

Chuck vs. the Background Check

by blueboy714

Lou Palone walked into the Burbank Buy More with a broken phone. Who would have ever guessed from that single broken phone that everything in the entire world would change for Chuck, Sarah, Casey, and the CIA and NSA? Complete AU

Rated: T · Genre: Romance · Chapters: 10

Chapter 1: Chuck vs. the Background Check

Chapter 1: Chapter 1 - The Broken Phone

Description - Lou Palone walked into the Burbank Buy More with a broken phone. Who would have ever guessed from that single broken phone that everything in the entire world would change for Chuck, Sarah, Casey, and the CIA and NSA? Complete AU

Song Recommendation - Telephone Line - Electric Light Orchestra

A/N1 - I always thought that Lou had great chemistry with Chuck on the show, and hoped that she would have been on more than two episodes. Lou was really the only one who stood a chance against Sarah when it came to winning Chuck's heart. You could see that Sarah was jealous of Lou's "real" relationship with Chuck. I wrote this story with that in mind.

Buckle in for an emotional rollercoaster ride for the right amount of spy, drama, family, angst, romance, and of course Charah, just like the show.

A/N2 - Thanks to my pre-reader. Kookykrumbs gave me some great feedback on the entire story. It helped a ton getting feedback from a woman's point of view, so much so that I added six more chapters because she made me do it. If you like the story, it's due in large part because of her. If you hate the story then it's my fault.

A/N3 - In season one, I've always had problems with Sarah leading Chuck on so much when, at the beginning of the series, she was still figuring out her past feelings for Bryce while dealing with her new feelings for Chuck.

+ Everything came to the surface when Chuck met Lou at the beginning of the episode Chuck vs. the Truth

+ Halfway through the episode, Sarah tells Chuck they could never have a real relationship after she was drugged with sodium pentothal. It wasn't at the end of the episode that she admitted to Casey that if she hadn't been trained to withstand sodium pentothal, she would have told Chuck how she really felt about him.

+ Then, at the end of the episode, Sarah kissed him in front of the bomb.

+ It wasn't until 2 episodes later (Chuck vs. the Nemesis) that Sarah picks Chuck over Bryce when both Chuck and Bryce call her at the same, and she decides to stay with Chuck.

What the heck was Chuck supposed to do with all of those mixed signals? Hope he could change his cover girlfriend's mind, even though he had already told her how he felt about her, while at the same time she told him they could never have a real relationship? Or should Chuck start a real relationship with a beautiful normal girl who wanted to and could be his real girlfriend? Lou certainly treated Chuck a hell of a lot better than Sarah had at that point in the series.

Disclaimer - Unfortunately, I don't own Chuck.

Chapter 1 - The Broken Phone

Burbank, CA

The Buy More looked exactly as it always did on a weekday afternoon.

Televisions blared advertisements no one watched. Customers wandered aimlessly through the aisles, looking confused. Somewhere in Home Entertainment, Jeff and Lester were arguing over which science-fiction movie had predicted the future more accurately.

Chuck Bartowski barely noticed any of it. He was behind the Nerd Herd counter, replacing the cracked charging port on a laptop while trying to convince himself that his life was normal. Normal as life could be after receiving the Intersect. He had learned to divide his existence into two worlds, and lately the line between them had been getting harder to see.

Chuck Bartowski barely noticed any of it. His attention was fixed on the laptop in front of him, but part of his mind was always listening for the next interruption from the world he tried to keep separate from the Buy More.

One belonged to the CIA and NSA, a world of encrypted transmissions, covert missions, General Beckman's orders, John Casey's perpetual scowl, and Sarah Walker pretending to be his girlfriend.

The other world belonged to the Buy More. That world still smelled like burnt popcorn and cheap electronics. Chuck preferred that one.

The Buy More world had its own kind of chaos, but at least it was familiar. Here, Chuck knew what was expected of him. Fix the computers. Help the customers. Avoid Jeff and Lester whenever possible. Pretend that nothing unusual happened after hours. It wasn't a perfect life, but it was his version of normal. For a few minutes that afternoon, Chuck was grateful for it.

His concentration was interrupted by the hurried footsteps of a woman with shoulder-length dark hair who practically ran to the counter, clutching a silver cell phone with both hands as though it were priceless.

The frantic woman said, "I keep pressing the button, and nothing's happening." She sounded more frightened than angry, and Chuck immediately recognized that she wasn't really asking only about a phone. She was asking whether the things she trusted to keep her life together could be trusted again.

Chuck Bartowski smiled reassuringly. "Is it fully charged? Because sometimes..."

"My entire life is in this thing," she looked genuinely panicked, "I've got names... places... dates... music... recipes... photos..."

Chuck immediately recognized the expression. Not fear of losing a phone. Fear of losing memories. He had seen it before in people who were terrified of losing something important, and he knew that reassurance sometimes mattered as much as the repair itself.

"What if I lose everything?" she continued. "I can't start over."

Chuck softened his voice. "This is kind of my world."

She finally looked directly at him.

"This is what I do," Chuck said, pointing to the Nerd Herd sign, "And I'm pretty good at it."

The tension in her shoulders eased only slightly.

"So trust me."

For the first time, she smiled. The change was small, but Chuck noticed it immediately. He had managed to turn a panicked customer into someone who felt safe enough to laugh. "OK, I know I'm totally spazzing out."

"It's okay," Chuck replied.

"No, really. It's embarrassing."

Chuck shrugged, "I've seen worse."

She laughed. He liked the sound of it. There was something unexpectedly easy about talking to her. Chuck couldn't explain it. Maybe it was because she didn't know anything about the Intersect. Maybe it was because she wasn't looking at him as an intelligence asset, a mission liability, or a guy who needed constant protection. To Lou, he was simply the Nerd Herd guy who knew how to fix phones. Chuck found that strangely refreshing.

Chuck motioned toward the service counter, "Come on."

She reluctantly handed him the phone.

"Now," he said, "go someplace happy."

"My happy place?" she asked.

"Everyone has one."

She considered the question for a moment. "Turkey... Muenster cheese, egg bread." The answer came so naturally that Chuck smiled. It was an oddly specific happy place, but something was reassuring about someone who knew exactly what comfort looked like to her.

Chuck couldn't help smiling. "Was that a sandwich?"

She nodded, "I own a deli."

Chuck smiled, "That explains everything."

"I think about meats and cheeses more often than people probably should."

"Honestly," Chuck replied, "I respect that."

She laughed again.

"I'll have it ready tomorrow."

"Really?"

"I promise."

She extended her hand. "I'm Lou."

"Chuck."

She smiled. "It's been nice talking with you, Chuck."

"You too... Lou. Hey, that rhymed."

"I know," and she walked away, still smiling.

Chuck watched her disappear into the crowd before returning to the phone. For reasons he couldn't explain, he wanted to make absolutely certain it worked perfectly. He told himself he was simply being careful with a customer's property, but he found himself thinking about her even after the automatic doors closed.

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Sarah's attention remained on Lou even after she moved out of direct view. There was nothing immediately suspicious. That should have made Sarah relax. Instead, it created a different problem. Lou seemed friendly. Intelligent. Comfortable around Chuck. She wasn't trying too hard. She wasn't asking questions about his work. She wasn't showing any obvious interest in his life beyond the man standing in front of her. In other words, she looked exactly like the kind of woman Chuck could safely date. Sarah wasn't sure why that possibility bothered her.

From across the sales floor, Sarah had seen the entire conversation. She had been watching Chuck, as always, but this time she found herself paying almost as much attention to the woman standing across from him.

Casey stepped beside her without warning. "You've been watching him for seven minutes."

"I've been watching everyone."

Casey followed her gaze toward the Nerd Herd counter. "You've been watching her."

Sarah didn't answer. Casey didn't need her to. The silence between them said more than either of them wanted to acknowledge. Sarah knew the professional question was whether Lou posed a threat. The question she was avoiding was much simpler: why did the sight of Chuck enjoying himself with another woman bother her?

Casey looked toward Lou just as she disappeared through the automatic doors. "Civilian."

"Obviously."

"Problem?"

"No."

"You sure?"

Sarah folded her arms in frustration. She knew she was overreacting, and that knowledge only made the feeling more irritating.

Casey raised an eyebrow. "He smiles all the time."

"Not like that."

Casey looked back toward Chuck. The Asset was already carefully disassembling Lou's phone with the kind of concentration usually reserved for bomb disposal. Casey grunted, "He'll survive."

Casey watched Chuck continue working. He had seen the Asset distracted before. Usually it happened after a flash or a mission. This was different.

Chuck looked interested. Casey didn't like unknown variables, and a civilian woman who had suddenly caught Chuck's attention qualified as one. He filed the observation away.

Sarah hoped he was right, but she wasn't entirely certain why she hoped that. The thought of Chuck being interested in someone should have been nothing more than a cover concern. Instead, it had landed somewhere much more personal.

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At the end of the day, in the Buy More modified home theater room. General Beckman's face appeared on the large monitor: "Status report."

