

Chuck vs. The Apology

by Steelejay

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Chuck was ecstatic that he was still alive, almost sobbing with unbridled joy while simultaneously riding the adrenaline from having actually flown and landed a helicopter! Sarah had talked him down and her idea to pretend it was a video game had been nothing short of pure genius. He knew he was being a little manic and over the top as he boisterously skipped his way over to her, but he couldn't help it. Who could blame him? She'd just talked him through landing a freaking helicopter!

He put his hand up excitedly for a high-five and gave her a tongue-in-cheek warning about his sweaty hands. Her response - her raw fury - caught him completely off guard.

"What the hell were you thinking!?" she shouted at him.

"Clammy hands, got it. No good," he said quietly as he put his arm down, unsure how to respond to her anger.

"Chuck, the secrets that you know are incredibly important! You compromised everything when you stopped trusting me!" she ranted.

"And when you got out of the car." Casey seemed to feel the need to pile on but Chuck barely heard him.

The secrets are what's important? That's what she cares about? He felt a sense of deep disappointment settle over him. *I know it's only been a week, but have I been deluding myself?*

"Listen, I.. I'm sorry, ok?" He wasn't really sure what he was apologizing for but he hated that she was so upset.

But it seemed she wasn't done ripping him a new asshole. "No, it is not ok!" She practically shouted at him. "How could you think I was the double, huh?"

Chuck felt his own anger rise at the question. Was she being serious? Casey had led him to believe she was! They both thought the other killed Zarnow and he was the one stuck in the middle! How could he know who to trust if they didn't trust each other?

But she didn't give him a chance to respond, simply continued berating him. "You know I am not Bryce. Bryce betrayed everything that I believe in and if you ever accuse me of that again, then I will walk away. Mission over and we all go back to Washington." She paused ominously as she glared at him. Her voice dropped from a shout but was somehow even more forceful. "And you do not want that to happen, Chuck. *That* you should trust me on." She didn't give him an opportunity to respond as she stormed away.

It didn't matter much because he was speechless. Did she seriously just threaten him with the bunker? He couldn't for the life of him understand why she was so angry. Did she not understand what this was like for him? How confusing everything was?

"Way to go, Ace." Casey said with a smirk.

Chuck looked at the larger man with utter disbelief. "Screw you, Casey. You're an asshole," he hissed, not sure where this surge of bravery was coming from and not really caring.

“What did you just say to me, you little geek?” Casey asked threateningly as he stepped closer.

His insult emboldened Chuck rather than intimidated him. “Did I stutter? I said, screw you, Casey. You’re an asshole. You were the one who convinced me Sarah was rogue with Bryce. That she was - what did you call it - ‘cleaning the operation’ by eliminating everyone she’d been in contact with? Now suddenly you’re taking Sarah’s side that I’m the piece of shit for thinking she was the double? In my book, that makes you a First. Class. Asshole.”

“You better watch yourself, Bartowski. I-“

Chuck was tired of hearing it. For the past week, Casey had been little more than a government sponsored schoolyard bully, constantly insulting him, demeaning him, threatening him. “You’ll what, Casey? Call me names? Put me in a bunker?” Chuck sneered at the larger man. “You guys need new threats.”

He ignored Casey’s angry grunts and walked back to the Nerd Herder. He didn’t wait for them as he knew they would have to handle taking Zarnow into custody so he simply drove away. He was still deeply hurt by Sarah’s implication that the secrets in his head were more important than his life. He supposed he could see her perspective on being upset that he hadn’t trusted her, but she’d asked for trust, not blind faith. She didn’t seem to even be trying to understand how confusing and terrifying this all was for him. He’d been betrayed by so many people in his life and she was asking him to ignore all of that. When it came to Ellie’s safety, that was simply too big of an ask.

He supposed he did owe Sarah an apology, though he felt like he was owed one as well. This entire event had been a cluster-fuck from the beginning, with Sarah telling him not to trust Casey and getting the same in reverse from the grunting NSA agent. How did they expect him to respond to that kind of situation? The two of them had obviously been

involved in some kind of scuffle, if Casey's face was any indication and he'd admitted as much earlier. It raised his level of respect for Sarah's abilities that she didn't have a mark on her, at least that he could see. Casey obviously came out on the losing end of that encounter.

As he drove, he turned the problem over in his mind. He was still so confused about everything, his feelings for Sarah being at the top of the list. Why did she affect him so strongly? Yes, she was obviously very beautiful, but there was so much more to it than that. It was like a low-voltage energy field surrounded them when they were together. His attraction to her was like nothing he'd ever felt before. The attraction he'd felt towards Jill was a pale shadow by comparison.

And as crazy it sounded, he thought she felt it too. There had been so many little moments over the last week, starting with when they first met. It didn't seem possible that anyone could fake their emotions, their physiological responses to such a minute degree, CIA agent or not.

He realized there were a couple of simple questions he could ask himself to help him figure out a path forward. The first question was, even as unlikely as he thought it might be, did he truly believe that their connection was real? The second was, if so, why did he believe it?

As soon as he asked the first question, he knew the answer was yes. He believed it was real. Part of it had to do with those little moments where he could see the woman shining through the CIA cover. Moments where she seemed to genuinely care for him - not as a handler might care about an asset, but the way a woman might care about a man. Was she faking it? Intentionally leading him to believe there was something 'under the cover'?

The answer was no, he didn't believe she was. And that led to the answer to the second question - why did he believe it was real? The first, most logical reasoning was, what

would be the point of her faking those little moments between them? The cover was in place to make his friends and family believe they were in a relationship. It served no purpose to make him think there was more to it. In fact, it created unnecessary tension and anxiety for him.

