

Chapter 1

As he drifted toward consciousness, Michel Doucette realized he was having trouble breathing. A heavy weight pressed down on his chest. He took a deep breath, held it for a few seconds, then exhaled loudly.

“Good morning, Blue,” he said, without opening his eyes.

He heard a sound like the beating of huge butterfly wings, and felt the mattress vibrate. He knew the dog’s tail was beating out a quick cadence somewhere near his feet. He opened his eyes and stared into the light brown-and-yellow speckled eyes only a few inches away. As always, Blue’s expression looked slightly anxious, as though she’d been afraid he might not wake up.

“How are you?” he asked gently. “Did you have a good sleepy-sleep?”

The dog responded by jabbing her nose against his and darting her tongue quickly into his right nostril, then she pulled her head back and continued staring at him.

“Thanks,” Michel replied with a combination of mock revulsion and genuine affection. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

He pulled his right arm from under the blanket and began rubbing the scruff on the left side of the dog’s neck. She responded as she always did—turning her head away from him as though she didn’t welcome his affection, while at the same time pressing into his hand more heavily.

“Okay, Greta Garbo,” he said after a minute. “I suppose you want to go outside?”

Blue responded by increasing the rhythm of her tail, which now thumped loudly against the comforter.

“Well, I can’t get up with you lying on me,” Michel replied.

The dog gave him another quick lick on the nose, then jumped up excitedly and bounded from the bed toward the door. She paused for a moment and looked back at him expectantly.

“I’m coming,” Michel said, rolling his eyes. “Why didn’t you just have Joel let you out if you’re in such a hurry?”

“Because you open the door so much better than I do,” Joel’s voice called from down the hall. “Besides, it’s about time you got your lazy ass out of bed.”

Michel smiled and threw back the comforter.

“Give me a second,” he said to Blue. “I have to take care of some business.”

He pushed himself up and shuffled into the bathroom, straightening the waistband of his boxer shorts as he went, and wondering for the thousandth time how they got so twisted while he slept. He closed the bathroom door and stood in front of the toilet. He could hear Blue pacing in the bedroom while he emptied his bladder, her nails lightly clicking on the cypress floor.

“Okay, okay,” he said as he shook off and flushed the toilet. “I’m coming.”

As soon as he opened the bathroom door, Blue bolted from the bedroom and down the hall. Michel followed her at a more leisurely pace.

“Good morning, sunshine,” Joel said with a faux sincere, morning-TV-anchor smile.

He was standing in the entrance to the kitchen, dressed only in a pair of low slung, baggy gray sweatpants, and holding out a mug of coffee.

“Morning,” Michel replied with exaggerated grumpiness, despite the fact that seeing Joel made him want to smile.

He took the coffee and gave Joel a light kiss.

“What time is it, anyway?” he asked.

“Almost eight,” Joel replied.

“What time did you get up?” Michel asked as he headed for the back of the house.

Blue was standing inside the French doors, her body taut with excitement. Michel opened the far left door and she charged outside.

“About six,” Joel replied as he came up behind Michel.

“Why so early on a Saturday?” Michel asked.

“I wanted to go for a run before it got too hot,” Joel replied.

“That explains that stink,” Michel said with an impish smirk as he walked out to the patio.

“Very funny,” Joel replied. “I already showered. You’re probably smelling yourself.”

Michel made a show of lifting both arms and sniffing.

“Not me,” he said, shaking his head. “I smell like sunshine and lollipops, just like always.”

He dropped down into one of the wrought iron chairs and immediately felt the craving for a cigarette. It had been six months since his last one, and while he didn’t think about smoking most of the time, he still longed for a cigarette with his first cup of coffee every morning. He took a deep breath to remind himself how much better he felt since he quit.

Blue finished patrolling the walled perimeter of the garden, and settled down in front of the fountain.

“Good girl,” Michel said. “Did you scare away all those dangerous killer squirrels?”

Blue looked at him and seemed to smile proudly, then lowered her head between her front paws and blew out a loud sigh that stirred the dust in front of her nose.

