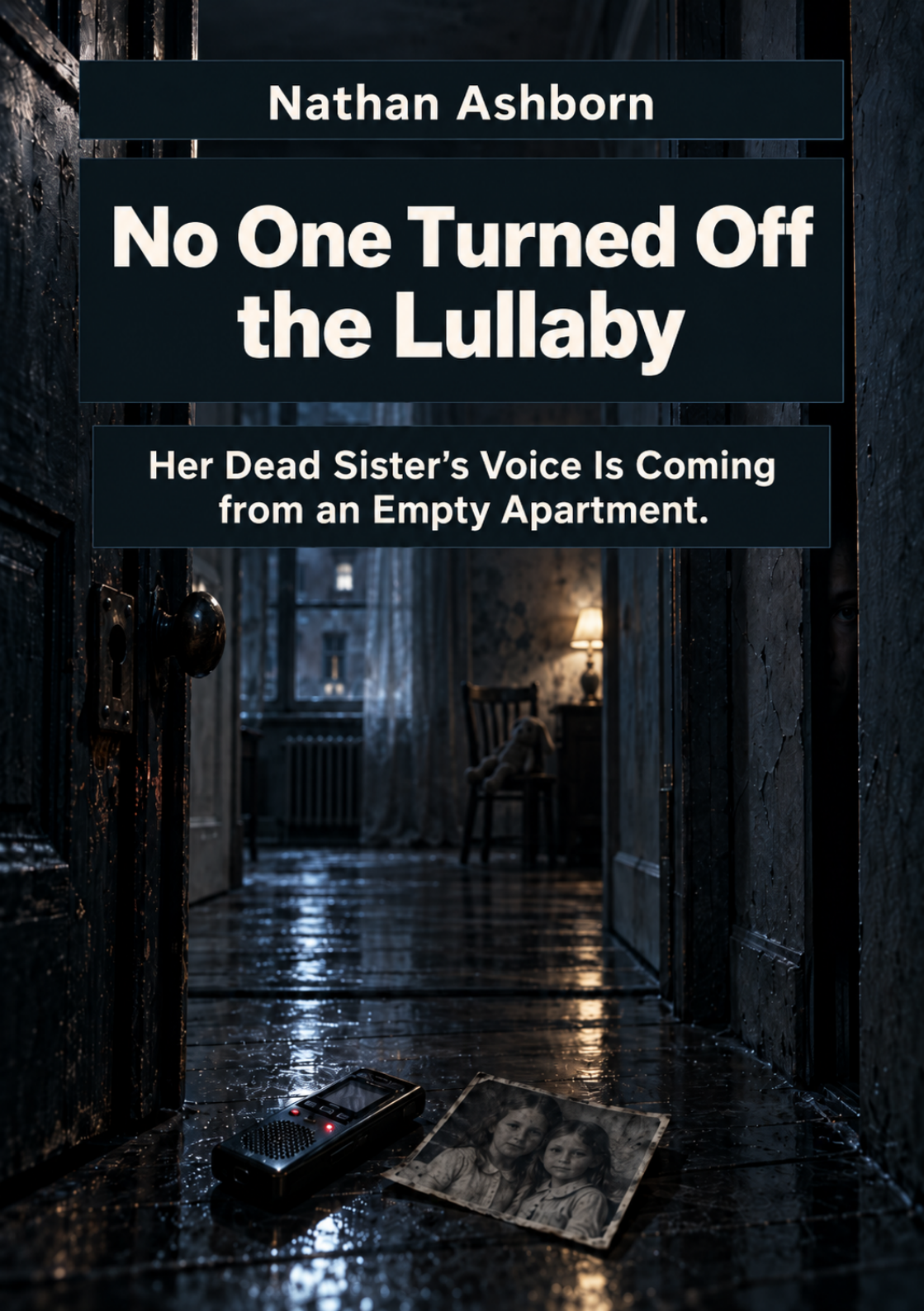


**Nathan Ashborn**

# **No One Turned Off the Lullaby**

**Her Dead Sister's Voice Is Coming  
from an Empty Apartment.**



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Empty Apartment.

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THRILLER

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# INTRO

Lena recognized the first four notes before she had time to remind herself that she should never hear them again.

She stood on the half landing with a paper bag in one hand and her keys in the other. Outside, October rain struck the tall stairwell window; inside, the building smelled of wet concrete, dust, and someone's dinner frying one floor below. An ordinary evening in an ordinary tenement building. The only extraordinary thing was the voice coming from behind the door of apartment number eight.

Marta's voice.

Lena did not move.

First she thought of a radio. Then a television in one of the neighbors' apartments, sound traveling through the old ventilation shafts, someone out in the courtyard. Her mind supplied one explanation after another with a speed that betrayed panic. Every one of them was better than the single possibility she refused to name.

The lullaby drifted softly through the door, almost a whisper.

It was not a song anyone else would know. You could not find it online or hear it on a children's television show. Their mother had made up the melody when Marta was six and Lena was three. Later, Marta had sung it to her little sister during thunderstorms, when their parents argued, or when an ambulance came in the middle of the night to take their father to the hospital. Over the years, all that remained were three verses that no one except the two of them could remember in full.

Marta was singing the second one now.

Lena slowly set the paper bag down on the step.

Apartment number eight was empty.

She knew that better than anyone else in the building.

