

CyberChuck2077

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CYBERCHUCK2077 In 2077, humanity is just another product. Corporations own Miami. Chrome is cheap. Loyalty has a price. And people are just assets waiting to be exploited. Then, one Friday night, a corporate killing machine and a little girl walk into the life of a nobody with an analyst's badge. Wrong place. Wrong time. Right man. Welcome to the future.

Rated: T · Genre: Adventure · Chapters: 4

Chapter 1: CyberChuck2077

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Chapter 1 - Have Better Problems

The torrential downpour lashed violently against the soaring glass exterior of Downtown Nexus, hammering the structure as though the Miami weather took personal offense at the mere existence of dry human beings. Down below, huddled near one of the less glamorous flanks of Nakamichi Plaza, Chuck Bartowski pulled his damp coat tightly around his shoulders, shivering against the humid chill.

"This is a bad idea," Chuck muttered under his breath, his eyes darting nervously down toward the glowing screen of the handheld terminal cradled in his palms. He paused for a beat, watching the lines of code cascade down the display. "A *really* bad idea."

Another moment ticked by in anxious silence as he adjusted his grip.

"In fact, this is a distinctly *Morgan-level* bad idea," he muttered to himself.

The neon green glow of the device flickered, casting eerie, shifting light across the sharp contours of Chuck's face. He let out a long, weary sigh that fogged slightly in the cool night air. Hover cars and bright advertisements danced around the buildings.

"And of course," Chuck whispered to no one in particular, "I'm the designated idiot who actually has to carry it out."

Above the Plaza's imposing main entryway, a massive holographic advertisement drifted serenely through the heavy curtain of rain. A woman with a blindingly immaculate, corporate smile gestured toward a slowly rotating NeoTech logo shimmering behind her.

SECURITY IS FREEDOM.

Chuck tilted his head up, staring at the sheer irony of the giant floating promise. "Sure it is," he murmured sarcastically.

A sharp chime emitted from the handheld interface as a small green indicator pulsed into existence on the display.

ACCESS GRANTED.

Chuck winced softly at the words. "Fantastic. Now I'm officially a burglar. Nice work, Bartowski, there goes the quiet life."

With a subtle mechanical hiss, the heavy rear service door unlatched and swung open. Chuck seized the moment, slipping inside the dimly lit facility like a reluctant shadow. The second the door clicked shut behind him, he slammed his back flat against the cold concrete wall, his chest heaving with nervous adrenaline. The noise of the city fell muffled away.

Footsteps echoed down the corridor ahead—heavy, deliberate boots. Two security guards were approaching. Chuck squeezed his eyes shut and held his breath, praying his pounding heartbeat wouldn't echo off the walls.

One of the guards came to a sudden halt right outside Chuck's alcove. Chuck's eyes snapped wide with sheer panic, every muscle in his body freezing in place as he tried to blend into the shadows. The guard paused, sweeping his gaze down the empty hallway for a tense, agonizing second, before casually resuming his patrol.

Only when the footfalls faded completely into the distance did Chuck dare to exhale, clutching his chest.

"Okay," he squeaked, his voice cracking slightly. "Good. That went well."

A heartbeat later, his trembling fingers slipped, and the terminal nearly dropped right out of his hands onto the hard floor. He caught it awkwardly against his knees with a muffled gasp.

"Morgan," Chuck hissed into the dark, empty corridor, "if I somehow survive tonight, I am going to kill you."

He paused, his brain rapidly recalibrating his priorities.

"No... wait. First, I have to save your life. *Then* I am going to kill you."

Another brief pause as he contemplated the sheer absurdity of his current existence.

"And then I'm going to bring you back to life just to kill you again."

Morgan Guillermo Grimes was, naturally, the root cause of this entire mess. More specifically, it was Morgan's uncanny, almost miraculous ability to take a completely harmless, innocent-looking side hustle—conceived in a dusty corner of a local thrift shop—and transform it, within a matter of weeks, into a full-blown financial catastrophe. It was the kind of spectacular disaster that inevitably caught the sharp, unrelenting attention of Big Mike.

And when Big Mike started taking a personal interest in anyone's finances, it was universally understood to be an omen of doom.

It was even worse whenever his vulture-like henchmen Jeff and Lester were lingering nearby. Chuck hadn't particularly wanted to decipher what Big Mike had meant earlier that afternoon when he had casually grunted that he "knew people who understood how to tidy things up." Nor did Chuck wish to investigate why Morgan had spent the remainder of the day making frequent, terrified references to the black-market value of his own kidneys.

Yet, despite every rational instinct yelling at Chuck to run in the opposite direction, Morgan was his best friend. Chuck owed him. But this wasn't just about settling a casual debt or returning a borrowed video game—this was a high-stakes, life-saving

transaction. If Chuck pulled this off, Morgan got to keep breathing.

At least, that was the hopeful theory.

The hallway leading toward the elevator bank was mercifully deserted. Chuck darted across the open space and slipped into one of the sleek elevator cabs. The moment the doors sealed, he pulled out his custom-modified control interface, plugging it directly into the elevator's maintenance port.

"Twenty-third floor, please," Chuck said aloud to the empty cab, tapping the bypass command on his device.

The elevator didn't budge.

Chuck's brow furrowed in frustration as he stared at the unresponsive buttons. "Come on..."

Nothing happened.

"Don't do this to me right now."

The digital display remained stubbornly frozen on the same text: GROUND LEVEL.

With a groan, Chuck lightly rapped his knuckles against the metallic wall panel. "You know, just once in my life, I would really appreciate a completely normal, uncomplicated task."

He forcefully pulled the cables and reached for his implant under his left ear. *Time for the Piranha*. His hazel eyes lit up; it would seem that his iris had small golden freckles, but that was just his inner implant firing up. His vision focused on the control panel only for a fraction of a second. With a low, mechanical hum, the elevator finally shuddered to life and began its smooth, rapid ascent.

"Thank you," Chuck sighed, leaning back against the wall.

On paper, the twenty-third floor was the corporate home of *Kleinschitz & Lichtenstein*, Attorneys at Law. In actual reality, the firm specialized in representing a very specific clientele—the kind of shadowy figures one learned never to ask too many detailed questions about. Especially when the client in question went by the alias *Havana*

Hounds. Chuck, with every fiber of his body, tried to avoid confrontation with those gangs, in particular with the Hounds. Those were, as the name suggested, the most vicious ones in the territorial disputes against the Neon Vipers and against the whole city of Miami.

The doors parted with a quiet chime, and Chuck stepped out into the pristine hallway. Before his second foot hit the carpet, a security camera mounted at the far end of the corridor began to swivel deliberately in his direction.

Chuck didn't duck or hide anywhere; the Piranha was loose, and the camera turned away almost instantly. The lens swept past his position without catching him in its field of view.

"Thank you," Chuck breathed with an amused smile.

Within a few tense milliseconds, he cracked into the building's internal security network. Schematic maps and system overlays began flooding his vision in rapid succession: motion sensors, closed-circuit cameras, electronic door locks, and high-intensity security grids.

Chuck's face visibly darkened as he absorbed the visual layout.

"Oh."

He zoomed in on the corridor map, his stomach dropping straight into his shoes.

"Oh... wow, this is really not good."

Guarding the corridor ahead wasn't just a basic alarm setup. Stretched across the dimly lit hallway was a dense, crisscrossing web of brilliant red lasers—a lethal array of optical sensors gridlocked from floor to ceiling.

Chuck swallowed hard, trying to clear the sudden dryness in his throat. "Right. Okay."

He reached up, adjusted his bag, and then stared with narrowed eyes down the corridor.

"Channel your inner Indiana Jones."

He paused, taking a closer look at the sheer density of the light beams, before hastily putting his glasses back on. "No. Definitely not. Way too little rope. And zero fedoras."

For several seconds, Chuck stood paralyzed, meticulously analyzing the pulsing rhythm of the laser system. The servers running the grid were too guarded; to dismantle them would take minutes. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, he carefully lowered himself and slunk under the lowest beam of the first cluster.

"Fuck it, we're doing this live," he whispered to himself.

He twisted his torso sideways, barely clearing a second beam as it hummed inches from his chest. By the third obstacle, he was forced to drop flat onto his stomach, crawling painstakingly along the chilly marble tile.

"This is utterly ridiculous," he muttered into the floor.

Chuck executed a clumsy, awkward side-roll, pushing himself back up into a crouch. Three more glowing red lines barred his path ahead.

"Morgan..." Chuck grunted through gritted teeth, contorting his body to slip past another beam. "You are going to pay for every single second of this."

With meticulous care, he extended his arm over the final beam, aiming to bypass the electronic door lock.

"Use... the Force..."

The security interface flickered violently for an agonizing second, pulsing with a bright warning hue.

Chuck froze completely, his heart dancing around in his chest.

Then, the warning light dissolved, and the entire laser array sputtered and died, plunging the hallway into ambient shadow.

Chuck exhaled a breath he felt like he had been holding for ten minutes. "...and that is precisely why I am never, ever going to tell a single soul that I actually pulled this off."

He reached the office door, listening as the electronic lock clicked open under his override signal. The room beyond was pitched in utter darkness.

Chuck took a final breath and stepped inside.

“Everything's shiny, Cap’n.”

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Chuck stepped into the office, his sneakers sinking quietly into the plush carpet.

It was dark. Far too dark for a high-powered law firm that supposedly ran round-the-clock shift work for high-yield clients. He pulled the door shut behind him, standing dead silent, his ears straining for any sign of life. Behind him, his vision data and windows scrolled past with inhuman speed.

There was nothing. Just the low, mechanical drone of the building's central ventilation system and the muted, rhythmic drumming of rain against the thick exterior glass.

Chuck moved toward the nearest workstation. A few quick seconds staring at the interface, and the monitor flared to life, illuminating his face in a cold, blue glow. Files began flooding the display: CyberForce internal dossiers, classified investigation logs, security footage, and off-the-books ledgers.

Chuck's brow furrowed as his eyes scanned the text.

"Oh," he breathed.

He opened another document, his stomach tightening into a knot.

"Oh, that's... not good."

Another file. Another revelation.

"That's *really* not good."

The encrypted documents painted a picture that was vastly uglier than anything Chuck had anticipated. CyberForce operations officially logged as routine enforcement were riddled with erased footage, unaccounted-for detentions, missing evidence, and catastrophic incidents quietly buried away from public record. Worse still, multiple financial pathways traced directly back to the deep pockets of Asura Corp, Sato Ventures, and other smaller companies.

Chuck stared at the glowing screen, processing the reality of what he was looking at. "Theoretically independent entities," he muttered, shaking his head bitterly. "Yeah. *Theoretically*." But deep down he knew this business was *se jodió*, as the cultured Cuban would say. Literally, it went to shit on an astronomical scale when the NeoTech logo appeared in his vision.

He plugged in his drive and initiated the copy sequence. A progress bar appeared, creeping across the display at a painfully agonizing pace.

41%

Chuck darted a quick glance back toward the dark corridor behind him. Still quiet.

58%

He rubbed his clammy hands together, his heart pounding a nervous rhythm against his ribs. "Come on, come on..."

73%

Suddenly, a sharp, metallic chime echoed through the quiet room, making him jump half an inch off the floor.

ACCESS TO SECURE ARCHIVE DETECTED.

Chuck froze, staring at the screen. "Well... that's interesting."

In his mind, a secondary window snapped open, displaying a high-resolution 3D blueprint of the floor layout. A single room nestled at the back of the suite flashed with a bright crimson marker: the vault.

A slow, involuntary grin tugged at the corner of Chuck's mouth. "Well, hello there."

Scooping up his hacking gear, Chuck moved briskly toward the rear of the office. He found the concealed wall compartment, sweeping aside an ornate decorative panel to reveal a heavy, reinforced vault face and the encrypted touch panel.

"Because apparently, defense attorneys require missile-proof safes now," Chuck muttered, snapping his fingers and starting to bypass the firewalls and security layers.

The interface lights began cycling rapidly as the hack took hold.

12%

Chuck leaned in closer, squinting at the status display.

27%

"Nice and easy," he whispered, trying to coax the machine along. "Just take your time..."

41%

Then—

BOOM!

The floor violently bucked under his feet as the massive floor-to-ceiling window detonated inward.

A blinding flash of light and raw kinetic pressure hurled Chuck sideways through the air. A lethal storm of razor-sharp glass fragments, twisted metal, and pulverized concrete shredded the room as the entire window panel evaporated into thin air.

"AAH!"

He hit the floor hard, skidding across the carpet on his shoulder as heavy debris rained down around him. For several agonized seconds, the world was reduced to a suffocating wave of smoke, a high-pitched ringing endlessly in his ears, and the freezing torrent of Miami rain suddenly whipping into the high-rise suite.

Chuck coughed violently, clutching his throbbing shoulder as he slowly pushed his head up off the ground.

"Okay..." he wheezed, shaking glass out of his messy hair. "Okay, that... was definitely not safe."

Through the swirling smoke and rain, a dark figure crashed through the shattered void where the window used to be.

It was a woman.

She hit the slick floor hard, rolling with practiced, combat-hardened precision before immediately fighting her way back to her feet. Her clothes were scorched and heavily bloodstained, dark streaks of crimson smearing her face. But held tightly against her chest, shielded from the brutal landing, was a little girl.

Chuck's jaw dropped, his mind struggling to process the scene. "What the...?"

The woman staggered, swaying slightly from sheer exhaustion and obvious physical trauma, yet her sharp blue eyes scanned the room with terrifying, absolute alertness. The little girl in her arms, miraculously, appeared completely unharmed. She let the child go, who just stood there frozen.

Overriding his own sheer terror, Chuck's deep-seated protective instincts kicked into overdrive. Abandoning his gear, he scrambled across the glass-littered floor toward the child.

"Hey... Hey, it's okay," Chuck rasped out, dropping into a low crouch in front of them. "Are you okay, sweetheart?"

Then, defying all logic in the middle of a burning, wrecked office building, she offered him a small, almost bewilderingly serene smile.

Chuck blinked in total astonishment. "Okay..."

Behind the child, the woman's arm snapped up with terrifying speed, wielding a Smith & Wesson Harbinger handgun.

Chuck instantly froze, his hands flying up defensively. "That's... that is a very big gun."

"Get away from there!" the woman rasped out, her voice raw, aiming the barrel directly past Chuck's head toward the yawning void of the shattered exterior.

Chuck turned his head to look.

Rising slowly from the storm-drenched abyss outside the twenty-third floor was the ominous silhouette of a heavy armored gravocopter. Its blinding searchlight cut through the gloom, sweeping ruthlessly across the destroyed office and pinning them in its stark white glare.

Chuck's eyes widened in horror. "Oh, come on!"

The gravocopter's heavy front gun-turret rotated with a mechanical whine, locking directly onto their position.

The mounted heavy machine gun roared to life.

BRRRRRT!

A merciless hail of heavy-caliber rounds tore through the office, disintegrating drywall, pulverizing fake mahogany desks, and turning monitors into flying clouds of plastic and sparks.

Instinct took over—Chuck hurled his entire body over the little girl, pressing her flat against the floor to shield her with his own frame. "DOWN!"

The woman barked a harsh shot from her Harbinger, driving rounds back into the rain-slick canopy of the gunship. She grabbed the little girl by the shoulder, shoving her against Chuck's chest, and screamed over the deafening roar of gunfire: "MOVE!"

Chuck didn't need a second invitation. Gathering the small girl tightly into his arms, he scrambled to his feet and sprinted blindly through the smoke toward the hallway door, the woman covering their retreat.

Behind them, another violent stream of heavy ammunition hammered into the structural concrete, tearing the office to shreds.

"I officially hate Friday nights!" Chuck screamed into the chaos.

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Chuck burst into the main corridor like a cannonball, his shoes skidding wildly on the polished floor. He locked his arms securely around the little girl, cradling her head against his chest to shield her from the flying debris.

Behind them, the law firm of *Kleinschitz & Lichtenstein* was rapidly being reduced to a pulverized cloud of acoustic foam, splinters, and airborne drywall. Red emergency lights bathed the hallway in a pulsing crimson glare, punctuated by the shrieking wail of building-wide security alarms.

The woman backed out of the ruined doorway a fraction of a second later, her Smith & Wesson Harbinger barking out two ear-splitting shots toward the storm-drenched void before she slammed the heavy security door shut. The metal panel lasted less than two seconds before high-caliber rounds punched clean through it, turning the steel into a jagged sieve.

"Stairwell!" she barked, her voice hoarse and wet, laced with lethal urgency. "Move!"

Chuck didn't need to be told twice. He sprinted down the corridor as fast as his legs could carry him. Remarkably, the little girl in his arms didn't scream; she simply wrapped her small arms around Chuck's neck, tucking her face tightly into the crook of his collarbone.

"You're doing great, kiddo," Chuck panted, his chest burning as he leaped over a fallen ceiling tile. "Just... don't look back. Looking back is always a terrible idea in these situations!"

The armored gravocopter outside wasn't letting up. Through the glass-walled conference rooms lining the outer perimeter of the floor, Chuck could see the silhouette of the massive gunship adjusting its position. Its blinding searchlight tracked them through the interior glass walls, illuminating their path in stark, terrifying white light.

The mounted machine gun roared again.

BRRRRRRRT!

The stream of lead acted like a giant, kinetic chainsaw, chewing through the glass partitions, shattering conference tables, and sending a wall of razor-sharp shrapnel cascading into the hallway right behind them.

"Left! Go left!" Chuck yelled, veering wildly into a side corridor to break line of sight.

They reached the end of the hall where a reinforced steel door stood, marked *FIRE EXIT / SERVICE STAIRS*. Chuck slammed his hip against the panic bar, expecting it to give way.

Nothing happened. The heavy mechanical latch remained deadlocked.

"Oh, come on!" Chuck shrieked, desperately battering the door with his shoulder. "Building lockdown! Of course the emergency exits lock during an emergency! Who designs these systems?!" His eyes flared up as the Piranha was loose again.

The woman limped up beside him, her breathing ragged and shallow. She shoved her bloody hair out of her eyes and raised her Harbinger, aiming the barrel directly at the door's reinforced magnetic locking mechanism. "Get back," she grunted.

Before she could squeeze the trigger, the glass curtain wall at the end of the junction detonated inward.

The gravocopter had repositioned, firing a high-explosive round straight through the exterior facade. The concussion wave hit them like a physical wall. Chuck was slammed face-first against the steel door, his body taking the brunt of the impact while he kept the little girl shielded beneath him.

A wet, sickening crunch echoed over the blast, followed by a sharp, strangled gasp.

