

Bitten

Prologue

I have to.

I've been fighting it all night. I'm going to lose. My battle is as futile as a woman feeling the first pangs of labor and deciding it's an inconvenient time to give birth. Nature wins out. It always does.

It's nearly two AM, too late for this foolishness and I need my sleep. Four nights spent cramming to meet a deadline have left me exhausted. It doesn't matter. Patches of skin behind my knees and elbows have been tingling and now begin to burn. My heart beats so fast I have to gulp air. I clench my eyes shut, willing the sensations to stop but they don't.

Philip is sleeping beside me. He's another reason why I can't leave, sneaking out in the middle of the night again and returning with a torrent of lame excuses. He's working late tomorrow. If I can just wait one more day. My temples begin to throb. The burning sensation in my skin spreads down my arms and legs. The rage forms a tight ball in my gut and threatens to explode.

I've got to get out of here—I don't have a lot of time left.

Philip doesn't stir when I slip from the bed. There's a pile of clothing tucked underneath my dresser so I won't have to risk the squeaks and groans of opening drawers and closets. I pick up my keys, clasping my fist around them so they don't jangle, ease open the door and creep into the hallway.

Everything's quiet. The lights seem dimmed, as if overpowered by the emptiness. When I push the elevator button, it creaks out a complaint at being disturbed at so ungodly an hour. The first floor and lobby are equally empty. People who can afford the rent this close to downtown Toronto are comfortably asleep right now.

My legs now itch as well as hurt and I curl my toes to see if the itching stops. It doesn't. I look down at the car keys in my hand. It's too late to drive to a safe place now--the itching has crystallized into a sharp burn. Keys in my pocket, I stride out onto the streets, looking for a quiet

place to Change. As I walk, I monitor the sensation in my legs, tracing its passage to my arms and the back of my neck. Soon. Soon. When my scalp starts to tingle, I know I have walked as far as I can so I search for an alley. The first one I find has been claimed by two men squeezed together inside a tattered big-screen TV box but the next one is empty. I hurry to the end and undress quickly behind a barricade of trash bins, hide the clothes under an old newspaper. Then I start the Change.

My skin stretches. The sensation deepens and I try to block the pain. Pain. What a trivial word--agony is better. One doesn't call the sensation of being flayed alive 'painful'. I inhale deeply and focus my attention on the Change, dropping to the ground before I'm doubled over and forced down. It's never easy—perhaps I'm still too human. In the struggle to keep my thoughts straight, I try to anticipate each phase and move my body into position--head down, arms and legs pulled in and held straight out at the joints, feet and hands flexed, and back arched. My leg muscles knot and convulse. I gasp and strain to relax. Sweat breaks out, pouring off me in streams, but the muscles finally relent and untwist themselves. Next comes the ten seconds of pure hell that used to make me swear I would rather die than endure this again. Then it's over.

Changed.

I stretch and blink. When I look around, the world has mutated to an array of colors unknown to the human eye, blacks and browns and grays with subtle shadings that my brain still converts to blues and greens and reds. I lift my nose and inhale. I pick up scents of fresh asphalt and rotting tomatoes and window-pot mums and day-old sweat and a million other things, mixing together in an odor so overwhelming I cough and shake my head. As I turn, I catch distorted fragments of my reflection in a dented trash can. My eyes stare back at me. I curl my lips back and snarl at myself. White fangs flash in the metal.

I am a wolf, a hundred and thirty-pound wolf with pale blonde fur. The only part of me that remains are my eyes, sparking with a cold intelligence and a simmering ferocity that could never be mistaken for anything but human.

I look around, inhaling the scents of the city again. I'm nervous here. It's too close, too confined, it reeks of human spoor. I must be careful. If I'm seen, I'll be mistaken for a dog, a large

mixed breed, perhaps a husky and yellow Labrador mix. But even a dog my size is cause for alarm when it's running loose. I head for the back of the laneway and seek a path through the underbelly of the city.

