

**THREE
DEADLY
TWINNS**

David A. Thyfault

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DEDICATION

To my lifelong pal, Eddie Marquiss.

*I wish you were still with us so you could
read the book that you inspired.*

WITH GRATITUDE

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thanks to you all. Special thanks go out to:

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CHAPTER 1

If it weren't for the bars on the windows and the glaring lack of walls around the stool, Don's cell would have resembled a dorm room in a struggling junior college. Breakfast was over and it would be a couple of hours before he'd be allowed in the common area, which was one of the token rewards for being less bad than most of the others.

At five-foot ten, early thirties, and white, Don ought to be doing something more productive. Instead, the ever-boring routine of minimum security dragged on while the well-trained wisp of brown hair that dangled above his baby face added to the collegiate effect. But prison wasn't a place for no college boys.

One of the worst parts of living in this particular ten-by-twelve chunk of real estate was the bathroom arrangement—or the lack thereof. Don had pooped in worse places, especially during the brief period he spent on the frontlines in the early part of the Iraq war.

At least those sons-a-bitches had a good excuse. Port-a-Potties would have been easy targets. This was different. The state could have built some walls around his friggin' stool if they had wanted to. He shook his head, unbuckled his belt and parked his butt. About all he could do for the next few minutes was read a recycled mag and think about Miranda.

With the paperwork finished, Don washed up better than he needed to just to kill a few extra minutes before returning to his bunk, where he laid down. As always, his flattened

foam pillow smelled stuffy. So did everything else around there. No wonder. Fifty miles inland, Lancaster California was nearly always dry and hot in spite of the air conditioning.

Bored beyond bored, he sighed. At least this was better than living among the general prisoner population where he could easily get stuck with a know-it-all tough-guy cellmate. For now, maybe he could sleep some time away. Horny, he wondered what Miranda was up to.

Slow minutes crept past before he heard a familiar clinking coming in his direction. It had to be Jingle Keys, as Don thought of the huge black guard with the perfect smile—except for the gold tooth on the lower right. His official name was Officer Jackson. Something was up. This wasn't part of the routine. Probably had something to do with somebody else in one of the nearby cells. A moment later Jingle Keys stopped just outside Don's extra-thick hardwood door. Don opened one eye. A large key invaded the deadbolt.

"Evans," Jingle Keys said with more authority than the drill sergeants Don once knew. "I brought you a present."

Huh? Don rolled over and sat on the edge of his bunk as a wide-eyed fellow about his age, with a folder-sized envelope in one hand and a blanket and coffee cup in the other, eased his way into Don's not-so-private hideout. A goddamn cellmate. He glared at the new guy, who was both taller and thinner than he, then back to Jingle Keys. "Couldn't you stick him with somebody else?"

"Nope," Jingle Keys said. "It's your turn. He's a first-timer."

The newbie's anxious eyes scanned the boxy cell as if they were getting used to a dark room. Then he extended his shaking hand. "I'm Thomas. Sorry to invade your space."

Invade. He got that right. Don preferred to be alone, especially at night when he was free to think about Miranda. But what the hell could he do? This wasn't no damn hotel and any boisterous protests would be perceived as making trouble. Like it or not, Don had a new cellmate. "Don't worry

about it," he said, taking the dude's hand. "Ain't your fault. I'm Don Evans."

Jingle Keys stepped backwards into the doorframe. "You girls play nice," he said, his golden tooth accenting a mischievous grin. "I don't want to hear no banging on the walls, if you get my drift."

"Cute," Don said just before the heavy door clanked shut and the auto-lock clicked. He turned to his new cellmate, would have liked to say what he thought of smart-ass guards, but opted instead to ask the usual question. "What you in for?" He'd best not be no chi-mo 'cause Don didn't have no sympathy for child molesters.

Thomas carefully placed his coffee cup and blanket onto the counter, but clung to his folder as he slowly eased onto the remaining bunk as if it were a nest for Amazon-sized bedbugs. Don resisted the urge to laugh.

