

OUR LADY OF THE UNFADING BLOOD

by Alina Fabozzi



Our Lady of the Unfading Blood is a non-profit, 478-bed acute care teaching hospital sponsored by the Eastern Catholic Diocese and the Laurent Navison Foundation. Our Lady brings the latest medical practices and highly skilled professionals to the bedside. It employs more than 3,600 healthcare professionals and support personnel, and more than 1,000 doctors and dentists are on staff. Our Lady treats more than 23,000 inpatients and more than 245,000 outpatients yearly.

CHAPTER 1

"I'm dying. PL" Muscle memory: delete all messages from Ma.

She killed the engine and fumbled out of her airless car. The cool fall air carried deep-water brine from the bay, coating her tongue in salted vapor with every breath. Marina watched the hospital shift change right at sunset. The parking lot bloomed with nurses, technicians, and doctors beeping, slamming, and opening car doors.

Employees in seafoam, wine, and plum scrubs flowed around her silently in a coordinated current. A group of nurses in Caribbean blue turned in a silent, schooling unison toward the automatic doors. In and out of the automatic doors, touching the hand sanitizer pump as they went. Something dark red and viscous swirled in the clear reservoir, a slow-motion nebula of red iridescent liquid. Marina looked away, up above the front doors.

The expansive main entrance was a towering arch of steel and glass. At its apex, a bronze sculpture of a woman in flowing robes covering her face with her hands: the hospital's patron saint. Fin-like ridges along the seams of her metallic robes suggested a creature breaking the surface of the water. Breaking the surface of being human.

Through the automated sally port a blast of hot air carried the aroma of mugwort and benzoin. Churchy scents mixed with medicinal redolence. A temple inside of a trauma ward. Hesitating on the threshold, Marina pulled out her phone, heavy finger hovering over Vincent, her brother's name.

What would I even say? "Come back. I'm sorry. Don't make me do this alone?" No.

She put the phone in her back pocket, choked down a dry swallow, and stepped into the grottoesque lobby.

Folded wheelchairs stood stacked near the door. Damp. From rain or something else.

The atrium was decorated with white and beige vases overflowing with soft pink, burgundy, and lime-green amaranth. Their tassel-like bloom clusters swept the floor in the HVAC breeze. Marina's mother adored amaranth.

"They never fade, never lose their color," she'd say.

"It's not meant to be inspirational, Ma," Marina would reply.

Her boots echoed loudly on the hard terrazzo, reverberating off the ceiling. The floor was a mosaic of crushed shell and green marble, polished so high it reflected the setting light like a sun-drenched lagoon. Stretched two and a half stories high, the lobby was vaulted like a cathedral. Marble columns, brass fixtures, and cold stone were typical of a bank rather than a hospital. An Art Deco mausoleum to keep the sick away from society.

The design didn't account for modern security checkpoints. Metal detectors and security desks looked like ugly, temporary fixtures dropped into a grand space, cluttering the flow. A

white set of marble stairs snaked up to the second floor. A poured-in concrete wheelchair ramp switch-backed along the side, jarring and out of place.

High above, ancient chandeliers barely illuminated the ceiling. The mix of fluorescent and incandescent created a watery light in the upper vaults..

Marina approached the security desk. An older woman with a long silver braid chatted on the phone and her nametag read *DiTomasso*.

"Oncology?" Marina asked. An acrylic display on the desk held brochures for Laurent Navison's Foundation. Medication-marinated people hugging graced the front. She pushed it away from her scope of vision.

The woman smiled, too wide, too long, put down the receiver, then said, "Need to see some ID, hon. I'll print you out a guest pass."

Marina sighed and patted her pockets for her wallet. The older woman pointed to an old plastic webcam clipped to a computer monitor.

"Oh, you must be Valeria's little girl," the older woman said, looking at her driver's license.

"Good guess, how'd you know?" Marina asked.

"You look just like her." That smile again.

Marina nodded.

