

Chuck versus Valley Downs

by trytryagain

Lizzie is too late and Longshore flies away with Chuck, leaving Sarah to face a future without her guy. 1x13 Marlin disaster that tries to cost all of them everything.

Rated: T · Genre: Angst · Chapters: 4

Chapter 1: Chuck versus Valley Downs

Chapter 1 - The Roof Wednesday, January 27, 2008 Los Angeles Chuck squeezed her hands, committing everything he could to memory. The soul-deep ache in her luminous eyes, the softness where he stroked the back of her hands. The strength as she squeezed him back. Hands he'd held before, clinging with urgency this time. Trembling even. Not the hands of a CIA assassin. At least not in this moment. He'd never known a person so consumed in contradictions as Sarah Walker. Fierce and frightening, playful and tender. At times almost shy and unsure, which in light of her history puzzled and fascinated Chuck beyond anything he'd ever known. Chuck wondered for months if Sarah felt in return anything like the adoration he felt for her. Under the weight of their brief, tense, confusing acquaintance, she liked him, at least. He knew that much. Hers were not tears of indifference. Chuck did not delay any longer than the minute Longshore gave him. He wasn't resigned to going; he was frankly terrified of what came next. This was killing him, and Sarah didn't look any better. But he feared what she might do even more if he escalated things with Longshore. He'd seen Sarah's hand drift behind her back where she surely had a pistol. As emotional as she was, if he clung to her, said the right things, begged even, she was capable in her distress of doing something she couldn't take back. Sarah might do it if he asked. That's what Graham did, pointed his favorite weapon at a problem with no regard for what it cost her. And this would cost her everything. This was his last chance to be the man Sarah needed him to be, and Chuck didn't want to be anything like Langston Graham. He slowly drew their handhold out to their fingertips

and made himself let go. "Goodbye, Sarah." Turn. Put one foot in front of the other. Don't give her a reason. The way Chuck said it, so resigned, out of hope and determined to walk away with some dignity and not make it any harder for Sarah opened up a burning pit in her stomach. Not Graham nor Beckman, maybe not even Casey, understood what they were losing here. The only reason they did this job was to protect good people, and one of the best was walking away forever if the higher ups had their way. Sarah already ached with the loss. Every step he took was like a dagger. Her asset. Her guy. Sarah wanted to do something, give Chuck some kind of hope. "Chuck!" He turned back grimly, just barely hanging on. Longshore looked annoyed at the interruption, but Sarah couldn't care less. "Save ya later," Sarah said, wishing it didn't sound so foolish or impossible. His expression said he knew it was all that she could give him, and Chuck appreciated the effort, however little it could mean. He watched her across the short distance with a tiny, sad smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. Longshore wrapped an iron hand around Chuck's arm and pulled him across the helipad. Chuck stumbled a bit, stubbornly facing Sarah as he was propelled out of the way of the approaching chopper. Sarah jogged to her left, outside the circle of the landing zone, far enough that the helo wouldn't block her view of Chuck and Longshore. The agent pulled Chuck down and forward at the same time the landing skids touched down. Chuck grabbed the edge of the door and held fast. He wasn't trying to get away, only wanting to see her for a little longer. The sob Sarah had been holding in finally got the better of her and she gasped as the steady stream of tears became a flood. She'd never felt more useless in her life. Longshore threw his shoulder into Chuck's back once, twice, and Chuck's grip on the edge of the door faltered. The last thing Sarah saw before a hand in the chopper reached out and dragged her asset inside was Chuck speaking, looking directly at her as he formed the words. There was no use yelling over the thunder of the rotors, but he spoke it clearly, deliberately, with no trace of hesitation. "I love you." Then he was gone. The chopper lifted and banked away from the building. Sarah ran to the edge of the roof, as close as she could get. She saw the pilot and the top of Longshore's head, but because of Chuck's little rebellion at the door, it looked like whomever had yanked him into the helicopter had Chuck pinned to the floor, out of sight. In a moment of clarity, she wiped her eyes and squinted at the tail number.

N7J1472. She repeated it over and over again as she sank to the ground. It was all she could do. For now. Sarah had participated in extractions to no-return clandestine facilities. She had disappeared very bad people forever just like this. Chuck had asked her to take care of his family, in whatever limited way she could, to say something to make it all right. What could she possibly say to Ellie? Nothing could possibly make this right, ever. Sarah knew Graham would recall her so fast, she might not even see Ellie, leaving Chuck's family completely in the dark. Her director would absolutely do that, because Graham didn't care what happened to them. It wasn't mission critical, so it wouldn't be a concern. Sarah typed the tail number into her notes app, saved it, turned off her phone and pulled the battery. Graham would be angry, but it would be the smallest thing they disagreed about when she stood across the desk from him at Langley. She watched the helicopter strobe lights grow smaller and smaller. The thrumming of the blades faded to nothing. Sarah heard the creak of the fire door on the lower level, and a few seconds later, light footsteps tapping on the stairs. As much as he tried otherwise, Casey's footfalls were heavy and distinct. Sarah knew exactly who this was. She crept forward and crouched low as white-hot rage boiled up inside her. Lizzie's smug face popped up above the edge of the roof. In one motion Sarah rose and delivered a devastating spinning back kick. Sarah's foot connected solidly with Lizzie's head and launched the enemy agent clear over the open side handrail and twenty feet to the roof below. Lizzie landed in a heap of unnatural angles and lay completely still. A permanent kind of still. Sarah didn't even bother to go check for a pulse. Casey popped up through the open roof access hatch not two minutes later to find the Fulcrum agent he was tailing trending toward ambient temperature. It took no imagination at all to know Lizzie had sailed to her death from the helipad deck above, or to know who put her to flight. Lizzie's neck and right arm were not at factory settings. Casey poked her with a heavy shoe and put two fingers against her carotid. Nothing. He noticed a sparkle on her hand. The Fulcrum agent didn't deserve to touch, much less wear Ellie's diamond ring. Casey removed it and put it in his pocket for safe keeping. Her pistol lay on the asphalt a few feet away and Casey shoved it in his waistband. He saw no one from his vantage point, but had a pretty good idea he wasn't alone. "I'm comin' up, Walker." Hearing on reply, Casey slogged up the stairs with an arm held up between him and the roof ledge, just in