My brain is dulled, disoriented not by my change of form but by the unnaturalness of my surroundings. I can't get my bearings and the first alley I go down turns out to be the one I had encountered in human form, the one with the two men in the faded Sony box. One of them is awake now. He's tugging the remnants of a filth-encrusted blanket between his fingers as if he can stretch it large enough to cover himself against the cold October night. He looks up and sees me and his eyes widen. He starts to shrink back, then stops himself. He says something. His voice is crooning, the musical, exaggerated tones people use with infants and animals. If I concentrated, I could make out the words, but there's no point. I know what he's saying, some variation of 'nice doggy', repeated over and over in a variety of inflections. His hands are outstretched, palms out to ward me off, the physical language contradicting the vocal. Stay back--nice doggy--stay back. And people wonder why animals don't understand them.

I can smell the neglect and waste rising from his body. It smells like weakness, like an aged deer driven to the fringe of the herd, prime pickings for predators. If I were hungry, he would smell like dinner. Fortunately, I am not hungry yet, so I don't have to deal with the temptation, the conflict, the revulsion. I snort, condensation trumpeting from my nostrils, then turn and lope back up the alley.

There's a Vietnamese restaurant further down. The smell of food is embedded in the very wood frame of the building. On a rear addition, an exhaust fan turns slowly, clicking with each revolution as one blade catches the metal screen casing. Below the fan a window is open. Faded sunflower print curtains billow out in the night breeze. I can hear people inside, a room full of people, grunting and whistling in sleep. I want to see them. I want to stick my muzzle in the open window and look inside. A werewolf can have a lot of fun with a roomful of unprotected people.

I start to creep forward but a sudden crackle and hiss stops me. The hiss softens, then is drowned out by a man's voice, sharp, his words snapped off like icicles. I turn my head each way,

radar searching for the source. He is further down the street. I abandon the restaurant and go to him. We are curious by nature.

He's standing in a three-car parking lot wedged at the end of a narrow passage between buildings. He holds a walkie-talkie to his ear and leans one elbow against a brick building, casual but not resting. His shoulders are relaxed. His gaze goes nowhere. He is confident in his place, that he has a right to be here and little to fear from the night. The gun dangling from his belt probably helps. He stops talking, jabs a button and slams the walkie-talkie into its holster. His eyes scan the parking lot once, taking inventory and seeing nothing requiring his attention. Then he heads deeper into the alley maze. This could be amusing. I follow quietly.

My nails click against the pavement. He doesn't seem to notice. I pick up speed, darting around trash bags and empty boxes. Finally I'm close enough. He hears the steady clicking behind him and stops. I duck behind a dumpster, peer out around the corner. He turns and squints into the darkness. After a second he starts forward. I let him get a few steps away, then resume the pursuit. This time when he stops, I wait one extra second before diving for cover. He lets out a muffled oath. He's seen something--a flash of motion, a shadow flickering, something. His right hand slips to his gun, caressing the metal, then pulling back, as if the reassurance is enough. He hesitates, then looks up and down the alley, realizing he is alone and uncertain what to do about it. He mutters something, then starts forward, a bit quicker this time.

As he walks, his eyes flick from side to side, wariness treading the border of alarm. I inhale deeply, picking up only wisps of fear, enough to make my heart pound, but not enough to send my brain spinning out of control. He's safe quarry for a stalking game. He won't run. I can suppress most of my instincts. I can stalk him without killing him. I can suffer the first pangs of hunger without killing him. I can watch him pull his gun without killing him. Yet, if he runs, I won't be able to stop myself. That's a temptation I can't fight. If he runs, I *will* chase. If I chase, either he'll kill me or I'll kill him.