Sarah delivered the mission summary efficiently.

"No hostile contacts, no Fulcrum activity, no unusual Intersect flashes."

Beckman nodded, "And the Asset?"

Sarah replied, "Performing within expected parameters."

Casey glanced toward Sarah. He noticed she hesitated. Only for a moment.

"There was... one civilian interaction," Sarah continued.

Beckman's expression sharpened immediately. "Explain."

"A woman named Lou Palone."

Sarah watched Beckman's face carefully. She knew the General would not remember the name. The report was deliberately brief. No unnecessary details. No assumptions.

Sarah had learned long ago that the safest intelligence report was the one that separated what you knew from what you felt. Unfortunately, she was beginning to discover that the two were getting harder to separate.

"Civilian?"

"Owner of a deli in the shopping center."

Beckman asked, "Any indication she approached deliberately?"

"No."

"Connection to hostile intelligence services?"

"None observed," Sarah replied.

Beckman considered the report. "Continue routine observation." Her tone was calm, but Sarah knew the order meant more than casual observation. Anyone who entered Chuck's life had to be evaluated, especially someone who seemed to have appeared without any obvious connection to the intelligence world.

Sarah nodded, but her attention remained on the report. The instruction was simple. Observe Lou. Determine whether she was a threat. Report anything unusual. Sarah had performed variations of that assignment countless times. She had no idea that this particular assignment would eventually force her to examine herself as closely as she examined Lou.

"Yes, General."

The monitor went dark.

Sarah released a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding. She had reported the interaction exactly as protocol required, but something about saying Lou's name aloud had made the encounter feel more significant.

Casey noticed, "You could've left that out."

Sarah shook her head, "No."

Casey understood. The rules existed for a reason. Chuck Bartowski wasn't just a civilian anymore. He was the Intersect... a very important Asset to the CIA and NSA. Every new relationship, every friendship, and every stranger had to be considered a possible threat.

Neither of them realized that a simple broken cell phone was about to change all of their lives. More importantly, neither realized that Lou's apparently ordinary life would soon become the subject of a formal security investigation, an investigation Sarah would eventually have to conduct herself.

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Chuck had spent the morning pretending he wasn't waiting for her. He had checked the front doors more often than necessary. He had reorganized the same tools twice. He had

even cleaned a section of the Nerd Herd counter that had not needed cleaning. He told himself he was being prepared. Morgan would have called it obvious. Chuck had been watching the front doors more often than he cared to admit. He told himself it was because he wanted to know whether Lou's phone was working properly, but the excuse sounded weak even to him.

Lou leaned against the Nerd Herd counter, folding her arms. "Okay," she said with a grin. "Just give me the verdict, Chuck. I can take it."

Chuck held up the phone. "You sure you want to hear?"

She pointed a finger at him. "If you're not teasing me... don't lie to me."

Chuck smiled, "Good as new...ish."

Lou laughed, "I don't believe you." The easy familiarity between them had already begun to grow. Chuck had known Lou for less than a day, yet talking to her felt surprisingly natural. That was precisely what made Sarah uneasy when she noticed it.

Chuck grinned. He had expected Lou to tease him about the repair, but there was something warmer in the exchange now. They were no longer just technician and customer. There was an ease developing between them. Chuck wasn't sure where it was going. He only knew that he wanted to find out.

"I actually learned a lot while fixing it," Chuck admitted. "You can learn a lot about a person through their cell phone."

"Oh, really?"

"For example... I noticed your Nana is the very first contact in your phone. You actually have her listed as 'A-Nana.'"

Lou's expression softened immediately. "Thank you," she said quietly.

Chuck shrugged modestly, "Hey... yeah."

Lou took the phone, turning it over in her hands before slipping it into her pocket. "You really saved my ass, Chuck."

Chuck chuckled, "You love your Nana, and you have the mouth of a trucker."

Lou laughed out loud.

"You're a very complicated woman, Lou."

"So I've been told."

Lou reached behind her back and produced a neatly wrapped package. "I brought you something."

Chuck blinked. "For fixing it?" he accepted the package and looked inside. "A sandwich?"

Lou nodded proudly. "It's turkey, Muenster cheese, on fresh egg bread. I'm even going to put it on the menu. I'm calling it the Chuck Bartowski."

Chuck stared at her. "I can't believe you're going to name a sandwich after me."

"You earned it."

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Chuck couldn't stop smiling. "This might be the greatest honor I've ever received." The sandwich was ridiculous, thoughtful, and somehow more personal than any gift he could remember receiving from someone he had just met.

Lou laughed, "You know, you should come by the shop sometime and try one fresh."

Chuck nodded enthusiastically, "Yeah... yeah. Yes. I'd love that. Lou, this is kind of the biggest honor..." He stopped himself before he could say more. He was already imagining what it would be like to visit the deli without a mission attached, and the thought felt strangely appealing.

Just then, Chuck's smile froze. Sarah had just stepped through the Buy More entrance, and she immediately noticed Chuck smiling at another woman holding a conversation that seemed far more comfortable than she expected

Chuck unexpectedly blurted out, "... Sarah!"

Sarah walked toward them with practiced confidence, even though she could already see the question forming in Lou's expression. A faint flicker of curiosity crossed her face. "Hi," Sarah said politely. "I'm Sarah."

She immediately assessed Lou the way she assessed everyone near Chuck: posture, eyes, hands, exits, and awareness. Nothing looked suspicious. If anything, Lou looked almost annoyingly normal.

Chuck suddenly looked as though someone had unplugged his brain. "Lou..." He gestured awkwardly between the two women, "Lou is... her name."

Chuck suddenly looked as though someone had unplugged his brain. One second he had been talking comfortably with Lou; the next, the cover relationship he had almost forgotten about had stepped directly into the conversation.

Lou raised an eyebrow.

Chuck continued rambling, "This is ... Lou... I was fixing Lou's phone for her."

Lou looked from Chuck to Sarah. "Who's that?"

Chuck swallowed, "That's Sarah."

Lou smiled politely, "She said that. Who's Sarah?"

Chuck opened his mouth, "Sarah... is..."

He searched desperately for the right answer, "What's the best way to describe..."

Sarah didn't hesitate, "... His girlfriend."

She extended her hand, "Nice to meet you."

Lou accepted the handshake, "Nice to meet you, Sarah."

She glanced back toward Chuck before pointing at the wrapped sandwich, "You should refrigerate that. It'd be a shame for the Chuck to make you sick."

Chuck laughed nervously, "Yes... absolutely. Great idea."

Sarah waited until Lou started walking toward the exit before turning her attention back to Chuck. Her expression immediately shifted from pleasant to professional.

Sarah waited until Lou started walking toward the exit. She could feel Chuck's attention following the woman. That should not have mattered. It did. Sarah told herself the reaction was about operational security, but the explanation was becoming less convincing every time she used it.

"Casey just called. Beckman wants us to contact her immediately."

Chuck nodded, realizing his brief moment of normal life had once again been interrupted by the spy world.

He glanced once toward the exit where Lou disappeared into the parking lot, then looked back at Sarah, "Looks like the Chuck Bartowski sandwich will have to wait."

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Every time Chuck opened the refrigerator, he saw the package. It was ridiculous. It was also one of the nicest things anyone had done for him in a long time. The sandwich represented something he hadn't expected from a stranger: an invitation into an ordinary life. Chuck didn't know yet whether he wanted that life, but he knew he wanted the chance to find out.

Chuck barely remembered the rest of his shift. The mission briefing mattered, the reports mattered, and the Intersect mattered, but his thoughts kept returning to Lou and the look on her face when Sarah had called herself his girlfriend.

Every few minutes, he caught himself thinking about Lou's expression after Sarah introduced herself. Not angry, not embarrassed, but disappointed. He hated that expression. When his shift finally ended, Chuck hurried through the front doors of the Buy More. He looked around the parking lot. No sign of Lou.

He sighed and thought to himself, "Too late."

Then he noticed a familiar blue sedan backing out of a parking space. Chuck shouted, "Lou!"

The car stopped, and the driver's window rolled down. Lou looked at him with a polite smile. "Hey."

Chuck jogged across the parking lot. "Wait...wait...please."

She shifted the car into park. Chuck rested his hands on his knees, catching his breath. "About earlier..."

Lou smiled faintly, "Forget it, Chuck."

"... No, please."

She shrugged, "You don't have to be single to fix a broken phone. Maybe our signals just got crossed."

Chuck shook his head immediately, "No. Not at all."

He searched for the right words, "They weren't crossed. Sarah and I...it's complicated."

Lou tilted her head, "Well, is she your girlfriend or not?"

The truthful answer was impossible. Chuck couldn't tell Lou about the Intersect, Castle, or the CIA. But the dishonest answer felt wrong because Lou had been straightforward with him from the beginning. He hated that the secret life he had accepted as necessary could make an honest conversation with someone he liked almost impossible.

The truthful answer was impossible. Chuck couldn't tell Lou about the Intersect, Castle, or the CIA. But the dishonest answer felt wrong because Lou had been straightforward with him from the beginning.