But the deeper reasoning was that after every moment where she seemed to drop her guard, he saw her realize it; realize that Sarah the woman was on display. He would then watch her withdraw back into being Agent Walker. Sometimes the shift was so fast and so complete, he questioned if the moment had occurred at all. But other times, she seemed a little reluctant to let go of the moment as well.

Adding credence to his realization, he remembered how she was consistently touching him in little ways that were too subtle to be a part of cover maintenance. Straightening his tie; smoothing down imaginary wrinkles on his shirt; brushing non-existent lint off his shoulders; pushing curls of hair off his forehead. Often doing these things when they were alone, seemingly not aware that she was doing them at all.

The only logical conclusion he could draw, as unlikely as it seemed, was that she had feelings for him. The realization hit him like a brick to the face. Holy shit. Her anger made so much more sense when viewed through that lens.

How do you feel when someone you care about shows that they don't trust you? You're deeply hurt, of course. By caring for someone, you convey to them the power to hurt you. That's the trade you make. The level of hurt experienced could be inversely proportional to the strength of feelings you had for the person. If the person were a casual friend, you'd maybe be a little disappointed, but it would be mostly inconsequential. If it were a loved one, the hurt could be quite devastating. If he were simply an asset to her, would his lack of trust have really offended her to that level? How could it? By definition, an asset was disposable. You don't give disposable people that much power or control over your feelings.

Which led him to the next aspect of her anger as it pertained to the night's events. How do you feel when someone you care about puts themselves in an insanely dangerous situation where they could be killed? You're incredibly relieved when they come out ok but that relief translates immediately to rage that they put themselves in jeopardy to begin with. She was hurt that he hadn't trusted her, then scared for him with the events of the helicopter. Both of those feelings had transitioned to anger and she had lashed out.

The statement about the secrets being what was important had to be her way of rationalizing or obfuscating the reasons behind her anger. She couldn't possibly be that invested in the idea of the secrets in his head - it was all theoretical. He might flash again on important secrets or he might flash on the formula for New Coke, but either way, it made no sense to be so emotionally invested in it.

If he died, yes, they would lose the Intersect, but the CIA and the NSA still had their secrets. They just wouldn't have them all together in one place. It's not like they deleted everything after they uploaded it into the Intersect. Without him, Sarah and Casey would simply move on to their next missions for their respective agencies, with little or no thought regarding the government asset they'd briefly been responsible for. The Intersect might be important to the honcho's in DC, but in the grand scheme of things, it made no sense for Sarah to be that concerned. And he realized that if all he was to her was an asset with important secrets buried in his brain, she wouldn't be. But she obviously was.

He was afraid that he couldn't be objective about it because he so badly wanted it to be true, but it was the only thing that made any sense. It explained everything. Sarah Walker had genuine feelings for him, perhaps as strong as those he had for her. If her anger tonight was a measure of the depth of those feelings, she must care for him a great deal indeed.

A horn blaring woke him up to the fact that he was still actually driving and had started to drift into the lane next to him. He jerked the wheel and focused a little more of his attention on driving. His insight into her emotional state resonated deeply with him. Even given how unlikely he thought it might be that anyone as incredible as Sarah Walker could develop feelings for him. It sounded counter-intuitive, but that as much as anything made him certain it was true. At his core, he was a man of science, and all the evidence supported this conclusion.

A more difficult question to answer was what he should do about it. Was there anything *to* do? He knew he needed to apologize to her and he was genuinely sorry that she felt betrayed by his lack of trust, but she needed to acknowledge his place in all of this, understand things from his perspective. He also needed to let her know that her threat of the bunker was not appreciated nor helpful. He couldn't let himself be overwhelmed at the idea of her having feelings for him, he needed to stand up for himself. Ultimately, their feelings towards each other might make little or no difference in their situation. The thought depressed him but he had to acknowledge the truth of their circumstances.

That truth was that he was a government asset and she was his CIA handler. She'd explained to him that there were very strict rules regarding their relationship. If her bosses suspected that she had genuine feelings for him, they would take her off the team and reassign her. He really, really didn't want that to happen. Even if they were unable to explore what their feelings for each other might mean, he would rather have her around than not. She was by far the best part of this crazy world Bryce had brought him into.

What forced his decision was the knowledge that he wouldn't get any sleep until he was able to talk to her. They might not find any resolution for their situation that night, but he still needed to begin the process. He altered his route and headed to the hotel where she was staying. He'd wait for her until it was time to go home and get ready for Bryce's funeral the next day.

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Sarah was still in a rage as she stomped away from Chuck and Casey. She honestly couldn't remember when she'd last been this angry. To make matters worse, she wasn't really sure where it was coming from. So he hadn't trusted her – so what? She'd been in situations to be mistrusted by assets in the past and hadn't cared in the least. Why was *his* trust so important to her? Why did it hurt so deeply that he'd chosen to believe Casey over her? The fact that she didn't know only served to fan the flames of her wrath.

She was shocked at herself for what she'd said to him and wanted to take it back but her anger and her confusion made that impossible. The entire last week of this crazy mission had found her riding a recurring parabola of conflicting emotions; seemingly weightless with excitement and anticipation one moment, only to come crashing down with confusion and anxiety the next. It all seemed to center around Chuck. He could be exceedingly immature at times as well as incredibly naïve, and was frustratingly ill-equipped to deal with his new reality. He was also the most genuine, caring, loyal, funny man she'd ever met. Life as he knew it hung by the most tenuous of threads. One minor misstep and General Beckman would demand he be taken into protective custody. She decided to focus her attention on cleaning up the mess Zarnow had created as she called in a cleaner team.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Chuck heading over to the silly little gel-cap of a car and assumed he was leaving. There was something about his posture that made her uncomfortable. He seemed to be striding purposefully, not slinking away in shame like she expected.

