

Prologue

September 1996

The boy was still except for his thumbs, which bounced around the controller like a pair of hyperactive toddlers on sugar highs. The only sounds in the room were the hard tapping of the buttons, and the muted cries of the two warriors on the TV screen.

A sudden motion to his left caught the boy's eye, and he looked down for a split second. The white kitten gave a feeble, high-pitched meow. The boy looked back at the screen and kept playing. The kitten continued staring at him for a moment, then walked to the foot of the bed and lay down.

The boy executed a series of roundhouse kicks on screen, then moved in for the kill. As his opponent swayed back and forth, the boy quickly punched in an eleven-button sequence, his heart racing with excitement. His opponent exploded, leaving behind only a pile of bloody bones.

"Yes!" the boy shouted, jerking up into a sitting position.

Suddenly he felt tiny needles in his left foot, and looked down. The kitten had wrapped herself around his sock and was trying to gnaw at his big toe.

"Leave me alone, you little shit," the boy said.

He swept his leg sideways over the edge of the bed and shook his foot. The kitten dropped to the floor. She looked around in a daze for a moment, then scrambled clumsily out of the room.

The boy rested the controller in his lap and looked at the clock. It was nearly 5 PM. His parents would be home soon. He grabbed a chocolate chip cookie from the plate on the nightstand and took a bite, then washed it down with some milk. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the kitten peering at him around the door frame.

He finished the cookie, put the half-empty glass beside the plate, and lay down. The TV screen was prompting him to start a new game, but he ignored it. Instead he grabbed the bed spread with his left hand and lifted it a few inches. He shook it back and forth. The kitten immediately slipped into the room and dropped into a crouch. She began slowly moving forward as she stalked the dancing fabric.

The boy waited until he felt the kitten tugging on the spread, then ripped it upward. The kitten tumbled halfway across the room, and ran toward the door. The boy let out a squeal of laughter, and began to bounce the spread again. The kitten stopped and turned back. She watched curiously for a moment, then crouched again.

The boy closed his eyes and tried to visualize the kitten's approach. He held his breath, and was sure he could hear velvet footsteps. He shook the spread more vigorously, feeling the excitement building inside him again.

Then suddenly he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He brought his feet down hard, and heard a satisfying cry of pain. He leaned forward and lifted his feet.

"I think you're dying, kitty," he said, as he watched the kitten's body spasm.

He got down on his knees to watch more closely, and considered crushing the animal's skull, but knew that would be too hard to explain. Instead he lifted the tiny body and placed it on his pillow. He watched it for a few minutes, waiting for it to stop convulsing, and for its spirit to rise into the air.

Finally it stopped breathing and he placed it on the floor. He sat back on the bed and finished his milk.

October 2007

“Did you ever have nightmares when you were a kid?”

“Sure.”

“About what?”

“Being ordinary.”

A laugh in response.

“I’m serious, but I don’t have to worry about that anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Because I did something amazing.”

“What?”

“I killed someone.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I wouldn’t joke about something like that.”

A nervous pause, then, “Why did you do it?”

“To see what it was like.”

“And?”

“It made me feel powerful.”

A much longer silence.

“So what did *you* have nightmares about as a kid?”

“Dying. I still do.”

“I can help you get rid of them.”

“How?”

“By teaching you to control death.”

Chapter 1

June 2008

Michel Doucette opened the front door and flipped on the hall light. He hadn't planned on being out so late, but he'd started chatting with a cute redhead, and before he knew it, one drink had lead to three, and it was dark. As usual, Blue was standing at the end of the hallway, waiting. After a moment's hesitation to be sure it was him, she skittered forward excitedly.

"Hey, girl," Michel said. "Did you miss me?"

Blue bowed her head, ears back but tail bouncing. It was the same each time he came home. First caution, then excitement, then shyness, as though she needed assurance he still loved her. He rubbed her neck and kissed the top of her head.

"I'm sorry I left you alone for so long," he said.

Blue gave him a quick nibble on the nose. Michel turned to the redhead standing just inside the door.

"Blue, this is..." he scrunched his face with embarrassment.

"Harlan," the redhead responded.

Of course you are, Michel thought with a mental eye roll.

"This is Harlan," he said, "and this is Blue."

Harlan squatted down, and Blue walked cautiously toward him. When she was two feet away, she stopped. Harlan held out his right hand, and Blue sniffed his fingers. She quickly backed away. Michel sighed silently.

