at that last one.

Back then, I'd thought it meant something.

Now I knew how quickly she could forget.

I turned another page and found the entry from the day she'd held my hand beside the river. I'd written about it in ridiculous detail, including the exact way her fingers had curled around mine. I could still remember how warm her hand had felt, and how I'd spent the entire walk home trying not to grin like an idiot.

I closed the journal.

I didn't want to read any more.

Not because the memories were painful, exactly, but because they were too good. Every page reminded me of something I might never have again.

Mum and Dad returned just before lunch.

I heard the car pull into the drive and went straight to the front door. Dad came in carrying a small toolbox, while Mum followed with her handbag and a face that told me something was wrong.

"What happened?" I asked.

Dad put the toolbox down.

"Let's sit down."

My stomach tightened.

We went into the kitchen. Mum made tea, although nobody particularly wanted any, and Dad spread several photographs across the table. They showed the window from different angles, including close-ups of the damaged hinge and the split running along the lower frame.

"It's worse," he said.

I stared at him.

"How much worse?"

He pointed to one of the photographs. "The lower section has started pulling away from the wall. I think the bracket you fitted was the only thing holding part of it together, and even that's coming loose now."

I looked down at the picture.

The crack was wider than I'd realised.

"Can you fix it?"

Dad hesitated.

"Not safely."

I swallowed.

He continued, "I could try to support the frame, but the wood's rotten right through. Anything I attach would be relying on timber that's already falling apart. And if I start removing pieces, I don't know what happens to the opening."

I looked at Mum.

She was watching me carefully.

"So what do we do?" I asked.

Dad took a breath.

"I think we need to accept that it might not last much longer."

I stared at the photographs.

"How long?"

He shook his head.

"I don't know. It could be days. It could fail the next time someone touches it."

I looked down at my hands.

For weeks, I'd been afraid of having to choose between Elsie and my family. Now it seemed possible that I wouldn't get to choose at all.

Mum reached across the table and took my hand.

"Freya, we talked about this."

I nodded.

"One more visit."

She squeezed my fingers.

"Yes."

I looked at Dad.

"When?"

He glanced at Mum.

"Tomorrow."

I stared at him.

"Saturday?"

He nodded.

"We'll go together. We'll make sure the window's as safe as it can be, and you'll have some time with Elsie."

I swallowed.

"How much time?"

Dad hesitated.

"A few hours."

I looked down.

A few hours.

It sounded generous, and I knew it was. Mum and Dad were allowing me to return to a place they barely understood, through a window they knew was dangerous, so I could spend time with someone they'd never met. I should have been grateful.

I was grateful.

But a few hours felt impossibly small.

Mum seemed to understand.

"Love, I know it's not what you want."

I looked at her.

She smiled sadly.

"But it's what we can give you."

I nodded.

"Okay."

Dad leaned forward.

"And Freya, I need you to promise something."

I looked at him.

"When it's time to come back, you come back. No arguments, no disappearing into town, no trying to stay longer."

I swallowed.

"I promise."

The words felt heavy.

Dad studied me for a moment, then nodded.

"All right."

That afternoon, I went for a walk.

I told Mum I needed some fresh air, and she let me go after making me promise not to go near the factory. I kept that promise. Instead, I walked towards the seafront, following the narrow streets until the houses gave way to the promenade.

The tide was out, leaving a wide stretch of wet sand beneath the grey sky. A few people were walking dogs, and a little boy was trying to fly a kite that seemed

determined to crash into the ground. I sat on a bench and watched the sea for a while, listening to the gulls and the distant sound of traffic.

I thought about the first time I'd met Elsie.

Not the first time I'd seen her cycling away from the factory, but the first time we'd properly spoken. She'd been standing in the bookshop, looking at postcards, and I'd been so nervous that I could barely manage a sentence. She'd smiled at me as though we'd known each other for years, then told me that normal people were boring.

I'd liked her immediately.

I hadn't known anything about her then. Not her surname, not her family, not the things she wanted to do with her life. I'd just known that she was funny and kind, and that being around her made me feel less awkward than I usually did.

I wondered whether that was what falling in love was supposed to feel like.

