

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.

Chapter 5: Chuck vs the Nerds Rewrite Ch 5

A/N: DC here...so it came time to write the date, and I know I can do fluffy, I know I can do sweet, but guys, this was one of those times I, as the late great Dusty Rhoades would say, sat down at the learning tree, and let Steampunk do her thing. And oh my word did she. So sit back, relax, and treat yo eyes to the date we should have had. FYI there is absolutely no truth to the rumor that Steampunk has had to turn the firehose on me a couple of times to turn down the fluffiness...None...nope...didn't happen....(shakes water off as he leaves....)

"Okay," he said as they stepped out of the elevator in the lobby. "Before we get out there, you need to know something. I-I mean, I need to tell you exactly what you're getting yourself into."

Sarah furrowed her brow and smirked at him. "What exactly am I getting myself into?" she asked with no small amount of humor in her tone.

He tilted his head and made a high-pitched humming sound. "Actually, I'm gonna look over here in this direction while I tell you this so that I don't see your reaction of complete and utter dismay and mortification...gives you a chance to cover it up. We're going to have to drive around LA in the company car," he rushed out.

Sarah raised her eyebrows as they rounded the corner and stepped onto the sidewalk. There was no mistaking what car he meant, as he held his hands up to block him from looking at her face. She was amused by his antics and she laughed, grabbing his arm and pulling it back down to his side. "Calm down. It's not that bad."

"Driving around town in a car that says NERD on the side in big block letters?" he asked, shrugging.

"You do it all the time, don't you?" she asked, shrugging back. "Trust me. I'll live."

This guy seriously needed a crash course in self-confidence, she decided. How much had he stressed over the prospect of picking up his date in this car, she wondered? Poor guy.

The drive to the restaurant he was taking her to was spent engaging in small talk. She asked him how long he'd been in Los Angeles, and he told her since he was born.

"So what you're telling me is I picked the perfect guy to show me around LA."

"Oh, hell yeah, ya did," he chuckled. "I know this place like the back of my hand. When, uh, when I was a kid, Morgan and I would collect up the money we made from mowing lawns and washing people's cars and stuff, and we'd hop on just about every bit of public transportation in town to explore."

"That sounds pretty fun."

"It was fun. Sometimes harrowing. Cannot tell you how often we got lost. I love him dearly, but man, that guy will never have any kind of sense of direction." He laughed and shook his head as she watched him closely, the lights he drove under flashing intermittently across his face. He was settling into this, she realized, now that she'd gotten him talking a bit.

And she liked how easy it was for her to set him at ease, just by being politely interested in him, in his life. "What'd you do? Where'd you go to?" she asked.

"I mean, what any twelve year old nerds would do. We went to comic book stores, libraries..." Then he stopped talking suddenly and blurted. "Ah! Here! Right here...This is something you need to know if you live here in LA." He slowed a bit, checking his mirror to make sure there weren't cars driving anywhere around him.

Sarah leaned forward and cracked up the second she saw the sign at the entrance of the parking lot.

"That's right, Sarah. The beloved Department of Motor Vehicles. Where the devil lays his head to rest."

She just laughed again, surveying him a little. "That's actually a pretty important place to show me, Chuck. So I appreciate it."

"Oh, good. I'll cross my fingers you don't end up there too often." Then he pointed out the other window to where there was a liquor store. "But theeeere....that's different..."

She cracked up again, shaking her head. "Depends on how this job hunt goes," she said, finding this already much more enjoyable than she'd bargained for.

"Oh, yeah? Well, what are ya looking for?" he asked.

"Um. Anything." That was the safest answer she could come up with.

"I'd tell you to apply for the open sales person position at the Buy More, but I refuse to do you dirty like that." He smiled harder at the sound of her laughter and it wasn't altogether a bad feeling, she found. "I mean, I could tell you to, but it'd be for purely selfish reasons."

"And what are those?"

"It'd be really nice to have someone else there with their head screwed on right."

She snorted, feeling warmth rise from her blouse as she felt his smile on the side of her face. "Why do you work there?" She realized how that sounded and she reached out a hand, gently laying it on his upper arm. "Not that there's anything wrong with it. I'd have this stupid broken phone and no way to contact potential employers if you hadn't fixed it for me yesterday."

He smiled a bit crookedly. "Nah, I'm not offended. It's a fair question. I slam my job and my employer, and sometimes even my coworkers, which probably isn't the nicest. But that company, the store in particular, has been good to me in, um, rough times. Guess it's hard to abandon 'em."

"I get that," she said quietly. He was perhaps altruistic, then? He was holding himself back, she surmised, because he didn't want to disappoint these people, this company, that gave him a chance when he was having a hard time of it?

She pondered about that hard time, outside of what she'd read in his file. He'd been kicked out of Stanford early for stealing tests apparently. It didn't seem all that believable right at this moment, not from where she was sitting. She could imagine that wasn't easy for him. What sort of a future had he pictured for himself back then, she wondered?

And now he was here, driving her to a Mexican restaurant, in a car he called a “Herder”, working for eleven dollars an hour at an electronics retailer. She imagined this *wasn’t* what he’d pictured for himself when he first got into Stanford.

As Chuck pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant with a playfully ominous, “Here we aaaare”, she smiled in amusement at him and wondered what it was about him that had made Bryce Larkin entrust government secrets with him, especially if they were as sensitive as Graham had made them seem. He was perfectly unassuming, charming in a sort of goofy way, and he was seemingly lacking in a healthy amount of self-esteem.

Granted, she supposed she understood why, with him having been at Stanford, and how much of a step down he must feel like he’d had to take to be where he was now. But on the other hand, he wasn’t exactly...terrible to be around.

In fact...

As they walked to the front door of the restaurant, he did a few punches with his fists in celebration and drawled, “Margarita tiiiiiiiime”, making her laugh and answer with an emphatic, “Yes it is.”

And when he laughed at her response, she nibbled on the inside of her lip a little to keep from being *too* pleased by it.

They were sat immediately, sliding into a booth across from one another as the mariachi band finished a song. Chuck turned and made sure to clap for them and she watched him with soft, steady eyes.

This wasn’t someone who knowingly acted against his government. This wasn’t someone who would purposely help a rogue agent steal or hide incredibly sensitive intel. There was just no way. There was no guile in him. There was nothing under any kind of facade. She hadn’t seen any trace of a facade to begin with. He was just...Chuck Bartowski. A regular guy.

A regular guy passing her a large margarita menu. “Oh my God!” she exclaimed, looking at it. “It’s front *and* back?? These are all different kinds of margaritas?”

“El Torero is specifically known for that margarita menu,” he said with a bit of a proud grin.

She slid her gaze slowly up from the menu and smirked just enough to make him swallow hard. “You know the way to a girl’s heart,” she said. And then she broke character a bit and chuckled. “At least, *this* girl. I love me a good margarita. How do I even choose?”

Chuck laughed. “Can I make a suggestion?” He held his hands out to the side, palm facing her. “And this isn’t me tellin’ you what to do at all. Just, if you’re overwhelmed, which I usually am...”

“Make your suggestion. I’m all ears.” She lowered the menu, leaning in a bit.

“Get the original lime margarita. The other ones are all fantastic. Trust me, I’ve tried most of ‘em. Except the papaya. Sometimes papaya tastes like hangover mouth to me.”

Sarah let out a genuine bark of laughter. “That is so weirdly specific.”

“I know. I have crazy taste buds. It’s a thing,” he chuckled.

“I can’t do this,” she said, a serious look on her face. He almost looked nervous. “I can’t be on a date with a guy with crazy taste buds. I’ve gotta call a cab or something.” She made to grab her jacket and leave, dropping the act and laughing as he sat back and groaned, dropping his head on the seat behind him and laughing.

“You had me goin’ for a second. Just trust me on the original lime, okay? That’s the point I’m tryin’ to make,” he said with a grin, still obviously amused by her antics. “Nobody does the original like El Torero.”

She trusted him and ordered the original lime like he’d suggested when the waiter came to take their orders, and they ordered their meals as well. As the waiter left, Sarah leaned her elbows on the table and gazed at him a bit, letting him see some interest there. Sooner rather than later, she had to start asking questions, real questions. She wanted to be able to say for sure that he was not a willing participant in any of this.

And she was a little startled, and by extension frustrated, that she wanted him to be innocent as badly as she did.

“So tell me about yourself, Chuck.”

“I work at the Buy More as the Nerd Herd supervisor,” he answered immediately, a cheeky look on his face.

“Uuuuh, yeah, I knew that.”

He chuckled and mimicked her pose, leaning his arms on top of the table. “What do ya wanna know? You can ask me anything.”

You can ask me anything... He’d said it without blinking, no hesitation, his tone genuine. That alone was enough to convince her. But she kept going anyway.

“Is that all you do?” she asked. “Work?”

“On the crazier days at the Buy More, it really feels that way.” He widened his eyes and chuckled.

“Uh, I’ve only been in there twice, but I still have to ask...Are there any days that *aren’t* crazy?”

Chuck laughed. “Ummmm. Well, no. It’s more on a scale of crazy. From Hannibal Lector on a human flesh diet to Meryl Streep reading a nice historical fiction novel by the fire.” She couldn’t hold back a laugh at that. It was quite specific. “But to actually answer that first question you asked, I don’t just work. Sometimes I sit around watching movies with my sister and her boyfriend when they get home from their shifts at the hospital, sometimes I mess around with programming on my computer, read...stuff...”

“Stuff?”

“Yeah, stuff.” He shrugged.

“Your sister and her boyfriend?” she asked then, raising her eyebrow. “You’re close with them?”

“Super close.”

"You live close? Or with them?"

"Um, define *with*, though. Because the set-up of the place is--Okay, yes. I live with my sister and her boyfriend." He winced. "Eleven dollars an hour makes it hard to have your own place. Or maybe announcing my income probably was a bad idea right then??? Maybe." He let out a self-deprecating chuckle.

"You're talking to someone who doesn't have a job, remember."

"Good point. Thank you." They exchanged a smile. "So yeah, I live with my sister and her boyfriend, Captain Awesome."

"Nooo," she said, letting out a bubbly laugh.

"It's true, though."

"So--So wait. You call him 'Captain Awesome'..."

"Yeah. Wait 'til you meet 'im." He said it so easily, as though that was a sure thing that was going to happen. As though he could see this extending past just one date. Already. It wasn't hubris or ego, either. She thought it might just be that he liked her. And she had to fight to keep the interested, happy smile on her face suddenly. "Everything he does is awesome. Climbing mountains, jumping out of planes...flossing."

She pulled her chin back in surprise and chuckled. "That's funny."

"Well, I'm a funny guy," he said, and she detected some teasing in the way he said it.

"Clearly. Which is good, 'cause, I am *not funny*," she drawled. She immediately saw the dismissal in his face, the dubious look in his narrowed eyes. But he didn't tell her otherwise with his words, and there was almost a sweetness in that, wasn't there?

"Is that your big secret, by the way?" he asked. "Because I've been sittin' here trying to figure out what's wrong with you..."

"Oh, plenty. Believe me."

"...and I was thinkin' either she's a cannibal or not that funny, and I was really pullin' for cannibal 'cause I've never met one before."

He was such a nerd, and in spite of his lack of self-esteem she'd already witnessed in just a few meetings and the hour since he'd picked her up at her door, there was such an ease with which he was...himself. No filtering the strange, bizarre things that popped into his head. No holding himself back. It was refreshing. It set her at ease.

"Uhh, not a cannibal," she said, nodding once. "But I did just come out of a long relationship, so I may come with baggage."

"Well, I can be your very own baggage handler."

For once, Agent Sarah Walker didn't know what to say to that. And she didn't know why she'd felt the need to talk about any kind of relationship. Maybe because that was what normal people talked about? Or...or maybe she was letting her guard down when she shouldn't be. But the pained, moritified look that clearly read *What in the hell did I just say oh my God* was enough for her to brush her own discomfort to the side.

How was something so embarrassingly corny still charming when he said it? Maybe it was his recognition that it was terribly corny written all over his face. She looked to the side and pursed her lips. Still speechless. She knew for sure that this man was not Agent Larkin's accomplice. Not knowingly, at least.

"Uuuhhh!!!" he interrupted her thoughts and forged on like a trooper. "So, uh, the, uh, the guy. The ex. The guy. The ex is the reason you moved here from..." He paused.

