

Chuck versus the Day Off

by Brat55512

Chuck and Sarah have a Day Off, just a normal day which turns into something else.

Rated: T · Genre: Adventure

Chuck Versus the Day Off

By Brat

A/N: The premise is something Canon-ish and could be considered a "lost episode". Takes place exactly between 3x14 and 3x15.

Disclaimer: I don't own the rights for Chuck, this is only a fanfic for our entertainment.

Prologue

"Stop right there. Release Agent Walker. I didn't ask," General Beckman suddenly said from the screen. "I don't care about the details!"

"But... but you said no more lies!" Chuck protested, then pointed between the two of them. "And we're telling the truth."

"No!"

"General, Chuck and I are dating," Sarah said confidently, throwing it into the conversation while Chuck's eyes widened and he turned to look at her. The General let out a heavy sigh.

Chuck and Sarah exchanged a glance. Sarah smiled.

"Exclusively."

Chuck chuckled.

Then the smile vanished from his face when he noticed Beckman's disapproving look.

"I'm warning you that if your personal life"—her emphasis shifted—"starts overlapping with your professional life... it can be dangerous."

Chuck sighed.

"But unofficially... it's about time!" the General said with a smile.

A huge grin appeared on Chuck's face. Sarah gave him a soft smile.

Beckman ended the call. Sarah took Chuck's hand and looked at him. They were just about to kiss when Chuck caught sight of their courtyard and suddenly remembered Ellie—and the farewell party.

"Oh my God. I forgot Ellie!"

Ellie was upset that Chuck hadn't been there for their goodbye party, but they talked it through later. Chuck assured her she wouldn't be alone when Sarah stepped through the door to say goodbye, and Ellie was delighted.

"Oh, this is great! You got back together?" Ellie asked.

"We're together," Chuck replied.

It felt good to finally tell the truth.

After saying their goodbyes, Sarah sat on the bed in Chuck's room.

Chuck walked over to the record player.

"I found the right one," he said, and Sarah's face lit up.

He set the record down and lowered the needle.

"This one's going to be your favorite."

Nina Simone's voice filled the room.

Birds flying high, you know how I feel...

Sarah smiled softly and tilted her head slightly as she listened to the music, then looked over at Chuck.

"I like this."

"It's a good place to start," Chuck said.

He kissed her gently, and they lay back on the bed listening to the music. He wrapped an arm around her. Sarah moved closer, curling up against him.

A new dawn...

He kissed her forehead and brushed away a stray strand of hair.

A new day...

They held each other's gaze for a moment, then kissed.

A new life for me...

The music continued to fill the room.

And I'm feeling good...

Chapter 1.

The morning sun streamed warmly through the window.

Chuck was awake, but he didn't move. He didn't want to disturb the rare balance of the moment. Sarah was pressed against him, still half asleep, as if this were the most natural thing in the world.

He looked at her. At the way her hair spilled across the pillow. At her face. Her features weren't as sharp as they were in any of their cover identities. He enjoyed the faint fruity scent she sometimes wore and the soft touch of her skin.

For a moment, he said nothing. He simply watched her, as if expecting something to interrupt this and send him back to the reality where all of it had been just wishful thinking. The moment passed, and with it, the doubt. Everything felt light again.

He wondered what it would be like to say it out loud—that their relationship wasn't just a lie anymore, that everything was real. He didn't look at the clock. He breathed more slowly than usual.

Sarah shifted slightly, then slowly opened her eyes.

For a second, she didn't say anything. She just looked at Chuck.

"Hey."

Her voice was still rough with sleep.

Chuck smiled. Not too broadly, not too "Chuck-ish." Just quietly.

"Good morning."

He didn't feel awkward being this close to her.

Sarah studied him for a moment, as if committing everything to memory, then her expression softened. She didn't ask what he was smiling about or how long he'd been awake. She simply moved closer.

The sunlight slowly crept farther up the wall. Then she kissed him gently. There was no urgency in it. No tension. Just a quiet confirmation that this morning was real.

"How did you sleep?" she asked after a brief pause.

"Great."

Chuck smiled again, a little wider this time.

He kept looking at her, as if weighing something before speaking. This time, he didn't overthink it.

"What would you say," he began quietly, "if we did something today?"

Sarah's fingers drifted across his chest in a slow, absent-minded motion. Her expression didn't change, but her answer didn't come immediately.

"Beckman will be angry," she said softly.

It wasn't a warning. More like a statement of fact.

Chuck answered with a faint smile.

"Yeah."

He didn't argue. He didn't launch into a speech the way he would have before.

"Let's have breakfast," he said at last. "And... we'll see."

It sounded more like a possibility than a plan.

Sarah watched him for a moment. The answer was too easy. Too... open.

But she didn't correct him.

"Okay."

This time she was the one who said it.

Chuck nodded as though that alone was enough to get the day started and make it real.

Morgan was pouring milk into his cereal when they walked into the kitchen.

"Good morning, lovebirds!" he said with a wide, almost suspiciously satisfied grin.

"Morning, Morgan," Sarah replied.

She slipped an arm around Chuck's waist as if it had always been natural. At least now it was honest.

Chuck just grinned.

"Hey, buddy."

Morgan's eyes moved from one of them to the other. Sarah didn't let go of Chuck for even a second. His gaze dropped to his bowl, then returned to them.

"I made coffee..."

The tone made it clear this wasn't really about the coffee.

Chuck nodded.

"That's... heroic. Thank you."

Sarah released him and walked over to the coffee maker. She paused for a moment as if assessing the situation, then simply poured herself a cup.

"So... breakfast. A very important foundation of any... long-term relationship," Morgan began. "Scientifically proven."

Chuck raised an eyebrow.

"Really?"

"Absolutely. I saw a documentary. Or maybe it was a commercial. But it was convincing."

Sarah took a sip.

"Not bad."

Morgan looked almost offended.

"'Not bad'? That's premium instant coffee from Buy More."

Chuck smiled.

"That means it's good," he translated theatrically, turning toward Morgan as if feeding him a line. Sarah glanced at him for a moment, as if deciding whether to comment. In the end, she didn't. She just smiled into her mug.

"So what's the plan today?" Morgan asked, less theatrically this time.

Chuck shrugged.

"Breakfast."

He paused for a second.

"Then... we'll see."

Morgan nodded slowly.

"That is... a surprisingly mature answer, buddy."

Chuck glanced at Sarah.

"I'm working on my adult behavior."

Sarah didn't comment. She simply stayed nearby while Chuck wandered over to the fridge.

"Ham and eggs okay?" he asked.

"Can't wait," Sarah replied, then sat down next to Morgan at the counter.

"Good, because that's all we have. At times like this, couldn't we ask some CIA elves to do the grocery shopping?" Chuck asked.

"That's not how it works," Sarah sighed.

Chuck leaned over the frying pan and cracked an egg with exaggerated concentration. His movements were smoother now than they had ever been whenever he'd tried cooking for Sarah before.

Meanwhile, Morgan cleaned up his bowl and carried it to the sink.

"I guess I'm going to work with Casey today."

Chuck looked up.

"Yeah... probably."

Morgan shrugged.

"No big deal. He likes driving anyway. Or at least... he doesn't let anyone else drive."

It didn't sound like a complaint. Just an accepted fact. Sarah glanced toward them for a moment but didn't comment. Everyone knew Casey's quirks.

Chuck turned back to the pan.

"Thanks, Morgan."

Morgan gave half a smile.

"Hey, somebody has to keep Buy More alive while you two..." He gestured dramatically around the room. "...explore the philosophical depths of ham and eggs."

Sarah laughed softly.

Morgan grabbed his jacket and headed for the door, but turned back one last time.

"Just call if you... you know. If you need me. Anytime."

This time it wasn't a joke. Morgan was part of the team now. Charles Irving Bartowski's personal assistant by night, Chuck's peer at Buy More by day. Spy-in-training.

But Chuck knew he could always count on him as a friend.

He nodded.

"Definitely."

Morgan looked at both of them once more. He didn't analyze. He didn't comment further.

"Have a good day off. Or... whatever this is."

Sarah's eyes met his briefly.

"Thank you."

Morgan left, and closed the door softly behind him. The apartment felt quieter. Chuck stirred the eggs a little longer than necessary.

"I think these might actually be edible this time," he finally said, more to the frying pan than to Sarah. Sarah stepped closer.

"They were last time too."

Chuck glanced at her.

"That was an optimistic assessment, if memory serves."

Sarah smiled faintly.

"I remember."