case, and paused briefly on the third stair from the top. He'd never seen Walker look so small. The fiercest woman he'd ever known sat with her face on her knees, hugging herself around the shins in the most compact package possible. Her shoulders vibrated with the strain of holding it together. Sarah swallowed hard. "They took him." Casey lowered himself to the deck next to her. He hated this, everything about it, more than he ever imagined possible. "I know it feels all wrong...but maybe this is for the best," Casey said. "In fact, I promise you this is better." Sarah looked at Casey like she'd been slapped. "Are you that tired of selling appliances? Don't you see how much damage they've done? This will destroy him! Ellie and Morgan will never recover." Tears streamed down Walker's face. She made no effort to hide her anguish. "What could possibly be better about having Chuck underground?" That was reasonable, given what Walker didn't know. Casey flicked away a few pieces of gravel next to his shoe. He was probably getting roofing tar on his khaki pants. Didn't matter. Everything in Burbank was about to be pitched in a dumpster. Big Mike was going to need to hire a new green shirt, because it was all over. For four months, Casey rolled his eyes at everything he saw around him, but the prospect of moving on to another assignment now didn't feel the way it should. "Walker...they're working toward launching a new Intersect," Casey said carefully. "They're scouring the ranks for volunteers. We're months away. Weeks, maybe. We would be winding down here." "Why does that matter?" Sarah said, a little strident. "We could stop relying on Chuck for flashes. We could focus on removing the Intersect. He could go back to his normal life again. That's. What. Chuck. Wanted." Casey shook his head. She didn't get it. "That would take time. He'd still need protection." "Then we'd protect him! I would stay," she said, her voice suddenly softer. "I would stay." Casey pinched the bridge of his nose. Walker, for all her icy reputation to the contrary was attached to the nerd, hard. Totally compromised. She would go on a rampage over this, and if she wasn't careful, there would be trouble. And the general would tear him a new one. Every instinct said to get up and go deal with the Fulcrum agent downstairs and leave Walker to sort herself out. But that was the coward's way out, and John Casey was not a coward. He spared a long, pained look at Sarah. Man, this was gonna be awful. "I know you would," Casey said quietly, his voice devoid of his normal sarcasm. "But they weren't going to allow that. Chuck drew the short straw."

Casey grimaced and looked away. A cluster of radio towers on the Hollywood hills blinked in the distance and he watched them as Sarah bored a hole in the side of his head with the intensity of her stare. Casey sighed. This might be his career, right here. "However short-sighted it is, right now they're focused on making Intersects, not un-making them. Once they succeeded...created their little Intersect army, with real spies and not a happy help desk nerd from Burbank, they weren't going to spend any more time, or money or personnel babysitting an obsolete piece of technology on the other side of the country," he told her, his voice unusually tight. "This is better...because I no longer have to shoot that sweet kid in the head and walk away like that's an acceptable loss." Sarah's chest seized. She rocked forward, willing her lungs to do their job. Chuck was never going to walk away. The gravel roof bit into her knees and palms but she didn't care, because they'd planned to terminate Chuck and she couldn't breathe. Sarah had burned assets, but never like this. Never someone better than anyone she'd ever known. She'd burned enemy spies, hitmen, terrorists, human traffickers, political operators who were actively abetting those kinds of people. Sometimes that meant leaving them holding the bag and reaping the natural consequences of their treachery. Sometimes they were taken away. A few times she saved their angry compatriots a bullet and did the bloody work herself, when she needed a quick exit and her mark was in the way. But no one kind and gentle and unfailingly decent. Sarah burned people who had it coming, bad actors who threatened the wellbeing of their fellow man. But not good people. Not people like Chuck. Casey watched Walker collapse in on herself, and for the first time in more years than he'd prefer to count, his eyes misted over. Without thinking, he placed a hand on Sarah's shoulder. She flinched and knocked it away. "You knew," she accused him, her voice increasingly rougher and more tearful. "Every day, for months, while I got to know him. Spent time with his family. Made friends with Ellie. Listened to his worries. Held his hand. Slept in his bed." She pushed to her feet, putting some space between them. "The whole time, you and your sarcasm and your snide comments..." "I was keeping my distance...trying to stay objective, not that it did any good," he admitted with a shake of his head. "Beckman reminded me at Christmas what they expected of me. I told her there had to be another way." Casey wiped his thumb and index finger across his eyes. "She wasn't hearing me." Not even the

uncharacteristic sorrow Casey displayed could breach the flood of anger rolling off Sarah. "You knew for months...and you said nothing." "Chuck sees you, Walker. He reads you way too well. How would you have handled Chuck knowing that was coming?" Badly, she admitted to herself. So badly. "This assignment is different," she said, breathing raggedly. "Chuck is different. I think...I think I'm different because of him." "Exactly. We only got a completely unprepared, very emotional asset this far because he looked at you and believed he could trust you, and Chuck needed to trust you. Without that trust this whole op would have gone sideways so much faster. He'd have been gone one way or another weeks ago. I know it's not right, nothing about this is right, but what you accomplished, by not knowing, was to buy him a little more time." Sarah stood at the edge of the roof, staring at the dead Fulcrum operative. She killed Lizzie without a second thought. Even now, she looked down on her body without a shred of remorse. "Would you...do you think you could have done it?" Sarah choked out. Casey stood and brushed his hands off on his pants. "I...I don't know. But what I do know is if I didn't follow through, they just would have sent someone else...but so we're clear, I hated the thought of it more than anything else I've ever been asked to do." Sarah stood with her back to him, eyes closed, processing that. "So...the bunker is the lesser of two evils," Sarah said bitterly. "Maybe...I don't know, maybe I can do something. Given enough time, maybe figure something out." Casey knew Sarah knew better. Nobody in Chuck's situation ever left the bunker, it was a one-way trip. But if Walker had to tell herself that to get through the next few days, he wasn't going to argue. Casey remembered Ellie's ring and dug it out of his pocket. "Lizzie had this." Sarah took it from his outstretched hand and grimaced. "Chuck asked me to talk to Ellie...he said if...if he's supposed to be dead now...he wants me to tell Ellie something that will make it okay. Nothing I say can say will ever make this okay." "Walker..." Casey gaped. "You can't. Put the ring in the apartment somewhere they'll find it, but you gotta leave that alone." "You know what they'll do. Ellie will not be quiet. The agency will plant evidence of wrongdoing or start a whisper campaign and destroy the memory of a good man just to shut her up. Ellie is my friend, Casey. I am not going to leave her to swallow whatever story the agency fabricates." "She'll hate you." "Better she hates me than believes the government's story, that-that Chuck is dead...or did something awful...and abandoned her to save his

own skin. That's all Chuck and Ellie have ever known, being abandoned by people who were supposed to love them. I won't do it, Casey. If I end up just as buried as Chuck, so be it." Sarah's voice faded to naught, and she cleared her throat. "I've done so many things I'm not proud of. I'm going to do this one thing right." Casey observed his partner carefully. Walker was at an eleven, for sure. Heightened color, irregular breathing, pupils the size of dinner plates. "Okay...so...how do you do it? You can't call Ellie, can't go to the house. There's cameras and mics everywhere." Sarah laughed bitterly with tears on her lashes. "Haven't you heard? Project Bartowski is over."