"Uh, D.C."

"Right."

"Yeah. After I realized that all my friends were *his* friends and that everything about Washington reminded me of..." He voice halted for a moment. She'd almost said it. "Bruce." Good enough. "I needed change. A big one."

Like potentially leaving the CIA. Though that had almost nothing to do with Bryce, and had almost everything to do with Ryker and the knowledge that she'd been a puppet for the CIA for going on a decade now, her hands dripping with blood, and a soul-deep fatigue that existed in every last facet of her being no matter how much sleep she tried to get between missions.

“Bruce.” She felt a spike of nerves for a moment. And then he smirked. “Yeeah...you give me crap for being Chuck and you went out with a Bruce?” The nerves dissipated and she let out a breathy laugh. “That’s nice. That’s real good.”

“Soo--So what about you? What skeletons do you have in your closet?” she asked, then. Because he’d given her the perfect way to prod him for information about himself. He got a look on his face then, like he wasn’t expecting that question and she wondered if this was a bad first date question. Had she not put as much teasing into it as she should have? “Any secrets?” She paused as he continued to look a bit like a deer in headlights. “Any women?”

“Uhhhhh...yeah,” he said quietly. “Yeah, um...Actually back in college there was...” He cleared his throat and fidgeted in his booth. “There was one. Um. Back in college. I mean, there was...I had someone. It was...” And then he just stopped, staring at her. And it was strange, because he didn’t look uncomfortable, exactly. It was more like he flat-out didn’t know what else to say, didn’t know how to finish that thought. She just stared back, lowering her chin a little, waiting...

“But that’s all over with now,” he rushed out. “And talking about her is as useless as the pile of Starbucks gift cards people have given me as gifts over the years, rotting away in my desk drawer at home.”

Sarah laughed, ducking her head as she realized every time she thought she might have him on something, he went ahead and knocked her back on her heels by saying something bizarre but cute, or funny. And as she looked up at him again, she found she didn’t want to stop herself from saying, “I like you, Chuck.”

Because she did. Already. And wasn’t that just great? she thought to herself with an inward roll of her eyes.

She sipped her margarita, deciding she really liked that, and maybe she should be careful about having more than just the one because she was getting much too comfortable sitting here in this booth, across from him, listening to him talk about his family, his work, the self-deprecating humor...And more than anything else, there were the looks he sent her when he thought she wasn’t looking, his eyes soft, eyebrows

turned up in the middle, as though he couldn't believe he was sitting here with her. Like he was in a dream or something that someone hadn't woken him up from yet.

It was sweet and it made her uncomfortable all at once. Because he really and truly had no idea.

She did, though. She was certain that this guy wasn't guilty of anything besides maybe basing too much of his self-worth off of some girl he liked in college. Or maybe she was just assuming considering what he'd said and how awful he'd looked mentioning it. Not to mention how fast he'd brushed it away.

When they finally finished eating, Chuck spent a good three minutes arguing with her about the check, never actually pushing, but being adamant enough about wanting to pay that she finally relented. It hadn't sat well with her, though, so when he'd helped her put her jacket on, she "accidentally" bumped his hip with her hand and slipped thirty dollars into his pocket without him realizing it. He'd figure it out later, after she was gone, on a plane back to Langley.

She fought back the melancholy as they wandered out onto the sidewalk and began strolling along side by side. He didn't make any kind of move, not to put his hand on her back, touch her arm, hold her hand, and it was...interesting. Instead he stuck his hands in his pockets and turned to glance at her.

"So D.C., huh?"

"Yeah. D.C." She smiled at him and he smiled back.

"That means you're good with the whole snow thing, then." She laughed. "Because I need to warn you, if you're a snow girl, that's not a thing here in LA proper. Now...you can find snow up in the mountains more inland during the right seasons, buuut..." He finished it off with a chuckle.

"I can take it or leave it. I didn't exactly come here for the weather." No, she came here to find out if Agent Larkin was working with someone else, primarily Chuck Bartowski, supervisor of the Buy More Nerd Herd. Not that this was something she'd be telling said Nerd Herd supervisor.

If she played her cards right, she could finish this date, get Graham on the line, and tell him to have them call that crazy bastard Casey off. Chuck was innocent. He had no idea what any of this was. He was just a nice guy. A legitimately nice guy.

A legitimately nice guy she couldn't help liking and wondering, not for the first time, what it might be like to go out on a real date with him, one that didn't involve her feeling him out for the potential to betray his country. What might it be like to actually go out on the town with a guy like Chuck Bartowski and just...enjoy? Have a conversation. Walk around and have him show her things like the DMV and liquor stores?

And maybe it was right then, in that moment, that she let her guard down a little bit and allowed herself to loosen up, enjoy.

"Does that mean if the apocalypse happened and LA was suddenly turned into a winter wonderland, you wouldn't make it?" she asked.

"Whoa, whoa! Whoa, there!" He held out a hand towards her in faux offense, and she laughed, rocking forward. "Slow down, little missy. Okay? I wouldn't just curl into a ball in the snow and freeze to death. Oh my God!"

She laughed again. "I wouldn't let you, don't worry."

"You tryin' to say you'd keep me warm?" He looked like he regretted it immediately, somehow managing to shove almost his entire fist into his mouth and clamping his teeth down onto it. He pulled it back out just as quickly. "You gave me an inch and I took, like, three miles. Can we just ignore that? Can we pretend I didn't just? Thanks."

Sarah cracked up and put a hand on his arm. "It's done."

"Thank you. Seriously. Oh my God."

"I kind of take the blame for it, so don't worry. I've got your back." And he really couldn't even have an inkling of an idea just how intensely she had his back at the moment. That there was potentially a guy out there right now who was headed here to put a bullet in him, that she was wracking her brain for a way to get proof to Graham that he wasn't working with Larkin, that he was just an innocent civilian.

He led her out onto an overpass then, and she decided to change the subject, give him a bit of a hand.

“So, um...where we going?” she asked, since she was following him and really had no idea where he was leading her.

“Well, do you like music?”

She paused, unable to really come up with a lie. “I guess.”

It made him laugh. “You guess? What’s your favorite band?” She just beamed at him, still not knowing how to answer. That wasn’t really ever something she paid attention to. “Ooohh my gosh. Oh my gosh.”

He shook his head and looked away, and she decided to maybe take a page out of his book this time. “God, I’m not funny. I don’t listen to music. This must be your worst date ever, right?”

But Chuck had stopped a few feet back, she realized a bit belatedly, and she turned to watch him. He’d frozen, facing away from her, looking down at the street below as police vehicles blasting their sirens sped past. He looked stricken...a little strange.

“I was waiting for you to say no,” she continued, watching him closely.

But then he spun on his heel and gaped at her. “Sorry...S--Uh, I kinda zoned out there for a second. Uh, no. No! God, no. You kiddin’ me? I’ve had--I’ve had much, *much* worse experiences. Oh my God.” The way he gently put his hand on her elbow and guided her to walk with him again set her at ease immediately, and she grinned, watching him stumble to clean up the minor mess he’d made taking so long to answer. “In the eleventh grade, actually...”

“Oh! Oh, you have to go back that far???” she exclaimed, cracking up. “Come on!”

“I don’t date all that much!”

“Suuuure. Sure, Chuck. Got me on a rollercoaster over here.” And she smiled in a way that let him know she was just teasing him.

“Sorry. It’s not purposeful, I promise. I’m just a dipshit.”

"You are not," she chuckled. "Stop it. I don't typically ask dipshits to show me around when I move to a new place."

"Not that you know of. Us dipshits have a way of sneakin' up on ya with the dipshittedness."

Sarah snorted outright and shook her head. "That's bullshit and I don't believe you."

"Fine, fine. But I'll have you know, a Buy More customer called me one just the other day, and they say in retail that the customer is always right." He grinned cheekily, playing with the keys to the Nerd Herd car he'd driven them in between his hands now.

"Also bullshit. The customer is often wrong, and sometimes they're big stupid assholes about it, too."

"Oh, wow. Wow, can you be my manager, please?"

"Is there an opening for management at the Buy More?" He winced. "What? Did I...say something...?" She felt a bit unsure. Had she offended him?

"No, no. Not at all. No. There's just this...it's an AssMan position." She made a face.

"Sorry. Assistant manager. AssMan. Ahem..." She giggled. "I was putting in my application. Or, uh...thinking about it."

"Wow, really? Good luck. I hope you get it, Chuck."

"I haven't--I haven't even--I mean, I have to turn it in first. Heh." He rubbed the back of his head. "But thanks! I appreciate it. Cross your fingers, and uh...I'll keep ya updated." He made a goofy face and crossed his fingers. She couldn't help but notice he'd said something that insinuated he was foreseeing another meeting between them, a future date, an actual friendship or relationship maybe... And it made her...sad.

"You'll get it," she said with an emphatic nod. "I'm sure you will."

His smile was warm. "You have any suggestions?"

"Who, me? Uhhh..."

“Dear God, whatever you do....don’t say ‘just be yourself’. I heard that too much today and I can’t hear it again.” Sarah immediately picked up on the meaning of that, even though he might not have meant for her to. She could picture this sweet nerdy guy asking his people--his sister, that Captain Awesome guy, but hopefully not that bearded friend Morgan--for advice before this date tonight. It made her insides feel a little...soft.

“Okay, well...” She giggled. “I won’t say just be yourself. But maybe channel the guy who managed to get a whole bunch of Buy More employees to set up a makeshift stage for an impromptu ballet recital to make a little girl happy and hopefully keep her dad outta the doghouse.”

They turned the corner and he peered at her for what felt like a long time. Then he cleared his throat and looked away. “Yeah, that’s...really good advice. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I have my moments.”

“I dunno. Maybe it’s just meeee, buuut...I just get this feeling like you have an awful lot of moments, Sarah.” His smile was so warm, his words managing to make her speechless for a few moments. She had to remind herself that he was talking to some other girl, someone she’d invented just for the night, and not her. Then why did it feel like he was talking to *her*?

“Maybe it’s just those cool sticks you’ve got in your hair or somethin’.”

He caught her offguard and she barked out a laugh, having to take a few extra steps as she leaned forward with laughter, and he looked so pleased about it, and this was becoming a legitimate problem--a problem she wasn’t feeling like stopping at the moment.

“Oh. Hey. We’re in here...” He put a hand on her arm and gestured towards the line in front of what looked like your average downstairs bar. She moved to get in the back of the line but he shook his head and gestured for her to follow him. “No, no... Listen, you picked the right tour guide, okay? You don’t wait in lines at the bars when you’re out with Chuck.”

She raised her eyebrows with a teasingly impressed look and followed him past the bouncer who he exchanged some dorky handshake with, and as they walked into the hallway, Chuck leaned in close. "Full disclosure, this is literally the only place I can do this with." Sarah laughed again and he chuckled, raising his voice as the band playing downstairs became louder, the further inside they got. "I did the owner a solid fixing his tech free of charge."

"Ah, cool!"

He shrugged as they got to the top of the stairs, and she did a quick scan of the place down below, out of habit more than anything, the red, dim lighting making it hard to see much more than the band on the stage and the jumping (she guessed that was dancing??) people on the floor underneath.

They got a little ways down the stairs as he made up a few silly rules of the bar so that she wouldn't break any of them. Things like not feeding the fish (there were no fish), no moonwalking, no pirating...and he was sure to make it clear he meant the seafaring version and not the music stealing version. And finally, he said, no sliding down the banister of the stairs. And right after he said that, he half sat on the railing and made a goofy little sound, sliding the rest of the way to the bottom and letting out a boyish chuckle. She'd already been beaming at his antics, but that last bit made her laugh out loud as she paused on the staircase and finally followed him down the rest of the way.

"First thing's first. We gotta get drinks," he said and he moved up onto his tiptoes to glance over at the bar. "Yesssss! Jenna's tending the bar tonight. She will make you your perfect drink. Trust. Best bartender in LA."

"Oh, really?" she asked, raising her eyebrow and following him as he weaved through the crowd.

He glanced at her over his shoulder and laughed. "Jenna is fifty seven and lives with her husband and two parakeets, so don't you even give me that eyebrow raise, as stupidly pretty as it is."

She smirked and it became a lot warmer of a smile when he turned back to look forward again. *Stupidly pretty* was probably the nicest and cutest thing she'd heard someone say about her in...longer than she could remember.