Casey approached her, watching Chuck as he drove away and she thought his expression was odd. He looked somewhat contrite, which was not an expression she ever thought she'd see on his grumpy face. His expression became more neutral as he waited for her to finish the call. As she hung up the phone with the cleaner team, she looked at him expectantly and his expression soured.



"You know that kid has more stones than I gave him credit for, even after the hotel bomb," he admitted, shaking his head.

"What do you mean?"

He actually chuckled a little as he said, "He just called me out for being an asshole." Sarah was stunned. It was completely out of character for Chuck, who to this point had been unapologetically easy going.

"You're kidding? And you didn't pull out his spleen?"

Casey grunted. "Don't get me wrong, I seriously considered it. But he's right. I was an asshole," he admitted with a grimace. "I keep putting Bartowski in the 'government asset' box in my head, so that's how I've been dealing with him. He's disposable. His life doesn't matter and his girly feelings certainly don't matter. But I have to admit, it's not really appropriate to be treating him like the kind of low-life scum or foreign agent that are typically made into assets."

Sarah sighed as she ran her hand through her hair. "He doesn't deserve any of this, Casey."

"For not deserving all of this, you were pretty hard on him yourself, just now."

She made a frustrated noise and said, "I know. I was just so angry that he chose to believe you over me. That he thought I was the double. And then to stupidly risk his life for me and get himself caught? I seriously wanted to throttle him!"

Casey grunted his agreement. "Zarnow planted an Incinerator in my truck. It must have malfunctioned because it rang a few times before it went off, giving us time to get out. Since we thought Zarnow was dead, the only person it could have been was you. I told

him you were cleaning the operation because that's what I thought was happening. He realized you were meeting with his sister and I could tell that fear for her safety pushed all other coherent thoughts out of his mind. I thought you were the double, just like you thought I was. Zarnow was able to pit us against each other."

"I didn't know about the incinerator in your truck, obviously," she admitted. "Chuck was right; you are an asshole for not backing him up after working to convince him I was rogue." Sarah understood that this new information should mitigate some of the anger and hurt she felt, and it did a little. But not enough. "Still, Chuck should have trusted me." The words sounded hollow and childish to her own ears.

"Even forgetting the fact that it was extraordinary circumstances, what was the kid supposed to believe?" Casey asked. "Anyway, why do you care so much, Walker?"

"Because Chuck is different!" she blurted out suddenly. "You said it yourself, he's not like the people we typically deal with as assets. Admit it, he's the best person you've ever met. I know he's the best I've ever met. By far. I thought that if someone as good and kind and decent as he is trusted me, then maybe I'm actually fucking worthy of being trusted!"

Casey looked at her appraisingly for a few moments. "You really like the dweeb, don't you?"

She glared at Casey, directing at him the anger she felt towards herself for letting her guard down. For letting Chuck get inside her defenses and throwing her previously ordered and structured life into turmoil.

"I'm not compromised, Casey, if that's what you're asking," she replied. She paused for a moment and gave a frustrated sigh. "But yes, I like him. I liked him from the first moment I met him and I've only grown to like him more since then. Think about the betrayal he's been through, Casey. First his mom, then his dad both leave, abandoning

him and his sister? Then what Larkin did to him in college? And his girlfriend? Who goes through that and doesn't become bitter and resentful? All it really did was make him afraid to put himself out in the world, but he didn't lose his moral compass."

Casey grunted and waved his hand dismissively. "Yeah, whatever. I really don't care about all that crap. What I care about is that we get a handle on this. You tell me you're not compromised? Great, I believe you. But that moron is head over heels for you. You need to either shut it down or fan the flames. Whatever it takes to get him on board and get him to stay in the fucking car." Casey motioned dramatically back towards the helicopter. "Tonight was nine different levels of fubar, and it was mostly our own damn fault. We're supposed to be the professionals here but Zarnow played us both like a fiddle. By all rights, Chuck should be a soggy corpse at the bottom of the bay right now. That or on a North Korean trawler in the middle of the Pacific with a car battery hooked up to his nuts, being asked questions he doesn't know how to answer."

Sarah felt nauseous at the image and pushed it out of her mind. Chuck was on his way home. For now, at least, he was safe and the thought brought her more comfort than she thought possible.

She looked at Casey appraisingly and asked, "What are you proposing?"

"I'll make you a deal. I'll stop winding him up and pushing his buttons, but you need to start *handling* him! Take off the kid gloves and do what needs to be done to get him to listen to us. Kick his ass or fuck his brains out. I don't care which."

"I've told you I already have feelings for him," she reminded him. "You're willing to risk that I won't eventually become compromised if he and I start an intimate relationship?"

"What does that even mean, compromised?" Casey asked. "I think you'll do your job, which is to keep him safe. That's what's important for this mission."

“What about when the mission is over?” Sarah asked.

Casey shrugged and grunted. “We’ll worry about that then. Why borrow trouble?”

“Ok,” Sarah replied, unconvinced. “What about Graham and Beckman, the surveillance?”

“You’re supposed to be his girlfriend for God’s sake! You think they’re going to fault you for playing the part? Besides, no one else is cleared for this project. Think about it for a minute. Who’s going to audit the surveillance? Do you think Graham or Beckman have the time to be watching grainy footage of the moron playing video games with that bearded troll friend of his, or listening to him fart in his sleep?” Casey obviously thought the idea was absurd. “Once we tell them that one of the lead scientists on the Intersect project was a traitor, they’re not going to be rushing to bring more people into the fold anytime soon. You teach him how to keep his game face on during briefings and we keep putting marks in the ‘W’ column, I guarantee you, no one will look too closely at your cover. Why look for ways to fuck up a successful team?”