----- Stupidly long author's note: Some very serious threats were made to Chuck during the show, and this was a big one. If Lizzie was too late to interfere with Chuck's transfer and Longshore flew away with Chuck at the end of Marlin, how would that gigantic detour set up what came after? Toss canon in the blender. What might have happened to Chuck in the time between? What would it take to get Chuck back in action? Here the CIA and its officers don't always tell the truth, and black sites aren't necessarily nice places, no matter what Longshore told him. For those who need to know about content, we'll visit themes including anxiety, depression, loneliness, chemical dependance and the headspace of someone enduring ongoing physical and emotional abuse. A physical assault is described in chapter 23 by way of a secondhand description and surveillance footage, which is not gratuitous but does address specific injuries. Described, not lived through first person. I attempted to not dwell there overlong. They all struggle and endure over time, and in the aftermath, the family that forms around Chuck, blood and not, works to make him whole and will not accept excuses or half measures in restoring him. That's the story. It will end way better than it started. What life can they make together after this hurt? I have kind of semi-sketched a follow up, I'm on the fence about it. What I know is this one fought me the whole way to completion and I clearly don't need to write sad stuff. It's not my best work, but it's been WIP since last August and I need to kick it out the door. The next one, unrelated to Valley Downs, will be better. I have 100k of it written. It'll be my apology for story. I don't use a beta, so all the mistakes are my own, typos which I will notice two seconds after I post, and particularly things I'm certain I got super wrong about the Stephen/Mary/Intersect back story. Sorry. You can expect 60 chapters/150k

words, updates 2x a week as I do final edit, unless a personal situation around here gets more untenable, and then that will take priority. I would love to hear from you as the story progresses. Thanks for your patience and thanks for reading.

Chapter 2: Chapter 2 - The Sister

Lizzie made it into a body bag, and then into the trunk of the Crown Vic by way of a ten-story flight to a dumpster. It was not standard operating procedure. Neither agent cared. At Casey's apartment, the Echo Park surveillance package bit the dust. Casey went so far as to unplug the server in his living room so none of the D.C. pocket protector crowd could boot it remotely. The more he thought about Walker's rebellion, the more he liked it. The ones who would order him to kill Chuck could fly blind for a while. He actually looked forward to telling the general with a straight face that there was no use spending the money to power the server and store the footage once Chuck gone. Casey, who had ignored his phone for the last hour, finally looked. He had a text from Devon. Chuck won't answer his phone. Did you see him at end of shift? Give a shout out, thanks. Sarah knew if Chuck's family was chasing down Casey they surely already attempted to contact her. She hesitated to boot her phone. She didn't want anything to chip away at her resolve. Graham could wait. The sun just began to peek over the buildings across the road as Sarah stepped into the courtyard with Casey. "Really, I'll come in with you," Casey said for probably the fourth time. In the space of a couple of hours, he had gone from orders are orders to anarchy is fun. "One of us has to stay out of prison and depending on how Graham interprets all of this, I could be in trouble." "You could still walk," Casey suggested, but his tone said he knew she'd never take the out. "Or I could get lucky and end up Chuck's next-door neighbor." She really was going to do this. Woefully short on sleep, Casey spoke without filtering himself. "I'm worried about you, Walker...which is almost as scary to me as what you're about to do." "I just...I will not leave the agency in charge of setting the narrative. I can't keep them from doing it, but I can get to Ellie first, so she knows what to trust, and what not to. I owe that to Chuck...and to her." Casey wasn't doubting her resolve, but he did want Sarah to settle in her own mind why she was doing it. "Is Bartowski really worth this?" Sarah looked at the apartment door for a long moment and nodded. "Yes." "Okay. Come get me if they need confirmation." Sarah's eyes teared up, and she shook her head. "Why

would you put yourself out there like that?" "Because Chuck served honorably, and I decline to operate with less honor than him." Casey looked at Ellie's door and down at his shoes with a sigh. "I've waited my whole career to land in the situation where treason and honor are the same side of the coin, and here we are." Sarah fished the diamond ring out of her pocket. Something that should bring Ellie's family so much joy would forever be tainted, and there was nothing Sarah could do to fix it. "I hate my life, John. I hate the things we have to do. I hate the people who make them necessary. I hate Graham. I hate Beckman. I despise Lizzy." Casey placed an awkward hand on her shoulder and squeezed. "Come find me after and we'll empty a bottle of scotch while the sky falls. Just don't take too long. I have to call the general back eventually. You can duck out on that if you want. I'll tell her you've already killed one person tonight and for Graham's own safety it's probably best he doesn't bother you 'til later." Sarah's phone, still minus the battery, was shoved into her pocket. She did not want to talk to Graham. "That'll go over well." "Do you really care?" Sarah wiped an errant tear from her cheek. "No. You tell her exactly that. Or tell him, since he'll probably be lurking over her shoulder like a condescending statue." "You in the habit of telling him to shove it?" Sarah shrugged. "First time for everything." With a reputation like Walker's, you heard her out no matter your place on the org chart, but what little Casey knew about Director Graham gave him little hope that the man would. Sarah peeked in the window. Devon sat on the sofa in the early light with Ellie's head in his lap. Everything about his posture and expression told the story of his proposal plan gone horribly awry. Sarah hated to wake Ellie, and do everything else that came after, but it was time. She knocked on the door and waited in agony. Devon yanked the door open in a panic. "Hey, uh, Sarah. Do you...have you seen Chuck?" She pushed a lock of hair behind her ear and swallowed. "Can I come in?" Something about Sarah's manner weirded Devon out even more. "I-yeah, yeah absolutely." Ellie got up from the sofa, wiping the sleep out of her eyes. She came over and wrapped her around Devon's waist. "Hey, Sarah. Chuck's in his room." She stopped and thought for a moment and looked inquiringly at Devon. "I must have missed when he got home." "Uhh...no. Chuck's...not here," Sarah answered for Devon. "Can we sit down and talk?" Sarah held her hand out. In her open palm Ellie and Devon saw the ring. They both gaped at it, but for different reasons. Devon took it, shocked to