I'd always imagined it would be something dramatic. A sudden moment where everything changed, where music played and the world seemed brighter. But with Elsie, it had happened slowly, through little things. The way she listened when I talked about writing. The way

she made fun of herself when she was nervous. The way she'd held my hand without making a fuss about it.

I looked out towards the sea.

I wanted more of those little things.

I wanted to know what she was like when she was tired, when she was annoyed, when she was having a bad day. I wanted to meet her family properly, sit beside her in a classroom, walk home with her after college and argue about what film to watch. I wanted ordinary days with her, not just one perfect Saturday repeated over and over again.

And that was the problem.

I'd fallen in love with someone whose ordinary days I couldn't reach.

I could visit the same Saturday as often as the window allowed, but I couldn't move forward with her unless I stayed. I couldn't find out what happened on Sunday, or Monday, or any of the thousands of days that would follow.

Not without leaving everything else behind.

I sat there until the wind became too cold, then walked home.

That evening, Mum made my favourite dinner.

I noticed immediately, although she pretended it was a coincidence. Dad had bought a chocolate cake from the supermarket, and Sophie had sent me a message asking whether I wanted to meet up over the weekend. I told her I was busy on Saturday but might be free on Sunday.

She replied with a suspicious-looking emoji.

I smiled and put my phone down.

We ate together at the kitchen table, talking about ordinary things. Dad told us about an argument at work over a headline, Mum complained about the neighbour's cat again, and I almost laughed when Dad suggested we start charging it rent. It was a lovely evening, which somehow made everything worse.

After dinner, we watched a film in the living room. I sat between Mum and Dad, with a blanket over my legs, and tried to concentrate on the story. Halfway through, Mum rested her head against mine. I leaned into her, and for a moment I was eight years old again, safe and warm and certain that nothing could ever take me away from them.

I wanted to stay like that forever.

But I also wanted tomorrow to come.

When the film ended, Dad switched off the television and looked at me.

"Ready for bed?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

He smiled.

"Big day tomorrow."

I swallowed.

"Yeah."

Mum hugged me tightly before I went upstairs.

"Love you," she whispered.

"Love you too."

She kissed my forehead.

"Get some sleep."

I nodded and went to my room.

I didn't sleep much.

On Saturday morning, I packed my bag carefully.

I put in my journal, the old factory photograph and a few things I thought Elsie might like. There was a little notebook I'd bought for her, with a blue cover and a tiny silver star on the front. I'd chosen it because it reminded me of the bracelet she wore, and because she'd always seemed interested in my writing. I thought she might use it to write down her own stories, or perhaps the places she wanted to visit.

I also packed a photograph of myself.

Not a particularly good one. It was from a school trip the previous year, and I was squinting into the sun with my hair blowing across my face. But it was the only recent picture I had printed, and I wanted Elsie to have something to remember me by.

Then I stopped.

Remember me.

I stared at the photograph.

If I came home, she wouldn't remember me tomorrow. She might keep the notebook and the photograph, but she wouldn't know why she had them. Or perhaps they'd disappear when the day reset. I didn't know.

I put the photograph in my bag anyway. Perhaps she would remember me. Just this girl who came around for one afternoon and never returned.

Downstairs, Mum and Dad were waiting.

Dad had packed a flask of tea and some sandwiches, while Mum carried a small first-aid kit and a packet of tissues. She looked as though she was preparing for a school trip, except her hands were shaking slightly when she picked up her coat.

We drove to the factory in silence.

When we arrived, Dad parked in the same place as before. He switched off the engine and turned towards me.

"Freya."

I looked at him.

"Remember what we agreed."

I nodded.

"A few hours. Then I come back."

He studied my face.

"And no trying to stay overnight."

I swallowed.

"I know."

Mum reached back and squeezed my hand.

"We love you."

I nodded.

"Love you too."

We got out of the car.

The sky was grey, and the air smelled of rain. We walked through the gap in the fence and crossed the yard towards the back office. Dad went first, checking the ground as we went, while Mum stayed close beside me.

When we reached the doorway, I stopped.

The window was still open.

But the frame had dropped further.

One corner hung lower than the other, and the split beneath the hinge had widened into a dark gap. A piece of wood lay on the floor, and the metal bracket I'd fitted was twisted slightly away from the wall.

Dad stared at it.

