

Chuck vs The Nerds Rewrite

by David Carner

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Chapter 1: Chuck vs The Nerds Rewrite

Muaahahahahahahahahahaaaaa!

From the minds of Steampunk.Chuckster and David Carner comes the fic you didn't even know you wanted, but you're getting anyway...*Chuck Versus the Nerds Rewrite*.

The text had come in the morning. She'd heard her phone beep across the room, and she'd stayed right where she was, in the semi-darkness of the kitchen, blinds drawn as tightly as she could possibly make them. She'd thought about drinking, taking the bottle out from the back of the cupboard and just pounding it. But that was stupid and foolish and it wouldn't change anything. And anyway, she didn't want to forget. She wanted this to stay in her mind forever...yet another reason to leave, to walk away, an example of the utter bullshit the CIA had put her through in the last ten years of her life.

Worse than that, though, she needed to know that no matter where she went or what happened, her choices wouldn't endanger anyone she cared about, her choices wouldn't destroy an innocent child's life. Whether she stayed or left, she wanted to remember what had happened, what she'd done. She wouldn't be upset if she ended up forgetting everything else she'd done in the last decade. But there was no chance in hell that would happen. She was stuck with it. And the blood would stay on her hands no matter what she did to try to forget.

She knew who the text was from. Nobody else even had the number. She'd trashed the phone she'd been using before, and Graham had provided her with a new one when she'd returned to Langley. Now he was texting her. A new mission, no doubt. Already. Not even giving her a chance to get back to breathing. Not that she was sure she even

wanted that.

And so she stayed standing there, palms on the countertops, staring down at the swirling patterns of the granite in the dark. What was she even doing? What was this existence? Was it even an existence? Because some days she wondered if she technically even existed. Her badge read Sarah Walker, the colleagues that deigned to speak with her called her Agent Walker, when they weren't whispering "Ice Queen" or "Graham's wildcard enforcer" behind her back. But she felt like a ghost. Or, worse yet, some sort of specter. Like she haunted the hallways of Langley, haunted the Earth in general.

She rolled her eyes at herself and left the kitchen, walking over to grab her phone from the coffee table, passing a room that was sparsely furnished, no decorations, nothing that made this place a home. She had nothing to put up, and she refused to go to one of those World Market type places to buy some too-expensive print of some ocean seascape to hang on the wall. For whom, exactly? No one ever came inside her apartment, and she sure as hell wasn't going to do it for herself.

The text from the unlisted number was short and simple: *My office. Noon. LG*

Just as she'd thought. Another mission. Graham was well aware of what she'd been through, what she'd had to do, the person she'd had to say goodbye to. And here he was thrusting her right back into it, as though her entire world hadn't been rocked by the last week's events. Maybe he didn't know how bad it had affected her. Maybe she did a good enough job pretending none of this affected her. The Ice Queen.

Whatever.

It would be okay. She'd show up, get her mission, and get on a plane to fly halfway across the world again. It would give her time to really think through all of this. To make decisions. Maybe she would have something to actually say to Director Langston Graham once she got back from her mission, something to explain to him that being here, doing this, was too much now. It had gotten too overwhelming, too...a lot.

Or maybe she wouldn't do that. Because what else was even out there for someone who'd killed as often as she had in the last ten years, the last five especially? Lives she'd

ruined, innocent people she'd had to betray...all for the good of the country. That was what her superiors said, and it was in her contract to believe it when they said it. Or at least to pretend. And she had been pretending. For years.

She huffed in frustration with herself and grabbed her coat. If she didn't hurry, she'd miss her appointment. And as disillusioned as she was with...well, everything...she refused to compromise when it came to timeliness.

An hour later, she stood in front of Director Graham's desk as he drummed his fingers on a file. The room was silent, an uncomfortable silence, but she wasn't going to be the first to speak. He'd brought *her* here, hadn't he? And not the other way around.

That file under his hand was a mission, she knew. What kind of mission, she couldn't know for sure. Assassination? Maybe. She wouldn't put it past the CIA to take an agent who'd just dealt with a traitorous handler and had been forced to massacre a building full of people and thrust her right back into a situation that required her to kill again.

"It's good to have you back, Agent Walker." Graham sat back against his chair and looked at her for a moment. It wasn't what she'd expected to hear. "Sometimes when an agent goes through what you did, we lose 'em."

She said what she thought he might want to hear, knowing he was potentially testing out the water, seeing how she responded to his attempt at softness, understanding. Seeing if she really was still considering leaving. She wouldn't give him anything, though. So she responded quickly.

"Well, you're not gonna lose me, Sir." She paused. "But I am done with handlers." That one she meant with every last part of her.

"Oh, I agree," he said, folding his hands on his desk and looking up at her, that understanding still in his face. "In fact, I think that it's time for you to become one."

That was...unexpected. She could feel the stony mask she'd walked into the room with fall away, surprise on her face instead.

"I have a new assignment for you," he continued, sliding the file over his desk towards her. She lowered her eyes to it, raising her eyebrows in genuine interest. "Something

stateside.” That was also a perk.

She reached down to pick it up, opening it to the first page. The name was there in bold, printed letters. Charles Bartowski. Above it, they’d clipped a picture of the man. It only took her a moment to get the gist of what she was expected to do. Extraction of information from this Bartowski guy. And by the looks of him--the messy hair, the lack of self-esteem in his closed-mouth smile, like he’s just...going through the motions of life--it’d be easier than anything else she’d ever done for the CIA.

So maybe Graham was going a little easy on her, this time.

“Think you can handle it?” he asked, with a tone and a look that told her he knew she could handle it. They both did. She just smirked back at him.

But then she spotted something in his eyes. After ten years of working under him, all the way back to when he’d blackmailed her into the Farm at seventeen years old, she’d secretly picked up on his tells. But she wasn’t letting this one go. “Is there a catch?” she asked boldly. “There’s a catch, isn’t there?”

He glanced to the side and let out a frustrated sigh. “You see too much for your own good.”

She disagreed. But she didn’t say anything.

“This is top secret, Agent Walker.”

“Who am I gonna tell, Sir? My *friends*?” she asked with a bit of a roll of her eyes. That earned her a look and she straightened her spine a little. “Sorry. What exactly is this?”

“I don’t trust that anyone can handle this the way you can. I need it to be fast, painless.”

“You want me to kill this guy?”

“No,” he said quickly. “At least, I don’t think that should be necessary. For all we know, he’s an innocent bystander. But just in case he isn’t, I need you to be there. I need you to suss Bartowski out. I want to know if he worked with Bryce.”

Sarah’s head snapped up from the file. “Bryce?” she asked quietly. There was the catch. She thought she’d been finished with all of that.

"Bryce sent him something that we need. It's on his home computer. You need to make contact, find out if this guy could be working with the rogue agent, Bryce Larkin. And if he is, we need to either bring him in or...dispose of him." He looked pained as he finished the statement. But Sarah knew it was an act. She wasn't stupid. And it stung that he was trying it anyway as though he thought she was stupid enough to fall for it.

She knew better than to believe one picture, but she couldn't help but wonder if this Charles guy was simply caught up in this because Bryce was a selfish, conniving asshole who'd dragged him in. He looked...sad. As mean as that sounded. At the most, she could imagine Bryce threatening or blackmailing him to help.

But she just nodded and closed the file. "Yessir."

"We need to know why Bryce sent this program with highly sensitive material on it to a civilian, and why *this* civilian in particular. Get to know him. I'll leave that part to your discretion. Ask him questions. Feel him out. And we're going to need you to get that harddrive from his apartment. Bring it back to Langley and we'll figure out just how much of that program Bryce sent."

Frustration and annoyance was in his face, and as much as she hated Bryce for going rogue, for betraying her, for betraying the CIA, a part of her envied him for having the guts to do something that pissed Graham off this bad. She'd never want to be in Bryce's shoes, but God, sometimes she wanted to snap at this man sitting behind his desk, handing off files that would change the trajectory of people's lives if not end them altogether like it was nothing more than a homework assignment in a seventh grade pre-algebra class.

"Understood, Sir."

"You have one hour to pack. Everything will be taken care of by the time you arrive in Burbank. Like I said, Agent Walker...Sarah..." She nearly winced. "Get this done quickly. Three days max. You might even have some vacation time awaiting you when you get back."

She wouldn't even give him the satisfaction of acknowledging that. Instead, she gathered the folder under her arm. "Is that all, Sir?"

"Yes, Agent. You're dismissed. And...good luck." He didn't have to say *Don't let me down* because it was in his face, behind the wan smile he'd plastered there.

"Thank you, Sir."

She made quick work of getting out of his office, walking down the hallway, needing to get out of the building altogether.

Get to know him. I'll leave that part to your discretion.

Sarah's eyes slipped shut as she stopped around the corner, leaning back against the wall. Her discretion. Did that mean she could kidnap him, take him to a warehouse, tie him to a chair, and ask him what he had to do with all of this with the tip of her knife pressed to his jugular? No, most likely not. Especially if the CIA wanted this to be "painless" like Graham had said. And so, she knew what was expected of her, something she'd done a handful of times before. A quick, chance, fly-by-night encounter, a date maybe to get him comfortable and talking, a few hours of time spent with him so that she could observe, pick apart his person, discover any hidden identity, any motives that might align him with Bryce. Was he sincere, or a liar? And if he was a liar, was he simply just like everyone else--the guy who lied about trivial things to impress people, or to get out of going to a birthday party he didn't want to go to? Or was he specifically the type of liar who worked with traitors and turncoats, rogue spies?

Either way, she'd get the information she needed, steal his harddrive, and get out. Just like always, she wouldn't give him even an inkling of a chance to look at her sideways or lay a hand on her.

She was on the plane an hour later, watching things whiz past her window as it took off, and then she sat back against her seat and wondered if she had the courage to make this her last mission. That was if, and only if, she was even allowed to make that kind of a decision. She hadn't joined the CIA by choice. And there were times it still felt like...something of a prison. What would Graham say if she stood at his desk and told

him she wanted to leave the CIA? Would he laugh and shake his head? Would he be angry? Call her ungrateful? Remind her of what her life might've been like if he hadn't given her a chance to be on the side of the "good guys"? Prison maybe, like her father. Or worse.

But could she keep doing this? A three day mission, easy in and easy out, would be nothing at all. But these weren't the types of missions she'd be sent on if she didn't leave.

And she knew she'd done enough to keep them safe, whether she had to leave the CIA or not. She'd meant what she said when she looked at her mom with that baby in her arms. She couldn't come back. Ever. That wasn't going to change whether she tried to start a new life outside of the agency or not. Too much was at stake.

She brushed aside the tear that made its way down her cheek.

One week earlier...

She stood there, staring at her Mom and the little baby. Emma had a pleading look on her face. "This is your home, too. It doesn't have to be this way."