"I fell off a ladder, broke my collarbone and over-dosed on pain meds," Thomas said. "Doctor cut me off but I met a guy who said the stuff was basically just heroin and he could get me some on the cheap. So I stockpiled a couple dozen decks. Then I got busted. Cops said I intended to sell it, which was bullshit." He shrugged. "Since I wouldn't rat out my source, the bastards sent me here."

There was probably more to this guy's misfortune than that, but Don had learned a long time ago that most of the greeners fluffed up their stories – at least until they understood that they weren't getting out early. At least the guy wasn't no stooly. Don respected guys who knew how to hold their mud. "We all got screwed in one way or the other," he said. He flashed his arm around the cell as if he were a magician introducing a beautiful assistant. "Now we're both stuck in the Shithole Motel."

Thomas pulled his folder close to his chest. "What about you? Get caught in the arms of some other dude's wife?"

Don snickered. "Not me. There's enough women out there without doing that crap."

“But it had something to do with a woman, didn’t it?”

Don sat up tall. “How the hell’d you know that?”

“Simple. You’re more focused on getting out of here than making waves. You must have something going on.”

Good observation. This guy didn’t seem so bad, especially for a newbie. If nothing else, his fresh ears lent Don an opportunity to burn a half-hour or so. “Her name’s Miranda. We met over a keg of beer at a twins convention.”

Thomas grinned for the first time since he’d arrived. “Twins convention?”

“Twinsburg, Ohio. Not far from where I grew up. They do it every year. I just went for kicks.”

“So you’re a twin?”

“An identical. But me and Mac ain’t like normal twins. We hate each other. Ain’t spoken in years.”

“Mac and Donald? Like hamburgers?”

Don smirked. “Worse than that. When we were one damn day old, our old man was drunk, as usual, and named us after that goddamn fairytale.”

“Old McDonald had a farm?” Thomas said, grinning even bigger than before. “Didn’t your mom say something?”

Don waved his hand dismissively. “Couldn’t. That bastard beat her up when she argued with him.”

Thomas tilted his head. “Well, neither name is that bad —until you hear them both together and in the right order. What did your brother do to piss you off?”

“Everything. Asshole always thought he was better than me. When our old man beat us, Mac cried like a damn girl, so I got the worst of it. After high school, he got a motorcycle and rode around the country, but I had to go in the goddamn Army. When I got back I tried to look him up, but he had a girlfriend and wouldn’t let me crash with him. He was always screwing me over so screw him back.” Don suddenly realized he cussed a lot more when he talked about his brother.

“What about Miranda? She got an identical too? Maybe you could hook me up when I get outta here?”

"She's paternal. Got a mentally challenged brother named Mickey. He acts like a ten-year-old. Lives in a group home. Gets mad as hell sometimes. She brought him to the convention for a change of pace. All she wants is to take care of her brother."

"So you hit it off pretty good, but something must have gone wrong."

"You got that right." Don checked the clock again. Time moved faster when the bullshit was flying. "We hooked up and I came back here to California. We was getting along pretty good when we went to a bar where some half-drunk asshole tried to pick her up. You know the type. Big son-of-a-bitch. I told him to leave her alone, but he didn't like me butting in, so later him and two friends with billy clubs was waiting for me. I coulda handled that one dude, but not all three with weapons. They got me on the ground and banged on my head and face pretty good." Don proudly pointed to a scar on his eyebrow. "Took eight stitches. I hung in there as best I could, then that first bastard grabbed Miranda. I thought he was going to rape her. I got back to my knees but one of the other pricks treated my head like a goddamn golf ball and took a full swing. I woke up in the hospital with my eye swollen shut, and damn near lost my ear. Good news was enough other people was standing around by that time that Miranda didn't get hurt."

Thomas shook his head. "But it wasn't over, was it?"

"Hell, no. I wasn't going to let that chicken shit get away with his crap. He didn't know I'm a bad ass with cutters, knives. Grew up with 'em. Trained with 'em as a Green Beret. Even became a butcher when I got out of the service. I can split a toothpick with a machete. Coulda slit that son-of-a-bitch from ear to ear too, but Miranda stopped me."

"Really? If she stopped you, how'd you end up in here?"