Eleven months earlier, she had packed Marta's clothes into black garbage bags herself. She had thrown the withered plants from the kitchen windowsill away herself. With the help of a lawyer, she had settled the bills, canceled the internet service, and had the electricity disconnected. They had not sold the apartment because the probate proceedings had dragged on due to a dispute with the man Marta had been involved with before her death. No one had lived there for five months. For the last three, Lena had not even had a key. The set was held in the law firm's custody.

And yet there was no light beneath the door, and her sister's voice was coming from the other side.

Not a recording, she thought.

The thought was absurd, but it came instantly.

Marta breathed between the lines.

Lena knew those pauses. The short intake of breath after the first two words. The slight stretching of the final syllable. The same way Marta had sung to her over the phone three years earlier, when Lena had spent her first night alone in a new apartment after the divorce and joked that she could not fall asleep.

Then she heard the third verse.

Her knees went weak.

Marta got one word wrong in exactly the way she always had.

Lena walked toward the door.

"Hello?"

The lullaby continued for a few more seconds.

"Is someone in there?"

Silence.

So sudden that Lena heard a raindrop sliding down the outside windowsill.

She pressed her ear to the door.

Nothing.

She knocked once, then harder.

"Open the door."

The words sounded ridiculous. An order addressed to an empty apartment.

She stepped back and took out her phone. The screen showed 9:17 p.m. For a moment she stared at the building manager's number, but she did not call.

What was she supposed to say?

Good evening, someone is singing in my dead sister's apartment in her voice?

Instead, she opened the camera and started recording.

"Apartment eight," she said quietly, more to herself than to the camera. "October second. Nine eighteen p.m. I heard music."

She regretted it immediately. She sounded like someone preparing evidence against her own sanity.

She lowered the phone.

Then something clicked behind the door.

Not loudly. Like a drawer being closed or something being set down on a wooden surface.

Lena pressed the doorbell.

It did not work. Of course it did not work. The power had been disconnected.

She leaned toward the lock. The old brass plate had a fresh, pale scratch across it.

It had not been there that morning.

She was certain because she walked past this door twice a day. She lived one floor above, and since Marta's death she had developed a habit of looking at apartment number eight whenever she passed. She had never admitted it to anyone. She checked whether the doormat was still straight, whether anyone had left a flyer on the handle, whether someone had tried to get inside.

Now the handle sat a few millimeters lower than usual.

Lena touched it with one finger.

The door gave way.

She stepped back.

It did not open wide. The security chain fastened on the inside stopped it.

Through the gap she saw a narrow slice of the hallway. Darkness, a white wall, and the edge of a mirror she had left behind when clearing out the apartment.

The chain trembled slightly.

Someone had to have fastened it from inside.

"Who's there?"

No answer.

Lena raised her phone and aimed the camera through the gap. She zoomed in. Nothing. She lowered the phone.

Something pale lay on the floor.

A sheet of paper.

No, a photograph.

The door suddenly jerked toward her.

Lena jumped back. The chain snapped taut with a metallic knock, then the door slammed so hard that the stairwell window shuddered in its frame.

For several seconds, she could not move her hand.

Then a notification appeared on her phone.

Not a message.

Not a call.

A new voice recording had been sent from the number she had kept saved for eleven months as MARTA - DO NOT DELETE.

Recording length: seven seconds.

Lena stared at the screen until it went dark.

She unlocked it again.

The number was correct.

She tapped the file.

First came static, a soft crackle, and the first two notes of the lullaby.

Then Marta said:

"Lenka, don't go inside yet."

The recording ended.

Lena stood motionless outside the door of apartment number eight.

Not because she had heard the voice of her dead sister.

Because Marta had used the word "yet."

## Chapter 1 - Locked from the Inside

Lena listened to the message a second time only because the first time she could not trust her own memory.

"Lenka, don't go inside yet."

Seven seconds. Static. Two notes of the lullaby. Marta's voice. End.

The third time, Lena stopped the recording after the word "yet." She brought the phone closer to her face, as if a larger screen might reveal something her ears had missed. Above the file was the contact name MARTA - DO NOT DELETE, and below it the time, 9:19 p.m. There was no profile picture. Lena had removed it herself a few weeks after the funeral because she could no longer bear seeing her sister's smiling face appear in contact searches.

Now she almost wished the picture would come back.

The door to apartment number eight remained closed. The handle had returned to its normal position. Only the fresh pale scratch across the brass lock plate proved that anything at all had happened a moment earlier.

Lena called emergency services.

When the operator asked whether anyone's life was in immediate danger, she hesitated.

"I don't know."

"Is someone inside the apartment?"

She looked at the door.

"I think so."

"You think so?"

"The door was chained from the inside. Someone just slammed it shut."

That sounded reasonable until the next question came.

"Do you know the person?"

Lena tightened her grip on the phone.

"The person whose voice I heard is dead."

There was a brief silence on the other end.

She did not explain further. She reported a possible break-in, an empty apartment, movement behind the door, and the security chain. She left out the lullaby. Left out the message. Left out Marta.

When the call ended, she went down half a flight. She did not want to stand directly opposite number eight. Leaning against the banister, she listened.

The tenement had its own nighttime rhythm, one she had known for five years: water moving through the vertical pipes, the thud of the front entrance downstairs, the elevator stopping with a metallic groan, Mrs. Jadzia's television from number eleven. From Wólczańska Street came the sound of passing cars and tires hissing over wet asphalt.

Nothing came from Marta's apartment.

A few minutes later, the door to number seven opened. The head of Mr. Leon, seventy years old, appeared in the gap.

"Everything all right?"

"Yes."

He looked at the paper bag she had left on the stairs, then at Lena.

"Someone banging on a door?"