

# BITTEN

A Bite Series Short Story

By Lynn Best

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# 1

Stephanie glanced around the coffee shop, hoping to God no one would recognize her as she hid her red-rimmed eyes behind her book. How awful to be spotted in public trying desperately not to cry.

What if someone came up to her and asked her if she was okay? She'd be forced to mumble some lie about a dying aunt or cancer diagnosis.

Shit. She should probably come up with a cover story just in case.

Her caramel mocha latte sat untouched on the table beside her armchair. Truth be told, she hated coffee, but she had nowhere else to go after the fight. She couldn't stay in the apartment, not after he'd called her a fat pig and threw her purse at her face.

Jesus, just thinking about it brought the tears back. She grabbed for the mug and sipped it, hoping it would calm her. She wasn't even mad at Jeremy. Well, she was, but she was madder at herself. Why had she agreed to move out to Austin with him? She'd only known him for two months, but they'd been the best two months of her life—the whirlwind trips, the gifts, the spontaneous candlelight dinners.

She was a fool. A stupid fool, and that's why she was crying. What in the hell would she do now? Move home with her mother? At twenty-two, moving back home seemed like the ultimate failure.

Instead of ruminating on all her life's pitfalls, she decided to people watch. The coffee shop was small and homey, probably why she chose it. The brick walls and reclaimed pallet wood floors gave it a hipster vibe. A dozen two- and four-top tables with mismatched chairs were scattered around, but she had claimed one of the worn leather chairs near the bathrooms. There was a dull buzz of chatter from the clumps of people sipping brew together. A few were loners, most with laptops, banging away at the next great American novel. The smell of coffee was everywhere, and beneath it hints of the bakery muffins she was trying desperately not to order.

*Fat pig.*

Looking over her steaming mug, she watched a young couple flirt. Probably a first date. The girl wore lipstick and had curled her hair. He'd clearly picked out a nice shirt.

Next to them, a man and woman in their twenties looked at their cellphones, barely talking. This woman's hair sat in a frumpy ponytail. The man had a stain on his shirt. Stephanie wondered if the flirting couple saw where they were headed—the slow death of infatuation until a post from your Aunt Linda was more interesting than the man sitting across the table from you.

Oh God, what was she going to do? She'd have to go back to the apartment eventually.

“Excuse me, miss. Is everything okay?”

Stephanie startled, looking around to find the source of the voice.

He was standing at the side of her chair and taking up more space than one man should. Six-foot-six or seven, his broad chest and massive arms looked like he lived and breathed working out. His skin was a deep brown, and, with his black hair and accent, she pegged him as Latino. And one of the most handsome men she'd ever seen.

“I... uh... Yes. I'm fine. Thanks.” She set her mug down with a clunk. What in the world was a guy like that doing talking to her? She ran a hand through her hair, but she knew it was no use. She'd blown out of the apartment after the fight without even a glance in a mirror.

He observed her stammering and nervousness with a calm but determined expression. “Are you sure? You look like... Well, frankly, you look like you've been crying. If anyone is harassing you...” He didn't finish, but he didn't need to. This guy could take out anyone with a well-aimed punch.

“No one is harassing me.” No one *here*, she thought. “I'm fine. Really. Allergies.”

His frown let her know he wasn't buying what she was selling. He nodded, took a step toward the counter and then swiveled. His jeans clung to his thick thighs as he moved once again back toward her.

When he sat down in the armchair opposite her, she felt her breath catch in her throat.

“Could I ask your name?” he asked, his accented voice so melodic and sexy she felt herself melting.

“Stephanie,” she managed, and then regretted it. Didn’t she know better than to give a strange man her name? “Johnson,” she lied. “Stephanie Johnson.”

“Stephanie Johnson, I’m Francisco. I’m not from here, but where I come from, if a man hurts a woman, we deal with it.” He leaned forward, massive arms on massive knees, his brown eyes locking onto hers as if he could see right through to her core.

“Did someone hurt you, Stephanie?”

She shook her head, but could feel the tears in her eyes betraying her. How could her life have come to this? Crying in front of a GQ model at a coffee shop when she didn’t even like coffee. Maybe she should move home to live with her mother. It was clear she wasn’t doing a great job of handling her life on her own.

When she didn’t answer, Francisco stood up, the leather chair groaning a sigh of relief.

Well, that was that. She’d managed to scare him away. Not that she was trying to entice him. He was way, way out of her league.

She grabbed her purse, shoving the unread book into it. Time to face facts.

But as she got up, Francisco was coming back, one of the chocolate muffins she was trying so hard not to eat in his hand. He looked crestfallen when he saw she was about to leave.

“I’ve been told chocolate makes people feel better.” He held out the muffin centered in his massive open palm. “Feel better, Stephanie.”

She looked at the muffin, the perfect gift, the very thing that would make her feel better. Then she remembered Jeremy’s words.

“Thanks, but no thanks. I’m off gluten.” Quickly, she strode around him and out of the shop, the door banging behind her.

Under the street lamps, she looked back one more time. Francisco was staring out the window at her, holding the muffin to his chest.

The nicest guy she'd ever met just bought her a muffin, and she'd refused. It was all pity, anyway. And right now, the last thing she wanted was pity.

It had only been an hour since their fight, but Stephanie had nowhere else to go. New to the city, she didn't have any friends. They were all in Michigan. And she didn't know other places to visit to kill time. Besides, she thought. If she was going to have to pack up her shit and move home, there was no time like the frickin' present.

She walked the three blocks to her apartment complex and took the stairs up slowly. Only a month ago, she'd mounted these same steps with Jeremy, hand-in-hand, so happy to see their new place. Now, the stairwell carpet looked worn and the paint was dingy. There was a smell of smoke in the air and an undercurrent of urine coming from one dark corner on the second floor.

A shit hole. How had she not seen it before?

The third floor arrived too soon and she stood in front of her apartment, staring at the door, unable to move. What she should do, if she had balls, was march down to the coffee house and tell Francisco exactly what Jeremy had said. Yes, someone had hurt her, and Francisco could show Jeremy how to treat a lady. But, for someone who hated conflict that was a silly daydream. And, no matter how much Jeremy had hurt her, she didn't want to see him beaten to a bloody pulp.

Punched in the beak once? Well... maybe.

Hand on the knob, she tried to talk herself into turning it. It was a solid minute before she was able to.

The door cracked open and she pushed in slowly. The smell of pot was immediate and overpowering. Jeremy had been getting high a lot more than usual lately. Before they moved, she'd never seen him do it, though she'd suspected a time or two. But now that they were living together, she realized it was an everyday thing. And it changed him.

Walking in, she followed the sounds of virtual shooting in the spare bedroom and Jeremy's "office." He worked from home as a product manager and graphic designer for an Internet company. But, as she stood in the doorway, she could see he wasn't working. His first-shooter avatar was taking out aliens.

“You’re back,” he said, not turning around.

“Should I not be?”

He paused his game, swiveling in his chair. Sighing, he looked at her. “Are you ready to talk like adults?”