"Smile for the camera," DiTomasso said, taking a grainy, black and white photo of her. DiTomasso handed Marina her ID and a sticker that said FAST PASS VISITOR with her picture on it. Marina squinted at the sticker. She was right, she did look like her mother, her face distorted in the middle.

"Geez, did you take this picture with an ultrasound?" Marina said.

The security guard smiled, "We like to keep things old school around here."

Marina stuck the pass to her jacket. The edges curled, leaving a tacky residue.

"Twentieth floor. You'll want the far elevators, hon. The close ones don't go all the way up," DiTomasso said.

"Thanks," Marina said.

The woman was already back on the phone, but Marina felt her eyes tracking her across the lobby. The distant din of telephones ringing, the clattering of equipment, and the smell of disinfectant. Unseen eyes tracked her movements through security cameras.

Get in and out quickly, she thought. Get it done and go home.

Between the security desk and elevators, a small shrine to Our Lady of Unfading Blood occupied the central space of an old, repurposed fountain. It was a dark stone statue that glittered with gold inclusions. Hematite. The saint's flowing robes draped over her pedestal like ink. She was faceless, with her hands and headscarf covering her visage. Encircling the hem of her robe were dozens of little battery-operated tea lights. Little bits of sea glass and

spotted shells were scattered in between. As she passed, Marina felt a warm breeze land on her neck and snake down her back. Sweating now, Marina coiled her dark hair around her hand and secured it with a green claw clip with broken teeth. She refused to part with it.

The brass bank of far elevators glowed with the sunset. Vintage half-moon dials set above the door bobbed up and down like depth gauges.

Waiting in the lobby, she observed the others. Pale patients leaning on IV stands, shuffling out for a smoke. Young physicians two-handing cans of energy drinks. Housekeeping staff rolling rattling carts full of soiled linens. All of them turned to look at Marina as they passed.

Marina focused on the elevator. Above the brass doors, the floor indicator arrow had swept to *L* on the dial. A bell dinged loudly, and the doors slid open to an empty car. Marina stepped inside, again catching the scent of antiseptic, camphor, and old metal. As the doors slowly closed, Marina saw the statue of the faceless saint. The lighting in the lobby –perhaps flickering caused by fluorescent tubes high up– cast shadows that made the blank face turn toward her.

The black Bakelite floor buttons were sticky like little blocks of licorice. A flash of red in the black. Knuckle-pressing the twentieth floor button, the elevator box rumbled upward. The sage green walls were scratched from decades of gurney collisions, revealing steel underneath. Above, the lights cast a sickly yellow glow from a boxy, caged bulb. Dead flies collected in the cavity. The inspection sheet was yellowed and the last date written was suspiciously long ago. She stood at the center of the machineroom, afraid to touch anything.

The elevator lurched to a halt. The heavy brass doors slid open with a breathy hiss of hydraulics. Marina stepped out, and her ears popped. The air felt thin. The impressive echo of the lobby was gone, replaced by clinical silence. Here, the terrazzo floors had been swapped for noise-dampening rubber tiles in a checkerboard of cream and pale green. The damp smell was replaced with lemon wax, rubbing alcohol, and the ozone-like heat of electronics.

The corridor stretched before her like a spine, lined with heavy oak-veneer doors. This was the "High Rise" where the long-term, high-acuity, and high-paying patients drifted. No waddling smokers or rattling carts here. Just the low hum of the fluorescent lights and the distant, rhythmic *whoosh-click* of a mechanical ventilator echoing from an open door down the hall.

Marina found room 2014. A plastic isolation cart stood outside, stocked with yellow gowns and boxes of gloves. Hands shaking, she pushed the door open. A bitter breeze filtered out.

The room was dim, lit only by the glowing monitors and the fiery orange sunset bleeding through the slats of the blinds. The first thing that hit her was the sound. *Blup...*

blup... hissss. The wet, gurgling rhythm of a bubbling humidifier bottle attached to the wall oxygen flow. It sounded like drowning in slow motion.

"Ma?" Marina whispered.

