

Nathan Ashborn

One Door Is Missing from the House

**The Floor Plan Remembers a Room
the Family Refuses to Talk About.**



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THRILLER

CONTENTS

INTRO	4
Chapter 1 - The Wall That Shouldn't Be There	12
Chapter 2 - The Key Marked P	37
Chapter 3 - Footprints in the Attic	64
Chapter 4 - The Girl After She Disappeared	77
Chapter 5 - The Room Didn't Belong to Anna	91
Chapter 6 - Five Marks.....	110
Chapter 7 - Tape Five.....	128
Chapter 8 - The Woman Who Drove Anna Away	144
Chapter 9 - The Same Bend	163
Chapter 10 - The Doctor Who Remembered Too Much	180
Chapter 11 - The Man in the Dark Sedan	202
Chapter 12 - Paweł Didn't Die.....	222
Chapter 13 - The Second Floor Plan.....	242
Chapter 14 - Wojciech Stopped Running	263
Chapter 15 - Anna Came Back for the Truth.....	288
Chapter 16 - What Jerzy Left in the Doorframe.....	308
Chapter 17 - The Copy That Never Existed	326
Chapter 18 - Four Numbers on the Photograph	343
Chapter 19 - The Man Who Was Never on the List	368
Chapter 20 - The Door	384

INTRO

The first thing Marta could not find in the house after her father died was not the will.

It was a door.

She stood in the middle of the upstairs hallway with a yellowed floor plan spread across the floor, trying for several minutes to convince herself that she was reading it wrong. The paper was nearly forty years old, worn along the folds and stamped by an office whose name had changed twice since then. But the lines were clear. Stairs. Bathroom. Three bedrooms. A walk-in closet. A small room on the north side of the house.

Marta looked up.

On the north side of the hallway, there was only a wall.

No door.

No recess.

No sign that anything had ever been there.

"Did you lose something?"

Her brother's voice came from downstairs.

Marta did not answer. She crouched, held the plan flat with one hand, and ran a finger along the dimensions. Four meters eighty from the bathroom wall to the exterior wall. Earlier, she had measured the hallway with a folding ruler she had found in her father's workshop.

Not quite three meters.

Almost two were missing.

Not from the plan.

From the house.

She heard footsteps on the stairs.

Tomasz appeared on the landing carrying two mugs of coffee. His shirt was open at the collar, and he looked as though he had spent the entire morning trying to organize a funeral, sell a house, and prevent a family argument all at once.

He had managed only the first.

"I found another stack of documents in the study," he said. "If they're bills, I'm throwing them out without reading them."

He handed her a mug.

Marta pointed at the plan.

"Do you remember this room?"

Tomasz glanced at the paper.

He did not need to bend down. He did not even need a proper look.

The change in his face lasted perhaps a second, but Marta saw it. The exhaustion disappeared. Something alert took its place.

Then he shrugged.

"Old design. The house was remodeled."

"When?"

"I don't know."

"You lived here longer than I did."

"Marta, I was twelve when you moved out. I wasn't keeping a renovation diary."

He tried to smile, but his eyes remained still.

Marta looked down at the plan again.

"There's no note about the layout being changed."

"So?"

"Dad kept a permit for replacing a single window from ninety-eight. Every invoice. Every installation plan. Everything."

"Maybe he didn't keep this."

"He kept the original floor plan."

Tomasz set his coffee on the windowsill.

"Do you really want to spend the first day after the funeral measuring walls?"

"I want to get the paperwork ready for the realtor."

"The realtor doesn't need architectural archaeology."

"They need the correct floor area."

This time her brother looked at the wall.

Briefly.

Too briefly.

Marta stood.

She remembered the house as almost unchanged: the dark wooden stairs, the bright hallway, the bathroom tiles their mother had wanted to replace for the past fifteen years and never had. Marta's old bedroom still had a small crack beneath the windowsill. The lamp in their parents' bedroom was still the one they had bought before her high school graduation.

And yet now that she knew the measurements, the hallway looked different.