Ha. Adults? He was hilarious, sitting there wearing his Power Rangers T-shirt.

She narrowed her eyes. “Sure. Help me out here. Was it adult to call me a fat pig?”

He looked away, at least showing enough human decency to feel bad. “I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry.”

“Okaaay.” She drew out the word, searching for her next course of action. “What about the drugs? Have you thought about what I said?”

“Thought about it? Yeah. Changed my mind? No. It’s medicinal, Stephanie. Healthy.”

She fought to maintain her composure at his condescending tone. “Smoking it several times a day is healthy? You aren’t even sick.”

“You don’t have to be sick to get health benefits from it.”

Here they were again, right back to arguing.

“Whatever. I’m going to bed.” Maybe she could decide what to do with her life in the morning.

He didn’t stop her. She could hear the sounds of his video game resume the moment she left the room.

Slipping into her pajamas, she crawled under the covers. Alone in bed, her thoughts floated back to Francisco. Picturing his massive body, his arms like telephone poles, stirred something in her. It had been three weeks since she and Jeremy had done anything more than kiss goodnight. Three weeks with no man’s hands on her body. She ran fingertips down the front of her nightgown, feeling the rise of her breast. Sure, she’d put on weight over the last few months. The result of too much eating out at restaurants combined with the stress of moving. But the weight she’d put on had



gone to her breasts and ass, something she'd liked until Jeremy commented that he liked thin girls. Athletic girls.

She was as far from athletic as you could get. She once knocked herself unconscious playing badminton.

But Francisco had brought her a chocolate muffin. He'd looked into her eyes. Sure, he probably didn't find her sexy, but... What if he did?

Her hand slid over the hard rise of one nipple. Then the other.

What would his giant hands feel like there?

A burning began between her legs. Hot. Unquenchable.

What would his weight, his girth, feel like down there?

## 2

The next morning Stephanie woke up with a strange desire for coffee.

Rolling over, she found Jeremy, the lump beside her, silently snoring. Now that he could make his own work hours, he'd been staying up later and getting up well into the afternoon. Even though she hadn't found a job yet, she couldn't make herself get up past 8 a.m. And she'd learned not to wake up the sleeping dragon beside her.

Slipping out of bed, she tip-toed out of the bedroom and into the kitchen. As she heated water for tea, she stared at Jeremy's Keurig on the counter. Coffee might be okay today.

*It's not the coffee you want, idiot.*

But he wouldn't be at the coffee shop, would he? It wasn't like he lived there.

Still, a muffin wouldn't hurt. She hadn't eaten anything since last night's dinner.

Showering and dressing, she took extra care with her appearance, telling herself that she might walk downtown and apply for jobs. She needed her own money, and besides, a job would take her mind off her bottomless pit of a relationship.

Properly lipsticked and mascaraed, she grabbed her purse and headed downstairs.

Her heart began to pound as she left the apartment complex and walked the few blocks to the coffee shop. Showing up this soon would make it obvious she was trying to hit on Francisco. Maybe she should apologize for running out on his kind gesture. Try to make it up to him by buying him a muffin in return. But when she got inside the building, there was no tall, dark, handsome stranger anywhere.

Sadly, she got in line, planning on drowning her sorrows in as many pastries as she could manage. He'd probably never be back to this coffee shop. She'd blown her chance, just like everything else.

The two people in front of her ordered, and she stepped up to the counter, clutching her purse.

The young male barista at the counter held up a hand. "Just a second." Then he strode away to the back.

Stephanie blew out a breath. How long would she have to wait? What did it matter? She had nothing to do today.

But then a tall, dark, stranger emerged from the back room.

Francisco.

He stood behind the cash register, beaming at her. "You're back. And looking happier. Some other man get you the chocolate you needed?" One of his eyebrows arched.

Blushing, she gripped her purse and tried to form an answer. "No. No, uh, chocolate."

He worked here?

"Well, I'm glad you're feeling better, no matter how. What can I get you?" He pressed his hands on the counter and waited expectantly.

"I, uh, I..." Her eyes searched the counter, landing on a help wanted sign next to a selection of wrapped cookies. "I want a job."

"You do?" he asked, leaning back. "You want to work here?"

"Yes," she said, not really sure where her mouth train was taking her.

"Okay, well, let's do an interview. Mary?" He called toward the back and a young barista with a black bun, cool tattoos, and dark horn-rimmed glasses came out. "Mary, could you run the counter for a few minutes? I'm going to interview this young lady."

Interview? Stephanie could not believe what was happening. In a daze she followed Francisco toward the back room, walking into a small, neat office. He sat his large frame behind a wooden desk tucked in a corner, and she found the only other chair in the room. She sat down, pulling her purse onto her lap like it could protect her from the bad decisions she was currently making.

“So, Stephanie Johnson,” he said, clasping his hands together on the desk’s wood top. “What makes you want to work in coffee?”

Wringing her hands together, she quickly put together an answer. “I like it. I like all coffee. And muffins.” Lord, she sounded like she had Tourette’s.

“Good. And do you have experience? I mean, in serving people?”

Why did all of his questions sound sexual? He was so sexy her imagination was running wild. “I worked at my college cafeteria for two years.”

“And why did you leave there?” His warm brown eyes sought out hers.

“I had to quit school. For personal reasons.” This was a train wreck for sure.

“Oh.” His head cocked to the side sympathetically. “What kinds of personal reasons, if you don’t mind me asking?”

She chewed the inside of her cheek. “Someone... died. In my family.”

Nodding slowly, he spread his fingers out on the desk, trailing them along the wood. Her cheeks flushed as she remembered making that same motion over her nipples while thinking of him.

“It’s okay,” she stammered, getting up. “I know I’m not really the person you’re looking for, so I’ll just go.”

“Wait. You have the job.”

She whirled back and stared at him.

Standing, he held his hands out. “We really need help. The shop is way more popular than I anticipated, and I don’t have enough workers. You’d be doing me a favor if you could start today.”

“Today?” Her head was spinning.

“That is... unless you have other things you have to attend to. Someone at home waiting?” That dark eyebrow arched again. Was he asking if she had a boyfriend?

“No one is waiting,” she said, knowing it was the truth.

“Great.” He slapped his hands together in excitement. “You’re going to love it here. Let’s get you started.”

When he walked around her, nearly brushing against her, chills ran up and down her spine.

This was going to be one hell of an interesting first day.

# 3

“You’ve met Mary, and this is Matt,” Francisco said as he led her back out into the shop. Both workers smiled politely and then went back to their business, wiping up countertops and manning the ever refreshing line of customers.

“And over here is where you make the coffee.” He pointed to the overly complicated contraption with knobs and buttons, the colorful mugs stacked beside it. She could barely figure out how to make Jeremy coffee on the Keurig. This was going to be one short-lived job.

She followed him as he explained all the inner workings of the coffee grinder and the espresso machine, the way to make milk froth and how much ham to put on a Panini. She followed, doing her best, but feeling so overwhelmed. And he kept standing so close to her. His cologne made her head swim and her heart pound every time she got a whiff of it. Which was often, as he was always reaching past her to grab a mug or point to a knob. The area behind the counter was small and he was huge. His hand brushed her arm twice. Skin on skin. Those chills got their own chills.

