

Nemi Celestia

9:17

A NEMI SHORT STORY



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Preface

Content warning: grief, death, death of a sibling, emotional isolation.

This story deals with themes of loss, memory, and connection in the aftermath of a tragedy. While nothing is shown graphically, it includes emotional descriptions of grief, a young person's death, and the ways we try to hold on to someone after they're gone.

If you are in a vulnerable place, please read with care. You are not alone.

— Nemi

In memory

For those we've lost, and the people still carrying their light.

Chapter One

I didn't know what I expected when we moved. Maybe something easier. A clean start. A chance to feel less out of place than I always had.

The city didn't sleep. Even when the sky went dark, it stayed loud and lit — like the whole place was afraid of silence. I learned the rhythm quickly: sirens in the distance, voices floating up from the street, the hum of traffic that never quite stopped. None of it ever felt like mine.

But the fire escape did.

It clung to the building like an afterthought — narrow, rusted, just outside my bedroom window. I found it that first night by accident. After that, it became my spot. Somewhere to sit when I couldn't stand the feeling of the apartment pressing in.

Mom thought I was adjusting. I told her school was okay. It wasn't awful, but no one really saw me either. I was just... there. A name on a roster. A body in the hall. I think that kind of loneliness is worse than being actively disliked. At least when people hate you, you're real to them. I was more like a visitor. Someone passing through. Or perhaps a ghost.

That night, I was curled up on the fire escape, my hoodie pulled over my knees, staring out at the rooftops across the street. Nothing special. Just bricks, vents, the occasional flicker of a neon sign from the laundromat on the corner.

And then someone stepped into view.

It was a shadow at first — a figure near the edge of the opposite building, just barely visible under the streetlights. They wore a hoodie, too, pulled low over their face. I couldn't tell anything else — not how old they were, not if it was a boy or a girl. Just that they moved like they were trying not to break the night. Quiet. Precise. Almost like walking on ice.

They stopped, turned slowly, and raised their arms into a pose — something I couldn't name. Balanced. Still. Not performance exactly... more like ritual.

I didn't know what I was seeing. I just knew I couldn't look away.

After a couple of minutes, maybe less, they turned and disappeared behind a stairwell door. No sound. No glance in my direction. Just gone.

I sat there for a long time, hugging my knees, the image still flickering behind my eyes like an afterimage from staring at the sun too long.

I didn't know who they were.

I didn't know what any of it meant.

But I knew one thing.

I'd be out there again tomorrow night.

Just in case.

The next day passed in a blur. School felt even grayer than before — too loud in the halls, too quiet in the classroom. I kept glancing out the windows, half-expecting to see something, though I didn't know what. My mind kept drifting back to that rooftop.

I didn't tell Mom. I didn't know how to explain it anyway. She was in a good mood that evening, trying to make the apartment feel less like a halfway house and more like home. She made pasta, the kind from the packet with too much garlic powder, and we ate together at the little kitchen table. She asked if I wanted to start a show together — something “low commitment,” she said, just a comedy she'd heard about.

We watched two episodes. I even laughed a few times. It wasn't bad. But the whole time, I could feel the minutes tugging at me, like the night was stretching out without me.

So I excused myself early. Said I had a headache — not exactly a lie. It was that fuzzy kind, more like static behind the eyes.

I slipped into my room, opened the window, and climbed out onto the fire escape. The metal groaned faintly under me, but it held. The air was cooler than the night before, the kind of crisp that smells like pavement and wind.

I waited. I didn't know how long I'd sit there. Ten minutes passed. Then twenty. I tried not to look too often. I didn't want to seem desperate, even to myself.

And then — there.

Same rooftop. Same shadowed figure. Hoodie up. Silent as before. They moved with that same careful grace, not so much sneaking as... gliding. Like they didn't want to disturb the world more than necessary.

I looked at my phone. 9:17 PM. I typed it into my notes app without thinking, then looked back up.

They were standing near the edge again. No flourish, no hesitation — just that same stillness. Same pose.

I lifted my hand and gave a little wave. Nothing big. Just enough to say I was there, that I'd come back.

But the figure didn't move. Not a nod, not a glance. I couldn't even see their face, not really — the hoodie cast everything in shadow, just like before.

I held the wave for a few seconds, then let my arm fall back to my lap.

Maybe they hadn't seen me. Or maybe I wasn't supposed to be seen.

Still, I stayed until they vanished again.

Then I went back inside and wrote down the time one more time, just to be sure.

9:17 PM. Exactly.

Chapter Two

A few nights passed, each one like a quiet echo of the last.

I kept returning to the fire escape just before nine, curling up with my legs tucked beneath me, waiting. I never brought anything to do—no book, no sketchpad, no headphones. Just my phone to check the time now and then. Most evenings, it was just me and the sky, the rustle of wind through rusted metal, the hum of traffic far below. The occasional bark of a dog. A siren. Someone laughing blocks away. The city breathing in and out while I watched the rooftop across the street, hoping.

And always, at exactly 9:17, they appeared.

Most evenings I'd get there early and start wondering if I'd imagined them. If maybe the pose and the timing were just coincidences, and my brain had made a

pattern out of shadows and habit. But then the figure would emerge from the rooftop access like clockwork. Every time.

I always waved. Small. Polite. Not desperate. Just a gesture — *hello, I see you.*

And like clockwork — maybe just another cog in the same mechanism — I never got anything back. Not even a twitch. Just stillness. Just the pose.

Tonight was different, though.

I noticed it the second they stepped into view: the hoodie. Not the deep charcoal or navy I'd grown used to. This one was white. Bright against the night sky, almost glowing under the rooftop floodlight. It caught me off guard.

I found myself wondering—had they always changed their hoodie each night? Had I just assumed it was the same because the others were dark? Maybe all the dark ones ended up in the laundry hamper at once. Or maybe they didn't think anyone would notice. Maybe they didn't care.

I checked the time.

9:17 on the dot.

They walked with that same quiet grace, every step careful, almost ceremonial. And then, just like the other nights, they took their place and settled into that motionless pose. Arms shaped into something that looked like still water or folded wings — I hadn't decided yet.

I waved, out of habit more than hope.
And I watched.

But instead of turning and vanishing like before, they stayed.

Just a few seconds longer. Enough to make me sit up straighter.

Then it happened — the smallest flicker of light.

It appeared in their hands, low and careful, like a secret. A tiny, steady flame. I blinked, not sure I was seeing it right. It wasn't a phone screen, too warm for that. It wasn't electric.

It was real.

A flame. Tiny and vulnerable. Just a wisp of gold hovering in the dark.

I couldn't tell if it was a candle, a torch, or one of those storm matches you strike against anything. But the way

they shielded it from the breeze told me it meant something.

And then, just as quickly, the flame disappeared. Snuffed out between cupped hands.

They stood a few seconds longer. Then, as always, turned and slipped away down the hatch.

I sat there long after they were gone, feeling oddly unsettled — not scared, not exactly, just... pulled into something I didn't understand yet.

Later that night, I lay in bed with the lights off and the curtains drawn almost — but not quite — shut. Citylight spilled in through the gaps, smeared across the ceiling like pale paint. Somewhere below, a car alarm whooped and then gave up. The hum of traffic was constant, a far-off ocean I was still getting used to.

I turned onto my side and stared at the wall, the rhythm of lights and shadows passing in long, silent waves.

Seven nights.

I counted them on my fingers just to be sure. Seven times I'd seen the stranger. Seven nights at 9:17 sharp. Seven waves from me, zero returned. Always the same pattern. Until tonight — the flame. A shift in the pattern. Small, but deliberate.

The white hoodie stood out in my mind, too. Maybe because it was different. Maybe because it wasn't trying to disappear. Maybe it meant something. I didn't know. I wasn't sure how much of any of this was real, and how much was just the way I needed it to be.

