

Charah vs. The Drunk Wedding

by KaulfrStonemason

A Chuck AU. They got married in Vegas by accident. Staying married? That part is anything but accidental. As Chuck discovers that love can't be managed like a business deal, Sarah discovers the man beneath the genius. Sometimes the best plans are the ones you never made.

Rated: T · Genre: Romance

Prologue: The Two Kinds of Confidence

At 9:14 a.m. on a Tuesday, Chuck Bartowski talked Waterford Capital's lead partner down from a valuation dispute by staying completely, boringly calm. For forty straight minutes, while three lawyers yelled at each other over speakerphone, Chuck leaned back in his Herman Miller chair, staring at the ceiling tiles of his corner office, and systematically dismantled their arguments with the precision of a man who had built his company from a single line of code.

By 9:54 a.m., the lawyers were quiet, the lead partner had conceded the term sheet, and Chuck had successfully protected his board from a hostile oversight clause.

At 9:58 a.m., exactly four minutes after that call ended, he spent nineteen agonizing minutes trying to decide whether to text Sarah Walker the words lunch later? or lunch later! or lunch later? no pressure. He nearly deployed a thumbs-up emoji before reeling back in horror and setting the phone face-down on his desk like it was a live explosive.

"You've been staring at your phone since I got here," Morgan said from the doorway. He was holding two coffees, both of which he had clearly already started drinking. "Is it the Waterford thing? Did the Waterford thing explode?"

"The Waterford thing did not explode," Chuck said, rubbing his temples. "The Waterford thing is fine. The Waterford thing is the easiest part of my day."

"Then what—" Morgan looked at the phone. Looked at Chuck's face. Understanding dawned with the horrible slowness of a man who had seen this show before. "It's a text

to Sarah."

"It's not—I mean, yes, it's a text to Sarah. But it's not a thing. It's lunch. People ask people to lunch every day. This is a completely normal, low-stakes human interaction."

"You wrote 'lunch later' four different ways. I saw you type and delete 'greetings' at one point."

"I was trying to sound breezy! How do you know that, anyway? Are you reading my phone upside down?"

"Buddy." Morgan set the second coffee down next to Chuck's elbow, gently, the way you'd approach a startled animal. "You can restructure a term sheet in your sleep. You once explained recursive scheduling algorithms to a Senate subcommittee and made them laugh. And you cannot send Sarah Walker the word 'lunch' without sweating through your shirt."

Chuck picked the phone back up, stared at the blank text box, and put it back down again. "I think the exclamation point comes across as aggressive. Like I'm demanding lunch."

This was, roughly, the shape of Chuck Bartowski's life lately: unnervingly composed in rooms full of hostile executives, catastrophic in rooms with exactly one specific person in them. He had spent years learning how to become the first kind of confident. He had spent the last year and a half discovering he had absolutely no idea how to handle the second.

Part One: The Setup

To understand why Chuck was currently terrified of an exclamation point, it helped to understand how he had met the "Miller sisters."

Stanford, senior year. Chuck's roommate Bryce and his girlfriend Jill decided the cleanest way to explain a leaked economics exam was to plant the evidence on Chuck's hard drive. It worked flawlessly. He drove home to Burbank three weeks before graduation with no degree, an eviction notice, and a profound, bone-deep realization that his five-year plan needed a complete extreme makeover.

He moved in with his sister Ellie, took a job at the Burbank Buy More, put on a short-sleeved button-up white shirt and a black tie, and tried very hard to stop existing.

For three years, he fixed computers at the Nerd Herd desk with the specific, thousand-yard focus of a man avoiding his own thoughts. He built tiny things to keep his brain from rotting. One Tuesday, tired of Morgan double-booking local on-site installs, Chuck developed a simulated database structure for a 30-client CSV file to be used in a test system. It was a simple dispatch router, but it worked perfectly, automatically predicting hardware needs based on client zip codes and past repair histories.

He called it a "tool suite." He thought nothing of it.

Then Carina Miller walked in.

Carina didn't belong in a Buy More. She had the polished, impossible confidence of someone who knew exactly how people looked at her and had learned to make that attention useful. She carried a shattered company tablet from the marketing firm where she and Sarah worked, set it on Chuck's counter, leaned in just enough to make the moment feel deliberate, and purred, "I have a highly sensitive system that needs a gentle touch. Are you as good with your hands as your badge implies, Chuck?"

Chuck had already powered the tablet on by then, because of course he had. While Carina insinuated herself across the counter, all perfume and confidence and deliberate proximity, his fingers were carefully navigating around the spiderwebbed glass, coaxing the damaged device toward its company login screen.

"I—well, the Nerd Herd guarantees a standard level of manual dexterity," Chuck said, not looking up from the boot sequence. "But this thing is running a custom company security layer, and the drive is encrypted well beyond what I usually see on retail hardware. So either your marketing firm is extremely serious about protecting client campaigns, or I should not be touching this without a lawyer and a Bible-sized NDA signed and notarized."

Carina's smile widened. "I like a man who knows when he's in over his head."

"That is generous phrasing," Chuck said. "I was going to say close to freaking out." He tapped twice, frowned when the tablet resisted him, then tilted it toward the light. "Also, just so we're clear, if this locks me out and emails your entire IT department, I am immediately becoming someone else's problem."

"Relax." Carina shifted closer, making the word sound like both an order and an offer.