Sarah was genuinely surprised at his willingness to look the other way while she pursued a relationship with an asset. “I don’t get it, Casey. Why would you do this?”

Casey looked back in the direction that Chuck had driven off in. “Because the kid showed me something tonight. The past week I thought he was just an annoying, spineless loser. I still think he’s a loser and he’s extremely annoying, but he’s not spineless. Not many people have the cajones to tell me off to my face. It just takes a lot to get him to stand up for himself.” He shrugged as he looked back at Sarah. “I think this could be an important mission. This team has a lot of potential, if we can learn to trust each other and work together. Last week the kid stopped a bombing. This week we caught a high level NSA traitor, even if just fucking barely. That’s not nothing.”

Sarah nodded. "I agree," she replied. "I think there's a lot of potential here too. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't have other concerns about pursuing a relationship with Chuck. Right or wrong, he's still classified as a government asset. That's a line I've never crossed. It's unprofessional."

Casey grunted angrily and threw his hands up. "Name one thing about this situation tonight that was at all "professional." He made exaggerated air-quotes with his fingers. "We were played by a traitor and the asset we're tasked with protecting almost got captured or killed like three separate times." He huffed impatiently. "Anyway, you're overthinking it, Walker. Just talk to the moron. Maybe the two of you can find some middle ground."

Sarah looked dubious but the conversation ended abruptly when several government issue SUVs rolled up.

"The cleaners are here. Let's get this mess taken care of and we'll deal with the rest tomorrow."

Casey only grunted in response.

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It was the small hours of the morning when Sarah pulled into the parking lot of her hotel and was dismayed but also happy to see Chuck's nerd herder in the parking lot. She wondered briefly if perhaps she was dismayed *at* how happy she was to see him waiting for her.

Her anger had been replaced with guilt regarding her treatment of him. When she thought about it from his perspective, it made no sense whatsoever for him to trust her. She needed to apologize but it wasn't a situation she was used to dealing with. She parked next to him and walked around to the driver's side of his car. He had fallen

asleep with his head against the window and his mouth had fallen open a little. A thin line of drool was leaking out the corner of his mouth and she found herself suppressing a giggle at how adorable he was.

She rapped lightly on the window and he jumped up as if he'd been tased, letting out a short but shrill screech. She let herself smile a little but held in the laughter. He looked up at her through his window, obviously a little disoriented. He felt the drool on his chin and grimaced as he wiped it off with his hand. She felt her smile get a little bigger as she shook her head. He finally opened the door and stepped out of the car.

"Hey, Sarah. Hi," he said hesitantly. "Sorry, I fell asleep. I didn't mean to. I didn't think I'd be able to but I guess I did." He was rambling a little, obviously not sure how she'd feel about him being here, especially after she'd reamed him out earlier.

"It's ok, Chuck," she said softly. "I'm actually glad you're here." He looked surprised for a moment, then rewarded her with an appreciative smile.

"Is it too late to talk for a bit?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, it's not too late." She held out her hand. "Let's go upstairs."

He seemed surprised at the offer, but took her hand in his and they made their way to her room in mostly comfortable silence. As soon as she closed her door, Chuck spoke up first, for which she was grateful.

"Sarah, I want you to know that I'm sorry I wasn't able to trust you today, with everything that happened. I let Casey get in my head and I didn't know what else to think."

She could tell that he was going to spiral again if she didn't step in. "It's OK, Chuck. That's one of the things I wanted to talk about as well. I wanted to apologize. I was out

of line earlier tonight when I went off on you. It was unreasonable for me to expect you to trust me with everything that was going on.” She could tell he was relieved but could also tell there was more on his mind.

“There’s more you want to say about that, isn’t there?” she asked.

He nodded and said, “Yeah.” He paced for a few moments and she gave him some time to gather his thoughts as she climbed on the bed and sat down.

“Sarah, tonight you sort of threatened me with ‘the bunker’ option,” he looked her in the eyes but she could tell he was nervous. “I need you to know that I don’t appreciate that. I don’t like being threatened and I really, really don’t want us to have that kind of... relationship. I understand that I’m a government asset and I don’t really have a lot of say about how I’m treated, which isn’t cool, by the way. I didn’t ask for any of this. What I mean is, if we have to work together, I don’t want it to be because I’m constantly in fear of being taken away from my family, my friends. I might not have much of a life here, but it is my life and I want to stay in it. I’m cooperating because I actually want to help, but I won’t do it under duress. I can’t live like that.”

His voice firmed up midway through his little speech and Sarah was incredibly proud of the way he was sticking up for himself, but felt like a complete asshole as she remembered her words from earlier.

She nodded as she looked at him. “You’re right, Chuck. That was out of line and I’m very sorry. I was angry but that’s no excuse. I can tell you that I will do everything I can to prevent you from being taken into protective custody and I would certainly never be the one to cause it. I promise you that much.”

She could tell he was immensely relieved and it only served to make her feel that much worse. “Thank you, Sarah. That means a lot to me.” Again, she could tell that he had more he wanted to say.

“Chuck, you have my undivided attention. Let’s see how much we can work out tonight before we both need to get some sleep. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

He ran his hands through his hair and started pacing again. “When I was thinking about this earlier, it just made so much sense in my head, but now I’m thinking I might be a little crazy.”

“What do you mean?”