She saw the bed and a small mound under the starch-stiff sheets. Her mother. She looked smaller than Marina remembered. Her skin was the color of old parchment, translucent enough to show the dark veins beneath. A tangle of clear tubing ran from her nose to the wall, and an IV line snaked from her bruised forearm to a pump that flashed a green light in the corner. A wash of cold air from the open bathroom made her shiver.

Marina inched forward and held her breath.

On the bedside table, crowded among the generic "Get Well" carnations and plastic water pitchers, sat a heavy crystal vase. It was filled with deep red amaranth tassels. Their clusters of petals, like drops of blood, were aggressively vibrant against the beige room. A large framed portrait of the patron saint in crimson and gold robes. Beneath the portrait, delicate text read: "Dedicated in honor of the 2019 archaeological discovery." The frame cast a shadow that didn't match its shape.

Above the bed, where a crucifix usually hung, someone had mounted a small wooden icon. It was *Her* again: Our Lady of Unfading Blood. The wood was dark, ancient-looking, but the paint on the robes was a wet, lacquered crimson that caught the dying light from the window. The faceless hood stared directly at the pillow where her mother's head rested.

Marina reached out to touch the railing of the bed. The metal was freezing.

"I'm here," she said to the bubbling silence.

Her mother's hands were porcelain. The skeletal frame melted into the hospital bed was barely recognizable as human. Her narrow, suspicious eyes were puffy and closed. A braid of black hair sat on top of her head like a set of stacked horns. The wall behind her mother's hospital bed was festooned with plastic bags of red, white, and yellow liquids and garlands of plastic tubing.

Marina took a seat in the corner chair. Vinyl upholstery with cracks and duct taped tears. Her phone was a needed distraction. She scrolled through photos of her and Shayanna at Jersey Shore last summer. Sunburnt and laughing. Shayanna's sun-blonde hair tamed with a green claw clip. Marina's arm slung over her shoulder like she owned her. Like she'd never leave.

The phone screen glitched and a luminous white and teal line appeared straight down the middle. *Damn, I squeezed too hard.* She rapidly rubbed her eyes behind her glasses, dry air irritating her face. Hair irritating her face. Her mother's face irritating her.

The hospital room smelled like an industrial cleaner that failed to mask something fetid and organic. Under the odorous chemical bite: the yeasty smell of her mother's unwashed

body, the metallic coil of IV fluids, something else she couldn't name. Sweet. Minerally. Almost floral. Like raw meat. Spit coated mouth and her stomach soured.

The machines beeped in irregular rhythm. Marina counted them without meaning to. *Beep-beep-pause-beep. Beep-beep-pause-beep.* Her mother's breathing didn't sync with any of it.

An oncologist and nurse in plum-colored scrubs entered the room to attend to her mother without a word to Marina. They worked in absolute silence, synchronized and flawless in their movements, smelling like camphor and honeyed vanilla. Marina scarcely noticed the doctor approaching her with a tablet. He moved as silent as a shark.

"Miss Acuario, please sign off on your mother's treatment." Dr. Seonghan handed Marina a red leather-bound tablet, snapping her out of her reverie. Marina was surprised, she didn't expect her mother to give her that kind of control. Skimming the treatment procedure profile, and it read like a sermon.

"What's 'pleroma'? And 'blood ministration'?" Marina asked.

Dr. Seonghan raised an eyebrow. "That's... why your mother is here," he said. "Ministered blood therapy is an experimental but highly effective treatment."

"Experimental how?" Marina noticed that before they spoke, the doctor and nurse exchanged glances, as if seeking approval.

Dr. Seonghan then looked at his watch and said, "Miss Acuario, your mother is in good hands. She needs treatment or she will die. We want to start tonight at midnight. Please sign the forms." Both doctor and nurse turned to look at the portrait of the faceless Lady at her mother's bedside. The doctor excused himself and left the room. Peyton stayed behind to replace IV bags.

"Love-lies-bleeding," Peyton said, filling the silence.

"What?" Marina looked up.

"That's the name of this flower: love-lies-bleeding. It's remarkably rich in iron, efficient for improved capillary action."