"If corporate security calls, I'll tell them you were seduced by an authorized employee."

"That's not as comforting as I think you intended." Chuck finally glanced up, caught the full force of her expression, and immediately looked back down at the tablet like the operating system might protect him. "Okay. Good news: it's alive. Bad news: it is very committed to not telling me why."

"Good," she said, her voice dropping a velvety octave. "Because I know a very good hotel nearby. I lived in L.A. too, once, so trust me: the bar is excellent, the scotch they keep in the rooms is indecently good, and the breakfast is the kind of thing people make regrettable decisions just to deserve. I'd love a private demonstration of what else you can troubleshoot and what type of cables you carry."

It wasn't a joke. She was entirely sincere, and the sheer force of her confidence usually worked instantly. People fell over themselves for Carina. Chuck, however, was still staring at the tablet's diagnostic readout with the baffled concentration of a man trying very hard not to notice the beautiful woman weaponizing every word out of her mouth at him.

Chuck looked at her. He actually looked directly at her blue eyes. He saw the stubborn company encryption on the tablet first, because of course he did, but then something about the whole performance tugged at an old memory: Ellie at sixteen, black lipstick and combat boots and music loud enough to make the apartment walls vibrate, daring the world to call her angry when what she had really been was sad. Ellie had used rebellion like a warning sign. Carina, maybe, was using sex the same way.

"You know," Chuck said quietly, his nervous stammer thinning but not disappearing. He pulled his own stool out from behind the counter and nudged it toward her. "I could be completely wrong, and I have a long, humiliating history of being completely wrong about women who scare me, but... you don't have to do that here."

Carina blinked. "Do what? Offer you alcohol, breakfast, and superior room service? Because most men consider that hospitality."

"The performance. The armor," Chuck said gently. "My sister went through this phase when we were kids where she looked like she was auditioning for a vampire band, and everybody thought she was being dramatic. She wasn't. She was just trying to make the outside loud enough that nobody asked what hurt underneath." He winced. "Which is a very specific comparison, and possibly unfair to you. I'm just saying... if you're tired, you

can be tired. It's a Buy More. Sit down, take a breath, and I'll re-solder this processor, and the screen will need to order a new one while you decide whether I'm an idiot."

"You're a very strange guy, Chuck," she said, her voice softer, almost reverent.

But a second later, the smirk returned, bright and sharp, and her eyes flashed toward the dispatch code on his monitor. "But if your hands are as fast as your intuition, I might still drag you to that hotel room. Now, what the hell is that soul-reading by looking into my eyes technique you are running?"

They ended up talking for four hours.

She became the seed investor who bankrolled the patent for his dispatch router. She became the person who told him to stop calling it a "tool suite" and start calling it Omni. The first six months were not glamorous. Chuck wrote code in borrowed conference rooms and half-finished offices while Carina made the kind of early bets no cautious fund would touch. By the time Waterford entered the picture, Omni had customers, momentum, and a reputation for making bigger companies nervous—but it was still a growing company with more promise than protection. The Waterford deal was the strategic leap that could give Omni the scale and credibility to challenge the market leaders instead of merely annoying them.

And eighteen months before Vegas, just as Omni was graduating from scrappy survivor to serious contender, Carina introduced him to the woman she had called her sister since childhood.

Sarah was six when Gene Miller and his daughter Carina moved into the house next door to Jack Burton and Emma Walker. The girls became best friends almost immediately. When Jack and Emma later divorced, Sarah chose to stay with Emma in large part because leaving would have meant leaving Carina. Over the years, the two neighboring households became an improvised family: Emma became a surrogate mother to Carina, Gene became a surrogate father to Sarah, and the girls grew up thinking of each other as sisters even though their parents never became more than good friends.

Sarah Walker—or Sarah Burton, as Jack still occasionally insisted when he was being sentimental—became a fixture quickly. She and Carina worked together at the same marketing company, so Sarah regularly stopped by Omni with campaign files, contracts,

replacement equipment, or sharp-eyed comments no one had asked for. Somehow, she became the person Chuck looked for first in any crowded room. For a year and a half, she had been close enough to matter and far enough away for him to do absolutely nothing useful about it.

Part Two: Eighteen Months Before Vegas

By the time Vegas entered the picture, neither of them had admitted the obvious: eighteen months was short enough to feel reckless and long enough to feel inevitable. They were already behaving like people waiting for permission. The marriage did not create the feeling. It only gave the feeling paperwork, witnesses, and a public-relations crisis.

The version of the story that actually mattered started at a launch party neither of them wanted to be at.

Sarah showed up late. She was wearing a dark green dress she'd bought that afternoon out of pure spite toward a bad week at her corporate marketing consulting firm. She found Chuck by the bar, arguing with a caterer about whether a signature cocktail could ethically be named "The Devil Wears Prada."

"It's misleading," Chuck was saying, gesturing with a tiny decorative umbrella. "People will think it's a metaphor for something fashion-related, and there's no metaphor. It's just gin."

"Chuck."

He turned. When he saw her, something happened to his face for about a quarter of a second—a flicker of total, unguarded awe, gone almost before it started—and then he recovered so fast Sarah nearly missed that it had happened at all.

"Walker! You came. Great. Good. This is a party with a badly named cocktail, so, really, top marks for showing up."

"You look—" She didn't finish the sentence. She didn't need to. She just stood there for one extra beat, giving him every opportunity in the world to notice the dress. To notice her.