Chuck made a frustrated noise and muttered, “Ah, what the hell. If I could die at any moment, I’m going to *live* now.” Then his voice firmed up but he was obviously still very nervous. “I think the reason you were so upset with me for not trusting you and for putting myself in danger tonight is because you have feelings for me!”

Sarah wasn’t surprised that he’d figured it out. She’d never had such a hard time keeping her walls up as she did around him. So many times over the past week it seemed like she’d forgotten she was his handler and he was her asset.

She was just so unprepared to deal with someone like him. Her training had covered every possible contingency when it came to dealing with the scum of the earth, but they’d taught her nothing about how to deal with a charming, decent, caring, brave man. Especially one with such beautiful, intelligent, soft brown eyes that seemed to look into her very soul and find her... worthy.

He spoke again, the nervousness replaced with resolve. “Sarah, can you tell me I’m not completely crazy? Do you have feelings for me?”

Sarah stared at her hands in her lap as she thought about how to answer him. She knew that if she gave him the truth, there would be no going back. Until then, she could still walk away, request another assignment. She was shocked at how emphatic the mental

No! was at that thought. It seemed maybe she was a little further gone than she'd admitted to Casey. Was she already compromised? The idea seemed absurd and her instinct was to dismiss it out of hand. Casey had even gone so far as to ask the question, what did it even mean?

She knew that to Graham and Beckman, it meant that she'd choose Chuck over any orders that might cause him harm. She really hadn't meant what she'd said earlier, about walking away and sending him to a bunker. It had been a cruel thing to say to him. But what if Beckman ordered it tomorrow? Would she do it? Add her name to the long list of people in his life who'd betrayed him? It could be the final straw for him. The final betrayal; the one that hardened his heart to the world.

Could she honestly live with being the one who broke this incredibly sweet, genuine man? It would be perhaps the blackest stain on her soul yet. She fully understood that if she were to betray him, she would also be betraying that last vestige of humanity that still existed within her. She would from that moment forward never be anything more than the Ice Queen. It was a reputation that she'd cultivated over the last decade but which she hated, nevertheless. She'd never wanted to be the Ice Queen to begin with.

So, she had her answer. She was officially compromised. She wouldn't betray him. Couldn't betray him. And she knew it was as much to protect herself as to protect him.

"Sarah?" Chuck asked quietly. "You've been quiet a really long time. Are you ok?"

She finally looked up at him. "Yes," she admitted quietly.

He nodded, looking relieved at first, then confused. "Wait, did you mean yes that you're ok, or yes to the other..." He trailed off, seemingly not sure he wanted to know.

"I have feelings for you, Chuck." She climbed off the bed and walked slowly over to him. "I've had feelings for you from just about the first moment we met." She understood that

she was most assuredly compromised when his answering smile made her body tingle. He didn't just smile with his mouth or his face; he smiled with his entire being. His smile called out to her and she felt herself smiling back at him.

"Really?" He asked softly through his grin.

"Yes, Chuck," she admitted again. "I was telling you the truth on our date when I told you I like you. In my line of work, I don't get to meet genuinely charming, honest, kind-hearted men. You're the first."

His smile was magnificent as he replied. "Thank you for being honest with me about this. I want you to know, I don't expect anything to change between us. I know there are rules you can't break, but just knowing makes things easier for me. It was just so confusing before, not really knowing where things stand between us."

She smiled back at him as she shook her head. "Things not changing between us doesn't really work for me, Chuck," she said quietly. She stepped even closer to him and took his hand.

His smile dimmed a little and he started looking a little nervous. "Wh- Uh, what exactly doesn't work for you?"

"The cover, specifically, doesn't work for me," she answered, looking up at him shyly. That she actually felt shy at that moment was unnerving.

He swallowed and she found she enjoyed toying with him immensely. "The cover? You, ah, you don't want to be my cover girlfriend?"

"Nope," she answered. "I really, really do not want to be your *cover* girlfriend."

"Um, ok, uh. I, uh.." he stuttered.

She let him off the hook by putting her other hand behind his neck and pulling him into a kiss. He was surprised at first, but quickly started kissing her back. It was soft and warm and intimate. She could spend all night just kissing him.

She pulled back after a minute and smiled up at his dazed expression, his eyes still closed, his mouth slightly open. She knew how he felt.

“Wow,” he whispered, eliciting a giggle from Sarah. “That was, um.. wonderful.”

“You’re not so bad yourself,” she admitted with a wry grin.

His brain finally caught up with the reality of what she was proposing and he looked at her intently. “How is this going to work? You mentioned that if your bosses thought we were involved, they would reassign you. I don’t want you to be reassigned, Sarah.” His voice was low and quiet but firm.

“What I told you wasn’t exactly the full truth,” she said. “Let’s talk about this for a minute.” She pulled him over to the bed and sat down, pulling him down next to her as she turned to face him.

“I’m going to be honest with you, Chuck. Us being in a relationship is going to be incredibly difficult. As far as the government is concerned, you are an asset and I’m your handler.”

Chuck nodded. “Trust me, I get that part.”

“As your handler, I’m given a lot of latitude in how I treat you,” she explained. “They don’t really care, as long as it gets results.”

“Okay...” Chuck said slowly, not really sure where she was headed.

“For example, if I chose to use physical violence to get you to cooperate, my bosses wouldn’t care, as long as it worked,” She paused for a long moment before continuing. “They also wouldn’t care if I were to use sex to get you to cooperate.”

He was obviously a little shocked at that information. “Well, that’s messed up. You’re worth so much more than that,” he said earnestly. “And I think you know I’m not a quid pro quo kind of guy, Sarah.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “I knew that within two minutes of meeting you, Chuck. Besides, I don’t operate that way. If I was going to use sex as part of my job, I’d become a call girl and make probably ten times what I make at the CIA and not get shot at so much.”