When they got to the bar, the woman with the jet black hair and the tank top that had a blond rocker-looking chick on it caught sight of Chuck and threw a big grin his way. "Heyyyy, if it isn't Chuckles!" Sarah wasn't sure but she might've caught a blush on his face under the red lights. Jenna made her way over and gave Chuck a half hug over the bar. "Usual?" she asked.

"Uh yes. Please. And this is Sarah. She's my guest for tonight--"

"Guest or date?" The older woman winked. Sarah thought it'd be smart not to answer that question, and instead she just turned a toothy smile on Chuck, who ducked his head in embarrassment. "I'm just messin' with ya, kid. Hi, Sarah. Jenna. What are you drinkin'?"

"I, um...I dunno."

"You seem like an international woman of mystery." Sarah gaped for a moment, then schooled her features. "You're hiding a lot behind those eyes. I'll make you a martini fit for Emma Peel."

The woman seemed to just be joking with her as she moved away to make the drinks, but it still left Sarah feeling a bit...seen. Chuck must've seen a bit of a startled look on her face because he laughed and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder, leaning in to speak so she could hear him over the band. "Don't pay attention to Jenna. She likes to freak people out by making these weird fortune teller statements when she makes drinks for 'em. It's always way far off, too, but it still gets 'em every time."

She just grinned and nodded. Jenna came back with the drinks and Chuck moved to pay, but Sarah stopped him with a hard look. He actually let her pay for the drinks, which was...refreshing. Incredibly refreshing. And she gave Jenna an extra big tip and felt a little silly about it. As much as she knew the woman deserved a big tip, the reason she'd really done it was because she thought maybe spies weren't big tippers...Maybe the

woman would be dispelled of any notion that Sarah wasn't a CIA agent after all, that she'd been wrong.

Sarah felt like an idiot, but she covered it up with a grin as Chuck tried to form a bit of a barrier between her and people who might knock her very full martini by dancing too drunkenly near her.

He pointed out an empty couch in the corner and she nodded, and they made their way over to sit. It wasn't exactly an atmosphere that was conducive to conversing, so they just sort of peered at one another, smiling. It felt good. It felt normal and real. And she let herself enjoy it because who would really know about it besides her when it came down to it?

Chuck kept pushing his hand down his thigh, clutching his drink with his other hand, as he stared up at the band and bobbed his head a little. He was a bit awkward now, as though he didn't know how to proceed.

So she leaned to the side and bumped his shoulder with hers. "They're good!" she said.

"Good!" He blurted. "Good." He glanced away then as she looked up at the stage, nodding to the beat. When she turned to him again, meaning to say something to wipe the anguished awkward look off of his face, she caught something out of the corner of her eye.

And immediately, her guard was up again, all pretenses of enjoyment, any notion she'd get to spend the rest of this night like a regular girl on a date with a regular boy absolutely gone. She had a job to do. And Chuck was in serious danger. For that matter, so was she.

Everywhere she looked, she saw men in suits--obvious feds, she guessed NSA. They'd never learn how to properly blend in, the idiots. They stuck out like sore thumbs.

She turned and looked forward again. What could she do? How did she get them out of here when they were surrounded?

Then an idea struck her. She turned to Chuck and grabbed his hand.

“Let’s dance.”

Chapter 6: Chuck vs the Nerds Rewrite Ch 6

They rushed out of the night club with Sarah tugging on his arm. The date was definitely over now....if she could call it that...she could. Chuck looked quite confused. "Where's the fire?"

She never turned toward him, just heading toward his car. "Chuck, give me your keys."

Chuck was a bit taken aback. "I don't mean to be old-fashioned, but the company only wants employees... nerds, driving the Nerd Herd mobile. I mean, it's kinda, you know..." He dangled the keys in the air.

She didn't have time. HE didn't have time. While he was talking she quickly picked the lock on the door and got in. "Get in the car," she ordered.

Chuck had a perplexed look on his face. "How did you get in to my car?"

What had been a funny situation suddenly got a whole lot more serious when a black SUV headed in their direction. She yelled this time. "Get in the car right now!"

Chuck was beginning to freak out. "Sarah..." he nearly whimpered.

She had no time for this. She still didn't know if he was innocent...Yes she did, she just didn't have proof, and time was running out to get that proof. In fact, if they didn't get away, time was up...for him...and God help her, that wasn't an option.

"Just get in!"

Chuck jumped in and Sarah slammed the car in reverse. He yelled the entire time she drove the car backwards. He muttered under his breath she drove better backwards than he did forwards. She caught him looking back once. He paled, like he was about to throw up, and then didn't look backwards anymore. He muttered things the whole way, and Sarah had to ignore him and drove on.

"Sarah, you're not even looking! Wait, wait, wait. Who are these guys? What do they want?" The SUV rammed into the front fender of the Nerd Herder. Chuck was beside

himself. He just kept muttering “Oh, My God!” over and over. He mumbled something about wetting himself, but she decided for both their sakes to ignore it.

As she drove backwards, Sarah came up with a plan. It wasn’t the best plan, it required Chuck but it was all they had. “Tell me when to turn.”

Her request made him look at her. He looked confused, and to be fair it was more of an order and she could tell he was trying to process what she was asking. It did snap him out of his worry and he turned to look behind them. “Uh, uh, left in five seconds!”

The SUV hit them again, and Sarah knew it was time. “Your left or my left?”

Chucks eyes widened. “What?”

Uh, oh, Sarah thought. This could be bad... “Too late!”

She whipped the wheel, running the car backwards through a narrow opening, forcing the SUV to stop. The went backwards down a flight of stairs, Chuck screaming the entire way. The car was in shambles.

Sarah knew she had very little time, she had to get the proof she needed. HE couldn’t go out like this. She wouldn’t let it happen, she couldn’t. “Listen to me, Chuck. Those men will hurt you. They’re from the NSA and they’re after you.”

Chuck turned to her. They had the wrong person, that had to be it. “Me? Why, why? Why me? I’m nobody. I’m the supervisor of a Nerd Herd at a Buy More. Maybe one day I’ll be assistant store manager and I don’t even know if I want that job. You know, that’s not your problem... but that is.” She turned to see what Chuck was pointing at. It was the SUV. It crashed into them, T-boning the Nerd Herder.

Sarah got out of the car, pulling Chuck with her. “Get out of the car.” They began to run, but he tripped. “Let’s go, Chuck.” He fell, and Sarah spun around to check on him.

The driver of the SUV pointed the vehicle at Sarah and hit the gas. Chuck screamed, “Sarah, look out!” She looked down, saw the plates in the street for the emergency blockade, looked over at the guard booth and turned back to the SUV. Casey seemed to grin as the vehicle hurtled toward her. She dropped, reached down with her right hand,

came up, pivoted to her left, and her throw was true. It hit the emergency button, and the emergency blockade sprung up. She continued to turn to the left, like a very tall ballerina and dropped down, her fingertips, touching the ground, and she squatted on the balls of her feet, ready to dive away if necessary. The SUV hit the blockage and sparks flew everywhere.

Chuck came up, shock covering his face. "Sarah!"

Sarah stood immediately while calling for back-up. "Request emergency air evac. Track location, we're on foot." She grabbed Chuck's hand and they ran. "Let's go!"

They went up the side of the building to the roof, and Sarah knew she had just minutes to figure this thing out...just minutes to save him. "How well do you know Bryce Larkin?"

Chuck was gasping for air. "What? How do you... how do you know Bryce?"

"We worked together at the CIA," she replied, scoping out their current situation.

Chuck's eyes went wide. Shock covered his face again. "The what?! The CIA? Bryce is a spy?! Bryce Larkin from Connecticut is a spy?"

Either he was innocent or he was playing dumb. She hated this but she had to pressure him, she had to know. "A rogue spy. Did he try to contact you?"

Chuck looked around like he was trying to gather his thoughts. "I haven't heard from Bryce in... wait. No, he... he-he sent, he sent me an e-mail."

Sarah spun having heard that. "Did you open it?" Her heart sank.

"Yeah, It was, it was a line from Zork."

Sarah had no idea what the hell that was, but it sounded so Chuck Bartowski. She didn't even have time to think about what that meant. Was this some code? "What?"

"Zork, it's a video game that we used to play. It was like a riddle, and I solved it and then there was, uh, pictures. Lots and lots of pictures."

Damn it, he saw the sensitive intel. She had no idea what kind of intel, what was on it, what Bryce had stolen. But it was important enough for her to be here, important enough for the NSA to be gunning for them.

"You saw them?" He never answered, he swallowed, and his face was answer enough. She had seconds to figure this out. "Uh, your computer, did you back it up? Is there an external drive?"

"It crashed a week ago." So far there was no copy of the intel. This guy was no spy. He wasn't with Bryce. He was an innocent who got an email from Bryce Larkin, rogue spy, who knew him a long time ago. "Wait, wait, wait. Hold on. Was I not supposed to look at those pictures?"

She caught movement on the other side of the roof out of the corner of her eye. Damn it, time had run out. Please let her save this innocent man. She could do this. She saved a baby. She could do this. "Okay, I may have to aim my gun at you, so just don't freak out."

Chuck's eyes widened. "Why?"

Casey appeared behind him, rubbing his eye. "It's late. I'm tired. Let's cut the crap and give him to me now. He belongs to the NSA."

Sarah pulled her gun on Chuck making him gasp. "The CIA gets him first."

Casey pulled his gun on Sarah and advanced. "You come any closer and I shoot." Sarah knew she had to come up with something to save them....and it had to be now.

Chuck was freaking out. "Sarah... I'm freaking out." He realized by the look on his face that he didn't need to tell her that for her to know it.

The NSA guy spoke, the weariness obvious in his voice. "You shoot him, I shoot you. I leave both your bodies here, go out for a late snack. I'm thinking maybe pancakes." Chuck had heard about all he could take. He turned and ran even as Sarah yelled at him not to.

He knew he had no chance of getting away but he had to try and then he saw the building in front of him. This time the feeling in his head came on quickly, but he was ready. The ridiculous pictures flew through his head but they made all the sense in the world. For once in his life, Chuck Bartowski KNEW what had to be done. He KNEW it was up to him.

He spun toward Sarah and pointed in the direction of the building. "They're gonna kill him." Sarah glanced at the NSA guy and he glanced back.

NSA guy then glanced at Chuck, his gun still trained at Sarah. He snarled at Chuck, "Kill who?"

Chuck had to explain this quickly before he ended up shot...or worse. "Stanfield, the general. The General Stanfield, the NATO guy." The NSA guy looked at Sarah. Chuck could tell he thought it was a ploy. Sarah had a speculative look on her face as she glanced at Chuck. Chuck had had it. It had been a long evening. He had gone out to dinner with what he thought was the most wonderful woman in the world. Instead, he found out that she had only asked him out because she was a spy assigned to him. He could take a lot, but today...today he reached his limit. He rolled his eyes, exasperated and began to explain. "Look, something is wrong with me, okay? I don't know what it is, but something is very, very wrong with me, and I'm remembering things that I shouldn't know."

Sarah looked confused, but she kept the gun pointed at him. "Okay, Chuck, talk to me. Like what?"

Really, Sarah? "I don't know. I don't know. For example, uh... there was, there was a Serbian demolitions expert at the Large Mart today. That's kind of odd, wouldn't you say? Look, last week the NSA, you guys intercepted some blue prints, blue prints of a hotel, that hotel. And then the CIA, you guys found a file of schematics of a bomb in Prague. The bomb is in that hotel!" The NSA guy swung his gun toward Chuck as he said that. Chuck noticed Sarah took her gun off of him and pointed it toward the NSA guy.

There was a sneer on the guy's face as the red laser dot danced on Chuck's chest. "He was working with Bryce."

Sarah surprisingly came to Chuck's defense before he could say anything. "No, he opened Bryce's e-mail." The NSA guy slowly turned his head toward Sarah as she looked to Chuck again. "Chuck, those pictures that you saw...Could they have told you this?"

The NSA guy glanced at Sarah, like he was trying to figure out what to say. "Those pictures were encoded with secrets, government secrets. If he saw them, then he knows them."

Chuck tried to process what he said. "There were thousands of 'em." Sarah blinked. For the first time tonight she looked like how Chuck had felt: confused, shocked, and just all around dismayed. She looked at the other agent. "Wait a minute. You're telling me government secrets are in his head?"

