

A single, vibrant red rose with green leaves and a stem, positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the cover.

Once Bitten,
Twice
Charmed

*By
Gwen Mitchell*

Once Bitten, Twice Charmed

Contemporary Paranormal

Heat Rating: Sensual

For Chris, because it might be the only *short* story I ever write.
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Once Bitten, Twice Charmed

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It was the same dream for the third night in a row. I waited in my bedroom with the window open, the gauzy curtains lifting in a chilly breeze and the candle on the window ledge flickering. I lay there on my bed, dressed in luxurious lingerie that I didn't own, shivering with anticipation. The candle went out as a dark shadow filled the window, blocking out the twinkling stars behind. Darkness seeped up the walls and the shadow took form only a few feet away from me. I didn't need to see his face. I knew who it was.

I didn't want to think about why he was in my dreams. There was no good reason, other than the fact that my waking hours were focused on him too. Forrest Meydenbauer. With his decorous manners and pretty words, his chiseled features and flawless taste. Yeah, I thought about him. It was my job to dig up the dirt and report the gossip on Boston's up and coming society. Among them, Forrest was King on High. He was also squeaky clean, suspiciously so. I knew it for the ruse that it was, because I'm a reporter, and I trusted my gut. There was something to him that no one else saw, something . . . sinister.

But the dreams were different. Despite the knowledge that it was a man I despised hovering over me, my skin burned for him. His features were formless, fluid, like they were made out of smoke, and yet unmistakable. His hands caressed me, his body covered mine, and in the midst of sensual euphoria, I would see his familiar smile. That sly, sparkling grin that held more malice than goodwill. Only, in the dreams, there was something more. Fangs. In my fantasy, if that's what you'd call it, Forrest Meydenbauer was a vampire, and he sucked my blood. It doesn't take a soothsayer to figure out the symbolism there.

I rolled over in bed to check the clock on my nightstand: four-thirty. Beautiful. One more way for his highness to ruin my day. I forced my eyes closed again and tried to clear my head. It wasn't happening, so I finally decided to get an early start. The city never sleeps, they say, and neither does the news.



It never fails - get in the shower, and the phone rings. Though the only people that call me at five A.M. are my mother and my boss. I was betting on the latter as I stepped out of the bathroom half-wrapped in a towel, but it was neither.

"Kelly, I mean, uh . . . Miss Lincoln?" a fidgety voice croaked over the line.

"Arnie?" I asked, trying to catch most of the water from my dripping hair in a cupped palm. Arnold Mason was my gopher. He worked even more than I did, ferreting out headlines before they happened. It meant everything from sifting through trash to tailing well-to-dos, but

Once Bitten, Twice Charmed

www.gwenmitchellfiction.com

he seemed suited to it. To sum him up in a word, he was inconspicuous, which is a nice way of saying forgettable. “Jeez, it’s a little early, isn’t it?” I wondered out loud.

“You told me I could call you any time if I had something about Mr. Meydenbauer.” I could almost hear him doing his nervous-excited dance from foot to foot.

“You’ve got something?” I asked, dropping all pretense of being bothered. “Spit it out!”

“I, well I . . . uh . . . you might want to skip breakfast this morning.” He was whispering, and I could hear other voices in the background.

“Huh?”

“I’m at Monique Sylvan’s apartment. She’s dead.”

I almost dropped the phone. My heart was thundering so loud I couldn’t hear, but my grip went limp with shock. “Don’t move. I’ll be there in ten minutes,” I answered, sounding surprisingly calm. As I hung up the phone, I stared at my empty bed, at the sheets I had rumped in the throws of my dream. “I’ve got you now, you bastard,” I said to no one. About bloody time.



Monique Sylvan was the latest in a string of escorts on Forrest’s dance card. As the city’s favorite playboy, he got around. To my dismay, the public loved him all the more for it. His tastes were eclectic, but his girlfriends all had three things in common: they were supermodel gorgeous, they were nobodies when he met them, and when he was done with them, they disappeared. Unfortunately, no one seemed to care about the last part. Except for me, that is. Monique had worked in accessories at Saks before she caught the eye of Boston’s most eligible bachelor. By the time I reached her apartment, Arnie was waiting for me on the curb. As I pulled my Volvo over, he gave me an apologetic look, made even more pathetic by his sickly pallor and the heavy bags under his eyes.

“Jesus, Arnie, don’t you sleep?” I chastised as he climbed into the passenger seat.

“I don’t know if I ever will again,” he sighed. “Have you ever seen a dead body?”

“Well . . . yeah,” I shrugged. Rich people died, just like everyone else. Someone had to report on it.

Arnie gave an involuntary shudder. “It was creepy,” he said, dragging a thin hand through his ruddy curls. “I heard it on the police scanner, and I was one of the first ones there. I would have stayed longer if Captain Morris hadn’t shown up and kicked me out.” I nodded, and Arnie took a deep breath. “She was just . . . lying there, like she had died in her sleep.” He shuddered again and reached over to turn the heat up.

“Drug overdose?” I speculated.

