

Chuck vs Honesty

by Steelejay

A despondent Chuck on the beach after events in the Pilot. It's a morning for brutal Honesty, wielded by a man who feels he has very little left to lose.

Rated: T · Genre: Adventure

The tears flowed freely as he sat in the sand and stared out at the expanse of the Pacific Ocean. They were not tears of sadness, but anger. Hurt and betrayal too, but mostly anger. A deep, burning anger that he thought felt acidic. Corrosive. An emotion with which he was wholly unfamiliar. The anger needed an outlet and since violence wasn't an option for him, tears were the only release he could find.

Normally being in this place at the beach filled him with a sense of wonder at the sheer vastness spread out before him, helped him put things in perspective. This morning it just reminded him of how insignificant he was. How irrelevant he'd let himself become in his own life. The ocean mocked his small world, scorned his inconsequential hurts, dismissed his trivial concerns. Somehow this seemed to make his pains that much sharper.

He ran through the night's events in his head and struggled to understand why Bryce felt it necessary to destroy his life yet again. How much ruination could one man wreak upon another man's life?

His intent after the events at the hotel had been to go home, but a crushing realization had dawned on him and he needed the clarity that this particular spot on the beach had always been able to give him in the past. It hadn't been working so he just continued to sit and eventually the tears started to flow. He didn't fight them. He wasn't ashamed. He'd earned them and, scientifically, he understood the release they represented. He knew analysis would show that the tears were full of stress hormones. An actual physical release of what his body was going through.

He'd been angry at Bryce for what he'd done at Stanford. It was strange to think, but he felt it was a betrayal almost on par with his parents leaving. Not quite, but almost. Afterwards he'd been angry at himself for not fighting against his dismissal, rather than passively accepting it. So much that was wrong with his life seemed to stem from passive acceptance. After being home from Stanford for a while, his anger transitioned to self-pity and that had led to five years in a hole of his own digging. One that he'd still been digging up to the previous morning.

He wasn't going to let himself follow that pattern this time around. If nothing else, he'd learn from his prior experiences. He would figure out how to channel this anger somehow, make it productive rather than self-destructive. But first he needed to let himself grieve a little. He needed to stop worrying about whether what he was feeling was childish or selfish and just let himself feel it. Feel the anger, feel the hurt, feel the impotence with his inability to change his circumstances.

When Sarah had left her number on that card, he'd known it was too good to be true. He'd told Morgan as much when his friend had pushed him to call her back. The woman was so far out of his league it was laughable. But then she'd come back to see him. Not only to see him, but specifically to ask him out and the directness of it had thrilled him. Yes, she was incredibly beautiful, but there was more to it than that. This was LA after all. He helped beautiful women every day and generally forgot them as soon as they left. There was more to his attraction to Sarah than her physical beauty. He couldn't define it other than to say, as trite and cliché as it sounded, that it was some kind of chemistry. And so he'd actively ignored that voice in the back of his head telling him there was a catch, because he'd wanted to believe that someone so stunning, so compelling, was interested in him. Found him attractive, wanted to know more about him.

But of course the voice had been right. She wasn't interested in him, she was interested in the email Bryce had sent him. In the secrets in his head. That had been the realization he'd had on the way home. Sarah Walker was a CIA agent on a case, and he was her mark. She would have behaved the same way towards Jeff or Lester had Bryce sent them the email instead of him. The thought filled him with fury and his breath caught as the tears flowed harder. He raged at how unfair it was to the waves that rolled in toward

him and the waves sent back total indifference to his suffering.

He heard footsteps behind him and realized it was her just before she sat down next him. Of course she would have followed him. He felt like an idiot for not realizing it sooner. He had all their secrets in his head, they couldn't let him out of their sight. He didn't speak or acknowledge her presence, though he did look at her out of the corner of his eye and was once again blown away. Yes she was incredibly pretty, that was obvious, but there was more to it than that. The anger intensified and he had to look away, but he didn't bother to hide the tears. It would be pointless anyway as they were still actively flowing.

"Talk to me, Chuck," she said quietly.

He shook his head a little. "I don't think that's a good idea right now. I'm not in a good headspace at the moment. I'm not sure I trust myself... to articulate..." He made a dismissive gesture with one hand and left it at that.

