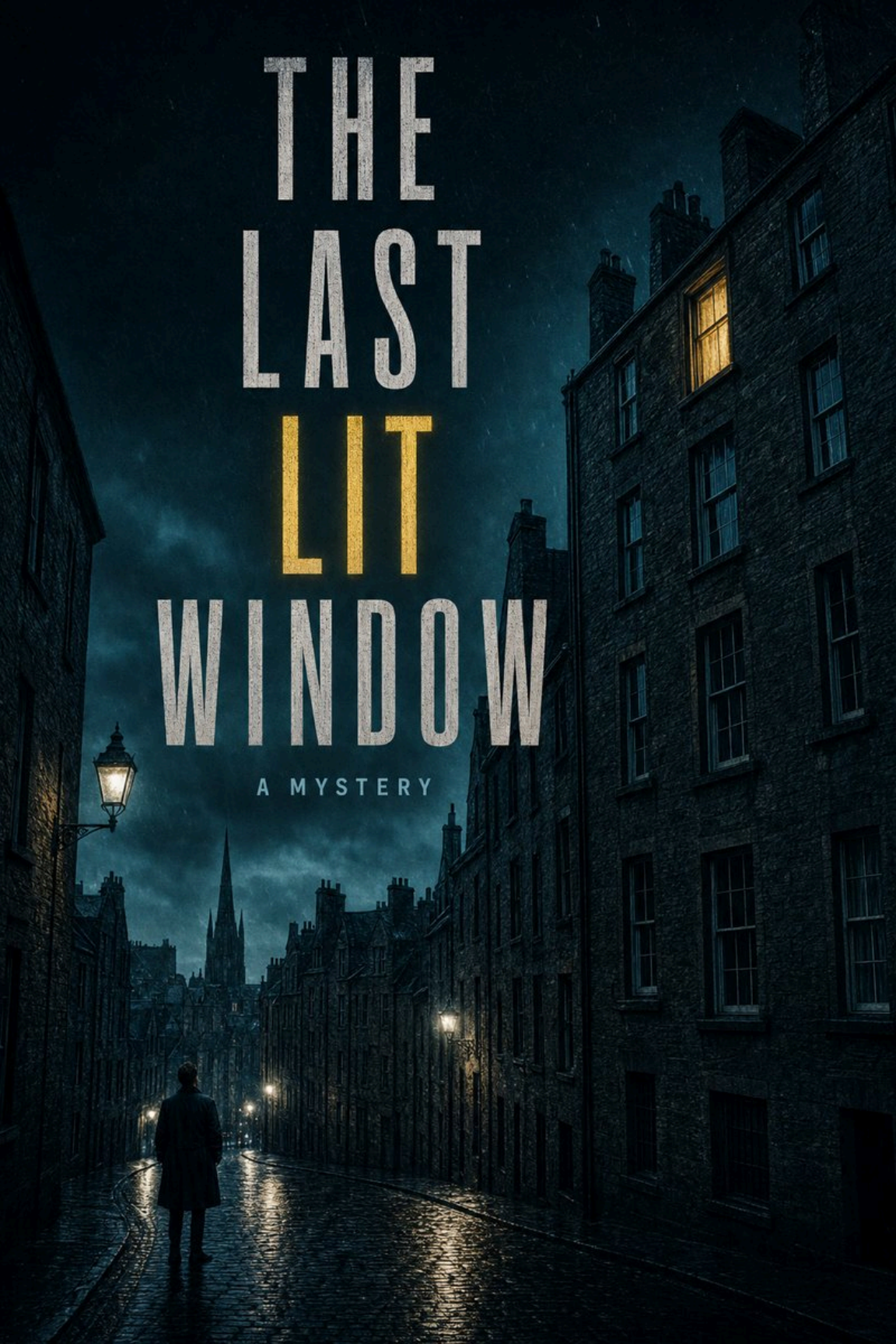

THE
LAST
LIT
WINDOW
A MYSTERY

The Last Lit Window

YOUR NAME

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First edition 2026

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CHAPTER ONE

The Window on Candlemaker Row

Ada Kerr had walked past the window every night since March, and for most of that time she had believed it belonged to someone who could not sleep.

It was the top-floor window of the narrow grey tenement where Candlemaker Row bent down towards the Grassmarket, five storeys up, under a roof that leaned like a tired shoulder. Every other window in the building went dark by midnight. That one never did. It burned a soft, steady yellow behind a thin curtain, the colour of a reading lamp, and on wet nights it was the only warm thing on the whole street.

She had made up a whole life for whoever lived behind it. A student with exams. A nurse on nights. An old man who read until dawn because the dark had started to frighten him. It was a habit of the job. You spent enough evenings kneeling at other people's doors and you began to wonder about the rooms behind them.