"Oh, no."

I felt my stomach drop.

"What?"

He stepped closer, examining the damage.

"It's worse than yesterday."

I looked at the opening.

Beyond it, the August sun was shining.

I could hear the distant sound of machinery.

Elsie was there.

Somewhere.

Dad touched the frame carefully.

It shifted.

He pulled his hand away.

"Freya, I don't think this is safe."

I stared at him.

"What?"

He looked at me.

"The frame could come down at any moment."

I felt tears prick my eyes.

"But we agreed."

"I know."

"You said I could go."

He looked pained.

"Freya..."

I shook my head. "Please."

Mum came beside me.

"Love, listen to your dad."

I looked at her.

"Please, Mum. Just once."

She looked towards the window, then at Dad.

For a long moment, nobody spoke.

Then Dad took a breath.

"All right."

Mum stared at him.

"What?"

He held up a hand.

"One visit. But I'm going to support the frame while she goes through, and we're not leaving this room."

I looked at him.

"Really?"

He nodded.

"But Freya, if I tell you to come back, you come back immediately. No arguing."

I swallowed.

"Okay."

He looked at Mum.

She hesitated, then nodded reluctantly.

Dad moved to the window and carefully lifted the frame, supporting its weight with both hands. The wood

creaked, and a small piece broke away beneath the hinge.

I froze.

Dad held it steady.

"Go on."

I looked at Mum.

She was crying.

I stepped towards her and hugged her tightly.

"I'll come back."

She held me.

"You'd better."

I smiled through my tears.

"I will."

She kissed my forehead.

Then I turned towards the window.

Dad looked at me.

"Careful."

I nodded.

I climbed through.

The warm August air touched my face, and I stepped down into the grass.

For a moment, I just stood there, breathing.

Then I turned back.

Mum and Dad were watching me through the opening.

I smiled.

"See you in a bit."

Mum waved weakly.

Dad nodded.

"Don't be long."

I smiled again.

Then I turned and walked towards the road.

Elsie was exactly where I expected her to be.

She came around the corner with her bicycle, wearing the floral dress and looking as though she hadn't a care

in the world. When she saw me standing beside the wall, she smiled.

"Hi."

I smiled back.

"Hi."

She leaned her bicycle against the wall.

"Waiting for someone?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Anyone interesting?"

I laughed softly.

"Very."

She grinned. A bit confused.

"Well, I hope they're worth it."

I looked at her.

She was.

More than she could possibly know.

I took a breath.

"Can we go somewhere?"

She smiled.

"Course. Where?"

"Somewhere quiet."

She studied me for a moment, then nodded.

"All right."

We walked towards town together, and I tried to make the most of every second. I listened to her talk about her brother, her plans for college and the places she wanted to visit. I laughed at her jokes, asked questions and tried to remember every little detail.

At the river, we sat beneath the same tree where we'd spent so many afternoons.

Elsie leaned back against the trunk and looked towards the water.

"Lovely day, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She glanced at me.

"You're quiet."

I smiled faintly.

"Sorry."

She laughed.

"Don't be. Just wondering."

I looked down at my hands.

There was so much I wanted to say.

So much I needed her to know.

I opened my bag and took out the little blue notebook.

"Here."

She looked surprised.

"What's that?"

"For you."

She took it carefully and examined the cover.

"Oh! That's lovely."

I smiled.

"Thought you might like it."

She opened it, turning the blank pages.

"What shall I write in it?"

I shrugged.

"Anything. Stories, places you want to visit, things you don't want to forget."

She looked at me.

Then she smiled.

"That's a nice idea."

I swallowed.

"Yeah."

She closed the notebook and held it against her chest.

"Thank you."

I smiled.

"You're welcome."

For a moment, we sat quietly.

Then I took a breath.

"Elsie, there's something I need to tell you."

She turned towards me.

"All right."

I looked at her.

And began.

I told her about the window.

About 2026.

About the way the day reset whenever I returned.

I told her about all the times we'd met, the conversations we'd had and the way she'd forgotten me afterwards. I told her about finding her older self, about the photograph and the life she seemed to have built.

Elsie listened carefully.

At first, she laughed, thinking I was joking. Then she saw how serious I was and began asking questions. I answered as best I could, showing her the old factory

photograph and explaining how my parents had seen the window.

