

Chapter One

Early Wednesday morning

It started with a late night phone call.

She knew that the phone was in his hand even before Jovanic rolled out of bed. The familiar ringtone was never a good awakening. He pressed the answer button, waiting until he was in the bathroom with the door closed before acknowledging the caller, but Claudia had already been jarred out of a sound sleep.

She curled onto her side in the dark, grateful to escape the dream in which she had been immersed, but struggling to recapture it. Anxious, breathless, running barefoot through the barren rooms of a derelict mansion, her feet never quite touching the floor in the odd way things worked in dreams. The sense of feathery fingers reaching for her as she fled. Not quite a nightmare, but the memory left her unsettled.

She reached for the blanket crumpled at the foot of the bed and drew it over her bare shoulders, listening to Jovanic's low voice filter through the wall. Though the words were indistinct, something in his tone made her think that this was other than a routine homicide call out. If any homicide could be thought of as routine.

The sound of water beating against the wall a minute later told her the call had ended. Three minutes in and out of the shower; then water running in the sink—brushing his teeth, a hurried shave. He'd switched off the light before re-entering the bedroom, doing his best not to disturb her as he made his way across the room to the closet. Still, Claudia knew from the click of the security snap precisely when he holstered his Glock; from the whisper of cotton against acetate when he shrugged into his suit coat. She knew, too, from the muttered curse under his breath when he stumbled against the sharp corner of the bed frame while hunting for his shoes.

The red numbers on the bedside clock glowed 2:33.

"Where is it?" she asked, her voice still thick with the remnants of the dream.

"Shhh. Go back to sleep."

"No, tell me."

Jovanic hesitated, then loosed a sigh. "Venice Beach."

Normally she would not push him, but his reluctance compelled her. Claudia propped herself on an elbow, seeking him through the shadows. "I want to know."

Already halfway through the bedroom door, he paused in the frame and turned back, chilling her with his words. "It's a kid."