Michel felt a surge of affection and smiled. It continually amazed him how much his life had changed in the six months since his cousin Verle had died. At the time he’d been living

alone, his relationship with Joel had been stuck in a seemingly perpetual state of limbo, his professional life was in transition after leaving the New Orleans Police Department, he thought he'd lost his last living relative, and at best he could have said that he wasn't unhappy with his life.

Since then everything had changed. Since then he'd been on a roll: he'd become a "father" to Blue, Verle's dog; his relationship with Joel was thriving; the private investigation firm he'd started with his former police partner and best friend, Sassy, was turning a profit; he'd met his father and begun building a tenuous relationship with him; and he'd inherited a substantial fortune. Most importantly, though, he felt happy and contented. Still, even at his happiest moments, like now, he couldn't help but worry that the other shoe was about to drop.

Maybe the other shoe will just be that I'll become a fat, boring, middle aged man, he thought.

"So what do you want to do today?" Joel asked.

Michel looked at him and raised his eyebrows mischievously.

"Guess," he replied.

"Gee, would it have anything to do with real estate?" Joel replied sarcastically.

Michel had been on an obsessive quest to find a new house with a larger yard since Blue had come to live with him.

"Ding, ding, ding," Michel replied in a sharp, nasal voice like a cartoon carnival barker. "We have a winner, folks."

Joel gave him a deadpan look.

"And apparently a great big loser, too," he said.

Michel gave a self-satisfied smile.

"You really want to look at houses again?" Joel asked with a mild note of protest. "We have to have seen every house in New Orleans by now."

He was leaving the next morning for a three-day seminar on antisocial personality disorder in Orlando, and didn't relish the idea of spending the day house hunting.

“Not quite,” Michel replied. “There’s one more. Though technically it’s not really a house. I swear it’ll only take an hour.”

Joel gave a resigned sigh.

“This is a sickness, you know,” he said, shaking his head tolerantly. “You really need to get some help.”

“Well, that’ll give you something to talk about at the conference,” Michel replied.

“So what do you think?” Michel asked.

The overly solicitous realtor had just stepped outside.

“It’s kind of...gothic...don’t you think?” Joel replied.

“Of course it’s gothic,” Michel replied. “It was a church. But just picture it without the bench-thingies and the stained glass windows.”

“You can’t get rid of the windows,” Joel protested.

“Why not?”

“Because they’re probably historic.”

“So we can donate them to a museum,” Michel replied. “And we can get rid of the big cross, though Jesus does look kind of sexy...”

“You’re just not right,” Joel said, shaking his head.

“...and we could have a big living room over here,” Michel continued excitedly, ignoring him, “with a pool table over there. Then we could put the dining room back there on the left, and the kitchen on the right, and we could build a half wall and put our bedroom up there.”

“In the sanctuary?” Joel replied with disbelief.

Michel shrugged innocently.

“What?”

“You want to put our bedroom in the sanctuary?” Joel replied. “The place where we’ll be having sex, in the same place where they performed marriages and baptisms and funerals?”

“So?” Michel replied.

“So that’s sacrilegious,” Joel replied.

“Not any more it isn’t,” Michel replied. “The whole place has been desanctified, or whatever you call it.”

Joel just stared at him in reply.

“Okay, fine,” Michel replied, turning around. “Then we can put our bedroom up there where the band played.”

“The choir loft,” Joel interjected.

“The *choir loft*,” Michel corrected himself, “and we could put the dining room in the sanctuary since that would go with the whole ‘this is my body, eat it, this is my blood, drink it’ thing. Then we could turn the priests’ dressing room into a guest room.”

“It’s called a vestry,” Joel replied, sighing.

“Okay, altar boy,” Michel replied. “So what do you think?”

“I think it would be a lot of work to make it seem like a home,” Joel replied.

“But it could be fun,” Michel countered, “and we could work on it together. You’ve got a month before school.”

Joel had started at Tulane University the previous fall, pursuing a degree in criminal psychology, but had been forced to miss the spring semester to help care for his grandfather back home in Natchez. He was starting classes again in September.

He shook his head slowly.

“I don’t know.”

“The location is great,” Michel replied, not ready to give up his sales pitch yet, “and it’s got a huge yard that’s already walled in for Blue. Plus we could dig up the parking area and put in a patio and pool.”

