



Nathan Ashborn

Your Alibi Just Died

The Only Witness to Your Innocence
Left Behind Proof of Your Guilt.

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THRILLER

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INTRO

The phone rang at 4:17 a.m., at exactly the kind of hour when every sound feels like a mistake.

Marta Sawicka opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling for several seconds, unable to understand why she had woken with the feeling that someone was standing beside the bed. Only when it rang a second time did she realize it was her phone vibrating on the nightstand. The screen cast a pale bluish glow across half the room.

The number was withheld.

She did not answer.

The phone went quiet, and Marta rolled onto her side. She had been sleeping badly for three weeks. Several times each night she woke, listened to the noises from the stairwell, and made sure the door was locked. She had thought it would stop after the funeral. Then after the interview. Then after the prosecutor told her they were not planning any further action for the time being.

It had not stopped.

The phone rang again.

This time she answered.

"Hello?"

For a moment, all she heard was a faint hiss.

"Ms. Marta Sawicka?"

A man's voice. Calm. Official.

She sat up.

"Yes."

"Aspirant Krzysztof Malec, City Police Headquarters. I'm sorry to call at this hour. We need to speak with you urgently about Paweł Rudnicki."

Marta tightened her fingers around the phone.

Paweł.

The only person whose name she had spoken more often over the past month than her own husband's.

"What happened?"

The police officer hesitated so briefly that someone less alert might not have noticed.

"Can you confirm when you last spoke with Mr. Rudnicki?"

"Yesterday. In the evening. Why?"

"What time?"

She automatically looked at the empty side of the bed. Tomasz had left for Poznań the previous day. If he had been beside her, he probably would have been on his feet already, switching on the lamp and taking the phone from her hand. Lately he had been doing that more and more often, as though every question directed at Marta first had to pass through him.

"I don't know. Before nine."

"By phone?"

"Yes."

"How long did the conversation last?"

"Maybe two minutes. Please tell me what happened."

Silence settled at the other end.

"Mr. Rudnicki is dead."

Marta stopped breathing.

The words were simple. They needed no explanation. Even so, her mind tried to rearrange them, give them another meaning, find some way for them to mean something less final.

"What?"

"His body was found tonight in his car in a parking lot near Liściasta Street."

Marta got out of bed. The cold floor beneath her feet made the room suddenly feel real.

"In the car?"

"Yes."

"In his car?"

"Ms. Sawicka, I'd like you to come to the station."

"Why?"

The officer did not answer immediately.

"There are several things we need to clarify."

Marta walked to the window. Only one lamp was lit in the courtyard of the apartment building. The wet asphalt gleamed after the night's rain. No one was outside.

"How did he die?"

"I can't discuss the details right now."

"An accident?"

Again, that tiny pause.

"It doesn't look like an accident."

She pressed a hand against the glass.

Paweł was dead.

Only yesterday he had told her not to worry.

His exact words had been: "You were with me. I'll tell anyone that as many times as I have to."

That sentence was supposed to protect her.

A month earlier, on the night Anna Lewicka died, Paweł had been the only person who could confirm that Marta had not been anywhere near Jaracza Street between ten and midnight. Not a camera. Not a receipt. Not her phone location, because the battery had died earlier.

Only Paweł.

They had been sitting in his photography studio on the other side of the city, arguing about old photographs Marta never wanted to see again. Paweł remembered the time because he had armed the alarm system at 10:31 p.m. before they went back into the rear room. He remembered her wet coat. He remembered that she drank two coffees. He even remembered that she used his phone to call a taxi because hers was dead.

The police knew all of that too.

That was why, after his statement, they had stopped treating Marta as their main suspect.

Not completely.

But enough.

"When do you want me there?" she asked.

"As soon as possible."

"I need to call my husband."

"Of course."

"Was Paweł..." Her voice broke. She cleared her throat.
"Did someone kill him?"

"We don't have complete findings yet."

"Then why are you calling me at four in the morning?"

This time the officer remained silent longer.

"Because we found something with him that concerns you."

Marta felt a faint cramp in her stomach.

"What?"

"I'd rather discuss it when you get here."

"You've just told me he's dead. I think we're past the point of trying to be delicate."