Chuck noticed. Chuck absolutely noticed. Every alarm bell in his nervous system went off simultaneously. And then, because his brain had exactly one setting when it detected

a social situation he wasn't equipped to handle, he panicked sideways.

"So did you know," he said, aggressively examining his glass, "that the average corporate open bar spends four hundred percent more on garnish than actual—that's not true. I don't know why I said that. I don't actually know that statistic. I think I invented it just now, out loud, to you."

"You invented a statistic."

"I panicked and manufactured data. It's a skill. It's not a good skill, but it's one of mine." Sarah laughed—the real one, the one that crinkled the corners of her eyes. Something in Chuck's chest did something complicated and heavy. He wanted to tell her she looked breathtaking. He wanted to ask her if she wanted to leave this terrible party and get tacos.

Instead, he asked her if she wanted to hear his theory about why hotel minibars were morally indefensible. She said sure, and that was the entire conversation.

She went home that night and called Carina.

"I wore the dress," Sarah said, flatly, dropping her keys on her kitchen counter. "And he talked to me about minibars for twenty minutes."

Carina laughed so hard she had to put the phone on speaker. Neither of them said anything else about it. Chuck did not find out until much later that the dress had been on purpose.

Part Three: Vegas

"Twenty-eight," Carina announced on the Bellagio casino floor, raising a glass of incredibly expensive scotch. "And officially off the clock. Happy birthday, Walker."

Sarah was two drinks in and feeling considerably more forgiving of the universe than she had in months. The casino floor was a blur of neon and velvet. She was having a genuinely good time, right up until she spotted Chuck across the floor. He had his sleeves rolled up, revealing the lean lines of his forearms, and he was laughing at something a board member had said. He looked, infuriatingly, like a man who owned the building.

Which, it turned out, he did not exactly own outright so much as command through a high-stakes hospitality partnership Omni had taken on to showcase its logistics platform.

Chuck had signed off on the venue deal after seeing one too many sleek renderings and convincing himself it was technically marketing.

"You didn't tell me you had a casino partnership," Sarah said when he finally broke away from the executives and walked over to them.

"I didn't buy it so much as... let a very persuasive team turn one integration pilot into a full casino-floor deployment. I have a weakness for renderings. It's a documented flaw, ask Morgan about it. If you don't trust him because he's my best friend and employee, ask my sister—" He stopped. His eyes met hers, and he visibly recalibrated. "You look... twenty-eight looks..."

"You've been rehearsing that line."

"No." A beat. "I mean—yes. Not that specific line. More the general concept of you turning twenty-eight. I've had thoughts about it. They weren't organized into a sentence, and that sentence, now that it's out of my mouth, sounded considerably better in my head about four seconds ago."

"You're doing the thing, Chuck."

"I'm aware I'm doing the thing. I would like it on the record that I'm aware. I can't help it, but I'm aware. That's some progress. I think." He rubbed the back of his neck, his face flushing. "Is this a normal amount of eye contact? I feel like I've been doing an abnormal amount of eye contact this entire conversation. Again with the babbling. I'm shutting up now. Sorry."

"Chuck."

"Yes."

"Buy me a drink and stop narrating your own face."

They found each other three more times that night. Each collision was a little less accidental than the last. The air between them felt thick, charged with the year and a half of unsaid things. Somewhere past midnight, after the executives had gone to bed and the scotch had been replaced by tequila, somebody's dare walked the whole group toward a chapel with a flickering neon sign just off the Strip.

Chuck, tie loose, one eyebrow raised, called back to her from the door.

"Scared, Walker?"

"Never."

"Famous last words."

"You'd know. You say a lot of them."

Inside, under garish red velvet and an Elvis impersonator's genuinely committed performance, the dare kept escalating. It was a joke. It was supposed to be a joke. A vow here, a dare-kiss there. But then Elvis asked Chuck, with real ceremony, if he took Sarah Walker to be his lawfully wedded wife.

Chuck opened his mouth to make a sarcastic remark. He looked at Sarah—at the way the terrible red light caught her hair, at the dare in her eyes that was masking something softer—and nothing funny came out.

"I—yeah. Yes. I do. I really, really do."

It came out too honest. Too fast. Stripped of every deflection he usually kept loaded and ready. He looked faintly startled at himself, his voice echoing in the cheap chapel.

Elvis turned to Sarah. She should have laughed it off. She had every excuse ready on her tongue. Instead, she looked at Chuck—actually looked, past the rambling and the invented statistics, past the polished CEO to the guy who had once fixed computers at the Buy More and been too scared to hold her gaze.

"I do," she said. And she meant it in a way that had nothing to do with tequila.

The kiss, when it came, was not a joke. It was hungry, and desperate, and felt like a dam breaking.

Part Four: The Morning After

Sarah woke to a headache like a struck bell, a plastic ring still on her finger, and an absurd amount of missed notifications.

Chuck called twenty minutes later. She picked up the phone, not bothering with a greeting. "Tell me you're seeing this."

"I'm seeing it," Chuck's voice was a high-pitched frantic hum. "I've seen it eleven times. I've counted the shares on the TMZ article. I don't know why I counted the shares, that's not helpful information, I just—Sarah, Waterford's lead partner texted me a laughing emoji. Do you understand how out of character that is for a man who once made me resubmit a deck because the font wasn't 'serious enough'?"