Chuck spun around, his ears ringing violently. "Hey—!"

The woman was staggering backward, a dark, heavy fountain of crimson blooming across the left side of her tactical vest. A stray piece of high-velocity tungsten shrapnel had torn straight through her armor and deep into her flank.

She collapsed against the wall, her fingers clutching uselessly at her bleeding side as her Harbinger clattered onto the carpet. She slid downward, leaving a thick, dark streak on the wall, her eyes rolling back as her legs buckled beneath her.

"No, no, no!" Chuck panicked, his voice reaching a frantic, high-pitched octave as he tucked her gun in his pants. "Hey! Stay awake! Look at me!"

The searchlight from the hovering gunship swept through the newly blasted gap in the outer wall, locking its harsh, blinding beam right onto the alcove where they were trapped. Outside, the heavy gun turret began to whine as it aligned its crosshairs for a final, lethal sweep.

Time slowed down to a crawl.

Chuck set the little girl down in the tiny, recessed corner of the doorframe. "Stay right here, sweetie. Don't move," he said, his hands shaking violently as he pulled some combat gauze from the woman's first aid kit and shoved it in the wound; his fingers moving in a blur of pure, panicked instinct. And at the same time the terminal flared, cycling through encryption keys in a frantic race against the spinning turret outside.

OVERRIDING SECURITY...

ACCESS GRANTED.

The heavy steel door unlatched with a loud *CLACK*.

Chuck shoved the door open, grabbed the little girl by her jacket, and gently deposited her into the dark, reinforced concrete safety of the stairwell landing. "In, in, in!"

He turned back to the hallway. The woman was barely conscious, her head slumping against her chest, her breathing reduced to a shallow, bubbling rattle. Blood was pooling around her waist.

Out in the void, the gravocopter's machine gun began to spin up with a low, terrifying hum.

"Oh, God... I am going to get so many ulcers from this," Chuck whimpered.

Dropping to his knees, Chuck grabbed the woman by the reinforced shoulder straps of her tactical vest. He dug his heels into the blood-slicked carpet, gritted his teeth, and hauled with every ounce of strength in his body.

"Up! Come on, help me out here!" Chuck screamed, his muscles straining as he dragged her dead weight backward.

The machine gun opened fire.

BRRRRRT!

Rounds pulverized the floor where the woman had been sitting a split-second prior, tearing the carpet to shreds and showering Chuck's face with sparks and concrete dust.

With a final, desperate heave, Chuck hauled her bleeding body across the threshold, tumbling backward into the stairwell. He threw his leg out, catching the heavy steel fire door with his sneakers and kicking it shut with all his weight.

The heavy door slammed into place with a resounding boom just as a barrage of lead hammered against the outside of the steel, denting the metal but failing to penetrate.

In the sudden, dim quiet of the concrete stairwell, Chuck collapsed onto his back beside the unconscious woman and the quiet little girl, his chest heaving as he stared up at the emergency exit sign.

"Okay," Chuck whispered, his voice trembling uncontrollably. "Step one... survived. Step two... figure out how the hell we get down twenty-three flights of stairs." He said to the little girl who had watched him with awe and dark blue eyes.

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By the time Chuck stumbled out of the lower service stairwell onto Sub-Level 3, his thighs felt like liquid fire and his lungs burned with every ragged breath. Halfway down the mountain of concrete steps, he had managed to bypass a freight elevator's emergency lock to skip the final twelve floors, but dragging a fully geared, unconscious operative through the subterranean bowels of Nakamichi Plaza was still testing the absolute limits of his physical existence.

He collapsed against a concrete pillar, dragging the bleeding woman along the slick floor behind him.

"Okay..." Chuck wheezed, wiping a mixture of sweat and ceiling dust from his eyes. "Okay, muscle failure is imminent. If my arms fall off, sweetie, you're going to have to carry her."

The little girl, still clutching the hem of Chuck's damp jacket, gave him that same remarkably placid look, as if being dragged through a subterranean war zone by a panicked netrunner was just a standard Friday evening routine.

Sub-Level 3 was a sprawling, cavernous expanse of damp concrete, humming high-voltage conduits, and automated logistics tracks. Fluorescent strip lights flickered

overhead, casting harsh white glare over rows of shipping crates and industrial charging stations. It smelled heavily of hydraulic fluid, wet rubber, and ozone.

And, most importantly, there were no human security guards down here yet—just the rhythmic, mechanical whirl of automated machinery.

Parked in Bay 4 was their potential ticket to survival: a massive, six-wheeled NeoTech Autonomous Cargo Hauler. It was a heavy-duty electric beast, painted matte grey, designed to shuttle high-value corporate freight between Downtown Nexus and the Miami shipping docks without a human driver to bribe or ambush.

"Perfect," Chuck gasped, his eyes lighting up. "Unmanned. No driver to yell at me, no key to lose. Just a cold, unfeeling corporate neural network."

He lugged the woman toward the vehicle's passenger side, struggling to lift her dead weight into the spacious cab. With a low grunt that sounded dangerously like a hernia forming, he shoved her onto the wide bench seat, propping her bleeding torso against the headrest.

"Hop in, sweetie," Chuck urged the child, lifting her gently into the middle seat next to the wounded woman before slamming the heavy reinforced door shut.

Chuck scrambled into the driver's seat. Where a steering wheel and pedals should have been, there was only a sealed plastic console housing the automated drive-by-wire module and a blinking optical camera array.

High above, the heavy blast doors at the top of the subterranean access ramp began to groan as emergency sirens started wailing through the sub-levels. Heavy footsteps and shouting echoed down the concrete incline. The plaza security team had finally figured out where they were going.

"Right. Time to do what I do best," Chuck muttered through gritted teeth and stared at the machine. "Disregard basic warranty terms."

He popped the maintenance access flap beneath the main console. The small screen flared with aggressive streams of hex code as Chuck's custom bypass scripts hammered against the vehicle's factory encryption.

CRITICAL ERROR: MANUAL OVERRIDE NOT PERMITTED.

ROUTE GUIDANCE ACTIVE: DOCKING BAY 4.

"Oh, come on, you gloriously over-engineered toaster!" Chuck yelled, his eyes almost glowing gold. "I am updating your firmware! You are no longer a delivery truck! You are a getaway vehicle!"

Outside the windshield, three armed security guards burst through the ramp doors, rifles raised, searchlights slicing through the industrial haze of the basement.

"There! In the hauler! Open fire!"

Bullets began to ping and snap against the cargo truck's thick, reinforced windshield, spider-webbing the outer laminate but failing to breach the bulletproof glass.

The little girl winced, ducking her head into the woman's side.

OVERRIDING ROUTE MATRIX...

DRIVE-BY-WIRE CONTROL: ESTABLISHED.

A virtual steering wheel and manual throttle interface popped up on Chuck's retinal display.

"Yes!" Chuck roared.

He slammed his thumb down on the virtual accelerator.

The cargo truck's massive electric motors torqued instantly with a high-pitched, deafening screech of rubber. The six heavy tires bit into the slick concrete, throwing up a cloud of burning smoke as the multi-ton vehicle lurched forward like an enraged bull.

The security guards scattered, diving out of the way as the massive steel bumper swept through their position.

Ahead of them lay the automated exit gate—a heavy, reinforced yellow barrier arm backed by thick steel security shutters blocking the exit ramp to the street level.

"Hold onto something!" Chuck shrieked, ducking his head behind the dash.

The hauler slammed into the security gates at forty miles an hour.

Metal shrieked, glass exploded, and the barrier shattered into a shower of twisted yellow steel as the heavy truck tore through the gate like paper, bursting out of the dark sub-level into the blinding, storm-drenched reality of the Miami night.

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Consciousness returned to Sarah in painful, agonizing waves.

The first thing that breached the darkness was not sight, but the deep, grinding ache settling into every nerve ending in her body. It wasn't the sharp, fiery sting of a fresh wound, but something heavy and pervasive—the kind of dull agony that had claimed territory while she was unconscious. Her left flank throbbed in time with her erratic pulse, her shoulder felt as though it had been struck by a sledgehammer, and a sharp, localized tender spot along her temple sent shooting pain straight down into her collarbone whenever her chest expanded.

Sarah did not open her eyes immediately. She didn't move a single muscle.

Her instincts, honed by years of surviving in environments where a momentary twitch meant death, took over before her mind fully cleared. She lay perfectly still, breathing through her nose in shallow, silent rhythms, listening.

The low, steady hum of a budget air-conditioning unit overhead. The distant, muted hiss of tires on wet asphalt miles away. The faint, rhythmic tapping of rain lingering against glass.

No heavy tactical boots. No harsh, distorted radio chatter. No blaring corporate security alarms.

Slowly, imperceptibly, Sarah cracked her eyelids, sweeping the room through a narrow filter of eyelashes.

A ceiling. Cheap textured epoxy wall, painted an off-white that had faded with age. Unfamiliar.

She turned her head an inch at a time, assessing the perimeter. She was lying on a worn, micro-fiber couch in what appeared to be a modest, low-rent suburban condo. Nothing about the space whispered corporate wealth or high-level surveillance. A small kitchen sat off to her left; an entryway with a cheap wooden door stood directly ahead. Nearby, a folding table was completely littered with an erratic mess of soldering irons, stripped wires, open circuit boards, and handheld diagnostic gear—tools that had clearly been cannibalized and reassembled into devices they were never intended to be.

One main window. One main exit. No visible motion sensors or optical lenses.

Sarah tested her core muscles, intending to roll into a defensive posture. A white-hot spike of agony shot straight up her ribcage, forcing her to freeze. Her breath caught in her throat.

Someone had stripped away her scorched tactical outer layer. Beneath an oversized, worn cotton T-shirt, her flank was tightly wrapped in sterile gauze. The bandage was wrapped with clean, practiced precision—snug enough to apply pressure without restricting her breathing. Whoever had done it understood basic field medicine well enough to avoid making the trauma worse.

The knowledge brought her zero comfort. A capable stranger was far more dangerous than an incompetent one.

Then, a sound cut through the quiet hum of the apartment.

A laugh. High, clear, and unmistakably a child's.

Sarah's eyes snapped toward the origin of the sound, all pretense of passive recovery instantly evaporating. She pushed herself upright, ignoring the violent protest in her tearing abdominal muscles, and swung her legs toward the floor.

On the far side of the room, sitting cross-legged on a faded rug, was a tall brown-haired man with hazel eyes.

Sitting directly opposite him was the little girl.

Between them sat a makeshift gaming setup—a small handheld console had been hard-wired into a larger, repurposed monitor resting on a plastic crate. The screen pulsed with vibrant, primary colors, depicting brightly shaded geometric blocks cascading down the display in a chaotic, competitive sprint.

Chuck leaned forward, tapping frantically at a modified controller, his face a portrait of intense, dramatic concentration. "No, no, no. That's cheating. That is unequivocally cheating."

The little girl giggled, her tiny fingers moving across her own controller with alarming speed. "You said that last time."

Chuck stared at her, his brow furrowing in exaggerated betrayal. "Because you *cheated* last time!"

The girl shook her head, her calm, serene expression breaking into a tiny, victorious smirk. "I won."

"Those are not mutually exclusive concepts!" Chuck argued back, pointing a finger at the screen in disbelief. "Look at that! That angle of rotation is statistically impossible without custom code!"

Sarah's hand slid with quiet, lethal precision toward the cushion edge, her tactical brain immediately running threat-assessment protocols. She scanned the immediate radius for a weapon.

There. On the edge of the workbench, three feet from the couch.

Her Smith & Wesson sat resting on the wood within arm's reach. But her trained eye caught the detail instantly: the slide was locked back, and the high-capacity magazine sat completely removed, resting three inches away from the receiver.

Sarah's jaw set into a hard, rigid line. She stood up.

Her knees buckled instantly, the room taking a sharp, nauseating tilt as shock and blood loss warred for control of her nervous system. She forced her body straight through sheer force of will, refusing to allow her posture to betray the weakness pouring through

her veins.

The shifting weight caught Chuck's attention. He blinked, turning away from the glowing screen, and his goofy, lighthearted smile instantly vanished into thin air.

"Oh," Chuck breathed, his posture going rigid.

"Hey," he said quickly, holding his palms open as he began to rise from the rug. "Easy. Just... take it easy."

Sarah's eyes locked onto his face like crosshairs. Her voice was flat, ice-cold, and entirely devoid of panic. "Don't move."

Chuck froze mid-stand, hovering awkwardly two feet off the floor before carefully settling back down onto his heels.

The little girl stopped playing, her eyes darting between the two of them with quiet curiosity.

Sarah shifted her stance, keeping her body angled so if the opportunity arises she could shield the girl from Chuck's reach. "Step... away... from her."

Chuck slowly raised both hands to shoulder height, showing open palms. "Okay. Okay, taking a step back." He shuffled backward on his knees, putting a deliberate three feet of distance between himself and the child. "I'm not gonna hurt her. I promise."

Sarah didn't offer a response. Her gaze remained locked on his throat, analyzing his center of gravity, his balance, the tension in his shoulders. He didn't move like a black-ops operative; his posture was awkward, guarded, and entirely defensive.

Chuck's eyes flicked toward the desk where the disarmed Harbinger rested. Sarah tracked the movement instantly.

The gun was useless to her in a split-second engagement. She didn't have the leverage to grab the frame, seat the magazine, rack the slide, and acquire a target before a hostile could close the distance.

For a fraction of a second, a dark flicker of frustration passed across her face.

Then, she moved.

Her motion was a blur of lethal efficiency. Her right hand swept back.

Chuck's eyes widened in sheer terror. "Wait—!"

Before his brain could process the movement, a six-inch slim combat blade materialized in her grip. One second her hand was empty; the next, cold steel was angled directly toward his chest.

Chuck instinctively scrambled backward, his heels slipping on the rug as his back hit the side of an armchair. "Okay! Okay!"

Sarah held the knife steady, her shoulder muscles trembling slightly under the physical strain, but the point of the blade didn't waver an inch. "Don't touch her," she rasped, her voice low, raspy, and dangerously controlled. "Get away from her."

Chuck swallowed hard, his throat dry as he stared at the gleaming steel. "I am... I am very far away from her. I am practically in the wall."

"You were sitting with her."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Chuck blinked, looking at her as if she had asked him to explain quantum physics in Latin. "Because... because she asked me to play?"

Sarah stared at him, searching his face for the subtle twitches of a cover story, the deliberate eye movements of a trained interrogator. There were none. Just raw, unadulterated civilian panic.

"You expect me to believe that?" she demanded.

"Honestly?" Chuck offered a weak, helpless shrug, his hands still firmly planted in the air. He darted a nervous glance down at the little girl. "I was really hoping you would, because the alternative involving a grand conspiracy is just way too complicated for a Saturday morning."

Sarah took a cautious step forward, intending to force him further toward the kitchen exit. But as her foot planted, a sharp tear tore through her left flank. A choked gasp escaped her lips, and a micro-expression of intense pain flashed across her features before she could lock it down.

Chuck noticed it instantly. The panic in his eyes flickered, replaced by genuine concern. "You're hurt."

"Stay back," she warned, tightening her grip on the hilt.

"I'm serious, you're going to tear the sutures," Chuck said, leaning forward slightly despite the blade pointed at his throat. "I spent two hours trying to figure out how to weave surgical thread through three layers of enhanced muscle fibers."

Sarah's eyes narrowed into slits. "You stitched me up?"

Chuck nodded carefully, keeping his movements painfully slow. "Yes."

"Why?"

Chuck looked profoundly confused by the question, as if the concept of basic human decency was an alien dialect. "Because you were bleeding out on my carpet! You were literally dying!"

Sarah's fingers twitched against the rubberized grip of the knife. The logic didn't fit. Nothing about this man fit standard security protocols. "Who are you?"

"Chuck," he said simply.

"Chuck what?"

"Bartowski."

Silence stretched tight across the small room. Sarah waited for the secondary identifier, the agency code, the corporate affiliation.

Chuck just sat there, looking faintly apologetic.

"Does that... mean something?" Sarah asked, her voice dropping an octave.

Chuck shook his head softly. "Not really. It's... mostly just my name."

Sarah's eyes swept the apartment again, calculating variables in fractions of a second. Unloaded weapon on the desk. Knife in hand. Single exit. One civilian male, untrained, terrified. One unharmed child. No active pursuit team in sight.

She was measuring distances, threat levels, exit vectors, and physical limitations.

Chuck recognized the cold, terrifying processing speed behind her eyes. He had seen that look before—not on her, but on the kind of lethal individuals who viewed every room as a kill zone and every human being as either cover or a threat.

"Look," Chuck said quietly, lowering his hands an inch. "I'm not your enemy."

"I don't know that," Sarah replied coldly.

"Fair," Chuck conceded with a nod. "That is actually a completely reasonable stance given the circumstances."

Sarah didn't lower the blade.

Slowly, deliberately, Chuck extended a single finger toward the folding table. "Your gun is right over there."

Her gaze flicked toward the steel frame, then back to his eyes.

"I unloaded it," Chuck offered.

"Why?"

Chuck let out a weary breath, resting his hands on his knees. "Because having a highly trained, deeply terrifying stranger wake up with a loaded firearm in my living room felt like a statistical fast-track to me getting shot."

"You had no right to touch my weapon," Sarah stated, her tone sharp as a razor.

"You're right," Chuck agreed instantly.

The sudden, absolute compliance caught her off guard. She held her breath, waiting for the trap.

"I had no right," Chuck continued, his tone turning grounded and completely sincere.

"But I also had no idea who you were when you came crashing through a twenty-third-

story window with a child while an armored gunship tried to turn my workspace into Swiss cheese."

Sarah's posture stiffened slightly. "Your workspace?"

"Long story. Involves a very bad decision and a friend who owes me his life."

"Where are we?"

"My condo."

"Where?"

"Lower suburbs. Miles away from Downtown Nexus."

Sarah processed the geography, her mind mapping the transit time. "How long?"

"Since late last night. You've been out for nearly ten hours."

Her eyes shifted toward the small girl sitting quietly on the floor. "The girl?"

"She's fine," Chuck said gently. "Not a scratch on her. I gave her some cereal."

The child sat perfectly still beneath the weight of their attention. She had completely abandoned the game, her bright, solemn eyes moving back and forth between Sarah's lethal stance and Chuck's defenseless posture.

Sarah looked at the girl, a deep, unsettling feeling coiling in her gut. The child wasn't crying. She wasn't trembling. She possessed a strange, unnatural calm that felt dangerously out of place for a survivor of a black-ops hit squad.

