

CHAPTER 1



THE FIRST TEST

Camille St. Pierre forced herself to move. Her feet seemed glued to the ground when she tried to head out on her mission. “Don’t back down now!” she ordered herself. “Nobody will believe you until you have evidence. They will all laugh in your face. You can do this. You will do this. With the right evidence in hand, your family and friends will have to take you seriously this time.”

With a sharp nod of determination, she picked up the casserole dish and headed to her new neighbor’s house. Mid-way there, she started to turn around so she could scurry back to safety. It took another self-affirming lecture to make her see her plans through. Walking faster this time, Camille found herself at the front door of her new neighbor faster than she hoped. Her hand fought against the order to knock. Steeling her nerve, she opted to ring the doorbell and forge ahead before she could totally chicken out.

The sun was setting in the background as someone peeked through a nearby window. The house was clouded in shadows,

giving it a surreal feeling and playing havoc on her nerves. The front door slowly inched open and one pale blue eye spied at her. “Is there a problem?”

So much for a warm welcome, Camille told herself. The man’s voice was gruff and unfriendly, as if he was not pleased with her intrusion. She wanted to drop the glass dish and run for her life, but she had come too far to give up now. “Welcome to the neighborhood.” She forced a smile and held out her food offering.

The eye studying her had a dark ring around the pupil. Her father had raised racing pigeons when she was a child. She remembered Daddy explaining that eye trait was an indicator of superior vision. Flying creatures needed keen vision to navigate. Camille had her suspicions about this man. If she was right, he was a creature of prey, and those eyes would help him hone in on victims. The door suddenly closed, and Camille felt her heart drop. After all that worrying about what might happen when she tested him, he would not even give her a chance? Now what was she supposed to do?

The sound of a safety chain sliding against metal told her he might not be slamming the door in her face just yet. Sure enough, the door slowly inched open to reveal a dark room. “Come inside,” the male voice coaxed. Run, her brain warned. With a deep breath of resignation, she stepped inside and heard the front door close behind her, like the seal on a crypt. A small lamp was switched on and it took several moments for her eyes to adjust to the new surroundings. The room was bare, save for one desk with a computer and chair. Nothing hung on the walls. The floor was bare, too. Not even a mirror offered relief from the stark area.

Slowly turning, she found herself looking at the most attractive man she had ever seen. He was well over six-foot tall. The paleness of his face suggested he was in some serious need of protein. Dark reddish hair hung around his shoulders and a matching beard and mustache covered much of his face. His lips were oddly red and her eyes locked on them, mesmerizing her for a moment.

When he spoke, she jumped and almost dropped her glass container. "Do I have something on my face? You are staring."

Camille's face reddened and she looked around for a place to put down her casserole dish. The desk seemed to be the only place available. "Sorry for staring. I've never gotten a good look at you before. Since you moved in last week, I have yet to have a chance to come over and introduce myself. We seem to keep different hours. My name is Camille, by the way. I'm a school teacher at one of the local elementary schools."

"Jean," he said, offering his hand. She reached out reluctantly to grasp it. The moment her fingers disappeared into the large palm of his, she felt trapped. This man had powerful hands and a strong grip. If she wanted to pull away, she doubted she would be able to escape if he decided not to let go.

"Hello, Jean. Welcome to Magnolia Ridge. If you were looking for a nice, quiet place to live, you picked the right area. Most of the people who live here keep to themselves, and we hardly have any crime to worry about. In fact, a lot of people don't even bother to lock their doors."

Hell, why did she tell him that, Camille cursed herself. If this guy was what she feared, the last thing she needed to do was tell him how easy it would be to victimize people around the neighborhood. "Cops patrol the area all the time," she rushed to add. "And there are lots of nosy old people who keep track of who comes and goes." Her voice sounded dry. Coming here may not have been the best plan of action on her part. There were other ways to prove if this man was the monster she feared. Putting herself at his mercy, alone in his lair, was a foolish idea which might prove fatal.

"I notice you seem to stick close to home during the day. Do you work night shift by any chance?" Did she sound as scared as she felt? Probably, because the sexy man was studying her as if unsure of what to make of her.

"I only go out at night," he told her, letting go of her hand to lift up the lid of the dish she had set onto his table. "Steak? Medium

rare, if I am not mistaken. My favorite," he offered. "What a unique dish to bring someone new to the neighborhood."

"They had a special on T-bones at the grocery store. There are some roasted potatoes in there, too. I hope you enjoy the meal."

"Why don't you join me? The portion is quite large." Jean's large hands gathered the dish and lid. He started for a room deeper inside.