She nodded her understanding. "Well, I want you to know again how impressed I was with the way you handled things at the hotel. You saved a lot of lives last night, mine and Casey's included. That deserves a thank you, so thank you."

"Don't do that," Chuck said, his jaw clenched. "Don't patronize me."

He could tell she was a little taken aback by that. Or at least she seemed to be. She was a spy after all, it could be an act. He wondered if any of their night together was real and the thought angered him yet further as he wiped tears off his face.

He couldn't seem to stop himself from digging the knife in a little deeper. "You said on the roof that you worked with Bryce at the CIA."

"I did," she acknowledged. "We were partners."

"And lovers," Chuck blurted angrily.

She gave him a shocked look and was about to answer him, but he held up his hand and interrupted her. "Don't bother denying it. If I catch you in a lie right now, we're done." He grabbed a fist full of sand and squeezed it angrily.

"I know it's none of my business. I don't care and I warned you that I'm not in a great place at the moment. I know Bryce. There's no way he could have been your partner without eventually trying to sleep with you. If you didn't kick his ass and have him fired for sexual harassment then the only other conclusion is that you were together. You don't have to confirm it, but do not lie to me."

Sarah sighed and looked out at the ocean. She nodded after a few moments. "I guess I can't really blame you. Yes, Bryce and I were partners, and we were... together. It was..." she took a deep breath and made a frustrated noise. "The truth is, I have no idea what it was other than convenient."

Chuck was self-aware enough in his anger to understand that Bryce's death might be hard on her. "I'm sorry for you. About his death, I mean." He noticed that she was giving him a strange look. "What?"

She shook her head and blew out a puff of breath. "You're a strange specimen is all, Chuck. I upend your life and you're offering me condolences?"

Chuck shrugged. "I guess I am who I am, even in the midst of an existential crisis."

"Can I ask you what the root of your existential crisis is?" she asked after a few moments.

Chuck figured he was in this, so he may as well jump in with both feet. He would answer honestly any question she asked. "I realized as I was driving home last night that you asking me out wasn't real and it sort of broke me. I let myself believe in something, even if for just a few hours. You'd think I'd learned my lesson with that by now."

Sarah frowned as she asked him, "Me asking you out meant that much to you?"

Chuck looked at her dubiously. "Come on, Sarah. Don't try and pretend with me that you don't realize the effect you have on men. I'm not making any judgments, but isn't that part of your job with the CIA? To seduce saps like me into telling you what you want to know? You asking me out was the highlight of the last five years of my life. To have that taken away hurt," he shrugged and looked away before continuing. "Hurt is cumulative. I've had a lot already and that was too much. The last straw, so to speak."

He noticed that Sarah was actually crying now as well, though his tears seemed to have stopped since he started talking to her. He hadn't noticed. She looked genuinely upset, but could he trust it? She still needed his cooperation. She looked out at the water as she wiped the tears away roughly.

"I don't know what to say to all of that," she admitted. "I mean, I'm really sorry to have done that to you, but you should know, it wasn't all fake. Yes, I was sent here to find out your connection to Bryce, but I knew pretty quickly that you were innocent of any wrongdoing. I found you charming, Chuck. I enjoyed our date. I meant it when I said I liked you. You're a genuinely nice guy, Chuck and I live in a world where nice guys are like unicorns. I've been trained to believe it's just a horse with a fake horn. Rather than something rare and beautiful, it's just another lie meant to trick us."

Chuck looked at her and wished he could discern her true motives and intent. She seemed completely honest and genuine. "Sarah, I promise right now to not lie to you, to give you as much raw honesty as I can. In the interest of fulfilling that promise, I will admit that I don't know if I can believe you. I want to, but you're a spy after all. I have this ridiculous computer in my head and you guys need my cooperation. I'm sure you have some kind of file on me. The CIA would know how to manipulate me."

Sarah nodded as she looked out at the ocean. "That's all very true. The CIA and the NSA both will do whatever they think is necessary to get your cooperation. We do have a file on you, but it's pretty thin. It was mostly cobbled together over the last few days. We know you have a sister that's about four years older than you. She's a neuroscience resident at Westside Hospital. She helped raise you after your parents abandoned the two of you when you were about nine. Your mom left first, then your dad a few years later. You were kicked out of Stanford for cheating your senior year and you've been working at the Buy More since then."

