

# Shadow Zone

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## 1

On some days, impending doom announces its approach, not in a way you can see, like a dark-grey sky predicting a storm, but subtly. It is those mornings when the sky above London feels dry and cold as you leave your flat and head to the Tube station, but by the time you reach Wembley Park, the first drops are falling down the back of your neck. You turn up your collar, think about the umbrella you left at home and curse the man on the busy platform who steps on your foot without apologising. When you're on the Tube and you're pressed up against a woman with BO and a teenager who must be at least fifteen years younger furtively rubs up against you, then you know it's going to be another one of those days.

That was what Kate was thinking when she got off, two stops later, at Baker Street and had to walk the last part of the way to the Frazier Health Clinic in the pouring rain. The gravel path to the clinic was strewn with rotting autumn leaves, like a carpet in a Victorian house that has seen better days. She hurried along the path, past the grand main entrance that was reserved for patients and visitors, and to the staff entrance at the side of the building.

She keyed in the code, opened the door and stepped into the hallway. Just beneath the portrait of Edgar Frazier senior, she shook herself like a wet dog. She wasn't bothered by the disapproving look from the private psychiatric clinic's founder, the great-grandfather of the current director. Last week, in front of his very eyes, she'd removed her chewing gum from her mouth and stuck it to the underside of the handrail.

If her grandmother had still been alive, she might have asked why Kate was acting like some kind of teen rebel even though she was thirty.

"If you don't have any breathing space, you suffocate," Kate would have replied.

Then a silence would have fallen. The thought of what had happened to Kate's mother still hurt after all those years. It had not only meant that her grandparents had to take charge of a ten-year-old time bomb, but also that they had constantly tried to clip Kate's wings, and that had only strengthened her urge to fly away.

As a long list of babysitters, teachers and, in her teenage years, Liverpool's police could have testified.

Kate walked towards the mirror, which had a gold frame that was just as ostentatious as the one around Edgar Frazier senior. The current director did whatever he could to keep up appearances. The clinic had once been popular among the well-to-do upper and middle classes for its luxurious rooms, discreet care and stylish service, which allowed patients to recharge their batteries without feeling that

they had been torn away from their luxurious home comforts. Compared to the Frazier Health Clinic, hospitals at that time had seemed like factories. But times had changed. A lack of money meant that many aristocrats could no longer afford to maintain their country estates. Wealthy individuals made their way to modern hospitals that had long ceased to resemble factories, or spent their money on therapeutic innovators and their fine new theories.

Kate paused in front of the mirror and gently removed a stray lash from just beneath her right eye. Sparking flints. That was how Gloria had described the light in her eyes; green eyes that flashed when she lost her patience, which Gloria said sometimes happened a little too quickly. She would put up with that kind of comment from Gloria. She had considered her fellow nurse – who was the same age as her – as part of her select circle of good friends ever since Gloria had once subtly nudged her awake at a staff meeting without the director noticing.

She yawned and stroked a lock of hair from her eyes. If the builders who had been around in the summer were to be believed, she was easy on the eyes. Not too fat, not too thin, long blonde hair and a face that her late grandmother had said would be even prettier if she smiled more. In Gloria's opinion, it certainly wasn't Kate's looks that were to blame for her lack of a steady boyfriend.

Yawning again, she studied the dark circles under her eyes.

Gloria knew a lot, but not everything.

Kate had told no one about the sleep study she had recently taken part in at a specialist hospital. She was hoping the examination would rule out a certain condition. The doctor at the sleep lab had said she could call tomorrow afternoon for the results.

She looked at her mobile. Time to get to work.

As she walked down the corridor towards the staff room, she put her hair up with an elastic band. Pushing the door open, she was relieved to see that the room was empty. She was not in the mood for Trevor this morning. Single and in his thirties, he seized upon any opportunity to strike up a conversation with her: the weather, a hip new restaurant in the neighbourhood, Mrs Higgins's bowel problems. Gloria had once said you could see the despair on his face after every rejection and that he wouldn't give up until Kate went for a drink with him. Although Trevor was not unattractive, with his dark hair and the sporty physique that he enjoyed showing off, Kate had repeatedly tried to make it clear that there was never going to be anything between the two of them. But he seemed to have his own way of interpreting the signals.