"Come here," Sarah commanded, her tone dropping into a firm, non-negotiable register.

The girl didn't budge.

Chuck looked down at the child, his expression softening. "You don't have to if you don't want to."

Sarah's blade snapped toward him instantly. "I wasn't talking to you!"

Chuck's hands flew straight back into the air. "Right! Message received! Shutting up!"

The little girl stared at Sarah for a long, quiet moment. Then, slowly, she pushed herself up from the carpet.

Sarah lowered the knife half an inch, expecting the child to run toward her protection.

Instead, the girl took one small step forward... and then another, coming to a halt directly beside Chuck's leg. She reached out a tiny hand and lightly held onto the hem of Chuck's jeans.

Sarah's eyes narrowed into dark, dangerous slits. "Step away from her."

Chuck looked down at the little hand clutching his denim, looking utterly trapped. "I am literally not touching her. She is touching *me*."

Sarah felt her vision blur slightly around the edges. Her pulse was racing too fast; cold sweat was slicking her palms, and the sheer exertion of standing upright was draining her reserves at an unsustainable rate.

"You need to sit down," Chuck urged, his voice losing its frantic edge, replacing it with urgent concern.

"No."

"You're going to pass out."

"I'm fine."

Chuck gave her a deeply skeptical look. "That is a shockingly unconvincing lie coming from someone who looks like a professional."

Sarah took another rigid step forward, intending to force the issue, but her left knee simply gave out. Her balance faltered violently.

Chuck instinctively lunged forward to catch her before she hit the floor.

The knife snapped up in a deadly arc, stopping two inches from his throat. "Don't!"

Chuck froze dead in his tracks, his hands hovering inches from her shaking shoulders.

"Okay," he whispered softly. "Okay. Backing off."

He took a careful step backward, lowering his body to remain non-threatening. "I am not going to hurt you."

Sarah glared at him, her chest heaving, the knife trembling in her slick grip as the silence in the room stretched to a razor-thin breaking point.

Then, the little girl broke the silence.

Her voice was tiny, quiet, and impossibly calm against the heavy violence lingering in the air.

"My name is Lisa."

The world seemed to halt on its axis.

Chuck looked down at the child in surprise.

Sarah's sharp, tactical gaze slowly drifted away from Chuck's throat, landing squarely on the small girl holding onto his jeans again. The combat blade remained held in Sarah's hand, but for the first time since waking up in the unfamiliar room, her absolute focus was no longer on the man considered a threat in front of her.

It was on Lisa.

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Sarah kept her focus locked on Lisa for a long, heavy moment, processing the surreal sight in front of her.

The little girl remained standing beside Chuck on the faded rug for a moment and then sat down, her small hands resting quietly in her lap. She looked entirely untroubled, as though waking up in a stranger's low-rent apartment after surviving a brutal firefight and being hunted through the Miami storm by an armored gunship was just a perfectly reasonable way to begin a Saturday morning.

Slowly, painfully, Sarah forced her spine straight. Her breath hitched in her throat as the fresh sutures in her flank pulled taut, but she refused to let her posture collapse.

She turned her gaze back to Chuck.

Chuck shifted uncomfortably under her sharp, analytical stare. Perhaps realizing that this was the moment in the script where normal human beings exchange basic social pleasantries, he cleared his throat and offered a weak, tentative smile.

"Chuck Bartowski," he said, introducing himself again as if trying to anchor the reality of his name in the space between them.

Sarah didn't speak. Her eyes flicked down to the six-inch combat blade held firmly in her hand.

Chuck watched her, his breath catching in his chest.

There was no dramatic flair, no theatrical flourish. Sarah simply lowered her wrist, and somehow—between one microscopic blink of an eye and the next—the knife vanished.

Not slipped into a pocket. Not tucked into a sheath. Not placed on the nearby table.

Just... gone.

Chuck stared at her empty palm for half a second, his brain completely failing to compute the sleight-of-hand wizardry. He opened his mouth, thought better of it, and closed it again. There were already several terrifying things about this woman that he had decided were far better left unexplained for his own sanity.

The sheer, crushing weight of physical exhaustion finally broke Sarah's defensive reserve. Her legs gave out, and she lowered herself back onto the worn microfiber couch.

For several agonizing seconds, she simply sat there staring straight ahead into the dim ambient light of the living room. She looked utterly spent. Not merely tired, but bone-deep, marrow-drained exhausted—the kind of soul-crushing fatigue born from days of continuous evasive maneuvers, blood loss, and relentless adrenaline spikes that even her tuned and wired body couldn't handle anymore.

Then, her voice cut through the quiet hum of the air conditioner, flat and chillingly precise.

"We need to disappear."

Chuck frowned. "This place is safe."

"How do you know?" Sarah demanded, her eyes cutting sideways to lock onto his.

"Because if a Rhino police squad or some corporate hit team had managed to track us here," Chuck replied reasonably, "they wouldn't be knocking. They would've kicked the front door off its hinges forty minutes ago and thrown a flashbang through the window."

Sarah turned her head slowly, searching his face, her blue eyes narrowing into sharp, calculating slits. "Who the hell are you?"

Chuck gave her a tired, lopsided smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Chuck Bartowski. At your service."

Sarah said nothing. She simply studied him, her sharp gaze tracing the nervous tension in his shoulders, the dark circles beneath his eyes, and the faint traces of dried blood still lingering on his collar.

Her gaze shifted to Lisa, who was quietly tracing patterns on the carpet, and then flicked back to Chuck.

Chuck shifted his weight nervously under the intense scrutiny. He had the distinct, unmistakable feeling he was being systematically evaluated, cataloged, and weighed as a potential liability. Again.

"Well," Chuck offered, rubbing the back of his neck with a sheepish grin, "I didn't exactly plan this kind of weekend when I woke up yesterday, but... I'm glad we ran into each other. You know, relatively speaking."

Sarah's left eyebrow twitched upward, a silent gesture of profound disbelief.

Chuck ignored the reaction and pressed on, eager to break the razor-thin tension. "Look, I'm going to head down to grab some clean clothes for you guys and something to eat. What do you want?"

Sarah's expression remained stone-hard, her voice dropping into a dangerous register. "How the hell do I know you're not going to walk out that door and sell us out?"

Chuck stared at her for a moment, the absurdity of the accusation washing over him. Then, a quiet, genuinely amused laugh escaped his lips, and he smiled tiredly.

"Honestly? When I was waiting for you to wake up, I tried to mentally prepare myself," Chuck said, leaning back slightly. "I figured you might either turn out to be particularly funny... or a cannibal."

Lisa let out a soft, melodious giggle from the floor.

Chuck pointed a vague, accusing finger in Sarah's direction, leaning down toward the child. "I was actually betting on cannibal, sweetie. Mostly because I've never met a real one before."

Sarah's face didn't break. Not even a fraction of an inch.

"And now," Chuck continued smoothly, turning back to Sarah, "I find out you're actually funny, too."

"You talk too much," Sarah stated coldly.

"Yeah," Chuck sighed, nodding in agreement. "I've been told that. Repeatedly."

A heavy beat of silence settled over the room.

Chuck glanced down at Lisa, his expression softening into a warm smile. "I'll go grab some clothes. And maybe pizza. How does pizza sound?"

"Pizza!" Lisa cheered quietly, her eyes lighting up with genuine childhood enthusiasm for the first time all morning.

Sarah slowly let her head fall back against the worn headrest of the couch. She closed her eyes, her chest rising and falling in deep, measured breaths as she fought against the waves of dizziness threatening to pull her back under.

Chuck stood watching her for a quiet moment.

Suddenly, Sarah's eyes snapped open again, fixing him with an icy, lethal intensity that made his blood run cold.

"If you betray us," she whispered, every word coated in iron, "I will kill you."

Chuck didn't answer immediately. He stood frozen in the middle of the room, staring at her motionless form, processing the absolute certainty behind her promise.

He swallowed hard, leaning close to himself as he muttered under his breath, "Right. Absolutely. I've added you as a guest to the condo's system. This is going to be a fantastic weekend."

Sarah tracked his movement with narrowed eyes as he reached for a light jacket near the door. "Where the hell are we, Bartowski?"

Chuck's goofy smile faded just a fraction, replaced by a quiet, subtle shift in demeanor. He gestured vaguely toward the window, where the looming, massive silhouette of the city's concrete-and-glass megastructures cut through the morning drizzle.

"The Liandri & McKay Tower," Chuck said quietly.

Sarah's eyes narrowed instantly, recognizing the corporate designation.

Chuck gave her a small, almost apologetic smile, resting his hand on the door panel.

"Welcome to the Aurora."

Chapter 2: Chapter 2: The Apartment

Chapter 2 - The Apartment

The apartment fell quiet again.

For the first time since Sarah had dragged her bruised, blood-soaked body through the shattered window of the law firm, the world had gone eerily still. There was no rattling roar of heavy machine-gun fire, no high-pitched shrieks of corporate alarm systems, no screaming, and no armored gunship hovering in the tempest outside, threatening to convert high-end architecture into pulverized concrete.

Only the steady, low-frequency hum of the budget air-conditioning unit mounted high on the wall.

And the rain, drumming against the bulletproof glass of the condo. After the front door clicked shut, Sarah sat motionless on the microfiber couch for several seconds, staring into space. Her head was tilted slightly, her ear tuned to the heavy oak paneling. She tracked Chuck's footfalls down the carpeted hallway outside.

One.

Two.

Three.

Then, nothing. The corridor swallowed the sound completely.

Sarah's gaze drifted slowly toward the deadbolt. The lock had engaged automatically as the door closed. She had watched him gather his jacket and step through that door with a bizarre, casual ease—no hesitation, no cautious backward glance, no strategic sweeping of the hallway perimeter. He had simply walked out of his own home on a Saturday morning to buy clean clothes and hot food for two strangers, one of whom had just held a combat knife to his throat.

Sarah didn't like it.

She liked it even less because she couldn't categorize him. Unpredictable targets were dangerous; unpredictable civilians were an absolute liability.

Pain tore through her abdominal wall the second she tried to stand, a sharp, white-hot reminder that her body was held together by fresh thread and sheer force of will. Her hand flew instinctively to her left flank, her fingers pressing lightly against the bandage.

The gauze held firm. So did Chuck's surprisingly neat sutures.

She looked down at herself, staring at the faded gray T-shirt swallowing her frame. Not hers. None of this was hers. The couch, the apartment, the expensive-looking equipment scattered across the tables. Not even the awkward guy who'd pulled her out of the kill zone.

Sarah pushed herself to her feet and spread her stance when the room tilted around her. She waited a moment, blinking until things settled, then checked the room.

Her priority was perimeter security. She moved to the heavy front door and inspected the lock assembly. Standard mechanical deadbolt paired with a basic digital pad—easily pickable, but intact. She checked the windows next, testing the frame seals and scanning the drop down into the wet, neon-lit alley below.

No emergency extraction routes. No pre-rigged escape lines.

Next came the sweep for surveillance. Sarah systematically checked the room's corners, ceiling light fixtures, air vents, and power outlets.

Nothing. No pinhole optical lenses, no acoustic bugs, no hidden hard drives, and no electronic monitoring gear sophisticated enough to belong to an intelligence handler or a corporate purger team.

The condo was painfully, almost offensively ordinary.

Almost.

Sarah's eyes settled on the long folding table tucked against the far wall. That, she noted, was a glaring anomaly.

She limped toward the workstation, her eyes scanning the chaotic spread of circuit boards, half-disassembled handheld terminals, and cannibalized diagnostic interfaces. She reached out and picked up a heavy, custom-built handheld unit.

She flipped it over in her palm. The casing was brushed magnesium, completely stripped of manufacturer serial numbers or corporate branding. She noted the hand-soldered bus ports, three distinct data interface connections, a stripped drone processor, and a custom-flashed field intrusion module.

This wasn't hobbyist gear. This was high-level, military-adjacent breach hardware.

Sarah placed the device back onto the anti-static mat in the exact spot and orientation she had found it.

As her hand retreated, she noticed a framed photograph resting on a narrow bookshelf beside the desk. She stepped closer, her sharp eyes picking out the details.

The picture showed Chuck. Younger—considerably younger—standing inside a brightly lit, sterile corporate office surrounded by a group of smiling, suited executives. He looked virtually identical to the man who had just left: same unruly mop of hair, same broad shoulders, the same slightly awkward, self-conscious posture.

But his expression was different. He was smiling with genuine, unburdened pride.

Sarah's eyes narrowed as she leaned in. Resting directly behind the glass frame was a polished brass plaque.

EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH — CIKEN SYSTEMS ANALYTICS

Sarah stared at the plaque. Then at the younger Chuck in the photo. Then back at the plaque.

The ghost of a smirk twitched at the corner of her lips. Almost.

"Of course," she murmured under her breath—a middle-tier corporate cog.

She went to set the frame down, but her gaze caught a second photograph partially hidden in its shadow. This one was older. Considerably older.

It depicted Chuck standing on the paved courtyard of a towering corporate monolith, wearing a formal dress jacket that looked a size too large for his frame. Hanging around his neck by a dark blue ribbon was a heavy, blackened metallic cross.

Sarah stepped closer, her eyes fixed on the small, silver-engraved plate beneath the image.

DISTINGUISHED 4 YEAR SERVICE — 4th CORPORATE WAR

The room seemed to grow cold. Sarah's expression hardened, and every trace of lighthearted amusement evaporated.

The Corporate War wasn't a team-building exercise or a regional business dispute. It had been a brutal, unacknowledged meat-grinder. Entire subsidiary companies had been vaporized in night raids; orbital data hubs had been detonated over ocean trenches; black-budget purge teams had cleared out whole office towers in broad daylight while local governments looked the other way.

And Chuck Bartowski had been in the thick of it.

Sarah studied his face in the second photograph. He didn't carry himself like a hardened mercenary or a cold-blooded company assassin. He looked miserable. He looked uncomfortable, deeply pained, and utterly embarrassed to wear the heavy piece of metal resting on his chest.

She swept her eyes over the small apartment again. The chaotic mess on the workbench suddenly took on an entirely different context. It wasn't the random junk of a tech enthusiast. It was the tailored kit of someone who knew precisely how corporate networks worked, how they broke, and how to survive when they failed.

She stepped toward the active monitor on the desk. A diagnostic terminal was quietly scrolling lines of raw system code. Sarah couldn't decipher the script's complex architecture, but she recognized its function: a deep-level network sniffer silently monitoring local corporate frequencies for ping spikes and security flags.

She reached for the keyboard, paused, and slowly drew her hand back.

Not yet.

This apartment had no military trophies. No weapons mounted on the walls, no tactical webbing hanging in the closet, no framed mission commendations, and no classified dossiers left out on the coffee table. Just a quiet, cluttered home belonging to a man who possessed far more lethal technical capability than he let on.

Sarah looked back at the *Employee of the Month* plaque, and then at the *Corporate War* medal—two entirely contradictory identities coexisting in the same space. Neither made sense.

A soft rustle of movement sounded behind her.

Sarah turned smoothly, her hand dropping toward her waist out of sheer habit before she remembered she was disarmed.

Lisa stood in the doorway, wearing oversized flannel socks bunched around her ankles. The little girl looked at the framed photograph in Sarah's hand, then raised her eyes to meet Sarah's cold gaze.

"That's Chuck," Lisa said softly.

Sarah looked down at the image of the young man in the dress jacket. "I know."

Lisa nodded sagely, her expression unbothered. "He won."

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "Won what?"

Lisa offered a tiny, indifferent shrug. "Something."

Sarah felt a small, involuntary breath through her nose. "Helpful."

Lisa offered a serene, almost conspiratorial smile.

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Meanwhile, three floors down inside the massive, cavernous retail concourse of the Liandri & McKay Tower, Chuck Bartowski was suffering a quiet, existential breakdown.

He had made one catastrophic, fundamental error in judgment: he assumed buying basic domestic supplies would be much easier than breaching a secure twenty-third-floor law

firm.

It wasn't.

Breaking into the law firm followed logical rules: predictable code, laser grids, and electronic bypasses.

Shopping, on the other hand, involved choices. Infinite, paralyzing choices.

Chuck stood frozen in the middle of a brightly lit, automated convenience hub, staring down the clothing aisle with profound, helpless dread.

"This is objectively harder than the lasers," he muttered.

He reached out, grabbed a generic gray cotton shirt, looked at it, and put it back immediately. He picked up another. Too small. Another. Horrifyingly bright neon orange.

"Okay," Chuck whispered, pressing two fingers against his temple to stave off an impending headache. "She is approximately... what? Five-seven? Five-eight? Tactical posture, lean build, highly likely to snap my neck if I get this wrong."

He stopped, staring blankly at the metal shelving. He didn't know her size. Of course he didn't. He had known her for roughly twelve hours, and approximately eleven of those hours had been spent amidst high-explosive ordnance, airborne shattered glass, grand theft auto escape, bedroom surgery, and some minor rest. Not counting the incident with her magical knife.

Chuck looked down at the plastic basket resting in his arm's crook.

Two plain shirts. A pair of gray drawstring sweatpants. A warm fleece jacket for Lisa, small pants, T-shirts. Socks.

Then his eyes drifted to the next display rack. Chuck stood frozen in the middle of the brightly lit apparel aisle, feeling as though he had wandered directly into a psychological landmine engineered specifically to break his spirit.

Underwear.

It was a simple, everyday necessity of human civilization. Yet, standing here in the middle of the automated concourse market, faced with the sheer, suffocating volume of options, Chuck felt a cold sweat break out on the back of his neck. The problem was not Lisa's.

"Okay," he muttered under his breath, his eyes wide as he stared at the wall of packaged intimates. "Okay, don't panic, Chuck. You have a degree from Mironov-Ji. You solved complex data-encryption matrices before breakfast. You can figure out basic female attire."

Except he couldn't. Because the options weren't logical. They were an absolute chaotic nightmare.

He reached out a trembling hand, hovering over a rack of delicate, black lace-trimmed pairs. He snatched his hand back as if the fabric had bitten him.

Lace? he thought, his brain spiraling into overdrive. *Why would anyone wear lace under tactical gear? Is lace aerodynamic? No, of course it's not aerodynamic! What if I buy her lace, and she thinks I'm making a move? What if she thinks I'm being inappropriately romantic with a woman who literally held a six-inch combat blade to my neck twenty minutes ago?!*

He shifted two inches left, his eyes falling on a display of seamless, minimalist thongs.

Chuck's throat went bone-dry. He stared at the packaging in absolute horror.