She played with her fingers, shifting nervously from one foot to the other. Part of her had been afraid, leaving this little girl at her mom's doorstep, wondering if it would be the right fit for the child, for her mom. But they looked right. Her mom holding this baby...it looked so natural, and she was relieved, but there was also an ache in her that threatened to leave her reeling.

But she couldn't. And she wouldn't. No matter how many regrets were flooding through her at seeing her mom again.

"Mom, I've thought a lot about this and I can't stay. Because for both of you to be safe, well, I can never see you again." It hurt even worse to say it out loud, as much as it had hurt her to think, over and over and over again while she made the journey to her mom's house. She'd solidified it in her mind, she was resolved, and now she'd said it and it felt so unfair. Necessary. And unfair.

Emma simply looked away, fighting back tears. As though she had known what her daughter would say.

She took a deep breath and continued. Because this was the part that really mattered. This was the part that had made the decision for her. "When the CIA recruited me, I was on the run with Dad. We changed identities so much they never knew you existed. And we can't let them find out about you now."

"When you were a little girl, all I ever wanted for you was a normal life. But you went off with your father, and he was never one to...." She sighed heavily, looking away, her voice breaking. Unlike what she remembered experiencing when she was a child, the frustration in her mom's tone when she talked about how irresponsible her father was, instead, Sarah just saw regret. Regret for the life Sarah'd missed out on. "You just-- You never got to go trick-or-treating or play on the soccer team or get to go to prom or homecoming. I just wish I could have given you at least some of that."

Sarah nodded once, blinking back tears. Because what could she really say? That she'd wanted that too? It was done. Too late for her now. She felt the weight of Molly's rattle in her back pocket and she quickly grabbed it, thrusting it in front of her. "Um...Don't forget this." She handed the rattle to Emma. "Um, yeah, she likes to be wrapped up in a blanket." She rushed on, talking nervously, making more hand gestures than she ever remembered. "It helps her sleep. And the sound of the rain, she likes the sound of the rain. And I've noticed--"

Emma cut her off, knowing what Sarah was doing. "It's okay, honey." Sarah just stared at Emma, heartbroken. "I'll take good care of her."

Sarah bit back tears and spoke softly. "Yeah, I know. I know." She turned to leave, went halfway down the stairs, and stopped. She had to. She needed to make sure this was the right thing. That she'd not only saved this child, but that she was giving her a life that was so much better than hers had been. For so many reasons. Her mom's long trips away from home as a traveling nurse, the amount of times she had to sit quietly and watch TV with her grandma who babysat her, the unrivaled joy of her dad showing up at the door to take her on another adventure, and everything else that had led to this

moment. She didn't want that kind of life for this little girl. She needed to know her mom wouldn't do this again.

She turned and looked up, her fingers tapping on the porch railing. "Mom?"

"Yes?"

She struggled with what to say, because she didn't want her mom to feel guilty. She didn't want her mom drowning in regrets and thinking what had happened to her was her fault. It was the past and it wouldn't help anyone to dwell on all of that. She had to say this the right way, without bitterness or regret.

"Going to prom and soccer games and, uh...and all those normal things that you wanted for me...?" Her voice was full of emotion. She fought back tears. "Will you just make sure that she gets them?"

Emma nodded, tears pooled in her eyes. "Of course I will."

Sarah believed her. With everything in her, she believed her mom. She'd done the right thing bringing that baby here. And this, all of this, was the right thing to do. Leaving and not looking back. In spite of the secret conversations she'd begun having in the last year or two with her mom, late night phone calls, never able to mention anything about her missions, but hearing about her mom's nurse work, the garden she was planting...small but normal things that settled Sarah. That was finished now. For her mom's safety, for the baby's safety. And it hurt, but it was right.

They both knew beyond all doubt that it was too late for Sarah to get any of that normalcy back. Her life was laid out in front of her now. Her mom wasn't pushing more than she already had when she first arrived with the baby in her arms.

"Thank you." Sarah wasn't sure if her mom understood just how deep that 'thank you' was, just how many things she was thanking her for. For everything. But she turned and left quickly, forcing herself not to turn back.

A/N: So, I said if we get this going I'd publish all the chapters we had in reserve that had not yet be published. Will SC come back? Don't know, but I know this, she's more interested in returning than ever. Keep the faith friends. We're here. See you soon.

DC

Chapter 2: Nerds Rewrite Ch 2

A/N: Again, SC MIGHT come back. No promises. I do promise I will post around 10 new chapters to this minimum, and after that, we'll see. Thank you for reading. Disclaimer: We don't own Chuck *Burbank, California* "Bartowski!" Chuck dropped his head and sighed. That was Big Mike's 10:13 *Where are my donuts?* yell. Chuck looked over at Morgan who shrugged and fled. "Bartowski!" Chuck spun, the fake smile already plastered on his face. "Big Mike, how are you this morning?" Big Mike walked up to Chuck and gave him his normal glare. "Bartowski, we have a problem." "A problem, Sir?" Big Mike always had problems and he usually wanted everyone but him to fix it. "It seems I'm having a little issue in the," Big Mike looked around, leaned in, and made a circling motion at his stomach area. "Apparently I need some more fiber." He was now talking in a very quiet voice, but he might as well been screaming as far as Chuck was concerned. He could never unhear these words. "I have something called in over at the Large Mart, and I'm afraid to go myself in case...well...things..." "I got it," Chuck cut in quickly before Big Mike decided to explain in detail what might happen. "And you'd like me to go?" Big Mike handed him some money. "Thank you, Son, you're the only one of these idiots I can trust. I'll never forget this, in fact, how about you take off a half hour early tonight, since it's your birthday." Chuck smiled. "You remembered." Big Mike gave him a look that said 'don't be stupid'. "Your sister called and reminded me to make sure you got off on time. I don't want to mess with Ellie." "That makes two of us," he muttered heading towards the door. He crossed the parking lot. He was twenty-six today and his sister was throwing him a birthday party. Twenty-six. He had no college degree, thank you Bryce Larkin, lived with his sister and her boyfriend, serious thank you, Ellie and Awesome, and he made eleven bucks an hour at the Buy More, where souls went to die. As he entered the Large Mart his cell phone rang. He pulled it out, looked at the screen, and grinned. "Hello, Ellie." "Hey, Chuck! Happy birthday! How's your birthday going?" "Uh, birthdayish?" He felt her frown into the phone. He hurried on. "Big Mike has me getting some medicine for him." "Oh, does he have a spastic colon?" "Ellie, one of us has a medical degree, and one of us didn't

graduate from college." "Chuuuck," the voice was low, and ominous...well, as ominous as Ellie could get, but he knew the warning when he heard it. "Sorry, Ellie." "Hey, I need you to be in a good mood tonight. Do you have any idea how many of my friends I've invited to this party?" "Ellie, really?" He found the pharmacist, gave her the piece of paper Big Mike had given him, and waited. "These women aren't going to be interested in me." "Why wouldn't they?" "HA! You think I'm falling for that, but I know if I answer this truthfully, you'll just yell." He heard the sigh. She was trying to do something nice, and he was...he was being difficult. But she didn't understand. She didn't understand what it was like to wonder, did your parents leave because of you? Well...she did understand that, but after that, things got better for her. A medical degree, a superhero for a boyfriend, and honestly a good guy. For him, things started to go well, and then it all burst into flames. Bryce sleeping with his girlfriend and getting him kicked out of college had been the icing on a crap cake. He knew it was on him that he hadn't done anything since, but what was the point? Things would get to a perfect point, and then it would explode, or implode. Life was against him, and he thought he had accepted that, but today, today it was wearing on him. He was in line to get Big Mike medicine for his stomach...life couldn't get worse...and then the pharmacist opened the container of Big Mike's medicine right in front of him and Chuck thought he might pass out from the smell. "Chuck," Ellie began patiently. "Ellie, I'm sorry," Chuck said, as apologetic as he could. "You are trying to do a nice thing for me, and I'm bitching about the same old thing again. Thank you for the party, and I'm going to get a smile on my face, and enjoy tonight." He could feel her smile through the phone. "Chuck, that's so good to hear. Thank you. Now make sure you're not late tonight." And with that she ended the call. He paid the pharmacist, thanked her, and headed back toward the Buy More, determined to enjoy the day. He entered the store, and heard a scream. "What's that?" Chuck asked Jeff, who he then realized was spraying cheese into Lester's mouth from a can. "Oh, that? Morgan's locked in the cage with the old computers." Chuck took off running. He knew Morgan's fear of old computers. Chuck crashed through the doors and saw Anna standing there twirling the key, tapping her foot, looking like some dastardly villain from a 20s silent movie. "What is going on?" Chuck looked at Morgan who was nearly white as a sheet and could do nothing but

whimper. He turned to Anna. "Why aren't you letting him out?" Anna smirked. "I locked him in there. He was being nice and asked me how my day was." Chuck swore she was growling. He pleaded with her. "Please, Anna, let him go, please." She walked over to him and drew up. Chuck was nearly 6 foot 4, and Anna was in the 5 foot 2 range, but he felt like she towered over him. "Give me one good reason." "It's my birthday," he pleaded. "I need my best friend for my birthday party tonight. And if you come I promise I'll keep him away from you." "I'll let him out if I don't have to come to your party." Chuck stuck his hand out. "Deal." She shook it, and released Morgan. Morgan scampered from the room. He was probably heading for the roof and the fresh air. That meant at some point Chuck would have to go get him off the roof. Anna shook her head and started toward the door. "Chuck, you're the smartest person here, but you're also the dumbest. Anyone else with your brain would have gotten out of here by now. I'm a slacker, that's why I'm here. You're not, why are you? What are you afraid of?" Chuck didn't have an answer. She left the room and he followed her. He looked around the Buy More. Why was he here? Why hadn't he moved on? It had been five years. Maybe it was time. But what if something happened out there again? He was safer here. Skip walked up to him. "Uh, Chuck, Big Mike wants to see you in his office." Chuck nodded, and patted Skip on the arm. "Thanks, Skip," and headed toward Big Mike's office. "Uh, Chuck, not that office," Skip said. Chuck grimaced, turned and saw Skip pointing toward the men's room. "BARTOWSKI!" Big Mike yelled. Maybe it was safer out in the real world than in the Buy More. }o{ "Psst!" Chuck looked up from the bottle aka instrument he was blowing into in an attempt at playing "Three Blind Mice" and furrowed his brow, glancing around. "Psst! Chuck! Dude!" "Morgan?" he asked at a regular volume of voice. "Up here! On the double!" He looked up and noticed his bearded friend looking down into the courtyard from the upstairs window. "What are you doin' up there? At least come down and be bored out here with me. What kind of a friend are you?" "Shh! Dude, shut up...Whispers! You gotta whisper! Ellie has the hearing of a bat!" "I'm telling her you said that." "Please don't. Just--Just come up here. I have an idea." "Video games?" "No! Just...come--oh crap!" He pulled back in and the window shut with a click as Chuck wrinkled his face in confusion and turned to see his sister approaching. "Hey!" she said, a tentative look on her face. "What, uh, what are