And that pose...

I'd tried to describe it to myself a dozen different ways. It reminded me of someone halfway through the "Y" in YMCA — arms lifted, but tilted, like the moment before movement rather than the shape itself. But it didn't spell anything I knew.

It looked like something ancient.

Not just a pose, but a symbol. A rune from a long-lost language. A hieroglyph carved into stone. Or maybe something from farther away — a signal from someone who didn't quite belong to this planet. Something that meant "remember," or "wait," or "I'm still here."

I closed my eyes and saw it burned behind my lids — arms curved just so, body poised like a statue in wind.

I didn't know who they were.

I didn't know why they did it.

But I knew I'd be back tomorrow.

Chapter Three

A few more nights passed.

The pattern held steady.

No flames. No white hoodie.

Just the stranger — still as ever — stepping out of the shadows at 9:17, striking that same strange pose, and then melting back into the night. Like clockwork. Like ritual.

I started to wonder if they saw me at all. Or if I was just waving into the dark, like a lighthouse trying to signal a ship that might not even be there.

Once, halfway through reheating leftovers for dinner, I almost told Mom. I had the words lined up — not everything, just the basics. That I'd seen someone across the street on the rooftops at night. That they moved in a certain way. That they were there every night, always at the same time.

But then I imagined the look on her face. The way her brow would crease in that soft, worried way. How she'd tilt her head slightly, like she did when I'd say something she didn't quite know how to handle.

I didn't want that look.

Worse, I didn't want her to think I was making it all up just to feel less alone. Or worse than that — that I *wasn't* making it up. That I was really, *truly*, that lonely.

I guess I was. I really, really think I was.

School was still weird. Not hostile, just... vague. Blurry around the edges. The kind of place you drift through without anyone stopping you, but also without anyone really seeing you. Some kids smiled when I passed them in the hall. One girl asked me what bus I took. That was something, I guess.

But most days I felt like a visitor. Like I'd wandered into someone else's life by mistake and no one had noticed yet.

At night, though — out on the fire escape — I didn't feel like a visitor. I didn't feel like a ghost.

I felt real.

Maybe that was the whole point.

That night I sat out on the fire escape again.

The breeze was warmer now — not quite summer, but getting there. The kind that clings to your skin, rather than a cold wind biting through it. I didn't bother with my hoodie. Just a t-shirt and my old pajama pants, legs tucked beneath me as I leaned against the railing.

I wondered if the stranger would still be wearing theirs. Maybe they always wore a hoodie because of who they were — not because of the weather. But still, I couldn't help wondering.

The minutes ticked toward 9:17. I watched the rooftop like usual, one knee bouncing.

And then they were there.

Like always.

Like magic.

Hoodie on. Same fluid steps. Same pause.

Same pose — the one I'd tried to draw a dozen times but could never quite get right. It wasn't exactly graceful, but it had weight. Like it meant something.

Then —

A shift.

Not much. Just a small turn. The tilt of their hooded head. I couldn't see their face, not really — but they were looking. *At me.*

I felt it like a spark up my spine.

Without thinking, I raised my hand in a fuller wave than usual. Not the soft little flick I normally gave, but a proper wave. Open palm, a bit silly, like I was greeting someone across a parking lot.

And for the first time —

A response.

Just a small motion. Barely more than a twitch of the hand. But deliberate. A wave. *My* wave.

I held still, not even breathing, as the stranger lowered their hand and turned away, vanishing down whatever path they always took, as silent as ever.

But this time, I wasn't left behind quite the same way.

Something had shifted.

Later that night, I lay in bed with the lights off and the city pressing soft shapes against my curtains.

I stared at the ceiling, arms above my head, fingers laced. I could still feel the air from the fire escape on my skin — warm, restless.

The wave had been small. Quick. Maybe I imagined it.

Maybe it was a trick of the light. Or the way my heart had wanted something so badly, it built it out of shadows and hope.

I replayed it again and again. The turn of the head. The movement of the hand. It hadn't been nothing. I was sure of that.

Almost sure.

I whispered the time into the darkness — *Nine seventeen* — like a charm. My secret tether.

And then I closed my eyes, trying not to smile.

Just in case it *had* been real.

Chapter Four

Mom glanced up from the kitchen table as I headed for my room right on the dot — 8:50, like clockwork.

“You’re heading to bed pretty early these days, Lark,” she said, that nickname soft and careful. “Back before the move, you wouldn’t think of going to bed before ten, maybe even later. I’d have to remind you a dozen times.”

I paused in the doorway, the urge to tell her about the rooftop stranger flickering but held back.

“Guess the new school wears me out,” I said, trying to sound casual. “I just need the sleep.”

She nodded, eyes warm but a little curious. “If you ever want to talk about anything, you know where to find me.”

I gave a quick smile and slipped inside, the sound of her voice a quiet comfort as the door closed behind me.

Minutes later, I was in my bedroom with the lights off, window cracked open just enough to slip through. The air was warm and sticky, full of city dust and the scent of something grilled a few stories down. I climbed out onto the fire escape and settled into my usual spot, legs folded beneath me, back against the railing.

It was always the same. The whole day—school, dinner, conversation, brushing my teeth, even this quiet moment—all of it seemed like a lead-up to now. Just a few minutes. Just this. The part of the day that felt the most real. The most important.

Everything else was just... waiting.

I didn't even realize my thoughts had drifted until I noticed the faint movement across the street. A shift in shadow. A figure stepping out onto the rooftop, just as the clock on my phone turned 9:17.

I sat up a little straighter.

There they were.

The city was starting to sweat. Even this high up, the heat clung to everything like a damp hand. The fire escape railing had cooled a little since sunset, but the

air still carried that heavy, sticky feeling — the kind that meant summer was almost here.

Below me, the waste bins stank like old fruit. Someone must've missed the last pickup. I tried not to breathe too deep. Two windows over, an AC unit rattled like it was falling apart one screw at a time, chugging out stale, half-cold air that barely reached the open space between the buildings.

But now it was 9.17 and all that had disappeared. The stranger on the rooftop had moved to the usual spot — as always quiet, deliberate, like they were afraid of breaking the night.

I raised my hand in the little wave, still not eager, but consistent. It had become a kind of reflex by now, like brushing my teeth or checking the time. And across the gap between us, they lifted a hand in return.

Still no face I could make out. Just the same hoodie — dark again tonight — and that same careful grace, like walking on glass. But the wave was real. Not long, not dramatic. Just a flick of the fingers. Enough.

They moved into the pose — the one I'd come to expect. Still impossible to name. Still strangely beautiful. Part statue, part signal, part... something else. I didn't know what it meant. I just knew it mattered.

And then, just before they disappeared back into the dark, they lifted their hand again.

A goodnight.

I waved back. A quiet mirror.

This was our rhythm now. Wave, pose, wave. A kind of dance stretched across rooftops. A new normal.

And honestly? It was the best part of my day.

Chapter Five

I was out there by 8.50 as usual.

The sky was a burnt orange bruise, softening into the kind of blue that turns everything silver. My knees were pulled up, chin resting on them, the railing cool against my shoulder. I kept my eyes fixed on the rooftop like always, as if focus alone could will them into being.

9:17 came.

Nothing.

The roof across the way stayed still — empty, unremarkable. Like any other roof in any other city. Like it hadn't ever held something sacred.

I waited. Five minutes. Then ten.

My heart did that thing it sometimes does when you're trying really hard not to care but your body betrays you

anyway. A tightness, a flutter, a sinking. I kept telling myself maybe they were just late. Or maybe they weren't feeling well. Or maybe their family had people over and it wasn't safe to sneak out. Maybe-maybe-maybe.

But the rooftop stayed empty.