Chuck grimaced and looked away from her. "The Cliff Notes version of my fucking life," he mumbled. He looked back at her and his voice gained clarity, along with no small amount of heat. "Did the file tell you that I broke my mom's favorite charm off her bracelet the day before she left and for years I thought that was why she abandoned us?"

Did the file tell you that my dad couldn't handle her leaving, so he checked out mentally years before he left physically? Did the file talk about all the sacrifices Ellie had to make for us to stay together and avoid going into foster care or how goddamn hard we worked to earn our respective scholarships? I had a full ride, academic scholarship, and Bryce blew up eight years of my labors in a fucking afternoon, then stood around and played pool while I carried my shit to my car. Did the file talk about how he, my roommate and best friend, is the one who claimed he found the answer sheet under my mattress and reported me for cheating? Did the file mention how all my friends and professors turned their backs on me after I had busted my ass there for four years and maintained a 3.9 GPA? That I was only three classes short of getting my degree, with Distinction? That I never had a hint of any wrongdoing on my academic record and yet I was dismissed without so much as a hearing? Did the file mention how my girlfriend of three years, to whom I was going to propose, broke up with me and then slept with Bryce Fucking Larson only days after that asshole had me kicked out of school?" By the end of his rant, Chuck had started crying again and couldn't bear it when he saw Sarah crying too. He looked back out at the ocean.

"Chuck, I'm so sorry," Sarah said softly. He felt her hand on his shoulder and hated how comforting it felt. Hated how much he still wanted her empathy, her recognition, even after the heartbreak of the previous night. "Chuck, even though I know you don't trust me right now, I'm going to make you the same promise. I'm not going to lie to you about any of this. I'm not going to try and manipulate you. I'll do whatever I can to help you through all of this. I would ask you to trust me, but I know that would be completely unfair. You have no reason to trust me and every reason not to."

It was a few moments before either of them spoke. Chuck ran his hands across his face and asked, "There's nowhere I can run is there?"

"Not from us. Not from the combined power of the CIA and the NSA. But could you run? I know we just had the one date - and I do consider it a date, Chuck - but could you go on the run and leave Ellie? I don't ask that to manipulate you, but because I know how important she is to you. How important you are to each other."

Chuck sighed and shook his head. “No, you’re right. I could never do that to her. It’d be just like what our parents did. It would destroy her.”

Sarah nodded a little and Chuck noticed she still hadn’t pulled her hand away from his shoulder. He found himself once again wanting to know about her. “How long have you been with the CIA?” he asked as he glanced at her.

She did take her hand off his shoulder then, getting a pensive look on her face as she ran her fingers across the sand. It took a long time for her to reply. So long that he was starting to think she wasn’t going to and he regretted the question because he missed her hand on his shoulder.

“Ten years,” she said finally. “The current Director recruited me when I was a senior in high school, while he was Deputy Director of Operations. I was seventeen when I started training.”

“Jesus, Sarah!” Chuck exclaimed. “How?... What...?” He didn’t know how to articulate a question so he just let them hang as he looked at her dumbfounded.

Sarah took a deep breath. “I said I would tell you the truth, Chuck, but I didn’t say the answers would be easy for me to give. We’re getting into territory here that I’ve never talked about with anyone. Ever.”

Chuck thought about that for a moment before responding. “My initial instinct is to be understanding and tell you that you don’t have to tell me, but I’m honestly not in a very understanding place right now. So if you can, I’d like to encourage you to earn the trust you’re asking of me. It only seems fair, and I could use a little fair right now.”

She nodded and took a deep breath. “Jesus, I can’t believe I’m going to tell you this,” she muttered. It was several long moments before she continued speaking. She didn’t look at him. “My dad left my mom when I was seven years old. I left with him. I chose him over my mom because he was fun. We had adventures together. My mom was the grown-up who wanted me to eat my vegetables and do my chores and go to school. She was a good parent, so of course I chose my dad who let me have ice cream for dinner and stay up late. Like I said, we would go on these adventures. Every few days, we

would go to a new town and we would trick people into giving us their money. It didn't take me long to figure out that what we were doing was wrong, but I was having fun. I was having fun with my grifter dad, helping him con people out of their money. I eventually got to the point where I didn't want to do it anymore. I was fifteen and we got into a big argument about it. I just couldn't do it. I'd had enough. I thought about trying to call my mom and go home but I had so much residual guilt about leaving her and doing what I did with my dad. I was afraid she'd reject me. So even though I stopped helping him, I stayed with dad while he kept up his cons. We were living in San Diego when I came home from school one day and there were police all around our house. He was being led away in handcuffs, so I kept on driving."