Neither of them said anything else. Neither felt the need to. Chuck noticed the way Sarah stood there in the kitchen, mug in hand, not merely present—but truly there.

Not as part of their cover or playing a role. That subtle, invisible distance that had always existed between them was gone now. So was the spark of suppressed longing. Even Sarah's smile seemed different. Not the carefully measured, controlled version. A lot softer. Less... deliberate and more carefree. For once, she didn't look like she was mentally counting exits or calculating lines of fire.

Chuck turned back to the pan and stirred the eggs a little more before serving them onto plates. Then he said:

"I was thinking maybe today... We could do a few things. Slowly. No rush."

His voice was calm. He wasn't looking for a reaction. He didn't add anything else. He didn't overexplain the way he used to.

Sarah set her mug down on the counter and stepped closer. Not hurriedly. Not cautiously. She stopped beside him and slipped her arms around his neck.

"Let's just enjoy each other's company," she said softly.

Then she added:

"What does 'a few things' mean?"

There was genuine curiosity in her voice.

Chuck thought about it for a moment, but this time he didn't start making a list.

"I don't know exactly," he said. "After breakfast maybe... I'll show you a few places I like."

A brief pause.

"Non-mission things."

Sarah watched him. Not the words. The way he said them.

"Okay."

Simple again. But this time there was something else behind it. Chuck nodded as if that was all he needed.

"Okay. First stop: breakfast."

Sarah smiled faintly.

"Ambitious plan."

Chuck looked at her.

"I know. But you've got to start somewhere."

Then he added:

"Oh, and the gun stays."

A reminder.

"No life-threatening situations."

"Of course," Sarah said with a smile. "Good thing I'll have you there to protect me if necessary."

They both smiled.

Sarah moved closer and kissed him slowly.

Neither of them was in any hurry to move on.

Chapter 2.

They were walking hand in hand through the sunlit streets of Burbank when both their phones vibrated at the exact same moment. Neither of them looked. The vibration faded away as if it had never happened. Chuck glanced sideways at Sarah for a moment. She didn't look back at him. Neither of them said anything. Neither let the other go.

They stopped at a crosswalk. The sounds of the city seemed more distant somehow, as though the traffic from the main road were coming from a layer farther away.

"A little more walking," Chuck said, "and I'll show you my favorite comic book store."

Again, he didn't explain. He didn't launch into why that particular store mattered or why it was important. He just wanted to show it to her. Sarah looked at him.

She knew he was crazy about geeky things. It had been in his file, and she'd wanted to make him happy with that Princess Leia bikini costume long before they had been anything more than a fake relationship. Maybe she'd wear it for him again. Maybe for his birthday.

"Sounds exciting."

Her tone was light, but her eyes instinctively drifted past Chuck's shoulder. One car was moving too slowly. One pedestrian had been standing in the same place for too long. The edges of the environment assembled themselves automatically in her mind: exits, blind spots, distances. It took less than a second. Then she looked back at Chuck, hoping he hadn't noticed.

"Of course it is," Chuck chuckled. "But no life-threatening situations."

The light turned green, and they started walking. Sarah consciously resisted the urge to look back. She tried to push the thoughts away. Her pace matched Chuck's rhythm instead of the environment. Her attention returned to him, to the warmth of the sun on her face as they walked hand in hand. The training hadn't disappeared, it had simply moved into the background.

"So," Chuck said half a block later, "this place... isn't very big. But there's a guy named Louis who always sets things aside for me. I mean..." He gestured vaguely. "Comics. Not classified files or anything."

He paused.

"What would that even be like?" Chuck said. "'Yeah, I'll take the latest issue of Justice League, and while you're at it, could you throw in the details of a terrorist network?'"

He swallowed and continued.

"Although now that I say it out loud... that would actually be pretty cool."

A faint smile touched Sarah's lips.

"I'm sure it would."

Chuck glanced at her as if checking whether she was joking. He didn't ask though and they simply kept walking.

Chapter 3.

Despite Chuck's description, the store wasn't small at all.

Shelves stretched row after row, lined with colorful comic book spines. Collector figures stood inside display cases. Posters hung from the ceiling. Everything had its own order, one that only regular customers truly understood.

Sarah stepped inside and paused for a moment. Not because she felt out of place. Because this space... didn't fit into any familiar category.

Her pink summer dress practically glowed against the darker colors around her. Several people looked their way. Not for long. Just long enough to be noticeable.

Chuck didn't react. He didn't pull her closer or comment on it, he simply led her toward the counter. This was his territory.

"Hey, Louis!" he called. "What've you got for me this time?"

The bearded, heavysset man behind the counter looked up, and his face immediately brightened.

"Hey, Chuck!"

With a practiced motion, he pulled a stack out from beneath the counter.

"The usual. Some Justice League, a new Bob Morane, an Archer..."

Chuck took the pile and flipped through it.

He wasn't in a hurry. Sarah stood half a step beside him and watched.

Not the comics, but him. His movements were familiar, but more confident somehow.

For a moment, Chuck held up the last two titles, both spy-related, as though he ought to explain himself. He still felt the need to explain himself, just not as much as he used to.

"Occupational hazard."

His tone was light, not defensive.

"Sure. That's always how it starts, " Louis laughed as though he knew exactly what was going on between the two of them.

Then he noticed Sarah. She didn't fit the picture. He didn't ask immediately. He recalibrated the situation.

"She is...?"

"Sarah."

Chuck didn't hesitate, but he didn't add anything else.

"Nice to meet you."

Louis's attention shifted briefly from Chuck and his comics to Sarah.

"Hi."

Her voice was warm. Her smile was breathtaking.

"Good choice," Louis remarked to Chuck.

Chuck raised an eyebrow but was still going through the comics.

"Obviously."

Louis smiled.

A nearly invisible smile appeared on Sarah's lips. She didn't join in the conversation, instead, she looked around. At the shelves. The figures. The organized chaos of the place.

For once, she wasn't looking for exits. Chuck set the comics down, and his attention returned to Sarah.

"I come here a lot," he said. "It's one of my favorite places."

He was just sharing it.

"I can see that."

After a brief pause, Sarah looked around once more.

"I like it."

Chuck glanced at her.

He didn't ask if she really meant it.

For the first time, there wasn't any doubt.

Chapter 4.

On a sudden impulse, Chuck pointed across the street.

The patio of an ice cream shop was crowded. People sat at the tables talking, eating ice cream as though it were the most important part of the day.

"How about some ice cream?"

Sarah looked at him.

"Sounds good."

Her voice was soft. They crossed the street and joined the line. There was no order to it. No system. People chose. Changed their minds, and chose again.

Sarah studied the display case for a moment.

Colors and too many choices.

Too much freedom. She wasn't thinking about flavors. She was thinking about the absence of structure. No optimization. No correct answer. Just... a choice. Not very CIA catering like.

"What's your favorite?" Chuck asked.

Sarah fell quiet for a moment.

Not because she didn't know. Because she wasn't used to thinking that way. The answer was simple. Almost too simple.

"Raspberry."

Chuck nodded as if this were important information.

"Do you always get that?"

After a brief pause, Sarah shook her head.

"Not always."

A moment passed.

"But usually."

Chuck smiled. He didn't make a big deal out of it.

"Then it's a good choice today, too."

Sarah looked at him. There was no game behind it. No analysis. Just acceptance.

The line moved forward slowly. Around them came conversations, laughter, and the quiet clink of spoons against cups.

Sarah realized she wasn't watching the room anymore. Quickly, she assessed the situation as if Ring agents might appear at any second. She briefly entertained the idea of what kind of maneuvers could be executed in a crowd of civilians like this. Then the voice in the back of her mind warned her, and she stopped.

Meanwhile, Chuck was staring at the display case as if he existed in an entirely different universe.

"I think I might try something new," he said.

"Or not. There's a good chance I'll panic."

A faint smile touched Sarah's lips.

"That's a strategy too."

Chuck glanced at her.

"Thank you for your support."

"You're welcome, " her smile was warm.

They stepped forward. The sun rested pleasantly on their skin, and the air carried the sweet scent of fruit and summer. For once, neither of them was thinking about what came next—or about the fact that they had been breaking protocol over and over again for days.

Chapter 5.

Casey stood inside the Buy More, his gaze drifting back to the entrance over and over again.

Not nervously or impatiently, more like... calculating.

Morgan stepped up beside him. For a moment, he followed Casey's line of sight, then smiled.

"You're staring at that door like you're waiting for the Messiah."

"Grimes," Casey grunted without looking at him. "Your friend and Walker should be here."

Morgan shrugged.