As he turns the corner down a connecting alley, he starts to relax. All has been silent behind him. I creep forward now, shifting my weight to the back of my foot-pads to muffle the sound of

my nails. Soon I am only a few feet behind him. I can smell his after-shave, almost masking the natural scent of a long day's work. I can see his white socks appearing and disappearing between his shoes and pant-legs. I can hear his breathing, the slight elevation in tempo betraying the fact that he is walking faster than usual. I ease forward, coming close enough that I could lunge if I want to and knock him to the ground before he even thought to reach for his gun. His head jerks up. He knows I'm there. He knows *something* is there. I wonder if he will turn. Does he dare to look, to face something he can't see or hear, but can only sense? His hand slips to his gun, but he doesn't turn. He walks faster. Then he swings back to the safety of the street

I follow him to the end and observe from the darkness. He strides forward, keys in hand to a parked cruiser, unlocks it and hops inside. The car roars and squeals out from the curb. I watch the receding taillights and sigh. Game over. I won.

That was nice but it wasn't nearly enough to satisfy me. These city backstreets are too confining. My heart is thudding with unspent excitement. My legs are aching with built-up energy. I must *run*.

A wind gusts from the south, bringing the sharp tang of Lake Ontario with it. I think of heading to the beach, imagining running along the stretch of sand, feeling the icy water slapping against my paws but it's not safe. If I want to run, I must go to the ravine. It's a long way, but I have little choice unless I plan to skulk around human-smelling alleyways for the rest of the night. I swing to the northwest and begin the journey.

Nearly a half-hour later, I'm standing at the crest of a hill. My nose twitches, picking up the vestiges of an illegal leaf fire smoldering in a nearby yard. The wind bristles through my fur, chill, nearly cold, invigorating. Above me, traffic thunders across the overpass. Below me is sanctuary, a perfect oasis in the middle of the city. I leap forward, throwing myself off. At last I'm running.

My legs pick up the rhythm before I'm halfway down the ravine. I close my eyes for a second and feel the wind slice across my muzzle. As my paws thump against the hard earth, tiny darts of

pain shoot up my legs, but they make me feel alive, like jolting awake after an overlong sleep. The muscles contract and extend in perfect harmony. With each stretch comes an ache and a burst of physical joy. My body is thanking me for the exercise, rewarding me with jolts of near-narcotic adrenaline. The more I run, the lighter I feel, the pain falling free as if my paws are no longer striking the ground. Even as I race along the bottom of the ravine, I feel like I'm still running downhill, gaining energy instead of expending it. I want to run until all the tension in my body flies away, leaving nothing but the sensations of the moment. I couldn't stop if I wanted to. And I don't want to.

Dead leaves crackle under my paws. Somewhere in the forest an owl hoots softly. It has finished its hunting and rests contented, not caring who knows it's around. A rabbit bolts out of a thicket and halfway across my path, then realizes its mistake and zooms back into the undergrowth. I keep running. My heart is pounding now. Against my rising body heat, the air feels ice cold, stinging as it storms through my nostrils and into my lungs. I inhale deeply, savoring the shock of it hitting my insides. I'm running too fast to smell anything. Bits of scents flutter through my brain in a jumbled montage that smells of freedom. Unable to resist, I finally skid to a halt, throw my head back and howl. The music pours up from my chest in a tangible evocation of pure joy. It echoes through the ravine and soars to the moonless sky, letting them all know I'm here. I own this place! When I'm done, I drop my head, panting with exertion. I am standing there, staring down into a scattering of yellow and red maple leaves when a sound finally pierces my self-absorption. It's a growl, a soft menacing growl. There's a pretender to my throne.

I look up to see a brownish yellow dog standing a few meters away. No, not a dog. My brain takes a second, but it finally recognizes the animal. A coyote. The recognition takes a second because it's unexpected. I've heard the The coyote is equally confused by me. Animals don't know what to make of me. They smell human, but see wolf and, just when they decide their nose is tricking them, they look into my eyes and see human. When I encounter dogs, they either turn tail and run or attack immediately. The coyote does neither. It lifts its muzzle and sniffs the air, then bristles and pulls its lips back in a drawn-out growl. It's half my size, scarcely worth my notice. I

let it know this with a lazy 'get-lost' growl and a shake of my head. The coyote doesn't move. I stare at it for a moment. It breaks the gaze-lock first.