He shrugged and moved the laser sight to Chuck's forehead, Chuck watching it the entire time. Like he was a damn professor pointing something out on a PowerPoint for the class instead of pointing a live weapon at a human being. "Chuck is the computer."

He had a laser sight pointed toward his head, he had the woman he thought he'd been crazy about arguing with a crazy grumpy NSA agent. And...wait...what? He was the what now? "What did you, what did you say? What does that mean?"

Chuck saw something on Sarah's face. Was it desperation? Why? She was a CIA agent, apparently. Wasn't she supposed to have this under control? Wasn't that her job? Or was it about him? Why should she care about him? Why was he thinking about that right now when the rest of this was going on...?

"Chuck, you have to listen to me. You have to tell us where..."

He SNAPPED, interrupting her. "What's happening to me?"

Sarah stared at him, intensely. An hour ago, he wouldn't felt some nice fluttery feelings at that look, but right now he had a gun pointed at his forehead. And some important guy, and some innocent other people, were about to be blown up by a bomb.

"You said there was a bomb. Is there time to stop it?" she asked, ignoring his question.

"What? What? Are you crazy?"

The NSA guy looked at him like he was a child, lowered the laser sight to his chest, and began to explain to him in a patronizing voice which was its own level of crazy, because...well...he still had a GUN pointed at him. "No, we're the good guys. We get paid to keep bombs from exploding."

He had to get out of this. Right now! "Look, I can't, I can't help you, okay? I really wish that I could, but I can't. Call Bryce. He's the guy that can save the day."

Sarah snapped off her words. "Bryce is dead!" Bryce...dead....Bryce was dead. He was dead? Something nasty crept up his spine as he realized all the bad things he'd thought about the guy...Chuck couldn't think ill of the dead. For all they had been through, Chuck still thought of him as a friend... Chuck tried to process it, and he saw her face soften. Here they were in the middle of a Wild West standoff and she was trying to soften the blow. Bryce was dead. He was dead. "He died sending those secrets to you."

He just couldn't wrap his head around it. Dead...because of the email he sent. How'd he die? He was dead. Oh God. Someone had died because of all of this. A human being... "Bryce is dead...?"

Sarah gave him the slightest of nods, and then he saw it, in her eyes...something...a lot of somethings...regret, pain, but the one that confused him the most was the look that she wanted to comfort him. That was crazy. It was official, his mind had snapped. He couldn't be processing that right. That's what it was...Now that he could see and understand weird pictures he couldn't understand normal emotions on people's faces, anymore.

Chuck met Sarah's blue eyes, stricken...Until there was a loud bang, the NSA guy shooting his gun into the air. They both jumped and spun to look at him. Chuck wondered if this guy had been hugged enough as a child. "Yeah, and he's gonna have a lot of company unless you start talking. So, pretty please... Can we defuse the bomb

now?"

Chuck glanced at Sarah. She didn't say a word, she didn't move a muscle, but something in her eyes told him what to do. He took a deep breath and felt ridiculous calm given the situation. "According to the schedule, the general's already on the stage." Casey shrugged and the three took off.

They entered the lobby when Sarah grabbed Chuck and surprised him. He was surprised by the intensity. And...was that a sliver of trust there? Or was this thing screwing up his brain?

Sarah looked at the NSA agent as she grabbed Chuck. "Wait! Casey, wait! We can't take him in. He's too valuable."

Casey...So this guy was named Casey. Casey what? It didn't matter. Casey agreed, unceremoniously shoving Chuck to the floor. "Okay, Johnny Commodore. You stay here, but you tell us where to go."

Chuck looked up from the ground. "Uh, the easiest way?"

"No. Fastest, Chuck," Sarah replied.

Chuck pointed at her, running through the schematics in his head. He could tell them, but Sarah said the fastest... "The fastest. Got it." He got up and scurried toward the bomb, the other two right behind him. He didn't spare a single thought as to the danger of running straight at what he knew was a live bomb. He just went.

He heard her behind him. "Chuck, stop! Chuck, wait!" He led them into the dining room and they realized how big a problem they had with this massive room.

"Chuck, where is it?" Sarah asked.

Chuck looked around. The room was huge. It could be anywhere. He was gonna die because of this bomb, everyone in here was going to die because of this bomb. Including Sarah, and damn him for that thought. "I don't, uh... I don't, uh...That's the guy from the Large Mart!" He saw the guy run away from something. He saw it, and fear ran through him. He gathered all his courage and the words still sounded a bit weak coming out of

his mouth. "That's it." Casey grabbed him and pushed him toward the bomb. "Uh, right here."

Chuck looked at Sarah's face. There was fear there for a moment. Chuck didn't want to know what she had seen to make her that look cross her beautiful features. "Oh, god." She'd moved the cover off of the bomb, and it didn't look good.

Casey was no nonsense. "No time to evacuate. Ideas?"

"Disconnect the laptop," Sarah replied. Chuck noticed she looked like him when he was running game scenarios through his head.

Casey took stock of the situation. "There's no trigger. The cables."

Sarah shook her head. "NO! I had thought of that but remembered a bomb in Tanzania." Casey gave her an appreciative look. "Definitely a trap." Casey nodded.

Security ran up on them. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Stanfield saw what was going on and took control of the situation. "Uh... ladies and gentlemen, we-we may have a cautionary situation here, so we'll take a short break." The room began to evacuate.

Sarah turned to Chuck. "Chuck, is there anything else you remember about the bomb?"

Chuck had no idea, no clue what to say, and with both Agent Walker and Casey staring at him it was making him very uncomfortable. That, of course, was exactly when Chuck's cellphone went off. He took the call while Sarah and Casey went back to the bomb.

"Hi, Morgan."

"Hey...How's it going?" He could hear the tone in his friend's voice and he wasn't even slightly in the right state of mind for this right now.

"Little busy right now, buddy."

"In a good way? Details."

Seriously? What if he *was*?

"Why are you calling?"

"I don't know, just... laying on your bed, Ellie's with the captain. I was gonna hang out with Anna but she's working on all the computers that got a case of the Demovas. So, I figured I'd check in. You old..." Chuck hung up the phone, the idea hitting him.

For the first time since Stanford, since his days as Piranha, he felt like himself. He rolled up his sleeves and pushed his way in. Sarah stepped back, shocked. "Okay, okay, I have an idea."

Casey grabbed him. "That's not an Xbox. And you're not a X-Man."

Chuck really wanted to explain to him what the X-Men were, and why he was obviously *not* one... but this wasn't the best time. "I understand that. This is a prism express laptop, okay? We sell this at our store. It has a DOS override." Sarah stared at him and their eyes met. *I can do this*, he said with his eyes. *Are you sure?* she seemed to reply. "I think I can do this. I can do this, please."

Sarah took a deep breath. She looked Casey in the eye. "He's our best shot."

Casey seemed to think about it, and he must have realized they had little time and no other viable choice, and he took his hand off of him. "Go."

Chuck wiggled his fingers, and cracked them, making Casey more exasperated. Sarah leaned in close over his shoulder as he began to type. "Mr. Bomb, meet Mr. Internet."

Casey looked at Sarah, irritated. "He's searching for porn." Chuck threw a finger up and made an 'eh' sound, while he saw Sarah take the wrath of Casey's glare in his peripheral. Chuck hit the button and closed his eyes. Sarah and Casey had no warning and got the pleasure of watching the virus do its work. As the timer counted down to one, it short-circuited and died.

Sarah turned to him, shock on her face. "You did it," she gasped, relief in her voice.

"I did it. I did it. I... I defused a real bomb. This was a real... What if I was wrong?" The weight of what he had done came crashing down around him. And what would have happened if he hadn't done it... He pulled away from the computer.

“Don't puke on the c-4, huh?” Casey walked away with that while Sarah laid her hand encouragingly on his shoulder.

Her hand finally left his shoulder and he could feel her reassuring presence drift away from him. Somebody grabbed him then, hoisted him back to his feet, moved him out of their way, and people he didn't know surrounded the bomb and laptop. Police? Agents? He didn't know. He needed to just go, get out of here.

His feet moved him out of the room altogether, as if he was in a trance or something, as everything flooded through him. He felt numb. Confused. His date was a CIA agent, his old classmate at Stanford who'd wrecked his life had been a CIA agent before he emailed him an important thing that had then gotten the guy killed apparently, NSA agents then tried to kill Chuck, and he'd just used a porn virus to stop a bomb from going off.

Mere hours ago, he'd been nervous about a date. Picking out clothes for a freaking *date* was the biggest worry of his existence.

And now there was this...this whole thing with the weird pictures and how the hell did he know this stuff? Why was his head hurting? It was hurting pretty bad, actually. But it was starting to dull. Maybe. He didn't know. *Chuck is the computer*. What the hell did that even mean?

He wandered out into the cool night air, too numb and confused still to even feel how much nicer the air out here was as opposed to the air in the stuffy, warm ballroom in the hotel. And that was when he stumbled across his very own agents...

And of course they were arguing over him like he was a piece of property. *Who gets to keep the dog after the divorce, the CIA or the NSA?* he thought nastily. Well, in Casey's eyes he probably was not much more than that, and in Sarah's....he wasn't sure. It was complicated enough with her before he knew she was a spy.

The argument continued, and he just let it until he heard them mention his family. That snapped him out of his numbness and he felt fury flood him, and make his chest ache, even.

He walked up to them boldly. "What *about* my sister?"

Sarah shot Casey a warning look. "Nothing. We were just discussing--"

Chuck cut in. He was laying his cards on the table right now. Consequences be damned. "No, no, no, hold on a second. You have to leave my family and my friends out of this."

"We'll see," Casey popped back. Sarah *glared* at Casey. If it hadn't been the seriousness of the situation, Chuck would have taken more time to think about that.

Chuck. Was. Done.

"Look, Bryce sent that e-mail to *me*. I'm the one remembering your secrets. Which means you have to listen to me, both of you. And right now...?" He paused. And then he realized how tired he was. "I'm going to go home."

Casey grabbed him. "No, you're not. Uh-uh." Chuck pulled away and swore for the briefest second he saw respect in Casey's eyes. The look on Sarah's face was more of someone who was torn.

Chuck looked at both of them and pointed toward them as he talked. "You... you need me."

And he walked away. He didn't care what they did...but he was pretty sure they would find him sooner rather than later. Right then, he needed to think.

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"That's correct, Director." Sarah was on the phone with Graham. He was beyond unhappy. "I can work with him." She chose her next words very carefully. "I have established something of a relationship with him."

"So you have the Intersect under control?"

The way he said that, like Chuck was some volatile piece of machinery and nothing more... "Director, he is a civilian that has been thrust into this. He is scared at the moment, he has friends and family, and to remove him...I believe it will cause him not to function. He can be an asset to us. He can help us."

"Then that is exactly what he has just become....your asset."

"Director--"

"It's that or a bunker, Agent Walker." He paused. She could tell it was coming. The dressing down she was about to get, she prepared herself. *Easy mission, in and out* her ass. Graham had underestimated Chuck, and he hadn't properly prepared her for this. He wanted this cleaned up right now and she still wasn't sure why. Could Chuck access something, could he access her file, could he access Graham's even? How much did this guy know now? "Agent Walker....Sarah." Shit. He went the Sarah route. She let her eyes gaze back out at Chuck as he sat there watching the ocean. "Don't waste my best agent on this. Bring him in."

She ignored the shallow compliment.

"How important is this information he's seen?" That stopped him cold in his tracks. She could hear it in the pause.

"It is the most sensitive information in all of the intelligence communities."

Hook. Line. Sinker. "Then, *Director*, it is probably for the best that your *best* agent is protecting Chuck."

"The *Intersect* will be more secure here, with us." Careful, Sarah, careful... "Director, again, if we put him in a bunker he may not be able to recall the information. It may be useless if he's out of his element, away from his people. Think of all we can do if he's operating at his fullest potential." Had she gone too far? Had she gone far enough? "Think of the greater good." She heard a hitch in his breath and she smiled. She had him.

"Fine. You will guard the asset."

"Director, assets are--"

"AGENT. He is an asset."

No use fighting that battle right now. She had kept him out of a hole. His life wasn't going to be destroyed, but it wasn't going to be perfect...and she would keep him safe.

She had to. "I understand."