“I don’t think so.” Arnie shook his head. “At least, the cops didn’t find anything before I left.”

Once Bitten, Twice Charmed

www.gwenmitchellfiction.com

“Do they suspect foul play?” I asked, raising my eyebrows. Arnie gave me a pained look and I waved the question away, sparing him an interrogation. “Okay, here’s the plan: you’re gonna go home and get some rest. This afternoon, I want you to hang out at the morgue. I want to know as soon as we have a cause of death. Hmm . . . it’s Thursday, right?” Arnie shrugged, probably because he truly didn’t know what day it was. “Forrest has a museum dedication this morning. I think it’d be the perfect time for an interview,” I grinned.

“You really have it out for that guy,” Arnie said. He leaned his head against the window and closed his eyes.

“He’s dirty. I’ve always known it.” Since the first time I laid eyes on him, since he’d kissed my hand and laughed in my face when I asked about the first mistress of his that had gone *poof*.

“It’s more than that,” Arnie yawned, talking almost to himself. “There are lots of dirty folks in Boston, Kelly, and you don’t care this much about them. Whatever it is, and I really *don’t* wanna know, it’s personal. Don’t try to fool me. I see everything, remember?” The corner of his mouth curled up at the last.

“You’re home, my all-seeing smartass,” I said as I pulled over in front of Arnie’s building. “Don’t oversleep. Be at the morgue by noon.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he grumbled, unbuckling. “Remind me never to get on your bad side.”

“Sweet dreams,” I smiled serenely as he lumbered out and shut the door.

Arnie was right, at least in part. In a way, it was personal. But it was more than that. Forrest Meydenbauer looked down his nose at the entire world, like he was better than everyone. He looked down at me like he knew something I didn’t. And he traipsed through the papers, untouchable, infallible, adored. It made my stomach churn.

As the only girl in an entire family of carpenters, I’d fought for everything I had. I’d earned it. I’d also worked damn hard to rise above the blond-haired, big-boobed stereotype that preceded me, and was totally undeserved. Normally, it was worth it because people cared what I thought, especially the wealthy. I held their reputations in my quick-typing fingertips. But Forrest thought he was above all of that, above the law, above me, out of my reach. So yeah, it was personal.



There wasn’t much of a press conference at the museum dedication. It was just a routine charity event. Lucky for me, because I wanted to be the first one out of the gate. I stood in the front row, making high-noon standoff eyes at Forrest through most of the curator’s speech. His Highness seemed nonplussed in his navy blue silk suit that cost more than two months rent on my apartment. I knew he saw me as his steely grey eyes darted over the entire room, cool and calculating. But he ignored me. It was all part of the game we played.

Once Bitten, Twice Charmed

www.gwenmitchellfiction.com

When it was his turn to speak, the room grew even quieter than before, as if everyone were holding their breath. He smiled, a serene coaxing of his wide, sculpted mouth. I rolled my eyes and tapped my foot on the slick marble floor. A few people nearby cast irritated glances in my direction, but I fumbled in my pocket for my tape recorder, pretending not to notice. Then he spoke. The words weren't really important – something about the value of knowledge and history, blah, blah. But he held the small audience entranced. Just like everything about him, his voice held an air of elegance and breeding that couldn't be faked. And they all soaked it up. Charm. Forrest Meydenbauer wore it like a dazzling cloak. Only he didn't fool me. I knew what was behind it: a cold-hearted user. Maybe even a murderer.

After the obligatory ribbon cutting, Forrest rubbed elbows with the Mayor and the other less-generous museum patrons. No surprise, there was a new bleached-blond doll on his arm. She looked like she was fresh from beauty school. I worked my way over to them and cornered Forrest in the middle of a retelling of some Swiss Alps ski adventure.

"Not much for grieving, huh?" I asked, clicking my tape recorder on.

He blinked as if he didn't understand. I had to admit, it was a good act. "Miss Lincoln," he inclined his head with a small smirk. "How lovely to see you again."

"Oh, I'm sure it is," I smiled blandly. "Tell me, Mr. Meydenbauer, do you have any comment on Monique Sylvan's sudden and unexplained death?"

The people around us shifted with discomfort, and then a quiet filled the large hall as the pause before his answer stretched on. I watched Forrest carefully as he gazed down at the floor, hooding his eyes from me. He licked his lips, then lifted his head. As I'd expected, his expression was impassable. "I'm sorry. I wasn't aware-" he began.

I cut him off and held the tape recorder up to him. "Can you remember the last time you saw Miss Sylvan . . . *alive*?"

His lips pressed into a thin line and tension sang through his already rigid posture. My insides coiled with anticipation. "Do you have an official statement on why you stopped seeing her? Or when?" I fixed an amiable smile on my face and waited. So did everyone else. A look of ire seemed to flicker through his eyes, but I was certain it was meant only for me, and I was the only one who'd caught it.

"I don't believe I'm prepared to make a statement on that. If you have any questions regarding the museum-"

"No, just one more. What did you do with the other bodies?"