"I gotta get outta here." Marina handed the tablet to Nurse Peyton. "You'll let me know about my mom, how the treatment went and all?"

"Someone will definitely call tomorrow, probably Dr. Seonghan," she said, placing a hand on her mother's shoulder. "Your mom is all ready for treatment tonight. You'll see, you are so, so blessed by Our Lady."

Marina held back an eyeroll. After the nurse left, Marina anchored herself at the foot of her mother's bed. The railing was warm under her palm, like someone had been gripping it.

"Hey, Ma." Her voice was too loud and too small at once. "I signed the forms. I hope that was the right thing to do."

Her mother didn't stir. The ventilator breathed with a rhythmic *hiss-click*.

Move closer. Touch her hand. Go be a dutiful daughter. But her feet wouldn't move. All those years of flinching from those hands, that face, the memories were stronger than her shallow intentions.

"Did you know Vinny got married? I didn't." Marina looked out the window instead of at her mother. Easier that way. She could blame her tear-welled eyes on the brightness of the setting sun. "Did you go to the wedding?"

The machines beeped. Her mother's chest rose and fell in response.

"I'm trying, Ma. I'm trying to do the right thing. For you and Vinny. For everyone. For Shayanna—" Her voice cracked. She pressed the back of her hand against her mouth until the urge to sob passed. Her throat was as tight as a drum, making her cough.

But behind those grayish, papery eyelids, Marina knew she was listening. Like something was hovering above her mother's body, and whispering into her ear. She patted the bed railing, cold now, and left the room quickly, before the feeling grew teeth. Even comatose, her mother sucked all the air out of the room.

Marina's hands were cold and sweaty. She stuffed them into her pockets for a moment and took some regulated breaths. Her stomach rumbled and cramped. She sat down on one of the small chairs scattered up and down the hallway.

A bulletin board nearby advertised childcare, legal services, and a large poster of Laurent Navison's live performance from three months ago. *A healer and a scholar*, Marina read.

In the quiet hospital hallway, she stretched to relieve the tension built up in her neck and shoulders. Marina's spine tightened the moment she stepped into Our Lady of Unfading Blood Hospital. At first, she believed it was nerves from seeing her mother after one long, painful year. But the feeling didn't abate. Marina's shirt stuck to her back between her shoulder blades in the humidity.

The air felt recycled, like it had been breathed too many times already, and tasted bitter. Ceiling tiles stained with reddish organic patterns caught her eye as she navigated the halls. She blinked once and the pattern disappeared.

"What the hell," she whispered.

Marina tried to call her roomie Kallista and let her know she was on her way home. No service. She tried texting. The message failed to deliver over and over.

"Huh, come on," Marina said, flicking through the settings, turning the Wi-Fi on and off, and even restarted her phone. "It was just working in there." But Marina didn't want to go back in that room. *I'll call when I get outside.*

She took the long way around to pass the inpatient rooms, looking for stray bags, cell phones, or jewelry to tactically acquire. Someone left a purse on a bench near the bathrooms. Marina rifled through it quickly, coming away with three-hundred and fifty dollars in cash.

People are always so careless when they're grieving dear old mom, she thought, securing her spoils inside her bra. Petty theft always managed to give her a little rush, a quarter hit of adrenaline, a boost in self-confidence.

"I can treat Kalli to sushi for dinner," Marina said, musing that her roommate might also forget the shared utilities she's behind on. She attempted to use her phone to look up a nearby restaurant. This time, it worked, and she texted Kallista to meet her at Yuzu in one hour.

> *Can't wait!* Kallista replied with a smiley face.

Marina smiled, too. She had to hurry and get to her car now.

Her footsteps squeaks echoed down the corridor and came back changed, slightly delayed, like sound had to travel in and out of a doorway before reaching her ears.

Patient rooms were closed and the beeping of life-saving machinery was muffled. She passed a heavy wooden door, slightly ajar, with a wired-glass window. It smelled awful, like sharp disinfectant and the sweet-rot of human dirt. It stuck to the back of her throat. Beyond, she could make out two figures moving, but terribly blurred, like smudges, whispering, "Are you still sick?" said one.