"Oh, God, no," he whispered frantically, darting a paranoid glance over his shoulder to see if any passersby were watching his internal collapse. *A thong?! If I hand a lethal, highly trained corporate operative a pair of satin thongs, she won't just refuse them—she'll execute me on principle. She'll use the thong to strangle me! It's practically a weapon in a professional's hands!*

And then came the secondary, even more terrifying layer of the crisis: the sizing.

Chuck picked up a package and squinted at the small grid on the back. *Small. Medium. Extra Small.*

He stared at the letters, his mind churning through terrifying scenarios.

If I buy Extra Small and it's too tight, it's going to compress her abdominal wound, tear out my meticulously placed sutures, and cause her to bleed out on my carpet again. But if I buy Large...

Chuck shuddered as a cold chill ran down his spine.

If I buy Large, she's going to look at the label, assume I think she's out of shape, take it as a profound personal insult to her elite physical conditioning, and snap my collarbone in three places.

"There is no statistically safe choice here," Chuck whimpered, pressing his palm flat against his forehead. "Every single option leads directly to severe bodily harm or death."

He stood there for two full minutes, paralyzed, holding a box of silk briefs in one hand and a pack of basic cotton hipsters in the other, debating whether it would be less dangerous to go back to the apartment and tell her he'd failed the mission entirely.

And then, his gaze drifted past the lace, past the silk, and landed on an adjacent display three pegs down in the activewear aisle.

A mannequin's bust sat under a bright LED spotlight, wearing a seamless, moisture-wicking charcoal-gray sports bra paired with high-waisted, stretchy athletic compression shorts.

Chuck froze.

His eyes widened. The metaphorical lightbulb above his head didn't just turn on; it detonated like a flashbang.

"Wait..." Chuck breathed, stepping closer as if approaching a holy artifact. "Wait a second."

He stared at the athletic wear, his brain rapidly running through the parameters.

She wasn't a civilian going to a cocktail party. She wasn't looking for luxury or delicate fashion. She was a machine—a high-velocity, combat-hardened weapon currently recovering from a major traumatic injury.

"Sports stuff," Chuck whispered, a manic, triumphant grin slowly spreading across his face. "Of course! Athletic gear!"

It was the ultimate, flawless tactical solution.

First: *Fit*. Sports bras and high-waisted performance shorts were made of heavy elastane and spandex. They stretched! They had forgiving, flexible sizing parameters! A 'Medium' in performance activewear had a variable margin of error that could accommodate a wide range of athletic builds without insulting anyone's intelligence or anatomy!

Second: *Functionality*. High-waisted athletic shorts wouldn't dig into her waistline. They would sit smoothly over her bandages, providing gentle, firm support to her lower core without irritating the surgical thread holding her flank together.

Third: *The Vibe*. It was entirely, beautifully, unequivocally non-creepy. It didn't scream 'romantic gesture' or 'awkward civilian guess.' It screamed: *I acknowledge that you are a dangerous professional who needs to move quickly and comfortably while recovering from a shrapnel wound*.

"It's perfect," Chuck declared softly to the empty aisle, a wave of profound relief washing over him. "It's practical, it's functional, it's non-threatening, and most importantly, it significantly lowers the statistical probability of me getting stabbed in my own living room!"

Feeling like a genius who had just cracked a zero-day security exploit, Chuck reached out and grabbed two pairs of seamless performance shorts and two high-impact, racerback sports bras in flexible athletic sizes.

He dumped them into his shopping basket with a triumphant thud, brushing his hands together with absolute satisfaction.

"Take that, corporate espionage," Chuck muttered happily, wheeling his cart toward the frozen pizza aisle. "Chuck Bartowski: 1. Terror-induced awkwardness: 0."

He reluctantly put the lacey items back, kept four sports ones, and let out a long, defeated sigh. "Whatever. She can execute me after she eats."

He pushed toward the automated grocer section, his mood brightening slightly when he spotted the thermal food units.

Pizza. Lisa had practically cheered at the word. That was a safe variable.

He grabbed two large frozen pizzas, the ones with the chemical heater in the box. The ads were at least true on these; they get backed in and pretty fast. Then he paused, remembering the terrifying amount of energy she could have expended while bleeding through her shirt. He grabbed a third.

He hovered over the display, his fingers twitching over a fourth.

"She looks like she could easily polish off a fourth pizza," Chuck reasoned softly. He paused, recalculating. "Or she'll murder me before the crust cools. Either way, extra calories are a net positive."

He dumped the fourth pizza into his cart.

As he headed to the self-checkout kiosks, Chuck's anxious mind drifted to his sister.

That was the absolute worst part of his life hitting a chaotic bump: whenever something completely insane happened, his brain instantly summoned the ghost of Ellie's reaction.

What would Ellie say if she knew he was currently harboring a wounded, high-caliber operative and a quiet, mysterious child in his sublevel apartment? What would she do if she found out he had spent his Friday night using surgical thread to stitch up a gunshot victim on his living room floor?

He could practically hear her voice echoing in his ear, crisp, stern, and terrifyingly sharp: *'Chuck! You brought an armed, bleeding fugitive into your home?!'*

Chuck winced, ducking his head as he scanned his items at the kiosk.

"Technically, Ellie, she brought herself through the window of an office I tried to rob. I just handled the logistics."

A teenage store clerk stocking shelves nearby gave him an utterly bewildered look.

Chuck offered a tight, polite smile and leaned over the scanner. "Just... double-checking the math. Carry on."

He imagined Ellie walking into his condo, finding the dark bloodstains in the bathroom sink, the ruined tactical vest shoved under the counter, the medical wrappings, and the lethal woman sitting on his couch summoning a fuckin' combat knife out of thin air.

She wouldn't just yell at him. Yelling was manageable.

She would give him *The Look*. The heavy, soul-crushing, big-sister disappointment look that made him feel like he was eight years old again and had accidentally set the kitchen curtains on fire.

Chuck shuddered, grabbing his receipt as the kiosk beeped.

"Okay," he muttered, hauling the heavy, stuffed shopping bags onto his shoulders. "New rule: Ellie never, ever finds out about this. Ever."

He stepped into the concourse, the heavy plastic handles digging into his fingers. Left the armed store security guys. The thought of Ellie nagged at him, leaving a sour taste in his mouth. Ellie was the one person in his life he shared everything with. He didn't do covert secrets. He was a bad liar, a terrible actor, and an awful fugitive.

He stared down the tower's long, gleaming corridor.

"Great," Chuck sighed softly. "Now I have a big deal of black-ops secrets. Just great."

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Back in the apartment, Sarah stood in front of the bookshelf again.

She had found a third frame tucked behind a stack of technical manuals. This one was different from the corporate awards and the war medal.

It was a candid shot of Chuck and a young woman with dark hair and sharp, expressive eyes. They were standing on a sunlit pier, his arm slung casually over her shoulders.

'Love U, bro. Ellie' was written with a faded Sharpie on the frame.

Sarah studied the image carefully. Chuck's eyes held an absolute, unfiltered warmth as he looked at his sister—a fierce, quiet protectiveness that required no military training or tactical armor.

It was the same look she had caught on his face when the heavy machine gun had opened fire through the window of the law firm, the split-second before he had thrown his body over Lisa to take the impact himself. It was the same look he had given Sarah before she passed out and he dragged her bleeding, unconscious body into the safety of the fire stairwell instead of running for his life.

Sarah set the photo down slowly, as if it hurt.

A cold, dangerous realization crystallized in her mind.

Chuck Bartowski wasn't brave because he was reckless, nor was he fearless because he thought he was invincible. He was brave because he had a fatal, unyielding instinct to protect people—an inability to abandon anyone in distress, regardless of the cost to himself.

That was terrifying.

Sarah had known people with that trait before. In her world, those were the operatives who ended up in unmarked graves, sacrificed to cover someone else's clean getaway.

Lisa wandered back into the living room, holding the modified gaming controller by its cord. "Chuck's coming back."

Sarah turned her head slowly toward the door, her hand resting near her flank. "How do you know?"

Lisa shrugged, matter-of-fact. "He's Chuck."

Sarah stared at the child. It wasn't an answer—not an operational one, at least. But to Lisa, it was an absolute, unshakeable truth.

A second later, the front door lock clicked, and Chuck stumbled into the entryway, laden with enough brightly colored shopping bags to survive a minor siege.

"I have returned!" Chuck announced, his voice echoing loudly in the quiet space as the door shut behind him.

He froze mid-step.

Sarah was standing by the bookshelf, watching him. She held a photograph of him in his dress uniform.

Chuck's eyes locked onto the frame. Then they shifted to Sarah's calm, unreadable expression.

A heavy silence filled the room.

Chuck swallowed hard, his goofy demeanor faltering for a fraction of a second. He slowly pointed a thumb toward the picture. "That... Huh... that one?"

Sarah said nothing, her blue eyes tracking his every move.

Chuck cleared his throat and set the heavy bags on the floor with a soft plastic rustle. "Before you ask... yes. That's me."

Sarah's gaze drifted down to the silver inscription on the plaque. "4th Corporate War."

Chuck looked at the medal in the photograph. For a single, fleeting heartbeat, the goofy, civilian light behind his eyes vanished, replaced by a dark, heavy shadow—a glimpse of something old, exhausted, and deeply buried.

Then, as quickly as it had appeared, the shadow evaporated. The familiar, easygoing Chuck smile snapped back into place.

"Yeah," he said softly, offering a quiet, self-deprecating nod. "A long time ago."

Sarah studied the subtle shift in his posture, filing the information away.

Chuck turned to the little girl sitting on the rug and lifted one of the heavy thermal bags with a flourish. "So... who's ready for pizza?"

"Pizza!" Lisa cheered, sprang to her feet, and ran toward the kitchen counter with genuine childhood glee.

Chuck smiled and followed her to unpack the boxes.

Sarah stayed by the shelf, eyes fixed on Chuck's back as he pulled paper plates from a bag.

The apartment suddenly felt much smaller than it had twenty minutes ago.

For the first time since he dragged them out of the storm, Chuck realized Sarah hadn't spent her morning resting on his couch. She had been hunting through his past.

And Sarah realized that Chuck Bartowski had just risked his life, his home, and his quiet existence to buy food and clothes for a pair of ghosts he didn't know.

Neither of them said a word. The silence between them had shifted—they were no longer strangers, but something far more complicated.

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Chuck nudged the cluster of plastic shopping bags across the counter, setting them down with a soft rustle right beside Sarah's arm.

"I brought clothes," Chuck said, his tone casual, though his eyes darted nervously to the faint smudge of dried blood lingering along her jawline. "You should probably take a shower. Wash off the... you know, high-rise demolition grime. You'll feel better."

Sarah didn't immediately reach for the bags. She looked down at the dark plastic, then raised her eyes and fixed Chuck with a sharp, calculating stare that could have bored through steel plating.

Chuck cleared his throat and pointed a thumb over his shoulder toward the short hallway. "Go ahead. Shower. I'll get the pizzas ready with Lisa."

Sarah remained completely motionless. She didn't flinch, didn't shift her weight, simply watching him with an intense, unreadable focus.

Something about the way this man operated was deeply, profoundly unsettling. Standard operational procedure dictated that a civilian thrust into a black-ops crossfire would either panic, demand answers, or attempt to negotiate for their own safety. Chuck Bartowski had done none of those things. No interrogation. No furious demands. No desperate attempts to extract tactical information from her. He had simply walked out of

his own condo, bought a wardrobe's worth of clothes for two absolute strangers, and returned laden with enough hot food to feed a small militia.

"Why are you doing this, Bartowski?" Sarah asked softly.

Chuck paused. For the first time since she had opened her eyes on his couch, the quick-witted, nervous rambling vanished. He had no joke ready. He had no awkward deflection.

He rubbed the back of his neck, his shoulders slumping slightly. "I honestly don't know."

Sarah's eyes narrowed into thin, dangerous slits, searching his face for the subtle twitch of a liar.

Chuck offered a small, helpless shrug. "Look... if I hadn't been in that office building last night, we wouldn't be standing in my condo right now." He paused, his gaze drifting to the floor where Lisa quietly stacked plastic cups. "Any of us."

Sarah studied the subtle rise and fall of his chest, the genuine fatigue etched around his eyes. "What were you doing there in the first place?"

The shift in Chuck's posture was instant. His shoulders squared, his jaw tightened, and the open, transparent warmth in his eyes locked down behind an impenetrable, guarded shutter.

"Well..." Chuck said, his voice dropping into a quiet, firm register. "That's my business."

Sarah caught the subtle wall going up. It was understated, but to a trained operative, it was as bright as a signal flare. Ever since she had pulled a knife on him, Chuck had been nervous, talkative, and almost painfully transparent. Now, for the first time, he had actively drawn a boundary.

Sarah didn't push it. Not yet. Information extraction was a game played over time, and right now, her physical reserves were running on fumes.

She reached out and snagged the handles of the clothing bags.

"Fresh towels are in the cabinet under the sink."

Sarah walked past him, her boots making almost no sound on the floorboards. She paused for a fraction of a second beside the bathroom cabin's doorframe, casting one last backward glance into the living room. Chuck was already leaning over the counter, opening the first of four steaming pizza boxes for the little girl.

Sarah stepped inside, and the automation closed the heavy framed door. The latch clicked into place with a definitive metallic snap.

A moment later, the harsh, rushing hiss of hot water echoed through the plumbing.

In the kitchen, Chuck stood, listening to the running shower through the drywall. He let out a long, slow breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, then looked down at Lisa, who sat patiently on a barstool.

"Well," Chuck said softly.

Lisa tilted her head, looking up at him with those impossibly calm eyes. "Pizza?"

Chuck managed a faint, genuine smile. "Exactly. Pizza."

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Chuck crouched beside the low coffee table in the living room, opening the pizza boxes one after another like a grand reveal. The savory, rich scent of melted cheese, garlic, and toasted crust flooded the room, cutting through the sterile hum of the air conditioner.

"Okay, Lisa," Chuck said, fanning his hands over the steam. "We have options. Which one should we officially start with?"

He lifted the first cardboard lid with a flourish. "Option A: Pepperoni and salami."

Lisa leaned forward slightly, watching with quiet curiosity.

He lifted the second. "Option B: Ham and mushroom."

A tiny flicker of interest crossed her face.

He lifted the third lid. "Option C: Hawaiian style. Pineapple and ham."

Lisa's serene composure instantly broke. Her small nose wrinkled in absolute revulsion, her lips curling into an unmistakable expression of disgust. "Eww! Pineapple!"

Chuck pulled back, genuinely offended. "Excuse me? What was that?"

"Pineapple is gross," Lisa declared flatly.

"Pineapple is a culinary masterpiece!" Chuck argued, pointing an accusing finger at the golden yellow chunks resting on the cheese. "It provides a sweet counterbalance to the savory acidity of the tomato sauce!"

Lisa shook her head, absolutely convinced. "No."

"Yes." he nodded with a grin.

"No."

Chuck let out a grand, dramatic sigh and shook his head in mock defeat. "Fine. More pineapple for me. It's your loss, kiddo."

He shoved the Hawaiian box aside and opened the final one. "And Option D: Vegetarian with extra black olives."

Lisa stared at the array of steaming food resting on the table. Chuck rested his elbows on his knees and studied her quiet demeanor.

"So," Chuck asked gently, "what's your absolute favorite, Lisa?"

The little girl went quiet for a long moment. She reached out a tiny hand and traced the corrugated edge of the cardboard box, her brows drawing together in quiet contemplation.

"I've never eaten it," she said softly.

Chuck froze mid-reach. "What?"

"Pizza," Lisa repeated, her voice small and entirely matter-of-fact.

Chuck blinked, staring at her. "You've never eaten pizza? Ever?"

Lisa shook her head slowly.

“Wait a minute...” Chuck frowned, and pointed toward the Hawaiian box. “If you’ve never eaten pizza, how do you know you don’t like pineapple on it?”

Lisa looked up, meeting his eyes with an unblinking, serene gaze. “I remember.”

Chuck stared at her. Something about the way she delivered that line sent a subtle, icy chill trailing down his spine. It wasn’t the answer itself—children said bizarre, imaginative things all the time. It was the absolute, eerie simplicity of her delivery. No hesitation. No childish uncertainty. Just a calm, unwavering statement of fact: *I remember.*

He glanced toward the hallway. The shower still roared behind the second door.

Chuck turned back to the child, tilting his head. “You’re a little strange, you know that?”

Lisa offered him a tiny, mysterious smile.

“How old are you, anyway?” Chuck asked.

Lisa paused, her small face scrunching up as if searching through a vast, complicated archive of information to find the right number.

Chuck tilted his head. “Four or five?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” Chuck smiled warmly, trying to keep the tone light. “But which one is it?”

The girl looked at him with striking seriousness. “Four.”

Chuck nodded slowly, accepting the answer. “Four. Got it.”

He filed the information away in his analytical brain, processing the variables: Four years old. She had never eaten pizza and claimed to remember things she apparently had never experienced. And somehow, through a terrifying night of explosions, heavy machine-gun fire, an armored gunship attack, and a high-speed escape in a hijacked cargo hauler, she had remained completely, unnaturally composed.

Chuck cast another long, quiet look toward the bathroom cabin.

“And what’s her story?” Chuck whispered.

Lisa didn't answer. She picked up a plain slice of pepperoni and took a tiny, careful bite. The shower kept running in the background.

Chuck lowered his voice to a bare whisper, staring at the closed bathroom door.

"That's pretty much what I'd like to know, too," he said, grabbing a slice of the Hawaiian pizza.

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The water beating down on Sarah's back was almost painfully hot, turning her fair skin a deep, flushed red. She stood with both palms braced flat against the cool, white subway tile of the shower enclosure, her head hanging low as thick clouds of steam billowed up to fill the small room.

For the first time in what felt like an eternity, the world had stopped moving.

No deafening gunfire tearing through drywall or heavy combat boots pounding down concrete corridors. No tactical radio chatter buzzing in her ear canal: no target markers, no mission parameters, and no cold, unfeeling briefing packets.

Just the rhythmic, roaring cascade of water.

She closed her eyes, but the dark brought the memories flooding back in violent, fragmented flashes: The sleek glass walls of the law firm. The blinding flash of the entry charge. The gravocopter rising from the abyss like a mechanical nightmare. Lisa clutched tight against her chest. The metal doors failing. The searing, blinding agony of tungsten shrapnel tearing through her ribs.

And then... Chuck.

Sarah opened her eyes and watched the water swirl down the chrome drain beneath her feet.

Chuck Bartowski.

A civilian. Supposedly.