you doing all the way over here? The party is more in, uh, that area. With all the people.” “Oh! God, yeah. I see that. I must’ve wandered off.” Ellie gave him a flat look. “What are you even accomplishing standing over here with this bottle of beer, not bothering to even try to converse with these people I brought here for you?” “I can play ‘Three Blind Mice’ with my bottle. Watch.” He started it and she snatched the beer from him, pointing. “Fiiiiine,” he groaned. “I’m a little out of my depth.” “You *think* you are, but you’re not. It’s not like everyone here is talking about Plato’s whatever essays or something. Tracy just told a story about her dog rolling in another dog’s poo at the park.” Chuck laughed. “That’s awesome.” “See?” “Okay, I’ll be over in a second. I, um, I got a phonecall from someone who might be coming tonight and I’m just gonna call back and see what’s up...Go have fun.” He took his phone out and wiggled it. She smiled and handed him his beer again, squeezing his shoulder and walking back towards the party. He followed after her only so far as to get to the door and then he ducked inside and rushed upstairs, leaving his beer on the counter along the way. As he finally pushed into the room, he found Morgan already pulling gloves on. “Wait, what are you even freaking doing?” he asked. “Tell me somethin’, buddy. And be truthful. Do you want to be here?” “It’s--It’s my birthday.” Morgan sighed, his eyes shutting in pity, which Chuck didn’t particularly appreciate. Then he came up to him and put his hands on his shoulders. “I told a joke about the *Legend of Legaia* and I got blank stares. Blank stares, man!” “I mean, it’s not one of the really big ones. I kinda get where--” “No! Chuck, that’s not my point. We don’t belong here. With these people.” Morgan’s reasoning was silly, he knew. But deep down, Chuck also knew that there was more to what Morgan said, even though his best friend didn’t realize it. This wasn’t the first party he’d ended up standing off to the side for in the last five years. In fact, that was most parties, even the holiday parties at the Buy More, where people weren’t so...medical professional-ish. It was perhaps the soul-deep fear that he’d have to explain his life choices. *So what do you do?* He’d say he worked at the Buy More. Then there’d be an awkward pause. *Your sister mentioned Stanford...?* Yep, and he’d been kicked out before he could finish his degree, he’d tell them. Followed by an inward, *Thanks for the reminder, and also while you’re at it, give me one of those uncomfortable look-away gestures before excusing yourself. Great.* For all intents and purposes, he could survive what was going on in that courtyard. He could

banter with Captain Awesome and his fellow doctor friends. He could talk about dogs and their funny antics. He could smile and engage and put on a show, if only to make Ellie happy. But the fact of the matter was he didn't fit out there. Where *did* he fit? He didn't know. He'd once thought he had this higher calling, to be the next Bill Gates--not because of the money, that wasn't so important, but the huge strides his work would make in the tech world. He could make people's lives easier, put tech in people's hands who hadn't had it before, level the playing field. And now instead, he sat in a literal cage in the back warehouse of a Buy More in Burbank, California and fixed people's broken computers. He'd missed out on his chance and that was that. Maybe fate just didn't want him to have a calling after all. He was meant for this bullshit. He should accept it and just be happy with what he had, which was a lot more than a lot of people. Sure, there were pretty women outside. Sure, he could talk to them just fine. He might even be charming. But what did any of that matter, and why should he even try, when he had already found something he'd thought was perfect, only to have it thrown back in his face, his heart decimated, pulverized, and his face rubbed in it over and over...? Why the hell would he want that again? He didn't care *who* she was. He didn't want that. And as grateful as he was to Ellie, he didn't want women shoved in front of him. She meant well, but she didn't get it. And how many times had he thought that about his sister over the last five years? Just today, even? And so... "What's the plan?" he asked finally. "Yes!! Yesyes! Okay...here, put your jacket on, 'cause it's a little chilly out there and I've only got my bike, so..." Morgan thrust his jacket at him and he rolled his eyes and put it on, zipping it up slowly. "Is that...tape? Did you tape your fingers?" "Yes. This is serious." "What's the flashlight for?" "Hey, you got any AA batteries in here? I forgot to get some batteries." Chuck gave him a flat look. He hadn't forgotten, the guy was just cheap. "Ah! Nevermind. Found them in this drawer..." He slid them inside and screwed the top back on. "Perfect. We're blowin' this joint." "Are these...bedsheets?" Chuck asked, lifting the material in his hands. "Yes. Gimme, I got this." He began tying it securely. "Morgan, this is a bad idea." "Well, we can't stay here, Chuck!" he whispered. Within minutes, they were sitting side by side under the window which Morgan had pushed open, the lights off in the room just to be safe, but they could just see each other in the moonlight coming in. "I'm uncomfortable with the plan," Chuck murmured. Ellie

would be so pissed if she couldn't find him anywhere later. He picked up the flashlight and started playing with it, turning it on and off, on and off. "Plan? What plan?" Morgan whispered. "This is survival!" he growled in his best Batman impersonation. God, this was ridiculous. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. *Crap! Crap crap!!!* "That's her! We've been compromised!!" Morgan hissed, climbing up from where he sat. As he leapt up onto the windowsill, he said in full seriousness, "I'm a GHOST!" "Morgan. Buddy, you can't leave me here like this," he muttered in fear. "You can't do this to me, man--" The door opened and Ellie turned the lights on, the flattest look he'd ever seen her give anyone plastered on her face. "Chuck...what are you doing?" There was no point in lying or beating around the bush. "Uhhhh... escaping." "From your own birthday party..." she droned, hand on her hip. He could only give a half-assed shrug. "Hey, Ellie!" Morgan rasped, still holding onto the makeshift rope and dangling out of the window. Part of him wondered if he should reach back and help the guy, but then he thought to himself, *Naaah*. "You know, sis, the thing is: Morgan and I don't really feel like we're fitting in...at my birthday party...'cause we don't know anybody...'cause they're all your friends..." He winced. "And they all happen to be doctors." "Doctors who don't really get our jokes," Morgan chimed in. "Well, *your* jokes," he corrected over his shoulder, aware he was being kind of a brat. He was just tired. He was tired and he didn't want to be here. Or anywhere. He just wanted to...not be. He wanted a night to escape *being*. "Okay," Morgan assented. "My jokes." "Chuck," Ellie said through her teeth. Oh, he was in trouble. "I have invited real, live women...FOR YOU...So, please! Let's go. Morgan, you stay here," she seemed to add as an afterthought, leaving and shutting the door behind her. Chuck climbed up and reached out towards Morgan. "Need a hand buddy?" "No, I'm all right." He climbed back into the room easily, already taking his gloves off, a glum look on his face. They went down to join the others and Chuck did his best, just as he promised himself he would. And just as he thought would happen, his time at Stanford had come up, his job, since he was still in his Nerd Herd uniform...one woman had even asked if it was a costume. That had felt great. Then again, it was his own fault, wasn't it? For not changing into normal clothes for his birthday party. He just didn't...feel like it. Ellie's pep-talk, followed by one from Captain Awesome, had done nothing to make the situation better. And yet, he soldiered on. "You

went to Stanford???" one of Ellie's friends asked in excitement. "What was your major??" "Engineering." "Oh my God! I knew this great guy there who was an engineer...I think he ran track and was a gymnast... His name was..." She screwed up her face as she thought. His stomach churned halfway through her description. "Bryce Larkin," he murmured, feeling the good show he'd been putting on for a few minutes there crashing down around him. "He was my roommate." Chuck wanted out. He needed to get out. He was crumbling. He could feel it. The wound was five years old, but it still felt so fresh. "Yes!! What is he doing now?" she asked, with the exact amount of interest he'd expect. That was what happened with women around Bryce Larkin. Not that he'd been angling for this woman, or any of these women, in any way, shape, or form, but if he had, Bryce would've just ruined that for him, too. "I think he's an accountant," he said. Because if he couldn't beat 'em, he'd just have to join 'em. "So, do you have a girlfriend?" Oh. That was unexpected. "I did. Uh, a while back." He wasn't even looking at the woman anymore, his mind going back to a time when he felt like things were clicking. His life was on this incredible path to greatness and happiness. He had friends, a girlfriend, some purpose, professors who'd challenged him... but also, a girlfriend who'd been *the ideal*. "Back at Stanford." She said something about that but he wasn't listening, already halfway in the rabbit hole. "We met freshman year. Her name was Jill. I saw her drop her bag and I kinda ran over there to help her pick it up, and she didn't see me, and we did that whole, uh, cartoon thing where we bumped heads. And it was like this immediate...thing, you know? Like what you see in the movies. Where you look up and it's like, *ahhhh*, you know? And everything just like, sort of, fell into place for me. Like this gaping hole was filled by this great girl who was smart and, you know, fit in with me and my buddies. We had this whole gang after that, me and Bryce, and Jill. And then, you know, I guess...I dunno," he muttered quietly, "I wasn't enough or somethin'. Probably that. Most likely that. Especially stacked next to Bryce, right? And then the whole thing with the tests happened, and uh, I found out they were a thing. Jill and Bryce, I mean. Which just made sense. And that hole she'd filled, she left it, you know? But it felt, like, worse. Like the hole was even bigger and more gaping like...the Great Pit of Carkoon, when she left it. So anyway, there I was...Jill and Bryce...me on a train home...Guess she thought he was more exciting." When he looked

up, all he saw was the courtyard fountain. The woman he'd been talking to, whatever her name had been (did he even get her name??), was gone. She'd probably run away. "Checks out," he mumbled to himself. And he went back to his corner for the rest of the party, blowing tunes into his half empty beer bottle. "Smoke on the Water" was a good one. He'd try that one. By the time the courtyard had cleared out late into the night, Chuck found himself sitting alone on the fountain, still dwelling on everything that could've been but wasn't. Bryce Larkin, his roommate and once best friend, getting him kicked out of Stanford, derailing his entire future because he wanted his girlfriend for himself. It wouldn't even make a good subplot in a crappy dramatic made-for-TV movie. But it had happened. And now five years later, it was still jammed in his ribcage, making it hard to breathe and spread his wings...or something. It was hard to forget, hard to heal, because it wasn't just about one woman. It was about the avalanche of utter shit that had torn up his insides when he'd thought maybe he was getting to a place where he was...okay. Like almost getting to the top of a cliff after years of climbing, and when you reach the top, about to pull yourself up and over, your roommate and best friend puts his boot against your forehead and gives a hearty push. He was at the bottom of the cliff. And frankly, the more years that passed, the more time he spent in an \$11 per hour job that was easy enough if you ignored the clinically disturbed people who also worked there, the less he wanted to start that climb again. It had been five years. Maybe it was too late. Maybe he should just...never try. That sounded like an okay solution to all of this. He'd had his legs cut out from under him and he was just going to lie here. And accept it. Chuck unwrapped his fingers, stretching them out, dropping the tape at his feet and pushing a hand through his hair. Ellie slowly strolled over to stand next to him, offering him a beer. He smiled up at her and took it. "Hey. Thanks for my party." She smiled back, but he could see a bit of disappointment in her face. And on top of everything else he failed at, he'd just let his sister down on his birthday, too. Great work. "Your seven-layer dip? Tasted like eight." He reached up to clink his bottle against hers, doing his best to assuage her disappointment and maybe make her laugh. She didn't. Instead she smirked a little and sat next to him on the fountain, scooting close so that their sides were pressed together, providing a bit of emotional warmth like she always did. "Chuck, can I tell you something?" Ohhh no. Oh boy, that tone. He wished he could