On the Tuesday in November when the solicitor rang, it was raining in the patient, sideways Edinburgh way, and Ada was halfway through a cheese sandwich in the van.

"Ms Kerr? Graham Imrie, of Imrie and Doig. I have a property that needs opening. The keys were never found, and the family would rather we didn't break the door."

"Address?"

"Flat seven, fourteen Candlemaker Row. Top floor."

Ada put the sandwich down.

"The owner was a Mrs Esther Vail," Imrie went on. "She passed away in March. The estate has been rather slow, I'm afraid. There's a nephew in Toronto who has finally decided to sell."

"March," Ada said.

"The fourth, yes. Is that a problem?"

She looked up through the wet windscreen, along the curve of the street, to the top floor of number fourteen. In the grey afternoon the window was only a window. Glass, a curtain, a sill streaked with pigeon droppings.

"No," she said. "No problem. I can be there in ten minutes."

. . .

GRAHAM IMRIE TURNED out to be a soft, careful man in a raincoat a size too large, waiting in the stairwell with a folder held against his chest like a hot-water bottle. The stair smelled of damp stone and other people's dinners. A bicycle was chained to the bannister on the second landing, and someone on the fourth floor was playing the same three bars of a piano piece over and over, stopping each time at the same wrong note.

"Has anyone been in since she died?" Ada asked, kneeling at the door of flat seven.

"Not to my knowledge. She was found by a neighbour. Natural causes, quite peaceful. The police came in through the roof hatch, because the door was locked and her keys were nowhere to be found." He cleared his throat. "It has been locked ever since. I confess I never asked who locked it."

It was an old mortice lock, brass and solid, the kind installed by someone who expected the building to last longer than they

would. Ada felt the pins give one by one under her pick, patient as counting stairs. When the last one went, the bolt slid back with a sound like a held breath let out.

The door opened onto dust.

It lay over everything in the hall, fine and grey and undisturbed: on the coat stand, on the hall table, on the folded umbrella that leaned against the wall, on a pair of sensible brown shoes set neatly side by side. Eight months of nobody. Even the air felt as if it had been waiting.

Except the floor.

Ada stayed where she was, on the threshold, and looked. Down the middle of the hall runner, through the dust, ran a clean path. Not footprints exactly. More the shape left by someone who walked the same line, the same way, often enough to wear it smooth. It went from the door, along the hall, and through the half-open door at the end.

"Mr Imrie," she said, "you said nobody had a key."

"That's right."

"Then I'd like you to stay behind me."

. . .

THE PATH LED TO the front room, the one with the window.

It was a small, crowded room, the room of a woman who had stopped buying things a long time ago and stopped throwing them away a little after that. Books stacked against every wall. A gas fire with a tiled surround. A wing-backed armchair facing the window, its seat still holding the shape of whoever had sat in it last. On the mantelpiece, a row of photographs in silver frames, every one of them turned to face the wall.

Dust everywhere. Dust on the books, on the chair, on the photographs.

Not on the little table by the window. Not on the brass lamp that stood on it, with its green glass shade, unlit now in the daylight.

Ada crossed the room along the clean path, because it seemed rude not to, and crouched beside the table. The lamp was plugged into the wall through a white plastic timer, the cheap kind you could buy in any hardware shop, its little dial set to switch on at dusk and off at dawn. The plastic was bright and unscratched. There was a price sticker still on the side.

Under the base of the lamp, folded into a neat square, was a till receipt.

She did not touch it. She tilted her head and read it where it lay. Timer plug, one. Light bulb, sixty watt, two. Paid in cash at a shop on Lothian Road.

It was dated the previous Saturday.

Behind her, Graham Imrie made a small sound, as though he had meant to say something and then thought better of it.

"Who else knew she lived here?" Ada asked.

"I—well. Everyone in the building, I suppose. The nephew. Her doctor. I really couldn't say." He was holding the folder very tightly now. "Ms Kerr, I think perhaps we ought to call someone."

"Perhaps," Ada said. She stood up slowly and looked out through the thin curtain at the street below, at the roofs and chimneys and the dark mouth of the close where she parked the van every night. From up here you could see the whole curve of Candlemaker Row. You could see anyone who walked along it.

You could see her.

On the fourth floor, the piano stopped at its wrong note and did not start again.

Ada turned back to the room, to the armchair facing the glass, to the row of photographs with their backs to the world. She thought of every night she had walked home under this window and felt better for it, as if the light were meant for her.

Someone had wanted that window lit. Someone had climbed five floors of a dead woman's building, every week, for eight months, to make sure it never went dark.

The question, Ada thought, was who they had been keeping it lit for.