"Chuck. Breathe."

"I can't breathe! My board is having what I believe is technically an emergency. There's a call in four minutes. I don't know what to say on the call. I've never had to explain an accidental Vegas wedding on an earnings call! There's no template for this. I checked. I actually checked my software if there was a template for 'accidental nuptials impacting market shares'."

"Chuck."

"Sorry. Sorry. I'm doing the thing."

"You're doing the thing."

Morgan arrived at her hotel room forty minutes later with a laptop, a legal pad covered in his own handwriting, and an expression that suggested he had personally been waiting his whole career for a morning exactly like this one. Chuck arrived three minutes after that, looking like he'd slept in a blender.

"Okay, so I have three options," Morgan said, pacing the carpet. "And I also have a fourth option that isn't really an option so much as a working theory, but hear me out on the theory first because I think it's actually the most important one."

"Morgan," Chuck said, burying his face in his hands.

"The theory is: what if this isn't random? What if some element of the universe has been trying to get you two together since Sarah first walked into Omni and finally just skipped every step and went straight to the marriage license? The healthiest thing anyone here can do is stop fighting the universe's very aggressive scheduling."

"That's not a plan, Morgan," Sarah said, rubbing her temples. "That's a rom-com plot or astrology, take your pick."

"It's fifteen percent astrology and eighty-five percent I've watched you two orbit each other since the Chuck left Nerd Herd desk. So, respectfully, I have data too."

Chuck finally looked up, his expression dead serious. "Here's the actual problem. We are negotiating the Waterford deal, and it is the deal that lets Omni stop being promising and start becoming dangerous. If this were just a stupid private mistake, maybe we could laugh it off. But Sarah is already publicly connected to Omni through Carina's firm, this whole Vegas trip is tied to our hospitality deployment, and the press is already turning it into a story about my judgment during closing. Waterford does not care that I got married. They care that it happened loudly, messily, and in the middle of the one

week Omni is supposed to look stable, mature, and investment-ready. If that narrative spins out, Waterford can walk, and the board will have every excuse it needs to question whether I'm still the safest person to lead the company through it. I don't just lose funding. I lose the chance to turn Omni into a company that can actually rival the market."

Sarah froze. "They can do that?"

"If I look reckless enough to damage the company's public image during a crucial valuation period? Yes. They can challenge me. They can frame it as governance risk, conflict-of-interest risk, founder-instability risk—pick your favorite boardroom euphemism for our CEO accidentally became the headline instead of the product."

The actual plans were laid out. Annul it fast and embarrassingly? It would turn one stupid night into a headline about instability and make Waterford wonder what else Chuck could lose control of during diligence. Divorce it slow and expensively? Same optics, just with more lawyers, worse photos, and a month of reporters implying Sarah had influence over Omni before anyone had bothered to define what her connection to the company actually was.

Option three: Stay married through the Waterford negotiations, present a united front of corporate stability, and quietly reassess everything once the deal was either signed or dead.

It landed, inevitably, on the third option. Sarah's practical brain and Chuck's terrified one arrived at the same conclusion from two completely different directions and met in the middle.

"Fine," Sarah said, looking at the plastic ring. "But we set rules."

"Whatever you need," Chuck said. He meant it so plainly, with such earnest desperation to not ruin her life, that the plastic ring suddenly felt heavier than it had any right to.

Part Five: Rules, and the Immediate Failure of Rules

Chuck's penthouse looked like a hotel suite that had given up on being lived in. It was vast, sterile, and full of glass. Sarah stood in the doorway with a single suitcase and declared war on the bookshelf within four minutes of arrival.

"You organized these by height," she said, appalled.

"It's aesthetically consistent."

"It's fourteen books arranged like a crime scene, Chuck."

Rule one was separate bedrooms. Rule two was no real feelings. Rule three was an exit clause, available to either of them at any time, no arguments. Rule four was no flirting unless someone from the board or the press was watching.

The rules sounded reasonable until they had to survive actual proximity. Separate bedrooms were easy on paper. No real feelings was easy before Chuck started leaving perfectly calibrated coffee on Sarah's desk. No flirting unless someone was watching lasted only until both of them realized performance and honesty were beginning to look dangerously similar.

Sarah was highly competent, relentlessly controlled, and entirely accustomed to a life that ran with quiet efficiency. Living with a man whose nervous system was basically a bag of feral cats occasionally drove her out of her mind.

Three mornings after she moved in, she woke up at 6:00 a.m. to find Chuck entirely disassembling the kitchen's espresso machine with a tiny screwdriver. He was convinced the drip-rate was mathematically inefficient for two people operating on separate morning schedules.

Sarah had a 7:30 a.m. strategy meeting. She just wanted a cup of coffee.

"Chuck," she said, rubbing her temples as he held up a tiny internal spring. "It's a coffee maker. It makes coffee."

"I'm optimizing the brew time so we don't cross paths in the kitchen and violate Rule One—"

"Oh my goodness Chuck," she snapped, her voice cracking like a whip, genuine irritation slicing through the morning air. "Put the spring down, or I will use it to optimize your windpipe. I just want a cup of coffee. Stop over-engineering my breakfast."

He froze, terrified, and slowly put the screwdriver down.