say no without making her annoyed with him. He tried to keep up the jokester act. "It really was eight layers," he said, looking at her seriously. Her face didn't change even a bit as she tilted her head. "Even though a woman may ask about an old girlfriend, we really don't want to hear about it." He shook his head and she rushed on, probably sensing he was shutting her off...because he was. "It's hard to listen to. Depressing. And more than anything, especially if it's someone you've just met, like with Rachel at the party tonight--" "Was that her name? I didn't get that far." "Chuck, it's kinda uncomfortable and awkward. What happened to you at Stanford was terrible. To this day, I'd probably kill the both of them, and frankly, set fire to the entire school, for what they did to you. To your life. But...if you're just meeting somebody...It was five years ago, okay?" she asked, tilting her beer back and forth. "At some point, you're going to need to move on from Jill. You know? And--" "Do we have to do this every time? I mean, do you really have to lecture me after every party when I'm not peppy enough, when I don't come out of it with one of your friend's phone numbers?" She narrowed her eyes a little, thankfully not seeming hurt. Just frustrated. He couldn't blame her. "I'm trying to help." "Yes, El. I realize that. And you know I love you and appreciate you, for-for everything. But do we really have to have this conversation *again*?" He could hear the shortness in his voice, could feel the anger starting to rise, the feeling that this, and everything really, was unfair. He knew self-pity didn't suit him, but he needed a break from always being the better side of himself, if only for just one freaking night. "We've rehearsed it enough..." she said, bumping his shoulder with hers a little, obviously trying to make him see she wasn't trying to upset him, or make him feel bad about himself. She was speaking the truth and he knew it, but it was so easy to say, so much harder to actually do it. That happiness and contentment, that feeling of being *something* instead of nothing, going somewhere instead of nowhere, had been right there for him. And then it was gone. It was hard to move on from that. "Fine, I'll...get over Jill tomorrow," he mumbled sarcastically, climbing to his feet and just walking away. He didn't need another pep-talk. He didn't need to talk about this again. He just wanted to lose himself in picking up these stupid red cups and stuffing them in the stupider white plastic trash bags. He ignored the sight of her still staring after him from her spot on the fountain, and he continued to ignore pretty much everything except for the comforting

monotonous job of cleaning up the courtyard. An hour later, he stared at the TV screen while Morgan played one of his video games. He really didn't know why the bearded one was still here. But sometimes he had a sixth sense of when Chuck needed... Well, just needed. He'd find Morgan there even when he didn't know he needed somebody else to just be around. Since they were kids, Morgan had just always been there. But right now, he sort of just needed to be alone. Maybe Morgan's sixth sense didn't work when he was focused on video games. "Cheer up, Chuck! You talked to *some* women. You know? That's a start." God, he really didn't need this. It wasn't a start. If anything, he'd taken steps backwards. He rubbed his eyes and stared at the screen some more, distantly hearing a quiet beep in the room. "Wow. Blast from the past..." Chuck frowned and looked at Morgan. "What?" "The guy who got you kicked outta Stanford, stole your girl? Same one you didn't stop blabbing about tonight to the girls...?" *Thanks so much, buddy* ... "He just sent you something. Just came up on your desktop." As Morgan gestured to the computer with a flick of his head, Chuck's eyes widened and he clambered up from the bed. "What?!" "Remember that guy? 'Cause he remembered your birthday." Chuck ignored Morgan and moved to the computer, already leaning over before he got to it. "All right, well, uh...let's see what we got here," his friend continued, coming to sidle up next to him. Chuck opened the file and watched as a screen he remembered like it was yesterday popped up. ***The terrible troll raises his sword*** "What is it?" Morgan asked. "You remember that old text-based video game Zork? Bryce and I programmed our own version of it using an old TRS-80..." he drawled, feeling pretty proud of himself, a little impressed. Those were the days. "You guys were *really* cool." Chuck ignored the bitter sarcasm and focused on the game, feeling that seemingly ancient sensation of anticipation and excitement at seeing his creation again, getting to solve the puzzle again. "If I could only remember what was in my hero's satchel..." He could feel Morgan's question without him even saying anything. "Those are the weapons I'd use to kill the terrible troll." He saw Morgan giving him an unimpressed look in his peripheral and kept ignoring him. "Riiiiight," the beard drawled. "You know what? You're still really cool." "And you're goin' home," he said, because Morgan had finally given him the perfect reason to kick him out. "Is it that time?" he asked, obviously hoping it wasn't that time. "It's that time." "Right." He straightened up and walked out of the bedroom.

“Pedal safe!” Chuck called after him, and he turned back to the game as he heard Morgan’s “Thank you” carry down the hallway. He wracked his brain. What had they written for this part? Something about... He grinned a bit to himself and typed the command. “Attack troll with nasty knife,” he said to himself, proud that he’d even remembered that after seven years. He tapped enter with a flourish and stared at the screen. An image of a pair of binoculars popped up on the screen then, and the images began flashing, so quickly he could only pick out what they were for a millisecond, and then there was a fog settling over him, his awareness drifting away, his feet planted to the floor. And when it ended, he had no idea what had happened except that he was dizzy, his brain overwhelmed, his vision covered in spots, and then there was pain in his head as he fell, and finally...nothing at all. A/N: I’ll slowly get this up to test the site. If you haven’t read this before, welcome. Hope you enjoy it.

Chapter 3: Nerds Rewrite Ch 3

A/N: The republishing of The Rewrite continues.... Disclaimer: We don't own Chuck To say it had been a weird morning was an understatement. Chuck had woken up on the ground, Morgan looking down at him, weird visions swimming around Morgan's head. He wondered if Morgan had spiked the drinks last night...Spoiler alert, he had. Of course he had. Chuck's head had felt...full. It wasn't uncomfortable it was just....well...full. But that wasn't where the weirdness stopped. He was in the shower when a traffic report on the radio made images flash through his head. He hadn't felt something like that in a long time, not since he was a young boy, and that was disconcerting as well. He quickly realized what the images meant, which was weird. Really weird. He felt so weird he had Morgan drive. Chuck made sure to warn him to skip the 5 because the police were in phased deployment....that's what the pictures he had seen while listening to the radio had told him, and obviously that was something...what, he wasn't sure, but something. He had gathered all the nerds (Anna, Jeff and Lester) to warn them of the day's incoming disaster...Because it was the Buy More, and disasters were a daily thing. Today's specialty: the Irene Demova virus. He showed the herders the virus, after warning Anna not to look, not that she listened, because, well, she was Anna. Lonely guy call volume would be high on this one, and the smirk on her face made him realize that might be sexist. He was ending the meeting when he heard one of the TVs that Morgan was showing to a customer. Chuck turned toward it, seeing a newscast. "... to arrive in Los Angeles later today to deliver a speech before the Pacific Security League tomorrow evening..." Chuck began to concentrate on the man walking in the picture. He felt something in his head similar to earlier this morning. "... the general has drawn fire for his criticism. General Stanfield, the former allied commander of nato..." The flashes in his head began again. They were nonsense really, but at the same time they weren't. The random pictures meant....something...information that pooled into his brain and allowed Chuck to come to a conclusion. "He's already here. He landed last night," he blurted out. Anna leaned in toward him. "Who's already here, Chuckles?" Chuck was confused. He knew he had

just said “he landed last night,” but Chuck wasn’t sure what it all meant. “I don't know,” he answered. Anyone else, it would have concerned. The nerd herd gang...it didn’t even phase them. ----- After embassies, mansions, dark hotel rooms in the rain, and the interior of multiple planes, there was something strangely...comforting...about walking across a packed parking lot in the middle of the day in Southern California. And towards such a ridiculously large, monstrosity of a building with BUY MORE printed in ugly green and yellow letters. It was so normal, walking into a corporate electronics store like this, as though she was merely looking for a new television. And part of her wondered if there were other paths she could’ve taken in her life that would’ve made that silly little image the truth. Going into a Buy More to buy a new TV. That was never going to happen. And frankly, she thought she’d never really want that life for herself. Not now. She wouldn’t even know how to handle something like that, unless it was part of a cover. Like now, she thought to herself, stepping through the automatic doors and stopping just inside. She saw a man in a green polo in the corner of the store, struggling under the weight of half of a fifty-inch TV, his coworker walking too fast for him. As she glanced in the other direction, a mother and her son were buying some electronic book reader thing for kids at the cash registers. And then she finally looked right down the middle aisle. She recognized him from his picture immediately, standing there under the massive Nerd Herd sign, behind the round desk, a phone smashed between his ear and his shoulder. Agent Walker smirked. God, this was going to be so easy. Such a quick and easy mission. By tomorrow or the next day, it’d be over. And she could focus again on what was really important. Whether or not she’d be back to the CIA after that “vacation”. Pushing that out of her head so that she could actually focus on the assignment at hand, she walked towards the desk, not taking her eyes off of her mark for even a moment. It took a few seconds for her to actually arrive at the desk, and in that time she picked out a few things: His hair was messier than it had been in his dossier photo. He was lankier than she’d imagined him, in spite of his six foot four height printed in the file. He had a softness in the way he held himself, and she could even see a vulnerability and lack of confidence in the very slight slump to his shoulders. She’d feel worse for him if she wasn’t so eager to exploit that to learn whatever she could, as fast as she could, and rush back out of this city like she’d never been here in

