



KHAYALAMI HOSPITAL

ANGELA MEADON

Khayalami Hospital

© 2014 Angela Meadon
All rights reserved

Sarah squeezed her eyes shut and tried to block the infant's cries from her mind. *It isn't real, it isn't real.* Yet the cries continued to echo through the darkened halls of the Khayalami Hospital.

"Do you hear that?" she asked.

"What? I don't hear anything." Brendon replied. His face was grey in the feeble light of their flashlight and deep shadows pooled around his handsome features.

"Oh, I thought I heard something," Sarah said. She hugged her arms around herself and tried to ignore the wailing.

"Let's go in here," Brendon said. The beam of light danced along the sign above the double doors ahead of them.

"The ICU?"

"Yeah, I bet lots of people died in here!"

Sarah shivered but allowed Brendon to lead her deeper into the abandoned hospital. They pushed the doors open with a squeal of neglected hinges. Brendon swept the flashlight over the beds and chairs that cluttered the ward. Weak moonlight filtered in through the dusty windows on one wall. She walked up to one of the beds, the mattress had been removed but all of the equipment stood silently next to the bed. An IV stand trailed thin chains. The black screens on monitors she couldn't identify reflected the pale moonlight.

At least the crying is quieter.

"Hey, look at this!" Brendon's excited voice grabbed her attention. He walked up to her holding a water-damaged manila folder. Faded and ratty papers stuck out of it at odd angles. "Most of it is in Afrikaans, but the x-rays are still here."

He held up a thick black film, using the moonlight to illuminate the image. It showed a thick bone that had snapped cleanly in two pieces.

"Ouch!" Brendon said with a smile on his face. "This is amazing. There's more here. They just left everything behind when they left."

They shuffled through the pages and x-rays. Whoever the patient had been, he had clearly been in an accident of some sort. All the x-rays showed broken bones, in his legs, arms, ribs, even his skull.

"I wonder if he survived," Sarah said. A cold chill ran down her spine and she hugged herself again.

"You OK?" Brendon asked. "We can leave if you've seen enough."

"Just cold," Sarah said. She wanted to leave, but Brendon had paid the security guards a hundred rand to let them into the old hospital and she knew he would be upset if she made him take her home. "I'll be fine, let's look around some more."

"Cool," Brendon said. "Oh, look at that!" He shone the flashlight at Sarah's feet and she gasped, taking a step back. A dark brown stain marked the old linoleum tiles. Sarah had been standing right in it.

"Oh, fuck," she felt dirty and a wave of nausea swept over her. "Do you think that's blood?"

"It must be, on CSI they said blood goes dark brown after a long time."

"Yuck," Sarah's skin crawled and she wiped the soles of her shoes on the tiles. "Let's look somewhere else, this is gross."

Brendon laughed and pulled her close. She immediately felt safer with his arms around her. He wasn't as big and strong as some of the other guys in their class, but she knew Brendon would do anything he could to protect her. They had all heard the stories of how haunted this hospital was, how everyone who worked in it had just walked out one day fourteen years earlier leaving everything as it stood.

They had spent Friday afternoon enjoying the autumn sun on the quad outside their classes, swapping stories they'd heard about the old building. Genny lived a block from the hospital and said her mom kept seeing ghosts in the photos she took around their house. Peter said a film crew had come here to make a movie but they had destroyed the film. He also said

the security guards would let you in at night if you paid them.

Brendon couldn't resist. He'd convinced her to come with him and they had watched from the parking lot as groups of teens who arrived before them had been let in after the sun went down. The guards only allowed five or six people in at a time and they all came out laughing and smiling, although some of their smiles had seemed a bit forced to Sarah.

Finally their turn had come and Brendon paid the surly guard the money and led her into the old building. The crying had started almost immediately.

They reached a flight of stairs, heaps of junk were piled up along the walls all the way to the landing above and a narrow passage had been swept for tourists to climb to the second floor. Papers, boxes, shoes and old blankets lay in tangles on each step. All the detritus was covered in a thick layer of dust and smelled of mould and stale urine.