A soft breath came from the other end.

"We found an envelope in Mr. Rudnicki's car."

"What kind of envelope?"

"Your name was written on it."

Marta closed her eyes.

Paweł had mentioned documents recently. He said he had found something in the archive, something connected to Anna. He had not wanted to discuss it over the phone. He promised he would show her the next time they met.

Maybe that was what he had left.

Maybe he had been trying to help her.

"What was inside?"

The officer answered more quietly.

"A flash drive."

The relief lasted less than a second.

"And?"

"We've watched part of the material."

Marta pulled the phone away from her ear as if the man's voice had suddenly become too loud.

"What material?"

"Video footage."

She stopped looking out the window.

"From when?"

"The night Anna Lewicka died."

Marta said nothing.

Somewhere across the city, a car moved along a wet street. Tires whispered against the asphalt, then everything went quiet again.

"That's impossible," she said.

"Why?"

"Because Paweł was with me."

"That's exactly why we need to talk."

A chill moved down Marta's back.

"What's on the recording?"

The officer hesitated again.

This time for too long.

"You are."

She did not understand.

"What?"

"The recording shows you, Ms. Sawicka."

"Where?"

"Near the building where Anna Lewicka was found."

Marta gripped the phone so tightly her fingers began to hurt.

"No."

"The footage has a timestamp."

"Paweł testified..."

"I know what Mr. Rudnicki testified."

"I was with him."

"That's why we want to establish where the footage came from."

Marta stepped backward and struck her calf against the edge of the bed.

"You said the envelope was with him?"

"Yes."

"With my name on it?"

"Yes."

"Could someone have put it there?"

"That's one of the things we're checking."

Marta stared at the dark television screen opposite the bed. In its black surface she could see her own reflection: tangled hair, pale T-shirt, phone pressed to her ear.

And something else.

On the dresser behind her.

A small white rectangle.

She turned.

An envelope lay between her keys and the empty water glass.

She was certain it had not been there the night before.

In the center, someone had written a single word in black ink.

MARTA.

"Ms. Sawicka?" the officer said. "Are you still there?"

Marta did not answer.

She moved closer.

The envelope was not sealed.

Inside was a photograph.

She pulled it out with two fingers.

The picture showed Paweł sitting in his car. He was looking directly into the camera, as if he knew someone was taking his photograph. A date and time were written on the back.

Yesterday, 11:48 p.m.

Beneath it was one sentence, written in the same handwriting as her name on the envelope.

"Now try to prove where you really were."

Marta looked toward the apartment door.

The chain was fastened from the inside.

So was the lock.

Aspirant Malec was still saying something through the phone, but Marta no longer heard him.

Paweł had not merely been her witness.

He had been the only person who could keep her version of events alive.

And someone had just killed him and left behind evidence that said exactly the opposite.

Chapter 1 - The Last Statement

"Ms. Sawicka?"

Aspirant Malec's voice came back to Marta as though it were reaching her through several closed doors.

She stood in the middle of the bedroom with the photograph in her hand, staring at the words on the back.

Now try to prove where you really were.

The letters were large, slanting slightly to the right, stripped of any distinctive flourishes. Whoever had written them had done it slowly, probably to make the handwriting impossible to identify. At least that was what Marta thought. She had no idea whether anyone could truly tell such a thing from a single sentence, or whether her mind simply needed something to focus on other than Paweł's face trapped inside a rectangle of photographic paper.

"I'm here," she said.

"What's happening?"

Marta looked toward the front door. From the bedroom she could see part of the hallway, a white wall, and the reflection of the lamp in the mirror. The door was still locked. The security chain hung exactly as she had fastened it before going to bed.

"I have the same kind of envelope."

Silence on the other end.

"What do you mean, the same?"

"With my name on it. It was inside the apartment."

"Don't touch anything else."

Marta looked at the photograph between her fingers.

"A little late for that."

"Where are you?"

"In the bedroom."

"Is there anyone else in the apartment?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

The question sounded absurd, but Marta glanced around the room as if the answer might be hiding behind the curtains or under the bed.

"Yes."

"Don't walk around the apartment. A patrol is already on its way. I'm coming too."

"What about the station?"