But soon he would find out that she lied and then he’d fire her. And that would be the end of smelling his cologne or letting his fingers brush the soft skin of her wrist.

“Ready to take a crack at the cash register?” he asked, looking both hopeful and encouraging in one very stunning smile.

“Sure,” she said with no confidence.

Following him to the counter, Mary stepped aside and Stephanie took her place, staring down the line of lunch customers that extended to the back of the shop. They were going to be so mad when she messed everything up.

But the amazing thing was she remembered what Francisco had told her. And she remembered her work at the college cafeteria. Soon, she was making change and hitting buttons without asking Mary for help. Two hours passed in the blink of an eye and a blur of coffee mugs.

A tap on her shoulder made her turn around.

Francisco was back, smiling. "You're a natural."

She blushed, dipping her head. "I just did what you told me to."

"You'd be surprised at how many people can't even do that. But you need a break, super star. Or you'll fall over dead. You haven't eaten a thing."

"Oh, that's okay," she said, feeling nervous that she'd have to eat in front of this Adonis. She was soft in the middle and the thought of putting food in her mouth as he watched her was overwhelming.

"I insist. No one's ever died on the job here, and I plan on keeping up my streak. It's on me. I hired you so quick you didn't have a plan for eating."

Before she could stammer a response, he was grabbing two sandwiches from the deli counter, swiping two sodas, and putting them all in a bag, nodding at her to follow him.

She glanced at Mary, who waited patiently to take over the cash register, and then followed Francisco through the back room. Thinking he might set their lunch up in the tiny office, her nerves started to bundle again. Such a small space. But then he was walking past the office door and out the back, holding it open with his backside as she slipped through.

She stepped into the fresh air only to see the back parking lot, the dumpster, and a brick wall. Romantic.

Francisco slung the bag handle over his arm and began to climb a metal ladder that scaled up the side of the building. Stopping a few feet up, he looked down at her.

"Come on up. I want to show you something."

She frowned. "Up there?"

"Yeah. I promise it's worth it."

He was so confident, so happy to show her something, how could she refuse? She grabbed the rungs and started climbing up the ladder, hoping to God she didn't fall off and make a total fool of herself.

By the time she got to the top, she was panting and trying to hide it. He had scaled the wall like Spider-Man and was already arranging their food on a small bistro table in the center of the space. A rug blanketed the black tar paper that covered the roof's surface and potted flowering planters formed a ring around the table, making the rooftop feel garden-like. Francisco cranked open the blue umbrella in the center of the table, and spread out the food. One plate for her and one for him.

This looked like a date.

Stephanie walked to the chair he held out for her. "This is... very nice. Did you do this yourself?"

He nodded, looking around. "I wanted my employees to have somewhere to retreat to, to recharge from the madness down below. Everyone needs a rest sometimes." Broad lips quirked into a smile. "I hope the sandwiches I picked out are okay. They are my favorite."

Oh shit. Eating. She'd almost forgotten.

"They look good, except, I'm not that hungry." She dropped her eyes to the sandwich—a specialty chicken pesto that looked amazing. But then she remembered Jeremy's fat pig comment.

When she looked up, Francisco was frowning. "Why won't you eat? You've been here all day and haven't taken a bite of anything."

"I ate before I came in," she lied.

But he wouldn't stop examining her expression. "Is it because of last night? The person that hurt you?"

It was like he could read her mind. She was quickly realizing she couldn't hide from those eyes. So, instead of lying again, she reached down and picked up the sandwich, bringing it to her lips.

When she took a bite, she nearly cried out for joy. It was the best sandwich she'd ever tasted. And she was starving.



Unable to control herself, she ate the Panini in a few minutes. She was shocked to realize how fast she wolfed it down. Then she smiled, embarrassed, at Francisco, but he looked like he couldn't be happier. He gave her half of his, refusing to take it back when she tried to return it. So, she ate that too, knowing that it was too late to impress him. She was too damn hungry to care now.

But the strange thing was that the more she ate, the happier he became. He started telling her about how he came to Austin from Mexico three years ago after a fallout with his family. He was from Cozumel and missed the night life, but not the heat. He'd opened this shop, using every penny he had. For a while it looked like it would fail but then he started making sandwiches and those really took off, getting him some recent good reviews in the local paper.

"And business hasn't stopped since," he said, leaning back in the chair and stretching his arms behind his head. The move tightened his shirt around the muscles of his chest and arms. Stephanie could feel herself blushing.

"And what about you? What brought you to Austin? You don't seem like a native."

"I'm not. I moved here with... a friend just a few months ago. But it's not exactly what I've been expecting."

He tilted his head. "Not finding what you were looking for?"

Again, she had the feeling he was hitting on her. But he was so out of her league. "Maybe I've been looking in the wrong places."

"Definitely," he said, gathering up all their wrappers and clearing their trash. "There's so much here for you. You just haven't found what you need yet."

"Why do I feel like you're my therapist?" she added. "Somehow you always know the right thing to say."

"I've had a lot of practice," he answered seriously.

A lot of practice with women? That was for sure. He probably had to beat them off with a stick.

"I had six sisters growing up. I know women."

“Oh,” she said, nodding. Phew.

“We have a few minutes before we have to go back. Can I show you the view?”

She followed him to the edge of the roof and looked out at the bustling downtown spread out before her. Austin was a beautiful city. In the distance she could see the towering skyline. And below she spotted the smaller shops and retailers that she had not yet begun to explore.

Just as she was starting to relax again, a buzzing sound grabbed her attention. A small cluster of bees flew angrily toward them.

“Bees! I’m allergic.” She turned to run, but tripped on a piece of curled up tar paper and started to fall. Bracing herself for the landing, she fell into strong hands. Francisco’s massive arms drew her up to her feet and guided her away from the bees.

She stood, dazed, facing him. Only inches from his mouth.

Oh God, he smelled delicious.

“Are you okay?” he asked quietly.

She nodded, no words forming. Her heart was pounding.

“Not stung?”

“No.” He was even more handsome up close. And his smell... There was nothing like it. Along with the pounding of her heart, she felt a tingle in her extremities.

“If anything were to happen to you... I’d feel responsible. I brought you up here.”

“Not your fault,” she said, trying to hide how hard she was breathing. Trying not to focus on the hard muscles of his chest, his biceps, his pecs.

Slowly setting her on her feet again, he did not let go. His eyes trailed down her face and lingered on her lips. She stared up, looking into his eyes, wanting nothing in life like she wanted him to kiss her.

“Stephanie,” he breathed, his chest heaving. His face was contorting with some sort of strain, like he was fighting against something.

“Yes?”

“We should go back.”

What?

“Um, okay.”

Gently, he let her go and walked toward the ladder, stopping once to look back at her sadly before climbing down.

Well, *that* answered any question in her mind about whether he was out of her league.