That word grated against her instincts like glass on metal. Nothing about the man fit neatly into the standard definitions of a non-combatant. He had breached a high-security corporate law firm using custom, un-serialized hardware. He had stitched up a deep arterial laceration on a living room rug with surgical precision. Then, without a single trace of cognitive dissonance, he spent his Saturday morning sitting on the floor, playing geometric video games with a four-year-old child.

Either Chuck Bartowski was the most bizarre, impossible civilian she had ever encountered—or he was a master operative playing a character so absurdly well that even her trained eyes couldn't spot the seam.

Sarah reached for the small bottle of soap, her mind shifting gears with cold, clinical efficiency.

She needed to get Lisa out. Immediately. Far from Miami, far from Downtown Nexus, and far from whatever corporate cleanup crew had been deployed in that gunship.

Cuba, she calculated, mapping out transit vectors in her head. It was close enough to reach by boat without attracting high-level maritime traffic, but distant enough to sever local tracking signals.

No, Nassau would be better. Nassau offered high-density tourist traffic to blend into, and from there, Costa Gravas was a short charter flight away.

And Costa Gravas had people. Old, deep-cover contacts from her former life. Individuals who still owed her life-debts. If any of them were still breathing, they had the resources to procure a clean, high-grade passport for the child—something legitimate enough to pass deep biometric scans at a border checkpoint. Something that would grant Lisa entry into the Latin American Confederation.

A clean slate. A new identity. A real life.

For Lisa. Not for herself.

Sarah knew the dark mechanics of her world too well to harbor naive fantasies about her own survival. Targets like her didn't get happy endings or quiet retirements in the suburbs. But Lisa wasn't a target yet. Lisa could still disappear.

That was the only parameter that mattered.

Sarah lifted her face into the hot stream, letting the water wash away dried crimson blood, concrete dust, the acrid smell of burnt cordite, and the grime of the subterranean escape.

For a few fleeting seconds, she simply stood there, absorbing the heat.

Then, out of sheer habit, her hand drifted down to test her left flank. The thick gauze dressing was completely soaked through, heavy with warm water. That wasn't a good idea, but Sarah didn't step right away.

"Damn it," Sarah muttered through her teeth.

She shut off the shower valves, the sudden silence in the small bathroom feeling deafening. Stepping carefully over the edge of the tub, she grabbed a thick white towel and pressed it firmly against her flank, holding back a hiss of pain as the raw tissue beneath the sutures protested the movement.

She set the towel aside and turned her attention to the plastic shopping bags resting on the sink counter.

She pulled out the first item: a charcoal-gray athletic sports bra made of heavy, moisture-wicking elastane. She raised an eyebrow, noting the high-impact design and wide racerback straps. Practical. Surprisingly practical.

She pulled out the second item: a pair of dark compression shorts. She checked the tag: Medium. Another eyebrow went up.

Then she reached to the bottom of the bag and pulled out a package of seamless cotton underwear. She flipped the box over and checked the size printed on the corner.

Medium.

Sarah stared at the box for a moment, holding it between two fingers. She evaluated the garment against her frame. A Small would have been a much better fit, but given that most untrained men would have panic-bought silk lace, string thongs, or completely misjudged the scale and gone straight to extra-large, she considered it a remarkably

respectable logistical attempt.

"He didn't ask, though," she whispered to the foggy mirror.

A ghost of a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. Almost. At least the man had prioritized utility over absurdity.

Sarah pulled on the athletic gear, followed by a soft, oversized gray T-shirt. The clean fabric felt strange against her skin—soft, light, and completely devoid of the heavy, familiar weight of tactical armor.

She gathered her scorched, blood-stained clothes into a tight, compact bundle and shoved them out of sight beneath the sink.

Turning to the mirror, Sarah wiped a circle through the condensation, staring at her reflection. For a split second, she barely recognized the woman looking back—no tactical gear. No holsters, no weapons or armor.

Just Sarah. Tired, with dark circles under her eyes and a faint bruise blooming along her cheek, but alive.

She squared her shoulders, pushing the fatigue back down into the dark corners of her mind. Whatever came next, she would handle it. First Lisa's exit route. Then everything else.

Sarah unlocked the door and stepped out into the apartment.

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Chuck was standing beside the small dining table. All four pizza boxes were open in front of him, steaming hot. Each box had its own chemical heater that could turn the frozen slab into a hot meal in a couple of minutes without any flame. Lisa was standing on a chair beside him, staring down at the spread with open, childish fascination.

Chuck looked up as the door opened. "Perfect timing."

Sarah walked in, her bare feet silent on the floorboards. Chuck's eyes briefly swept over her clean clothes—noticing the practical fit of the shirt—before immediately returning to the food.

He gestured generously toward the spread. "Food's hot."

Lisa was already reaching for a slice of pepperoni. Sarah remained standing a few feet back, her posture guarded, her eyes sweeping the room out of sheer habit.

Chuck looked at her, and for once, he didn't attempt to fill the quiet air with nervous banter.

Sarah looked at the child, then at the modest apartment, and finally at the heavy front door.

Her gaze returned to the little girl happily chewing her pizza, then to Chuck's open, honest face.

"Thank you," Sarah said, her voice dropping into a quiet, sincere register. "For taking us in."

Chuck's guarded expression softened, a warm, easy smile touching his eyes.

"...But we're leaving," Sarah added firmly.

Chuck opened his mouth to protest, but before a word could escape, a sharp, metallic crackle echoed from the ceiling-mounted building intercom.

The quiet of the apartment was instantly shattered by a flat, synthesized automated broadcast:

ATTENTION RESIDENTS. RHINO SECURITY UNITS HAVE ENTERED THE LIANDRI & MCKAY TOWER. A FULL STRUCTURAL AND RESIDENTIAL SWEEP IS NOW IN PROGRESS. PLEASE REMAIN INSIDE YOUR APARTMENTS AND COOPERATE FULLY WITH SECURITY PERSONNEL.

Chuck froze dead in his tracks. A slice of Hawaiian pizza hung halfway to his mouth.

His eyes slowly widened in sheer, unadulterated terror. He turned his head inch by inch to look at Sarah.

Sarah was already staring back at him, her body locking into a predatory stance. Lisa looked quietly between them and set her pizza slice back on the box.

Chuck swallowed hard, his throat clicking audibly.

“Okay,” Chuck whispered, slowly lowering the pizza slice back onto the cardboard. “That... is statistically very bad.”

Sarah’s face hardened into an iron mask.

Chuck stared at the front door, then at the reinforced glass window, and finally back to Sarah.

“Well,” Chuck whimpered softly under his breath. “Looks like we’re not going anywhere.”

Sarah’s right hand moved on muscle memory, reaching behind her back to where her pistol usually rested, then remembered her waist was empty, and these were only sweatpants.

Chuck noticed the movement. He looked at Lisa, then at Sarah’s empty hands, and then down at his own trembling fingers.

For the first time since Sarah crashed into his life, the nervous, goofy civilian facade melted from Chuck’s face. Not entirely—the terror was still lingering in his eyes—but beneath it, a cold, sharp focus clicked into place.

Chuck looked up, meeting her gaze, and whispered:

“Welcome to my weekend.”

Chapter 3: Chapter 3: The Secret Girlfriend

Chapter 3 — Secret girlfriend

The flat, synthesized chime of the automated announcement still echoed through the condo as Chuck slowly set his pizza down on the cardboard box.

For a long, agonizing moment, nobody moved. The only sounds in the apartment were the quiet, steady hum of the air-conditioning unit and the soft tapping of rain against the windowpane.

Then Chuck gave a single, quiet nod. "Okay."

Sarah's eyes locked onto him, sharp as cold steel. "Okay?"

Chuck swallowed, his throat clicking dryly. "Okay."

The Rhino enforcement unit was moving through the Liandri & McKay Tower with methodical, ruthless efficiency. Floor by floor. Apartment by apartment. Door by door.

Sarah's gaze snapped back to the entrance, her mind running fast, clinical calculations. "How long until they reach this floor?"

Chuck didn't answer right away. Instead, he pushed himself up from the table, crossed the room with quiet, deliberate steps, and dropped onto one knee beside the dark fake wood kitchen island. His fingers brushed along a microscopic, almost invisible seam in the floorboards.

Sarah watched his hands move with practiced ease.

A tiny mechanical latch clicked beneath his pressure. Chuck pulled a rectangular section of the flooring upward, revealing a dark, recessed service compartment lined with anti-static foam. He reached inside and hoisted a heavy, matte-black case roughly the size of a tactical duffle bag.

Sarah's expression hardened instantly. The blood drained slightly from her face as her eyes registered the sleek, reinforced carbon-fiber casing.

She knew precisely what rested inside that container.

"Where the hell did you get that?" Sarah whispered, her voice dropping to a lethal urgency. She stepped toward him, her blue eyes narrowing. "And why does a middle-tier systems analyst have a class-five Lurker combat-drone?"

Chuck glanced up at her, his face completely unreadable as he rested the case on the rug. "Insurance."

Sarah stared down at him. "You keep black-budget military reconnaissance gear as *insurance*?"

"I've got a somewhat complicated life," Chuck muttered smoothly, unlatching the primary security clasps.

The matte-black casing opened with a soft, pneumatic hiss of depressurization. Inside, the sleek, insectoid machine unfolded with a series of sharp, precise mechanical clicks. Six articulated, hydraulic limbs extended outward from its central chassis, followed by a secondary pair of stabilization appendages. The limbs spread wide against the carpet. At the end of each leg, a narrow, monomolecular metallic blade slid forward and locked into place with a subtle *clack*.

Sarah's hand instinctively snapped behind her back, her fingers brushing the hilt of her weapon before she remembered the holster wasn't there, and the memory of fighting these nightmares left again.

The Lurker's central optical array flared to life with a quiet, high-pitched electronic chirp.

Chuck tapped a sequence into his handheld interface module. The machine didn't hover—it moved with sickening, spider-like agility, scuttling across the rug and vaulting onto the living room wall. Its jointed limbs folded and unfolded with terrifying, silent precision as it ascended toward the ceiling.

Once it reached the room's highest corner, the machine's outer chassis shimmered violently. Light bent around its carbon frame as its active optical camouflage engaged, dissolving the black shape seamlessly into the shadows overhead.

Sarah watched the drone vanish into thin air; her heart started pounding a frantic rhythm. Wasting no time, she lunged toward the workbench, retrieved her Harbinger, slammed the high-capacity magazine home, and sent home the slide with a heavy metallic *clack*.

She turned, grabbing Lisa's small hand to pull the child behind her.

Chuck reached out, his hand gently catching her wrist. "Don't."

Sarah froze, her eyes flashing dangerously as she glared down at his grip. "What?"

"You won't need it," Chuck said softly, releasing her wrist.

Sarah's posture remained rigid, her fingers white-knuckled around the grip of the heavy pistol. "What is your plan, Bartowski? We have armed purge teams descending on this corridor."

Chuck looked up at the empty ceiling corner where the cloaked Lurker rested, then turned back to her. "We're on floor thirteen."

Sarah frowned. "That's no insurance."

"There are roughly one hundred residential units per floor," Chuck said, pacing slowly back and forth across the rug, his mind clearly running complex, analytical algorithms. "To conduct a proper, thorough door-to-door sweep, a standard Rhino squad needs at least twenty to thirty operatives—more if they're actually cross-referencing resident biometrics instead of just knocking, grunting, and pretending it's an investigation."

Another heavy metallic thud echoed from the floor above, vibrating subtly through the ceiling beams.

Chuck pointed upward toward the noise. "Minimum twenty minutes. Probably closer to thirty."

He turned back to face her. "That gives us half an hour more or less before they knock on that door."

Sarah stared at him, her tactical mind weighing his estimates. "Unless they bring breach charges or sweep three apartments at a time."

"Then we adapt," Chuck replied calmly.

"Run?" Sarah suggested, her eyes flicking toward the window.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because the tower's primary perimeter is sealed," Chuck explained, giving her a tired, slightly helpless smile. "Running down the service stairs right now would be like trying to escape a swimming pool by swimming harder. They control the ground levels."

Sarah's eyes narrowed into slits. "So what are we doing?"

Chuck looked her dead in the eye, his demeanor shifting into something sharp, composed, and undeniably confident. "I have an idea. But to make it work, I need you to do something for me."

"What?"

He took a slow, deep breath. "Tell me your name."

Sarah stood frozen, staring at him as if he had just spoken in a long dead, ancient language. "Have you lost your mind, Bartowski?"

"No," Chuck said, offering a small, casual shrug. "I really haven't. But you're going to have to trust me on this one."

Sarah didn't look remotely convinced. Her hand remained firm on her weapon.

"Look," Chuck continued, gesturing vaguely toward the ceiling. "You could literally report me to CyberForce right now for possessing an illegal, unregistered class-five military drone and have me thrown into a federal black site for twenty years. So... please. Tell me your name."

Sarah's expression stayed stone-hard, her sharp blue eyes taking in every millimeter of his face.

Then, her shoulders dropped half an inch. "Sarah," she said quietly.

Chuck waited, his head tilted.

"Sarah Walker."

A heavy beat of silence passed between them.

"I'm going to go ahead and assume that's not your real birth name," Chuck noted dryly.

Sarah's head snapped toward him, her glare lethal enough to melt lead. "What?"

Chuck raised his hands defensively. "Nothing! Just an observation. Sarah Walker is fine. Great, in fact."

He turned away, walking back toward the microfiber couch, and sat down. Sarah watched him with deep suspicion as Chuck leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, staring intently at the terminal screen resting on the coffee table.

For a fraction of a second, something extraordinary happened.

Behind the dark, hazel pupils of Chuck's eyes, a microscopic, golden flicker of light flared to life. It was a fleeting, terrifying burst of raw data processing—a rapid neural sequence that illuminated his irises with tiny, golden specks before vanishing just as quickly as it had appeared.

Sarah caught the phenomenon instantly. Her breath hitched in her throat. *What the hell was that?*

Chuck didn't look up at her. His fingers began moving across the terminal's touch interface with blinding, supernatural speed, executing complex keyboard commands without looking at the keys.

"So, here's our official narrative," Chuck announced smoothly, his tone remarkably composed. "Sarah Walker, my smoking-hot girlfriend..."

Sarah blinked, her jaw tightening. "Excuse me?"

"And her little sister," Chuck continued, gesturing toward Lisa, "Lisa Walker, came over to visit for the weekend."

He paused, his brow furrowing as his fingers hovered over the screen. "No, wait. That sounds slightly suspicious given the current regional travel restrictions."

He tapped a sequence on his knee, some sort of melody or just moves for concentration; Sarah couldn't decipher it. "California Republic," he said.

Sarah stared at him in utter disbelief. "What about it?"

"She came here from the California Republic because she's planning to move back in with me," Chuck explained, nodding to himself as if assembling a completely logical jigsaw puzzle. "Yes. That's good. That explains the lack of local residential history for the last year."

Then, his face brightened with an awkward, genuine grin. "Because she couldn't find a decent job in Hollywood."

Sarah's left eyebrow rose to an impossible height. "Hollywood?"

"Yeah, good thing that you don't have some visible and ugly chrome on you. Hollywood could have been nice. But to land a job there, except for a brief, incredibly dark stint at an Orange-Orange frozen yogurt stand," Chuck added, nodding vigorously. "There we go. Flawless backstory."

He stood up and walked back to the dining table with a triumphant air. "It's perfectly believable."

Sarah simply stared at him, her mind struggling to bridge the gap between his absurd cover story and the terrifying speed at which he was operating.

Chuck pulled out a wooden chair and gestured toward the four open pizza boxes. "Come on. Eat while it's hot. Panic on an empty stomach gives you terrible heartburn."

Sarah didn't move an inch. She pointed a rigid finger at the glowing terminal on the coffee table. "What the hell did you just do, Bartowski?"

Chuck offered a sheepish smile. "A little magic." He reached down, picking up a slice of vegetarian pizza. "Go look."

Sarah approached the table cautiously, keeping her distance from Chuck as she leaned over the display.

The terminal screen was displaying an official, high-resolution digital file from the Miami-Dade Municipal Registry.

Sarah stopped dead in her tracks.

The primary image field showed a photograph of her. Or rather, a photograph that looked undeniably, terrifyingly real. She stood on a sun-drenched beach, her arm linked through Chuck's, both laughing into the camera as the ocean crashed behind them.

Before she could process the image, another photo auto-scrolled past: Chuck and Sarah sitting at a dimly lit, high-end Italian restaurant, clinking wine glasses together.

Another: Chuck, Sarah, and little Lisa sitting together on a park bench, holding ice cream cones.

Another: A group family photo at a holiday dinner. Birthday parties. Vacations. Different outfits, different lighting conditions, different years, completely seamless depth-of-field rendering, and perfect shadows.

The photographic footprint was utterly staggering. It wasn't just raw image manipulation—there were digital video loops, geotagged metadata, timestamped receipts, and archived social media pings spanning three full years.

Sarah's eyes narrowed into dark slits.

"Malibu," Chuck noted casually, taking a bite of his pizza. "The lighting algorithms in the California database are surprisingly easy to match."

Sarah raised her head, locking her icy gaze onto him. "How?"

Chuck gave a mild shrug. "I altered the deep registries. Municipal archives, birth cross-references, regional tax nodes, government health databases. Everything."

He picked up a napkin, wiping his thumb. "Your driver's license is in the system now, too. Fully verified."

Sarah stared at the screen as a digital rendering of a Miami Driver's License popped up. She leaned closer to inspect her face on the ID card, and her expression instantly hardened into stone.

"You gave me braces?" she demanded, her voice dropping into a deadly whisper.

Chuck winced and stepped back. "Well... not *currently*! It's an archived driver's license photo from when you were younger!"

"You gave me metal braces."

"It's a driver's license photo!" Chuck defended frantically, holding up his hands. "Everyone looks slightly awkward in their teenage driver's license photo! It adds an undeniable layer of bureaucratic authenticity! Those are very convincing braces!"

Sarah stared at him in absolute, speechless astonishment. For five full seconds, the deadly corporate operative was rendered completely speechless by a civilian who had just rewritten national databases to give her a fake past with orthodontic history.

Slowly, deliberately, Sarah lowered her Smith & Wesson Harbinger. She slid the weapon behind a cardboard box near the table, keeping it within easy, split-second reach.

She walked over to the table and sat down.

The vegetarian pizza box was closest to her. She reached out, pulled a slice toward her plate, and then paused. With clinical, meticulous precision, she began picking off the sliced black olives one by one, setting them neatly on the edge of the cardboard.

Chuck watched her, leaning against the counter. "You don't like olives?"