"Jesus," Chuck muttered quietly.

Sarah nodded. "My dad and I had an emergency stash setup for me in case something like this happened, so that's where I went. Director Graham found me there and offered me the chance to join the CIA, use the skills my dad had taught me in the con game, but use them for good. At least, that's how he phrased it at the time. He was manipulating me even more skillfully than my dad could in any of his cons. He implied that if I agreed, he'd make things easy on my dad. Make sure he got protection in prison, maybe a reduced sentence." Sarah absently wiped away a tear.

"So not only were you underage, you were recruited under duress as well?" Chuck demanded. He wasn't sure when it had happened, but he realized his anger, previously a raging inferno, had dwindled to a small candle flame. It wasn't gone, but anger was foreign to him for the most part; slow to take root, fast to burn itself out.

Sarah nodded slightly and shrugged. "So I agreed, of course. What else was I going to do?"

"Damn, now I feel like an asshole for complaining about my childhood," he confessed. "I'm so sorry, Sarah."

"Chuck, just because I had it rough doesn't negate the fact that you also had it rough. I at least had my father and as crazy as it sounds, and as much guilt as I still carry around about it, I really did have a lot of fun with him. For a while anyway."

“Yeah, and as bad as it was, Ellie and I had each other. She really had it worse than I did. She saw to it that I got to be a kid at least sometimes, hid from me some of the more difficult things she was dealing with. And I had Morgan, along with a few other friends in high school. I can’t imagine how lonely your childhood must have been, always on the move, never making friends.”

Sarah shrugged. “I never really had any frame of reference. I was lonely, but I just thought that’s the way life was.”

Chuck looked at her for a long moment and he saw the pensive look in her eye again. “Thank you for sharing all that with me, Sarah. I really needed that... I don’t know, I guess just that intimacy.”

She smiled shyly and nodded. “You’re welcome. It wasn’t as hard to talk about as I thought it would be, honestly.”

“If I asked you what exactly you do for the CIA, would you be able to tell me?” he asked, knowing he was likely pushing the boundaries of their agreement for honesty, but wanting to do just that.

She looked out at the ocean for a long time before responding. Just as Chuck thought silence was going to be the answer, she spoke up quietly. “I’m a killer, Chuck.” Her expression was completely flat, but he thought he saw a tempest in her eyes. He was ashamed to admit that the answer shocked him and scared him more than a little.

“I had orders to kill you if you ran.” Her voice was so quiet he could barely hear her over the crashing of the waves on the beach.

He couldn’t help the lump in his throat as he asked her, “Could you have?”

She didn’t hesitate. “No,” she admitted. “I guess I haven’t lost my soul yet because once I knew you were innocent, I knew I couldn’t hurt you. The only thing that gives me any solace is the fact that of all the lives I’ve taken, I’ve prevented the deaths of at least that many. I knew as soon as you helped that little ballerina that you were innocent.”

Chuck smiled. “Well, just for the record, I really wanted to keep talking to you.”

Sarah smiled back at him. "I know."

Chuck couldn't help but cough a laugh at her unexpected response. "See, I knew you were lying about not being funny."

"But I was being honest about having a lot of baggage. A plane load."

Chuck sighed and said, "And as cheesy as the line was, I was honest about being your baggage handler."

He thought maybe she blushed a little. "That wasn't cheesy," she objected. He gave her a flat look and it was her turn to laugh. "Ok, maybe it was a little cheesy. But, since we're doing the honesty thing here, I really, really liked it."

The thought that had been skittering across the edges of his consciousness dropped into his mind and he blurted it out before he could second guess himself. "I know that it's possible that all of this with us right now is a manipulation. That this is simply you being a really great spy and finding a way to connect with me. Win me over. And it's working. Or rather, it has worked. But just know that down the road, if I discover any deceit about any of this, I'll... I'll..." he paused as he realized he had no idea what he might do. "Well, shit, other than come here and cry my eyes out again, I don't know what the hell I'll do," he admitted despondently.