Chuck snorted at that. “Good to know,” he chuckled.

“On the other hand, I’ve had assets before who’s asses I thoroughly enjoyed kicking in order to get them to cooperate. But they were generally scum-bags who needed to have a beat down on a regular basis, as a karmic payback, if nothing else. Obviously that doesn’t apply to you.”

He chuckled again. “I’m glad to hear that periodic beatings are not going to be a part of this arrangement.”

It was Sarah’s turn to laugh softly. “No, they aren’t. The point is, my bosses have a ‘don’t-ask-don’t-tell’ policy when it comes to assets and their handlers. Up to a very specific line, and that is that if they think that the handler has developed genuine feelings for their asset. They can’t risk that the handler will place the interests of the asset ahead of what the powers-that-be might want.”

Chuck nodded but looked a little nervous. "Objectively, I can see how that makes sense," he admitted. "As the asset in question, I find that rule a little terrifying."

She smiled softly and rubbed his hand. "It's OK, Chuck. I realized something just now. I realized that at least as it pertains to you, I was compromised before we even got our entrees at El Compadre on our first date."

He grinned. "Really?"

She nodded. "Yep. And to be honest, I'm surprised Graham hasn't thought about this. He's overlooked something pretty fundamental and it's not like him."

Chuck was obviously a little confused. "What has he overlooked?"

She hesitated, reluctant to talk about this aspect of her life, even though he already knew some of it. "Chuck, earlier tonight, at your apartment after you drowned my soufflé, you mentioned my mission in France. You know I've killed people." He nodded and she continued. "Every last person that I've killed has either been in self-defense, or sanctioned by the US government. Every single one. I have never... physically.. harmed an innocent person. I've gone to great lengths to make sure that I don't create any collateral damage on my missions. That's what Graham has overlooked. You, Chuck Bartowski, are an innocent man. You were brought into all this spy nonsense by a rogue operative, through no fault of your own. You're the kind of person I took this job to protect. Even if I didn't have any feelings for you at all, I would never harm you." Sarah looked down at his hand in hers, noting how much larger it was than her own. "So, if Graham or General Beckman were to give the order to kill you, not only would I refuse, I would do my best to protect you. To them, that is the very definition of compromised. The fact that I have feelings for you is irrelevant."

Chuck was quiet for a moment, then said, "Thank you, Sarah. I hadn't really thought about the possibility of you being ordered to kill me, but it's nice to hear that you

wouldn't. What about Casey?"

She sighed, blowing out her cheeks. "Yeah, Casey is a different story. He has a reputation for following orders. If they told him that the Intersect represented a clear and present danger, I believe he'd do it."

Chuck looked a little pale suddenly so she put her hand on his cheek and said, "Chuck, don't freak out about this, OK? It's not going to happen. First of all, you're too important to them. They would order you to be taken into protective custody first. Second, I won't allow it. You believe me, right?"

He put his hand over hers and kissed her palm. "I do," he said quietly. She looked into his eyes for a long time and felt something pass between them; a level of connection, of intimacy she'd never had with anyone else in her life. It felt like a soothing balm had been applied to her scarred soul and she wanted more of that feeling.

The moment passed and Chuck cleared his throat as he looked down and blushed. "Ah, yeah. So, getting back to our situation. You kissed me a few minutes ago and said you didn't want to be my cover girlfriend. Can you elaborate on that a little?" He gave her a goofy smile and waggled his eyebrows.

She laughed then leaned forward and kissed him again. He was really a really good kisser. Really, really good. "You're pretty adorable, you know that?" she said as she pulled back.

He sighed dramatically. "It's a burden, but I've learned to cope."

She smiled for a moment then became more serious. "Chuck, like I said before, us being in a real relationship would be monumentally difficult. My job is to protect you. There will be times that I need you to do as I tell you without question or complaint. That creates a power disparity between us."

“Sarah, all relationships have their challenges. You’re worth it. I’m not going to lie and promise that I won’t try to help you if I think you’re in danger, but when it comes to missions, I can promise that I’ll do what you tell me up to that line.”

She groaned with frustration and said, “Chuck, that’s not good enough! Tonight is a prime example of that. You should not have come into that warehouse looking for me. You can’t risk being captured. You can’t risk your life for me. When I realized you were actually trying to fly that helicopter tonight... I can’t remember the last time I was so scared.”

“You aren’t the only one,” he observed with a grin, trying to lighten the mood. She obviously wasn’t having it. “Too soon?” he asked, wincing.

“Dammit, Chuck, this is exactly what I’m talking about! You need to take this seriously!” she exclaimed. “Do you have any idea what the North Koreans would have done to you if Zarnow had succeeded? You say I’m worth it like you have any idea what you’re talking about, but you don’t! Trust me, thirty seconds in their custody and you’d be cursing the day you met me!”

Chuck felt his own frustration rise as well. “Ok, I get it, Sarah! When it comes to all this spy business, I’m hopelessly naïve. But that doesn’t change the fact that I can’t sit by and do nothing while someone I lo... care about is in danger! I can’t do it and I won’t. Us being in a cover relationship or a real one wouldn’t have any bearing on that in the least!”

Sarah picked up on his slip and couldn’t hide her shock. She knew he cared for her, wanted to be with her, but he loved her? Casey had said Chuck was head over heels for her but she hadn’t really internalized what he meant. It took Chuck’s own words to make her fully realize the depth of his feelings for her, and in turn make her realize the depth of her feelings for him.

Her voice was very quiet as she asked, "You love me? How is that possible, Chuck? We've known each other for a week."

