

Chuck versus The Last Wish

by Brat55512

The Last Wish evolved from a one shot, to a complete 5th Season continuation novel with several more chapters. This is my version of what could have been. Also it will be rated M/16+.

Rated: M · Genre: Adventure · Chapters: 9

Chapter 1: Chuck versus The Last Wish

Author's lengthy expalanation - This version is based on the one shot published on CFF. The first chapter and the second chapter intro scene is the same as that one shot, not much changed. After that the story takes up.

The story evolved from being a one shot into my version of Season 5 continuation arc. It is a long story, almost a big novel, but I keep it running as it fascinates me and it is a joy to develop further. I've tried to fit things from canon as neatly as possible and find explanations for them or use the questions the show left us open.

This story is rated M/16+. Honestly I don't know where it fits with these ratings, but it is more mature and natural in some cases (without explicit scenes or gore). Some fight scenes are depicted in more Bourne or Who is Erin Carter?(great show worth the watch) gritty style.

All my stories are interlinked from the Open Invite, The Day Off, The Black Swan... etc.

There are original characters and historic events referenced in this heavily. Some information is taken from my not yet finished/published pieces like Chuck vs the Swordfish or Chuck vs the 2nd Variety.

So there are some spoilers for these stories ahead, which is unfortunate, but necessary:

Swordfish - Team Bartowski is tasked to recon a drug smuggler operation that starts first as a luxury vacation in the Caribbean Sea and escalates to a point where they act as the “Swordfish pirates” of Costa Gravas.

2nd Variety - Somebody uses the Intersect technology to produce throw away spies, that after the mission is done don't remember it, the catch is they use the profile imprint of Sarah Walker (from around Season 2 timeline). The only problem is some of them, the dangerous ones, remember longer as intended and keep being Sarah.

List of Characters referenced from those stories:

- Mariana Luna Cruz - former spy, antagonist of Chuck and Sarah
- Diane Moore - Director and information broker of the Blue Tide
- Natalie Emerson - Moore's assistant
- Dylan Johnson - 2nd in command of Stanley Ingram in the drug operation
- Stanley Ingram - former soldier main antagonist in the Swordfish story
- Louis - the comic book clerk

The **Blue Tide** in Nassau is a safe harbor for modern pirates and shady deals, and is neutral as Switzerland is.

MARS (Modular Adaptive Response Solutions) - Tech company cover for the bad guys who experiment with the Sarah Walker profile.

Now, this is out of the way, I hope you enjoy it.

Disclaimer: I don't own Chuck.

Chapter 1 - Magical Kiss

The salty ocean breeze drifted across the beach as gentle waves rolled onto the shore. Chuck sat in the sand, hoping for a miracle as he kissed Sarah. Morgan's ridiculous idea about a magic kiss. Sarah's lips rested softly against his, and for one perfect moment, nothing else existed. Then they slowly parted. Sarah kept looking at him for a long time, as if she wanted to memorize every line of his face before finally leaning back. Chuck searched her eyes in silence. "Did it work?" Sarah didn't answer right away. She looked

at him, then out at the ocean. Her gaze dropped before returning to his. "It didn't." The words lingered between them. There was no coldness in her voice. Only sadness. Chuck sat perfectly still. It felt as though the ground had disappeared beneath him. The fragile hope he'd clung to over the last few minutes quietly slipped away. His shoulders sagged. "I'm sorry," Sarah whispered. "I guess... I started hoping it would work too. After everything you told me about us..." She reached over and gently took his hand. Her touch was warm and familiar, but Chuck turned away before she could notice the tear forming in the corner of his eye. "It's... it's okay," he said quietly. "I should've known it wouldn't be that simple. I guess miracles don't really work that way." He casually brushed the tear away, pretending he was only rubbing his tired eyes. "So... what do we do now?" Sarah let out a slow breath. "I don't know. I think... I really do need to leave for a while. I need to figure things out." Chuck nodded, then hesitated. "Can I ask you one thing? I promise I won't keep you. It's my last request, Sarah." His voice cracked. "It'll probably sound selfish, but after this... I won't ask anything else. Really." He couldn't bring himself to finish. Sarah couldn't wait any longer. "Chuck..." The way she said his name was exactly the same. He'd heard that tone for years. She only used it when something truly mattered. "What is it?" she asked softly. "Would you come home with me? Just... home. I mean my place." He forced a nervous smile. "For one last night." Sarah watched him for a long moment, almost as if she were arguing with herself. "You'd have the guest room," he added quickly. "Don't get the wrong idea." Sarah simply looked into his eyes. "Chuck." "You're right." He let out a quiet laugh at himself. "Listen to me. I'm standing here begging my amnesiac wife to spend one more night with me. That's probably about as pathetic as—" She never let him finish. "Okay." Chuck blinked. "W-wait... what?" "I'll stay." His heart immediately began pounding. He stood up, still not quite believing what he'd heard. "Thank you." Sarah simply shook her head. "Don't thank me." Chuck frowned. "What do you mean?" She lowered her eyes. "I can't explain it... but something tells me..." She looked back at him. "...that this is what I want too." XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX The drive home passed in comfortable silence. Chuck kept his eyes on the road while Sarah watched Los Angeles drift by outside the passenger window. He stopped at a red light. Nina Simone's voice filled the car. *'Birds flyin' high... you know how I feel...'* Without taking her eyes off the window, Sarah spoke. "My favorite." Chuck

froze. "...What?" "The song, "a faint smile appeared on her face. "I love it." Chuck looked at her for a moment before the light turned green. He pulled away from the intersection while Nina Simone continued singing. Neither of them said another word. Several minutes later they passed a row of small shops and an old neighborhood ice cream parlor. Out of nowhere Sarah asked, "So... what did Louis give you this time?" Chuck answered automatically. "The usual. Some DC books, a Bob Morane collection... and an Archer." Sarah nodded. "Sounds good." Several seconds passed. Then she frowned. "...Who's Louis?" Chuck glanced at her. Sarah shook her head, looking genuinely confused. "I have no idea why I asked that." For the first time since the beach, Chuck smiled. "I think..." He kept driving, unable to hide it anymore. "...I know why."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX When they pulled into the driveway, Morgan and Alex were already waiting outside. Morgan started toward them immediately, but Alex gently caught his arm. "So? How'd it go?" Chuck turned to Sarah and unclipped the house keys from his belt. "Can I talk to Morgan for a minute?" Sarah nodded. "Sure." He placed the keys in her hand. "Go on in." "Okay." Sarah headed toward the front door, then stopped halfway there. Without the slightest hesitation, she turned and walked straight to the bedroom window instead. Chuck, Morgan, and Alex all watched in silence. Sarah slid the window open, climbed over the sill with practiced ease, and disappeared into the room. Morgan blinked. "Uh..." Chuck smiled. "Did Sarah just use the Morgan door instead of the front door?" "Yeah." Chuck's smile grew a little wider. Alex let out a quiet laugh. Morgan finally looked back at him. "Okay... seriously. What happened?" Chuck kept his eyes on the bedroom window for another moment. "It didn't work." Morgan's face fell. "What?" "The kiss," Chuck shook his head. "It didn't work." Alex looked at him sympathetically. "I'm sorry, Chuck." But Chuck was still smiling. Morgan frowned. "Hold on... then why are you smiling?" Chuck glanced toward the bedroom where Sarah had disappeared only moments before. "Because the kiss didn't work..." He paused. "...but something else is." Morgan still looked confused. Chuck lowered his voice. "On the way home she knew '*Feeling Good*' was her favorite song. Then she asked what Louis had given me at the comic shop. A minute later she had no idea who Louis was." He nodded toward the bedroom window. "And she climbed into the house through the window without even thinking about it as she used to sometimes." Understanding slowly spread across Alex's

face. "It's like her body remembers before her mind does." Chuck nodded. "Exactly." Morgan was quiet for a moment. Then a smile finally crossed his face. "So... You haven't lost her." Chuck looked toward the house. "No," A quiet smile returned to his face. "She just has to find her way back to me." XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX Sarah landed silently on the bedroom floor. Pure instinct. Only after she straightened up did she realize she was standing beside the open window, as if climbing in had been the most natural way to enter the room. She slowly looked around. The bedroom felt unfamiliar. And yet... There was something strangely comforting about it. She stepped farther inside. The room had its own scent. Fresh laundry. Polished wood... and something else. She stopped. Closing her eyes, she took another slow breath. It was familiar. She couldn't explain why. It wasn't the smell of a place. It was the scent of someone. Sarah opened her eyes again, looking around the room as though she expected to find an explanation. "...That's strange," she whispered. The feeling slowly faded. A framed wedding photograph sat on the nightstand. Chuck was smiling. She stood beside him in a white wedding dress, smiling just as brightly. Sarah picked up the frame. She studied it for a long time. The woman in the picture looked happy. So happy that Sarah almost envied her. Carefully, she placed the frame back where she'd found it. Her eyes wandered across the room. Chuck's vinyl records lined one shelf. The old *TRON* poster hung on the wall. A handful of books. Several comic books. Everything in the room told the story of a life someone had built here. A life with someone she was supposed to have loved. And yet she couldn't remember a single moment of it. Her gaze stopped on something oddly familiar. The suitcase. It rested quietly on the floor inside the closet, almost inviting her closer. Sarah froze. She knelt beside it and slowly lifted the lid. A photograph rested neatly on top of the folded clothes. It was her. Chuck's arms were wrapped around her from behind. She carefully picked it up. She had no idea when it had been taken. She had no idea why someone had tucked it inside the suitcase. She simply stared at it. Chuck held her as though he were afraid of ever letting her go. And in the photograph, she leaned back against him without the slightest hesitation. Sarah's thumb slowly traced the edge of the picture. Something stirred inside her. Not a memory. Just... A feeling. Warm. Familiar. Safe. She let out a slow breath. "What's happening to me...?" The room offered no answer. She kept looking at the photograph, and for the first time since the kiss on that

beach, she allowed herself to believe that perhaps not everything about the woman she used to be had been lost after all. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX Chuck knocked softly on the bedroom door. "Sarah?" "Yeah?" "I'm making coffee... Well, I'm *trying* to. Want some?" A few seconds later, the door opened. "Thanks." Sarah followed him into the kitchen. Chuck went through the familiar routine with practiced hands. "You know... this machine is smarter than I am. Some days it cooperates. Some days it doesn't." A faint smile crossed Sarah's face. "Does that happen often?" "To the machine?" Chuck shrugged. "To me? Every day." The coffee maker sputtered loudly before spraying a few drops across the countertop. Chuck sighed. "See?" This time Sarah actually laughed. Chuck looked up. "That's a good sign." "What is?" "You laughed." Her smile faded into a thoughtful expression. Chuck didn't push it. He set two mugs on the counter. "Sugar?" The answer came without hesitation. "Two." Chuck froze. Sarah noticed. "What?" "Nothing." Still smiling, he dropped two sugar cubes into her coffee. "It's just... you always took two." Sarah lowered her eyes. "I did?" "Every time." Silence settled between them. Not an uncomfortable silence. Just a quiet one. Chuck opened the refrigerator. "I'll make breakfast too. Or... at least I'll give it my best shot." "Need some help?" "I'd like that." He reached for the carton of eggs. One slipped from his hand. Sarah caught it instinctively, stopping it only inches above the floor. Neither of them moved. She slowly placed the egg back on the counter. "...That was a reflex." Chuck smiled. "A pretty good one." A few minutes later they were making breakfast side by side. Neither of them spoke very much. For the first time that day, the silence felt comfortable.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX Around noon, Chuck closed the refrigerator. "Want me to order lunch?" Sarah looked around the kitchen. "No." Chuck glanced at her. "We have pasta." The words left her mouth before she could think about them. She stopped. "I... think." Walking over to one of the upper cabinets, she opened it. A package of spaghetti sat exactly where she'd expected. She stared at it for several seconds. "How did I know that?" Chuck didn't answer. Sarah opened the refrigerator. Tomatoes. Garlic. Parmesan. Without thinking, she reached for each ingredient. Only when the water began to boil did she stop. "This is so strange." Chuck stepped beside her. "What is?" She looked down at the wooden spoon in her hand. "It feels like I've done this a thousand times..." She shook her head. "...but I can't remember doing it even once." Chuck simply nodded.

"I know." Sarah didn't ask any more questions. A few minutes later they were eating in silence. Chuck twirled some pasta around his fork and took a bite. A smile slowly spread across his face. "It tastes exactly the same." Sarah looked at him, puzzled. "The same as what?" Chuck set his fork down. "The way you used to make it." XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX Late that afternoon, the house had settled into a comfortable silence. Chuck was tidying up the kitchen when someone knocked. Morgan poked his head through the front door. "Bad time?" Chuck looked up and smiled. "Come on in." "I figured I'd check on you guys." Morgan stepped into the living room. Sarah was curled up on the couch with her legs tucked beneath her, completely absorbed in a book. She didn't even notice him until he stopped beside her. "Hey." She looked up. "Hi, Morgan." "Just checking in. How're you two doing?" "Nothing exciting," Sarah said. "I'm reading. The deckhand's cleaning up." Morgan froze. *Deckhand*. Sarah hadn't called Chuck that since their mission in the Caribbean years ago. Slowly, Morgan turned toward the kitchen. Chuck had stopped in the middle of drying a plate. Their eyes met. Neither of them said a word. Morgan finally nodded toward the book. "So... what are you reading?" Sarah looked down at the novel in her hands. "I don't know." Morgan laughed. "That is such a Sarah answer." A small smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "I mean... I don't know why I picked this one." She opened the book. An old bookmark rested between the pages. "I just... had this feeling I'd started it once." "And never finished." Morgan's smile slowly faded. "Do you remember reading it?" Sarah shook her head. "No." She gently ran her fingers along the spine. "But when I saw it... it didn't feel right to leave it unfinished." Morgan watched her for a long moment. "Chuck." Chuck stepped out of the kitchen. "Yeah?" Morgan simply pointed at the book. Chuck recognized it immediately. He remembered all those evenings when Sarah would read a chapter before bed, then tuck that same bookmark between the pages. He didn't say any of that. He simply smiled. Sarah looked at him curiously. "You're smiling again." Chuck shook his head. "I'm just glad you're finishing the story." XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX After dinner, Chuck quietly gathered the plates from the table. Sarah stood. "I'll help." "You don't have to." "You sure?" Chuck smiled. "Yeah." She lingered for another moment before wandering into the living room. Chuck washed the dishes slowly, the sound of running water filling the quiet house. It had been a good day. Far better than he'd dared hope that morning. Sarah had laughed. She smiled.

She'd cooked. She'd read. She'd even called him by an old nickname she had given him as a joke during the mission, when she acted as a pirate Captain. *Deckhand at day, the Captain's lover at night*. And yet... By tomorrow, she'd probably be gone. Maybe this had been their last day together. Chuck closed his eyes for a moment. "Hey." He turned around. Sarah was leaning against the kitchen wall. "You okay?" He nodded too quickly. "Yeah." She watched him for several seconds. "No." Chuck let out a quiet laugh. "You still read people pretty well." "I don't remember ever being able to." "It still works." Sarah walked over to him. "You're sad." Chuck lowered his eyes. "I just..." He sighed. "I know you'll probably leave tomorrow." She didn't answer right away. The truth was, she didn't know what she was going to do either. She only knew that the thought of leaving made something tighten in her chest. "I don't want to promise something I can't keep," she said softly. Chuck nodded. "I'm not asking you to." He offered her a small smile. "I just wanted to say... Thank you for today." Sarah held his gaze for a long moment. Then, almost in a whisper, she said, "I had a good day too." It was a simple sentence. To Chuck, it meant more than anything else she'd said all day. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX Night settled over the house in quiet silence. Chuck stopped outside the guest room and knocked softly. "Come in." Sarah was sitting on the edge of the bed. She had changed into comfortable clothes, but the same book she'd been reading that afternoon was still resting in her hands. Chuck stepped inside. Sarah's eyes immediately locked onto the combat knife he was carrying. Her body tensed in an instant. Her shoulders stiffened as her gaze flicked from the blade to Chuck's face. He noticed immediately. "Hey... it's okay." He raised the knife so she could see it clearly. "It's not meant for you." Sarah slowly let out the breath she'd been holding. "Then... why do you have it?" Chuck smiled. "Because you always keep it under your pillow." She looked at him, puzzled. "I do?" "Yeah." He shrugged. "You always said you sleep better knowing it's there." Sarah studied the knife for a moment. "...That's surprisingly logical." Chuck laughed. "See? I thought so too." He walked over to the bed and carefully slipped the knife beneath the pillow. "Old habit." Sarah watched him. Something stirred inside her again. Not a memory. Just a strange feeling. As though she'd seen that exact gesture a thousand times before. "Good night, Sarah." "Good night, Chuck." He lingered in the doorway for another moment. "If you need anything..." She nodded. "I know." Chuck smiled one last

time before quietly closing the door behind him. Sarah stared at the closed door. Almost unconsciously, she slipped her hand beneath the pillow. Her fingers found the knife's handle. She didn't pull it out. She simply rested her hand on it. For some reason... it made her feel safe. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX Chuck had been lying awake for hours. At least, that's what it felt like. Sleep simply refused to come. He stared at the ceiling before finally reaching for the framed photograph on the nightstand. Their wedding day. Even in the dim light, Sarah's smile seemed just as bright as it had that afternoon. "Good night..." he whispered to the picture. He wasn't sure who he was talking to. The Sarah he'd lost... or the one trying to fall asleep only a few feet away. A gentle knock broke the silence. Chuck quickly set the frame back down. "Come in." The door opened just enough for Sarah to peek inside. "Am I bothering you?" "Not at all." She lingered in the doorway, uncertain. "I can't sleep." Chuck sat up. "I'm sorry." "You don't have to be." For several long seconds, neither of them spoke. Finally Sarah lowered her eyes. "Can I ask you something?" "Of course." "Would you mind..." She hesitated. "...if I stayed here?" Chuck blinked. "With me?" She nodded. "I can't explain it." She searched for the right words. "I just keep tossing and turning in the guest room." Another pause. "But in here..." She looked at him. "...I feel calmer." Without a moment's hesitation, Chuck folded back the blanket. "I could never mind." Sarah walked over slowly and slipped into bed beside him, carefully leaving a respectful gap between them. Silence settled over the room. "Would you tell me another story?" Chuck smiled. "About what?" "About us." He leaned back against the headboard. "One time you took me to a restaurant because you wanted to prove you could actually plan a normal date." Sarah laughed. "Really?" "Well..." Chuck grinned. "It didn't exactly stay normal." "What happened?" "We got shot at about five minutes later." Sarah couldn't help laughing again. "That... somehow sounds believable." Chuck kept talking. About the Buy More. About Morgan. About Ellie and Captain Awesome. About the missions they'd survived together. About the night Sarah taught him how to cook hot dogs over a campfire. And about the countless times she'd taught him to believe in himself. Without realizing it, Sarah slowly moved closer. Little by little. Eventually, she rested her head against his shoulder. She stayed perfectly still for a few moments before speaking. "...Is this okay?" Chuck looked down at her. She met his eyes with quiet uncertainty. "I don't know why I'm doing this." A small smile

appeared on her lips. "It just... feels right." Chuck felt his eyes sting. Very gently, he slipped an arm around her. "It's okay." His voice caught for just a moment. "It's more than okay." Sarah closed her eyes. "Good," She nestled a little closer. "Then... I'll stay a little longer." Chuck didn't answer. He didn't want to disturb the moment. Sarah's breathing gradually became slow and steady. Within minutes, she was asleep. Chuck remained awake long after that. Not because he was afraid she would wake up. Because he was afraid that if he closed his eyes... he might wake to discover that this had all been a dream.