I stayed out longer than usual. Past when the pose would've happened. Past when the wave should've come. Past when it made sense to wait.

Eventually I pulled myself back through the window, my pajama pants catching on the sill. I didn't turn on the light.

Didn't need to see my own face in the mirror.

I just sat on the edge of the bed, trying not to wonder if the spell had broken. If maybe I'd imagined the whole thing. Or worse — if they'd stopped showing up because they'd changed their mind.

Because maybe this had only ever meant something to me.

I crawled under the covers without brushing my teeth. My pajama pants — the ones I tore on the window frame — were crumpled on the floor, thread pulled and hanging like a loose thought I couldn't quite follow.

I lay there staring up at the ceiling, blinking slow. The city seeped in, a car horn, the hiss of a truck's brakes, someone yelling too far away to understand. All of it felt louder tonight, like the quiet left behind had made space for noise.

What if they never came back?

What if I scared them off somehow — with my waving, or just by being there?

Or worse — what if I made it all up?

The thought hit hard. I let it sit in my chest like a rock. Maybe none of it was real. Maybe the heat and the loneliness had gotten to me and my brain decided to make a friend out of shadows and rooftops. Maybe I'd imagined the wave. Or twisted some stranger's stretch into something meaningful. I wouldn't be the first lonely kid to make up a connection where there wasn't one.

But no. No, I hadn't made it up.

I closed my eyes and saw it again — the exact way they held their hand, the angle of their body in that pose, the flicker of the flame. The shift in their shoulders when they finally waved back. The dark hoodie, except that one time. The softness of the matchlight that time.

That kind of detail doesn't live in a dream.

Does it?

I pulled the blanket up over my mouth and breathed deep, anchoring myself to the softness, the weight, the now. The stranger was real. I was sure of it.

Pretty sure.

Probably.

Chapter Six

All day, my stomach had been knotted. Not in a sick way — more like something I'd forgotten to do was quietly unraveling inside me, tugging at every thought. I went through school like a shadow. Barely heard what anyone said. Barely cared. The only thing that mattered was whether they'd be there tonight.

I couldn't stand the wait.

So I made an excuse to head to my room early. Earlier than normal, even for me.

"That tired already?" Mom asked, raising an eyebrow.

I nodded and mumbled something about a headache. She didn't press.

By eight o'clock I was already out on the fire escape, sitting cross-legged in my pajama pants and a hoodie,

even though the air didn't really need it. The metal was still warm from the day. The city below was doing its usual thing — honking, rattling, talking to itself. I'd never noticed how long an hour could be.

I watched the windows across the street flicker on one by one. People settling in. Someone laughed loud through an open window. The smell of something spicy drifted up from a kitchen vent.

Still no sign.

My eyes kept darting to the rooftop. Nothing. Again. Nothing.

At 9:10, my hands started to sweat. At 9:15, I stopped blinking.

And then — 9:17.

They appeared like always, as if nothing had ever been different. Same hoodie — dark again — same quiet presence. Just standing there. Like the missed night hadn't happened at all.

I let out a breath I didn't realise I'd been holding. My whole body sagged.

And then I waved.

And, just like before, they waved back.

I lay there, still enough to hear my own breathing — slow, uneven. The room was dark but warm, the curtains barely moving in the night breeze. Somewhere outside, the hum of the city drifted in, soft and steady, like a heartbeat I could almost follow.

Summer was definitely here. My room felt like a sauna, even with the window wide open. I'd ditched my clothes ages ago, thrown the sheets to the floor — and still, sweat kept sneaking down my ribs like I'd run a mile in my sleep.

I had no idea how long I had been laying here now. Perhaps hours. I didn't want to check my phone. I traced the patterns of shadows on the ceiling, letting my mind settle on the thought I hadn't dared to hold earlier.

They'd come back.

That meant something. Maybe it wasn't much. Maybe it was just a small, fragile thing. But it was real.

I could still feel the faint warmth of the fire escape against my skin, the slight chill of the night air mixing with the heat of summer creeping in, but not chill enough to really cool me off.

My heart, which had been tight and pounding all day, began to slow, the edges of worry softening like the way a shadow blurs at dusk.

I didn't want to think too hard about what this meant — didn't want to ruin the fragile peace wrapping itself around me like a blanket.

So I closed my eyes and let the quiet fill the room, holding on to the simple fact that tonight, I wasn't alone. I didn't know what comforted me more — that my rooftop shadow friend was real, that someone was out there, part of my life now.

Or just the fact that I wasn't crazy. At least not crazy enough to have imagined it all.

Chapter Seven

The sun was warm on my skin, and the park smelled of freshly cut grass and blooming flowers. I should've gone straight home to do my homework, but summer was in full swing, and I got off the bus a stop early. The playground was nearly empty, the swings creaking gently in the breeze. Just a couple of kids on the see-saw.

I walked slowly, letting the weight of the day settle around me. My mind drifted back to those nights — the small, steady moments that had become my anchor. Nothing new had happened at 9:17 lately. No missed appearances, no flickering flames, no white hoodies. Just the usual.

I waved. The shadow struck the pose. We waved goodbye. Over and over, like a quiet dance neither of us needed to speak about.

Those few minutes every night were the only real connection I had to someone besides Mom. The rest of the day felt hollow, like I was just waiting — waiting for the darkness, for that small movement across the street that made the loneliness easier to bear.

I kept walking, the laughter and shouts from the playground fading behind me like a slowly closing curtain. The park grew quieter, the usual hum of the city softened as if wrapped in a thick blanket. Soon after, I found a weathered bench beneath a sprawling oak and sank down, letting the stillness settle around me like a quiet breath.

I sat there for a few moments, breathing in the soft stillness, when something caught my eye—movement. Someone was walking along the crossing path about fifty yards ahead. At first, I couldn't say why it mattered. Then, as the figure disappeared around a corner and left the park, it hit me—the way they moved. Smooth, like a ninja, as if stepping carefully over thin ice. It was my rooftop stranger. And just like that, they were gone.

I jumped up from the bench, breath catching in my throat. Without thinking, I sprinted toward the gate that separated the park from the city streets. My eyes darted left, then right, scanning every shadow, every flicker of movement. The harsh sunlight made everything a bit

blurry, but I was sure of what I'd seen — that smooth, almost gliding step, the same quiet grace as my rooftop stranger.

I scanned the street, the hotdog vendor, the group of kids standing further down at the next entrance to the park. But they were gone. The strange figure had vanished again, slipping away like a ghost just beyond reach. My chest tightened with a mix of hope and frustration. Was it really them? Or just my mind playing tricks on me? The city swallowed them up, leaving me standing there, wanting more than anything to call out, to follow, but rooted to the spot instead.

Later that evening, just before 9, I climbed out onto the fire escape again. The metal was warm beneath my bare feet, the familiar creak greeting me like an old friend. I stared across at the stranger's rooftop, the distance between us suddenly feeling huge and impossible.

I ran through a hundred ideas in my head — sneaking in through a back door, climbing across the fire escapes, maybe even asking someone who lived in that building.

But nothing seemed doable, and the fear of getting caught or rejected held me back.

For now, all I could do was sit there and wait — waiting for that flicker of movement, that quiet dance, that small, silent connection that made the lonely nights bearable.

At exactly 9:17, the stranger emerged on the rooftop, just as always. My eyes locked on that silhouette, every tiny movement burning into my mind. I tried to compare this graceful glide with what I'd glimpsed in the park earlier—like walking on ice so thin it could crack any second.

Each step was deliberate but light, barely making a sound. The weight shifted fluidly from heel to toe, balancing perfectly as if dancing on a wire. The knees bent just so, muscles tensed and relaxed in a silent rhythm. The arms hung loose, ready to adjust with the slightest change, fingers occasionally twitching, like a cat sensing the air.