## 4

She worked the rest of her shift with her eyes on the customers and cash register only. She didn't stop to pee or take a break. If she had, she might have run into Francisco and would literally die of embarrassment. He'd seen her demolish that food, watched her fall over at just the whiff of a bee and changed his mind. He was just a nice guy, taking her up to the roof and feeding her. She'd gotten the wrong impression.

Stupid. Stupid and fat.

She was being hard on herself. Her mom would tell her that all these negative thoughts were unproductive, to pick herself up and brush herself off. She was stronger than this. It was okay if she wasn't desirable to the most attractive man in Texas. Today she had landed a job and could get another. After work, she would go back, freshen up and walk downtown to apply somewhere else. She could stand seeing Francisco for a few more days until she got a new job. And then she'd save money and get her own place. Maybe she and Jeremy could get along if they didn't live together.

Her shift ended at four. She said goodbye to Mary and Matt and grabbed her purse. Francisco hadn't come out of the office since lunch, and he didn't make an appearance when she was leaving either. She realized when she walked out the front door that part of her was hoping he'd chase after her.

That only happened in the movies and not to plain girls like her.

Either way, she was feeling okay as she got to the apartment. Jeremy was usually in a good mood in the afternoon and not too high to be fun. She unlocked the door and pushed it open, calling in. "Hello? I'm home."

Nothing. She didn't even hear computer sounds.

She walked past the kitchen/living room combo and into their bedroom, seeing an unmade bed and no Jeremy. The office was empty, too. It looked like he had been working, but she saw the message he had typed to his co-workers saying that he would be right back. That was thirty minutes ago. She walked around the apartment, looking

for a note he might have left for her, but found nothing. Then she got out her cell and tried to call and text him.

No answer.

Sitting down on the couch, she mulled over where he could've gone. He didn't have friends in the city. The only person he talked to besides his online friends was the next door neighbor, Beth.

Maybe Beth knew where he'd gone.

She walked to her neighbor's apartment, feeling awkward for the four hundredth time today.

Beth lived right across the hall, so the walk was short. She stood at the door, taking a deep breath, and then knocked lightly.

No answer, but she could hear quiet murmuring on the other side.

She knocked again. This time the door actually squeaked open a crack.

Oh geez. She was breaking and entering. She turned to go, but then she heard a male voice coming from inside.

Jeremy.

What was he doing inside Beth's apartment?

Heart beginning to seize, Stephanie carefully pushed the door open wider. The voice was definitely Jeremy's. And what were those noises she was hearing?

Unable to stop the compulsion, she walked inside. Beth's apartment was identical in layout to theirs, but much different in decor. Flowery and bohemian, the apartment had bold colors and soft, low-lying furniture. Stephanie counted at least three beanbags in different colors around the TV. The bathroom had a beaded curtain straight from the seventies and Stephanie wondered how Beth's guests managed to poop in peace. A large poster of an Indian elephant with six arms dominated one wall. And there was a giant bong on the dirty coffee table. Jeremy's bong.

Barely able to breathe, Stephanie tip-toed to the bedroom. The noises gave her a clue, but she had to know.

And she saw exactly what she feared.

The first thing her eyes landed on was Jeremy's pasty white ass as he thrust inside Beth. She was flat on her back on her messy bed, arms out, eyes closed. Stephanie watched as one boob jiggled while Jeremy grunted on top of her.

Jeremy was having sex with their neighbor. Right here in front of her. Stephanie was too stunned to do anything.

But then Beth opened her eyes. Jolting upright, her hands flew up to cover her breasts. "What the fuck?"

Jeremy stopped thrusting and looked over his shoulder. "Steph?"

He jumped off of Beth, facing Stephanie. She was struck by how small and inadequate his penis was.

Still, she was crushed. Stephanie turned ran as fast as she could out of the apartment. Jeremy called after her, but it only made her flee faster.

Bursting into the night, she took off down the street. She didn't stop running until she was blocks away. Panting, she looked around, realizing too late that she had run right to the coffee shop.

But she couldn't go in. Her eyes were blurred with tears and so many emotions, most of them terrible, were rampaging through her. She needed to think. Plus, she'd left there less than an hour ago after making a fool of herself with Francisco. She turned around to leave and ran right into someone.

"Stephanie?" Francisco asked, putting his hand under her elbow to steady her. "You're back? Your shift is over." He put down the large trash bag he had been taking to the dumpster and went to her. His eyes searched her face and she could tell he knew something was very wrong.

This time she couldn't stop the tears from flowing. "I just... I don't... I can't go home."

“Come with me.” Resting his hand gently on her back, he led her down the street. She was crying too hard to really tell where they were going, how many blocks or which direction. When she finally got her act together, she saw they were in a ritzy part of town. A glittering apartment complex stood in front of them, one she and Jeremy used to drool over until they found out how much the rent was. She watched in a daze as he showed her to the elevator.

She was going to his apartment. Was this a good idea? She was too stunned to care. All she could picture was Jeremy’s naked ass as he thrust inside of Beth. They’d been together for eight months. And then he just went and had sex with *Beth* of all people? She didn’t even shave. And Stephanie had once seen her kick a stray cat that was on their apartment porch for no reason other than it was in her way. Beth was awful. Did that mean Stephanie was worse than awful?

They got off at the top floor, and he pointed out his door. Once he opened it and let her in, she could see why most people could not afford to live here. The view through the floor-to-ceiling windows highlighted the best parts of Austin. Once you got used to the splendor outside of the apartment, you had to take in the apartment itself—luxury accommodations in every nook and cranny—stainless steel appliances, granite countertops, up-lit paintings that looked expensive. A leather couch sectional that faced a flat screen TV over a stone fireplace. It looked like a showroom apartment; it was so neat and tidy.

Stephanie swallowed, not sure what to do with herself. He helped her there, too, gesturing to a chrome bar stool along the countertop bar and opening the fridge. “Can I get you some water? Or something stronger?” He held up a bottle of whiskey.

“Something stronger,” she nodded, wiping her eyes.

He pulled out two highball glasses and poured a considerable amount of amber liquid in them before handing her one. She drank in gulps while he watched.

He leaned his amazing body against the counter and looked into her eyes. “You have that same look on your face as you did last night. Why is it that wherever you come from, it gives you so much pain?”

She practically choked on her drink, swallowing so she would have something to do while she thought about how to answer. At this point, though, what good would lying do?

“My boyfriend—Ha, boyfriend. That’s a joke. My soon-to-be *ex*-boyfriend was fucking my neighbor when I got home today, so... there’s that.” She set the glass down on the countertop with a clunk. “More, please.”

He poured another healthy serving of whiskey in her glass before taking a swig of his own. “That’s awful.”

“You know something. It’s not even that big of a loss. I mean, I don’t really like him that much. He’s an asshole. What I’m really mad about is that I moved here for this loser, and now I’m stuck. I don’t even know anyone.”

“You know me,” he added quietly.

Her eyes flicked up. “Why do you keep being so nice to me?”

Setting his glass down, he pressed his palms to the counter. “Stephanie, this isn’t me being so nice. It’s how you should be treated. You deserve someone who will take care of you.”