Chuck immediately regretted saying it. "It's hard to explain."

He laughed nervously, "I really, really wish I could explain."

Lou studied him for several seconds, weighing the awkward explanation against what she had seen for herself.

She folded her arms. "Then let me explain something."

Chuck looked up.

"I like you, Chuck."

The words caught him completely off guard.

"I like almost everything about you."

A nervous smile spread across Chuck's face despite himself.

"I think you're cute. I think you're funny, and our vast height difference intrigues me."

Chuck laughed.

Lou smiled with him before her expression became more serious. "But do you know what I don't like?"

Chuck swallowed, "Very ...very much."

"I think anyone who cheats on his girlfriend is a big, fat, stupid jackass."

Chuck nodded immediately, "Exactly. I completely concur."

Lou couldn't help smiling, "Of course you do, which is why I like you."

Chuck blinked. Even after calling him a jackass, she still liked him.

She stepped closer. "So let's make a deal. If your situation ever becomes less complicated..."

Chuck didn't know what to say. He had spent his life worrying about saying the wrong thing around women. Now Lou was standing in front of him, giving him a very simple choice: be honest about wanting something more, or walk away. The problem was that honesty was dangerous when the truth about his life was classified.

She smiled warmly, "...you let me know."

Chuck nodded, "I will. I promise."

Lou smiled one last time before getting back into her car, "Take care of yourself, Chuck."

"You too."

She drove away.

This time, Chuck remained standing in the parking lot until her car disappeared around the corner.

Only then did he quietly say to himself, "I wish I could tell you."

Chuck stood there for another moment. He wanted to go after her. He wanted to tell her that Sarah wasn't really his girlfriend. He wanted to tell her why he couldn't explain. Instead, he stood beside his car and watched the place where Lou's sedan had disappeared. For the first time, Chuck understood how frustrating his secret life could be. It wasn't just preventing him from telling people what he did. It was preventing him from telling someone how he felt.

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From the shadows near the Buy More entrance, Sarah had watched the entire conversation. Not because she wanted to, but because protecting Chuck required observation. At least, that was the justification she gave herself.

She couldn't hear every word. She didn't need to. She saw Lou smile. She saw Chuck smile back. She saw Lou step closer. She saw Chuck standing there long after the car disappeared.

Sarah felt an unfamiliar ache in her chest. She had watched Chuck in dangerous situations without feeling this helpless. Bullets were simple. Assassins were simple. Lou wasn't a threat at all, and somehow that made Sarah feel more vulnerable.

Casey stepped beside her, carrying a cup of coffee. "You've been standing there for ten minutes."

"I know," she replied.

"You weren't watching for assassins."

"No."

Casey replied, "You were watching them."

Sarah didn't deny it.

Casey took a sip of coffee. "Civilian likes him."

Sarah nodded once. "He likes her too."

Sarah looked away before Casey could read too much into her expression. She knew what the facts said. Lou liked Chuck. Chuck liked Lou. Lou appeared clean. And Chuck was happier when he was around her. The facts were almost offensively simple. Sarah preferred problems that had solutions.

Casey watched Chuck walking slowly toward his car. "Good."

Sarah looked at him in surprise, "Good?"

Casey shrugged, "Sometimes a normal relationship keeps people grounded." He didn't say what he was thinking: if Lou really was a civilian, then she might be exactly what Chuck needed. Sarah understood the implication immediately.

Sarah didn't answer.

Casey continued, "If he's happy, he'll have something worth protecting."

Sarah stared at Chuck as he walked across the parking lot, looking more alone than she had expected. She wanted to call after him, but she had no professional reason to do so.

Somehow, Casey's words made her feel even worse.

Sarah knew Casey was right. Chuck needed something outside the spy world. He needed people who knew him without knowing the Intersect. He needed a reason to believe that his life could be more than missions and danger. Lou could give him that. Sarah just wasn't prepared for how much she wanted to be the person who gave it to him.

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Casa Bartowski/Woodcomb

Burbank, CA

Later that evening, in Chuck's bedroom, Chuck and Sarah were in bed together, trying to keep up appearances that their cover dating seemed like they had a real relationship, at least to Ellie and Devon.

Chuck broke the silence.

"What exactly are the rules with our...our thing?"

Sarah looked at him. "What do you mean?"

Chuck leaned over. "What do I mean?" he laughed awkwardly. "I mean...hypothetically speaking...are we allowed to see other people?"

Sarah stared at him for a moment. She had expected the question eventually, but hearing Chuck ask it made the possibility of him dating someone else suddenly feel real.

"Well, our cover is boyfriend and girlfriend, so tactically that would be challenging."

Chuck waited.

"Any prospective girlfriend would have to undergo a rigorous background investigation." Sarah meant it as a security requirement, but part of her also knew that the investigation would force her to confront whether Lou was truly a danger, or simply someone Sarah didn't want close to Chuck.

Chuck considered the requirement. He could have complained. He could have argued that Lou was obviously harmless. Instead, he nodded. That was one of the things Sarah had always admired about him: when he understood that a rule existed to protect someone, he followed it. She just hadn't realized that this particular rule might put her in the position of deciding whether another woman was allowed into Chuck's life.

Chuck blinked. "A background investigation to determine her motivation? Wouldn't her motivation be love?"

The innocent question caught Sarah off guard. For Chuck, love was becoming the simplest explanation in the room. For Sarah, it was the one explanation she was least prepared to consider.

Sarah's expression softened almost imperceptibly. She wanted to tell him that he deserved something real. What she couldn't admit was how much she wanted that real thing to be with her. "Ideally, but you're one of the government's most valuable intelligence Assets, and you have to be handled with extreme care."

Chuck smiled, "That sounds oddly flattering."

For a moment, the room felt almost normal. No missions. No encrypted transmissions. No Fulcrum. Just two people talking about whether Chuck was allowed to date someone. Sarah looked at him and realized that he had already made his decision emotionally. The only question was what the rules would allow.

Sarah smiled despite herself, "Chuck, I don't have to be a spy to figure this out. You're interested in Lou."

Chuck hesitated, and then he answered honestly, "Yeah, I really am."

Chuck looked down at his hands. He hadn't meant to sound so certain. But he was certain. Lou had made him laugh. She had treated him like an ordinary guy. She hadn't looked at him like he was a weapon or a liability. For Chuck, that mattered more than he could explain.

Sarah nodded once. She had hoped he would deny it. Instead, he looked happier simply admitting it.

Neither of them realized that this conversation had just set in motion a decision that would change all of their lives. Sarah had just given herself a professional reason to investigate Lou. Chuck had just decided that if the investigation came back clean, he would follow the rules and pursue the relationship honestly. Exactly to the letter.

Sarah watched him for a long moment. Chuck had always been willing to follow rules when he believed they protected people. She had assumed the background investigation would discourage him. Instead, he was about to do exactly what she had told him to do. And Sarah was beginning to suspect that she had just created a problem she could not solve by following protocol.

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End Chapter 1

Chapter 2: Chapter 2 - Permission

Song Recommendation – Don't You Want Me – Human League

Disclaimer – Unfortunately, I don't own Chuck.

Chapter 2 – Permission

Burbank, CA

The following morning, Chuck and Sarah were in Chuck's bedroom getting ready for work.

Chuck took a deep breath and told Sarah, "I've been thinking about what you said last night."

Sarah asked, "About Lou?"

He nodded, "You were right."

Sarah wasn't expecting agreement. "I was?"

Chuck smiled sadly, "This fake relationship, it serves its purpose. It kept me alive. It protected my identity. It gave us a believable cover, but it isn't fair. Not to Lou, and not to us."

Chuck's smile faded as he looked at Sarah. He had expected the conversation to feel like a decision. Instead, it felt like a loss. He knew ending the cover was the right thing. Lou deserved the chance to meet him without a pretend girlfriend standing in the background. What he hadn't expected was how much saying goodbye to the cover would hurt. For a moment, he wondered whether that meant the cover had become something more. He pushed the thought away. There were too many other things he needed to figure out.

Sarah felt her stomach tighten.

Chuck continued, "I can't ask someone to date me while pretending to have a girlfriend. I don't want to start a relationship with a lie."

He looked directly at Sarah, "So...I think we should end our cover relationship."

The words hung in the air. Sarah had imagined this conversation many times, but she had never imagined that hearing it would hurt this much. She had prepared herself for Chuck wanting a normal life; she had not prepared herself for the possibility that his normal life might no longer include her.

She asked, "So, you've made up your mind."

Chuck nodded, "I want a chance at something real."

Sarah forced herself to smile. "If that's what you want, but we will need to clear it with General Beckman."

Chuck smiled with genuine gratitude. "Thank you," he hesitated. "I really do appreciate everything you've done for me."

Sarah nodded once. "So, we're broken up." The words sounded strangely final, even though both of them knew the relationship had always been a cover.

Chuck tried to laugh. "I guess we are."