find it in Sarah's possession and baffled by how his whole surprise proposal had completely fallen apart. "I...what on earth? Devon, what's going on?" Ellie asked. He shot Sarah a bewildered look and focused on Ellie. "I...I had a plan, babe. I was going to ask you to marry me last night. Chuck was holding on to the ring for me, you know, so you didn't find it in the apartment and spoil the surprise? But Chuck...Chuck never turned up with it last night. He..." Devon looked at Sarah in growing panic. "He never came home." Ellie's gaze bobbed between Devon and Sarah, trying to process that bit of news from Devon without freaking out. "I...okay, that's...not good," Ellie managed. "Sarah, Chuck tells me if he's not coming home, or at least he used to." Ellie's eyes grew wide and glassy. "Is he hurt?" Sarah wanted to die. If she dropped dead right now, she wouldn't have to do this. This was going to break Ellie's heart forever, and Sarah had to be the one to do it. "No, he's not hurt." Sarah pointed at the sofa. "Can we please sit?" Devon backed toward the sofa pulling Ellie with him. They left room for Sarah, who sat down facing them. Sarah felt faintly nauseous as she reached into her back pocket and withdrew the CIA credentials, placing the ID wallet open on the coffee table. Ellie gasped and Devon swore under his breath. Sarah hardly ever carried her credentials in L.A. The bulky wallet just got in the way, and she already carried her phone and a pistol. But just this once, she needed her bona fides. As Ellie stared at it with tears clinging to her lashes and Devon's horrified gaze ping-ponged between the coffee table and Sarah's face, Agent Walker hated absolutely everything about her job more now than she ever had before. Devon picked up the wallet and examined her ID closely. "Sarah...this...you're a spy?" "I...am a clandestine officer with the CIA, so...yes." Sarah reached out and wrapped her hand around Ellie's wrist. "Ellie, I need to tell you a story. I need you to let me tell you it, all the way through, and I need you to understand a few things at the outset. The story I'm about to tell you isn't completely accurate, but it's how I have to frame it. What I'm telling you now is how I need you to think about the situation. I need you to use my version of the story to inform how you respond to what's coming, because it's very likely that you'll be asked to believe something completely different, and I can't allow that." Ellie pulled out of Sarah's grasp. "Sarah, you're not making any sense, and you're scaring me. Where is my brother?" Sarah looked at Devon in frustration. So far, he looked badly worried, but he was listening. Sarah needed Ellie

to do the same. "Ellie, if you believe that I care about you and your brother at all, I desperately need you to listen to me. Please." Devon squeezed Ellie's hand in both of his. "Babe, this sounds super important. It's Sarah. Let's just...let her talk." Ellie's intense gaze flooded with tears. She swiped them away in frustration but nodded. "Please," she whispered. Sarah's hands shook and she clasped them together in her lap. "Four months ago, the United States government became aware that some information of great strategic interest to our government and our enemies was out in the open, unprotected. We had reason to believe that someone in Los Angeles came into possession of this information. That's why I came to L.A., to track down this person, to determine if they were threat to U.S. national security and to acquire the sensitive information before it fell into the wrong hands. That's how I met your brother." "Chuck has it?" Ellie asked desperately. "This information, whatever it is? Is he hacking again?" Sarah ignored the question and pressed on. "Has it," Sarah acknowledged, "and no. Chuck gained access to it through no fault of his own. Chuck did absolutely nothing wrong, not a single thing. I can't elaborate, except to say now that Chuck has seen it, it has also become known that someone has seen it, these bad actors have been trying very hard to get their hands on the information, or failing that, on the person who had seen it. For the last four months, I have been working with a partner, John Casey, to protect your brother, to prevent him from being identified by anyone else as the person of interest in this highly classified matter of national security, and to help Chuck live as close to his normal life as possible under that threat." "John is CIA?" Devon asked in shock. "No, Casey is NSA, National Security Agency. He's a good man." The jury was out on how accurate a picture that was of John Casey's character, but Sarah had no room to dwell on or explain that now. Ellie sat with that for a moment, holding Devon's hand in a vice and bearing down against the sob fighting its way out of her chest. "All of the strange behavior, late nights, missed dinners..." she breathed out. "All of the out of character behavior was Chuck trying to keep the wheels on while we navigated this nightmare." Sarah swallowed hard, fighting a losing battle against her emotions. "Chuck wasn't allowed to say anything to you, Ellie. It's been killing him, feeling like he's constantly letting you down." Ellie covered her face with her hands and wept. "I've been giving him such a hard time." "Ellie, Chuck knows you love him. He knows..." Sarah's voice broke and she took a shaky breath. "He is so

worried about you, how this will affect you. He loves you so much." Devon was crying too at this point. He went to bookshelf for a box of tissues and handed them out liberally. Sarah crushed handful of them in her fist and continued. "The people Chuck works with at the store...you and Devon...Morgan...you're all in danger, just being near him." Sarah squeezed her eyes shut and turned her face to the floor. "The people in charge believe we can no longer guarantee Chuck's safety or the safety of those around him." Sarah swallowed hard and met Ellie's gaze. "Chuck is safe, but tonight, someone who meant Chuck harm got close enough to our operation that our bosses made a decision...another CIA officer has taken your brother into protective custody. Chuck is gone." "WHAT?" Ellie gasped out. "Where did they take him? When is he coming home?" "Ellie...he's not coming home, at least not now. Very possibly never." Devon, who had been doing his best to shut up and listen and support Ellie, couldn't hold his peace any longer. "What do you mean he's not coming home?" he shouted. "He has to! He didn't do anything wrong! They can't just-just KEEP him!" "Yes, they can." The Morgan door proved useful, one more time. They all turned to find John Casey standing in hallway. Ellie boiled up in a rage and flew toward Sarah's partner. She pounded Casey with her fists. "They can't! It's wrong. They can't do that! I won't let them. It's WRONG!" Devon, only a few steps behind his fiancée, wrapped Ellie up in his arms before she could inflict any real damage. Casey tasted the slight tang of blood inside his bottom lip. "It is wrong," he agreed. "But they won't acknowledge that, not when they're protecting the security of three hundred million Americans. That's how big this is." "Whatever Chuck has, can't he just give it back?" Ellie gasped out tearfully. "He never tried to keep it from us. But the people who mean our country harm won't stop trying to get their hands on Chuck, as long they think they can make him talk about what he saw," John said steadily. "If the government has him somewhere secure, and there is no operation here obviously protecting someone, the threat ends. The bosses won't tell you where he is or let you see Chuck because an enemy could use your movements to track him. Walker is trying to figure out a way to get to Chuck, but honestly...I'm not convinced she'll be able to do it, even if she was his handler." Ellie turned her face into Devon's chest and sobbed quietly. "Handler...what does that mean?" Devon asked unsteadily. "Chuck, because he's a civilian, was considered an asset, and Walker and I were his handlers; his...guides...for