The phone disconnected and she put it on the table. She was sitting on a picnic table, watching Chuck Bartowski and the moonlight that bounced off of the waves framing him on the beach. She stretched her bootless legs. She had pulled those off an hour ago. They did look good, but they were hell on her feet.

In the past week, she'd had to save an innocent child, and now an innocent man had US Intelligence secrets in his head. She was so done with it all. The lying, the backstabbing, the cold blooded murders. She had done so much, and for what? She looked at him, sitting there, slouched. God, he was such a good guy. She ran her hand through her hair, and wondered how this was going to work. She was sure Casey wasn't going anywhere. She was sure Graham was either lying to her or leaving out all sorts of important information, and she couldn't for the life of her figure out why Bryce would involve an innocent civilian in *this*. She saw Chuck's shoulders slump again and she wanted to go to him, reassure him, but she couldn't. She needed to be careful here. She would protect him, just like she did Molly, except this time she'd be there with him every step of the way.

She couldn't imagine what was going through his mind as he sat out there by himself, staring out at the dark water. How inviting was that darkness for him right now, she wondered? After tonight, especially. Just how deep in the shit was he? Very. And she was similarly deep now, wasn't she? The darkness looked good to her, too, as she sat here watching him.

Going on hour...she glanced at her watch...two...she looked again after awhile...three hours. And he hadn't budged yet. She'd thought about going down and just sitting quietly beside him. But he deserved time on his own, time to digest, time to think. She'd give him as much of tonight as he needed. But come morning, things would have to return to normal--at least, it would have to appear normal to his family, his friends and coworkers.

The poor guy.

Her gut feeling about him had been right. He wasn't just innocent; Bryce had taken a good person, someone he'd apparently cared about at one point in time, and he'd essentially ruined his life. And for what? That phone call with Graham cemented for her that this stuff in Chuck's head was incredibly top secret, high-level security stuff. Stuff above her clearance, too, she assumed.

He'd have a target on his back now. And not just when it came to the bad people out there who'd kill to have those secrets in their possession. But she was afraid her superiors, Chuck's own government, would be gunning for him too. If not literally, then at least figuratively.

She could imagine terrifying guinea pig situations. How did his brain handle that much information? They'd want to know eventually.

Pushing that thought out of her head, trying to keep from getting lost down the rabbit hole of morbidity and darkness, she thought instead of how much he'd smiled and laughed throughout the night, and how much he'd made her smile and laugh. If she went back as far as she could remember, she wouldn't be able to recall laughing that much, or grinning so idiotically.

And to think she'd been duped into thinking this would be a three day mission, quick and painless. If she could help it, she'd stick by this Nerd Herd supervisor's side for as long as she needed to. Because he had no one in his corner, otherwise.

God, he must feel so lost. So confused.

And hurt.

She'd seen it in his eyes--that look of genuine interest when he gazed across the table at her, over his chile relleno and her carnitas taco plate. And then there'd been the awe and even a speck of confusion, as though he didn't understand what a girl like her was doing on a date with a guy like him. Like he'd accidentally stepped into some other man's life.

He had to understand now.

Because a girl like her hadn't gone out on a date with him because she wanted to. That much had to be clear to Chuck now. And she was positive that didn't feel good. Granted, she was sure she wasn't even close to the worst thing about tonight. He had the government dogging his every step. She was sure he knew she'd followed him, that she was up here watching, to make sure that heaviness in his shoulders and head didn't cause him to just walk into the ocean and not stop until it was too late to come back to the shore.

But that wasn't him. That wasn't Chuck Bartowski. She'd only needed to see the way he protected his sister a few hours ago, not ten minutes after he used a porn virus to defuse a bomb. Instead of being a complete basketcase, which she never would've faulted a civilian for, especially after everything they put him through, the revelations, the whole almost dying thing, he charged towards two government agents. He looked right into both of their faces and laid down the rules, ensuring his sister's safety. He'd been right to do it, and he'd impressed her, as frustrating as it was that this guy didn't seem like he'd be as easy as she let Graham think he'd be.

The less fuss he caused, the easier it'd be to sell this whole set-up to the director of the CIA. And this guy was going to cause fuss. The second he told them they needed him, before marching off with his shoulders pulled back, determination in his gait, she knew Chuck would be trouble.

And she admired him for it. She liked it this way. God, she was crazy but she liked it this way.

This wasn't the type of man who gave up when things looked bleak, when life proved to be too hard. As slumped as his shoulders were currently, as he sat out in the sea breeze, moonlight playing on the water in front of him, this man was a survivor. And if for nothing else, he'd continue and fight and do what he could for his sister's protection, for all of the people he cared about.

She hated how selfish it was, but she couldn't help being almost upset that there was little chance of her being one of those people Chuck cared about. At least, not anymore. Not after he found out she was a spy who worked with the CIA and not merely a woman

who was interested in him.

He probably hated her now. She'd lied to him, manipulated and played him. And now she'd be here, hovering around him, invading his life. There was no way for him to escape her. It was so much worse knowing he wasn't going to look at her with those golden-hued eyes of his the way he had a few hours ago when she teased him for dropping his fork on the floor.

He had every reason to hate her. She hated *herself*.

Would he hate her less if he knew she was the only reason he was sitting out on this beach in Malibu instead of in a jumpsuit in a bunker somewhere underneath Langley? Or maybe in another country altogether? The image of him being locked in handcuffs like some sort of criminal or prisoner and shoved into a van with bars on the window haunted her. He'd be terrified and alone, and she thought, after that show he'd given them outside of the hotel a few hours ago, the first thing he'd think of would be what they'd do with his sister, what would they tell her? Would she be okay? Because that was the kind of guy he was.

Sarah shook her head at herself and huffed. For now, she had managed to prevent that. And she'd do everything in her power to try to keep her head above water where she could potentially see what in the hell the CIA--and Graham in particular--were doing here. What was this thing Bryce sent Chuck? How did it work? How was Chuck able to even retain all of that information in his human brain? How could she keep him safe in the meantime while she tried to figure all of this out?

She didn't know, but she'd figure it out, damn it.

Sarah Walker, Langston Graham's wildcard enforcer... She could play along. She do this for a little while longer until they figured out how to free Chuck Bartowski's brain and get him his old life back. He could go back to his desk at the Nerd Herd, save little ballerinas, goof off with his strange bearded friend, and maybe find some normal girl, some non-CIA agent, to go on a date with.

And to think just five hours ago, she was sitting at a table with him, sipping her margarita, original lime at his brilliant suggestion, wondering how a guy who made the kind of genuinely funny, off-the-cuff jokes he'd been making could ever betray his country the way Bryce was. The way Bryce *had*. Bryce was dead now, and she had to keep reminding herself of that. His last act on this earth had been potentially ruining this guy who'd been his friend at one time's life. It was despicable. She was angry. She wanted to bring him back to life so that she could punch him. For lying to her, yes, but mostly because he'd chosen Chuck, out of everyone he could've sent that to. He'd chosen to wreck Chuck's life.

She couldn't help but think it was something of a lucky fluke, the way Chuck had stopped the bomb tonight. This guy wasn't an agent. He wasn't an analyst even. He had no idea about this life, what it was, the horrible things it *could be*. He'd used a porn virus he'd probably come across at work to save the lives of dozens of people, as well as her life, Casey's, his own. But she knew in spite of that quick thinking and act of heroism, this guy didn't belong in this situation. Could he help them? Probably. Would he help them? He had no choice. But this would wear on him fast. And if he slipped, showed resistance, Graham would be there, the NSA and their asshole assassin would be there, to sweep him up and throw him in a deep hole where he'd never see the sun again and it wasn't fair. He deserved better.

She'd thought she was done with the CIA before. Well...she was especially done now. And yet, at the same time, she'd never been so...not done. She couldn't be done now. She had to be the best agent the CIA had ever produced if she wanted to protect Chuck from Casey, from whoever handled Casey, from Graham and the CIA. On top of protecting him from outside forces. She would have to be the best agent she was capable of being, and she knew she was damn good. They weren't going to continue pulling the wool over her eyes. She'd stay ahead of this thing so she could keep Chuck alive and out of a bunker, home with his people.

Because if she'd found out anything about Chuck Bartowski tonight besides the fact that he laughed and smiled easily, that he had a thing for salsa after she saw him dump it all over his plate...she shook her head, getting herself back on track even as she felt herself

smiling...If she'd found out anything about him, it was that he wouldn't survive without his people. He wouldn't make it for long away from his sister, his best friend, probably even the people at the Buy More. Maybe even Jenna at the bar he'd taken her to. He was a people person...

God, she couldn't let them do this to him. But first she'd need to find a way to get him on her side. She needed him to know she had his best interests at heart. He needed to trust her more than he'd ever trusted anyone. Because just as he needed an ally in her, she needed one in him. She needed him.

But she was afraid. Because she wasn't sure the extent to how much he'd need her. And after tonight, after those moments of real and genuine warmth she'd felt towards him, the little inklings of ponderings about what might happen if it had been a real date, just two regular people enjoying one another, she was afraid she might want to meet those needs in a way that wasn't conducive to keeping him safe. Or to her eventually leaving once she was sure he was out of danger, his brain free.

She had too much to juggle. She had taken too much on. This was all too much. And she had to get her head on straight. To think she'd thought this damn mission would be a walk in the park, her asset just a two day acquaintance, a potential hit if Graham required it... No, maybe not. Especially not now. They'd have to kill her first before she put a bullet in this man. She was absolutely certain of that.

She would have to make certain he knew it, too. He didn't have to trust Graham, the CIA, the NSA, or even Casey. He just had to trust her.

When his head drooped even lower, she felt an ache in her chest. She was so done after this. But until then, she would be every bit of the good agent she had to be. Not for Graham, not for the CIA, not even for the country... but for Chuck Bartowski. And then...when he was safe...she was out. For good.

"Don't worry, Chuck," she breathed quietly, as if the sea breeze might waft her voice across the cool sand and into his ear, warming him, reassuring him. "I've got you."

-----The beach was quiet...the waves crashing against the shore always calmed him. However tonight he didn't need to be calmed like he did most nights he was here. He placed his hand down, felt a small rock beside him, picked it up, and threw it into the ocean and realized he had just thrown something back into the ocean that may have taken decades to get where it was. He sighed.

He had thought when all the guns were pulled, they were here for him because of his past...not Bryce, but his past as Piranha. They weren't, and although he was worried, there was a look Sarah had given him that told him she would protect him. He should have known someone like her wasn't asking him out because she was interested in him. Which brought him to another problem... his actions today.

He wasn't a hero, but he couldn't watch people die. He chuckled to himself. That was true, but what drove him into action tonight, more than anything was her. He couldn't watch her die and do nothing. It could have been two random people and he would have done something, but with her there it was...different. It figured, the one person who FINALLY pulled him out of the Jill Funk (™ pending) was out of his league and only there because she *had* to be. Because it was her job. But, he was in Sarah Walker's life, and he was pretty sure that was pretty special in it's own right.

The sun was rising, and he had thought about a lot of things, but the one he always came back to, was that he wanted to be in her life. He wanted to be a part of her life, and if the only way he could be was this way, then he would. He felt a peace come over him. He knew it wasn't the decision he made, but that she was near. He'd been feeling that anytime he was around her for a while. He just hadn't admitted it to himself. He was gonna be in Sarah Walker's life, and that was better than not being in it at all. Maybe. Hopefully. He had no idea what all of this would mean, still.

The small smile that had come over his face dimmed as he realized the depths of trouble he was in now. In spite of the sky lightening over the horizon, he felt like he was still drowning in the dark. He was confused and afraid, and he needed something solid, something real, to hold onto.

That was when that strange sense of peace got a bit stronger, and he heard shuffling behind him. He didn't look, because he knew it was her. And her legs clad in black pants appeared beside him. For some reason, her bare feet digging into the sand made him feel less alone in that moment. He didn't get why. They just did.

"How long you been here?" he asked when she stood there silently for a few seconds.

And then she slowly lowered herself to sit next to him, close. Closer than he'd expected. And she set her boots down beside her, letting them flop to the side, caked in sand. "All night."

He knew that. He hadn't looked behind him once but he'd known she was there. When he'd left the two agents alone after that determined, brave spiel he'd given them, he'd felt even more depleted. Empty threats. They all knew it. But he had to do something to make it known he wasn't letting his family, his people, get wrapped up in this, no matter what happened to him.