Chapter 2: Chapter 2 - Back to the Future

Chapter 2 - Back to the Future

Chuck slowly opened his eyes. The morning sun was already filtering through the curtains. Smiling, he rolled onto his side. The bed was empty. The smile vanished from his face.

"Sarah?"

Silence. He sat up and hurried to the guest room. The pillow looked untouched. The blanket had been folded neatly. Chuck felt his stomach tighten.

She'd left.

Of course she'd left.

She hadn't promised him anything.

He'd been the one hoping again.

Even the doorknob felt heavier than usual as he stepped into the hallway.

The house was quiet. Then he heard it. The soft sizzle of a pan. The gentle clink of dishes.

He stopped.

The sounds were coming from the kitchen. Carefully, he looked around the corner. Sarah stood at the stove with her back to him, making scrambled eggs. Bread was toasting. The coffee maker hummed quietly in the background. As if sensing him, she turned around.

"Good morning."

She smiled softly.

Chuck could only stare.

"I thought..."

The words caught in his throat. Sarah's smile became a little warmer.

"That I'd left?"

He nodded.

"Yeah."

She lowered the heat beneath the pan.

"So did I."

Chuck frowned, confused. Sarah looked back at the eggs.

"When I woke up, I was completely sure I was going to pack my things and leave."

She paused.

"Then I came into the kitchen."

"I saw the eggs. The coffee. The bread."

A small smile found its way back onto her face.

"And before I even realized what I was doing... I started making breakfast."

Chuck let out a quiet laugh.

"Reflex?"

Sarah nodded.

"Maybe."

Then she looked at him. For a long moment.

"I still don't remember us. I don't remember our wedding."

She fell silent.

Chuck didn't interrupt.

Sarah slowly let out her breath.

"But yesterday after the kiss..."

She searched for the words.

"All day long... everything kept telling me that this is where I belong."

"That's a start," said softly Chuck.

Silence filled the kitchen once again. Then, almost in a whisper, she spoke.

"I think..."

Chuck hardly dared breathe.

Sarah smiled at him.

"...I'm staying."

Tears welled in Chuck's eyes. He didn't say a word. He simply walked over to the table.

Sarah slid a plate in front of him.

"I still put too much pepper in the scrambled eggs, don't I?"

Chuck laughed.

"Yeah."

Her smile widened.

"Then at least something really hasn't changed."

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They ate in silence for a few moments, the morning sunlight slowly creeping across the table.

Eventually, Sarah broke the silence.

"So... what happens now?"

Chuck set down his fork.

"That depends... what do you mean?"

"Everything," she said with a sigh.

Chuck smiled.

"That's a pretty big topic for breakfast."

"I think we have time," Sarah said with a faint smile.

Chuck nodded, staring down at his plate for a moment.

"Yeah... For the first time, we really do." He took a breath. "I don't want to dump everything on you. Yesterday, I thought it was going to be our last day together. That I'd never see you again. Today..." He looked up at her. "Today, things are different."

Sarah listened quietly.

"What do you want?"

Chuck let out a slow breath.

"I don't want to rush anything. I don't..." He hesitated, his eyes dropping to the table. "I don't want to mess this up. Not this. I asked you to trust me, and I wished you'd stay. I think I've pretty much used up my miracle allowance for a while."

Sarah's lips twitched with the beginning of a smile.

"So how about we take it one small step at a time?"

She nodded.

"That sounds good."

A beat.

"One mission at a time, Chuck."

Chuck froze.

Sarah immediately realized she had hit something. He looked at her for a moment, almost surprised.

"Did I say something wrong?" she asked, studying his face.

"No. No, not at all," he said, shaking his head. "It's just... I feel like I've heard that before."

"From me?"

"Yeah."

Sarah said nothing. She lowered her eyes and took a sip of orange juice, her thumb slowly tracing the rim of the glass. After a long moment, she spoke again.

"And what's the next step?"

"You stay here and get some rest. No pressure. No obligations."

"No obligations," Sarah repeated.

"Yeah." Chuck shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Although... I'd appreciate it if you told me if you decided to leave. I mean..."

Sarah reached across the table and placed her hand over his, her fingers settling gently against the back of his hand. For a moment, neither of them said anything.

"Chuck..."

"Yeah?" His voice caught slightly.

"Don't panic."

Chuck laughed — a genuine laugh, the sound easing something inside him.

"You've really said that to me a lot, haven't you?"

"I guess I have," Sarah said with a faint smile, her hand still resting on his. It didn't feel strange.

"So," she asked, "what are your plans?"

"I think I'm going down to Castle. Beckman still needs Morgan and me."

"For what?"

Chuck shrugged.

"Research. We're going to try to figure out how quickly we can put together an Intersect that might help you." He paused. "Ellie said it could work. If the Intersect took your memories away, maybe it can give them back."

Sarah slowly nodded.

"Not because we want to force anything on you," Chuck added quickly. "Just... so you have a choice."

Sarah nodded again. Chuck hesitated before continuing.

"I was also hoping maybe Alex could spend some time with you."

Sarah tilted her head slightly. Chuck immediately looked uncomfortable.

"Not because you need someone to look after you. And not because anyone's watching you. I just..." He searched for the right words. "I don't want you sitting here alone all day while we're working."

Sarah watched him quietly, her eyes never leaving his face.

"Alex really liked you," Chuck said. "I think she'd be happy to spend some time with you. Nothing more than that." He paused. "And Ellie wants to talk to you sometime, too."

"As a doctor?"

"No," Chuck shook his head. "As a family member."

A small smile touched Sarah's face.

"You're sisters-in-law, after all. You two were close."

Sarah's expression softened.

"Is everyone really trying this hard to help?"

There was surprise in her voice. And something else — something close to being touched by it.

Chuck gave a small laugh and nodded.

"Yeah. They're a pretty stubborn bunch."

Sarah lowered her eyes.

"But they don't even know me."

Chuck immediately shook his head.

"Of course they do." Sarah looked up. "You just don't remember them right now." He held her gaze. "They're not waiting for you to become the same Sarah you were a month ago."

Sarah was quiet for a moment.

"Then what are they waiting for?"

Chuck smiled.

"They just want to help you be happy again."

Sarah didn't answer right away. She wrapped her fingers around the cold glass, letting the chill settle into her palm. Finally, she spoke softly.

"I think... I want that, too."

Chuck simply smiled at her. For the first time, they weren't talking about their past. They were talking about their future.

Breakfast slowly came to an end, but neither of them was in any hurry to leave the table.

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Morgan eased the door open, sticking his head through first as if he didn't want to interrupt them.

"Hey. Is this a bad time?"

Chuck looked up.

"Not at all."

Sarah smiled at him, tilting her head slightly.

"Hi."

Morgan stopped in the doorway.

"Okay... that is still really weird to hear."

Sarah looked at him uncertainly.

“What?”

“You saying hello like we’re meeting for the first time.”

Chuck could see Morgan struggling with it too. He also caught the brief sadness that crossed Sarah’s face.

“Morgan...”

“No, it’s okay.” Morgan waved it off quickly. “It’s just... I miss the old ‘Hey, Morgan!’ And the occasional eye roll that came with it.”

Sarah gave him an apologetic smile and lowered her eyes.

“I’m sorry.”

Morgan immediately shook his head, waving his hand.

“Hey. Don’t apologize.”

He walked over to her.

“Look... when Chuck first met me, he didn’t remember that I borrowed the Millennium Falcon and crashed it either.”

Chuck’s head snapped up.

“Morgan!”

“Okay, maybe that’s not the best example.”

Sarah laughed.

Morgan straightened, looking pleased with himself.

“There. That’s much better.”

Chuck got to his feet.

“We should probably get going.”

Morgan nodded.

“Beckman’s already called twice.”

Then he turned toward Sarah.

“Alex was thinking about stopping by later, if that’s okay with you.”

Sarah’s expression softened.

“Thank you.”

Morgan scratched the back of his neck, searching for the right words.

“You know...” He shifted awkwardly. “You once told me that family isn’t about having the same last name.”

Sarah looked at him attentively.

“I really said that?”

“Yeah.”

Morgan shrugged.

“So... until you remember us again...” A small smile appeared on his face. “...we’ll remember for you.”

A tear glistened in Sarah’s eye, and the corner of her mouth trembled.

She didn't say anything.

She simply stood and hugged Morgan.

She didn't really understand why she was doing it. She only knew that, somehow, Morgan needed it.

Morgan froze the instant her arms went around him, as if his brain had suddenly stopped working.

“Uh...”

Chuck watched with a grin.

Slowly, carefully, Morgan hugged her back.

“Okay...” He cleared his throat. “Officially, this is way too many feelings for a Monday morning.”

Sarah laughed.

Chuck and Morgan exchanged a look.

Things weren't fixed yet.

But they both knew Sarah wasn't trying to put herself back together alone anymore.

Chuck stepped toward her and waited until Morgan finally let go. Then he took her hand.

“So, I...”

“You’re coming back tonight?” Sarah asked softly.

Chuck looked at her, momentarily surprised.

“Yeah.”

Sarah nodded.

“Go.”

She slowly released his hand, her thumb brushing gently across the back of his.

“I’ll be okay.”

That was all it took.

Chuck and Morgan headed off to work.

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Alex stood outside the door for a few seconds, adjusting the strap of her bag twice before finally knocking.

Soft footsteps approached from inside.

The door opened.

Sarah stood there in a simple pair of jeans and a light blue T-shirt. She looked almost as if she belonged here already.

“Hi.”

Alex’s smile faltered for a moment.

“Hi... Sarah.”

An awkward silence settled between them. Alex suddenly had no idea what to do with her hands. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

“Um... Chuck said that... I mean, I thought...”

Sarah tilted her head.

“You’re nervous.”

Alex laughed.

“Is it that obvious?”

“I’m pretty good at reading people.” Sarah sounded almost surprised by her own words.

“At least... I think I am.”

Alex nodded.

“Yeah. The guys said that about you, too.”

With an instinctively welcoming gesture, Sarah stepped aside.

“Come in?”

“Thanks.”

Alex stepped inside. The familiar scent of the living room hit her, and for a few seconds she simply looked around.

“This is weird.”

Sarah looked at her curiously.

“For you?”

“Yeah.” Alex gave an awkward smile. “I know you’re Sarah. It’s just...” She glanced around again. “The Sarah who opened the door isn’t quite the same Sarah I know.”

Sarah nodded.

“I feel something like that about myself, too.”

The silence was less uncomfortable now.

Alex let out a breath.

“Sorry. Chuck asked me not to treat you like you’re made of porcelain.”

“He was right.”

“I just want to do this right.”

Sarah smiled.

“I think you already are.”

It was as if someone had given Alex permission to breathe again. She laughed with relief.

“Thanks.”

Another brief silence followed.

Sarah finally spoke.

“Chuck said we could spend some time together.”

“Yeah.”

“What do we usually do?”

Alex laughed.

“Well... we haven’t actually spent that much time together. I was usually busy with Morgan or Dad.”

Sarah nodded.

“Then Chuck may have exaggerated a little.”

Alex smiled.

“A little.”

After a brief pause, she added,

“But whenever we did spend time together, I always had a good time.”

Sarah looked at her curiously and leaned slightly closer.

“Why?”

“Because you never treated me like Casey’s daughter.”

Sarah raised an eyebrow.

“Then how did I treat you?”

“Just... like Alex. I’m not saying we spent tons of time together, but you were always nice to me.”

Sarah turned her gaze toward the window for a moment.

“I’m glad I wasn’t a complete idiot.”

Alex laughed.

“No. Not at all.”

Then she looked around the living room.

“Okay... what if we don’t spend the entire morning sitting here?”

Sarah looked back at her.

“Have something in mind?”

“I know a great little coffee shop a few blocks from here.”

Sarah smiled.

“And after that?”

Alex shrugged.

“We could go shopping. Not because you need anything... just because sometimes that’s what girls do.”

Sarah gave a quiet laugh.

“How do you know that?”

“Devon says I watch too many romantic comedies.”

“And?”

Alex grinned and shrugged.

“Morgan’s fault.”

Sarah stood.

The decision came more easily than she expected.

“Give me five minutes.”

Alex nodded.

“Okay.”

Sarah started toward the bedroom, then glanced back halfway there.

“Alex?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for not looking at me like I’m broken.”

Alex didn’t hesitate.

“Sarah... you’re not broken.”

A small smile appeared on her face.

“I just get to know you all over again.”

Sarah stared at her for a few seconds, that same quiet emotion returning to her eyes.

“Then...” She smiled softly. “Let’s start with coffee.”

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

The car rolled quietly through the streets of Burbank. Morning traffic slowly flowed around them, the radio carrying the morning news.

"...authorities are continuing to investigate the explosion at the port of Rotterdam. Police are currently treating it as an industrial accident..."

Morgan turned it off.

"Just nope."

For the next five minutes, Morgan didn't say a word. That alone was enough to make Chuck start worrying, so he finally broke the silence.

"You think I talked too much, right?"

Morgan didn't even look up from his phone.

"Yes."

Chuck sighed. His fingers started drumming against the steering wheel.

"I knew it."

Morgan slipped his phone into his pocket.

"Chuck..."

"Yeah?"

"You always talk too much."

Chuck smiled.

"Somehow, that's not very comforting."

"It was meant to be."

Morgan would have nudged him in the side, but Chuck was driving.

They continued in silence for a few seconds before Chuck spoke again. It was obvious he had been turning the same thoughts over in his head the entire drive.

“What if I screw this up?”

He didn't look at Morgan.

“What?”

“Everything. What if I push too hard? Or am I too careful? What if I say the wrong thing? What if I come home one day... and Sarah isn't there anymore?”

Morgan didn't answer for a long moment.

Chuck instinctively glanced at his left hand. His wedding ring caught the light as his fingers rested on the steering wheel. His thumb brushed over it, almost as if he were looking for something to hold on to.

Morgan let Chuck's words settle for a moment.

Then he spoke.

“Chuck.”

“Hmm?”

“She stayed last night.”

“Yeah.”

“She made you breakfast this morning.”

Morgan listed the facts like a prosecutor building a case.

Chuck nodded.

“Yeah.”

“She held your hand.”

Another nod.

“Yeah.”

“She said she wants to get better. She said it, Chuck!” Morgan's voice was equal parts exasperated and gentle. He turned toward him. “I think there's only one person in this

car who hasn't noticed that Sarah is trying."

Chuck fell silent.

He started adjusting the rearview mirror, even though it didn't need adjusting.

"I know she's scared."

"Of course she's scared!" Morgan smiled as though that were the most obvious thing in the world. "But she stayed."

Chuck let out a breath.

"For now."

Morgan laughed.

"See? That's exactly what I'm talking about."

Chuck looked at him, confused.

"You're always waiting for the next disaster."

"Because it might happen."

"It might," Morgan agreed with a nod. "But it might not."

Chuck looked out the window. A young couple walked down the sidewalk hand in hand.

"It feels like we're back at the beginning."

Morgan grinned.

"Dude..."

"Yeah?"

"You two are always at the beginning."

Chuck raised an eyebrow.

"What does that mean?"

"Think about it." Morgan started counting on his fingers, getting more animated as he went. "When you first met her, you thought she was just part of your cover. Then you

realized you were in love with her. Then you broke up, danced around each other, found out she was in love with you, and got back together.”

“You got married!” Morgan added, sounding much prouder of the achievement than necessary.

“Then she lost her memories,” Chuck interjected.

Morgan looked at him.

“You two somehow always... start over.”

As if that were Chuck and Sarah’s superpower.

Chuck let out a quiet laugh. It was brief, but genuine.

“That sounds exhausting.”

“It is, even just watching it is hard,” Morgan admitted. “But you know what all of those times have in common?”

“What?”

“Every single time, you chose each other. No matter what happened. Every time.”

For the first time, Morgan was completely serious.

Chuck fell silent.

Morgan looked through the windshield.

“I don't see that changing now.”