When I finished, she was quiet for a long time.

Then she looked at me.

"So this is goodbye?"

I swallowed.

"Maybe."

She looked down at the notebook.

"Because the window's breaking?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She was quiet.

Then she asked, "And if you stayed?"

I looked at her.

"I'd lose my family."

She nodded slowly.

"Right."

I swallowed.

"I don't want to."

She looked up.

"Of course you don't."

I felt tears prick my eyes.

"But I don't want to lose you either."

Elsie stared at me.

Then she reached over and took my hand.

"Freya."

I looked at her.

She smiled sadly.

"I don't want you to lose your family."

I swallowed.

"I know."

She squeezed my fingers.

"And I don't want you to stay here because you're frightened of saying goodbye."

I looked down.

She moved closer.

"Look at me."

I looked up.

She smiled gently.

"You've given me a lovely afternoon. Even if I forget it tomorrow, it's still happened."

I felt tears sliding down my cheeks.

She brushed one away with her thumb.

"And maybe that's enough."

I shook my head.

"It doesn't feel like enough."

She smiled sadly.

For a long moment, we sat there holding hands.

Then she looked at me.

"Freya?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I ask you something?"

I nodded.

She hesitated.

"Have we ever kissed?"

My heart seemed to stop.

I stared at her.

"No."

She looked surprised.

"Really?"

I shook my head.

She smiled faintly.

"Well, that's a shame."

I laughed through my tears.

She moved a little closer.

"Would you like to?"

I swallowed.

"Yeah."

She smiled.

"Good."

Then she leaned towards me.

I closed my eyes.

Her lips touched mine.

It was gentle and a little awkward, and I was so nervous that I almost forgot to breathe. But when she pulled back, she was smiling, and I couldn't help smiling too.

"Well," she said softly.

I laughed.

"Yeah."

She grinned.

"That was nice."

I nodded.

"Really nice."

She took my hand again.

For a while, we sat together beneath the tree, watching the river and talking quietly. We didn't try to solve anything. We didn't discuss the future or the window. We just sat there, holding hands, enjoying the afternoon.

Eventually, I looked at my watch.

I'd been gone for nearly three hours.

I felt my stomach tighten.

"I have to go."

Elsie looked at me.

"Now?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She was quiet for a moment.

Then she smiled sadly.

"All right."

We stood, and she picked up her bicycle. We walked back towards the factory slowly, taking the long way through town. I tried to memorise everything: the shop

windows, the cars, the smell of warm pavement and the sound of Elsie's bicycle wheels turning beside us.

When we reached the factory, she stopped.

"Freya?"

I looked at her.

"Yeah?"

She smiled.

"I'm glad you found that window."

I felt my throat tighten.

"Me too."

She stepped closer and hugged me.

I held her tightly.

For a long time, neither of us moved.

Then she pulled back and kissed me once more, softly.

"Go home," she whispered.

I nodded.

"Okay."

She smiled through her tears.

"And have a lovely life."

I tried to smile.

"You too."

She picked up her bicycle.

I watched her ride away.

Then I turned towards the window.

Mum and Dad were still there, waiting on the other side.

I could see them through the opening.

Dad was holding the frame.

Mum was standing beside him, watching me.

I walked towards them.

For a moment, I stopped.

I looked back towards the road.

Elsie was gone.

Then I looked at Mum and Dad.

They were waiting.

I took a breath.

And climbed through.

The cold air hit me immediately.

Dad helped me down, and Mum wrapped her arms around me before my feet had properly touched the floor. She held me so tightly that I could barely breathe, but I didn't complain.

"I'm here," I whispered.

She nodded against my shoulder.

"I know."

Dad put a hand on my back.

For a long moment, we stood together beside the window.

Then there was a sharp cracking sound.

Dad looked up.

"Move!"

He pulled us away just as the lower hinge tore free.

The window frame dropped.

Glass shattered against the floor, and a shower of rotten wood fell from the wall. I stumbled backwards, Mum still holding my arm, and watched as the frame collapsed into the office.

For a moment, I could still see the warm August sunlight beyond it.

Then the opening flickered.

The factory yard disappeared.