I snort, toss my head again and slowly turn away. I'm halfway turned when I see a flash of brown fur leaping at my shoulder. Diving to the side, I roll out of the way, then scramble to my feet. The coyote is watching me and snarling. I give a serious growl, a canine 'now you're pissing me off'. The coyote stands its ground. It wants a fight. Good.

My fur rises until it stands on end, my tail bushing out behind me. I lower my head between my shoulder bones and lay my ears flat. My lips pull back and I feel the snarl tickling up through my throat then reverberating into the night. The coyote does not back down. I crouch and I am about to lunge when something hits me hard in the shoulder, throwing me off balance. Pain stabs through my shoulder. I stumble, then twist to face my attacker. A second coyote, gray-brown, hangs from my shoulder, fangs sunk to the bone. With a roar of rage and pain, I buck up and throw my weight to the side.

As the second coyote flies free, the first launches itself straight at my face. Ducking my head, I catch it in the throat, but my teeth clamp down on fur instead of flesh and it squirms away. It tries to back off for a second lunge, but I leap at it, backing it into a tree. It rears up, trying to get out of my way. I slash my head down, aiming for the throat. This time I get my grip. Blood spurts in my mouth, salty and thick. The coyote's mate lands on my back. My legs buckle. Teeth sink into the loose skin beneath my skull. Fresh pain arcs through me. Concentrating hard, I keep my grip on the first coyote's throat. I steady myself, then release it for a split second, just long enough to make the fatal slash and tear. As I pull back, blood sprays in my eyes, blinding me. I close my eyes and swing my head hard, ripping out the coyote's throat. Once I feel it go limp, I toss it aside, then throw myself on the ground and roll over. The coyote on my back yips in surprise and releases its hold. I jump up and turn in the same motion, ready to take this other animal out of the game but it scrambles up and dives into the brush. With a flash of a wire-brush tail, it's gone. I look over at the dead coyote. Blood streams from its throat, eagerly lapped up by the dry earth below. A tremor runs through me, like the final shudder of sated lust. I close my eyes and shiver. Not my

fault. They attacked me first. The ravine has gone quiet, echoing the calm that floods through me. Not so much as a cricket chirps. The world is dark and silent and sleeping.

I try to examine and clean my wounds, but they are out of reach. I stretch and assess the pain. Two deep cuts, both bleeding only enough to mat my fur. I'll live. I turn and start the trip out of the ravine and back to the city.

Back in the alley I Change then quickly pull my clothes on and scurry out to the sidewalk like a junkie caught shooting up in the shadows. Frustration fills me. It shouldn't end like this, dirty and furtive, amidst the garbage and filth of the city. It should end in a clearing in the forest, clothing abandoned in some thicket, stretched out naked, feeling the coolness of the earth beneath me and the night breeze tickling my bare skin. I should be falling asleep in the grass, exhausted beyond all thought, with only the miasma of contentedness floating through my mind. And I should not be alone. In my mind, I can see the others, lying around me in the grass. I can hear the familiar snores, the occasional whisper and laugh. I can feel warm skin against mine, a bare foot hooked over my calf, twitching in a dream of running. I can smell them, their sweat, their breath, mingling with the scent of blood, smears from a deer killed in the chase. The image shatters and I am staring into a shop window, seeing nothing but myself reflecting back at me. My chest tightens in a loneliness so deep and so complete I can't breathe.

I turn quickly and lash out at the nearest object. A street-lamp quavers and rings with the blow. Pain sears down my arm. Welcome to reality--changing in alleyways and creeping back to my apartment. I am cursed to live between worlds. On the one hand there is normalcy. On the other, there is a place where I can be what I am with no fear of reprisals, where I can commit murder itself and scarcely raise the eyebrows of those around me, where I am even encouraged to do so to protect the sanctity of that world. But I left.