"First we'll secure what you found."

"Someone was in my home."

"We don't know that yet."

"That envelope wasn't there last night."

"I understand."

He did not say, I believe you.

Marta sat on the edge of the bed. Only then did she realize she was still barefoot and that the window had been left cracked open the previous evening. A thin stream of cold air entered the room. It smelled of rain and wet plaster.

"Should I close the window?" she asked.

"No. For now, don't change anything."

Four minutes later, she heard the intercom.

The patrol arrived first. A young policewoman and an older officer entered only after Marta unfastened the chain. The older man examined the lock, the frame, and the peephole without commenting. The policewoman asked Marta to show her exactly where the envelope had been.

Marta pointed to the dresser.

"Right here?"

"Between the keys and the glass."

"Were the keys there before?"

"Yes."

"The glass?"

"Since last night."

"And the envelope?"

"No."

The policewoman looked at her carefully.

"Are you sure?"

That was the second time she had been asked the same question within minutes.

"I am."

Malec arrived shortly afterward. He showed his identification even though Marta recognized his voice immediately. He looked to be around forty-five, with closely cropped hair and the face of a man who had been sleeping too little for a long time and disliked discussing it. He was not in uniform. He removed his wet jacket only once he was inside the hallway, as if expecting to stay.

He examined the photograph, already sealed in a transparent evidence sleeve.

"Do you recognize the place?"

Marta leaned closer without touching the plastic.

"The parking lot outside his studio."

"Are you sure?"

"That brick wall in the background. And the post. He always parked in the same spot when it was free."

"Who took the picture?"

She looked at him.

"If I knew that, you probably wouldn't need me at four in the morning."

Malec did not react.

"When did you see this photograph for the first time?"

"Five minutes ago."

"Anything similar to it?"

"Never."

"Did Mr. Rudnicki send you photographs?"

"What kind of photographs?"

"Of himself. His car. Anything from last night."

"No."

"Think carefully."

"I am thinking."

It came out sharper than she intended. Malec gave a small nod, as though he were noting not the tone but the answer itself.

"When did you fall asleep?"

"After midnight. Maybe one."

"Was the door locked?"

"Yes."

"The chain?"

"Yes."

"Does anyone else have keys?"

Marta hesitated.

"Tomasz."

"Your husband?"

"Yes."

"Anyone else?"

"No."

"Where is your husband?"

"In Poznań. He left yesterday."

Malec looked at the locked door, then back at the dresser.

"What time?"

"In the afternoon. After three, I think."

"By car?"

"Train."

"Do you know which station?"

"Fabryczna."

Malec did not write it down in front of her. He merely nodded.

"We'll need a more precise timeline."

"You think my husband came back from Poznań in the middle of the night, entered the apartment despite the chain, and left me a photograph of a dead man?"

"I haven't told you what we think."

"No. You're just asking about everything except Paweł."

For the first time, Malec looked at her without professional neutrality.

"Ms. Sawicka, a few hours ago we found a dead man who was a key witness in the investigation into Anna Lewicka's death. In his car we found a storage device containing material that calls his previous statement into question. Now, inside your locked apartment, we find a photograph of that same man, apparently taken shortly before his death. If you want me to look at only one thing at a time, I'm afraid you picked the wrong night."

Marta felt cold even though someone had already closed the balcony door.

"You said apparently."

"The time written on the back of the photograph is not proof of when the picture was taken."

It was the first thing he had said that gave her even the smallest relief.

"So someone could have taken it earlier."

"They could have."

"Paweł could have been alive long after eleven forty-eight."

Malec did not answer.

"When did he die?"

"The medical examiner's findings are preliminary."

"When?"

"Between late evening and one in the morning."

Marta stood.

"So you don't even know that."

"That's why we're gathering information."

The phone lying on the bed vibrated.

TOMASZ.

Marta looked at the screen, then at Malec.

"I'm answering."

"Of course."

She walked into the kitchen. This time the policewoman followed her a few steps but stopped in the doorway.

"Hello?"

"Marta? You called."

Tomasz's voice was rough. He sounded as if she had woken him.

"Paweł is dead."

Silence.

"What?"

"They found him in his car."

"God."

Marta closed her eyes.