the first place. But then his friend must have caught sight of her, even as Charles himself was focused on the file he held in his hands, or maybe whatever hold music was playing over the phone. The short man with the bad hair and the beard said something about a Vicki Vale person, which was...strange. But she was unfazed as she closed the rest of the distance and stopped right in front of her mark. "Vicki Vaaaale, vuh-vick vuh-Vicki Vaaaale! Vickety-vickety Vicki Vaaaale vuh-vick--" He moved the files in his hands and opened the one that had been on the bottom, smirking at his own antics, and then he glanced up and looked right into her eyes, before lowering his gaze to the contents of the file again. He did a cartoonish double-take and the phone fell from where he'd trapped it against his ear, the file plopping down on the desk, and he put his hands on his hips in an inherent and seemingly unconscious attempt to play it cool. It was almost...funny. "I hope I'm not interrupting," she said, unable to keep the amusement from her voice, the smile on her face a lot more natural than she'd planned for it to be. "No. Not at...all." He glanced to his friend, his chest puffed out a little. And she couldn't help noticing that he wasn't taking his eyes away from hers. Not even for a moment. Not even to let them wander down the rest of her. It was interesting, to say the least. "That is...that's from Batman," he rushed out, playing with his tie a little as he glanced at his coworker. His coworker who seemed like he *was* looking at the rest of her. "Oh, right. 'Cause...that makes it better," she said, wondering why in the hell he felt the need to even tell her that. He let out a nervous laugh, but before she could take in a bit more of him, his coworker cut in, like most men usually did when their friends were...struggling, to put it nicely. Then again, was he struggling? Really? She couldn't really tell, and maybe she was being a bit hard on him. And maybe she shouldn't be thinking like that because a rogue agent had sent this man some incredibly sensitive government intel he absolutely shouldn't have--especially considering what she'd witnessed in this place where he worked so far. "Hi. Hey. I'm Morgan." Then he gestured with a flick of his head to her mark. "This is Chuck." She decided to play a game, test him out a bit. And she found herself wanting to put a bit of a flirty edge to her voice as she teased them. "Wow, I didn't think people still named their kids Chuck...or, uh, Morgan, for that matter," she added as an afterthought. She didn't want *Chuck* to know she was gunning for him in particular, after all. But he looked amused, seeming to have settled into

himself after the shock of her appearing at his desk out of the blue. She was almost impressed by how easily he'd done it. And by how quickly he threw her teasing back at her. "My parents are sadists. And carnival freaks found him in a dumpster..." "But they raised me as one of their own." She switched her gaze over to Morgan and he seemed to almost cave in on himself in embarrassment, finishing it with a weak, "So..." "How can I help you...?" Chuck interrupted. "Sarah." "Sarah?" he finished. She could tell he had a certain amount of social awareness, moving things along like this, and she thought maybe he was at least somewhat professional, though his nametag said he was the Nerd Herd supervisor, so maybe he *had* to be the responsible one. His friend didn't quite seem the type. "I'm here about this," she said, putting a cellphone she'd bought in a Radioshack down the road on her way here down on the desk between them. An analyst had told her which phone to buy--the Intellicell had some problem she hadn't paid much attention to when she was told about it. All that mattered was that it was a legitimate issue, and if this Chuck Bartowski guy was good enough to be the supervisor of this desk, he would be able to tell if she brought a cell to him with a fake issue. She'd taken the back off, along with the battery, and she set those down, too. "Intellicell! Yeah! Absolutely," he said, and she heard a sudden bout of confidence in his voice. And he picked it up, slipping the battery back in its place as though he'd done it tens of thousands of times before. "Uh, this model has a little screw that pops loose..." He produced a small screwdriver and began to fix the phone, explaining as he went. And when he stuck the back of her phone between his lips as he worked, such a completely unnecessary thing for him to do, it was... Well, it made her smile, and she didn't know why. Maybe it was the way his voice sounded when he talked around the back of her phone. Or maybe it was the fact that she'd been standing here for about two minutes and had even semi-flirted and teased him, and he had yet to hit on her, or even look at her in the wrong way. And she was almost surprised by that. Not because she expected a constant barrage of men hitting on her all the time, but because he fit the bill of a guy who...might. Then again, there had been that slump to his shoulders she'd spotted right in the beginning. Was it a lack of self-esteem? Or was he just...a decent guy? Either way, as he grabbed the piece of her phone out of his mouth and popped it right back into place with a quick, almost sweet, "Good as new. No problem," she found this all

very...unexpected. Not that she'd lost control of this situation. Not by a long shot. But he was...different than she'd thought he'd be. Already. "Wow!" she exclaimed with an impressed look at Morgan first, then back up at him. "You geeks *are* good." "Nerds!" he said after a bit of a loaded pause. His friend backed him up as he tried to correct her politely, explain to why nerd was the preferential term, both men rambling a bit as she pressed her lips together and smiled at Chuck in amusement. She wasn't ready to make any judgment on whether or not he was actively helping Bryce, because there was an awareness and intelligence in his eyes that no one else in this building had. And she wasn't sure if it was just self-awareness, or if he was perhaps sharing a joke with her as their eyes met. "E-Excuse me!!!! Excuse me!" A man ran to the desk, out of breath, holding the hand of a young girl dressed as a ballerina, stress all over his face and confused concern on hers. "I-I don't know what I did wrong," he breathed as he thrust a digital video camera out towards the Nerd Herd supervisor. She shifted to the side a bit to watch. "I shot the entire recital and now it won't play back." Chuck blinked, probably at the suddenness of the man's arrival, or the desperate panic in him. And then he glanced down at the daughter. "O...kay. Okay." His smile was inherently warm and reassuring towards her. "We'll just take a look--" He opened it up and immediately furrowed his brow with, "You don't have a tape...in here." "But...it's digital," the dad said quietly. "Ohhhhh, boy," Morgan said derisively, and yet there was no judgment or rudeness from Chuck, she noticed. His tone didn't change; he was still just perplexed, and maybe he was wincing a little for this poor man. "Right. Yes. But you still need digital tape." The anguish that came over the dad's face was palpable, but worse than that was the way the little ballerina dropped her gaze and frowned. "Ohh. Ohhh no. Her mom is gonna kill me. I mean, my wife was--Oh no. The whole thing..." Chuck looked down at the ballerina again, at her disappointment, then back up at the dad...And then he turned and looked right at her. She saw so much in his face in that moment, but she didn't know what it was until he snapped out a determined, "Morgan...I need the wall." Morgan dashed off and Chuck turned to look at her again. "I'm so sorry," he said, genuine regret on his face. That had been what was in his face. He was deciding: should he stay and continue talking to this woman who was pretty and flirting with him, or help this clueless father and his small ballerina? He'd made his choice as he told the dad and

little girl to follow him. And Agent Walker was almost gobsmacked as she watched him scurry after his friend towards the wall of televisions in the back of the store. Not just because of the choice he made, but how quick he was at problem solving. He'd just left her here at the desk, too, and instead of being offended, she was almost... Well, something was stirring in her chest. Something she didn't recognize, and she decided not to think too hard on it, instead moving a bit closer to watch Chuck orchestrate everything with a few other Nerd Herders and Morgan as the dad and daughter stood off to the side in confusion. He asked the dad if he knew what song she'd danced to, and when he answered, Chuck snapped his fingers and pointed towards the CDs section of the store. A Buy More salesperson sprinted past her to go find it as Chuck and another employee set up the tripod, put digital tape in the camera, and angled it at the wall of TVs. They connected wires, cleared the space to make something of a stage, and Chuck slid the CD into a nearby stereo system. Sarah snuck in a bit closer once Chuck invited the ballerina to her stage, a flourish in the way he moved, a grin on his face. "It's show time." Then he stood to his full height, turning towards the little audience of shoppers who had gathered. "Quiet in the audience, please," he chirped in an official but teasing tone, and he clapped twice, then moved out of the way of the camera. It was quiet, but the ballerina looked uneasy suddenly, her eyes darting to and fro, and Sarah recognized stage fright in the queasy look on her poor face. Her dad just stood off to the side, ready for the Buy More employees, and Chuck in particular, to save his ass, ready to get the show on the road so he'd have at least something to show his wife, so that he didn't end up in the dog house. But then Chuck hurried to her side and immediately knelt down to her height, a warm smile on his face. "Ready?" She shifted even closer to hear as the girl directed the queasy look at him. "What's wrong?" Oh, no. The tone he'd used immediately made something churn in her stomach, something warm and...oh, no. "I'm usually in the back row," she said with a pained look on her face. "Why?" he asked, genuinely confused, concern in his face. It wasn't an act. She could tell none of this was an act. He was just...like this. And...oh, no. "I'm too tall," the ballerina explained. "I block the other ballerinas." Sarah leaned to the side a bit to see and hear better as he lowered his voice. "Can I tell ya a secret? But you can't tell the other girls." She nodded, already looking like she was feeling a bit better just by having someone at her level,

speaking to her kindly. "Real ballerinas are tall." The way she smiled like that had just changed everything, filled her with the confidence... She saw right in front of her eyes, as Chuck put his hand on her back and grinned at her, one tall person sharing a moment with another, as this ballerina accepted her height that probably made her stick out like a sore thumb on stage, or even on the playground at school. She even looked a bit excited and proud. As someone who'd spent her youth almost a head taller than even the boys, sitting by herself on one of the swings until someone kicked her off, and even in middle school and high school, when she'd hit an extra growth spurt before most of her male classmates had...Agent Walker felt something inside of her open up. That was the only way she could describe it. And it was terrifying. It was bad. She felt exposed. But she couldn't go anywhere. She had to stay here and see the culmination of the Buy More employees' work to help this man and his daughter. The television screens behind her filled with her image as she got into starting position and Chuck pointed over at his coworker near the CD player. Then he glanced at his other coworker behind the camera and she made the okay sign with her fingers. As the music started, the ballerina put on quite a show for everyone who'd gathered to watch, confidence in the way she moved, a smile breaking out on her face. Sarah thought maybe Chuck had glanced back at her in her peripheral, and she swept her gaze over to meet his, tilting her head, her smile widening, before she went back to watching the ballerina. And it wasn't until she felt him look away that she looked back. He was giving the dad a reassuring look as a coworker pat the guy on the back. And she found it interesting, strange, that these genuinely weird individuals were doing this, coming together to help a little girl and her dad. But then the performance was over and everyone clapped enthusiastically. As the dad moved to make sure it had all been recorded, Sarah saw the ballerina look to Chuck for approval and he clapped even harder for her, his entire face lit by a grin that wrinkled his nose and the corners of his eyes. Sarah moved back to the desk slowly, watching as everyone started clearing up the place, moving things back to where they were supposed to be. And then she spotted Chuck turning to glance at her, seeing she was still there and smiling a little, making his way back towards the desk. She didn't have to try hard to smile back at him, leaning her elbow on the desk and waiting. And then a coworker who hadn't been a part of the effort, she noticed, swept in front of him,

stopping him. It was the perfect out. She needed to get out of here, away from this situation. She shook herself a bit and pulled one of the Nerd Herd cards from the holder, writing the number of her burn phone down, leaving it on the desk, and hurrying away. After what she'd just seen, and how Chuck's actions and behavior, the almost heroic gesture he'd made for people he didn't even know, and most importantly, how intense her own response had been, she couldn't talk with him again. Not until she could regroup. Because Chuck Bartowski had taken her by surprise. In just five minutes, he'd knocked her back on her ass. And maybe this wouldn't be as easy as she'd thought.

A/N: Bear with me. I am lost as everyone using this new site. I guarantee some of you know more about it than I. Take care, hope to get the rest out much quicker, but who knows.