He thought maybe she just looked really sad as she tried to assuage his fears. "That's our hurdle right now, I know. Attaining that trust. And to be clear, yes, you are correct that it's theoretically possible for this to be a manipulation. I can think of a couple of other female agents I've worked with that could probably pull it off, but I couldn't. This kind of subterfuge - seduction - was never my strong suit and on one hand I'm glad for that, but on the other, my strong suit is killing. A long time ago I reached an agreement with Graham that I wouldn't run seduction missions. I don't regret making that deal, but I sometimes wonder why it's so important to me. I mean, a tainted soul is a tainted soul, right?"

Chuck shivered in spite of the morning sun shining down on them. "I can't begin to fathom how a person could even be presented with such questions, much less discern

how to answer them,” he admitted. “And I’m sorry for my earlier comments about you and Bryce. I’m only just now coming to appreciate how lonely your life must really be. Not just yours specifically, but the spy life in general.”

She gave him a small smile. “It’s ok, Chuck. Given what Bryce has done to you, I think you can be forgiven for feeling some animosity towards the man.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” he acknowledged. The two of them sat quietly a little longer, Chuck not yet ready to end their little therapy session or whatever it might be. Even if it turned out to be false down the road, right at that moment it felt real, and that was exactly what he needed. For her part, he didn’t think Sarah seemed anxious to leave either.

“So what happens next?” Chuck finally asked. “I mean, over the next few days.”

Sarah seemed to mull it over for a few moments. “I can make some predictions. The Intersect itself is a highly classified piece of technology, not to mention all the information that came with it. Like I mentioned before, they’ll find a way to force your cooperation. I won’t help them do that, Chuck. I won’t force you. But if you refuse to help, they’ll have no choice but to take you into custody.”

“That’s basically the same thing as killing me, just slower.”

Sarah cringed at that, but nodded in agreement. “But you’re not without some leverage here, Chuck. Your actions last night at the hotel were truly remarkable. I think you should use that to your advantage. Like you told Casey last night, they need you.”

“Other than keeping my life, what else should I try to get out of this?”

“The main thing is to get them to make you either an NSA or CIA analyst. Or maybe a consultant. But you should adamantly refuse to become what’s called an asset.”

“Why? Assets have value”

“Yes, and they can also be disposed of with little or no regard for the individual. Being an asset would basically make you property of the government. Property doesn’t get a say in how it’s treated.”

Chuck nodded. "That makes sense. What about you and the mean, angry NSA guy, John Casey?"

"Well, assuming they decide to let you stay in your current life, since Casey and I are already cleared into the Intersect project, we'll probably be assigned to be your protectors. Director Graham and the NSA Director, General Beckman, will probably want to send you daily intelligence briefings to see if you can use the Intersect to filter out connections, like you did with Stansfield last night."

"How do we explain you and Casey suddenly being in my life all the time? That's going to be weird to my friends and family."

"Well, explaining me is fairly easy. Casey, I don't know but we'll figure something out."

Chuck couldn't help but be confused by her statement. "How is explaining you being around all the time fairly easy?" he asked dubiously.

"By telling everyone I'm your girlfriend, Chuck," she said with a grin. "Man, I thought Stanford grew them smarter."

He couldn't stop the disbelieving laughter and he suddenly realized she looked maybe a little hurt. "What's so funny about me being your girlfriend, Chuck?"

He sobered up quickly. "No, Sarah, it's not you. Well, actually it's totally you. No one is going to buy you being my girlfriend. You're so far out of my league it's honestly a bit of a joke. Albeit not a very funny one."

Sarah just shook her head as her expression softened. "You know what, I'm not even going to debate how ridiculous that analysis is. I'm just another pretty face in a city full of them, Chuck."

Another realization occurred to Chuck and he suddenly was both excited and terrified of the idea of Sarah posing to be his girlfriend. She noticed how quickly his expression changed.

"What is it? You just had another thought pop into that big brain of yours."

He looked away from her and stared out at the ocean, trying desperately to figure out if this was too much honesty.

"It's ok, Chuck. I want us to put all the cards on the table. This morning is all about honesty, remember? Nothing is out of bounds."

"Yeah, but this bit of honesty hits a little close to home," he mumbled.

"How so?"

