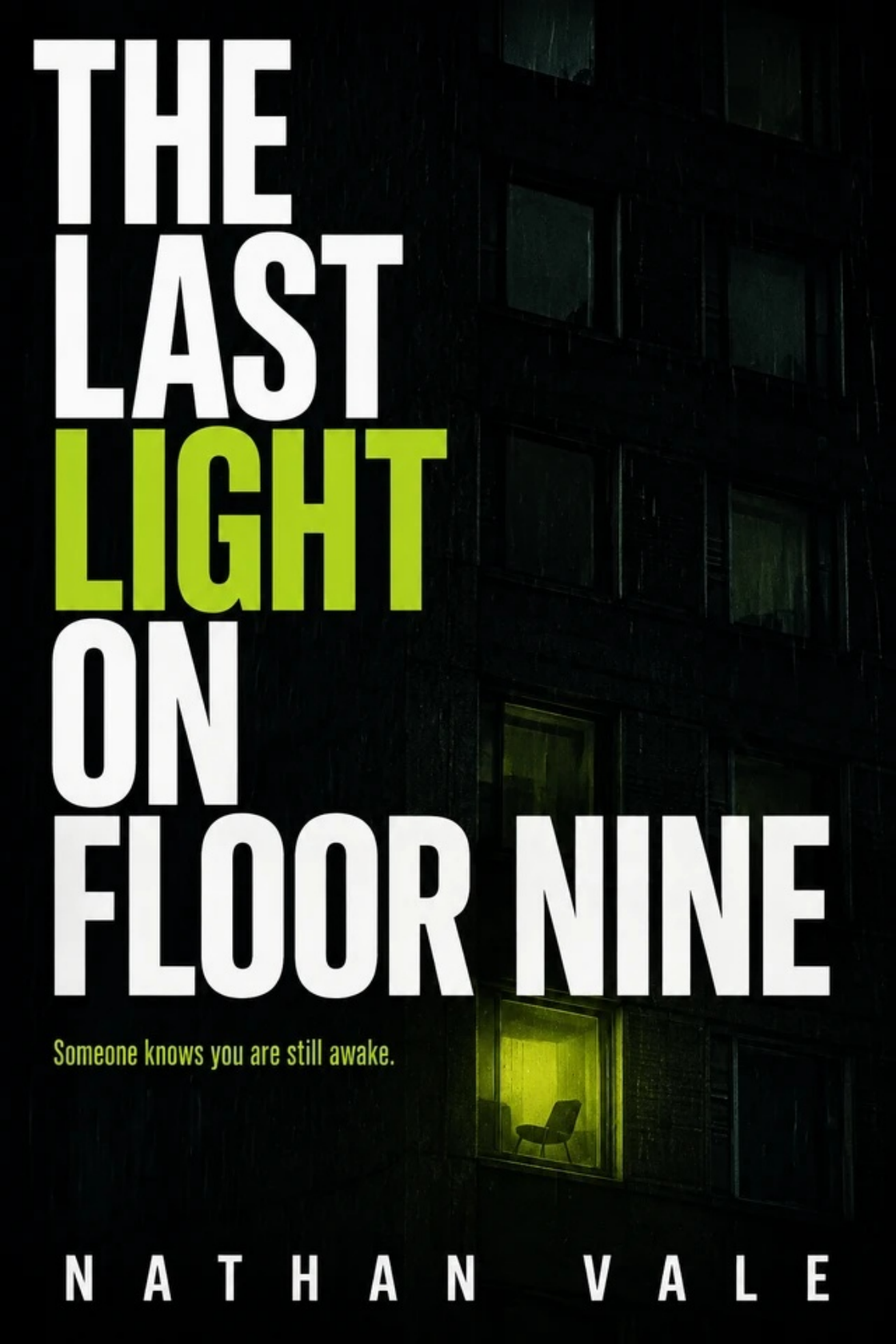




THE LAST LIGHT ON FLOOR NINE

Someone knows you are still awake.

N A T H A N V A L E

CHAPTER ONE

02:13

At 2:13 every morning, the light came on in apartment 9C. Helen knew the time because she was already awake. She knew the apartment because it faced her kitchen. She knew it was empty because she had helped carry the last box out.

For the first three nights, she blamed a timer. On the fourth, a figure crossed the window. On the fifth, the figure stopped and looked directly at her.

She stepped back from the sink. Across the courtyard, the greenish room remained still. No furniture except a chair. No curtains. Just the shape of someone standing where nobody should be.

In the morning she called the building manager. He asked whether she had been sleeping well. She hung up before he could suggest anything useful.

That evening, Helen moved her kitchen clock where it could be seen from the window. At 2:12, she switched off every light.

CHAPTER ONE / CONTINUED

The empty room

Nothing happened. She waited until 2:20, then 2:40. The window stayed dark. At three she made tea, furious at the relief she felt.

The knock came while the kettle was boiling. Three taps, evenly spaced. Helen did not approach the door. She looked through the little security screen on her phone. An empty corridor. The lift doors closing.

Under her door lay an envelope. Inside was a photograph, printed on ordinary office paper. Her kitchen window. Her own face behind the glass. Yesterday's face, before she had moved the clock.

Across the bottom someone had written: You were easier to see with the light on.

She called the police this time. While she waited for someone to answer, a square of green appeared across the courtyard. The chair in 9C had been turned toward her.

CHAPTER ONE / CONTINUED

A second key

The officer who arrived smelled of wet wool. She photographed the envelope, asked sensible questions and made Helen feel foolish for having expected disbelief.

'Who lived there?' 'My sister.' The officer stopped writing. Helen had intended to begin with the light. The sister complicated everything.

'When did she move out?' 'Six weeks ago.' 'Do you have a way to reach her?' Helen looked toward the window. The room was dark again. 'Not anymore.'

The officer asked to see the keys. Helen took the spare from the drawer beside the cooker, where she had left it after clearing the flat. The small brass key was warm.

That was impossible. The drawer was nowhere near the stove. And tied to the key was a green ribbon that had not been there yesterday.