Chuck didn't answer. His eyes remained on the road, but his grip on the steering wheel tightened slightly.

Morgan reached over, put a hand on his shoulder, and gave it a brief squeeze.

“Hey.”

Chuck looked at him.

“One thing at a time.”

Chuck smiled.

“I've already heard that from someone today.”

Morgan grinned and nodded.

“Then maybe listen this time!”

He leaned back in his seat, satisfied.

The car slowly pulled into the Buy More parking lot.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

The small café's patio was almost completely full. The smell of freshly ground coffee drifted through the air. People walked along the street, a cyclist sped past, and the bakery across the street filled the air with the scent of fresh bread. Inside, a television was broadcasting the news.

“An unidentified cyberattack temporarily knocked several communications satellites offline for twelve minutes. And now, in sports news, the Miami Dolphins...”

Alex set down her bag.

“What do you want?”

Sarah looked around, her eyes moving over the specials written on the chalkboard.

“Anything.”

“That's not very specific.”

“I don't remember what I like.”

Alex smiled.

“Then let's start with two cappuccinos.”

Sarah nodded.

“Sounds good.”

While Alex went to the counter to order, Sarah was left alone at the table. Without realizing it, she straightened in her chair.

Her eyes instinctively swept across the café.

Quick. Methodical.

The exits.

The windows.

The staff. Who was alone? Who was watching them?

A man reading a newspaper in the corner.

A woman pushing a stroller.

A young barista behind the counter.

Sarah's eyes automatically caught on the security camera mounted in the corner of the ceiling.

Then on a black SUV parked across the street.

Without thinking, she read the license plate.

She didn't stare at anything for long.

A glance was all she needed.

Then she turned back toward the table.

A few minutes later, Alex returned with two cups.

As she set them down, she noticed that Sarah wasn't looking at the coffee.

She was watching the entrance.

"Sarah?" Alex said gently, not wanting to startle her.

There was no response.

"Sarah."

This time, Sarah looked up.

“Yes?”

Alex sat down carefully.

“Is something wrong?”

A small crease appeared between Sarah’s brows. She was still half-focused on the entrance.

“Why do you ask?”

“Because while I was standing in line...” Alex hesitated. “You didn't look at me once.”

Sarah thought about that for a moment.

“What was I doing?”

“Watching the exits. The people. The street.”

Sarah was silent for several seconds. Slowly, she exhaled.

“I really did that?”

Alex nodded.

“Yeah.”

Sarah’s fingers instinctively reached for the handle of her cup, even though it was still in front of Alex. She caught herself halfway through the motion and awkwardly pulled her hand back.

“I didn't even notice.”

Alex was quiet for a moment.

“You were really in agent mode.”

It was as if she was only now beginning to understand what the old Sarah must have been like.

A bitter smile crossed her face.

“I guess my body remembers before I do.”

Alex gently wrapped her fingers around her cup.

“And now?”

This time, Sarah deliberately looked around the café. Not out of instinct, but because she was choosing to.

Her eyes paused on the entrance, then the camera, and finally returned to Alex.

A small smile appeared on her face.

For the first time, she felt like an ordinary customer.

“That it’s just a completely normal coffee shop.”

Alex laughed.

“That’s good news.”

Sarah picked up her cup.

“I think we can actually drink that coffee now.”

They drank in silence for a while.

Sarah stared at her coffee for a moment before speaking quietly.

“Alex...”

“Yeah?”

“Did Chuck always worry this much?”

Sarah tried to make the question sound casual.

Alex laughed.

“No. Even more.”

“Really?”

Sarah looked at her in surprise, but Alex added,

“That’s according to Morgan. I didn't know you guys back then, but I believe him.”

She smiled.

“But I did see how much you two loved each other. Dad told me, too. Although, by his standards...” She paused. “You two were almost unbearably in love.”

Alex sighed, and it was obvious Casey had come to mind.

Sarah said nothing.

Casey was still only a handful of hazy feelings to her.

And the memory that they had seen each other again a week ago.

Alex turned her coffee slowly between her hands for a few seconds before speaking quietly.

“There’s one thing I know for sure.”

Sarah looked up.

“Chuck loves you just as much now as he did then.”

Sarah slowly ran her fingers along the rim of the porcelain cup. The motion helped steady her.

Her gaze drifted toward one of the café’s bulletin boards, as though she might find the right words there.

Finally, she spoke softly.

“He’s afraid he’s going to lose me.”

Saying it out loud made it feel much more real.

Alex nodded.

“Yeah.”

Sarah stared at her cup for a long time.

“That’s the worst part.”

Alex waited quietly for her to continue.

"I can see how much he loves me. I kissed him." It felt strange saying it out loud. "I like being with him. I feel safe with him, and the strangest part is..." She paused. "I don't have to try. It just happens."

She took a small breath.

"At least I know that much."

Her voice grew thinner as she fought to hold back her tears.

"But... I don't remember falling in love with him."

Her voice nearly broke.

"I lost the happiest part of my life... and it..." She swallowed. "It's horrible."

She closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath, slowly letting it out. A tightness had begun to build in her chest.

When she opened her eyes again, tears glistened in them.

Alex didn't say anything.

She simply let Sarah feel it.

Slowly, she reached across the table and placed her hand gently over Sarah's.

Sarah flinched for a moment, but she didn't pull away.

"We'll help you," Alex said.

Sarah took another deep breath. Her eyes were still wet, but a faint smile had begun to appear.

"Thank you."

Alex gave her hand a gentle squeeze, then let go.

"Well..." she said, deliberately lightening her tone. "How about some shopping?"

Sarah smiled and wiped the corner of her eye.

"Sounds good."

“Then come on. Let’s go look around. I’ll show you some of my favorite stores.”

Sarah laughed, and her laughter brought smiles to a few of the other customers.

“I thought this was going to be some kind of spy assignment.”

“Much more dangerous!” Alex grinned.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3 - The Walker Identity

Chapter 3 - The Walker Identity

Chuck and Morgan stood in silence for a few moments, staring at the old Buy More building. The Subway logo was already displayed across the front. The old neon sign was nowhere to be seen.

Morgan sighed. Somehow, it felt harder than he'd expected.

"It's still weird."

Chuck gave him a faint smile.

"What?"

"This place exists without us."

"Somehow, we survived," Chuck said.

Morgan grinned and nodded.

"True."

They crossed the street. Both of them fell into the same old routine as they headed toward the yogurt shop and stepped inside Orange Orange.

The place was empty. There was still no one behind the counter.

For a moment, Chuck imagined Sarah smiling at him as she walked through the door.

"Maybe we should hire someone for this place," he mused. "Someone from the agency."

They stepped into the freezer. The panel scanned Chuck's retina, and the door opened.

They entered the Carmichael Industries headquarters.

"I miss the others," Morgan said as he looked around. The room seemed bigger without them. "Especially the big grumpy bear."

“Only Casey could express fifty different emotions with the exact same growl,” Chuck said.

The main screen came to life, and General Beckman appeared.

Morgan instinctively straightened.

“Good morning, Bartowski.” Beckman’s voice carried the same calm authority it always had.

“General.” Chuck nodded.

Morgan gave her a little wave.

“And good morning to you, Mr. Grimes.”

She paused only briefly.

“Let’s get to the point. Quinn’s death raised more questions than it answered.”

Chuck and Morgan exchanged a look.

Neither of them liked where this was going.

“According to current intelligence, Nicholas Quinn’s identity was fabricated. So far, we have found no lead to his true identity.”

Morgan raised an eyebrow.

“A ghost.”

He instinctively folded his arms.

“Precisely,” Beckman replied. “And that concerns me.”

Chuck leaned forward. His mind was already working.

“What do you want us to do?”

“The two of you are going back on active duty.”

For a moment, neither of them said anything.

Chuck blinked in surprise.

“Ma’am... we left the CIA.”

“I know.”

Beckman’s voice didn't change.

“I need the two people who know more about the Intersect than almost anyone else.”

“What do you suspect?”

Beckman was silent for a moment.

“That Quinn wasn't working alone. He had too many resources. Too many connections. Too much reach.”

Her expression hardened slightly.

“Find out what’s going on.”

“General,” Chuck said. “I’d like to ask for something.”

“What is it, Agent Bartowski?”

“An Intersect.”

A brief silence followed.

The weight of the request hung in the air.

“Approved. And one more thing.”

Her voice became slightly more personal. Beckman set aside the file in front of her.

The next question wasn't asked as a general.

“How is Sarah?”

The question caught Chuck off guard. He was silent for a moment before a faint smile appeared at the corner of his mouth.

“Better than yesterday.”

His smile grew despite himself.

“She said... she’s staying.”

Beckman nodded.

"I'm glad."

She paused.

"If the situation requires it, can we count on your wife?"

Chuck swallowed.

He already knew what he was going to say.

"General... I don't think that's a good idea right now."

Beckman didn't interrupt.

"Sarah is still the best agent there is. But right now, she doesn't need to be an agent. She needs some time to figure out who she is."

Morgan nodded in agreement.

Casey would have said the same thing.

Chuck continued.

"If we do need to involve her... I want her to stay here with us at Castle. Analysis, research, support. But, ma'am, I don't want to send her into the field yet."

Beckman remained silent for several seconds, weighing his words.

"I trust your judgment, Bartowski."

Several encrypted folders appeared beside her on the screen.

"Then find out who Nicholas Quinn really was. As for the Intersect, I'll let you know."

She gave them a brief nod.

"Welcome back to active service."

The connection ended.

"Let's get to work..." Chuck looked over at Morgan.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Sarah held a dark blue coat up in front of the mirror and took half a step back to get a better look at herself.

“What do you think?”

There was genuine curiosity in her voice.

Alex tilted her head.

“Too serious.”

She folded her arms.

“Serious?”

“Yeah. It makes you look like you’re about to sell someone a fake passport in five minutes. Or chase some bad guy across a rooftop...”

Sarah smiled despite herself. The smile looking back at her from the mirror felt strangely familiar.

“That’s weird.”

“What?”

“For some reason, this doesn't feel unlike me.”

Alex laughed.

“Well, it shouldn’t. You and Chuck were constantly running around in disguises.”

Sarah continued looking at herself in the mirror, almost as if she were trying to recognize an old acquaintance.

“After all those missions...” she murmured. “How did you know who you really were?”

Alex considered the question.

“I think it was because you always had somewhere to go home to.”

The words lingered between them for a long moment.

Sarah slowly put the coat back on its hanger.

“Was Casey like that, too?”

Alex looked at her in surprise.

“Dad?”

Sarah nodded.

“Somehow... when you were talking about disguises, I thought of him.”

Alex smiled.

“Even though he hated disguises.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. He complained about them all the time. According to him, a good sniper rifle was a lot more reliable than a bad wig.”

Sarah laughed. For a moment, she could almost hear Casey’s familiar grumble.

Several other shoppers glanced in their direction.

“That sounds about right.”

Alex laughed too.

“He had to dress up as a cowboy once. He was angry about it for days.”

Sarah looked at her curiously.

“But he did it?”

The answer seemed more important than the story itself.

“For you guys?” Alex said without hesitation. “Anytime.”

Sarah’s smile slowly faded. She lowered the hanger to her side.

“He was really that important to you?”

Alex nodded.

“Chuck... you... Morgan...”

She paused.

“Dad never would have said it out loud. But you were his family.”

Sarah was silent for a long time.

Then she spoke quietly.

“Yesterday, at Castle, when we said goodbye...”

Alex watched her carefully. Sarah struggled to find the words.

“I had this feeling...” She swallowed. “That I was going to miss him.”

Her voice softened.

“I hope... someday I’ll remember him, too. Just the way I did before.”

She didn't wait for Alex to respond.

Instead, she reached for a stylish top and instinctively picked out her size.

“I’m going to try this on,” she announced confidently.

Then, a little more uncertainly, she added,

“Do you think Chuck would like it?”

The question sounded as though the answer genuinely mattered to her.

Sarah held the top against herself and looked at her reflection in the mirror once more.

This time, she wasn't wondering whether she liked it.

Without even realizing it, she was trying to imagine what Chuck would see.

“Knowing Chuck...” Alex smiled. “If he gets to see you wearing it, he’s definitely going to like it.”

XXXXXXXXXXXXThey walked slowly along the row of shops. Now and then, Alex stopped in front of a display window, and Sarah looked around curiously beside her. Afternoon sunlight reflected off the glass, while people chatted around them and children ran past. For once, Sarah felt like an ordinary person simply passing through.

"I think Chuck would like this coat, too," Alex remarked.

Sarah smiled.

"Maybe..." She wasn't really looking at the coat anymore. Her attention had shifted to her reflection in the glass.

A sharp scream suddenly cut through the air.

Several people turned toward the sound at once. Sarah instinctively looked over.

"Thief!"

A man in his thirties burst through the crowd. He was clutching an elderly woman's purse, desperately trying to force his way through the people around him. He shoved two people aside, and the crowd jumped back in alarm.

Alex instinctively turned toward Sarah.

"Sarah..."

But Sarah wasn't listening anymore.

Her breathing slowed automatically.

The man was running straight toward them.

Everything seemed to slow down.

The distance.

His speed.

The rhythm of his steps.

His center of gravity.

The obstacles around him.

By the time the thief realized what was happening, Sarah was already moving.

One step to the side, smooth and almost effortless.

Her left hand caught his wrist. Her right palm struck him once, short and precise, in the chest.

The thief gasped for air and staggered.

Sarah twisted the purse free with a single motion, then used his momentum to sweep his legs out from under him.

He hit the ground.

The people around them instinctively backed away.

The entire thing had taken less than a second.

Silence fell.

Everyone nearby stared at them in stunned disbelief.

Sarah was just as surprised.

Only now did her pulse begin to race.

She slowly looked down at the purse in her hand.

Then at the man on the ground.

He scrambled to his feet and ran.

It didn't even occur to her to chase him.

Sarah finally looked at Alex.

"I..." She frowned. "I didn't even think."

Alex let out a disbelieving laugh.

"I believe you."

The elderly woman hurried toward them, still trembling and struggling to catch her breath.

"My purse!"

Sarah immediately held it out.

"Here."

The woman hugged it to herself, tears in her eyes.

"Thank you... Thank you!"

Sarah gave an awkward nod.

"You're welcome."

"Are you a police officer?"

"Something like that," Sarah said, looking down at her own hand.

After the elderly woman had finally made her way off, Sarah turned to Alex.

"It just... happened."

Alex smiled and gently touched her shoulder. She could feel that Sarah was still tense.

"I think I just got a glimpse of the real Sarah Walker."

Sarah let out a quiet laugh.

"Alex, what do you want to do next?"

XXXXXXXXXXXX

The monitors in Castle flickered to life one after another. Chuck sat down at the central terminal while Morgan headed straight for the coffee maker.

"I'll get coffee."

Chuck didn't look up.

"Okay, buddy."

"It's kind of funny that we can't just go upstairs to the Buy More for coffee anymore."

"Morgan, I think we drank enough Buy More coffee to last us a lifetime."

Morgan laughed.

"Fair point."

A few moments later, he returned with two steaming mugs and set one down beside Chuck.

"Thanks."

Chuck was already typing, his fingers moving so quickly that Morgan couldn't even follow what he was doing.

One after another, the CIA, NSA, and Interpol databases opened across the monitors. Quinn's face appeared on the screens.

"What are you searching for?" Morgan asked.

"Everything."

"That was a very Chuck answer."

Chuck smiled.

"There has to be something. Some trace of this guy."

Morgan took a sip of his coffee and immediately burned his tongue.

"You think we'll find anything?"

"I hope so. He was way too prepared to have been working alone. Someone funded him. Equipped him. Helped him erase his tracks."

"So someone left a trail."

Chuck nodded.

"Everyone leaves a trail. Sometimes they just hide it really well."

A news site suddenly appeared on one of the screens.

Senator James Harrison Resigns, Citing Unexpected Health Issues.

Chuck closed the page. Not what he was looking for.

The rapid clicking of the keyboard filled Castle. Morgan slowly stirred his coffee, the soft clink of the spoon mixing with the sound.

“What do you think the girls are doing right now?”

Chuck stopped for a moment. He gave an awkward smile.

“I hope... Alex managed to convince Sarah not to sit at home all day.”

“I hope so too. I told Alex to take her somewhere. According to the movies, this is when girls go to beauty salons, go shopping, get coffee... who knows what else.”

Chuck laughed.

“Morgan... you watch way too many romantic comedies.”

Morgan grinned and shrugged.

“Alex’s fault.”

After a brief pause, he added,

“Poor Sarah. She probably has no idea what she’s gotten herself into.”

Chuck laughed and shook his head.

“Alex will be good for her,” he said more seriously. “I think that’s exactly what Sarah needs right now.”

“Normal people?”

Chuck slowly shook his head.

“Normal days.”

Morgan nodded.

“She deserves that.”

Chuck turned back to the monitors.

The search continued.

XXXXXXXXXXXXChuck closed the door behind him that evening. He automatically tossed his keys into the bowl beside the newspaper, one of the headlines reporting that an unidentified group of investors was financing a Middle Eastern port development

project.

Sarah was sitting on the couch, a book resting in her lap. She looked up at him and instinctively slipped the bookmark between the pages.

“Hi.”

For a few seconds, Chuck simply looked at her. He was already smiling by the time he took off his jacket.

“It’s good to have you home.”

Sarah paused.

She hadn't expected that. Her smile slowly became more uncertain.

“It’s good to be here,” she finally said softly.

Chuck nodded. Nothing more was needed right now.

“I’m glad.”

He didn't ask questions or press her about how her day had gone. He simply sat down beside her on the couch.

Sarah instinctively turned toward him a little.

XXXXXXXXXXXX

Later that night, Chuck quietly opened the bedroom door.

“Sarah?”