"I feel like death. Look at this wound, it won't stop leaking," said the other.

"Shhh, keep it down. I don't want to get in trouble." The door thudded shut. Marina pressed her ear to the door. She heard soft sobbing mixed with the faint dripping of water.

The smell of illness, the confusing layout. Why would anyone want to work here?

Fluorescent lights flickered, blinking in and out randomly, plunging entire sections of the hallway into darkness. The shadows were dark purple and consuming.

"Oh, finally! I thought I'd never get..." Marina had found the nurses' station, but it was empty. No Peyton D. Only an ancient water cooler gurgled in the corner. Marina paced the waiting room, checking her phone, and clearing her throat.

Reflexively, she opened the picture gallery and scrolled through the memories with Shayanna again. Marina sat in one of the chairs and held her throbbing head in her hands. Sweat poured off her scalp and nose.

On the muted TV in the corner, a news segment warned people to keep children and pets indoors while city-wide spraying for an increase in poisonous centipedes continued into next week.

"Well, that's one good thing," Marina said.

The water cooler gurgled again. A loud *bla-bub-bub* in the irregular silence. She grabbed a paper cup. In the distorted reflection of the blueish plastic, Marina saw a dark figure standing behind her, just over her shoulder. A blast of hot air parted the hair on her neck. She whirled around. Nothing but the hum and beep of life-sustaining machinery.

The skin on the back of her arms crinkled, like everything was tightening in her body to run. Her glasses kept slipping down her nose. Uncomfortable and hot, she wiped her face with the back of her sleeve.

Down the hall from the nurse's station, Marina saw a far away figure get violently yanked into a room. A pained scream cut short. She stepped back with a little gasp. Leaving the oncology ward behind, Marina followed the signs to the bank of elevators.

Are all religious hospitals like this? Marina thought, looking up and down the hallways as she made her way to the far elevator bank. Office doors were closed and lights turned off.

Two office lights turned off as she approached, but no one exited. Finally, she made it to the brushed brass of four elevator doors and a floor to ceiling window. It looked out onto the bay, but the light glinting off the water was abnormally bright and unnaturally pale, like color was bleeding from the world.

Marina pressed the down button, but it didn't respond. The elevators didn't move in their shafts, just the tense creaking of cable and a constant rushing of air, like deep breathing. Marina punched the button one last time, then stormed down the fire stairs instead.

The stairwell was dimly lit with a large open central shaft and motion-detector lights. At every landing, the greenish glow of an energy-saving LED clicked on, while the one above clicked off. Marina carefully descended in this bubble of light.

I can barely see three feet in front of me. Kind of extreme energy saving, dontcha think guys... Well, if I fall and break my neck, at least I'm in a hospital, Marina thought, clutching the railing. A creaking noise, like a heavy weight swinging from a rope, quietly echoed down the stairwell. The pendulum of sound followed her down, never fading or increasing in timbre, just constant.

When she had made it halfway through her journey, Marina stumbled upon a little familiar shrine tucked into the corner of the landing between the eleventh and twelfth floors. Barely knee-high, but lovingly arranged with red and gold cloth draped over a wooden box. An LED tealight was placed at the center, battery-powered but flickering like a real flame.

The same wallet-sized Our Lady card from the gift shop, propped at the back. Someone had kissed it. It was covered with the faint smudge of lips on the plastic sleeve.

In an olive wood bowl: cigarettes, a cheap lighter, a faded photograph of a young woman with '90s hair and a gap-toothed smile, pieces of sea glass worn smooth. The flotsam and jetsam of prayers. Of hoping someone was listening when throwing the message in a bottle out to sea.

Marina crouched, knees popping. She looked for money or jewelry among the offerings, but there was nothing truly valuable. Her mother used to make shrines like this when she was small, before the drinking got bad, before her father left. Candles for dead relatives Marina had never met. Photographs and flowers and coins. Folk traditions of blood and air.