lack of a better word, to help him through the last few months. Sarah was his sounding board, advisor, his closest protector. She took on a cover identity as his girlfriend because it allowed her unconditional access to Chuck and your family, even though that came with some challenges." Ellie pushed out of Devon's arms and watched Sarah, still on the sofa, bent over her knees while tears dripped off her chin onto the floor. Ellie grabbed another handful of tissues and sat in the chair on Sarah's left. "For all I didn't understand about the last few months, I know my brother, Sarah. I saw how much you affected him. He loves you. Are you aware of that? That my brother loves you?" Sarah wished fervently for a fault to open up and swallow her whole. When Sarah didn't respond, Casey did. "She knows," he said gruffly. "But fraternization...a real relationship, is strictly forbidden. They had to be very careful to give the appearance but not cross that line." "That's just...awful." Ellie and Casey looked at Devon, but Devon was focused on Sarah. "Seriously?" Devon asked her. "How do you do that? Act like that, with a big, sweet, handsome guy like Chuck? Such a gentle, good-hearted dude? How do you get that close to a guy that cares for you that much and have it all mean nothing?" Devon lamented. "How is that even possible?" Sarah barely got the words past the lump in her throat. "It's not." Sarah focused on the floor and missed Devon's wide-eyed expression and the way Ellie's eyes flooded with new tears. Casey sat down on the arm of the sofa next to his partner. "Just so you understand how much Walker objects to all of this...she killed the enemy agent that discovered Chuck's identity tonight." "Casey, stop," Sarah begged through clenched teeth. "All of this truth-telling, and that's what you object to?" Casey shook his head in disbelief. "Ellie needs to know you're not at fault here...and frankly, so do you. You tried, Walker. You took better care of Chuck than anyone else in your position could have. You defied orders and went to the extraction site, just to have a few more minutes with him. You threw that toxic little whore off the roof before she could tell her superiors the target's name and that he had a family." Ellie gasped and leaned back in her seat, maybe unconsciously, but she did put space between herself and the killer on her sofa. Sarah wanted to leave. She wanted to curse Casey for his incredibly uncommon attack of candor and run, to be anywhere but in Chuck's living room, breaking his sister's heart, admitting to Ellie that she was a liar and a killer, and watching this moment become about anything other than Chuck and his

family. This should not be about her at all, not even a little bit, and Casey needed to stop. "Bottom line...our feelings, whatever they are, are not relevant to the mission, ever." Casey told Ellie and Devon. "We need to move on from that part of the discussion, because we have limited time here, and what we feel as operators doesn't change anything. It might even keep us from making choices we need to, and at this point we can't afford that. We're going to make the argument to our bosses that the threat was contained before Chuck's identity was known to anyone other than the dead enemy agent, and that Chuck should be released. And our bosses will ignore us. They will tell us to cut ties and get out of town. "For obvious reasons, Chuck can't just disappear and nobody care," Casey posited. "Ordinarily they'd try to float some dumb explanation, like Chuck met a woman online and ran off to meet her. But this week we discovered some recording equipment, microphones, that didn't belong to us in the Buy More. It was the first tip off that someone had zeroed in on the store searching for Chuck. In the rush to figure out how great the threat was, a big federal team got into the store overnight and moved everything to an offsite location so we could search through it without an audience. I can just about guarantee the higher-ups will use that apparent theft as the explanation for Chuck's disappearance. They'll gin up some cock and bull story that Chuck was disgruntled and conspired to steal and sell the inventory and skipped town to avoid arrest. It'll be awkward for everyone and highly out of character, but they just need an excuse that lets them wrap this operation and recall us to Washington. They may even try to convince everyone he's dead. Whatever tack they take, it's gonna be brutal." Sarah used the time Casey spoke to compose herself. She wiped her eyes and focused on Ellie. "We have to be so careful. What we've told you, it's...dangerous. If we get jailed for treason, and it's a possibility now, then we can't work toward getting Chuck back, and I'm the only one inside who will care enough to try. Please understand, John...he cares too, but one of us has to tow the party line and stay connected enough to learn things, and that will have to be John. I'll need intel I won't be able to get once my boss figures out that I read in Chuck's family on our operation. And my boss will probably figure that out." Devon's expression tensed even more, if that was possible. "How could they possibly know you told us?" Sarah looked at Casey for a long moment. Nothing could be worse than telling them Chuck was gone. But among the lesser

revelations, this one was going to sting. Casey spared Sarah the telling. "Because your family has been under surveillance since the beginning...all of you. Phones, email, taps on the cameras at the hospital, this apartment, inside and out. The footage is written to a server at my apartment. We pulled the plug on that server before we got here this morning so we could speak with you freely. We'll argue that the recording was no longer necessary with Chuck gone, but it's a flimsy excuse, and they won't like it. They will likely assume the worst of our motives, because it's how they're wired." Ellie pressed a hand to her chest and took a deep breath. "You recorded us?" "Everything Ellie, every room," Sarah said. "It was...an unforgiveable violation, in a very long list of them." Devon cleared his throat, his expression angry and his face fligid. "You got a warrant for that? The bathroom, our bedroom?" "The project...it's...incredibly sensitive, even within our own government. There are...limits...to how widely details can be shared. It's..." Casey carefully considered how to describe it, because the surveillance was entirely illegal. "It's the kind of project...that people of malleable morals could be persuaded to take advantage of. It takes bodies, lawyers, clerks, judges, to obtain FISA warrants. The more people who knew what was going on, the more likely we'd run into someone who could be manipulated to take advantage of that information and create an unrecoverable security leak." "You don't trust your own people?" Devon whispered, overawed in the worst way. "Good grief, John." More tears streamed down Ellie's face. "You recorded the most private moments of Chuck's life, of our lives, for four months, illegally." Casey, who normally had no problems being forthright, struggled to meet Ellie's gaze. "I partitioned the private spaces, other than Chuck's bedroom, to a specific drive on the server, and I didn't view footage or pass any of it along to Washington unless we had material reason to review it. You have my word that I will shred that drive, later today. I won't turn any more of that footage over to the NSA." Devon was trying valiantly to approach this as a problem to be solved, and to do that he needed information. The alternative was to slide down the drain in a flood of tears, and Ellie needed him to be strong. "Who's pulling the strings?" Devon asked unsteadily. "How high does this go?" "I doubt the president knows yet, but short of him...that high. Certainly, to the director of national intelligence. Walker is...special," Casey admitted with a grimace. "She's a direct report to the director of the CIA. I work for the NSA in a similar capacity. This intelligence, it's as

classified as it comes. People will kill for it, and worse. If they had succeeded in taking Chuck tonight...protective custody is an order of magnitude better for Chuck than what our enemies would have done to make him talk." Casey's jaw clenched and he sighed. "I promise you, dying would have been better for Chuck than falling into their hands." Ellie's paper-thin composure failed entirely, and she sagged against Devon and sobbed. Sarah knew Casey was saying these things for a reason. He was laying the foundation for Ellie to really understand how careful they had to be. Sarah asked for this, insisted Ellie understand something of the truth. Casey was being the partner Sarah needed and asked for, in his unvarnished way. The front door beckoned, but if Sarah had any hope of Ellie trusting her going forward, she could not run away, not yet. But she was a breath away from falling completely and utterly apart and thought of doing it in front of Casey, any of them, really, completely repelled. Sarah was halfway to Chuck's bedroom before she really registered that she was moving. She got as far as the window in his room and slid down the closet door and cried. AN: It ended up a quiet weekend here. Let's make some progress.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3 - The Lie