"Come on, Casey. They're enjoying each other's company."

Casey's jaw tightened briefly.

"Between this and the week they spent in Paris and on that train, they've broken enough rules already. The General won't be forgiving."

A brief pause.

"And I'm supposed to report that they failed to show up ready for work."

Morgan tilted his head.

"Is that really necessary, John?"

Casey finally looked at him.

"It is. It's compliant."

His voice was cold, but not sharp. A second passed. Then he looked back at the door.

"But I'm not telling Beckman."

Morgan blinked.

"Wait... what?"

Casey didn't explain. He didn't look at him again.

"Day off."

That was all he said.

Morgan slowly smiled.

"That is... surprisingly human."

Casey didn't respond.

His eyes remained fixed on the door.

As if he knew perfectly well they weren't going to walk through it.

Chapter 6.

A gravel path beside the little ice cream shop led into a small back courtyard along a narrow ivy-covered brick wall. Cheap plastic tables and chairs were scattered throughout the space. The cheerful atmosphere of the shop came with the sound of children running around and playing.

Chuck and Sarah walked in and picked a table they liked.

The sun was still warm, but the shadows in the courtyard softened its intensity. The air was sweet with the scent of fruit, and filled with the sound of conversations from the people around them.

For a moment, Chuck watched Sarah. The way she ate her ice cream. Not hurriedly or just functionally. She was actually enjoying it. It was a subtle difference. But it was there. And once again Chuck found himself thinking that today he wasn't looking at Agent Walker or the carefully constructed version of his "girlfriend" from their cover story.

Just Sarah.

His real girlfriend.

The thought suddenly felt too big, and as often happened, something switched inside him.

"Sarah, can I ask you something?"

Sarah looked up.

"Of course," she said softly. "As long as it isn't work-related."

Chuck smiled, though this time it was a little forced.

"No, no... it's... not."

He fell silent for a moment, as if searching for the sentence again.

"So... I just... I never actually asked if you're having a good time."

He gestured around the ice cream shop—the plastic tables, the noisy children, the completely ordinary afternoon. He couldn't help thinking that for someone used to luxury parties, danger, and glamour, a day like this had to be boring. At least they weren't sitting around in silence waiting for a mission the way they had on Valentine's Day last year.

"I didn't even ask what you wanted to do. I just... kinda dragged you around with me..."

His voice wasn't loud.

It grew quieter as he spoke.

"And that... might..."

He stopped.

He didn't finish the thought. Sarah didn't interrupt, she waited silently.

Chuck finally let out a breath.

"It might be boring for you."

A brief silence followed. Sarah looked down at her ice cream, then back at him. She didn't rush her answer.

"This..." she began, then paused for a moment as if she wanted to phrase it exactly right.

"This is perfect."

She was quiet for a moment, as though she wanted to add something, then decided not to.

Chuck didn't respond immediately. He didn't joke. He didn't ask a follow-up question. He simply looked at her.

Sarah leaned forward slightly across the table.

"It's not because of what we're doing," she added softly.

A brief pause.

"It's because I'm with you."

It didn't sound exaggerated. There was no hidden agenda behind it. Just reassurance.

"Okay, " Chuck sighed quietly and nodded, as though he were still trying to convince himself that everything really was okay. His expression gradually relaxed. The old tension had returned for a moment and it faded again. The ice cream slowly melted inside the paper cups.

"We've still got a few hours before somebody starts checking up on us," Sarah said casually as she set down her spoon. Her tone was light, as if she were commenting on the weather.

"What do you want to do?"

Chuck thought about it, yet again, he didn't rush to answer. This was new for him, too.

"I think..." he said eventually, "we could have a really good dinner. And maybe visit the observatory."

The word "good" wasn't really about the plan. It sounded more like a promise.

Sarah nodded as if it were the most ambitious idea in the world.

"Sounds good."

After a brief pause, she added:

"Before that, we could stop by my place."

Chuck looked up at her. The sentence hadn't been emphasized. Yet it shifted the entire shape of the rest of the day.

"Your place?" he asked, confirming.

Sarah nodded calmly.

"Yeah."

She didn't overexplain or offer a reason. She didn't add, 'just to change clothes' or 'just for a few minutes.' It was simply another option among the others.

Chuck smiled.

"Okay."

They stood up and the chairs creaked softly behind them.

The day—one neither of them wanted to control too carefully—had just gained another destination.

Chapter 7.

Sarah unlocked the door of her apartment and stepped inside. Chuck followed.

He'd been here several times over the years, but the place still gave him the same first impression: everything was too perfectly ordered. Not the kind of order that came from cleaning, the kind that came from decisions.

Everything had its place and every place had a reason. It felt almost like a display window. Clothes were neatly folded. Surfaces were clear, as if nobody wanted to leave a trace behind.

For half a second, Chuck wondered how many times Sarah had left this apartment without knowing whether she would ever return. Then his eyes drifted around the room automatically. He wasn't looking for anything specific.

Just taking it in and wondering how he could ask Sarah to move in with him.

Maybe during dinner. Maybe he could bring it up then...

Looking around the apartment, another familiar thought returned. Somewhere there had to be a bag ready to grab at a moment's notice. Or a suitcase that was never completely unpacked. And yes—somewhere in here was probably that combat knife Sarah used to keep under her pillow, even when she was only pretending to be his girlfriend while she spent the night at his place.

She hadn't brought it over last night.

Chuck hadn't asked about it.

He sat down at the small polygon-shaped table, just as he always did when he was here. That was becoming a habit too. The silence in the apartment was different from the silence outside. More of a controlled kind. Sarah set her keys down and turned toward him.

"I'm going to change, and then we can go."

She paused briefly.

"You don't have to look away," she said, a hint of amusement in her eyes.

For a moment, it seemed as if she were waiting to see what he would do with that.

Chuck smiled.

Not broadly. More like an old tension finally letting go.

"Okay."

Then, after a brief pause, he added:

"This still feels weird."

Sarah had already started toward the other room, slipping out of her dress as she went, when she glanced back at him.

"Why?"

Chuck shrugged.

"Because before... that wasn't an option."

Sarah nodded as if she accepted that answer.

"Now it is," she said with a knowing smile, then disappeared into the other room.

Chuck remained at the table.

He didn't look away. That wasn't what mattered between them anymore.

The apartment was quiet, but it wasn't the empty kind of quiet.

It was the kind of quiet that no longer needed lies.

Chapter 8.

Sarah changed into a pair of black jeans and a simple T-shirt. She chose a short leather jacket to go with them. There was nothing flashy about the outfit. That was the point.

Then she opened a drawer.

Among her makeup supplies was a handgun. She touched the cold metal.

For a second, she almost picked it up. Almost out of habit. Then she left it where it was. The motion wasn't hurried. It wasn't emotional, either. More like a brief self-check. Instead, she chose a smaller, quieter solution. A throwing knife disappeared into a concealed sheath at her hip. Her movements were precise and practiced.

She never looked toward Chuck.

Not because she was trying to hide anything.

It was simply a habit.

The drawer slid shut.

Sarah smoothed a hand over her shirt, as though she were merely adjusting it so it covered a little more.

"Ready," she said as she pulled her hair back into a simple ponytail.

Chuck looked at her and studied her for a moment.

He couldn't figure out what was different today. Then he realized it was nothing.

"Okay," he said, getting to his feet.

He didn't ask what had been in the drawer.

Chapter 9.

The noise of the street faded as they stepped into the restaurant, where warm, spicy aromas drifted from the kitchen. The sounds of traffic gave way to the clatter of silverware and plates, quiet conversations, and the occasional crash of dishes in the distance.

The restaurant wasn't particularly elegant.

It was the kind of place Morgan would classify as "surprisingly good and suspiciously cheap," and he always seemed to have a story about how he'd found it.

Chuck's smile grew a little more tense as they sat down.

"It's not the best place," he said. "Morgan recommended it."

Sarah looked around, quickly and professionally assessing the room. Then her gaze lingered on Chuck a fraction of a second longer than necessary.

Chuck didn't comment.

He was used to the fact that Sarah always carried a map in her head that he couldn't see.

"That's okay," she said calmly. "I'm sure it's better than the Bamboo Dragon."

The grin that appeared on her face made the reference obvious.

The Triad case.

Chuck laughed.

"That wasn't exactly simple."

They sat down. The table was in a corner, not quite in the center of the room. Sarah gave a tiny nod of approval. Clear sightlines and Unblocked exits. Acceptable background noise. Then she let the thought go. This wasn't the time for it.

They ordered.

The conversation gradually settled back into something normal.