“I don’t need to be taken care of,” she mumbled into her glass as she raised it to her lips again. She was starting to feel the effects of the whiskey, which was probably why she was speaking so candidly.

“Not taking care of you in that *a woman’s place is in the kitchen sort of way*. You need someone who deserves you. Who worships you.”

His stare was intense, and she decided to ignore it. She remembered the last time he looked at her like that—on the roof, right before he nearly tripped over himself trying to leave.

“I’m serious,” he said, reaching across the counter and taking her hand.

This time she couldn’t ignore his touch, or the way he was staring at her. His fingers traced over the skin of her palm and up her wrist gently as he spoke in a low tone. “I can’t stand to see someone hurt a person as nice as you.”

“You barely know me,” she whispered, watching the way his fingers trailed up the veins on her wrist. It felt amazing.



“I know you are kind, helpful, funny. That you put others before yourself. That you don’t give yourself enough credit.” His finger made a swirl pattern on her forearm. Her heart was slamming against her ribcage again. “I know you’re a hard worker.”

“That was only my first day. Wait until day two where I really slack off,” she mumbled, still watching him touch her.

“I know that you are incredibly sexy, but you don’t know it. That you think you don’t deserve to be loved, but you are.” His large hand closed over hers as he waited for her to look him in the eyes. When she did, he was staring at her intently. “You need a man to really love you.”

“I do?” she asked. Her chest was heaving. She felt her nipples harden and strain against the soft fabric of her bra and tingles rippled between her legs.

He let go of her arm and came around the counter, sliding between the bar stools until his body was nearly touching hers. Even sitting high up like this, she had to crane her neck to look into his face, so masculine and sexy. She loved his Latin features, his deep accent, the way his Rs rolled even when he wasn’t trying.

Reaching out, he gently grasped a strand of hair and slipped it behind her ear, letting the tips of his fingers skim down the side of her cheek before dropping away. She found herself leaning toward him while a need for him kindled in her jeans. Wanting to touch him, but afraid to, she sat on the stool, mesmerized. Being just inches away from him left her panting, waiting.

He reached out again, slipping his hand around her neck and cupping it like he was about to kiss her. His eyes were half-lidded. But he paused. “I shouldn’t. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I can take it,” she murmured, willing to say anything at this point to get him to touch her.

“You don’t need to be hurt anymore,” he said, moving closer until their lips were inches apart.

She could smell the scent of his aftershave and feel the puffs of his breath against her skin. “Francisco,” was all she could manage. Her hand reached out and bundled his shirt. She wanted to yank him on top of her.

He seemed to be warring with something inside him, but when she leaned forward a bit more he reacted. He moved quickly, tilting his head and pressing his lips on hers with growing desire. The kiss was hungry. He opened his mouth and prodded hers open, licking inside as his hand moved up her back. She stood, falling into his embrace, her head spinning. Maybe she'd drunk too much, but this high wasn't just from alcohol. She'd never been this turned on by a man before. Her panties were already drenched and the throb inside them kept tempo with her heart. She gripped his back, pulling them together until she could feel the smooth muscles of his abs and chest and the rise in his jeans that let her know she wasn't too chubby to turn on a man like Francisco. That made it hotter.

Pulling away, he looked down at her. "Are you sure? You've just had a rough time, and I don't want to make it worse."

"Are you kidding?" she panted. "The only thing that would make it worse is if you stopped now."

A smile spread across his face.

He picked her up like she was a child and carried her from the kitchen into his bedroom. When he laid her down on the freshly made bed with the view of the city beyond, she felt like she was dreaming.

And God, she was turned on. She could barely stand the ache in her core. There was no time for foreplay. She wanted to scratch this itch now.

But as he started to undress, she became self-conscious again. Sure, she looked good with clothing on. She spent hours picking out outfits that would flatter her figure. But once the cloth was off, there was nowhere to hide. And it was broad daylight.

She crossed her arms over her chest and kept her clothes on.

When he got his shirt over his head, revealing a set of abs that would make *Men's Health* models jealous, he noticed her sudden change in disposition. "Why that look?"

"It's awfully bright in here."

"All the better for me to see your gorgeous body with," he smiled, crawling toward her on the bed. But he stopped when he was kneeling with his legs on either side of her. "Are you worried about me seeing you, because, if you are, please don't."

“Look at you,” she gestured. “I don’t... look like that.”

“I wouldn’t want you to look like this,” he said, gesturing to himself. “I like soft women. Curves.”

“Curves I’ve got, but...” Her words trailed away as he began slowly undressing her. Despite her worries of him seeing her, she was too turned on to tell him to stop when he unbuttoned her jeans and urged the zipper down, kissing the soft skin of her hips. Then, slowly, he tugged the jeans off, leaving her in just her panties. When that was done, he worked on her shirt, slowly slipping buttons apart one by one and kissing the skin it revealed, leaving her arching up, and clawing the bed sheets as his lips and tongue trailed over the mounds of flesh around her bra.

When she was down to just her underwear, he sat up, looking at her. “I could stare at you all day. So beautiful.”

She wasn’t used to the compliments, but he seemed like he meant it. So she said nothing, using her energy instead to keep from coming as he reached around and unhooked her bra.

The fabric loosened on her breasts, rubbing against them in all the right ways. But when he slipped that down, tossing it aside and positioned his mouth over one, she nearly died from the wanting.

One lick. Then two across the soft skin of her nipple. She bit her lip and thrashed.

He moved over and did the same to the other, slow sensual licks, bringing her so much pleasure. He could make her come with just his tongue on her breasts right here and now.

Then he moved lower, kissing a trail down her stomach, to the tender skin above her panties. His large fingers urged the fabric down further until he was sliding them off too. And when he urged her legs up, she complied, willing to do anything he wanted at his point if he would continue what he was doing.

Spread wide, he licked her core like he licked her nipples, slowly and with intention. Pleasure exploded into her with each touch. And when he slowly inserted a finger inside, she nearly lost it.

“What about you?” she panted.

He lifted his head. “What about me?”

“I want to please you.”

He shook his head. “No need.”

“No,” she said, propping herself up on her elbows. “I don’t want it to just be me. I’d like it if we both were... satisfied.”

He thought this over carefully and then nodded. He removed his boxers, showing her what she knew to be true, that he was large in every way. He carefully applied some protection and then crawled up between her legs, positioning himself exactly where she wanted him to be.

Holding himself up with his arms, he held her eyes with a serious look. “If I hurt you, even just a little bit, I want you to tell me. Promise?”

She nodded, the anticipation practically killing her.

Then he lowered himself down until his delicious weight rested on her body. She felt him enter her slowly, the stretch of it more pleasurable than she could have possibly dreamed.

And then he was moving, creating friction that set her on fire. It felt so good, him inside of her sliding in and out, his face buried in her neck. It wasn’t long before the pleasure built to an explosion. She came, crying out and clenching her legs around him.

Amazing. Nothing like it.

But he wasn’t quite finished. And she liked that, thinking maybe she could come again. His body was tense on top of hers. She felt him turn and place his teeth against the soft flesh of her neck. It was a turn-on, but then he began to bite harder. The pleasure and pain was so intense she thought she might climax once more.