His eyes flashed with real anger then, and my heart was thumping in my chest so loud I swore it was echoing off the high ceilings. "That's quite enough," he said through gritted teeth. "If you'll excuse me," he nodded curtly, then led his wide-eyed companion away from me into the safety net of the Boston elite.

I finally ran into the next Miss Mystery Disappearance in the ladies room. Well, okay, I had been hiding out there waiting for her to show - for her own good. I stepped up to the sink to

Once Bitten, Twice Charmed

www.gwenmitchellfiction.com

wash my hands as she fussed with her already flawless make-up. She huffed when she saw me, but I was surprised when she faced me instead of walking away.

"I know what you're about," she accused, her pointy chin jutting out.

"Really?" I asked, drying my hands.

"He dumped you once, and you can't stand to see him with anyone else," she said, her hands on her hips. She jolted when I laughed, and the smug look melted off her lacquered face.

"I wouldn't go near that man for a million bucks," I shook my head. "And if you know what's good for you, you'll get out while you can. He doesn't have a very good track record." She dropped her hands, prepared to argue with me, but I reached out and touched her sleeve. I gazed up at her, my brows knit in worry. "I'm serious. His last mistress is in the city morgue as we speak, and the three before her are still missing."

Her pretty brown doe-eyes blinked furiously as she searched my face. I gave her an apologetic smile and reached into a pocket to hand her my card. "If you know anything, anything at all, please call me. It could save your life."

I wasn't one to waste a good line like that. I left her staring after me.



It only took Lyndsey Dougherty two hours to use the card I'd given her. After a wake-up call to Arnie, I was on my way to meet her at Cho's Bistro for 'lunch'. My fingers were tingling with the sure knowledge that she was going to spill – big.

When I arrived, she was already tucked into a booth in the back. Her face was clean and her eyes were red-rimmed. She'd also changed into normal street clothes. I have to say, I liked her better when she looked like an average person. I ordered a cup of coffee and slid my tape recorder into the middle of the table, giving her an inquiring glance. Lyndsey nodded minutely, then closed her eyes and sighed.

If there's one thing I pride myself on, it's instincts. I know how to read people. I could push on Forrest, because that's what he expected of me. Strength was the only thing he respected, if he respected anything at all. I knew that the fragile beauty before me was not the same. It was my plea that had gotten her here, and it would be my genuine concern that would get her talking.

"I'm glad you called me, Lyndsey. You're doing the right thing," I reassured her, clicking on the recorder.

"I called it off. Told him I couldn't see him anymore," she sniffed, keeping her eyes downcast.

"How long have you been seeing him?"

She glanced up at me briefly, then her brows creased. "Only about a week, in person," she mumbled.

Once Bitten, Twice Charmed

www.gwenmitchellfiction.com

I thanked the waitress for my coffee and added cream and sugar, trying to hold my flood of questions in check. “You knew him before that?” I asked, taking a sip. I tried my damndest to make it sound like we were just a couple of girls sharing sordid details. I needed her relaxed, and I needed her to trust me.

“I met him a few weeks ago,” she confided. “He visits the spa where I work.”

I lifted my eyebrows at that. I hadn’t been far off about the beauty school, then. Damn I’m good. “Mmm hmm?” I smiled - sweet as pie.

“Well, it was a few days after that, that I started having . . . the dreams,” she whispered.

I was jarred out of wondering if the recorder would pick her up with all the noise in the restaurant as the last word resounded in my skull. “Dreams?” I asked, then cleared my throat. A cold wash ran up one side of me and down the other in quick succession and my knee started to bounce nervously.

Across from me, Lyndsey looked hot rather than cool. Her cheeks were burning a fierce red to rival the ketchup bottle beside her. She nodded. “I thought they were just, you know.” Her voice had gotten lower with each word and I found myself leaning over the table to hear her. “Sexual fantasies,” she whispered, then looked away, as if ashamed.

My brain went for another lap without me as I contemplated the impossibility of what I was hearing. When I finally caught up, I realized Lyndsey was staring at me curiously. “I’m sorry,” I said, forcing myself to relax and taking another sip of coffee. “Go ahead.”

“Well, that’s what I thought they were. Until he showed up at the Spa to see me, and he knew about them.”

I nearly choked on the scalding hot liquid I poured into my mouth, but managed to only make my eyes bulge instead.

“He knew every detail, as if he’d actually been there. And not just that, he knew everything about me. Everything I ever wanted. Secret things, that I’d never told anyone.” Lyndsey’s voice sped up and gained strength as she went on. It was one of those moments that you sometimes run into in my business. People don’t like to hold things in. The Catholics were really onto something with confession. Sometimes, when you open the floodgates, the truth just comes pouring out, whether you like it or not. “He knew my fantasies, and he was just like in the dreams,” her eyes glazed with a mixture of anxiety and wonder. “Better,” she finally added, then sighed.

I swallowed hard and frowned into my cup. Impossible. That was the only word that kept echoing through my mind. And I’m never short on words. But it was *impossible*.

“Anyway, when you showed up, and you told me about the other girls . . .” she trailed off, then shivered. “I don’t want to end up like that. I don’t care what he promised me.” She hugged herself, trying to rub away the goosebumps on her arms.