Camille's eyes darted to the exit and back toward where her host was disappearing. "Oh, I'm not that hungry at the moment. I really should be going back to my place. Er, I have lots of papers to grade and lesson plans to finish up." She stopped jabbering when he turned to study her. Then she rushed on with her words, hoping to appear more normal. "I fixed the steak especially for you. I know you are probably heading out soon. Don't you usually leave home around this time every night?"

"So, it's not just old people who keep track of who comes and goes around the neighborhood." His blue eyes seemed to be peering into her soul now, seeing her hidden agenda, trying to get her to show her hand. "There is nothing in this wonderful meal which might harm someone, is there, Camille?" His tone was mocking now.

How did he know? Could she run for the door and escape before he caught her? Definitely not, she realized. It was too late to back down now. "Are you afraid I put some kind of poison in the food?" She gave a dry chuckle. "There is nothing in there which would cause a human injury." Extra emphasis was put on the word human. There it was, out in the open. Let the stalemate begin, Camille crossed her arms in front of her and headed to where he stood. "I'd love a bite before I head back to handle the tons of homework facing me tonight. Is your kitchen this way?"

"To your left," Jean directed. He turned on the light over the table. Two of the four bulbs were out. Creatures of the night preferred the darkness, Camille reminded herself. "Have a seat, Camille. I'll get us some utensils."

When his back was turned, she studied the exits carefully. There was a back door near the far wall. She took the wooden chair closest to it just in case she needed to make a quick escape. Jean joined her, sitting right beside her. Their legs touched and she felt his heat warm her. Don't look in his eyes, she ordered herself. Those eyes were hypnotic. She needed to be on full alert when things went south. "Shall I'll take the first bite?" she offered. "Just so I can prove there isn't anything a human can't ingest in here."

Jean cut a piece of the meat and forked it up to feed her. There was something incredibly sexy about the arrogant way he moved. "You keep saying the word human as if it's some secret qualifier, Camille." There was a slight mocking in his tone.

He was trying to appear innocent, but Camille was not falling for it. Her teeth scraped across the metal of the fork when she accepted the offer of meat. "Delicious. Have a bite, Jean." His eyes watched her mouth with fascination, and she fought the urge to run.

She watched him cut into the meat again, exposing the red center, liquid seeping out, promising a juicy treat. Camille's eyes locked on his lips as he started chewing. They were almost ruby in color, and his square jaw barely moved as he consumed the rare meat. A bit of juice slipped between his lips and disappeared into his beard. Would he have a reaction? How soon would it occur if he did?

While her studies had taught her vampires and garlic did not mix, there was no explanation on what would happen if one ate some. There was no doubt Jean's piece of meat contained garlic. She had saturated the entire T-bone in it. Nothing seemed to be happening. He murmured something about the interesting seasoning before offering her another bite. What if she had been totally wrong about her new neighbor? All this time she had been so sure he was a member of the undead.

Not to brag, but Camille considered herself quite the expert on the subject. She had read every vampire novel on the market, gone

on lots of vampire tours in New Orleans and seen the *Twilight* movies two times each. Jean had all the markings of a real vampire. Damn it, he only came out at night. He had a seductive allure which made it impossible to ignore his presence. His house was dark and shadowy. How could he not be a vampire?

He took another large bite and gave her a sexy smile. Camille's pulse started racing. If Jean was no blood sucking fiend, she might just consider starting a relationship with him. She almost started to ask what his plans were for the weekend when it happened. Jean stopped chewing and started reaching for his throat. Suddenly, he seemed to be choking or having some type of trouble breathing.

"What did you use to season this meat?" He gasped, getting up and heading to the refrigerator to rummage inside.

"The usual," she said, inching toward the door, "salt, pepper, chili powder and garlic. I really need to go now. Like I said before, I have tons of homework to take care of..." She managed to unlock the back door and was heading out when she saw him take a syringe out and jam it into his thigh.

The deadly look on his face stopped her from hesitating with her escape. He gave her a look which suggested he knew she had tried to get him to have an allergic reaction tonight. No doubt about it, the very notion had pissed him off a lot. Making out his words was difficult because his tongue seemed to be swollen, but she thought he might have called her a psycho brat who needed to be beaten.

Back at her house, she grabbed her bottle of holy water and started sprinkling it around every doorway and window of her apartment. She dared not spy out of the window to see if her vampire was trying to locate her. Grabbing her laptop and bag of test papers to grade, she rushed into her bedroom and locked the door for added safety.