There was no answer. The bathroom door was slightly ajar, and a few seconds later, Sarah stepped out and walked past him, her hair still slightly damp.

Chuck froze. Sarah was wearing an oversized gray T-shirt—his T-shirt. Sarah noticed where he was looking and glanced down at herself.

“Is something wrong?”

Chuck quickly shook his head. “No... just...” He gestured toward the closet, where Sarah’s clothes were lined up.

Sarah uncertainly caught the bottom of the shirt between her fingers. "It felt good to put it on." She looked down at it. "Like being home."

Chuck couldn't decide whether he wanted to laugh or cry. "You used to do that, too."

Sarah looked up. "I did?"

Chuck simply nodded, a lump forming in his throat.

Sarah stepped closer. "By the way... can I sleep here tonight, too?" She gestured toward the bed.

Chuck froze for a moment. "Of course. Yeah... absolutely."

Sarah slipped into bed with a completely natural ease, moving as though she'd always slept there. "Good."

Chuck was still standing in the doorway when Sarah looked up at him.

"Chuck..."

"Yeah?"

"I don't bite."

Chuck laughed. "I know."

"Then come on." She impatiently patted the blanket beside her.

Chuck climbed into bed next to her. For a few seconds, neither of them said anything. Sarah turned onto her side, absently twisting the edge of the blanket between her fingers.

"Good night, Chuck."

"Good night, Sarah."

A little while later, Sarah's breathing had settled into an even rhythm, and the tension had disappeared from her face. Chuck, however, was still awake. In the dim light, the oversized sleeve of the T-shirt poked out from beneath the blanket. He smiled.

Softer than a sigh, he whispered, "It's good to have you home."

Then he slowly closed his eyes, and silence settled over the room.

He was already half asleep when Sarah's breathing changed.

At first, the difference was barely noticeable. Then she began breathing faster, each breath more desperate than the last. She shifted restlessly, her entire body gradually tensing, and exhaled sharply—as if trying to speak, though no intelligible sound came out. Just a faint whisper.

Then, a little louder and clearer: “No...”

A brief silence.

“No... please...” Her voice sounded as though she were speaking to someone else—someone who wasn't in the room.

Chuck jolted awake and pushed himself up on one elbow. “Sarah?”

Her eyes remained closed, darting rapidly beneath her lids as her breathing grew faster.

“No...” This time, there was desperation in her voice.

Chuck felt a chill run down his back.

“Please... no...”

He gently placed a hand on her shoulder and began rubbing it, switching on the bedside reading lamp with his other hand. “Sarah... wake up.”

Sarah suddenly went rigid, her fingers curling into fists. “No!” she cried out in pain, making Chuck flinch.

She shot upright, gasping for breath, her pupils wide with terror. Adrenaline made her whole body tremble. Her eyes darted wildly around the room as if searching for cover or an escape route. In one practiced motion, she pulled a knife from beneath her pillow and raised the blade instinctively in front of herself.

She wasn't looking at Chuck. She was looking for someone else.

“Where is he?!” she screamed, her eyes racing across the room. “Where is he?!”

“Who?”

Sarah didn't answer. Maybe she didn't know herself.

Chuck slowly raised his hands, making no sudden movements. He placed one gently over hers and carefully lowered the knife. “Sarah... easy. I'm here. Everything's okay.”

Finally, she looked at him. It took several seconds before she truly recognized Chuck, and her posture slowly relaxed as she returned to the present.

“Chuck...” Her voice broke.

Chuck didn't ask any questions; he simply moved closer. Sarah was trembling, her whole body shaking in small, uncontrollable bursts. Finally, she released the knife.

“Was it a nightmare?”

For a long time, she didn't answer as tears streamed down her face. Then she gave the smallest nod. “I was so scared.” She went silent again and touched her chest. Her heart was still pounding wildly, the icy grip of terror barely beginning to loosen. “Someone... was chasing me. I couldn't get away.”

Chuck watched her quietly and swallowed almost imperceptibly.

“It was dark and cold.” Sarah brought her right hand to her mouth. “He was going to kill me... I couldn't stop him.”

Chuck carefully wrapped his arms around her, and Sarah didn't resist for even a second. She buried her face against his chest, clinging to him as though she were afraid that if she let go, she'd be back in the place she'd been in her dream.

For a while, they simply sat there holding each other. Sarah's tears soaked into Chuck's shirt while her body continued to tremble silently.

Finally, Sarah spoke in a whisper, her face still pressed against his chest. “Stay.”

“I'm here. I'm never leaving you.”

Chuck didn't let go, and he didn't ask anything else about the dream. They had time; there was no need to figure it out tonight while the experience was still too raw.

Eventually, they lay back down. This time, Sarah curled silently against him, resting her head on his chest as though Chuck's closeness and the steady beat of his heart were enough to make her feel safe. Chuck held her gently but firmly.

Slowly, Sarah's heartbeat returned to normal. Only then did Chuck allow himself to take a deeper breath and let out a quiet sigh.

A little while later, Sarah was asleep again. Chuck eventually drifted off too, but he woke several times during the night—checking each time to make sure Sarah was okay.

Chapter 4: Chapter 4 - Remember Me

Chapter 4 - Remember Me

The first light of dawn was only just beginning to filter through the curtains when Chuck opened his eyes. Outside, a single bird was singing. Sarah lay with her back to him, her shoulder rising and falling steadily, the oversized T-shirt bunched up slightly across her back. Chuck watched her for a while, then carefully turned onto his side, making sure not to wake her.

The knife lay beside the edge of the pillow—not where it belonged. Sarah had pulled it out during the night and, at some point, set it down not beneath the pillow, but beside it, as if her hand had simply grown tired. Chuck didn't touch it. He stared at it for a moment, then quietly slipped out of bed.

In the kitchen, the coffee maker began its daily struggle with a familiar sputtering sound. Chuck leaned against the counter and waited for it to finish when he heard soft footsteps behind him.

“You’re up early,” Sarah said.

Chuck turned. Sarah was leaning against the doorframe, still wearing his T-shirt, one hand absently adjusting the sleeve. She looked sleepy as the smell of freshly brewed coffee slowly filled the kitchen.

“Didn't sleep very well.”

Sarah nodded. Chuck didn't ask about the night, and Sarah didn't bring it up either; he didn't want to stir it all up again. Instead, he poured two cups of coffee, put two sugar cubes in one, and set it down in front of her.

“Thank you.” She wrapped her fingers around the mug as if warming her hands against it, even though the kitchen wasn't cold.

For a few minutes, they stood quietly beside the counter. Then Chuck glanced at the clock, looking at the time reluctantly. “I have to go. Morgan will be here in ten minutes.”

Sarah nodded. "Go ahead."

Chuck paused at the doorway and looked back. "Ellie wanted to call you. Thought I'd warn you to be ready." He gave her a crooked half-smile. "She can be pretty persistent."

Sarah laughed, and Chuck couldn't help smiling too.

"Living with you guys, that doesn't surprise me."

XXXXXXXXXXXX

The call came around ten that morning. Sarah was sitting in the living room when Ellie's smiling face appeared on the tablet, looking familiar and welcoming from the very first moment.

"Hi, Sarah!"

"Hi, Ellie."

"Alex told me she kidnapped you for a little while yesterday."

Sarah smiled. "Yeah. I think it went pretty well."

"I heard you went shopping."

"We did."

"Did you find anything?"

Sarah held one of the shirts up to the camera. "This."

For a moment, a childlike delight appeared on her face, and Ellie answered with an equally broad smile. "I like it."

A brief silence settled between them, and Ellie didn't rush to fill it. Happy children could be heard in the background, along with Devon's voice. Something fell in the kitchen, followed by Devon's patient voice as he dealt with whatever had happened.

"Devon's currently trying to convince Clara that broccoli isn't the enemy of humanity."

Sarah smiled faintly. "Is he succeeding?"

"No. But they're both very persistent."

They laughed together, and suddenly, the distance between them seemed a little smaller.

Then another silence followed, this one longer, until Sarah finally broke it. "What was I like?"

Ellie went quiet for a moment. "You mean..."

"Like... with you guys."

Ellie smiled, her expression growing distant for a moment as she remembered. "You came over for dinner more often than you ever admitted to. You were a wonderful friend. You had an incredible effect on my little brother, and I was so happy when you agreed to be my maid of honor."

Sarah looked at her in surprise. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"I thought we only spent time together because of Chuck."

Ellie shook her head. "Not just because of him. You liked coming over to our place. We had great dinners, talked... You and Chuck just clicked so well."

Sarah lowered her eyes. "I wish I could remember that."

Ellie didn't try to comfort her; she simply nodded. The silence said more than any advice could have.

Sarah was quiet for several seconds. "Sometimes I feel like..."

"Yeah?"

"Like everyone knows me." She had finally put into words what she'd been feeling for days. She paused, struggling with the thought. "Except me."

Ellie's voice softened, but there was no pity in it. "That must be really scary."

Sarah nodded. "It is."

"But you know..." Ellie continued. "We don't have to get to know you all over again."

“You don't?”

“No. You need to get to know yourself again.”

Sarah was silent for a long time. Finally, she asked quietly, “What if I'm not the same?”

Ellie's smile never faded. “Then we'll love that Sarah, too.”

Sarah looked down at her mug and blinked, fighting back tears, then looked back at the camera. “Thank you, Ellie.”

“Oh, please. You're a Bartowski now, too. Even if you don't know it yet.”

Sarah's thumb instinctively found her wedding ring. She slowly ran her finger over it as Ellie's words continued to echo in her mind.

“You're a Bartowski now, too.”

XXXXXXXXXXXX

At Castle, Chuck was on his third cup of coffee when a hit appeared in the corner of one of the monitors. The first cup, now completely cold, was still sitting beside him.

“Morgan!”

Morgan spun around in his chair, pushing off so hard that he nearly crashed into Chuck's desk. “What?”

“I've got a hit. A corporate structure that might be a lead.”

Morgan leaned over to look at the screen. “That's... a lot of money.”

“Too much for one person to move around.”

Chuck slowly traced the cursor through the network until it stopped at one particular point, digging deeper and deeper into the corporate web. Something told him they were on the right track.

“This. This is the parent company.”

The name appeared on the screen—a holding company with no obvious connection to the CIA, Fulcrum, or any of the Ring's previous structures.

Morgan frowned. "We've never seen this before."

"Exactly," Chuck said quietly. "This is something new."

Beside the holding company's name, a date appeared on the screen. It had been established only a few months before Quinn first surfaced. Chuck and Morgan looked at each other for a moment, the silence suddenly feeling heavier.

Then Chuck saw something buried deeper in the corporate network. He abruptly stopped the cursor.

"Wait..."

Morgan rolled closer. Chuck silently pointed to a line on the screen.

Morgan's face went pale. "You've got to be kidding me..."

XXXXXXXXXXXX

In the afternoon, Sarah found herself alone in the house. It was the first time she'd been completely on her own for any length of time. She wandered from room to room without really knowing what she was looking for; there was no particular destination, yet she found herself checking every room anyway.

In the living room, she stopped in front of the bookshelf. Her fingers drifted over the spines until they came to rest on a thin box sitting at the end of the shelf, half-hidden behind a row of novels. She pulled it down.

A layer of old memories filled the top: movie tickets, a napkin covered in faded scribbles, and a handful of Polaroids. Sarah sat down on the floor, crossed her legs, and rested the box in her lap. Slowly, she began going through them.

One photograph showed a sunset over the ocean. She and Chuck were laughing about something the picture couldn't reveal. Another showed a Christmas tree, where Morgan was clowning around in the background while Sarah—her old self—was laughing so hard she looked ready to cry.

Her fingers stopped on a faded Polaroid. She couldn't turn to the next one.

It showed the deck of a boat. She and Chuck were both wearing sunglasses and some kind of costume—Sarah was wearing a hat, a bikini, and a sarong, while Chuck had on a strange, brightly colored shirt.

She didn't remember the moment. But something stirred inside her as she looked at the picture.

Not an image. Not a word.

A feeling.

The taste of salt on the wind. The gentle rocking of a boat beneath her feet. A name she couldn't place.

“Natalie...?” she whispered involuntarily.

She immediately fell silent, startled by the sound of her own voice. Sarah frowned as a dull pulse ran through her temple, coming as quickly as it disappeared.

She instinctively touched her head. She had no idea where the word had come from. She simply sat there, the photograph still held tight in her hand, trying to understand what it might once have meant.

XXXXXXXXXXXX

That evening, Chuck stood in the doorway when he spotted Sarah sitting on the living room floor, the box still in her lap. Photographs were scattered around her, illuminated by the orange glow of the setting sun.

“Hey,” he said gently. “What did you find?”

Sarah looked up. Her eyes were tired, but not sad. “I’m not entirely sure.” She held up the Polaroid. “This... was a boat?”

Chuck crouched beside her, took the photograph, and his breath caught for a moment. “Yeah.”

“Where did we go on it?”

Chuck slowly sat down beside her on the floor. “That’s a long story.”

Sarah frowned slightly. "I remember a name. I don't even know where it came from."

"What name?"

"Natalie."

Chuck went quiet for a moment. Then he spoke softly. "That... was an old mission."

Sarah watched his face. "Bad memory?"

"No." Chuck shook his head, a faint smile appearing. "Not at all. It's just... strange that it came back now."

Sarah looked at the photograph again, then back at Chuck. "Will you tell me about it?"

Chuck studied her for a long moment, then nodded. "Yeah. But this isn't exactly a short bedtime story, Sarah. It's a pretty big adventure."

Sarah moved a little closer until her shoulder touched his. "We have time."

Chuck didn't even notice that Sarah's hand had found its way beside his on the floor. She didn't take his hand; she simply left hers there. He picked up the Polaroid and, before beginning, looked at the two people in the photograph for another moment: the people they had been, and the people they were becoming again.

"All right," he said softly. "Let's start at the beginning. It started with a ship called the *Azure Horizon*..."

Chuck told her about Nassau and the adventures they'd had there. He told her about how they later ended up playing pirates in Costa Gravas, with Sarah as the captain and him as her deckhand — at least for fun. He told her about the wonderful moments, the dangers, and the people they'd met along the way.

"Natalie..." Chuck looked up as their eyes met. "She was a brave girl."

His gaze drifted away for a moment.

"Did she end up happy?" Sarah asked.

Chuck slowly shook his head. "Not the way she wanted to."

Sarah looked at the photograph again. "But we did."

A smile appeared on Chuck's face, his eyes smiling with it. "You're getting all that from the picture?"

Sarah lifted the photograph and ran a finger along its edge. "Because this..." She tapped the picture lightly. "This is not how someone looks at another person unless they're completely crazy about them."

Chuck simply stared at her for a long moment. Finally, he spoke so quietly it was almost a whisper. "I miss that smile."

Sarah didn't understand. She looked down at the photograph, then handed it back to him. "Tell me more about her."

She tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear and settled more comfortably beside him, resting her hand on Chuck's leg.

"Sure. Why not?" he said. "Let's make a deal. I'll tell you stories before you go to sleep."

Sarah looked up at him, warmth in her eyes. "Like bedtime stories?"

"Something like that."

"Only instead of dragons, there'll be terrorists... and instead of a princess, there'll be Sarah Walker."

Sarah raised an eyebrow, already waiting for the rest. "And the knight?"

Chuck smiled. "That's still up for debate. At best, I'm the wizard's apprentice."

"Chuck Bartowski, master of magic?"

"Personally."

Sarah laughed. "You goof!" She gave Chuck a gentle shove on the shoulder.

XXXXXXXXXXXX

The evening settled in quietly. The chirping of crickets drifted in through the open window.

That night, Chuck told her about his first days in Costa Gravas. His voice shifted between seriousness and playful amusement as the story unfolded.

Sarah was still sitting beside him on the rug, their shoulders occasionally brushing. She turned the Polaroid slowly between her fingers.

"That's a good story," she said softly, still looking at the photograph.

"It was." Chuck smiled, his gaze drifting for a moment. "Although Morgan would probably say I left out the funniest parts."

Sarah laughed.

Her laughter sounded completely natural now.

"Will you finish it tomorrow?"

Chuck looked at her.

The question caught him by surprise. He hadn't expected Sarah to ask.

"If you want me to."

"I do."

XXXXXXXXXXXX

Later, it was fully dark outside, the room lit only by the warm glow of the bedside lamp. Chuck had just set his book on the nightstand when Sarah came out of the bathroom. Without a word, she walked over to the bed and slipped beneath the covers as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

Her shoulder brushed against Chuck's arm, and neither of them moved away. She edged a little closer until she was resting fully against him. Chuck slowly wrapped an arm around her, letting Sarah decide how close she wanted to be.

Sarah let out a deep sigh, her shoulders gradually relaxing. "This... is good."

"I know," Chuck replied softly.

For several minutes, neither of them spoke. Sarah carefully placed one hand over Chuck's, almost as if she needed to make sure he was really there. Her thumb slowly brushed across the back of his hand—once. The movement was slow and tentative, then again, completely instinctive.

Chuck's heart began beating faster, but he didn't move. He took a deep breath and gently laced his fingers with hers. She let him.

Sarah closed her eyes. "That's strange..."

"What is?"

"I don't remember us doing this."

Chuck smiled faintly. "Not always."

Sarah looked up at him. "But we did?"

"When something was bothering you... Yeah." He remembered how many times he'd comforted Sarah this way.

Sarah didn't answer, as though she were trying to picture it. Then her thumb slowly brushed over Chuck's hand again.

A few minutes later, she was softly breathing in sleep. Chuck knew she was asleep, but he didn't pull his hand away.

Maybe Sarah's memories were still somewhere far away. But her heart... it felt like it was already finding its way home.

Chapter 5: Chapter 5 - One step at a time

Chapter 5 - One step at a time

Chuck stood by the front door, adjusting his jacket while Morgan impatiently honked outside. His hand was already on the doorknob, but he still hadn't left. On the television, the news was quietly broadcasting in the background.