And all that remained was a broken window looking out onto the grey, overgrown grounds of 2026.

I stared.

"No."

Dad stepped towards the opening, then stopped.

I pushed past him.

"No, no, no."

I reached the wall and looked through.

There was nothing.

Just weeds, broken concrete and the remains of an old fence.

I touched the edge of the opening.

Cold air.

Ordinary air.

I leaned closer.

"Elsie?"

Nothing.

I looked back at Mum and Dad.

"It's gone."

Mum came towards me.

I shook my head.

"No."

She reached for my hand.

I pulled away.

I looked through the opening again, desperate to see the sunshine, the clean brickwork, anything that might mean it was still there.

But there was nothing.

The window was broken.

The past was gone.

And Elsie was twenty-nine years away.

I sank to the floor.

Mum knelt beside me and put her arms around me.

I cried.

Not quietly.

Not the way I usually did, trying to hide it from everyone.

I cried until my chest hurt and I could barely breathe.

Mum held me, and Dad sat beside us, one hand resting on my shoulder.

Nobody told me it would be all right.

Nobody told me I'd get over it.

They just stayed.

Eventually, when I had no tears left, I looked towards the broken window.

The grey afternoon was fading.

Somewhere beyond it, the world carried on as though nothing had happened.

I thought about Elsie beneath the tree, smiling at me after our first kiss.

I thought about the little blue notebook I'd given her.

I thought about the way she'd told me to go home and have a lovely life.

Then I closed my eyes.

I had come home.

I'd kept my promise.

But for the first time since finding the window, I knew I would never see her again.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

For the first few days, I kept expecting the window to come back.

It was a stupid thing to expect, really. I'd watched it collapse. I'd seen the warm August afternoon disappear, leaving nothing but the ruined factory and the grey sky beyond. Dad had checked the opening again before we left, and there had been no sign of anything unusual. Just broken glass, rotten wood and a cold breeze coming through a hole in the wall.

But knowing something was gone and accepting it were two different things.

On Sunday morning, I woke up thinking about Elsie. For a few seconds, before I was properly awake, I forgot what had happened. I imagined getting dressed, walking to the factory and finding her waiting beside her bicycle, smiling as though we'd never been apart.

Even though that had never been the case. As though we'd never met, I suppose.

But then I remembered.

I lay there staring at the ceiling until Mum knocked on my door.

"Morning, love."

I didn't answer immediately.

She opened the door a little further.

"Can I come in?"

I nodded.

She sat on the edge of my bed and brushed my hair away from my face. She didn't ask how I was feeling. I think she already knew.

"Fancy some breakfast?"

"Not really."

"All right."

She stayed for a while, talking about nothing in particular. The weather, the garden, something Dad had said while trying to fix the kitchen cupboard. I listened,

occasionally smiling, but mostly I just lay there and let her talk.

Eventually, she kissed my forehead and stood.

"Come downstairs when you're ready."

I nodded.

When she'd gone, I turned onto my side and looked at the little pile of things on my bedside table. My journal, the photograph of the factory and the scraps of paper with Elsie's telephone number. I'd kept them all together since Saturday, afraid that if I put them away, it would feel like admitting she was gone.

I picked up one of the slips.

Her handwriting was slightly untidy, with a little star drawn beside the number.

I ran my thumb over it.

I wondered what had happened to the notebook I'd given her.

Had she taken it home? Had she written anything in it? Would she wake up on Sunday morning and remember me, or had everything reset the moment the window collapsed?

I didn't know.

That was the worst part.

I could live with never seeing her again, eventually. At least I hoped I could. But not knowing whether she'd remembered me felt almost unbearable.

I put the slip down and closed my eyes.

Somewhere in the past, Sunday had either happened or it hadn't.

And there was nothing I could do to find out.

I didn't go to school on Monday.

Mum and Dad decided I needed a few days at home, and for once I didn't argue. I spent most of the morning sitting in the garden with a book I barely read, watching the clouds move across the sky. Dad worked from home, and Mum checked on me every so often, bringing tea or asking whether I wanted lunch.

They were trying not to make a fuss.

I appreciated that.

By Tuesday, I was restless enough to go for a walk. Mum offered to come with me, but I told her I wanted

to be alone for a little while. She hesitated, then agreed, as long as I kept my phone with me.

