

CHARLIE'S SECOND CHANCE

Bella's father and I have always had a tenuous relationship. To begin with, I was the first "boy" that his daughter dated and that—as I now am finding for myself—is a relationship rife with difficulties for a father. Despite that, Charlie gave me a chance in the beginning. He was perfectly pleasant to me when I introduced myself to him before taking Bella to our family baseball game. However, that good will was sadly short-lived when I returned his agitated daughter later that evening and she immediately ran away from home. He didn't see her again for weeks and when he finally got her back, she came home to him wearing a leg cast and very nearly having lost her life. It still pains us both.

He blamed me. Of course he did. It was my fault. I should have seen the nomads coming. I should never have taken Bella out in the woods. I should never have fallen in love with her in the first place. So I did not begrudge him his ill-will and tolerated it with the polite condescension of the immortal. Human emotions are mostly irrelevant to us when we take the long view of things. After all, in-the-not-too-distant future, that human will be dead. Problem over. (Not that I wish Charlie dead. Of course not.)

Charlie tolerated my continuing relationship with his daughter at her insistence, though he never missed a chance to take verbal potshots at me. It didn't matter. He was Bella's father and, as such, deserved my respect and good manners, which I offered him to the best of my ability.

After Bella's "accident" in Phoenix, it took Charlie months to get beyond his distrust of me...just in time for me to re-earn it by abandoning his daughter in the woods and leaving her to suffer and waste away for the next six months. He truly hated me then. I drove his hatred to even higher heights by inadvertently luring Bella to Italy, leaving him with no idea where she'd gone. Meanwhile his best friend, Harry, had just died and he was already suffering greatly over that.

When I showed up three days later carrying Bella to his front door, only the restraint of many years as an officer of the law kept him from taking a swing at me. Or arresting me. Or committing acts of police brutality against me. He was utterly justified. And I was sorry for him, but Charlie was never my primary concern.

It was easy to forgive Charlie every cold shoulder and every verbal slight and all the blatant bias he held for my competition, because everything he ever did or said came from his great love for his daughter and his father's mandate to protect her from the likes of me. Understood.

Things have changed now that his daughter and I are happily married—deliriously happy—and have given him his first and only grandchild. He's in love with her, as is everyone, but with the added boost of the grandfather's special position. (Not to mention the obvious physical features they share due to their biological relationship, which nobody ever admits to. He knows. He can feel it.)

And now, God bless him, he has adjusted to the insanity implicit in a human man having a daughter and a son-in-law who are vampires and a grandchild who is half-and-half. He has more-or-less accepted his new in-laws too, all of whom are creatures from his species' nightmares. It's a lot to take in. So, as I said, God bless Charlie.

But all of that is just a preface to explain why I am having fun in my role of silent spectator as Charlie is given a new lease on life. He has lost his daughter to another man, just as he lost his wife to another man two decades hence, and the former has finally cured him of the latter. It has set him free to perhaps try again. And who better to try with than the widow of your best friend, someone you've known your whole life, just never before in that way.

Now she looks entirely different when she invites you to sit down at that kitchen table where you've spent countless hours hanging around, swapping fishing tales with your best buddy. Now her attention is focused entirely on you and your constantly growling stomach. Boxed

macaroni and canned tuna don't really cut it anymore after your loving daughter has been serving you home-cooked meals for two years.

So now, you hang out in her kitchen because she feels sorry for you eating your pathetic bachelor's fare every night. And as you visit more frequently, she begins to pull out a few of the stops, like lighting up the grill to cook a traditional whole salmon and spending three hours picking wild huckleberries and baking a cobbler instead of frying a hamburger. Maybe she even breaks out the cookbooks and spreads her wings a little, since she can now cook for someone who is overwhelmingly grateful and for whom she doesn't have to skimp on the butter and cream because he's fit and has a healthy heart.

As she looks at you sitting there at her table, a comfortable presence who's been there for as long as she's been married, your attention is now on her only, not divided between her and her husband, and with her widow's eyes, she also sees that yes, it's lonely lying by herself in her bed every night. She's not used to it and she longs to feel the roughened skin of a man's body against her own. She finds that you carry an intoxicating smell with you that she never noticed before...an indefinable blend of aftershave, soap, sweat, and sex...a scent that speaks to her on an unconscious level, urging her to remember how long it has been since she's stroked a man's chest, felt his lips against hers, or especially, since her lower regions sang with the excitement of new possibilities.

And what man, divorced nearly twenty years and newly freed from the bonds of first love, could ignore the draw of sizzling bacon fat, yeasty baking bread, and her sweet, but light perfume? What man wouldn't notice the heart-stirring, black tresses (slightly streaked with silver) that are the glory of the Northwest coastal native? Who wouldn't see the warmth in the cinnamon shade of her still-soft skin, or notice that—in spite of birthing two children—she retains the narrow waist and taut behind of the twenty-something single girl she used to be?

It's the second act of an adult life, the flush of new love that, though mature, still carries the excitement of those first knowing

glances, that first accidental brush of the hands, that pregnant pause before you say goodnight. You wonder if she feels the same draw that you do, the pull that makes you want to bury your fingers in her hair, caress the curve between her lower ribs and gracefully rounded hips. You lay your hand in the small of her back as you direct her toward the living room sofa, where she offers you that unnecessary cup of coffee that you don't really want, but accept anyway to prolong your time in her solitary presence. And as you settle next to one another there, feeling the discomfort of uncertainty, but wanting to indulge your impulses, you feel her hand softly cover yours and when you look up, you see her staring into your eyes. At that moment, you know that you are not alone. She wants you too.

Emboldened, you lean forward, hoping that the onion slice you ate at lunch is fully defused by the spearmint gum you've been slyly stashing in your front shirt pocket. You see her lips slightly separate and, moved by that subtle signal, you take your chance. Luckily (or perhaps fatefully), she leans toward you at the same moment and your lips touch a tad before you expected, but no matter, that great canyon has been crossed. Perhaps you missed your mark and landed just above her top lip and you adjust your face downward at the same time that she adjusts upward so that once again you both overshoot.

If all goes well, though, that awkward moment dissolves as you both shiver with the realization that yes, this IS what you wanted and that you would like more of it, please. Close now, it's easy to try again and get it right this time, your lips moving in synchrony, and it feels natural to wrap your arm around her back and to feel hers on your waist as you scoot even closer and dare a third kiss, this one cracking open the concrete door that shields you from the physical need you've been denying for too, too long.

In one ear, a whisper, "Take a chance, do it now! She's pretty and kind and she wants you, too." In the other ear, a shout, "Stop right there! Do you even remember how? It won't go up! You'll never last! And oh, by the way, what would Harry say?"

You shift away uneasily, gazing at your lap. She understands your meaning and pulls away in turn. Your face begins to color and you need to get away, so you say, "I've got an early morning," and she says, "Oh yes, me too." You notice on the table the cup you haven't touched and pick it up and take a gulp so her effort's not for naught. You stand and raise your hand to shake, but see tout suite how dumb that looks and gracelessly let it fall. She holds the door as you step outside where, safe behind the summer screen, you think your second thoughts, but say, "I had a nice time. Let's get together again." She, a mite less timid, invites you 'round for roast tomorrow.

Edward

Ω