It drove her insane. But later that afternoon, when she arrived at her office to find a perfectly brewed, temperature-controlled thermos of her exact coffee order waiting on her desk with a sticky note that said Please do not optimize my windpipe, the irritation melted into something fiercely affectionate. That was the problem. The affection was getting stronger, not weaker.

Rule four officially died the following Thursday.

Chuck was standing in the kitchen, on the phone with a reporter doing a soft profile piece on Omni's new interface. Sarah was on the couch, reading.

"Well, yes, the integration is seamless," Chuck was saying into the phone. "Actually, my wife was using the beta version the other day, and she noted that the predictive text—" He stopped. He stopped completely.

He had said the words "my wife" without noticing he'd said them. They had slipped out of his mouth easily, naturally, like they belonged there.

"I have to call you back," he told the reporter, his voice suddenly hollow. He hung up and stood very still by the kitchen island.

"You okay?" Sarah asked from the couch, not looking up from her book.

"I called you my wife. On the record. To a journalist."

Sarah finally looked up. "I mean, technically, I am."

"But I didn't even notice I was doing it! It just came out, like a normal sentence. Like it wasn't a whole legally binding corporate strategy—"

"Chuck."

"I'm not panicking."

"You're extremely panicking. I can see your pulse in your neck."

He tried, after that, to overcorrect. If he was going to be married, he was going to execute it like a flawless data rollout. He built—genuinely built, in a spreadsheet, alphabetized with cross-referenced tabs—a document titled Sarah Facts to make sure he never again got caught flat-footed.

He was reviewing it at the kitchen island two nights later, muttering to himself like flashcards, when Sarah walked in and read over his shoulder.

"You made a study guide for our marriage."

"It's not—okay, it's a study guide."

She leaned in, close enough that he could smell her shampoo, and tapped the screen.

"What's our song?"

He checked the document, his heart hammering against his ribs. "'Ours' is blank. I couldn't decide. I spent forty minutes on it and then just wrote 'TBD' and moved on to your coffee order. Which, for the record, is oat milk, no foam, and don't let anyone tell

you that's a controversial order."

"Chuck."

"Nobody is going to quiz us on our song, Sarah."

"Somebody is absolutely going to quiz us on our song. That's the first question every human being on earth asks a newly married couple. If you freeze and invent a statistic about Spotify algorithms, they're going to know."

She picked up his pen, grabbed a sticky note, and wrote something down. She folded it twice and shoved it into his suit jacket pocket hanging over the chair.

"There," she said. "Now we have one. Don't ask what it is. Improvising badly is kind of your whole thing, so you'll find out eventually."

Part Six: The Gala Question

The Omni investor gala was the first real test. Black tie, ballroom lights, and the entirety of the Waterford Capital team watching them like hawks, because the closing period had turned their private chaos into a public-stability problem. Sarah was no longer just the woman Chuck had drunkenly married in Vegas. To anyone reading the coverage, she was Carina Miller's sister-in-every-way-that-mattered, a familiar face around Omni, and someone already close enough to the company for the gossip to sound strategic if you squinted. Omni still needed Waterford's scale and credibility, but the night did not need to become a corporate thriller with better catering.

Ellie arrived early enough to find them by the champagne tower before anyone else did.

"So you're the one," Ellie said to Sarah. She sized her up with the particular directness of a woman who had once raised a teenager while passing AP Biology. She didn't say anything else. She didn't need to; she just looked between Chuck's rigid posture and Sarah's perfectly controlled smile, made a small noise that could have meant anything, and said, "Separate bedrooms, right?"

"How did you—" Chuck started.

"You're both standing like people who haven't slept in the same building yet. The tension is radiating off you like a space heater." Ellie took a glass of champagne off a passing tray. "Anyway. Behave. Or don't. I'm not your mother."

Ellie took her champagne and melted into the crowd.

Ten minutes later, the first real threat of the evening emerged, and it wasn't a hostile board member. It was a gorgeous, blue-eyed brunette in a plunging backless gown who introduced herself as Valerie, a VP of Acquisitions from a rival tech firm.

Sarah watched from the edge of the champagne tower as Valerie laughed—a throaty, entirely manufactured sound—and rested a manicured hand squarely on Chuck's bicep. Chuck, entirely oblivious to the fact that he was currently being undressed with human eyes, was earnestly gesturing with a cocktail napkin.

"Well, the dynamic heuristic structure actually bypasses the secondary firewall by—" Chuck was saying, practically vibrating with the joy of discussing actual software instead of stock options.

Sarah felt a sudden, sharp spike of irritation. It wasn't just that the brunette was flirting. It was that Chuck was so fundamentally, deeply nice that he couldn't see it. He was always too polite, even when he absolutely shouldn't be. He thought he was explaining predictive modeling. Valerie was calculating how quickly she could get him into an Uber.

Sarah abandoned her champagne and glided across the ballroom like a guided missile.

"There you are, sweetie," Sarah said, her voice dripping with enough artificial sweetness to give a dentist a panic attack. She slipped her arm securely through Chuck's, her grip slightly tighter than necessary, and flashed the brunette a smile that did not reach her eyes. "I hope my husband isn't boring you with his algorithms."

"Not at all," Valerie said, her blue eyes narrowing slightly. "Charles was just explaining his server architecture. The routing layer is fascinating, actually. Most companies your size fake half of that with middleware."

"Charles," Sarah repeated, the name tasting like ash. "How nice. Well, unfortunately, I have to steal him away. We have an urgent, um, structural crisis we need to attend to."