Joel’s eyes lit up a little, but he kept his expression neutral.

“And you’re sure that yard isn’t an old graveyard?” he asked. “I can just imagine Blue coming to the door with someone’s arm in her mouth.”

“I’m sure,” Michel replied, laughing.

Joel looked around at the bare stone walls and up at the high vaulted ceiling. He had to admit it really was quite striking, though he couldn't imagine how they were ever going to make the space seem intimate.

"I think before you make an offer, you should bring in a contractor to find out how much it would all cost," he said.

"Fine," Michel replied. "I can do it while you're in Orlando. And I was thinking about asking Ray to draw up some plans."

Ray Nassir was an architect who had been dating Joel's best friend, Chance, for the past seven months.

"I wouldn't mention that to Chance just now," Joel replied.

"Why not?"

"He just dumped Ray's ass. Apparently Ray didn't consider things to be quite as monogamous as Chance did."

Michel frowned. Although his relationship with Chance had been somewhat contentious in the beginning, and still had a fair amount of competitive antagonism, he was actually liked Chance quite a bit.

"That sucks," he said, "though I wasn't actually planning to mention it to Chance anyway."

Joel gave him a look that was both curious and suspicious.

"And why's that?" he asked.

Michel averted his eyes for a moment, then looked up sheepishly.

"Well, because I think that maybe he was planning to buy this place and convert it to apartments," he said in a small voice.

In addition to managing the office and finances for Michel and Sassy, Chance had used money he'd inherited from his grandfather to start a property development company that specialized in renovating old buildings for affordable housing.

"Michel!" Joel exclaimed.

"I don't know that he was definitely planning it," Michel replied defensively. "I just happened to notice the listing on his desk while he was at lunch yesterday."

Joel shook his head and gave Michel a chastening look.

“You need to talk to him,” he said.

Michel looked at the ground for a moment, then nodded reluctantly.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll call him this afternoon.”

Joel had to fight the urge to laugh at Michel’s sullen expression. He looked like a kid who’d just been told he had to tell the cranky neighbor that he’d broken his window.

“Okay, you can wait until Monday,” Joel said. “I suppose he’s already got enough to be pissed off about right now.”

“Thanks,” Michel replied without enthusiasm.

“By the way,” Joel said, “I hope you don’t mind, but I made plans with him tonight. I figured he needed a girls’ night out.”

“No, that’s fine,” Michel said. “Maybe I’ll call Sassy and see if she wants to play.”

Chapter 2

Michel arrived at Good Friends Bar on Dauphine Street a little before 7:30 PM. He had a half hour to kill before he met Sassy for dinner at Bayona, a few blocks away. He headed up the stairs to the Queen's Head Pub, and settled in at the nearly empty bar.

"Jack on the rocks?" Mitchell the bartender asked.

"Yeah, thanks," Michel replied.

He pulled out his wallet and put a ten on the bar, then reflexively patted the breast and side pockets of his jacket, checking for cigarettes. He shook his head and smiled to himself when he realized what he was doing.

Out of the corner of his left eye, he saw someone moving unsteadily toward him. He fought the impulse to look, hoping it was just a drunk on the way to the stairs. Then the person sidled up to the bar and took a position intrusively close to his left elbow. After a few seconds, Michel looked up.

"Hello, Michel," the man said, with an elaborate nod.

Michel stared at him for a moment without recognition.

"I'm sorry, but do we..." he started, then stopped himself.

He realized it was Severin Davis Marchand IV. Marchand had been Michel's and Sassy's first client when they'd opened the agency. He'd hired them to find out who'd destroyed the costume he was working on for the Bourbon Street Awards during Mardi Gras. Marchand was the last member of one of New Orleans's oldest and wealthiest families, and was a fixture on the city's gay social circuit.

While Marchand had never been attractive, he'd at least always had the look of someone who'd been pampered. Now his skin was pale and sagging, and his owl eyes were red-rimmed and puffy. Michel guessed he'd lost at least fifty pounds.

"Severin," Michel said. "I'm sorry, I didn't recognize you for a second."

"Yes," Marchand replied dryly. "I've been on a very strict diet and working out quite a bit recently. At my age, one has to do whatever's necessary to stay beautiful."

