



Nathan Ashborn

The Last Night Without Cameras

23:47
53:11

**Seven Guests. Seventeen Minutes
Without a Recording. One Disappearance.**

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THRILLER

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INTRO

Marta noticed the first camera before she even reached the gate.

A black dome protruded from beneath the eaves of the small security building, aimed directly at the road cutting through the forest. A second had been mounted above the intercom keypad. A third watched the driveway from the stone wall. When the heavy steel gate slid open without a sound, Marta counted four more.

Seven cameras before she had even seen the house.

Her phone had been without a signal for twenty minutes.

She stopped the car on the gravel forecourt and stayed behind the wheel for a moment. Ahead of her, beyond a row of bare birch trees, stood Willa Orla - three levels of glass, dark timber and gray stone built into a slope above a Masurian lake. It looked more like a private hotel than somewhere anyone would invite friends for the weekend. Warm light glowed behind the huge windows. A gas fire burned on the terrace. Beyond it there was nothing but the black surface of the water and forest stretching all the way to the opposite shore.

There were six cars already parked outside.

Marta counted them twice.

Her Volvo was the seventh.

She had no idea why that detail reassured her.

The front door opened before she had time to take out her suitcase.

"You're eleven minutes late."

Klara Radecka had not changed as much as Marta had hoped.

The same short blond hair. The same way of standing with her arms folded beneath her chest, as if every conversation were a negotiation she intended to win. Only her face was thinner now, and shadows had formed beneath her eyes that makeup could not quite hide.

"Hello to you too," Marta said.

Klara smiled and came down two steps.

"I thought you wouldn't come."

"So did I."

They hugged briefly. Marta felt the cold of Klara's hand against the back of her neck.

"Did your phone die?"

"No signal."

"That's normal. There's Wi-Fi in the house."

Marta looked at the camera mounted above the door.

Klara noticed.

"Szymon is obsessed with security."

"I can see that."

"No. Not yet, you can't."

There was another camera in the hallway.

Then another by the stairs.

And one more above the entrance to the living room.

Marta took off her coat, but instead of handing it to Klara, she slung it over one arm.

"You record your guests?"

"Only the shared areas. Hallways, entrances, the garden, garage, terraces. No cameras in bedrooms or bathrooms."

"How reassuring."

"I told you, it's Szymon's idea."

Laughter drifted from the living room.

Marta recognized Paweł's voice before she saw him.

That alone was enough to make her consider turning around and going back to the car.

Klara must have read something in her expression.

"You knew who'd be here."

"I knew who you'd invited. I didn't know who would actually come."

"Everyone came."

Of course they had.

Ten years of silence, and then one message from Klara.

Saturday. One night. All seven of us. No partners. No children. We finally need to talk about what happened back then.

Marta had read it at the office between two meetings and had been unable to focus on a single document for the next hour.

She never replied to the final sentence.

She wrote only: I'll be there.

The other six were waiting in the living room.

Paweł was the first to raise his glass.

"Well, look who it is. Our runaway."

"I didn't run," Marta said.

"You left Warsaw three weeks later and spent a decade not answering my calls."

"That's not the same thing."

"Feels pretty similar from the other end of the phone."

Natalia interrupted them, walking up to Marta with an overly broad smile. Behind her sat Michał, Olga, Wiktor and Adrian. Some greeted Marta warmly, others with the cautious politeness of people unsure whether the old rules still applied after ten years apart.

Seven.

Marta counted them too.

Klara remained by the entrance.

"Szymon will join us later. He's still on a call."

"I thought tonight was supposed to be work-free," Adrian said.

"For us."

"And the host?"

Klara hesitated a fraction too long.

"For him too. As soon as he's done."

Marta sat at the far end of the sofa.

On the coffee table stood seven wine glasses, seven water glasses and a small wooden box.

"Phones," Klara explained. "That was the condition."

"Whose?" Olga asked.

"Mine."

"That wasn't in the invitation."

"Because half of you would have found an excuse."

Paweł let out a short laugh.

No one joined him.

Klara opened the box.

"One night. No phones. No walking out of the conversation because of an email, a child, a client or a headache. Tomorrow morning everyone goes back to their own life."

"And the cameras stay?" Marta asked.

Klara looked at her.

"The cameras stay."

"So we're supposed to be honest in a house where everything is being recorded?"

"Video only. No audio."

"That makes an enormous difference."

This time Michał spoke.

"Marta, could we maybe spend the first five minutes not assuming somebody wants to murder us?"

"I can try for three."

A few people laughed. The tension eased for a moment.

Marta took out her phone. The screen showed a single Wi-Fi bar, connected to ORLA_GUEST. Before she placed the device in the box, she noticed a notification.

There was no sender.

No number.

Only a message displayed on the lock screen.

DO NOT GIVE UP YOUR PHONE.

Marta froze.

The notification disappeared before she could open it.

"Everything okay?" Klara asked.

Marta looked up.

Behind her friend, high in the corner of the living room, a small black camera made an almost imperceptible movement.

The lens turned directly toward her.

"Yes," she said.

She switched off the phone.

But she did not put it in the box.

When no one was looking, she slipped it into the inside pocket of her coat.

Eleven hours later, the police would secure recordings from all twenty-six cameras at Willa Orla.

Every recording would be missing exactly the same stretch of time.

From 23:47 to 00:04.

Seventeen minutes.

Long enough for one of the seven people to disappear.

And short enough for the remaining six to start lying.

Chapter 1 - Seven Places at the Table

Marta realized she had made a mistake only when Klara closed the wooden box of phones with a small metal latch.

The sound was quiet, almost ridiculous in the spacious living room, yet everyone glanced toward it for a moment. Paweł raised his glass as if they were taking part in some strange toast. Natalia went back to watching the snow beginning to settle on the terrace. Michał asked Wiktor about the drive from Warsaw. Only Olga kept her eyes on Klara for several seconds, wearing the expression of someone who wanted to ask whether the box really needed to be locked.

Marta was thinking about the phone in her coat pocket.

And the message.

DO NOT GIVE UP YOUR PHONE.

She had not seen a number. She had not opened the notification. If someone asked whether she had really read those words, she could not even have proved to herself that it had not been an ordinary app notification displayed in a way that her tired mind had completed for her.

Except she remembered the sentence perfectly.

"The rooms are upstairs," Klara said. "Marta, yours is the last one on the left. I left towels in there."

"Wine first," Paweł said.

"Not everyone came here to drink."

"That already sounds like an accusation."

"Everything sounds like an accusation to you."

He laughed.

Klara did not.

Marta picked up her suitcase and headed upstairs, taking the first opportunity to disappear from their sight.

The staircase ran alongside a tall wall of raw concrete. Low lights were set between the wooden steps, switching on one after another as she passed. On the landing, a camera watched the corridor. It was larger than those in the living room, housed in black casing and fitted with a small diode glowing a steady green.

Marta stopped for a moment.

The light did not blink.

The camera did not move either.

Even so, she had the impression the house responded to every step she took.

The room was exactly where Klara had said it would be. Pale wood, a double bed, a simple armchair, an entire glass wall overlooking the lake. In winter it looked nothing like the photographs Marta had once seen online. It was neither turquoise nor calm. Wind drove black waves across its surface, and the far shore disappeared into darkness.

She locked the door.

Only then did she take the phone from her coat.

There was no notification.

She checked her messages, notification history, apps. Nothing. The Wi-Fi worked, though weakly. She tried opening the messenger.

For several seconds the screen remained blank.

Then a new message appeared.

This time it stayed long enough for her to read it.