I didn't go near the factory.

Instead, I walked towards the river.

It wasn't the same riverbank where Elsie and I had sat. Not exactly. Twenty-nine years had changed the town, and the little stretch of grass beneath the tree was now part of a paved path. There were benches, bins and a sign telling people not to feed the ducks.

I sat on one of the benches and looked at the water.

The river moved slowly beneath the grey sky, carrying leaves and little bits of rubbish towards the sea. A woman walked past with a dog, and somewhere behind me a child was laughing.

I tried to imagine Elsie sitting beside me.

She'd probably have complained about the sign, then fed the ducks anyway. She'd have made some joke about how the future was supposed to be exciting, not full of rules about bread.

I smiled.

Then I cried.

It happened so suddenly that I barely had time to look away. One moment I was smiling at the thought of her, and the next I was wiping tears from my face, not caring if anybody noticed.

I sat there for a long time.

Eventually, I took out my journal and opened it to a blank page.

I wrote:

I don't know if you remember me.

I stopped.

Then I continued.

I hope you do. I hope you woke up on Sunday and found the little blue notebook beside your bed. I hope you looked at it and remembered the girl who told you impossible things, and that you smiled instead of feeling sad.

I swallowed.

I'm sorry I couldn't stay.

I stared at the words.

Then I added:

I wanted to.

For a while, I couldn't write anything else.

I closed the journal and looked out across the water.

The river kept moving.

It didn't care what year it was.

By Wednesday, I was back at school.

Sophie met me at the gates and hugged me so tightly that I nearly dropped my bag.

"Where have you been?"

I laughed weakly.

"Home."

She pulled back and looked at me.

"You look awful."

"Thanks."

"I'm serious."

"I know."

She studied my face.

"Elsie?"

I nodded.

Her expression softened.

"Oh, Freya."

I looked down.

"It's over."

She was quiet for a moment.

Then she put an arm around my shoulders.

"Come on."

We walked towards the building together.

She didn't ask for details, and I was grateful. I wasn't ready to explain anything, not even the parts that could be explained without mentioning time travel. I just wanted to get through the day without crying in front of everyone.

At lunch, Sophie sat beside me and talked about ordinary things. She told me about a ridiculous argument in her family, complained about a teacher and made me laugh with an impression of our headteacher that was probably unfair but extremely accurate.

For the first time in days, I felt something other than sadness. It didn't last long but it was there. And that mattered.

The weeks passed.

Not quickly, exactly, but they passed.

The weather grew warmer, school carried on and the days began to feel ordinary again. I still thought about Elsie constantly, but the memories became less sharp around the edges. I could remember her laugh without immediately wanting to cry, and sometimes I found myself smiling at something she'd said before remembering that I would never hear her say anything new. Or old.

Mum and Dad didn't pretend she'd never existed.

That helped more than I could explain.

Sometimes Mum asked about her. Not in a way that made me feel I had to talk, but gently, as though Elsie were someone I'd known who had moved away. Dad occasionally asked questions about 1997, usually when something on television reminded him of it. We never went back to the factory, although he kept an eye on the

redevelopment plans and told me when the council postponed the demolition decision.

I didn't ask him to take me there.

I knew what we'd find.

One evening, near the end of June, Mum came into my room carrying a small box.

"Found this while sorting the cupboard."

I looked up.

Inside were old photographs, birthday cards and bits of paper she'd kept from when I was little. There were drawings I'd made, stories I'd written and a photograph of me aged about six, standing in the garden with a plastic sword and a very serious expression.

I laughed.

"What was I doing?"

Mum smiled.

"Defending the kingdom, apparently."

I looked at the photograph.

"From what?"

"Slugs, mostly."

I laughed again.

We spent the next hour going through the box, and for a while I forgot about everything else. Mum told me stories about things I'd done as a child, including several I sincerely hoped she'd never mention in public. Dad came upstairs halfway through and joined in, which made everything worse.

By the time they left, my cheeks hurt from smiling.

I sat on my bed, looking at the photographs scattered around me.

Then I looked at the picture of Elsie from 1997.

I picked it up.

She was still standing beside the factory gates, smiling towards something outside the frame.

I smiled faintly.