Michel smiled, though he knew Marchand's appearance was the result of anything but diet and exercise. He was either sick or had been on an extended drug binge.

"I haven't see you in a while," Michel said.

"No, I've been spending more time at the estate," Marchand replied. "I decided I needed to take a little break."

Marchand's family estate was located on Prytania Street in the Garden District, though for years he'd lived primarily in a townhouse on Royal Street in the Quarter.

Michel nodded.

"So, are you well?" Marchand asked in his typically unctuous manner.

Again, Michel nodded.

"Yes, thank you. Everything's fine."

He studied Marchand carefully. Marchand seemed nervous and distracted, his eyes darting quickly around the room every few seconds.

Despite the fact that he found Marchand generally repugnant, Michel had actually been hoping to run into him for some time. Shortly before he died, Verle had told Michel that he'd met someone in a conservation chat room who knew Michel, and that they'd been emailing one another for several months. Based on details the person had provided and his email address—SeverinIV@yahoo.com—Michel had assumed it was Marchand, and had wanted to ask him about it.

“I thought you’d want to know that my cousin Verle passed away six months ago,” he said.

“I’m so sorry,” Marchand replied. “My condolences to you and your family.”

It was a completely obligatory expression, lacking any genuine sympathy.

“My cousin Verle,” Michel repeated, watching for a reaction. “Verle Doucette?”

Marchand just stared at him blankly.

“I don’t believe I ever had the pleasure,” he said.

The response seemed genuine. Michel took a sip of his drink. He suddenly felt very uneasy.

“You’re sure you’ve never heard of him?” he asked.

Marchand looked at him impatiently.

“Quite sure.”

Michel looked down at the bar and frowned.

“Because someone from New Orleans was emailing Verle,” Michel explained. “Someone who knew quite a bit about me. I assumed it was you because the email address was SeverinIV@yahoo.com.”

For a split second, Michel thought he saw fear in Marchand’s eyes. Then it was gone, replaced by indignation.

“Are you accusing me of lying?” Marchand asked, his voice rising enough that the few other people at the bar looked up.

“I’m not accusing you of anything,” Michel replied in an even tone. “I’m just trying to find out who was feeding information about me to my cousin, and since you’re the only Severin I know, I figured I’d start with you.”

He decided to leave out his bigger concern: that the person had been trying to get information about his past.

“I assure you, I have much better things to do than spread gossip about *you*,” Marchand replied coldly.

The emphasis on “you” made it clear that while Marchand would have no qualms about spreading gossip in general, he

didn't consider Michel worthy of his efforts. Michel knew from experience that in Marchand's world, a person's value was based solely on wealth, family background, or what one could provide, and for just a moment he considered mentioning that he'd inherited over \$10,000,000 from Verle, just to see Marchand's reaction.

"Are there any other Severins you know?" he asked instead.

"Any other Severins?" Marchand repeated, as though the words had a bitter taste.

Michel nodded.

"Of course not," Marchand replied haughtily, "Severin is a family name."

A sudden widening of his eyes and quiver of his thin lips betrayed that Marchand realized he'd made a mistake.

"Okay, so then is that your email address?" Michel pressed.

Marchand didn't reply for a moment. Michel could see him calculating how to respond, and noticed that sweat had broken out on Marchand's upper lip.

"Possibly," Marchand replied, trying to sound casual. "My accountant set up an email for me so that he could send me documents, but I don't use it myself. Members of the staff do that for me. In fact, I don't use a computer at all."

Michel was certain that was a lie. He had no doubt that Marchand was an avid surfer of porn sites. He reached into his jacket and took out his wallet, then removed a card and handed it to Marchand.

"I'd appreciate it if you could check and let me know."

Marchand's expression went suddenly cold.

"Of course," he said.

He took an unsteady step away from the bar.

"Now if you'll excuse me," he said.

Michel nodded, then held up his right index finger.

"Just one more question," he said. "Do you belong to any conservation groups?"

Marchand snorted derisively.

“I’m sure I wouldn’t know,” he replied. “My accountant handles all of my charitable contributions.”

Then he walked quickly to the stairs and was gone.

Freak, Michel thought.