

## **In Her Name**

**A Father, A Daughter, and A Promise to Keep Going**

## Chapter 1

### The Desert

The desert was silent in a way most people never experience.

Not the quiet of a countryside evening where distant tractors hum somewhere beyond the hedgerows. Not the calm hush of a forest where wind brushes through the trees.

This silence felt deeper.

Heavier.

It was the kind of silence that exists when there is simply nothing there to break it.

No traffic.

No voices.

No distant machinery.

Just wind moving slowly across an endless landscape.

I was sitting on an adventure box beside my pickup truck in the middle of the Gobi Desert.

Dexter lay a few metres away from me, stretched out comfortably on the sand. His thick grey and white coat lifted slightly in the breeze as he watched the empty world around us with the calm curiosity that seemed to define him.

Behind us the truck stood alone in the desert.

Dust had settled across its body from days of driving through dry terrain. It had carried us thousands of miles to reach this place, across countries and landscapes that seemed almost impossible to connect when looking back on the journey as a whole.

Now it sat quietly behind us.

Still.

Patient.

As if it too was waiting to see what would happen next.

The horizon stretched so far in every direction that distance began to lose meaning. There were no landmarks close enough to judge how far away anything really was. The land simply rolled outward into the distance until the ground and sky seemed to merge somewhere far beyond sight.

When people imagine deserts, they often picture endless sand dunes rising and falling like waves across the landscape.

The Gobi is different.

Much of it is open plains, rock, and hardened earth stretching for miles without interruption. The sand dunes appear in places, sometimes rising suddenly from the desert floor like frozen waves in the middle of a vast ocean.

But where Dexter and I had stopped, the landscape was almost perfectly open.

Flat.

Empty.

Endless.

I had stopped the truck because the numbers had finally forced me to.

The fuel gauge was dangerously close to empty.

Food had been reduced to what little remained in the back of the vehicle, and a half bottle of Heinz Ketchup.

Water had become something I now measured carefully with every drink.

Earlier that afternoon I had been driving slowly across the open desert, searching for any sign of a track that might lead toward civilisation. The map suggested that somewhere ahead there should be a settlement.

But maps don't always reflect reality in the Gobi, and the nomadic Mongolian herders don't stay in one spot for too long.

In places like this, a settlement might mean a handful of buildings separated by miles of empty ground. It might mean a fuel station.

Or it might mean nothing more than a name printed on a piece of paper.

The desert doesn't care about your expectations.

It doesn't care how far you've travelled or why you came.

It simply exists.

I had been watching the fuel gauge closely for several hours before deciding to stop.

Each mile we drove carried a small calculation.

How far could we go?

How much fuel remained?

How much distance might still lie between us and the next place where help might exist?

Eventually I realised something important.

Driving further without thinking carefully might only carry us deeper into trouble.

So I stopped the truck.

When the engine fell silent, the desert immediately reclaimed the soundscape around us.

The faint mechanical hum that had accompanied us for days vanished completely.

For a few moments I simply sat behind the wheel listening to the quiet.

Then I opened the door and stepped outside.

The air was warm and dry, carrying the faint smell of dust that seemed to define the entire landscape. There was no humidity, no moisture in the air at all.

Just heat and wind.

Dexter jumped down from the rear passenger seat the moment the door opened.

He stretched, shook himself slightly, and began exploring the ground nearby with his nose close to the sand.

Everything seemed interesting to him.

Every scent carried by the wind.

Every small movement in the distance.

Watching him always reminded me how differently dogs experience the world.

They do not measure risk the way humans do.

They do not watch fuel gauges or calculate distances between places.

They simply trust the person beside them.

I walked around the truck slowly and sat down on the adventure box we carried in the back.

Expedition travel requires practical solutions to small problems. The adventure box was one of those simple pieces of equipment. It held tools, spare parts, and supplies needed for long journeys through remote landscapes.

It also happened to be the closest thing to a chair within hundreds of miles.

So I sat.

The wind brushed gently across the sand.

Dexter wandered a short distance away, investigating something invisible to me before eventually returning to lie down beside the truck.

For a long time I simply looked out across the desert.

When you spend enough time in places like this, something strange begins to happen to your sense of time.

Without the constant noise of civilisation, minutes stretch out differently. Thoughts become clearer. Memories surface more easily.

The silence allows your mind to wander in ways that rarely happen in the busy rhythm of everyday life.

Eventually a quiet realisation began forming in my mind.

Dexter and I might not make it out of the desert.

The thought arrived slowly.

Without panic.

Without drama.

Just a calm recognition of the situation we were in.

Fuel was nearly gone.

Food was limited.

Water was running low.

The nearest help might be hours away.

Or it might be much further.

I looked over at Dexter again.

He had rolled onto his side now, completely relaxed, as if lying in the middle of one of the most remote places on Earth was simply another pleasant afternoon.

His ears twitched occasionally as the wind carried unfamiliar scents across the landscape.

Watching him brought a strange mixture of comfort and responsibility.

He trusted me completely.

That trust felt heavy in that moment.

After a while I stood up and walked back to the truck.

I opened one of the windows.

Not because the air inside the cab was hot.

But because of a thought that had crossed my mind.

If something happened to us out here, I didn't want Dexter trapped inside the vehicle.

If the desert eventually claimed the truck, at least he would have a chance.

I closed the door again and returned to the adventure box.

The wind continued moving softly across the sand.

For the first time since entering the desert, I allowed myself to think about something honestly.

For years after my daughter died, part of me had been quietly searching for an ending.

Not in an obvious or deliberate way.

But somewhere deep inside my mind there had been a belief that if I travelled far enough, pushed hard enough, or placed myself in difficult enough situations, perhaps the world might eventually decide things for me.

Perhaps fate might simply bring the story to a close.

Standing there in the desert, closer to that possibility than I had ever been before, something inside me suddenly shifted.

The idea that had followed me for years no longer felt right.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone.

For a moment I simply stared at the screen.

Then I pressed record.

If someone eventually found the truck...

If someone eventually found the phone...

Perhaps they would understand how we had ended up here.

I began speaking quietly into the camera.

Not dramatically.

Just honestly.

But as the words left my mouth, something unexpected happened.

The thought that had been following me for years suddenly changed shape.

I realised something that should perhaps have been obvious all along.

I could not die my way back to my daughter.

There was no road that led there.

No place where that journey ended.

The desert stretched endlessly around us.

Dexter shifted slightly beside the truck.

And sitting there on that adventure box, in the middle of one of the most remote places on Earth, something finally became clear.

The only promise I could still keep was to live.

To keep moving forward.

To keep going.

In her name.

Because this story didn't begin in the desert.

It began with a little girl called Kira.

## Chapter 2

### Fun, Cheeky, Adventurous

If I had to describe Kira in three words, they would be the same three words every time.

Fun.

Cheeky.

Adventurous.

But to understand our life together, you have to understand something else first.

From the day Kira was born, I was the one who raised her.

At the time that was unusual. Stay-at-home dads were not common in the United Kingdom when Kira arrived. Most families still followed the traditional pattern where fathers went to work and mothers stayed home with the children.

Our family worked differently.

Kira's mum worked, and I stayed home.

That arrangement meant something very simple but very powerful: from the moment Kira entered the world, I was there for almost every part of her childhood.

I was there when she woke up in the morning.

I was there when she learned to walk.

I was there for school mornings, packed lunches, bedtime stories, and everything in between.

I fed her.

Carried her.

Taught her things.

Listened to her questions.

Walked beside her through the early years of her life.

Day after day.

Year after year.

From the day she was born until the day she died, I was there.

And over time that created something incredibly strong between us.

We were not just father and daughter.

We were a team.

Some people spend years trying to find the right language to describe the person they love most. They search for something poetic or unusual, as if bigger words might somehow come closer to the truth. But with Kira, the simplest words were always the truest. She was fun in the purest sense of the word. She made life lighter. She made ordinary days feel like they were worth noticing. She was cheeky in the way children sometimes are when they know exactly how far they can push a joke before an adult tries to look stern and fails. And she was adventurous not only because she loved mountains and camping and the outdoors, but because she seemed to meet life itself with a kind of forward movement that never allowed fear to take too much space.

She was the sort of child who filled a room the moment she entered it.

Some children are naturally quiet. They hover on the edge of conversations, watching, listening, deciding whether they want to join in. Kira was never really like that. She arrived fully as herself. You knew when she was there. Not because she was badly behaved or demanding, but because she brought energy with her. Curiosity. Questions. Humour. She had a way of making the world around her feel slightly more awake.

Questions came constantly. Some were serious. Some were funny. Some were so unexpected that they left adults scrambling for an answer they hoped sounded more confident than they felt.

Why do clouds look heavier before rain?  
Do dogs dream?  
If Sonic is so fast, why does anyone ever catch him?  
How high do you think we can climb today?  
Do you think sheep get bored?

That was part of her charm. Her mind never seemed to stay still for long. Something was always interesting to her. Something was always worth asking about. She moved through life with the assumption that the world was full of things worth noticing, and because she noticed them, the people around her did too.

Before illness entered our lives, weekends were often built around the outdoors. That was our rhythm. The week belonged to school, routine, the ordinary patterns of daily life. The weekends belonged to something else. They belonged to movement, weather, hills, boots by the door, sandwiches packed into bags, and the simple excitement of heading somewhere with no real purpose beyond being there together.

Kira loved the mountains.

Not in a vague sentimental way, not as a nice background to a day out, but properly. She loved the effort of getting there, the small rituals of setting out, the idea that a day could involve climbing toward something. She loved the air feeling different as you gained height. She loved the moment when a trail began to open up and a bigger view appeared. She loved

reaching the top of a fell and looking out over the world as if it had somehow become newly hers.

There was always a spark in her eye when she said it, that mixture of mischief and certainty that was so characteristically hers. Sometimes I would tell her I was pacing myself. Sometimes I would tell her that true mountaineers understood the value of conserving energy. Sometimes I would remind her that I was the one carrying the bag. She was never impressed by any of those arguments.

To her, the whole point was to get moving.

Sometimes we would sit and eat sandwiches looking out across the valleys and ridges. Sometimes we talked. Sometimes we just sat there with the kind of quiet that only exists when nobody feels the need to fill it. Those moments live very clearly in my mind. The cool air. The smell of grass and stone. The rustle of wrappers. Her voice carrying easily in open space. They were ordinary days at the time, which is perhaps why they matter so much now. You do not always know, while you are living them, which days will one day become sacred in memory.

Camping was the same.

Children experience camping differently than adults. Adults notice the inconvenience. The lack of proper comfort. The cold in the morning. The effort of setting things up. Children often notice something else entirely. The adventure of it. The feeling that ordinary rules have been suspended for a while. A tent is not just shelter to a child. It is a base, a fortress, a secret world. A stove becomes an expedition tool. A flask becomes part of survival. A sleeping bag becomes a cocoon, a cave, a thing to disappear inside while laughing.

Kira loved all of it.

She loved the preparation, the pitching of the tent, the sorting of gear, the novelty of eating simple food outside. She loved the feeling that life had been stripped down to essentials. A bag. A path. A place to sleep. A sky above you.

At night, when the world grew quiet and the day's movement settled into tiredness, there was often a moment when she would look up and simply stare at the sky.

"Look at that," she would say, as if the stars had turned up specifically for us.

And perhaps that was part of who she was. She looked at ordinary wonders as if they deserved to be spoken about. As if amazement was not embarrassing. As if the correct response to beauty was simply to notice it and say so.

During the week, when we were not climbing hills or pitching tents, she carried the same energy into everything else she did.

She was a Brownie and took enormous pride in it. The uniform mattered. The meetings mattered. The sense of belonging mattered. But the badges mattered most of all. Each badge was evidence that she had learned something, completed something, earned something. She

liked achievement, but not in a competitive or showy way. She simply liked the feeling of being involved in life. Doing things. Trying things. Belonging to something with purpose.

She also loved reading.

Books opened doors for her the same way paths did. Give her a story and she stepped into it fully. Some children read because they are told to. Kira read because she wanted to know what happened next. She wanted to meet characters, argue with them, laugh at them, tell me about them. She moved easily between the real world and the imagined one, and both seemed equally alive to her.

Then there was Sonic the Hedgehog.

Kira absolutely loved Sonic. Not casually, not as one character among many, but properly loved him. Sonic was not just a game or a cartoon to her. He was an attitude. Speed, confidence, adventure, loyalty, humour. All the things a child might find thrilling in a character. And alongside Sonic there was Two-Tails, who she also adored. If Sonic was the energy and the boldness, Two-Tails was the cleverness, the faithfulness, the companion always alongside the main adventure. She once mentioned she had a dream that she married Two-Tails and that Sonic was the best man.

If you asked her about either of them, you had better be prepared.

She could speak with tremendous seriousness about fictional characters in a way that was both hilarious and oddly persuasive. She spoke as if their personalities were self-evident facts and you were merely catching up. There was no irony in it. She did not half-believe in the importance of the things she loved. She believed in them fully. That is something children often do better than adults. They commit. They love openly. They invest themselves without embarrassment.

And Kira had no embarrassment about enthusiasm.

That was one of the most likeable things about her.

She was proud of me too, in a way that was often humbling. Children sometimes assume their parents can do almost anything. But with Kira, that pride often felt active. She did not merely love her dad because he was her dad. She admired me. She thought I was worth being proud of. That is not something a parent forgets. It is one of the most flattering, frightening, and precious gifts a child can offer.

There were also parts of her life that might have surprised people who only knew the softer outline of childhood.

I was a member of a gun club and had a firearms certificate, which meant rifles and long-barrelled pistols were securely stored in a safe at home. From time to time, Kira came with me to the rifle range.

Some people might immediately think that sounds unusual, and perhaps it was, but to Kira it was simply another thing to learn. Another environment to understand. Another challenge to take seriously. Safety was always absolute. Clear. Non-negotiable. And she understood that.

Once rules were explained, she respected them completely. That was another side of her personality people might not have expected. She was cheeky, yes, but she also understood when something mattered and should be done properly.

What interested her was not the equipment for its own sake. It was the skill. The discipline. The challenge of doing something carefully and correctly. She enjoyed learning. She liked proving to herself that she could understand things. That part of her personality appeared everywhere. On a mountain. In a book. At Brownies. At the range. In a conversation. Wherever there was something to learn or try, she leaned toward it rather than away.

That is what I mean when I say she was adventurous.

It wasn't only about hiking boots and campsites. It was about the way she met life. She did not seem limited by other people's ideas of what children were supposed to be interested in. If something looked interesting, she was interested. If something seemed difficult, she wanted to know more, not less. If something looked fun, she was already halfway there.

And then there was the humour.

Her cheekiness was not background decoration. It was central to who she was.

She had a quickness about her. A sense of timing. A willingness to say the thing other people might only think. But because she was Kira, it rarely landed as cruelty. It landed as personality. Wit. Spark. She knew how to make people laugh, and she seemed to enjoy the little moment of surprise when a grown-up realised a small girl had just outmanoeuvred them in conversation.

She was particularly good at finding humour in moments where adults had become too serious.

That quality stayed with her even when life became unimaginably hard.

One memory in particular has never left me. It came much later, after illness had already entered our world in a way neither of us wanted. We had been at a hospital appointment, and as we were leaving, an able-bodied man rushed in front of Kira's wheelchair when I was trying to get her to the toilet. I was furious. Furious enough that security had to stop me kicking the door down. It was one of those moments where anger comes not only from the immediate incident but from everything else you are already carrying.

We got back to the car.

I was crying.

The doctor had just told me he would be surprised if Kira was alive the next day. Those are words that do not sit anywhere comfortable in the mind. They do not feel possible. They do not fit the world as you know it. I sat there overwhelmed, the kind of overwhelmed that strips you back to something raw and helpless.

I turned to her and said, "What am I going to do without you?"

And Kira, with the calmness and sharpness that were entirely her own, answered, “You’re going to have to grow some balls, Daddy.”

Even now, writing those words, I can hear her voice.

It was such a Kira line. Funny. Bold. Completely unexpected. It cut through grief and pain in a single second. I did not know whether to laugh or cry, so I probably did some version of both. That was one of her gifts. Even when everything around her was becoming unbearable, she still had the instinct to make the moment human. She could still be funny. She could still disarm pain, if only briefly, with honesty and cheek.

That matters when remembering her.

Because I never want her story to become only the story of illness.

She was not defined by what happened to her. She was defined by who she was while it happened. And who she was remained astonishingly consistent.

Fun.

Cheeky.

Adventurous.

Those words were not a tidy summary added afterwards. They were the truth of her life. They explained the way she walked up a mountain and then turned around to mock my pace. They explained the seriousness with which she wore her Brownie uniform. They explained the delight she took in Sonic and Tails. They explained the way she threw herself into the outdoors, into books, into learning, into jokes, into connection.

Most of all, they explained the atmosphere she created around her.

Some people make life heavier when they enter a room. Others make it lighter. Kira made it lighter. She was a child who carried life with her in a very visible way. She did not merely occupy the world. She animated it. She sharpened it. She made people around her more awake to what was funny, interesting, beautiful, or worth noticing.

When I think back now to the years before everything changed, that is what comes first. Not a sequence of events. Not a neat list of memories. But a feeling. The feeling of being in the company of someone very alive. Someone with spark. Someone whose presence changed the quality of a day simply by being part of it.

Memory is strange after loss. It edits and magnifies at the same time. Some details disappear completely. Others become so vivid they feel almost physically present. With Kira, what has remained most vividly is not only what we did together but the force of her personality inside those moments.

A mountain trail and a voice calling back, “Come on, Daddy.”

A summit and her hands on her hips.

A tent lit softly from inside.

A discussion about Sonic conducted as if it were a matter of national importance.

A Brownie badge examined with solemn pride.

A sudden joke at exactly the moment adults had become too serious.

That was Kira.

