

# Chuck versus the Open Invite

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· Chapters: 14

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## Chapter 1: Chuck versus the Open Invite

A/N: Takes place around season 2, no exact place on the timeline thought. Comes before the Day Off or Black Swan. Will be updated as soon as I can translate it, but in worst case updates will come weekly.

### Chapter 1 - Day One, 7:30 A.M.

Chuck woke up expecting an ordinary morning. Still half asleep, he slapped the alarm clock silent and lay there for another few seconds before something felt... off. He was wearing a suit. Not only that—a fake mustache clung to his upper lip, and a name tag on his jacket proudly declared: François Chuck blinked.

"...Right."

Last night's mission. He'd spent the evening pretending to be a wealthy French businessman. Maybe he shouldn't have accepted quite so many glasses of champagne. He peeled off the mustache with a wince, stripped out of the suit, and headed for the shower. Ellie and Devon were already gone—or maybe they hadn't even made it home from the hospital yet.

The hot water slowly chased the fog from his head. Bits and pieces of the previous night drifted back. Crystal chandeliers. Terrible French. Far too much champagne. And Sarah. She'd looked incredible in that evening gown. Chuck smiled despite himself.

"I wish..." he sighed.

A few minutes later he stood in the kitchen brewing coffee. Leaning against the counter, he stared into the steaming mug as if it might provide answers. The memories returned in fragments—bright lights, awkward French, an overenthusiastic champagne toast... ..and Sarah. He decided he'd stop by the Orange Orange before work. Not because he had to. Technically they were just a cover couple. Still... It felt right. Maybe she'd feel the same way. He couldn't stop thinking about the moment she'd smiled at him in the middle of the ballroom. Not the practiced cover smile. A real one. Chuck shook his head.

"Okay, Bartowski. Don't overthink it. It was just a mission."

He took another sip of coffee. Then another memory hit. A man. Tall. Too well dressed not to be suspicious. And... A briefcase. Chuck froze.

"The briefcase..."

His own memory blurred into something else. An Intersect flash exploded behind his eyes. Fish. An airplane. A giraffe. Encrypted drive. Weapons blueprints. International arms trafficking network. The briefcase wasn't just another prop. It was the mission. Chuck set his mug down and instinctively reached for his phone. Nothing. He looked at the kitchen counter. Nothing. He rushed into the living room, checking under cushions, behind the couch, even inside the refrigerator—as though every missing object in the universe eventually ended up there.

"No, no, no... this is really bad..."

He had just slipped on his shoes when his phone finally rang. It was lying on the floor beside the dresser. CASEY flashed on the screen. Chuck grabbed it.

"Hey, Casey!"

"Bartowski."

Casey's voice was as warm as a firing squad.

"Do you have the briefcase?"

Chuck stopped cold.

"Well... that depends."

A pause.

"How bad would it be if I said... maybe?"

Silence. Then—

"Orange Orange. Now."

The line went dead. Chuck sighed.

"So... I guess I really am stopping by Sarah's."

The Orange Orange was unusually quiet, carrying its familiar scent of fresh citrus. Sarah stood behind the counter in civilian clothes—jeans and a simple pink top—but to Chuck... She was still Sarah. She looked up as he walked in, and for just a moment everything else faded away. That feeling was back. Something bigger than their cover relationship had ever allowed.

"Hey, Chuck."

"Heeey," Chuck answered a little too quickly.

"I just... coffee... well, I already had coffee, so maybe orange juice. Or... conversation. Or..."

Sarah smiled. Just a little.

"Chuck."

"Yeah?"

"Relax."

There was a brief silence before she leaned in slightly.

"Do you have it?"

Chuck swallowed.

"Well... first of all, hi."

She smiled a little wider.

"And second?"

"That depends on what we're looking for."

The front door opened. Casey entered like an approaching thunderstorm.

"The briefcase, Bartowski."

Chuck slowly shook his head.

"I don't have it."

Casey's jaw tightened. He muttered something under his breath that was probably illegal in several states. Sarah's expression was different. She wasn't angry. She looked worried.

"Chuck," she said quietly, "do you remember anything? Any detail at all?"

Chuck hesitated. Then the memories snapped into place. A dark parking garage. The elegant man carrying the briefcase. Handing it to a beautiful woman. A woman Chuck recognized. The flash ended.

"I know who has it."

Casey frowned.

"You don't remember half the night, but you know who has the briefcase?"

"It flashed."

Casey was already turning toward the door.

"Let's move."

Chuck didn't follow. Instead, he looked at Sarah.

"She..."

Sarah met his eyes.

"...she acted like she knew you."

Something changed in Sarah's expression.

"Who?"

Chuck swallowed.

"The woman who organized last night's event."

Silence. The room suddenly felt colder. Sarah's face became completely unreadable. Too unreadable. Casey slowly turned toward her.

"Walker?"

Sarah didn't answer immediately. She looked at Chuck for a long moment before quietly removing her apron and setting it on the counter.

"Then let's go."

Chuck nodded, but he couldn't shake the feeling settling in the pit of his stomach. This wasn't going to be a routine mission. Not even close.

The previous evening's operation had taken place at an upscale winery, where several hostile operatives had been working undercover. Chuck still had no idea where the briefcase had ended up—or even what was inside it. But one question bothered him more than any of that. How did that woman know Sarah?

## **Chapter 2: Chapter 2 - Day One, 8:10 A.M.**

### **Chapter 2 - Day One, 8:10 A.M.**

The black Crown Victoria glided through the morning traffic. Casey drove the way he always did—fast, focused, every movement deliberate. Chuck sat in the back seat, trying to piece together what had happened the night before. The winery. The lights. The music. The champagne. And the woman. There had been something about the way she'd looked at Sarah.

"It was at a winery, right?" Chuck finally said, more to himself than anyone else. "Some exclusive event full of rich people laughing way too hard at things that weren't actually funny."

"Cover event: charity auction," Casey replied flatly. "Reality: arms dealers' summit."

Chuck nodded.

"Of course. Because nothing says fine wine like illegal weapons trafficking."

Sarah sat in the passenger seat, her eyes fixed on the road ahead.

"Chuck," she said quietly. "What exactly did you see?"

Chuck leaned back and closed his eyes, hoping the memory would become clearer.

"The parking garage was dimly lit. The guy with the briefcase..." He frowned. "He was nervous. Not 'I'm about to get caught' nervous. More like... 'I'm working for the wrong people' nervous."

He opened his eyes and looked at Sarah.

"Then the woman showed up."

"She was confident. Didn't ask any questions. She just took the briefcase like she already knew exactly what was inside."

"Did you see her face?" Casey asked.

Chuck nodded.

"Yeah. And..." He hesitated. "She saw me too. Or... François."

"That's a problem," Casey muttered.

"That's not all," Chuck continued. "After she took the briefcase, I saw her looking at you, Sarah."

Silence settled over the car.

"Not the way you'd look at a stranger," Chuck said. "More like..."

"...she recognized you."

Sarah tensed ever so slightly.

"I've worked with a lot of people."

"Yeah, but this was different." Chuck shook his head. "It wasn't a 'we worked together once on a rainy Tuesday' kind of look. It was more..."

Casey turned his head just enough to glance at her.

"Something you'd like to share, Walker?"

Sarah didn't answer. The road stretched endlessly ahead, but inside the car the tension kept building. Chuck drifted back to the briefcase.

"And the case..." he said quietly. "It wasn't carrying cash or documents."

"What was it carrying?" Casey asked.

Chuck rubbed his forehead.

"I don't have the whole picture, but... some kind of technology. An encrypted drive."

He paused.

"Maybe weapons systems... but not conventional ones."

Sarah finally turned toward him.

"What do you mean by 'not conventional'?"

Chuck gave an uneasy smile.

"I mean... if the Intersect's right, this isn't just another bad-guy weapons deal."

He searched for the right words.

"This thing can penetrate secure networks. Transportation systems. Power grids. Public utilities. Buildings..."

He let the implication hang in the air.

"It could throw entire cities into chaos."

No one said anything. He didn't need to. Finally Sarah spoke, more quietly than before.

"The woman's name is probably..."

She hesitated.

"...Mariana Luna Cruz."

Chuck blinked. Another Intersect flash burst through his mind. A hummingbird. The Lincoln Memorial. A yellow school bus. Then images of the woman herself. Mission reports. Blood. Death. Things no one should ever have to see.

"Probably?" Chuck asked.

Sarah finally looked at him.

"That's what she used to be called."

Casey raised an eyebrow.

"Used to?"

A faint smirk crossed his face.

"Now you've got my attention, Walker."

Sarah was silent for a moment, as if deciding how much to reveal.

"I knew her from an old operation."

"Deep cover."

"She was one of the best."

"Was?" Chuck asked.

Sarah's expression darkened.

"We believed she was dead."

The air inside the car suddenly felt ice cold. Chuck slowly leaned back in his seat.

"Okay..."

"So a supposedly dead elite operative is buying and selling weapons technology at a winery."

He let that sit for a beat.

"Yeah... this is officially not an average day anymore."

Casey snorted.

"It never was, moron."

He accelerated past a semi without another word. Chuck, however, couldn't take his eyes off Sarah.

"And you..." he asked carefully. "How well did you know her?"

Sarah didn't answer right away. At the end of the road, the winery came into view, sitting atop the rolling hills.

"Well enough," she finally said, "that if it really is Mariana..."

She looked back toward the vineyard.

"...then this is personal."

Chuck felt his stomach tighten. Not because of the mission. Because for the first time, he truly realized there were parts of Sarah's life... ...that he might never be part of. Casey slowed the car to a stop at the foot of the hill. The winery was only a few hundred yards away now. Rows of grapevines stretched across the slopes with military precision. Everything looked peaceful. Too peaceful. Sarah's voice cut through the silence.

"We go back in carefully. If that was Mariana..."

She looked from Casey to Chuck.

"...then this is a trap."

Chuck watched her from the back seat. There was something different in her voice. Not just the calm professionalism he was used to. There was tension beneath it. Resolve. Casey gave a single nod.

"Then we treat it like one."

He killed the engine. For a moment, no one moved. Chuck finally broke the silence.

"Okay... just so we're clear. When you say 'trap,' are we talking the 'slightly dangerous' kind... or the 'one wrong move and we're all dead' kind?"

Casey answered without hesitation.

"The second one."

"Fantastic." Chuck sighed. "Should've gone to Subway instead."

Sarah turned around to face him. For just a second, there was no cover story. No professional distance. Just honesty.

"Chuck... If it's really Mariana, she's expecting us to come back. And she's expecting you to remember."

Chuck swallowed.

"So... I'm the bait?"

"You're the only one who witnessed the handoff," Sarah said softly. "And the only one who got close enough for her to notice."

A brief silence followed. Then Sarah's expression softened.

"But Chuck... You won't be facing her alone."

Something about the way she said it made Chuck smile despite everything.

"Was that the CIA talking... or Sarah?"

For the briefest moment, Sarah hesitated. Then a tiny smile appeared.

"Both."

Casey was already opening his door.

"We're working."

The winery looked completely different in daylight. The elegance of the previous evening had vanished, replaced by silence and emptiness. The main building was closed. Too neat. Chuck slowly looked around.

"This is the part where I say, 'Something's wrong,' isn't it?"

"This is that part," Casey answered.

Sarah stepped forward, her eyes sweeping across the courtyard, taking in every tiny detail.

"Too clean," she said. "They packed up too fast."

Chuck suddenly stopped.

"Guys... wait."

Both of them turned toward him. He squinted, as though trying to replay the previous night in his head.

"The parking garage..."

He frowned.

"It wasn't here."

Casey narrowed his eyes.

"Then where?"

The memories surfaced piece by piece. Another entrance. Hidden behind the vineyard. A narrow service road used only by the staff. Mariana had disappeared down there with the briefcase. Chuck's eyes widened.

"There's a back entrance."

He pointed toward the hillside.

"Hidden behind the vines."

Casey was already moving, his pistol drawn.

"Lead the way."

The deeper they walked between the rows of grapevines, the heavier the silence became. There was another smell now. Something metallic. Mixed with the scent of fresh earth. Sarah suddenly froze.

"Stop."

Casey halted instantly. So did Chuck.

"What is it?" Chuck whispered.

Sarah pointed at the ground. A thin strand of nearly invisible fishing line stretched between two vines. Chuck's eyes widened.

"Okay... That is definitely not standard winery equipment."

Casey carefully stepped over it.

"Could be a motion sensor."

He shrugged.

"Could be an anti-personnel mine."

Chuck stared at him.

"You know, those are two very different possibilities."

Sarah ignored them both, scanning the surrounding hills.

"Someone's watching us."

Chuck felt his stomach knot.

"So..."

"They know we're here."

As if on cue, slow, deliberate applause echoed through the vineyard.

"Bravo."

The voice belonged to a woman. Smooth. Familiar. Her English carried the unmistakable softness of a Castilian Spanish seseo accent. Chuck turned around. She stood at the end of the vineyard exactly as he remembered her. Pistol resting casually in one hand. Mariana Luna Cruz. *Chimera*, according to the Intersect. Alive. Very much alive. And smiling at them.

"I knew you'd come back, Rebecca."

Her gaze drifted to Chuck.

"And you even brought your little Frenchman."

Chuck leaned toward Sarah and whispered,

"Okay... I officially miss breakfast at Subway."

Sarah took one step forward. When she spoke, her voice was cold as ice.

"We thought you were dead."

Mariana smiled.

"You were wrong about a great many things."

A beat passed.