I knew this motion now—intimate and precise, like a dance choreographed for solitude and secrecy. It was neither hurried nor hesitant. Instead, it held the quiet confidence of someone who had practiced this ritual endlessly, who moved through the world aware of every breath and shadow.

No need to guess anymore. That had been them.

And somehow, despite all the distance and darkness, I
felt closer than ever.

Chapter Eight

The days stretched long and slow. Every afternoon after school, I found myself walking through the park, no matter the weather. It had become a ritual — a fragile thread tying me to something real, something maybe even hopeful.

I always sat on the same bench beneath the broad arms of the old oak tree, its leaves whispering softly in the breeze. From here, I could see most of the crossing path, the spot where I'd first caught that shadowy glimpse.

Sometimes I told myself it was silly, waiting for someone who might never come. But still, I held on to the hope that maybe, just maybe, they'd appear again — moving like a secret through the quiet park, as real and elusive as the twilight.

Each day, I scanned the path, heart quietly pounding, wondering if today was the day I'd see them again.

I hadn't been on the bench long when I saw the silhouette. It had been days. A week perhaps. It moved like before—smooth, silent, gliding beneath the shimmering sunlight filtered through the oak's crown.

On impulse, I called out—a creaky, shaky “hey.” The sound was louder than I expected, carrying just enough to make the figure pause and turn their head, if only for a moment.

I couldn't see the face, just the outline of that familiar hoodie, but I knew they saw me. Then, just as quickly, they slipped out of sight again, leaving me alone with the echo of my own voice.

They didn't stop. Just like before, the stranger moved toward the gate at the edge of the park, disappearing into the city beyond.

I stayed put, my heart thudding louder than the quiet around me. Part of me wanted to chase after them, but I told myself if they wanted to talk, they would have stopped. Maybe they weren't ready yet.

I kicked myself for not planning what I'd say or do if they came back. I'd been so caught up in hoping, I

hadn't thought through a single word. Now the silence pressed in—heavier than before.

So I sat back down on the bench, the warm afternoon air settling around me, waiting for whatever would come next.

That night at 8:50 when I climbed out onto the fire escape, my heart was pounding like a drum. I wasn't sure why, really. The city was quieter than usual, shadows long and soft in the summer heat.

The minutes crawled past. Slower than usual. But as always, or nearly always, I caught sight of them across the rooftops. I raised my hand and they waved back, just like we had done for a very long time now. Then, without missing a beat, they struck the pose—the same one they always did.

Then they turned and waved goodbye, just like every night before. But then—they stopped.

A change in the rhythm. In the ritual. My heart skipped a beat and I sat up straight. Slowly, deliberately, they turned fully toward me.

With careful fingers, they pulled down the hoodie, peeling back the shadow that had hidden them all this time.

Her face was there, clear in the dim light. A girl. Maybe a little older than me. For the first time, I saw her and I felt something shift inside me.

And then, just like every other night, she vanished—slipping back into the rooftop shadows as if she'd never been there at all.

But I didn't move.

I stayed where I was, cross-legged in my pajama pants, elbows resting on the warm iron rail, forehead leaning into my hands. The city was out there, alive and humming, but none of it seemed to touch me. Not really.

She had shown me her face.

Not just a wave, not just the pose. She had looked at me—really looked—and let me see her. And that simple, quiet act had cracked something open in my chest.

I replayed it over and over again, clinging to every detail. At least as much as I could tell over the considerable distance to the rooftop. The tilt of her chin. The shape of her eyes.

That calm, unreadable expression, like she knew what it meant and wasn't quite sure if I did. Perhaps these things were real, perhaps they were me imagining them, my brain filling out the blanks caused by the distance between us.

Was she older? Probably. A year, maybe two. The thought tugged at me gently, like a loose thread in my sweater. I didn't even know her name. I didn't know anything.

Except that she was real.

And tonight, she'd let me in, just a little.

I stayed on the fire escape long after she'd gone. The metal cooling beneath me. The city softening into sleep.

I didn't want to let it go.

Chapter Nine

A few nights passed, but she didn't show her face again. Still something had changed.

Whenever the shadow stepped onto the rooftop at exactly 9:17, I found myself holding my breath, eyes straining against the dark. It was as if I could almost make out the curve of her cheekbone, the shape of her eyes—details that shouldn't be there in the night, but felt so vivid in my mind that the darkness almost gave way to them.

The hoodie was still pulled low, the familiar pose still there, but I swear, I could see her. Not clearly, not quite—more like a memory lingering at the edge of my vision, a half-remembered dream that hovered just beyond reach.

It was a strange kind of comfort, this almost-vision, like she was closer somehow, even when she stayed hidden.

I waved as always, and waited for her goodbye wave in return. The city buzzed around us, but in that moment, it was just the two of us—connected by silence, shadows, and a flicker of something fragile but real.

But she didn't wave goodbye like usual. Instead, she pulled out her phone and held it so the flashlight shone toward me.

Then, using her finger, she covered and uncovered the light in quick, deliberate blinks—short flashes, one after another.

I watched, trying to make sense of the pattern, but it was like a secret language I didn't understand.

My heart beat a little faster. What was she trying to say?

I wanted to respond, to show I was paying attention, but all I could do was sit there, caught between wonder and confusion, staring at the blinking light.

What did it mean?

After a few more deliberate flashes, the girl slipped away into the night as she always did — silent, swift, vanishing into the shadows.

I stayed on the fire escape, the warm metal railing pressing into my back. The blinking light played over my thoughts, a puzzle I couldn't quite solve.

At first, I was at a loss. What did those flashes mean? Was it some kind of code?

Then, slowly, I realised — it wasn't random. It was some kind of language, a message sent through light.

But what language? I didn't know yet.

I hugged my knees and looked out over the dark cityscape, my mind spinning with new questions and a flicker of hope.

Maybe — just maybe — she was trying to reach me.

I couldn't let it go. The blinking light kept echoing in my mind, refusing to fade into the background.

Quietly, I slipped back inside the apartment, careful not to wake Mom if she was asleep. But she was still up, sitting on the couch with a book in her lap, the soft glow of the lamp casting a warm circle around her.

“Mom,” I whispered, sliding onto the armrest beside her. “What does it mean if someone flashes a light like... like a code?”

She looked up, surprised but patient. “Hmm,” she said, setting the book aside. “That could be Morse code, Lark. It’s an old way of sending messages — dots and dashes, or short and long flashes of light.”

I frowned, thinking. “So, like a secret language?”

“Exactly,” she nodded, her eyes gentle. “People used it a lot before phones were common. It’s still used sometimes — by ships at sea, or in emergencies.”

Back in my room, I closed the door softly behind me and dropped onto my bed. The apartment was quiet now, the city sounds muffled through the windows. My fingers trembled a little as I pulled out my phone and opened the search bar.

Typing in *Morse code*, I scrolled through pages of dots and dashes, short and long flashes — patterns that looked like a secret only meant for a few.

The explanations made sense, but the more I read, the more I realized something important: to understand the message, I’d have to write down the flashes as dots and dashes first. Just watching wasn’t enough. I needed a way to capture each blink, each pause, to decode whatever she was trying to say.

I bit my lip, thinking about the blurry light from earlier, how fast the flashes had been. Could I really keep up?

Would I get it right? But there was no turning back now. I had to try.

With a slow breath, I grabbed a notebook from my desk, opened it to a fresh page, and started jotting down symbols, copying the letters and their dots and dashes from the phone's screen, determined to unravel the stranger's message — one blink at a time.

Chapter Ten

The next night I settled onto the fire escape just before 9, exactly like I had done for about a month now, the familiar scrape of the metal steps under me. My notebook lay open on my lap, pen poised and ready, a fresh page waiting to catch every flicker of light.