And if I had to describe her in three words, if I had to reduce the brightness of her to something simple and true, I would still choose the same three.

Fun.

Cheeky.

Adventurous.

They were not just the best words for her.

They were the shape of the world when she was in it.

## Chapter 3

### The Mountains

The mountains were where some of our best memories lived.

Not because they were extraordinary places on their own, although they often were, but because of how they changed the way we experienced time together. In the mountains, life slowed down. The noise of everyday routines faded away. There were no televisions, no rushing from one obligation to another, no sense that something else was waiting just around the corner.

There was only the path.

And the person walking beside you.

For Kira and me, the mountains became something like a shared language. A place where conversation, laughter, silence, and effort all blended into something simple and honest. When we set out together on a trail, the world seemed to shrink down to the essentials: boots, breath, weather, distance, and whatever thoughts happened to surface along the way.

The Lake District became the heart of those adventures.

There is something about that landscape that feels both welcoming and demanding at the same time. The mountains are not enormous by global standards, but they have character. They rise suddenly from the valleys, their ridges and fells layered across the horizon like a landscape painted with deliberate care. On clear days you can see for miles. On misty ones the world closes in until it feels like you and the mountain are alone together.

Kira loved it immediately.

Some children need encouragement to walk long distances. They grow bored or tired or distracted. Kira was rarely like that. From the moment we stepped onto a trail, she moved forward with purpose. Her small boots crunched confidently against gravel paths or grassy slopes, and she carried herself with the kind of determined excitement that made the climb feel like a game.

Most of the time she walked ahead.

Not far enough that I worried about losing sight of her, but always far enough to suggest she considered herself the expedition leader. Every now and then she would stop, turn around, and plant her hands on her hips in exaggerated impatience.

“Come on, Daddy,” she would call. “You’re too slow.”

The first time she said it, I laughed.

The tenth time she said it, I laughed again.

It became one of those phrases that belonged entirely to our hikes. It wasn't criticism. It was simply Kira being Kira — playful, confident, completely convinced that speed was the correct approach to mountaineering.

In reality, I often stayed a few steps behind on purpose.

There is a particular pleasure in watching a child explore the world with curiosity. When you walk beside them, you sometimes miss the details of how they move through the landscape. When you walk behind them, you see everything: the way they stop suddenly to look at something interesting, the way they climb over rocks with exaggerated determination, the way they pause and stare out across the view as if storing it away somewhere inside themselves.

Kira noticed everything.

A strangely shaped stone.

A cluster of tiny flowers growing stubbornly through the grass.

A sheep standing calmly on what looked like an impossible section of hillside.

She treated each discovery with the seriousness of someone conducting important research.

“Why do sheep stand like that?” she would ask.

Or:

“Do you think people have climbed that bit?”

Or sometimes simply:

“Look at that.”

She didn't always need an answer. Often it was enough just to notice together.

That was part of the beauty of walking in the mountains with her. The climb was never only about reaching the top. The journey itself was where most of the adventure lived. Each section of path offered something new to look at, something to talk about, something to laugh about.

Sometimes we invented little challenges along the way.

Who could spot the most sheep.

Who could find the strangest shaped rock.

Who could guess how long it would take to reach the next bend in the path.

These small competitions rarely had clear winners. But that was never the point.

The point was the shared experience.

The sense that the mountain had become our playground.

Eventually, of course, the path always led upward.

The higher we climbed, the quieter the world seemed to become. Trees thinned out. The ground grew rockier. The air felt cooler and fresher against the skin. Sometimes the wind would begin to move more strongly across the open slopes.

And then, almost suddenly, the summit would appear.

For Kira, reaching the top of a mountain was a moment of genuine triumph.

She had a particular way of celebrating it.

The moment we reached the highest point she could find, she would climb onto it — carefully but confidently — and stand there with her hands on her hips like a tiny explorer claiming a new continent.

From that position she would stare out across the landscape with a mixture of pride and quiet satisfaction.

“We did it,” she would say.

The words always made me smile.

Because the truth was that she had done most of the work.

I had simply followed along behind, occasionally reminding her to drink water or slow down slightly on steeper sections.

But in her mind the climb was always something we had achieved together.

That sense of partnership was one of the things I loved most about those days.

When we sat down to eat our sandwiches at the summit, the world stretched out below us in a way that felt almost unreal. Valleys rolled into the distance. Lakes reflected the sky like pieces of polished glass. Other mountains rose along the horizon, each one inviting a new adventure on another day.

Sometimes we talked.

Sometimes we simply sat quietly.

There is a special kind of silence that exists in the mountains. It isn't empty. It feels more like a pause in the noise of life. A moment where everything slows down enough for you to notice where you are.

Those were the moments I often remember most clearly now.

Kira sitting beside me, swinging her legs slightly over the edge of a rock.

The sound of wind brushing across the grass.

The occasional bleat of a sheep somewhere on the hillside below.

And the enormous feeling of space surrounding us.

It was a good place to be together.

Camping trips often followed the same rhythm.

Sometimes we would climb during the day and then pitch a tent nearby as evening approached. The process of setting up camp became part of the adventure itself. Kira loved helping with everything: laying out the groundsheet, holding poles while I assembled them, arranging sleeping bags inside the tent.

To a child, these small tasks feel important.

They feel like participation in something meaningful.

Once the tent was up and the day's walking was done, the mountains took on a different character. The air cooled quickly as the sun began to drop behind the ridges. The light softened, turning the landscape into something calmer and quieter.

We would sit outside the tent for a while, eating simple food and watching the sky change colour.

Kira always seemed fascinated by the way the world transformed in those moments. Daytime brightness faded into deep blues and purples. The first stars appeared quietly above the peaks.

"Look at that," she would say.

As if the sky had performed the whole show just for us.

Later, when we climbed into the tent and zipped the door closed against the cool air, the sense of adventure continued. A tent at night becomes its own little world. Sounds outside seem louder. The rustle of wind against the fabric feels mysterious. Even the simple act of lying inside a sleeping bag becomes part of the experience.

Sometimes we talked for a while before sleep arrived.

Other times we simply lay there listening to the quiet of the mountains.

Those nights felt peaceful in a way that is difficult to recreate anywhere else.

Looking back now, I realise that those mountain days were not only about adventure.

They were about connection.

The mountains stripped life down to its simplest form. There were no distractions, no competing priorities. Just two people sharing the same path, the same effort, the same view.

It allowed conversations to happen naturally.

Kira often asked thoughtful questions during those walks.

Not only about the landscape around us, but about life in general.

Children sometimes ask questions that adults find unexpectedly profound.

“Why do people like mountains?” she once asked.

I thought about it for a moment before answering.

“Maybe because they remind us how big the world is.”

She considered that answer carefully, then nodded as if it made sense.

Moments like that felt important.

Not because they were dramatic or life-changing, but because they were honest. They were part of the quiet bond that forms when people spend time together without rushing.

Those memories remain some of the clearest I have.

The mountains were where Kira felt most alive.

And in many ways, they were where I felt closest to her too.

Years later, after everything had changed, those same mountains would carry a very different meaning.

Kira’s ashes were scattered on Scafell Pike.

The highest mountain in England.

The kind of place where the wind moves constantly and the view stretches for miles in every direction.

The same kind of landscape where we had once walked side by side.

Now, whenever I climb those slopes again, the memories return.

The small boots crunching ahead on the trail.

The voice calling back over the wind.

“Come on, Daddy.”

Sometimes, standing high on those ridges, it almost feels as if she might still be somewhere just around the next bend in the path.

Waiting.

Smiling.

Hands on her hips.

Telling me I'm too slow.

## Chapter 4

### The Diagnosis

There are moments in life when everything changes.

They rarely arrive with warning.

Most of the time they begin like any other day. You wake up, follow familiar routines, move through the hours expecting nothing unusual. Life feels steady. Predictable. The future stretches ahead in the quiet assumption that tomorrow will resemble today.

And then a conversation happens.

A sentence is spoken.

Two or three words are placed next to each other in a way that rearranges everything that comes after.

For us, that moment happened in a hospital.

Before the diagnosis, life with Kira had followed a rhythm that felt natural and uncomplicated. School during the week. Adventures on weekends. Walks in the mountains. Camping trips. Conversations about books and characters she loved, particularly Sonic the Hedgehog and his loyal friend Two-Tails.

She was nine years old.

At nine, the future should feel enormous. Childhood stretches ahead like an open landscape, full of possibilities that have not yet been imagined. Most parents never spend much time thinking about how fragile that future might be.

You simply assume it will unfold.

At first, nothing seemed especially alarming.

Like many illnesses, it began with small things.

The kind of symptoms that appear ordinary enough that they can easily be explained away. A headache that lasted longer than expected. Moments of tiredness that seemed unusual but not impossible. Occasional complaints that something “didn’t feel right.”

Children get headaches.

Children feel unwell from time to time.

Life continues.

But when those small signs refuse to disappear, something inside you begins to notice.

The concern starts quietly.

Then it grows.

Eventually concern leads to a visit to the doctor.

A visit leads to tests.

Tests lead to more tests.

And slowly the world begins to feel less certain.

Hospitals have a particular atmosphere.

Anyone who has spent time in one knows the feeling. The lighting is slightly too bright. The air carries a faint antiseptic smell. Conversations tend to happen in quiet voices, as if everyone instinctively understands that important things are being discussed.

When you first walk into that environment as a parent with your child, you don't immediately imagine the worst.

You hope for reassurance.

You expect answers that will eventually lead back to normal life.

Even when doctors begin using careful language, part of you still believes that the outcome will somehow return to safety.

But sometimes the words move in a different direction.

I remember sitting in a hospital room waiting for the doctor.

Kira was beside me.

She looked relaxed enough, curious about the unfamiliar environment around her. Children often treat hospitals with a mixture of interest and mild boredom. Machines become objects of fascination. Corridors feel like strange new spaces to explore.

She asked questions.

What does that machine do?

Why are there so many wires?

Do doctors get bored?

Her curiosity had not disappeared simply because we were inside a hospital.

When the doctor finally entered the room, his expression carried the calm seriousness that doctors learn to wear when delivering difficult news.

At the time I didn't fully understand what that expression meant.

I would soon learn.

The conversation began carefully.

Doctors often start with explanations that lead gradually toward the point they need to make. They describe the tests that have been performed. They explain what the results suggest. They outline what they have discovered.

Sometimes they pause.

Sometimes they choose their words with great care.

Eventually the moment arrives when the truth has to be spoken clearly.

A brain tumour.

Two words.

Simple words, on the surface.

But placed together they carry a weight that is difficult to describe.

In that instant, the entire structure of the future changes.

Your mind tries to process the information logically, but logic struggles to keep pace with the emotional shock that arrives at the same time.

Fear appears immediately.

Then disbelief.

Part of you waits for the doctor to continue speaking, hoping the next sentence will soften what you have just heard.

Perhaps there is a mistake.

Perhaps another test will show something different.

Perhaps the condition is treatable.

Perhaps the situation is not as serious as it sounds.

But the quiet certainty in the doctor's voice made it clear that this was not a misunderstanding.

“Kira has a 20 per cent chance of living 2-5 years”, the doctor would say.

Something serious had entered our lives.

The days that followed became filled with appointments.

Specialists.

Scans.

Conversations that felt both urgent and strangely surreal.

When doctors speak about illness, they often rely on language that balances honesty with hope. They discuss treatment options. They explain possible outcomes. They try to provide a path forward even when the situation is uncertain.

But beneath those explanations, another reality exists.

The realisation that life has crossed an invisible line.

Before the diagnosis, the world felt stable.

After the diagnosis, everything feels fragile.

Even simple routines begin to change.

Hospital visits become frequent.

Waiting rooms become familiar places.

Medical terminology becomes something you gradually learn to understand.

For Kira, however, the experience unfolded in a very different way.

Children often approach illness differently than adults.

Adults imagine the future.

We project forward into possibilities and fears that may or may not happen.

Children tend to focus on the present moment.

Kira remained remarkably herself, even though the tumour had caused her to lose 95% of her vision.

That was something that surprised me again and again.

She spoke easily with nurses.

She asked doctors questions about the machines they used.

Sometimes she even managed to make the hospital staff laugh.

It was difficult not to admire that.

The environment that felt frightening and uncertain to me seemed to become simply another place for her to explore.

She treated hospital corridors the way she treated mountain paths — as places where something interesting might appear around the next corner.

There were moments when I watched her interacting with the staff and wondered how someone so young could carry such natural resilience.

Of course, there were difficult moments too.

Illness brings fatigue.

Treatments bring discomfort.

There were days when the hospital visits felt overwhelming.

But even then, Kira often found ways to bring humour into the situation.

I sometimes think that children possess a kind of wisdom that adults struggle to maintain.

They accept certain realities more quickly.

They ask questions directly.

They speak about difficult things without the complicated layers adults often add.

The hospital became a place where that contrast appeared clearly.

While I wrestled with fear, uncertainty, and the enormous weight of the diagnosis, Kira continued to approach each day with curiosity.

She still laughed.

She still asked questions.

She still wanted to know what the machines did.

That resilience did not make the situation easier.

But it did make it extraordinary.

The diagnosis had drawn a line through our lives.

Everything before it belonged to one world.

Everything after it belonged to another.

And although neither of us fully understood where that new path would lead, we had already begun walking it together.

## Chapter 5

### Hospital Life

After the diagnosis, hospitals slowly became part of everyday life.

At first they felt unfamiliar.

The long corridors. The constant movement of staff in uniforms. The quiet conversations that seemed to take place everywhere at once. The smell that seems to exist in almost every hospital building — antiseptic, plastic, and something faintly metallic beneath it all.

It is a strange environment to step into when you have previously only visited occasionally.

But when illness becomes part of your life, hospitals stop being places you visit and start becoming places you know.

Very quickly we began to learn the routines.

Where to park.

Which entrance led to which department.

The waiting rooms where families sat quietly beside each other, each one carrying their own private worries.

The way doctors would sometimes pause before speaking, choosing words carefully.

The way time behaved differently inside hospital walls.

Sometimes hours passed slowly while you waited for appointments or tests. Other times entire days seemed to disappear into a blur of conversations, paperwork, and quiet uncertainty.

But through all of it, Kira somehow remained completely herself.

That was something that surprised me again and again.

Even while facing something as serious as a brain tumour, she never seemed to lose the part of her personality that brought humour into everyday situations.

She spoke easily with nurses.

She asked doctors questions.

She treated medical equipment with the same curiosity she might have given to something interesting on a mountain trail.

Doctors often entered the room expecting to see a frightened child.

Instead they were greeted by someone who wanted to know what everything did.

“What does that machine do?”

“Why does that one make that noise?”

“Do you have to go to school to learn all this?”

Sometimes she asked questions that caught people off guard.

And occasionally she made them laugh.

That was something Kira was very good at.

Hospital rooms can easily become places filled with tension and fear. But she had a way of lifting that atmosphere, sometimes without even trying.

There were moments when nurses found themselves laughing with her.

Moments when the seriousness of the situation softened for a few minutes and the room simply felt like a place where people were talking together.

It wasn't that Kira didn't understand something serious was happening.

Children often understand more than adults realise.

But she seemed determined not to let the illness define every moment.

She was still the same girl who loved adventure.

The same girl who loved talking about Sonic the Hedgehog and his loyal friend Two-Tails.

Sometimes those conversations appeared in the most unlikely places.

A nurse might walk into the room expecting a quiet medical discussion and instead find themselves listening to a passionate explanation about why Sonic was faster than anyone else and why Tails was the best sidekick ever invented.

Kira spoke about those characters as if they were old friends.

And in a way, they probably were.

During that time the hospital became a strange mixture of two worlds.

One world was serious, medical, and often frightening.

The other world belonged entirely to Kira — full of curiosity, jokes, and small moments of normal childhood that somehow continued to exist even inside hospital walls.

One day the doctors spoke to me privately about something that was incredibly difficult to hear.

They told me that Kira needed to know the truth.

Not every detail.

But the reality of what was happening.

They explained that children often sense far more than adults realise. They believe honesty allows a child to understand what is happening around them rather than leaving them confused or frightened by things they cannot fully explain.

They believed Kira should know she was going to die.

It was one of the hardest things I have ever been asked to do.

How do you sit down with your ten-year-old daughter and explain something like that?

Every instinct in me wanted to protect her from that knowledge.

Parents are built that way.

We try to shield our children from pain whenever we can.

But eventually I understood that the doctors were right.

Kira deserved honesty.

So one day, in a quiet moment, I sat beside her.

I tried to speak gently.

I told her that the doctors had tried everything they could, but the illness in her brain was something they could not fix.

I told her she was going to die.

For a moment she cried.

Seeing those tears was incredibly difficult.

Every instinct in me wanted to take those words back.

But after a short while the crying stopped.

She thought quietly for a moment.

Then she asked me a question.

“What’s it like in heaven?”

The question caught me slightly off guard.

I paused before answering.

Finally I said something simple.

I told her that heaven was a place where she could have anything she wanted.

I told her she wouldn’t be alone.

People she already knew would be there waiting for her.

People who loved her.

I told her my mum — her grandmother — would be there.

Waiting to look after her.

Kira listened quietly.

She seemed to accept that explanation.

The conversation moved gently forward after that.

Looking back now, it was one of the most honest moments we ever shared.

A father and his daughter sitting together, speaking about the most difficult truth either of them would ever face.

But even after that conversation, Kira continued to be herself.

She still joked with nurses.

One of the most remarkable things she did during that time was create a farewell video.

The idea came from her.

She wanted to record a message for the people she cared about — friends, family, people who had been part of her life.

Watching her do that was incredibly moving.

Even then, she approached the moment with the same mixture of honesty and humour that had always defined her personality.

She spoke clearly.

Calmly.

As if she understood that the video would carry a piece of her into the future.

She still asked questions.

She still spoke about the things she loved.