Kate headed into the changing rooms. She opened her personal locker, where she kept her work clothes and could safely leave her belongings. Then she took out her blue uniform – trousers and a top – and put it on. Like every morning, she felt as if she were squeezing herself into a straitjacket.

Studying to become a nurse was the very last chance her grandparents had given her. The thought of working on the production line at the local chicken slaughterhouse for the rest of her life, as her grandad had threatened, combined with something that she might even go so far as to describe as a feeling of guilt, had ensured that she completed her course. Besides, going into nursing had had a certain appeal, as she had been mad about a medical series on TV at the time. Her studies had taught her a great deal, mainly how much some people could irritate her. Children and old people most of all.

She had always hated whining toddlers in supermarkets and senior citizens walking in slow motion and blocking the aisles with their shopping trolleys. Of course, that was not what she had said last year at her interview with Frazier. She had presented her excellent qualifications, and the silk blouse she had worn – as she could tell from the look on his face – had also been a plus point. With tears in her eyes, she had told him that she had been orphaned at a young age, also adding in the father she had never known. That had undoubtedly plucked at the man's heartstrings, a dad of three children who was also an active member of his local church. She had got the job.

Although she needed the money to pay the rent for her flat in Wembley, she wondered how much longer she would be able to stick it out for at the clinic. The job was wearing her out. Morning after morning, she woke up exhausted and could scarcely get out of bed. Every day was a battle against sleep. Her blood tests had shown nothing out of the ordinary. For a while she had thought that drinking

less alcohol at the weekend and going to bed early would solve everything, but it had only become worse.

Stifling a yawn as she stepped into Mrs Higgins's room, she put on a friendly face and wished her a good morning.

"Everything all right, Mrs Higgins? Just here to check your blood pressure."

Mrs Higgins, a spinster who was getting on for eighty, had been struggling with depression since the death of her ninety-year-old cousin, as she was now the sole surviving member of her family. She looked at Kate a little guiltily. Even before the old lady said anything, Kate could smell it.

"I had a little accident," Mrs Higgins said, pointing at the bathroom.

*The nurses on TV never have to deal with this sort of thing,* thought Kate.

## 2

*There are some longings that you can't share with anyone. They'd choke on their coffee and look at you as if you were ready to be carted off to an asylum. Or from then on they'd avoid walking downstairs with you behind them, like a dangerous shadow breathing down their neck.*

*That's why I only confide such thoughts to paper. Now and then I reread my sentences, enjoying the meaning concealed behind the words and feeling the excitement that runs through my body at the thought of the lives that have come to an end because of me.*

*How many is it so far? Three. Actually four if you count my next victim, the one I smile and nod at while I'm thinking about how long they have left to live and exactly how I'm going to kill them.*

*Because that's the trick.*

*Sometimes, with increasing contempt, I leaf through the morning paper and read how many people have been shot dead, strangled or beaten to a pulp by someone who thinks he can escape justice.*

*They're losers. I don't mean the victims – it's too late for them anyway – but the perpetrators.*

*I pay far more attention to reports about suicides, fatal car accidents and obituaries for someone "who has left us far too soon". I always wonder what percentage of those cases was in fact premeditated murder. One in a hundred at most?*

*And that's my place.*

*I wish I could share my pride with like-minded individuals, and just shove a newspaper article under their noses about someone who's died in apparently innocent circumstances and say: "Look, that's how I did it, too!"*

*Unfortunately, I have to keep it to myself.*

*That isn't always easy.*

*Particularly not when it comes to your next victim. Sometimes the anticipation has almost got the better of me and I've wanted to say: "What a beautiful day! Enjoy it, because it's your last."*

*But that would not be professional. That would place me among the ninety-nine per cent of losers.*

*And those days are forever behind me.*

### 3

As her shoes quickly tapped along the pavement and the dim streetlights danced before her eyes, Kate realised that going to the pub after work had not been a great idea.

"Oh, come on," Suzy had said, "you only turn forty once. Besides, I need some booze to deal with it."

The nice thing about Suzy was that she always remained cheerful, no matter what the circumstances. Even whining patients, like Mr Abbott, a former policeman who complained about cold coffee, cold food and chilly service, did nothing to change that. Kate had often wondered how she managed to get along with both Gloria and Suzy, because the two nurses were each other's opposites in so many ways. Gloria, with her lank hair, her pointed features, and her cardigans had something mousy about her, including the timidity, while the redheaded Suzy was the kind of woman who would happily sign up for a TV show like *My Big Fat Bum* and would be more interested in appearing on TV than winning the battle of the bulge.

