



ONE LAST NIGHT AT WAVERLY HILLS

By

Debbie Kuhn

(A Prequel to "Midnight at Waverly Hills")

The sudden spray of watery blood stained the skirt of Nora's crisp, white uniform. She caught the glass as it fell and laid a comforting hand on her patient's shoulder. When the violent coughing spell had ceased, the woman met Nora's sympathetic gaze with tear-filled, sunken eyes.

"I'm so sorry, hon."

"No need to apologize. I'm quite used to it."

Mrs. Davidson only had a few more weeks to live. Nora recognized the signs.

"What was I saying? Oh, are you leaving Waverly to get married?"

Nora smiled. "No. I'm transferring to a regular hospital."

The woman closed her eyes and sighed. "You're young and attractive. You should find a husband to take you away from all this suffering and death."

Nora didn't bother to reply. She covered her patient with a clean white blanket. "Goodnight, Mrs. Davidson. I'll check back soon."

Nora's twelve-hour shift – her last – had begun five hours earlier at 6:00 p.m. She would take a break around midnight and run back to the dormitory to change her uniform. Bloodstains upset her littlest patients.

The children – they were the reason she had to leave. She couldn't bear to watch any more of them waste away and die from the "white death" that was tuberculosis.

At midnight, she left the third floor nurse's station and headed down the hallway to the elevator, her soft-soled shoes making no noise on the red and black tiles. It was quiet now except for the occasional hiss of a radiator, or the sound of a patient coughing.

Nora rode the elevator alone down to the first floor. When the doors opened, a hideous screeching noise assaulted her ears. She stepped out and looked to her left.

At the end of the dimly-lit corridor, the heavy metal door that led to the draining room was standing wide-open. A little girl with long, black hair appeared from behind it. She was dressed in a white hospital gown.

Katie Hanson?

It couldn't be. Eight-year-old Katie had died on the operating table two weeks before. It had been a last-ditch effort to save the orphan's life. Nora had been off-duty at the time and had not had a chance to say goodbye.

No, it must be Molly, Katie's friend. The two had looked incredibly alike.

Nora watched in horror as the little girl entered the draining room.

She sprinted down the hall. No child should see what was in there. No adult could remain unaffected by the sight. The room was the last stop for infectious TB victims before they were carried through the death tunnel to waiting hearses.

Nora paused in the doorway, gasping at the sight – and the overwhelming stench.

Two bodies – one male, one female – hung upside down from metal poles. They'd been sliced open from groin to sternum. Little rivers of blood, mixed with other bodily fluids, snaked across the sloping cement floor to trickle down one drain.

Nora caught a glimpse of the little girl behind one of the hanging corpses.

"Molly, honey, you should be in bed. We can't stay here."

It was Katie's voice that replied – accusatory and full of unshed tears. “They cut me, Miss Nora. You PROMISED me you wouldn't let them.”

“Katie?”

The overhead light flickered and went out just as the metal door slammed shut behind Nora. She screamed and threw herself against it, pummeling the unyielding surface with her small fists.

“No! Please, somebody let me out!”

“Don't leave us, Miss Nora.”

Nora felt little hands tugging on the bottom of her skirt. The pitch-dark room was filled with the sound of labored breathing.

She let out a blood-curdling shriek and fell forward as the door suddenly opened. She shielded her eyes from the light and looked up into the stern face of a security guard.

Nora didn't give him a chance to speak. She brushed past him and flew down the hall to the lobby. She leaned against one of the wooden pillars for several minutes, catching her breath, trying to think rationally.

One last night at Waverly Hills – she'd get through it somehow. Stress, guilt, and grief had led to that horrifying hallucination. It was that simple. She'd take a break and then get back to her rounds.

On her walk back from the dormitory, Nora noticed a light shining in Room 502. Only mentally ill TB patients were kept up there. They didn't like to sleep.

She would check on them – see if someone needed a sedative.

Nora took the elevator to the fifth floor – the rooftop. Room 502 was isolated and the open space around it was used by patients to take in the healing rays of the sun.

She crossed the roof. It was a chilly March night, with only a whisper of a breeze. She fished the room key out of the pocket of her sweater. The door was unlocked.

Nora entered cautiously and was met with silence. All ten patients were awake, sitting on their beds. The men and women stared at her with blank, pale faces.

Except.....there should only have been nine.

Nora's hands began to tremble as a tall, gaunt woman stood and faced her.

No. Alma Hanson was dead. She'd committed suicide rather than watch her daughter die.

"You can't leave us, Miss Nora."

Nora whirled around, stifling a scream. The front of Katie's gown was soaked with blood.

"Mama knows how to make you stay."

Nora felt an ice-cold entity invade every fiber of her being – she had no control of her limbs, no voice.

The ghost made her walk towards a darkened corner. Nora could see a wooden chair.....a white sheet draped over one of the ceiling pipes – and the noose.

She tried to scream, but couldn't.

Alma forced her onto the chair – then slipped the noose over her head. Her stiff, white cap tumbled to the floor.

Hot tears streamed down Nora's face.

"Don't worry." Katie said, smiling innocently. "Mama says it'll only hurt a little."

Alma kicked away the chair.

THE END