Suddenly he sprang up, shouting and jumping off the bed. He ran to the door and slammed it behind him so hard the picture on the wall rattled and crashed down.

“Francisco?” She sat up, baffled about what had just happened.

But he was gone.

# 5

Stephanie sat on the bed, panting. What the hell had just happened?

Shocked, she got up, grabbing her clothes. Throwing on a shirt and underwear, she opened the door cautiously and looked out. "Francisco?"

Nothing.

Did he leave the apartment? What in the hell?

She went back into the bedroom and fully dressed, looking at herself in the mirror above his dresser. There on her neck was a red mark. Not a hickey. More like she'd been bitten, though he hadn't broken the skin.

So he was into something weird. She could get over that.

But maybe he was embarrassed? It still didn't explain him running out of his own apartment. Naked.

She walked out, checking all the rooms, but, yep, he was gone. Feeling so awkward now, she grabbed her purse and saw herself out, realizing once again that she'd let a man take advantage of her. Either that, or he was mentally ill, though she doubted that. He'd taken what he wanted and ran out. But he hadn't even finished. Geez, she didn't know how to categorize this encounter.

The fact remained that it was only seven-thirty and she still had nowhere to go. She'd just cheated on Jeremy, as he had on her, but she had no intention of going back to the apartment to discuss their mutual animosity for one another. She'd have to go back to get her stuff eventually, but who knew when that would be? She realized she'd half hoped that Francisco would have her stay at his place. Maybe for quite a while. Now that was totally out of the question.

She decided to treat herself to dinner on the only credit card she had, picking a rib place that she'd always wanted to go to, but Jeremy had called too expensive. She ate

her fill, trying not to cry and thankfully succeeding. Nothing worse than a girl crying into her barbeque.

Once she finished dinner, she didn't know what to do with herself. Walking a few blocks, she resigned herself to seeing a movie when someone behind her called her name.

“Stephanie!”

Whirling around, she saw Francisco running up the street toward her. He'd found clothes, but women were still turning their heads, staring at the man calling to her.

“Stephanie, wait,” he said, skidding up to her. “I'm so sorry. What happened at my place... Can we go somewhere to talk?”

It took her a moment to come up with an answer. “Look, Francisco, I know you're a nice guy and you were doing me a favor, but I don't need a pity fuck. I can get by just fine—”

“Pity?” he interrupted. “Jesus, is that what you think? No. That's not what happened.”

She stared up at him, arms crossed. “You ran out so fast you forgot your clothes.”

“I was worried I was going to... hurt you. Please, can we just go somewhere to talk?”

“The café.” She tucked her arms tighter against her chest.

“The café? *My* café?”

“Yes. At least there I know you'll be on your best behavior. And if you start lying, I will scream about cockroaches at the top of my lungs.” Where was this ballsy side of her coming from?

“Fine.” He waved his hand, offering for her to lead the way.

She marched her way down the block and to the café. Through the glass, she saw Matt at the counter and another guy with a waxed handlebar moustache assisting him. Both men waved as she and Francisco came in.

“Thought you went home for the night, boss?” the moustached man said.

“Just popping in for a quick coffee,” he responded, sounding sheepish.

“Sure thing,” Matt said, making the orders.

They waited in tense silence as the machines foamed and dripped. Coffees in hand, Francisco found the booth farthest away from the counter and hunched his giant body inside. Stephanie slid in, cupping her mug and wondering, once again, what the hell had happened to her life.

“I have something important to tell you.” Francisco didn’t touch his coffee, looking around the coffee shop to make sure that no one was close enough to hear. “But you have to promise that you will hear me out before running out of here.”

Here it was. He was a convicted sex offender. Or he had herpes. Or AIDS. She gripped the mug, offering him only a nod.

He took a deep breath. “The reason I ran out is because... it’s because I was worried I would hurt you.”

“You said that already.”

“I was worried I would *bite* you. I have a virus.”

Damnit. She knew it.

He shifted in the booth uncomfortably. “My people... Where I come from, we are thought of as,” he leaned forward and whispered the word, “vampires.”

“What?” This was absurd.

“But we’re not. It’s just when we’re in the midst of something passionate, love or violence, we tend to want to bite, to infect. That’s why I jumped up and ran off.”

She couldn’t quite understand what he was talking about. Was he crazy? She was glad she’d picked an open venue like this in case she really did have to run. “Like rabies?”



“This is really hard to explain. I wouldn’t even try except...” he reached across the table and put his hand over hers. “I really like you, Stephanie.”

Slowly, she pulled her hand back, though it hurt her to do so. She had really wanted it to work out with Francisco. He was perfect. Except for the mental illness or whatever it was he was suffering from.

She took a deep breath and attempted to break up with the most beautiful man she’d ever seen. “Francisco, you’re a nice guy.”

Across the booth, he tensed.

“But it seems like maybe this isn’t going to work out. I’ve decided I’m going to go home. My mom is there. She’s waiting for me.”

He shook his head. “You don’t believe me.”

A dry laugh escaped her. “That you’re a vampire? Sorry. You had to know how that sounded.”

His brow furrowed. “I said that they called us vampires. But we’re not. Not really.”

“Not really?”

“Look, if you let me show you.” He reached out for her, but she pulled away.

“I have to go.” She stood up, her heart pounding. If she stayed too much longer, she’d let him talk her into staying, and then she’d be stuck with another man who would run her life into the ground.

“Please, don’t go,” he said, standing up and moving the whole table with him.

“Stephanie?” a voice behind her said.

She turned around, and there was Jeremy. And behind him Beth.

“Popular place,” she mumbled, feeling sick.

Jeremy came forward, leaving Beth at the counter and looking as scrubby and unwashed as she’d last seen him in a dirty Pink Floyd T-shirt and unwashed jeans.

His eyes flicked between Stephanie and over her shoulder. When she looked, Francisco was towering behind her.

“Who the hell is that?” Jeremy asked, actually sounding mad.

Stephanie wanted to laugh. “This is Francisco.” Not thinking, she slipped her arm through his giant one and looked smug. “I see you and Beth are getting along well.”

He flushed, turning back to glance at Beth before returning his focus to Stephanie. “I want you to come home.” He reached out and took hold of her hand.

Beside her, Francisco stepped forward, a wall of muscle compared to Jeremy’s flab. “Let go of her.”

For a moment, Jeremy looked scared, but then he adopted a more “tough guy” expression. “Back off, bud. This is between me and her.”

Francisco stepped even closer, invading Jeremy’s space. “This is between me and you. And it will continue to be until you let go of the lady’s wrist.”

Jeremy let her go, stepping back and holding up his hands in surrender. When he was far enough away for Francisco, Jeremy sneered at her. “Nice company you keep, Stephanie.”

Angry, she threw back, “You’re one to talk. Hi, Beth.” She waved in mock friendliness at her former neighbor.

Francisco stepped forward again, but Stephanie pulled him back, tugging on his arm. “Let’s go.”

He looked down at her, confusion on his face. “Really?”