Chapter 4: Nerds Rewrite Ch 4

Morgan kicked at a small pebble, sending it skittering ahead of Chuck, and as he came upon the same pebble, he kicked it forward with the rubber toe of his Converse, shoving his hands in his pockets. "You still have that number, right?" Morgan finally asked, breaking the silence. "Oh my God, yes! Yes, I have it. It's in my pocket, man." "Okay!" His friend held his hands up in surrender. "I'm just checking. Because I really think you need to reconsider--" "I'm not reconsidering," Chuck interrupted. "--calling that crazy hot girl." "No." "Chuck, come on! She left her number for you." He snorted and shook his head. "It's probably one of those numbers you call and it's a robot saying, 'You got plaaayed, sucka!' And I really don't think my self-esteem can take that kind of hit again." "What *again*?" Chuck gave Morgan a look at that and his friend rolled his eyes. "Ohhh, man. Come on. Not Jill again. Screw that stupid girl, okay? A woman who is way hotter and already waaay nicer than Jill ever was or will be was flirting with you, my dude. She had sparkles in those mesmerizing blue eyes. You gave her eye sparkles!" "I did not! She was just nice." "She was charmed. Call her." "Morgster, listen. You're my best friend, so you're biased. I appreciate that about you. Really. But also did you see her? Did you see how incredibly gorgeous she is?" he asked, leading Morgan around the corner and hopping up onto the sidewalk as they made their way towards his apartment complex. "Yeah! I was there, dude! So what?" "So what? Look at me!" "All I see is a stud, dude. A straight-up stud." Chuck scoffed. "No. A nerd in a stupid Nerd Herd uniform with a pocket protector, hair I didn't have time to even try to brush this morning 'cause I overslept--" "Maybe so. Maybe you are all those things." Chuck made a face as Morgan scrambled up in front of him and turned to stop him, a hand on his shoulder. "But you have a heart of gold." "Oh my Godddd," Chuck groaned, laughing and shaking his head as he pushed past his best friend to keep walking. "No! Chuck, I'm serious!! That whole production you staged for her today, with that cute ballerina and her technologically clueless dad! That was A plus charm-age, man! Hook, line, and sinker..." He mimed fishing gestures. "What *production*? I didn't do it for her. I thought she'd left already because I just, like, *ugh* I just left her there. But that guy really needed

help and I felt bad for him, ya know?" He shrugged. "That's exactly what I mean! And she knew that! She saw it! She's probably thinkin' about ya right now, wondering why you aren't calling." He smacked Chuck in the shoulder. "I know you don't think much of yourself, man. But I mean it when I say you're a stud." "Stop calling me a stud. It's making me uncomfortable." "Fine! Fine..." Chuck used the moment of silence to ponder Morgan's insistence that he call the woman from the store. Sarah. But it was ridiculous. He imagined her leaving her number because of her phone. It was most likely that. Maybe she had another question about her phone. And he said that out loud to Morgan as they neared his complex. "Okay, so she needs help with her phone. Why don't you call her?" Chuck groaned. That blew up in his face. He didn't want to call her. He didn't want to call a woman who was obviously so much cooler, so much nicer, so much prettier than the woman who'd absolutely destroyed his heart and his ability to trust *people*--not even just women. He wasn't going to do women the disservice of thinking they would all treat him the way Jill had. But relationships were lost all the time, and he'd been abandoned enough that... Well, trusting anyone outside of his family--Morgan, included--was incredibly hard. What if he called and she *wasn't interested*? After all of this stupid back and forth with Morgan, the little guy actually doing quite a bit to pump him up even if he wasn't admitting it. And what scared him more was that maybe she *was* interested... "I just think you should call this girl, man...That's all I'm saying. She is stunning and you are missing out on a huge opportunity." "Maybe I don't deserve a huge opportunity until I'm not such a wreck. Ever think of that?" he asked as they walked through the gate and into the courtyard. "You seem so concerned with her getting a call, so why don't you just call her?" He went into his pocket and pulled the card out, grabbing Morgan's hand and shoving it into his palm. "There. Have a blast." "What?! She doesn't give a rat's ass about me! She barely even spared me a glance. You dazzled her, dude. YOU. She doesn't want me to call. She wants you to call. She wants to date you hard, you stu--you lanky so-and-so." Morgan corrected himself when Chuck sent a warning glare. "Listen, Morgs. I live on planet Earth. I'm not even in the top fifty percent on planet Earth. I barely remembered to tie my shoes before I left this morning..." "You also saved a man from divorce, most likely, and changed a little girl's self-perspective in the best way." He shrugged. "That puts you in the top ten percent in

my book. Take her number back." "Nnno!" "Take it back!" The shorter man shoved the number back into Chuck's jacket pocket. "No give-backs!" he yelled then, leaping away and nearly falling into the fountain. He saved himself by hopping up onto the edge of it. Would've served him right if he'd fallen in, though, Chuck thought to himself. "Morgan, why'd you follow me home?" "Uh. Did I--Did I follow you home? Nah. You're just...you know, you're goin' through somethin', buddy. I love ya. Wanted to help ya--You said about six and a half hours ago that Ellie asked you if leftover pot roast was okay for dinner and I love Ellie's pot roast," he said, finally coming clean. "Oh, God..." As Chuck unlocked the apartment door and pushed inside, he was still making fun of his best friend. He flicked on the lights and Morgan's response died. There, standing in the middle of his living room, was very definitely a burglar, dressed head to toe in black, the mask pulled down over their head and everything. They held his computer in both hands as they froze and glanced over at him and Morgan. He thought maybe he was dead for a second, seeing his beloved computer in the burglar's hands. "Please...not the computer." And when they set the computer back down, he felt relief. But then they went into fighting pose and he realized this was maybe worse. He glanced over at Morgan who glanced back at him. And then he watched as the bearded man grabbed one of Ellie's fancy plates and threw it like a frisbee. The intruder hit that away easily, sending it shattering against the floor. Morgan threw another of Ellie's decorations and the same thing happened. "What the hell?" he heard his friend breathe. "Chuck, dude! I'm outta ideas! Do something!!! Protect your realm!!!!" "My realm--What?" He turned to give him a look, in spite of the harrowing situation. "Fine. If you aren't gonna protect us, it's up to me." He grabbed a glass vase from the entry table and ran at the intruder who was already picking up the computer and trying to escape in the other direction. "Morgan, don't!" The masked figure spun and put the computer on the shelf behind them, then reached out and caught Morgan by his hair, yanking him in against them and rounding his through with their arm. "Hhggghhhkkkkk!!!" Morgan gasped. "Hey!! Pick on someone your own size!" Chuck yelled, watching as Morgan went limp. The intruder seemed almost confused by it but let him slump to the ground. "Did you kill him? Is he dead???" He grit his teeth and ran at the burglar, but they side-stepped him easily and caught him by the back of his jacket before he could crash into the lamp, tossing him to

the side so that he landed safely on the floor. Before he could get up again, there was a loud cracking sound, and they both turned to watch as the shelf broke right off the wall under the weight of the computer and hit the floor with a sickening smash, breaking into pieces. "No!!!" he yelled, reaching out for it. "God, no!" The intruder left it and ran. "Hey!!!" But he couldn't get to his feet fast enough, and anyway, he valued his own life more than to chase them. Morgan was stirring and he needed to make sure his friend, who he now realized had fainted in fear, was okay. This was a really great birthday week, he decided. The best birthday week. And maybe next year he'd spend it hiding away inside a cave somewhere. ----- She'd seen him head into the Large Mart from her car, sunk low in her seat so that he didn't spot her. And now she was just waiting. So it was perfect that her phone buzzed in her purse right then. She would have to tell Director Graham about last night at some point, right? Sighing heavily, she went into her purse and grabbed her phone. "Walker. Secure." "You didn't get the computer." Of course he'd known before he even called. Because if she had gotten it, she would've told him immediately. And he knew that. "I didn't get it, no. Bartowski came home as I was getting away. It's a long story and it doesn't matter. Unfortunately, the computer ended up smashed, most likely the information on it irretrievable, but I kept *him* alive, so at least there is that." Graham was silent for a moment. She continued, feeling like somehow she needed to. "If the computer is destroyed, at least we know he won't have access to that program, or the sensitive intel that was on it. Our secrets are safe..." He took a long time to respond, and it made her feel uneasy. About *something* but she didn't know what. And then she chalked it up to the fact that he was probably frustrated this part of the assignment hadn't gone to plan. If only she'd broken in a few minutes earlier... She couldn't help but kick herself for her mistake. "Just keep your eye on him, Agent Walker. Maybe the computer is destroyed and maybe that information won't ever be able to be accessed again. But this means it's more important than ever that we know who this...Bartowski guy is. What he's capable of. It's time to make contact with him." She shut her eyes for a moment, silently cursing. This was exactly what she didn't want to have happen. Even if a small part of her liked the idea of talking to him again--or perhaps, more than that, she liked the idea of watching him when he talked to *her*. When she opened her eyes again, the steely mask was back, the focus was there, and

Agent Walker was prepared to do her damn job. What else was there but that? At least for now, this was it. And she needed to focus. Because there he was, walking out of the Large Mart, looking over his shoulder...almost looking frazzled. Though she wondered if that was just...him. "I have eyes on him right now." She paused, watching him still, and then she looked away, in case he happened to glance across the parking lot and see her. "And like I said, the computer was destroyed. Beyond repair." "And if he has a back-up? Or if he's hiding something else Bryce sent him that we don't know about?" the director asked. "Bryce was CIA. He was our guy. And he burned us." There was a long pause. But she was stuck on one word. Before he could say anything else, she found her voice and asked, "Was?" "Agent Larkin is dead, Agen--Sarah. He was killed while sending that program to this guy." She felt something inside of her start to quiver in the worst way, and she swallowed thickly, not trusting her voice. "They found him trying to escape after he sent it, and they shot him. NSA." "Was--?" She swallowed her question, hearing the potential for her voice to break while she spoke, so she shook her head instead and decided not to ask after all. Was it quick, she wanted to know? And she felt sick inside, torn. He was a rogue agent. He'd betrayed her, their partnership, his country. But it still hurt. It hurt to think of him...dead. Gone. She had to pull herself together. "NSA?" she asked. "Yes. And now that he's finished Larkin off, Casey's on his way out to Burbank as we speak. So you better make quick work of this before NSA makes me recall you." Anger flared in her--she wasn't sure if it was vengeance or what, but it was an almost murderous anger. "Because of Casey? He's a burn-out." "He's a killer," Graham came back, his hard tone pounding it home. She got the message loud and clear. And none of this felt right. None of it. She scrambled for a way to respond that didn't make it sound like she had any intention of doing anything besides her job, even with knowing now that Bryce had been killed in cold blood. "I want you to listen to me, Agent Walker. Sarah. What happened with Bryce..." *Please don't. Not right now...* "It couldn't have been helped. None of us could have stopped this." "But I can fix it," she said, her voice tight, her chest constricting. Because she didn't know if she believed what happened couldn't have been helped. If she'd paid more attention, if she hadn't been as focused on the job instead of paying attention to her partner and whatever was going on with him. They were sleeping together. She should have known. She should've seen something,