"And one of them... who has betrayed whom."

The words hung in the air. Even the wind seemed to stop. Casey and Sarah stood perfectly still, each waiting for the first move. Casey's muscles tightened around his pistol. Sarah never took her eyes off Mariana, but Chuck knew what was happening behind that calm expression. Distance. Angles. Cover. Reaction time. She was already calculating everything. Chuck had absolutely no idea what possessed him. Maybe it was instinct. Maybe it was panic. Maybe it was just what Chuck Bartowski always did. He stepped forward and raised both hands.

"Okay!"

He forced an awkward smile.

"Before anybody shoots anybody... maybe we could try talking?"

Casey shot him a murderous look.

"Bartowski. What the hell are you doing?"

But it was already too late.

Mariana tilted her head with amused curiosity.

"So... Your little Frenchman wants to talk."

Chuck offered a nervous smile.

"Yeah... well... technically, I'm not French."

He shrugged.

"It was... a brief phase in my life."

A beat of silence. Even Casey seemed to stall for half a second. Chuck rushed to fill the void before anyone remembered they were supposed to be shooting each other.

"Look, all I'm saying is..." He gestured between them. "Everybody's really tense right now. Guns, betrayal, people coming back from the dead—which, by the way, is a lot to process before lunch."

He raised one finger.

"But... Maybe there's a version of today where we don't start shooting immediately."

The corner of Mariana's mouth lifted.

"And what version would that be?"

Chuck swallowed.

"The one where you tell us what's in the briefcase... and why you're still alive..."

He glanced briefly at Sarah.

"...and who betrayed whom."

For the first time, Mariana's smile faded. Just a little. Sarah caught it instantly.

"Chuck..."

Her voice was quiet. Not a warning this time. Recognition. Chuck didn't look at her. Not this time.

"Because right now," he continued, "everyone here thinks somebody else is the bad guy."

He shrugged.

"And, in my experience... that's usually when it turns out everyone's only half right."

Casey let out a low grunt.

"This isn't family therapy, moron."

"It could be!" Chuck shot back.

Mariana's attention was fixed entirely on him now.

"Interesting," she said slowly. "You aren't at all what I imagined the man who swept Rebecca Franco off her feet would be."

The words lingered in the air. Casey instinctively took one step forward. Mariana never took her eyes off Chuck.

"I know more than you think."

She paused.

"And here's a secret. I'm not planning to sell what's inside the briefcase."

Another deliberate pause.

"I'm going to use it."

Chuck felt his stomach drop.

"Okay... That's new. Very new. And... honestly? Pretty terrifying."

Sarah's voice turned hard again.

"Mariana. Put the gun down."

For a long moment, the two women simply stared at each other. There was more between them than history. More than betrayal. Something unfinished. Something that had been waiting years to explode. Mariana spoke without looking away.

"You're asking me to do that? After everything?"

Sarah's expression never changed.

"I don't know what you think happened. But I didn't betray you."

A flash of anger crossed Mariana's face.

"No? Then who gave up my position?"

Silence. Chuck slowly turned toward Sarah. This was different. Not part of a cover. Not a mission. This felt like the edge of the truth. Casey's voice was low and controlled.

"This isn't the place."

Mariana gave a cold smile.

"On the contrary. It's the only place."

Her pistol never wavered. But Chuck felt something shift. This wasn't just an ambush anymore. It was a deadly game built on years of lies. And somehow— against all logic— he'd ended up standing in the middle of it.

"Okay..."

Chuck spoke again, much more quietly this time.

"Then let's start at the beginning."

Mariana raised an eyebrow. Chuck took a slow breath.

"What's in that briefcase... that was worth coming back from the dead?"

Sarah looked at Chuck. She wasn't angry anymore. She was worried. Mariana was calm, disciplined, and dangerously professional. Whatever happened next, Sarah had already made one decision. No matter what, she'd protect Chuck.

"So..." Sarah said, never taking her eyes off Mariana. "What's in the briefcase?"

Mariana shrugged.

"I don't know. What I know is that a lot of people are willing to pay a fortune for it. And I know even more are willing to kill for it."

She paused.

"Before you arrived... three others came looking for it."

Chuck swallowed. The silence wasn't just tense anymore. It was lethal.

"Th-three?" he asked, hearing his own voice climb at least an octave. "That... that doesn't exactly make me feel better."

Mariana smiled faintly. Her eyes didn't.

"It wasn't meant to."

Casey shifted almost imperceptibly, taking half a step to the right.

"Where are they now?"

Mariana's smile lingered.

"They're no longer a problem."

Chuck blinked.

"Okay..."

"When somebody says that... it usually means they were a very big problem before."

Sarah never looked away from Mariana.

"Who sent them?"

A brief silence followed.

"Several interested parties," Mariana answered. "Nations. Organizations. And a few that don't even have names."

Chuck let out a nervous laugh.

"Sure..."

"Because 'unnamed shadow organizations' is always the comforting option."

Mariana looked at him with genuine curiosity.

"You're remarkable."

Chuck pointed at himself.

"Okay, I'm choosing to take that as a compliment... even though I have a feeling it really isn't."

Sarah took another step forward.

"Give us the briefcase, Mariana."

The name no longer belonged to a ghost from Sarah's past. It belonged to a very real threat standing only yards away. Mariana slowly shook her head.

"I can't."

Casey's grip tightened around his pistol.

"Then we'll take it."

Her smile returned.

"You can certainly try."

For one fragile moment... Everything stood perfectly still. Chuck could hear his own heartbeat pounding in his ears. Then— he heard it. A soft metallic click. Not in front of them. Off to the side. Somewhere among the rows of vines. Casey's eyes snapped toward the sound.

"Movement!"

Everything happened at once. Figures emerged between the grapevines. Four. No... Five. They moved with practiced precision. Quiet. Disciplined. Not amateurs. Mariana never even looked in their direction. Instead, she kept her eyes on Chuck.

"See?" she said softly. "I told you... I wasn't giving it to you."

Chuck felt his stomach drop.

"Okay... So this is the part where everything goes spectacularly wrong, right?"

Sarah reacted instantly. In a single fluid motion, she stepped in front of him, placing herself between Chuck and the threat.

"Stay behind me."

It wasn't a request. Casey raised his weapon, ready to fire. Mariana still didn't move. She simply watched Chuck. Chuck blinked— and the first gunshot shattered the silence. Chaos erupted.

Later, Chuck would barely remember how they'd made it out of the firefight without taking a serious hit. Only fragments remained. The deafening crack of gunfire. Muzzle flashes. The sharp smell of gunpowder. And Sarah's voice.

"Chuck! Down!"

He hit the ground. Maybe out of instinct. Maybe because he trusted her. Bullets ripped into the dirt where he'd been standing barely a second earlier. Casey was already returning fire, tracking movement between the rows of grapevines. Calm. Precise. Every shot deliberate. Chuck lay face-down in the dirt, concentrating very hard on not dying. At the moment, it felt like a full-time job.

"Okay... okay... This was a terrible idea. The whole day was a terrible idea."

He squeezed his arms over his head as another burst of gunfire cracked overhead.

"Move!"

Sarah grabbed him by the arm, hauling him to his feet and pulling him through the vineyard. Casey covered their retreat, backing away while firing with mechanical precision like a one-man shield. By the time they dove behind a small storage shed, Chuck was gasping for air.

"This... this was definitely not in my job description."

"You don't have a job description," Casey shot back.

"You know...", Chuck panted. "That is becoming increasingly disturbing."

Another volley slammed into the shed. Several rounds punched jagged holes through the corrugated metal walls. Sarah grabbed Chuck again and pulled him behind a low stone wall.

"You okay?" she asked quickly.

Chuck nodded, although his heart was probably setting new personal records.

"Yeah... I think so. I mean... I seem to have all the important pieces."

He looked around.

"Where's Mariana?"

Silence. Casey slid in beside them.

"She's gone."

Chuck let out a nervous laugh.

"Of course she is. Because why would the mysterious dead spy stick around during a gunfight?"

Sarah didn't smile. Her eyes remained fixed on the vineyard.

"No."

Chuck looked at her.

"No?"

"She didn't run."

"Then what?"

Sarah slowly rose just enough to scan over the stone wall.

"She's waiting."

A beat passed.

"She doesn't run."

Chuck felt his stomach tighten again.

"So..."

"This isn't over."

Casey slammed a fresh magazine into his pistol.

"No. It's just getting started."

In the distance, the fading rumble of off-road vehicles echoed across the hills, kicking up clouds of dust as they disappeared. Chuck closed his eyes for just a second.

"You know... I've got this feeling... today isn't going to get any better."

Sarah looked over at him. Her answer was quiet. Almost gentle.

"Then stay close to me."

There was something different in the way she said it. It wasn't just an agent protecting an asset anymore. It was Sarah. And somehow, even in the middle of the chaos... ...that was enough to steady Chuck's breathing.

## **Chapter 3: Chapter 3 - Day One, 9:50 AM**

### **Chapter 3 - Day One, 9:50 A.M.**

Castle felt strangely quiet compared to the Buy More. General Beckman appeared on the secure monitor, and from the look on her face, the news had not improved her morning.

"If Mariana is alive," she said, "we have a serious problem."

She looked directly at Sarah.

"Agent Walker, I want twenty-four-hour protection on Bartowski, effective immediately."

Her gaze shifted.

"Major Casey, your priority is identifying today's attackers. Dismissed."

The screen went black. For a few seconds, no one spoke. Only the low hum of Castle's computers filled the room. Chuck broke the silence.

"Twenty-four-hour protection detail?"

Sarah turned toward him.

"That means I'll be staying with you."

There wasn't the slightest hint of embarrassment in her voice. Just calm determination. Chuck swallowed.

"Or," Casey growled, "we disappear you into a secure CIA bunker, Bartowski."

He didn't even look up from his desk.

"I recommend you pick Blondie."

Chuck glanced between them.

"...You know, when you put it like that, it's not exactly a difficult decision."

Sarah stepped a little closer. There was none of her usual professional distance. Only quiet resolve.

"This isn't a game anymore, Chuck."

She held his gaze.

"If Mariana even suspects who you are... You're already a target."

Chuck nodded, trying to keep things light.

"Yeah... I kind of figured that out around the time people started shooting at me."

For a moment, they simply looked at each other. Then Chuck smiled.

"So... You're really staying at my place?"

The corner of Sarah's mouth lifted.

"Yes."

Casey snorted.

"The bunker is still an option, Bartowski."

Chuck nodded thoughtfully.

"Sounds... significantly less romantic."

Casey ignored him and moved to one of Castle's computer terminals. His fingers flew across the keyboard.

"The shooters weren't amateurs."

He studied the incoming data.

"Disciplined movement. Military training. This wasn't some hired tug outfit."

"Then who were they?" Chuck asked.

"I'm working on it."

Casey never looked away from the monitor.

"But if Mariana brought them... she's built herself a well-organized team."

He paused.

"Fulcrum could be involved."

Sarah's expression darkened.

"She was always organized."

Chuck looked back at her.

"How long is 'always'?"

Sarah hesitated.

"For a while... We worked together."

Chuck raised an eyebrow.

""Worked together' as in... friends? Or more like... rival spies who occasionally save each other during explosions'?"

Sarah was quiet for a moment. Then she answered.

"Both."

The single word carried more weight than a long explanation ever could. Chuck nodded slowly.

"Okay... That actually explains... a lot."

Casey finally looked up from the monitor.

"One thing we know for certain."

Chuck and Sarah turned toward him.

"If Mariana knows about the Intersect... she's not going to stop."

Chuck let out a long breath.

"Of course she isn't. Why would she?"

Sarah stepped closer until she was standing right beside him. Her voice was soft. Firm.

"That's why you're staying with me."

She caught herself, then smiled faintly.

"I mean... I'm staying with you."

She met his eyes.

"Either way... I'm not leaving you alone."

Chuck tried to grin.

"So this is the part where I'm supposed to say... 'Oh no... how terrible?'"

He paused dramatically.

"...I'm having a really hard time selling it."

A tiny smile escaped Sarah.

"We'll work on that."

Casey rolled his eyes.

"Get a room."

Chuck looked at Sarah.

"We kind just did."

## **Chapter 4: Chapter 4 - Day One, 10:10 AM**

### **Chapter 4 - Day One, 10:10 AM**

Before they crossed the street toward the Buy More, Sarah reached for Chuck's hand. It was warm. Steady. Real. The kind of touch that completely contradicted the dangerous world they lived in.

"I know this is hard," she said quietly. "And if Mariana weren't involved... ..everything would be different."

Another moment passed. "I'm not going to let anyone hurt you."

It wasn't a threat. It was a promise. Chuck looked down at their joined hands, almost afraid that if he stared too long, the moment would disappear. Then, just before they reached the Buy More entrance, Sarah slowly let go. With that simple gesture, something else seemed to change. Agent Walker returned.

"Try not to get into trouble at the Buy More," she said, her tone becoming more businesslike. "Casey's on high alert today." A tiny pause. "So am I."

Chuck raised an eyebrow. "That's somehow comforting... and terrifying at the same time."

Sarah ignored the joke. "I'll stop by during lunch."

Chuck nodded. "Okay."

"And after work, we'll leave together." She hesitated almost imperceptibly. "Then we'll go back to your place."

Chuck blinked. "Okay... is this the 'we're going home together' version... ..or the 'I'm making sure you don't get killed on the way home' version?"

A faint smile touched Sarah's lips. "Both."