Sarah didn't look up, continuing her task. "No."

Chuck nodded thoughtfully. "Okay. Good to know. So... if anyone asks how long we've been together..."

Sarah looked up at him, her face unreadable.

"Three years," Chuck said, nodding.

"That is completely insane," Sarah stated flatly.

Chuck shrugged smoothly. "That's precisely why the algorithm will accept it. Bureaucracy never questions long-term mundane details."

Sarah looked back down at the terminal screen, watching the forged life history scroll by. The photographs, short video clips, fabricated medical records, and tax filings—an entire, living, breathing identity generated out of thin air and woven into hundreds of secure government databases in less than ninety seconds.

She took a slow bite of her pizza.

Above them, perfectly concealed against the dark ceiling, the Lurker drone remained motionless, its optical sensors silently scanning the perimeter.

Sarah looked across the small table at Chuck Bartowski.

He was casually chewing his pizza, brushing crumbs off his shirt, looking for all the world as if fabricating an entire digital existence for two hunted fugitives was just a mundane, everyday part of a Saturday morning.

For the first time since she had crashed through the window of Nakamichi Plaza, Sarah Walker found herself wondering with absolute, terrifying certainty... who the hell Chuck Bartowski really was.

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They continued eating in relative silence, the heavy tension in the condo slowly giving way to the mundane, savory reality of hot food. Lisa happily worked her way through her very first slice of pepperoni pizza.

Chuck lifted another slice of Hawaiian, took a thoughtful bite, chewed slowly, and then froze mid-swallow. His eyes widened as a horrifying realization hit him like a freight train.

"There is one problem, my sister," Chuck announced, lowering his food like a man holding a live grenade. "A massive, glaring, catastrophic problem."

Sarah tilted her head, her blue eyes tracking his sudden shift in posture. She took a neat, measured bite of her pizza before answering. "Why is that a problem?"

"Why is that a problem?" Chuck echoed, his hands gesturing wildly with the slice. "That isn't just a problem, Sarah. That is *THE* problem."

He lowered his hands to the table and leaned forward urgently. "Look, fabricating digital records? That's child's play. Photos, municipal registries, driver's licenses, birth certificates... That's just raw data. Data can be manipulated. Data doesn't ask awkward questions at Thanksgiving."

Sarah waited quietly, her expression unreadable, though a spark of genuine curiosity flickered in her eyes.

"But Ellie?" Chuck shook his head, a genuine shudder running through his shoulders. "She can't be fooled. You can't rewrite her hard drive."

Sarah raised a single eyebrow. "What?"

"Because she's my sister," Chuck said, as if that were a universal law of physics explaining the entire cosmos. "She knows me. She *really* knows me. She knows my facial twitches, my nervous habits, and every lie I've tried to tell since third grade. And, more importantly, she has never heard a single syllable about you."

Sarah leaned back slightly against her chair, studying the sheer panic radiating off the man who had just effortlessly rewritten national databases sixty seconds prior. "So?"

"So I can't exactly waltz up to her and casually explain that I've been dating a woman like you for three whole years!"

He gestured vaguely toward Sarah—taking in her sharp, lethal grace, her stunning features, and the faint, lingering shadow of high-level military training.

"Because the second I mention your name," Chuck continued, his voice rising an octave, "Ellie's big-sister radar is going to detonate. She is immediately going to ask where you've been hiding for thirty-six months. Then she's going to ask why I've never mentioned you at family dinners."

He paused, dramatically pointing at Lisa, who was blissfully chewing her crust.

"And *then* she is going to ask why my apparently drop-dead-gorgeous, secret girlfriend suddenly has a four-year-old little sister who lives with us now."

Sarah looked down at Lisa, then back at Chuck's wide, terrified eyes.

Chuck let out a heavy, weary sigh, resting his forehead in his hand. "See? That's already three life-threatening questions before we even get to the dessert."

The ghost of a smirk twitched at the corner of Sarah's mouth. "Your sister sounds difficult."

"You have no idea," Chuck groaned, sitting back up. "She's an MD. She diagnoses complex internal pathologies for a living. Spotting my terrible cover stories is practically a hobby for her."

He picked his pizza back up, taking a small bite to calm his nerves before his face darkened further. "And then... There's her boyfriend Captain Awesome."

Sarah blinked, pausing mid-reach for her water glass. "Why do you call him that?"

Chuck stared at her as if she had just asked why the sky was blue. "Why *wouldn't* I call him that?"

Sarah waited, her jaw set in quiet amusement.

"Everything he does is awesome," Chuck explained, counting on his fingers with deep, lingering resentment. "One: LifeLine Medical Team leader in the worst parts of town. Two: Professional-level extreme sports enthusiast. Three: He cooks gourmet meals out of leftover vegetables."

He held up a fourth finger, leaning in close. "Four: Flossing."

Sarah stared at him, genuinely lost. "Flossing?"

"Super flossing," Chuck insisted solemnly, nodding. "It's a thing apparently."

Sarah shook her head, a soft, silent breath escaping her nose as she tried to reconcile this terrified, neurotic civilian with the man who had dragged her through a hail of heavy machine-gun fire twelve hours ago.

Chuck leaned back in his chair and rubbed his aching temples. "Between Ellie's interrogations and Devon's absurdly healthy optimism, they are going to be an absolutely tough nut to crack."

Sarah took another calm bite of her pizza. She watched Chuck for a quiet moment. He looked utterly exhausted—dark smudges lingering beneath his eyes, his hair a messy mop, his shoulders weighed down by the absurd reality they were trapped in. Yet, despite the exhaustion, his analytical mind was still spinning at a hundred miles an hour, desperately trying to map out and solve the next threat before it landed on his doorstep.

It was a strange, dangerous kind of bravery.

Sarah lowered her slice to her plate, her blue eyes softening just a fraction. "One mission at a time, Chuck."

Chuck looked up and met her gaze across the table. The frantic, nervous energy in his face slowly ebbed away, replaced by a quiet, sheepish smile. "Right. Yeah. One mission at a time."

For a long, peaceful moment, neither of them said anything. The condo's quiet warmth settled over them, a tiny sanctuary floating thirteen floors above a city crawling with corporate purgers.

Then Lisa held up her empty paper plate, pointing her tiny finger at the pepperoni box. "Can I have another one?"

Chuck's face brightened instantly, and a genuine, booming laugh escaped his chest. "See? Finally, someone in this apartment who actually understands proper tactical priorities! Here you go, sweetie, but you should try the one with the ham and mushrooms too."

Sarah shook her head, turning her face slightly toward the rain-slicked window to hide the small, rare smile breaking across her lips.

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The sound arrived long before the knock.

It wasn't a gentle sound—it was the heavy, rhythmic thud of pressurized hydraulic joint-actuators and steel-toed combat boots vibrating directly through the floorboards. It was a slow, mechanical cadence that signaled the approach of heavy tactical armor.

Then came the impact.

Three measured, iron-heavy strikes against the reinforced metal face of the front door.

THUD. THUD. THUD.

Inside the apartment, the quiet atmosphere shattered instantly. Lisa's hand hovered an inch above her paper plate, her childish enthusiasm freezing in a heartbeat.

Chuck swallowed hard, his throat dry as bone. His pulse hammered against his ribs like a trapped bird, but he forced his facial muscles into a mask of mild, civilian annoyance. *Deep breaths, Bartowski*, he screamed at himself internally. *You are just a normal guy. With a normal, yet too-gorgeous girlfriend. And a completely normal, legitimate digital footprint that definitely wasn't forged twenty minutes ago. Boy, hope the biometrics will hold. Please...*

Chuck looked across the table at Sarah.

Sarah gave him the smallest, almost imperceptible nod of her chin—an unspoken command to execute the play.

Chuck stood up, his legs feeling a bit like lead, and walked to the door. He unlatched the heavy deadbolt with a deliberate, metallic click and pulled the panel sideways.

Five Rhino enforcement operators filled the narrow corridor.

They didn't look like municipal police officers; they looked like walking war machines, matte black and grey. Sealed ballistic suits, reinforced chest plates, and heavy tactical helmets with dark, polarized visors obscured any trace of human features. They held their weapons in a practiced low-ready, their gear built less like body armor and more like someone had taken a bomb-disposal rig, reinforced it for urban warfare, and handed it to a squad of black-ops purgers.

The operator leading the stack took half a step forward.

"Identification," the lead operator grunted, his voice carrying the synthetic rasp of a vocal modulator.

Chuck straightened, trying to project slightly startled, law-abiding compliance. "Chuck Bartowski. Resident." He pointed an awkward, stiff thumb over his shoulder into the warm light of his living room. "And my girlfriend, Sarah Walker, and her little sister, Lisa Walker."

Behind him, a shadow shifted. Sarah moved.

Chuck's soul practically left his body. *Please don't*, he prayed desperately in his head. *Please do not try to snap the neck of a guy wearing class-four tactical plating!*

Sarah completely ignored the wave of sheer panic radiating off him. She glided past Chuck, stepping into the doorway. She positioned herself directly beneath the hallway's overhead halogen light, allowing the harsh glow to illuminate her features.

She stopped inches from the lead operator's chest plate, looking up at him. "Officer, can I ask you a question?"

The operator tilted his helmet down, his optical sensors and helmet-mounted camera array sweeping her from head to toe.

His visor lingered on the dark, blooming violet-and-green bruises on her. Her posture was rigid, favoring her left flank as she subtly protected it, where fresh, hand-sewn sutures pulled beneath her athletic shirt.

At the same time, a tiny heads-up display inside the operator's helmet processed the automated query pinged to the building's central server. On his screen, Chuck's deep-level hack executed perfectly, flashing a green verification node: VALIDATED: WALKER, SARAH. RESIDENTIAL GUEST. CLEAN RECORD. WALKER, LISA. RESIDENTIAL GUEST. CLEAN RECORD. The connection to the NeoTech subservers was established, but the biometrics file came back corrupted. The Rhino leader took in her battered physical condition, then shifted his gaze to Chuck—who was standing beside her, sweating profusely, eyes wide with manic terror, looking guilty as sin and entirely out of his depth.

"We don't deal with domestic disputes," the operator stated, his voice flat, deadpan, and utterly devoid of empathy.

He didn't wait for an answer. "Unit Four to Control. Apartment 1304 is clear. Moving to 1305."

Without another word, the leader turned his armored back on them. He raised two fingers to signal his squad. The five living tanks turned in crisp, synchronized formation, their heavy boots clanking rhythmically down the carpeted hallway toward the next door.

Silence returned to the threshold of Apartment 1304.

Chuck stood frozen, staring out into the corridor as the heavy thuds moved along.

Inside the quiet apartment, Lisa set her pizza crust back down on her plate and raised a tiny, polite hand in the air. "Can I have more pizza now?"

Chuck slowly closed his eyes, resting his forehead flat against the edge of the open doorframe with a long, wheezing exhale. "Sure, honey..." he whimpered softly into the steel.

Beside him, Sarah remained standing in the doorway, staring down the corridor. For the first time since she had crashed into his life, the lethal, hardened operative looked genuinely, utterly speechless. She—a top-tier corporate black-ops agent recovering from high-explosive shrapnel wounds—had just been completely dismissed by an elite corporate purge squad as the victim of an ugly domestic argument with Chuck Bartowski.

Beside her, Chuck had to bite the inside of his cheek until it nearly bled to keep from bursting into a wild, hysterical fit of terrified laughter and closed the door.

Chapter 4: Chapter 4: This is what friends are for

Chapter 4 - This is what friends are for

The heavy, floor-shaking vibration of the Rhino squad's hydraulic armor gradually faded down the concrete corridor. The mechanical thud of their boots grew faint, dying away until, finally, the safe-house apartment fell into a heavy, suffocating silence.

Chuck waited three long seconds, his hand resting on the reinforced latch, before slowly sliding the door shut.

He leaned forward, resting his forehead flat against the cold metal plate.

"Well," he murmured, his voice muffled against the door, "I'm guessing they don't send the Rhinos to the upper levels. Probably suits and ties up there."

Sarah sank onto the worn couch cushions without offering an answer.

She stared straight ahead into the dim room, her body frozen in watchful stillness. Her left hand rested loosely against her ribs, applying light, instinctual pressure to her injured side. The fierce, metallic rush of adrenaline was finally draining from her system, leaving behind the deep, throbbing ache of torn tissue and a bone-deep, overwhelming exhaustion.

Across the room, Lisa swung her small legs back and forth from the edge of an oversized chair, her dark eyes tracking Chuck.

"I'm bored," the child announced plainly.

Chuck straightened up, turning around. "Already?"

Lisa gave a solemn, emphatic nod.

"Okay. Television it is." Chuck grabbed the remote from the counter and clicked the wall-mounted display to life. The room instantly filled with the ambient, low hum of corporate advertisements and bright, flickering graphics. "There. Civilization has been restored."

Lisa turned her focus toward the screen, bathed in the soft blue glow.

Chuck's eyes flicked over to Sarah. She hadn't moved. She was still staring hollowly into space, her jaw set, her mind running through threat assessments and exit routes.

A few heavy seconds ticked by.

"We need to talk," Sarah said, her voice dropping into a quiet, hard register.

Chuck's relaxed posture vanished, his expression turning serious. "Okay."

Sarah stood up, suppressing a sharp intake of breath as the movement pulled at her side, and walked toward the small sleeping alcove at the rear of the apartment. Chuck followed her. Before stepping through the threshold, he paused and glanced back at the little girl.

"Stay here, okay?"

Lisa didn't even look away from the holographic display. "Okay."

Chuck pulled the heavy sliding door shut behind them, sealing off the main room.

The cramped bedroom instantly felt suffocatingly small. The air was thick with the scent of pine air freshener, some dust, and the metallic tang of dried blood.

Sarah sat down on the edge of the mattress. She leaned forward slightly, resting her elbows on her knees, keeping her hands clasped tightly to mask the faint tremor in her fingers.

Chuck stood over her for a moment, looking wildly out of place in the tiny room, before finally sinking onto a low stool opposite her.

Sarah raised her eyes, her gaze cutting into him like steel. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Chuck blinked, taken aback by the sudden heat in her voice. "That's... a pretty broad question."

"Why are you doing this at all?"

Chuck looked down at his calloused hands, his fingers flexed into his lap. "I don't know." He let out a soft, helpless breath, his shoulders slumping. "Maybe I'm an idiot."

Silence stretched between them. Through the thin partition of the sliding door, the muffled audio of the television droned on—a synthetic, cheerful commercial for off-world transit.

Sarah broke the quiet first. "NeoTech will come looking for us."

Chuck looked up, his hazel eyes clear and attentive.

"With a lot of people," she added flatly.

"Because of her?"

"Yes."

Another heavy beat passed. Chuck glanced sideways toward the closed door, his mind processing the threat matrix.

"She's not an average four-year-old, is she?"

Sarah offered him a sharp, sideways glance. "You haven't met many four-year-olds, apparently."

The ghost of a smile tugged at Chuck's lips, fleeting and warm.

Sarah shook her head, her tone hardening again. "No. She isn't."

"I figured." Chuck leaned back against the wall, watching her carefully. Chuck shifted slightly, his jaw tightening: "What is your plan for her?"

Sarah's blue eyes locked onto his, searching every line of his face for deceit, for an angle, for the inevitable catch. "I'm not telling you."

"You don't trust me?" Chuck asked.

Sarah's eyes narrowed into cold, tactical points. "Professional hazard."

Despite herself, a tiny, involuntary curve touched the corner of Sarah's mouth.

Funny, she thought.

Then, the warmth vanished, replaced by a sudden, icy surge of self-preservation. A sharp warning bell rang out in the back of her mind, loud and unforgiving.

Guard down, Walker. Watch out!

She caught herself studying his earnest face—the messy hair, the absurd, stubborn courage, the way he stood between a corporate kill-squad and a child he barely knew without asking for a reward. It was disarming. It was human.

And it was dangerously, recklessly familiar.

This could turn into another mistake, Walker... The Larkin type. You don't want to do that again.

She squeezed her inner thoughts down into a dark, locked vault. Bryce Larkin had been brilliant, charming, and lethal—and trusting him had left her bleeding in the rain, burned by her own corporation. She couldn't afford to fall for the soft, heroic routine again. Not now. Not with NeoTech closing in.

Chuck stared at her, deadpan. “Funny. But you could actually be a cannibal for all I know.”

One of Sarah’s eyebrows lifted in mild defiance.

Sarah hardened her stance, pushing the dangerous softness aside. “You talk too much.”

Chuck’s eyes drifted down to her waist, his focus shifting entirely. “Show me the wound.”

Sarah hesitated for half a second, then reached down and pulled up the hem of her T-shirt.

The makeshift bandage beneath was ruined. Fresh, dark crimson blood had saturated the center of the pad, spreading outward in a wet, heavy stain against her pale skin.

Chuck’s sarcastic demeanor vanished in an instant, replaced by a dark, intense concern. “I need to change that.”

“I can handle it myself,” Sarah said automatically, her voice tight.

“Okay. Sure.” Chuck gave a solemn, exaggerated nod. “I understand. You’re a big girl.”

Sarah glared at him.

Chuck looked away, rubbing the back of his neck as he stared at the floorboards, trying to give her a fraction of privacy. But his eyes inevitably flicked back to the blood-soaked cloth.

“I’ll find some dermal foam,” Chuck said softly, his tone completely stripped of humor. “Or something loaded with medical nanites.”

Sarah watched him, evaluating the absolute sincerity in his face.

“They’ll accelerate the cellular repair,” he continued, gesturing vaguely toward her side. “At least enough to get you back on your feet and moving again.” He paused, holding her gaze. “If you really want to leave.”

Sarah said nothing.

Chuck rubbed his palms together, his mind working through the tactical reality of their situation. “All I’m asking is that you stay a couple more days. Let things calm down out there. Let NeoTech stop turning every single floor in this spire upside down.”

He looked straight into her eyes, steady and unblinking.

“After that... if you still want to disappear...” He gave a small, quiet shrug. “You can go. With my blessing.”

Sarah continued to look at him, her blue eyes unreadable, her mind locked in a silent war between the instincts that had kept her alive and the strange, impossible safety sitting three feet away from her.

Chuck didn't know what she was thinking, and for once, he didn't try to fill the silence.

Sarah held his gaze for a long, heavy stretch of seconds, her blue eyes searching every line of his face for a flicker of hesitation or deceit.

Then, her shoulder tension subtly released, and she gave a single, firm nod.

“We'll stay.”

Chuck blinked, his hands dropping an inch. “Really?”