Too short.

Like a badly cropped photograph.

She walked over to the wall.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking."

"I can see that."

The wallpaper had been put up years ago. Cream-colored, with a pattern of vertical stripes so faint they were almost invisible. Her father had hung it himself. Marta remembered the smell of paste, the open windows, and a radio playing somewhere downstairs.

She ran her hand over the surface.

Halfway along the wall, she felt an uneven patch.

"Marta."

Tomasz said her name differently this time.

She turned.

"What?"

"Leave it."

He no longer sounded irritated.

He sounded serious.

"Why?"

"Because we're trying to sell the house, and you're about to start tearing off wallpaper to prove that some architect drew a line wrong forty years ago."

"It's not one line."

"There is no room there."

Marta watched him for a moment.

"How do you know?"

Tomasz clenched his jaw.

The front door slammed downstairs.

They both fell silent.

"Probably Mom," Tomasz said.

Their mother was not supposed to be back until evening.

Marta followed her brother downstairs.

Aunt Elżbieta stood in the entryway. She had taken off her black coat, but her handbag was still hanging from her shoulder as though she had no intention of staying long. Her father's sister looked worse than she had at the funeral. Her face was pale, and her hair, usually arranged with meticulous care, had fallen across her forehead.

"Is your mother here?" she asked.

"Not yet," Tomasz replied. "Did something happen?"

Elżbieta noticed the floor plan in Marta's hand.

Her eyes fixed on it.

She did not ask what it was.

"Where did you get that?"

Marta felt her brother go still beside her.

"From Dad's papers."

Her aunt held out a hand.

"Give it to me."

It was not a request.

"Why?"

"Because it's an old piece of paper. You don't need it."

"That's exactly what I'm trying to figure out."

Elżbieta stepped toward her.

"Marta, give me the plan."

"What's behind the wall upstairs?"

Tomasz swore under his breath.

Their aunt froze.

The house became so quiet that Marta could hear the clock ticking in the living room.

Elżbieta slowly lowered her hand.

"Nothing."

"There's a room on the plan."

"Plans sometimes show things that were never built."

"The exterior dimensions of the house match."

Her aunt looked at Tomasz.

Not Marta.

That was enough.

"You know," Marta said.

"No," her brother replied.

Too quickly.

Elżbieta closed her eyes.

"Your father should never have kept that."

Only then did Marta feel uneasy. Not when she saw the blank wall, not when she discovered the missing two meters, not even when she noticed Tomasz's reaction.

Only now, when her aunt spoke in the voice of someone who had spent years fearing one specific thing.

"What shouldn't he have kept?" Marta asked.

Elżbieta did not answer.

Something knocked upstairs.

Once.

Dull.

All three of them looked up.

Tomasz was the first to move toward the stairs.

"Stay here."

Marta followed him.

"There's no one up there."

"I said stay."

"Since when do you give me orders in my own house?"

"This isn't your house."

He turned toward her on the stairs.

He immediately understood what he had said.

So did Marta.

"We haven't even read the will yet," she reminded him.

Tomasz went pale.

A second knock sounded upstairs.

Clearer this time.

It came from the far end of the hallway.

From the wall where, according to the plan, there should have been a door.

Marta pushed past her brother.

When she reached the top floor, she noticed something she had missed before.

At floor level, a strip of wallpaper had come loose from the wall.

Not much. Perhaps the width of two fingers.

There was no plaster underneath.

There was wood.

Marta crouched and slipped a fingernail beneath the edge of the wallpaper.

"Don't touch that," Aunt Elżbieta said behind her.

Marta pulled.

The wallpaper came away with a soft tearing sound.

Underneath ran a perfectly vertical seam.

The edge of a doorframe.

Someone had not removed the door.

Someone had built over it.

Marta looked at the family standing behind her.

Tomasz was no longer looking at the wall.

He was looking at Elżbieta.

And her aunt was looking only at Marta.

"Your father promised," she said quietly, "that he would never open it."