Chuck sighed dramatically. "You know... If there wasn't a homicidal ex-spy trying to kill us... ..this could actually be romantic."

Sarah looked at him. One second. Two. Then, barely above a whisper— "It is."

And just like that, she stepped back, as though she hadn't said anything at all. "Go to work."

Chuck lingered for another moment. "Yes, ma'am."

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The fluorescent lights of the Buy More belonged to an entirely different universe. No gunfire. No vineyards. No supposedly dead super-spies. Just customers. Discount televisions. And Morgan Grimes talking at a speed normally reserved for auctioneers.

"Chuck!" Morgan slapped him on the shoulder. "I knew it! You had some kind of adventure last night." His eyes widened. "Were you with Sarah?"

Chuck froze for half a second. "Yeah... Uh... Long story."

"Tell me!"

"No."

Morgan narrowed his eyes. "That's suspicious."

Chuck opened his mouth, but Sarah's voice echoed in his head. Try not to get into trouble. "You know what?" he said quickly. "We had a date. Now let me work."

Morgan stared at him. "That doesn't sound like you."

Chuck shrugged. "New era."

He headed back toward the register, but his mind wasn't on work anymore. Sarah's hand. Her voice. And the words she probably hadn't meant to say out loud. We'll go back to your place. Then another image refused to leave his mind. Sarah... At his apartment. Not on a mission. Not as Agent Walker. Just... Sarah. His girlfriend. He caught himself sighing as he rang up a customer buying a discounted game console. Okay... This is heading somewhere dangerously hopeful. He couldn't stop thinking about the fact that Sarah would be spending the night with him. If it weren't for the danger Mariana represented... If it weren't for the fiction of their cover... He'd probably be looking

forward to it far more than he should. I wish it weren't fake... I wish... The thought never finished. Reality interrupted. Morgan was once again trying to invent creative ways to avoid doing any actual work. Across the sales floor, Jeff and Lester were circling an exceptionally attractive customer, each desperately trying to outdo the other in fake helpfulness.

"This HDMI cable will change your life!" Jeff declared with ridiculous enthusiasm.

Lester rolled his eyes. "It'll change your life if you stop embarrassing us."

Behind the Nerd Herd counter, Morgan appeared to be deeply engaged in what he proudly called "administrative responsibilities." In reality, he was hiding behind a computer monitor. "If I concentrate hard enough..." he whispered to himself, "...I might actually become invisible."

Casey stood nearby, perfectly still. Like a bad feeling that had somehow taken human form. His eyes swept across every aisle, every customer, every suspiciously slow shopper wandering through the store. Chuck glanced sideways at him. "Just another normal Friday..."

Casey answered without even looking over. "There is no such thing."

Chuck smiled to himself. "Fair enough."

For a little while, normal life returned. Registers. Price checks. Customers asking impossible questions. The noisy, chaotic, wonderfully insignificant world of the Buy More. But Chuck's mind was somewhere else. Sarah had said it so naturally. We'll go back to your place. And he couldn't shake the dangerous thought that followed. What if this wasn't just a cover anymore? A customer complaining about a sale price pulled him back to reality. "Yes, I understand," Chuck said automatically. "Look, technically... ..this is still better than the end of the world."

The customer stared at him. Chuck blinked. "I—I mean... Sorry. That came out wrong."

Behind him, Morgan popped up from behind the Nerd Herd counter. "Chuck! We should have a movie night tonight." He grinned. "Just the guys."

"No." Chuck answered so quickly that Morgan looked genuinely offended. "Wow. That was immediate."

Chuck pretended to study the register display. His mind wasn't seeing numbers anymore. It was seeing Sarah. Standing in the doorway of his apartment. And wondering just how thin the line really was between a cover relationship... ..and something far more dangerous. "Okay..." he muttered under his breath. "This is getting complicated."

Morgan folded his arms. "Fine. Then how about video games? Retro night?"

Chuck shook his head. "Can't. Family dinner tonight."

Morgan's face lit up. "Really? What are we having? Ellie makes the best roast beef. I'm telling you, that woman is a culinary superhero."

"Morgan..." Chuck answered with the patient tone usually reserved for explaining things to children. "Not tonight. I'm spending the evening with Sarah."

Morgan shrugged. "I mean... yeah. If I had a gorgeous girlfriend, I'd probably pick her too."

Chuck smiled apologetically. "We'll make it up another night. The food. The games. Everything."

Morgan dramatically leaned back in his chair as though Chuck had just canceled an international peace treaty instead of game night. "So I don't even get consolation prizes? One round of Pac-Man? Starfighter? Anything? I'd rather not spend another evening alone with Jeff's conspiracy theories."

Chuck continued organizing the register, but mentally he was already somewhere else. Family dinner. Ellie. Awesome. A glimpse of a normal life. And afterward... Sarah. "No can do, buddy."

Morgan sighed. "Okay, okay. I get it. 'Family dinner.'" He made exaggerated quotation marks with his fingers. "Or... 'Chuck is unavailable because he's on a classified romantic mission.'"

Chuck froze. "...That was... weirdly accurate."

Morgan shrugged. "Come on. I have eyes."

Chuck's smile disappeared. "What do you mean?"

Morgan leaned closer. "The Sarah thing."

"There is no Sarah thing," Chuck answered much too quickly.

"Uh-huh." Morgan nodded knowingly. "And I definitely haven't noticed that every time she walks in... ..you magically become a functional human being for about five seconds."

Chuck rubbed the back of his neck.

"You look at her differently, man." He smiled. "Dude... You're in love."

Chuck let out a long breath. "It's... Complicated."

Morgan nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah. Kind of like one of those terrible sci-fi movies where you're the main character and everybody dies if you push the wrong button."

Chuck laughed. "Thanks. That really helps."

Morgan grinned. "Anytime."

Chuck picked up his backpack. "We'll reschedule. I promise. Dinner. Games. Everything."

Morgan perked up. "You swear?"

"I swear."

Morgan sighed dramatically one last time, but the disappointment was gone. "Fine. But if you're canceling a Mario Kart night because of Sarah... ..it better be for a really good reason."

Chuck smiled to himself. "Trust me. It is."

As he stepped out of the Buy More and into the afternoon sunlight, leaving behind the fluorescent lights and the illusion of normal life... ..he wasn't thinking about Morgan. Or work. Or even the mission. He was thinking about Sarah. She would be at his apartment.

Not because of a cover. Not because the CIA told her to be there. But because something between them— something neither of them had planned— was beginning to feel real. And somehow... that was more frightening than any weapon Mariana could ever point at him.

## **Chapter 5: Chapter 5 - Day One, 12:35 PM**

### **Chapter 5 - Day One, 12:35 P.M.**

The door to the Orange Orange swung shut softly behind Sarah as she stepped into the afternoon sunshine. For a moment, she simply looked at Chuck. As if making sure he was really there. Really safe. Then the careful assessment disappeared. She stepped closer— and kissed him. It was brief. Confident. And far too natural to be dismissed as part of a cover. Chuck blinked. Then smiled. "So... Was that a cover-kiss... or are you just happy to see me?"

Sarah didn't pull away immediately. The hint of a smile lingered on her lips. "That was a... 'national security crisis and I'm glad you're still alive' kiss."

Chuck nodded thoughtfully. "I figured." He smiled. "Now that we've cleared that up... What do you feel like eating?"

Sarah thought for a moment. When she answered, it sounded less like choosing lunch and more like evaluating tactical options. "Joe's Diner."

Chuck raised an eyebrow. "Interesting choice. If you're craving third-rate food."

Sarah's faint smile returned as she slipped her arm through his. This time, it wasn't tactical. It simply felt... natural. "Exactly. Not very crowded. Clear lines of sight. Multiple exits. Good cover."

Chuck looked sideways at her. "I suppose that's one way to pick a restaurant. Hamburger?"

Sarah shrugged. "I was thinking pizza."

Chuck smiled. "See? That's a much more human answer."

As they walked down the sidewalk together, the sounds of the city slowly settled around them. Traffic. Conversations. The comforting illusion of ordinary life. Chuck glanced at Sarah. "You know... Sometimes it's weird."

"What is?"

"Watching you mentally calculate fields of fire... ...during something that looks suspiciously like a date."

Sarah didn't answer immediately. Finally she said, "This isn't a date."

Chuck nodded. "I know." But he didn't sound convinced.

Sarah looked over at him. "It's a protected movement."

"Right." Chuck answered just a little too quickly.

Sarah smiled again. This one was softer. "Chuck?"

"Yeah?"

"That doesn't mean it can't still be nice."

Chuck was quiet for a moment. Her arm was still linked with his. Warm. Comforting. Real. He couldn't help smiling. "Okay. Joe's Diner it is."

Sarah nodded. "It's the safest location."

Chuck laughed. "You already said that."

"Because it's true."

They kept walking side by side, looking for all the world like an ordinary couple headed out for lunch. In another life... Maybe they would have been. And for the first time, Chuck found himself wondering if the line between the cover... ...and the truth... ...had already started to disappear.

Joe's Diner was busy, but still quiet enough that Chuck and Sarah's conversation disappeared into the background hum of lunchtime chatter. An open pizza box sat between them. Chuck barely noticed it. His appetite was following his thoughts, not the food. He carefully tested the waters. "Uh... Sarah? Can I ask you something?"

She looked up. There was no alarm in her eyes. Just attention.

"I know you and Mariana have history." He hesitated. "And I'm not trying to dig into it."

"Really."

"I just..." He took a breath. "Why did she say she wasn't the one who betrayed you?"

The air suddenly felt a little colder. Sarah's gaze drifted away from him for a moment, somewhere beyond the diner walls... ..to a much older memory. Then she looked back.

"No, Chuck." Her voice was quiet. "I don't want to talk about that."

A brief silence followed. The control returned to her voice, but there was still an edge beneath it. "Instead... Let's figure out what we're going to tell Ellie and Devon about why I'm staying at your apartment."

Chuck nodded immediately, as if he hadn't noticed the door she'd just closed. "Right. Definitely a much safer topic."

Sarah almost smiled. Almost. "So?"

Chuck leaned back in the booth. "Official version... 'Security reasons.'"

Sarah shook her head. "Too vague." She took a sip of her soda.

"Something like witness protection?" Chuck suggested before taking another bite of pizza.

"Too dramatic."

Chuck thought for another second. "My apartment is closer to the potential threat than yours."

Sarah tilted her head. "That's... almost believable."

Chuck grinned. "See? We lie really well together."

This time Sarah actually smiled. The distance between them softened again. "That's not a lie."

Chuck looked at her. The words escaped before he had time to stop them. "Well... ..that's because you're my amazing girlfriend."

Sarah's eyebrows shot up. Silence. Then— "Don't flatter me."

But the smile had already reached her eyes. Chuck leaned back triumphantly. Direct hit. "Fair. So was 'amazing' too much?"

Sarah answered without missing a beat. "'Amazing' is always too much."

Chuck nodded thoughtfully. "Okay. So... 'Dangerously competent undercover partner with frighteningly accurate aim.'"

Sarah laughed. A real laugh. Brief. Warm. Completely genuine. "That's much closer."

Chuck smiled back. Then his thoughts drifted for just a moment. Their first fake date. Dinner. Dancing. Gunfire. Defusing a bomb. It felt like a lifetime ago. The smile slowly faded from his face. Because behind Sarah's laughter... there was still something she hadn't said. And Mariana's words refused to leave his mind. I wasn't the one who betrayed you. Deep down, Chuck was beginning to understand something. This lunch wasn't really about figuring out what to tell Ellie and Devon. It was about everything he and Sarah still weren't ready to tell each other.

The fluorescent glow of the Buy More slowly faded behind them as Chuck stepped outside. Sarah was already there. As if she'd been waiting for him all afternoon. "Casey says everything stayed quiet," she said, falling into step beside him. "No sign of Mariana. No Fulcrum activity."

Chuck answered immediately. "Let's keep it that way."

For a moment, neither of them spoke. A rare, fragile kind of peace settled between them. Neither one quite trusted it enough to believe it would last. Chuck finally broke the silence. "So... What do we do until dinner?"

Sarah shrugged. She already knew the answer. "Whatever you want. I've got paperwork to finish."

Chuck raised an eyebrow. "Of course. The classic arrangement. I play video games while you save the world with spreadsheets."

A faint smile crossed Sarah's face. "Something like that."

They reached the Crown Victoria. Chuck opened the passenger door. "I only have one request."

Sarah looked over. "What's that?"

"Please don't let Ellie or Captain Awesome catch me... ...taking the whole 'relax while Sarah stands guard' thing too seriously."

Sarah fastened her seatbelt before answering. "That would be difficult to explain?"

Chuck laughed. "'She's a secret agent, and I'm...'" He gestured helplessly. "'...basically in charge of morale.'"

"Not exactly convincing."

Sarah let out a quiet laugh. "Then we could do something together."

Chuck stopped halfway into his seat. "Together?"

"Yes."

"Like what?"

Sarah leaned in slightly, lowering her voice as though she were about to reveal classified information. "You could help me work."

Chuck made an expression that suggested physical pain. "Okay. I take everything back. I'd rather explain the whole thing to Ellie."

Sarah smiled mischievously. "I thought you might."

They sat in comfortable silence for a few seconds. Then Chuck looked at her again. "You know... I think there's a third option."

Sarah turned toward him with genuine curiosity. "I'm listening."

Chuck shrugged. "We pretend I'm helping. You do the paperwork... ...and every few minutes I say something intelligent." He adopted a serious voice. "'Yes.' 'That definitely looks important.'"