He'd known one of them would follow him.

For some reason, he felt it would be her.

She'd just let him be alone for most of the night, watching over him like a silent bodyguard or something. A sentinel in the Malibu darkness. He inwardly snorted at himself for that one.

But then she'd been here all night. Somehow she'd followed him. He hadn't seen her following him as he drove his Herder through the streets of LA, onto the multiple freeways that took him out towards the coastline, to his favorite beach. Not that he'd been looking for her. He hadn't cared so long as he got to one of the places that seemed to give him peace when he was struggling the most.

She'd tailed him here, in spite of not knowing where he was going, that this was one of his *places*. And that meant she could probably tail him anywhere. Everywhere. "There's nowhere I can run, is there?"

She paused for a moment. "Not from us."

That answer almost pissed him off. Not at her. She was just doing her job, wasn't she? Following orders. Just like she had when she'd picked him up at his Nerd Herd desk yesterday afternoon. No, he was upset at just...everything. He could feel change in the air, and not the good kind of change. It was bad change, the kind of change that meant his life and freedom were in danger. And that feeling of helplessness washed over him again and he wanted to hold onto something. Something stationary...normal.

He felt trapped. He was terrified. And then he was also just tired. Always so tired. Because of course this shit would happen to him. After everything else he'd dealt with. He couldn't just live his normal eleven dollars an hour retail existence in peace. Why not? He didn't hurt anybody. He didn't wish anyone harm, not even the people who'd hurt him the most in life. He just wanted to be left alone.

Screw everything.

And screw the way he could feel the heat of her gaze against the side of his face. She stared at him blatantly, as though trying to figure him out. It couldn't be all that hard, he thought a bit sourly, when she was a CIA agent, after all. It had been woefully easy for her to get him out on a date last night, hadn't it?

Of course it was easy. Look at her, you idiot.

"Talk to me, Chuck."

He just watched the waves straight ahead, but he couldn't help being a bit surprised. Was she angling to get inside his head? Figure out where he was? Was this more manipulation?

And then he thought immediately that he was being incredibly unfair. This wasn't her fault. It wasn't his fault, either. And yet they were both stuck here, with this shitty situation, with each other. And because he was a sap, because he needed something to make him feel at least a little okay, he let himself feel a bit comforted that she was here. That he wasn't totally alone. At least not physically, not anymore. And then...she'd been there all night. He hadn't really been alone.

Chuck allowed that the woman sitting beside him was genuinely extending an ear to him, letting him talk things out, tell her what was on his mind. And he appreciated it. So he unloaded a bit, unable to keep the disbelief and frustration from his voice, hoping she knew it wasn't directed at her.

"Yesterday I was making eleven bucks an hour fixing computers." He finally turned his face towards her and that heat against his cheek was gone as she looked away, down at her lap. "Now I have one in my brain. And I can't figure out why Bryce did this. Why he chose me."

He took in her profile as the breeze picked up her blond hair and whipped it about her face. She'd had her hair up in those stick things, and he'd teased her about them right before things had gotten insane, when they were still walking down the sidewalk towards the bar, when things were still normal and he thought things were finally working in his favor.

What a stupid sap he'd been.

Sarah--Agent Sarah--whoever she was--pushed her hair back out of her face and gave her head a little shake, raising her eyebrows. "I'm sorry I don't have an answer for you, Chuck."

He sniffed in bitter amusement. "Thank you for at least being honest. I mean, he had--he had so many other people he could've done this to. Was he trying to screw up my life even more than it already is? I mean, wait for the guy to be at least somewhat stable, then implicate him in some terrible government sabotage bullshit scheme so that his life gets utterly fucked. Gah, this is so unfair."

"I know," she said quietly. "For what it's worth, and that might not be very much right now, I'm sorry, Chuck. I'm really sorry."

For which part, he wondered? The part she'd played last night? The faux date? Or because his life was, for all intents and purposes, over? Maybe she was just sorry for all of it.

"I'd say 'that's life', but this is so God damn out of control bizarre and not at all like anybody else's real life, so I can't even say that. I don't know *what* to say." He threw his hands up a little in frustration. "He could've at least picked another agent, someone he could trust to actually know what to do with this stuff. Instead of a nobody who clocks out at work and goes home to eat kettle corn for dinner while playing Call of Duty."

"You eat kettle corn for dinner?" He sent her a look and she ducked her head with a bit of a smirk, tucking her hair behind her ear. "Sorry. I suppose I was trying to lighten the mood sort of."

Chuck snorted and shook his head. And the smile dimmed then, as he realized there were some heavy implications to all of this. He had some heinously secret shit stored in his brain somehow thanks to Bryce who was apparently not an accountant and also dead. This was all stuff that was life and death for someone, somewhere. Hugely important. And that meant they'd never let him go. He wouldn't get far if he tried.

And he thought to himself that he'd never know what was in store for him unless he asked. Whether this CIA agent told him the truth or not, he wouldn't be able to know.

"What are you gonna do with me?" He turned to look right at her, studying her face hard, looking for any tells, any cracks in that beautiful mask. Then again, part of him wondered if she had a mask on right at that moment. Because there was compassion in her face, and it felt real. It felt so earnest. He wanted to believe it *was* earnest, so he did. He chose to believe. "What happens now?"

She swallowed, pausing for only a moment. "For now, you go back to your own life."

"W-Wha--D'you mean back to the Buy More?"

"Mhm."

"Like...everything is normal? Like none of this ever happened?"

"Something like that, yes." When he turned to look away from her, not saying anything else, his brain confused and hurting and fuzzy with exhaustion, she continued. "We'll protect you and you'll work with us."

He looked right at her, meeting her blue eyes that had a golden hue to them now in the light of the rising sun. He let himself actually think for a moment that he was going to be allowed to continue living his life, all of this disappearing, no agents or secrets, just his semi-deadbeat existence. He was a complete fool to think they'd ever let him off the hook like that.

He was going to have protection now. And he was going to *work with them*, whatever the hell that meant. He was way too tired to ask what any of it meant. He was tired and mad. And sad and confused.

"We?" he asked anyway, almost as if to spite his own brain. "Like...as in you?"

"Me, yes." She waited for him to meet her eye again and there was something there that set him at ease as she smiled, just enough for him to know it was one. It wasn't even that she smiled as much as she seemed to almost soften. "I'll be here." And then she looked away, and something else was in her face, something she covered up quickly. But he saw it. He was sure he'd seen it. Unsureness, or something else that made her seem almost vulnerable for a moment. And that more than anything else she'd said or done in the last twelve hours set him so at ease. "And he's gonna be here, too. Casey."

And there went the whole ease thing. "What? He's gonna protect me? He hates my guts. He tried to shoot me so he could eat pancakes."

A quick, amused smile appeared on her face as she ducked her head and looked away. And she quashed it fast, twisting her hands in her lap a bit. He wondered if that was a habit she wasn't aware of and he felt more and more like this could maybe be...not as terrible. Still terrible. And *terrifying*. But maybe not as much as he'd feared.

"The fate of our country depends on him making sure nothing bad happens to you, Chuck. I don't know Casey *that* well, but you better believe he thinks he's the biggest patriot that ever walked the face of this earth. He'll protect you no matter what he thinks about you. Those are his orders." She seemed like she was going to say something else, but then she shook her head a bit and shut her mouth, her lips forming a thin line.

"The fate of our country, huh? Depends on me staying alive? To quote someone we both know, that makes it better?"

She sniffed in amusement and shrugged a little. "Yeah. I mean, who else can say they've got two of the top intelligence officers in the country making sure nothing bad happens to them?"

"You make a good point. As terrifying as it is." Something occurred to him then and he looked right at her again, watching her closely. "My sister and my friends...are they in danger?"

The CIA agent looked away, blinking out at the water, nibbling on the inside of her bottom lip. That was answer enough, he thought to himself bitterly.

"Fine. Then answer me this," he said, letting her off the hook a bit. "What do I tell them about all of this?"

"Tell them nothing to keep them safe," she said immediately, meeting his gaze steadily. He raised his eyebrows a bit and looked away from her, frowning deeply. "I'm sorry," she said again. "It's for the best."

He shook his head and scoffed quietly. "On top of everything, I have to lie to the people I care about, too."

She bit her lip and shrugged. "It's less like lying and more like...keeping a secret." He gave her an incredibly flat look. "A very big secret."

"Don't. It's lying. I'm lying to them. But if you say that's what's gonna keep 'em safe, well, then...what choice do I have?" He shrugged in frustration, shaking his head.

She didn't do him the disservice of lying or giving him false hope, she wasn't blowing smoke up his ass, and he appreciated that so much. In just staying silent and looking at him with that quietly warm gaze of hers, she somehow made him feel better than any words she might use could.

"Are you okay?" she asked finally. He lowered his chin and made a face at her, making her smile and look away again, shaking her head a bit. "I know this is...a whole lot. And

you probably aren't okay. At the moment. But I still think it's a fair enough question for me to ask right now."

He smirked at her. "I'm not. I'm not okay. But I'll have to get there, won't I? I don't have a choice in that, either. If I'm going back to my life, back to the Buy More, living with my sister and her boyfriend...They can't know anything. And I'm going to have to at least learn to pretend I'm okay."

She nodded. "Yeah."

"Yeah." He huffed. "Speaking of...They probably thought I'd be home hours ago. I'm not really known for scoring like this on first dates," he said, pointing to the both of them. And then he realized how bad that sounded belatedly. "S-I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. I mean, I did, but that wasn't...I shouldn't have. Sorry."

Her eyes had widened a bit, but she chuckled good-naturedly, squirming a little awkwardly. "It's okay, Chuck."

"I mean, that wasn't--it hadn't been my...I mean before I found out you were a CIA agent sent to find out if Bryce was--I mean, if I was working with Bryce. I wasn't looking to...not on the first date. Unless that was...No, nope. Not gonna say that. I'm--I'm really tired. I'm exhausted. I think--Does that thing that's in my head do something to my brain cells? I feel like my dendrites are probably damaged from that weird thing that happened with the, uh, the guy. And the bomb."

Her hand landed on his arm. "Do you want me to take you home? I-I mean, I can drive. I'll drop you off at home."

She'd cut him off, saving him from his own damn mouth. He felt grateful. And he shook his head. "No. Nah, I'll drive. I'm okay to drive. I can...take you somewhere I guess."

"Oh. That's nice of you but I've got a car."

"Oh." He glanced over his shoulder. "Yeah. That makes sense. How would you have found me without a car?"

She smiled quietly at him and then she diverted her gaze. "Hey, I'm gonna need you to do one more thing for me."

He sighed and nodded a bit. "Yeah?"

He felt her gaze land on him again, and it felt important almost, so he swept his brown eyes over to meet her blue ones.

"Trust me, Chuck."

He gave her a bit of a crooked smile, taking her in, thinking about how much he'd liked her the night before, how adamant she was that she wasn't funny, even as she made him laugh. How she'd finished her margarita and had made a show of deciding whether she wanted another one or not. And that smile of hers that was flirtatious sometimes and other times just so warm and endearing and beautiful.

Chuck wasn't sure if any of that had been real. In fact, he thought most of it hadn't been. Or maybe he just didn't know anything at all and he was a complete mess. But the way she was looking at him right in that moment, with no one else around but them made him think that he could stand to trust somebody maybe.

She walked all the way out here to talk to him when she didn't have to. He imagined anyone else, that jerk guy Casey for instance, the guy who was apparently going to be a bodyguard or something, would've just sat up there and waited until he finally got up and made to leave the beach.

But Sarah didn't do that. She was here, sitting next to him, reassuring him.

And he must've held her gaze for a little long, because she looked down, turning her head forward, and she twisted her lips to the side a bit, pushing her hair behind her ear again. When he looked down into his lap, he felt her bump him with her shoulder.

And he grinned, feeling her peek around at his face, seeing her smile in his peripheral. He could trust her, maybe. He felt like he needed to. He needed something to steady him. *Someone*. And in spite of the hurt he'd felt at realizing she wasn't on a date with him because she was interested in him, he wondered if that wasn't just his ego.

Everything else was more important than that. He had to find a way to be okay. And Sarah--Well, she just might be the way.