"A structural crisis?" Chuck asked, alarmed, his eyes darting toward the ceiling. "Is it the load-bearing pillars? I told the event coordinator about the pillars—"

"No, sweetie. It's the ice sculpture. By the buffet. We need to look at it. Right now." Sarah practically hoisted him away by the elbow, dragging him through a crowd of bewildered investors.

"Sarah, what are you doing?" Chuck hissed, stumbling slightly to keep up with her

relentless pace. "We don't need to inspect the ice sculpture. It's a swan. It's melting perfectly normally in accordance with room temperature."

"She was flirting with you, Chuck."

"Valerie? No, she wasn't. She asked exactly the right question about backend routing protocols! Do you know how rare it is to find someone at these things who understands multi-threaded data processing and doesn't immediately compare it to blockchain?"

"She was touching your bicep."

"She was emphasizing a point about bandwidth!"

"She called you Charles."

"It's on my birth certificate!"

Sarah stopped next to the ice swan, turned to him, and sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "You are a genius, Chuck, but you are also an idiot."

Chuck blinked at her, profoundly confused, before reaching out and tentatively tapping the ice swan. "Okay. Well. The swan seems structurally sound, for the record."

Before Sarah could respond, a society photographer appeared, snapping a flash that made Chuck blink rapidly. "One more for the lifestyle section," the photographer said.

"And for the caption, give the readers something sweet. First dance song?"

"Our song," Chuck said, at the exact moment Sarah said, "We don't really—"

They looked at each other.

"It's—" Chuck started, his brain entirely blank.

"It's kind of new," Sarah said smoothly.

"It's a jazz thing! Mostly instrumental. Very sophisticated." Chuck blurted out. It was not anything he had prepared. The actual answer was still sitting folded in his jacket pocket, completely forgotten in his anxiety over the Waterford executives.

The photographer clearly didn't believe either of them, wrote down something generic, and moved on.

Chuck spent the rest of the gala feeling profoundly off-balance. To compensate for the awkward interview—and maybe slightly aware that Sarah was still lingeringly annoyed about Valerie—he placed his hand low on Sarah's back as they navigated the room. It started as a performance for the board, but he didn't pull away when no one was looking. When the orchestra finally played something slow, he pulled her onto the floor

before he'd consciously decided to.

"There's a man at three o'clock who hasn't stopped looking at you," Chuck muttered against her ear as they swayed. His voice was sharper than he meant it to be.

"Should I be flattered?"

"You should be—" He caught himself. "I don't—that's not a thing I get to have an opinion about. We have rules. I signed off on the rules. I typed the rules into a highly secure, encrypted document."

"Chuck."

"I'm not jealous."

"Nobody said you were jealous."

"I'm extremely not jealous, is what I'm saying, in a normal, controlled, rule-following way."

"You're doing the thing again."

"I know."

She didn't tell him what the song was. He didn't ask again. They just kept dancing, badly, a half-beat off the actual music, the heat of her hand in his grounding him to the floor. Neither one was willing to be the first to step back.

Part Seven: The Discovery

It was an accident. Sarah was looking for a signed non-disclosure form on Chuck's desk while he was in the shower. Instead, she found a folder marked Waterford Capital — Series D, Confidential.

Clipped to the top was an email from Chuck's lead counsel.

Chuck, the board is getting anxious about the Vegas coverage. Founder stability is still the deciding factor for the committee, and Waterford wants no further public surprises during closing. The concern is not the marriage in isolation; it is the optics of a sudden public marriage to someone already associated with Omni through the Miller account work, during an active valuation window, after a highly visible hospitality deployment. A high-profile divorce or annulment would give the board grounds to argue that the situation has become a governance and judgment risk before the deal is complete. Recommend keeping the public narrative calm and boring until signatures are finalized.

Underneath the email was a timeline. It mapped their marriage against the fund's closing period and the cleanest possible window for saying, publicly and bloodlessly, that the relationship had ended after the business risk had passed.

It looked exactly like a business acquisition. Worse, it looked like a decision made around her instead of with her. The timeline reduced their marriage to a risk-management asset, and it reduced Sarah to the variable Chuck had forgotten to trust.

She was still holding it when Chuck walked into the office, towel-drying his hair. The moment he saw what she was holding, everything he had built a career on—staying calm under pressure, thinking three moves ahead—evaporated instantly.

"Okay, so, that's—okay," Chuck stammered, freezing in the doorway. "Give me a second, I can explain this. I just need you to not look at me like that while I—no, look at me however you want, I don't actually get to ask for a specific kind of look right now."

He pointed at the folder. "I found out about the timeline requirement... I want to say Tuesday. I found out Tuesday. Actually, no. Monday. I found out Monday, which is worse, somehow, than Tuesday. I don't know why one day matters this much to me right now, but it does."

"Chuck."

"And the funding round was already moving before Vegas; that part's true! I need you to know that part's true. But I'm aware that it being true doesn't fix the actual problem, which is that I had time to tell you they were treating our marriage like a stability metric, and I didn't tell you."

"Chuck. Stop talking."

He stopped talking. The silence in the room was suffocating.

Sarah didn't yell. She didn't cry. That wasn't her style. Her anger was cold, calculating, and devastatingly quiet.

"I don't know which part of any of this was real," she said. Her voice was completely devoid of emotion.

