



# The Graveyard Shift

By Kate Kelsen

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## About The Author

Kate Kelsen's writing has been widely recognized by literary awards and competitions around Australia. The Graveyard Shift won third place in the Warrambucca Books Spooky But True Competition in 2011.

In her writing, Kate takes a particular interest in exploring various human experiences and perspectives, using her writing to help to share people's stories in the wider community.

Kate lives on the Gold Coast, Australia.

## The Graveyard Shift

Holding the patient's arm steady, Cole watched the syringe fill with dark red blood as he drew out the plunger. He gently withdrew the shaft and dressed the tiny wound.

"All done, Bob."

As a medical student Cole spent his nights collecting blood samples and delivering them to pathology for further testing. He regularly capped off his rounds with a cup of coffee, in a cafeteria nestled in the bowels of the hospital. Over the years the new building had grown and thrived above, burying its wartime origins beneath it.

Some staff still braved the freezing winter mornings for the smoker's area outside the cafeteria. Cole stirred milk into his coffee, turning to the table behind him. Cole jumped at the sight, hot liquid sloshing over the edge of his mug and narrowly missing his shirt. Near the entrance to the old ward, a silver-haired elderly woman stood wrapped in a faded pink dressing gown.

Cole hastily placed the mug down on the table and ripped a handful of napkins from the dispenser. He briefly looked up at the woman.

"Are you alright?" he called to her.

"Yes," she murmured.

"Wait right there."

Mopping up the mess on the table, out of the corner of his eye Cole watched as the slight figure shuffled out of sight into the ward.

"Hey, wait!"

He muttered to himself as he swiftly disposed of the napkins. If he were lucky, he was only thirty seconds behind her.

Twenty years of medical detritus was crammed into the old ward. Cole manoeuvred an old wheelchair and an IV trolley out of the way, and eased himself between steel-

framed hospital beds and nightstands cluttered with jugs and bedpans.

Inside a set of glass cabinets, tin canisters were stuffed full with long, slender surgical scissors and a collection of thick stainless steel syringes. Among them were brown glass bottles of sterilizers with faded labels. A rusty old cart held all manner of twisted metal tools.

Cole continued along, scanning the dimly lit ward for nooks and crannies, any space big enough to swallow a little old lady.

Cole glanced at his watch. He had been searching for half an hour, but he couldn't be sure he hadn't missed her somewhere. He started to make his way back through the maze of equipment.

"I'm coming back," he called. "I'll bring someone to help."

Returning to the cafeteria and a cold cup of coffee, Cole called for security to aid in his search. More eyes were better than his alone, he thought. The team of guards arrived and began pulling the ward apart, while Phil, the Head of Security, clicked his tongue and shook his head.

"I can't think of anything I would rather be doing than chasing after little old ladies down here."

"Well, what would you have me do, leave her here?" Cole probed. "She could be a dementia patient and has wandered out of her ward."

Phil rolled his eyes. An exacerbated guard approached the two men.

"We can't find anything," he reported.

His arms tightly folded, Phil raised an eyebrow to Cole.

"Come on, boys," he barked. "Let's get out of here."

Fluorescent lighting starkly lit the respiratory ward, and Cole's shoes tapped crisply against the polished floor. He smiled and waved to June as he passed the nurse's station.

Up ahead, he spotted a light on in one of the rooms. Approaching the doorway, he found a heavily set man sitting on the edge of his bed in his hospital gown. His face was pale and eyes flushed red as he violently coughed his lungs up onto his tray table.

"Sir, have you pressed the button for the nurse?" asked Cole, hurrying to his side.

"Yes," the man wheezed.

"I'll get someone. I'll be right back."

Cole turned back into the corridor, quickening his pace back to the nurse's station. June looked up at him as he approached.

"June, the man in room forty-two has been pressing his button," Cole stated.

June looked confused.

"I was just talking to him," Cole insisted. "He's in a lot of distress."

He pointed to the board, where the light above room forty-two was indeed illuminated. June looked peculiarly at it as she rose from her seat, and then followed Cole. Approaching room forty-two, Cole stopped. The light was out. He flicked it on, and found the bed empty and sheets neatly made.

"He was here," Cole insisted.

"There is no-one checked into this room, Cole."

"I touched his shoulder. The light was on. How could I imagine the light being on?"

June nodded thoughtfully.

"A man died a few months ago on the ward. He had suffered respiratory distress, and the nurse at the desk had fallen asleep and didn't respond his buzzer."

June patted Cole on the shoulder.

"It might be time for a coffee."

Coffee's pungent aroma warmed Cole from the inside out. Two men stepped inside from the smoker's area.

"Haven't seen Gladys for awhile," one commented to the other.

Cole turned to look at them from the table.

"Who's Gladys?" he asked.

"She's the ghost," the man replied. "We see her walking around near the old wards sometimes. I heard someone saw her and had security pull the ward apart looking for her. He could not work out why they couldn't find her."

The two men continued their banter, and Cole took a generous sip of his coffee.

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Thanks again, Kate