Brendon started climbing. Sarah held his hand and stayed close behind him. The stench grew stronger as they climbed and when Sarah looked toward the second floor landing she had to stifle a yelp. The flashlight illuminated the motes of dust that hung in the air. For an instant she thought she saw a face there; dark eyes wide and mouth open in an eternal scream. She shut her eyes tightly and when she opened them again the face was gone.

"Your hands are sweaty," Brandon said. "You sure you're OK with this?"

Sarah swallowed a lump in her throat and nodded. The baby had started crying again and the noise grated her nerves. She wished someone would pick it up and make it stop. A wave of warm air blew over her as they reached the top step.

"Tell me you're getting some of this," she whispered. "It can't only be me."

"Some of what?"

"The crying baby, the ghost in the dust, the warm air?"

"Ah shit! I'm not getting any of it. I always miss out." Brendon pouted a little and moved down the hall.

He stopped a few paces away, his body tense. He held his hand up in front of his face and brushed at the air in front of him. "Did you see that?" he asked.

"No, what was it? What did you see?"

"The look on your face! It's priceless!" Brendon laughed as he walked down the passage. Sarah groaned and followed him. She fell a little way behind him. The sound of the crying baby grew quieter and then faded away completely. Sarah started to feel silly. She'd allowed her imagination to get the better of her and had scared herself. *Idiot, there's nothing here.*

Brendon walked further down the passage, passing yawning doors as he went. Sarah got her cell phone out of her pocket and turned it on to use as a flashlight. She glanced at the time; 11:57.

"Wait up!" she called as she hurried down the passage. The shadows danced in the doorways as she ran past and more than once she thought she saw people walking towards her as she passed the entrances. "Brendon!"

Sarah saw bright light up ahead of her and she skidded in the dusty corridor as she rounded the corner. She was ready to give Brendon an earful for leaving her on her own, but the words died on the tip of her tongue.

The light wasn't coming from Brendon's flashlight. It streamed out of light fittings in the ceiling. The corridor was clean and crisp, the piles of garbage and abandoned equipment gone. Sarah stepped into the bright light and shielded her eyes from the glare. Her footsteps echoed in the ammonia-tinted air and mingled with the staccato beeping of machines in the rooms that opened up off the corridor.

Sarah approached the nurse's station and she felt the cool breeze from an air conditioner blow down her back and relieve the nervous heat that had brought sweat out along her spine. The droplets converged and a rivulet traced its way down the middle of her back.

The baby started to cry again and Sarah turned toward it. The wails were louder, high pitched and insistent. Her heart ached and tears welled up in her eyes.

The nursery was closed in with a glass window that stretched from waist height to the ceiling. Rows of empty bassinets stood in the low light that illuminated the room. Only one of the baskets held a baby, a tiny little girl wrapped up in a blanket with pink and yellow bunnies on it. A single lock of dark hair stuck out from beneath a crocheted hat.

"There, there, it's OK." Sarah put her hands to the glass and pressed her forehead against the smooth partition. "Mommy will be with you now."

"Do you want to hold the baby?"

Sarah jumped, turned and looked into a pair of caring eyes nestled in a face full of wrinkles. She nodded and the nurse, dressed in the shapeless green gown that all the hospital staff wore, opened a small door and went into the nursery. She lifted the infant and brought her out into the ward. The baby stopped crying as soon as Sarah held her tiny body close.

"There, that's better," she crooned. "Mommy will make you feel better."

"Sarah! There you are!"

She spun on her heel and found herself staring straight into the beam of the flashlight. The corridor was dark again; the baby and the nurse had disappeared into the night. Brendon came up to her and scowled at her in the darkness.

"We must stick together; if you get lost you'll be stuck in here overnight. Come see what I found."