"She talked me out of killing the bastard, but I wasn't gonna let him off that easy, so me and her compromised. One morning, after he went to work, I jimmed his door

with a Bowie knife. I wanted to cut up everything he owned, furniture, kitchen cabinets, all of it. But when I got into his bedroom, I was attacked by a big old boxer that was hiding from the noise until I got too close. Damn thing was lightning-fast.”

Thomas’s head snapped back. “You stabbed a dog?”

“Sliced. It was an accident, cause of my reflexes—how was I supposed to know that dude was watching somebody else’s pet? Anyway, the damage was done and I had a ton of blood on me when I got back to the parking lot. Trouble was I had parked in a reserved spot and the woman it belonged to just come home and already got my plate number to have my car towed.” He shrugged. “I got a three-year bit in this shithole for destruction of property and cruelty to an animal—although I never would have hurt that dog if he didn’t catch me off-guard.”

“Three years, huh?”

“Only got four months left. Miranda thinks I’m some Prince Charming ‘cause I stood up for her, but she’s the one who’s got her shit together. In addition to taking care of her brother, she comes to see me every week, and once a month we get to go to the bone yard.”

“Bone yard?”

“Love cabins, Dude. For conjugal visits. The main reason I keep my nose clean. Don’t want them to take that away.”

“Now you’re making me wish I had a girlfriend.”

“Just wait a while. It gets worse.” Don pointed at Thomas’s folder. “That’s enough about me. What you got in there?”

Thomas lifted the file. “This?” He glanced inside. “Papers from my attorney. We were just talking about filing an appeal with the court.” He frowned and tugged a few pages out. “Hey. This can’t be mine. My dumbshit attorney musta – oh, I see what happened. These people have the same last name as me. He got some of their papers mixed up with mine.”

“Interesting. Mind if I take a look?” Don asked, reaching for the misplaced papers. Practically anything was better

than reading the same magazines over and over. He glanced through the pages. "This stuff was written back in the 'eighties. Looks like some old farts left a bunch of money to their granddaughter." He scanned further. "Says she don't get the money 'til she gets married."

"That's strange. How much money we talking about?"

Don flipped the papers over and back. "Can't tell. Some of the pages are missing. Gotta be a lot, though. Nobody would spend money on legal fees to do something like this over peanuts."

"That girl's probably filthy rich by now."

"Not if she ain't married yet. You got any more pages in that folder?"

Thomas thumbed through his file. "Nope. Looks like we just got part of it. Why don't guys like us ever catch a break like that girl did?"

Don tossed the papers aside. "'Cause we're a couple a losers in the Shithole Motel, that's why."

CHAPTER 2

Miranda pressed her blonde hair aside and delicately spritzed some *Euphoria* behind her ears. She climbed out of her black SUV and into the relatively cool ninety-nine degree desert heat. At thirty-five years old, the heat bothered her a little more than it used to. She brushed her hand down the front of her blue polyester pantsuit and heard the clickety-click of her sandals as she strode toward the building. She wondered if it were possible to overdress for a conjugal visit.

Her visits with Don had nothing to do with pity sex. She genuinely loved him. He'd always treated her differently than most men she'd met—including the married ones—who all seemed to have one thing in mind.

In fact that was the problem with nearly everybody she'd gotten close to in her life. They'd exploit nearly anybody if they could get ahead in some other way. Her parents were like that.

Back in Chicago, where she grew up, her daddy was an attorney and her mother enjoyed the relative comfort that his success afforded them. But Daddy had immoral dealings. For instance he once convinced an elderly couple to sell their long-held family deli to a friend of his at half its value when he could have just as easily helped them get a loan and keep their store. Miranda never forgot how proud he was for his so-called *accomplishment*.

Her mom had moral problems too. At the time, Miranda was too young to understand that when Mommy dropped her off at a midday baby sitter's, from time to time, she was actually sneaking off with a lover. It wasn't until Miranda was in sixth grade that she saw the guy waiting in a car for her mom and was later told he was *Uncle Larry*, but there were never any other references to this mysterious relative. What else could it have been?