She nodded. Maybe Francisco was a little crazy. Maybe she was, too. But all she wanted right now was to get out of this coffee shop. And if she was honest, she wanted Francisco with her, crazy and all.

Together the two of them walked out of the coffee shop and didn’t look back.

They were halfway down the block when she realized they were headed to his place again. She stopped in her tracks, and he spun towards her. “What is it?”

“Look. What you told me is nuts, but maybe we can work through it. I do like you. But you have to promise that you’ll go to therapy or something.”

“Will that make you stay?”

She shrugged. “We’ll see.”

He pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her and leaning down. Staring into her eyes, he smiled warmly. “I’ll do whatever it takes. I want to be with you, Stephanie.”

“I’m probably making a big mistake. Again.”

He shook his head, smiling. “Give me a week and I’ll show you just how well you’ll be taken care of.”

There was that purr in his voice again. And just like that she felt her body react to his. She wanted him to take care of her like he had a few hours ago.

Leaning down, he gave her a kiss, warm and full of passion. Tingly and warm, she fell into his embrace. It was like the comfort of returning home to your own bed.

When they stopped kissing, she pulled back. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

“What?” he asked, still looking at her dreamily.

“My name isn’t Stephanie Johnson. It’s Stephanie Magney.”

“Stephanie Magney. I like it better.” Smiling, he brushed hair out of her face.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, not really believing any of this was happening. It was like some strange dream. *He* was like some strange dream. “I’m not sure I deserve all this adoration. Eventually you’ll get sick of my nagging or hate my TV choices. It always happens.”

He shook his head. “Not with us. Love can be a beautiful thing. Let me show you.” So she did.

THE END

STAY TUNED FOR A SNEAK PEEK

Did you like this story? There are more where this came from. Now, please enjoy this sneak peek of *Love Bite*, another book in the Bite Series.

LYNN BEST

BOOK ONE

Love  
BITE



## LOVE BITE: BOOK ONE

### CHAPTER ONE

Brooklyn's hands are shaking by the time she jerks the scooter to a stop in the driveway and jumps off the Vespa. If she can just get inside the house before the attack hits, everything will be fine.

She whips her helmet from her head as she hurries toward the house, letting it clunk on the gravel. She loves that goddamned helmet, a 1950s vintage Hermes Pudding Bucket motorcycle helmet her father gave her four years ago for her high school graduation. And now it's probably scratched. But she can't worry about that now.

Not while she feels like killing someone.

Well, maybe killing them was the wrong word. Biting them. Ripping their flesh with her teeth.

Jesus Christ, she needs help.

House keys. She needs house keys.

She fumbles for her keys with shaking hands. The tremors are bad now, the pockets of her jeans too tight and her fingers too thick. The raw burning moves up her throat like the slow creep of lava and her vision blurs. The attack is grabbing hold of her faster than a drunk frat boy.

This is taking too long. She can't stay out here. Soon she'll do something she'll regret.

A small voice from behind startles her. "Brook, what are you doing?"

She whirls, her blurring eyes shooting past her patch of yard to the one next door. Winnie, their adorable six-year-old neighbor, sits astraddle her pink Barbie bicycle, her head cocked and her golden hair dangling. She watches Brooklyn carefully. Curiously.

Brooklyn can smell her.

“S–stay there, Winnie. Don’t come over here.” Brooklyn pounds her fist against the wooden door, trying to see through the frosted glass. “Mei! Open up. Hurry!”

She hears bike tires turning over gravel.

“Brooklyn, wait up.”

“Please, Winnie, don’t come over here!” She spins, her back to the door. Heart pounding, she watches the little girl maneuver the bike’s training wheels across the bumpy lawn and onto Brooklyn’s driveway.

The skin of her neck, flashing in the sunlight, is pink and supple.

It’s as if a chasm has opened up in Brooklyn’s chest. A gaping maw of want. She presses the urge down and claws at the door as tears fill her eyes. Where are her goddamned keys? “Open up, Mei!” Maybe she should call her, but her phone is all the way over on the scooter.

The little bike tires crunch closer. “Are you okay?” Winnie asks. Her cherubic face looks at Brooklyn, clawing at her own door, with concern. She stops near the parked Vespa, her legs straddling her own pink bike. One hand plays with the handle’s spangles nervously as she watches.

“Please, Winnie,” Brooklyn says through gritted teeth, gripping the doorframe. “Go. Home.”

“Why?” the little girl asks. “You sick?”

“Yes,” Brooklyn moans. Her stomach is roiling like it’s filled with slugs. And now there’s an awful humming in her head. She’s going to lose it.

She’s going to bite this little girl.

She slumps to the ground, her back to the door, and digs her fingers into the gravel as if it could hold her. Her vision blurs. Soon the ringing in her head will be all she can hear.

Behind her, the door opens.

Brooklyn tumbles into the house, landing on her back. Above her Mei's concerned face looks down. But Brooklyn has no time for Mei's questions. She wills her limbs to compel her up. "Shut. The. Door."

"Oh shit! Is it happening again?" Mei slams the door and rushes forward.

"Get the poker," Brooklyn rasps, dragging her writhing body through the small kitchen.

Mei nods, running over to snag the long metal fire poker, a solid-steel relic and her go-to weapon. What if it's not enough to protect her this time?

Her body convulses like a fist squeezing itself over and over. Her head scintillates with pain as if her skull is a pincushion. But it's the thirst, an animal thirst that worries her most.

"Fuck," she says into the floor, clenching her fists. "Basement. Hurry."

She feels Mei's hands under her armpits. Brooklyn struggles to kneel and then stand, her head spinning as bile rises up her throat. The smell of her friend turns the thirst up to eleven. Brooklyn grits her teeth as her friend helps her stumble across their kitchen to the basement door. She hears the creak of uncoiled hinges and opens her eyes to the inky blackness below.

Another wave of nausea rolls over her, pounding up into her head until she can't stand it. Each muscle tightens. Her throat isn't just on fire, it's molten lava.

She grips Mei's arm until she winces.

They half-jog, half-fall down the stairs. Brooklyn hits the landing at the bottom—hard— then crawls on hands and knees toward the cage, a chain-link fence running from floor to ceiling bolted tight to the cement walls.

She yanks on the gate, but the padlock holds it shut. Shit.

"No!" Mei says, running over, the metal poker trailing on the floor. She gives the padlock a yank and curses again. Her trembling fingers begin to spin the combination.

But Brooklyn doesn't notice. She's looking at her hands. She must have split the skin on her palms when she crashed down the stairs.



The blood is so red. So fragrant. Like the best goddamned steak you've ever had. And she's so hungry.

She licks first one palm, then the other.

"Brooklyn?" Mei asks.

Brooklyn doesn't answer.

She whips toward her friend, running at Mei.

"Stop!" Mei screams. She swings the poker at Brooklyn like a baseball bat.

It smashes into Brooklyn's shoulder like a battering ram. The force knocks her over, sending her into a teetering shelf of boxes that slam down on her, burying her in a pile of garbage. She rears up, but the poker smashes down again.