The city was quieter now, the evening heat fading into a gentle coolness that brushed against my skin. My heartbeat felt steady but expectant. Tonight, I told myself, I would be ready.

As the minutes ticked by, I watched the rooftop across from me, scanning the shadows for the faintest movement, the slightest hint of the girl in the white hoodie. My fingers tightened around the pen, eyes fixed on the space where she usually appeared.

At exactly 9:17, she emerged — silhouette sharp against the dim glow of the city lights. I lifted my hand

in a wave, and she answered with hers, before settling into the pose I knew so well.

But tonight, she didn't raise her phone. Instead, after the pose, she simply waved goodbye, a slow, deliberate motion, before slipping back into the shadows and disappearing as always.

I stayed still a moment longer, the quiet settling around me, wondering what the change meant.

I lowered my hand slowly, watching the empty rooftop where she had just vanished. The silence after her disappearance pressed in, heavier than usual. No flashing light. No secret message tonight.

A sharp twist of frustration knotted in my chest. Why hadn't I been ready? Why hadn't I thought this through better? I wanted to be clever, to decode whatever she was trying to say, but I'd just sat there, waiting... waiting for a sign that never came.

I scolded myself quietly, a whisper more than a shout. *Why can't you be smarter? Why can't you be braver?* The words circled inside my mind, twisting around like a storm I couldn't calm. I wanted to believe this was real — that she was real — but if I couldn't even keep up, what hope was there?

The city breathed around me, indifferent and sprawling,
and I felt smaller than ever.

I went to bed unsure what I should do. Unhappy with myself. I lay there in the dark, the city's hum seeping through my curtains like a restless lullaby. My breath slowed, but my mind raced — replaying the night, her silent wave, the missed chance.

Tomorrow, I decided, tomorrow I would be ready. I'd learn the words needed, piece by piece, until I could ask her myself — *please say again*. No more guessing, no more waiting in silence.

I pictured the pen and paper in my hands, steady this time. I'd catch the light, capture the message. Somehow, I would get it right.

Sleep felt distant, but hope was a quiet pulse beneath my skin, steadying me.

Chapter Eleven

After school, I wandered through the park, the soft warmth of early evening pressing against my skin. The air smelled faintly of grass and distant pavement, mingling with the faint rustle of leaves overhead. I found my usual spot beneath the oak—the one place that felt steady in this shifting world—and sank down onto the rough wooden bench. The bark's texture pressed into my palms as I curled my fingers around the edges.

Time slowed, stretching out like a thin thread. I told myself to be patient, to wait without hope, but the truth hovered heavier. I was waiting because I had to. Because something inside me had turned this quiet ritual into a lifeline. My heart thumped too loud in the stillness, each passing minute knotting my nerves tighter. It was becoming compulsive, this need to see

her—to catch even a glimpse of that ghostlike silhouette, that smooth, silent walk.

I tried to steady my breath, to tell myself it was okay if she never showed, but the thought gnawed at me. The park faded around me, swallowed by the weight of wanting — and not knowing why. I sat there, alone beneath the oak, tangled in the ache of needing something I barely understood.

After what felt like hours, I finally let the tension in my shoulders ease and pushed myself up from the bench. The park was quiet now, shadows lengthening as the sun dipped lower. I didn't see her again—not today. My chest tightened, a mix of disappointment and something like loneliness settling deep. Not a new feeling but a repetition of how most days felt.

I started walking back toward home, the familiar weight of my backpack a small comfort against the restless thoughts swirling in my head. With every step, I told myself this wasn't the end. I had a plan for tonight—something I could control, a way to reach out without words.

Maybe tonight, things would be different. Maybe tonight, she'd understand. Maybe tonight, the silence would break. And that thought, fragile but real, kept the

hope alive as I climbed the stairs to my apartment and prepared to wait again.

Dinner was quiet, the clink of cutlery and the hum of the evening news filling the gaps between our words. Mom looked up from her plate as I pushed mine away, nerves tightening my throat.

“Mom... there’s a girl,” I began, voice barely above a whisper. “Across the street. I’ve been waving to her every night.”

She blinked, setting down her fork. “A girl?”

I nodded, hesitating, unsure how much to say. “Yeah. She goes out on the rooftop there every evening. I don’t really know why. I just... I wanted to tell you.”

Mom’s expression softened, a gentle curiosity in her eyes. “That’s... interesting, Lark. How does it make you feel?”

I shrugged, trying to sound casual, but my heart was pounding. “I don’t know. Less lonely, maybe.”

Mom gave my hand a quick squeeze and smiled softly, but then her expression grew firmer.

“Thank you for telling me, Lark. And just so we’re clear—no going out on any rooftops, ever. Promise me that.”

I nodded quickly, understanding the worry behind her words.

“Promise,” I said, feeling both cared for and a little grounded in the same moment.

Chapter Twelve

I settled onto the fire escape, the familiar scrape of metal beneath me and the warm night air wrapping around me like a worn blanket. My phone glowed softly in my hand, screen lit to the simple Morse code chart I'd saved. Beside me, a small notebook and pen lay ready on my knees.

I closed my eyes for a moment and took a steadying breath, then tapped out the rhythm again, whispering the letters under my breath:

“Di—dah—di di... di dah di...”

Please say again.

My fingers hovered over the screen, poised to flash the light in the dark. The city breathed around me—distant sirens, the hum of an air conditioner two windows down, a stray dog barking somewhere far off. Then, at

exactly 9:17, the familiar silhouette appeared on the rooftop opposite.

My heart quickened. Tonight, I would be ready.

As the girl stepped onto the rooftop, her silhouette crisp against the night sky, I held my breath. The usual ritual unfolded—the wave, the pose, that strange, graceful movement that had become our quiet language. My eyes never left her.

Just as the girl lifted her hand to wave goodbye, I flicked on my phone's flashlight, sending a quick, deliberate blink—then another, and another. My fingers moved carefully, flashing out the message I had practiced so many times all day: *Please say again.*

The light danced in the darkness between us, a small beacon of hope and connection.

My heart hammered in my chest as I sent the blinking message. My fingers trembled slightly, unsure if I had spelled it correctly—if the dots and dashes had formed the right letters at all. Doubt crept in, whispering that maybe I'd messed it up, that the girl might just turn away and disappear like before.

I held my breath, watching intently, waiting to see if the stranger would stay... or vanish into the night.

The girl froze mid-wave, her silhouette still against the darkening sky. Slowly, she reached into her pocket and pulled out her own phone. A faint glow flickered as she turned on the flashlight, its beam cutting through the night like a quiet beacon.

She repeated the message, this time slower and more deliberate, each flash carefully timed. Then she held still, waiting, the light pulsing softly in the night air.

My hand trembled as I tapped out the dots and dashes, my pen tracing the Morse code clumsily on the paper. I knew I was making mistakes—an S turning into an O maybe—but I hoped the message the girl on the rooftop was sending would still make sense when I read it. When I finally looked up, half-expecting the stranger to vanish, she was still there, watching patiently.

I held my breath for a moment, then realised I had to respond. I glanced down at my cheat sheet, looking for the letters I needed: O and K.

I took a deep breath, trying to ground myself, and raised my phone and carefully flashed the light in short bursts—dash, dash, dash for “O,” then dash, dot, dash for “K.” I held the last flash a moment longer, hoping the message came through clear to the other side.

Chapter Thirteen

The evening air was thick with the scent of asphalt and something like distant rain, even though the sky was clear. Streetlights flickered on one by one, casting long shadows that stretched across the sidewalks and empty streets. My footsteps echoed softly as I walked through the neighborhood, my breath steady but my mind restless. I didn't know exactly where the old station was — only that it was supposed to be near the edge of town, forgotten by most, left behind by trains that didn't stop anymore.