Chapter 7: Chuck vs the Nerds Rewrite Ch 7

A/N: DC here. I've read all the reviews, so first off, thank you all! Secondly...it does feel a bit stalkerish to do so...Anyway, it took 6 chapters to get through the pilot. Each ep won't be that way. Some eps won't exist in our world. Some brand new ones will. Early, you'll see small changes. Those lead to big changes. We have three seasons planned out. We figure when we finish season one we'll work on four. Sounds like a plan. Do you know how much fun it is to collaborate with Steampunk? It's awesome. And by the way, there's a spot coming that was originally fluffier, and I pulled it back, not her. Because we have a plan. It's a good plan....we think. We're fairly sure.

Disclaimer: Neither of us own Chuck or profit off of it monetarily...it does bring joy to our hearts however.

"Chuck!"

He sighed heavily as he stared at the motherboard he held in his hands, not even looking up at the intruder making their way into his cage. "What?" he droned.

"Thank God I found you, okay?" Lester slithered up to the desk he sat at. "I can't do this anymore. I cannot be out there alone with that...scary and terrifying man. I swear, he looks like the type of person who sharpens his teeth before he goes to bed at night."

"What the hell are you talking about, Lester?" Chuck asked, finally looking up at his coworker. "I have, like, thirteen of these damn things to fix. That's why I'm back *here* doing it instead of out *there*. I've got a lot of work to do."

"Well, Charles, so do I. But I can't do any work while I'm being literally stalked around the store by that tank of a man Big Mike hired." He slammed his fist down on Chuck's desk. "I've *had it*." All Chuck had to do was raise an eyebrow and slowly stand to his full height, towering over the much smaller man, and Lester nearly whimpered, his chin quivering as he looked up at him. "I mean, I could just deal with it. I could deal, that's fine. I'm a big boy, right? ...Right?"

Chuck sighed tiredly. "Lester. Why don't you just tell him to stop following you around?"

"Because you're taller than me. Logic, Charles."

"You want *me* to do it?" He laughed in Lester's face, even leaning down a little. "Uh, no. Nuh uh."

"Why noooottttt?" the shorter man whined as Chuck plopped back down into his chair.

"You're my supervisor. You're here to protect me."

"No. I'm here to tell you what to do. Like right now: Get out of my space."

"Char--"

"Bartowski!" He looked up to see Casey walk into the back, approaching the cage. "You see that little pipsqueak Le--Oh. There you are, Lester." A predatory look came over his face and Chuck was almost afraid for the other man's life.

"Lester? Who's he? I'm just a figment of your imagination." He lifted his hands and wiggled his fingers as both Chuck and Casey looked at him dryly.

"Can we do...whatever this is..." Chuck grouched, gesturing between them, "elsewhere? So that I can fix these things before I'm eighty years old?"

"You're supposed to be a supervisor, ain't ya?" Casey growled at him. "Can you supervise so these idiotsticks stop messing with my sales?"

Chuck groaned, plopped back into his chair, then looked up at the ceiling, making a pitiful sound, and finally letting his head fall to the desk. "Why meeee?"

"I didn't do anything!" Lester said.

"You asked my customer what his *musk* is, you freakin'...freak," Casey said through his teeth. "He left before I could sell him the bullet blender. That would've been commission."

"How is that a strange question?" Lester asked, looking between them with legitimate curiosity.

Chuck lifted his head and furrowed his brow at Lester. Was he more confused or disgusted? He didn't really know. "Seriously? That--"

"Bertha to video games. Bertha to video games..." Morgan's voice came over the store's intercom and they all froze.

"Wait a second..." Casey snapped his fingers. "That's the shoplifter announcement. Bertha, right?"

"C-Casey, remember during training? I said BERTHA means you just go stand in the area and ask customers if they need help finding anything--Casey? Casey. Casey..."

That predatory look was on his face again though as he started for the door that led out onto the floor of the Buy More.

"Casey? Cas--Casey. Oh, boy." Chuck scrambled up from his chair and followed after him, pushing Lester out of his way.

"That shoplifter is about to be murdered, methinks," Lester chirped unhelpfully, not budging.

Casey picked up the pace, walking like a man on a mission. And maybe the NSA shouldn't have sent some kind of crazy-ass killing machine to protect him and then make him work *retail*, for God's sake.

"Hey! Hey, Casey! Don't...don't do it. Casey..." He hurried his own step and tried to grab the burly man's arm, but he had his hand shrugged off easily. "Oh, God..."

"I repeat," Morgan said over the intercom. "Bertha to video games...like, the XBox region...or thereabouts..."

Chuck rolled his eyes as he turned the corner, still hurrying after Casey, and saw Morgan holding the intercom in his hand, crouched behind a cardboard promotion stand-up and peeking around it to watch as Doug, their usual shoplifting culprit, picked up one of the games and looked down at it in a very obvious *I'm going to steal you* sort of way.

“You sonofabitch,” Casey roared, and the poor kid spun on his heels to look at him. He literally screamed, then took off in the other direction. “Hey!! Get back here, ya little shit!”

“Casey!!!!” Chuck yelled as the NSA agent tore after the kid. “Oh God!”

Chuck had no choice but to race after both of them. What would he do if he caught up to them? He didn’t know. He’d tackle that when he got to it.

“Hey! The hell’s he doin’???” Morgan called, and Chuck heard his friend take off after him, hot on his heels.

Chuck saw the kid disappear out of the store then, and Casey wasn’t far behind him, nearly knocking an elderly man walking inside onto his ass.

“I’m so sorry!!!” Chuck yelled as he dashed through the door, nearly crushed by it. He thought he heard the unfortunate sound of Morgan smacking into the glass before it reopened for him, but he just kept running. He couldn’t let the guy who was supposed to be protecting him murder a kid for stealing a stupid video game. Nobody’s life was worth any single one of the products the Buy More sold. “Casey!!!! Stop!!!!”

As he sprinted into another row in the parking lot, he belatedly saw the car that was driving into his path, and he felt the bumper slam into his thigh. He flew up onto the hood, rolled off of it, nearly fell flat on his face, but managed to get back to his feet in record time. “Gah!!! Sor--!!” was all he managed to get out as he kept running. Hopefully that person didn’t have nightmares over that moment. *Woops.*

Someone pushed their Large Mart cart out from behind their SUV and he valiantly leapt into the air, clearing the cart altogether, thanking the gods of height for his six foot four frame as he continued to stagger after the agent.

“Casey!!!!”

The agent jumped up onto the hood of a car, his boots making dents in it as he leapt onto another car’s hood and did the same, then another, then another, damaging at least four cars in the meantime. Totally unnecessary. “No, no!! No! Casey!”

He finally dove off of one of the cars and tackled the shoplifter hard, hard enough that the kid would probably see stars until he was twenty.

When he straddled him, spun him onto his back and reared his fist, Chuck just barely got there in time to grab his wrist in both hands. "Casey! No, no, no, no, no!!! Dear God! It's just a video game, okay? Lives are not in danger!!! And the country is still safe."

Casey whipped his wrist out of his grip hard enough that Chuck nearly staggered backwards, just barely catching himself, still unable to catch his breath.

Morgan chose that moment to finally catch up to them. "Wow...." he panted. "Guy's been here for like twenty-four hours and he takes the job way more seriously than me..."

"That's because *HE'S CRAZY*," Chuck exclaimed, hunched over with his hands on his knees.

"Tell me somethin' I don't know," the agent growled as he hoisted the shoplifter to his feet and started walking him back towards the store. That kid was lucky to be alive, Chuck thought to himself.

"Oh, hey, Doooug," Morgan drawled as he followed after Casey. "Nice to see ya again, huh? Not so tough now, are ya?" He continued taunting the kid as they went back to the Buy More and Chuck just stood there, gaping, gasping for breath still, wondering how in the hell this was his life.

And then he caught sight of something out of the corner of his eye and the sentiment increased tenfold.

Because she turned right then and looked at him across the parking lot, her hair in pigtails on either side of her head and... "What?" he breathed out, standing to his full height and slowly lifting his hand to wave. Was she...working at the Wienerlicious? Wait, since when was there a Wienerlicious right there? And what in the hell was she wearing? Why did she have to wear that? What...?

She grinned, so bright and vibrant, and for a moment, he thought he might be able to run another mile he was filled with so much...something. And then she lifted the empty food tray and soda cup, wiggling her fingers at him around it. God, that was so cute.

Why was she so--?

Wait, he had questions. A lot of them.

He should go ask her them. Yep.

Smoothing his hands down his pants, aware that he was sweating from the impromptu sprint, and nearly getting hit by a car... he moved across the parking lot, turning to look back towards the Buy More. He wouldn't be that missed, right? It'd be fine...

He hurried over to the Wienerlicious as Sarah carefully opened the door and slipped inside. As he got inside, he saw her standing behind the counter, her back to him, and the smell of the place was... Well, burnt corndog. Very badly burnt corndog. And maybe gas? He wondered if it was safe for either of them to even be in this building...

"Sarah..." he gasped out as he closed the distance. "What--What are you doing here?"

She spun on her heel, an overwhelmed look on her face. He'd laugh at the sight of her with a dishtowel in one hand and tongs in the other, smoke billowing up behind her, if he wasn't sure there was a chance she'd murder him for it. "I...uh, work here now, Chuck," she said above the frighteningly loud sizzling sound coming from the grill and the deep fryer.

"At the...Wienerlicious." He narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips.

"Yes. You got a problem with that?" she snapped, lifting the basket out of the deep frier. "God *damn it!* Stupid fff--damn! God!" She kicked a trash can out from under the counter and picked the black, utterly dead corndogs from the basket, dropping them in the garbage. "I burned another stupid batch!"

Chuck pulled his lips back between his teeth and widened his eyes, watching the scene. "You, um...maybe..." Nope. The look she gave him told him to shut up real fast, so he did. "Um, can I ask why? Why you're working here, I mean."

"Surveillance," she said. "This way I can monitor the Buy More from here while you work."

“Oh. Cool. Well, Casey is currently working *at* the Buy More. Breathing down my neck practically,” he groused through gritted teeth. “They really wanna have the both of you here, huh?”

She got a bit of a look on her face and then nodded. “Yeah. Just in case he, uh, needs back-up.”

“Oh. Well, just FYI, he nearly put his fist through a shoplifter’s head and the kid probably has a really good case for a lawsuit now, so is the, uh, government gonna cover the legal bills, ‘caaaause...”

She smirked and shook her head. “Sounds like something he’d do.”

“Yeah, um...so you’re here. Casey’s, um... Well, I guess what I mean to ask is, uh, is there a plan here? There’s gotta be a plan here. Right? Because you making gourmet wieners isn’t exactly the reason why you joined the CIA...” She got a look on her face and he spun to look to make sure nobody else was in the store. Since he realized he hadn’t exactly...checked before. He was really good at this whole secret government shindig thing apparently. This felt like a great start. When he saw he was clear, he turned back to see an amused look on her face. “Casey isn’t a natural born appliance salesman. And the whole, kinda, government secrets locked in my brain thing? That’s, uh, I’m sure not really a boon for national security, so I’m hoping--I’m hoping that you’ll tell me there’s a plan?” He narrowed his eyes at her again, running his hands down his shirt to dry them. He was losing his footing a bit with all of this. Once again.

She gave him a closed mouth smile and leaned her palms on the counter-top. “There is a plan. We have a briefing in the Buy More in about...” She checked her watch. “Ten minutes.”

“In-In the Buy More?” He raised his eyebrows. “There are, like, close to eighty people in there at the moment. Are we gonna do this in...front of them? My coworkers really aren’t the brightest crayons in the box, Sarah, but I think they’ll probably be a little freaked out if, like, the guns come out.” He made his fingers into guns and made *pew pew* sounds.

She snorted and shook her head, wiping her hands on a towel and turning everything off. "We aren't taking guns out. It's just a briefing."

"Oh, like where heads pop up on screens and tell you the message will self-destruct in twenty seconds?"

She gave him a look. "Chuck, what is it exactly you think intelligence agencies do?"

"I dunno. I only have fiction to go off of. But where is this meeting supposed to happen? This just seems like a bad idea. Buy More employees are incredibly nosy. And curious. Like puppies. Horrible, awful puppies who sometimes harass our customers." He winced and she giggled a bit.

"Well, don't worry. Casey is taking care of it, apparently."

"Oh, the guy who nearly murdered a sixteen year old for stealing a video game?" He raised his eyebrows expressively at her. "I feel very reassured."