“What did he promise you?” I asked, forgetting about my easy-going cover.

Once Bitten, Twice Charmed

www.gwenmitchellfiction.com

“Everything,” she whispered, bowing her head to her chest. “Everything I’ve ever wanted.”

I leaned back slowly, pinching the bridge of my nose, as if it could make my brain work faster. “Lyndsey-“ I started, then bit off my question, frowning. It was ridiculous. Impossible. I sighed and met her trusting chocolate eyes. What the hell? I thought. “In your dreams, did Forrest . . . did he . . . bite you?”

I shook my head at myself as soon as I’d got the words out. But my informant sat stock still, staring at me with her pert little mouth hanging open.

“How did you know that?”



I stayed at Cho’s a long while after I sent Lyndsey home. The recorder hadn’t picked up all of our conversation, but a good amount of it. Even after listening to it a second time, I wasn’t sure I believed it. I was convinced I was missing something. There was simply no way that what she was telling me could be true.

I even pondered the possibility that Forrest was having a laugh at my expense. But that didn’t explain the dreams - my dreams. No one knew about that. How could they? Three more cups of coffee and four Aspirin later, I packed up my things. There had to be an explanation, I just had to get to uncover it. I was getting ready to dial Arnie as I hit the sidewalk, until I noticed a stretch limousine parked across the street. Very subtle.

I squared my shoulders and marched over, looking for all intents and purposes like a woman on a mission. And I was, despite the fact that my heart had bungee-jumped into my stomach and sprung back up into my throat. I didn’t have to tap on the window, or anything. The uniformed driver was standing by the door, waiting to open it for me. I quirked my eyebrow at the novelty of that as he did, then hefted my bag onto my shoulder and nodded in thanks.

Forrest was reclined in the far seat, his arms stretched out along the back of it, his legs crossed. He looked . . . well, hell - he looked good. He always did. But he also looked pleased, and that irked me. “Wow, I should accuse you in public more often,” I quipped, settling in across from him. “That’s all I had to do to get a private interview?”

His placating smile didn’t falter one bit as he answered, “Off the record, Miss Lincoln.”

I regarded him for a space of heartbeats, wanting to argue, wanting to get out of the car. But my curiosity got the better of me. Occupational hazard. “I see,” I sighed, without missing a beat. “So, this is the part where you tell me that I should back off, or you’ll ruin me. That I’m just a bug to be squashed?”

The side of Forrest’s mouth twitched, and he narrowed his eyes at me as he tapped his fingers in an indifferent rhythm, contemplating his reply. I took notice of all these things, every minute detail, down to the weave of his socks. And yet, I had no idea what he was thinking.

Once Bitten, Twice Charmed

www.gwenmitchellfiction.com

Arnie's words from earlier came back to me as the appraising silence stretched between us, punctuated by his soft drumming on the leather seat. Was it more personal than I had thought? Was the conundrum that was Forrest Meydenbauer and what he kept hidden behind his mask really what drove me to pursue him so vehemently? And more importantly, did he think so?

"I believe you owe me a date," he said at last. His voice was so cool and business-like, it took a moment for me to reconcile it with his words.

"Excuse me?" I gawked.

"Miss Dougherty was to accompany me to the Opera this evening, but you've frightened her off. It seems only fair that you should take her place." He actually sounded reasonable when he said this.

I laughed. It came out more nervous than I'd meant it, but I shook my head and smoothed my skirt over my lap. "I don't think so. Now, if you'd like to give me a story, I'm listening." I reached into my pocket and caressed my small recorder, like a touchstone grounding me in reality. He was definitely up to something, trying to throw me off. If his method was out of left field, it was still effective.

Forrest sighed and dropped his arms to his sides. He sat up, more rigid, more imposing. With just that simple change of posture, he seemed to take up more space. He moved with grace that shouldn't be possible in such a small space, and eased into the seat beside me. I fluttered my lashes but resisted the urge to shift away as his Acqua di Parma cologne permeated my palate.

He had good taste. I would give him that. That, and a suspicious glare, which only widened his intrepid smirk.

"I propose we make a deal." He spoke in soft tones that made the hair on the back of my neck prickle. It was far too familiar for my comfort and I couldn't help blushing at the shameful betrayal of my body in response to his closeness. He was a beautiful man - there was no disputing it. Powerful, graceful, cunning, confident. And a killer, I mentally chastised myself.

But my purely physical reaction only emboldened him. He eased closer with a whisper of leather, the heat of his body seeped into the side of mine. "Did you really think you could buy me off?" I asked in a raspy whisper, then cleared my throat. "You don't have any morals, do you?" And my outrage gave me the strength to force him back with just the coolness of my stare.

Forrest eased off, but if anything, he looked amused. The smug bastard. "You know, your cunning wit has always been refreshing. I very much enjoy your column, but it seems a waste of your talent."

I felt the blood drain away from my face as he continued. I'd always felt the same, though I'd never voiced it to anyone. "I think it's your sharp tongue that holds you back. A pity. There are so many more interesting activities to engage it in besides mincing harsh words."