It had taken me a while to decipher her message. I wasn't sure if I'd caught all the letters, or if the ones I did were even right. "McKinsley St." puzzled me. The bus station was called Riverview Depot, but when I looked it up on my phone, I found an old, defunct train station nearby named McKinsley.

The buildings grew quieter, less familiar as I moved further on, and the hum of the city faded into a soft hush. Houses gave way to stretches of overgrown grass and cracked pavement. Somewhere far off, I thought I heard the faint creak of old metal — the tracks, maybe — but it was just a whisper in the distance. I tugged nervously at the hem of my t-shirt, already picturing what the place would feel like: empty benches, rusted signs, the ghost of footsteps long gone.

Even with the streetlights giving me some comfort, the shadows seemed to gather thicker here, like they wanted to keep their secrets safe. My heart beat a little faster — not from fear exactly, but from the quiet thrill of anticipation. This was new territory, a step away from the rooftops and the park. Somewhere I might finally catch up with her, without distance or darkness between us.

I slowed down, scanning for any sign — a broken ticket booth, a faded poster, the glint of old rails under the dimming light — but the street just stretched on, empty and still.

Finally I found McKinsley train station. It was tucked away behind a row of overgrown bushes and rusty fences, like it had been waiting for someone to remember it. The platform stretched out in front of me, cracked concrete and faded paint telling stories of

long-forgotten comings and goings. I walked along it slowly, eyes scanning every shadow and corner — but I was alone. No sign of anyone else, no footsteps but my own.

I finally sat down on the edge of the platform, legs swinging over the side. The wood was rough beneath my hands, on the concrete behind me the old paint peeled away, and the quiet stretched out around me like a secret. The city felt far away here, softened by distance and time.

I sat there for a while, letting the silence settle around me. The message had been clear enough once I'd figured out the letters — she wanted me to meet her here, at McKinsley, at 7:30. My heart had started racing the moment I'd worked it out, like it was already counting down the minutes.

I glanced at my watch. It was 7:06. Twenty-four minutes to go.

The platform creaked softly beneath my legs as I swung them back and forth, trying to steady my nerves. The air had cooled just a little, the sun slipping lower behind the buildings. I wasn't sure what I expected — or even wanted — but I knew I had to wait. Somehow, this felt like a beginning.

My legs kept swinging over the edge, the rhythm steady, but then a shift in the air caught me—more a feeling than a sound. Someone was there, close behind me. I didn't turn right away. Instead, I stayed still, letting the moment stretch out. The quiet was thick, the city noises muted somehow, as if holding its breath with me.

The girl settled down beside me, her presence close but still wrapped in shadows. I stole a quick glance sideways, hoping to catch a hint of her face—but all I saw was the smooth curve of the hood, pulled low, hiding everything. The fabric seemed almost a shield, keeping her just out of reach, and I felt the quiet weight of the unknown pressing between us.

Chapter Fourteen

I walked home with my head buzzing, the sky washing itself in soft greys and golds as the sun sank behind the buildings. Everything around me looked normal—cars, sidewalks, windows glowing from kitchens and TVs—but none of it felt quite real.

Aoife.

The name circled my thoughts, slow and heavy like a bell tone after it's rung. She was fifteen, same as me, but there was something in the way she moved, the way she spoke, that made her feel older. Not in the usual way, not like someone trying to look cool or grown. Just... worn. Like she'd lived through something and was still carrying the weight of it.

She'd sat next to me, both of us facing forward on the edge of that crumbling train platform. Her hood stayed up the whole time, shadowing most of her face. She

barely looked at me when she spoke—just the occasional flicker of movement under the fabric, like checking if I was still there.

And I was. I didn't ask questions. I didn't push.

She told me, quietly, that the rooftop was for her brother. That she did it to remember him.

That was all she said.

I didn't ask what had happened. I wanted to—I burned to—but something in her voice told me that would close a door I'd only just been allowed to peek through. So I held it. Sat with it. Let it fill the space between us, heavy but not unwelcome.

Now, with the evening air brushing past my cheeks, I tried to replay it all. The silence. The softness. The weight of the words she *did* choose to say.

She didn't invite me into her ritual. I hadn't expected her to. I knew, somehow, that it wasn't something that could be shared. Not really. But she'd let me see a corner of it. Just enough. Enough to know that it mattered.

And enough to feel the shift in me—something new and small and tender that hadn't been there before.

When I got home, the apartment was empty. Mom was still at work, the late shift, and the place felt dim even with the lights on. I locked the door behind me, slipped off my shoes, and just stood there for a moment in the quiet.

Everything felt too still.

I should've gone to the kitchen. Started dinner. Got something to eat. Done *something*. But instead, I wandered to my room, dropped my bag on the floor, and sat on the edge of my bed, still wearing my jacket, still holding my phone in one hand like I might need it again.

My thoughts were a slow tangle—half-formed questions looping back on themselves. I kept replaying our conversation, the shape of it, the way Aoife's voice barely rose above the wind, and the way she never quite looked at me when she spoke. I didn't mind. I wasn't sure I could've handled eye contact either.

It wasn't what I expected. I didn't even know what I *had* expected. Some kind of mystery solved, maybe. Some clear line from rooftop to now. But everything was still shadowed, still folding in on itself. I only had fragments.

But there was one thing I knew for certain.

Tonight, at 9:17, she would be out there again.

Wearing the white hoodie and lighting a single match.
For her brother.

And somehow, that made me feel like I needed to sit
very still and let the world be quiet for a while.

Chapter Fifteen

I didn't know why I'd put the white hoodie on.

Maybe it was for Aoife. Maybe it was for her brother, the one she never named. Or maybe it was for the girl I'd been before all this started—quiet, invisible, watching everything from a safe distance and pretending it didn't matter.

But I put it on anyway. Pulled the hood up over my head and stepped out onto the fire escape, the air cooler than I expected, pressing soft and damp against my cheeks.

The metal beneath me hummed with the day's leftover warmth. I tucked my feet up, wrapped my arms around my knees, and leaned into the railing, watching the skyline fade into shadow. The city never got completely dark, not here, but it felt dimmer somehow tonight. Like it was holding its breath too.

I didn't have my phone. No pen. No paper. Nothing to send or decode or write down.

Just me. Sitting.

Waiting.

There was something solemn about it—ritual-like. I didn't know the full story, but I didn't need to. I felt it. In the hush of the street below. In the way my heart kept time with the ticking windows behind me. In the white fabric covering my shoulders, soft and still.

I hadn't done anything.

But somehow I wanted to be part of it.

Not for attention. Not for answers.

Just... to be there.

9.17. I straightened, just a little.

Aoife stepped onto the rooftop like always—quiet, contained, as if the air made room for her. The white hoodie glowed faintly under the city light, almost silver against the black of the sky.

She turned toward me and raised her hand.

I waved back, smaller than usual, unsure why I suddenly felt so shy. Maybe it was the matching hoodie. Maybe it was the silence between us, not empty this time, but full of something I didn't know how to name.

Then she shifted her stance.

I watched her settle into it—feet shoulder-width apart, knees slightly bent, arms slowly rising, one hand up, one hand down, fingers held just so. The movement was precise but soft. Intentional. Familiar.

A Tai Chi salutation, she had explained.

I'd never seen it before—perhaps it was one Aoife's brother had come up with himself, or just because I didn't know anything about Tai Chi. It didn't really matter. But now, watching Aoife, I could feel the gravity of it. Not a performance. A gesture. A memory made physical.

She held the pose for a long moment, face calm beneath the hood, then slowly straightened and reached into her pocket.

A small flare of orange. The match caught with a soft snap of flame, bright against the dark.

Aoife shielded it with both hands, holding it close to her chest. The light flickered over her face, casting brief shapes I couldn't read.

