

Nathan Ashborn

The Shift After She Disappeared

**She Took Over Her Shift.
Guests Say She Took Her Name Too.**



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THRILLER

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INTRO

At 10:17 p.m., Zofia Kalinowska became Zofia Żak.

She found out from a stranger in a wet coat who placed a key card for room 308 on the front desk and said,

"Good evening, Ms. Żak. So you did come back."

Zofia looked up from the monitor.

The man was around sixty, with gray hair plastered to his temples by the rain and glasses that had fogged the moment he stepped out of the October night and into the overheated lobby. He was watching her with a kind of cautious relief, as if for the past several minutes he had been wondering whether he would find her behind the desk.

"I think you've mistaken me for someone else."

"I don't think so."

He smiled, but the smile disappeared before it could become polite.

Behind him, the automatic doors of the Lumen Hotel slid shut without a sound. Rain blurred the lights in the parking lot. Beyond it rose a dark slope covered in spruce trees, and the fog hanging over Świeradów was so thick that the last streetlamps looked like yellow stains submerged in milk.

Zofia glanced at the screen.

"Room three-oh-eight, Mr. Roman Lis?"

"Yes."

"Your card stopped working?"

"Again."

She ran it through the encoder.

This was her first night shift at the Lumen. Until now, she had only worked afternoons, never alone. Paweł Kopeć, the front desk manager, had asked her that morning to cover the shift. He had said he had no choice. Marta Żak had failed to show up for work for the third day in a row, wasn't answering her phone, and the other night receptionist was on sick leave.

He had been brief when Zofia asked about Marta.

Family matters.

Zofia hadn't asked what kind of family matter lasted three days without a single text message to an employer.

"All set," she said, holding the card out to him.

Lis didn't take it.

He was looking lower.

At her chest.

Zofia instinctively touched the name badge pinned to her navy blazer. She had received a new one before the shift because the clasp on the old one had broken. The envelope had been lying on Paweł's desk. ZOFIA, someone had written across it in marker. She had pinned the badge on in a hurry without even looking at it.

Now she turned it toward the light.

ZOFIA ŻAK

FRONT DESK

For several seconds, the only thing she could hear was the soft hum of the ventilation.

"That's a mistake," she said.

Roman Lis finally took his card.

"That's exactly what you said last time."

"Last time?"

He frowned.

"Saturday."

"I wasn't here on Saturday."

"You were."

"I worked through Friday. Saturday was my day off."

The man looked at her longer than necessary.

"Then I apologize."

He started toward the elevators, but after a few steps he stopped.

"You had your hair tied differently, that's all."

The elevator doors slid open and Lis stepped inside.

Zofia waited until the number above the elevator changed to three. Only then did she unpin the badge.

She turned it over again.

ŻAK.

Not a sticker. Not a surname corrected in pen. A professionally printed badge, identical to every other employee badge in the hotel.

She took out her phone and photographed it.

Then she opened the staff messenger and found Paweł.

She typed: "My new name badge has Marta's surname on it."

She stared at the sentence for a moment.

Then added: "A guest says he saw me here on Saturday."

She did not send the second part.

She deleted it.

She sent the first message at 10:21 p.m.

Paweł did not reply.

Zofia put the phone down and sat in front of the monitor. The hotel system required users to sign in again after fifteen minutes of inactivity. She entered her four-digit PIN.

The screen flickered.

In the top-right corner appeared:

Logged in: Zofia Żak

Zofia went still.

She logged out.

Entered the PIN again.

Zofia Żak.

She tried once more, more slowly this time, making sure she had not made a mistake.

The same result.

She opened the employee list.

Kopeć, Paweł.

Milewska, Anna.

Nowak, Kamila.

Żak, Zofia.

She scrolled down.

Marta wasn't there.

As recently as Friday, Zofia had seen her name on the shift schedule.

Marta Żak - night.

For almost a year, they had passed each other several times a week. Marta always arrived fifteen minutes early,

carrying a black thermos, her hair tied low at the nape of her neck. They weren't friends. They knew the kinds of things people learn about one another when they work at the same desk: who drank coffee without milk, who left unfinished sudoku puzzles in the drawer, and who hated it when guests called to ask about the temperature of the spa pool even though the spa number was printed on their room key sleeve.

Zofia opened the schedule.

Next to today's date, it read:

10:00 p.m.-6:00 a.m. - Zofia Żak.

Last night:

10:00 p.m.-6:00 a.m. - Zofia Żak.

The night before that:

10:00 p.m.-6:00 a.m. - Zofia Żak.

A chill spread through Zofia's hands.

Yesterday she had slept in her own apartment in Jelenia Góra. The night before that, she had eaten dinner with her sister.

She could prove it.

She clicked on Saturday.

10:00 p.m.-6:00 a.m. - Zofia Żak.

That was the night Roman Lis claimed she had been standing behind this desk.

The phone rang.

Not her cell.

The hotel phone.

The display showed room 214.

Zofia looked at the occupancy board. The second floor was nearly full, but 214 stood out in gray.

ROOM OUT OF SERVICE.

Plumbing issue. That was what she remembered.

The phone rang a second time.

A third.

Zofia picked up.

"Front desk, how may I help you?"

For a moment, there was no answer.

She heard breathing.

A woman's.

Shallow. Fast.

"Hello?"

"What is your last name?" the voice asked.

Zofia tightened her grip on the receiver.

"Who is this?"

"Please answer."

"Zofia Kalinowska."

Silence on the other end.

Then the woman said very quietly,

"So you still remember."

The call disconnected.

Zofia immediately dialed 214.

The line rang in her ear.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

No one answered.

She reached for the master key card kept in the locked drawer.

Her phone vibrated.

Paweł had replied.

"Do not go to the second floor."

Zofia read the message twice.

Before she could respond, another appeared.

"And take off the name badge."

She looked at the badge lying beside the keyboard.

A third message arrived almost immediately.

"If anyone asks about Marta, tell them she never worked here."

A chime sounded in the lobby.

The number above the elevator doors changed from 3 to 2.

Then from 2 to 1.

Zofia stood.

The elevator doors opened.

The car was empty.

A black thermos lay on the floor.

She knew it.

Marta Żak brought it to every night shift.

Chapter 1 - The Room That Doesn't Exist

The black thermos lay exactly in the middle of the elevator car, as though someone had placed it there on purpose.

Zofia did not move from behind the front desk. The elevator doors waited a few seconds, then began to close. Only then did she step out from behind the counter and slide her hand between them. The mechanism stopped and the doors opened again.

The thermos had a matte finish, a narrow silver ring beneath the cap, and a small dent near the base. For months, Marta had set it on the left side of the monitor, always on a folded napkin because she claimed the metal left a mark on the counter. Zofia even remembered a tiny scratch shaped like the letter V. Now she could see it near the bottom edge.

She did not need to touch the thermos to know who it belonged to.

Her phone vibrated in her hand.

Paweł: "Stay at the front desk. I'm on my way."

Zofia looked at the empty elevator.

She replied: "How do you know what's happening?"

For a moment, only one gray delivery check appeared beneath the message. Then a second. Paweł had read it.

He did not answer.

Without stepping into the elevator, Zofia took a photograph of the thermos. Then she photographed the elevator panel, where the number one was still illuminated.