Neither of them moved. Neither knew how to say goodbye to a relationship that had never really existed, except that, somewhere along the way, it had become real for both of them, even if only one of them was ready to admit it. Chuck saw a cover story. Sarah saw the closest thing to a real relationship she had allowed herself to have in years.

Chuck left to go to work. Only after Chuck left did she whisper to herself, "What have I done?" Sarah stood alone in the bedroom, staring at the closed door. She knew she had done exactly what her job required. What she didn't know was how to live with what it had cost her.

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Casey's Apartment - Burbank, CA

Later that day, Sarah and Casey had their daily morning debrief with General Beckman.

General Beckman's image appeared on the large monitor. Immediately, she said, "I understand there's been a change in your cover."

Sarah answered professionally, "Yes, General. Chuck and I mutually agreed it would be better for him to establish a genuine civilian relationship." She kept her voice steady, carefully hiding how much the decision had affected her.

Casey folded his arms. "She got dumped."

Sarah shot him a look. "We decided that it would be best for Chuck to date a civilian. It will help secure his cover if someone identifies me."

Casey didn't even look up. "Yeah, because she got dumped."

General Beckman ignored the interruption. "I don't like the idea of this breakup at all."

She looked directly at Sarah. "What the hell happened?"

Sarah maintained her composure. "Chuck met a civilian named Lou Palone. She appears to be genuinely interested in him."

Beckman's expression hardened. "Let me get this straight. Some woman comes in off the street and starts dating the Asset, and this doesn't strike either of you as suspicious?" The General's concern was genuine; anyone who came close to Chuck had the potential to become a vulnerability.

Sarah answered carefully, "It's not completely unfeasible." A faint smile crossed her face despite herself. "He is a reasonably charming guy." She immediately regretted letting the personal observation slip, but Beckman had already noticed.

Casey smirked.

Beckman remained unconvinced. "I've heard enough." She leaned toward the camera. "I want to know everything there is to know about this woman before she gets too close."

Sarah glanced toward the empty chair where Chuck normally sat. For the first time, she realized that the background investigation she herself had insisted upon might actually clear Lou to date Chuck. The thought should have reassured her professionally. Instead, it made her stomach tighten, and if it did, she would have no professional reason left to

stand between them. The realization worried her more than she expected.

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Buy More

Burbank, CA

After work, Chuck, Sarah, and Casey went to the Buy More modified home theater room to review the day's intelligence reports that they were sent for Chuck to review, and see if he flashed on anything.

Chuck remained where he was. He looked unusually thoughtful.

Sarah noticed, "Something on your mind?"

Chuck nodded, "Actually, yes."

She expected another question about spy training, or perhaps another concern about the Intersect.

Instead, he smiled politely, "I'd like to speak with General Beckman."

Sarah looked up, "Now?"

Sarah studied Chuck's face. There was no nervous rambling. No attempt to make a joke. He had clearly decided that whatever he wanted to say mattered enough to ask directly. That alone made Sarah uneasy. Chuck was usually at his most unpredictable when he was being serious. "If she's available."

Sarah studied him. "What about?"

Chuck shrugged. "I'd rather tell her myself."

Something in his voice made Sarah uneasy. She pressed the secure communications button. Within seconds, General Beckman's image appeared on the large monitor in the movie theater room.

"Report."

Sarah spoke first, "No mission updates, General."

Chuck stepped forward, "I actually requested this meeting."

Beckman looked directly at him, "What is it, Mr. Bartowski?"

Chuck stood straighter than usual. He had rehearsed this conversation several times in his head, but every version had sounded easier than the real thing. Asking permission to date someone shouldn't have felt like asking for clearance to enter a hostile country.

"General, I'd like to request authorization to begin dating a woman named Lou Palone. She lives in Burbank and owns a deli next to the Buy More."

Silence filled the home theatre room. Chuck suddenly became aware of how strange the request sounded when spoken aloud. He was asking a General for permission to go on a date, but everyone in the room understood that this was about far more than dinner and a movie.

Sarah blinked.

Casey slowly lowered the clipboard he had been holding.

Beckman remained expressionless. "Continue."

Chuck nodded. "Yesterday, Sarah explained to me that since I am an Asset, any civilian I wanted to date would need to undergo a vigorous government background investigation before she could become involved with me."

Sarah suddenly realized exactly where this conversation was going. A strange feeling settled over Sarah. She had spent days telling herself that a background check was necessary. Now Chuck was voluntarily asking for one. He was giving her exactly what she had claimed she needed. The problem was that she wasn't sure she wanted the answer anymore.

Chuck continued, "I understand why. I'm the Intersect. My life isn't normal. I don't want to put anyone in danger; I also don't want to violate protocol."

Sarah stared at him. He had listened to every word she said. Every single damn one. She had expected Chuck to treat her warning as another obstacle to work around. Instead, he had taken it seriously because he trusted her judgment.

"So," Chuck finished, "I'm formally requesting that the NSA or CIA conduct whatever background investigation is necessary. If Miss Palone passes, I'd like permission to ask her out."

Nobody spoke. Casey looked toward Sarah. She looked genuinely stunned.

Finally, Beckman broke the silence, "Mr. Bartowski, were you under the impression this was an official requirement?"

Chuck answered immediately, "Yes, General."

Sarah closed her eyes for a brief moment.

Beckman shifted her attention toward Sarah, "Agent Walker?"

Sarah chose her words carefully, "I informed Chuck that any civilian becoming personally involved with the Intersect would require a thorough vetting process."

Beckman nodded slowly, "So you did."

Sarah couldn't tell whether the General approved or disapproved.

She replied, "I believed it was the safest course of action."

Sarah kept her expression neutral. It was the safest course of action. That was true. It was also true that part of her had hoped the investigation would uncover something that would stop Chuck from moving forward. She hated that both things could be true at once.

Casey folded his arms. "It is."

Sarah glanced at him, surprised by his support.

Casey continued, "If she's clean, she's clean. If she's dirty, we find out before she gets too close."

Beckman leaned back in her chair. The request itself was unusual. Not because it was unreasonable. Quite the opposite. In her nearly thirty years of intelligence work, she had never encountered an agent or intelligence asset who voluntarily requested additional government scrutiny before beginning a relationship.

Most agents tried to hide relationships after one starts. Chuck understood that his life created risks for ordinary people, and he was willing to accept scrutiny to protect someone he barely knew.

Chuck Bartowski was asking permission. He was trying to do things correctly. It spoke volumes about his character.

Beckman said, "Mr. Bartowski."

"Yes, General?"

"I appreciate your willingness to follow protocol."

Chuck smiled, "I figured that's what I was supposed to do. That's what Sarah told me I should do."

Sarah looked at him. There wasn't a trace of manipulation. He wasn't trying to work around the rules. He genuinely trusted them.

Beckman made her decision, "Very well, I am authorizing a complete background investigation into Lou Palone..."

Chuck's face brightened.

"... The investigation will be comprehensive. Financial history. Criminal record. Foreign contacts. Employment. Family. Known associates. Travel history. Everything."

Chuck nodded, "I understand, ma'am." There was disappointment underneath the words, but he didn't argue. He had asked for the rules, and now he was prepared to follow them.

Beckman told him, "Until that investigation is complete, you will not initiate a romantic relationship."

"Understood, Ma'am."

"And if the investigation reveals anything suspicious..."

Chuck answered before she finished, "Then I won't pursue the relationship."

Beckman looked at Sarah. "Agent Walker, you'll oversee the investigation."

Sarah felt the room suddenly become much smaller. "Yes, General." She had wanted the investigation as a safeguard. Now she understood that it could become the very thing that forced her to let Chuck move forward with Lou.

Casey grunted because he knew it was an impossible assignment.

Sarah had wanted the background check because she believed it would create an obstacle. Instead, she had just been ordered to prove whether the woman she secretly hoped would fail the background check deserved to date the man she had strong feelings for, even if she wouldn't admit it to herself.

Beckman's voice interrupted her thoughts, I expect a preliminary report within four days. "Dismissed."

The monitor went dark. Silence returned to the Buy More.

For several seconds, nobody moved. The secure room suddenly felt much quieter than it had before. Sarah looked at the dark monitor and realized that the next four days could change everything. If Lou was clean, Sarah would have to tell Chuck. If Lou was clean, Chuck would finally have the permission he wanted. Sarah wasn't sure which possibility frightened her more.

Chuck let out the breath he had been holding. "Thank you."

He looked at Sarah. "I know this probably creates more work for you."

Sarah forced a professional smile, "It's my job."

Chuck nodded, "I appreciate it." He meant it. That was what made the situation harder for Sarah. He trusted her to be fair, even though she wasn't sure she could be completely objective.

He genuinely meant it. He was trusting Sarah to give Lou a fair chance.

As Chuck left Buy More to return home, Casey watched Sarah standing motionless in front of the now-dark monitor. "You just volunteered to investigate your competition." Casey's words were blunt, but Sarah knew he was trying to make her confront what she was doing before the investigation made the truth impossible to ignore.