Chuck was in the middle of telling a Morgan story, with too many gestures and far too many details, though he was much more relaxed than he used to be.

"And then Morgan thought the action figure was a limited edition, but actually it was just missing the—"

He stopped.

The sentence died halfway through because two men in suits had appeared beside their table. They had approached too quietly.

"Agent Walker. Agent Bartowski. *Tonight we light the fires...*"

The voice was too official. Chuck blinked. The words didn't fit the situation.

Before he could react, Sarah moved first. She slowly placed her hand over his.

"...and we call our ships to port. It's okay, Chuck," she said quietly.

Her hand remained on his, but she wasn't trying to reassure him anymore.

"Just protocol."

Her voice was calm compared to what her body already knew. Sarah's expression didn't change, but one shoulder tightened by a millimeter. For her, that was panic.

So much for the day off...

They stood and paid. The two suited men escorted them outside.

The sounds of the restaurant gradually faded behind them as they stepped back onto the street.

A black van waited in the side alley. An undercover one, masked as a civilian contractor van. Inside, two more agents were already seated.

The air suddenly felt heavier. Chuck's gaze swept over the area.

Too many people. Too much control for something this minor mishap. Two more figures appeared behind them and suddenly something broke in the pattern.

Sarah's body tensed before Chuck consciously understood why.

The movement wasn't a decision.

It was a reflex. In the next second, Chuck's eyes landed on one of the newly arrived men.

He flashed. Not strongly. Not for long. But enough.

Airplane.

Dolphins.

A corridor inside the Pentagon.

A stack of files.

A covert operative designation.

Fulcrum—or what had become the Ring.

The space around them suddenly felt smaller.

The puzzle snapped together.

A trap.

Neither of them spoke.

Sarah was already moving.

Chuck moved at exactly the same moment.

Almost perfect synchronization. With the Intersect, Chuck's movements became sharper.

He threw his body into them, though there still wasn't complete control behind them.

Sarah focused on the agent directly in front of her.

One clean motion. She grabbed his neck, broke his balance, and slammed him to the ground. No wasted force, just pure efficiency. The man hit the concrete with a dull impact.

Meanwhile, Chuck was already fighting the other one.

It wasn't pretty. It wasn't clean. But it worked.

The Intersect flooded him with images.

Krav Maga.

Angles.

Kung Fu.

Grips.

Centers of gravity.

Chuck tried to keep up.

He avoided one punch.

There wasn't room to avoid the next. He turned his head, absorbed part of the blow, then instinctively shoved his opponent into the side of the van.

Metal rang out and for a moment it looked as though he had the upper hand.

Then came more footsteps. Faster.

More of them were coming from behind.

Sarah lifted her gaze from the ground where she was pinning the first agent.

She didn't look at Chuck for confirmation. She didn't need to, she already knew.

"More of them," she said.

Chuck didn't answer.

There wasn't time. Two more agents were already moving and behind them, even more shadows.

The space that had seemed manageable only moments ago was closing around them.

While Chuck turned to face the attackers coming from behind, Sarah had already picked up the rhythm of the men advancing in front of her.

One of them raised a stun gun.

Not a gun.

Not a blade.

Sarah immediately understood.

They were wanted alive. The realization didn't slow her down. She redirected the first attack to the side. The stun gun crackled through empty air beside her. She stepped closer, too close for the weapon to be effective. She seized the man's wrist, twisted it downward, and yanked. Something in his hand popped. The stun gun dropped to the pavement.

The second agent was already moving.

Sarah lowered her center of gravity and drew the concealed knife.

A fast, precise slash across his thigh. Not deep enough to kill him, just to throw him out of balance. The agent's knee buckled.

For half a second there was silence.

Then all hell broke loose again.

Sarah didn't stop. She moved relentlessly forward. Every action was built around a single condition: Chuck stayed behind her and she had to protect him.

Meanwhile, Chuck was already in the middle of the fight behind them.

The Intersect images came faster than he could process them, but his body followed anyway.

An elbow backward and striking behind him. It hit hard. A follow up half-turn and the kick delivered with momentum. One attacker stumbled backward but didn't fall.

Some movements only made sense afterward—after he'd nearly missed them. Chuck stopped trying to be graceful.

There wasn't time and this wasn't the place for it.

His punch swung too wide and missed completely, another more accurate left hook followed up. For a moment, everything connected.

Then it fell apart again. With a sudden idea, he used one attacker's arm to drag him in front of him as a shield against the next. Not pretty, but effective street fighting.

The air filled with movement, quick footsteps, and short, heavy impacts.

And the attackers kept coming.

Chuck searched for Sarah with a quick glance.

When he saw her moving, he was reminded why nobody got to touch her.

The knife shifted in Sarah's hand. A quick upward slash cut into one attacker's arm.

The strike had started half a second too late. Enough for her to notice.

She couldn't afford another mistake. The blade got stuck in the guy's forearm. She didn't try to pull it free, just let it go and with a kick created distance between them.

Then she moved again. Faster. Fought harder. Her pace wasn't justified. But Chuck was behind her and that's why she didn't slow down. Another agent got behind her and closed his arms around her neck.

Sarah didn't panic. She dropped her weight, hooked an elbow into the hold, broke the grip with a quick practiced movement, and drove an elbow backward. It connected, the dull crack wasn't loud, but it was enough. The hold disappeared.

Across the fight, Chuck wasn't trying to be nice anymore.

He dropped one attacker to his knees. A spinning kick sent another crashing to the ground. The Intersect kept flashing images, but he wasn't thinking about them anymore.

He just kept moving. Unstoppable.

For a moment, there was only silence. Everyone was down.

Sarah didn't say a word, she grabbed Chuck's hand and started running. Then she looked at him, not to check on him, but to reassure herself. Chuck looked back for a second. That was enough for her.

The next corner was only a few yards away.

Chuck actually laughed with a disbelieving sound.

"We're gonna make it!"

Sarah didn't answer.

But one corner of her mouth tightened briefly. They didn't look back.

As soon as they rounded the corner, their momentum shattered.

Two more agents popped up. They almost collided with them. The stun guns were already in their hands.

No life-threatening situations.

The thought reached Chuck too late. The electrical arc flashed. It didn't drop them instantly. First came the shock. Then the paralysis.

"Sarah—"

The word broke apart. Chuck's body locked up, then convulsed as the current ripped through him. Sarah took the hit as well. Her muscles stopped obeying. She managed one more step forward. Anger and adrenaline carried her. Then her leg gave in. The world tilted sideways.

And both of them crashed to the ground.

Chapter 10.

Chuck felt the pain first. Then came the darkness. The cool concrete seeped through his clothes. A shiver ran through him. He moved, and his wrist immediately pulled tight.

He was handcuffed.

"Sarah?" he asked hoarsely.

A brief pause.

"I'm here," came the quiet reply from somewhere to his left.

Chuck slowly let out the breath he'd been holding. He turned his head towards her voice. For a moment, the memory of the taser surged through him again. Every muscle protested even the smallest movement.

"You okay?"

"I've been worse," Sarah replied. After a brief pause, she added, "You?"

Chuck attempted a half-smile that neither of them could see.

"I've definitely been less electrocuted."

Sarah let out a quiet breath of her own. Not quite a laugh, but close.

Silence settled between them again.

Chuck shifted more carefully this time. His hands were secured behind his back. His legs were free, but heavy. The floor beneath him was smooth and cold.

"I can't see anything," he said.

"Neither can I," Sarah replied. Then, after a moment's thought, she added, "That doesn't mean anything."

That didn't sound reassuring. Sarah wasn't supposed to not see things. Chuck swallowed.

"Okay. So... we're handcuffed in a very dark, very unfriendly place after a bunch of fake agents took us down with tasers."

A moment of silence.

"That... wasn't part of the plan."

Sarah didn't answer immediately. She listened to him—not his words, but his voice.

"No. It wasn't."

Chuck heard her move. Metal scraped softly. Testing the boundaries. She was always a step ahead.

"How tight?" he finally asked.

"Reasonably."

Chuck sighed.

"Of course."

Silence again.

Then:

"Chuck."

Her voice had changed. Sharper. More focused.

"Yeah?"

"When we were outside... what did you see?"

Chuck closed his eyes. Not that it mattered.

The images were still there. "It was a flash," he said quietly. "Quick. But..." He stopped, trying to piece it together. "Fulcrum. Or what's left of it. A Ring splinter cell. Deep-cover operatives. This wasn't an official CIA team."

Sarah didn't answer right away. When she finally spoke, her voice had grown noticeably colder.