Sarah looked up to find Ellie and Devon standing in the doorway. Devon trailed behind his fiancée, and they sat on the floor at the foot of Chuck's bed. Ellie wiped her eyes and took a calming breath. "John said he had to go check messages." Sarah looked out across the courtyard. "Our bosses are overdue for an update." "Should you go call?" Sarah clenched her teeth and nodded. "Yes...but if I have to talk to them right now, I will burn a bridge. I can't afford that. We can't afford that." Graham was going to be angry, and he would say no to anything Sarah requested if she ran right at him. Her only chance was to sound reasonable enough to get him to table the discussion, rather than shutting her down entirely, and she wasn't calm enough for that yet. "Emotions are liabilities in my job. I have to be calm and rational, or my boss won't hear me...even though I want to set fire to all of it right now." What Ellie believed she knew about Sarah was in tatters, and she needed information, some way to gauge what they were up against. "Is it...always like this? Your whole life, the secrets...and the lying? Is Sarah even your real name?" Sarah closed her eyes and her countenance twisted into something raw and aching. She started to speak, and hesitated. Sometimes as an agent, Sarah gave up a bit of personal information, which was never, ever true, to gain the trust of an asset or a mark. She was good at it, the appearance of vulnerability, in the short term, at least. But real trust, the kind Ellie needed to believe Sarah and John and act according to their guidance, was reciprocal. Sarah needed Ellie's trust, and she had something to give, something real. Painfully, awfully real. "In this line of work, whatever you tell someone to establish intimacy, to get them to give you what you want, to make them trust you, it's never the truth. It's never you," Sarah began. She looked at the ceiling and wiped her eyes. "Chuck hates that. I gave him so little, and I regret that now." Sarah looked at the mascara on her fingers and shook her head. She might need to lay off the eye make-up. "My name is Sarah, now. But the truth is...I haven't been me since I was eight years old." Sarah told them her mother was gone, and her father a career criminal. In elementary school, Sarah was already her father's partner, a

professional con artist, a nameless, rootless, remorseless thief. She told them she was in high school before she truly felt the weight of their wrongdoing. With high school graduation in sight, by the time she might be able to get a real job and take care of herself and be free of her father's schemes, it was too late, because he was arrested as part of a sweeping federal investigation that landed him behind bars. The man who had been Sarah's boss for ten years, since she was scarcely seventeen, who claimed to have arrested her father to protect him from people who wished him harm, found her that day, too. That man offered her a career instead of prison, and Sarah took it. That man worked for the CIA, and now, a decade later, he was in charge. "I changed my name so many times since I was a kid, my real identity, a name that's on a birth certificate I don't even have...there isn't anyone left in my life who knows me by that name. When I was recruited, my boss created an identity for me. Legally, I'm Sarah Walker. If I had any idea when I came to Los Angeles that I would stay this long, I would have used an alias...but...things happened, and I stayed, and...that's me." Ellie turned her face into Devon's shoulder, and he pulled her into his arms. Sarah doubted Ellie's tears were for anything other than Chuck. It couldn't be for her, but maybe, at least, Ellie believed that Sarah understood what it meant to be drawn into a life of secrets like you, as a person, did not matter. At length, Ellie sat up straight and looked at Sarah, and found Chuck's handler just as emotional, if by experience, a little more resigned to the facts at hand. "What do we do?" Ellie asked, with her voice hoarse from crying. Good. Sarah nodded, wiping her face. It was time to get practical. "The best you can do is appear frustrated and distraught and defend Chuck to the utmost. Be the sister you already are. They won't care how uncomfortable you make the LAPD but stop short of any hint of a witch hunt on the federal government. As far as you know, the feds have nothing to do with this. Do not google any of the agencies or the leadership. You've all been under mostly illegal surveillance for months and your digital footprints will be under scrutiny. These people are pragmatists. If you go after the federal agencies and make it uncomfortable for them to keep Chuck..." Sarah's voice vibrated with anger, but she kept talking because Ellie had to understand. "They could call your hand, and we'll...find Chuck's body by the side of the road somewhere. So, whatever you do, keep your complaints local. Compared to the legitimate national security risk, they have no regard for what

happens to your family. Your misery is an unfortunate byproduct of the operation. I do not feel that way. Casey does not feel that way. But the people we answer to will destroy Chuck's reputation or worse to manage this, and however much it hurts you is not a concern. Please, please don't give them a reason." Sarah needed to leave Ellie with something to do. "It's daylight now, and...it's time to do what you would do if you didn't know what's going on. Text Chuck's number, call him, leave messages. Call me and Morgan. Call Casey. Go to the store and ask Big Mike if he's seen Chuck. Is he on a big install? Give it a few hours and call the police. File a police report. I'm going to have to tell the police something. I will say that I knew Chuck was going to drop off the ring. He told me he planned to clear out long enough to let you have dinner and propose, and he'd come home after to congratulate you both. So, I didn't think much of it when I didn't hear from him, because it was family time." Ellie shook her head resolutely. "Chuck wouldn't do that." Sarah did a double take. "What? Why?" "You were his girlfriend for four months." Ellie's voice cracked and she squeezed Devon's hand. "He would bring you. Chuck would want you to share that with us." Chuck would. He'd taken every opportunity to draw Sarah into his family life, and Sarah came to genuinely care for Ellie and Devon. It made lying to them so much harder. Sarah looked down at her lap and nodded. "That's...probably true. But Devon and I need to tell the same story to avoid creating a problem with the LAPD. So...I kissed him goodbye after work and went home. I thought I might hear from him later, after your engagement, but he didn't outright say so, and he didn't call. But I didn't worry because I knew he was with his family and I'd see him in the morning. So, Devon...what's your story?" Devon's brow creased in concentration. "I-I gave Chuck the ring because Ellie is like a truffle hound with gifts. She found the cashmere sweater I got for her birthday last year, even though I hid it under Chuck's bed. Chuck carried the ring around with him for a couple of days and—" Sarah shook her head. "No, he stored the ring in his locker at work. And chances are over the last couple of days someone in the store heard him mention it, and we have to act accordingly. I know it's your grandmother's and you deserve to have it back, but we need to account for how you get the ring back, because it can't come from me, here, this morning. I need to leave the ring under the seat in a Nerd Herder for the police to find. You might not get it back for a few days, but we'll make sure they don't keep it."