Sarah didn't answer. Casey watched her carefully. He didn't need another answer. Sarah's silence told him enough. She had spent the entire conversation insisting that the investigation was about Chuck's safety. Now she was standing in front of the dark monitor looking as though the investigation might determine her own future. Casey knew better than to say it aloud, but he wasn't finished. "You know what's going to happen."

She finally looked at him. "What?"

Casey shrugged. "If she's clean, you'll be the one who tells Chuck he can date her."

For the first time since becoming a CIA agent, Sarah found herself hoping a background investigation would uncover something. Anything. Because if Lou Palone came back completely clean, Sarah would have no one to blame but herself.

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End Chapter 2

Chapter 3: Chapter 3 - Under Investigation

Song Recommendation - Watching the Detectives - Elvis Costello and the Attractions

Disclaimer - Unfortunately, I don't own Chuck.

Chapter 3 - Under Investigation

Burbank, CA

For the next four days, Lou Palone became the most thoroughly investigated deli owner in California. Sarah and Casey approached the assignment as a genuine security investigation, but Sarah privately knew she was asking for more scrutiny than the situation strictly required.

Every morning, Sarah received another folder waiting at Casey's apartment.

By the second morning, the stack of folders had become a silent reminder of what Sarah was doing. She had requested a thorough investigation because Chuck's safety demanded it. That was the official reason. The unofficial reason was harder to admit. If Lou had a secret, Sarah wanted to find it. If Lou had a weakness, Sarah wanted to know, and if Lou was exactly who she appeared to be, Sarah wasn't sure what she would do with that answer.

Every afternoon, another agency report arrived.

Every evening, another possibility quietly disappeared. Each clean result removed another reason Sarah could use to keep a Chuck and Lou relationship from moving forward, and she was beginning to understand that the investigation might ultimately force her to give him exactly what he wanted.

Casey joked that Sarah would have the investigation wrapped up in an afternoon. He knew the files would probably be clean; what he didn't know was whether Sarah was looking for a security problem or an emotional excuse.

Sarah insisted they vet her thoroughly. She used the language of protocol. Complete financial review, personal history, travel, contacts, and behavioral assessment, but Casey recognized the intensity behind the request.

Casey noticed she was reading every page instead of skimming.

Sarah kept secretly hoping to find something disqualifying the entire time.

XXXX

On day one of the background check, Sarah visited Lou's Deli undercover as an ordinary customer.

She watched Lou interact with customers.

Sarah had expected the first visit to produce something useful. A nervous reaction. An unexplained phone call. A customer who seemed to know Lou too well. Something. Instead, the investigation immediately began moving in the opposite direction. Every ordinary detail made Lou look more genuine, and every genuine detail made Sarah's job more difficult.

Lou remembered customers by name.

She gave free soup to an elderly regular.

She hired a high school student who needed a first job.

She closed early one evening so she could deliver food to a sick neighbor.

Sarah wrote in her notebook: "Displays consistent compassion. No indication of deception." She stared at the sentence for several seconds before closing the notebook. It was the kind of conclusion an investigator was supposed to want. Sarah found herself wishing she could write something else.

She hated writing it.

XXXX

Chuck wasn't allowed to date Lou yet. Instead, he stopped by the deli for lunch almost every day.

Sarah watched from across the mall. Chuck and Lou sat at a table and talked for nearly twenty minutes. Neither realized Sarah was watching from a distance. They were simply enjoying each other's company.

Sarah remained far enough away to avoid being noticed. She told herself that she was protecting Chuck, but as she watched him sit across from Lou, she realized the surveillance was revealing something the paperwork couldn't. Chuck was happy. Not excited. Not distracted. Happy. Sarah had seen Chuck happy before, but usually it lasted only until the next mission or the next flash. This looked different.

Sarah noticed something she wasn't expecting. Chuck looked different around Lou. There was no nervous performance, no exaggerated charm, and no attempt to hide behind humor. He simply looked comfortable because he could finally relax. No cover. No lies. No missions. Just be Chuck.

That realization hurt Sarah more than she could have ever anticipated. It wasn't that Chuck was falling in love with Lou; Sarah wasn't ready to call it that. It was that Lou had somehow given him permission to relax, and Sarah realized how rarely Chuck had been allowed to do that since the Intersect came into his life.

XXXX

On day two, Casey made them coffee at his apartment. Without asking, he set a cup beside Sarah. She barely noticed. She was reading Lou's financial records for what had to be the fifth time.

Casey watched Sarah turn another page. He had stopped pretending not to notice.

She wasn't looking for new information anymore. She was looking for permission to reach a different conclusion. Casey had seen that look before in agents who were fighting something they couldn't shoot.

Casey looked over her shoulder, "You've already read that."

"I know," she replied.

Casey grunted, "You missed something?"

"No."

"Then why are you reading it again?"

Sarah slowly closed the folder. "I don't know." She did know, of course. She was looking for something that would make the decision easier.

Casey sat down across from her. "Yes, you do."

Sarah sighed, "I keep expecting something to be there."

"And?"

"It isn't."

"Because there isn't anything to find." Casey let the words sit between them. Sarah had asked for the investigation because she wanted certainty. The problem was that certainty was beginning to point in a direction she didn't want.

XXXX

On day three of the background check, Sarah continued to review reports on Lou. Every report Sarah received said the same thing.

Clean.

The report in front of Sarah was remarkably ordinary. That was becoming the most remarkable thing about Lou. Every database, interview, financial record, and observation told the same story: Lou was exactly who she claimed to be.

Lou Palone. Owner, Lou's Deli. No criminal record. No outstanding warrants. No civil lawsuits. Excellent credit. Taxes are paid on time every year. Business profitable. No unexplained income. No offshore accounts. No suspicious travel. No known association with foreign nationals. Absolutely nothing.

Sarah turned another page.

Volunteer work. Every Thanksgiving morning, Lou closed the deli for the day so she and her employees could prepare sandwiches for the local homeless shelter. Every Christmas Eve, she donated food to families who couldn't afford holiday meals. Several

customers had written letters praising her generosity.

Sarah paused over the volunteer records. There was nothing strategically valuable about them. That was precisely why they mattered. Lou didn't volunteer because anyone was watching. She had been doing it for years, long before Chuck had ever walked into her deli. Sarah closed her eyes briefly. A person didn't manufacture a history like this overnight.

Sarah frowned. "This woman is impossible." She meant it as an expression of frustration, but Casey knew what she really meant: Lou was making it impossible for Sarah to find a professional reason to stop Chuck from seeing her.

Casey looked up. "No. "She's normal."

Sarah almost laughed, "I'd forgotten what that looks like."

Beckman began receiving updates, and every background report and investigation confirmed that Lou Palone was exactly who she appeared to be.

XXXX

On day four of the background check, Sarah visited the deli one final time. Not because protocol required it, but because she needed to be absolutely certain.

The lunch rush was beginning. Customers filled nearly every table. Lou stood behind the counter, making sandwiches almost faster than Sarah could follow.

Yet somehow she greeted every customer by name. "Hi, Mrs. Alvarez. The usual today?"

The elderly woman smiled, "Please."

Lou noticed another customer waiting. "Just one second."

She finished wrapping the sandwich before walking around the counter.

An elderly man struggled to carry his tray. Without saying a word, Lou picked it up herself. "I've got it."

"You don't have to," the elderly man replied.

"I know," she smiled, "I want to."

Sarah watched the entire interaction. Nothing about it felt rehearsed. It was simply who Lou was. She was genuinely nice. That mattered more than any database result. People could fake records; they were much harder to fake when they didn't know they were being observed.

A teenage employee accidentally dropped an entire tray of sliced tomatoes onto the floor.

The young man immediately looked terrified. "I'm sorry! I'll pay for them."

Lou shook her head. "No, you don't need to. Accidents happen."

She handed him another tray. "Take a breath. We've all been there."

The teenager smiled with obvious relief. Sarah quietly wrote another note. Treats employees with respect. Displays patience under stress. Leadership style: supportive.

Sarah looked down at the notebook. The page was filled with observations about Lou's character. Compassionate. Patient. Honest. Protective. Trustworthy. The words looked less like a security assessment and more like a recommendation for someone Sarah wanted to approve. She didn't like that distinction. She stopped writing and wondered, when had this become a personality profile instead of an in-depth security investigation? She looked at the notebook and realized she had documented Lou's kindness, patience, loyalty, and compassion with the same precision she normally reserved for identifying threats.

XXXX

As Sarah prepared to leave, the bell above the front door chimed. Chuck walked inside. He hadn't noticed Sarah sitting in the corner booth. He wasn't looking for her.

He smiled when he saw Lou. She smiled even bigger, "Chuck!"

Chuck replied, "Hi Lou, I was just getting lunch."

Lou laughed, "Funny, I was just making lunch. Would you like me to make you a 'Chuck Bartowski'?"

Sarah watched from across the restaurant.

For nearly twenty minutes, they talked while Lou prepared sandwiches between customers. Movies. Books. Old arcade games. Science fiction. Favorite restaurants. Embarrassing childhood stories. The conversation flowed effortlessly.