picked up on cues. She could make this right. Or at least, she didn't like the idea of leaving before she tried. "If there's a back-up, I'll find it," she said. "If he knows more about Bryce, about us, I'll figure out what he knows. Tell the NSA to give me twelve hours. They can hold off with their burn-out assassin 'til then." Agent Walker hung up on the CIA director and tossed her phone back into her purse angrily. They were really sending someone in to take this guy out, not even knowing if he was actually innocent or not. She wasn't letting it happen, not before knowing for sure if he really was the potential accomplice they thought he might be. And she'd heard stories of John Casey. The man pulled the trigger first and asked questions later. He was verging on being a renegade. But when he got an order, he carried it out. She felt like a hypocrite as she finally watched Chuck Bartowski disappear inside of the Buy More, because she had blood on her hands as well. And she'd shot first, asked later at least once, if not a few times in her own career. She wasn't letting it happen here, though. She was getting to the bottom of this. And she maybe only had twelve hours to do it in. Checking her watch, she grabbed her purse and got out of her car, quickly crossing the parking lot and fluffing her hair a bit. This time, she didn't have to look for him. He was right where she'd expected him to be. And she didn't glance anywhere else as she walked down the aisle towards the Nerd Herd desk. But something was wrong. His head was down, buried in his arms he'd crossed on top of the desk. And as she approached, she heard him repeating, "I'm losing my mind, I'm losing my mind, I'm losing my mind..." She just watched him for a moment, then gently reached out to delicately ring the bell that was on the desk next to him. "Morgannnn? Not now--" his tired, annoyed voice came muffled as he surprised her by laying his hand on top of where hers still rested on the bell. But then his fingers curled around hers, tightening almost as though his body spasmed at the realization this wasn't his bearded friend's hand he was holding. He moved his fingers and felt her hand gently, squeezing again, and then he lifted his head, eyes wide. "HI!" he burst out, breathless as he straightened to his full height, stunned. "Hiyeeee." She just smiled at him again, waiting for that kind of cute shocked look of his to settle again like it had yesterday. "Uh! Phone trouble?? Again??" Chuck pulled the little screwdriver out of his pocket and wiggled it a little, ready to come to her aid again. Almost as if she hadn't left a card with her phone number written on it yesterday. And

why was it suddenly endearing that this guy kept a tiny screwdriver in his pocket? She shook herself mentally with an “Uuuuhhh...” And then she was right back on track again, Agent Walker focusing on her assignment. She had a mess to fix. “Yeah!” she said, unconsciously tucking a bit of hair away from her face. “Um, I’m not sure I’m able to receive calls, ‘cause...” She looked down and then oh so slowly lifted her blue eyes to meet his gaze through her eyelashes. “I never got one from you,” she finished, her words slow and dripping with honey. “Oh ho hoooooooo!” And there was Morgan. But before he could say anything else, Chuck turned and looked at him. She couldn’t see the taller man’s face, but it must’ve had murder in it because Morgan practically tripped getting away from the situation. Chuck turned back to her, looking pained. She thought she’d try to put him out of his misery a little bit. “I’m sorry I left so quickly yesterday. I had an appointment with a realtor. I just moved here,” she explained. “Welcome!” he squeaked, and it was such a sweet response, made all the sweeter by the fact that he lifted the screwdriver up between them for some reason. He glanced at it like he wasn’t all too sure why he was even still holding it, and then he shoved it back into his pocket quickly. “Thanks...” She was admittedly a bit tripped up by his sincere antics--so sincere, in fact, it almost seemed like he wasn’t in control of what he was doing yet. She had really thrown him off today, apparently. More so than yesterday. And she was accidentally enjoying his response to seeing her again. She quickly continued before she lost any semblance of focus. She needed to go in for the kill. So to speak. “And, uh, I don’t really know anyone here.” She tilted her head and looked at him for a moment. “And I was wondering if you would show me around.” He froze, and then she watched as his eyebrows slowly raised, his mouth falling open. She spared a moment to wonder what had happened to this guy that he was so incredibly surprised by the fact that a woman was talking to him like this, with invitation. As far as she could tell, the situation with Agent Larkin sending him sensitive government secrets aside, he seemed almost like a diamond in the rough. At least here, in this particular store. And perhaps even elsewhere...? Maybe? Her mark didn’t seem capable of saying anything to that. So she had to prompt him a bit. “That is...if you’re free...” She used that dripping with honey voice again. She even grabbed the end of her hair and played with it flirtatiously. If he didn’t latch onto this, she didn’t know what else she was going to have to do... “Oh, he’s

free!!!! He's so free!! He's got nothin' but time on his hands!!! He's *very* available!!!! You guys are gonna have a great time!" She glanced over Chuck's shoulder to see that Morgan had wandered back at some point to watch this unfold. She felt a bit bad for Chuck now. *Very available. Ouch...* But at least Morgan was somewhat helping her cause with his intrusive nosiness. Was he always like this, she wondered? Chuck's slow turn with the simpering smile made her think that, yes, this happened often enough, and Chuck was unfortunately used to it. Morgan sprinted off again muttering something about xerox machines, leaving them alone together. "Apparently, my schedule's wide open," Chuck said then, turning back to her, attempting to make the best of the embarrassing scene his friend had just potentially made. But there was some humor in his face, a tinge of self-deprecation and awareness again. And she found herself liking him a little more. She nodded with a beaming smile. "Great." Giving off a breathy laugh, feigning relief, even though she'd known she would end up with a date by the time she walked away from this desk, she took her phone out of her purse and looked up at him expectantly. "Oh! Oh, yeah. You probably want my number." "Do you...still have mine?" she asked as he wrote it down on a post it and passed it across the desk towards her. He winced, and she liked that, too. "Yes," he admitted quietly. "I'm--I should apologize for not--you know, things got--" "No, no." She giggled and brushed a hand through the air. "Don't worry about it. It's okay. Um...but like I said, I don't...know any places around town." "Oh, of course! Yeah. I'll-I'll take care of that. You free tonight? I ask, 'cause I get off a bit earlier. I can maybe...swing by your place?" A look came over his face then, a little like a deer in headlights, then he walked that back. "If you want me to. I mean, if you're more comfortable meeting someplace, we can do that, too." "I'll text you where I'm staying. How's that?" "Great. Perfect. Yeah. Of course. That's..." A dreamy look came over his face then. "Stellar." He furrowed his brow and shook his head, laughing at himself. "Stellar? Really? I don't know where that...came from." She giggled again and texted him the address for Maison23. She heard his phone beep in his pocket and he took it out, wiggling it in his hand. "There it is. I got it." "Perfect. What, um...what time should I expect you?" He looked so overwhelmed but there was something else there now, maybe a bit of confidence. A sense of resolve, as though he was deciding not to look a gift horse in the mouth... and wasn't it sweet but sad at the same time? "Seven?

That work? And, hmmm, you like Mexican?" "Love it." "Great!" She put her phone away and grinned again, making sure her eyes sparkled a bit, and then she pushed her hair back behind her shoulder. "See you tonight, Chuck." "Yes. Definitely." She smirked, gave him one last look over his shoulder to make sure he got the message, and then she turned back to the door, making a beeline for her car again, dropping the act and frowning. Twelve hours to save this guy's life, most likely. Twelve hours to find out whether he *deserved* to be saved. And she had this horribly sick feeling in her gut that told her he was entirely innocent in all of this, and that things were potentially going to get worse for him if she didn't fix this mess quick. ----- "Morgan, just...let me do the talking, okay?" "But I need to see her face when you say it." "Let me do it!" "Okay okay...." Chuck burst into the living room, spotting his sister and her boyfriend sitting on the couch watching TV. "Hey, Chuck," Ellie murmured, keeping her eyes on the screen, that sleepy post-twelve hour shift look on her face. "Ellie... Captain...Don't freak out. Remain calm." That probably wasn't the best way to start things because Ellie looked away from the TV at him in genuine concern. So he finished it quick. "I have some news..." They looked at each other. Out of nowhere, Morgan's excited voice filled the room. "CHUCK'S GOT A DATE!" He felt the entirety of the other man's weight slam into his side, his limbs wrapping around him like a koala. "What?!?!?" Ellie asked, suddenly very alert, excitement on her face as she sat up and faced him. "WHO???" "Way to go, Chuck. That's awesome," Devon said very diplomatically, pointing. This was exactly the response he was expecting. And then he saw a look of almost terror come over his sister's face, which was less expected. "Oh, GOD!!! What are you gonna wear?!?!?" He just shrugged. He was too excited, too nervous, too...a lot of things...to think that far ahead. He had a date. But then Ellie bounded up from the couch, and hurried to his side. "Morgan, off. Get off. I have work to do." She smacked at Morgan's shoulder until he untangled himself and hopped back down to his own feet, holding his hands up. "C'mon, Chuck." Chuck let Ellie drag him down the hall to his bedroom, going straight for his closet. He leaned against his desk and watched as she stepped inside, combing through his clothes. "What's her name?" she asked. "Is that...some kind of epic girl code thing? Where you can tell by her name what colors she likes on a guy or something?" Morgan asked, having followed them into the room. "I just want to know her *name*, Morgan. Why

are you here?" Ellie asked from inside the closet. Chuck just shrugged at his best friend. "Sarah," he answered then. "Her name is Sarah." "You look good in dark colors, usually. But if you're going to a place that has dark lighting, I'd go for lighter...Where are you taking her?" "El Torero." "Oh that is an excellent choice, brother. Mexican food is always a winner. There aren't many people in the world who dislike Mexican food. Also, margaritas are amazing." She poked her head out of the closet and pointed at him as he chuckled, then ducked back into the closet again as he heard her moving shirts around, sliding hangers over. "So Sarah...She's nice?" she asked then, stepping out and holding what looked like the clothes he'd most likely be wearing for this date. "Pretty?" His nerves were a little frayed, hands clammy, so he did what he always did when he felt that way--he deflected with a joke. "Yeah! Actually, Morgan met her online. It was kind of a chat room..." He inwardly smirked at the momentarily look of *Dear God no* on his sister's face. "I'm totally kidding," he said quickly when she looked like she might kill him. "Chuck." "She came into the store and I fixed her cell phone. She's new here, I guess, and she needs someone to show her around." He laughed nervously. "I mean, honestly, I'm bein' honest, she probably doesn't even consider this a date, ya know? She probably just needs someone to--" "Chuck!" "What?" "Stop doing that," Ellie said, pointing at him. He shrugged, a bit of a pout on his face. "It's a date. How did it go?" "Oh. I can answer that!" Morgan said. "She said she's new here and doesn't really know anybody, and she was wondering if he would show her around...and then she looked up through her eyelashes all coy-like and flirty and said..." He made his voice deep and husky. "If you're free..." "That is *not* what she sounds like!" Chuck grouched, reaching out to smack the side of his friend's head. "Yeah it is! I mean, I have guy voice, obviously! But I'm tellin' ya, she was asking you out on a date. Ellie, she left her phone number for him yesterday and he didn't even call her." "Someone broke into the apartment last night! I was maybe a little preoccupied, for God's sake!" "Boys!" Ellie whistled. "Hey! First of all, Morgan, you aren't needed anymore. Secondly, Chuck, stop tearing yourself down. It's frustrating and hard to watch." "I'm here for support," Morgan tried. "Buddy..." Chuck winced. "Fiiiiine. But I need text updates while you're on your date, huh?" He reached over and grabbed the candy bar that was most definitely Chuck's candy bar from the desk next to Chuck's hip, and unwrapped it. "See