Sarah's eyes sparkled. "And what are you actually doing?"

Chuck smiled. "Just being with you."

The words lingered between them. There was no joke hiding behind them. No attempt to dodge the moment. Just the truth. Sarah didn't answer right away. Chuck started the engine. Finally she spoke. "I think... ..I could work with that."

Chuck leaned back in his seat with a satisfied grin. "I knew you would."

As they pulled away from the curb, the city bustled around them with the comforting rhythm of an ordinary afternoon. Traffic. People heading home. A world pretending everything was normal. But they both knew better. This was only the calm before the storm. And somewhere out there... Mariana was still playing the game.

## **Chapter 6: Chapter 6 - Day One, 9:15 PM**

### **Chapter 6 - Day One, 9:15 P.M.**

Chuck was still leaning over his stereo, searching through his CDs, when Sarah quietly stepped into his room. Soft music drifted through the apartment. Something easy. Comfortable. Completely ordinary. The sight of Sarah, however... ..was anything but. She was wearing one of Chuck's oversized T-shirts and a pair of simple sleep shorts. Chuck's bedroom was filled with stacks of movies, video games, comic books, music, and years of carefully collected memories. Sarah didn't see clutter. She saw a life. A real one. The kind she'd never had. She stood there for a long moment, letting her eyes wander over the shelves as though she were looking at something she didn't quite have permission to touch. She'd never had a favorite band. Or favorite albums. There had never been time for things like that. But with Chuck... Maybe there could be. She could already imagine him enthusiastically trying to convince her why one album was better than another. "Wow..."

The word slipped out before she realized she'd spoken. Chuck looked up. "What?"

She nodded toward the shelves.

Chuck smiled sheepishly. "Yeah." Then he noticed what she was wearing. His eyes widened for exactly one second before he forced himself to look somewhere else. "Well..." He cleared his throat. "This is... considerably less distracting than last time."

Sarah tilted her head. Then remembered. "Oh." She smiled knowingly. "That was different."

"You remember?"

Chuck laughed nervously. "Pretty sure that's not something I could forget."

Sarah folded her arms casually. "Back then we were supposed to convince everyone we'd be sleeping together for the first time." She gestured toward herself. "This... ..is what a couple who's been together for a while would actually wear."

Chuck nodded slowly. "Right. That makes sense." He couldn't help smiling. Honestly, Sarah would have looked beautiful wearing sweatpants and an old hoodie. The smile disappeared an instant later. Sarah knelt beside her overnight bag. Then calmly pulled out a combat knife.

Chuck blinked. "...Whoa. What exactly are you planning to do with that?"

Sarah looked at the knife as if the answer were obvious. "This?" She walked over to the bed and slid it beneath her pillow. "I sleep better with it."

Chuck stared. "Sure. Because that's obviously what normal people keep under their pillows."

Sarah shrugged. "This isn't a normal situation."

Chuck sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed. "I know. I just wish... ..sometimes we could pretend it was."

Sarah looked at him. There was none of Agent Walker's usual emotional armor in her eyes. "I know."

Silence settled between them. The music continued softly in the background, filling the space where neither of them quite knew what to say. Chuck finally broke it. "So... There's a combat knife under your pillow."

"Yes."

"Casey's probably watching the building."

"Most likely."

"And a supposedly dead spy is hunting us."

Sarah nodded. "Yes."

Chuck leaned back against the headboard. "Okay. Just making sure we're still living in the same reality."

Sarah smiled. A tired smile. An honest one. "Yes, Chuck. We are."

Another quiet moment passed. Sarah settled onto the bed beside him. Chuck glanced sideways. "So... What's the plan in this version of reality?"

Sarah thought about it. "We sleep."

Chuck laughed softly. "Right. Because it's obviously that simple."

She met his eyes. "It isn't." A pause. "But we can still try."

Chuck nodded. "Okay."

The bedside lamp dimmed. The music slowly faded into silence. Outside, the world kept turning— filled with danger... secrets... and Mariana. Inside the apartment, there were only two people trying, for just a few hours, to forget all of that. For the moment... it was enough. Chuck took a slow breath. "Sarah, I..."

She gently interrupted him without looking away from the ceiling. "Don't. Let's just sleep."

There wasn't a trace of coldness in her voice. Only quiet certainty. A few moments later, her breathing settled into a slow, steady rhythm. She had fallen asleep. At some point, her arm came to rest lightly across Chuck's. So naturally... as if this had always been how they slept. Chuck, on the other hand, remained wide awake. Far too awake. His thoughts were impossibly loud. This is really happening. He barely dared move. Barely dared breathe. Just go to sleep. Come on. Just... Sometime before dawn... sleep finally claimed him.

When Chuck woke up, he didn't understand what he was feeling at first. Warmth. Softness. The faint scent of fruit. Something unexpectedly comforting. Then realization hit him. He was holding someone. His mind slowly caught up. Sarah. Sometime during the night, they'd drifted closer together. This wasn't an accidental brush of hands anymore. They were curled up together. Chuck's arm rested around Sarah. Sarah was nestled comfortably against him. As though they'd always slept that way. Chuck's brain stopped working for a full second. Then immediately rebooted into full panic mode. Okay. Okay. This wasn't intentional. People move in their sleep. There's probably science explaining this. Very carefully... millimeter by millimeter... he tried to ease his

arm away. Don't wake her. Don't make this awkward. Don't—

"It's okay."

Chuck froze. Sarah's voice was soft. Sleepy. Her eyes were still closed. "Stay... ..just a little longer."

His heart skipped a beat. "You're awake?"

"I have been."

"And... You didn't say anything?"

A tiny smile appeared on her face. Her eyes still closed. "I didn't want to."

Silence. But not the awkward kind. The kind that felt... dangerously comfortable. Chuck didn't move. He wasn't sure he wanted to. "This..." he whispered. "...is definitely not part of the cover."

Sarah slowly opened her eyes. She looked at him. Far too close. For one suspended heartbeat, the world simply stopped. "I know."

A few moments later, Sarah slowly eased herself back. Not abruptly. Not awkwardly. "We should get up."

Chuck nodded. "Yeah."

"Mission."

"Mission."

Neither of them moved right away. Because they both knew... those few quiet moments had belonged to neither the CIA... ..nor the mission. They had belonged only to them.

## **Chapter 7: Chapter 7 - Day Two, 6:20 AM**

### **Chapter 7 - Day Two, 6:20 A.M.**

Casey had been at Castle for hours. Ever since before sunrise, he'd been trying to solve one problem. Mariana. He already knew Walker wasn't going to tell him everything. Not because she was being difficult. Because whatever history she had with Mariana... ..it was personal. That meant Casey had to find the answers himself. Rows of monitors flickered across the dark operations center. Personnel files. Mission reports. Facial recognition results. Archived intelligence. None of it was enough. None of it fit. "Mariana..." he muttered to himself.

Casey hated blind spots. And this one was enormous. Walker wasn't talking. That alone told him something. Not that she didn't want to help. That she couldn't. Or at least... not the way Casey wanted. Personal history got people killed. Personal history made good agents hesitate. Casey leaned back, closed his eyes for a brief moment, then returned to the keyboard. His fingers moved quickly. Old operations. Classified missions. A database of deceased operatives appeared on the screen. "No one just dies," Casey muttered. "They're either buried... ..or buried in paperwork."

Alias after alias scrolled past. Different countries. Different agencies. Different operations. Too many threads. Yet Casey had the growing feeling they all led back to the same operative. His eyes narrowed. "This wasn't an ordinary field agent."

He opened another file. Highly encrypted. Buried deep enough that someone had clearly intended it to stay forgotten. Casey stared at it for a moment. Then began breaking through the security. A partially redacted mission report appeared. Whole sections had been removed. Deliberately. Casey nodded to himself. "Of course. Someone buried this."

One codename caught his attention. Open Invitation. Casey's jaw tightened. "I knew it."

He kept reading. The report said one thing. The missing pages said something else. There were holes everywhere. Places where entire pieces of the story had been cut away. Whatever remained... didn't make sense by itself. "Betrayal..." Casey muttered.

"But whose?"

He pulled up another collection of intelligence. Satellite imagery. Financial transfers. Communication networks. And then... he saw it. A pattern. "Someone's pulling the strings."

He stopped. Looked at the screen again. "And you're not working alone."

Casey stood and slowly paced across Castle's operations floor. The picture was beginning to come together. Mariana hadn't simply resurfaced. She'd come back for a reason. And if she knew about the Intersect... Then this wasn't a coincidence. It was a plan. "Bartowski..." Casey said quietly. "You're showing up on the wrong people's radar."

He looked back toward the monitor. The classified file was still open. One name remained on the screen. Rebecca Franco. Casey's expression hardened. "Whether Walker likes it or not... I'm going to find out what really happened."

The silence inside Castle seemed heavier than before. Above ground, the sun had already risen over Burbank. Down here... something far darker was beginning to take shape.

## **Chapter 8: Chapter 8 - Day Two, 9:25 AM**

### **Chapter 8 - Day Two, 9:25 AM**

The Buy More was unusually busy that morning. Morgan had been dying of boredom until a stunningly attractive woman wandered over and struck up a conversation with him. His entire day instantly improved. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, Chuck and Sarah appeared.

"Oh, Mariana," Sarah said pleasantly, offering a practiced smile. "It's good to see you."

Chuck forced one of his own. "Yeah... Great seeing you again."

Morgan looked between them, completely confused. "Wait—you guys know each other?"

Mariana smiled warmly. "Small world." She turned back to Morgan. "Would you mind giving us a minute? We have a few things to catch up on."

"Oh. Yeah, sure." Morgan wandered off without another thought.

The moment he was out of earshot... Sarah changed. The warmth vanished. Agent Walker stood in her place. "What are you doing here?"

Mariana tilted her head innocently. "I just stopped by to pick up a few things." She glanced toward Morgan. "And your adorable bearded salesman is exceptionally helpful."

"Leave him out of this."

Mariana's smile never faded. "Or what? My dear... We're all in this up to our necks." Her voice remained almost playful. The threat underneath it was unmistakable.

Sarah's jaw tightened. "Push me... ...and I'll shoot you where you stand."

"Gentlemen—" Chuck raised both hands. "Couldn't we maybe... ...talk this out?"

Mariana laughed softly. "Oh... I think we're a little past that." She glanced around the sales floor. "I've planted explosives throughout the store. Everyone here is my hostage." Her eyes shifted toward the DVD section. "And tell your major to stop sneaking around."

Otherwise... ..I'll send the entire building into the sky."

Chuck swallowed hard. Sarah spoke quietly into the communicator hidden inside her watch. "Casey. Mariana says she's planted a bomb. Stand down. She'll detonate it."

Across the store, Casey slowly straightened from behind a display shelf. Like a lion reluctantly abandoning a charge.

"Much better," Mariana purred. "This small-town life has made you soft, Rebecca." She smiled sweetly. "But enough reminiscing. This is business. Where's the briefcase?"

Chuck answered before Sarah could. "We don't have it."

Mariana's expression barely changed. "That's unfortunate. I need the briefcase." She let the silence linger. "If I don't have it within forty-eight hours... ..I'll come back. And I'll kill everyone in this store. One... ..by one."

Sarah looked as though she were containing an explosion behind perfectly controlled eyes. "Forty-eight hours. Not one minute more."

Mariana's smile returned. "This has been lovely. I should be going. Enjoy the rest of your day."

She turned... ..and calmly walked out of the Buy More. Only after the automatic doors closed behind her did Casey reach them. "What the hell was that?"

Sarah answered without taking her eyes off the entrance. "An ultimatum." She finally turned. "Casey. Call the bomb squad. But keep it quiet."

Then she looked at Chuck. "You're going to Castle."

Chuck decided this was not the moment to argue. Inside, however, panic was already taking over. Who was Mariana? What did she really want? And why had she called Sarah... Rebecca? The doors slid shut behind Mariana. Yet somehow... her smile still seemed to linger in the air. Like a knife you couldn't see— only feel. Chuck didn't move. "Okay... This is... really bad."

Casey was already speaking quietly into his phone. His movements remained perfectly controlled. Precise. Exactly as they always were when things became truly dangerous.

"Bomb squad's on the way. Keep it discreet."

Sarah didn't answer. She simply stared at the front entrance where Mariana had disappeared. Chuck could see it. This wasn't just another mission. This was personal. "Sarah..." he began carefully.

"Go to Castle." It wasn't a suggestion.

Chuck hesitated. "Yeah... I just... Morgan."

"He's fine," Casey said. "He's not the target."

Chuck frowned. "That doesn't actually make me feel any better."

Sarah stepped closer. "Chuck..." Her voice was soft. Tense. "The most important thing right now... ...is keeping you alive."

Chuck nodded. "I know." A pause. "I just wish I understood what was happening."

For the briefest instant, something flickered across Sarah's face. Then the wall came back. "We're working on it."

Chuck nodded slowly. "Okay." But it wasn't okay. Not even close.

Chuck climbed down through the hidden projection-room trapdoor into Castle. The underground base felt colder than ever. Not because of the temperature. Because nothing down here belonged to his real life. Everything that mattered... Ellie. Morgan. Sarah. ...was several stories of reinforced concrete above his head. The security monitors displayed different angles of the Buy More. Customers browsing. Employees working. Perfectly ordinary scenes. And somewhere inside the building... a bomb. "Okay..." Chuck whispered to himself. "This is the part where we don't panic." He was panicking.

Then something clicked. Mariana. Her voice. Her exact words. I need the briefcase. Chuck slowly sat down. "What's in it... ...that's worth all of this?"

