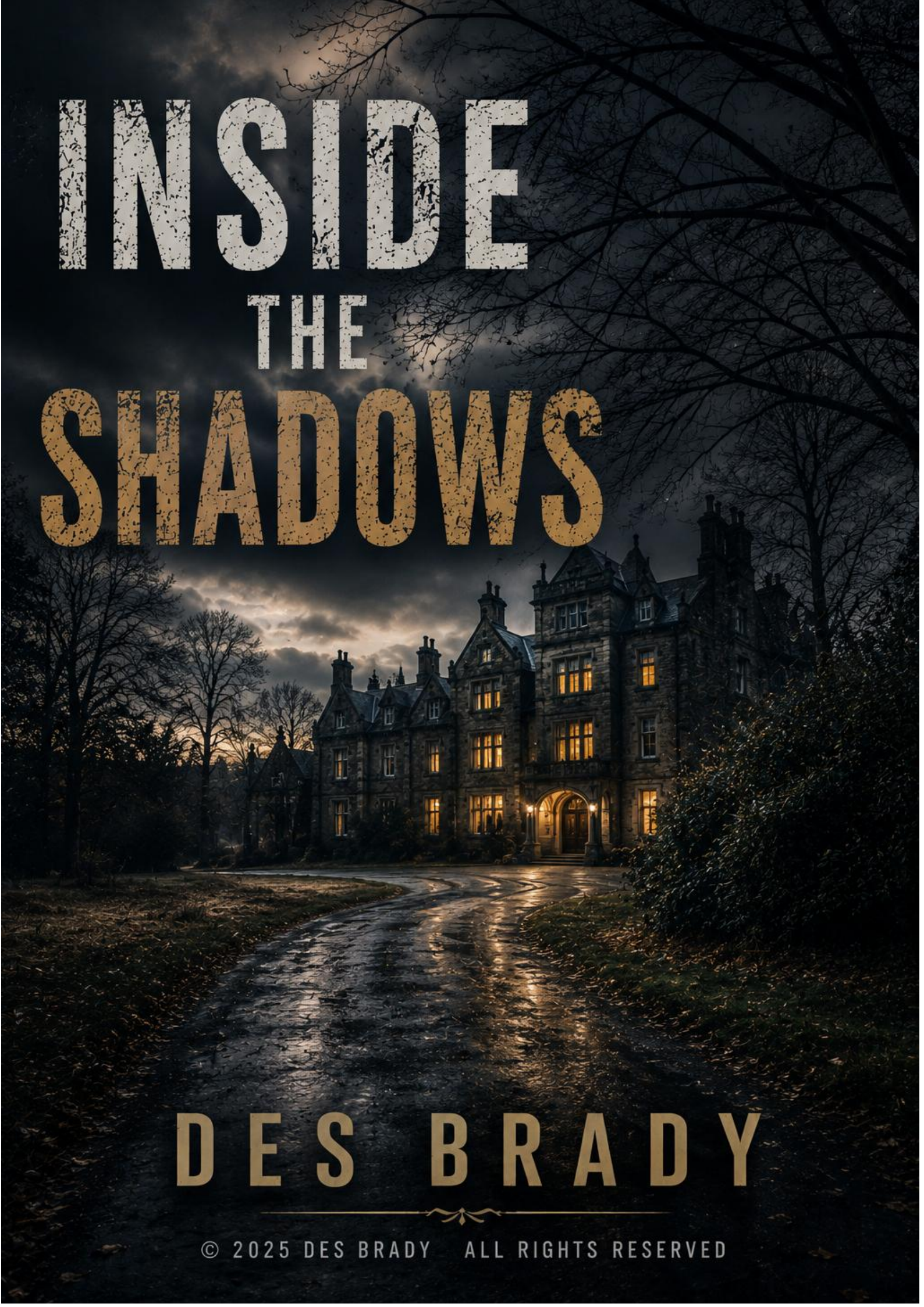


INSIDE THE SHADOWS



DES BRADY

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The words fell into the room, echoing cold off stone walls:

'In the darkened halls of Holloway Lodge, she stood over her sleeping husband, knife raised, breathing laboured, heart racing. Hesitating.'

Sarah's voice broke as she uttered that final word, her body shaking from having said aloud what she rarely shared. She hadn't meant to read that passage. Nor was she entirely sure why she had chosen to.

In the stunned silence, faces paled. Most of the group averted their eyes. Someone shifted in their chair — a small, involuntary sound, as though the body needed to confirm it was still alive. An older man sat motionless, pen suspended above his notebook.

Finally, the retreat leader, Sam, cleared his throat.

'That's quite... um... compelling, Sarah. Very powerful.'

He sounded careful, almost diplomatic. He'd been the one to encourage her to speak.