"You say we must stick together," Sarah said. Anger welled up inside her and she couldn't hold it in. "Why did you walk away from me? I don't have a light!"

"Sarah," Brendon looked at her with hurt and confusion on his face. "You were right behind me and then you disappeared. I had to search three other wards before I found you here. Stay close and come with me, I want to show you something."

Hurt by his leaving her, scared and confused by his version of the story, Sarah walked beside Brendon as he led her into one of the rooms off the passage. It was the delivery ward. Single-bed rooms led straight into the corridor on one side, and surgical theatres led off the opposite side.

"Check it out," Brendon pointed out the leather straps and laces used to secure a labouring woman's feet to the stirrups.

"It's barbaric," Sarah said. The rest of her comment was driven from her mind when an anguished cry tore through the room.

"What the fuck was that?" Brendon grabbed Sarah and made her jump.

"You heard it too?"

"Yeah, is that what you heard earlier?"

The cry came again and they both winced. Sarah nodded. It was all she could manage. An icy finger of fear lanced down her spine and she couldn't find the words to tell him that it was like the cries she'd been hearing all night.

"Let's get out of here," Brendon said.

Sarah nodded again, but as they were about to walk out of the theatre the room was flooded with bright light. The overhead lights had come on, and the surgical lights hummed into glaring white life. The cries grew nearer, louder, and Sarah watched in mute terror as three nurses wheeled a bed into the theatre. A woman lay there, clasping her swollen belly and screaming in agony. Sarah felt the woman's fear as she was lifted across to the narrow, bare theatre bed.

A surgeon ran into the room, tying a mask behind his head. He hurried over to the woman and placed his hand on her shoulder as he spoke calmly to her. Sarah couldn't hear what he said, but the look of fear and grief that twisted the woman's face tore at her heart and pushed her into the corner of the theatre.

She shoved her hands against her ears to try and drown out the cries. A hand grabbed her shoulder. Sarah pushed it away and kicked out, trying to get further away from the anguish in the room.

"Sarah," Brendon's voice cut through the fear in her mind. "You're safe baby, we're alone, there's no one else here."

She pulled her hands away from her head and looked around the dark room. The abandoned equipment shone faintly in the light of the torch.

"We must leave." Sarah's voice was little more than a whisper.

"Ok, sure baby, we'll leave right now."

Brendon lifted her up off the floor, and supported her weight as they left the ward and headed down the staircase. Halfway down the staircase the flashlight faltered, flickering on and off.

"Brendon." Sarah could hear the panic in her voice and she felt the muscles in his body tense. He shook the flashlight and the light grew stronger for a moment before flickering again. Each time the beam cut the dusty air around them, Sarah saw the screaming face in the grey light that surrounded her. Hands reached out and brushed against her arms. Something pulled the hair away from the side of her neck and she felt warm air blow against her cheek.

Something snapped within her then. The last piece of bravery blew away from her on the warm breath of the spirit. She stumbled down the remaining stairs and fled, screaming, down the midnight halls. Brendon shouted her name, imploring her to stop and wait for him, but she couldn't hear him over the sound of the crying baby.

At the end of one of the corridors, Sarah found a door with light shining out beneath it. She put her hands up against the cold steel and pushed the door open. The wall on her left held ten small metal doors. A table stood in the middle of the room on a hydraulic lift. A hose dangled

from the ceiling and rested on the steel table next to a cloth-shrouded shape.

Sarah walked slowly forward. Whatever lay under that cloth was the reason why the spirits of the hospital had brought her here, she knew this although she couldn't say how. The crushing fear lifted from her shoulders and she felt strength return to her limbs. She walked over to the table and lifted the shroud.

It was the woman from the theatre. Her face was slack and rubbery now, no longer contorted by pain and fear. A long wound ran from her sternum to her pelvis. Large, careless sutures held her abdomen closed. Sarah walked to the foot of the table and took the cardboard tag from the woman's toe.

Evelyn Close.

"Mom?"

<<<<>>>>