I stayed still, not moving, not waving. I hadn't brought any light. Didn't want to. It didn't feel right.

But I was here.

In the white hoodie. Sitting in the same place, at the same time. Watching the ritual and holding it close, like a secret folded inside my chest.

And for the first time, I didn't feel like a stranger watching from across the street.

I felt like I was part of it.

Chapter Sixteen

After she left, the silence filled in around me like water. Heavy and still.

I stayed on the platform, legs drawn up, chin resting on my knees. The air had cooled, and the white hoodie — still warm from earlier — now felt like a second skin. A soft weight over my shoulders.

I could still see the shape of Aoife walking away if I closed my eyes. The quiet confidence of her steps. The way she'd said goodbye without actually saying it. Just a nod, just a look.

She hadn't told me when we'd meet again. If we'd meet again.

And I hadn't asked.

Now I was alone. But it didn't feel like before — not quite. I wasn't watching from far away anymore. I'd heard her voice. I'd sat beside her.

I traced a circle into the dust on the platform with my sneaker. The silence didn't bother me, not really. I just... missed her. Already.

But it was more than that. I felt lit up inside, like the afterglow of something I hadn't expected — and didn't want to lose.

I hadn't known what to say when she told me.

Aoife didn't offer it dramatically. Just... factually. Like she was handing me a folded note she'd carried for too long, and now it was mine to hold for a while.

Her brother had died.

The EMT had called it at 9:17 PM. The exact time she stood still every night, silent and still on the rooftop. The pose. The light. I had watched it for so long without knowing what it meant.

And now I did. It was a moment of silence.

Every month on the 20th, she said, she wore the white hoodie and lit a match for him. She didn't say his name. I didn't ask.

Even now, sitting on the empty platform, the details settled in me like dust. Quiet. I thought about how small that flame must look from the street. How delicate. But to her it was something else. Not a show, not a statement. Just a tether. Something to hold on to.

I looked down at my own white sleeves.

It didn't feel like copying. Not now. It felt like standing beside someone without getting in the way.

The breeze stirred, brushing past me like a breath.

I stayed a while longer before getting up. Quiet steps down the broken stairwell. The hoodie tugged close around my arms. My head full of things I didn't know how to say yet.

Chapter Seventeen

I'd been out there a while when she finally appeared.

Aoife stepped out onto the rooftop like always, black hoodie drawn up, silhouetted against the night sky. For a moment, she stood in stillness—her ritual beginning just as I'd come to expect.

She waved.

I waved back.

Then the pose, slow and deliberate. That same tai chi-like movement—palms together, spine straight, head slightly bowed. A moment that belonged more to memory than anything else.

But then... she lingered.

Usually, that would be it. She'd wave and disappear, her goodbye swift and clean, like a page being turned. But not tonight.

Tonight, she waved again. A second time.

This one longer.

Her hand moved back and forth, slow and almost unsure, like she didn't quite know how to end it. I counted the seconds—one, two, three, four, five... She was still there.

Still waving.

It wasn't flashy or loud. Just... Real.

And then she was gone.

The rooftop empty once more. The matchlight memory fading into the dark. But the space she left behind felt different now—less like an unreachable rooftop and more like a step taken. A kind of pause. A kind of door.

I didn't know what it meant.

But I stayed there long after, hoodie pulled tight, heart ticking loud in my ears. Watching the dark, and wondering.

Chapter Eighteen

The next night, I was out early.

I'd barely touched dinner. Couldn't sit still. Couldn't focus. Something about the way Aoife had waved last night—it had stayed with me. Tugged at me, somehow. So I was there, perched on the fire escape by 8:45, knees tucked to my chest, hoodie zipped all the way up. Pen and paper beside me, flashlight ready. Just in case.

At 9:00, I scanned the rooftop.

Still empty. Of course it was. She was never early. Nor was she late.

At 9:10, I told myself not to overthink. She would be there. She had been every night for months.

9:17 came. And went.

I started crying. Not wailing, just silent. The tears running down my cheek. Somehow I knew it was over. I waited anyway. To see movement over there. For her silhouette. For the feeling of being seen in the dark.

But the rooftop across the street stayed empty. A flat, blank shape against the sky. No wave. No pose. No goodbye.

Nothing.

I didn't move. Just sat there, heart tightening by degrees. Telling myself not to be stupid. That this didn't *mean* anything. That people missed things all the time.

Still, something in me folded a little. Quietly, like paper.

I stayed until 9:30. Then 10:30.

Still nothing.

Eventually, I climbed back through the window. My room felt heavier than usual. Quieter.

I didn't sleep well.

And in the back of my mind, something whispered: *Maybe she's done with this. Maybe I misread everything.*

But beneath that, even deeper, something else
whispered louder: *I hope she's okay.*

That was the last time I saw Aoife.

Chapter Nineteen

Morning light crept through the thin curtains, soft but unkind.

I woke, heart still tight, tangled between hope and worry.

The quiet of my room felt heavier than the darkness from the night before.

I lay there, staring at the ceiling, replaying everything — the waves, the match, the silence.

What did it all mean?

Was Aoife okay? Had she just needed a night off, or was something wrong? I felt that I knew the answer to that.

But I didn't have answers. Not really. Just a restless ache in my chest that wouldn't quiet.

Slowly, I got up, wrapped myself in the white hoodie again — a small comfort, a silent promise.

Maybe tonight, she'd be there again.

And if not?

Well, then I'd wait a little longer.

Because some connections — even the quietest ones — were worth waiting for.

Chapter Twenty

The next day felt colder, heavier — like the world had lost its colour.

Aoife didn't come out on the rooftop last night either.

I kept staring out my window, hoping for even the smallest sign of her hoodie against the dark. But the emptiness stared back at me.

The silence wasn't just around me anymore — it was inside me too.

I realised how much those brief moments with Aoife had come to mean. How her presence had been the only thread pulling me out of the quiet, the only warmth in a world that often felt too vast and too empty.

Without her, the loneliness stretched out, wider and deeper than before.

I curled up on my bed, hugging my knees, wishing I could hold onto her somehow — even if just a little longer.

And for the first time, I understood how much I'd been holding onto her light.

Because without it, the dark felt unbearable.

Suddenly, a thought struck me — the train station.

Maybe Aoife had left me a message there.

Without thinking, I scrambled out of bed, my heart pounding in my chest.

I threw on my clothes, barely tying my shoes properly, and ran out of the apartment.

The cool morning air hit my face as I sprinted through the empty streets, every step fueled by a desperate hope.

I didn't know what I expected to find, but I couldn't just wait here anymore.

I had to see for myself — maybe she was still out there, somewhere, waiting for me to find her.

The station felt utterly desolate, swallowed by a thick, grey sky that seemed to leak sadness into every crack and corner.

The faded paint peeled from the walls like forgotten memories, and the cold wind whispered through broken windows, carrying a chill that seeped straight into my bones.

Empty benches sat like silent sentinels, their metal arms twisted and cold, offering no comfort.

The rusted rails stretched out like tired veins, disappearing into a fog that blurred the horizon — endless and unwelcoming.

A single flickering streetlamp cast weak shadows, and even its light seemed too tired to fight the darkness.

I wrapped my arms tightly around myself, trying to hold back a wave of loneliness that threatened to spill over.

Here, in this forgotten place, it was as if time had stopped — and so had hope.

The silence was overwhelming, a heavy quiet that pressed against my ears, filling every space where words or warmth might have been.

I felt small. Invisible.

And the ache in my chest grew sharper, a dull, persistent reminder that she wasn't here.

I couldn't hold it in any longer.

The weight of the silence, the cold, the emptiness—it all crashed down on me like a tidal wave.

A shuddering breath escaped my lips, then another, faster, harsher.