From across the circle, a woman in black cashmere watched her with unreadable eyes. She had not reacted like the others. She had not looked away. She was the only one still looking directly at Sarah.

After the session, the woman approached her.

'I'm Melissa,' she said. Her handshake was brief, measured. 'That wasn't just intense. That was honest. Your narrator — she's you, isn't she?'

Sarah found herself reflexively agreeing, before the thought arrived. As June's dusk fell early, bare trees etched starkly against a cold grey sky, she and Melissa walked the grounds discussing the text. Sarah felt a surge of relief and began opening up. Admitting fears she'd kept close for too long. Her husband David's growing distance. The quiet of his absences. Imagined betrayals. Unproven infidelities.

'I know it sounds crazy,' Sarah whispered, pressing her hands to her temples. 'Seeing things that don't exist. That seem impossible.'

Melissa stopped walking, turning to her. 'Or maybe you're the only one seeing clearly. Writers have instincts others don't. Trust what you're feeling, Sarah.'

That night, over wine in Melissa's room, Sarah showed her more of her manuscript. Melissa read in silence, until she looked up at her.

'Your character knows what she needs to do. She's just afraid to act. The question is—are you writing about her, or for her?'

Sarah didn't understand the question then. But she remembered Melissa's offer:

Call me anytime you need.

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Three days after the retreat, Sarah lay awake long after midnight, listening to David's quiet breathing beside her. Her phone lit up with an email notification. Unknown sender. No subject line. A video attachment.

She almost ignored it. Then, before she could decide not to, her fingers opened it. Putting in her earbuds, checking that David was still asleep, she lay stunned as it played.

A hotel room. Expensive, anonymous. A woman's laugh, low and intimate, her back to the camera. Then David stepped into frame, his hand on her lower back—that gesture, the one that had always been Sarah's, proprietary and tender. The woman's face was obscured by cascading blonde hair as he pulled her close, kissing her with a hunger she did not recognise.

The images seared into her, each replaying as slow-motion, horrific vignettes. She gasped as the phone slipped from her shaking hands, clattering loudly against the hardwood floor. He stirred, his voice thick with sleep.

'What's up?'

She snatched up the phone and set it aside.

'Nothing. Bad dream,' she whispered in a voice she could barely control. 'Go back to sleep.'

He did. She didn't.

Just lay in the dark, eyes wide despite the blackness. Feeling him close beside her, breathing slowly, yet a stranger in her bed. The same man who brought her coffee every morning for seven years.

And she wondered—had it all changed?



The next morning David asked, almost absentmindedly, if she was okay. Sarah nodded, unable to meet his eyes. After he left for work, she watched the video a dozen times, compelled, as every gesture, every touch, every stolen intimacy dismantled her reason. The timestamp betrayed the appalling truth: last Thursday, when he'd claimed to be at a client dinner.

She texted Melissa: *I need to talk. Please.*

They met at a café, sat in a corner booth away from windows. Sarah showed her the video with hands that wouldn't stop trembling. Saw Melissa's face darken as she watched David's hands on another woman's body, as they fell onto the hotel bed.

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‘Oh god, Sarah.’ Melissa looked up, eyes alive with something Sarah couldn’t name. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘Could it be fake? Could someone have—’

‘I don’t know...’ Melissa studied the screen. ‘It looks real to me. But more importantly...’ She reached across the table, gripping Sarah’s hand. ‘What does your gut tell you?’

Sarah’s gut was screaming, her face pinched as she held her hand to her mouth.

‘What will you say to him?’ Melissa asked softly, placing her hand on Sarah’s. ‘When you see him?’

Sarah’s mind blanked. She didn’t know. Couldn’t think. The cafe was too bright, too loud, reality skewing her sideways.

That afternoon, another anonymous message arrived: *Your husband was at the Metropole Hotel last Thursday. Thought you should know.*

Sarah dropped her head, not wanting to believe it, then looked at her screen again but could no longer find the text. Had she deleted it in some unbridled rage? Was it all a figment of her imagination? Yet, when she checked their bank accounts, her body stiffened, her mind reeling as she confronted the truth—it was true. Here was the receipt.

Metropole Hotel, 9.34 p.m. Thursday.



When David returned from work, it all felt wrong. Although he kissed her cheek, he wore another cologne she didn’t recognise, moving quickly away. Maybe she was imagining it. Maybe everything was imagination. Maybe nothing was.

After he fell asleep, Sarah silently slipped downstairs and opened her laptop, falling into a rabbit hole of lies and discontent. Forums about infidelity, Reddit threads of betrayal, article after article about the signs, the lies, the patterns. Everyone said the same thing: *trust your instinct; once a cheater; they never change; your body knows before your mind does.*

Her phone buzzed with another text as the sun crept over the horizon in an all-too-bright haze. Terrified it might be yet another mysterious message, she released her breath, realising it was from Melissa.