The answer was already forming inside his head. Not completely. But enough. "It's not just an object. It's a key." His hands were already moving across the keyboard. "Come on, Chuck... Think."

He replayed the surveillance footage. The winery. The parking garage. The handoff. "If I were Mariana..." He stopped. "Which... ...I sincerely hope I'm not."

He rewound the video again. The courier. The briefcase. The exchange. His eyes narrowed. "It was too easy..." he whispered. Then he froze. His pulse accelerated. "The briefcase was either empty... ...or it was a decoy."

He shot to his feet. "Oh... That is really bad." Because if that was true... Mariana wasn't actually after the briefcase. She was after something else. And if she knew about the Intersect... Chuck slowly took a step backward. "Then... ...I'm the real objective."

The realization hit him like ice water. For the first time... he wasn't just afraid. He understood. Mariana wasn't simply hunting them. She was only one piece... ...of something much bigger.

It was already evening. Chuck lay on the narrow cot in Castle's holding room, his hands folded behind his head as he stared at the ceiling. He kept turning the same questions over in his mind. Why had Mariana called Sarah Rebecca? For once, Chuck decided the smartest move was the one he'd learned from Jenny Burton's advice: Don't ask. If it was something truly painful... If it belonged to Sarah's past... Then digging into it wouldn't help either of them. His thoughts drifted back to Mariana. What did she really want? Did she actually know he was the Intersect? The cot wasn't comfortable. But it was safe. Casey was watching over Ellie and Devon. Sarah was... Sarah... As if summoned by the thought, she appeared in the doorway. Tonight she wasn't wearing the perfectly controlled mask of Agent Walker. She simply looked tired. Quiet. "You can't sleep?"

Sarah crossed the room and sat beside him on the edge of the cot. Chuck lifted his head. "For a holding cell... ...it's surprisingly cozy. But no. No sleep." He managed a faint smile. "I guess a bomb... ...a blackmailing spy... ...and a forty-eight-hour deadline... ...aren't exactly the world's best sleeping pills."

Sarah settled beside him. The heavy door closed softly behind her. For a while... neither of them spoke. It wasn't uncomfortable. Just... quiet. Chuck looked over at her. "So... Is this the part where you tell me... 'Everything's going to be okay'?"

Sarah was silent for a moment. "No." She met his eyes. "This is the part where we make sure it becomes okay."

Chuck nodded. "Fair enough." Another pause. "Casey?"

"He went back to your apartment. He's watching Ellie and Devon. They're safe."

Chuck let out a slow breath. "At least that's something."

Silence settled between them again. Finally Chuck spoke. "Do you think she really knows?"

Sarah looked at him. "Knows what?"

"That I'm..." He gestured vaguely toward himself. "...the Intersect."

Sarah's expression grew serious. "She knows something. I'm not convinced she knows everything."

Chuck sighed. "Oddly enough... ...that actually makes me feel a little better." He hesitated before asking the next question. "And you?"

Sarah frowned slightly. "What about me?"

"What do you want from her?"

She stiffened almost imperceptibly. "This isn't about me."

Chuck slowly shook his head. "I think it is. The way she looked at you... The way she talked to you..."

Sarah looked away. "That was a long time ago."

"But it isn't over." Chuck's voice was barely above a whisper.

Sarah didn't answer immediately. When she finally spoke, her voice was almost inaudible. "There are things... ...that didn't happen the way they were supposed to."

Chuck didn't interrupt. He simply listened. "And if Mariana's telling the truth..." Sarah continued quietly, "...then someone else may be behind all of this."

Chuck sat up a little. "Someone... ...bigger?"

Sarah nodded. "Yes."

Chuck thought about it. "Then the briefcase... ..is just a tool."

"Probably."

He leaned back again. "Great. So we don't have one problem. We have two."

Sarah gave a tiny shake of her head. "At least two."

Chuck smiled faintly. "I love how optimistic you are."

This time, Sarah looked at him. For just a moment... she wasn't Agent Walker. She was simply Sarah. "We'll figure it out."

Chuck nodded. "Yeah." A brief silence followed. "Hey... Sarah?"

"Yeah?"

He hesitated. "Thanks... ..for coming."

Sarah shrugged. "I couldn't sleep."

Chuck smiled knowingly. "Of course."

Another quiet moment. Then Sarah rested her hand on the mattress. Close to Chuck's. Not touching. Just... close enough. "Try to get some sleep."

Chuck nodded. "I'll try."

Sarah stood and walked toward the door. Before leaving, she looked back one last time. "Chuck?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm not going to let anything happen to the people you love."

Chuck smiled. "I know."

The door closed. The silence returned. But somehow... it wasn't nearly as heavy as before. Chuck closed his eyes. This time... sleep came a little easier.

Sarah left the holding room and returned to Castle's operations center. She was exhausted. One cup of coffee was enough to push her past the fatigue. Rest could wait. Finding Mariana couldn't. Mariana was patient. Calculating. And consumed by revenge. What had happened in Guatemala... Sarah still didn't know how to face it. If Bryce were here... The thought slipped into her mind before she could stop it. Then another face replaced it. Chuck. Sarah quietly exhaled. "Pull yourself together, Walker."

She turned back to the glowing monitors. And continued searching for every place Mariana might be hiding.

## **Chapter 9: Chapter 9 - Day Three, 4:13 AM**

### **Chapter 9 - Day Three, 4:13 A.M.**

While Sarah slept, Chuck sat alone in front of Castle's computer terminals. The warm scent of heated plastic mixed with stale coffee and the recycled air that constantly flowed through the bunker. It reminded him of an old-school LAN party. Except instead of playing video games... he was trying to stop a national security nightmare. Chuck kept fitting together every piece of the puzzle he could find. According to the Agency database, Mariana had been a CIA operative. Four years earlier, she'd disappeared without a trace during an operation in Guatemala. Officially, she'd been declared dead. Sarah had never told him what had happened. But Chuck had done enough digging to know that back then Sarah had still been partnered with Bryce Larkin. Bryce. The man who had ruined Chuck's life by getting him expelled from Stanford... ...and stealing Jill. A pattern of disasters. Chuck sighed. "Man... I hate you, Larkin."

He hated Bryce for a lot of reasons. But the one that still stung the most was discovering that Bryce and Sarah had once been more than partners. "More than partners..." he muttered. "Classic Bryce."

He immediately began searching for anything connected to Bryce Larkin. "Okay... Mariana... Tell me your secret." His fingers flew across the keyboard as he bounced between classified databases. "What we've got here, Bill, old budd... is the classic 'somebody's lying' opening." He smirked to himself. "Bill would say, 'You're right, Commander.' And Bob Morane would answer... 'Don't call me Commander.'"

He stopped. Bryce. The name kept pounding in the back of his mind like an old reflex. Fresh search results filled the screen. Operations. Aliases. Time stamps. Chuck leaned back for a moment. "So... Sarah. Mariana. And Bryce. Same time period."

Bob Morane would have solved this already. Probably somewhere in the middle of the jungle. Armed with nothing but a knife... and impossible confidence. "This can't be a coincidence."

Another file appeared. Encrypted. Buried even deeper than the last one. Instead of exploring some lost temple, Chuck was sitting beneath the Buy More in a secret CIA bunker, trying very hard not to confuse comic books with real life. "Okay... Let's play." A few quick keystrokes. A little Bartowski improvisation. The file opened. One operation filled the screen. Open Invitation. Guatemala. Chuck's eyes widened. "Bingo."

He began reading. Large portions had been blacked out. "'Primary objective: dismantle cartel weapons trafficking network...'" he read quietly. "'Secondary objective: recover data package...'" He stopped. "Data package?" He scrolled back. "The briefcase?" His pulse quickened. "Oh, come on..."

He kept reading. "'Data package stored on physical media...'" he murmured. "'Decryption scheduled for a later date.'"

Chuck sat bolt upright. "So it wasn't just a briefcase." Silence. "Okay... I really don't like this."

He scrolled farther. Missing pages. Entire paragraphs removed. "Of course..." he sighed. "Somebody really didn't want anyone to see this." But he'd already seen enough.

Chuck leaned back and stared at the ceiling. "So... Guatemala. The briefcase." The picture slowly came together. "Something went wrong." He sat forward again. "And somebody got branded a traitor." A long pause. "But maybe... ...they blamed the wrong person."

His eyes returned to the monitor. "And if Mariana wasn't the traitor..." The thought died halfway through. "Then who was?"

His stomach tightened. Bryce's name flashed through his mind again. "No..." He shook his head. "That's too easy."

But he couldn't let it go. He launched another search. Bryce Larkin. Mission logs. Operational discrepancies. Missing records. The results loaded one line at a time. Chuck leaned closer. "Come on..."

Then he saw it. A timestamp. After Guatemala. A classified communication. Never filed. Never archived. Hidden. Chuck stared at the single line for what felt like forever. His

thoughts slowed. His heartbeat didn't. "What did you do, Bryce...?"

Bryce wasn't just an old grudge anymore. He was a connection. And if that connection was real... Then Mariana wasn't looking for revenge. She was looking for the truth. Chuck slowly leaned back. "Okay... This is really bad. Because if Bryce was involved... ..then Sarah was too." He froze. "Or... ..maybe she never knew." The thought refused to leave.

Time was running out. By morning, the three of them were gathered around Castle's conference table. Casey broke the silence first. "We had three visitors at the apartment last night. They won't be causing any more problems." He looked at the other two. "So... What did we learn?"

Sarah answered first. "I've identified several possible places Mariana could be hiding." She shook her head. "But there are too many to search without attracting attention, and we don't have enough time."

Chuck swallowed. "Guys... I think I know what Mariana wants."

Sarah shot him a look that clearly said: Don't say another word.

Casey grunted with interest. "Let's hear it, Bartowski."

"I think..." Chuck began carefully. "...it all goes back to Guatemala."

Silence settled over the room. The words hung in the air like a mistake that couldn't be taken back. Sarah looked directly at him. There was no anger in her eyes. Only something worse. A warning. "Chuck. Don't."

Too late. Casey leaned forward, resting both hands on the table. "Interesting." A faint smile crossed his face. "Go on, Bartowski."

Chuck swallowed. He glanced at Sarah one last time. He could read her perfectly. Stop. Her fingers tightened around the edge of the table until her knuckles turned white. But he couldn't stop now. "I read the file."

Casey's eyes narrowed. "And?"

Chuck drew a slow breath. "The briefcase we recovered... ..was never just a briefcase. It contained something important. Something that wasn't supposed to be decrypted until later."

Sarah went completely still. "Chuck..."

"And there were three of you there," he continued before he could lose his nerve. "You. Mariana. And Titan."

Silence. Heavy. Dense. Casey slowly turned toward Sarah. "It's time we brought him in. He's going to figure it out anyway."

Chuck's heart skipped a beat. Brought him in? Into what?

"The report says the mission went sideways," Chuck continued. "Mariana disappeared. They declared her dead."

Casey nodded. "And a traitor."

Chuck raised a finger. "Right. But here's the important part."

Sarah's voice hardened. "Chuck. Stop."

"I can't." He shook his head. "Because... ..maybe she wasn't the traitor."

Silence. Casey slowly straightened. "Explain."

Chuck hesitated only a second. Then he said it. "I found a communication from Titan. Sent after the mission."

Sarah's face tightened. "That's impossible."

"It was never filed," Chuck continued. "It was hidden. As if somebody wanted to erase it."

Casey smiled. "What did it say?"

Chuck swallowed. "It isn't complete. But it suggests Titan contacted someone after the operation." A brief pause. "Someone who wasn't on the mission roster."

Silence. Sarah finally spoke. Quietly. "That doesn't prove anything."

Chuck looked at her. "I know. But... If Mariana says she wasn't the traitor..." He paused. "...then maybe she's telling the truth."

Casey nodded slowly. "Titan was one of Bryce Larkin's old callsigns. Back in his Stanford days." He didn't finish the sentence. He didn't have to.

Sarah's eyes turned to ice. "Bryce wasn't a traitor."

Chuck spoke gently. "Sarah... Are you sure?"

The silence that followed was different. No longer tactical. No longer professional. It was deeply... painfully... personal.

Sarah stood. "This is a dead end."

"Or it's the key," Casey replied.

She looked at him. "I'm not hunting Bryce."

Chuck rose to his feet. "We're not hunting Bryce."

Sarah's eyes shifted to him. "Then what?"

Chuck paused. Then answered quietly. "The truth."

A long, tense silence followed before Casey finally spoke. "We've only got a few hours left."

Sarah didn't move.

"If Bartowski's right..." Casey continued, "...then Mariana isn't just after the briefcase."

Chuck nodded. "She's after what was inside it."

"Or what she lost because of it," Casey added.

Sarah slowly let out a breath. Then she looked back at Chuck. There was no anger left. Only something heavy. "If you're wrong..."

Chuck nodded. "I know."

"You'll only make things worse." A beat. "But if I'm right..."

Sarah didn't answer. She didn't need to. Because if he was right... everything they believed about Guatemala... would change.

Casey slapped the table once. "Then let's move."

The game had just changed. It was no longer just about Mariana. Now... it was about discovering who had betrayed whom... and why.