"I'm sorry," he said, standing up, "but this isn't going to work out. I can call you a cab, if you want."

Harlan stood slowly, disbelief on his face.

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah,” Michel replied flatly.

Harlan began to smirk. He suddenly looked much older and a lot less cute.

“A friend of mine told me you brought him home, then kicked him out because your dog didn’t like him,” he said, his tone ripe with ridicule. “I figured that was just an excuse when you saw what he looked like with the lights on, but I guess not.”

He stared at Michel as though expecting a response. Michel just shrugged.

“And what if I don’t want to leave?” Harlan asked.

Michel wasn’t sure if it was meant to be playful or a threat. He decided it didn’t matter. He wanted Harlan gone. He squared his body to the door and looked down at the floor for a long moment. In the past, he’d often felt his attempts at intimidation had been unconvincing, even silly. Since his boyfriend Joel had been murdered two years earlier, however, that hadn’t been a problem. Now, even when he tried to be friendly, people sometimes reacted as though there were something unsettling about him. Apparently whatever small charm he might once have possessed had curdled.

He lifted his eyes and fixed Harlan with a cold stare.

“Do you really think that’s an option?” he asked.

Though he’d kept his tone neutral, Harlan’s head still jerked back involuntarily.

“Fuck you, freak,” he stammered, then turned and hurried out the door.

“That went well,” Michel said, watching him fade into the darkness. He knelt and hugged Blue’s neck. “You know, one of these days you’re going to have to let Daddy get some.”

Blue rested her head on his right knee and looked up at him with her soft brown eyes. Michel let out a resigned sigh.

“Or not,” he said.

Chapter 2

“So how can I help you?” Michel asked, studying the well-groomed couple on the other side of his desk. He’d been intrigued when he’d received the call from the Taylors’ assistant, particularly by the prospect of meeting Patricia “Trish” Campbell Rhodes Taylor.

Trish Taylor—then Trish Rhodes—had entered the national spotlight during her first husband’s run for the 1996 Republican Presidential nomination. Smart, outspoken, and sometimes outrageous, she’d provided some of the campaign’s most memorable sound bites. As the campaign had gone on, however, she’d begun to lash out at the media with increasing ferocity, and rumors had swirled that she was drinking heavily and addicted to prescription pain killers. Finally, six weeks before the convention, she’d checked herself into rehab.

When she’d re-emerged, she’d been serene and gracious, and her husband, Steven, a senator from New York, had swept to the nomination. When he’d died of a stroke a month before the election, Trish had ascended to that most sainted of public positions, the grieving political widow.

She’d used her new position to advocate on behalf of several worthy causes, but had stayed away from politics, despite rumored entreaties from both parties to endorse candidates or run for office herself. In 2000, she’d quietly married Scott Taylor, and essentially retired from public life.

Scott Taylor had been considered a legitimate Heisman Trophy candidate during his senior year, playing quarterback at

Harvard. Rather than enter the NFL draft, however, he'd gone on to get an MBA, then into a successful career in investment banking. Though he'd never shown any apparent political ambitions before, in the past few months he'd inexplicably emerged as a front-runner for the U.S. Senate after the death of a beloved Massachusetts Democrat who'd held the seat for five terms. Michel had seen Scott Taylor on television a few times, and had considered him to be a well-coached suit with better-than-average hair and no discernible ideas of his own.

Both Taylors appeared to be in their late forties, though Michel knew that Trish was at least ten years her husband's senior. Aside from the telltale "turkey neck" below her taut jawline, however, she could easily pass for his contemporary. Her cosmetic surgery had been excellent, and she now looked better than she had during her first husband's campaign twelve years earlier.

"Our son, Campbell, is missing," Scott Taylor replied gravely.

"Missing, as in you think he may have been kidnapped, or as in you think he's run away?" Michel replied.

The Taylors exchanged concerned looks for a moment.

"We're not sure," Scott Taylor said with a weary sigh. "That's what we're hoping you can find out."

It was a stock response right out of a bad movie, and the delivery had been unnaturally stiff, as though he were reading from a teleprompter. Michel immediately sensed that something wasn't right, but decided to play along for the moment. He sat forward, crossing his forearms on the edge of his desk, and furrowed his eyebrows.

