

Chapter 1

Black Suits



Warm sunlight sank into Jake's bones. Red capillaries glowed on the insides of his eyelids. He opened his eyes to witness summer reigning on the Santa Monica Pier. Andrea and Jade stood inches away, in front of him. He rested his hands on his wife and daughter's shoulders. These were his two favorite people in the universe. His love for them knew no limits. Their silky-brown hair shivered slightly, teased by an ocean breeze. Jade's big green eyes smiled up at him. Jake breathed in the fresh salt air.

The merry-go-round spun on the power of children's elated squeals. It had been relocated toward the end of the pier about a decade before to discourage fishing a dying ocean. A shoulder bumped lightly against Jake's back. He turned and saw a large, tanned surfer dude sporting an immaculate, finely tailored, black suit. His white-blond hair was pulled tightly back into a long ponytail. The man's eyes were concealed behind glossy black shades. Jake returned his attention to his family, but a change registered in his peripheral vision. The man turned instantly into a short, black-haired, pasty-faced

woman dressed in identical attire. Jake did a double take. The surfer-dude smiled back at him.

Children and parents disembarked from the ride. Jake watched Andrea and Jade choose a white fiberglass stallion, front hooves rearing up. Jake waved. The ride began to spin and the same pasty-faced woman reappeared, seated on a unicorn. She was three fiberglass horses behind his wife and daughter. Under the black suit and glasses, he could tell she was a wiry woman. Her hair was not as thick or as long as the surfer dude's, but it was pulled back in similar fashion. Jake stood as her unicorn sailed away from him to the sound of festive circus music. Just before she disappeared behind the circular center column, she instantly transformed back into the surfer dude.

Jake pinched his brow, disbelieving what he saw. He puzzled over his vision as he made a path through an ocean of tourists to reach an ice cream stand. Sun worshipers coated the beach like thick frosting from the pier all the way to the rocky shores of Temescal Canyon Road to the north. White clouds of cotton candy billowed overhead as boogie boarders and surfers played bumper cars for each swell that rolled in. They would all need antibiotics after spending a day in the bay.

A tiny hand tugged on Jake's t-shirt. Jake glanced down to see a small boy staring stoically up at him. The boy pointed forward. Jake turned to see that he was next in line to order. Jake plopped his hands on the counter. He opened his mouth but only the sound of laughter and surf filled his ears. The man at the counter stuffed three chocolate vanilla swirl cones into a cardboard tray and pushed them across the stainless steel counter toward Jake. Grinning under the influence of a beautiful day, Jake navigated back to the merry-go-round.

Jade's laughter rose above the other children. Jake spotted brown hair tossed back and tumbling in slow motion. Heartbreaking love rocked his core, as Andrea steadied their beautiful daughter on the gyrating steed. The woman in the black suit was now off her horse and navigating her way toward his family. She dodged ponies and the feet of excited child riders. A horse rose up, erasing her from Jake's vision. As the stallion dropped, Jake saw the surfer dude in her place. A child's leg flew up from the outside line of horses, wiping the figure out yet again. The black suit emerged closer to his family,

revealing the pasty-faced woman instead of the surfer dude. Alarm overtook Jake as he quickened his step. The black suit stood inches behind Andrea and Jade now. The surfer dude was back, raising his arms to steady himself on the tail of Jade's horse. The surfer dude's jacket opened revealing a small metallic device popping up from his waistline. Jake threw the ice cream on the hot asphalt of the pier and raced for the ride.

A fireball tore through horses, poles, and children. Flame engulfed the world before him. The roof of the merry-go-round spun into the sky on a massive column of fire. A shock wave hurled Jake and everyone around him backward toward the ice cream stand. They were all summarily slammed into the pier. Jake tumbled over a few people before he was able to regain control and stagger to his feet. His gray shorts and t-shirt smoldered. He did not notice the pain cutting into his scraped arms and legs. Ash and debris floated all around him. Through choking black smoke, he saw the last remnants of the ride tumble into the waves below the pier. He bounded over hundreds of prostrate and writhing people. His ears rang and blood pounded in his head. Jake reached the molten edge of the pier and gazed down into the smoky abyss. A charred fiberglass horse reared its head before it was swallowed by a wave.