Then there was the worst part—how they both treated Miranda's sweet twin brother, Mickey. They were the ones who failed to put locks on the kitchen cabinets. Then, when he was three, he found some cleaning products under the sink. Nobody knows exactly how much he drank but the brain damage was serious and permanent. From that time on her parents kept him in institutions where he had always been grouped in with other mentally challenged people. They looked upon him as an inconvenience. A lost cause. She concluded they treated him like that because there wasn't anything for them to gain by investing additional time, effort or money in him. Nonetheless, Miranda always loved her brother and had to plead with her parents to take her to visit him.

Her parents weren't the only people she'd known who mistreated others. Most of the bosses she'd had manipulated people for their own gain if they could. One potential employer came right out and made sex a condition of her employment. She'd turned in her resume to secure an assistant manager's job at one of the well-known printing companies she now referred to as Stinkos. The very next day she was invited in for an interview where crooked-toothed Kenny took her in his office and said matter-of-factly, "If you'll go to bed with me, I'll give you the job." Somebody else might find a situation like that to be erotic, but not Miranda. She simply walked out.

Then there was her ex. They dated a couple of years before they got married. But almost instantly he lost interest

in intimacy with her yet he forever flirted with the help, especially the barely-legal group. At first she wondered how he could be so interested in those relatively naïve young women while she had more sensuality in one finger than they had in their entire wrinkle-free bodies. But it didn't take her long to figure out it was a numbers game to him. Notches on the bedpost. The thrill of the chase. His self-esteem was at its highest when the young bimbos flirted back. Then when she had evidence he'd taken the next step, that being into bedrooms, at least two or three times, she divorced him.

The ultimate life-lesson she derived from these relationships was many successful people would turn their backs on people with whom they had relationships if it meant they could get something better from somebody else.

All of this was why she liked Don right from the beginning. He may not have had a college education or his own business or a big-time job or even a nice car. But there was one thing he had that none of them did: loyalty. Don was always more concerned for the relationship than he was for himself.

When they first met at the twins convention, instead of treating her like an outlet for lust, Don took some time off of his meat-cutting job and flew to California where they had several dates without ever discussing intimacy. Even though he was a little rough around the edges, he was both interesting and fun to be with. He cared about her and was nice to Mickey. All of that made the physical part of their relationship more natural and meaningful when it finally happened.

Several months later, after Don moved to California and got a new job, he took on three thugs at a bar because one of them wouldn't leave her alone. Nobody else, including her ex, had ever done anything that chivalrous for her. That cemented it. Don deserved the same loyalty from her, even if it was awkward sometimes, like on conjugal visit day.

As she drew closer to the building she popped a TicTac in her mouth. As badly as she wanted to see Don, she wished

it wasn't so obvious why she was there. But, they were only allowed one visit per week and only one of those each month was in private—and all were limited to an hour. She simply had to draw on her high school days, when she had had a minor role in the annual play, and *pretend* it didn't bother her. She scoffed at the magazine articles she'd read in which women complained that their sex lives had become dull.

She made her way through the main gate and toward the check-in area. If she was fortunate, Don might have some ideas about how she could work things out for Mickey's newest problems. She fought off a shiver. Mickey never adapted well to moving.

Once inside, Miranda turned off her cellphone and checked in her belongings before a female guard, Maxine Montoya, patted her down and escorted her to the waiting area. After she spent a few minutes of pretending to be invisible, the heavy clinking of keys in a nearby doorknob indicated that Officer Jackson and Don had arrived.

Without a hint of discretion the guard looked her over as if she were already naked. She wished she were a lot smaller. An inch tall would be about right. She hurried toward Don, who was wearing the usual orange jumpsuit, and wrapped her arms around his neck. "How you doing, Donnie?" she said as tenderly as possible.

"Hold off there, you two," Jackson said while pointing toward the yard. "Save that kissy-face stuff for the cabin."

"No problem," Don said with enthusiasm. He snatched Miranda's hand and together they led Jackson into the yard, which was surrounded by a tall chain-link fence with barbed wire rolled on top. A wide, straight sidewalk led through a nicely kept xeriscaped area of lava rock, Joshua trees, cacti and desert flowers. To their left, the whirl of window-mounted air conditioners on four identical modular homes disturbed the peace.

"Number four," Jackson said from behind Miranda. "But don't go too fast. I don't want to work any harder than I have

to in this heat." She dragged her feet along like a man so that her rear-end wouldn't sway and attract his sleazy eyes, but she assumed it was a waste of virtue.