“For a few days,” Sarah said, her tone instantly regaining its sharp, uncompromising edge. “But if you screw me over—”

“I know. You kill me.” Chuck nodded rapidly, holding up a finger. “It’s not even ten on Saturday morning, and you’ve already threatened my life twice.”

Sarah’s stone-carved expression didn’t soften.

Chuck raised both palms in an open gesture of surrender. “Look, I don’t love the prospect of dying, obviously, but I’m not going to betray you.” He paused, his gaze drifting toward the closed sliding door separating them from the main room. “And honestly... I couldn’t care less who Lisa actually is.”

That caught Sarah completely off guard. Her chin lifted slightly, her tactical calculations stalling mid-circuit.

Chuck turned back to her, his hazel eyes dropping their defensive humor, replaced by a quiet, grounded sincerity. “What I see is a frightened little girl who needs help. That’s it.”

Sarah stared at him, her lips slightly parted, unable to find an immediate tactical response to a motivation so completely devoid of leverage or self-interest.

“What if,” Chuck added, his voice dropping into a direct, unvarnished challenge, “you stopped being selfish for five minutes and thought about her, too?”

For the first time since they had slammed through his door, Sarah looked genuinely, utterly surprised.

Not angry. Not paranoid. Not sizing him up for a lethal counter-strike. Just... stunned.

The words struck her like a physical blow. *Selfish*. Her entire life was a masterclass in compartmentalization and survival—threat elimination, transit routes, collateral management. To her, running was logic; to Chuck, it was abandoning a child’s needs.

Chuck caught the sudden shift in her eyes and immediately realized his bold, unfiltered thought had landed far deeper than intended. The brave confrontation evaporated, and

he quickly looked away, rubbing his neck in sudden, awkward embarrassment.

“Anyway,” he muttered, clearing his throat. “I should... probably figure out where I can source high-grade medical supplies without flagging any corpo perimeter grid.”

Sarah stayed completely motionless on the edge of the mattress. The silence in the small alcove hummed with an entirely new weight.

Then, spoken so softly it almost dissolved into the buzz of the air filtration unit:

“Thank you.”

Chuck turned his head back to look at her. He didn't crack a self-deprecating joke. He didn't try to lighten the mood. He simply met her gaze and offered a single, quiet nod.

“Yeah.”

Chuck pulled the sliding door back, and they stepped out of the cramped unit together into the soft, flickering light of the living room.

Lisa was still sunk into the beanbag chair, her chin resting in her tiny hands as she stared at the glowing holographic display. As their footsteps echoed against the floorboards, her head pivoted toward them.

“Did you two kiss?”

Chuck stopped dead in his tracks, his foot hovering an inch off the floor. His hand flew straight to the back of his neck, his cheeks flushing instantly.

“What? No. We—no. Absolutely not. Never.”

Sarah glided right past him without missing a beat, her face a completely impenetrable operational mask. “We were discussing adult matters, Lisa.”

Lisa evaluated Sarah's tone for approximately one second before giving a small, disinterested shrug. “Okay.” She turned her head straight back toward the flickering holographic screen.

Chuck slowly lowered his hand, letting out a long, quiet breath. “Okay,” he muttered under his breath.

Sarah paused near the kitchen counter, glancing back at him with a serious expression. "What are we going to do about your sister?"

Chuck let out a heavy, long-suffering sigh, running a palm over his face. "That's not the immediate problem." He paused, grimacing as he imagined his sister. "Okay, fine, that is *also* a massive problem."

Before he could elaborate on the precise mathematical impossibility of explaining his current whereabouts to Dr. Eleanor Bartowski, a sharp, piercing electronic chime sliced through the apartment.

Chuck's wrist communicator lit up with a harsh, strobing yellow alert.

He looked down at the display, his stomach instantly dropping through the floorboards. "Oh, no."

A panicked, high-pitched voice instantly burst through the speaker, filling the air of his condo:

"Chuck!"

Chuck squeezed his eyes shut in quiet agony. "Morgan."

"Dude, where the hell are you?!" Morgan's voice crackled through the encrypted audio feed, practically vibrating with existential panic. *"Because I have been trying to ping your grid for, like, an eternity, and Big Mike is about thirty seconds away from cleaving out my kidneys."*

Chuck raised his head slowly, meeting Sarah's unblinking, blue eyes. Sarah looked at him. Chuck looked at Sarah. Neither of them moved a muscle.

In the corner, Lisa continued happily watching holographic advertisements.

Chuck slowly lifted his wrist communicator to his mouth, bracing himself for the incoming storm.

"Hey, Morgan."

"Finally!"

Chuck winced at the volume. "Okay, so... funny story."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX"I have to go," Chuck said, snatching his coat from the back of the dining chair.

Sarah's posture shifted seamlessly back into a defensive posture, her blue eyes narrowing into sharp, calculating slits. "Where?"

"I need to deal with Morgan."

"Who's Morgan?"

"My best friend," Chuck explained, shoving his arms into his jacket sleeves. "We're practically brothers. Which means if I don't go save him right now, he's going to end up in a ditch, or worse, indebted to people who collect interest in human tissue."

"Morgan must be important if you risk getting caught by a Rhino squad."

"He is," said Chuck with a sigh. "I know some service tunnels that can be used to get out safely. Just need to reach them."

He pulled up the tablet interface resting on the island, quickly tapping a sequence to check the Lurker's diagnostic stream. High above them, hidden in the dark recesses beside the building's central air ducts, the cloaked machine remained silently anchored, its optical sensors sweeping the outer hallway for ping spikes and heavy footsteps.

Chuck pointed toward the dark screen. "The Lurker stays active while I'm gone. Don't worry, it won't attack you. I logged your biometric profiles into its core whitelist before I bought the pizza. It knows you and Lisa aren't threats."

Sarah raised a skeptical eyebrow, casting a brief glance toward the ceiling. "That's reassuring."

"It's actually *very* reassuring," Chuck corrected, sliding the tablet onto the counter. "It's just... visually unappealing. Try not to stare directly at the corner if it uncloaks. That may not scare her."

He slipped his primary communicator into his inner coat pocket and tapped the side of his neck. "Whatever you do, don't try to ping my personal comm line. If your signal

starts broadcasting on standard frequencies, local corporate relay nodes will trace the origin point straight back to this unit in under four seconds.”

Sarah offered a crisp, concise nod. “And if something happens? If the sweep returns?”

Chuck hesitated, his hand hovering near the doorframe. “You use the terminal in the workspace.”

“The terminal,” Sarah repeated flatly.

“Yeah. The emergency terminal,” Chuck said, gesturing toward the back table covered in stripped circuit boards and hard-wired cables. “It runs on an isolated subterranean node. Completely dark to outside networks.”

Sarah crossed her arms, giving him a long, doubtful look. “And you expect me to know how to navigate your custom interface?”

“No,” Chuck answered plainly.

A heavy beat passed between them.

“That’s why I built it to be idiot-proof,” Chuck added.

Sarah’s left eyebrow rose to an impossible height, her expression turning dangerous.

Chuck’s brain instantly registered the lethal mistake, his hands flying up in a frantic, defensive gesture. “Not—not that I think you’re an idiot! Obviously! Quite the opposite, actually! You are terrifyingly, unnervingly competent! You could probably disassemble my entire apartment with a paperclip! I just meant... it’s simplified! Streamlined! For ease of use during high-stress operational environments!”

Sarah continued to stare at him, unblinking.

Chuck swallowed hard, backing toward the entryway. “Right. Going now.”

He grabbed the door handle, then paused as Sarah spoke again.

“Chuck.”

He stopped, turning his head back.

Sarah gestured with a chin tilt toward the workbench. "If we're in real, immediate danger?"

"Use the terminal."

"And if we aren't?"

"Don't call. Every packet sent carries a microscopic risk."

Sarah offered a single, firm nod of agreement.

The heavy door slid open; Chuck was checking the empty hallway for any lingering security personnel before stepping across the threshold. "I'll be back as fast as I can."

The door clicked shut behind him, leaving Sarah and Lisa alone in the quiet apartment.

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Sarah didn't move until the distinct click of the heavy deadbolt echoed through the foyer, followed by the faint, rhythmic recession of Chuck's footsteps down the hallway. She stood in place, her chin slightly elevated, listening until the sound vanished entirely into the ambient hum of the building's infrastructure.

Only then did she allow her tactical posture to collapse.

The adrenaline—the liquid fire that had been sustaining her ever since the high-explosive breach at Nakamichi Plaza—drained out of her bloodstream in a sudden, brutal wave. Her knees felt hollow. Every muscle in her core throbbed with a dull, heavy ache, and the fresh sutures along her left flank pulled like taut wire against her skin.

She crossed the small living room with slow, deliberate steps, her bare feet silent on the floorboards, and lowered her battered body onto the microfiber couch. The worn cushions gave way beneath her weight, enveloping her in a softness her body barely recognized.

Carefully, avoiding any sudden twisting of her torso, she stretched her legs along the length of the sofa. She rested her head back against the soft armrest, staring up at the white, textured ceiling.

In the corner, Lisa remained seated in the beanbag chair, her small face bathed in the soft, flickering light of the television. The muted broadcast droned on—a low, rhythmic murmur of voices and cheerful commercial jingles. Outside the high-rise window, Miami rolled on in its wet, neon-drenched reality: the distant hiss of tires on flooded avenues, the faint thrum of airborne transit, and the occasional, muffled wail of a siren miles away.

Inside Apartment 1304, however, the silence felt almost heavy. Suspended.

Sarah closed her eyes. *Just five minutes*, she told herself. Just five minutes to let her heart rate settle before she mapped out their extraction vector to Nassau.

Her breathing gradually deepened, smoothing out into a slow, steady cadence. The rigid tension that had locked her shoulders high near her ears slowly melted away. The constant, analytical processing of threats—exits, line of sight, firing arcs—gradually dimmed into darkness.

Before her trained mind could raise a single alarm, Sarah drifted into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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A sharp, tiny pressure poked at the back of her right hand.

Sarah's eyes snapped open instantly.

For a terrifying fraction of a second, total disorientation flooded her brain. The light in the room had shifted, and her right hand swept frantically toward her lower back by pure, unyielding muscle memory, searching for the tactile grip of her Smith & Wesson. Her fingers touched the cushions of the couch.

Her pulse spiked, her eyes sweeping the room for threats before her brain finally caught up with her surroundings.

Apartment 1304. The couch. Chuck's condo.

Standing right beside the couch, staring down at her with wide, unblinking eyes, was Lisa.

Sarah blinked hard, rubbing a palm against her face to clear the heavy fog of bone-deep exhaustion. Her eyelids felt as though they were weighed down with lead.

"Yeah?" Sarah rasped, her voice thick and raw from sleep.

Lisa extended one small index finger and poked the back of Sarah's knuckle again with cold, methodical precision. "I have to go!"

Sarah squinted up at her, her brain struggling to parse the operational meaning of the sentence. "Go where?"

The little girl began shifting restlessly from one foot to the other, her knees pressing together as she did a tiny, desperate dance on the rug.

The realization hit Sarah like a bucket of ice water.

"Oh," Sarah muttered, the fog instantly clearing from her mind.

She pushed herself upright with a low, smothered grunt, her hand clamping over her left flank as her core muscles protested the movement. She rubbed the bridge of her nose, letting out a long, weary exhalation.

"One or two?" Sarah asked, her voice dropping into a flat, pragmatic register.

Lisa looked at her solemnly, her small face a portrait of absolute, high-stakes urgency.

"I need to pooooop," she said, stretching the middle vowel out for as long as her tiny lungs would allow.

Sarah sat frozen for a beat, staring at the child. In all her years of tactical training—hand-to-hand combat, covert insertion, evasive driving, weapons field-stripping—nothing in her corporate briefing packets had ever prepared her for this specific crisis.

She let out another quiet, resigned breath and swung her legs off the couch onto the floor.

"Okay," Sarah said, pushing herself up into a standing position. She cast a long, wary look down towards the small bathroom. "Right. Let's get this over with, princess."

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A short while later, Chuck was behind the wheel of his car, fighting the mid-morning traffic as the vehicle glided through the lower levels of the city.

Beyond the windshield, Miami melted past in a blurred, neon-lit canvas. The towering, pristine glass pillars of Downtown Nexus gradually receded in his rearview mirror, replaced by the decaying, patched-together concrete of the lower suburbs. Elevated transit lines hummed overhead, spraying fine mist onto the flooded street grids below as structural drainage systems groaned under the heavy storm.

Somewhere several miles ahead was Morgan's thrift-shop near the Flood Lands, and far more terrifyingly, Big Mike's headquarters.

Chuck tightened his white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel, his mind racing through endless, improbable diplomatic scenarios. His entire objective for the morning was simple: convince Big Mike to restructure Morgan's crippling financial debt without invoking the heavy-handed services of "people who settle things."

Best-case scenario: Big Mike accepts a long-term payment plan. *Secondary goal:* Morgan doesn't get his legs broken. *Tertiary goal:* Chuck doesn't get his legs broken. *Ideal outcome:* Absolutely no one experiences blunt-force physical trauma.

It was not a particularly ambitious strategy, but given the trajectory of his last twenty-four hours, keeping all his bones intact felt like a monumental achievement.

He was only a few minutes away from entering the perimeter of the flooded commercial district when a sudden, low-frequency chime echoed through his vehicle's heads-up display.

A small, translucent red notification window materialised directly in his line of sight, pulsing in the center of the windshield.

INCOMING — EMERGENCY TERMINAL

Chuck's stomach instantly dropped through the floorboards. Cold sweat broke out along his spine.

Oh, God. They came back. The Rhino squad figured out the forged records. Or worse, another gunship.

The interface flashed, resolving the incoming distress message from his condo terminal.

It contained exactly three words:

Bring a potty.

Chuck stared at the holographic text hovering over the wet asphalt ahead.

“That’s the emergency?”

Another second passed.

Chuck let out a heavy, defeated sigh. “Of course it is.”

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By the time Chuck crossed the perimeter canal into the Flood Lands, the slick, polished grandeur of Downtown Nexus had faded into a distant memory.

Here, the city wore its decay on its sleeve. The soaring glass pillars gave way to squat, low-slung concrete blocks, their weather-beaten facades patched together with corrugated steel, acrylic sheeting, and whatever water-resistant scrap had survived the last major tidal surge. Below the rust-stained elevated walkways, the original street grid lay entirely submerged under three feet of brackish, stagnant water, turning the lower avenues into murky canals where broken neon signs flickered beneath the surface like dying bioluminescent sea creatures. The air smelled thick and heavy—a pungent mixture of diesel exhaust, fried street food, rotting seaweed, and damp ozone.

Chuck guided his sedan over a creaking iron access ramp, parking on the dry upper deck directly outside *Buy More*—Morgan’s optimistic, highly illegal thrift-and-salvage shop.

He sat in the driver's seat for a long moment, idling the engine. His fingers tightened around the worn leather of the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white.

"Okay," Chuck whispered to his reflection in the rearview mirror. He drew in a deep, steadying breath. "You're just going to walk in there and talk to Big Mike."

He took another breath, feeling his heart dancing around in his chest.

"Rational adults resolve financial discrepancies through civil dialogue every single day," he reasoned softly. "And sometimes... they even walk out with both kneecaps fully intact."

It wasn't the most inspiring pep talk he had ever given himself, but given the circumstances, it would have to do.

Chuck killed the ignition, pushed the door open, and stepped out into the humid, salt-tinged air.

Morgan was pacing frantic, tight circles on the metal walkway outside the shop's entrance. He looked like an absolute wreck—his hair standing on end, his worn corduroy jacket wrinkled beyond recognition, his eyes wide and bloodshot with unadulterated panic. He resembled a terrified, disheveled stray dog that had spent the entire morning dodging heavy traffic.

Looking at him, Chuck felt a sudden, familiar pang of deep sympathy. Despite the sheer, unmitigated disaster Morgan had dragged them into, Chuck couldn't stay angry at him. Morgan was entirely out of his depth—a well-meaning idiot who had tried to play the role of a savvy underworld entrepreneur without realizing he was swimming in a tank full of great white sharks.

The second Morgan caught sight of Chuck stepping out of the car, his entire face transformed. Pure, desperate relief washed over his features.

"You came!" Morgan squeaked, lunging forward as if Chuck were a life raft floating in the middle of an ocean.

Chuck stopped near the hood of the car, adjusting his jacket. "Of course I came, Morgan."

Morgan hurried over, grabbing Chuck by the shoulders and shaking him slightly. "Dude! I swear to God, I thought I was a dead man! I was mentally preparing my final words!"

"You're not dead," Chuck noted dryly.

"I know!" Morgan practically beamed, his voice cracking with emotion. "That's why I'm so extraordinarily happy right now!"

Chuck looked past Morgan's shoulder toward the dim, frosted-glass doors of the shop. "Where's Big Mike?"

Morgan's triumphant smile instantly evaporated, replaced by a look of sheer, cold dread. "Inside."

"Good."

"No, Chuck! *Not* good!" Morgan hissed, dropping his voice to a frantic whisper as he grabbed Chuck's forearm. "You don't understand the tactical gravity of the situation! He's brought people. They're everywhere. Sitting on the display counters, lingering by the register..."

"Jeff and Lester? I figured as much."

"Not just them, two others. And he is angry, Chuck. Like, *stomach-ulcer-level* angry."

"I figured that part out, too," Chuck sighed.

Morgan leaned in closer, his eyes wide as saucers. "And he specifically stated—in very clear, monosyllabic English—that if you didn't show up here within the hour..."

Chuck swallowed hard, his throat suddenly feeling like sandpaper. "What?"

Morgan hesitated, wincing as if delivering the news physically hurt him. "He said he was going to personally break your legs. Both of them."

Chuck stared at his best friend for a beat.

"Okay," Chuck murmured softly. He paused. "That's... actually slightly worse than the best-case scenario I was holding out for."

Morgan nodded solemnly. "Yeah. It's a pretty severe downgrade."

Chuck took one more long, deep breath, smoothing down the front of his jacket and squaring his shoulders. "Let's go."

Morgan blinked, staring at him in utter disbelief. "That's it? 'Let's go'?"

"What else am I supposed to do, Morgan?"

"I don't know! Run?!" Morgan gestured frantically toward the car. "Get back in the sedan! Drive into the ocean! Assume new identities!"

Chuck looked toward the heavy door of the shop, then back at Morgan's terrified face. "No. We're fixing this." He started walking toward the entrance. "Morgan, you're my best friend."

Morgan blinked, jogging a quick step to keep up.