"Just get back over there before your boss busts you," she said, biting her cheek and rolling her eyes.

"Wanna come with?"

"Uh, in a sec. If I leave on a break, I have to tell Scooter so he can come cover the counter. You go ahead." She smiled.

"Kay." He snapped his fingers and smiled back, leaving the Wienerlicious behind, not catching the way her eyes followed him all the way out. He didn't see her grab her cell phone from her apron pocket once the door shut behind him.

A few minutes later, Chuck was ushered into the theater room by Casey. Sarah was already inside, waiting for them. "How'd you get here so fast?" he asked her. But before she could answer, Casey went to the blinds and shut them melodramatically. "Kay, well...that's kinda...weird."

"You want the whole store of idiots seein' the director of the CIA on the TV screen, moron?" Casey asked.

"Wow, okay. That seems...harsh."

“Just connect it, Casey.”

He growled in annoyance at Sarah’s brisk order and crossed to the TV, turning it on. Chuck had plopped down on the couch in the meantime, kicking his feet up and sinking a bit lower against the cushions. But as the two very official-looking figures showed up on the screen, he felt Casey’s hand twist in his shirt and yank him to his feet.

“Have some damn respect,” he snapped.

Chuck stood at attention, straightening his shirt, giving Casey a glare, before turning back to the small, redheaded woman and the much taller man leaning down behind the chair she sat in to stay in the picture.

“This is Bartowski, then, is it?” the woman asked.

“Uh. Hi. Chuck. You can...call me Chuck. Or whatever. Whatever you want. I guess.”

Sarah’s hand was on his arm then as she stood ramrod straight beside him, some sort of a hard mask over her features, he noticed. “Chuck, this is Director Graham, director of the CIA. And General Beckman of the NSA.”

“I--Wow. Er...” He cleared his throat and stood a bit straighter, pulling his shoulders back. “Honored to, uh, meet ya.”

“Our orders?” Casey interrupted, obviously impatient with the proceedings.

That earned him a bit of a sideways look from the general and Chuck decided then and there that he never wanted to be on her bad side. Ever. It didn’t seem to bother Casey any, though. This guy was batshit crazy.

“For now, you stay as is,” Director Graham said. “Casey, you continue working your shifts here at the Buy More. Agent Walker, you work at the hot dog restaurant.” Chuck mused for a moment about whether the CIA director was actively avoiding using the word ‘Wienerlicious’ because it was stupid and ridiculous. “And you, Chuck. You do everything your handler tells you to do.”

“H-Handler?” he turned to look at Casey first, then at Sarah.

He was ignored.

"When we have something we need you to look at, Chuck, Casey and Agent Walker will walk you through it," the general said.

"L-Look at? Look at what?"

He was ignored again.

"One more thing," Director Graham said, leaning in closer to the camera. "We need one of you to stick close to the asset when he isn't here at work. Agent Walker? You've already gone on a date with him--it's established with his family. His friends. You'll pose as the asset's girlfriend."

Chuck felt the blood leave his face. "Say what now?"

Still, he was ignored.

"Chuck's girlfriend?" Sarah asked, stepping forward a bit. "Director, Sir, is that...necessary for the operation?"

"I-I don't--I don't think so." He turned to look at her and wrinkled his nose. "I think we're...good, just...not doing that."

"Agent Walker, can you think of any other reason why you would be at the asset's home at night?"

"At my what? Huh?" Chuck gave Sarah a pleading look and she studiously kept her blue eyes fastened on the TV screen.

"Director...This really doesn't seem like a necessary--"

"Agent Walker," General Beckman cut in, her voice clipped. Sarah shut up real quick. "We'll find a way to get Major Casey an apartment near the apartment of Devon Woodcomb and Ellie Bartowski--"

"I-I live there, too. I pay rent." Chuck turned to assure Sarah. "I pay rent. Just...so you know. Split three ways."

She finally looked at him, then diverted her eyes and turned back to the TV.

--but we can't rely on video surveillance all the time," the general continued. "There's a semblance of privacy we'd like to afford Chuck and his sister."

Chuck widened his eyes in surprise. "Surveillance? Video surveillance? That seems like a lot."

"Yes, we agree," the general explained in a patient tone, as though she was speaking to a child. "Which is why, instead, we will be installing Agent Walker as your girlfriend."

"Installing? Why are you making her sound like a dishwasher?" he asked, furrowing his brow.

He was ignored again, though he heard a soft choking sound from the CIA agent next to him. But when he looked at her, she was just as serious and professional as always. "Director... General... What exactly is the point of this?" she asked.

"Someone needs to protect him outside of work, when he isn't where Major Casey can see him throughout the day." Director Graham cleared his throat. "Agent Walker, this is an order. To the asset's family, friends, and coworkers, you will be his girlfriend. There is no other way to get Casey in that apartment..."

"Yeah, I'm not the cuddling type," the NSA agent snarked.

Chuck sent him a grossed out look. And he felt a little faint. Because the implication of that, and the rest of this, was clear. They'd have to be girlfriend and boyfriend, which meant...couch cuddles, hand holding...oh God, this couldn't be real. This couldn't be happening.

Sarah sighed quietly beside him. "Yessir. Understood."

"Good."

Chuck wondered if he should be a little offended by the fact that Sarah had argued against being his fake girlfriend (would it really be *that* terrible?), but he immediately dismissed that immature thought. She shouldn't be having to do this. And neither should he. It was nonsense. Just another thing for him to lie to Ellie about, and Morgan.

And he decided that Sarah had been the one who'd gotten the order, not him, so he pulled his shoulders back a bit and looked the general and director dead in their faces. Sort of. Through a TV screen, but dead in their faces.

"I guess what I'm curious about, though, is how this is at all believable. A girl--woman--woman like Sar--er, Agent Walker. And a guy like me. I work in a Buy More."

"She works at the Wienerlicious, Bartowski," Casey said, giving him a look like he was the stupidest person he'd ever met in his life.

"I mean...yes, okay? Yes, true. But..." He looked around, at Sarah first, then at the intelligence bosses, then at Casey, and back at Sarah again. "Seriously? Am I the only one who is seeing this? Why would...?" He looked at Graham and Beckman, his eyes pleading with them. Neither of them registered anything. It was obvious they were used to giving orders and never having them questioned. They thought this was a good idea. Why, he had no idea. "You know what? Forget it. It's useless. Okay. She's my girlfriend." He huffed, his shoulders sagging.

This was a terrible cover, though. It was the worst cover. Everyone would see right through it. Everyone. He just knew it.

"Are you finished?" General Beckman asked.

"Yup."

"Good. We'll contact you when we have more. Chuck? You can go back to work. We'd like to speak with our agents." And the way she turned her gaze down to the papers on her desk was a clear indication that he'd lost her attention completely and he supposed he had nothing else to say because apparently she wouldn't be listening to him anyway.

"Right. Well. Good meeting, everyone." He was angry as he squeezed past a smirking Casey to go towards the door of the theater room. "Briefing. Sorry. Briefing." He sent the entire room a sarcastic look, then bowed out, shutting the door a bit harder than was maybe necessary.

He'd just been treated like an inanimate object. Or a dog. Or something else that had no agency or voice of its own. And what was with the CIA guy calling him an asset? "My

name is *Chuck*," he growled.

Then he looked to the side and saw that Fernando was standing there, eyes wide behind his glasses. "I know," he said with a shrug.

"I hate my life, Fernando."

As he walked away, a dark cloud over his head, he heard Fernando say, "I know that, too."

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She stayed stoic during the next part of the briefing. Beckman and Graham went on and on about Dr. Zarnow and how maybe he could fix this nightmare. It was a nightmare. She was thinking about finger pistols and dishwashers. She had laughed during a briefing... Had she ever done that before?

This was an absolute nightmare. She had to be Chuck Bartowski's cover girlfriend. A part of her that she didn't like to recognize existed was losing its mind, and the rest of her was thinking about how much of a problem this was going to be.

In one date, over one night, Chuck Bartowski had gotten to her. What was going to happen if this didn't work and they couldn't get the Intersect out? What was going to happen if this went on for months or, God forbid, longer?

Not that he wasn't pleasant to be around. No, she *enjoyed* being around him and that was the problem. She enjoyed it too much. She fought shaking her head in the middle of the briefing because Chuck was right. Anyone looking at this from the outside wouldn't believe them as a couple. Chuck recognized it, just as anyone else might, but honestly, she was a little floored by just how wrecked his self-esteem was. She knew how attractive she was, and how much of a mismatch they might seem to others because of it. But nobody knew who she really was, or what she'd done. Nobody knew what she was capable of, least of all, Chuck. He couldn't know that he deserved so much better than a stone cold killer. And she couldn't tell him. He deserved so much better than this.

He was going to have to give up his privacy because of the Intersect, but now...this? This was going to be terrible. He couldn't tell his friends or family. She had already resigned

herself to the fact she was going to have to be his sounding board, the person he had to talk to work through things, because he was a talker. But now, the two of them, on dates, cuddling on the couch... Why'd her mind jump straight to that? She mentally shook her head. She was still in her thoughts as the meeting ended. She started to leave when he spoke.

"Walker, why are you doing this? You could be out of here tonight if we just put him in a bunker."

She turned and faced him. She knew what John Casey's answer to everything was, and she wasn't about to let him do what John Casey did best to Chuck. But maybe if he realized what Chuck could be... "We have a chance to work on real actionable intel and you want to throw him in a bunker? You realize that the best way to protect him is go on the offensive, which means gunplay."

Casey grunted, intrigued. "You have Secret Service training." It wasn't a question but she nodded. "You're in charge of the kid when we're both around. That way I can scratch my itchy trigger finger. Geek will probably piss his pants first time I shoot."

"Nerd," she fired back. She blinked and saw Casey's look. She calmed her tone. "Nerd," she said softer. "They prefer being called nerds. Little bit of honey keeps them calm." Casey nodded. "Now, I have a Wienerlicious to run." She turned and headed out the door.

"Does he know that's the only Weiner you're interested in?" She stiffened. It wasn't worth the retort. "The cover will crack him."

"He'll be okay," and with that walked out of the theater room. She walked past the desk, and saw Chuck. She was his cover girlfriend, so she should probably act like a cover girlfriend...

She gave him a slight wink and the smile on his face made something bubble up inside of her.

She pushed it down and turned on her heel, facing him and forcing a bit of a shy look onto her face. She could feel other eyes besides his on her--his coworkers, most likely--

which she supposed sold this whole thing a bit more.

“Hey, um...I was, uh, wondering if you might be free tonight,” she said, shrugging cutely. Chuck’s brows furrowed, and then he turned to look first one way, then whipped his head around to look the other way, before he looked back at her and poked himself in the chest with his finger. “Yes, you,” she giggled. “Who else would I be asking out on a date?”

“Oh. Nobody.” And then he caught up to what she was doing and she saw his eyes dim just slightly. “Oh, right. Right, right.” The cover. He’d figured it out. “Yeah, I’m free. Totally.”

“Can I pick you up at eight?”

“Sounds perfect.” He grinned. It was a very convincing grin, a bit dreamy, and she wasn’t sure if it was convincing because it was real or if he was just that good of an actor. She was...confused. And she needed to stop being confused.

“Okay...Well, um...” She cleared her throat. “See ya then.”

“Yooou will,” he drawled, and they smiled at each other again before she walked away from him. She gave one last flirtatious glance over her shoulder as she moved towards the exit, and she felt that strange leaping sensation in her chest again when he bit his lip in response.

Damn it, this was going to be bad.

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“Get your head out of the sky, Numbnuts.” Chuck turned around and saw Casey. “You do know she’s lethal, right?”

“What are you talking about? She kept you from killing me.”

Casey grunted a laugh. “Why don’t you ask her why they call her the Ice Queen?”

He turned and walked away, missing the odd face that Chuck made as he left.

The flash began suddenly. In it he saw random images of innocuous images, but two images stuck in his mind: One of Sarah Walker in surveillance footage, holding a gun...and the second was of her again, this time lifting a gun to point it right at the camera. The ring on her finger was clear as she fired a bullet taking out the camera. The flash ended and Chuck stood there, blinking. Morgan clapped him on the back, scaring him.

“Saw your girl earlier. You got another date?” Chuck turned toward his grinning friend and nodded. Morgan looked around. “Need me to get you some protection?”

Chuck let out a nervous laugh. Morgan had no idea.