At Cabin Two, behind the purr of the air conditioner, Miranda heard some thumping and an overly loud moan of pleasure from another woman. Don squeezed Miranda's hand as if to signal they would be doing the same thing in mere minutes. She squeezed back.

"Stop right there," Jackson said as they reached the final cabin. He stepped around them and unlocked the door like a bouncer in a low-priced brothel might do. "One hour. That's it," he said, helping himself to another lustful gaze at Miranda's breasts. "Be ready when your time is up. I ain't in no mood for messing around. Got it?"

"Yeah, yeah. We got it," Don said.

Inside, the main room was cool, clean and simple. Like the other cabins, it had a walled-in bathroom sans tub, which Don liked. In addition, there were a couple of metal folding chairs and a double bed on which the mattress sagged.

Ordinarily Miranda preferred some hugging and cuddling before making love, but this particular time she hoped a "wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am" arrangement would leave them with some time to discuss Mickey's anger issues. She removed her jacket and wrapped her arms around Don's neck. "I've been looking forward to this, Donnie," she whispered.

"First, I've got something to talk to you about," he said, nudging her away. He scooted to the curtains, looked up the sidewalk. "He's gone." Don flopped onto one of the chairs and patted the other. "Sit down. This is important."

He hadn't been this animated in the thirty-one months he'd been there. "What's the matter?"

His eyes razored through her. She pulled at the top button of her blouse. "You're not going to try to escape are you, 'cause that would be foolish since you're getting out in a few months anyway?"

“No, no. Nothing like that. I need you to listen to what I have to say—the whole thing. We don’t have time to argue over details or ask a bunch of questions. So let me get everything I want to say on the table; then we can discuss the most important items one by one if we have time. Okay?”

She sighed. “But I want—”

“Don’t worry. It’ll be worth it.” He rose, checked out the window again then slipped his chair directly in front of hers. “The other day, I got a new cellmate. A first-timer. His name is Thomas. He accidentally got hold of some documents about somebody else who had the same last name as his.”

“So what?”

“The papers were about a trust for a woman named Rachel who lives somewhere around here. Apparently she doesn’t know that she’ll inherit a lot of money just for getting married.”

Miranda sighed. “Why are we wasting time?”

“You promised not to ask questions. Remember?”

Miranda mockingly touched her forefinger to her lips. “Oops. My bad. But hurry.”

Don grinned. “That night, after lights out, I realized I’d found a once-in-a-lifetime goldmine.” He touched her cheek with the back of a knuckle. “You and me are going to be filthy rich.”

A get-rich-quick scheme? Yeah, right. Those always work. Miranda primped his collar. “You’re wasting our time, Donnie. I need to talk to you about—”

He twisted his head down and away. “This is more important. We’re talking about the big leagues here, and I want to see what you think. But this ain’t for no good girls, so if you don’t want in, that’s okay.”

“Let me guess. You want me to tell that woman about her trust and she’ll be so grateful she’ll run right out and get married to a handsome prince and give us a big reward. Right? ‘Cause if that’s it—”

Don scoffed. "Nah. That's small ball." He lowered his voice. "I know how we can get it all."

Miranda leapt to her feet. "It sounds like you're talking about something dishonest and I wouldn't want to steal somebody else's money." She jammed her hands onto her hips. "Do I have to remind you that we won't be alone like this again for another month?"

"I know that, Baby. I want to do it too, but that ought to tell you how important this is. Now, you promised me that you'd listen to the whole thing, so please just stick with me until you've heard me out."

Miranda folded her arms across her chest. "Alright, but you're wasting our time if you think I'm going to cheat somebody out of her inheritance."

"I don't think she'll miss it." He inched his chair even closer, placed his knees against hers. "It's a double con, double murder."

Miranda rolled her eyes and shook her head. "I can't believe this."

"It's beautiful," Don went on. "The first step involves that asshole brother of mine. You'll have to trick him into falling in love with you, which should be easy 'cause he's a sucker for good-looking blondes."

"Oh, please tell me more," she said with all the mockery she could generate.

