

# The Lamplighter's Ledger

*A Novella*

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The Lamplighter's Ledger  
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# Chapter One: The Last Flame

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The city of Verrow had four hundred lamps, and Corin knew every one of them by name. He had inherited the route from his father, who had inherited it from his, and though the gas company had been threatening electric conversion for a decade, the old iron posts still hissed their small blue tongues into the fog each evening at dusk.

Corin liked the work. It asked nothing of him but punctuality and a steady hand, and it gave him, in return, the quiet company of the streets before the world woke or after it had gone to bed. He had a pole with a wick at one end and a hook at the other, and a leather ledger in which he recorded the hour each lamp was lit and, in a separate column, the hour it was extinguished.

It was in that ledger, on the night of the first frost, that he noticed the discrepancy.

Lamp two hundred and eleven, on the corner of Ashmoor and Quill, had been extinguished at a quarter past three in the morning. Corin had not extinguished it. No one had. The lamps of Verrow were his and his alone, and he had been asleep at a quarter past three, as any reasonable man would be.

He turned back through the pages. It had happened before. Once a week, sometimes twice, a single lamp would go dark hours before his morning round. Always a different lamp. Always between three and four in the morning. And always, he saw now, tracing the entries with

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a cold finger, a lamp that stood before a house where someone had died that same night.

## Chapter Two: The House on Quill Street

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The house before lamp two hundred and eleven belonged to a clockmaker named Ives, a widower who had not been seen at his shop window in three days. Corin stood across the street in the grey morning and watched the door, feeling foolish and certain in equal measure.

When the undertaker's cart arrived at nine, he was not surprised. He had known, in the way one knows the weather from the ache of an old wound, that the clockmaker was gone.

What surprised him was the woman who stepped down from the cart. She was young, dressed in the grey of the mortuary guild, and she carried a lantern though the sun was well up. As she crossed to the house she paused beneath lamp two hundred and eleven, reached up with one gloved hand, and touched the cold glass as if greeting an old friend.

Then she looked directly at Corin, across the width of the street, and smiled.

## Chapter Three: What the Ledger Knew

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Her name was Wren, and she did not deny it when Corin, gathering more courage than he thought he owned, asked her whether she had put out his lamp.

"I put out all of them, eventually," she said. "That is the work. You light the way in. I light the way out. We have been doing it, your family and mine, for two hundred years, and never once been introduced. Isn't that strange?"

Corin said that it was, though strange was a small word for the thing turning over in his chest. He showed her the ledger. She read it the way a musician reads a familiar score, nodding at the entries, and when she reached the end she closed it gently and set her hand flat upon the cover.

"You've been keeping my accounts," she said, "without knowing you kept them. Every soul that leaves Verrow passes a lamp on its way, and the lamp knows, and the lamp tells you, and you write it down. Four hundred lamps. Four hundred small witnesses."

"And if I stopped writing?" Corin asked.

Wren considered this for a long moment, watching the fog thin over the rooftops.

"Then the accounts would still be kept," she said at last. "But no one living would know they were keeping them. That is a lonelier thing than it sounds. Believe me. I have kept accounts no one could read for

a very long time."

## Chapter Four: The Frost Agreement

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They struck a bargain, there beneath the guttering lamp, though neither of them called it that. Corin would go on lighting the four hundred lamps of Verrow, and go on writing his hours in the leather ledger, and once a week Wren would come to read what the lamps had told him, and tell him, in return, one true thing about the city he had lit his whole life without ever seeing.

The first true thing she told him was this: that a lamp lit by a steady hand burns three minutes longer than a lamp lit by a hurried one, and that in those three minutes, souls who might otherwise have gone out afraid instead went out warm.

Corin thought about that for the rest of the winter. He never hurried a lamp again.

And when, many years later, a young woman in the grey of the mortuary guild came to read a ledger she had never been introduced to, she found in the final column, in a steady hand, the hour that Corin himself had gone out — warm, and three minutes late, beneath the lamp he had loved best.