As I stride back to the apartment, I can feel my anger blistering the pavement with every step. A woman curled up under a pile of dirty blankets peers out as I pass and instinctively shrinks back

into her nest. As I round the corner, two men step out and size up my prospects as prey. I resist the urge to snarl at them, but just barely. I walk faster and they seem to decide I am not worth chasing. I shouldn't be here. I should be home in bed, not prowling downtown Toronto at four AM. A normal woman wouldn't be here. It's yet another reminder that I'm not normal. Not normal. I look down the darkened street and I can read a billet on a telephone post fifty feet off. Not normal. I catch a whiff of fresh bread from a bakery starting production miles away. Not normal. I stop by a storefront, grab a bar over the windows and flex my biceps. The metal groans in my hand. Not normal. Not normal. I chant the words in my head, flagellating myself with them. The anger only grows.

Outside my apartment door, I stop and inhale deeply. I mustn't wake Philip. And, if I do, I mustn't let him see me like this. I don't need a mirror to know what I look like, skin taut, color high, eyes incandescent with the rage that always seems to follow a Change now. Definitely not normal.

When I finally enter the apartment, I can hear his measured breathing from the bedroom. Still asleep. I am nearly to the bathroom when his breathing catches.

"Elena?" his voice is a sleep-stuffed croak.

"Just going to the washroom."

I try to slip past the doorway, but he's sitting up now, peering nearsightedly at me. He frowns.

"Fully dressed?" he says.

"I went out."

A moment of silence. He runs a hand through his dark hair and sighs. "It's not safe. Damn it, Elena. We've discussed this. Wake me up and I'll go with you."

"I need to be alone. To think."

"It's not safe."

"I know. I'm sorry."

I creep into the bathroom, spending longer than necessary. I pretend to use the toilet, wash my hands with enough water to fill a Jacuzzi, then find a fingernail that needs elaborate filing

attention. When I finally decide Philip has fallen back asleep, I head for the bedroom. The bedside lamp is on. He's propped on his pillow, glasses in place. I hesitate in the doorway. I can't bring myself to cross the threshold, to go and crawl into bed with him. I hate myself for it, but I can't do it. The memory of the night lingers and I feel out of place here.

When I don't move, Philip shifts his legs over the side of the bed and sits up.

"I didn't mean to snap," he says. "I worry. I know you need your freedom and I'm trying--"

He stops and rubs his hand across his mouth. His words slice through me. I know he doesn't mean them as a reprimand, but they are, a reminder that I'm screwing this up, that I'm fortunate to have found someone as patient and understanding as Philip, but I'm wearing through that patience at breakneck speed and all I seem capable of doing is standing back and waiting for the final crash.

"I know you need your freedom," he says again. "But there has to be some other way. Maybe you could go out in the morning, early. If you prefer night, maybe we could drive down to the lake. You could walk around. I could sit in the car and keep an eye on you. Maybe I could walk with you. Stay twenty paces behind or something." He manages a wry smile. "Or maybe not. I'd probably get picked up by the cops, the middle-aged guy stalking the beautiful young blonde."

He pauses, then leans forward. "That's your cue, Elena. You're supposed to remind me that forty-one is far from middle-aged."

"We'll work something out," I say.

We can't, of course. I have to run under the cover of night and I have to do it alone. There is no compromise.

As he sits on the edge of the bed, watching me, I know we're doomed. My only hope is to make this relationship so otherwise perfect that Philip might come to overlook our one insurmountable problem. To do that, my first step should be to go to him, crawl in bed, hold him and kiss him and tell him I love him. But I can't. Not tonight. Tonight I'm something else, something he doesn't know and couldn't understand. I don't want to go to him like this.

"I'm not tired" I say. "I might as well stay up. Do you want breakfast?"

He looks at me. Something in his expression falters and I know I've failed--again. But he doesn't say anything. He pulls his smile back in place. "Let's go out. Someplace in this city has to be open this early. We'll drive around until we find it. Drink five cups of coffee and watch the sun come up. Okay?"

I nod, not trusting myself to speak.

"Shower first?" he says. "Or flip for it?"

"You go ahead."

He kisses my cheek as he passes. I wait until I hear the shower running, then head for the kitchen.

Sometimes I get so hungry.