"The police are at our place."

"Why are they there?"

The question came immediately. Too quickly, she thought, and then felt ashamed. How else was a husband supposed to react to hearing that police officers were searching his home at dawn?

"I found something."

"What?"

She glanced toward Malec in the hallway.

"A photograph of Paweł."

"At home?"

"Yes."

"Where did it come from?"

"I don't know."

For a moment Tomasz breathed heavily into the phone.

"Don't explain anything to them without a lawyer."

"Five minutes ago you didn't even know Paweł was dead."

"That's exactly why I'm saying it."

"I'm a witness."

"You were a witness a month ago. Now your witness is dead and the police are standing in our bedroom."

Marta looked at the policewoman. The woman turned her gaze away.

"Are you coming back?"

"Yes. On the first train I can get. Marta, listen to me. Don't try to prove anything to them. Just answer their questions."

"That's what I'm doing."

"You always start explaining too much when you're scared."

The sentence hurt more than it should have.

"Thanks."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know."

"I'll call Borowski."

Marta pulled the phone slightly away from her ear.

"No."

"You need a lawyer."

"I need to know who got into our apartment."

"All the more reason."

"Just come back."

She ended the call.

Malec did not ask what they had discussed. He only said they should leave.

At five-thirty in the morning, the station was quieter than Marta had expected. There were no crowds, no shouting, no telephones ringing over one another. The fluorescent lights, the smell of machine coffee, and the echo of footsteps in the corridor made everything seem more ordinary than it did on television.

That frightened her.

Paweł's death was being processed in a building where someone was filling out a leave form at the same time, someone else was eating a sandwich, and a printer behind a wall was spitting out page after page.

Malec led her into a small room. A few minutes later, a woman Marta had never seen before came in.

"Sub-Inspector Lena Krawiec."

She was only a little older than Marta. Her dark hair was tied in a low ponytail, and there was a small scar beneath her left eye.

"Aspirant Malec told me what was found in your apartment."

"I'd rather know what you found with Paweł."

Krawiec sat opposite her.

"We'll get to that."

"I've been hearing that for an hour."

"Ms. Sawicka, at this stage we're trying to establish the facts. You're not under arrest."

"At this stage."

Krawiec ignored the provocation.

For the next half hour Marta described the previous day. Working from home. Shopping. Her conversation with Tomasz before he left. Paweł's phone call at around eight-thirty in the evening.

The officer returned to that call several times.

"What exactly did he say?"

"That I shouldn't worry."

"About what?"

"About the investigation into Anna."

"Why would you have been worried specifically yesterday?"

Marta shook her head.

"I don't know. Paweł brought it up first."

"What words did he use?"

Marta closed her eyes.

She could hear his voice almost perfectly.

"He said, 'You were with me. I'll tell anyone that as many times as I have to.'"

Krawiec looked at Malec.

He sat off to one side, writing nothing.

"What?" Marta asked.

"Nothing."

"People don't look at each other like that over nothing."

Krawiec rested her hands on the table.

"Did Paweł Rudnicki have any reason to lie for you?"

"He wasn't lying."

"That wasn't my question."

"I was with him."

"From what time?"

"I got there at about ten-fifteen."

"Exactly?"

"I wasn't watching the clock. I know it was after ten."

"And when did you leave?"

"After midnight."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"How did you get home?"

"Taxi."

"Ordered from Mr. Rudnicki's phone."

"Mine was dead."

"Correct."

Krawiec lifted the folder beside her elbow.

"In his original statement, Mr. Rudnicki said you arrived at his studio at approximately ten-ten p.m. At ten-thirty-one he armed the entrance alarm. He confirmed that the two of you remained together until around midnight."

"Exactly."

"The alarm system confirms it was armed at ten-thirty-one."

Marta waited.

"And?"

"Nothing else."

"What does that mean?"

"The alarm does not confirm who was inside."

"Paweł did."

Krawiec watched her for a moment.

"Would you like to see something?"

Malec shifted in his chair.

"Lena..."

"Only a fragment."

She took out a laptop, set it on the table, and turned the screen toward Marta.

The footage was black and white. The camera was mounted high, probably above the entrance to a shop or a gate. It took Marta several seconds to recognize the street.