The world goes gray for a while.

Then, semi-consciously, she feels her body slide along the cold concrete. She hears the clang of the metal door and the solid click of the lock. The last sound she hears before she passes out is her friend curled on the floor in a fit of sobs.

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Christ on a cracker, everything hurts. Her shoulder is throbbing. Patting her hand up her neck, she makes sure her head is intact (it is) and then her shoulder (still there), but what in the hell happened?

Coming to, she spies the thick chain-link fencing and the pitted concrete floor. Dim light filters in from a cobwebbed egress window across the room. There is the mountain bike she no longer rides and Mei's mother's mannequin wearing a purple Halloween wig.

She's in the cage.

"Oh God," she moans, trying to sit up. Her shoulder hurts because Mei hit her with a fire poker. Mei hit her with a fire poker because Brooklyn had been trying to eat her.

Well, drink her blood if you want to get technical about it.

Brooklyn really doesn't want to get technical because if she stares this problem in the face, she sees only one solution.

She has to turn herself in. She's infected, just like the others.

*Shit.*

But first, breakfast. Then she'll end her life as she knows it forever.

"Mei!" she calls, her voice breaking. Her throat feels like sandpaper and her stomach rumbles.

She hears footsteps upstairs and then the creak of the basement door. Mei thunders down holding the fire poker. Peering into the cage, she meets Brooklyn's eyes.

"Normal?" her best friend asks.

"When . . . have I ever been normal?" Brooklyn tries to stand, using the fencing to help. When she's mostly upright, she tries a smile. "How's my hair?"

"Do you like the word 'abysmal' or 'horrendous' better?" Mei gives a smirk. "But we'll save the makeover until we know you aren't going to kill me."

"I'm so sorry. Really. I . . . I'm going to turn myself in."

Mei drops the poker with a clang and comes to the fence. "Stop. We've already discussed this. You are *not* turning yourself over to the government. They're burning bodies, Brook, in a landfill in Detroit. People are being dragged from their homes." Tears fill Mei's eyes. Her voice drops to a whisper. "They'll *kill* you if you turn yourself in."

Brooklyn lays her hand gently over Mei's through the chain link. "No offense, honey, but none of those sites you visit are real. No *actual* news source is reporting anything like that. And don't tell me Perez Hilton is an actual news source."

Mei narrows her almond-shaped eyes. "Then why aren't we hearing about people being cured? No one is coming out of those treatment facilities, and you know it."

“Didn’t one of your news sources also tell you that Jada Pinkett killed Will Smith and now his movies are completely CGI?”

Mei bats this away with a flick of her hand. “It’s all a cover-up.”

Brooklyn smiles sadly. She’s really going to miss Mei when she goes into treatment. God knows how long she’ll be there. She should probably let her parents know, but they haven’t been the easiest people to get a hold of since they moved to Germany for her dad’s job and then divorced. Her parents hadn’t been the most present people even when she was growing up, but now that she’s twenty-two, they pretty much leave her on her own, sending checks in wrinkled envelopes twice a year. How would they react to knowing their daughter and only child had been infected with the world’s scariest new virus?

She looks up when she hears the tinny sound of the padlock unlatching. Mei pulls the cage door open wide and offers her a hand. Her legs like limp ramen, Brooklyn leans on Mei for support.

“Tell me you didn’t eat the leftovers from Carrie Lee’s.”

Her friend grins. “Saved it all for you.”

“Have I told you lately that you’re the best?” Brooklyn says, gripping Mei as they walk up the stairs.

“Remember that the next time you want to eat me.”

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They eat dim sum and watch the morning news in tense quiet. The footage hits too close to home for them to joke.

In their Michigan town, eleven confirmed cases have been documented of what doctors were calling the G7M1 virus strain and what the locals were calling the Dracula flu. There were dozens of cases in Mexico, where things were spreading faster than that government would like to admit, but as of last week, there had only been two cases in the U.S.—one at the border in Texas and one at a hospital in New York City.

But in their small town with only had three elementary schools, there were now eleven cases. Well, twelve if you count Brooklyn.

The girls watch curled up on their battered couch as the blond news reporter, wearing pink lip gloss and a fashionable blue blazer, stands outside their high school.

“Thank you, Chuck. Today in this little town things have taken a turn for the worse. This sleepy area just south of Port Huron and a stone’s throw from Sarnia, Canada, has had its share of bad news today. Earlier this morning a house was raided by the CDC, and four individuals were taken out on stretchers.”

The TV cuts away from the blond reporter and switches to recorded footage from the raid. A normal-looking blue-and-white ranch home with a trim yard and picket fence looks like any other until the door opens and four men in protective white suits and black CDC face masks wheel out a man strapped to a stretcher. The camera zooms in as the man flails against his bonds trying to free himself. His jaws snap at the air as spittle drips in long strands from the corners of his lips. Police follow closely.

Brooklyn turns away, trying hard to swallow down her meal. Suddenly she isn’t so hungry.

Mei runs a hand down Brooklyn’s arm, and Brooklyn offers her the most normal smile she can muster.

When she looks back at the TV, the man on the stretcher is gone and the blond reporter is back. “People have been advised to report any symptoms of this illness immediately. These include fever, chills, nausea, increased aggression, disorientation, and memory loss. If you notice someone acting ill, you are advised to immediately call this number.”

Brooklyn stares at the seven digits that appear on the screen. She knows she should write them down because she’s going to have to call them soon, but she can’t quite make herself. When it’s time, she can always look them up on the web. Instead, she puts her takeout container down and pulls the afghan up over her shoulders.

The TV switches back to the studio where Chuck and Carmen are waiting at the desk. Both polished reporters look a bit sick. Chuck grips the desk and speaks into the camera. “Thanks, Hannah. Did they say whether the town itself would be quarantined?”

*Chill out, Chuck. You sound like you want to firebomb my hometown just in case.*

The camera switches back to Hannah. “No, Chuck. The CDC has issued a statement that they will be reassessing the situation tomorrow morning. The citizens are advised to use caution and to avoid travel until this situation can be sorted out. Tune in tonight at seven for that update.”

Mei huffs and flips to her favorite station, TLC. The murmured soundtrack soothes Brooklyn’s nerves. For a while they watch, mesmerized by a family’s trip to the grocery store.

“I’ll go tomorrow,” Brooklyn says, feeling the weight of her words.

Mei looks over at her, sighing sadly. “It’s up to you.”

“After work,” Brooklyn says, getting up to shower and try to clear her head. “I need to tell my boss I won’t be in for a while.”

She heads to the bathroom to take a shower, but even with half a bottle of body wash she still doesn’t feel clean. *This terrible virus*, she thinks. *And it’s all Armando’s fault.*

END OF SAMPLE

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lynn is a seasoned writer with over a dozen books under her belt. She's been writing for years under another name and is excited to try something new. With multiple awards and Amazon best sellers to her credit, she's pleased lots of fans in many genres. She's loved paranormal romance before Twilight. She's also a wife, mother and avid Pinterest obsessionist. Find her at [LynnBest.com](http://LynnBest.com).