"Then I hope they're looking for us."

Chuck's stomach tightened.

"Casey?"

"Casey would've reported that we never checked in," Sarah said immediately. Not sharply. Just as a fact.

A brief pause.

"And after Switzerland this week, he would've come after us again. But he didn't, so..."

She thought for a second. Chuck exhaled. He already knew what she was going to say.

"Okay. So we're on our own."

"Yes."

It was a simple word. But it carried a different weight now. Chuck shifted his wrists against the cuffs. Metal scraped.

"Good news," he said. "At least we're still together."

Silence.

Then Sarah's voice, softer this time:

"Yeah."

For the first time, she wasn't responding to the situation. She was responding to him.

Carefully, she moved. Pulling her knees toward her chest as far as she could, she worked her cuffed hands underneath her legs and brought them around to the front. The maneuver required balance, flexibility, and a slimmer frame than most people possessed.

Sarah grunted softly as her hands finally came free in front of her. She reached out into the darkness, searching for Chuck. He wasn't where she expected. Her hand slightly trembled in empty air. The reaction came faster than it should have.

Then she found him.

Chuck tensed when her fingers brushed against him. Then slowly relaxed, as if his body remembered that this situation—however bad—was still familiar. Her touch was warm, a sense of serenity. He didn't say anything right away. In the darkness, he matched his breathing to Sarah's before he matched his thoughts.

"There you are," Sarah said softly, as if confirming reality itself.

There was no panic in her voice. Just something to hold on to. Chuck nodded before remembering she couldn't see him. Sarah's hand gently cupped his face. She pulled him closer and kissed him.

Softly.

Briefly.

"Let's get out of here," she said.

Chuck didn't move for a moment.

The kiss had been brief.

But real.

"Yeah. That... sounds like a good plan."

He slowly shifted upward until his back rested against something.

Cold.

Smooth.

Concrete.

Or metal.

"Okay," he whispered. "So. We've got a dark room, handcuffs, and zero visibility. Classic."

"Chuck."

"Yeah?"

"Listen."

He fell silent. Chuck held his breath, at first, he heard nothing. His own pulse was too loud. Then... Something very faint. A deep, steady hum somewhere beyond the walls.

"A generator?" he asked quietly.

"Probably," Sarah replied. "And not nearby."

"So we're not in somebody's basement."

"No."

A brief pause.

"More like a facility."

That somehow sounded worse. Chuck slid his shoulder along the wall, mapping the room inch by inch. His shoe bumped into something. He froze.

"Found something?" Sarah asked immediately.

"Maybe."

He nudged it with his foot, it made a metallic sound.

"Some kind of... grate? Or tray."

"Don't kick it away."

"I'm not."

Chuck crouched as much as the cuffs allowed. His fingers found cold metal. Flat. Raised edges.

"Yeah. It's a tray."

He paused.

"Empty."

"They've used this room before."

That sounded even worse. Chuck sat back down.

"Okay. So they're not just storing us."

"No ", Sarah's voice had become fully professional now, calm and clear.

Chuck took a breath.

"Okay. So... plan?"

A brief silence, then Sarah said:

"The cuffs."

Chuck lifted his wrists.

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing. I just... can't see what I'm doing."

"You don't need to."

She moved closer. Chuck heard her shift across the concrete.

"You'll feel it. Turn a little ", she tried to move him. " To your left".

Chuck obeyed. A moment later Sarah's fingers were on his wrists. Precise and a bit cold. She ran her fingertips over the cuffs.

"Not standard," she murmured. "But not military grade either."

"Is that... good?"

"It means we have a chance."

Chuck exhaled quietly.

"I like chances."

Sarah didn't answer. She was working, her fingers moving over the metal. Then stopped. A tiny adjustment. Then another. Nothing. She paused.

"I need something thin."

Chuck raised an eyebrow, though in the darkness it accomplished absolutely nothing.

"I'd say I always carry something like that, but..."

"I know," Sarah said.

Silence.

Then: "Wait."

Chuck heard the rustle of fabric. He lifted his head.

"Please tell me you're not—"

"Wire."

Her tone was matter-of-fact.

"Small piece. Hidden in the hem of my jeans."

Chuck smiled in the darkness.

"Of course you have a wire hidden in your jeans. And here I was already trying to figure out how to take apart your bra for one while handcuffed and completely blind."

"Habits."

She didn't sound proud, just practical.

A brief pause.

"Okay. Next step?"

Sarah's voice came closer again.

"I'm working on it."

Chuck felt her searching fingers find the cuff.

"Stay still. Don't move."

A beat.

"If I drop this, we're screwed."

Chuck swallowed but didn't move. A few years ago he would've panicked. Now he simply let Sarah do what she did best. Soft scraping. Tiny movements. Then the cuff began to give. Chuck desperately wanted to stretch his shoulder, but he stayed perfectly still.

"Okay," Sarah said quietly. "Now mine."

"Just hold out your hand."

Chuck felt the wire placed into his palm. It felt almost weightless and yet too important.

"Turn it carefully until the lock gives."

Chuck felt around for a moment and started working. Considering how little lock-picking practice he'd actually gotten in Prague, it went surprisingly well. A soft click and Sarah's hands were free. Without thinking, Chuck pulled her into a hug. Sarah tensed for a moment. As if her first instinct was to step away from the sudden embrace. Then she didn't, instead relaxed.

"Great. So now what?" Chuck asked.

"We wait."

Sarah rested her head on his shoulder.

"The cuffs and the tray can both be weapons."

A brief pause.

"And we'll have the element of surprise."

Chuck nodded.

"Sounds good."

Another pause.

"Assuming they don't open the door on us right now."

Chapter 11.

Chuck slowly let go of Sarah, but his hand lingered on her arm for another moment, as if he wanted to make sure she was really there.

The darkness settled over them again.

Not the calm silence from before.

This one was tense.

Waiting.

"So..." Chuck whispered. "Are we just sitting here like two very badly parked tourists?"

"We're listening," Sarah corrected quietly.

Chuck nodded. Then he remembered nobody could see it.

"We're listening," he repeated.

A few seconds passed.

Or more.

It was hard to tell.

Then—

A sound.

Distant and a bit metallic.

Chuck tensed.

"You hear that?"

"Yes."

Sarah's voice had changed completely now.

It was sharp, not uncertain.

Footsteps.

At first only one set.

Then several.

Echoing somewhere down a corridor.

Chuck leaned forward slowly, his fingers tightening around the cold metal.

The edge of the tray.

Sarah touched his hand lightly.

A quick squeeze.

I'm here.

Chuck squeezed back.

The footsteps drew closer.

Keys rattled. Metal against metal. The lock gave with a click. Then a narrow beam of light sliced through the darkness as the door opened.

Chuck's eyes narrowed immediately, but he didn't look directly at it. Not entirely. Just enough to make out the silhouettes. Two men. One stepped inside.

"They're awake," a voice said.

Not a question. Sarah didn't move. Neither did Chuck.

The second figure remained in the doorway.

Holding a weapon.

"Good," the first man continued. "Then let's find out what they know about the Intersect."

A step closer.

"They only need to react to the images."

Too close.

Sarah's fingers tightened almost imperceptibly. Chuck felt it.

Now.

The man bent down to grab Chuck's arm and in that instant, everything escalated.

Chuck swung the tray a fraction of a second later than he'd intended.

But it still connected. Metal cracked against the man's face with a dull impact.

Surprise and pain made him take a half a step backward.

Sarah was already moving—not because of a signal from Chuck, but because of that half-beat mistake.

Low and fast. The second man's weapon was just coming up when Sarah struck his wrist, twisted it aside, and drove him into the wall with the momentum.

The gun hit the floor with a sharp clatter. Sarah kept him pinned against the wall a fraction of a second longer than necessary.

Chuck didn't stop.

He grabbed the handcuffs and used them like a weapon, smashing them into the other man's face again and again.

He didn't count. He just kept hitting him.

"Sarah... now!"

"Already on it."

A quick movement, a dull impact. The second guard's body went limp.

Silence.

Only their fast breathing remained. Chuck slowly lowered the handcuffs.

His hand was shaking a little.

"That," he took a breath. "That actually worked?"

Sarah picked up the fallen weapon and checked it quickly.

"We're not safe yet."

Chuck nodded.

"Right. Because why would it ever be that simple?"

The light still spilled through the open doorway. A narrow path forward. Sarah looked at Chuck.

"Ready?"

Chuck looked back at her.

"Yes."

A faint smile crossed his face.

"Okay. Let's go."

Sarah held his gaze for a moment.