This felt the same. Desperate and tender. The kind that gave up on this world and moved to demanding answers from the hereafter. She reached for the cigarette pack. Her fingers had just closed around it when something moved inside. Skittering and pressure against the cardboard. Marina opened the pack.

A centipede the size of her hand, candy-red and segmented like raw meat. It crawled onto her palm with legs that felt like eyelashes brushing her skin.

She yelped and fell backward, shaking her hand violently until the insect dropped. It disappeared into the seam between the floor and wall. Her palm itched where it had touched her and the creeping sensation spread up her wrist.

What kind of psychopath? Marina thought, stomping on the cigarette pack. Marina dared the Lady of Unfading Blood mentally, staring at the faded framed image. The saint remained still, unmoving, unfaded.

Five landings above, a light clicked on.

She heard a soft sliding and clink of jewelry on the metal railing and heavy, steady footsteps. The next light clicked on, only two landing above. She scrambled up and took off down the stairs as quickly and quietly as possible.

Loud and steady, the footsteps trailed her. When she stopped, the footsteps stopped.

"Hey," she called, leaning over the railing. She waited and listened, but heard nothing except the sound of soft creaking riding the warm column of air flowing up the stairwell. "On the stairs up there, I'm talking to you."

In response, wet suctioning sounds, like a burlap sack of meat tumbling down the steps. Marina tried to will her body to stand strong, but every instinct screamed at her to run. So, she ran.

Flying down the stairs until she reached the ground floor, Marina slammed her body against the heavy panic bar of the fire door, and burst into the lobby. She held a hand over her chest, feeling her heart hammer her sternum. The lobby was empty, and her ragged breathing resonated all around.

Hide.

She sprinted around a corner and whirled into the first unlocked door: Facilities Manager. Marina closed the door and smacked the lock home. The office was dark except for the setting light weakly filtering through the windows. Outside, wet slapping sounds.

The doorknob turned slowly.

Marina scrambled back, tripping over a rolling chair. She dove under the heavy oak desk, curling into a ball in the dust bunnies and computer cords.

The handle rattled. Then it shook. Violently, as if the door was having a seizure

Marina clamped her hands over her mouth. In the gap beneath the door, she saw shadows. Not feet. Something wet and heavy was pressing against the threshold, oozing darkness.

Her hand, bracing against the floor, touched hard plastic. A lanyard. She pulled it into the shadows. A white keycard. The name SHAW was scrawled across it in black marker.

The rattling stopped abruptly. The black ooze slithered away, fading like a receding tide. Marina was left holding the keycard against her pounding chest. She stood slowly, peering over the desk littered with papers.

“What’s this?” Marina pushed a few printouts to the side. Strange, rudimentary drawings of a giant skull chamber on lined paper hidden under invoices and notes. Measurements were scrawled in the margins. *One-hundred and fifty feet by three hundred feet. Room for burial chamber. Blood mote?*

“Is he a DM or a serial killer?” Marina wondered. The rest of the office was sparsely decorated. A faded prayer card of Our Lady was pasted to the top of the computer monitor, staring eyelessly.

Exiting the maintenance office, keycard securely in her pocket, Marina went back to the massive lobby. An expansive, modern mural of Our Lady of Unfading Blood dominated the double-height wall above the front doors. The Lady was painted robed in crimson and gilded with gold leaf. Her face was hidden behind her hands. The nameless saint sat on a wooden throne as a giant among the painted blue mountains, green rivers and red seas. Tiny people from the four corners of the canvas converged to her form, bringing grain, animals, and fruit as offerings. Marina’s vision narrowed looking at her. It was the same feeling she felt at the stairwell shrine: something wanted *in*.

Marina read the new plaque installed underneath: “Dedicated to Our Lady of the Unfading Blood. Flowers bloom and fade, and dawn turns to dusk, but Our Lady is Unfading, and all those who Minister the Blood remain in Her Eternal Gratitude.” Marina thought it was creepy to have a faceless entity as a hospital patron saint. Her mother loved it, go figure. She even made Marina buy a mural magnet from the gift shop to put on the fridge at home.