Sarah watched Chuck settle into the conversation as though he had forgotten that he was supposed to be nervous around women. With Lou, he didn't seem to be trying to impress anyone.

Neither of them struggled to keep it going. Neither dominated it. They simply enjoyed each other's company.

Chuck laughed harder than Sarah had heard him laugh in months. It was the kind of laugh Sarah had almost forgotten existed. Not the nervous laugh he used during missions. Not the awkward laugh he used around intelligence officers. A genuine laugh, completely relaxed. The laugh of the man underneath the Intersect, underneath the missions, underneath all the secrets.

Sarah realized something that surprised her. Chuck wasn't pretending to be anyone. For perhaps the first time since receiving the Intersect, he was simply being himself.

XXXX

Outside the deli, Casey leaned against the wall waiting. "You done?"

Casey had been waiting long enough to know that Sarah was going to come out with the same answer she had written in the report. Clean. He was also waiting to see whether she would admit what the investigation had done to her. Sarah walked through the door. One look at her face told him everything.

Sarah nodded.

"You watch them?" Casey asked.

She replied, "Yes."

"And?"

Sarah looked back through the front window.

"They're good together." Sarah hated how difficult the sentence was to say. It was the conclusion of the investigation, and it was also the truth she had spent four days trying not to reach.

Casey wasn't surprised. "I know."

Sarah looked at him. "You knew?"

"I watched them too."

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "For security."

Casey grunted, "Sure."

He took another sip of coffee. "You hoping she'd suddenly start speaking Russian?"

Sarah couldn't help smiling. "No."

"You hoping she'd meet with Fulcrum?"

"No."

"You hoping she'd rob a bank?"

Sarah laughed despite herself, "No."

Casey became serious, "You're looking for something that isn't there."

Sarah looked back toward the deli, "I know."

Casey folded his arms, "Walker... I've known a lot of spies. I've known good ones. I've known bad ones. I've never met anyone who wanted to find evidence against someone because they wished they weren't a good person."

Sarah quietly answered, "I don't wish she were a bad person."

Casey grunted again, "What do you wish?"

Sarah didn't answer because she already knew. She wished Lou had been dangerous. She wished there had been a hidden account, a suspicious contact, or a secret identity. Anything that would have made the decision simple. Instead, there was only a kind woman who genuinely liked Chuck.

She wished Lou Palone had never walked into the Buy More and met Chuck.

XXXX

Two days after their investigation of Lou Palone, Casey and Sarah were in Casey's apartment.

General Beckman's image appeared on the main screen, "Agent Walker, status."

Sarah stood beside the conference table. A thick investigation file rested in front of her. "General, the background investigation is complete."

Beckman replied, "Proceed."

Sarah opened the folder. "No criminal history. No foreign intelligence connections. No unexplained financial activity. No suspicious communications. No indications of coercion. No evidence of hostile intent." She delivered each finding like an intelligence briefing, refusing to let her voice reveal how much the conclusion mattered personally.

Beckman listened without interruption, "Continue."

Sarah continued, "Miss Palone owns her business outright. Her employees speak highly of her. Her customers describe her as dependable. Neighbors report no unusual activity."

Casey added quietly, "She's boring..."

Sarah glanced at him.

Casey continued, "...In the best possible way."

Beckman folded her hands. "Psychological assessment?"

Sarah paused. "Emotionally stable. Compassionate. Honest. Protective of family. Demonstrates empathy. Loyal."

Beckman noticed the slight hesitation. "Motivation?"

Sarah took a slow breath. "She genuinely likes Chuck Bartowski." The admission was harder than any of the others because it wasn't merely an assessment of Lou's motives. It was an acknowledgment that Chuck had found someone who made him happy.

"For what reason?"

Sarah answered without looking at her notes, "Because he listened when she was scared that her phone was broken. He treated her with respect. He didn't laugh at her. He made her feel important."

"And?" Beckman asked.

Sarah smiled despite herself, "She thinks he's funny. She likes that he's kind. She enjoys how awkward he becomes when he's embarrassed."

Sarah heard herself describing Lou's feelings and realized how much she had learned about them. Not because Lou had told her directly, but because Sarah had watched. She had listened. She had noticed every smile Chuck brought out of Lou, and somewhere along the way, Sarah had begun comparing those smiles to the ones Chuck used to give her.

Casey looked sideways at Sarah and thought, "Sarah sure knew an awful lot about Lou's feelings." Casey suspected Sarah had similar feelings for Chuck.

Beckman asked one final question, "Agent Walker...based solely upon your professional investigation, would you recommend Lou Palone as an acceptable civilian companion for Mr. Bartowski?"

The room became perfectly silent. Sarah could hear the faint hum of the equipment in Casey's apartment. Every report was in front of her. Every question had been answered. There was nowhere left for her to hide behind uncertainty.

All of it pointed toward exactly the same conclusion. There was only one honest answer.

She closed the folder. "Yes, General." The answer was professional, honest, and devastating. Sarah had spent four days looking for a reason to say no. Instead, she had discovered that the only responsible answer was yes.

Beckman nodded once, "Very well."

Beckman pressed a button on her console, "I am officially authorizing Mr. Bartowski to pursue a relationship with Miss Lou Palone."

The authorization was now official. There would be no ambiguity. Chuck could date Lou. Sarah had investigated her. Sarah had recommended her. Sarah had effectively opened the door. Now she would have to live with the fact that she had done the right thing and still felt as though she had lost something.

Sarah felt her heart sink. She had known this moment was coming, but knowing it intellectually had not prepared her for hearing Beckman authorize Chuck to pursue a relationship with Lou.

"However..."

Both agents looked up.

Beckman continued, "The approval is conditional. If circumstances change. If Miss Palone becomes aware of classified information. If she finds out who Mr. Bartowski really is. If she becomes the target of a hostile organization. This authorization will be immediately revoked... Understood?"

"Yes, General," Sarah and Casey answered together.

Beckman looked directly at Sarah one last time. "You've done an excellent investigation, Agent Walker; your professionalism reflects well on the Agency."

The words should have felt like praise. Instead, they felt like punishment. Sarah had done exactly what an exemplary agent was supposed to do. She had protected Chuck, investigated a potential vulnerability, and delivered an honest recommendation. The fact that the result broke her heart was something she could not put in the report.

After the transmission ended, Casey remained silent for several moments. Finally, he picked up the authorization envelope from the table. "You going to tell him?"

Sarah nodded, "I have to."

She accepted the envelope. Inside was a single sheet of paper bearing the NSA and CIA gold-embossed seal.

CIVILIAN CONTACT AUTHORIZATION

LOU PALONE

STATUS: APPROVED

Sarah stared at the page. APPROVED. The word seemed almost absurdly simple after four days of interviews, surveillance, financial analysis, and emotional turmoil.

Now she had to deliver it, and with it, she would give Chuck the CIA's approval letter to pursue the life she secretly wished he would have with her.

XXXX

End Chapter 3

Chapter 4: Chapter 4 - Cleared

Song Recommendation – Jump Around – House of Pain

Disclaimer – Unfortunately, I don't own Chuck.

Chapter 4 – Cleared

Burbank, CA

Chuck had met Sarah later that week in Castle. The approval letter remained folded neatly in Chuck's jacket pocket all morning. Chuck kept touching it through the fabric, as if the paper might disappear if he stopped checking that it was still there. He had read it three times, not because he doubted what it said, but because he could hardly believe it.

For two years, every important decision in his life had been dictated by the Intersect, the CIA, or the NSA.

Even choices that should have belonged to him had somehow become mission questions, security questions, or questions of what the government would allow. They had determined where he lived, where he went, and even who he pretended to date.

For the first time, the government had officially permitted him to have something that could belong only to him. It was strange that something as ordinary as asking a woman to dinner required an official authorization, but Chuck had learned that ordinary was a luxury in his life.

A real relationship. Chuck kept the smile until he reached the Buy More. Morgan noticed immediately. He didn't say anything at first. He stared at Chuck's face, then at the jacket pocket where the authorization letter was hidden. Chuck knew that look. Morgan was going to ask questions. For once, Chuck didn't mind.

Sarah was in the Orange Orange, watching the security cameras in between customers.

One monitor showed the Buy More sales floor. Another overlooked the parking lot. A third covered the parking lot leading toward Lou's Deli.

She wasn't supposed to be watching Chuck. She told herself she was monitoring the Asset's environment. The distinction sounded professional in her head, even though she knew exactly which camera she had chosen first.

Casey walked into the main conference room carrying a cup of coffee. "You've watched the parking lot for twenty minutes."

Sarah replied, "I'm monitoring possible approaches."

Casey looked at the monitor. "The only thing approaching Chuck is a woman carrying a pretzel."

Sarah didn't answer.

Casey handed her the coffee anyway. "You should stop doing this to yourself." Sarah wanted to argue, but she knew Casey had watched her long enough to recognize when an assignment had become personal.

"I'm doing my job."

"No," Casey looked directly at her, "You're watching another woman get the life you were hoping for."