"Uhg, you caught that, huh?" he asked sheepishly. He looked down at their hands for a moment then looked her in the eyes. "First off, since when is there a time-limit on these things? Beyond that, I think a better question is, how could I not love you, Sarah? Yes, for a brief period tonight, I was afraid that you were possibly a double-agent but that fear mostly revolved around how confused I was with everything that was going on, and the possibility that my sister might be in danger. Learning that you weren't and seeing you hanging from your arms in that warehouse helped me clarify my feelings."

"Chuck, I don't know if I'm capable of those kinds of feelings," she admitted softly.

He gave her a scornful look that actually made her cringe inside. "Sarah, I mean this in the nicest possible way, but that's the most ridiculous thing I've heard you say. You aren't a sociopath or a psychopath. Just because you're a spy who's had to do terrible things doesn't change the fact that you're still a human being, capable of the full range of human emotions."

"How can you be so sure?" she asked quietly, unable to maintain his gaze.

He smiled at her and said, "Because for all I've been wallowing in self-pity and working at a Buy More for the last five years, I'm still a pretty smart guy. Not to toot my own horn, but I did go to Stanford on a full-ride academic scholarship after all."

"There's a lot you don't know about me, Chuck. Not just my job. Things from my childhood. Things I can't talk about, but that might change how you feel."

She saw him shaking his head in disagreement. "Nothing you did as a child could change my mind, Sarah. Believe it or not, I see the woman in front of me. I see a kind,

intelligent, incredibly strong and amazing woman.”

She finally forced herself to look up at him and saw the truth of his words in his eyes. She wasn't sure if what she was feeling for him was love, but she knew it was something she'd never felt before. A fierce desire to not only protect him, but to know him. Even more startling than that was the desire for him to know her. That was genuinely terrifying.

“You didn't include beautiful in your description,” she noted with a wry smile.

He grinned at her and she felt her heart flutter a little. “Sarah, you're the most beautiful woman I've ever put eyes on, but that has nothing to do with who you are. You barely seem aware of it yourself, which is another pretty amazing quality. Most beautiful people I've met think it makes them better than the rest of us.”

Sarah snorted. “Better than the rest of us, Chuck? You're a remarkably handsome man yourself, you know.”

His grin deepened. “Why Agent Walker, are you saying you're attracted to me?” His joking tone belied his lack of belief that such a thing could be true.

She gave him a smoldering look and leaned into him as she whispered, “I could tell you that I am, Chuck, but I'm not so good with words. I'm more of an action oriented woman.” He squeaked as she pushed him down on the bed and laid on top of him, kissing him firmly. She ran her tongue over his lips and he opened his mouth, moaning as she ran her tongue across his. She wanted him to understand just how attractive she found him to be and heard her own moans in response to his.

They finally parted, both breathless with desire. She held his gaze as she asked him, “Does that answer your question, Chuck?”

He grinned at her and said, "It does. Apparently you're somewhat attracted to me. It's quite a boost to my poor, under-fed ego, I must say."

His expression became more somber. "As much as I'd like for you to continue showing me how attracted you are to me, I think we have more to talk about regarding... our "cover". She was surprised how much she missed his hands on her for the brief moment he took them off to make air quotes with his fingers.

She sighed as she rolled herself off of him, but kept one hand on his chest as she propped her head on her other hand. He mimicked her position facing her, his other hand on her hip, his thumb idly rubbing her exposed skin above her slacks, sending soft tingles of pleasure through her.

"Yes, we do," she admitted. "You should know that Casey sort of encouraged me to have this conversation with you."

He obviously wasn't expecting that bit of information. "You're kidding? The guy who has to check the manual when he scratches his ass to make sure he's doing it by-the-book? That guy encouraged you to break protocol with your asset?"

Sarah chuckled at his observation. "Yeah, it seems you impressed him tonight. Apparently he's not used to people calling him an asshole to his face. That was pretty brave, by the way. I'd be careful poking him in the future."

Chuck grimaced. "Yeah, well, he was an asshole. He spent the whole night telling me you were the double, then his truck blew up and he told me you were cleaning the operation. Then after you went off on me he said, "Way to go, Ace" like I was an idiot for believing him. I sort of snapped."

She reached up and cupped his cheek. "I'm really sorry for what I said, Chuck. I didn't mean any of it. I was hurt and angry and didn't really understand why."

"I've already accepted your apology, Sarah. I'm just happy we've cleared the air, so to speak. But I have to ask, what do we do now? How does this work going forward?"

"Well, Casey made some interesting points. I know you're not going to like hearing this, but there's surveillance all over your apartment complex and in your apartment."

She was correct that he didn't like hearing that as his expression hardened. "Wait a minute? There's surveillance In my apartment?"

Sarah bit her lip and nodded shyly. "Yeah. I'm sorry, Chuck. We should have told you but we got so caught up in protocol, dealing with you the way we would any other asset. Casey agrees that it was a mistake."

"Jesus, Sarah. How long has it been there? That's kind of freaking humiliating! Not just for me, but for Ellie and Devon as well. I can maybe forgive the intrusion into my privacy given everything that's going on, but to intrude on theirs is absolutely unacceptable."

She agreed with him wholeheartedly. "You're right, Chuck. We'll figure something out with that, I promise, OK? It might just take a little time."

He looked at her for several long moments before his expression softened. "Ok, Sarah. I trust you. We'll put a pin in that for now, but I'm not letting it go. That's a bridge too far."

"I promise," she assured him.

He nodded. "Ok, so what does the surveillance mean? Is someone watching, listening all the time?"