Standing there, staring at the faceless entity, Marina felt a quaking underneath, like a train rumbling by. It vibrated her eyeballs in their sockets. It wasn’t movement outside, but inside, somewhere deep below. The very foundation of the hospital was pulsating like the shallow breathing of a comatose patient.

There’s something here. I can feel it. It’s just below.

Marina forced her eyes away from the mural and carried on down the lobby toward the main doors. The painted patrons’ eyes followed her.

Just focus on getting out of here. The main entrance was brightly lit for the night and she made a beeline for it. She pushed the revolving doors, but they were locked. The ADA doors beside were locked, too. She knocked on the glass, hoping to catch the attention of someone in the parking lot. The sun, low on the horizon, glinted off of the car roofs, blinding Marina from seeing anyone.

The reflection of the lobby in the glass doors showed Marina an altered mirrored image. A rundown lobby, broken columns, and peeling wallpaper. Strange spongy growths ballooned from the ground like giant beach balls. Marina looked back to the reflection and moved her body, but the strange environment in the glass remained.

She rattled the door handles with anger, breaking the reflective illusion. "This can't be happening. Come on, I just want to go get some sushi," Marina said. She pulled out her phone and scrolled to the hospital's main number. Her thumb hovered over the call button. What would she even say? "Hi, I'm stuck in your lobby and can't find the exit"? They'd think she was drunk. Or stupid. And besides, her phone was still acting up.

Marina stomped up and down the lobby looking for someone, anyone. This was insane. Hospitals had staff 24/7. Security. Janitors. Someone.

Maybe she was stupid. There had to be another door. A side entrance. The emergency department was at the back of the building, there'd be people there. She could walk around through the parking lot.

Except the doors were locked. God damn it! Marina yanked at the doors again, pulling with all her body weight. She kicked and banged at the door. And the parking lot looked wrong through the glass. The cars were there, rows of them, but too still. Like a photograph. Like someone had paused the world outside. Not a soul walking among them. The trees looked pink and coral-like, but when she looked for a second time, they were verdant and full. The sounds of dripping, trickling water filled the space.

When she moved, her boots made splashing noises on the dry, polished terrazzo floors. The runner carpets squished like a sponge. And the unmistakable scent of low tide stalked her nose. It smells like it flooded and they couldn't get the moisture out of the walls. Marina pressed her palm against the glass. Her cold hand fogged on the surface when she pulled away.

Under the fog, for just a second, she thought she saw handprints on the other side. Small ones. Like little frogs crawling up the glass on the other side.

But when the fog faded, there was nothing. Okay, maybe someone at the security desk can let you out. Maybe they just lock the front doors at night? One thing after another... Nothing can ever be easy with Mom, not even leaving a hospital.

Marina had passed the security desk on the way in, and it was staffed by an older woman with a long silver braid. She remembered her old navy blue uniform looked a little too

big for her. But now, the security desk was abandoned. The radio was left on. It was tuned to Navison's show, loudly announcing to the lobby: "Our next guest is a doctor of naturopathy and CEO at the Nathan Springer Wellness Center for Healing and Enlightenment: Mr. Nathan Springer. Now, Mr. Springer you say that boiling water actually removes the oxygen from the water, turning living water into dead water?

"That's right, Laurent. Living water has a natural structure and when you boil it... the blood becomes congested... blood flows... freely... blood of the eternal..."

The sound dipped in and out, crackled and strained through the little old radio. In the lonely atrium, the sound of rope creaking sounded throughout, like the strain of a heavy weight anchored. The fluorescent lights hummed their electrical song. For a moment, it all felt normal to Marina.

The radio program cut out mid-sentence.

In the silence, Marina heard it: a deep, guttural chuckle. Layered. Distorted. Like multiple voices laughing at the same joke in different octaves, slightly out of sync.

It came from the radio speakers. From the walls. From inside her own chest. It sent an icy wave of anxiety all over Marina's body. Looking back at the mural, the Lady's sleeve had noticeably moved down more, revealing a voided face rather than pallid skin. She was watching, like a sentinel turned warden, facing toward the enemy within.