And one day she said something that surprised me in a completely different way.

Kira was lying on the bed, looking thoughtful.

Then she looked at me and asked a question.

“Daddy... will you marry me?”

For a second I wasn't sure if I had heard her correctly.

The question was so unexpected that it caught me completely off guard.

But the way she asked it made it clear that she meant it.

There was nothing romantic or complicated about the question.

In her mind, it was something simple.

Marriage meant commitment.

It meant belonging to someone.

It meant promising to stay close.

And in the world she understood, those things were important.

So I smiled.

And I said yes.

Because in that moment, the meaning behind the question was obvious.

She wasn't asking about marriage the way adults understand it.

She was asking for reassurance.

For connection.

For a promise that we would always belong to each other.

In her world, that was what marriage meant.

That moment remains one of the most beautiful memories I have from that time.

Not because it was dramatic.

But because it was so purely Kira.

Honest.

Direct.

Full of love.

Even in the middle of illness, she still found ways to express the things that mattered to her.

The hospital continued to be a place where difficult conversations happened.

But it also became a place where some of our most meaningful moments took place.

Moments of laughter.

Moments of honesty.

Moments of love.

Looking back now, I realise something important about that time.

The hospital may have been where we spent many of those days.

But it never became the centre of who Kira was.

She remained the same girl who loved mountains, adventure, and making people laugh.

Fun.

Cheeky.

Adventurous.

Even in a hospital room filled with machines, she never stopped being those things.

## Chapter 6

### The Birthday

Birthdays are usually simple things.

Most of the time they pass quietly, almost unnoticed except for a few messages from friends, perhaps a small celebration, a reminder that another year has slipped by. For most people they mark time in a gentle way, another candle, another number, another ordinary moment in the flow of life.

But sometimes a birthday becomes something else entirely.

Sometimes it becomes a day that lives in your memory with such clarity that every detail feels permanently fixed in place.

The 17th of May was my birthday.

That year, it became one of the most important days of my life.

By that point Kira's illness had already changed the shape of our world. Hospital visits had become routine. Conversations with doctors had grown increasingly serious. Treatments had been tried, plans had been discussed, and hope had slowly begun to take on a more fragile form.

Even so, life still carried a strange mixture of normality and uncertainty.

Children have a remarkable ability to hold onto ordinary moments even when life around them becomes difficult. Kira still found ways to be curious, to laugh, to ask questions, to talk about the things she loved.

But beneath that everyday surface, something else had begun to develop.

The doctors knew it.

I knew it.

And somewhere deep down, Kira probably sensed it too.

That morning began quietly.

There were no decorations or celebrations that year. Birthdays did not feel especially important under the circumstances. The house carried a gentle stillness that had slowly become familiar in the months since Kira's diagnosis.

Later that day, several doctors and nurses came to the house.

They had arranged to visit so they could explain something that was becoming increasingly clear to them medically.

They needed to talk about how Kira was going to die.

Those words are difficult to write.

They are even more difficult to hear.

The conversation took place in our home.

That alone made the situation feel strangely surreal. Hospitals are places where serious medical discussions are expected. They belong to that environment.

But when doctors sit in your living room explaining how your child's life will end, something about the normal world seems to fracture slightly.

The familiar furniture looked exactly the same as it always had.

The photographs on the walls still showed the same memories.

The house still smelled like home.

And yet the words being spoken inside it belonged to an entirely different reality.

The doctors spoke gently.

They explained the stages that might occur when the illness reached its final phase. They described how Kira's breathing might change. How her body would gradually become weaker. How medication could be used to keep her comfortable when that time came.

Their tone was calm.

Compassionate.

Professional.

But no amount of gentleness can remove the weight of those words.

Listening to them felt like standing on the edge of something enormous and impossible.

Part of my mind tried to absorb the information logically.

Another part refused to accept that this was real.

Eventually the conversation ended.

The doctors gathered their things, offered a few quiet words of reassurance, and left the house.

The front door closed behind them.

And suddenly the silence that followed felt enormous.

For a few minutes I simply sat there.

Trying to process what had just happened.

It is difficult to describe the emotional state that follows a conversation like that. Your thoughts feel scattered. Time seems to slow down slightly. Everything around you looks exactly the same, yet nothing feels the same anymore.

Kira was resting.

She had not been part of the conversation.

The doctors had spoken to me separately because they wanted to explain things clearly without frightening her unnecessarily.

But eventually I knew I had to go and see her.

So I stood up and walked into the next room.

Kira was sitting on the couch in the living room playing with her Gameboy. She looked tired, but when she saw me enter the room her face brightened slightly.

Before I even had a chance to speak, she said something that immediately caught me off guard.

“Sorry I’m poorly on your birthday.”

The words landed with a kind of quiet innocence that was almost impossible to respond to.

In the middle of everything she was facing — the illness, the hospital visits, the exhaustion — she was apologising to me.

For being sick.

On my birthday.

For a moment I didn’t know what to say.

Eventually I smiled and reassured her.

“It’s okay,” I said. “Everything will be fine.”

Sometimes adults say those words because we want them to be true.

Even when we know life is about to become very difficult.

Kira watched me quietly for a moment.

There was a thoughtful expression on her face.

Then she asked a question.

“Daddy... will you die with me so you can look after me?”

The question arrived so calmly that it almost felt like part of an ordinary conversation.

There was no panic in her voice.

No drama.

Just a simple question from a child who trusted her father completely.

In her mind, the idea made perfect sense.

If she was going somewhere else, then the person who had always looked after her should come too.

For a moment I felt completely frozen.

Every instinct in me wanted to promise her anything she asked for.

That is the nature of being a parent.

You want to solve every problem.

Remove every fear.

Protect your child from anything that might hurt them.

But this was a promise I couldn't make.

Not because I didn't love her enough.

But because of something else I believed very strongly.

If I deliberately ended my life, there was a possibility I might never see her again.

And the thought of being separated from her forever was something I could not accept.

So I told her the truth.

“I can't do that.”

The moment hung quietly in the air for a few seconds.

Kira didn't argue.

She didn't appear angry or upset.

She simply listened.

Then she nodded slightly, as if she had processed the answer and accepted it.

Children sometimes respond to difficult truths in ways that surprise adults.

They absorb information quickly.

They move through emotions with a kind of honesty that doesn't always linger the way adult emotions do.

After that conversation the moment seemed to soften.

The atmosphere in the room returned to something calmer.

We spoke about other things for a while.

Simple things.

Ordinary things.

Looking back now, I realise that the conversation we had that day stayed with me for years.

At the time I didn't fully understand how deeply those words would echo through my life.

But when Kira eventually died, the question she asked me on my birthday returned again and again.

"Daddy... will you die with me so you can look after me?"

For a long time after her death, those words became something I carried constantly.

A quiet weight.

A question I kept asking myself.

Had I let her down?

Had I failed her somehow by refusing that promise?

Grief has a way of twisting thoughts into difficult shapes.

Even when logic tells you that something was impossible, emotion sometimes searches for a different answer.

But on that birthday, sitting beside my daughter in the living room, the moment felt strangely peaceful.

The world outside the house continued as normal.

Cars passed somewhere on the nearby road.

People went about their ordinary routines.

But inside the house time seemed to slow down.

Kira lay quietly on the bed.

I sat beside her.

And for a little while the world felt small enough to hold both of us safely inside it.

Birthdays usually pass without leaving much trace behind.

But that birthday became something else.

It became the day my daughter asked me to die with her.

And the day I realised how much love can exist inside a single question.

## Chapter 7

### The Last Week

After the conversation on my birthday, something in the house quietly shifted.

Nothing about the building itself had changed. The same furniture stood in the same places. The photographs on the walls still showed moments from happier days — mountain hikes, smiles, ordinary memories captured in frames that now seemed to belong to another time.

And yet the atmosphere felt different.

The doctors had spoken clearly. Their words had settled into the back of my mind like something heavy that could not be moved. They had explained what would happen when the illness reached its final stage.

The changes in breathing.

The gradual weakening of the body.

The way life slowly prepares itself to let go.

Once you hear those explanations, you begin to watch time differently.

Every hour feels more important.

Every small moment feels like something that might not happen many more times.

A hospital bed had been delivered to the house and setup in the living room.

It was partly practical. The nurses who came to the house needed easy access to her, and it meant she didn't have to struggle with stairs when she was already weak and tired.

But it also meant something else.

She remained in the centre of the house.

The living room had once been a place where ordinary life happened — television, conversations, cups of tea, quiet evenings. Now it had slowly become a space where care and comfort were the most important priorities.

Medical equipment had appeared gradually.

A syringe driver sat beside the bed, quietly delivering medication that helped control pain and keep her comfortable. Small tubes and wires connected devices that worked silently in the background.

Despite all of that, the room still felt like part of the home.

The lights remained soft.

Conversations were gentle.

No one moved quickly or spoke loudly.

Everyone who entered the house seemed to instinctively understand that something sacred was happening there.

During that final week, time began behaving in a strange way.

Some hours stretched endlessly.

Others passed so quickly it was difficult to remember how they had disappeared.

Friends and family came to visit when they could.

They spoke quietly with Kira, sat beside the bed, and sometimes simply remained present without saying very much at all. When someone you love is nearing the end of their life, words often become less important than presence.

Just being there matters.

The nurses who visited the house were calm and compassionate. They explained what they were doing whenever they adjusted medication or checked equipment. Their experience gave the situation a sense of quiet steadiness.

They had been through moments like this before.

For me, however, everything still felt new and overwhelming.

Kira spent much of the time resting.

The medication helped her sleep, and the illness itself had taken much of her strength. But there were still moments when she opened her eyes, or spoke softly, or smiled in a way that reminded everyone in the room that she was still very much herself.

I stayed close to her most of the time, not sleeping for days

There is a powerful instinct that takes over when someone you love is approaching the end of their life.

You simply want to be near them.

To make sure they are not alone.

To be there for whatever moments remain.

Sometimes I would sit beside the bed and simply watch her breathing.

The rise and fall of her chest became something I paid attention to constantly. It is strange how something so ordinary can suddenly feel so significant.

Breathing is something we rarely think about during everyday life.

But when someone is dying, every breath becomes precious.

Outside the house, life continued exactly as it always had.

Cars drove along the nearby road.

People went to work.

Shops opened and closed.

The world did not pause.

But inside the house, everything felt suspended in a quiet space between moments.

During that week there were times when the emotional weight of the situation felt almost impossible to carry.

Grief arrived in waves.

Sometimes it came as sadness.

Sometimes as disbelief.

Sometimes as a strange numbness that seemed to protect the mind from feeling too much all at once.

And yet there were also moments of calm.

Moments when the room felt peaceful rather than tragic.

When Kira rested quietly and the atmosphere felt almost gentle.

Looking back now, I realise that something important happened during those days.

The house became a place of love.

Not in a dramatic or sentimental sense, but in a simple human way.

Every action that took place there had the same purpose.

Make sure Kira was comfortable.

Make sure she was not afraid.

Make sure she was surrounded by people who cared about her.

The changes the doctors had described slowly began to appear.

Her body grew weaker.

Her breathing became softer.

The amount of time she spent asleep increased.

Even though we had been prepared for these changes, seeing them unfold in real time was incredibly difficult.

Each small shift felt like a step closer to something none of us wanted to face.

But the house remained calm.

There was no panic.

No chaos.

Just quiet care.

The nurses continued to visit regularly, checking medication and making sure everything was working as it should. They spoke softly and moved gently around the room, as if the entire house had become a place that required careful respect.

At times I would sit beside Kira and talk to her, even when she seemed asleep.

Parents do that.

We speak because the silence feels too heavy.

I told her stories about our adventures.

About the mountains we had climbed.

About the times she had raced ahead on the trail and turned around to tell me I was too slow.

Sometimes I spoke about things that had happened long before the illness.

Ordinary memories.

Happy ones.

Whether she heard those words or not, I cannot say.

But speaking them felt important.

As the days passed, the sense that the final moment was approaching became more and more real.

You begin to recognise the signs.

The nurses recognise them too.

They become quieter.

More attentive.

Not because something dramatic is happening, but because everyone understands that time is becoming very short.

Eventually the final night arrived.

There was no announcement.

No clear signal that it had begun.

Just the quiet understanding that the moment the doctors had described was drawing closer.

The house was still.

The lights remained soft.

Kira lay peacefully on the bed in the living room.

I stayed beside her.

The same place where we had spent so many hours together during that week.

Waiting.

Watching.

Loving her as completely as any parent possibly can.

The world outside continued moving forward.

But inside the house, time felt like it had paused.

Suspended between one breath and the next.

## Chapter 8

02:55

By the evening of the 24th of May, the house had grown very still.

For days there had been a quiet rhythm to everything. Nurses coming and going. Medication being checked. Small conversations spoken softly in the living room. Family moving carefully around the house as if louder movement might somehow disturb the fragile peace that had settled there.

By that night, even those small rhythms seemed to have slowed.

Kira's bed was downstairs in the living room. It had become the centre of the house in a way I had never imagined a bed could. Not just physically, but emotionally too. Every thought, every movement, every decision seemed to lead back to that room. The place where she lay. The place where we waited. The place where love and fear and helplessness all seemed to exist together in the same air.

The lights were low. The room was quiet. The ordinary objects that belonged in a living room were still there, but they no longer felt like the focus of the space. The furniture, the television, the photographs, the familiar layout of the room — all of it seemed to have shifted into the background. What mattered was the bed, the syringe driver, the slow passing of time, and the sound of Kira's breathing.

Her breathing had changed.

Anyone who has sat beside someone at the end of life will recognise that change. It is not always dramatic. Sometimes it begins so gradually that at first you almost think you are imagining it. The breath becomes less regular. Heavier in some moments. Quieter in others. Fluids begin to gather, and the body starts to sound different as it works more and more gently toward the end.

Some people call it the death rattle.

There is something very stark about that phrase, but it is also accurate in the sense that once the sound begins, you understand something important. The body is entering its final stage. The distance between life and death has become very small.

The breathing had continued like that for hours.

Fourteen hours in total.

That is a long time to sit in a room listening to the changing breath of your child.

Time became strange during those hours. At some points it felt as though the night was barely moving at all. At others, whole stretches of time seemed to vanish without leaving much memory behind except the sound of breathing, the dimness of the room, and the ache of waiting.

Kira was on a syringe driver that kept her comfortable and asleep. The small machine delivered medication steadily and quietly, doing its work without drama. It sat beside the bed as if it were just another object in the room, but of course it was much more than that. It was part of the effort to make sure she did not wake in pain. Part of the care that held everything together in those last hours.

I stayed close to her.

Most of the time I was sitting right beside the bed, watching her, listening, trying to make sense of each shift in her breathing. There was nothing practical left to do for long stretches of the night. No new decisions to make. No new information to absorb. Only presence.

And yet presence felt like everything.

When someone you love is dying, there is a powerful instinct to remain beside them no matter what. You want them to know they are not alone, even if they cannot open their eyes and see you. You want your nearness to mean something. You want love, when everything else has reached its limit, to still be doing some kind of work.

Every now and then I would lean in slightly, watching her face, trying to reassure myself that she still looked peaceful.

She did.

That mattered.

The room itself seemed to hold its breath with us. Night pressed gently against the windows. Somewhere outside, the rest of the world carried on in the way it always does. There would have been cars on nearby roads, people asleep in their homes, streetlights casting their ordinary pools of light onto pavements and gardens. But inside our house, and particularly inside that living room, the world had narrowed to one child in one bed and the people who loved her.

At some point during the night we tried to gently sit Kira up a little.

The breathing sounded heavy, and there is something instinctive in a parent that wants to adjust things, improve things, make something easier if at all possible. Even when you know the outcome will not change, you still reach for small acts of care. Straightening a pillow. Adjusting a blanket. Changing a position slightly in the hope that comfort might be improved, even by a fraction.

As I lifted her, I accidentally caught the line feeding the syringe driver.

The line came away.

For a second panic moved through me completely.

It was sudden and sharp. Not because I thought I had changed what was happening overall, but because the one thing I did not want was for Kira to wake in pain. That fear cut through

everything. At the end of life, when there is so little control left, comfort becomes almost sacred. Protecting that comfort feels like the last and most important responsibility.

I called the nurses immediately.

Even in that moment, they were calm when they arrived. Professional. Gentle. They came into the house carrying the kind of steadiness that families rely on in those final hours. Their voices were quiet. Their movements were careful. They replaced the line and checked the syringe driver, making sure everything was working properly again.

I remember watching them closely, wanting reassurance not only from what they said but from how they behaved. Their calmness helped. When you are sitting inside the worst night of your life, other people's calmness can feel like something solid to hold onto for a moment.

Once the line was replaced and the syringe driver was running as it should, the room seemed to settle again.

Then one of the nurses said something softly.

There was nothing more they could do.

I already knew that, of course. In one sense, we had known it for days. That was what the whole week had been leading toward. And yet hearing it spoken aloud in that room still carried a particular weight. It marked something. It confirmed what the night had already been saying in quieter ways.

I remembered the letter from the doctor.

He had written that Kira could be given diamorphine to keep her comfortable at the end. I knew what that meant. Not in a dramatic, cinematic way, but in the simple, terrible way that parents and medical staff sometimes come to understand these things. The purpose was not to end life. The purpose was comfort. To make sure suffering did not intrude into the final moments. To allow the body to let go peacefully.

The nurses asked whether I wanted them to administer it.

That question is one of those moments that remains suspended in memory. Time slows around it. Not because there was uncertainty about what mattered, but because the answer carries the full weight of love, fear, responsibility, and acceptance all at once.

I said yes.

There was no scene after that. No sudden rush of emotion in the room. No dramatic music, no great declaration, no final speech. Real life does not usually behave that way. The nurses did what they needed to do. Quietly. Carefully. With respect.

And after that, the night simply continued.