Sarah watched Chuck walk away from the camera. She could still hear Casey's words in her head. You gave him a fair chance. That was true. The investigation had been fair. Lou had passed every test. Sarah had recommended her, and yet Sarah couldn't shake the feeling that by doing her job perfectly, she had made it impossible to pretend she didn't care about Chuck.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Casey grunted, "Sure, keep telling yourself that, Walker."

He walked away, and Sarah never took her eyes off the screen.

XXXX

Chuck finished his shift fifteen minutes early. For once, he wasn't nervous because of a mission. He had checked the clock three times in the last hour and had spent the final fifteen minutes pretending to organize equipment that was already perfectly organized.

He wasn't worried about any threats. He wasn't trying to remember a cover story. He was trying to figure out how to ask a woman to dinner.

He laughed quietly to himself. Somehow, that seemed scarier. Missions came with plans, weapons, exits, and Casey. Asking Lou to dinner came with none of those things.

As he reached Lou's Deli, she looked up from behind the counter and smiled, "Chuck! You're back."

Chuck grinned and replied, "I am."

"Were you craving another Chuck Bartowski?"

Chuck laughed, "No. Actually, I was hoping to talk to you."

Lou immediately sensed he was serious. She turned to one of her employees, "Jenny, could you watch the counter for a few minutes?"

The young woman nodded, "Of course."

Lou walked around the counter, and they went to a booth to sit and talk. "So, what's on your mind?"

Chuck reached into his jacket. "I owe you an explanation."

For several seconds, Chuck held the letter. He had rehearsed this conversation in his head. None of those rehearsals had included Lou looking at him with complete trust. He decided then that he would tell her only what he could safely tell her, but he would not make her feel as though she had done something wrong. She deserved better than that.

He unfolded the authorization letter.

Lou looked at the government seal. "What is this?"

Chuck hesitated. He couldn't tell her the real truth, but he could tell part of it. He wanted Lou to understand that the strange approval wasn't because anyone suspected

her of doing something wrong. It was because Chuck's life had rules she could never be allowed to see.

"I work with some people who take security very seriously. They wanted to make sure anyone close to me wasn't being put into a difficult situation."

Lou looked at the letter again, "So, this was about me?"

Chuck nodded, "I know it sounds strange."

"A little," she agreed.

"I'm sorry."

Lou smiled gently, "It's OK, you didn't make the rules." Chuck felt some of the tension leave his shoulders. Lou wasn't demanding an explanation he couldn't give. She was accepting the strange part of his life without making him feel strange for having it.

"No ... I didn't."

She looked at him for a long moment. "So, what does it say?"

Chuck smiled. "They ran a background check on you. It says you're officially approved." Saying the words aloud made the whole situation sound even more absurd. Somehow, the most romantic question Chuck had ever asked had first required permission from two intelligence agencies.

Lou laughed, "I've never had someone that needed a background check done on me before"

"Neither have I."

"So...", she folded her arms playfully, "What happens now?"

Chuck took a deep breath, "Now, I finally get to ask the question I've wanted to ask you since I met you."

Lou waited.

"Would you have dinner with me Friday night?"

Her answer came instantly, "I thought you'd never ask." Chuck stared at her for half a second, almost expecting the Intersect to flash and reveal some hidden complication. Nothing happened. There was no mission. No threat. Just Lou smiling at him.

Chuck couldn't stop grinning. "Really?"

He had asked. She had said yes. That was it. There was no classified file to sign, no extraction plan, no emergency rendezvous. Chuck had asked Lou to dinner, and she wanted to go.

Lou nodded, "Chuck... I've been waiting three weeks for you to ask me out," and she gave him a peck on the cheek.

XXXX

At Castle, Sarah watched Chuck leave the deli through the security cameras.

She didn't need audio. She could tell from his ear-to-ear grin. She knew the answer.

Casey stepped beside her. "He asked."

Sarah nodded. "She said yes." The words felt heavier than they should have. Sarah had known they were coming, but hearing herself confirm them made the authorization suddenly feel permanent.

Another nod. Casey crossed his arms. "You okay?"

Sarah took a long breath before answering, "I told him he couldn't date her without a background check."

"You did."

"He took me at my word; he trusted me, and then asked General Beckman if she would run a background check on her, and I had to investigate her."

Casey nodded, "You did."

"I recommended she be approved."

"You did."

Sarah looked at the floor. "I did this."

Casey rarely spoke gently; when he did, people listened. "No..."

Sarah looked up,

"...You gave him a fair chance."

Casey nodded toward the monitor where Chuck was almost skipping happily back toward the Buy More, "...And he took it."

For the first time since meeting him, he looked completely free. There was no calculation in his expression, no fear that he was doing something wrong, and no need to look toward Sarah for reassurance.

The sight should have made her happy. Instead, it left an ache inside her she couldn't explain. She could feel the breaking of her heart.

XXXX

Chuck arrived ten minutes early at Lou's apartment. He had changed into a charcoal-gray button-down shirt and a nice pair of blue jeans instead of his usual Nerd Herd shirt and tie.

He had even borrowed one of Ellie's old suggestions about dressing for a first date: "Confidence starts with looking like you belong," Ellie had told him.

Standing outside Lou's apartment, he suddenly wondered if he belonged at all. He had spent so long pretending to be someone else that the idea of showing up as Chuck Bartowski felt surprisingly vulnerable.

The door opened before he could knock, and Lou smiled, "You clean up pretty well, Chuck."

Chuck looked at her and grinned, "Wow, so do you."

For a moment, neither of them said anything. Chuck could hear his own heartbeat and wondered why facing an armed Fulcrum agent had sometimes felt easier than standing on Lou's doorstep. They looked at each other. No cover story. No mission. No handlers.

No fake relationship. Just two people who genuinely wanted to spend time together.

Lou stepped forward. "So, where are we going?"

Chuck smiled, "I was thinking dinner, and afterward, if you're willing, miniature golf."

Lou laughed, "You're taking me miniature golfing on our first date?"

Chuck shrugged, "I figured if it goes badly, at least we'll have laughed."

Lou slipped her hand into his, "I have a feeling it's going to go very well."

Together, they walked through the parking lot to Chuck's car. Neither noticed the woman standing on the roof across the street from them. Chuck felt almost weightless. For once, he wasn't driving toward a mission or away from danger. He was taking someone he liked to dinner.

Sarah stayed on the roof long after the car disappeared. Sarah watched them leave. She saw Lou reach for Chuck's hand. She saw Chuck smile in a way she had never seen before. She watched until their car disappeared into the evening traffic.

She had spent years telling herself that Chuck needed protection more than he needed romance. Now she was watching him get both. Lou wasn't taking Chuck away from the spy world. She was giving him a place where the spy world didn't matter.

Only then did she whisper to herself, "I hope she's good to you."

It was the truth, and somehow, that made her hurt even more.

XXXX

A few weeks after Chuck and Lou's first date, life settled into an unfamiliar rhythm.

The normal rhythm surprised Chuck. At first, he kept waiting for something to go wrong. He expected a mission to interrupt dinner. He expected a flash to ruin a conversation. He expected Sarah or Casey to appear with another urgent problem. Sometimes those things happened, but more often, they didn't, and slowly, Chuck began to understand how much he had missed his old ordinary life.

Chuck worked at the Buy More during the day, while Lou ran her deli.

On Friday evenings, they had dinner. Sometimes they went out for dinner, and sometimes Lou cooked for him at her apartment.

On Saturdays, they found somewhere new to explore: miniature golf, arcade games, the Santa Monica Pier, a classic movie theater that still served popcorn in paper bags.

On Sunday afternoons, Chuck usually stopped by Lou's Deli after closing to help her clean the kitchen in exchange for lunch.

One Sunday evening a few weeks later, Lou went to dinner at Ellie and Devon's apartment. Lou had replaced Sarah as Chuck's current girlfriend. At least that's what Ellie and Devon thought, not knowing his relationship with Sarah had been just a cover.

Chuck's life with Lou was remarkably normal. That normality became its own kind of refuge. He could talk about movies, computers, bad dates, childhood memories, and whatever ridiculous thing Morgan had done at the Buy More without worrying that the conversation might become classified.

XXXX

At Castle, Sarah finished her morning surveillance briefing, "No unusual activity."

She advanced to the next photograph, "Buy More traffic consistent."

Another photograph, "No evidence of hostile surveillance."

Beckman listened quietly, "What about Miss Palone?"

Sarah glanced at the report, "No indications she's under observation. No suspicious contacts. No security concerns."

Beckman nodded, "Continue routine monitoring to make sure she's safe. We still need the Asset to help us review intelligence reports each day.

Sarah grew to hate the word, "Asset." Every time she heard it, she remembered that Chuck was supposed to be protected by the program, yet the word reduced him to the very thing she knew he was not: a piece of intelligence equipment.

"Routine," that was the word Sarah repeated to herself all morning. Routine, nothing more.

XXXX

That afternoon, Sarah parked an unmarked sedan across from Lou's Deli. Officially, she was conducting a counter-surveillance sweep. Chuck was scheduled to meet Lou for lunch.