Then:

"Let's go."

And they stepped into the light.

There was no going back.

Chapter 12.

The light was suddenly too bright after the darkness.

Chuck squinted but didn't stop moving. Sarah was already in motion beside him—not faster, just more decisive, as if she had chosen a direction before the door had even opened. The corridor was narrow, lined with concrete walls and cold, evenly spaced strips of light overhead.

Too sterile.

After a brief assessment, Sarah turned left. Chuck didn't ask why. He simply followed. They ran at half speed. Their shoes struck the floor with dull impacts, though Chuck still felt they were making far too much noise. He tried to step more quietly, with limited success.

After rounding a corner, Sarah suddenly slowed and threw an arm out in front of him.

Chuck nearly ran into her. Footsteps came from ahead.

"Right," Sarah whispered.

A narrow side corridor opened there, barely lit, they slipped inside.

Two armed guards walked past along the main corridor.

They weren't running or searching.

Chuck held his breath, pressing his back against the cold wall.

Sarah didn't look at him. She was watching the hallway.

But her hand remained nearby, close enough to reach him without actually touching him.

When the footsteps faded away, Chuck slowly exhaled.

"Okay... this is going surprisingly well."

"So far," Sarah said.

They moved again. Chuck slowed for a moment.

Something felt off. There were markings on the walls.

Numbers. One of them caught his attention.

3B.

The Intersect stirred. Not as clear images.

Fragments. Hallways. A blue-tinted floor plan. An elevator. Then it vanished.

"Wait," he whispered.

Sarah stopped immediately and Chuck nearly collided with her.

"Sorry."

"Quieter."

He lowered his voice.

"Right. Right, quieter. I don't have the full layout, but... there's something that way. An elevator. Or an exit. Or both."

"How sure are you?" Sarah asked.

Chuck grimaced and made a vague gesture with his hand.

"Like... thirty percent?"

Sarah looked at him for half a second, then she was already moving.

A quiet, disbelieving laugh escaped Chuck.

"That's what I like about you."

They kept running, the corridor widened, which was a bad sign.

More doors meant more possibilities or more mistakes.

Then the alarm activated. A deep, pulsing vibration that seemed to travel through the walls themselves.

Chuck slowed for half a step.

"That's definitely not for us, right?"

Sarah didn't answer.

"Sarah?"

"Faster."

At the next corner they ran straight into two guards.

Too close again, there wasn't time to fully react.

Sarah moved first—but half a beat late. One of the guards already had his weapon halfway up.

Chuck saw it. He didn't think too much, ripped a fire extinguisher from the wall and threw it as hard as he could. It wasn't a clean hit, but it was enough to throw the guard off balance.

"Sorry!"

Sarah immediately finished the job.

Fast with some close punches and elbow. One guard hit the floor.

The other tried to react, but Chuck was already there. Without any plan, he shoved the guy and made a hasty, badly angled punch to his face. It wasn't pretty, but effective to throw the guard into Sarah's way. She made a snap kick to his head and the guard fell.

Chuck was breathing hard.

"This is becoming a habit."

Sarah watched one of the guards on the floor a fraction longer than necessary, then looked at Chuck.

"Let's go."

Chuck nodded.

This time he didn't ask questions.

At the end of the corridor stood a metal door.

An elevator or something like one.

Chuck stopped in front of it.

Sarah glanced at him.

"Thirty percent, huh?"

"More now."

The alarm grew stronger.

Footsteps echoed somewhere in the distance.

Lots of them.

Getting closer.

Chuck pressed the button and they waited, the downward arrow of the elevator indicator lit up. Yet, nothing happened.

"Of course."

Chuck shifted impatiently in front of the door. Sarah stepped half a pace back, into position.

The elevator didn't come.

Chuck pressed the button again as if that might somehow help. Nothing. Only the dull pulsing alarm and the approaching footsteps. "Seriously?" he whispered.

Sarah wasn't looking at the panel anymore.

She was watching the corridor.

"It's locked out."

Chuck closed his eyes for a moment.

"Of course it is."

The footsteps were much closer now.

Not one person.

Several.

Moving faster than before.

Sarah cast a quick glance down the opposite end of the hallway.

Her eyes moved over the walls, the doors, the corners.

Calculating.

"We can't go back."

Chuck followed her gaze.

Several doors.

All closed.

Or at least they appeared to be.

"Then... we improvise."

He was already moving toward one of them.

Not because he was certain.

Because they had to do something.

He grabbed the handle.

It didn't move.

"Strong start," he muttered.

Sarah was beside him immediately.

A quick pull then a harder one. Nothing budged.

"Locked."

The footsteps echoed off the walls now.

They got closer and closer. Chuck stepped back, his eyes darted around.

Then he saw it. It was not a door, instead a service panel or fire escape. Half recessed into the wall and unmarked. The Intersect stirred again.

Fragments.

Ventilation shafts.

Maintenance routes and tight spaces.

"This."

He was already moving toward it.

Sarah didn't ask, she was already opening it. The panel gave way far more easily than it should have.

Darkness laid beyond and a narrow metal ladder leading upward, illuminated at regular intervals with red service light. Chuck looked up.

"This feels incredibly unsafe."

"Move," Sarah snapped.

The footsteps were already rounding the corner.

Chuck didn't argue, with a swift motion climbed onto the edge and started ascending.

The metal was cold beneath his hands and the ladder creaked softly.

"If this were a horror movie," he whispered, "this is where I'd say this is a terrible idea."

"It isn't."

Sarah climbed in behind him and pulled the panel closed.

Silence.

Then footsteps outside.

"Find them," came a muffled voice.

Both of them held their breath for a moment.

Then they started climbing, only their breathing filled the shaft. And somewhere above them came the steady hum of machinery.

Chuck stopped on the ladder.

"Okay," he whispered. "So we've escaped into a dark, narrow, completely unknown place while being chased by armed men."

A brief pause.

"How good of a decision was this?"

Sarah's voice drifted up from below him. Calm. Focused.

"Better than staying down there."

Chuck nodded slowly.

Mostly to himself.

"Good."

"Then let's keep going."

A pause.

"Upward."

"Toward more problems."

Silence.

Then:

"Chuck."

"Yeah?"

"Quiet."

"Right. Quiet. Completely quiet. Like a ninja. Just gliding through the air like a leaf in the wind. Watch how I soar..."

He climbed one more rung.

The ladder creaked.

Chuck froze.

"...that wasn't my fault."

Sarah didn't answer.

She didn't need to.

They kept climbing.

Chapter 13.

At the top of the ladder, they weren't greeted by another enclosed corridor. They were greeted by light. Chuck paused for a moment before climbing out. Sarah was immediately behind him, staying in motion, watching the room.

After the darkness of the maintenance shaft, the lighting felt almost unnaturally clean. A floor-to-ceiling glass wall stretched along the left side. Beyond it, the mountains stood as black silhouettes against the night sky, broken only by moonlight and the distant glow of the city. It was as if the rest of the world had ceased to exist, leaving only this place behind.

Wood and stone gave it a warm texture. Too much *home* for a place where anything happening wasn't supposed to be. For a moment, Chuck expected this to be another cover-like location. Something corporate. Sterile. Easy to understand.

It wasn't.

This place had received far too many resources to be simple. That was the first thing that felt wrong. The second was what he was looking at. This wasn't a facility. It was a living room. Low couches surrounded a cold fireplace in the center of the room. They didn't look abandoned.

They looked as though someone had stepped away for a moment and could return at any second.

It was too quiet, but not empty. Chuck slowly looked around.

"Okay..." he whispered. "This is so Bond."

He took a step forward and studied the room.

"Or... Archer. Totally Sterling Archer."

Sarah remained behind him but didn't react. Her attention had already shifted toward the right side, where the living-room atmosphere transitioned into something entirely different. Sarah wasn't looking at what belonged, she was looking for what didn't. That was the difference between them.

After the wood and stone came metal and light. Monitors. Consoles. A strange hybrid of old and new technology fused together. The bluish glow wasn't illumination. It seemed like it was kind of a status.

Not fully powered down, nor fully active. They moved deeper into the room. The living room wasn't really a living room any more. It was a workspace. Notes, maps, and photographs covered a long table. Exactly the way people leave things in the middle of a project. As if someone had stepped away for a moment. Perhaps not long ago. Chuck's hand brushed across a document. Coordinates. A photograph beside it.

The Intersect flashed briefly, but it didn't provide a complete picture.

Only fragments and an eerie feeling.