Chuck had no trouble believing Bryce Larkin could have been the traitor. In fact, he was only a few seconds away from saying it out loud. The only thing stopping him was Sarah. She wasn't simply defending Bryce. She believed in him. Whatever had happened in Guatemala, Sarah was still keeping part of it to herself. And the only person who could tell Chuck the rest of the story... ..was Sarah. Bryce could have been anywhere in the world. Mariana certainly wasn't about to answer his questions. Meanwhile, the forty-eight-hour deadline kept ticking away. Casey had stepped out to coordinate with Beckman. For the first time that morning... they were alone. Chuck didn't look away. "Sarah... Can we talk?"

She was already shaking her head before he finished. "If this is about what I think it is... ..no, Chuck."

He stepped closer. "My family's in danger." There was no humor in his voice. No teasing. No cover story. "We have to figure this out." He spoke quietly, but there was urgency beneath every word. "We've only got thirty-two hours left. Please."

Sarah closed her eyes for a long moment. Then she let out a slow breath. When she opened them again... Agent Walker was gone. Only Sarah remained. "Guatemala..." she began quietly. "...didn't happen the way the reports say it did."

Chuck stayed silent.

"The target was a cartel arms broker." "The briefcase contained intelligence on his network." "Names." "Contacts." "Financial records." She paused. "And someone... ..already knew we were coming."

Chuck's stomach tightened. "It was an ambush?"

Sarah nodded. "Yes." She looked away. "They separated us. Mariana and I went one way. Bryce went another."

Chuck listened carefully. "Then the shooting started."

Sarah's voice grew softer. "Mariana disappeared. I couldn't find her." A painful silence. "Bryce came back."

Chuck waited.

"He told me..." She stopped for a moment. "...that Mariana had betrayed us." "That she'd disappeared with the briefcase."

Chuck nodded slowly. "And you believed him."

Sarah met his eyes. "At the time... ...yes."

A long silence followed. "You saw the communication." Chuck spoke gently.

Sarah's jaw tightened. "Yes."

"And now?"

She didn't answer immediately. "Bryce..." She hesitated. "...wasn't perfect." "But he wasn't a traitor."

Chuck stepped closer. "Sarah... That's not evidence. That's faith."

Something flashed across her face. "Sometimes... ...faith is all you have left."

Chuck slowly shook his head. "It's not enough for me." Silence. "Because if you're wrong..." he continued, "...then Mariana isn't our enemy."

Sarah answered so quietly he almost missed it. "I know."

Chuck blinked. "You do?"

She nodded once. "That's the problem."

Another silence settled between them. "Because if she isn't..." Chuck began.

"...then someone else is." Sarah finished the thought. Neither of them said the name. They didn't have to. Bryce.

Chuck spoke carefully. "So what do we do?"

Sarah took a deep breath. Then looked him straight in the eyes. "We find Mariana."

Chuck blinked. "A minute ago you wanted to stop her."

"I still do." Sarah's voice remained steady. "But not to kill her." A brief pause. "To hear what she has to say."

Chuck couldn't help smiling. "That's progress."

A faint smile answered his. "Don't get used to it." Then she became serious again. "But if you're right... ..someone has been playing us from the beginning."

Chuck nodded. "And we've only got a few hours left to find out who."

Sarah held his gaze. "Then we'd better stop wasting them."

## **Chapter 10: Chapter 10 - Day Three, 7:47 AM**

### **Chapter 10 - Day Three, 7:47 AM**

Morgan, as always, climbed through Chuck's bedroom window. Some traditions simply couldn't be broken. Chuck's room was empty. He poked his head into the living room, where Ellie and Devon were lounging on the couch, already dressed in their blue hospital scrubs before heading to work. "Morning!" He looked around. "Have either of you seen Chuck?"

Ellie immediately sat upright. "Seriously, Morgan? Have you ever considered using the front door?"

Devon, still only half awake, grinned. "That would be pretty awesome."

Morgan shrugged proudly. "I understand your concern, Ellie. But I can't promise I'll abandon tradition." He placed a hand over his heart. "It's part of who I am." A dramatic pause. "I'm looking for Chuck. My life depends on him."

Ellie and Devon exchanged a look. "He didn't come home last night," Ellie said. "He's probably with Sarah. And he hasn't answered his phone."

Devon sat up and slipped effortlessly into Captain Awesome mode. "You know, Morgan... When two adults are in love... They don't always answer their phones." He gave Morgan an exaggeratedly meaningful look. "You know what I'm saying, buddy?"

Morgan blinked. "Well... Yeah. I think I do."

A beat. Ellie narrowed her eyes. "What did you do, Morgan?"

He immediately raised both hands in surrender. "Nothing... that couldn't be explained with a little creative storytelling."

"Morgan."

"Okay!" He threw his hands into the air. "It's a long story."

Devon leaned back comfortably. "We've got time."

"I don't! Morgan shot back. "Big Mike's going to kill me."

Ellie sighed. "This just keeps getting better."

Morgan began pacing nervously. "So... There was a... minor misunderstanding involving inventory."

Devon tilted his head. "How minor?"

Morgan stopped walking. "The kind where... a few things disappeared... that maybe... I shouldn't have sold to a customer who was paying suspiciously well."

Silence. Ellie spoke slowly. "Morgan..."

"I didn't know he was suspicious!" Morgan protested immediately. "He was just...really confident. And he paid cash!"

Devon raised an eyebrow. "That's usually a clue."

Morgan waved dismissively. "Okay, yes. In hindsight. I see that now."

Ellie rubbed her forehead. "What exactly did you sell?"

Morgan hesitated. "A few... ..technical items."

"Morgan."

"Okay! A lot of technical items."

Devon straightened. "How many is 'a lot'?"

Morgan swallowed. "Enough... that if Chuck doesn't help me... Big Mike won't just fire me. He'll probably ban me from the store forever."

Silence. Ellie and Devon exchanged another look. Finally Ellie sighed. "If we see Chuck, we'll tell him you're looking for him."

Morgan nodded rapidly. "Good. Good. That's good." He started toward Chuck's bedroom... then turned back. "And... don't tell him I panicked."

Devon smiled. "Of course."

Ellie folded her arms. "You've been panicking this entire time."

Morgan sighed dramatically. "Okay. Fair enough." He headed back toward the bedroom window. A moment later... he disappeared the same way he'd arrived.

The apartment fell quiet again. Ellie looked over at Devon. "Do you really think Chuck's with Sarah?"

Devon smiled with absolute confidence. "Honey... I'd bet my medical degree on it."

## **Chapter 11: Chapter 11 - Day Three, 7:55 AM**

### **Chapter 11 - Day Three, 7:55 AM**

Chuck's phone rang again. This time it wasn't Morgan. It was Ellie. Sarah looked up at him.

"Aren't you going to answer it?"

Chuck froze for half a second. Then nodded automatically. "Y-Yeah. Of course." He answered. "Hey, Ellie!" He swallowed. "Sarah? Yeah... I'm with Sarah."

Sarah slowly raised an eyebrow. Chuck instinctively took half a step backward, as if putting more distance between himself and the lie might somehow make it more convincing.

"Morgan? Oh... right. He called. I just... you know... there was this thing. I couldn't answer."

A pause. Chuck's expression became increasingly strained. "Uh-huh... Okay. I'll find him."

He hung up. Silence immediately settled over the room. Sarah stood there with her arms crossed. "'This thing'?"

Chuck attempted an innocent smile. "It's a very... context-dependent expression."

"Chuck."

"Okay, okay... Morgan's in trouble."

Sarah's expression didn't change. "And?"

Chuck sighed. "And... I'm apparently the one who has to fix it." He smiled tiredly. "Looks like I'm rescuing the Bearded Wonder again."

Sarah exhaled softly. "Big Mike?"

Chuck nodded. "Something involving missing inventory, the wrong customer... and a level of detail I'm honestly afraid to ask about."

Sarah considered it for a moment. "Morgan got himself mixed up in something."

"As usual," Chuck replied automatically. Then he realized what he'd said. "I mean... This one's bigger."

Sarah walked over to a computer terminal. "How much time do we have?"

Chuck checked his phone. "According to Morgan... not much."

Sarah nodded. "Then we'll deal with it quickly."

Chuck blinked. "What?"

She was already typing. "Yes."

Chuck frowned. "Sarah... This is Morgan."

She didn't even look up. "And?"

Chuck spread his hands. "Shouldn't we be focusing on Mariana... the bomb... and whatever global conspiracy we're caught in?"

Sarah finally looked at him. "Those things aren't mutually exclusive."

Chuck smiled. "Fair point."

A brief pause. "You know... Sometimes I forget your definition of a normal day is a little... flexible."

Sarah shut down the terminal and stood. "Let's go."

Chuck looked surprised. "Right now?"

"We're already late."

Chuck nodded. Then smiled. "So... It's official. We're running off to save the world... because Morgan did something stupid."

Sarah looked at him. "Nothing new there."

Chuck followed her toward the exit. "I know." He smiled to himself. "I just haven't gotten used to it yet."

Together, they climbed the stairs out of Castle. And for the next few minutes... their race against Mariana would have to wait. Because Morgan Grimes had somehow managed to create another crisis. Which, for everyone involved... felt strangely normal.

Morgan was wringing his hands when Chuck and Sarah walked into the Buy More. "Dude!" His face lit up with relief. "I am so glad to see you." He glanced at Sarah. "And Sarah... you look amazing today, by the way."

Sarah rewarded him with a faint smile. "Ellie said you were in trouble. What happened, Morgan?"

Morgan swallowed nervously before looking back at Sarah. "Could Chuck and I have... just a minute?"

Sarah didn't like the idea. It showed for the briefest moment. Still, she nodded politely. "I'll be over there."

She wandered toward the other side of the store, casually pretending to browse through a display of DVD players. Chuck knew better. She wasn't shopping. She was watching. "So?" Chuck asked.

Morgan leaned in. "I went along with one of Jeff and Lester's brilliant business opportunities."

Chuck closed his eyes. "Morgan..."

"They said they had a friend." "A guy who makes great investments."

"Morgan."

Morgan swallowed hard. "I know, Chuck. I know. Don't hate me. The thing is... an entire pallet disappeared from the warehouse."

"Oh, my God. Morgan! Where are Jeff and Lester?"

"They went on..." Morgan hesitated. "...an off-site installation."

Chuck stared at him. "They're trying to get it back."

"Get what back?"

Morgan looked everywhere except at Chuck. "From a self-storage facility. On Twenty-Seventh Street."

Chuck slowly closed his eyes. "This... doesn't sound good."

Morgan looked genuinely desperate. "Chuck... You can help, right?" It wasn't really a question. Chuck sighed and nodded. "I'll do what I can."

He turned toward the exit. Sarah appeared at his side almost immediately, slipping her arm through his. "So? Did they fix it?"

Chuck shook his head. "No. I have to go out to a storage facility on Twenty-Seventh Street."

Sarah studied him for a moment. "Morgan's in serious trouble. I have to help him."

She nodded once. "I'm coming with you. I just need to run down to Castle and grab a few things. I'll bring Casey. Wait here."

She leaned closer, speaking softly enough that only Chuck could hear. Then she kissed his cheek. Her voice had been light. Her smile effortless. To anyone watching, they looked like an ordinary couple. Chuck knew it was part of the cover. But he didn't care. It still felt good. And somehow... knowing Sarah had his back made everything seem just a little more manageable.

The self-storage complex on Twenty-Seventh Street looked like an industrial beehive. Perfect rows. Identical steel doors. Unit numbers glowing beneath fluorescent lights that made the entire place feel orderly... as though everything here was under control. Chuck immediately spotted the Nerd Herd van. Jeff and Lester, however, were nowhere to be seen. A black Crown Victoria glided between the rows like an approaching storm cloud. Casey climbed out, already grumbling. "We're wasting valuable time on this." He slammed the door shut. "I'm gonna wring those idiots' necks."

They stepped out together. Sarah moved beside Chuck, quietly scanning every angle of the storage yard. She didn't answer. She simply watched. "No movement," Casey muttered. "Complete waste of time."

Sarah glanced sideways at Chuck. "Stay in the center aisle. If anything happens, call it in."

Chuck nodded. "Like always."

"Like always," Sarah confirmed. There wasn't the slightest hint of playfulness in her voice. She was too alert. Too tense.

As they entered the maze of storage units, Chuck walked cautiously down one of the rows. Every footstep echoed off the corrugated metal walls. "Jeff? Lester?" His voice disappeared into the silence. Nothing. Only the faint hum of fluorescent lights overhead. Then— Clunk. Chuck froze. "Did you guys hear that?" he whispered into his communicator.

Sarah answered immediately. "I did." "Stay where you are."

Another noise. Closer this time. Chuck slowly ducked behind a trash bin left in the aisle. "Okay... That definitely doesn't sound like missing inventory."

Casey's voice came over the radio, harder now. "Walker. I've got movement in the east sector. I'm on my way."

Chuck swallowed. Then he saw it. One of the storage-unit doors stood slightly open. Light spilled through the gap. Voices. Movement. "Sarah..." he whispered. "I found something."

"Don't go inside." Her reply came instantly. Too late. Chuck was already standing in front of the door. He hesitated for one heartbeat. Then stepped inside. His heart skipped a beat. "Okay..." he whispered. "This is officially worse than I expected."

Sarah's voice sharpened in his earpiece. "Chuck. Don't move."

Too late. A voice spoke from somewhere behind the stacks of boxes. "So... You must be the boss."

A lanky man covered in tattoos stepped out from behind a pallet. He looked like exactly what he was— a low-level street thug. His oversized Red Bulls jacket hung loosely from his shoulders, and he lazily waved a pistol in one hand. "Me?" Chuck pointed to himself. "No, no, no. I'm just the manager of the Nerd Herd at Buy More."