He turned to look at her and fell headlong into those fathomless blue eyes. Damn. It was happening even faster than he'd previously realized. "Ok, you want honesty? Here you go. There's no way that I'm not going to fall hopelessly in love with you, Sarah. I can already feel it happening. Even after the soul crushing realization that you weren't asking me out because you were interested in me but because you had to. I knew there had to be a catch, because women like you just don't ask guys like me out. I know because, hello, I'm that guy and it. Never. Happens. Then when it does happen and I'm over the goddamn moon, I find out later that, no, sorry Chuck, it actually didn't happen. Realizing that killed a small part of me. It killed a part of my hope. My hope that I might actually be in your league, or maybe someone like you, someday." He stopped to take a breath, then dove back in. He knew he was spiraling but he didn't really care. If she wanted honesty, she was going to get it.

"I've never felt this kind of attraction to another woman before, Sarah. Ever. If the CIA picked you as my seductress, man they knocked it out of the park. Grand slam home run. That ball isn't ever going to land. And it's not just physical, either. It's like I can feel your damn spirit drawing me in, whispering sweet nothings to my own. Like there was a Sarah Walker shaped hole in my life before that I didn't know was there.. It might sound a little corny.. fuck it, it is. It's insanely corny, but it's true. And given the nature of our situation, I honestly don't think I can handle falling in love with you only to have our relationship be some kind of cover. Never being able to really be with you but also never being able to be with anyone else either because first off, they'd never compare to you and second because it would interfere with our cover. I can't think of a worse cage than one whose bars are composed of unrequited love. I for one refuse to live there. The

thought terrifies me. May as well put me in a bunker because while either option would be slow death, at least the bunker wouldn't include daily torture."

Chuck had looked away from her at some point during his rant and didn't see the tears running down her cheeks or the stunned expression on her face. He couldn't bring himself to look at her. He felt her stand up and knew that it was over between them. He'd done it. Given too much honesty and while he couldn't bring himself to regret it, he thought the wave of despair he felt building just might drown him. Except that she wasn't leaving. She had moved around and was standing in front of him. In spite of himself, he looked up at her and couldn't have been more shocked at the dreamy expression she was looking down at him with. Doing exactly the very last thing on earth he expected her to do, she sat down in his lap, wrapping her legs around his waist and tucking her feet in behind him. He was unable to form words as he saw the tear tracks on her face. He could only stare mesmerized into her stunning azure eyes as she put her hands on the sides of his face and stared back into his. He had no idea how long they sat that way before she finally spoke. It was both a long time and not nearly long enough.

Her voice was barely above a whisper. "Chuck, that was the most beautiful thing anyone has ever said to me." To his absolute disbelief and amazement, she leaned down and kissed him. It was soft and wet and more delicious than he could possibly have imagined. And he had done a fair bit of imagining. She continued kissing him and he felt he gave as good as he got, given her reactions. Another indeterminate period of time elapsed during which he felt like he had some insight into what heaven might possibly be like. Heaven on earth was made up entirely of kissing Sarah Walker on the beach while she sat in his lap, made the most amazing little moaning noises and ran her hands through his hair. She finally pulled back a little and looked him in the eyes again.

"Three things, Chuck," she said with a small smile. "First, who said anything about being your 'cover' girlfriend?"

He had to clear his throat twice before he could form coherent words. "Uh, I just... that is I didn't want to... uh, no one said it. Uh, I inferred it, I guess."

“Ok, well let’s just dispel that particular notion right now. We will not be cover-dating. We will be dating, dating. Exclusively. Is that acceptable to you?”

“Uh, yes. I find that to be an agreeable arrangement,” he whispered, eliciting a small smile from her that sent a thrill through him. He’d done that. Made her smile like that. He couldn’t help but give her one back. She leaned in and he returned to Heaven on earth as the kissing resumed. Euphoria filled him as a small part of him that wasn’t solely focused on kissing Sarah Walker realized that he was the one responsible for those noises she was making. Noises which were slowly driving him completely mad. He was the one who finally had to come up for air the next time around.

“Second thing, Chuck,” she whispered again. “I felt the same thing you felt, from the beginning. Your spirit whispered sweet nothings to mine first. Mine was simply responding to yours in kind. You were nothing like what I expected. You turned everything upside down, just by being yourself. Yes, it’s true that my asking you out wasn’t real, but that doesn’t mean that the experience was any less meaningful. As far as I’m concerned, last night was our first date, regardless of why I asked you out. Our first of many.”