Once Bitten, Twice Charmed

www.gwenmitchellfiction.com

"Does that line actually work?" I scoffed, feeling more at ease with the two of us at odds. It was far more familiar territory. Him being nice was just . . . creepy.

Forrest answered with an indulgent nod. "A deal, Miss Lincoln. You be my guest to the Opera tonight, and I will answer any one question you ask me with pure candor."

I wanted to laugh it off. The idea of going on a 'date' with him, whatever the circumstances that led to it, was ridiculous. But the truth, directly from his mouth, was the ultimate temptation. Even off the record. And he knew it, damn him. I bit my lower lip and considered it.

Of course, he could just lie. But then, I could stand him up. Somehow I knew that if we made an agreement, he would uphold his end. It wasn't that he was honest, or even honorable. I knew it because ultimately I understood that he didn't want to lie to me - he wanted to outsmart me. He wanted to win. And lord help me, if I have one weakness, it's my competitive streak. "Deal," I agreed.

Forrest raised his eyebrows in mock surprise, then smiled and waited.

I looked around the plush interior of the limo, stalling for time. I had to choose my question wisely. So, what did I want to know most? What was I the least sure of? What piece of information would get me ahead? All of the suspicions I'd harbored for almost a year congealed in my head. They were all riding on one assumption, and if that proved wrong, I was sunk. Was Forrest a killer? I swallowed as I made up my mind. "Were you involved at all in Monique Sylvan's death?"

Forrest steepled his fingers in front of him and seemed to be considering every word with care, searching for a loophole. There was none. Words are my trade, and I know how to wield them to my best advantage. His eyes met mine, a smoky grey that cleared momentarily to reveal dangerous quicksilver that made my breath catch. He'd been caught, and in that one look I could see that it both thrilled and angered him. I was just plain horrified at the confirmation of what was at once my greatest hope and worst fear. For the first time in a long while, I wished I'd been wrong.

"Yes," he answered, unrepentant.



Normally, I'm not the squeamish type. But Forrest's confession had left me chilled to the bone, and sick with the truth. I climbed out of his big fancy car, the Opera ticket tucked into my purse. I was too numb to even ask any more questions. It didn't matter, because he wouldn't answer them, but still - I was speechless. It doesn't happen often. I did have the sense to refuse being picked up for our 'date' and insisted that I would meet him there. There was no way I was letting him into my apartment.

Once Bitten, Twice Charmed

www.gwenmitchellfiction.com

I drove myself home on autopilot as I sifted through facts in the back of my mind. Not the least of which was the notion that I was letting myself walk into whatever trap an admitted murderer had set for me. Anyone with a speck of sense would have run screaming to the police. But the problem was, why would they believe me? I had no proof, except my word. And my word might have been enough to determine who got invited to the annual Lindberg Christmas party, but it certainly couldn't dethrone the Emperor of Posh. Forrest knew that. He was safe in telling me his secret.

And then it dawned on me that it had been his intention all along. Every sociopath craves an audience. Serial killers want to be caught, or at least chased. It's a game to them. In my rush to 'bring down the wicked', I'd become an unwitting counterpart in his sick idea of fun.

"Brilliant, Kelly," I groaned. But then there were the dreams, and the nauseating fact that there was an uncanny thread of desire reeling me into his web. At least now I knew it wasn't just me. But how was he doing it? Some sort of drug? I hadn't taken any food or drink. An inhalant, maybe?

"The cologne," I answered myself, slapping my palm on the steering wheel. Of course! It got stronger when he was closer. That had to be it.

With one mystery solved, I was feeling less rattled. I couldn't go to the police – yet. I needed something more concrete. I needed to catch him in the act, or get him on tape. And if my other hunch about Forrest was right, he was going to give me the opportunity. I just had to seize it. My chaotic thoughts started to settle into some semblance of order. I was just beginning to relax a little when my phone rang from the passenger seat, making me jump.

"Kelly Lincoln," I answered, pulling on my headset as I merged onto a quieter street.

"Kelly, it's Arnie. I'm at the morgue." He didn't sound tired anymore. In fact, his voice cracked with anxiety.

"What did you find out?" I asked, forcing a calm tone that I didn't feel at all.

"Um . . . we have a problem," he answered me with a half squeak.

"What? They autopsy was inconclusive?"

"No, that's the problem. There was no autopsy. The body is gone."



The parking on Washington, the heart of Boston's theater district, is always a nightmare. The street was impossible, and the lots were full. I ended up paying through the nose for a valet at the Hyatt. As my feet ached and my pantyhose rode up during the short walk down the busy sidewalk, the idea of being dropped off at the VIP entrance by Forrest's limo was sounding much more appealing. Admittedly, it wasn't so much fear that had kept me from accepting the offer. I knew he wouldn't make a move in the open - it wasn't his style. No, it had been a matter of

Once Bitten, Twice Charmed

www.gwenmitchellfiction.com

pride. I renounced Forrest Meydenbauer and everything he stood for. I wasn't going to be seen arriving at a public event with him, like one of his pretty, mindless baubles.