"Like...Chuck realized something bad was happening and stashed it, so it didn't get stolen?" "Exactly. Now, keep going, what's your story?" Devon blinked. "Ooo-okay, he told me he'd keep it in his locker at work, and I asked him to bring it home last night before dinner, but he didn't show up. And Ellie was tired and fell asleep after dinner, and the proposal..." Devon had to clear his throat. "It didn't happen. I was bummed but I figured Chuck got caught up with something and if he didn't show up, it would be for a really good reason. It was just dinner, not a big plan. I figured I'd see Chuck in the morning, and I was irritated, but I knew Chuck would explain. But then he didn't come home. And I texted and called, that part's true." "It's all true, Devon. That's the thing to remember, everything before now is true," Sarah told him quietly. "Tell your story, the way you just told me. Answer the questions they ask. When you don't know the answer, tell them you don't know the answer. Don't feel pressured to invent new details. They use silence in an interrogation, a quiet delay, to make you ramble. Human nature says silence is uncomfortable, and nervous people try to fill it. Don't bite. Let the silence sit. Ellie, you and me, same thing goes for us. And don't worry about being emotional. You can't avoid it, and it's honest. Let your emotions be honest." Sarah closed her eyes and sagged against the closet door while Ellie and Devon absorbed that. Barely a minute later, Casey tapped on the window. She scooted to her right so he could step through it for the second time that morning. He sat in the chair next to Sarah as the conversation continued. "So now, this morning you start by texting me and Morgan and then you call both of us." Sarah prompted. "I have to call Morgan," Devon said anxiously. "That's gonna be awful." "I'll...call Morgan," Ellie said slowly. "No, babe—" "I know how to talk to him," Ellie said with a sad shrug. "I'll call Morgan and Sarah. You call John and go see Big Mike." "Divide and conquer," Devon said to himself. "O-okay." "Just, have a plan before you start that conversation," Sarah advised them. "Have you seen or heard from Chuck since he left work last night? He didn't come home and he didn't call. He won't answer his phone. We don't know where he is. Stuff like that," Sarah said. She blew out a careful breath and wiped her eyes. "John and I need to stay in town long enough, so it doesn't look suspicious, but I won't be in charge of how long that is. I'm sure we'll see each other," Sarah told them. "And at some point, I'll come here to say goodbye. With the cameras, it's very likely I'll have to do that as Chuck's girlfriend and not an agent."

That's going to be...difficult. It'll be my last opportunity to sell the story that you believe I'm your brother's girlfriend, and the audience will be the people watching in Washington. They're going to be angry that we cut the surveillance, even though we'll make the argument that the asset was gone and your privacy had been violated enough. But they'll push back and make us turn the cameras back on, so when I come for the last time...or really, any time you see me from now on, just remember that I'm Sarah, not Agent Walker. John, too. It has to look like this conversation never happened, and you're totally in the dark." "How do you do that?" Devon asked. "How can anyone ever know you, or believe you? How are you two different people?" Sarah's expression crumbled and she barely held on to her voice. "I don't, Devon. I promise you, Agent Walker felt...feels...everything Sarah does. I'm not two people. I'm one woman who has lied to you for four months to keep everyone safe, and starting when I walk out of here, I'll lie to them instead." Casey felt like he needed to reengage and give Sarah a break, "When we leave here, you will have a very narrow window of time to say what you need to each other, a couple of minutes max. My boss ordered me to reboot the server ten minutes ago. After the op is shut down, I'll let you know when all the cameras and mics are gone for good. But please, be careful. What you say, and where you say it. Even after. It's wildly unfair, but there's no helping it now. If you need to talk, leave your phones at home and go for a walk in the park." Sarah nodded in agreement. "I may not always have this phone number. If I have to get ahold of you, it could help if we have established some passphrases, so you know it's me. It's low-tech tradecraft, but it might cut through some uncertainty of you are contacted by someone claiming to be me. I'll remember whatever you tell me. Four words, that we'll use in the order you give them to me and not reuse them in case you're being monitored. Let's make it easy - a rock, a shape, a place and a bird. You pick." Ellie looked skeptical but Sarah was entirely serious. "You can't imagine how often something this simple is the difference between succeeding and failing," Casey offered. "Please humor her." "Okay..." Ellie looked at Devon, and he nodded. "Granite, crescent," Ellie began. "Pacoima," Devon offered. Sarah shot Ellie a perplexed look but didn't ask. "A swift," Ellie finished. "Granite, crescent, Pacoima, swift," she said softly. "Devon's first Pop Warner football team was the Pacoima Pirates." Sarah looked at John as they both ran through their own processes

to commit that to memory. "Granite, crescent, Pacoima, swift," Sarah echoed and nodded. "Good. That's good. I can't be in regular contact. My boss is going to be very mad at me for several reasons, so it's likely I'll be monitored for a while. If I don't have anything to share, I won't risk it. But if you get a text from an unknown number beginning with one of those words, that's us. So please trust it. For now, it's all we can do." Sarah knew she had to go; she'd stayed too long already. She hesitated and finally reached for Ellie. The embrace began awkwardly, but Ellie couldn't not be herself. She squeezed Sarah tightly. "There has to be a way," Ellie insisted. "I did not raise Chuck after our parents abandoned us, and he did not survive that loss and make it through Stanford and his best friend and girlfriend betraying him to end up like this. If there's anything you can do, either of you, I'm begging you...please." "Whatever it takes, I won't stop trying, Ellie." Sarah pulled her even closer. "I'm so sorry you have to do this. I would rather die than have him taken from you like this. I know it can't mean much, but I'm so, so sorry." Ellie sobbed against Sarah's shoulder and Devon wrapped his arms around them both. Casey sat close by, with his hand on Sarah's back. He had shed tears over the years. Not often, but it had happened. A couple of losses in the corps were too awful for anyone to bear, and again after a fouled-up NSA op in Tangiers. Outcomes that Casey didn't dwell on, because he couldn't make them right, and it would be futile to try. The kinds of things you walled off and ignored for your own sanity. Casey found himself there again. He squeezed Walker's shoulder. Ellie was likely to hold on forever and they really needed to go, but Casey stopped short of bodily pulling Sarah away. He got up instead, and she reluctantly followed. Devon looked down at the ring in his hand one more time and reluctantly handed it to Sarah. She trailed her partner out the window, and across the courtyard. Sarah noticed Casey's phone on the kitchen table. She took hers from her pocket and gritted her teeth as she reinstalled the battery. Four text messages from Graham. Ellie called almost immediately and Sarah answered in character. Ellie played her part perfectly, although Sarah knew the quaver in her voice was entirely real. The call to Graham was brief. He told Sarah in the tersest of terms to get back to Washington immediately. Sarah told Graham that three people disappearing in a matter of hours would create questions that the agency did not want. He swore and hung up. Casey initialized most of the surveillance package. He made the round trip to

the Buy More in record time and with the confidence that the security cameras remained offline behind the building, wiped Ellie's ring for prints and carefully placed it under the driver's seat of Chuck's herder. Over the next couple of hours, their phones would ring as Ellie and Devon called to ask after Chuck's whereabouts again. Sarah would struggle to keep it together. Morgan would spiral. They would all falter together. He looked down at his phone and grimaced as he dialed General Beckman. The bottle of scotch in the kitchen cabinet would get a work out later, for good reason. Casey was right. The sky was falling.