"Whoever you are... You're not getting your merchandise back."

Chuck swallowed. "Actually... I kind of need it. My friend's in serious trouble if those products don't make it back."

"I'll show you who's in trouble." The man raised his gun— —but before he could aim, Sarah exploded into motion. She came in from the side with a flying roundhouse kick. Her boot connected with his temple. The thug collapsed like an empty sack.

Casey looked down at the unconscious man. "That was easy." He sounded almost disappointed. Then he looked at Chuck. "The morons are locked in another storage unit out back. Should we let them out... ..or leave them there a little longer?"

Chuck couldn't help smiling. "I think they've probably learned their lesson."

Then he looked around the unit. It was packed floor to ceiling with stolen electronics. Televisions. Game consoles. Computers. Boxes everywhere. His eyes swept across the room— —and suddenly stopped. Hidden among the electronics... was the briefcase. Chuck's eyes widened. "Guys... You're not going to believe this. We found it!" He lifted the briefcase high above his head with a huge grin.

Sarah immediately took possession of the briefcase. Casey dragged the unconscious thug out of the way. Meanwhile, Chuck located the storage unit where Jeff and Lester had been locked inside. Even before he opened the door, he could hear them arguing. "Jeffrey!" Lester wailed. "I can't go to prison! They'll shank me on the first day!"

"If you rat me out... I'll shank you first!" Jeff shot back with complete conviction.

Both men froze when Chuck yanked the door open. "Jeff. Lester." They stared at him. "Charles!" Lester blurted out far too enthusiastically. "Oh, thank God you're here!"

"Idiots," Casey muttered from behind Chuck. Lester instantly fell silent. Jeff took one cautious step backward. "Look... This isn't what it—"

Chuck raised a hand. "I don't care." Silence. "You're putting every single piece of stolen merchandise back in the Buy More. And you are never... ever... dragging Morgan into one of your brilliant ideas again."

Jeff swallowed. "What about Big Mike?"

Chuck thought for a second. "Not. One. Word."

Lester nodded so hard Chuck thought his neck might snap. "We swear!"

The two of them bolted out of the storage unit and immediately started hauling boxes toward the Nerd Herd van. Casey watched them go. "It's a miracle they're still alive."

By then Sarah had already disappeared with the briefcase. Slowly... the tension inside the storage warehouse began to fade.

## **Chapter 12: Chapter 12 - Day Three, 1:08 PM**

### **Chapter 12 - Day Three, 1:08 P.M.**

Inside Castle, the briefcase now rested inside a blast-proof, NBC-isolated examination chamber, as though even it knew it deserved to be handled with extreme caution. Using the remote manipulator arms, Casey slowly released the latches. The mechanism clicked softly. Chuck held his breath. Nothing happened. No explosion. No hidden compartment. No high-tech device waiting to activate. Just... an utterly ordinary briefcase. Inside were a legal pad. A few candy wrappers. Several pens. Chuck blinked. "That's... ..not what I expected."

"Neither did we," Casey grunted. He studied the contents again. A notebook. Candy wrappers. Pens. No encrypted drive. No hardware. No doomsday device. His jaw tightened. "Those idiots didn't remove anything?" His hand drifted toward the pistol at his hip.

Sarah stepped closer, carefully turning the briefcase over in her hands. "This doesn't make sense."

Chuck spoke cautiously. "Or... ..it makes perfect sense."

Sarah looked at him. "We're running out of time. We have to figure this out before Mariana makes her next move."

Casey slowly let his hand fall away from the pistol. "Then let's start thinking."

Chuck hesitated. Then quietly asked, "Sarah... Can I ask you something?"

She looked at him. "What happened in Guatemala?"

The room seemed to freeze. Sarah's eyes snapped toward him. For one long second... her expression said only one thing. Not now. Chuck was already about to apologize when Sarah slowly exhaled. She turned toward the wall. She didn't want either of them to see her face. "It's about Bryce..."

Chuck stiffened. Casey's eyes narrowed. "Larkin," he muttered.

Sarah nodded slowly. "He was there with us."

The briefcase no longer mattered to Chuck. "According to the official report..." Sarah continued, "...Bryce was supposed to extract Mariana. Something went wrong. He came back alone. He told us Mariana was dead." She paused. "The mission wasn't originally about the briefcase... ...but Bryce recovered something."

Chuck spoke quietly. "And you don't believe him?"

Sarah didn't answer immediately. "I... ...don't know." That was the answer. Not yes. Not no. She genuinely didn't know anymore. Which was somehow worse.

"Something doesn't fit," she admitted softly. "Every report supports Bryce's version. But... I can't believe he would have abandoned her."

Casey grunted. "Classic."

Chuck never looked away from Sarah. "Or... ...someone else rewrote the story."

Sarah looked at him. For the first time... she didn't dismiss the idea. If Fulcrum had infiltrated the CIA as deeply as they suspected... there was no telling how far the corruption reached. "That's why I never talked about it."

Chuck nodded quietly. "Because if Bryce wasn't the traitor..."

Sarah finished the sentence for him. "...then somebody is lying. And I'm the only one left from that team."

Casey stepped forward. "I want the truth."

Sarah sighed. "So do I."

Chuck looked back at the briefcase. The forgotten notebook. The candy wrappers. Lion. Bryce used to buy Lion bars from the vending machines at Stanford. A small, uncomfortable feeling settled in Chuck's stomach. "Wait..."

Sarah looked over. "What is it?"

Chuck slowly picked up the notebook. "What if this never contained data at all? What if... ..it was hiding something instead?"

Sarah's expression changed. "What do you mean?"

Chuck swallowed. "Sometimes... ..the best place to hide a secret... ..is somewhere nobody thinks to look."

He opened the notebook. The first page looked completely ordinary. Nothing but a handwritten date. Four years old. Sarah stopped breathing. Chuck didn't notice. Casey did. Without saying a word, he reached into a drawer and pulled out a UV flashlight. He swept the beam across the page. The ink glowed. Above the date... someone had written a single phrase in invisible ink. OPEN INVITATION. Chuck stared. "Invisible ink? Why?"

Casey answered without looking away from the notebook. "Sometimes... ..you have to hide things in plain sight."

Chuck didn't flash. Nothing. Casey was already running the phrase through CIA databases. No matches. Sarah suddenly tensed. Only for a heartbeat. Then the moment passed. Chuck caught it anyway. He was more convinced than ever that Guatemala hadn't happened the way everyone believed. But Sarah still couldn't bring herself to talk about it. Whatever had happened... it cut too deeply. The last time he'd seen her this shaken had been at his high school reunion. That night she'd made it very clear... digging into her past was a bad idea. Chuck had respected that. He'd never intended to pry. Not until the clock started running out... and everyone he loved became a target. "Sarah..." He gently pulled her aside. "We need to talk."

She looked at him. "What is it, Chuck?"

"I don't have to be a spy to see something's wrong. I want to help. I just don't know how." He looked directly into her eyes. "And everyone I care about is in danger."

Sarah shook her head. "Not now, Chuck." She started to walk away. Chuck gently caught her hand. Sarah spun back instantly. For the briefest moment, the look she gave him was fierce enough to make it clear she was ready to defend herself if she had to.

Then Casey turned away from his computer. "Tell him, Walker. It's time Bartowski knew the whole story."

The anger vanished from Sarah's face. In its place... only sadness remained. Chuck realized he was still holding her hand. Slowly... he let go. Sarah leaned against the edge of the table. Took a deep breath. And finally... began to tell the story. Chuck quietly placed the notebook back inside the briefcase. Then closed the lid. It looked exactly as ordinary as it had when they'd first opened it. Somehow... that was the most frightening thing about it. "I met Bryce in Guatemala." Sarah's voice was calm, almost detached. "Our mission was a false-flag operation against a cartel. Mariana had already been undercover for months, posing as an NGO aid worker." She paused. "Bryce and I arrived later. It should have been a straightforward operation. It wasn't. Everything went wrong. Mariana died."

Chuck listened carefully. So far... everything matched the official report. "After that," Sarah continued, "Bryce officially became my partner."

Something still felt off. People didn't bury ordinary memories that deeply. Then Sarah spoke again. "It wasn't until years later... ..that I learned Mariana had actually been Bryce's girlfriend."

Chuck hadn't expected that. The room fell completely silent. He managed only a few blinks before speaking. "Okay..." he said quietly. "I definitely didn't see that coming."

Casey folded his arms. "That explains a lot."

Sarah still wasn't looking at either of them. Her eyes remained fixed somewhere far away... back in Guatemala. "I had no idea," she said softly. "No one did. They kept it secret."

Chuck stepped closer. "And when you finally found out?"

Sarah smiled bitterly. "By then... ..it was already too late."

Casey grunted beneath his breath. "Larkin always knew exactly how much to tell people." Then he spoke louder. "If Mariana was involved with Bryce... ..there are only two possibilities." He leaned forward. "Either they betrayed you together."

Chuck immediately shook his head. "No. If that were true... ...she wouldn't come back after all these years."

Casey nodded once. "Then it's the second option. Someone walked them into an extraction trap."

Chuck's pulse quickened. "One of them survived... ...and the other swore revenge."

Sarah closed her eyes briefly. "Yes." Then she looked down at the notebook. "And now... ...it's started again."

Chuck looked at the handwritten date. "Does that date mean something to you?"

Sarah answered without hesitation. "Yes."

Chuck and Casey looked at her simultaneously. "That's the day..." Sarah said quietly, "...Mariana died."

Chuck's stomach tightened. "So... ...it's not a coincidence."

Sarah slowly shook her head. "No. It's a message. Whoever sent it..."

Casey slammed his hand onto the table. "...wants a meeting."

Chuck nodded slowly. "Yeah. And they want you to remember."

"Or..." Sarah added quietly, "...they want us to face it." A shadow crossed her face. "I have to face her alone."

Casey answered immediately. "Not happening, Walker."

"I'm not going in alone," Sarah shot back. "But it has to look that way."

Chuck cut in. "Wait. If this is a trap..."

"It is," Casey replied flatly.

"Then why would we walk into it?"

Sarah met Chuck's eyes. "Because we don't have another choice."

Chuck laughed nervously. "This is becoming a theme." A brief silence. "Unless..." he continued, "...she doesn't actually want the briefcase. What if she wants answers?"

Sarah slowly nodded. "Then she'll get them."

Casey looked toward the weapons locker. "So will we."

The game had changed again. It was no longer about the briefcase. Or the bomb. Now... it was about the past. About discovering who had betrayed whom. Chuck spoke quietly. "When?"

Sarah looked back at the date. "Midnight."

Chuck swallowed. "How do you know?"

Sarah reached into her jacket pocket and unfolded a crumpled slip of paper. "Mariana left this. It was attached to the bomb."

Chuck read it. "That's... ..not much time."

Without another word, Casey walked to the armory. He unlocked the weapons locker and began loading out equipment. Assault rifles. Shotguns. Sidearms. A grin slowly spread across his face as he pulled a handful of grenades from a shelf. He glanced at his watch... then started tossing everything into a large black duffel bag. Sarah looked at Chuck. For the first time since Guatemala had entered the conversation... he no longer felt that invisible wall between them.

## **Chapter 13: Chapter 13 - Day Three, 2:56 PM**

### **Chapter 13 - Day Three, 2:56 PM**

Sarah headed home for the afternoon while Casey kept watch over Devon and Ellie at the hospital. Two agents escorted Chuck back to his apartment. He desperately needed to clear his head. Too much was swirling around at once. Sarah. Bryce. Mariana. Then there was his family. His friends. All in danger again because of Bryce Larkin. Chuck hated how Bryce always managed to ruin his life—even when he wasn't around. A shower seemed like the best idea.

The hot water helped a little. Chuck wrapped a towel around his waist and stepped out of the bathroom. "Don't make a sound."

The voice came from the hallway. Chuck froze. Mariana stood in his apartment, a pistol trained directly on him. The only sound Chuck managed was a startled squeak. "Okay... that's... actually a perfectly reasonable request." He forced himself to keep talking, buying time. "W-What are you doing here?"

Still wrapped in nothing but a towel, water droplets rolled down his shoulders. But it wasn't the cool air that sent a chill through him. It was the gun. Mariana didn't move. She was entirely too calm. "The deadline is almost up," she said. "And I still don't have what I want."

Chuck instinctively tightened his grip on the towel. "I can get you the briefcase!" he blurted out. "Just... don't hurt anyone."

Mariana stepped closer. Her eyes slowly traveled over him. "We'll see, Mr. Bartowski." She tilted her head slightly. "It depends... what kind of mood I'm in."

Chuck tried not to panic. He failed. "You're coming with me."

Chuck blinked. "With you... where?"

Mariana let the silence linger. "Somewhere we'll finally get some answers."

Chuck's heart skipped a beat. "Why me?"

A flicker crossed Mariana's eyes. "Because you're the key."

Silence. Chuck swallowed. "Yeah... I'm liking this less and less."

Mariana leaned closer. When she spoke again, her voice was softer. Colder. "Get dressed."

Chuck nodded. "Okay... um... would you mind turning around?"

One eyebrow rose. "Seriously?"

"Look... this is already one of the weirdest situations I've ever been in. I'm just trying to salvage a tiny bit of dignity here."

For a long moment she simply stared at him. Then—to Chuck's genuine surprise—she turned halfway around. "Thirty seconds."

Chuck's hands trembled as his mind raced. Okay. Think. Sarah. Casey. Find a way to tell them. He hurried into a T-shirt and jeans. Then he stopped. His phone lay on the bed. One quick motion. He slipped it into his pocket. I hope they notice. "I'm ready."