Now, in addition to a confession that did me no good, I had the added bonus of a missing body fiasco. News about Monique Sylvan's disappearance would surely be covered in the papers. And no doubt, Forrest's name would be well hidden in the intrigue. After all, I'd played right into his hand. I was his alibi for when the body went missing. So, I was back to square one. Without a body, without a cause of death, and without any evidence aside from my own certain knowledge. And that was the only reason I was even going to the damn Opera. I had to let things play out. I had to take my chances to get the big scoop. I'm a reporter, and that's what I do.

It was a tricky business to stay on the fringe of the crowd when I entered the opulent lobby. Most of my regular 'hot topics' were in attendance, and for once, I had no wish to be seen. I skirted up the stairs, waving away the usher that tried to take my coat and crept down the plush carpeted hallway towards the Meydenbauer box. I felt a familiar rush as I kept my face averted from the passers-by.

This really was what I lived for - covert investigation. Scrambling through a crowd of other reporters to get my recorder the closest in an outright yelling match was not my gig. It paid the bills, but I wanted more. I wanted to tell an important story, to dig up real news and air the dirty laundry of the city. It was a dream, and this was the key to achieving it. If I brought the likes of Mr. Untouchable to justice in the process, well, that was just an added bonus.

I glanced to my left and right one last time before slipping between the heavy velvet drapes of Box 13. As soon as I turned around, I was standing nose to chest with the man himself. Surprised, I fumbled backwards with a high-pitched yip, and my feet tangled underneath me. I nearly tripped, but Forrest caught me by the arm with a firm grip. I got a hold of myself and planted my feet, but he didn't let go. The old-fashioned lamps were turned down low, and the outer drapes were closed. In the dimness, his steely eyes glinted like blades, sharp and dangerous.

"Good evening, Miss Lincoln," he spoke in low tones, one side of his mouth curving up into a teasing smile. I gave an involuntary shudder, both from the unwelcome recognition my body had at his closeness, and from the disgust that ensued.

"Let me go, please," I said coolly.

Forrest did as I asked and took a step back. I found it easier to breathe, until he picked up my hand and pressed it to his warm lips. A jolt of familiar desire sang down my arm and sent my heart into overdrive. I jerked my hand away and glared at him, but he only inclined his head, ever the perfect gentleman. "Shall I take your coat?" he asked.

"No thanks, I got it," I answered, edging around him. He held his hands behind his back and nodded, unfettered by my obvious lack of manners. I noticed that he was in full regalia, a black tuxedo, complete with coattails, bow tie, and gold cuff links. I took off my own coat and

Once Bitten, Twice Charmed

www.gwenmitchellfiction.com

looked around the small space for the first time. I'd seen up into this box from below, but I'd never been in it. From inside, and in Forrest's unnerving presence, it was far too small for my liking. And it was outfitted with only a silk-covered loveseat and a low table. How quaint. I ignored the hook on the wall and laid my coat over the center of the couch before sitting down.

"So, what time will this be over?" I asked, crossing my legs.

"Do you have somewhere else to be?" Forrest countered, picking up my coat and hanging it on the hook. I'll have to admit, I got a minor thrill at the idea of him waiting on me. But it passed when he sat where my coat had been and stretched an arm out behind me. Beyond the outer curtains, the orchestra began their warm-up.

"Anywhere is better than here," I answered under my breath.

He chuckled softly as he leaned forward to pour wine into two glasses on the table. "I find it hard to believe you find my company quite as repugnant as you claim." He swirled the burgundy liquid in the goblet, then handed it to me.

"And why is that?" I accepted the proffered glass and scowled.

"Suffice it to say that it is what goes unsaid between us that interests me," he answered after his first sip.

I couldn't meet his eyes then, though I could feel the heat of his gaze on me. I stared into my wine, which I wouldn't dare drink. I didn't smell his heady cologne, but that didn't mean he hadn't found another way to dull my senses. What the hell was I doing here? This was all a game to him - a sick, twisted, game. And I was a pawn. He'd as much as told me he murdered his last mistress, and yet I was wondering in the back of my mind what the Cabernet would taste like on his lips. I frowned and edged away as he settled beside me again.

"It's an intoxicating thing," he whispered, smoothing his knuckles down my bare arm, "the mingling of such intense feelings. Fear and desire. Pain and pleasure. Hatred and love."

I wanted to argue, to tell him to back off, to call him out on it all - especially the last. What could Forrest Meydenbauer possibly know about love? He loved himself, and that was all. But the words caught in my throat. The truth of what he said struck a chord in me, deeper than any played by the harp below us. It was why I loved reporting, even in the society pages. I liked to walk a line, any line, as long as it was hard-edged, like the line between fiction and truth that is the news. And somehow, he'd known exactly what I was thinking.

Forrest took the wine from my hand and set it aside as he slid his well-manicured fingers into its place, and I let him. I sat there, watching it all take place as if through a gauzy veil. It felt exactly like the dreams. He took my hand, and even though my breathing was unsteady and my mouth was dry, I made no protest. *He knew everything about me, everything I'd ever wanted*, Lyndsey had said.