That is one of the strangest things about death. Even in the most important moments of your life, time does not always announce itself as important. The clock continues. The room remains a room. Breathing continues until it does not.

When the nurses had finished, I climbed onto the bed beside Kira.

I lay down next to her.

That is where I wanted to be.

Close enough to feel that I was still protecting her in the only way left to me. Close enough that if there was any part of her still aware of the world, she would know I was there. Close enough that love remained physical, immediate, present.

I listened to her breathing.

At that stage each breath seemed to arrive from a greater distance than the one before. There were pauses between them that made the room feel even quieter. Then another breath would come, and the waiting would begin again.

I do not remember every minute of that stretch of time in a neat sequence. Memory does not always preserve events that way. Instead I remember fragments with extraordinary clarity.

The texture of the blanket.

The dim light in the room.

The sound of the syringe driver.

The quiet presence of the nurses before they left.

The stillness in the house.

The way grief and love can exist together so completely that they almost become the same thing.

I remember watching her face.

I remember wanting peace for her more than anything.

I remember knowing that nothing I could do now would stop what was coming, but that staying beside her still mattered.

I remember the helplessness of that.

Parents spend a lifetime protecting their children in large ways and small ones. We tie shoelaces. Hold hands near roads. Carry them when they are tired. Sit beside hospital beds. We do a thousand ordinary acts of protection that together become love in practice. But in the final hours of a child's life, you arrive at the edge of something protection cannot cross.

That is one of the cruelest truths of all.

And still, you stay.

Because staying is what love does.

At 02:55 in the morning on the 25th of May, Kira died.

The breathing stopped.

There was no struggle.

No dramatic final moment.

No last words.

Just stillness.

The kind of stillness that is different from every silence that came before it.

For a few seconds, or perhaps longer, the room felt as though it had slipped outside time entirely. I knew what had happened, but part of me could not fully absorb it. The body and mind do strange things in moments like that. You can know something absolutely and still not feel able to believe it.

I stayed where I was.

I did not want to move.

There was no part of me ready to create distance between us, even of a few inches. She had been there beside me, and then she was gone, and yet she was still there too. That contradiction is impossible to explain properly to anyone who has not lived it. The person you love is suddenly absent and present at exactly the same time.

The room was very quiet.

The breathing that had filled it for fourteen hours was gone.

That absence was immediate and shocking in its own way. Sound had left the room, and with it something else had gone too — the final thread connecting us to the hope that another breath might come.

But it did not.

For a long time I stayed beside her.

I do not know exactly how long at first. Clocks lose some of their meaning in moments like that, even though I know the precise time of her death. The body is still there. Your child is still there. And love does not know what to do with the fact that life has ended. So it simply

remains. It keeps watch. It refuses, at least for a while, to step back into the ordinary movement of time.

Eventually the first signs of morning began to appear.

The darkness outside the windows softened almost imperceptibly. Night was giving way to dawn, and I remember how strange that felt. The world was moving on. Morning was arriving as it always does. Light was returning to the sky. Birds may even have begun somewhere outside. The ordinary mechanisms of the world were continuing exactly as they always had.

Inside the house, everything had changed.

I remained with her.

That mattered deeply to me.

I had lain beside her as she died, and I wanted to stay beside her after death too. It felt like the last thing I could still do for her. Not because she would know in any practical sense, but because leaving too soon felt impossible. Presence had been the one thing I could still offer. I was not ready to stop offering it.

The house was silent in a way I had never experienced before.

Not just quiet, but changed. Altered. The kind of silence that follows an event so enormous that everything around it seems to absorb the shock. Every room in the house felt different because she was no longer alive inside it. The air itself seemed changed.

Later that morning the funeral directors came.

Even writing that sentence feels stark, because it was stark. There is no easy way to say it. They came to take my daughter away.

I remember that part of the day less in detailed sequence than in feeling. By then exhaustion, grief, disbelief, and the long wakefulness of the night had all merged into something heavy and numb. But one thing remained absolutely clear.

I stayed with Kira until they took her.

I would not leave her before that.

During those hours between 02:55 and their arrival, the world seemed to stand at a terrible distance. People may have spoken. Practical things may have been done. Time must have passed. But my real memory of it is simply this: I stayed beside her.

That was the final act of fatherhood available to me in that room.

To remain.

To keep watch.

To love her without being able to help her any longer.

There is a particular cruelty in the fact that some of the most devastating moments in life are also the quietest. There was no audience for that night. No spectacle. No grand external event. Just a child, a father, a living room, a long night, and a single moment at 02:55 when everything changed forever.

For a long time afterwards, that time existed in my mind almost like a landmark.

Not only because it marked her death, but because it divided my life into before and after.

Before 02:55, I was still a father with a living daughter.

After 02:55, I was a father carrying her absence.

That is the kind of line grief draws through a life. Clean, irreversible, impossible to step back across.

Even now, when I think about that night, what comes back most strongly is not just the pain, but the love.

The love in the waiting.

The love in calling the nurses because I did not want her to wake in pain.

The love in saying yes to comfort when comfort was all that remained.

The love in lying beside her.

The love in staying after the breathing stopped.

The love in refusing to leave until she was taken away.

None of it changed the ending.

But all of it mattered.

That is what I believe now.

Love cannot always save. It cannot always heal. It cannot always prevent loss, no matter how desperately we want it to. But it can remain. It can witness. It can accompany someone right to the edge and stay there as long as possible.

That is what I did for Kira that night.

I stayed.

At 02:55 on the 25th of May, my daughter died.

And for the rest of that night, and into the day that followed, I remained beside her because it felt like the last thing I could still do.

It was the last gift available to me.

To stay.

To keep watch.

To be her dad.

## Chapter 9

### The Quiet House

When the funeral directors left, the house felt different in a way that is difficult to explain.

For days the house had been full of movement. Nurses arriving quietly with medical bags. Doctors sitting at the dining table explaining what might happen next. Family members stepping carefully through the front door, speaking softly as if loud voices might somehow disturb the fragile balance that had settled over everything.

Even though those days had been filled with sadness, the house had not been empty.

There had been presence.

People.

Voices.

Now there was none of that.

Just silence.

The bed that had been placed in the living room for Kira had been removed. The syringe driver and the medical equipment that had slowly gathered around it during her final days had been taken away as well.

The living room had been returned to something that looked almost normal.

The sofa was still there.

The television sat in its usual place.

The photographs on the wall still showed the same memories they always had.

But nothing about the room felt normal.

When someone you love dies, the objects in a house don't change.

But the meaning of space does.

I remember standing in the doorway of the living room for a long time.

Only hours earlier I had been lying beside Kira on that bed, listening to her breathing as the night slowly moved toward morning.

Now the space where the bed had stood was empty.

The room looked larger somehow.

But it also felt heavier.

Silence filled the space in a way that seemed almost physical.

Children fill a house with sound without even trying.

Footsteps running down hallways.

Doors opening and closing.

Questions called out from another room.

Laughter appearing suddenly in the middle of an ordinary afternoon.

When those sounds disappear, the silence they leave behind feels enormous.

I walked slowly through the house that day.

Each room carried memories.

The kitchen where we had made simple meals together.

The hallway where boots had once been left after coming home from walks.

The places where ordinary life had once happened without either of us thinking twice about it.

Grief does something strange to memory.

Small details suddenly become vivid.

The way sunlight falls across a particular chair.

The sound a door makes when it closes.

The exact place where someone once stood while talking.

Everything seems to carry meaning.

At times it felt as though the house itself had become a collection of memories.

I remember standing in Kira's room for a while.

Her belongings were still there.

Books.

Clothes.

Small objects that belonged entirely to the everyday life of a ten-year-old girl.

Nothing had moved.

Nothing had changed.

And yet everything had changed.

One of the hardest parts of grief is the way your mind continues to expect the person you love to appear.

Even when you know they are gone, some quiet part of you still listens for their voice.

You half expect to hear footsteps.

To hear a question called out from another room.

To see them appear around a corner.

That feeling takes time to fade.

Sometimes it never completely disappears.

Later that day I returned to the living room and sat down.

The same room that had been the centre of everything during Kira's final week now felt strangely empty.

It was quiet in a way that felt almost unnatural.

I looked at the space where the bed had been.

Only hours earlier I had been lying beside her there.

Listening.

Waiting.

Loving her as completely as any parent possibly could.

Now the room held only silence.

Outside the house, life continued exactly as it always had.

Cars passed along the nearby road.

People went about their daily routines.

Somewhere in the distance a dog barked.

The world had not stopped.

But inside the house, time seemed to move differently.

Grief does that.

It separates you from the ordinary rhythm of the world.

Other people continue moving forward through their days while you remain standing in the space where something enormous has just happened.

I remember noticing small things.

The way the clock on the wall continued ticking.

The faint hum of electricity somewhere in the house.

The sound of wind brushing lightly against the windows.

Normally those sounds would barely register.

That day they felt unusually loud.

Silence makes ordinary sounds stand out.

But the quiet that filled the house was not simply the absence of noise.

It was the absence of Kira.

The absence of her voice.

Her laughter.

Her questions.

The energy she had always carried into every room.

That was the silence that truly filled the house.

For the first time since the illness had entered our lives, there was nothing left to do.

No hospital appointments to prepare for.

No medication schedules to follow.

No waiting for doctors to explain what might happen next.

The long stretch of uncertainty that had defined the previous months had finally ended.

And the ending had left an enormous emptiness behind.

I think that is one of the strangest aspects of grief.

You spend so much time fearing the moment when the person you love will die.

But when that moment finally arrives, the world does not collapse in the dramatic way you might imagine.

Instead there is quiet.

Stillness.

A slow realisation that life has been divided into two parts.

Before.

And after.

That afternoon I found myself sitting in the living room for a long time.

I did not turn on the television.

I did not pick up a book.

I simply sat there.

Looking at the room.

Trying to understand what life was supposed to look like now.

People sometimes imagine grief as something explosive.

A storm of emotion that crashes through your life all at once.

But often it is much quieter than that.

It arrives as a kind of heavy fog.

Everything feels muted.

Slow.

Uncertain.

Even simple decisions become difficult.

Time stretches strangely.

Hours pass without you noticing exactly how.

Eventually evening arrived.

The light outside the windows began to fade.

The house grew darker.

And still the silence remained.

At some point I realised something important.

The house had not only lost Kira.

It had lost its sense of purpose.

Before her illness, life had been full of ordinary routines.

School mornings.

Meals together.

Planning the next adventure.

Even during the months when she was ill, the house had still been organised around caring for her.

Now that structure had disappeared completely.

And I was left alone inside the quiet.

That first day after her death remains one of the strangest days I have ever lived through.

Nothing dramatic happened.

No major decisions were made.

The world simply continued.

And I began the long process of learning what life looked like without my daughter.

The quiet house was where that process began.

It was the place where grief first settled in fully.

The place where the absence of Kira became real in a way that could no longer be ignored.

And the place where I began to understand that the life I had known before was never coming back.

Only the silence remained.

And inside that silence, the slow and painful work of learning how to live again would eventually begin.

## Chapter 10

### Falling Apart

Grief does not always arrive the way people imagine.

Before losing Kira, I probably held the same quiet assumptions that many people do about grief. I imagined it as something overwhelming but temporary — a storm that arrives violently and then gradually passes, leaving sadness behind but eventually allowing life to rebuild itself around the loss.

The reality was very different.

Grief did not arrive as a storm.

It arrived as erosion.

Slow, persistent, almost invisible at first. It worked quietly beneath the surface of my life, wearing away the structures that had once felt solid until one day I realised that many of them had simply collapsed.

In the first days after Kira died, the world still contained people.

Family members visited.

Friends called.

Conversations happened, even if those conversations were awkward or painful. People tried to say the right things. Sometimes they succeeded. Sometimes they didn't. But their presence filled the house with voices, with movement, with reminders that life was still happening outside the boundaries of my grief.

For a while, that helped.

But life does not pause for long.

Gradually people returned to their own routines.

They had jobs, families, responsibilities, and lives that needed attention. That is not cruelty. It is simply how the world works. Even the deepest tragedies cannot hold the rest of the world still forever.

Slowly the visits became less frequent.

Phone calls happened less often.

The house grew quieter.

That quiet became one of the hardest things to live with.

A house that once held a child never sounds the same again. Children create noise without even trying. Their voices travel through hallways. Their footsteps move constantly from room to room. They ask questions from across the house, call out for help, laugh suddenly at something that only makes sense to them.

When that sound disappears, the silence feels enormous.

I remember walking through the house in those months after Kira died and feeling as though the space itself had changed. The walls had not moved. The furniture was still in the same places. But the atmosphere felt different.

Every room carried memories.

The kitchen where we had prepared simple meals.

The hallway where hiking boots had once been kicked off after long days outside.

The living room where she had watched television or talked about the characters she loved.

Those memories did not feel gentle.

At least not at first.

They felt sharp.

Like reminders of everything that had vanished.

For a long time I struggled to sit comfortably inside that quiet.

Eventually I began drinking more than I should have.

At first it seemed harmless.

A way to soften the edges of the day.

Alcohol has a way of doing that temporarily. It dulls the sharpest thoughts. It creates a short distance between you and the pain you are carrying.

For a while, it helped.

But the relief never lasted.

What begins as comfort slowly becomes dependence. Nights became longer. Sleep became unpredictable. Some evenings I drank simply because I could not bear the quiet of the house.

Grief had removed the structure that once organised my life.

Before Kira died, the days had been full of ordinary routines.

School.

Meals.

Planning weekend adventures.

Talking about mountains or camping or the next place we might explore.

Those routines disappeared almost overnight.

Without them, the days became shapeless.

Sometimes I woke late because sleep had not come until the early hours of the morning. Other times I found myself awake through the night with nothing but my thoughts for company.

Time lost its rhythm.

Financial problems slowly appeared as well.

Grief does not only affect the heart. It affects concentration, decision making, motivation. The small responsibilities of everyday life become harder to manage when your mind is constantly drawn back to the same painful place.

Bills were postponed.

Payments were delayed.

What began as small financial pressures slowly grew into something heavier.

Debt crept quietly into the background of everything.

Amazon became my new best friend – the only thing that could bring a vague smile was yet another parcel delivery. Delivery, after delivery after delivery. It served as a mild distraction, but contributed to huge debt build up.

Relationships began to suffer too.

Loss sends shockwaves through everyone connected to it. Sometimes those shockwaves draw people closer together. But sometimes they create fractures that are difficult to repair.

Conversations became harder.

Misunderstandings appeared where none had existed before.

Some relationships broke down completely.

Others simply faded away over time.

People drifted away not because they were cruel or uncaring, but because grief can be difficult to stand beside for long periods. Many people simply do not know how to help someone living inside that level of pain.

Gradually my world became smaller.

The circle of people around me shrank.

And then another loss arrived.

My sister died.

Grief layered itself on top of grief.

By that point the sense of isolation had grown overwhelming.

Friends who had once been part of my daily life seemed to exist somewhere far away. Conversations that had once felt easy now felt awkward or strained.

Eventually I realised something painful.

There was almost no one left.

No close family nearby.

No regular visits.

No shared routines.

Just the quiet house.

And the memories that filled it.

During that time I carried something else constantly.

Guilt.

The conversation from my birthday returned to my mind again and again.

“Daddy... will you die with me so you can look after me?”

At the time I had told her I couldn't.

I believed then — and still believe now — that taking my own life might have meant never seeing her again.

But grief does not respect logic.

It twists memories.

It reshapes conversations.

It searches endlessly for different outcomes.

Somewhere deep inside my mind a question kept repeating itself.

Had I let her down?

Had I failed her somehow by refusing that promise?

Those thoughts followed me everywhere.

They appeared during sleepless nights.

During quiet afternoons when the house felt unbearably empty.

During the long stretches of time when there was nothing to distract me from the reality of her absence.

The weight of that guilt became almost as heavy as the grief itself.

Looking back now, I can see that grief had begun dismantling the entire structure of my life.

Alcohol.

Debt.

Broken relationships.

Loss layered upon loss.

Isolation.

All of it grew from the same place.

The absence of a child who had once filled every corner of the world with life.

Those months were some of the darkest I have ever experienced.

Not because something dramatic happened each day.

But because the slow erosion of hope and stability left me standing inside a life that barely resembled the one I had known before.

The house remained quiet.

The days remained long.

And for a while it felt as though grief had reduced my world to something very small.

But even in the middle of that darkness, something else was quietly forming.

At the time I did not recognise it.

I simply believed that everything had fallen apart.

Looking back now, I understand that sometimes life must break down completely before something new can begin to grow.

## Chapter 11

### Just in Case

After Kira died, time began behaving in a way I had never experienced before.

Days passed, but they did not feel like the days I had known before. The ordinary rhythm of life — morning routines, work, conversations, plans — seemed to dissolve into something far less structured. Hours blurred together. Sometimes whole afternoons disappeared without leaving much memory behind.

Grief has a way of altering your sense of time.

You are still moving forward through the calendar, but emotionally you remain standing in the same place. The mind circles the same memories again and again, returning to moments that feel unfinished, as if revisiting them might somehow change the outcome.

The house remained quiet.

That silence became one of the most difficult parts of life after Kira's death. A house that once held a child's voice never sounds the same again. Even when nothing is actually different about the building itself, the atmosphere changes.

Children create movement.

They create noise without trying.

Questions shouted from another room.

Footsteps running through the hallway.

Laughter appearing suddenly in the middle of an ordinary day.

When those sounds disappear, the silence they leave behind is enormous.

For a long time I struggled to sit comfortably inside that silence.

Memories appeared everywhere.

Her books.

Clothes.

Small objects that had once belonged to ordinary childhood routines.

Sometimes those memories were comforting.

Other times they were almost unbearable.

Grief rarely behaves consistently.

One moment a memory feels warm and meaningful.

The next it feels like something sharp pressing against the heart.