She walked past him, packed a single bag methodically, and left the penthouse.

Chuck's mistake—the real one, the one that actually shattered things—didn't happen in that room. It happened two days later.

Alone in the massive penthouse, absolutely convinced he had irreparably ruined the best

thing in his life, Chuck panicked in the one direction that always felt useful to him: action. He wanted to protect her. He wanted to make the machinery stop touching her life. But the moment he picked up the phone, he was making the same mistake in a cleaner suit. Instead of asking Sarah what protection would look like, he treated the problem like a hostile negotiation and tried to solve it without her.

So he called Waterford's lead partner himself, without consulting anyone. He offered a brutal concession. He told them the marriage was a mistake, a private matter completely unrelated to the business. He promised to cut Sarah out of every press touchpoint entirely. He offered to make her disappear from the narrative, taking all the PR blame himself, to shield her from the fallout.

It felt, at the time, like falling on his sword.

It was, in fact, a catastrophe. Because when Sarah found out—from a leaked term sheet Morgan intercepted and sent her—it read exactly like what it looked like: Chuck deciding, unilaterally, without asking her, that the correct move was to erase her from the story the second she became inconvenient.

"You didn't even ask me," she said, when she finally called him. Her voice was flat with something far worse than anger. It was resignation. "You decided what was best for me, negotiated my life with a board of directors, and didn't think I deserved a vote."

"I was trying to protect you from them! I panicked!"

"I know you panicked. That's not the problem, Chuck. The problem is what you did with the panic. You shut me out."

The line went dead.

Part Eight: Fixing It

Sarah spent three days on Carina's couch, staring at the ceiling and not talking about it. Carina, to her enormous credit, didn't push. She just kept the wine glasses full.

"I'm not going to tell you what to feel," Carina said on the third night, leaning against the doorframe. "I've been wrong before. I just think you should decide based on what actually happened, not what you're scared might happen."

"He turned our marriage into a line item to protect his company."

"He built that company from a routing script in a Buy More, Sarah. It took years before

anyone powerful cared, and even now it's still fighting for the kind of scale Waterford can provide. And from what Morgan told me, he just risked losing it anyway."

Sarah frowned. "What do you mean?"

Carina just took a sip of her wine. "Go to the penthouse. Pick up the rest of your things. See for yourself."

When Sarah let herself into the quiet, glass-walled penthouse, Chuck wasn't in the living room. But on the kitchen island, his laptop was open. It wasn't the Sarah Facts spreadsheet on the screen. It was an open text document.

It was seventeen drafts of the same text message, dated across the last two nights. None of them had been sent.

I messed this up and I don't know how to say that without making it worse.

I panicked and I did the exact thing I was scared of doing, which is not talk to you first.

I keep starting this text and deleting it because everything I write sounds like an excuse and I don't want to give you an excuse, I want to actually be sorry.

I called Waterford back this morning and undid it. All of it. I told them we are legally married, we are staying married unless you decide otherwise, and if they want to walk because my private life is no longer perfectly marketable, they can walk. Your name stays in every version of the story if that's still what you want.

I don't know if there's a version of this where I get to keep being your husband, but I'd like to at least get to keep being someone you don't hate.

She read all seventeen drafts twice. Her heart, which had been frozen solid for four days, cracked.

She found him out on the terrace, staring down at the Los Angeles skyline.

"You called Waterford back," she said.

Chuck flinched, spinning around. He looked exhausted. "This morning."

"You told them the truth."

"Yes." A pause, longer than it needed to be. "Which was terrifying, for the record."

"Why terrifying?"

"Because by refusing their terms, they walked. The Waterford alliance is dead unless I can drag it back from the wreckage. I have an emergency board meeting on Friday where they are highly likely to argue that I have become too much of a liability to stay

CEO."

Sarah stared at him, stunned. "Chuck... Omni is your life."

"I know," he said, his voice dropping quieter. "And somewhere around minute two of that phone call with them, I realized I didn't care. Which is either the most honest thing I've said out loud in a decade, or evidence of a much bigger psychological problem. I genuinely haven't worked out which."

He dragged a hand over his face. "I should never have made the first call without you. I know that. I panicked and did the exact thing I promised myself I wouldn't do. I decided something about your life without you in the room, and I am so—"

Sarah held his gaze. "That doesn't make the first call okay."

"I know," Chuck said immediately. No joke. No explanation. "It doesn't. I don't get credit for fixing the thing I broke after you had to bleed on the floor to make me see it."

For the first time all week, Sarah saw him stop reaching for the version of events he could manage and simply sit inside the one he couldn't.

"Chuck."

"—sorry, genuinely, not the kind of sorry that comes with an explanation attached to soften the blow, I mean it without the—"

"Chuck."

"Sorry."

She crossed her arms. "Stop apologizing for one second and tell me what our song is. You never found out."

He blinked, utterly derailed. "That's—you're changing the subject. My career is actively imploding and you're asking about the sticky note?"

"I'm testing whether you actually read the note, or if you've been too busy panicking to open your own jacket pocket for three weeks."

He stared at her, then scrambled toward the chair where his gala suit jacket was still draped. He dug into the pocket and pulled out the folded sticky note.

He unfolded it. He read it.

Something in his face went completely soft, stunned and breathless all at once. He didn't say anything for a long second, because it wasn't a song title at all.

It was four words in Sarah's handwriting: ask me again properly.