"How long has he been missing?" he asked.

"For three weeks," Trish Taylor replied, echoing her husband's earlier sigh, but adding a not-very-subtle note of despair for dramatic effect.

"And you think he's somewhere in New Orleans?"

The Taylors nodded simultaneously.

“He was a student at Tulane,” Scott Taylor replied.

“Was?”

“He dropped out a month ago,” Trish replied.

“And I take it that wasn’t something he discussed with you in advance?” Michel asked.

“We didn’t find out until we received a letter from the school,” Scott Taylor replied. “We called his apartment and his roommate said he’d moved out a few days earlier. We’ve left dozens of messages on his cell phone, but he hasn’t returned any of them.”

Michel was amused by the way the Taylors were alternating responses in a clumsy imitation of natural conversation.

“And when was the last time you spoke to him?” he asked.

For the first time, there was a break in the rhythm. It was obviously Trish Taylor’s turn to speak, but she hesitated for a moment. Michel thought he saw uncertainty in her eyes.

“The beginning of March,” she replied finally.

Michel ticked off the time in his head.

“So roughly 12 weeks?” he asked.

Trish nodded.

“Is that unusual?” Michel asked, keeping his eyes locked on her.

Trish held his gaze without flinching.

“No, it’s not unusual,” she replied.

Michel sat back in his chair.

“And how would you characterize your last conversation?”

The Taylors exchanged another quick glance.

“Tense,” Trish replied, looking back at Michel.

“In what sense?”

“We’d gotten a letter from the dean of students telling us Cam was failing three of his classes,” Scott Taylor replied, “and we’d gotten the bill for his credit card. He’d been taking large cash draws.”

“And you confronted him about that?”

Taylor nodded.

“Did he have an explanation for the money?” Michel asked.

“He said it was for an art project,” Taylor replied, without conviction.

Michel nodded deliberately, then frowned.

“So he was failing school, taking out a lot of cash on his credit card, and now he’s dropped out and disappeared somewhere in New Orleans?” he summarized.

The Taylors nodded in seemingly rehearsed unison again. Michel pretended to give the situation careful consideration for a moment, then shrugged casually.

“I have to say, I’m not hearing anything that sounds like a cause for concern,” he said.

Trish Taylor’s eyes widened.

“You don’t think the fact that he’s been missing for three weeks is a cause for concern?” she replied indignantly.

Michel shook his head.

“No, and obviously you don’t either, or you’d be talking to the police,” he said, “and you wouldn’t have waited so long. So why don’t you tell me what this is really about?”

Trish Taylor glared at him coldly for a moment, then her eyes softened and she let out a smoky chuckle. It was the laugh Michel remembered from her many television appearances. It was rich and earthy.

“You’re quite clever, aren’t you?” she said.

“Not particularly,” Michel replied, with a thin smile, “but I’ve been around the block enough times to know when someone’s blowing smoke up my ass.”

Trish studied him for a moment, then nodded.

“We think that Cam is hiding,” she said.

“From?”

“Us.”

Michel raised his eyebrows. He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting, but it certainly hadn’t been that.

“Why didn’t you just tell me that in the first place?” he asked. “Why the charade?”

“Because it’s embarrassing to admit that your own child is hiding from you,” Trish replied, looking down.

Michel suspected it was the first completely honest response she’d given him. He offered a sympathetic smile.

“I can understand that. So why do you want to find him?”

Trish blinked in confusion for a moment.

“Because he’s my son, of course,” she replied.

Michel noticed her tone was oddly dispassionate.

“Yes, but it seems that he doesn’t want to be found,” he said.

“That’s not really your concern,” Trish replied with sudden sharpness.

“I’m afraid it is,” Michel replied, refusing to back down. “Your son is over 18. He’s an adult. If he doesn’t want to see you, he has that right.”

“And we have a right to look for him,” Trish replied.

Michel cut a quick look at Scott Taylor, whose blank expression made it clear his role was complete. Michel looked back at Trish.

“That’s true,” he said, “but if you want me to do the leg work, you’re going to have to give me a reason.”

Trish’s intense green eyes tried to burn a hole through Michel’s face, but he didn’t react. Finally she blinked, and looked down at the small black purse in her lap. Michel guessed that she was stalling while she assessed her options.

“Do you mind if I smoke?” she asked abruptly.