Without a murmur, Suzy had helped her to clean up both the bathroom and Mrs Higgins this morning. So, to return the favour, she had accepted Suzy's invitation. And now she was paying the price. A cutting wind blew down the empty street, chasing a plastic bag. It was a Monday morning in early November, getting on for midnight, and this part of Wembley was deserted. All the Indian clothes shops and restaurants were closed. She passed a fast-food place with a red neon light announcing that it was open, but apparently with little success.

Kate shivered, straightened her collar and hugged her handbag to her body. After a man was knocked down and mugged in the area last week, she had resolved to stop walking through the streets alone at night. Or swaying through the streets, as she was now.

Behind her, she heard footsteps. She stopped and looked around.

No one to be seen. Maybe it was just the gin and tonics. She was so befuddled that she had put the wrong coat on at first when she left the pub. Fortunately, Suzy had noticed, but then she had offered the services of her unattached cousin, Gilbert Collins – a skinny guy whose eyebrows met in a bridge above his eager eyes – to take Kate home.

Kate had been clearheaded enough not to accept the offer.

As the evening had progressed, Gilbert had become increasingly annoying. Gloria had known him when they were both students, but she had qualified and Gilbert had not. He had been loudly reminiscing about the excesses of his student days. Gloria had clearly not been impressed and had left the party early. "Watch out for that guy," she'd whispered to Kate before she left. "When he was a teenager, he spent some time in a young offender institution."

"What for?" Kate had asked.

"Aggravated burglary."

After Gloria's departure, Gilbert stuck to Kate's side. She had scarcely been listening when he said he knew someone who was staying at the Frazier Health Clinic.

"Now I've got a double reason for coming by," he had said with a wink.

After he'd leaned in closely to ask her if she was a big fan of horror films too, she'd slipped off to the toilet. She'd managed to say goodbye to Suzy and to leave without Gilbert seeing her.

At least she thought she had.

She took a deep breath and started walking faster.

Another few streets and she'd be home. She was longing for her little flat. She'd painted the living room white all by herself, with a red wall as a feature, and had bought modern furniture and a leather sofa that she'd recently spent a lot of time falling asleep on in front of the TV. Furnishing and decorating the flat had emptied her savings account. Her grandad had constantly grumbled about exactly that when she'd invited him to visit a month after she'd moved in. He was also unhappy about her living on the first floor. To illustrate his point, he'd gone onto the balcony, which looked out over the small

shared garden.

“Anyone could get in here, no trouble at all,” he’d said. “You might as well put a ladder there.”

An intruder could easily climb the wall around the garden, he’d explained, and then pull himself up on the rails of her balcony and get in through the glass doors. Kate had been happy to show her grandad out soon after that.

All that scaremongering didn’t help anyone, she thought. Her grandad saw criminals everywhere, both on the streets and in the government.

Turning the corner, she saw the familiar row of buildings. Just a couple more minutes.

Halfway down the street, she heard it again. The footsteps were back. Faster than before.

When she reached the entrance, she pushed the door open and ran into the lobby, brushing past the letterboxes with the residents’ names displayed on them. Without looking back, she put the key into the lock of the door that opened onto the stairwell, turned it and hurried inside. She waited until she saw the door close behind her.

She finally felt safe. Residents were the only ones with a key to that door.

Dizzily, she held onto the handrail as she walked upstairs, one slow step at a time. The birthday party and the dash home in the dark had taken too much of a toll. She was longing for her bed and was already cursing the alarm on her mobile phone that would take her away from it tomorrow morning.

When she was on the landing halfway there, she heard the door downstairs open and close, followed by rapid footsteps. She froze. It could just be another resident back from a night out. But if it was an intruder with ill intentions, she didn’t have enough time to sprint upstairs and let herself in.

Kate tried to keep her breath under control. The alcohol was clouding her judgment and fuelling her fear. Maybe she should call for help. But her French next-door neighbour was never at home and she couldn’t expect much help from the sixty-year-old Mrs Brock.

Holding her keys as a weapon, Kate turned around.

When she saw who appeared in front of her, she didn’t have the chance to scream. Her legs buckling, she crashed to the floor.