Jaracza.

Her chest tightened so hard she instinctively put a hand against it.

The date in the upper-right corner was the night Anna died. Seconds ticked along the bottom.

22:46:11.

A woman crossed the pavement.

Marta leaned closer.

The woman wore a light-colored coat that reached her knees. Shoulder-length hair. A slim build.

22:46:16.

She stopped in front of the entrance to Anna Lewicka's building.

22:46:18.

She turned her head.

The image was grainy, but for a moment her face fell within the light from a shop window.

Marta stopped breathing.

There were no clear details. Only the line of a nose, a cheek, pale skin, dark hair.

But even Marta thought: That's me.

The woman entered the building.

The video ended.

"Again," Marta said.

Krawiec replayed the clip.

Marta watched the way the woman placed her left foot. The movement of her arm. The way she adjusted the strap of her bag.

"That's not me."

"What convinces you of that?"

"Because I was at Paweł's."

"What else?"

Marta opened her mouth.

Nothing came.

The coat looked like hers. The bag resembled her leather one. Even the woman's walk seemed familiar.

"Where did you get this video?"

Krawiec closed the laptop.

"From the flash drive found in Mr. Rudnicki's car."

"And where did Paweł get it?"

"That's what we're trying to establish."

"The camera?"

"This is not the original recording secured by police after Anna's death."

"So you don't know where it came from."

"Not yet."

Marta almost laughed.

"Then someone could have changed the time. The date. Everything."

"We're checking that."

"And you're calling me in the middle of the night because of this?"

Krawiec said nothing.

Marta suddenly knew there was more.

"What else?"

Malec looked at Krawiec.

This time he answered.

"Yesterday at nine-oh-seven p.m., Mr. Rudnicki sent me a message."

Marta became still.

"What message?"

"He asked to meet this morning."

"Why?"

"He wrote that he wanted to supplement his earlier statement."

"Supplement it?"

"Yes."

"What exactly did he write?"

Malec looked away for a second, as though making sure he remembered the wording precisely.

"I need to correct one thing in the Anna Lewicka case. I shouldn't have confirmed the entire time window. We'll talk in the morning."

Marta stared at him.

"That doesn't make sense."

"Why not?"

"Because he spoke to me maybe fifteen minutes before that."

"We know."

"He told me I was with him."

"That's what you say."

"You have the call records."

"We have a record of the call."

"Then listen to the recording."

"Private phone calls are not automatically recorded."

Marta pushed her chair back.

"Paweł couldn't reassure me that he'd confirm my alibi and at the same time write to you saying he wanted to correct it."

"He could."

"Why?"

"You knew him better than we did."

Marta stood.

Malec did not try to stop her.

"I want to go home."

"You may."

"And then what?"

Krawiec answered calmly.

"Then we'll establish whether the footage is authentic. We'll determine who photographed Mr. Rudnicki. We'll find out how the envelope got into your apartment. And we'll check exactly what Mr. Rudnicki intended to change in his statement."

"And until then?"

"Please don't leave the city without contacting us."

Marta looked at her.

"You said I'm not under arrest."

"You're not."

"But I shouldn't leave."

"Consider it a reasonable request."

Marta picked up her handbag.

Krawiec spoke once more.

"Ms. Sawicka."

Marta stopped in the doorway.

"One more thing. Did Anna Lewicka ever tell you that Paweł was storing old negatives?"

Marta felt the muscles in the back of her neck tighten.

"What negatives?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm asking."

"Paweł was a photographer. He stored thousands of negatives."

"A few days before her death, Anna sent you a message: 'Paweł has the photographs. This time I won't keep quiet for you.'"

The room suddenly felt too small.

Marta slowly turned back toward Krawiec.

"Where did you get that message?"

"From Anna's phone."

"It wasn't in the conversation you showed me a month ago."

"We didn't show you everything."

Marta felt the familiar pressure return beneath her ribs. Not fear.

Something worse.

Memory.

"I don't know what photographs she meant."

Krawiec watched her for a long moment.

"That's interesting."

"What is?"

"You didn't ask what Anna had kept quiet about the first time."

Chapter 2 - Eleven Minutes

Tomasz was waiting outside the apartment building.