How are you holding up, babe?

Sarah texted back, her fingers barely able to form the words: *I don’t know what’s real anymore.*

Sarah stared at Melissa’s return message for a long time: *Sometimes you have to make your own decisions.* The words hung over her, heavy with consequence.

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Another anonymous text arrived, a link to an article: *'Women Who Snapped: When Betrayal Leads to Violence.'* She had no memory of clicking on it, but suddenly she was reading about wives who'd reached their breaking point, who'd acted on rage they couldn't contain.

It felt dark.

Ominous.

A world of unknown menace.

She closed her laptop as David entered the kitchen, smiled weakly at him, and busied herself making coffee. After he left, she tried to write, seeking refuge in her work. But she stopped abruptly, looking down at new entries she didn't recall writing. Scenes depicting a murder, act by act. In brutal detail. Much more brutal than the one she'd recounted at the writers' retreat. As if something set in motion that night was now gathering force.

That singular thought now pounded inside her head.

Loud.

Ringing.

Insistent.

What's happening to me? Sarah put her hands to her head, hands clammy with fear.

She tried to remember. Tried to separate what she knew from what she feared. But the more she reached for solid ground, the more it shifted beneath her. The video. The receipt. Real — all of it real. And yet her own manuscript stared back at her, scenes she had no memory of writing, ones she could not explain. Could not place herself at that desk, in that chair, with that pen. The ground she'd always stood on — her own mind, her own words — had become a ghostly moor.

This fugue consumed her every thought, made days blur into night, where the elasticity of time stretched to some endless vanishing point. She stopped writing, stopped eating properly, wandering the house, not recognising rooms. Knives mysteriously appearing in her hand, ones she didn't remember picking up.

Melissa checked in daily. *Thinking of you. You're stronger than you know. Sometimes our writing tells us truths we're afraid to acknowledge.*

Another email arrived: a photo of David leaving another building Sarah didn't recognize. Another text: *He's been lying to you for months.*

Melissa called. Sarah could barely form words, her thoughts no longer her own. 'I think I'm losing my mind.'

'No.' Melissa's voice was firm, grounding. 'You're finding clarity. There's a difference. There's a way.'

'But I don't know what to do. I'm drowning.'

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‘Get back to what you love. Your work.’

Sarah hung up. Stared at her manuscript, the scenes of unremembered violence rendered in precise detail now playing in her mind.

Fiction and reality bleeding together until she couldn’t find the seam.



Time passed. Minutes or hours, she couldn’t tell. Her phone buzzed. A message from Melissa. Sarah’s hands shook so badly she could barely type. *Help me. Please. I think I’ve done something—*

The response came quickly. Too quickly.

You really thought there was someone else? Sarah. Sweet, perceptive Sarah. Writers see things, remember? Sometimes they see things that aren’t there. But you saw so clearly. Acted on your instincts, trusted what you knew to be true.

Sarah’s breath caught in her throat. Surely this was a nightmare.

David took everything from me ten years ago. Promised forever, then met you at that conference. He abandoned me—and you made it possible. Do you remember when we met at the writers’ retreat? You said I looked familiar. I told you I had one of those faces. I didn’t tell you I’d followed you there.

The memories surged, haunting her. Melissa making subtle suggestions about handling David. Visiting her at home, telling her to have a shower to relax. New words suddenly appearing in her manuscript.

I’ve been planning this for so long. Waiting for the ideal instrument. And you—god, you were perfect. So devoted. So ready to see betrayal. So afraid of your own darkness that you couldn’t tell where your fiction ended and reality began.

Sarah’s world collapsed into fragments of memory and scraps of trust.

And I wrote those scenes in your manuscript, Sarah. While you slept. While you were showering. While you trusted me to read your work, to help you understand it.

I created the video using AI. And the texts, the emails, the threads.

I told you it was time to act.

And you did. You were brave enough. Just like your character.

I’ve done my work now. David paid for what he did to me. And your punishment will be eternal.

Goodbye, Sarah.

Live with your clarity.

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The account deleted as she watched, messages vanishing one by one. Sarah sat in the dark with David beside her, unable to remember what was real. What she wrote. What she saw. What Melissa planted. What she did.

Only two certainties remained: David was dead. And her hands were soaked in blood.

Sarah's eyes fell on her manuscript, still open on her laptop across the room. The final scene she'd written—or thought she'd written, or had written for her—glowed in the darkness, damning her forever:

The wife understood, finally, that certainty was a kind of madness. That seeing clearly and seeing truly were not the same thing. That the darkness she'd been so afraid of had been inside her all along, waiting for someone to tell her it was actually light.

She understood too late. That person was her.

And the knife had already fallen.