"And apparently," Chuck continued, pushing his shades up his nose, "according to Sarah, I am also a complete and total idiot."

Morgan froze dead in his tracks for half a second. His terror-stricken brain seemed to pivot instantly, his internal radar pinging on the name like a sonar pulse. He scrambled after Chuck, grabbing his elbow.

"Wait, wait, wait! Who the hell is Sarah?!"

Chuck caught his foot on the threshold, realizing his mistake a second too late. He kept walking into the shop's dim entryway. "That is a very, *very* long story."

Morgan's jaw dropped, his eyes widening into huge, inquisitive circles. "Oh, my God."

"What?" Chuck grumbled.

"You have a girlfriend!" Morgan gasped, his fear of impending violence momentarily eclipsed by overwhelming gossip potential.

"I do not have a girlfriend!"

"A hooker then?"

"What? No!" said Chuck. He couldn't imagine the bad-ass woman in his apartment in that role, despite the fact that she was smoking hot.

"You absolutely have a girlfriend!" Morgan insisted, matching Chuck's stride as they passed the outer display shelves. "You just used a woman's name – who, by the matter of the matter, is not your sister – in a tone that implies she recently criticized your life choices!"

"I say women's names all the time!" Chuck hissed back under his breath.

"Not like that! You said it with *baggage*, Chuck!"

Chuck reached the inner doorway leading to Big Mike's improvised negotiation parlor, resting his hand against the frame. He turned back, giving Morgan a stern, serious look.

"Morgan."

"Yeah?"

"If we survive Big Mike," Chuck whispered, "I promise I will explain everything to you."

Morgan's terrifying ordeal seemed to melt away, replaced by an enormous, goofy grin. "Dude."

"What?" Chuck asked warily.

"This is officially the most interesting Saturday of my entire life," Morgan declared, clapping his hands together softly.

Chuck looked at him, his face a portrait of profound, exhausted irony. "I am having a very, very different personal experience."

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Chuck stepped through the narrow doorway, with Morgan hovering so closely behind him that he almost stepped on his heels.

The interior of the Buy More was larger than the cramped storefront suggested, but it still felt suffocatingly small. Floor-to-ceiling metal shelving units choked the space, loaded with rain-damaged holo monitors, salvaged server blades, piles of tangled fiber-optic cables, and glass display cases filled with dusty, second-hand tech. The air inside was warm and heavy, smelling faintly of stale cigar smoke, wet cardboard, solder flux,

and the brackish water lingering right outside the door.

Dominating the far end of the room sat Big Mike. He was leaning back in a battered leather executive chair behind an ancient mahogany desk, looking for all the world like a warlord sitting on a throne built out of pawned electronics.

Chuck's eyes drifted immediately to the waist of Big Mike's unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt. Tucked casually into the waistband of his trousers was a heavy, chrome-and-orange-lined R50 Judge revolver, its polished wooden inlaid tactical grip gleaming under the harsh buzzing fluorescent lights from above.

Off to the left, perched on a pair of upturned milk crates, were Jeff and Lester. The two of them looked profoundly, almost heroically bored, hunching together as they lazily picked apart the internal gears of a small, twitching mechanical toy with a pair of needle-nose pliers. Neither of them even bothered to look up as the door clicked shut.

What caught Chuck's immediate, terrifying attention, however, were the two men standing silently in the shadows of the back corner. They were built like concrete retaining walls—wearing identical, dark Cosmo jackets, arms crossed over massive chests, facial expressions completely devoid of human warmth. They had clearly been hired for a singular, highly specific purpose: to ensure that nobody in the room attempted to get creative.

Big Mike's heavy head snapped up, his broad face breaking into a wide, booming smile the moment he registered Chuck's presence.

"Bartowski!"

His deep voice rolled across the cluttered shop like a clap of distant summer thunder, rattling the loose glass in the display cases.

"Good to see you, son!"

Chuck swallowed down the dry lump in his throat, forcing his facial muscles into a stiff, polite smile. "Big Mike."

Big Mike offered a regal nod, gesturing vaguely toward his left.

“Jeff. Lester.” Chuck’s eyes flicked past them, landing on the two silent mountains in the corner, before drifting back to Big Mike. “I don't know these two.”

Big Mike cast a quick, sideways glance at the corner goons. “Yeah. Me neither.”

Morgan gave Chuck a sharp, terrified elbow right in the ribs.

Chuck winced, cleared his throat loudly, and took a small, deliberate step toward the desk, trying to project a confidence he didn't feel in the slightest. “Anyway. Let's... skip the formalities, Big Mike.”

Big Mike’s smile broadened, leaning his heavy forearms onto the scarred mahogany. “I agree.”

Chuck took another step forward. “You know why I came.”

“Oh, I know.” Big Mike let out a long, theatrical sigh, shaking his head with deep, dramatic disappointment. “I am fully aware that young Morgan here is behind on his monthly structural interest payment.” He shook his head again, resting his chin on his fist. “Yes. A very sad, very tragic thing.”

He looked directly at Morgan, his dark eyes narrowing slightly. “And, if you ask me, profoundly disrespectful, too. Is this how you treat your future stepfather?”

Morgan’s jaw clenched so hard Chuck could hear his teeth grinding.

Big Mike spread his massive hands in an open, appealing gesture to the room. “I ask you, what will the local business community think?”

Jeff didn't look up from his small device, but chimed in with a monotone drone. “This can't continue.”

“No, it can't, Charles,” Lester added, nodding with solemn, manufactured gravity.

Big Mike’s head snapped toward Lester with terrifying speed. “Shut up, both of you!” he bellowed.

Lester instantly flinched, snapping his mouth shut and ducking his head straight back down toward his screwdriver. Jeff went just as silent, just as fast.

Big Mike turned his attention seamlessly back to Chuck, his thunderous tone softening almost instantly into a slick, conversational purr. "So." He offered a pleasant, expected smile. "You brought the data files?"

Chuck hesitated, his pulse hammering a frantic rhythm against his collarbone. "No."

Big Mike's smile evaporated into thin air. "I'm sorry?"

"I didn't get it," Chuck admitted quietly.

A heavy, suffocating silence descended over the shop. The buzzing of the fluorescent light overhead seemed to grow ten times louder. Big Mike simply stared at him, his face an unreadable, iron slab.

Chuck felt a cold drop of sweat trickle slowly down his spine. The urge to ramble—to explain the whole absurd story about the floor-to-ceiling lasers, the black-ops operative, the little girl, and the armored gravocopter that had turned the law office into floating ash—rose up in his chest like a tidal wave. But something in Big Mike's unblinking, predatory stare told him that bringing up flying gunships would only make him sound insane.

Finally, Big Mike leaned back in his leather chair, the worn springs groaning under his weight.

"I don't give a damn, Bartowski."

The warm, fatherly facade was completely gone now. His tone had dropped into a flat, deadly register that made the hair on the back of Chuck's neck stand straight up.

"But I need those files," Big Mike continued, tapping a single, heavy finger against the wood of his desk. "Because there are certain high-level people above me who aren't exactly known for their patience or their willingness to negotiate."

He leaned forward, lowering his voice until it was almost a whisper. "And they don't screw around with breaking kneecaps, if you catch my meaning."

Chuck nodded instantly, his hands raised in absolute submission. "Yeah. Completely, crystal clear."

“Good.” Big Mike jabbed a thick index finger directly at Chuck’s chest. “So here's what we're going to do. You've got forty-eight hours.”

Chuck blinked, his mind frantically running the math. “Forty-eight?”

“Forty-eight hours,” Big Mike repeated firmly. His broad face softened just a fraction, a shadow of his friendly demeanor returning like a mask being pulled back into place. “I'll do what I can to keep them off your back until the clock runs out.”

He paused, offering a casual, indifferent shrug. “But if things get too hot for me... I will toss you straight to the sharks.”

Chuck offered a tight, deeply nervous smile. “Great. Awesome.”

“Damn right,” Big Mike grunted. He leaned back once more, clapping his hands together with a sharp crack that made Morgan jump a foot off the floor. “Now, since we've settled the future... let's address the present.”

He pointed at Chuck again. “As Morgan's officially designated guarantor, you still owe me his current monthly fee.”

Chuck’s shoulders sagged, a long, weary exhalation escaping his lungs. He was too tired to argue. “Right.”

Big Mike pulled a small, worn wireless payment terminal from beneath his desk and slid it across the mahogany. “Cash or card?”

Chuck stared at the glowing digital screen for a quiet second, contemplating the slow, systematic destruction of his personal checking account. He let out another heavy sigh.

“Card.”

Big Mike grinned, his white teeth flashing in the dim light. “Smart choice, son.”

Chuck pulled his wallet from his coat, drew his primary credit card, and tapped it against the terminal’s sensor array. The machine let out a high-pitched, cheerful beep as the transaction processed, clearing his remaining emergency savings in a single, agonizing second.

PAYMENT ACCEPTED.

Big Mike looked down at the green confirmation text on the screen and nodded with deep, genuine satisfaction. "That's much better."

Chuck hastily slid his card back into his wallet and shoved it into his pocket, eager to put as much physical distance between himself and Big Mike as humanly possible.

Big Mike stood up, his massive frame towering over the desk, and reached across to give Chuck a firm, heavy pat on the shoulder that nearly knocked him off balance. "Take care of yourself, son."

Then, Big Mike turned his head slowly toward Morgan.

Morgan swallowed hard, his face turning pale. "Yeah?"

Big Mike gave him a small, terrifyingly domestic nod. "I'll see you at home for dinner."

Morgan offered a slow, miserable nod of his own. "Sure... Big Mike."

Chuck looked at Morgan. Morgan looked back at Chuck, his eyes filled with a profound, existential despair that transcended financial ruin. Neither of them said a single word.

Chuck turned and pushed his way out through the heavy door, stepping back out onto the damp, salt-scented walkway of the Flood Lands, with Morgan trailing silently in his wake.

As they walked toward the car, Chuck glanced back over his shoulder one last time at the dim, murky windows of the shop.

So this is what happens when Big Mike is boning your mother, Chuck thought bitterly, adjusting his coat against the humid air.

He immediately locked the thought away in the deepest vault of his brain, resolving that it was a conclusion he would never, under any circumstances, allow himself to speak aloud.

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The heavy door clicked shut behind Big Mike and his entourage, leaving a suffocating silence in its wake. The ambient hum of the shop's flickering fluorescent lights rushed back in to fill the void.

For several long seconds, neither of them moved.

Chuck stood frozen in the middle of an aisle choked with salvaged server racks and dusty electronic scrap, his shoulders slouched under the weight of an invisible anvil. Beside him, Morgan looked like a man who had narrowly dodged a firing squad, his chest heaving as he slowly remembered how to breathe.

Morgan was the first to break the stillness, wiping a sheen of cold sweat from his forehead with the back of his sleeve.

"Thanks, man."

"This is what friends are for."

"So..." Morgan squeaked, his voice cracking slightly before he cleared his throat. "What are you going to do now?"

Chuck turned and kept walking toward the exit, his hands shoved deep into his coat pockets. "I don't know," he muttered, his mind spinning in frantic, useless circles. He stared at the water-damaged floorboards. "But apparently, trouble has decided to arrive in bulk this week."

"Yeah," Morgan agreed, falling into step beside him as they navigated the maze of second-hand electronics. He nodded thoughtfully, his eyes lighting up with that familiar, dangerous spark of gossip-fueled curiosity. "Which brings us to a very important, highly relevant tactical question."

Chuck cast a wary sideways glance at him. "What question?"

A wide, irrepressible grin slowly spread across Morgan's face. "So... who exactly is Sarah?"

Chuck let out a long, suffering sigh that fogged slightly in the cool shop air. "Long story, Morgan."

“We’ve got time.”

“Forty-eight hours, actually,” Chuck corrected dryly, pulling his collar up against the draft. “Then, according to Big Mike’s exact words, I’m officially shark bait.”

Morgan’s grin faltered, his shoulders drooping slightly. “Right. Yeah. That time limit.”

Chuck slowed his pace as they reached the front counter, his expression darkening as the memories of the previous night flooded back. “Morgan... I saw the files.”

Morgan paused. “The ones you were supposed to pull from the law firm’s secure node?”

“Yeah.” Chuck looked at the floor, his voice dropping into a low, quiet register. “They were full of CyberForce abuses. Classified incidents, off-the-books black sites, erased security footage... stuff that makes the Corporate War look like a children's birthday party.”

The words hung heavy in the damp air. Morgan didn't answer immediately. His eyes dropped to the floor, his cheerful demeanor completely vanishing.

Without warning, a dull, thrumming ache began spreading through Morgan’s left forearm. Beneath his worn corduroy jacket, the matte-black military cybernetic implant—the heavy, mechanical souvenir he carried from his own brief, disastrous brush with death—pulled taut against his flesh. The internal servos gave a faint, microscopic *click-clack* as his artificial fingers twitched involuntarily.

“Damn,” Morgan whispered, staring at his gloved mechanical hand.

Chuck noticed the twitch, his eyes softening with genuine concern. “You okay?”

Morgan flexed his synthetic fingers, forcing a tight, reassuring smile that didn't reach his eyes. “Yeah. Just... phantom pains. I’m good. Though I forgot to take the dampeners this morning.”

He wasn't okay, and Chuck knew it. But in the unwritten rules of their lifelong friendship, neither of them pressed the issue. They walked in quiet solidarity toward the front door, the heavy weight of their shared reality settling over them.

Then, true to form, Morgan's irrepressible nature reasserted itself. He nudged Chuck's arm with his elbow, shooting him a sly, sideways glance.

"So... who's Sarah?"

Chuck stopped dead in his tracks, spinning around. "Morgan!"

Morgan threw both hands up in mock surrender. "What? What is so wrong with a best friend taking a healthy, supportive interest in your love life?!"

"I am not in love with her!" Chuck yelled, his cheeks suddenly burning hot.

"Sure, sure," Morgan said, nodding with exaggerated, solemn gravity. "Just like you haven't been in love with anyone since Jill."

Chuck winced as if he'd been physically struck. "That was completely different!"

"How?"

"We were young!" Chuck argued, throwing his arms out. "It was college! It was... a completely different dynamic!"

Morgan's smirk returned, slow and victorious. "Okay." He waited approximately two full seconds before leaning in closer. "At least tell me this secret girlfriend of yours is hot."

Chuck stared straight ahead into the street outside, his jaw working as he fought a desperate, losing battle against his own complete inability to lie.

Finally, he let out a defeated groan. "She is."

Morgan's eyebrows shot up toward his hairline. "And?"

Chuck rubbed the bridge of his nose, exhaling heavily. "And she's... she's fucking tough, Morgan."

Morgan's grin widened by several inches. "And?"

"And Lisa is adorable," Chuck added softly, his face softening before he could stop himself.

Morgan froze. He stopped walking entirely, his jaw dropping open as he processed the sentence. He stared at Chuck as if his best friend had suddenly had Elysium-grade access in the Aurora.

“Wait,” Morgan whispered, his eyes darting back and forth between Chuck’s eyes. “Two women, Chuck? A threesome, dude?”

Chuck stared at him, utterly bewildered. “What? No! That’s—that’s not what I meant!”

Morgan lunged forward and slapped Chuck lightly on the shoulder, his face a portrait of sheer, unadulterated awe. “My respect for you has increased by approximately four hundred percent by now!”

Chuck groaned loudly, burying his face in his hands. “My big, stupid mouth is going to get me killed. It really is.”

He took a deep breath, dropped his hands, and turned to face Morgan with absolute, deadly seriousness.

“Morgan. Swear to me.”

Morgan’s goofy smile faded instantly, caught off guard by the sudden, chilling weight in Chuck’s voice.

“Not just on your life,” Chuck whispered, stepping in close, his brown eyes locking onto Morgan’s with an intensity that made the air between them feel cold. “Swear on the 3rd rule.”

Morgan’s posture went rigid. The humor evaporated from the room in a single heartbeat.

The 3rd rule. It was their sacred, inviolable pact—the ultimate bond forged back when they were kids sitting in a cramped bedroom, making promises that could never be broken under any circumstances. If Chuck was invoking the 3rd rule, this wasn't a joke, an exaggeration, or a casual secret.

This was life and death.

“You have my word,” Morgan said, his voice dropping into a rare, steady register.

Chuck gave a single, firm nod. "And you never tell anyone. Ever."

Morgan swallowed hard. "...Especially Ellie?"

"*Especially* Ellie," Chuck emphasized fiercely. "If Ellie finds out, people die. Literally."

Morgan nodded solemnly. "Okay. I swear."

Chuck let out a long, ragged breath, looking around the empty storefront before leaning in to whisper. "Sarah is... incredible." He paused, searching his vocabulary for words that could accurately capture a woman who could breach a high-rise and rewrite government databases in her sleep or terminate a whole block in a Block War. "She's a corporate black-ops operative." Chuck showed Morgan the image of her.

Morgan's eyes dilated into huge, dark circles. "Holy crap!"

"She's tough as hell," Chuck continued, a mixture of awe and residual panic lacing his tone. "And, yeah... she's ridiculously, absurdly hot." He hesitated, his expression softening into something warm and genuinely fond. "And Lisa is a four-year-old girl. She's..." A small, helpless smile tugged at the corner of Chuck's mouth. "She's so damn adorable it actually takes your breath away."

Morgan stared at his best friend, his mind rapidly connecting the dots.

Slowly, inevitably, that familiar, mischievous glint returned to Morgan's eyes. A slow, terrifying smirk began to curdle on his lips.

Chuck immediately recognized that look. "Don't."

Morgan clapped his hands together, his face illuminating with pure joy. "Well, well, well, Chuck Bartowski! I never would have guessed in a million years that you were secretly into MILFs!"

"You absolute idiot!" Chuck hissed, shoving Morgan's shoulder as his face flushed bright crimson. "She's not—that's not what's happening!" He shook his head frantically. "Sarah and Lisa are the entire reason I couldn't pull the data files from the server. They were being hunted. I had to get them out."

Morgan's expression sobered up again, the gravity of the situation pulling him back. "And where are they right now?"

Chuck hesitated, suddenly realizing the trap he had walked into. "...At my place."

Morgan's entire face lit up like a Christmas tree. "Awesome!" He grabbed Chuck's shoulder with his organic hand, shaking him enthusiastically. "When do I get to meet them? Can I come over right now? I can bring board games!"

Chuck slowly closed his eyes, his head falling back as a wave of profound, existential dread washed over him.

"Oh, no," Chuck whimpered into the empty shop.

Morgan grinned wider. "What?"

"I have a really, *really* bad feeling about this," Chuck whispered.