This place wasn't being directed from the outside. It was being directed from within. That was enough. Chuck froze. CIA internal protocols. Operational channels and modifications that didn't belong to the official structure.

"Sarah..."

"I see it," she replied immediately.

Her voice had grown colder. Her eyes lingered on the evidence for a moment before shifting toward the monitors. Figures moved across surveillance feeds. Status indicators pulsed. Without hesitation, Sarah reached over and switched one of the monitors off.

At another workstation, a man with glasses and several days' worth of stubble sat hunched over a keyboard. A lit cigarette hung lazily from the corner of his mouth. He looked like the kind of guy who would kill you first and then help you file your taxes.

He was typing furiously when he finally noticed them and looked up.

"We're late," Chuck said naturally.

The words escaped before he could stop them.

"That's fine, we have awaited you guys" the man replied and turned back to his screen. No hostility. No questions. No reaching for a weapon. "Not any day does Command send more reinforcements. Baker's downstairs. He'll brief you."

He exhaled a stream of smoke.

"But he doesn't like stupid questions. Don't annoy him. Last month he broke a rookie's fingers because the kid kept bothering him. Poor guy's still wearing a cast."

For a second, Chuck couldn't decide whether the man didn't know there was an alarm downstairs—or whether he knew and considered it part of the job.

Neither possibility felt reassuring.

Sarah didn't look at him. She was studying the large display and the open windows on the screen. She simply stepped half a pace closer to Chuck. She had already decided.

This man wasn't relevant. Currently not an enemy and far from an ally. Part of the infrastructure.

"Which channels are active?" Sarah asked.

Her voice was calm. Too calm.

"Three... and five."

The man blew out another cloud of smoke.

Chuck's heartbeat quickened. It was working. Not perfectly, but enough, they have fooled him. For a moment, Chuck looked back through the glass wall. The mountains remained motionless. As if nothing had happened.

"So this whole thing..." He gestured around the room. "...is basically a surveillance center with a mountain view?"

Sarah glanced sideways at him but said nothing. A second later, she silently struck the man at the workstation with the grip of the pistol she'd taken earlier. The unconscious body collapsed onto the carpet.

"Jesus, Sarah!"

"Why is that blinking?" she asked, pointing at a monitor.

"I don't know."

A slight delay.

"Chuck."

"Okay, fine, I know. I think. Red blinking things are never good. I mean, they always indicate some kind of problem—"

"Focus, Chuck."

Her voice was sharp.

"We need to lock this facility down. Now."

"I'm focusing."

Chuck nodded quickly and dropped into the chair. His fingers flew across the keyboard. Even without the flashes, he could break into systems. Moments later, he sealed the fire doors on every floor. Now the maintenance shaft was the only route up.

Sarah checked the submachine gun resting on the table. The magazine was full.

Chuck turned to the displays again. The screens didn't open all at once. They unfolded in layers. First numbers. Then map coordinates. Then a structure that Chuck's brain initially refused to process as data. It felt more like an emotion than information. As if someone had rearranged the CIA itself. And he was looking at the fractures from the inside.

Sarah wasn't watching the screens. She was watching Chuck's hands. Whether they were steady. Whether they shook. That was easier for her to read than the system.

"I've locked down the bunker," Chuck announced suddenly.

Sarah lightly touched the back of his hand and it was slightly damp. She remembered him once admitting outside Wienerlicious that his hands got sweaty when he panicked. It felt like a lifetime ago. He was panicking now too. He was just hiding it better.

"How much time do we have?" she asked immediately.

Chuck looked at the screen.

"Not much."

As he said it, windows began flashing across the display.

"Sarah... somebody's rewriting this."

Chuck wanted to solve the problem.

"Hold them off. We need to call Casey."

Sarah wanted to survive.

The silence in the room hadn't disappeared. It simply wasn't peaceful anymore. Chuck glanced at her, then turned back to the computer and smacked the keyboard again.

"Okay..." he muttered. "This officially qualifies as a series of very bad decisions."

The clicking keys sounded too loud in the room.

It wasn't noisy and everything else remained under complete control. The glow of the monitors washed across Chuck's face. The system wasn't resisting him. It was letting him in. Too easily for a good hacker..And that was the worst sign of all.

"Okay... okay..." he muttered. "This is like a bad day at Buy More, except here the Blue Screen of Death has literal consequences."

Sarah didn't respond. She had already returned her attention to the exits. Standing still and calculating. Predicting where people would enter and how long each approach would take.

Then something changed on the screen.

It was a reaction, not an error. The cursor stopped and a new line appeared on its own.

Access Granted.

Chuck's hands froze. The system accepted every command he entered. He felt it far too easy, a really secure system wouldn't behave this way.

This wasn't hacking.

"That wasn't me," Chuck said quietly.

Sarah was already standing behind him.

"I know."

A moment of silence. Then the system opened further. Maps. Networks. Live connections and operator names.

Not aliases. Real names.

CIA internal designations.

Operational hubs, black sites.

And beside every line, a tiny modification marker.

Someone wasn't merely using the system.

Someone started to rewrite the whole CIA at once.

Chuck leaned back. This system wasn't behaving like anything he knew.

"This... this isn't Fulcrum," he said. "This goes deeper. Fulcrum made mistakes. This is different."

Sarah didn't answer immediately, just stared at the screen. Her expression tightened.

"Not deeper," she said. "This is part of the CIA. They didn't have to steal operational codes. The codes are valid."

Another line flashed onto the display.

Operation Blackout Activated.

Sarah read it. Then said very quietly:

"They're changing operations. Official orders are being sent out. Fake ones."

Chuck slowly looked up at her.

"Like... all operations?"

"Yes."

The word wasn't emphasized. That was the problem for Chuck. It sounded like a fact. Behind them, the man Sarah had knocked out began to stir.

"Okay... before you take this too seriously..." he started.

Sarah was already beside him. For a fraction of a second she evaluated the situation. Not whether it was right. Whether she was already too late. A quick strike again. The man collapsed. Sarah immediately searched for something to tie him up with.

The monitors continued flashing. The system never stopped. Chuck glanced back.

"Sarah..."

"There wasn't another option," she said simply.

There was no argument in her voice. Only a firm decision so Chuck turned back to the screen.

"Okay. So this is officially worse than I thought."

Sarah wasn't watching the monitors anymore. The exits were the greater threat now.

"Chuck," she said quietly. "We need to go."

"If this stays active..." Chuck swallowed hard and typed even faster. "Everything's over."

He looked up.

"I can't let this happen. I can stop it. Trust me."

Some part of Sarah wanted to argue, but in the end she didn't. Instead she searched for a way out.

If they stayed, Chuck might uncover and stop a betrayal rooted deep within the agency—something that could affect the entire CIA and perhaps far more. The entire world will be brought into Chaos. Besides that threat, they could die at any moment if the armed men reached them.

The dilemma was real.

If they disappeared, their lives as spies could be over regardless. On the other hand, none of it mattered if they didn't survive. Neither option was good.

Only less bad.

Inside the unconscious man's pocket, Sarah found a cellphone. She dialed a number. A simple payphone somewhere in New Jersey relayed the signal halfway across the country. After several rings, someone answered without any greeting.

"Walker, where are you?"

Casey.

"We're in trouble. We were kidnapped," Sarah said quickly.

"It looks like a black site somewhere in the mountains, not far from the city..."

She stopped.

She had no idea how to provide an exact location. Then she saw it. Several empty pizza boxes scattered around the room. All from the same place.

"Got it, Casey. Track Pizza Palace deliveries."

Silence on the other end. He didn't immediately question it. That was both good and bad.

"Pizza?" Casey sounded suspicious.

"Yeah. Multiple boxes. Same chain. Fresh delivery. Not long ago. There must be a place they drop them off. We should be near that."

Sarah scanned the room again. Several empty boxes. One still contained half a pizza.

Casey sighed over the phone.

"Pizza... sounds too easy."

"Casey dammit!"

The tone said everything.

"Fine."

A brief pause and Casey came to the same conclusion as Sarah.

"Pizza Palace has three distribution routes in the area. If this isn't a dead end, you have to be close."

"Casey, it's a three-level bunker with a modern style home on top. At least a dozen armed men. Don't bring the cavalry."

A beat.

"You are the cavalry."

A short silence. Casey understood exactly what she meant.

"I'm on my way."

Chapter 14.

The air in the room no longer felt like air.

The constant hum of machinery and the cold blue glow of the monitors were the only things holding the place together. It was as if the room wasn't really a building anymore.