For the first time, I didn't feel as though I was looking at someone I'd lost.

I felt as though I was looking at someone who'd been part of my life.

A real part.

Even if it had only lasted a few afternoons.

I put the photograph back on my desk.

Then I opened my laptop and started writing.

Not in my journal.

A story.

I didn't know exactly what it would be yet. Something about a girl who found a window into the past, perhaps, and fell in love with someone she couldn't keep. I wasn't sure whether I'd ever show it to anyone, but I wanted to write it down before the memories changed too much.

I wrote until nearly midnight.

When I finally stopped, I had twelve pages.

It wasn't very good.

But it was a start.

The letter arrived on a Thursday morning in July.

Dad was making breakfast when the post came through the door. He collected it, sorted through the usual collection of bills and advertisements, then stopped.

"Freya?"

I looked up from my cereal.

"Yeah?"

"There's something here for you."

I frowned.

"For me?"

He held up an envelope.

It was cream-coloured, slightly thicker than ordinary paper, with my name written across the front in careful handwriting.

I stared at it.

"Who's it from?"

Dad turned it over.

"No return address."

Mum looked up from her coffee.

"That's unusual."

I took the envelope.

My name was written in blue ink.

Freya.

No surname.

No address.

Just my name.

I turned it over.

The flap had been sealed with a small sticker shaped like a silver star.

My heart stopped.

For a moment, I couldn't move.

Then I looked at Dad.

He was watching me carefully.

"Freya?"

I swallowed.

"Where did this come from?"

"The post."

I shook my head.

"I mean..."

I looked at the envelope again.

The handwriting.

The star.

My hands began to shake.

Mum stood.

"Love?"

I carefully opened the envelope.

Inside was a folded sheet of paper.

And a photograph.

I took the photograph out first.

It showed a woman standing beside a river, smiling towards the camera. She had short hair with a few grey strands, glasses and a familiar expression that made my throat tighten.

Elsie.

Older Elsie.

I stared at her.

Then I turned the photograph over.

There was a date written on the back.

June 2026.

I looked at Mum and Dad.

Neither of them spoke.

I unfolded the letter.

The handwriting was neat, but there was something familiar about it. The way certain letters leaned slightly to the right, the little curl at the end of her name.

I began to read.

Dear Freya,

I hope I've found the right person.

I've been trying to decide whether to write this for a long time. There are some things that sound completely ridiculous when you say them out loud, and I've never been particularly good at explaining myself.

When I was sixteen, I met a girl called Freya. She told me she was from the future.

I stopped breathing.

I know how that sounds. I thought she was having me on at first. But she showed me something I couldn't explain, and for one afternoon I believed her.

She told me things about my future. Some of them turned out to be true. Others didn't, or perhaps I just made different choices. I don't know.

What I do know is that she gave me a little blue notebook with a silver star on the cover, and she told me to write down things I didn't want to forget.

I felt tears sliding down my face.

I started writing in it that evening.

The next morning, I remembered her.

I made a small sound.

Mum reached for my hand.

I kept reading.

I remembered everything. The window, the river, the way she laughed when she was nervous. I remembered

kissing her beneath the tree, and I remembered telling her to go home.

For a long time, I thought she'd come back.

I went to the factory more times than I care to admit. I checked the window, asked questions and made a complete nuisance of myself. But I never saw her again.

Eventually, I had to accept that perhaps she couldn't return.

I kept the notebook.

I filled it with stories, places I wanted to visit and things I was frightened of forgetting. I took it to college, then university, and later on my travels. It's rather battered now, and the cover is held together with tape, but I still have it.

I suppose you could say it changed my life.

I became interested in writing and art because of that notebook. I started working with young people because I wanted them to have somewhere to put the things they couldn't easily say out loud.

And every now and then, I thought about the girl who'd given it to me.

I wiped my face.

The words blurred.

I blinked and continued.

I never knew whether you were real, Freya. Not completely. As I got older, I started wondering whether I'd imagined the whole thing. But I had the notebook, and I had a photograph of a girl who hadn't been born yet.

Then, earlier this year, I saw something online about the old factory. There was a photograph of the building, and I recognised the window. I started looking into the redevelopment plans and found an article written by a local journalist.

His surname was familiar.