During those early months I found myself holding onto certain objects more than others.

Things that had once been part of Kira's everyday life suddenly carried enormous emotional weight.

One of those objects was her phone.

At first I didn't think much about it.

When someone dies, their belongings remain behind in a strange and difficult way. Clothes remain in drawers. Books remain on shelves. Photographs remain on walls.

A phone is different.

It contains pieces of someone's life that feel strangely alive.

Messages.

Photographs.

Games.

Fragments of conversations.

At first I simply kept the phone because I didn't know what else to do with it.

Putting it away somewhere felt wrong.

Almost like closing a door that I was not ready to close.

So I kept it close.

At some point I started making sure it remained charged.

That became a small habit.

Whenever the battery began to drop, I plugged it in.

I placed it beside the bed at night.

Sometimes I carried it with me when I left the house.

It became one of those small routines that quietly forms when you are grieving.

At first I told myself that I kept the phone simply because it belonged to her.

But over time I realised something else.

Somewhere deep inside me, there was a small thought that refused to disappear.

What if it rang?

The idea was not logical.

I understood that.

People who die do not send text messages.

Phones do not suddenly come to life with messages from the afterlife.

And yet grief does not always obey logic.

There was a quiet voice inside me that said:

What if?

What if one day the screen lit up?

What if a message appeared?

What if somehow there was still a connection I didn't understand?

The thought of missing that moment felt unbearable.

So I kept the phone nearby.

Just in case.

Most of the time the screen remained dark.

Silent.

Occasionally I would unlock it and scroll through the photographs that were still stored there.

Pictures of ordinary moments.

A day out somewhere.

A smile captured in a moment that had once seemed completely unimportant.

Looking at those photos felt like opening small windows into the past.

Sometimes I read through old messages as well.

Simple conversations that had once been part of everyday life.

“Where are you?”

“Can we go hiking this weekend?”

“Look at this!”

Those words had once been ordinary.

Now they felt incredibly precious.

But the phone remained mostly quiet.

No new messages.

No unexpected calls.

Just the silent possibility that perhaps something might appear one day.

For years I carried that phone with me.

Charged.

Nearby.

Waiting.

I never spoke to anyone about it.

It was one of those private habits that grief sometimes creates.

Small rituals that help you feel connected to the person you have lost.

People who have never experienced that kind of loss might find it difficult to understand.

But grief often lives in those small gestures.

The mind searches for ways to maintain connection.

Ways to feel that the bond between two people has not been completely severed.

Keeping the phone close became my version of that connection.

Not because I truly believed something impossible would happen.

But because some small part of me hoped.

Hope is a strange thing when someone dies.

You know that life cannot return to the way it was.

You understand that certain things are final.

And yet the heart still searches for some sign that love continues to exist somewhere beyond the limits of what we can see.

So the phone stayed with me.

Silent.

Charged.

Waiting.

Just in case.

## Chapter 12

### The Edge

There are moments in life when you realise how close you have come to disappearing.

Not in the physical sense alone, but in the deeper sense of losing the thread that connects you to the world. The moment when you recognise that something inside you had begun to unravel quietly, almost invisibly, until suddenly you were standing much closer to the edge than you ever intended.

For me, that understanding came slowly.

It did not arrive all at once.

The months after Kira's death had already begun to strip my life down piece by piece. Grief had hollowed out the routines that once shaped my days. The house had grown quiet in a way that seemed almost unnatural. Relationships had strained and faded. Financial pressure had crept into the background of everything.

And inside all of that, something else had been growing.

A quiet exhaustion.

Not the kind of tiredness that sleep can repair, but something deeper. A fatigue that lives inside the mind and the heart. The feeling that every step forward requires more effort than you have available.

For a long time I lived in that space.

Some days were easier than others. Occasionally I could find a small sense of purpose in simple tasks. But most of the time the weight of grief remained constant.

I carried something else as well.

Guilt.

The conversation from my birthday replayed itself endlessly in my mind.

“Daddy... will you die with me so you can look after me?”

At the time I had answered honestly.

I had told her I couldn't do that.

I had believed — and still believed — that taking my own life might mean never seeing her again.

But grief does not respect logic.

The mind begins searching for alternate outcomes.

What if I had said yes?

What if she had needed that promise?

What if refusing her had somehow been the wrong choice?

Those thoughts followed me everywhere.

In the quiet house.

During sleepless nights.

In the middle of ordinary days that suddenly felt completely disconnected from the life I once knew.

Over time, the question began to change shape.

It was no longer simply about whether I had done the right thing.

It became something darker.

If I could not die with her then...

Why was I still here now?

Grief sometimes pulls a person into dangerous territory.

Not necessarily because they actively want to die, but because the idea of continuing life without the person they love begins to feel meaningless.

For months after Kira died, I found myself drifting closer and closer to that emotional edge.

The drinking made it worse.

Alcohol dulled the pain temporarily, but it also stripped away the small barriers that normally protect people from their darkest thoughts. Nights became longer. The quiet in the house became heavier. The sense of isolation deepened.

I often sat alone for hours with nothing but my thoughts.

And those thoughts rarely travelled to safe places.

By August, only a few months after Kira's death, the weight of everything I was carrying had grown almost unbearable.

One evening the house felt particularly quiet.

I remember that clearly.

The kind of quiet that seems to fill every corner of a building until it becomes impossible to escape.

I walked from room to room without any clear purpose.

The same rooms where Kira had once lived.

The same rooms where she had laughed.

The same rooms where ordinary life had once unfolded.

Now they felt like empty spaces filled only with memory.

Eventually I found myself standing in front of the gun safe.

Before Kira died I had been a member of a gun club.

I held a firearms certificate, which allowed me to own rifles and long-barrelled pistols that were stored securely inside that safe.

The safe had remained closed since her death.

That evening I opened it.

Inside was the .44 Magnum pistol.

I removed it slowly.

Firearms demand respect.

Even when someone has handled them many times before, the weight of a weapon always carries a certain seriousness. It is impossible to forget what they are designed to do.

I loaded a single round.

Closed the cylinder.

Drew back the hammer.

The mechanical click echoed loudly in the quiet house.

In that moment there were no dramatic thoughts rushing through my mind.

There was simply exhaustion.

An overwhelming sense that life had lost its direction.

I raised the pistol.

The barrel touched my temple.

Cold metal against skin.

For a few seconds everything felt completely still.

When people imagine moments like that, they often picture chaos or intense emotional turmoil. But the reality can be very different.

Sometimes the mind becomes strangely calm.

Almost empty.

It feels less like a storm and more like a quiet surrender.

I remember thinking about Kira.

I remembered her voice.

Her laugh.

The way she used to stand on mountain summits with her hands on her hips.

The way she would turn around on the trail and shout:

“Come on, Daddy. You’re too slow.”

And I remember thinking about the promise she had asked for.

The promise I had refused.

The gun remained against my head.

My finger rested on the trigger.

And then something happened that I still struggle to explain completely.

In the middle of that moment, when everything felt darkest, I heard her voice.

Not outside the room.

Not physically in the air.

But clearly in my mind.

The same voice I had heard countless times before.

“No you can’t do that, Daddy.”

The words were unmistakable.

Firm.

Direct.

Exactly the way she would have said them.

For a second the entire moment froze.

The gun remained where it was, but something inside my mind had shifted.

Because in that instant I realised something with absolute clarity.

Kira would never have wanted that ending.

The love between us had never been about escaping life.

It had always been about living it together.

Slowly I lowered the gun.

My hand was shaking slightly now.

Not from fear, but from the sudden release of the emotional pressure that had been building for months.

I released the hammer carefully.

Opened the cylinder.

Removed the round.

Placed the pistol back into the safe.

Closed the door.

Locked it.

For a long time after that I simply stood there.

Breathing.

The quiet house surrounded me again.

But it felt slightly different.

Not better.

Not healed.

Grief was still there.

The loss was still enormous.

But something had changed.

I had stepped back from the edge.

Looking back now, I believe that moment was the lowest point of my life.

But it was also the beginning of something else.

Because once you realise how close you have come to disappearing, something inside you begins to reconsider what survival might mean.

I was still alive.

And if I was still alive, there had to be a reason for that.

At the time I didn't yet know what that reason might be.

But I knew one thing for certain.

Kira's voice had pulled me back.

And somewhere inside that moment was the first small step toward finding my way forward again.

## Chapter 13

### Dexter

Dexter came into my life at a time when I was barely holding myself together.

Grief had hollowed out the structure of my world. The house remained quiet in a way that felt unnatural. Days had begun to blur together, and the routines that once gave life shape had disappeared almost entirely. There were long stretches of time when the silence in the house felt so heavy that it seemed to press against the walls.

Losing a child changes the way you experience everything.

Even simple things — making a cup of tea, opening the front door, sitting in the living room — carry the quiet awareness that someone who once belonged there is gone. That absence follows you everywhere.

In those months after Kira died, the house often felt less like a home and more like a place filled with memories.

And yet, on the day Dexter was born, something unusual happened.

Dexter was an Alaskan Malamute.

A large, powerful breed originally bred for endurance and strength in some of the harshest environments on Earth. They are working dogs, built for cold landscapes and long distances. Thick fur, intelligent eyes, independent and a quiet strength that seems to exist in every movement they make.

But none of that is what mattered most to me.

What mattered was the timing.

Dexter was born on the same day Kira died.

The 25th of May.

The day my daughter left the world.

At first I did not attach any special meaning to that coincidence. Life contains strange alignments sometimes, and it is easy to dismiss them as simple chance.

But grief has a way of making you look for signs.

Small patterns.

Unexpected moments.

Anything that suggests the person you have lost might still be connected to the world somehow.

And slowly, the idea began to grow in my mind.

Perhaps Dexter had been sent to me.

Not in a mystical or supernatural sense exactly.

But in the quieter way that life sometimes places something in front of you exactly when you need it most.

When Dexter was still a puppy, he was full of energy.

Curious about everything.

He moved through the world with the same kind of eager interest that many young dogs have — exploring every smell, every sound, every new place as if the entire planet had been created for his investigation.

But there was also something calming about him.

Dogs have a remarkable ability to sense emotion. They notice things humans sometimes overlook — the tone of a voice, the way someone moves, the quiet signals that reveal how a person is really feeling.

Dexter seemed to understand that I was carrying something heavy.

He stayed close.

When I sat quietly in the house, he lay nearby.

When I walked from room to room without much purpose, he followed.

Not demanding attention.

Just present.

Sometimes presence is the most powerful form of companionship.

At first our walks were simple.

Short distances around the local area.

Just enough movement to break the stillness of the house.

But gradually those walks became longer.

Dexter loved being outside.

He moved with enthusiasm and curiosity, always slightly ahead, always eager to discover what might appear around the next corner.

Watching him reminded me of someone else.

Kira.

She had moved through the mountains in exactly the same way — always slightly ahead, always curious about what lay further along the trail.

Sometimes, walking with Dexter, I found myself remembering those hikes again.

The sound of boots against gravel.

The wind moving across open hills.

Kira's voice calling back down the path.

“Come on, Daddy. You're too slow.”

For a long time those memories had felt painful.

Sharp reminders of what I had lost.

But slowly something began to change.

Walking with Dexter brought movement back into my life.

And movement has a strange ability to loosen the grip of grief.

Not because the pain disappears.

But because the mind begins to breathe again.

Dexter grew quickly.

Malamutes are large dogs, and his strength became obvious very early. His paws seemed too big for his body at first, giving him a slightly awkward appearance as a young puppy.

But he grew into them.

Within months he had become a powerful animal.

Strong.

Confident.

Full of life.

And always eager for adventure.

Those adventures gradually grew larger.

Short walks turned into longer hikes.

Local paths turned into trips further away.

The outdoors, which had once been such an important part of my life with Kira, slowly returned as part of my life again.

Dexter loved the mountains.

Perhaps it was instinct.

Malamutes were originally bred to work in harsh northern landscapes, pulling sleds across snow and ice. They are built for endurance, built for long journeys across difficult terrain.

Watching him move across open ground felt almost natural.

He seemed completely at home there.

One of my favourite memories from that time happened during his first proper walk.

He was still young, still learning about the world, still discovering what it meant to move through open landscapes.

That day we encountered another dog.

Also an Alaskan Malamute.

That alone was unusual.

It is not the most common breed, especially in remote areas.

The two dogs greeted each other the way dogs do — cautious at first, then curious.

I spoke with the owner for a moment.

And eventually I asked the question people always ask when meeting another dog owner.

“What’s your dog’s name?”

The lady replied casually.

“Kira.”

For a moment I thought I had misheard her.

So I asked her to spell it.

She spelled it exactly the same way.

K-I-R-A.

That moment stayed with me for a long time.

Out of all the possible dog names in the world, I had met another Alaskan Malamute named Kira.

Spelled the same way.

In the middle of a random walk.

And strangely, I never saw that owner or dog again.

They appeared once.

Then disappeared from my life completely.

It may have been coincidence.

Most likely it was.

But grief sometimes allows small moments like that to carry meaning beyond logic.

At the time it felt like a quiet reminder.

A brief signal from somewhere.

As if the world was saying:

She is still connected to your story.

Dexter continued growing.

His personality developed into something that was both loyal and independent. Malamutes are not the kind of dogs that simply follow orders blindly. They are intelligent, thoughtful animals that often seem to make decisions for themselves.

Dexter had that quality.

But he also had something else.

A quiet loyalty.

He stayed close to me during those years when my life still felt fragile.

He became my companion during long walks.

During quiet evenings.

During the slow rebuilding of a life that had once fallen apart.

Dogs cannot replace people.

They cannot fill the space left by a child.

But they can bring something else.

Movement.

Companionship.

A reason to step outside.

A reason to keep going.

Looking back now, I sometimes think Dexter arrived at exactly the right moment.

Not because he was meant to replace anything.

But because he helped me begin moving again.

And sometimes movement is the first step back toward life.

## Chapter 14

### Movement

For a long time after Kira died, my life had felt completely still.

Not in the peaceful sense of stillness, but in the heavier sense — the kind where nothing seems to move forward. Days passed, weeks passed, months passed, but emotionally I felt as though I was standing in the exact same place where everything had broken apart.

Grief can do that.

It can hold you in a moment that the rest of the world has already moved beyond.

People around you continue living their lives. They go to work. They meet friends. They plan holidays. They talk about ordinary things that once filled your own life as well.

But when you lose a child, it often feels as if the world has divided into two separate realities.

There is the world everyone else continues to live in.

And there is the quiet, heavy place where you remain.

For a long time, I lived almost entirely inside that second world.

The house had grown silent.

Relationships had drifted away.

The routines that once gave life shape had disappeared.

Days often felt directionless.

And yet, slowly, something began to change.

That change did not arrive dramatically.

There was no single moment where everything suddenly improved.

Instead, it started with something much smaller.

Walking.

Dexter had grown into a powerful dog.

As an Alaskan Malamute, he needed exercise. These dogs were bred to move across vast distances, pulling sleds through harsh northern landscapes. Their bodies are built for endurance, for work, for constant forward motion.

Keeping a dog like that inside a quiet house simply wasn't possible.

He needed space.

Distance.

Adventure.

At first our walks were simple.

Short routes through nearby countryside.

Just enough to give him the exercise he needed and to break the silence that filled the house.

But even those small walks began to do something important.

They forced me outside.

They created a reason to move.

Grief often traps people indoors.

Inside their thoughts.

Inside their memories.

Inside the spaces where the person they loved once lived.

Stepping outside interrupts that cycle, even if only for a short time.

Fresh air.

Changing landscapes.

Movement.

All of these things begin to loosen the grip that grief holds over the mind.

Slowly, the walks grew longer.

Dexter loved being outdoors.

He moved ahead confidently, exploring every scent carried by the wind, every sound in the distance, every new path that appeared ahead of us.

Watching him often reminded me of someone else.

Kira.

She had moved through the world in exactly the same way — curious, energetic, always eager to see what lay beyond the next bend in the path.

Sometimes, while walking with Dexter, I could almost hear her voice again.

“Come on, Daddy.”

“You’re too slow.”

For a long time those memories had felt painful.

But gradually something began to change.

Instead of hurting every time they appeared, they started to feel like quiet companions walking beside me.

The outdoors had always been an important part of my life with Kira.

Mountains.

Hiking.

Camping.

Those places held some of our happiest memories.

After she died, I had avoided them.

Not deliberately.

But returning to those landscapes felt impossible at first.

They belonged to a life that no longer existed.

Yet walking with Dexter slowly brought me back toward those environments.

First small hills.

Then longer trails.

Eventually full days outdoors.

Each step forward felt like reclaiming something that grief had taken away.

Movement became something more than exercise.

It became survival.

There is something about physical movement that helps the mind process emotional pain.

When the body works — climbing, walking, breathing deeply — the mind often follows.

Thoughts become clearer.

Memories settle differently.

The weight of grief does not disappear, but it becomes something you can carry rather than something that completely stops you from moving.

Dexter seemed happiest when we were exploring new places.

He moved across open ground with the quiet confidence of an animal built for endurance. His thick coat shifted in the wind. His large paws moved easily over rough terrain.

Watching him often reminded me that life itself is built around movement.

Animals move.

Rivers move.

Wind moves.

The earth itself is constantly moving.

Stillness, the kind I had been living inside for months, is not the natural state of the world.

Movement is.

And gradually I began to feel that movement returning to my own life.

The walks became longer.

The landscapes became more remote.

Eventually the idea of travel appeared.

At first it was only a thought.

A vague idea that perhaps leaving the familiar environment of the quiet house might create some space for something different.

Grief can make the world feel very small.

The same rooms.

The same streets.

The same reminders of what has been lost.

Travel does the opposite.

It expands the world again.

New landscapes.

New roads.

New horizons.

Places where memories have not yet settled into every corner.

The idea began to grow stronger.