"It's impossible," I whispered as Forrest's hands grew bolder, and his wide, luscious mouth filled my vision. All the thoughts in my mind were crowded out by his overwhelming

presence. A mixture of what was happening and everything I had imagined clashed together, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality.

"Nothing is impossible," he answered, his voice a hushed baritone rumble that warmed me to the core.

I started to retort, but his lips closed over mine, and all cognizant thought left me like a wisp of smoke. The rich taste of him invaded my senses. Lyndsey had been right. It was just like the dreams, only better - it was real. My traitorous body responded to his advance, already knowing the steps to a dance that I'd practiced in my subconscious for almost a week. Before I realized what was happening, my hands were wrapped around his neck, my fingers twining in his hair. And his hands and tongue knew every crook and junction of my being in a way I never could have fathomed. It felt . . . utterly amazing. And that was wrong.

I shoved him away and stood up as quickly as my languid limbs would let me. I stared at him, breathing hard. My eyes narrowed in accusation, then flew open wide shock when he smiled, revealing two pointy fangs that hadn't been there before, except in my dreams.

"What the hell is going on?" I demanded, backing into the upholstered wall. Forrest straightened and sobered before he answered me. But his eyes were still shining like liquid moonbeams. I wasn't so sure anymore that it was merely a trick of the light.

"No more than what you want, I assure you," he answered me.

I blinked once, twice, trying to reassure myself that I was actually standing there, that any of it was really happening. "How would you know what I want?" I asked in a strained voice. I wanted to get the hell out of there. I wanted to forget the fact that I'd just been making out with a serial killer, and I'd *enjoyed* it. Lord help me, but it had felt so good.

He pulled on a look of disappointment, thinly covered by a sanguine smile. "I know everything about you, Kelly. I know all of your hopes and dreams, your fears, and your most secret desires. I can give them all to you, along with immortality."

I shook my head, and when I stopped, my vision was still reeling. "You can't. It's not possible."

Forrest clicked his tongue in disapproval. "Do you have another explanation?"

"No," I said stubbornly. I hadn't a clue. That's why I was there, and he knew that. Whatever he was doing to me, it was the same wiles he'd used on his other victims. I was there to solve the mystery. The music outside stopped, and a sudden stillness fell over the audience around us. I had forgotten all about the Opera, wrapped in the bubble of Box 13, dangling between worlds. The murmur of the Opera house brought me back into the world I was familiar with, the one where Forrest and I were rivals; where I, and only I knew what I wanted. "I want to know what happened to them," I stated, squaring my shoulders. The demand fell between us like a gauntlet, a barrier to keep us apart, and I sighed with relief.

Once Bitten, Twice Charmed

www.gwenmitchellfiction.com

Forrest didn't appear quite so pleased. His smile dropped away and he met my defiant gaze with a look of irritation. He sniffed impatiently. "The others," he said. It wasn't a question, but I nodded. "And what would you offer me in exchange for such a breach of discretion?"

I frowned. I hadn't planned on him wanting to negotiate. Well, okay, to be honest, I hadn't planned farther than the lobby. But I was still surprised. "How about a life sentence?" I said, raising one eyebrow.

He snorted. "For me that would be a very long time indeed. You really believe I'm a murderer?" He chuckled to himself and reclined back onto the sofa.

I was not amused. "But you said-"

"I said I was involved in Miss Sylvan's death," he nodded. "Murder is something else entirely." He stood up and I flattened myself to the wall, trying to puzzle out his cryptic revelations and failing. "I'm prepared to offer you proof that I did not murder the lovely Monique, despite the fact that it goes against my rules, and my better judgment. I'll ask you for only one thing in return," he stated as he took my coat off the hook and held it out to me. The Opera began on the other side of the velvet barrier, and I startled, then rolled my eyes at myself.

"What do you want?" I asked, snatching my coat from his hand.

"The benefit of the doubt."



The lobby was empty as we left, since the Opera had already begun. I was glad of it, because it spared me from having to explain myself to anyone that might see us together. I was kicking myself mentally as we walked down the curving stairs, trying to figure out what exactly I had missed. Forrest seemed wholly convinced that he really was a vampire. He'd flashed me the fangs and all. Just like my dream. I wasn't so ready to be duped. It had to be some high budget parlor trick. Despite how real it seemed, I just couldn't believe it. How could I?

For his part, Forrest was unconcerned by my reluctance - something else that threw up a red flag. He had a limitless amount of resources. Maybe he had drugged me, or hypnotized me, or . . . something. But every explanation I proposed to myself left me with a hollow feeling. My instincts, that I relied on so heavily, told me I was wrong. But I just couldn't let myself believe him. Forrest led us down a long hallway, to a lushly decorated chamber - the VIP room - another first for me.

Familiar words echoed in my mind, *'Will you walk into my parlour,' said the spider to the fly*. I scoffed, and Forrest gave me an imperious look, then crossed the room to another set of double doors. On the other side was a marble hallway, and glass doors opening to the street. The doorman was expressionless as he opened them for us, and we exited into the chill night air. I took a deep, calming lungful of it and pulled my coat tighter around me. It was good to be back in *my* world.