I remembered you'd told me your dad was a journalist.

It took a little searching, but eventually I found you.

I don't know whether you'll remember me. I don't know whether time works the way we thought it did. And I certainly don't know whether writing this letter is a good idea.

But I wanted you to know something.

You didn't ruin my future.

You were part of it.

I had a good life, Freya. Not a perfect one, because nobody does, but a good one. I travelled, I fell in love, I made mistakes and I found work that mattered to me. I was happy.

And I remembered you.

I still do.

If you ever wondered whether that Sunday happened, it did.

And if you ever wondered whether I was glad we met, I was.

I hope you're happy too.

Love,

Elsie.

I stared at the page.

For a long time, I couldn't speak.

Mum was crying.

Dad sat very still, looking at the letter in my hands.

I read the last few lines again.

You didn't ruin my future.

You were part of it.

I pressed the letter against my chest and cried.

But this time, it was different.

I wasn't crying because I'd lost her.

I was crying because she hadn't forgotten me.

Because somewhere in the past, Sunday had happened. Elsie had woken up, remembered the girl she'd kissed beneath the tree and carried that memory with her into the future.

And she'd been happy.

I looked at the photograph again.

Older Elsie was smiling beside the river.

I smiled through my tears.

"She remembered."

Mum put her arms around me.

"I know, love."

I laughed softly.

"She remembered me."

Dad reached across the table and squeezed my hand.

For a long time, we sat there together.

Then Mum wiped her eyes and looked at the letter.

"Well," she said, smiling through her tears, "I think that's the nicest thing I've ever read."

I laughed.

Dad nodded.

"Rather puts my newspaper articles to shame."

I laughed harder.

Mum kissed the top of my head.

I looked down at the letter again.

At the familiar handwriting.

At the little star beside her name.

For the first time since the window had broken, the future didn't feel like something I'd lost.

It felt like something I could still have.

That evening, I went for a walk along the river.

The sun was setting, and the water reflected the orange sky. I sat on the same bench where I'd cried weeks earlier, holding Elsie's letter in my hands.

I read it one more time.

Then I folded it carefully and put it back in the envelope.

I thought about the girl I'd met in 1997. The way she'd laughed, the way she'd held my hand and the way she'd told me to go home and have a lovely life.

I smiled.

I was going to try.

I didn't know what would happen next. I didn't know whether I'd fall in love again, whether I'd become a writer or whether I'd ever understand what had happened at the factory. There were still questions I couldn't answer, and perhaps there always would be.

But I knew something now that I hadn't known before.

Some things didn't need to last forever to matter.

Some people changed your life simply by being part of it, even for a little while.

And sometimes, the people you thought you'd lost were carrying a piece of you with them all along.

I looked out across the river.

Somewhere in town, a woman called Elsie Whitmore was living her life. She was forty-five years old now, with glasses and grey in her hair, and she had a battered blue notebook filled with things she didn't want to forget.

I wondered whether she'd like to meet me again.

Not as the girl she'd known in 1997.

Not as someone I could fall in love with.

Just as Freya.

The girl who'd once climbed through a window and found her.

I smiled.

Perhaps one day.

For now, I was content to sit beside the river and watch the last of the sunlight disappear.

I took out my journal and opened it to a blank page.

For a while, I thought about what to write.

Then I smiled and began.

There was once a girl who found a window into the past. She thought she'd discovered a way to escape her ordinary life. Instead, she found a reason to love it.

I stopped and looked at the words.

Then I closed the journal.

The river moved quietly beside me, carrying the evening towards the sea.

And for the first time in a long while, I was looking forward to tomorrow.

Through the Cracks of Time

Fifteen-year-old Freya never expected much from an abandoned factory. It was simply somewhere quiet to write, away from school, family and the ordinary complications of being a teenager.
Then she climbs through a broken window and finds herself in August 1997.

There she meets Elsie, a funny, fearless girl who makes the world feel a little less lonely. As their friendship grows into something more, Freya discovers the cruel truth about her impossible escape: every time she returns to the present, the past begins again.

And Elsie forgets her.

Freya remembers every conversation, every laugh and every moment they share. Elsie remembers nothing.

Through the Cracks of Time is a tender, bittersweet YA romance about first love and impossible choices.