Before Michel could reply, she had a Marlboro 100 clenched between her teeth and was lighting it with a thin silver lighter. She took a long drag and held it for a moment. As she exhaled, her body visibly relaxed.

“That’s better,” she said. “It’s the only vice I have left.”

Michel gave an automatic smile.

“So why is it so important to find your son?” he asked.

“Because that’s what he wants,” Trish replied bluntly. She blew a thick plume of smoke at the ceiling. “That’s what he *always* wants.”

“He’s done this before?” Michel asked.

Trish shook her head. “Never *this*, but things *like* this, and every time, it’s for the same reason. To provoke a reaction from me. And if he doesn’t get the reaction he wants, then he’ll just do something more extreme. Unfortunately, Mr. Doucette, my son is a drama queen.”

“Excuse me?” Michel replied with a laugh, certain he’d misheard her.

“He’s a drama queen,” Trish repeated.

Scott Taylor shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“Do you know what happened when he came out to us?” Trish asked. “We hugged him, and told him we loved him.”

Michel nodded slowly, wondering where she was headed.

“But apparently that wasn’t the reaction he wanted,” Trish continued. “Apparently he’d been hoping for anger and screaming and tears, so a few days later, when we got home from playing golf, we found him getting gangbanged by a half-dozen Mexican landscapers down by the pool.”

Michel studied her for a moment, trying to decide whether she was exaggerating. He decided she wasn’t.

“So you think he wants you to look for him, and if you don’t, he’ll up the ante?” he asked.

Trish nodded.

“And do you think the timing has anything to do with his father’s Senate campaign?” Michel asked.

“Stepfather,” Trish said in a tone that made it clear she wanted to distance her husband from her son’s actions, “and yes, probably. Cam’s always had a knack for knowing the absolute worst time to manufacture a crisis.”

Michel was surprised by her damning assessment.

“Do you think he’s trying to sabotage it?” he asked.

Trish leaned back and ran fingers through her long auburn hair, pulling it back from her face. Michel realized she had a very masculine energy. It was something she’d clearly learned to temper in front of the cameras. It was also clear she was stalling.

“That would require planning,” she replied finally, with a too-casual laugh. “Cam is bright, but forethought has never been one of his great strengths. He reacts in the moment.”

Michel noticed that she’d avoided a direct yes-or-no answer. He also noticed she’d contradicted herself given the obvious planning behind Cam Rhodes’s poolside gangbang.

“So what’s he reacting to now?” he asked.

An involuntary blink told him Trish hadn’t been expecting the question. She took a long, meditative drag on her cigarette.

“I imagine he’s probably feeling neglected because of the time Scott and I have been spending on the campaign,” she replied after a moment.

Michel tried to keep the surprise from his face. Though it sounded reasonable, again it didn’t fit with what she’d already told him. It was clear she was improvising now, and not very well. He decided to push for an unfiltered reaction.

“But you just said it wasn’t unusual to go months without speaking to him,” he said, “so why would he suddenly feel neglected *now*?”

Though he’d expected anger, the whiplash change in Trish Taylor’s demeanor still startled him.

“This is a simple *fucking* job,” she spat, her eyes glittering furiously. “I don’t need some half-assed family therapist. All I need is someone to find my son before he does something stupid, and to do it discreetly. If you can’t handle that, then I’ll find someone else who can. Is that clear?”

Perfectly, Michel thought. You want your drama queen son under your thumb where he can’t cause any embarrassment for your husband’s campaign. He suddenly wanted to find Cam Rhodes, if only to tell him to stay away from his mother.

“That won’t be necessary,” was all he said, “but you haven’t given me much to go on.”

The anger in Trish’s eyes diminished only slightly. She reached into her purse and pulled out an envelope, tossing it on the desk directly in front of Michel.

“There’s a picture of Cam in there, and his former roommate’s phone number,” she said. “There’s also a check for \$2,500. I believe that’s your retainer fee.”

Michel didn’t bother picking the envelope up.

“How do I reach you if I find anything?” he asked.

“You have our assistant’s number,” Trish replied curtly.

Michel looked at her curiously.

“You don’t want me to call you at your hotel?” he asked.

“We won’t be staying,” Trish replied with a look of distaste. “We just came down for a dinner party. We’ll be going back to Boston in the morning.”

Wow, and I thought my mother was cold, Michel thought.