

## *ROOM 303*

Dan Cummings visited his mother three times a week at the Golden Care Convalescent Home in Upland, Missouri. He had been faithful to this routine for the past three years - ever since his mom had been admitted to the place - and actually enjoyed the three hour round trip. He would pop in a book-on-tape, put the car on cruise control and kick back, watching the scenery and getting lost in another world.

Dan had two older siblings who were both married. His brother, Brad, lived in Chicago and made it down every couple of months or so; Jenni, his estranged sister in Duluth, never visited; the responsibility, like always, fell on his shoulders.

It was Thursday; he always ran late on Thursdays. And for the first time in three years, Dan Cummings did *not* enjoy the drive or the scenery. He couldn't seem to keep his mind focused; his thoughts would drift to what his mother had become: an emaciated human being suffering from bouts of dementia.

When he pulled into Golden Care's lot, the outdoor security lamps were on; dusk was blanketing the city. Dan looked at his watch: 7:15 p.m., she would have eaten dinner by now.

He got out of his Honda and walked across the snow-covered lot, nervously patting the pocket of his wool overcoat, feeling the lump of the small glass vial, taking comfort from it like he would an old friend. It was late November, and the weatherman predicted another round of light flurries tonight; he better not stay too late. Good thing he bought new snow tires. He also had a set of chains in the trunk; Dan was a good Boy Scout and followed the Boy Scout motto: Be prepared.

And prepared he was.

Once inside, he dusted the snow off his shoulders and smiled at the young nurse behind the counter, who was filling out tonight's charts. When he was almost upon her, she looked up.

"Hi Dan," the young woman said. She was in her mid-twenties, average-looking in a healthy sort of way, with short, brown hair and green eyes.

"Hey Charlene," Dan said, leaning over the counter. "Don't you ever get tired of working here? The smell alone would drive me crazy, not to mention the sponge baths, the diaper changing and dealing with *death*." He shuddered.

Setting her chart down, she studied him for a moment. "I do this because I believe that the elderly should have their dignity preserved ... and we do have bleach, Pine-Sol and other chemicals we use to keep the place clean and smelling fresh," she said, a noticeable irritation in her voice.

"Yes, but I—"

"And I would want someone to do the same for me when I get old. Your mom took care of you for years, Dan, and now it's her turn to have someone take care of her."

Over the past three years, Dan really got to know Charlene and found her to be extremely idealistic. Her Christian beliefs belied what he was about to do and, in a way, he hoped she would say something that would change his mind.

"You're right, of course."

She smiled. "Yes I am," she said, nodding her head.

"What are you working on?" he asked, seriously thinking about leaving without seeing his mother. He could just tell Charlene he suddenly felt ill and go home, rethink this again. But he'd been over his mother's wish again and again in his mind.

"I'm charting silly, like always. What's wrong with you tonight? You're acting strange."

"Am I? Sorry ... may I go see her?" he asked with a forced smile that didn't quite work.

"Of course," Charlene said. "Now go, I have work to do," she said, making a shooing gesture with her hand.

He had discussed what he was about to do at length with Brad, his brother in Chicago, but instead of trying to talk him out of it, Brad told him he was doing the right thing; he was, after all, ending her pain, putting her out of her misery. And if you loved someone, you didn't want them to hurt, did you?

*Yeah, but it's not you doing this, is it?* Dan had thought begrudgingly.

And he hadn't broached the subject with Jenna, his sister, because he knew she could care less; she probably wouldn't even come to the funeral. Jenna hadn't spoken to Mom for nine years, not since she married that jerk Harold and moved to Duluth. Mom had begged and pleaded for Jenna to change her mind – didn't she see what kind of man Harold was? – but Jenna flatly refused, accusing Mom of being selfish and cruel. And that was the last time they spoke. Mom had tried to repair that relationship, but her only daughter refused to take her calls.

Dan walked across the freshly waxed tiled floors to room 303, as he had hundreds of times over the past three years. He pushed the door gently inward, revealing the skinny, sickly woman that hardly resembled his mother. An IV needle was taped to her left arm, which lay limply at her side, mottled with brownish-black liver spots. The clear plastic tube ran from her arm to the IV bag, which was hanging from a pole next to the bed.

When he approached, the frail woman turned and looked at him. "It's about time!" she spat. "I've been waiting for three hours, where is Clarisse? Clarisse!"

"No, Mom, it's Danny."

"What? Who's Danny? I don't know any Danny! Get outa here!" she cried, trying to sit up. She struggled, then fell back on the bed, her eyes looking past him. It was as if she were watching people in a different life from a different time. "Make sure he comes back with the money! Hurry! Don't you run away when I'm talking to you!"

He plucked a Kleenex from the bedside table and tried to wipe the spittle from the corner of her mouth. She pushed his arm away. The skin on her face was leathery, old and hung off her like a dress that was three sizes too large.

"Oh Mom," he whispered. "I love you. I'm so, so sorry."

"Danny?" Her voice was soft now, not the rugged, hoarse sound he heard just a few seconds ago. It was the voice of his mother – kind, endearing - not that crazy woman who seemed to show up more and more often. "Did you bring it?" she whispered.

"Yes, Ma, I did," Dan said, choking back the tears now. "I-I don't know if I c-can do this."

"Please Danny, please, I beg you." Her eyes were clear, lucid. "You promised me, now be a good boy and do what you promised. Please, *please*."

He looked at his shoes and fidgeted like a ten-year-old boy being admonished by his elders. Sucking in a big breath of air, he tried one last time: "Maybe they can try some other medication, Mom, that might work. Maybe they—"

"No! Danny, I can't do this anymore...don't you understand that? When I go away in those fits, those fugues, I'm afraid of what I might do. I get so angry and it hurts so much that—"

"Okay Mom. Okay," he said quietly, running a shaky hand through his hair.

Without another word, he went to the door. He stuck his head around the corner. The halls were empty, Charlene's face was buried in her charts and the rest of the staff was attending

to other patients. He could hear laughter and the sound of a television coming from the lounge. He closed the door with a soft click. There wasn't a lock on the inside, so he pulled a chair across the room and lodged it under the doorknob.

He turned back to his mother, half-hoping the stranger would come back; it would make this at least a little easier. As he walked back to the bed, Dan pulled off his gloves and set them on the nightstand next to the box of Kleenex. From the inside pocket of his overcoat, he produced the vial of clear liquid – sodium thiopental – and introduced a lethal amount into the IV drip. That done, he returned the empty glass vial to his pocket, retrieved the chair from under the door and sat down next to his mother. He took her hand and squeezed gently.

“It will all be over soon,” he said, leaning in and kissing her lightly on the forehead. He brushed the brittle, gray hair out of her eyes.

She stiffened and arched her back as the drug entered her bloodstream. She squeezed his hand so hard it hurt. And then she went limp, her eyes glassy. “Thank you,” she said in a voice that was barely audible.

He stayed with her for another ten minutes. Then he leaned down, kissed his mother's mottled hand and placed it across her chest. A tiny tear rolled down his cheek; he absently wiped it away with the back of his hand.

“Goodbye, Mom. You're free now. See you soon,” Dan whispered.

He took one last look around Room 303, stepped out into the hall, and waved goodbye to Charlene. She waved back.

Outside, the snow was coming down hard. Head down against the flakes, he trudged across the parking lot, mentally preparing for the long drive home.

*I miss her already.* And then he thought of his brother Brad. Maybe now he would move to Chicago, be close to his nieces and nephews.

There was nothing left for him here.