"...in Mexico, unidentified gunmen killed several cartel leaders in a single night. Authorities believe the attacks were the result of a professional operation..."

"I have to go." Chuck gave Sarah an apologetic look and switched off the TV.

Sarah was leaning against the kitchen counter, a mug held between her hands as she stood barefoot on the cold floor. "I know."

Chuck walked over to her. "You're not going to be too lonely?"

Sarah gave him a faint smile. "I survived yesterday."

"Yeah, but..."

Sarah gently poked him in the stomach—a playful, easy gesture. "Chuck."

"Yeah?"

"Go to work."

Chuck laughed. "Yes, ma'am."

For a moment, neither of them moved, neither seeming in any hurry to say goodbye while Morgan honked again outside. Then Sarah stepped closer to him, as naturally as if she'd done it a thousand times before.

"Be careful."

"You too."

She gave him a gentle hug—brief and natural. Chuck still found it hard to believe that Sarah wasn't afraid to touch him anymore.

“You’ll tell me another story tonight?”

A smile spread across Chuck’s face. “Of course.”

“Then hurry home.”

“I’ll try.”

Chuck looked back at her one more time from the doorway. Sarah was still standing in the same spot, giving him a small wave, her smile still lingering.

The house grew quiet again. Sarah slowly walked through the living room without any real destination, not quite knowing what to do with herself.

She stopped in front of the bookshelf, where old DVDs stood lined up among movies and family recordings. Her eyes caught on a simple white case labeled with a black sharpie: ***Wedding.***

She froze, unable to look away. Slowly, her hand trembling almost imperceptibly, she pulled the case from the shelf.

A few minutes later, she was sitting on the couch as the recording began playing on the screen, her fingers gripping the remote more tightly than she needed to.

On screen, Chuck was nervously adjusting his tie—*that* Chuck felt familiar. Morgan was frantically explaining something, Ellie was laughing, and the camera shook slightly as whoever was filming adjusted their grip.

Then she appeared.

In a white dress. Radiant. Smiling.

Sarah instinctively leaned closer, almost forgetting to breathe, her chest barely moving as she watched herself. The woman on the screen was happy—genuinely happy, completely without fear. Then she looked at Chuck in a way Sarah had never looked at anyone before.

That was what hurt the most.

Sarah felt her chest tighten. On the video, Chuck leaned toward her and whispered something in her ear. The audio didn't pick it up, but Sarah could see the reaction: first she laughed, and then Chuck laughed too, as if on that day no one else in the world existed.

A tear slowly slipped from Sarah's eye, reaching her cheek before she even realized it was there. She didn't try to wipe it away.

"That's... me..."

The rings. The kiss. Sarah instinctively touched her fingers to her lips, as though the memory of the kiss she'd just watched was still hidden somewhere deep inside her. She quickly lowered her hand, not understanding why she'd done it.

The embrace. Their first dance.

The video continued playing, and every scene tightened the ache in her chest, yet she couldn't make herself stop it. Chuck looked at her as though she were his entire world.

Finally, Sarah couldn't take it anymore. She paused the recording, leaving the smiling bride frozen on the screen—a woman Sarah didn't remember at all.

The remote slipped from her fingers and landed silently on the carpet. She pulled her legs up onto the couch, curling herself into a tight ball, hugging a decorative pillow against her chest as she slowly rocked herself.

At first, she cried silently. Then she couldn't hold it back anymore.

"Why...?" Her voice broke. "Why don't I remember you? Why don't I remember myself?"

Minutes passed. The living room was filled only by the frozen image on the television and Sarah's quiet sobs.

When the tears finally stopped, she took a deep breath, wiped her face, and slowly stood. She didn't want to be alone; she knew she needed someone.

She put on her coat, crossed over to the neighboring apartment, and knocked.

Alex opened the door. One glance was enough; she immediately noticed Sarah's red eyes, and her smile vanished. "Oh, Sarah..."

Sarah tried to smile, but couldn't. "I... don't want to be alone right now."

Alex hugged her without a word, and Sarah immediately hugged her back. For several seconds, they simply stood there.

Then Alex stepped back. "Come in."

Sarah slowly shook her head. "Maybe... we could go over to the guys."

A warm smile returned to Alex's face. "Of course." She grabbed her sweater. "Let's go."

As they walked down the street together, Alex stayed quietly beside her. Over and over, the same image returned to Sarah's mind: the smiling bride, looking at Chuck Bartowski the way Sarah desperately wished she could remember looking at him.

XXXXXXXXXXXX

"Can't we send another team?" Morgan's palm came down hard on the table, making the coffee in his mug jump.

Chuck nervously ran a hand through his hair and closed his eyes for a moment. "We already did."

"Then send someone else!"

"Who, Morgan?"

Morgan threw his hands up helplessly. "I don't know! Somebody! CIA, NSA, Delta Force, Batman... anybody!"

Chuck pointed toward the monitors. "We already told Beckman, Morgan. There's nothing else we can do."

Morgan started pacing, taking long strides back and forth, rubbing the back of his neck every time he turned. "Then what's left?"

"Us."

Chuck didn't take his eyes off the monitors; he had already made up his mind.

"Beckman's never going to allow that," Morgan said, stopping.

"I don't care."

"Chuck..."

"If this really is what I think it is, Morgan, we might be able to find out who's funding Quinn at the Blue Tide."

Morgan let out a heavy sigh. "And Sarah?"

Chuck immediately shook his head. "No."

"Chuck..."

"No."

"But she—"

"Morgan!" His voice came out sharper than he'd intended. "I'm not taking her with me. We need to call my Mom..."

Morgan groaned, clearly disliking Chuck's idea. "No offense, Chuck, but your mom isn't exactly known for her subtle spy techniques."

Their argument completely shut out the rest of the world. The door opened with a soft hiss, but neither of them noticed as they kept arguing.

Alex stepped in first, the paper bag in her hand rustling softly. Sarah followed behind her, carrying two paper cups of coffee, smiling as she started down the stairs, her eyes searching for Chuck. She looked almost carefree.

"We brought—"

The sentence died in her throat.

Chuck and Morgan turned toward her at the same time, their argument stopping instantly. The silence that followed was so sudden that the quiet hum of the monitors seemed deafening.

Alex froze too.

Sarah took two more steps down the stairs, her smile slowly disappearing as her pace slowed, sensing that something was wrong. Her eyes moved across the operations table: satellite images of Nassau, the Blue Tide emblem, a date circled in red. It looked like a crime scene.

Then Chuck's face. Morgan's. And finally, Chuck again.

Sarah's jaw tightened. She slowly lowered her hands, the coffee cups still held in them, almost forgotten, as her expression grew more serious. She wasn't standing there like a guest anymore. She wasn't looking at the files; she was looking at Chuck, watching his face.

Several long seconds passed.

Then she spoke very quietly. "You have a mission."

It sounded exactly like an agent giving a report. Chuck didn't answer.

Sarah slowly nodded, as if she'd just confirmed something for herself. "And you didn't tell me a word about it."

Her voice remained calm—maybe too calm. Chuck held her gaze while Morgan instinctively looked at Chuck, then at Alex. And somehow, that made everything much worse.

XXXXXXXXXXXX

Sarah set the two paper cups on the edge of the operations table, her fingers lingering for a fraction of a second.

"We brought coffee."

Nobody moved. The room went entirely still.

Alex glanced between them, then down at the bag in her hand. "I think... I should probably—"

Morgan nodded immediately. "Yeah. Come on."

He guided Alex toward the hallway, giving Chuck and Sarah space. The door slid shut, leaving them alone in Castle's command center.

Sarah scanned the monitors, taking in the data streams before finally meeting Chuck's eyes.

"How long?"

"Three days." Chuck didn't flinch.

Sarah nodded. "Three days..."

Silence stretched between them.

"You came home every night. You told me stories. You held me. You said everything was fine." Her voice stayed low. "And the whole time, you were planning this."

Chuck took a step forward. "Sarah—"

"No."

She raised a single hand—a small gesture, but Chuck froze instantly. She didn't shout, and she didn't look furious; she just felt distant.

Terror hit him, cold and sharp. He had blown it. The mission vanished from his mind entirely.

"I'm so angry at you!" Her voice cracked on the edge of the sentence.

Her chest heaved with a sharp breath. Her right hand curled into a fist, then immediately went slack. She stared down at it, baffled by her own body's reaction.

She brought a hand to her mouth, stifling whatever came next, her brow furrowed as she looked past him.

She shook her head, unsettled. "Wait..."

Staring ahead, she muttered, almost to herself, "We've... been through this before."

Chuck's heart dropped. He didn't dare breathe.

"I was really angry with you." She looked at him with uncertainty. "I don't know when, or why. But this—" she gestured between them—"this already happened."

Chuck swallowed hard. "You really were." The familiar, crushing tightness returned to his chest. "Sarah, I—"

"You didn't trust me."

"I did."

"Then why didn't you tell me?"

Chuck dropped his gaze. Several long seconds ticked by. "Because I was selfish."

She watched him in silence.

"It's only been a few weeks since I lost you. The best thing that ever happened to me. I thought I lost you forever." He drew a sharp breath. "And then you kissed me. You came home. You stayed, you made breakfast, you laughed, you curled up next to me at night, you held my hand." His voice broke. "And every second of it, I was terrified you'd vanish again."

His eyes glistened, his hand shaking. Sarah saw it—truly saw him—vulnerable in a way he hadn't been in days.

"I couldn't risk losing you a second time."

The silence returned, heavier this time. Sarah studied him. The anger hadn't vanished, but it had dulled, replaced by a strange, quiet certainty. Somewhere underneath, she knew this wasn't how their story ended. She had been this angry before, and she had forgiven him before, too. The details were gone, but the instinct remained.

Her features softened. The tension in her forehead broke, and she let out a long breath.

"You're an idiot."

Chuck managed a tired smile. "Yeah."

"A really big idiot."

"I know."

She held his gaze for a beat, then closed the distance between them entirely, looking straight into his eyes.

“Next time, tell me. No secrets.”

“I will.”

“Good.”

Another pause hung in the air. Chuck assumed the interrogation was over.

Then Sarah spoke, entirely calm. “I’m coming with you.”

He looked up, startled. “Sarah—”

“If this is as big as you think it is—” she pointed toward the screens—“then I belong right beside you.”

Chuck closed his eyes. It was the exact outcome he had feared, even if he knew it was inevitable.

“I won't let anything happen to you,” she added.

He looked at her, surprised.

She paused, seeming just as shocked by her own words. “Just because—” she hesitated—“you matter to me.”

Chuck didn't speak. He stepped forward, and she didn't pull away. He wrapped his arms around her, and she rested her face against his shoulder without hesitation.

They stood together in the quiet until Sarah slipped out of his embrace.

“Show me what you've got.”

Chuck nodded, picked up one of the cups, took a sip, and walked to the main console.

“All right. Let’s start from the beginning.”

XXXXXXXXXXXX

Satellite imagery of Nassau lit up the main console—a beachfront estate, the crest of the Blue Tide Club, and a high-resolution portrait of a woman named Diane Moore.

Chuck tapped the screen. "Three days of digging on Quinn, and this is all we've turned up."

Sarah stepped closer to the display. "Nothing actionable?"

"Practically zero," Chuck said. "Nicholas Quinn doesn't exist on paper. No accounts, no property, no family records. Every alias he's ever burned left a dead end."

"The guy's a ghost," Morgan added. "A very paranoid ghost."

"Someone scrubbed his history clean," Sarah noted.

"Almost clean." Chuck brought up the emblem for the Blue Tide Club. "We found one recurring connection."

"The pirate bar," Morgan chimed in.

Sarah raised an eyebrow.

"Officially, it's a high-end resort lounge," Morgan clarified. "Unofficially? It's where arms dealers, corrupt politicians, and offshore fixers grab a drink when they want to talk off the record."

"Neutral territory," Chuck explained. "Most of the deals aren't finalized there, but that's where the introductions happen."

"And Quinn was a regular?" Sarah asked.

"Often enough to catch the owner's attention." Chuck enlarged Diane Moore's photo.

"Diane Moore," Sarah said, recognizing the face. "You briefed me on her files."

"High-society philanthropist on paper," Chuck nodded.

"And off paper," Morgan said, "she's the premier information broker in the West Indies."

"She trades intelligence," Chuck said. "High-tier, strictly vetted. We can't tell yet if Quinn was buying from her or freelancing, but they've got a history."

Morgan tapped his tablet, routing an ornate digital invitation onto the main display. "Which brings us to tomorrow night. Moore's hosting an exclusive gala at her villa. Half

the regional underworld will be in attendance under the guise of charitable giving.”

Chuck turned to Sarah. “It’s our best window.”

“What’s the play?”

“We fly to Nassau...” Chuck started.

“And walk right through the front gate,” Morgan finished.

Sarah glanced between them. “That’s the entry strategy?”

“Moore isn't a warlord,” Chuck said. “She’s a broker. Curiosity is her business. If Charles Carmichael requests an audience regarding Quinn, she won't turn him away—she'll want to figure out what hand we’re playing.”

“She'll want to see what information we have to offer,” Sarah realized.

“Exactly.”

Morgan grinned. “So we're knocking on a billionaire broker's front door and asking for a chat.”

“Sometimes the direct approach is the hardest one to anticipate,” Chuck said.

Sarah gave a single, resolute nod. “I'll get the gear.”

XXXXXXXXXXXX

Sarah knelt beside the open suitcase in the bedroom. She carefully folded a T-shirt, then placed the photograph Chuck had shown her the night before on top of it. Her eyes lingered on the picture for a moment before she carefully slipped it between the clothes.

Chuck was packing on the other side of the room. Every so often, he'd stop to think, then toss another shirt into his suitcase.

Sarah watched him for a while. “Chuck?”

“Hmm?” He looked up.

“There’s something I don't understand.”

Chuck closed the drawer. “What?”

“At Castle... when I found out you'd been keeping the case from me... you said I'd been really angry with you once before. And I had this feeling that it wasn't something new.”

Chuck nodded. “Yeah.”

“Why was I angry with you?”

“Prague. And the choice I made.”

“What choice?”

“You wanted to run away with me. Leave the spy life behind. You wanted a normal life... with me.”

“And what happened?”

“I didn't go with you. I chose spy training.”

Sarah thoughtfully ran her fingers along the edge of the suitcase. “And... how long was I angry with you?”

Chuck laughed. “Well...”

“Is that bad news?”

“A little.”

Sarah waited, curious.

Chuck scratched the back of his neck. “About... six months.”

Sarah looked up sharply. “Six months?”

“Give or take.”

“That’s a long time.”

Chuck nodded. “It was.”

Sarah still looked at him in disbelief. “What did I do during all that time?”

Chuck smiled. “You were undercover. And... I don't know, probably doing whatever it is you were doing. Meanwhile, I spent about half that time sitting on the couch, eating

cheese balls and feeling sorry for myself. Then we started working together again, and eventually we made up.”

Sarah raised an eyebrow. “That sounds... complicated.”

“Sarah...” Chuck smiled. “You’re incredibly smart, you have a great sense of humor, and you're ridiculously beautiful.”

Sarah blushed. “But...”

“Of course there’s a ‘but.’” Chuck laughed. “But the two of us... we weren't always very good at talking things through in the beginning. So sometimes we made things a lot harder than they needed to be.”

Sarah lowered her head. “That bad?”

“Believe me. Morgan could probably list our ten dumbest relationship decisions.”

Sarah looked up. “Really?”

“Sarah...” Chuck shook his head with a grin. “Morgan wouldn't just list them. He'd rank them. I’m pretty sure there'd be separate categories.”

A quiet laugh escaped Sarah. “What would be number one?”

Chuck pretended to give the question serious consideration. “Tough call. Prague would definitely make the podium. Then there was our ‘let’s not tell each other how we feel’ era... I think that one could have an entire list of its own.”

Sarah’s smile slowly softened. “So... we weren't perfect.”

Chuck walked over to her. “No.”

“And yet we got married.”

“And yet.”

Sarah closed her eyes for a moment, then looked down at the photograph lying inside the suitcase. “So... in the end, we always found our way back to each other.”

Chuck smiled gently. "Always. Sometimes by taking the long way around. Sometimes by being stubborn. But always."

Sarah nodded. She carefully ran her finger along the corner of the photograph, then closed the suitcase. "So maybe this time we can try to work things out a little faster?"

Chuck laughed. "Morgan would appreciate that."

"Let's not let him actually write that list."

"Knowing Morgan..."

"He's already started it?"

"He's probably finished it."

Sarah laughed freely. "So... hasn't that used up our bedtime-story quota?"

Chuck raised an eyebrow. "Come on. That was just Prague."

"Just?"

"Sarah... in five years, we've collected enough stories to fill a small library."

Sarah closed the suitcase. "Then I want another one tonight."

Chuck smiled at her. "Deal."

Chapter 6: Chapter 6 - A normal day

Chapter 6 - A normal day

The plane's steady vibration hummed through the glass against Sarah's temple, completely masking Morgan's rhythm of snores from three rows back. She tore her eyes away from the endless ceiling of white clouds and zeroed in on Chuck.

"You owe me a story."

Chuck's familiar, goofy grin meant trouble. "How about a game instead? Two truths and a lie about our fake-married week in the suburbs."

"Stakes?"

"The winner picks tomorrow's story."

"Deal." She laughed, lacing her fingers with his. "You're going to regret this, Bartowski."

Not a chance. She crushed the first two rounds without breaking a sweat, calling out his fake chocolate box and seeing right through Casey's tragic attempt at playing a cable technician. But then Chuck leaned forward, rubbing his hands together with comic-book villain energy.

"Round three," he purred. "The neighbor lady flirted with me, wanted to sleep with me, and tied me up with pink furry handcuffs."