“Okay,” he whispered. “Can we go back to heaven on earth?” he asked. When she tilted her head a little, he elaborated. “The kissing.” She smiled and leaned in. Heaven on earth was getting better. Things were starting to get genuinely heated when she moved her feet and pushed him back onto the sand and continued kissing him. She finally pulled back and looked down at him as they both panted to catch their breath.

“Third thing, Chuck,” she said between gulps of breath. “I never want to hear you talk about being out of anyone’s league ever again, especially mine. Is that understood?”

He was going to protest but she apparently felt it coming and pushed a finger lightly over his lips. “Just nod your acceptance, Chuck,” she whispered. “There will be no negotiation on this point.”

The feel of her finger on his lips was almost more than he could bear so he nodded. “Good,” she said. She leaned down towards him again, resting her forearms on the sand while she ran her hands through his hair. As she gazed into his eyes, he realized Heaven

on earth had multiple rooms. “Chuck, I’m the daughter of a conman. A child grifter who grew up to become a CIA assassin. Who am I to think I’m worthy of the love of a kind and caring man? A beautiful man with an amazing smile and wonderfully soft, dark curly hair that I can’t get enough of? Doesn’t that man deserve more than the tainted, bloodstained love that I might offer him in return?”

Chuck started to reply but she cut him off with a short but intense kiss. “Shhh, Chuck. These are rhetorical questions,” she said with a playful smile before her expression turned more serious. “What I’m telling you is that we’re both coming into this not just with baggage, but our own personal demons as well. These demons whisper in our ear and tell us we’re not worthy, that we don’t deserve what the other is offering and the other deserves better than what we can offer them. I have my demons just as you have yours. When I made the observation that I could become your girlfriend to explain my presence in your life, I did so unconsciously realizing the same thing you consciously realized. That falling in love would be a foregone conclusion. Of course, it scares the crap out of me. I was less scared standing in front of that bomb last night. But I guess I don’t care. If you’re willing to take that leap with me, then I’m ready to jump. Maybe we can hold each other as we fall together.”

“I’m ready too,” Chuck whispered.

After another quick peck on the lips, he was disappointed when she sat up, then levered herself to a standing position. She held her hand down to him and he accepted her help, and they spent a moment brushing the sand off themselves.

They shared a long look then each opened their mouths to speak at the same moment.

“Do-”

“Are-”

They giggled in unison.

“Cue awkward moment,” Chuck joked with a laugh. She giggled again as she bumped his shoulder with hers. She held out her hand and he took it happily, without reservation. He noticed how perfectly her hand seemed to fit in his.

“What happens next?” Chuck asked with no small amount of trepidation.

She gave him another shy smile. "Now we go back to my hotel. I have to check in with Graham, fill him in on things. I'm not supposed to, but I'm going to let you listen in on that conversation. I want to keep this honesty thing going between us."

"Me too. It worked out way better today than that time I was honest with Ellie about skipping school." As she laughed, Chuck thought it might be his new mission in life to make Sarah Walker laugh at least once a day. As life missions went, he could think of worse. "So your hotel, huh?"

She distracted him by pulling him up the beach towards the parking lot, not offering any further clarification other than that shy smile he thought might be his undoing.

Chuck changed the subject as they walked. "You know, at one point last night, for a minute or so, I thought you might be a genuine superhero."

"What? You did not!" she insisted with a grin. "When was that?"

"I did, I totally did," Chuck assured her. "It was right after the NSA guys crashed into us and we were running away. I tripped and fell but you didn't notice until you were a ways in front of me. Their SUV was bearing down on you and I had to look away because I couldn't bear to see you get creamed. Then I heard the crash and looked up and from my perspective it looked like the truck had indeed hit you, but you creamed it instead of the other way around. Like the front of the truck just wrapped itself around you. I had no idea where those crazy posts came from that stopped the truck. So yeah, for a few seconds until I saw what happened, I thought you might be a superhero."

"That's so crazy! You really take the nerd thing seriously, huh?"

"Oh, you seriously don't know what you're in for. Just wait until Comi-Con next year..."

Their voices faded off into the distance as they walked up the beach. Every so often their laughter echoed back down to the water until even that was lost to the crashing of the waves.

~ The End ~