ya, Bartowskis. Beard *out!*" "Thank God," Ellie called after him loud enough for him to hear. Then she turned back to Chuck. "Between us, you seriously drive me crazy with your reluctance to accept that you're a catch. My brother is not only handsome, he is also kind and smart." Chuck groaned. "I knooow, I know. You say it enough. And I get it. But, like, she saw me in the Buy More, ya know? Compared to the other men in that store, I'm basically George Clooney." "Anybody would be," she said distractedly, holding the shirts she'd picked out up against his body and squinting thoughtfully. "But I highly doubt it's that. Didn't Morgan say she came back for you?" "That's...incredibly dramatic," he chuckled. "She didn't come back for me." "She walked into the store and specifically asked you out on a date, Charles Irving. Which means she saw something in you that she liked. I highly doubt you're the first guy she came across in this town. But you *are* the guy she asked out on a date, aren't you?" She winked. He sniffed and nodded, looking off to the side and thinking. "Try these on," she said then, interrupting his thoughts before he could get much farther than thinking about how stunning Sarah's smiles were today. "Honestly, the--" "I know. I'm a girl. I know what girls like." "I'll go change." As he left to head for the shower, he finally had a moment to think about what had happened. Everything felt like such a whirlwind. She'd shown up yesterday, all warm and a bit flirty, though he'd thought at the time that he was just imagining it. And then she'd left him her number. And when he hadn't called her, she'd shown up *the very next day* to see him again. It was downright crazy. He didn't even know how to deal with it. It would've been staggering enough if she wasn't so incredibly gorgeous, but she *was* so incredibly gorgeous and he felt like he was way out of his depths with her. Gorgeous, a little fiirty, bold...deliciously bold. As much as it had made him act like an idiot, he'd found it insanely attractive. She did not beat around the bush *a bit*. But that meant he had to somehow shirk his insecurities, leave them here at home, and show up at her door as though he deserved to be there. As though he wasn't stupidly confused. He was stupidly confused, though. So stupidly confused. How did guys without giant gaping holes in their chests handle dates with pretty women, he wondered? Was that something he could Google? Or maybe she was exactly as nice as she seemed, unassuming and just as into him as Morgan kept insisting. He was probably doing her a huge disservice by putting her up on this goddess pedestal, like he made one misstep and she'd

immediately hate him and end the date. Normal people weren't like that, and she was probably perfectly normal. Emphasis on the perfectly part, because God, wasn't she perfect? And this was so insane. So crazy. He got out of the shower and got dressed, looking at his reflection and staring at his wild, untameable curls. Should he go with natural? Slicked back? He smoothed his hands tightly over his hair and pulled the curls down. "Ew," he muttered, letting them bounce back again. Not slicked back. This was the first date he'd been on in a long time, and he was losing his mind, maybe. Did he even really know how to do it anymore? He needed to just take a deep breath and be himself. That was the secret to success. Wasn't that what everyone always said about first dates? "Just be yourself!" he chirped at his reflection. And then he rolled his eyes at *himself* and left the bathroom. Ellie met him halfway down the hallway, a wince on her face. "Whaaaat is it?" he asked dubiously. "Remember how I told you it was totally okay for you to use the car tonight?" He shut his eyes in a wince, knowing what was coming. "Devon was called in. He needs to take it." "What about his car?" he asked, wondering if he could get even a single break. "It's in the shop, remember?" "Oh, yeah." "Chuck, I'm sorry. Maybe he can give you a ride?" That got her a flat look. "Well, I thought I'd at least offer." He chuckled and leaned in to kiss her forehead. "Don't worry about it. The Herder it is. I'm glad I drove it home today." "Hey, listen. If she's bothered by the car, she's silly, okay?" "If you saw what she looked like when she smiles, you wouldn't say that." "Hm?" she asked, already halfway down the hallway towards her own bedroom she shared with Captain Awesome. "Nothing! Tell Devon the car's all his. And not to worry about it. I'll make a joke about it or somethin'." "That's my guy," she said. He smiled at her retreating figure and went into his room, sitting down on his bed to put his socks and shoes on. There was a light rapping on his window as he frowned and looked up from his shoes. Of course Morgan was there, pointing down at the lock that was meant to keep him in particular out when Chuck wasn't home. The one time he'd snuck in when it was just Ellie at home, Morgan had nearly been murdered by a rolling pin. Rolling his eyes, he finished tying his last Converse sneaker, and he went over to open the window and let Morgan crawl in. "Hey. So I forgot to give you some advice." "No, thank you. Appreciate the thought, though." He climbed to his feet and grabbed his wallet, phone, and keys to the Herder. Snagging his jacket last minute, just in case.

"Hear me out, dude! I printed this out for you and biked back as fast as I could. Take it with you. Ten Do's and Don'ts of dating. And it's from *Cosmopolitan* which is, like, a really top level advice-giving women's magazine. So you know they know women." He thrust the sheet with the faded printer ink on it into Chuck's chest. "Morgan. No."

"Why? It might help!" "I'm not reading a dumb magazine thingy for dating. Leave me alone!" He left his room, Morgan arguing the whole way after him, and when he finally got out into the courtyard he heard Ellie's voice behind him. "Chuck!! Hey...Hey," she said nearing him, a bouquet of flowers in her hands. "These are leftover from the party."

"You put this together, sis?" "Yep." She gave me her best closed-mouth smile as he took the bouquet, putting her hands on his shoulders. "Listen to me, Chuck. You deserve this night. You deserve to go out and have a good time, okay? Don't let your head ruin it, huh? Just enjoy yourself. And *be* yourself." There it was. He chuckled quietly and nodded. "Gotcha. Thanks, sis." "And, uh, don't forget...about the old girlfriend rule."

"Right," he said in a flat voice. "Got it. No mention of...her." She beamed. He'd said the right thing. But then there was pride in her face, and happiness. He was making her happy and that, in turn, made him suddenly feel a lot better about tonight. "Aces, Charles." She met his eyes and her smile warmed. "You're aces." "A dad quote," he said, grinning back. "I'm impressed. Love you, sis." "I love *you*. Have fun." "I will, I'll try."

And he left just early enough to beat the traffic, knowingly leaving his sister with Morgan Grimes, alone in the courtyard. He was almost sorry for the little guy.

----- She came out of the bathroom, double checked the outfit she had picked out, and gently placed it on the bed. There was a feeling in the pit of her stomach that she didn't like. It was worry for a civilian. That's what she was telling herself. He wasn't a child like her last mission, he was a capable adult, but one that seemed just as naive about life as the baby she rescued. They both had no idea of the games being played with their lives over their heads. They both seemed to be pawns in a much larger game that she had been brought into. And just like the last mission, she was determined to protect him if he were innocent. She snorted, if. She would admit, part of her had underestimated him, in a way that made her uncomfortable with something that was bubbling up inside of her that she was just going to push back down, but Chuck Bartowski, part of a secret plot to infiltrate the government...not likely. She strapped her

knives to her ankle, feeling more covered, more protected, until she thought about him again. She tried to get him out of her mind. He was a mark, a civilian, she didn't even know if she believed the things she was telling herself, but this was what she did know, Chuck Bartowski deserved to have a life if he was innocent, and Sarah's gut told her he was innocent. She pulled the hairpins out of their bag, opened a container that contained poison and oh so carefully, dipped them in the liquid. She expertly placed them in her hair. They were stylish, she hoped he liked them. She paused. She hoped he liked them...what was she doing? When was the last time she had been on a date? Her and Bryce...well, they never "dated". They went out for the missions, to tail someone, to overhear someone, but a date? Anytime someone asked "what do you do?" the response had been, "an accountant." Her and Bryce, the accounting Andersons. She sighed. She wondered, if this was real life, would she go out with Chuck Bartowski? She shook her head. No, none of that. This was about a mission....her last mission. Because when she got back it was time for her and Graham to have a long talk. This easy mission had been anything but. Actually it was time for him to listen, and for her to talk. She crossed the room and picked up her very stylish kevlar vest. She slipped it over her shoulders, and pulled it tight, fastening the velcro fasteners around her waist. She finished getting dressed when she decided she needed to have words with Graham. He had to stop that burn-out from getting to Chuck. She was also getting a funny feeling from him...again. Maybe she could figure out what was going on. What intel did Bryce steal that was having him act this way? She picked up her phone, and grabbed her gun to calm her nerves as she began to pace. Why was she pacing? "Graham," the voice said on the other line. She took a deep breath to keep calm. She couldn't let him pick up on her nerves. "It's Walker, Director." Direct and to the point, that's what Graham appreciated. "You need to call off Casey, you need to let me vet this guy before we ruin an innocent life." Graham was silent for a second. "Have you made contact with Bartowski?" She began to pace again, and she held the gun, comforting her. She was right giving up the baby to Emma. A gun shouldn't comfort someone. She had missed her chance for a normal life, for that house with the red door and the white picket fence. "He's picking me up for a date. I'll know more in a few hours. Call him off, Director." Graham hesitated for a second, and then responded. "You're on your own on this one, Sarah. I

can't help you if something goes wrong." Why couldn't he? He was the Director of the CIA. Why couldn't he help her? What was going on that he wasn't telling her about? She knew what she should say, so she said that instead of what she wanted to say. "I don't know about this guy, Graham." She could feel him through the phone. He "had" her right where he wanted her. She checked herself out in the mirror. Everything was as she wanted it. Even Graham. He had forgotten about his "Ice Queen" that he had created. He had forgotten that you can be cut by your own blade. "Nice guys aren't sent government secrets." A knock on the door made her turn. She walked toward the door tucking the gun in her pants. If she had more time, there was more she could say, but she didn't. She knew what she should ask, she knew what he was expecting and she knew how to play the role. She had to play it, or Graham would suspect something, and she did, quickly, before she opened the door. "What should I do if he runs?" She opened the door. There was no hesitation in his voice. "Kill him." She opened the door and saw Chuck. He smiled at her, and at that moment, she decided Agent Walker had a new mission. Find out everything she could about Chuck Bartowski. Protect him if he was innocent. Agent Walker had never failed a mission, and she wasn't about to now.