Marta saw him before the taxi had fully pulled up to the curb. He stood beside the entrance with a small travel bag over one shoulder, without a coat even though the morning had turned noticeably colder. He must have gotten out of a car only moments earlier or come straight from the station and decided not to bother looking for his jacket in his luggage.

Only when she came closer did she notice a dark-blue taxi pulling away from the other side of the street.

"You said you'd come by train," she said instead of greeting him.

"I did."

He glanced at his watch.

"The one that gets in at six-twelve."

Marta did not know why she remembered the answer.

Tomasz pulled her into a tight embrace. For several seconds she let him hold her as if the entire morning could be erased by the force of someone else's arms. He smelled of aftershave and station coffee.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Were you alone when you found it?"

Marta pulled away.

"The envelope?"

"Yes."

She hesitated.

On the phone she had told him she found a photograph of Paweł in the apartment. She could not remember whether she had used the word envelope.

It meant nothing. The photograph could obviously have been inside one. The police might have told him. She herself might have said it and simply not remembered.

"I was alone."

"Did the police find anything else?"

"I don't know."

"Did they search the apartment?"

"They looked around."

Tomasz took out his keys.

"I called Borowski. He'll be available after nine."

"I asked you not to do that."

"And I'm asking you to stop acting as if hiring a lawyer is the same as admitting guilt."

They entered the stairwell.

"I haven't admitted anything."

"Good."

Marta stopped on the landing.

"They showed me a recording."

Tomasz turned.

"What recording?"

"From the night Anna died."

His face did not change immediately. Only after a second did his jaw tighten.

"What's on it?"

"Me."

Tomasz did not say, What?

He did not say, That's impossible.

He only looked at her in silence.

"Or at least someone who looks like me," she added.

"Where did they get the footage?"

"From the flash drive they found with Paweł."

Tomasz put a hand on the railing.

"And they believe it's real?"

"I don't know what they believe."

"You were at Paweł's."

"I know."

"Then the video is fake."

It should have reassured her.

Instead, she felt irritated.

"Easy for you to say."

"Because it is simple. If you were in one place, you couldn't have been in another."

"Except the only person who could confirm that is dead."

She started up the stairs.

Inside the apartment, everything looked exactly as it had before she left for the station, except for the empty space on the dresser. Someone from the police had moved the glass a few centimeters. Marta noticed immediately.

Tomasz set down his bag.

"Where did you find it?"

She pointed toward the dresser.

"Here."

He moved closer.

"The door was locked?"

"Yes."

"The chain?"

"Yes."

"Windows?"

"The balcony door was cracked open."

Tomasz looked toward the bedroom.

"We're on the third floor."

"I know where we live."

"Marta..."

"The police know too."

She went into the kitchen and filled the kettle. She did not want coffee, but she needed to perform ordinary tasks. Fill the kettle. Press the switch. Take out a mug.

Tomasz stood in the doorway.

"What else did they show you?"

"A message from Anna."

"What message?"

"They didn't show it. They quoted it."

The water began to hiss.

"What did she write?"

Marta looked at him.

"Paweł has the photographs. This time I won't keep quiet for you."

Tomasz went pale.

It lasted perhaps half a second.

Then his face was calm again.

"When?"

"A few days before she died."

"And you never got that message?"

"I did."

Tomasz straightened.

"What?"

Marta switched off the kettle before the water boiled.

"I got it. I deleted it."

For several seconds, the only sound was the soft burbling of the cooling water.

"Why?"

"Because I was angry."

"With Anna?"

"Yes."

"About what?"

"Everything."

"That's not an answer."

"Do you really want to interrogate me now?"

"The police already are. I'm trying to understand what you didn't tell them."

Marta turned toward the window.

Below the building, an elderly woman was walking a small dog on a leash. Across the street, a bakery was opening. People were buying rolls, driving to work, cursing traffic.

No one knew that a few floors above them a woman was trying to determine whether her dead friend had lied to the police for her or against her.

"Anna called me a week before she died," Marta said.

Tomasz said nothing.

"She told me Paweł had found part of the old archive."

"What archive?"

Marta turned around.

"You know which one."