Once Bitten, Twice Charmed

www.gwenmitchellfiction.com

I froze when I recognized Forrest's driver standing beside the stretch limo at the curb. "I'm not going anywhere with you," I protested to Forrest's back. He ignored me and waved the driver away. The tall, lanky man gave a small bow and retreated. I buried my clammy hands into my coat pockets. I was starting to feel a little ridiculous and was counting my blessings that I hadn't come out with my Meydenbauer exposé yet. I didn't have an ounce of proof, and any claims I made would ruin my career before they would so much as smear his name. For those few seconds as he opened the car door and leaned in, I could almost cry with a mixture of frustration, confusion, and embarrassment.

And then Monique Sylvan stepped out of Forrest's car. I would like to say that I handled it well, but in all honesty, I stood there like a buffoon, my mouth gaping. My eyes flicked from her concentrated frown to Forrest's haughty stare and back, trying to reconcile the two. I took the few steps that closed the distance between us and stared up at the five-ten bombshell, scrutinizing. I'd only met her in person once, though I'd seen her from a distance on several occasions. It was definitely Monique. That, or she had a twin sister that no one knew about.

For the second time in one day, I was speechless. I licked my lips, fumbling for words. "What the hell are you playing at?" I finally asked, focusing on Forrest Meydenbauer, magician extraordinaire. Apparently, he wasn't only above the laws of man, but the laws of nature as well. "She's dead. My friend saw her. The police saw her. She was at the morgue for God's sake!"

Forrest's eye glittered with amusement as he told Monique to wait for him in the car. With a final disapproving glance at me, she obliged. He shut the door and leaned against it, crossing his arms. "Satisfied?" he asked.

"Oh, *hardly!*" I fumed. "Are you trying to tell me that you can bring people back from the dead?" I might not have had a clue what was going on, but I still had my pride. I hated being made a fool of. At that moment, months of suspicions, weeks of investigating and days of confusion culminated into raw fury. I wanted to slap his self-righteous smirk right off of his perfect face. I lifted my hand to do just that, and he caught it effortlessly and didn't let go, even as I tried to yank it away.

He pulled me forward so that I stumbled into him and he caught me around the waist. I struggled, but he locked me in his embrace until I stilled. "What do you want from me?" I glared up at him.

"What I've been seeking for some time," he said simply, "a companion."

"It seems like you have enough playmates to keep you busy," I bit off.

He sighed and looked down at me with disarming openness. "Perhaps I tire of games."

"Then why are you toying with me?" I asked, searching his face for the telltale signs of his usual charade. There were none.

"I'm not. I meant what I said. You can have everything you've ever wanted. You want to be recognized, respected, a serious reporter, don't you? I can give you that, and much more."

"At what cost? My life? My soul?" I scoffed. My sanity? My morals?

Once Bitten, Twice Charmed

www.gwenmitchellfiction.com

His arms tightened around me slightly, and he bent his head so that our breath mingled in a misty cloud between us. "Think of what we could be together," he whispered, then kissed me before I could stop him. And by the time he did, I didn't want to. It was tempting. With our mouths locked in a sultry tango that stole all thought, it was easy to imagine what we could be, what we could do. In fact, I already had. My body wept for the feel of him, real and pressed so close. It would be so easy to surrender to it. And then he *bit* me. A sharp twinge followed by the taint of salty blood.

I backed away, startled, licking my lower lip, and he let me go. There was a mingling of pleasure and regret on his face that somehow undermined my angry words. Instead, I wiped my mouth and said, "I'm sorry, but I'm not for sale."

He smiled ruefully. "I suspected as much," he admitted, raising his eyebrows. "I knew that you would be different." He took a step towards me again and I gave him a warning look. He only smiled, with a hint of teasing. He drew a single long-stemmed rose from behind his back and held it out to me. "That's twice you've charmed me into offering you more truth than I should, Miss Lincoln. I find that very intriguing. Just remember, things are not always as they first appear."

I took the rose and shook my head. That was the understatement of the century. I still wasn't exactly sure what was real and what was smoke and mirrors when it came to Forrest Meydenbauer, but my instincts had been right in part – there was definitely more to him than met the eye.

"You'll consider my offer," he added as he opened the car door.

I laughed. Did his confidence know no bounds? "In your dreams," I mocked.

His wide lips curled up in a hungry grin. "No," he murmured, "in yours."

He left me standing there with my bleeding lip and crimson rose – both reminders of a night I couldn't forget if I tried. I watched him drive away and wondered if anything that had happened had been a dream, if my dreams had been real, and whether I really could consider his invitation. He seemed positive that I would. But there was one thing about me that Forrest Meydenbauer had neglected to consider. Maybe it was because in a way, we were quite a pair. In that one way, I was too much like him: I didn't take what was given to me, I went after what I wanted. And I wanted to figure him out first. Things aren't always as they first appear, but Forrest was exactly what he seemed – a temptation.