If movement had helped during simple walks, perhaps a larger journey might help even more.

Not because travel could solve grief.

Nothing can do that.

But because movement might allow life to breathe again.

Dexter would be the perfect companion for that kind of journey.

Malamutes are built for adventure.

Long distances.

Harsh landscapes.

Changing environments.

Everything about his nature suggested that he would thrive on a journey rather than a stationary life.

And perhaps, in some way, I would too.

For months after Kira died, I had been living in a state of emotional paralysis.

Grief had frozen my life in place.

But walking with Dexter had slowly begun to thaw that stillness.

Each step forward on a trail had quietly reminded me of something important.

Movement is the beginning of survival.

It does not erase loss.

It does not remove grief.

But it creates the possibility of continuing.

Step by step.

Path by path.

Breath by breath.

Eventually that movement would grow into something far larger than I could have imagined.

A journey that would carry Dexter and me across continents.

Across deserts.

Across landscapes so vast that the horizon seemed to stretch forever.

But the beginning of that journey was much simpler.

It began with a dog.

A quiet house.

And the decision to start walking again.

## Chapter 15

### The Long Road

The idea did not arrive all at once.

At first it was only a thought that appeared occasionally during long walks with Dexter. A quiet suggestion in the back of my mind that perhaps the life I was living — the quiet house, the familiar roads, the routines shaped by absence — had become too small.

Grief has a way of shrinking the world.

After Kira died, my life had slowly contracted around a handful of places: the house, the nearby countryside, the routes I walked with Dexter. Everything felt contained within a narrow circle of memory and routine.

Those places carried meaning.

But they also carried weight.

Every street held a reminder.

Every familiar path echoed with memories of the life that had once existed there.

The mountains we had climbed together.

The places where she had laughed.

The trails where she had once turned around with her hands on her hips and said:

“Come on, Daddy. You’re too slow.”

For a long time I had avoided travelling far beyond that circle.

Not deliberately.

But grief often anchors people to the places where their memories live.

Leaving those places can feel like abandoning something sacred.

Yet the more I walked with Dexter, the more something inside me began to change.

Movement had helped.

Even the small movement of daily walks had loosened the grip that grief once held over every moment of my life.

And gradually the thought appeared more often.

What if I kept going?

Not just along the same familiar paths.

But further.

Beyond the boundaries of the life I had been living.

At first it seemed unrealistic.

Travelling long distances requires planning, resources, and a sense of direction that I wasn't sure I possessed at that point in my life.

But the thought remained.

Each time it returned, it felt slightly more possible.

Dexter seemed to embody the same instinct.

As an Alaskan Malamute, he had been bred for endurance and movement. These dogs were designed to pull sleds across vast northern landscapes, working for hours at a time across snow-covered wilderness.

Movement was part of his nature.

He loved being outdoors.

Loved exploring new places.

Loved the sense of forward motion that seemed to energise him every time we stepped onto a trail.

Watching him run across open ground often reminded me of something important.

Life itself is built around movement.

Rivers move.

Wind moves.

Animals move.

The earth turns constantly beneath our feet.

Remaining completely still is rarely the natural state of anything living.

Eventually the thought of travel began to transform into something more concrete.

Not a holiday.

Not a short trip.

Something larger.

A journey.

The kind of journey that would place distance between me and the places where grief had become too familiar.

The more I thought about it, the more the idea seemed to grow.

The world was enormous.

Vast landscapes stretched far beyond the boundaries of the life I had been living.

Mountains.

Plains.

Deserts.

Entire continents filled with places I had never seen.

And suddenly the question appeared clearly in my mind.

What if I drove across them?

Not simply travelling from one destination to another.

But moving slowly across the world.

Exploring it.

Allowing the road itself to become part of the journey.

It was a strange idea at first.

Almost absurd.

But something about it felt right.

Driving long distances has a particular rhythm.

The steady movement of the road beneath the wheels.

The changing landscapes appearing slowly through the windscreen.

The quiet hours where the only sound is the engine and the wind moving across the vehicle.

There is something meditative about that kind of travel.

Something that allows the mind to process thoughts differently than it can inside the static environment of a house.

Dexter would travel with me.

That part felt obvious.

He had already become my constant companion.

The dog who had appeared in my life at exactly the moment I needed something to anchor me to the world again.

The dog who had helped pull me back toward movement.

The dog who seemed happiest when exploring open landscapes.

Planning the journey became something that gave the days structure again.

Maps appeared.

Routes were studied.

Ideas began to form about where the road might lead.

From the United Kingdom, the path stretched outward across Europe.

Across countries and landscapes I had only seen on maps before.

Further east.

Toward vast open spaces.

Toward places where the land itself felt enormous.

Eventually one destination stood out above all the others.

The Gobi Desert.

A place that existed almost at the edge of imagination.

A desert stretching across thousands of miles of Mongolia and northern China.

Remote.

Wild.

Empty in a way that few places on Earth still are.

The idea of reaching that desert began to settle in my mind as a kind of distant horizon.

A place so far away that the journey itself would become the real experience.

The desert would simply mark the farthest point.

But before that destination could exist, the journey had to begin.

Preparing for a trip like that requires practical decisions.

The vehicle needed to be capable of long-distance travel.

Supplies needed to be considered.

Equipment needed to be organised.

Slowly, piece by piece, the journey began to take shape.

The pickup truck would carry us.

It would hold the supplies we needed.

Food.

Water.

Camping equipment.

Tools.

An adventure box filled with the things required for travel across difficult terrain.

Dexter seemed completely unfazed by the growing pile of gear.

As long as he could climb into the passenger seat and look out of the window, he appeared perfectly content.

Dogs are wonderfully uncomplicated travellers.

They do not question the destination.

They do not worry about maps or fuel or logistics.

They simply trust the person beside them.

Eventually the day arrived when everything was ready.

The truck was packed.

Supplies organised.

The route stretched outward across maps that covered entire continents.

Standing beside the vehicle that morning, I remember feeling something unexpected.

Not fear.

Not uncertainty.

But anticipation.

For the first time in a long while, the future did not feel completely empty.

There was a road ahead.

A literal road.

One that would carry Dexter and me across landscapes neither of us had ever seen before.

I climbed into the driver's seat.

Dexter jumped into the passenger side.

He settled there comfortably, already watching the world outside with curiosity.

I started the engine.

The quiet rumble of the vehicle filled the morning air.

For a moment I sat there, looking down the road.

It stretched away from the house.

Away from the familiar streets.

Away from the places where grief had rooted itself so deeply in my life.

The road offered something different.

Distance.

Movement.

Possibility.

And perhaps, somewhere along that long road, the beginning of a new way to live with the loss I carried.

I placed the truck in gear.

Pressed gently on the accelerator.

And the journey began.

Dexter looked out of the window as the world started moving past us.

Fields.

Houses.

Road signs.

The familiar landscape slowly slipping behind us.

Ahead lay thousands of miles of unknown roads.

Across Europe.

Across Asia.

Across vast landscapes that would test both endurance and determination.

Eventually those roads would carry us into one of the most remote places on Earth.

But at that moment none of that mattered yet.

What mattered was movement.

The long road stretching ahead.

And the quiet understanding that sometimes the only way forward through grief is to start driving.

## Chapter 16

### Entering the Desert

By the time Dexter and I finally reached the edge of the Gobi Desert, the road behind us already felt impossibly long.

Thousands of miles had passed beneath the wheels of the pickup truck.

Countries had come and gone.

Languages had changed.

Landscapes had shifted gradually from the green fields and familiar countryside of home to something far wider and emptier. The terrain had opened out slowly across Europe and then further east into Asia, where distances stretched longer and towns appeared further apart.

Driving across continents changes the way you think about space.

In the United Kingdom, distance often feels measured carefully. Towns follow one another within manageable hours of travel. Roads twist through villages and hills that have been shaped by centuries of human presence.

But the further east you travel, the more the land begins to expand.

Roads become longer.

Horizons grow wider.

Settlements appear less frequently.

Eventually you reach places where the land seems almost untouched by the density of human life that defines much of the Western world.

The Gobi Desert was one of those places.

Even before entering it, the landscape began to change.

Vegetation became sparse.

The colours of the earth shifted into muted tones of brown, sand, and pale stone.

The air itself felt different — dry, carrying the faint smell of dust that seemed to belong entirely to the desert environment.

Driving toward it felt like approaching the edge of another world.

Dexter seemed fascinated.

He sat in the passenger seat with his head slightly tilted toward the open window, nose lifted as if he were studying the unfamiliar scents carried by the wind. His thick coat shifted slightly in the warm air as the truck rolled slowly across the increasingly barren landscape.

As an Alaskan Malamute, he had been bred for harsh environments. His ancestors had worked across frozen tundra and snow-covered wilderness, pulling sleds across enormous distances.

The desert was very different from those icy northern landscapes.

But the sense of adventure seemed to suit him perfectly.

When we finally crossed into the open desert, the first thing I noticed was the silence.

Not the quiet of countryside or mountains.

Something deeper.

The kind of silence that exists when there are simply no people nearby.

No distant roads.

No machinery.

No buildings.

Just wind moving across open land.

The Gobi is often imagined as endless rolling sand dunes, but much of it is something else entirely.

Wide plains.

Rocky ground.

Hard-packed earth stretching across vast distances.

The dunes appear in places, rising suddenly like frozen waves in the middle of a landscape that otherwise seems almost flat.

Driving through it required patience.

There were no clearly defined highways cutting through the desert interior. Instead there were faint tracks — sometimes visible, sometimes disappearing entirely — created by the occasional vehicles that had passed through before.

Navigation became part instinct, part map reading, and part careful observation of the terrain ahead.

Dexter often stepped out of the truck when we stopped to rest.

He moved cautiously at first, exploring the ground with his nose close to the sand. The unfamiliar environment seemed to trigger every instinct of curiosity he possessed.

Everything was new.

New smells.

New sounds.

New terrain.

Watching him explore the desert reminded me of something important.

The world was still full of places that neither of us had seen before.

That realisation carried a quiet kind of hope.

One afternoon we stopped in a particularly remote section of the desert.

The ground there was scattered with small openings in the earth.

At first I assumed they were simply natural cracks or holes formed by erosion. But when I crouched closer to examine them, I realised they were something else entirely.

They were small cave-like openings leading into the ground.

And inside them lived bats.

I had not expected to find bats in the middle of the desert, but there they were — small dark shapes shifting in the shadows of those holes. Occasionally one would flutter briefly out into the air before disappearing again into the darkness.

The desert was not empty after all.

Life finds ways to survive almost anywhere.

Dexter stood nearby watching them with quiet interest.

He did not bark or chase them.

He simply observed.

Perhaps even he sensed that this environment belonged to the bats in a way it did not belong to us.

While I was examining the holes, one of the bats emerged and fluttered briefly across the ground.

It landed near the truck, where a used wet wipe had fallen onto the desert floor beside Dexter.

The small bat seemed drawn to the moisture.

Water is incredibly scarce in the desert, and even the faint dampness of that wipe must have been attractive.

It crawled toward it slowly.

Then, to my surprise, it nestled itself into the wet wipe, wrapping its tiny body into the damp fabric as if it had discovered something incredibly valuable.

Dexter lowered his head slightly to watch.

The size difference between them was almost comical — a powerful Malamute capable of pulling sleds across frozen landscapes observing a tiny desert bat curled into a piece of fabric.

But there was something strangely peaceful about the moment.

Two creatures from entirely different worlds sharing the same quiet patch of desert.

Still, I knew the situation carried risks.

Bats can carry Rabies, and rabies is one of the few diseases in the world that remains almost universally fatal once symptoms begin.

Fortunately, Dexter had been vaccinated against rabies before we began the journey.

His vaccinations meant that even if he were bitten, the risk to him would be extremely low.

But the situation for humans is different.

I had received preventative rabies vaccinations before travelling, but those vaccinations do not make a person immune.

What they do is buy time.

If I were bitten by a rabid animal, the vaccinations meant I would still need further treatment — and that treatment needed to happen within about three days.

Three days to find a hospital.

Three days to reach medical care.

In the middle of the Gobi Desert, that reality carried a certain weight.

The nearest hospital could easily be hundreds of miles away.

Watching that small bat curled into the damp wipe, I felt a strange mixture of fascination and caution.

Dexter remained calm.

He seemed curious but not aggressive.

I gently moved the wipe away from him, allowing the bat space to remain undisturbed.

After a moment it shifted slightly, then fluttered away again toward the dark openings in the desert floor.

Within seconds it had disappeared completely.

The desert returned to silence.

Dexter looked at me briefly, as if confirming that the moment had passed.

Then he resumed exploring the ground around us.

Standing there in that vast landscape, I remember thinking how strange the journey had become.

A man and his dog from the United Kingdom standing in the middle of one of the largest deserts on Earth.

Watching bats nestle into discarded wet wipes.

Thinking about rabies vaccinations and the distance to the nearest hospital.

It was a surreal kind of reality.

But it also felt strangely alive.

After months of grief and stillness back home, the world had opened again.

Unexpected moments appeared in places I had never imagined visiting.

And each of those moments reminded me of something important.

Life continues moving forward.

Even in the middle of the desert.

## Chapter 17

### The Sand Dunes

The first sand dunes appeared almost without warning.

For hours Dexter and I had been driving across the vast plains of the Gobi Desert, where the land stretched flat and wide beneath an enormous sky. Much of the Gobi is not the rolling sea of sand people imagine when they think of deserts. Instead, it is a landscape of hard-packed earth, scattered rock, and wide-open spaces where the horizon seems impossibly far away.

Then, gradually, the ground began to change.

The soil beneath the truck's tyres softened.

The colour of the land shifted into pale gold.

Small ridges appeared in the distance, rising slowly from the flat desert floor.

As we drove closer, those ridges grew larger.

Soon they became unmistakable.

Sand dunes.

They rose from the landscape like frozen waves — enormous sweeping shapes sculpted by centuries of wind. Some were small and rounded. Others stretched upward into tall ridges that seemed to tower over the surrounding desert.

The sight of them stopped me immediately.

I pulled the truck to a halt and switched off the engine.

The silence that followed felt enormous.

Dexter lifted his head from the passenger seat and looked toward the dunes with quiet curiosity. His ears twitched slightly as he studied the unfamiliar landscape ahead of us.

For a few moments neither of us moved.

The wind drifted gently across the sand, shifting tiny grains across the surface and creating delicate patterns that looked almost like ripples across water.

Eventually I opened the door.

The air outside was warm and dry.

When my boots touched the sand, it felt different from the hard ground we had been driving across all day. Softer. Slightly unstable beneath each step.

Dexter jumped down beside me.

He took a few cautious steps at first, sniffing the sand as if trying to understand this strange new surface. Then his curiosity took over.

Within seconds he was moving quickly toward the nearest dune.

Even though his ancestors had been bred to pull sleds across frozen landscapes, Dexter seemed perfectly comfortable in the desert.

He climbed the slope of the dune with surprising ease.

Large paws digging into the sand.

Body leaning forward as he pushed himself upward.

Watching him climb made me smile.

Because once he reached the top, something unexpected happened.

He paused for a moment.

Looked down at the long slope of sand beneath him.

And then, with what looked suspiciously like excitement, he launched himself forward.

Dexter rolled down the dune.

Not gracefully.

Not carefully.

He simply threw himself sideways and allowed gravity to take over.

His thick fur filled with sand as he tumbled down the slope in a chaotic mix of legs, tail, and swirling grains of desert dust.

When he reached the bottom, he jumped to his feet immediately and shook himself violently.

Sand flew everywhere.

Then he looked back up at the dune.

And ran straight up it again.

Watching him play in the sand dunes was one of the most joyful things I had seen in a long time.

There was something wonderfully pure about it.

No hesitation.

No uncertainty.

Just the instinctive happiness of an animal discovering something new and exciting.

He climbed the dune again.

Reached the top.

And rolled all the way down.

Over and over.

Each time shaking himself and racing back up the slope as if the entire dune existed solely for his entertainment.

Standing there in the middle of that enormous desert, I couldn't help laughing.

The sound echoed strangely across the open landscape.

It was the first time I had laughed freely in a long time.

Dexter eventually paused halfway up the dune and turned back toward me.

For a moment he stood there, tail raised, tongue hanging slightly from the side of his mouth.

It looked almost like an invitation.

As if he were saying:

Why are you still standing down there?

So I started climbing.

Walking up a sand dune is harder than it looks.

Each step sinks slightly into the loose surface, sliding back just enough to make progress slow and awkward. The slope felt steeper than it had appeared from below.

Dexter watched patiently as I worked my way upward.

Occasionally he shifted slightly, sending small cascades of sand sliding down the slope.

When I finally reached the top, the view took my breath away.

From that height the desert stretched in every direction.

Dune after dune rolled across the landscape like a vast ocean of sand frozen in place by time.

The wind moved constantly across their surfaces, reshaping them grain by grain.

The sky above was enormous.

Clear.

Endless.

Standing there felt like being suspended in a different world.

There were no buildings.

No roads.

No power lines.

No signs of civilisation anywhere in sight.

Just sand.

Wind.

Sky.

Dexter walked along the ridge of the dune beside me.

His thick coat shifted gently in the breeze.

From time to time he lowered his nose to investigate something interesting in the sand.

Otherwise he simply moved calmly through the landscape as if he had always belonged there.

Watching him brought a quiet sense of peace.

For months after Kira died, the world had felt small and heavy.

My life had been confined mostly to the quiet house and the narrow circle of places nearby.

But standing on that dune, in the middle of one of the most remote deserts on Earth, something felt different.

The world had become enormous again.

Distance stretched in every direction.

Possibility existed far beyond the places where grief had once felt overwhelming.

Dexter eventually lay down on the sand beside me.

The warm surface of the dune seemed comfortable beneath his thick coat.

From time to time he rolled slightly onto his back, kicking his legs lazily into the air as if completely relaxed in this strange new environment.