For the first time, Chuck truly understood how little connection he had to the decisions he had always believed came from his own command. His fingers remained on the keyboard, but the confidence was gone. Now it felt more like instinctively clinging to something while everything slowly came apart around him.

The program corrupting the CIA network was still running.

At the same time, another system on the adjacent monitor was attempting to break into the bunker's physical controls and override Chuck's directives.

"Sarah..."

When Chuck finally spoke, he wasn't reporting information anymore. The realization forming in his mind wasn't technical.

"They're breaking into the elevator controls. The program is spreading faster."

He switched to the adjacent terminal.

"I can't hold both at the same time."

"Then don't."

Sarah's voice left no room for debate. There was no longer time for debate. Only a quick, nearly invisible decision, one in which the world simply reorganized itself according to a new logic. Sarah began moving furniture.

The couch turned sideways across the primary approach routes. The table blocked the direct line of sight from the hallway. The chairs stopped being furniture and became obstacles. And for the first time, Chuck truly understood that for Sarah, the environment had never been background.

It had always been a tool.

A muffled sound echoed from the maintenance shaft.

Muted voices and metallic impacts. Whoever was coming wasn't rushing, but they were getting closer.

At the same time, the elevator status changed on the monitors. The system authorized access. Almost as if the bunker itself had made the decision.

Chuck wasn't just typing quickly anymore. He was desperately trying to hold together a logic structure that kept falling apart before his eyes. Every attempt to lock down the system failed.

Sarah remained behind cover, the SMG steadily aimed toward the shaft.

And in that moment, Chuck realized with complete clarity that she was the only thing standing between them and total collapse.

He had no weapon or cover. Nothing but a system that was no longer necessarily working for him.

The maintenance hatch opened, so Sarah immediately fired a short burst. A figure appeared in the opening, just to stagger backward, and vanish back into the darkness.

At the same moment, the elevator arrived. The doors opened.

And the room exploded into motion. The gunfire didn't come from one direction. It came from several as the gunmen tried to spread out. Intersecting angles. As if the attackers already knew the layout Sarah had created and were systematically working around and with it. That was very professional of them. Sarah's movements remained precise. But the room no longer gave her enough time to react.

Meanwhile, Chuck could only watch as the system continued allowing personnel into the facility while he searched desperately for the one point where everything might still stop with a single command.

"I can't hold this much longer!" Sarah shouted between bursts of gunfire. Rounds cracked through the air around her, slamming into her cover.

Chuck had one piece of luck. The computer stations sat inside a recessed section of the room. The attackers couldn't see him yet. But it was only a matter of time.

A moment later, Sarah's SMG went dry. She immediately dropped it and transitioned to the pistol tucked into her waistband.

The rhythm changed. The attackers sensed an advantage. Fewer rounds were coming their way. They became bolder.

Sarah had been waiting for exactly that.

Her shots became deliberate and precise. Targeted for maximal damage. Then the slide locked back.

The pistol was also empty.

She pulled a second magazine from her jeans pocket and reloaded in one smooth motion. The couch around her was being shredded by gunfire now, sending bits of stuffing into the air.

The smell of gunpowder filled the room.

Then everything ran dry. Two of the attackers moved forward covering each other.

Chuck finally reached the core of the program. He was seconds away from stopping it. A stray bullet slammed into the second monitor beside him.

He jumped violently but kept typing. One second later his finger hit Enter. The program stopped.

At the same moment, everything in the room became too close.

The sounds.

The movement.

The danger.

It cumulated and at that breaking point, Sarah stopped retreating. She grabbed Chuck and dragged him behind the furniture they had designated as concealment.

A fraction of a second later, the wall behind them exploded where Chuck had been sitting.

There, surrounded by debris, smoke, and flashing light—where the system could no longer provide any stability at all—Sarah stopped following logic.

Instead, she followed something deeper.

Pulling Chuck toward her, she kissed him.

If they were about to die...

There was no room left for thought.

Only the kiss.

It pushed everything else away.

Chuck knew they were going to die.

Then the glass wall simply collapsed. Everything seemed to explode as a sustained burst of gunfire tore through the right side of the structure. The hail of bullets shredded everything in its path. Half the room became rubble and Casey was standing in the opening.

A smoking machine gun in his hands. As if chaos wasn't an obstacle to him, but his natural environment.

"This party got a little too loud."

He stepped forward. Glass and debris crunched beneath his boots. Then he walked to the service-shaft entrance and unleashed another burst down its entire length.

Casey grunted with satisfaction.

There probably weren't any survivors. Just to be sure, he casually pulled a few frag grenades and tossed them down the shaft. Some clinking sound and muffled explosions followed. Dust drifted upward.

The silence afterward wasn't peaceful. It was an artificially created absence of life.

Sarah slowly stood beside Chuck while Casey surveyed the room and silently acknowledged success.

He removed a small demolition pack from his shoulder and slid it into the elevator. Then he sent it to a lower level and moments later he pressed a remote detonator.

A deep rumble rolled through the structure. The entire building shook. Dust and small flames burst through the gaps around the elevator doors. As if the bunker itself were venting steam.

"Thank you," Sarah said.

"Yeah. Thanks, Casey."

"You're welcome."

Casey patted the machine gun affectionately.

"I always liked playing with Vera."

"Wait... did you just called your machine gun Vera?"

"Shut up, Bartowski."

Chuck grinned for a moment before the exhaustion finally caught up with him.

"We stopped it," Chuck said quietly.

Mostly to himself.

"I hope so," Sarah replied.

The tension was still coursing through her.

Chuck copied several files onto a portable drive while Casey dragged the unconscious technician outside and stuffed him into the trunk of the Crown Victoria parked nearby.

Sarah walked over and wrapped her arms around Chuck.

"I thought we were done."

"Me too."

He exhaled.

"That was way too close."

"Let's go home."

Sarah took his hand.

Together they walked out into the desert night.

Later, the Crown Victoria's engine started with a deep, steady rumble, as if nothing unusual had happened.

The city lights drifted past the windows with complete indifference.

Chuck and Sarah leaned back in the rear seat and finally allowed themselves to relax.

"Beckman's going to be very angry," Sarah said casually.

"Don't worry, Walker. I'll take the blame," Casey replied. "I got the lead from an informant and hit the base myself."

"With all due respect, Casey," Chuck said, his voice still slightly shaky from the adrenaline, "is Beckman really going to believe you did all that alone?"

"I'll tell her there wasn't time to call for backup."

Sarah looked at Chuck and took his hand again. Casey didn't say anything else. The silence was comforting.

When they arrived home, there were no goodbyes. Just movement. Casey headed toward his apartment.

Chuck and Sarah stopped briefly beneath their bedroom window.

"What a day off," Chuck sighed.

"Tell me about it," Sarah agreed.

Then, quietly, they climbed in.

Epilogue

The kitchen was still wrapped in the remnants of night. The silence in the apartment felt like a poorly finished dream—not fully awake, but no longer truly asleep either. Sarah stood by the refrigerator barefoot, wearing only a pair of panties and a loose, short night gown.

She pulled a pitcher of orange juice from the fridge as if it were the most natural thing in the world to be doing at dawn after a life-threatening night.

A soft rustle came from the doorway.

Morgan appeared in his pajamas with messy hair. Half asleep, he was wearing the unmistakable expression of someone who wasn't entirely convinced reality was currently functioning correctly.

"Hey, dude," he mumbled automatically. „I had the weirdest dream.”

Then his eyes finally caught up with the scene. He froze for a few seconds. Then stopped. His eyes widened.

Sarah closed the refrigerator door.

"I was just, uh..." Morgan began.

Sarah turned toward him, as if only now assessing the situation, and calmly returned her attention to the pitcher.

"Hello? Morgan?"

Out of pure reflex, Morgan returned the greeting.

The voice, however, no longer sounded like his own.

"Want some?"

Silence.

"Hi."

Morgan twitched.

"Want some orange juice?"

"Orange juice?"

"Orange juice."

"Absolutely. Sounds great. Vitamin D is very important. And vitamin C. The C vitamins. Vitamin C. Singular..." he rambled.

Meanwhile, he remained completely unable to stop staring at Sarah. Still frozen, like malfunctioning software.

A nearly invisible smile flickered across Sarah's face—not at the situation itself, but at Morgan's complete system failure.

"Right."

She waved a hand dismissively, pressed the pitcher into his hands, and headed back toward Chuck.

"I came for milk. Nice jugs," Morgan said.

Then immediately corrected himself.

"The pitcher. Sorry. I..."

Once Sarah was out of earshot, he let out a long sigh.

"I hate you, Chuck."

Another sigh.

"I hate you..."