Tomasz lowered his eyes.

"I thought it had been destroyed."

"So did I."

"What exactly did he find?"

"I don't know. Anna didn't say."

"And Paweł?"

"He claimed it was nothing important."

"And you believed him?"

Marta remembered Paweł's studio. Metal cabinets. Boxes labeled by year. The chemical smell that had lingered there long after he stopped developing film himself.

"I wanted to."

Tomasz went into the living room.

"We have to tell Borowski about this."

"First I want to know why Paweł died."

"That's what the police are for."

"The police think Paweł wanted to change his statement."

Tomasz stopped.

"Change it how?"

Marta repeated the message Paweł had sent to Malec. When she finished, Tomasz sat on the sofa.

"So he was going to say you weren't at his studio the whole time."

"That's what it looks like."

"Were you?"

Marta stared at him.

"Seriously?"

"I'm asking because if you've left anything out, I need to know now."

"I was there."

"The whole time?"

Anger pricked through her.

"Yes."

"You didn't leave for ten minutes? Go somewhere? Borrow a car?"

"No."

"Good."

"Good?"

"That means something is wrong with his message."

Marta walked to the table and opened her laptop.

"What are you doing?"

"Checking old conversations."

"The police have probably already secured some of the data."

"They didn't take my laptop."

Tomasz sighed.

"Marta, don't start your own investigation."

She did not answer.

She opened the messaging history. Her conversation with Paweł was long, stretching back years. Photographs from jobs, jokes, short messages, addresses, corrections to assignments.

She searched for the word Anna.

Hundreds of results.

Then archive.

The first message was from four months earlier.

PAWEŁ: Finally clearing the junk out of storage. If I find those tragic photos of you from 2011, I'm sending them to Tomasz.

MARTA: You burn them.

PAWEŁ: I don't destroy art.

MARTA: No one could call those art.

She scrolled.

Three weeks before Anna's death.

PAWEŁ: Found a box labeled "BRZEZINY."

MARTA: Throw it away.

PAWEŁ: I don't even know what's inside.

MARTA: I do.

PAWEŁ: Which is exactly why I'm not throwing it away.

Marta closed her eyes.

"Brzeziny?" Tomasz asked behind her.

She had not heard him approach.

"That's what was written on the box."

"Show me."

Marta pushed the laptop toward him.

Tomasz read the messages.

"We need to tell Borowski."

"According to you, everything needs to be told to Borowski."

"Because he's a lawyer."

"And Paweł was my friend."

"And he's dead."

Marta shut the laptop harder than she intended.

"Exactly."

Her phone vibrated.

For a second she expected the police.

The screen showed a name.

IGA.

Iga Czarnecka had worked with Paweł for five years. Officially as a retoucher and photo producer. In practice, she was the only person capable of keeping his studio organized.

Marta answered.

"Iga?"

She could hear crying on the other end.

"You know?"

"Yes."

"The police are at the studio."

Marta looked at Tomasz.

"Are you there?"

"Across the street. They won't let me in."

"What happened yesterday?"

"I don't know. He left after eight. Said he had to meet someone."

"Who?"

"He didn't say."

"Was he nervous?"

"He'd been strange for days."

"What does strange mean?"

"He locked the storage room. He never locks it. And twice he asked me if anyone had come by while he was out."

Marta stood.

"Did anyone?"

"No."

"Iga, what was he looking for in storage?"

Silence.

"How do you know he was looking for something?"

"He messaged me about an old box."

"The negatives?"

Tomasz raised his head.

"You know about it?" Marta asked.

"I helped him scan some of the material."

"What material?"

"Old film. More than a decade old. It was in bad condition."

"Brzeziny?"

Another silence.

"Yes."

Marta felt Tomasz step close behind her.

"What was in the photographs?"

"I didn't see all of them. Paweł only had me set up the scanner and leave the folder."

"What folder?"

"On the computer. I think he called it B11. But Marta..."

"What?"

"He found something yesterday."

"What?"

"I don't know. He printed several frames and said, 'It's not where we thought it was.'"

Marta tightened her fingers around the phone.

"What does that mean?"

"I asked. He wouldn't answer."

"Was anyone with him later?"

"I don't know. I left at eight."