The mental image was too much. Sarah burst out laughing, shaking her head. "The handcuffs are a lie. Pink, Chuck? Really?"

"They were real," Chuck countered, deadpan. "The lie was that she wanted to sleep with me. It was all a cover."

Unbelievable. Complete cheating—or pure strategy, depending on who was keeping score. By the time Chuck clapped his hands for the final round, her defenses were up. "One Fulcrum agent, zero danger, and Casey really was the cable guy."

A trap. It had to be. “The second one’s the lie.”

“Wrong.” Chuck’s smile widened. “An entire cell, and I almost got lobotomized by a botched Fulcrum Intersect.”

The sheer absurdity broke her. Pink handcuffs, suburban terrorists, brain-melting devices... God, their life was insane. Laughter doubled her over, her forehead pressed hard against his forearm while tears pricked the corners of her eyes. “Okay... fine. You win.”

As her breathing leveled out, the noise of the cabin faded into the background. She looked at him, feeling the steady heat off his skin, and the game suddenly felt completely irrelevant. She leaned in, cupping his cheek, and pressed her lips to his—soft, deliberate, and sweet enough to pull the air right out of the room.

Chuck blinked, thoroughly derailed. “What was that for?”

“I lost,” she offered a conspiratorial smile. “Paying my debt.”

“If losing looks like that—”

“Don’t get cocky Bartowski. Tomorrow I pick two short stories.”

“Wait... I won.”

Sarah leaned her head onto his shoulder, lacing her fingers through his as a bright turquoise ocean opened up below them. “I know. Sometimes I make the rules.”

XXXXXXXXXXXX

The terminal’s security camera footage played at high speed, the crowds constantly flowing in and out of the terminal like a living tide.

Then the image froze.

The operator zoomed in on a tall man and a blonde woman. A shorter, bearded man followed behind them, carrying their luggage.

“That’s them,” one of the operators said, reaching for the phone.

“They’ve arrived.”

XXXXXXXXXXXX

The CIA safe house looked completely ordinary from the outside. A well-kept garden, a white picket fence, and a black BMW waiting in the driveway. The rental paperwork and keys were waiting in the glove compartment. The cover company had prepared everything.

Morgan grabbed the keys while Chuck and Sarah carried the bags inside.

Sarah automatically checked the windows and exits. By the time she finished, her eyes met Chuck's.

A tiny nod was all it took.

The house appeared secure.

Morgan glanced back at the BMW from the doorway.

"We're supposed to return this in one piece, right?"

Chuck smiled.

"That's generally the idea."

Morgan spun the keys around his finger, looking pleased.

"Then I'll take good care of it."

Chuck and Sarah watched him go.

The faintest smile appeared at the corner of Sarah's mouth.

"Somehow, that doesn't make me feel better."

XXXXXXXXXXXX

Chuck wrestled with his tie in the living room mirror, losing the fight until Sarah stepped out of the bedroom. The blue evening gown caught the light—and Chuck's breath.

"Wow, Sarah. You look..."

"Help me with the zipper?" She turned, stepping close enough for him to catch the faint scent of jasmine.

He slid the track up, his fingers lingering on the silk. In the glass, their eyes locked.

She turned, taking his tie to fix the uneven knot, smoothing his lapel with deliberate slowness. "You clean up nicely, Bartowski."

"This whole setup feels familiar," Chuck murmured. "Milan. The fashion show."

A ghost of a smile touched her lips. "A long time ago?"

"Feels like yesterday. I forgot what I was going to say back then, too."

"Does that happen often?"

"Only when you look like that."

Her eyes softened. She brushed her fingers across his cheek before picking up her clutch. "Ready?"

Frantic footsteps clattered down the hall before Chuck could reply. Morgan burst into the doorway, drowning in a black tuxedo clearly designed for someone twice his shoulder width. He tugged at his collar, stopping dead when he saw them.

"Okay, this isn't fair."

Chuck snorted. "What?"

"You two look like a James Bond poster," Morgan groaned, gesturing at his pooling sleeves. "I look like Bond's unlucky accountant."

Sarah laughed softly. "You look great, Morgan."

Chuck clapped his shoulder. "Relax, buddy. You have one job tonight: don't spill champagne on any billionaires."

"Low bar. I can clear that." Morgan took a breath, squaring his shoulders. "Rich people party. Act natural, Grimes."

Chuck looked at Sarah. "That almost never works."

Sarah laced her fingers through Chuck's, her grip steady. "Then we stick to the classic."
"Improvise."

Outside, warm Bahamian air hit them, carrying the distant murmur of the ocean through the palm trees. Behind them, the sun-washed Nassau villa looked completely unremarkable—just another quiet retreat in an affluent neighborhood.

Which, of course, made it the perfect CIA safehouse.

XXXXXXXXXXXX

The black BMW wound up the driveway toward a seaside Mediterranean villa glowing with landscape lights. Soft jazz floated over open terraces where champagne-sipping guests mingled against a backdrop of floor-to-ceiling glass and dark ocean. The driveway was an auto show: Aston Martins, Bentleys, a dark blue Rolls-Royce Phantom, and a line of low-slung Italian sports cars.

Morgan let out a low whistle. "The entire Buy More parking lot isn't worth that Bentley."

Chuck glanced at the mansion. "And I used to worry about making rent."

Sarah's eyes didn't linger on the chrome. She scanned the perimeter: gate guards, roof cameras, rovers. Professional private security—expensive and lethal.

"Four are armed," she murmured.

"Six," Chuck corrected without turning his head.

"The driver by the Phantom?" Sarah asked.

"Jacket hangs too stiffly on the right side."

A rare smile touched Sarah's lips. "Look at you."

Morgan nervously tugged his oversized collar. "All I see is that everyone here could snap me like a twig."

They climbed the wide staircase toward a tall guard monitoring the entrance with a tablet. He didn't look up. "Invitations, please."

“We don't have one,” Chuck said evenly.

“Then I’m afraid this is a private event, sir.”

“Ms. Diane Moore is expecting us. Please tell her Mr. and Ms. Carmichael are here.”

The guard’s stone face didn't break. “Sir, kindly step away. You’re holding up the line.”

Morgan leaned in. “Buddy... this is the part where we discreetly walk back to the car before I get thrown into the ocean.”

Sarah’s gaze shifted to the left wing. Fourteen meters out, a service entrance was cycling waiters every two minutes. Beyond the fence line, thick palm cover offered an easy breach.

“Please,” Chuck insisted, his tone perfectly calibrated to aristocratic confidence. “Just radio her.”

Sensing a scene, the guard finally unclipped his radio. “There’s a Mr. Carmichael at the entrance. Claims Ms. Moore is expecting him.”

Silence stretched. Only the rhythmic crash of waves and distant brass filled the air.

Then the radio crackled. “*Let them in. Ms. Moore is waiting.*”

The guard’s eyebrow flickered upward as he stepped aside. “Terrace is through the main hall, sir.”

Chuck flashed Sarah a sideways grin. “Told you.”

“Easier than breaking in,” she admitted, stepping through the grand doorway.

Morgan exhaled, smoothing his pooled lapels. “I am really starting to love this Carmichael persona.”

XXXXXXXXXXXX

The villa’s interior was pure sensory overload—white marble, crystal chandeliers, and soft jazz competing with a live string quartet. Chuck’s eyes darted through the crowd as the Intersect flared silently, identifying black-market investors, foreign diplomats, and defense contractors.

Out on the terrace, Diane Moore excused herself from a trio of older men and glided toward them in a white evening gown.

"Mr. Carmichael, Mrs. Carmichael."

"Ms. Moore."

"Forgive the abrupt escape," she said, taking a sip of champagne. "Ambassadors are exhausting. That one spent twenty minutes explaining Pinot Noir."

Morgan nodded with deep, tragic empathy. "That sounds like a very long twenty minutes."

"Follow me."

A massive bodyguard escorted them down a series of corridors into a mahogany-lined study overlooking the ocean. As the guard shut the double doors behind them, Chuck glanced at the man.

"So... he's the new Natalie?"

Moore's composure cracked for a fraction of a second. "Natalie was irreplaceable. A lesson I learned far too late."

Chuck winced, lowering his gaze. "Sorry."

Moore let the silence settle before taking a seat behind her desk. "What do you need, Carmichael?"

"Nicholas Quinn," Chuck said. "We heard he showed up at the Blue Tide."

"Normally, I'd turn you away—information is currency in my world." Moore opened a drawer and slid a sleek black flash drive across the polished wood. "But you took care of Ingram. Consider my ledger balanced."

Sarah didn't touch the drive. "And what's your cut tonight?"

"Nothing." Moore stood, gesturing toward the exit. "Enjoy the party. Try the Bahamian rum."

Once back in the main hallway, Chuck slipped the flash drive into his pocket.

"That was... surprisingly painless," Morgan muttered.

"Too painless," Sarah said instantly. Her posture was locked tight, her eyes already sweeping the floor for blind spots and security cameras.

Chuck watched her. "Something bothering you?"

"Everything. A woman like Moore doesn't hand over intel without an ulterior motive."

"She's business-minded," Chuck argued gently. "We solved Ingram for her. Ledger closed."

"My spy instincts are screaming," Sarah insisted.

Chuck touched her hand softly. "Then we'll listen to them. We'll verify the drive on a secure terminal. But... five minutes to look around won't kill us."

Sarah glanced at their joined hands, the tension easing by a fraction. "Five minutes."

Morgan's ears perked up. "Did someone say drinks? Moore personally vouched for the rum. That's a diplomatic invitation."

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "Just don't try every single one."

"Sarah... is that how little you trust me?"

Chuck and Sarah answered in perfect unison: "Yes."

Morgan shrugged, already moving toward the bar. "Fair."

XXXXXXXXXXXX

A few minutes later, they said their goodbyes to Diane Moore.

The warm Bahamian night greeted them outside the villa. A light breeze blew in from the ocean while luxury cars continued to arrive one after another along the driveway. The valet recognized them from a distance.

"Good evening, sir."

A moment later, the black BMW silently pulled up in front of them. Chuck took the keys.

"Thank you."

He walked around the car and politely opened the passenger door for Sarah.

She smiled. "Such a gentleman."

"Casey would definitely be grumbling right now."

Sarah got in. Chuck closed the door, then slipped behind the wheel as Morgan dropped into the back seat.

"I'm not complaining, but I think every mission should end with a party like that."

Chuck started the engine. "I'll put it in the CIA suggestion box."

"Thanks."

The BMW quietly rolled through the villa gates.

XXXXXXXXXXXX

Palm tree shadows swept across the windshield as the BMW cruised through Nassau's quiet backstreets.

Morgan leaned back in the rear seat. "I'm just saying... that rum cocktail was in the top three in my life."

"Morgan..." Chuck warned.

"I'm focused! Just appreciating fine mixology."

Sarah wasn't listening. Her eyes flicked continuously between the side mirrors and the dark intersections behind them.

"Still thinking about Moore?" Chuck asked.

"No," Sarah muttered, her posture rigid.

That made Chuck's grip tighten on the wheel. Sarah rarely gave short answers unless her instincts were firing.

They turned down the quiet residential street toward the CIA safe house fifty yards ahead. Everything looked peaceful—porch light on, exact same shadows on the veranda.

Sarah sat up straight. "Chuck. Don't stop."

Chuck didn't question her. He kept his foot steady on the gas.

As they rolled past, a blinding orange flash tore through the night. The parked car outside the safe house detonated, hurling a shockwave of shattered metal and fire into the street.

“Chuck, go!” Sarah shouted.

Automatic gunfire erupted from the tree line. Bullets chewed up the asphalt, blowing out the driver’s side mirror and exploding through the rear windshield. Glass showered the back seat as Morgan hit the floorboards with a yelp.

Chuck slammed the accelerator. The rear tires shrieked, kicking the tail end sideways before grabbing traction and launching them forward.

Two black SUVs surged out from side streets—one riding their bumper, the other angling to block the intersection ahead.

Static buzzed in Chuck's head as the Intersect fired. Nassau's entire road network assembled behind his eyes in a microsecond—alleyways, dead ends, one-way paths, and traffic patterns flashing in real time.

Beside him, Sarah unclasped her tiny evening clutch.

Chuck glanced over. “Please tell me you're not looking for lipstick.”

Sarah pulled out a subcompact stainless-steel pistol, thumbing the safety with a crisp *click*. “No.”

Chuck yanked the wheel left, a grin breaking through the adrenaline. “Good.”

XXXXXXXXXXXX

Chuck countersteered hard, tires screaming for traction as the engine roared and pulled the BMW out of its skid. In the rearview mirror, the two black SUVs surged into pursuit.

“We’ve got company,” Chuck said.

“I noticed.”

Muzzle flashes strobed in the dark. A bullet slammed into the BMW's trunk with a heavy thud; another ricocheted off a parked sedan.

Morgan pressed himself flat against the floorboards. "This is definitely not a routine traffic stop!"

Chuck dropped two gears and floored the accelerator. Static buzzed behind his eyes as the Intersect mapped the grid—narrow streets, tight corners, construction zones. He yanked the wheel right into an alley lined with open-air bars, missing the curb by inches.

A taxi pulled out ahead. Chuck swerved, scraping past its front bumper. Behind them, the lead SUV sideswiped a parked pickup, sending metal and side mirrors flying without losing speed.

Sarah twisted in her seat, her compact pistol rock-steady. *Crack*. A hole appeared in the lead SUV's windshield right at eye level. The vehicle swerved violently, but the driver held the line.

"Nice shot," Chuck said.

"Eyes on the road!"

Flashing orange lights and concrete barriers blocked the end of the street—a dead end anchored by a massive excavator.

Morgan went pale. "Chuck... there's nowhere to go!"

Traction, speed, arc—the Intersect calculated the turn in a millisecond. Chuck grinned. "There is."

He slammed the brakes, pulled the handbrake, and yanked the wheel. The BMW whipped a brutal 180-degree bootleg turn in a cloud of white smoke. Before the car even settled, Chuck dropped the pedal, shooting straight back past the oncoming SUV.

The SUV driver overcorrected trying to stop, sliding sideways into a utility pole in a shower of sparks.

Morgan exhaled a breath he'd been holding since the safehouse. "That... was insanely cool!"

Sarah's lip twitched upward. "Focus, Chuck."

"Working on it."

Chuck glanced at the mirror as the second SUV pulled a U-turn. Something clicked. The Intersect analyzed their tactical behavior: no attempts to ram, no shots at the engine, no effort to disable the tires.

They weren't trying to destroy the car. They were herding them.

Chuck touched his inner jacket pocket. "Sarah... they're not trying to kill us."

Sarah turned to him, her eyes sharp. "Then what do they want?"

Chuck's hand rested on the outline of the drive. "This. As long as I'm holding it, they aren't going to stop."

XXXXXXXXXXXX

Static buzzed behind Chuck's eyes as the Intersect overlaid Nassau's road map across his vision. An escape vector lit up three blocks ahead, but they had to break line-of-sight first.

"Got it," Chuck muttered.

"What do you see?" Sarah asked.

"A shortcut. Hold on."

Chuck dropped two gears and threw the BMW into a sharp left without hitting the brakes. The back end broke loose, tires shrieking as they drifted through the corner before catching traction on the straightaway. Behind them, both SUVs took the turn hard on their tail.

"Still on us!" Morgan yelled from the floor.

Muzzle flashes strobed in the dark. Bullets hammered the trunk, one tearing a fresh spiderweb across the shattered rear window.

Sarah rolled down her window, leaning out just enough to frame her target against the rushing wind. *Crack. Crack. Crack.* Three fast rounds tore into the lead SUV's radiator and hood. The vehicle veered erratically, clipping a curb in a shower of sparks, but kept coming.

"Persistent," Sarah noted, pulling back inside.

Chuck dodged through a series of rapid turns—left, right, left—the BMW dancing through the narrow Bahamian streets. But the lead SUV refused to drop back.

"Chuck, they're closing in!" Morgan called out.

Ahead, Chuck spotted a gap between two ancient stucco buildings—a pitch-black gap barely wider than a footbridge.

"There."

Sarah caught the angle. "Chuck... that's too narrow."

"For an SUV."

Chuck yanked the wheel right at the last possible second. The BMW's nose cleared the stone corner by millimeters. Metal screeched as the right side scraped plaster, sending a cloud of white dust into the night, but the car squeezed into the gap without losing momentum.

Morgan covered his head. "You could tuck your elbows in!"

Behind them, the lead SUV tried to force its way in. The front bumper made it, but the wide frame didn't. A violent screech of tearing sheet metal echoed through the alley as both side doors crushed against the stone walls, jamming the SUV dead in its tracks and completely blocking the second vehicle behind it.

"They're wedged!" Morgan cheered, checking the rear glass.

Sarah was already on her satellite phone. "Safe house compromised. Requesting immediate extraction." She listened for a beat. "Understood. We're going dark."

At the end of the alley, Chuck killed the headlights, took two quick unlit turns, and let the ghosted BMW vanish into the Nassau night.

XXXXXXXXXXXX

The Gulfstream cut quietly through the night sky. Chuck and Sarah sat side by side in their rumpled evening wear, having had no time to change in the rush. A few rows back, Morgan was curled into a ball, snoring softly against an armrest.

Chuck turned the black flash drive over in his fingers, its weight heavy with everything they'd just survived.

Sarah glanced sideways at him. "You know... you owe me."

Chuck looked up. "For my driving?"

A familiar half-smile touched the corner of her mouth. "A story."

"Now? Sarah, we just survived an ambush, lost our luggage, and turned a BMW into Swiss cheese—"

"Chuck." Just one word.

Chuck sighed, a smile tugging at his lips. "Alright. There was this sandwich girl. Lou..."

Sarah turned in her seat to listen.