Looking at him, I thought about the journey that had brought us there.

A man and a dog who had left the United Kingdom months earlier.

Crossed Europe.

Driven across Asia.

Followed a road that stretched further than I had ever travelled before.

And now here we were.

Standing on a sand dune in the Gobi Desert.

Watching the wind move across an ocean of sand.

Eventually Dexter stood up again.

Looked down the slope.

And once again threw himself sideways into another rolling tumble down the dune.

Sand exploded around him as he descended.

I laughed again.

Climbed down more carefully.

And watched him shake himself clean for the third or fourth time that afternoon.

Moments like that are difficult to describe properly.

Not because they are dramatic or extraordinary in a traditional sense.

But because they carry a simple joy that feels incredibly powerful when you have spent so long living in grief.

For a little while that afternoon, standing among the sand dunes with Dexter rolling happily through the desert, life felt light again.

Not healed.

Not fixed.

But alive.

And sometimes that is enough.

Just the feeling that life, even after everything that has been lost, is still capable of surprising you with moments of unexpected happiness.

## Chapter 18

### Running Low

By the time Dexter and I had spent several days moving deeper into the Gobi Desert, the scale of the landscape had begun to change the way I thought about distance.

In most parts of the world, distance is measured with familiar reference points.

A nearby town.

A fuel station.

A road sign pointing toward the next place where people live.

Even in remote areas of the United Kingdom or Europe, the knowledge that civilisation lies just beyond the next ridge or valley is rarely far from your mind.

But the Gobi does not offer that kind of reassurance.

The desert stretches across enormous distances.

Entire days of travel can pass without encountering another person, another vehicle, or any sign that someone else has recently passed through the same place.

For a while that isolation felt almost peaceful.

Dexter and I had grown accustomed to the quiet rhythm of the desert. The truck moved slowly across faint tracks that sometimes disappeared entirely into the open landscape. Navigation became part instinct, part careful reading of maps, and part simple observation of the terrain.

Each morning we set out again.

Each evening we found a place to stop.

The desert wind carried dust across the ground in slow shifting patterns, reshaping the landscape grain by grain.

But after several days, something else began to change.

The numbers inside the truck started to matter more.

Fuel.

Water.

Food.

At first I had been monitoring them casually.

Long-distance travel always requires attention to supplies, but during the earlier part of the journey those numbers had never felt particularly urgent. Towns appeared often enough that refuelling and restocking supplies remained manageable.

The deeper we moved into the desert, however, the distances between those places grew larger.

Eventually they began to disappear entirely.

I remember the moment I first noticed the fuel gauge falling lower than I expected.

The needle had moved gradually during the day's driving, but now it had entered the final section of the gauge where every mile suddenly began to feel more significant.

I slowed the truck slightly.

Not dramatically.

But enough to conserve fuel.

Dexter was sitting in the passenger seat watching the desert roll slowly past the window. His thick coat moved gently in the warm breeze drifting through the open window.

He seemed completely unconcerned by the situation.

Dogs have a wonderful ability to live entirely in the present moment.

They do not worry about maps.

They do not calculate distances.

They trust the person beside them.

That trust was something I felt strongly during those hours.

Because as the fuel gauge continued to drop, the reality of our situation became clearer.

We were very far from anywhere.

And the desert around us was enormous.

The map suggested that a small settlement existed somewhere ahead of us.

A place where fuel might be available.

But maps in remote regions can be unreliable.

Sometimes the places they mark no longer exist.

Sometimes a “settlement” means little more than a handful of buildings separated by miles of empty land.

Sometimes it means nothing at all.

Still, the map offered the only direction we had.

So I continued driving.

The hours passed slowly.

The sun moved gradually across the sky.

The desert remained unchanged in every direction.

Eventually the fuel gauge dropped lower still.

At that point another calculation began to enter my mind.

Water.

We still had some.

But not a great deal.

Food was also running low.

Enough for another day or two perhaps.

But not much longer than that.

The deeper we moved into the desert, the clearer something became.

If the settlement marked on the map did not exist, our situation would become very difficult very quickly.

Late that afternoon I stopped the truck on a wide stretch of open desert.

The engine fell silent.

The sudden quiet seemed enormous.

Dexter jumped down from the passenger seat and began exploring the ground nearby, sniffing the sand with his usual curiosity.

I stepped out of the truck and walked a short distance away.

The wind moved gently across the desert.

The horizon stretched endlessly in every direction.

Standing there, the isolation of the place felt almost overwhelming.

There were no buildings.

No roads.

No signs of human activity anywhere within sight.

Just sand.

Stone.

Sky.

Dexter eventually wandered back and sat beside the truck, watching me as if waiting for the next instruction.

I looked at him and felt something heavy settle in my mind.

If the situation became serious out there, my responsibility was not only for myself.

Dexter depended on me completely.

He trusted that wherever we had travelled together, I would bring him safely back again.

That thought made the situation feel even more real.

I climbed back into the truck and checked the supplies again.

Fuel was dangerously low now.

Water had been reduced to a small number of bottles.

Food was nearly gone.

The sun had begun drifting lower toward the horizon.

That was when another thought entered my mind.

If something happened to us out there — if the truck stopped and we could not find help — there was a possibility that we might never be found.

The desert is large enough to swallow vehicles completely.

Sandstorms shift landscapes.

Tracks disappear.

Entire vehicles can vanish into the environment without leaving any visible trace.

After a while I started the truck again.

The engine rumbled softly back to life.

I placed the vehicle in gear and began driving once more.

The final stretch of fuel would have to be used carefully.

The map still suggested that somewhere ahead lay the small settlement we needed.

But until we reached it, the numbers inside the truck continued to fall.

Fuel dropping lower.

Water running low.

Food nearly gone.

And the desert stretching endlessly in every direction.

It was one of those moments when the journey stopped feeling like an adventure and began feeling like survival.

Dexter remained calm beside me.

Watching the world pass by.

Trusting that wherever we were going, I would get us there.

And as the sun slowly began to sink toward the desert horizon, that responsibility felt heavier than ever before.

## Chapter 19

### The Adventure Box

By the time the fuel gauge had dropped close to empty, the desert no longer felt like the same place we had entered days earlier.

At first the Gobi had seemed vast in an exciting way. It was a landscape so unlike anything I had known at home that even its emptiness felt full of possibility. The open plains, the enormous sky, the strange stillness, the dunes rising out of nowhere like frozen waves — all of it carried the kind of beauty that makes a person feel small in a good way.

But beauty changes when your supplies begin to run out.

The same distance that once looked magnificent begins to look dangerous. The same silence that once felt peaceful begins to feel indifferent. The same open horizon that invited adventure now offers no reassurance at all.

By then, fuel was low enough that I no longer needed to keep checking the gauge every few minutes. I already knew what it would tell me. Water had been reduced to something I measured carefully. Food had become whatever little remained in the truck, which happened to be a half bottle of Heinz Ketchup. There was no room left for optimism without evidence.

I kept driving as long as I could.

The truck rolled forward over the desert floor in a slow, careful way, partly because the terrain demanded it and partly because speed no longer made sense. Burning through the last of the fuel too quickly would have been pointless. Somewhere ahead there might be a settlement, a fuel station, a road that led toward help. Or there might be nothing at all.

The map had given me a direction.

The desert had not given me any promises.

Dexter sat in the passenger seat as he had for so much of the journey. Now and then he shifted position, looking out through the open window with that calm, interested expression dogs often have when they are watching a world they do not need to understand. He did not know what the fuel gauge meant. He did not know how far we were from help, or whether the next track across the desert floor would lead anywhere useful.

He simply trusted me.

That trust weighed heavily on me by then.

Eventually I stopped the truck.

Not because I had arrived anywhere.

Not because I had found what I was looking for.

But because the situation had reached a point where I needed to stop pretending it was still just another difficult stage of the journey.

The engine fell silent.

At once the desert reclaimed everything.

The rumble of the truck disappeared and the enormous quiet returned, stretching out in every direction just as the land did. Wind moved softly across the open plain. Somewhere in the distance sand shifted along the edge of a low ridge. Otherwise there was nothing.

No voices.

No roads.

No sign of another person.

Just the desert.

I sat for a few moments behind the wheel, hands still resting lightly on it, staring through the windscreen at the horizon. There are times in life when a person knows they are standing at the point where denial is no longer useful. You can continue thinking in half-hopes and vague possibilities, or you can admit the truth of where you are.

That was one of those moments.

I opened the door and stepped out into the heat.

Dexter jumped down after me and stretched. Then he wandered a few metres away, sniffing at the ground the way he always did, reading the world through scent in a way no human ever can. He seemed completely at ease. There was no fear in him, no anxiety, no awareness that the calculations in my head had begun turning darker.

I walked around to the back of the truck and sat down on one of the adventure boxes.

It was an ordinary enough piece of expedition gear, the kind of thing overlanders carry without much thought. Rugged, practical, built to hold equipment and spare parts. Throughout the journey it had been exactly that: a box full of useful things.

In that moment it became something else.

It became a place to stop.

A place to think.

A place where the journey, for a little while, narrowed down to one man sitting in the desert beside his truck, trying to decide what the truth was.

The surface of the box was warm beneath me. The air was dry in a way that seemed to pull moisture out of everything. The sky above looked impossibly large, and because there was nothing nearby to interrupt the scale of the landscape, it felt as if the desert had no edges at all.

Dexter eventually came back and lay down on the sand beside me.

He lowered himself slowly, front legs out, head up for a moment while he looked around, then rested his chin on his paws. It was an image of complete trust. Complete surrender to the present moment.

I remember looking at him and feeling a mix of love, responsibility, and something close to dread.

If I had been alone, the situation would have felt serious enough. But I was not alone.

Dexter was with me.

He relied on me absolutely.

And the desert did not care.

That, perhaps, was the hardest part of it. The desert was not cruel. Cruelty implies intention. It was simply indifferent. It would not become easier because I was tired. It would not produce fuel because I needed it. It would not shorten the distance to help because a dog was lying beside me trusting that I knew what I was doing.

The desert would go on being exactly what it was.

I sat there for a long time.

When you are in a place like that, time loosens. There are no clocks in the landscape. No appointments. No ordinary interruptions. Minutes feel longer because there is nothing to divide them except your own thoughts. The silence gives those thoughts space to grow.

At first I tried to think practically.

How much fuel remained, really?

How much water?

How far might the next settlement be?

Could I turn back? Was there any point in doing so? Did the distance behind me offer anything more certain than the distance ahead? Had I seen anything on the route that might count as a fallback?

But practical thinking only carried me so far.

Eventually the more difficult thought arrived.

We might die here.

It did not come to me as panic. It did not hit me like a shock. It settled into my mind quietly, almost calmly, because by then it had already been forming for some time. The low fuel, the shrinking supplies, the complete emptiness of the horizon — all of it had been leading there.

We might die here.

I looked out across the desert and tried to picture what that would mean. How long would it take before anyone came this way? Would anyone come this way at all? If the truck ran dry out there and no help appeared, how long before the desert simply absorbed us into itself?

Again I looked at Dexter.

He shifted slightly in the sand, content enough, and blinked at the distance.

Dogs do not imagine futures the way we do. They do not sit in dread of what might happen tomorrow. They live in what is directly in front of them. In some ways that makes them brave. In other ways it makes them vulnerable. Either way, they trust.

That trust returned me to a practical thought, and it was one of the bleakest thoughts I have ever had.

If something happened to us there, I did not want Dexter trapped inside the truck.

The idea came so quietly and so clearly that I stood up almost immediately. I walked over to the vehicle and opened one of the windows.

Not for air.

Not for comfort.

But because if I was right — if the worst happened, if the truck became nothing more than a metal shell stranded in the desert — then at least Dexter would have a chance to get out.

I remember pausing after I opened it, one hand still resting on the door frame, and realising what it meant that this seemed like a sensible thing to do.

This was no longer simply a difficult travel day. No longer a small setback. No longer the kind of challenge you later laugh about because it eventually turned out all right.

This was serious.

I closed the door gently and went back to the box.

Dexter watched me return, then lowered his head again.

For a while I said nothing. There was no one to say anything to, really. Just wind, truck, dog, desert.

Then I reached into my pocket and took out my phone.

I stared at it for a moment before turning it over in my hand.

So much of the journey had been documented in ordinary ways — photographs, videos, little moments captured because they seemed interesting or beautiful at the time. But this felt different. This did not feel like another travel clip. It felt like the kind of message a person records because they are no longer certain there will be another chance.

I pressed record.

At first I did not know exactly what I was going to say. The camera was simply there, open, waiting. Dexter lay on the desert floor beside me. The pickup truck stood behind me, dusty and still. The horizon stretched away into a silence so complete it felt almost unreal.

And then I began to speak.

Not dramatically.

Not with the kind of voice people use when they are performing emotion.

Just honestly.

I spoke because it seemed important to leave something behind in case that moment truly was what it felt like: the edge of the road.

The strange thing is that once I started speaking, something began to shift.

For years after Kira died, part of me had been moving through life with a quiet willingness to disappear. I did not always name it. I did not always look at it directly. But it was there. In the risks I took. In the way I kept moving toward harsher places. In the private exhaustion that sometimes made life feel like something I was enduring rather than living.

Not because I had stopped loving her.

Because I had never stopped loving her.

But because loving someone you have lost can make the world feel impossible to remain in.

Somewhere inside me there had been a half-formed belief that maybe I could push far enough, travel far enough, place myself far enough out on the edge of the world that fate might make the decision for me. That somehow I might reach her by refusing to turn back from dangerous places.

Sitting on that box, with the desert spread around me and Dexter lying close by, I understood something that had taken years to reach.

I could not die my way back to Kira.

There was no road that led there.

The desert had brought me right up against the possibility of death, and standing that close to it stripped away something I had been carrying for too long. For years the idea of ending had lived in me like a shadow. But there, at the point where ending felt real rather than imagined, what came to the surface was not surrender.

It was clarity.

Kira was gone.

Nothing I did in that desert would change that.

Nothing I did on any road, in any country, under any sky, would undo what had happened in our living room at 02:55 on the 25th of May – 255, 255.

I could not die my way back to her.

But I could still live in a way that honoured her.

I could live in her name.

That was the message video message I left on my phone.

That realisation did not remove the danger. The fuel gauge remained low. The water was still limited. The map was still uncertain. But the centre of gravity inside me changed. The question stopped being whether I might disappear there.

The question became how I was going to get us out.

I lowered the phone.

For a few moments I simply sat with what I had understood.

Dexter raised his head and looked at me, and I reached down to touch him. His fur was warm from the sun. Solid. Real. Alive. In that moment he was not only a companion. He was also a responsibility that brought me firmly back into the world of action.

I could not drift any longer.

If we were going to survive, I had to make decisions as someone who intended to live.

That was the real turning point on the adventure box.

Not the recording itself, though that mattered.

Not even the fear.

It was the moment I stopped being half in love with vanishing and accepted that I needed to keep going.

For myself.

For Dexter.

For Kira.

Eventually I stood up.

The box was once again just a box. The truck was once again a truck. The desert was still vast and unmoved by everything that had passed through my mind while sitting there.

But I was different from the man who had first lowered himself onto that seat.

I checked the truck again. Looked over the supplies. Thought through the route one more time. The practical world had returned, but now it had a different shape. Every action from that point on carried one simple intention.

Survive.

Leave the desert.

Keep going.

I climbed back into the driver's seat.

Dexter jumped into the passenger side with the easy certainty he had shown all journey long.

I turned the key.

The engine caught.

And the track — if you could call it that — began again.

## Chapter 20

### Leaving the Desert

When I started the engine again the sound felt strangely reassuring.

For a while the truck had been silent behind me, just another object resting in the middle of the desert. Now the low rumble of the engine returned, vibrating gently through the steering wheel and the seat beneath me.

It was a small sound in a very large place.

But in that moment it meant movement.

Dexter jumped back into the passenger seat as if nothing unusual had happened at all. He circled once before settling into the same comfortable position he had used for most of the journey, nose near the open window, ears occasionally twitching as the desert wind drifted through the cab.

If he sensed the seriousness of the situation we had been in, he did not show it.

Dogs rarely do.

They live in the moment directly in front of them.

The past is not something they revisit.

The future is not something they imagine.

There is only the road ahead.

I placed the truck into gear and began driving again.

The desert stretched outward in every direction exactly as it had before. The horizon remained enormous. The wind continued sliding across the sand. Nothing about the landscape had changed simply because my understanding of the situation had become clearer.

But something inside me had shifted.

For a long time after Kira died, part of me had been moving through life without a clear reason to continue. I had not always admitted that to myself, but it was there beneath the surface — a quiet acceptance that if something happened along the way, perhaps that would simply be how the story ended.

Sitting on that adventure box had stripped that idea away.

The desert had brought me face to face with something very simple.

If I was going to survive, I had to choose it.

Not in theory.

Not in some vague philosophical sense.

But in practical decisions.

Driving carefully.

Conserving fuel.

Making every choice count.

The truck moved slowly across the desert floor.

I kept the speed low, both because the terrain demanded it and because fuel was now more valuable than ever. The needle on the gauge sat dangerously close to empty.

Water was limited.

Food was nearly gone.

And somewhere ahead — according to the map — a small settlement might exist.

Or it might not.

The map had been the only guide through that enormous landscape, but maps can lie. In remote places they often show things that once existed but no longer do. A town that once had a fuel station might now be nothing more than a handful of buildings slowly disappearing into the sand.

Still, the map was all we had.

So I followed it.

Hours passed.

The desert did not change quickly. One of the strange things about travelling through such an open landscape is how little the view seems to shift even after long periods of movement. The same colours stretched across the ground. The same wide sky covered everything.

Occasionally the terrain rose slightly or dipped into shallow valleys, but the sense of endless space remained constant.

Dexter stayed alert beside me.