“No, but everything is recorded and stored. Casey audits it and submits a report along with the recordings. If he doesn’t flag anything in particular, then Graham or Beckman don’t have any reason to look at it. He doesn’t think they would take the time to review the surveillance on their own and I tend to agree with him. No one else is cleared in on this mission, so there’s no one else who might be reviewing it. As of right now, it’s really just the five of us – Graham, Beckman, Casey, me and you.”

“I suppose that makes it marginally less offensive,” Chuck noted. “But I assume you were going somewhere specific with telling me about this?”

“Yes,” she admitted with a nod. “Technically, you and I would only need to be affectionate with each other as part of our cover relationship, when we’re around your friends or family, but it’s sort of a blurry line. It’s understood that we would have to maintain a level of affection whenever we’re in public because we might not realize we’re being observed. It’s theoretically possible that Beckman or Graham could look at the footage to try and determine if I’m demonstrating any behaviors that might indicate that I’ve become compromised. That’s a tough thing to do though because how could they really tell if I’m behaving a particular way as part of acting out my cover, or because I’m genuinely compromised? First off, they have no reason to suspect me of being compromised and second, trying to determine it through that kind of passive surveillance is next to impossible.”

“That makes sense, but it feels like you’re leading to something.”

“I am. The only way for them to really start becoming concerned about me is how we behave during mission briefings. We need to act as if we’re merely teammates and nothing more. Less than teammates actually because they still see you as an asset. To them, you’re just the Intersect. From their perspective, you’re no more a member of the team than my laptop is. You’re there to provide information and do what you’re told.”

He made an aggravated noise and said, "That's pretty offensive. The CIA is treating me like a criminal when they are the ones who did this to me! Rogue or not, Bryce was still CIA when he sent me that email."

Sarah nodded as she rubbed his chest lightly. "I know. I agree with you and Casey does as well. We are going to see if we can get your status changed, but in the meantime, when it comes to briefings, I need you to keep your head down. Don't speak up unless you're asked a direct question. Don't pay undue attention to me or Casey either for that matter."

"So if I play the meek little mouse during meetings, and Casey has our backs with the surveillance, you're saying that we can have a real relationship, out in the open, right under their noses?" he asked dubiously.

"Yeah, pretty much," she admitted. "Casey made the point to me after you left; if we keep producing as a team like we have been, they won't want to risk upsetting the team dynamic by looking too closely, even if they did suspect something. We've had two major successes in the last week; stopping that bomb and capturing a high-level NSA traitor tonight. Either one of those could make an agent's career in other circumstances. Those are huge wins. Nothing buys goodwill like success. We keep that going, it will be easier to get your status changed, maybe bring you on as a consultant, or even on the payroll as a field support analyst or something."

Chuck thought about that for a moment and seemed to find the idea not completely without merit. "And I'm assuming that if you are able to get my status changed, it also changes the rules regarding us having a relationship, right?"

She smiled at him, liking the way his thought process worked. "That's right. Then it falls under HR guidelines for interoffice romances. It happens all the time."

He smiled at her. "I still find it hard to believe you're actually interested in dating me, like for real."

She was getting a little frustrated with his lack of self-confidence. She thought it was maybe time to feed his ego some more. "I'm interested in doing more than dating you, Chuck." She gave him her best bedroom eyes and could see the effect it was having on him.

His throat clicked as he swallowed and his face flushed. "Uh, yeah. I, ah, sort of picked up on that from the kissing. Um, I should mention, uh, you know, I, ah.. It's been a really long time... since I last, you know..."

She giggled at his nervousness. "Chuck, we can take this at whatever speed you're comfortable with. I'm not going anywhere. It's pretty late so it makes more sense for you to spend the night than it does for you to go home now. What do you say we get cleaned up and get some sleep?"

If anything, his nervousness seemed to step up a notch. "You, uh... I, uh... You mean, sleep here... in your bed? Together?"

"Yes, Chuck. Sleep together in the same bed. We are adults after all. I can control myself if you can," she said with a grin.

"Yes! I can control myself! I mean, I imagine you'd tie me up with my own intestines if I tried anything without your permission, but I would never-" Sarah interrupted his spiraling with a kiss.

After several long minutes, she pulled back and gave him a warm smile, loving the dazed look he had. "Chuck, don't freak out," she whispered. "I'm going to take a shower. I'm telling you right now that you have an open invitation to join me, but it's your choice." She turned his shocked look back into a dazed one with another searing kiss.

She hopped off the bed and pulled her blouse off over her head as she walked towards her bathroom. She stopped at the doorway, reached around and unclasped her bra, letting it slide slowly down her arms as she looked at him over her shoulder. The raw hunger she saw in his eyes made her shiver with anticipation. She really, really hoped he joined her.

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Chuck watched her walk into the bathroom and noticed that she made no effort to close the door. He could still see her in the bathroom mirror. He got up off the bed and took off his clothes. He heard the shower come on and saw Sarah had been openly watching him in the mirror as he'd undressed.

He smiled at her as he contemplated the dramatic turn the night had taken. He'd had more questions answered than he'd anticipated. He'd learned some things that made him very uncomfortable. He'd also learned some things that made his heart soar with new-found hope. His life had been completely and irretrievably altered, but given the shambles his life had been in before Sarah had showed up, having it up-ended wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

As he walked naked towards an equally naked Sarah Walker, he didn't care in the least. He knew he was hopelessly in love with her and she'd admitted that she felt very strongly for him. She might even love him, but the concept seemed to scare her. It scared him too.

As he stepped into the bathroom and closed the door, he decided he would do his best to not worry too much about it. He didn't know what his long-term future held, but his short-term future looked very promising indeed.

He stepped forward and embraced that future. She embraced him right back.

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