"Is this—"

"It's an invitation," she said, her voice dropping the guarded edge entirely. "You keep almost getting there, Chuck, and then you panic and talk about minibars or corporate clauses instead."

He crossed the terrace in three long steps. This time, when he kissed her, there was no rambling first. It was certain, and solid, and real.

Part Nine: Sunday Dinner

They agreed to tell both families the whole truth on their own schedule. Fate, in the form of Morgan after two beers, had other ideas.

Emma Walker's dining room in San Diego filled up fast: Emma and Gene Miller, who had spent decades co-parenting each other's daughters from neighboring houses; Jack Burton, Sarah's father, on strict behavioral probation; Ellie and Devon; Carina; and Morgan, who arrived with an actual PowerPoint presentation no one had asked for.

"I have a theory," Morgan announced before anyone had even sat down or touched the roast, hooking his laptop up to the television. "That the marriage was subconsciously orchestrated by the universe as a corrective to eighteen months of both of you being emotionally unavailable in complementary ways. And I have slides."

"Nobody asked for slides, Morgan," Chuck said, burying his face in his hands.

"Nobody ever asks for the good stuff, buddy. Slide one: The Omni Office Sightings."

Sarah, ignoring the slides, told the actual story. She laid out the chapel, the tequila, the Elvis impersonator, the folder, the terrible unilateral phone call, and Chuck risking his entire company to fix it. She didn't smooth any of it out into something tidier than it had been.

Jack Burton, Sarah's father, crossed his arms and studied Chuck the way he'd once studied marks at a poker table. "So, the CEO marries my daughter drunk. Then he nearly torpedoed his own company trying to protect her, fails miserably, and somehow that's the version where you two actually end up together?"

"That's an accurate summary, sir," Chuck said, wincing.

"Huh." Jack considered this with real professional appreciation. "Wrong execution. Right instinct. I respect the hustle."

"Jack," Emma scolded.

"I'm complimenting the Schnook!"

Gene Miller stood up, walked around the table, and put a hand on Chuck's shoulder. It was heavy and unambiguous. "You hurt either of my girls again, panicking or not, I will find out exactly how to dismantle your servers."

"Understood, sir," Chuck squeaked.

Ellie, entirely unbothered by the threats, refilled her wine glass. She looked at Chuck, then at Sarah, and said mildly, "So are we doing separate bedrooms again, or did that get resolved?"

She did not wait for an answer before moving on to the potatoes, which was, everyone silently agreed, the correct amount of commentary.

Epilogue: The Chaos Acquires a Permanent Partner

Six months later, Chuck retained his CEO position by the skin of his teeth, mostly thanks to Carina reminding the board that seed investors with receipts could be very inconvenient enemies. The Waterford deal survived, not as a coronation, but as a hard-won strategic alliance that gave Omni the scale, credibility, and runway to start challenging the companies Chuck had once only studied from the outside. It did not make Omni a giant overnight. It made Omni dangerous, which was exactly what Chuck had been fighting for. After that, he spent eleven weeks planning a proposal.

Sarah did not find out about the planning until much later, because if she'd known in real time, she would have stopped him.

He reserved a restaurant's private dining room because it had their favorite corner table and a view of the city. He wrote a speech, hated it, rewrote it, and then brought the cards anyway, because apparently growth had limits and Sarah Walker had married him knowing that.

He got through one and a half cards before the restaurant sound system, which Chuck had definitely not been allowed to control, started playing their song three minutes early.

It started mid-sentence, during the appetizer, while Chuck was trying to explain why the ring had two bands without accidentally turning it into a metaphor about market

consolidation.

"—and the two bands sort of coexist, structurally, neither one replacing the other," Chuck was saying, raising his voice over the violins. "Which, in fairness, is also a decent description of how we handled the corporate restructuring, actually. Now that I'm saying it out loud, that's a very unromantic thing to bring up right now. I don't know why past-me thought that belonged on an index card—"

"Chuck." Sarah was staring at him across the table. "Is this a performance review?"

"What? No. Why would you—"

"You're talking about structural coexistence and corporate restructuring, unprompted, over dinner, with a live quartet playing behind you."

"I'm proposing! This is a proposal. I had a structure! The song came in early, and now I'm on card one and a half of five, which is already four cards fewer than the first draft, so that should count as emotional progress—"

"You're proposing."

"I'm trying to propose that we stay married on purpose. But I'm on card one and a half of eleven, and the quartet is already playing the chorus, which was supposed to happen after I gave you the ring. The whole thing is out of order and I don't know how to fix the order—"

She stood up, walked around the table, and kissed him mid-sentence. Also out of order. Also exactly right.

"You don't have to fix the order," she murmured against his mouth. "Just ask me the actual question."

He did, badly, half-standing, one knee not fully committed to the floor, the index cards abandoned on the pristine white tablecloth.

"I know we already have the paperwork," he said, pulling a velvet box from his pocket.

"But I want the real thing. No rules. No exit clauses. Ask me again properly, right?"

She said yes before he finished the sentence, the way she always seemed to get there faster than he did.

She laughed as he finally got the real ring onto her finger, sliding it into place right next to the cheap plastic one from Vegas that she had never once taken off. She decided, right then, that a man who could out-negotiate hostile venture capitalists but still

couldn't get through a single romantic speech without bringing up structural integrity was exactly the chaos she intended to keep.

—End—