

The Sinister  
Chapter One

“Can you get the hotel room door, please?” Marie’s request wafted out of the steam filled bathroom into the two-bedroom suite’s living room. The scent of lilac mixed with the light fog of humidity that hung low from the ceiling. Marie didn’t like to be too far from me, not after all that had happened. Whenever possible she kept the doors open between us. I couldn’t blame her, when she left my view I tensed until she reappeared. Only time could heal emotional wounds that deep. Turn them to scars, give us some breathing room.

I stood next to the enormous tousled bed that could double as a regulation wrestling mat, the phone from the nightstand pressed hard to my ear. I had just dialed the hotel’s desk to tell them we were finally checking out when the knock came at the door. The nice clerk had said the bill would be: “Thirty-three thousand, five hundred and thirty-eight dollars and fifty-seven cents.” My breath caught. “Can you...ah, please repeat that?”

The knock came a second time, not insistent just a little louder.

“Bruno?” Marie said.

The desk clerk repeated the crazy number her tone calm and easy as if the amount a mere trifling, then: “Mr. Jackson, would you like me to put that on the credit card we have on file?”

Credit card? Who could live with that kind of revolving debt? Not at eighteen or twenty-four percent interest. Hell, for that kind of money we could pay cash for a brand-new SUV and still have enough for the gas to *drive* down to Costa Rica.

“Bruno?” Marie stuck her head out the open bathroom. “Hun, are you going to get the door? What’s the matter, you look like you’ve seen a ghost.” She stepped across the marble threshold and into the bedroom’s plush carpet, dripping water. She held up a thick terry cloth towel to cover her nakedness. Her smooth mocha skin was slick with moisture from having stepped out of a sunken tub, one filled with luxurious bath salts and piled high in bubbles. She was in her second trimester, five months in, four to go. Soon I’d be a father again. Only this time at forty-nine years old. I would be closer to grandfather age. I shivered from the prospect of the enormous responsibility. Each and every time, when the thought of approaching fatherhood pinged around in my head, up popped the lovely countenance of my daughter lost, Olivia. God rest her soul.

And of course, Bosco.

“Bruno, what is it, who’s on the phone?” She grabbed a terry cloth robe from the hook on the door and shrugged into it spooking a small mound of bubbles on her shoulder that sloughed off and gently floated to the carpet. “Who are you talking to?” Fear darkened her expression as she pushed her long black hair out of her face. Her perfectly round tummy bulged in the soft white robe as she tied it closed.

“No. No, it’s okay, it’s the front desk. That’s all. I called them about the bill and to check out.”

The knock, yet again.

She stepped over and socked me in the arm. “Don’t scare me like that.”

I held out the phone receiver as if needing verification to this newest nightmare. This one financial.

She waved it away.

I said, “Scare you like that? I told you we’re in the clear. Please try and relax. You just have a case of the nerves because we’re almost out of here. We’re almost across the finish line.”

“No, we’re not in the clear. Not until we touch down at Juan Santa Maria airport. Not even then. And you know darn well a phone call could be something about the kids. Your dad could be calling. Or...or it could be the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department down in the lobby asking you to come down and give yourself up.”

I smiled at her wild imagination, her innocence in how the real world worked. “The Sheriff’s? Really? After we’ve been here all this time? *Now*, they come looking for me, right out of the blue?”

Come looking for the *both* of us. I didn’t want to broach that ugly truth to my lovely wife. It would smother the wonderful light in her brown eyes. A twinkle I loved so much, that of late had gone missing and only recently returned. Law enforcement wanted her as well, though not as badly.

“You’re darn tootin’. They could be down there this very minute. And don’t give me that syrupy smile. You know it’s possible. Especially after—”

I needed to change the subject get her mind off the horrible events from two months earlier. My new goal in life, helping her to forget how the situation I’d forced upon us had forever changed how we viewed the world. An event that had made it necessary for her to pull the trigger and take a life. The one that gave her night terrors in her sleep. Helping her would also help me try to forget what I’d done. I had shoved it far back into my brain, slammed that door never to be opened again. If that were possible.

“Thirty-three thousand dollars.” I said.

“*What is?*”

“The hotel bill.”

Her mouth sagged open. She took the phone from my hand. “How is that possible?” She shook the phone as if trying to ring its neck. “Bruno, how much is that per night? We’ve been here, what...” Her lips silently counted all the lost time. “Sixty-three days. Two months. Oh my, God, that’s five hundred a night? Did you know it was that much? Didn’t you get the price when we checked in?”

As if we had a choice. I had to flee the hospital long before I was ready or risk permanent incarceration. We took up residency in the hotel, to hideout and recuperate. Marie, in her professional opinion had been the one to recommend that I not be moved.

I held my arms wide as if to say, “look at this elegant room, the wonderful view down into the court of the upscale mall from our third-floor balcony,” but held my tongue. “Sorry, I didn’t really pay attention to the price. Initially, we were only going to stay a few days, a week at the outside, remember? This is Glendale, rooms ain’t cheap, here my little chickadee.”

“This is terrible. And don’t call me that, *Muffin*.” Muffin, a derivative of Snuggle Muffin, okay to use in private but in the presences others the made me cringe just a little.

I pointed to the phone. The clerk could hear us. Marie put it to her shoulder to smother our words shielding us from the electronic world.

I wanted to ask her how much she had thought our little *vacation* was going to cost and again chose not to throw my dog into that fight.

Not much of a vacation. The first part of it I’d been in the hospital for two weeks recovering from a gunshot wound to the chest. The rest of the time laid up in bed or dealing with the blood, sweat and tears needed for rehabilitation. I’d only been walking unassisted for the last three weeks. Marie, a physician’s assistant, still thought I needed to use a cane or risk falling flat on my face. At the time she’d said, “Go ahead, don’t use the cane. A few more scars will only add character to that big boxer’s nose of yours.”

I didn't have a boxer's nose, not even close. And big? Well, that was just wrong.

She handed me back the phone. The tiny voice of the nice desk clerk squeaked out of the receiver. Marie said, "Can you deal with this, please?"

The knock at the door again. I spoke into the phone, "Let me call you back." Then to Marie, "I guess we could wait till dark and sneak out the side door--do the, 'ol' smokin' tennis shoes,' routine. The room's not in my real name." And what did it really matter, we were wanted by the law for much worse than, PC 537e Defrauding an Inn keeper.

She pointed a loaded finger at me. "We are not criminals. We pay our own way."

I smiled again. I had known her reaction before I'd offered up the unscrupulous solution.

She took another playful swipe at me, "Quit smiling like an idiot, ya big galoot. Get the door. I'm getting dressed. After that we'll deal with the hotel bill." She clapped her hands.

"Come on, chop, chop, you have to hurry and finish packing. We only have an hour to get to LAX. Our flight is at three and the International terminal takes a lot longer than the domestic."

All I had left to do was pack my toiletries bag in the suitcase. It'd take two minutes. I headed for the door speaking over my shoulder, "I guess I could get a bellhop job here at the hotel and..." Out of deeply ingrained instinct and experience, I automatically stood off to the side of the door, leaned over, and checked the peephole with a quick-peek. I took a sudden step back.

"And what?" Marie said from the steamy bathroom, "You know how long it would take you to work off thirty-three thousand dollars at minimum wage? Who's at the door? Is it Karl?"

"No," I whispered to no one, "it's the FBI."