"Then it gets trickier. You'll have to tell him about the trust and persuade him to meet that Rachel woman. Then he'll date her and figure out what he has to do to get her to marry him."

"Uh-huh. That ought to take fifteen minutes or so."

Don ignored her. "When they get married, the trust money becomes hers. A few months later, she has a horrible accident and my brother miraculously inherits her money."

"A horrible accident? No sweat. The God of Accidents is always standing by in case we need him."

Don put his hand on Miranda's knee. "By that time, I should be out of this shithole and all we got to do is get rid

of Mac once and for all. Since I look just like him and nobody knows either of us around here, I'll become him and nobody will suspect a thing. Then you and me slip off somewhere and live like royalty." Don sat back and locked his hands behind his head. "Okay. That's the gist of it. Now it's your turn. What do you think?"

"Is that all?" she said thrusting her hands skywards. "Just a couple murders? And I thought you were going to say something crazy. I have an idea. Maybe Jackson will loan us a gun. When do we start?"

Don shook his head. "C'mon. Cut the sarcasm. I need you to be open-minded. Give me some legitimate feedback."

Miranda sighed. "Legitimate feedback? Okay. How's this for legitimate feedback? That has to be one of the dumbest things I've ever heard from anybody, ever, especially you." She checked the clock and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "We only have twenty minutes left. I don't want to waste them. I have something to talk to you about."

Don removed her hands. "I thought you'd say something like that, but this is doable and it'll change everything for us. Now what's the first thing about it that bothers you?"

She would have screamed out loud if she weren't afraid somebody would think she was having a record-setting orgasm. Instead she lowered her voice. "You're kidding. Right? All I wanted to do was make love and discuss Mickey, but you're too stoked to care."

"No, Baby. It's the opposite. You're the one who doesn't understand. We need this. Let me try again."

Second verse, same as the first. Don launched into the same litany, ignoring her rolled eyes, folded arms and sighs of frustration until finally, a shadow darkened the curtain. Miranda's heart jumped as the combination black guard and white knight waggled his key into the lock. Thank God. She bolted to the door.

On the way back to the holding area Don tried to grasp her hand, but she pulled back, disgusted and unsure if she

wanted to see him again. She rushed straight to the check-in area, retrieved her belongings and got the hell out of there.

Outside, she marched briskly and breathed deeply. Shaking her head, she yanked her cellphone out of her purse, checked the read-out. There were a half-dozen new text messages from the director of Mickey's group home; the first one was painfully simple: *EMERGENCY!*

CHAPTER 3

An unanticipated honk sent Miranda, red eyes and all, swerving back into her lane. Damn it. Stay focused. A difficult objective considering all the unwelcome turmoil that had jammed its way into her life. Another tear dripped into her lap.

No more than a long hour had elapsed since Don exhibited a lack of ethics that she never would have imagined. Then Dr. Fenn, the female director of Mickey's group home, summoned her.

She should have anticipated the call. After all, she'd had several face-to-face conversations with Fenn about Mickey's outbursts. And of course there were Miranda's very own eyes. She'd seen Mickey's heightened impatience and the anger when he lashed out at others. Why did she kid herself into thinking he'd magically get better on his own? It appeared that her days as an ostrich were over. What a dope. She pulled into the group home parking lot and speed-walked to her appointment.

After checking in, she slouched into the lounge chair in the corner of the combination living room/lobby. The whole place boasted of organization, much like Fenn's own office, where the walls were packed with certificates and awards, and photographs with her colleagues and other photos of her cats. Missing were pictures of kids or a husband or any other indication of a core family.

Miranda clicked her tongue against her teeth. That was another reason she should have seen what was coming. Fenn was married to her job. A pro like that went to all the conferences, took all the continuing education classes, read all the new books on the subject at hand. When a person of that ilk warned her of Mickey's escalating problems, she should have taken the message more seriously. But as usual, she put more emphasis on hope and prayers than studies and science.

"Miranda, come on in," Dr. Fenn said from the corner.

Miranda rose and followed the ever-proper fortyish doctor into her private office. "Your work area always looks so nice," Miranda said, knowing from previous conversations that they both had to keep their surroundings extra tidy around certain clients, such as Mickey, or the clients got nervous and easily aggravated.