Tears spilled over before I even realised, streaking down my cheeks like rain on broken glass.

My body shook uncontrollably as I dropped to my knees on the hard, unforgiving concrete.

I curled into myself, wrapping my arms around my legs, trying to disappear into the smallest possible space.

My sobs tore through the quiet like desperate thunder, loud and raw, echoing off the cracked walls.

It felt like the world had folded in, swallowing every ounce of hope, every flicker of light I'd dared to hold onto.

There, alone on that forgotten platform, I let myself fall apart—completely and utterly.

Because sometimes, the only way to heal is to break first.

Chapter Twenty-One

Days slipped by in a blur, each one folding softly into the next.

I hadn't set foot in school since that night. Instead, I spent nearly every waking hour perched on the fire escape, the city's hum a distant murmur beneath me.

Wrapped in the familiar weight of the white hoodie, I felt both cocooned and exposed—safe in my solitude, yet aching for something I couldn't name.

The sky shifted from pale mornings to deep, quiet nights, and still I stayed, waiting for a sign, a flicker, anything that might reach through the silence.

Sometimes I stared out toward Aoife's rooftop, imagining her silhouette against the fading light, but the emptiness never changed.

Each day stretched longer, the loneliness settling deeper in my bones like a quiet ache.

And yet, despite the stillness, a small, stubborn hope flickered somewhere inside—fragile, but alive.

Chapter Twenty-One

One restless afternoon, as the sun dipped low and painted the sky in soft gold, an idea flickered in my mind.

I decided to count the doors on the block across from my apartment. Maybe—just maybe—I could figure out which ones led up to the rooftops.

With nothing else pulling me forward, I stood by the window, peering out at the row of buildings opposite. Each door felt like a small mystery, a secret waiting to be uncovered.

Slowly, I began to count, marking each one in my head—one, two, three...

It wasn't much, but it was something. A way to feel a little less lost, a little more in control.

The next morning, sunlight filtered softly through my curtains, but I barely noticed. My mind was tangled in questions I couldn't shake.

I sat cross-legged on my bed, laptop open on my knees. The search bar blinked patiently as desperately tried to find any mentions of deaths in the neighborhood, hoping to find some more information about Aoife's brother.

Each click pulled me deeper into a world I wasn't ready for—a patchwork of news reports, obituaries, and cold facts. But nothing matched. No boy or young man was ever mentioned on our street.

I skimmed through the words, hoping to find something that would make sense of it all, something that would fill the silence left behind.

Then there it was.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The article was just about two months old. There wasn't a name mentioned. But there had been a death. Not on my street, but one over — the back side of the block across from my window.

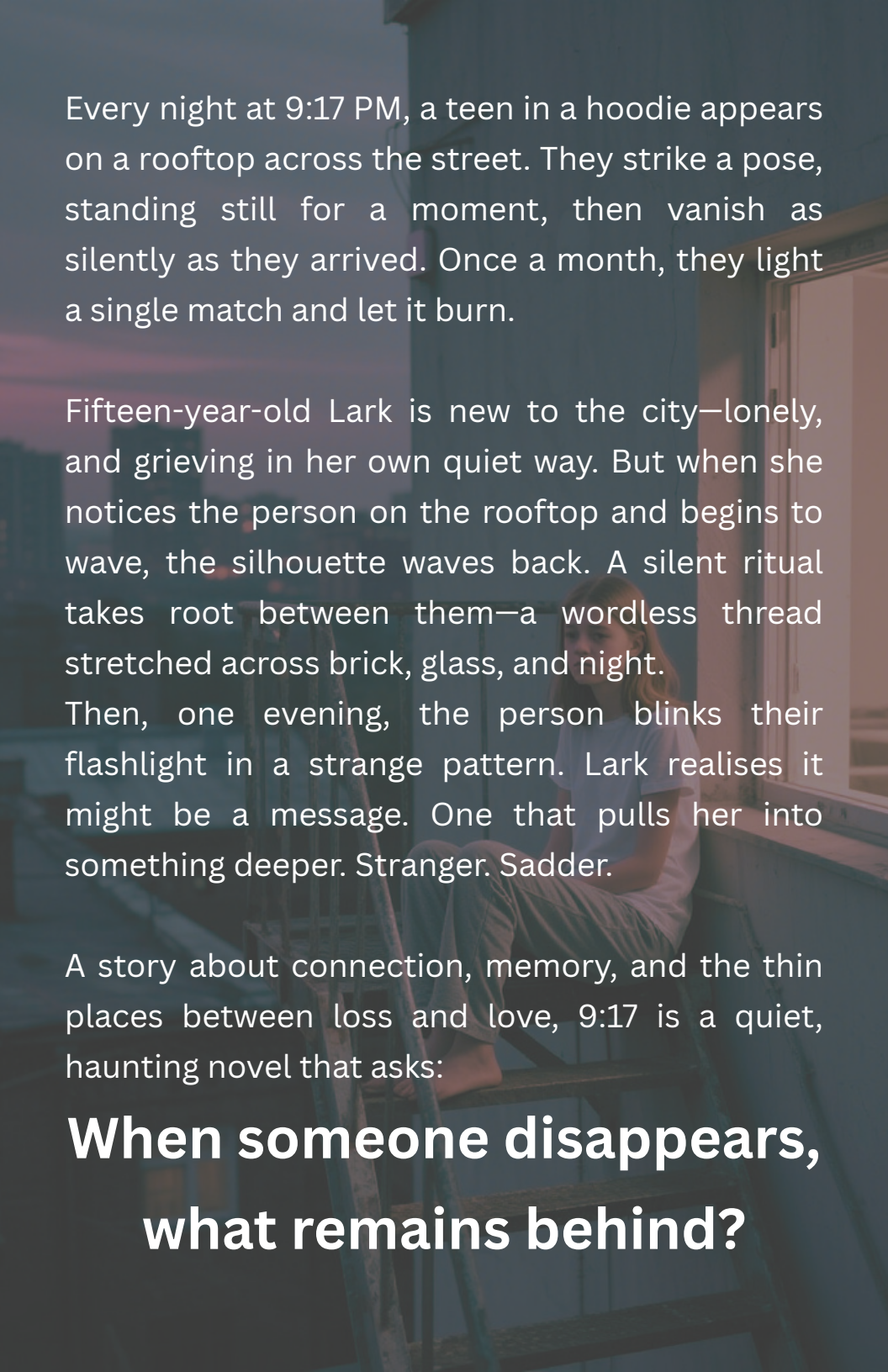
But it wasn't a boy. It was a girl. Fifteen years old.

The name was withheld, out of respect for the family.

Just a few short lines. A girl had fallen from the rooftop.

And one final sentence, like an afterthought, almost too cruel to name:

The parents' grief was doubled — they had already lost their older son, just a few years ago.

A young woman with long brown hair, wearing a white t-shirt and dark pants, is sitting on a metal staircase on a rooftop at night. She is looking down and slightly to the side. The background shows a city skyline with lights under a dark sky. The overall mood is quiet and contemplative.

Every night at 9:17 PM, a teen in a hoodie appears on a rooftop across the street. They strike a pose, standing still for a moment, then vanish as silently as they arrived. Once a month, they light a single match and let it burn.

Fifteen-year-old Lark is new to the city—lonely, and grieving in her own quiet way. But when she notices the person on the rooftop and begins to wave, the silhouette waves back. A silent ritual takes root between them—a wordless thread stretched across brick, glass, and night. Then, one evening, the person blinks their flashlight in a strange pattern. Lark realises it might be a message. One that pulls her into something deeper. Stranger. Sadder.

A story about connection, memory, and the thin places between loss and love, 9:17 is a quiet, haunting novel that asks:

**When someone disappears,
what remains behind?**