Sometimes he sat upright watching the world pass by.

Sometimes he rested his head on the edge of the open window, letting the wind move through his thick fur.

Watching him helped keep my mind steady.

Animals have a way of grounding you in the present moment. They do not share the human habit of imagining worst-case scenarios or replaying past regrets. They simply experience the world as it is.

If Dexter trusted that the road ahead was worth following, perhaps that was enough.

Late in the afternoon something appeared on the horizon.

At first it was barely noticeable.

Just a faint shape interrupting the flat line where desert met sky.

I leaned slightly forward in the seat, narrowing my eyes against the glare of the sun.

For several minutes it remained uncertain.

The desert often plays tricks with distance. Heat rising from the ground creates illusions that look like structures or vehicles far away, only to dissolve again when you approach.

But this shape did not disappear.

Gradually it grew clearer.

A building.

Then another.

And what looked unmistakably like the outline of a fuel pump.

The sight hit me with a sudden rush of relief.

Not the loud kind.

Not the sort that makes a person shout or celebrate.

Just a deep, quiet release of tension that had been building for hours.

The settlement was real.

And with it came the first sign of civilisation we had seen since entering that part of the desert.

As we drove closer, the buildings slowly became clearer.

They were simple structures, weathered by wind and sand, standing in a small cluster against the enormous landscape surrounding them. A few vehicles sat nearby — dusty, worn machines that looked as though they had been travelling the same unforgiving terrain we had.

The fuel pump stood beside one of the buildings.

It looked almost surreal.

A small piece of human infrastructure in the middle of a landscape that otherwise seemed completely untouched.

I pulled the truck alongside it and switched off the engine.

The sudden silence felt different this time.

Not heavy.

Not threatening.

Just quiet.

Dexter jumped down from the passenger seat and stretched, shaking dust from his coat before wandering a few steps away to investigate the ground around the building.

I climbed out and stood beside the truck for a moment, letting the reality of the situation settle in.

We had made it.

Fuel.

Water.

Food.

All of it suddenly seemed possible again.

A man eventually emerged from one of the buildings.

He moved slowly, looking at the truck and then at Dexter with quiet curiosity. Travellers appearing from deep inside the desert were probably not an everyday occurrence.

We exchanged a few simple words.

Language barriers made conversation limited, but some things do not require much explanation.

Fuel.

Water.

Those needs are universal.

He nodded and began preparing the pump.

Watching the fuel flow into the truck felt almost miraculous.

After hours of staring at the empty gauge, the slow movement of the needle climbing upward again carried an enormous sense of relief.

Dexter returned and sat beside the truck while I filled our water containers.

He seemed pleased with the new environment — curious about the unfamiliar smells around the buildings, watching the occasional movement of people passing nearby.

From time to time he looked up at me, tail resting comfortably against the ground.

As if checking that everything was fine.

For the first time in days, I felt certain that it was.

The sun had begun lowering toward the horizon by the time everything was ready again.

The settlement remained quiet.

A few vehicles moved slowly in the distance.

Wind carried sand gently across the ground.

But the enormous isolation we had experienced deeper in the desert no longer surrounded us.

We had reached the edge.

Standing beside the truck, I looked back toward the direction we had come from.

Somewhere out there lay the sand dunes where Dexter had rolled happily down the slopes.  
Somewhere out there lay the small holes in the desert floor where bats had nested.  
Somewhere out there lay the place where I had sat on the adventure box, staring across the empty horizon and recording what I thought might be my final message.

The desert had tested something in me.

Not just physically.

Emotionally.

Mentally.

It had brought me face to face with the truth that I could not escape grief by moving toward danger. That losing Kira had broken my world, but it had not removed my responsibility to continue living inside it.

The desert had forced that understanding in a way nothing else could.

Dexter climbed back into the passenger seat.

I started the engine once more.

The truck rolled forward slowly as we left the small settlement behind.

The track — if it could be called that — led away from the desert and toward the wider world beyond.

For the first time since entering the Gobi, I knew with certainty that we were leaving it behind as a tarmacked road appeared in the distance.

And as the vast landscape slowly began to fade into the distance behind us, I realised something else.

We had not only survived the desert.

In a quiet way, I had survived something inside myself as well.

## Chapter 21

### The Mountains Again

The journey home did not happen all at once.

Leaving the Gobi Desert was only the beginning of the long road back via the Sea of Japan, and then traversing the longest road in the world – the Trans-Siberian Highway.

Thousands of miles still stretched ahead of Dexter and me. Countries, borders, unfamiliar roads, long days behind the wheel and quiet nights wherever we could stop safely.

But something had changed.

The desert had forced a kind of clarity that had been missing from my life for years. Sitting on the adventure box in the middle of that enormous landscape had stripped away something I had been carrying quietly since Kira died.

For a long time part of me had been drifting.

Not consciously.

Not with dramatic intention.

But with a subtle lack of direction that made life feel like something I was simply enduring rather than choosing.

The desert had ended that.

Facing the possibility that Dexter and I might not leave it alive had brought something important into focus. Survival was not automatic. Life was not something that continued by default.

You had to choose it.

And once you chose it, you had to keep choosing it every day that followed.

The long road westward gave me time to think about that.

Driving across continents has a particular rhythm. Hours pass in a steady flow of movement. Time zones are crossed daily, sometimes more than one in a day. Landscapes shift slowly outside the windscreen. Towns appear and disappear. Languages change. Road signs carry unfamiliar shapes and alphabets.

But inside the cab of the truck, the world remains simple.

Steering wheel.

Engine.

Road ahead.

Dexter beside me.

He remained exactly as he had been throughout the entire journey — calm, curious, quietly loyal. Sometimes he watched the landscape outside the window. Sometimes he slept with his head resting on the seat. Occasionally he lifted his nose to the air drifting through the open window, studying scents that only a dog could understand.

The desert had not frightened him.

The distance had not bothered him.

For him the journey had been exactly what life should be.

Movement.

Exploration.

Being beside the person he trusted.

In many ways I envied that simplicity.

Days of driving slowly carried us back across the vast spaces of Asia.

The land gradually changed.

The dry desert air softened into greener landscapes.

Rivers began appearing again.

Trees returned to the horizon.

Small towns became more frequent.

Civilisation slowly rebuilt itself around the road.

And with every mile westward, something else began returning to my thoughts.

Mountains.

Not the distant desert ridges or the rocky outcrops scattered across Mongolia, but the mountains of home.

The places where Kira and I had once walked together.

The trails where she had raced ahead with endless energy.

The ridges where she had stood with her hands on her hips, proud of every summit we reached.

For a long time after she died I had avoided those places.

Not deliberately.

But returning to them had felt impossible.

The mountains held too many memories.

Too many echoes of a life that had ended too soon.

Yet during the long drive home, the idea began to grow slowly in my mind.

Perhaps I needed to go back.

Not to relive the past.

But to face it.

Eventually the truck rolled onto the familiar roads of the United Kingdom again.

The countryside looked almost strangely small after the enormous landscapes we had crossed during the journey. Hills that once felt large now seemed modest compared to the endless horizons of Asia.

But familiarity has its own comfort.

The green fields.

Stone walls.

The quiet villages.

All of it carried the sense of returning to something known.

Dexter seemed to recognise the change as well.

The smells were different.

The air was cooler.

The roads narrower.

But he remained just as interested in everything as he had been at the beginning of the journey.

When we finally arrived back near home, I did not stay inside the house for long.

Something else was waiting.

The mountains.

One morning not long after returning, I packed a small bag and loaded it into the truck.

Dexter watched with quiet interest, tail moving slowly as he followed my movements.

When I opened the passenger door he climbed in immediately.

He already understood.

We were going somewhere.

The drive toward the mountains felt familiar.

Roads I had travelled many times before slowly carried us toward the rising landscape of the Lake District.

Green hills grew larger on the horizon.

Stone walls traced ancient lines across the countryside.

The sky carried the soft grey tones that belong to northern England rather than the endless blue of the desert.

Eventually the road climbed into the valleys where the mountains began.

I parked the truck at the base of the trail.

Dexter jumped down immediately and stretched, clearly ready for the walk ahead.

For a moment I stood beside the vehicle looking upward.

The path wound its way across the hillside, rising gradually toward the higher ridges beyond.

I had walked that kind of trail many times before.

Often with Kira.

Those memories returned quickly.

Her small boots crunching against gravel.

Her voice calling back down the trail.

“Come on, Daddy. You’re too slow.”

For a moment the weight of those memories pressed heavily against me.

But this time something felt different.

I was not avoiding them anymore.

I clipped Dexter's lead onto his collar and started walking.

The trail climbed steadily upward.

The air felt fresh and cool after the heat of the desert.

Grass brushed against the path.

Sheep moved lazily across the hillside, occasionally lifting their heads to watch us pass.

Dexter walked ahead confidently, his thick Malamute coat perfectly suited to the cooler mountain climate.

Watching him move through that landscape felt strangely natural.

As if the journey across continents had somehow led us back to exactly the place we needed to be.

The higher we climbed, the wider the view became.

Valleys opened below us.

Lakes reflected the soft grey sky.

The familiar shapes of the fells stretched across the horizon.

Eventually we reached the higher slopes where the air grew cooler and the wind moved more freely across the ridges.

Dexter paused occasionally to sniff the ground or watch distant sheep moving across the hills.

Otherwise he walked steadily beside me.

When we finally reached the summit ridge, I stopped for a moment.

The landscape stretched out in every direction.

Green valleys.

Dark water.

Rolling mountains fading into the distance.

And somewhere among those mountains lay the highest point in England.

Scafell Pike.

That mountain held something incredibly important to me.

Because it was where Kira's ashes had been scattered.

The place where part of her had returned to the landscape she loved.

Standing there with Dexter beside me, I felt the long road from the desert finally settle into place.

The journey had not been about escaping grief.

It had not been about outrunning the past.

It had been about finding my way back to life.

And somehow that road had led me exactly where I needed to return.

The mountains again.

## Chapter 22

### Keep Going

For a long time after Kira died, I thought survival would feel bigger than it actually does.

I imagined that if I ever found a way to continue living, it would come with some clear sign that life had changed. Some dramatic moment of peace. Some final understanding that would settle everything inside me and allow me to move forward without carrying so much weight.

But that was not how it happened.

Life after loss does not usually return in one grand moment.

It returns quietly.

In small decisions.

In ordinary mornings.

In the choice to get out of bed.

In the act of putting one foot in front of the other when there is still a part of you that would rather remain still.

By the time Dexter and I had left the desert and returned to the mountains, I understood something that had taken years to reach.

Grief does not end.

It changes shape.

At first it had been overwhelming, the kind of pain that filled every room and every thought. It had lived in the quiet house, in the empty spaces where Kira should still have been, in the routines that no longer made sense without her. Then it had spread further, into alcohol, debt, broken relationships, isolation, and the slow dismantling of the life I had known.

For a long time grief had felt like a force that only took things away.

But somewhere along the road, and especially in the desert, I began to understand that grief was not the only thing still living inside me.

Love was still there too.

That matters.

Because love and grief are not opposites. Grief is what love becomes when the person you love is no longer physically present. It is the continuing shape of care. The evidence that the bond did not disappear just because life changed in the worst possible way.

For years I had carried the question Kira asked me on my birthday.

“Daddy... will you die with me so you can look after me?”

Those words had followed me through everything.

They had followed me through the final week of her life.

Through the living room where I lay beside her as she died at 02:55.

Through the quiet house.

Through the years that came after.

Through the nights when grief sat so heavily on my chest that continuing felt almost impossible.

Through the long road across continents.

All the way to the middle of the Gobi Desert, where I finally understood what I had not been able to understand before.

The promise she asked for had changed shape.

I could not die with her.

But I could still look after her in another way.

I could look after her memory.

I could protect the truth of who she was.

I could make sure the world remembered more than her illness.

I could live in a way that honoured the little girl who was fun, cheeky, and adventurous.

That realisation did not remove the pain.

It did not make the years after her death suddenly feel easier.

It did not erase the guilt I had carried for so long.

But it gave the future a different meaning.

For years I had been asking the wrong question.

I had been asking how to reach her.

What I needed to ask was how to carry her with me.

Those are not the same thing.

You cannot walk back into the past.

You cannot drive far enough, climb high enough, or suffer deeply enough to return to the person you lost.

There is no road that leads there.

But you can carry them forward.

In memory.

In action.

In the way you choose to continue.

That is what “keep going” came to mean for me.

Not some empty motivational phrase.

Not a denial of pain.

Not pretending that grief can be conquered through willpower.

It meant something much simpler and much harder.

It meant continuing to live while still loving someone who is gone.

That is not a single act.

It is a daily one.

Some days it comes more easily than others.

Some days the world feels manageable. The mountains look beautiful. The air feels clean. Dexter trots ahead on the path, and for a while life feels almost steady.

Other days grief returns with the same old force. A memory appears unexpectedly. A silence in the house feels too large. A date on the calendar brings everything rushing back. A single sentence, a smell, a photograph, the angle of light on a hill — any of it can reopen the distance between then and now.

That is what many people misunderstand about grief.

They imagine that healing means leaving it behind.

But grief is not something I left behind.

Kira is not something I left behind.

I carried her into every year that followed.

I still do.

Sometimes that presence appears in obvious ways.

In the mountains, for example.

The mountains will always belong to her in some way. Whenever I walk those paths, I remember her racing ahead, stopping to wait for me, hands on her hips, pretending patience she did not really feel.

“Come on, Daddy. You’re too slow.”

I can still hear it.

There are moments on certain trails when memory becomes so vivid that it almost feels like sound. Not in a supernatural sense. Just in the way grief and love can preserve a person so clearly inside you that their voice remains part of the landscape.

That is one of the reasons I moved to be close to where her ashes were scattered.

Near Scafell Pike, the highest mountain in England.

It felt right.

The mountains had been one of the places where we were happiest together. They were places of effort, laughter, weather, silence, and shared views. They were where she felt most like herself.

To be near those mountains now is to remain near something honest.

Something that still connects me to her.

Sometimes I stand high on those slopes with Dexter beside me and look out across the valleys, and I think about how strange life is.

How impossible.

How beautiful.

How cruel.

How persistent.

The same world that allowed me to watch my daughter die also still gives me wind across a summit, cloud shadows moving over the fells, the companionship of a dog sitting quietly beside me, and the memory of a girl who once made every walk feel like an expedition.

That contradiction never really goes away.

Life does not become fair.

It simply continues.

And somehow, we continue inside it.

Dexter has been part of that continuing in ways that are difficult to explain fully.

He arrived at a time when I had lost almost everything.

He gave shape back to my days.

He brought movement when my life had become still.

He walked beside me through grief, through isolation, through the road east, through the desert, and back again.

There is a particular kind of loyalty in a dog that feels almost sacred when you have known great loss. No explanations. No demands for emotional clarity. No need for words. Just presence.

Sometimes presence is enough to keep a person in the world.

And perhaps that is what I came to understand more than anything else.

You do not always keep going because you feel strong.

Sometimes you keep going because something — a memory, a dog, a mountain path, a voice inside your mind — gives you just enough reason to take the next step.

Then the step after that.

Then another.

People sometimes ask me how you survive something like this.

How do you keep living after losing a child?

I have never found a neat answer.

There are no clever words that solve that question.

No formula.

No lesson that makes the pain meaningful in the way people sometimes want suffering to be meaningful.

The truth is far less satisfying and far more real.

You survive one day at a time.

Sometimes one hour at a time.

You survive by doing the next thing.

By making tea.

By walking the dog.

By opening the curtains.

By answering the phone, or not answering it.

By breathing through anniversaries and birthdays and ordinary Tuesdays.

By learning that memory can hurt and sustain you in the same moment.

By allowing grief to travel with you instead of spending your life trying to outrun it.

And somewhere inside all of that, if you are lucky, you begin to hear the voice of the person you loved in a different way.

Not as a call back into the past.

But as something that gently pushes you forward.

If I think about Kira now, and I imagine what she would say if she could see me standing in the mountains or sitting quietly in the house or walking some long trail with Dexter beside me, I do not imagine complicated wisdom.

I do not imagine a speech.

I imagine something much more like her.

Direct.

Slightly cheeky.

Certain.

“Come on, Daddy.”

“Keep going.”

Those two words contain more truth than I once realised.

Keep going.

Not because everything is all right.

Not because grief is over.

Not because the past can be fixed.

But because life is still here.

Because love is still here.

Because the only promise I can now keep is to continue.

To get up.

To walk.

To remember.

To say her name.

To tell the truth about who she was.

To protect the part of her that remains in this world through memory and story and the way I live.

That is what keeping going means.

It means that every day I remain alive, I am still carrying her.

Every step I take in the mountains, every road I drive, every quiet evening I survive, every page I write, every memory I preserve — all of it is part of the same act.

An act of continued love.

For a long time I believed the central question of my life was how to survive losing Kira.

Now I think the real question is slightly different.

How do I live in a way that remains worthy of her?

I do not always know.

Some days I fail at it.

Some days I feel tired, withdrawn, lost, angry, or empty.

Some days I still question why I am here.

But even then, the answer remains the same.

Keep going.

That is the only way I know to honour her.

Kira was fun, cheeky, and adventurous.

She loved the mountains.

She loved laughter.

She loved life in a way many adults forget how to.

And even in illness, even in the darkest moments, she still found ways to make me smile, to tell the truth sharply, to bring light into places that should have been unbearably dark.

So if I want to remain faithful to her, if I want my life after her death to mean anything, then I have to follow the lesson she left behind without ever meaning to turn it into a lesson.

Keep going.

Not perfectly.

Not heroically.

Just honestly.

One day at a time.

One step at a time.

One mountain path.

One long road.

One breath.

Then another.

And so I do.

I keep going.

In her name.

Short Story Video

<https://youtu.be/0LYFM7EacEY>