"Thank you. I'm sorry to have been so persistent this morning, but I really needed to speak with you."

"I'm the one who should apologize, but I was in an important meeting where cellphones weren't allowed."

"Nonetheless," Fenn said, tapping one of her desk drawers, "I want to thank you for coming as quickly as possible." She hesitated a moment then leaned forward. "You know we love Mickey, but I'm afraid I don't have very good news."

Miranda raised her hand to her mouth. "Is he okay?"

Fenn nodded. "For now, but this morning at breakfast, something set him off. He became very aggressive. I thought he was going to hurt another client and we couldn't allow that. We could lose our license."

"Of course not. I'm sorry. Where is he now? Would you like me to talk with him?"

"He should be awake soon, but it took Blaine and three others to restrain him." She tapped her drawer again. "I'm afraid we had to inject him with haloperidol again."

Miranda pressed her foot to the floor to stop her nervous knee from bouncing up and down. "His doctor said it's okay — when you have to do it."

“I’m afraid it’s not that easy. The crux is that we’re not in a position to give that much special attention to any one client. It’s not that we don’t want to help Mickey, because we do. If we had a bigger staff, it would be different. The truth is, we need to focus on the lower-maintenance clients.”

Miranda’s hands shot to her mouth. “Oh, my God. You’re throwing him out?”

Fenn tilted her head to the side. “I wouldn’t think of it like that. It’s just that we all want to do what’s best for Mickey. That’s why he needs to be somewhere that’s better equipped to help him. He’s very strong when he gets like that, you know.”

That was one of the reasons he didn’t stay with Miranda. She simply couldn’t take care of him by herself. “But where?” she asked, eyes tearing up again. “You’ve said that there are very few facilities for mentally challenged children, let alone full-grown adults.”

“True. There aren’t many options for people like Mickey.” She reached into the same drawer and retrieved an envelope-sized brochure and handed it to Miranda. “I called the manager of this facility. I think it would be a great place for him.”

The colorful cover contained a picture of about twenty people, half being medical types, the others apparently their clients. “The Broadhouse? Aren’t they private?”

Fenn nodded. “They’re the only community for mentally challenged adults that has enough of the right resources to take care of Mickey. They just opened a new community in San Clemente—but they’re filling up fast. If you want to—”

“But that’s two hours away and they must be expensive.”

“They get an occasional grant and a few donations, but most of their money comes from a monthly fee they charge the clients’ families.”

Miranda tried to swallow, but her throat was too dry. “I don’t think I can afford them. What about the county? They must have some other group homes like yours. Maybe one of them can take him?”

Fenn shook her head. "There are a couple institutions, but they're in the same predicament we are. So are the state facilities. We're all overcrowded and underfunded. I'm afraid Mickey wouldn't get the kind of care he really needs or deserves in any of the government-run facilities. It could make him worse or even shorten his life."

Shorten his life? Miranda lowered her head and uncrumpled a tissue then dabbed her eye. "How much does it cost?"

"Based on his condition, between four and five thousand dollars a month, maybe a little more."

"But I can't afford that. I only have enough from my divorce settlement to last me a few more months. I'm getting a loan against my home, but that will run out, too. And I could never get a job that would pay me that much money."

"I understand," Fenn said while handing Miranda a fresh box of tissues. "I really do. What about your parents and other family members? Isn't there anybody else who can help?"

"Not really. Our folks never could deal with Mickey. They were mean to him. Never visited him. As if his disease was his fault. That's why I brought him out here, to California, where the facilities are better. Now they don't like me either."

"Maybe you could approach them again. They might change their minds if they know the urgency."

Miranda shook her head. "The last time I asked them for money, they just hung up on me. We're on our own."

Fenn nodded. "Unfortunately, I've seen that same situation too many times before. Some people just can't handle having special people like Mickey in their lives. I know how much he means to you. We love him too. Maybe I can keep him another few weeks, but then I've got to move him."

Miranda lifted her tissue to her eye. "But every time we move him it just confuses him."

"That's why we should consider The Broadhouse. I'm convinced that he'll get better if he gets the regular personal