Mariana turned back and silently looked him over. "Let's go." She gestured toward the door with her pistol.

Chuck started walking. Every step felt heavier than the last. The front door opened. The courtyard outside was empty. Too empty. The two agents were gone. Chuck glanced back one last time. "Just so we're clear..." he said quietly, "...this is the part where I get kidnapped, right?"

A faint smile crossed Mariana's lips. "I'd put it differently." She stepped closer. "This is where the truth finally begins." The muzzle of her pistol pressed lightly against his back. "Move."

Chuck stepped outside... and tried very hard not to panic.

West Side Medical always felt too clean. Too sterile. Too peaceful. Casey knew better. It was only the surface. The fluorescent lights hummed steadily overhead. Every footstep

echoed through the corridors. There was nothing alive about the place. That made it predictable. Controllable. Casey pushed a mop bucket down the hallway with his head lowered. A fake mustache rested above his upper lip, and he wore a janitor's uniform. The bucket's wheels squeaked softly across the polished floor. Anyone looking at him would see a tired maintenance worker counting the minutes until the end of his shift. No one looked twice. From one of the operating rooms came Devon's voice—calm, professional, slightly tired. At the far end of the hallway, Ellie reviewed patient charts and occasionally spoke with someone passing by. A perfectly ordinary afternoon. Casey paused for a moment. The polished floor reflected the ceiling lights in distorted streaks. Something wasn't right. A nurse walked past and nodded politely. "Good afternoon, sir."

"You too," Casey muttered. His voice sounded just different enough behind the fake mustache to sell the disguise.

The nurse continued on. Casey resumed mopping. But he wasn't watching the floor anymore. He watched reflections. Movement. Rhythm. Then he saw him. A stranger. Wearing civilian clothes beneath a white lab coat. He didn't belong. He moved too slowly. Too deliberately. He was heading toward the elevators. He never looked around. That was his mistake. Casey quietly leaned the mop against the wall. It squeaked softly. The elevator button lit up. Casey started walking. Never hurried. He never hurried. At the corner of the hallway, the overhead light briefly hid his face. When he stepped back into view... he no longer looked much like a janitor. Just a man who had decided someone had pushed the wrong button. The elevator doors began to open. The stranger still hadn't looked behind him. "Afternoon," Casey said quietly.

The man turned. "Yeah?"

Too late. The elevator doors slid fully open. Empty. Casey moved instantly. Fast. Clean. Efficient. Then... silence. Casey glanced inside the elevator. "Cleaning in progress," he muttered.

He stepped back as though nothing had happened. The mop still waited against the wall. The hallway slipped back into its normal rhythm. Devon's voice drifted out from surgery once again. Ellie laughed at something a nurse had said. Casey returned to his bucket...

and kept mopping. As if the world hadn't just become one layer quieter. "Casey." Sarah's voice crackled through his earpiece. "Chuck isn't answering. I can't reach Stevenson or Ray either."

"Bartowski," Casey growled. "Last known location?"

"He isn't wearing the watch," Sarah replied. "But his phone is still transmitting." A beat. "They took him to the harbor."

"I can't leave my position," Casey said immediately. "I'm calling in a SWAT team."

A brief pause. "Be careful, Walker."

Chuck was shoved into the back of a black cargo van, and a hood was pulled over his head. When it finally came off, Mariana was standing in front of him. He blinked against the dim light. A dark warehouse. His wrists were tied to a chair. "So..." Chuck swallowed. "This is the part where you torture me?"

"Not the worst idea," Mariana said with the faintest smile. She stepped close enough that Chuck caught the scent of her perfume. It was soft. Floral. Gentle. Completely at odds with the woman wearing it. "But no. I don't need to break you." Her eyes studied him. "You're the talkative type." She leaned in. "Tell me what you know about Bryce Larkin."

Chuck hesitated. "Well... he went to Stanford." A beat. "And he stole my girlfriend."

Mariana sighed. "Interesting." Another pause. "Not remotely what I meant." "Where is Larkin? I know you and your little friends know he's alive. Fulcrum is looking for him too." "They're saying he uploaded a supercomputer into someone's brain."

Chuck shook his head. "I honestly don't know where he is. I haven't seen him in years."

"Don't lie to me." Her voice turned colder. "My patience has limits."

Silence settled between them. "We'll get to the point where torture starts sounding like the better option."

A long moment passed. Then Mariana spoke again. "You may be my only chance."

Chuck frowned. "My only chance to find Larkin."

And just like that... the interrogation changed direction. "What exactly do you know about Guatemala?"

Chuck swallowed. "The report says... you disappeared near the end of the operation."

Mariana let out a bitter laugh. "How official. It didn't mention the cartel captured me? Or that Bryce Larkin and his little girlfriend betrayed me and left me to rot in the jungle?" She tapped the left side of her chest. "Or maybe that Bryce was my boyfriend? That certainly wasn't in there."

She looked directly into Chuck's eyes. "Neither was the little souvenir he gave me." Her finger rested over an old scar beneath her shirt. "It wasn't a fatal shot. But it was more than enough."

Chuck's stomach tightened. None of that had been in the files. "By the time I crawled out of that hellhole... ..and found out he'd hooked up with Rebecca and was happily vacationing in Cabo..." She smiled without warmth. "You can imagine how angry I was." A pause. "I'm not quite that angry anymore." She stressed every word. "Now I simply want revenge." "On Bryce Larkin." "And Rebecca Franco." She tilted her head. "Or Sarah Walker." "Whatever she calls herself these days."

Chuck took a careful breath. "Mariana..."

She looked at him. "You don't really want them." Silence. "You want the truth."

Something shifted in her expression. "The truth..." she repeated quietly.

Chuck nodded. "And maybe... ..maybe someone told you the wrong story."

A long silence followed. Finally, Mariana took a step back. She didn't relax. She didn't lower her guard. But somehow... the threat felt just a little less immediate. "Then prove it."

Chuck swallowed. For the first time... this didn't feel like an interrogation anymore. It felt like a negotiation. Chuck managed a nervous smile. "Look... We both hate Bryce Larkin. So, technically... ..that kind of makes us teammates."

"I fail to see how that helps."

Chuck shrugged. "There's an old saying. 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend.'"

"I don't have friends."

That was when Chuck caught movement in the darkness behind her. Sarah. Slipping silently through the shadows. "Oh, come on," Chuck said, desperately trying to keep Mariana talking. "There has to be somebody you consider a friend."

"I'm tired of this." Her voice sharpened. "Where is Larkin?"

She raised the pistol toward Chuck. Sarah exploded from the shadows. A spinning kick sent the handgun flying across the warehouse. At that exact moment, gunfire erupted outside. Mariana reacted instantly. She snapped her elbow backward. Sarah barely slipped past it, missing a direct hit to the head by inches. Then the two women collided. Punches. Kicks. Blocks. Counters. The fight exploded into a blur of motion. Mariana grabbed Sarah's ponytail and yanked her to the concrete floor. She drove a kick toward her— Sarah rolled clear just in time. Chuck barely managed to follow the exchange. The next instant, Mariana caught Sarah's arm, pivoted with flawless technique, and launched her with a textbook judo throw. Sarah flew straight into Chuck. Chair and all crashed onto the warehouse floor. The impact echoed through the room. Then everything went black.

"Chuck..." Sarah's voice came from somewhere far away. "Chuck, wake up."

The ceiling drifted in and out of focus until Sarah's worried face came into view. Her lower lip was swollen and split, and a dark bruise had already begun to bloom across her left cheekbone. "Chuck, are you okay?"

He blinked several times. "Yeah..." He winced. "My God, Sarah... what happened?"

"You blacked out when Mariana threw me into you..." She paused, a metallic taste filling her mouth. Sarah wiped a streak of blood from the corner of her lips with the back of her hand. "Did she get away?"

"She did." Chuck carefully slipped an arm around Sarah's waist, helping her to her feet. Together they made their way toward the exit. "I think..." Sarah muttered with a tired grimace, "...I could use some rest."

Sarah tried to say goodbye at the door of her apartment, but Chuck refused to leave her in that condition. The apartment was immaculate. Almost painfully so. Everything was perfectly organized. There wasn't a single photograph. Not a single souvenir. Nothing that hinted a person actually lived there. "Go home, Chuck. The tactical team will stay around your house tonight. Everyone's safe."

"No way." Chuck shook his head. "Look at yourself. Mariana practically beat you to death."

"Don't worry." Sarah managed a faint smile. "I've been through worse."

"Of course I'm worried." His voice softened. "You're important to me."

Sarah held his gaze for a long moment. "That's exactly why I need you to go home and get some sleep." She reached for his hand. "We'll need you tomorrow. We still have to figure all of this out." She squeezed his fingers gently. "Trust me, Chuck."

Reluctantly, he nodded. Every instinct told him not to leave. All he wanted was to wrap his arms around her and never let go. Instead... he quietly said goodnight and walked away.

The moment Chuck disappeared down the hallway, Sarah stepped into the shower. She simply stood beneath the water. The hot stream rolled over her shoulders... across her ribs... down her bruises... over skin that had already begun turning blue and purple, and would be even darker by the morning. She let it happen. She didn't count the bruises. She didn't assess the damage. Tomorrow. She rested her forehead against the cool tile. Mariana. She shouldn't have been surprised. Deep down... she had always known Mariana was alive. Bryce had said she'd died. Had he lied? Or had he believed it himself? Sarah had never been able to answer that question. And that was the worst part. When it came to Bryce... she no longer knew where conviction ended... and convenience began. Or what had been true from the very beginning.

"The cartel killed Mariana." That's what Bryce had said as he stepped out through the smoke. Quickly. Professionally. "One less problem." Rebecca Franco had simply nodded. Rebecca completed missions. Rebecca had no family. No attachments. Nothing to lose. Rebecca was safe.

Now, as the water washed dried blood from her hair... something inside her cracked. Something she refused to let happen. She forced herself to stay in the present. Not the past. Then Chuck's face appeared in her mind. His smile. The particular smile he wore whenever he was pretending to be brave... while absolutely terrified. He'd worn it tonight. Tied to that chair. "You're important to me." She had simply said it. No cover story. No surveillance cameras. No bugs. No pretending.

Tears welled up before she could stop them. That irritated her more than anything. She wasn't crying because of Mariana. Or Bryce. She was crying because Chuck Bartowski told her the truth every single day... while she lied to him all the time. Why does everything have to be so complicated? She loved him. She had known about it for a long time. She had simply refused to say the words. Because once spoken... they would become real. And once something is real... it can be lost. The water gradually cooled. Sarah never moved.

Chuck collapsed onto his bed without even changing clothes. Ellie and Captain Awesome were already asleep. He lay staring at the ceiling, thinking about Sarah. Her smile. Her warmth. The way she felt beside him. His phone vibrated. A text message. "Everything okay, Chuck?" A sad smile crossed his face. He began typing. "No. Nothing's okay. I'm tired of pretending we can't be together. I'm crazy about you. And I'm terrified of losing you." His thumb hovered over the Send button. Then he deleted every word. Instead, he sent only: "I'm okay. Good night, Sarah."

## **Chapter 14: Chapter 14 - Day Four, 7:48 AM**

### **Chapter 14 - Day Four, 7:48 AM**

The next morning, Chuck knocked softly on Sarah's door. A quiet click. The door opened just enough for Sarah's face to appear. She looked exhausted. The bruise along her cheekbone had darkened in the morning light. "Morning, Chuck."

"Hey... I brought breakfast."

A faint smile crossed Sarah's tired face. "Come in."

Chuck stepped inside. The apartment was silent. The kind of silence that lingered after the day before. "I finally stopped at Subway this morning," he said as they walked toward the table.

"That sounds good."

They sat by the window. Chuck unwrapped the sandwiches while stealing glances at Sarah. Her movements were slower than usual. Stiffer. "Déjà vu," he observed matter-of-factly.

Sarah smiled. "Did you bring ground beef too?" She was remembering the morning after his high school reunion, when they'd sat in this very apartment. Chuck had brought her a hamburger... ...and an extra beef patty for her black eye.

Chuck laughed quietly. "Not this time... ...but this might help." He handed her an ice-cold Dr Pepper.

Sarah pressed the can gently against her bruised cheek. "It'll do."

"Extra pickles?"

Chuck looked offended. "What kind of man do you think I am?"

"Extra pickles."

For a while they ate in silence. It wasn't uncomfortable. It was simply full of things neither of them knew how to say. Sarah finally broke it. "I think... ..I was wrong about Bryce." Her voice was quiet. Not defensive. Just tired. "He wasn't entirely the man I believed he was." "Guatemala..." "...was a mistake." "And I didn't want to admit that."

Chuck nearly choked on his sandwich. Sarah didn't know what Mariana had told him the night before. Bryce had already been so many things in Chuck's life— a friend... a traitor... a hero... a selfish jerk... But now there was something even worse. A cold-blooded man capable of turning on the people he loved without hesitation. Pieces of the truth...

"I think..." Chuck finally said, "...maybe all of us were wrong about something."

Sarah searched his eyes. For a long moment she didn't simply look at him. She was looking through him. Searching. "You know what happened."

Chuck's chest tightened. For one terrifying second, it felt like everything depended on his answer. "I don't," he said. He did know some things. Enough to understand that some truths weren't his to tell.

Sarah studied him for another moment. Then lowered her eyes. "Chuck..."

"Yeah?"

"Thank you for breakfast."