"She flirted with me, brought me subs, and then one day she ran into you at the Nerd Herd counter. She asked who you were, and I froze—trying to calculate a believable answer. Coworker, friend, roommate..." Chuck shook his head, a warm laugh escaping him. "And you didn't even hesitate. You stepped right up, held out your hand, and said, 'His girlfriend.'"

Sarah shrugged mildly. "Technically, that was our cover."

"Sure. But you said it with enough absolute authority that Lou gave up on the spot. Sarah... It was so convincing I almost believed you."

Sarah laughed softly. "Did you hate it?"

Chuck met her eyes. "Back then? Terrified me." He softened. "Now? Best break up of my life."

The laughter quieted, leaving only the steady hum of the jet engines. Chuck looked back down at the drive, his smile fading. "I'm really sorry about your suitcase."

Sarah looked at him. "I'll be okay."

"I meant the picture."

Sarah's expression shifted. Chuck knew what that photograph meant to her—one of the few tangible pieces of her past that could never be replaced.

Silence stretched between them. Then Sarah gently reached over, sliding her hand over his. Her thumb brushed softly across his knuckles. "You're here."

Chuck searched her face as she gave him a faint, reassuring smile. "We'll make new ones."

Chuck squeezed her hand. "Well... since I'm feeling generous."

Sarah raised an eyebrow.

"Bonus story to make up for the photo. The day you kissed me real for the first time because we thought a bomb was about to blow us to pieces. You kissed me," he mused.

Sarah smiled to herself, letting her head rest against Chuck's shoulder. "You were terrified."

Chuck chuckled. "Oh, absolutely."

Far below, the dark expanse of the Atlantic slipped away beneath the clouds, with home waiting somewhere ahead in the west.

XXXXXXXXXXXX

SECURE CHANNEL OPEN

[OVERSEER]Nassau?

[STORMCLOUD]Failed.

[OVERSEER]Moore?

[STORMCLOUD]Played us.

[OVERSEER]Harrison?

[STORMCLOUD]In our grasps.

...

[OVERSEER]Bartowski?

[STORMCLOUD]Acquired the data.

[OVERSEER]Unacceptable.

...

[STORMCLOUD]Requesting authorization for the Omega Protocol.

...

[OVERSEER]Reason?

[STORMCLOUD]Sentinel and Blackbeard have failed.Bartowski is unpredictable.Walker is back.

...

[OVERSEER]Operator?

[STORMCLOUD]Silver Fox.

...

(18 seconds of silence — no connection)

...

[OVERSEER]Approved.

[STORMCLOUD]Activating Silver Fox.

[OVERSEER]Remind him.

[STORMCLOUD]Of what?

[OVERSEER]He cannot fail.

=====CONNECTION TERMINATED
=====

Chapter 7: Chapter 7: Sixth... sense?

Chapter 7 - Sixth... sense?

The Castle operations room hummed in the blue glow of the monitors. Chuck carefully slotted the black flash drive into the isolated analysis terminal.

Morgan leaned over his shoulder. "Let's see the secret world-domination files."

The screen blinked. Folders. Spreadsheets. Offshore accounts. Accounting statements.

Morgan's shoulders slumped. "This is literally just tax data."

Chuck scrolled through endless ledgers of wire transfers and balance sheets.

Beckman's face appeared on the primary screen. "Status report, Bartowski?"

"Just financial records, General."

Morgan groaned. "They blew up a safehouse and sent an army over a spreadsheet?"

Sarah stood opposite the desk, arms crossed. "Somebody thought these numbers were worth killing for."

"Which means," Chuck muttered, "there's more here than balance sheets."

Minutes bled into hours as Chuck dug deeper through the encrypted directories. Nothing looked out of place.

Beckman broke the silence. "Stand down, team. Get some rest. Resume analysis at 0700."

"Yes, ma'am."

The screen darkened.

Morgan stretched with a groan. "I officially hate Microsoft Excel."

"Go home, Morgan," Chuck said quietly. "Fresh eyes tomorrow."

"And you?"

"I'll stay up a bit longer."

Morgan shot him a knowing look. "You're not sleeping at all, are you?"

"Not yet."

"Fine. I'm bringing double-strength espresso tomorrow."

Once the elevator doors closed, Sarah walked up behind Chuck's chair. "You really think there's a hidden layer?"

Chuck leaned back. "Moore wouldn't hand over a dead lead. Not with her reputation."

Sarah rested a hand on the edge of the console. "Then you'll find it."

Chuck looked up, surprised. "You trust me that much?"

Sarah's lips curved into a soft smile. "Always."

A heavy quiet settled over the room until Sarah reached up to touch her ear, wincing slightly. She tried to unclip her diamond earring, but her fingers fumbled. She exhaled a shaky breath of frustration.

Chuck stood instantly. "Let me."

Sarah turned her back to him without a word. Chuck gently brushed her blond hair over her shoulder, his fingers brushing the sensitive skin of her neck as he found the tiny clasp.

"Does it hurt?" he murmured.

"No. Just... the crash."

Chuck clicked the latch open, sliding the first earring free, then repeated the motion on the other side. Sarah let out a long, slow breath.

"I thought I was hiding the adrenaline spike better," she admitted.

"You weren't." Chuck dropped the small studs into his palm.

Sarah turned back to face him. "All night, out there... it felt like nothing could touch us."

"And now?"

"Now the crash is hitting all at once."

Chuck nodded gently. "Let's go home."

She turned toward the exit, then paused halfway across the room. "Chuck?"

"Yeah?"

"Tomorrow... I want to talk to Ellie again."

A warm, genuine smile broke across Chuck's face. "I think she'd love that."

Sarah returned the smile, the last lingering tension leaving her shoulders. "I hope so."

Chuck glanced back at the dark monitors one last time. Millions of meaningless numbers stared back from the glass. The pattern was buried there somewhere.

And tomorrow, they'd find it.

XXXXXXXXXXXX

The apartment door clicked shut, locking out the night. Chuck tossed his keys into the entry bowl while Sarah kicked off her high heels with a long, quiet sigh.

"That... feels exponentially better," she said, stretching her toes against the cool hardwood floor.

Chuck smiled, draping his jacket over the back of the couch. "I will never understand how you pull off tactical maneuvers with that on."

"Neither do I," Sarah admitted with a soft laugh.

Chuck poured two glasses of water in the kitchen and walked one over to Sarah as she stood by the balcony window. Outside, the distant grid of Los Angeles glittered in absolute peace.

"It's strange," Sarah murmured. "A few hours ago, we were dodging automatic fire in Nassau."

Chuck leaned against the frame beside her. "And now we're just... standing in our kitchen." Sarah looked out at the skyline. "It's like none of it even mattered."

"That was always the hardest part for me," Chuck said softly. "How the rest of the world just keeps right on spinning, completely oblivious to how close everything came to falling apart."

Sarah turned her gaze to him, her eyes dark and thoughtful. "Even when everything *does* fall apart."

A comfortable quiet settled between them. Sarah set her empty glass on the counter.

"I'm going to wash the night off."

Chuck gave her a gentle smile. "Go ahead. I'll lock up."

XXXXXXXXXXXX

Fifteen minutes later, Sarah stepped out of the bathroom in a loose sleep shirt, steam trailing into the hallway behind her.

Chuck was still staring at his screen when she walked up behind him, resting a warm hand on his shoulder.

"Found anything?" she asked, her voice quiet with exhaustion.

"Nothing yet."

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

Sarah squeezed his shoulder gently. "Then close it. That's enough for tonight."

Chuck finally shut the laptop, letting out a long breath. "Yeah. You're right."

Sarah stayed beside him as he stood. "Coming to bed?"

"One minute," he said, brushing his knuckles against her cheek. "Just going to wash off the night."

A moment later, the hum of running water drifted through the quiet apartment.

XXXXXXXXXXXX

The bedroom was quiet, lit only by the faint amber glow of streetlights through the blinds.

Sarah reached beneath her pillow, her fingers automatically finding the grip of her knife. She slid it out an inch, checked the blade by habit, and pushed it back into place.

Chuck watched from his side of the bed, silent.

Sarah looked up. "Still find it strange?"

"No," Chuck said softly. "Old habits. If it helps you sleep, I'm all for it."

Sarah offered a faint smile. "Yeah."

She slipped beneath the covers, and Chuck clicked off the lamp, plunging the room into darkness.

For a long moment, the only sound was the quiet hum of the city outside.

"Chuck?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

Chuck turned toward her. "For what?"

"For not hovering tonight. For not asking if I was okay every five minutes."

"I knew if you wanted to talk, you would."

Sarah shifted closer, resting her palm against his chest. "Is that why I fell in love with you?"

Chuck smiled in the dark, covering her hand with his. "I'd like to think there were a few other reasons too."

Sarah let out a soft, quiet laugh. "A few."

Silence settled over the room again as their breathing synchronized into the steady rhythm of sleep.

Then, Sarah's breathing suddenly fractured.

Her fingers clenched hard into Chuck's shirt. Her entire body locked tight as a sharp, ragged gasp escaped her throat—the daytime terror following her into the dark.

XXXXXXXXXXXX

The soft rustle of sheets was all it took to pull Chuck out of sleep. Beside him, Sarah was sitting cross-legged in the dark, her chest rising and falling in fast, shallow gasps.

"Sarah?" Chuck sat up, placing a hand on her knee to anchor her.

She traced her fingers over his knuckles as if tethering herself to reality, her tension only breaking when she felt his warmth.

"It came back," she rasped, her voice raw.

"The nightmare?"

"It doesn't feel like a dream," she whispered, staring into the dark.

Chuck pulled her into his arms, wrapping himself around her. She pressed her face into the crook of his neck, her breath hot against his skin.

"I don't see faces," she murmured. "Just cold. Everything is blurry... but tonight I heard a woman laughing." She shivered, her grip on his back tightening. "I'm scared, Chuck. What's happening to me?"

Chuck held her tighter, resting his chin on her head. "I don't know. But we're going to figure it out. Together."

She took a shaky breath, her thumb brushing gently across his cheek. "I think... I really need to talk to Ellie."

Chuck pressed a kiss to her forehead, praying his sister had answers he didn't.

They sank back into the pillows, Sarah curling tightly against his chest. The silence of the room slowly reclaimed them, their breathing synchronizing as exhaustion finally won out.

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Chuck had already left for Castle. Sarah sat propped up in bed, wrapped in a thin robe, the laptop warm against her knees. On the screen, Ellie's face appeared, still in her blue hospital scrubs.

"Hey, Sarah," Ellie yawned, rubbing her eyes.

"Hi, Ellie. Did I call at a bad time?"

"Just walked in from a shift. Perfect timing, actually. What's going on?"

Sarah hesitated, her eyes drifting upward as she searched for the right words. She took a slow, unsteady breath. "I think something's happening to me."

Ellie's exhaustion vanished, replaced instantly by focused concern.

"Nightmares," Sarah whispered. "At least... I think they're nightmares." She recounted the sensory fragments—the overwhelming cold, the blurry figures, the woman laughing. When she finished, Sarah swallowed hard. "I feel like I'm losing my mind."

Ellie leaned closer to her webcam. "You're not going crazy, Sarah. What you're describing happens in patients processing severe trauma."

"PTSD?"

"Not in the classic sense," Ellie said gently. "Think of it as a byproduct of your neural pathways rewiring. The Intersect did unprecedented things to your nervous system, and we're still mapping the fallout."

Seeing Sarah's jaw tighten, Ellie paused. "Sorry. Researcher brain took over." She took a breath before continuing. "It reminds me of brain injury cases I've treated. As memory networks rebuild, emotions resurface first. Then sensory triggers—sounds, smells, images—start unlocking specific pieces. The good ones come back, but the painful ones ride right along with them."

Ellie looked directly into the camera. "If you need us, Devon and I will be on the next flight out."

Sarah blinked back a wave of emotion. "Thank you, Ellie."

“How’s Chuck holding up?”

“He’s... sweet. Attentive. Trying not to push.”

“In other words, he’s terrified,” Ellie said warmly. “Chuck’s default setting is trying to carry the whole world on his shoulders. Yours too. If he starts taking on too much, tell me. I’ll set him straight.”

A faint, genuine smile broke through Sarah’s fatigue. “I don’t think I could get through this without you.”

“Hey,” Ellie smiled gently. “You’re family, Sarah. You don’t have to.”

Sarah nodded, a single tear slipping down her cheek—not from fear, but from the quiet realization that she was no longer alone.

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“I’m serious. If I see one more bank account number, I’m quitting,” Morgan remarked.

Chuck was still staring at the same spreadsheet.

“Something’s not right.”

“Besides the fact that there are three hundred offshore companies in twenty rows?”

Chuck shook his head.

“No.”

“Then what?”

“It’s too clean.”

Morgan blinked.

“Is that bad?”

“Yes.”

Chuck started drawing on the whiteboard. He drew arrows between the companies, then scribbled dates above them.

“Look.”

“All the money eventually disappears.”

“Yeah.”

“But it always happens the same way.”

Morgan still didn’t understand. Chuck sat back down, resting one leg on the other chair.

“They’re not laundering money.”

“Then what are they doing?”

“Creating cover stories, Morgan. Like the Blue Tide.”

He leaned back for a moment, staring at the ceiling.

“Only on an industrial scale.”

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Then Chuck’s phone rang. It was Ellie.

“Hey, Ellie.”

“Hi, Chuck. I talked to Sarah.”

The smile disappeared from Chuck’s face.

“Is everything okay?”

“For now, yes. But listen to me.”

Chuck sat up straighter.

“I’m listening.”

“Something is happening that I can’t explain. Sarah is clearly responding to emotional stimuli. But these nightmares worry me a little. I’m not a psychologist, so take this with a grain of salt, but she may be starting to process everything she’s been through.”

Chuck listened tensely.

“It’s almost as if everything inside her is getting mixed up right now. As if what she was two weeks ago is finally being balanced out.”

Chuck knew exactly what Ellie meant. Back then, Sarah hadn’t been herself. She hadn’t been his wife. After Quinn’s operation, Sarah had become distant, cold, and calculating. As if she had locked all her emotions away somewhere deep inside herself.

There was a reason Casey had called her Graham’s enforcer.

Emotionless. Precise. Ruthless.

Like a predator pushed to its absolute limit. Like a killing machine.

A perfect agent.

“If her condition doesn’t improve... take her away from here for a while.”

“What do you mean?”

“Somewhere without the CIA. No missions, no monitors, no weapons.”

Chuck was silent for a moment, then smiled.

Their father’s cabin.

The place where he had hidden for years.

They could be there, far away from everything.

“Okay.”

“I think it would do Sarah some good too.”

Chuck didn’t answer immediately.

“Okay.”

“Just... think about it.”

“I will.”

They said their goodbyes, and Chuck ended the call.

“We just have to somehow make it through until then...” he muttered to himself.

Morgan looked at him with concern.

“Everything okay?”

Chuck didn’t answer immediately. He swallowed.

“I think... I’m going to take a walk.”

With that, he left Castle.

Chapter 8: Chapter 8: Good choice

Chapter 8 - Good choice

Sarah sat motionless on the edge of the mattress long after the laptop screen faded to black, Ellie's parting words echoing in the quiet.

Don't try to get through this alone.

She took a slow breath and stood. The apartment felt suffocatingly small, the silence pressing in like a physical weight.

Shaking off the lingering chill, she pulled on jeans, a gray T-shirt, and her short leather jacket, grabbing her bag as she slipped out the door.

In the courtyard, her instincts automatically carried her left toward Alex and Morgan's apartment. She paused a few feet from their door, staring at the brass numbers. Alex would welcome her in without hesitation. She'd brew tea, offer a warm smile, and give Sarah the easy normality she usually craved.

Sarah slowly backed away. She didn't need comforting distractions right now. She needed answers.

She walked out to the street and hailed a passing yellow cab.

The cab pulled up to the curb, the driver leaning across to roll down the window. "Where to, miss?"

Sarah hesitated, the address sitting heavy on her tongue—a location buried deep in the fog of her missing years.

"Burbank," she said quietly, giving him the cross streets.

As the cab pulled into traffic, Sarah rested her forehead against the cool window, watching Los Angeles blur past. She didn't know exactly what she was looking for. She only knew it was time to stop running from her own head.

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The key turned in the lock with familiar ease, the door swinging open into absolute silence.

Sarah stood on the threshold, staring inside. Everything was immaculate—the bed made with military precision, the pillows aligned side-by-side.

Yet the room felt entirely cold. She stepped inside, her fingers gliding along the bookshelf without lingering on a single spine. In the wardrobe, her clothes hung sorted strictly by color and functional layout. The sterile layout of a temporary safehouse, not a home.

On the dresser sat a framed photograph: Chuck holding her, both of them caught in a moment of unscripted warmth. The duplicate she'd lost in Nassau, or was it the original? She didn't know.

Beside it lay Nicholas Quinn's file.

Sarah flipped it open. Quinn's smug, arrogant face stared back from the lead page. For minutes, she remained motionless, searching the void in her mind for a detail, a trigger, anything. Nothing came except a sudden, visceral hatred that curdled into white-hot rage. Her hand clenched into a fist.

What did you take from me?

She slammed the file shut, grabbed a heavy hardcover off the shelf, and hurled it across the room. It struck the wall with a loud crack before tumbling to the floor. Sarah closed her eyes, exhaling a single, jagged breath as the fury burned out, leaving only hollow regret in its wake.

Her mind flicked back to the Dream House. She remembered the brute force she had used against Chuck, beating him down, ready to execute him in cold blood under Quinn's orders. And Chuck hadn't even defended himself. He had just looked at her with unconditional love and devastating heartbreak.

Sarah lowered her head. "I'm sorry," she whispered—not to the dossier on the table, but to the man she had nearly destroyed.

She walked back to the dresser, popped the backing off the frame, and slid the photo into her pocket, leaving the empty glass behind. "You're not taking this from me anymore."

She couldn't stay in this tomb another minute.