"What about the car? Did he come back to the studio?"

"I think so."

"Why?"

"Because around ten I got a notification that the system had been disarmed."

Marta went rigid.

"Exactly what time?"

"I can check."

She heard tapping.

"Ten forty-one."

Marta looked at Tomasz.

The footage the police had shown her was timestamped 10:46 p.m.

"Iga, are you sure?"

"I'm looking at the app."

"Who can disarm the alarm?"

"Me. Paweł. We have separate codes."

"At ten forty-one, was his code used?"

"Hang on."

Iga checked again.

"Yes. Paweł's code."

For the first time since dawn, Marta felt she had something solid to hold on to.

If Paweł returned to the studio at 10:41, he could confirm she was there. Five minutes later, a camera outside Anna's building showed a woman resembling Marta. She did not know the exact distance between the two places, but by car it had to take at least several minutes, probably more. On foot, much longer.

"Have you told the police?"

"Not yet. I just got here. Marta, what's going on?"

"Tell them everything. The exact time. Don't delete anything."

"Of course."

Marta was about to end the call when Iga said:

"Wait."

"What?"

"Yesterday Paweł asked me to check one more thing."

"What?"

"The corridor camera."

"At the studio?"

"Yes. The camera in the back sometimes catches the entrance to storage."

"And?"

"A section was missing."

Marta felt the tension return.

"How much?"

"Eleven minutes."

"When?"

"The night Anna died."

Tomasz slowly sat down.

"From what time to what time?"

"I'd have to check exactly."

"Check."

Iga was silent for several seconds.

"Got it. From ten forty-three to ten fifty-four."

Marta stared at the wall.

22:43.

22:54.

The footage outside Anna's building: 22:46.

Eleven minutes.

"Marta?"

"I'm here."

"Paweł wrote those times down on a piece of paper. That's why I have them. He wrote one name too."

Marta stopped breathing.

"What name?"

A voice sounded at Iga's end. Male. Iga told someone she would finish in a moment.

"I can't right now."

"Iga, what name?"

"A police officer is coming over."

"Tell me."

"Not on the phone."

She disconnected.

Marta stared at the dark screen for a moment.

"We're going there," she said.

Tomasz stood immediately.

"No."

"Iga knows something."

"And she's speaking to the police right now."

"She said Paweł wrote down a name."

"All the more reason you shouldn't show up there."

Marta reached for her jacket.

"Move."

Tomasz stepped between her and the hallway.

He did not touch her. He simply stood there.

"Listen to me. There's video showing you outside the home of a murdered woman. The man who gave you an alibi has been killed. Someone left his photograph inside your

apartment. And now you want to go to his studio and question another witness before the police have even finished talking to her?"

"Yes."

"This is exactly the moment when you need someone else to think for you."

Marta looked him straight in the eyes.

"I don't need anyone to think for me."

"Right now you're terrified."

"You should be too."

Tomasz frowned.

"I am."

"You don't look like it."

"What am I supposed to look like?"

Marta did not answer.

She walked past him into the bedroom and pulled a coat from the wardrobe.

The same one she had worn on the night Anna died.

Light beige. Knee-length.

For several seconds she stared at it without moving.

Then she returned in her mind to the footage.

The woman walking along the street.

Light coat.

Dark bag.

Shoulder-length hair.

Marta held the coat up to the light and examined the sleeves.

One of the two decorative buttons was missing from the left cuff. She had torn it off in spring and never sewn on a replacement.

On the recording, the woman had raised her left hand toward the strap of her bag.

Marta closed her eyes, trying to reconstruct the frame.

She could not remember the button.

But she remembered something else.

The sleeve strap.

On Marta's coat, it had hung loose for months because the seam had come undone.

On the woman in the footage, it lay perfectly flat.

"Tomasz."

He appeared in the doorway.

"What?"

Marta lifted the coat.

"That wasn't this coat."

"How do you know?"

"Mine is damaged."

"On footage like that, you might not be able to see it."

"No. The sleeve strap. Hers was stitched down."

Tomasz came closer.

"Marta, tens of thousands of women own coats like that."

"Exactly."

For the first time since the call at 4:17, she felt something other than fear.

Direction.