Chapter 4: Chapter 4 - The Base

Chuck had the vague, drugged up impression of Longshore handing him off to someone else, although he did not know who or where. Overnight he was moved from the helicopter to a plane, at least one van and finally carried down a flight of stairs and left on the bunk in this room. He found bottled water waiting when he woke up on day one but there was no food. The powerful sedative hangover made it difficult to do more than sleep, although he yelled and beat on the door twice to no effect. On the morning of day two, someone opened a small window in the far corner of the room and left a tray on the shelf below it. Chuck called out and stumbled from the bed as they closed the window and locked it from the outside. He wolfed down the plate of lukewarm scrambled eggs and barely twenty minutes later passed out again. Chuck ignored the next two meal trays, except for a sealed carton of milk at dinner. He trusted it in error. On the morning of day three when Chuck sluggishly sat up in bed, a full tray waited, but not only that. Chuck blinked at the man leaning casually against the wall, ankles crossed, scrolling on his phone. "Morning, sunshine. Jim Rye, Central Intelligence." Chuck lurched to his feet as a flicker that might have become a flash were he not so groggy tickled at the base of his skull. As immediately as it arrived, it was gone. Chuck squeezed his eyes shut to clear it and scratched at the growing patch of angry red skin on the back of his right arm. Rye noticed and frowned. "What's that? The scratching?" Chuck glanced down. "Eczema." Rye's eyes grew wide, his expression too open, too concerned. He pushed off the wall to stand closer than Chuck preferred. "They haven't taken care of that?" Chuck clenched his jaw. "Take care? I don't think you people 'take care' of anything." The way Rye tipped his head to the side, radiating sympathy, made Chuck want to punch him in the teeth. "Well, I'll ask about that, see if we can get it taken care of. But now that you've had a couple of days to transition, we need to normalize things here, get into a routine. So, how about you eat breakfast, and you can go take a shower and change clothes. We'll work for a while and then you can have some free time this afternoon, hit the Xbox, check out the library." The longer Rye spoke, the more incredulous Chuck's expression became. "You are drugging the food." "Eh, the food's fine today." No

acknowledgement, not the least hint that Rye saw the injustice of Chuck's situation. Just an agenda. Chuck stared, waiting for something that didn't materialize. Rye's expression, friendly, expectant, utterly false, changed not a bit. "I want to talk to Sarah-Agent Sarah Walker," Chuck finally told him. "She's my CIA handler. Or John Casey, he's NSA. They looked out for me at home. They know all about the..." Chuck pinched the bridge of his nose and blinked again. The drugs, whatever they were, definitely lingered. "I need them. They know all about my situation." Rye winked. "The Intersect Project. Don't worry, Chuck, Director Graham has me all read in. Your handlers were never meant to be anything but temporary, and they knew that. Any promises they made were to gain your cooperation in the field. But don't feel too bad, buddy. They're field agents." Rye rolled his eyes, like the absurdity was all too much. "Their whole schtick is to cozy up to you and gain your trust, to attain their objective, and by all accounts they're pretty good at it." Rye clapped his hands together and Chuck flinched as the sound bounced off the walls in the small space. "I am your handler, Chuck. You work with me now, so let's get flashing." "No," Chuck said with more bravado than he felt. "Not like this." Rye blinked. "Whaddya mean, no?" "I had handlers and it was nothing like this. Your people tossed me around like luggage. I've been drugged three times. You left me alone down here and didn't feed me. I'm not the enemy, but that's exactly how you're treating me. I need to talk to Sarah and Casey. Or the general...or Director Graham. This isn't right." "You think I'd let an enemy whine about transport and gripe about the accommodations?" Agent Rye drew a long breath through his nose and drummed his fingers against his leg. "C'mon now, Chuck, I'm uniquely qualified. Certainly, more qualified than any of them. I'm a licensed psychologist and brains are sorta my thing. I'm an expert in interrogation methods of all kinds and the use of hypnosis, hallucinogens, psychotropics...and a rokudan...although maybe that's not entirely relevant," Rye said as the tension in his shoulders relaxed a little. "The Intersect blows conventional thinking about neuroplasticity out of the water. We have an incredible opportunity here to advance this project. I've studied your file and the Intersect project extensively. It's fascinating, the idea that so many of our secrets, really all of our secrets are housed in that noggin of yours. Hiding in plain sight? And the effect that has on the human brain?" He tapped himself on the temple and winked again. "Fascinating." Rye, if that was his

real name, was too strange for Chuck's liking, alternately serious and weirdly upbeat. Chuck's instinct was to move back, make space, but there was nowhere to go. The agent pressed his lips together and sighed. "Look...Casey and Walker are long gone, Chuck. Adios, buh bye, not coming back. And their bosses are not available for a chat." Chuck swallowed hard. "Then let me talk to my sister, Ellie." "Security risk. You know it's not happening." Rye leaned in and smiled. "But that doesn't mean you can't make new friends." Chuck was rapidly losing what little mastery of himself he possessed and clenched his fists. His voice grew tight and wavered. "Ellie is my family. And you are not my friend." Rye's gaze hardened. "This can be easy, or it can be difficult, Chuck. We can be friends. How this works is going to be entirely up to you." "Making friends with your captors is called Stockholm Syndrome," Chuck said through gritted teeth. "You know that's not actually a thing, right? Nobody in the history of ever has actually been diagnosed with Stockholm Syndrome. It's not even in the textbooks," Rye shook his head and looked at Chuck from under his creased brow. "You know, your whole no friends rule is kinda subjective. You seemed pretty friendly with Walker. I can't say I've met her, but I've seen video, and wow, that is a beautiful woman. Don't get me wrong, I totally get it. The Intersect Project is big deal, and special kind of op? Well, that requires a special kind of whore." Chuck aimed for Rye's smirk and hit a bullseye. In the next moment, Chuck bounced off the wall and collapsed, struggling to breathe. Rye tasted the blood on his teeth and smiled. "Nice shot, Chuck. Better than I'd expect from a help desk nerd." He kicked Chuck in the ribs for good measure, just to make his point. Rye crouched on the floor next to his prisoner and spit out a bit of blood. "See that?" Rye asked. He shoved Chuck's face closer to the splatter on the white tile floor. "That is my gift to you. We're going to leave that right there forever, a trophy if you will, a monument to your one and only rebellion. Congratulations on that. Now that that's out of the way, we've got important work to do, Chuck, and the first part of that work is realizing that holding on does more damage than letting go. And it will keep doing damage until you decide to play ball. This is your life, and the Intersect is your job. There is no other workable option, so settle that in your mind now." Chuck shrugged off Rye's hand and sat against the wall with an arm wrapped around his middle. "It was worth it to make you bleed," he wheezed. Rye threw his head back and laughed. "I'll bet

it was!" He left Chuck on the floor and reminded him to eat breakfast on the way out.