Stripping off her clothes, she pulled on black running tights, a blue-and-gray technical tee, and pulled her hair into a tight ponytail. She tapped the pocket of her jacket—the photograph was safe in there—and locked the door behind her.

She hit the pavement at a walk, slowly transitioning into a jog, then settling into a hard, rhythmic stride down the quiet streets of Burbank. She wasn't running away from the ghosts in her head. She was running to catch up with the woman she used to be.

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Chuck aimlessly wandered the streets of Burbank, walking just to keep moving. Passing a small neighborhood park, he noticed a young couple sitting on the grass, sharing a quiet laugh.

The sight brought an involuntary smile to his face—and immediately conjured Sarah's signature half-smile. The subtle, affectionate one she always reserved for his worst pop-culture references, not because the jokes were actually funny, but simply because they were his.

Ellie's advice echoed in his head: *It's like everything she's been through is getting tangled up... If she doesn't get better, take her away for a little while.*

His father's cabin. The more Chuck thought about it, the better it sounded—off the grid, far away from Castle, safehouses, and lingering ghosts. Just him and Sarah.

He stopped in front of a storefront window, staring at his reflection in the glass. "Just this one last case," he murmured to the quiet street. "Then we're done."

He pulled out his phone, thumb hovering over Sarah's name. He stopped himself. Ellie was right—his default setting was to rush in and try to fix everything, but right now, what Sarah needed most was time and space to process things on her own terms.

With a quiet sigh, Chuck slipped the phone back into his pocket and kept walking as the afternoon shadows lengthened across the pavement.

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Fifty minutes into her run, Sarah slowed to a walk outside a small neighborhood strip where an old-fashioned ice cream parlor sat near a comic book shop. Driven by a sudden impulse, she pushed open the door.

A few patrons glanced up, her athletic gear standing out against the walls covered in posters, collectibles, and organized nerd chaos.

She browsed the racks until a specific cover caught her eye: *Bob Morane*. She recognized it immediately from Chuck's collection at the apartment.

She brought it to the counter, where a bearded clerk in an AC/DC T-shirt gave her a warm smile. "Hi! Help you find anything?"

"I'll take this," Sarah said, pointing to the issue.

The clerk pulled the comic, eyeing it with a nod of respect. "Not many of my regulars appreciate classic European stuff." He paused, taking a closer look at her, before his face lit up. "Wait a second... you're Chuck's girlfriend!"

"His wife," Sarah corrected automatically, the words leaving her lips before she even had to think.

"Good choice!" The clerk grinned, sliding the issue into a brown paper bag and handing over her change.

"Thanks, Louis," Sarah smiled, taking the bag.

She stepped back out into the afternoon air, a sudden warmth blooming in her chest. She stopped dead on the sidewalk as the realization hit her: she had no conscious memory of ever meeting Louis or entering this shop. Yet his name had slipped off her tongue again effortlessly—not as a terrifying, violent flashback, but as an unprompted piece of her real life quietly returning to place.

Holding the paper bag close, Sarah set off toward home, a genuine smile breaking across her face. Chuck was going to love it.

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Chuck stepped through the front door, shoulders heavy with fatigue. "Sarah?"

"Kitchen!"

He hung his jacket and walked in. Sarah sat at the counter, a mug of tea between her hands. At the sight of him, she stood. They exchanged a quiet, grounded hug—no fireworks, just mutual relief.

"How was your day?" Chuck asked.

"Good. Cleared my head a little."

"Mine didn't."

Sarah offered a faint smile, sliding a brown paper bag across the counter. "I brought you something."

Chuck blinked. "For me?"

"I wanted to apologize," she said softly. "For... what I did in our dream house."

Silence settled over the kitchen.

"Sarah, you weren't yourself—"

"I know," she cut in gently, her eyes locking onto his with painful honesty. "But it was still my hands. I hurt you, Chuck. I'm so sorry."

Chuck stepped closer, placing his hand over hers. "I know."

He pulled the comic from the bag, a sudden laugh breaking through his exhaustion. "*Bob Morane?*"

Sarah gave him a tentative smile. "Good choice?"

"The best." He traced the cover art. "Where did you even find this?"

"From Louis. It just... felt right."

Chuck opened the cover. *The Yellow Shadow*.

The smile melted from his face. His thumb froze on the newsprint.

“Chuck?”

He didn't answer, staring at the title as if the words were burning through the page.

“The Yellow Shadow...”

He set the comic on the counter and bolted for his satchel, pulling out his encrypted CIA laptop.

“Chuck, what is it?”

“Morgan was right! The financial data isn't incomplete. I was just looking at the wrong scale.” Chuck flipped the screen open, spreadsheets flashing across his retinas. “Bob Morane didn't fight the Yellow Shadow in a single story. It was an ongoing arc—spanning multiple decades.”

Sarah followed him to the desk, watching the familiar spark rekindle in his eyes.

“I was searching through months of corporate transfers,” Chuck muttered, his fingers flying across the keys. “If this shadow network has been operating since Quinn’s early rogue days... I shouldn't be filtering for years.”

He locked eyes with her, a sharp, triumphant grin breaking through his fatigue. “I need to look back decades.”

Chapter 9: Chapter 9: Uncharted Worlds

Chapter 9 - Uncharted Worlds

Chuck leaned back from the terminal, the screen's blue glow framing *Anka Global Logistics* at the center of the display. Below it sat a physical street address in Istanbul, the central node in a web of front companies.

"Got it," Chuck murmured.

Sarah set down her mug, reading the quiet certainty in his voice. She walked over, resting a hand on the back of his chair. "Istanbul."

"Every shell account feeds back to this single hub," Chuck said, zooming in on the schematic. "And there's zero remote access. The network is completely air-gapped from the outside world."

Sarah scanned the surrounding district on the map. "Which means an on-site op."

Chuck cracked his neck with a weary wince, rubbing his eyes. "Tomorrow."

The monitor glare highlighted the dark smudges under his eyes and his heavy, slow blinks. He was running on pure fumes.

"My brain is officially fried," he admitted.

Sarah gently brushed her fingers against his cheek, pressing a soft kiss to his temple. "Go to bed."

Chuck gave her a grateful, tired smile before heading down the hall. A few minutes later, the bathroom door clicked shut, and the apartment fell quiet.

Sarah pulled the laptop closer, bypassing the financial ledgers. Chuck had solved the math; her job was the fieldcraft.

She pulled up high-res satellite imagery of Istanbul—the Bosphorus bridges, the industrial ports, warehouse districts, and high-density tourist neighborhoods. Pulling a notepad toward her, she began mapping potential entry points, surveillance blind spots,

cover IDs, and primary extraction routes.

Outside, the LA night deepened. The soft glow of the desk lamp and the low hum of the refrigerator were the only sounds as her pen moved steadily across the paper. Satisfied with a solid preliminary operational footprint, she shut the laptop.

After a quick shower, Sarah slipped quietly into the dark bedroom.

Chuck was fast asleep, his breathing slow and even, one arm thrown over the duvet.

Sarah carefully slid into bed beside him, anchoring herself close enough to feel his warmth. She watched his face in the shadows—a few hours ago tight with intense focus, now completely at peace.

She leaned in close, her breath warm against his skin. She waited, making sure Chuck was asleep and whispering so softly it barely registered as sound. “I love you...”

Chuck shifted slightly in his sleep, letting out a soft sigh, but didn't wake.

Sarah smiled, resting her hand lightly over his arm. Within minutes, the quiet dark pulled her under, and for the first time in weeks, both slept without interruption.

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“Impressive work, Agent Bartowski,” General Beckman said from the main monitor. “Identify what Istanbul has to do with Nicholas Quinn’s network.”

Chuck nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Morgan straightened up. “Time to buy some Turkish guidebooks. And sample authentic street kebabs.”

“Morgan...”

“What? I’m broadening my cultural horizons.”

A ghost of a smile touched Beckman’s lips. “Dismissed. I expect your initial deployment report ASAP.”

As Chuck and Morgan headed for the door, Beckman added, “Agent Walker, stay behind.”

Chuck paused, glancing back questioningly.

"Go ahead," Sarah said softly. "I'll be right out."

The heavy vault door sealed shut behind them. Beckman studied Sarah across the quiet room. "How are you holding up?"

"Better." Honest and direct.

Beckman nodded slowly. "I have a proposal. Are you prepared to re-engage with the CIA on this operation?"

Sarah's posture straightened, determination instantly sharpening her eyes.

"Not operational field duty," Beckman clarified. "Not yet. Tactical observer—evaluations, threat assessment, advisory. No solo fieldwork."

"Yes, ma'am," Sarah answered without hesitation. "I'm in."

Beckman searched her face. She'd watched Sarah Walker evolve from a green operative to an elite handler, and finally to a civilian searching for her bearings. The woman standing before her now wasn't looking to prove herself; she was someone who knew exactly where she belonged.

"Very well." Beckman's tone softened slightly. "Just one condition, Agent Walker."

"Ma'am?"

"Take care of yourself..." Beckman glanced toward the exit. "...and keep those boys out of trouble."

A faint smile touched Sarah's lips. "I always do."

"Good luck."

Sarah stepped out into the corridor where Chuck was leaning against the wall, while Morgan hovered nearby, glued to his phone screen.

"Everything okay?" Chuck asked, stepping forward.

"Everything's fine," Sarah said, a quiet sense of purpose easing her shoulders.

Morgan didn't look up from his screen. "Guys, it's official. Internet consensus says Istanbul kebab is elite."

Chuck laughed. "Morgan, focus." He turned back to Sarah, a familiar, mischievous glint in his eye. "I still owe you a short story."

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "That's true."

"First step: food," Chuck said, leading the way down the hall toward the surface. "As it happens, I know a spot. Right above Castle where the Buy More used to be, there's a brand-new Subway."

Sarah fell into step right beside him, a warm smile breaking through her fatigue. "Of course you do."

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Chuck knelt beside his open suitcase, carefully folding a few T-shirts before tucking his laptop charger into the side pocket.

A quiet rustle came from the closet. He looked up to see Sarah pulling her own suitcase off the top shelf.

"Sarah..."

She turned questioningly. "What?"

"What are you doing?"

"Packing." She said it as if there couldn't possibly be any other answer.

Chuck stood up slowly. "I really don't think that's a good idea."

Sarah didn't take offense; she simply kept folding her clothes. "Beckman reinstated me."

"Beckman said you'd be an observer."

"That's what I'll be."

"Knowing you," Chuck said, "you'd end up doing that observing from the front lines instead of Castle."

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

Chuck raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"Right now, you seem to know me better than I know myself."

A brief, nervous laugh escaped Chuck before he could stop it, though his smile quickly faded. "I'm still worried."

Sarah set her suitcase on the bed, leaving the zipper open. "Because you don't trust me?"

"No," he shook his head immediately.

Sarah sat on the edge of the mattress. "Will you tell me what's actually bothering you?"

Chuck sat beside her, staring down at the floor for a moment. "Once... we had a fight. Not just a minor argument, but our first real fight as an official couple."

Sarah looked at him with quiet interest. "What was it about? Was it like Prague?"

"No," Chuck shook his head gently. "Completely different. It was about my mom."

Sarah's expression shifted. "Mary Bartowski."

"Yeah. You might not remember the details yet, but she vanished when I was a kid to fix a CIA mistake, ending up deep undercover with a dangerous arms dealer named Volkoff." Chuck laced his fingers together. "When she finally surfaced, for a while we thought she was a total traitor. It was a nightmare—she shot me once, tried to blow us up another time... Though, to be fair, she never tried to stab me, so there's that."

Sarah listened intently, not interrupting.

"Eventually you, the old Sarah... arrested my mother."

Sarah blinked in surprise. "I did?"

"Yeah. Because you believed it was the right call. And honestly? It probably was."

"But you were angry with me."

"Furious," Chuck admitted.

“Then why are you telling me this now?”

Chuck took a breath. “Because for a long time, I thought the fight was about the arrest itself. But then I realized that wasn't it.”

“What was it?”

Chuck gave her a bittersweet smile. “It was because I talked to everyone about how much it hurt. Everyone... except you.”

Silence filled the bedroom. Sarah lowered her eyes softly. “That must have hurt.”

“Yeah,” Chuck nodded. “Even though you were just trying to protect me.”

Sarah thought for a moment. “That’s strange... I don’t remember any of it. But somehow, I can completely imagine it.” She reached out, lacing her fingers through his. “It wasn’t the disagreement that hurt. It was being left out in the cold alone.”

Chuck quietly exhaled. That was exactly why he’d brought it up.

Sarah looked at him calmly. “So this time, you’re talking to me about it?”

“Yes. And... I’m sorry, Sarah. I was wrong. I’m the one who asked Beckman to put you in an analyst role first.”

Sarah’s posture immediately stiffened, her lips pressing into a tight, sharp line. Anger flared in her eyes. Chuck watched her brace herself.

Then she took a slow breath, her shoulders relaxing.

“I’m going to chalk this up to you being worried about me,” she said, her tone dead serious. “I’ll give you a pass on that.”

Chuck, seeing her tense determination, backed down instantly. “You’re right. I won’t go behind your back again. I need to trust you more.”

“You’d better,” Sarah said sharply, though the edge in her voice was already giving way to a faint spark of playfulness. She wasn't truly angry anymore; talking it through had changed everything.

She picked up a rolled-up pair of socks from the bed. “And don’t think for a second this story gets you off the hook for what you owe me.”

Chuck relaxed, standing up. “I was really hoping it would.”

Sarah tossed the rolled-up socks straight at his chest. They hit him with a soft, silent thud.

Chuck stood there, looking bewildered. “What was that for?”

“Pay up, Bartowski!”

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The yellow taxi wove out of Istanbul Airport into the city's pulsing traffic.

From the front passenger seat, Sarah continuously scanned the side mirrors from behind her sunglasses. A black van trailed them through two intersections before veering down a side street—coincidence, but logged away regardless.

In the back, Chuck cracked his window. The warm breeze off the Bosphorus flooded the car, carrying the rich scents of charcoal-grilled meat, dark coffee, and sesame-crustedit bread from nearby stalls.

Morgan took a deep breath. “I think even the air here has a menu.”

“I knew that’d be your first thought,” Chuck laughed.

The taxi slammed on its brakes as a scooter darted inches across the hood. The driver yelled something out the window in Turkish, the rider waved back warmly, and both kept going without missing a beat.

Morgan stared after them. “Did they just fight... or compliment each other?”

“I think both,” Chuck said.

The city unfolded before them as they reached the crest of a hill. Ancient Ottoman stone houses sat alongside modern glass towers, with the silver ribbon of the Bosphorus stretching below. Ferries cut trails through the water while minarets and golden domes pierced the skyline against the afternoon sun.

Chuck stared out the window. “Wow... It’s like *Skyfall*.”

Sarah caught his eye in the rearview mirror. “Movie?”

“Yes, a Movie.”

“Definitely Skyfall,” Morgan agreed. “All that’s missing is Bond—and I’m seeing at least three places to eat on every block.”

A quiet smile broke across Sarah’s face.

Chuck caught it. “Well, look at that.”

“What?”

“You smiled.”

Sarah adjusted her sunglasses, turning back toward the street. “Prove it.”

Chuck grinned as the taxi turned down a narrow cobblestone alley, passing under overhanging balconies and squeezing past an orange cat lazily sunning itself on the curb.

Two blocks ahead, the sleek glass-and-steel facade of Anka Global Logistics towered over the historic roofs. Chuck’s eyes immediately locked onto the target.

The sightseeing was over. The mission had begun.

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The taxi pulled away down a narrow side street, leaving them outside a weathered four-story apartment building. Flaking plaster showed the building's age, though geranium boxes brightened the rusted wrought-iron balconies, and the bakery on the ground floor sent the rich scent of warm bread into the afternoon air.

Sarah stepped out first, her eyes immediately scanning the street—checking sightlines, rooftops, parked cars, and potential blind spots.

Chuck and Morgan hauled their luggage out of the trunk. Morgan turned in a slow circle. “This is... surprisingly normal.”

“That’s usually a good sign,” Chuck said.

“Or a very bad one.”

Sarah pushed open the heavy iron gate, leading them inside. The cool stairwell smelled of old plaster and freshly brewed coffee. Beside the staircase sat an antique cage elevator, its rusted metal grill and worn brass buttons looking like a relic from the last century.

Morgan eyed it suspiciously. “We’re not taking that, are we?”

“Stairs,” Sarah said without missing a beat.

“Thank God.”

On the fourth floor, Sarah stopped outside their door. Before inserting the key, her fingers glided around the frame, instinctively checking the lock and seam for subtle signs of tampering.

“Anything?” Chuck asked.

“Just a habit.” She turned the key, and the door swung open silently.

The safehouse was clean and minimal—light wood floors, a basic kitchen, two small bedrooms, and a living room opening onto a small balcony.

Morgan immediately dropped his bags in the living room and began laying out their gear: binoculars, long-lens cameras, encrypted laptops, and city maps.

Sarah stepped out onto the balcony, Chuck right beside her.

The ambient sound of Istanbul rose around them—the metallic ring of a tram, distant ship horns on the Bosphorus, and gulls circling overhead. Two blocks away, rising above the low Ottoman tile roofs, stood the dark-glass facade of Anka Global Logistics.

“Good vantage point,” Sarah said, tracking the window angles. “Far enough to avoid burning our faces to anyone watching from the roof, close enough for clear optics.”

Chuck smiled. “That’s why you’re the professional.”

Sarah shot him a quiet side-glance. “That’s why we’re a team.”

Down on the cobblestones below, life moved at its normal pace—a child kicking a ball, an old man balancing a tray of tea glasses, a line forming outside the bakery. But Chuck kept his eyes fixed on the dark glass tower ahead. The next piece of the puzzle was behind those walls.

Now they just had to find a way inside.