Sarah completed the sweep exactly as trained. She checked the exits. She checked the surrounding vehicles. She checked faces, windows, reflections, and movement. Everything was clean. The only thing she couldn't classify was why she felt disappointed that it was.

If Fulcrum had discovered Chuck's connection to Lou, then this would be an ideal place to watch. Sarah scanned the sidewalks through binoculars.

Nothing. No familiar faces. No surveillance teams. No suspicious vehicles.

Casey arrived twenty minutes later.

He tapped on her window, "Anything?"

Sarah lowered the binoculars, "No."

Casey looked around, "Good."

He started walking back toward his Crown Victoria. Sarah stopped him, "You're leaving?"

"My part's done."

"What about the observation?"

Casey looked at his watch, "The observation ended ten minutes ago."

Sarah hadn't noticed. She looked back toward the deli. Through the front window she could see Chuck laughing at something Lou had said.

Casey followed her gaze. "They're just eating sandwiches and talking."

"I know."

"They've been eating sandwiches for almost half an hour."

Sarah quietly answered, "I know."

Casey folded his arms. "Walker, you're no longer watching for threats..."

She didn't respond.

"... You're watching them, and it is borderline stalking."

Sarah finally lowered the binoculars. "I'll head back."

Casey nodded, "Good," and then he climbed into his Crown Vic.

Sarah remained parked for another minute. She knew she should leave. The official sweep was complete, Casey had gone, and there was nothing left to observe. Still, she found herself needing one last moment before returning to Castle.

Inside the deli, Chuck was trying to balance three pickle slices on the end of a French fry. Lou laughed so hard she nearly dropped her drink.

Sarah smiled despite herself. Chuck hadn't looked that carefree in a very long time. Then she started the engine. It was time to leave.

XXXX

Ace in the Hole Miniature Golf

Burbank, CA

Later that week, Chuck and Lou met after work to play miniature golf.

Castle had received no intelligence suggesting a threat. There was no operational reason to deploy surveillance.

Sarah knew that. Even so, she found herself requesting permission to conduct a "random security verification."

Beckman approved it without comment.

XXXX

Sarah watched from the far side of the miniature golf course through a discreet camera.

Chuck missed an easy putt.

Lou clapped anyway, "I think that counts."

Chuck frowned, "It absolutely does not."

"It counts because I say it counts."

Chuck laughed, "You are making up rules."

"I'm improving them," she replied.

Lou stepped closer and gently bumped his shoulder with hers. "No one likes a sore loser, Chuck."

"I'm not a sore loser."

"You've missed four holes."

"I prefer to call it a strategic delay," Chuck replied, grinning.

Lou laughed again.

Sarah quietly lowered the camera. She didn't need photographs. She had enough evidence already. Not of a threat, but of something she had been refusing to admit. Chuck was genuinely happy with Lou.

Nothing except how happy they looked together, and it was eating her up inside.

Sarah sat alone in the car after lowering the camera. She had spent the evening looking for danger. Instead, she had found happiness, and happiness was harder to fight. There was no enemy to arrest. No weapon to remove. No threat to neutralize. Only the painful realization that Chuck had found something she had wanted for him, and perhaps wanted for herself.

XXXX

Castle

Later that evening at Castle, there was a mission debrief.

Casey entered carrying a folder. "Anything?"

Sarah handed him her report. "No surveillance detected. No hostile contact. No operational concerns."

Casey read the final line.

Recommendation: Continue normal civilian contact.

He looked up. "That's it?"

Sarah nodded, "They're safe."

Casey closed the folder. "You know, I've worked with a lot of handlers..."

Sarah looked up from her paperwork.

Casey continued, "...And most of them would've been relieved."

She understood what he meant. Instead, she felt empty inside. The report said the situation was safe. The agent inside Sarah knew that was good news. The woman inside her was struggling to accept what that good news meant.

XXXX

Maison23

That evening, Sarah returned to her temporary apartment at Maison23.

The silence greeted her at the door. She hung up her jacket. She placed her service weapon under her pillow and made herself a cup of tea.

The apartment felt larger than usual. She sat on the balcony overlooking the city lights, and her thoughts drifted back to Chuck. Sarah realized she had grown accustomed to filling quiet moments by thinking about Chuck, even when she told herself she was thinking about the mission.

She remembered their first meeting at the Buy More when he fixed her broken phone, the beach, that damn Wienerlicious uniform, and now the Orange Orange and Castle built right under the Buy More. All to keep Chuck safe.

Director Graham had told her it would be a quick job. It turned out to be anything but that.

Now, she knew she was compromised, and she knew Casey suspected it as well.

Sarah closed her eyes. Being compromised had once meant a failure of judgment. Now she understood that her judgment wasn't the problem. Her feelings were. She had spent the past year keeping Chuck alive. Somewhere along the way, she had started wanting to be the person he came home to.

Chuck's awkward smile that somehow made her laugh.

She remembered pretending to be his girlfriend when it was really just a cover. At first, it had been nothing more than another assignment.

Going on missions with Casey and Chuck. Then came Sunday dinners with Ellie and Devon, shared jokes.

Movie nights that were supposed to strengthen their cover, and their conversations in the Nerd Herd.

Somewhere, without realizing it, pretending had slowly become the part she looked forward to most.

Now someone else occupied that place. Someone who didn't have to pretend. Lou could know Chuck as Chuck, while Sarah had spent years hiding behind the safety of a cover relationship.

Sarah quietly admitted something to herself she had been avoiding for weeks. She wasn't jealous because Chuck had moved on. She was jealous because Lou got to know the real Chuck every day. While Sarah had spent two years convincing herself that she couldn't have a real relationship with Chuck.

She looked toward the lights of Burbank and said to herself, "I should have told you how I felt."

The words disappeared into the night. There was no one there to hear them.

Miles away, Chuck was at Lou's apartment, fast asleep with someone that wasn't her.

Sarah realized that was all she had ever wanted for him. She wanted Chuck to have a life where he could sleep peacefully, laugh freely, and wake up beside someone who knew him without needing a security clearance.

For the first time in years, Chuck forgot to look over his shoulder. He trusted the room, trusted the woman beside him, and allowed himself to sleep without wondering whether the next sound would be a warning.

She just hadn't expected it to hurt this much, and she softly cried herself to sleep.

XXXX

End Chapter 4

Chapter 5: Chapter 5 - Ordinary

Song Recommendation – Everyday People – Sly and the Family Stone

Disclaimer – Unfortunately, I don't own Chuck.

Chapter 5 – Ordinary

Burbank, CA

Months had passed; the relationship between Chuck and Lou settled into something comfortable. What had begun with an unusual amount of government scrutiny had become surprisingly ordinary, and Chuck had started to realize just how much he valued that ordinary life.

Instead, they enjoyed being together. Friday dinners became a tradition. Saturday adventures became expected. Sunday afternoons were usually spent at Lou's deli after closing.

Those Sunday afternoons became Chuck's favorite part of the week. There was something almost therapeutic about standing behind the counter while Lou worked. No one needed anything from him. No one needed the Intersect. No one needed an intelligence briefing. He could wash dishes, taste sandwiches, and listen to Lou talk about her family. For Chuck, that was beginning to feel like freedom. Instead, they enjoyed being together. There was no pressure to define every moment, no need to perform for anyone, and no expectation that every date had to become an adventure. Sometimes being together was enough.

Chuck helped clean tables while Lou experimented with new sandwiches. She eventually admitted she was inventing recipes because Chuck enjoyed being the taste tester.

He claimed it was a terrible burden. She told him he was bravely serving his country.

XXXX

At Castle, Sarah closed another surveillance report. No hostile activity. No unusual communications. Another. Routine civilian interaction. Everything was normal. Painfully normal.

She had begun to recognize the pattern before she even opened the files: clean, ordinary, civilian. The same conclusion every time, and somehow the repetition never became easier.

Sarah placed the folders into the completed stack. She could have asked for another review, another surveillance pass, another reason to keep watching. Instead, she forced herself to close the file.

Casey walked into the operations room carrying a cardboard tray with two coffees and two sandwiches. He took one look at Sarah and knew she had been sitting there too long. "You skipped lunch."

"I'm not hungry."

"You skipped breakfast, too."

Sarah looked up. "I've been busy." It was the answer she always gave when she didn't want Casey asking the next question.

Casey set one coffee beside her anyway. "You've been hiding."

Sarah frowned, "I'm working."

Casey had noticed something else. Sarah wasn't just working more. She was choosing work that kept her away from Chuck. Every time a mission needed someone to review reports, Sarah volunteered. Every time there was paperwork, Sarah took it. It was the oldest trick in the spy world: stay busy enough and you never have to examine why you're hurting.

Casey leaned against the conference table. "You've volunteered for every paperwork assignment this week."

"I like paperwork."

"You hate paperwork, even more than having to get up in the morning."

Sarah didn't respond. Casey had known her too long. He knew the difference between Sarah being quiet because she was thinking and Sarah being quiet because she was trying not to feel.

XXXX

Later that week, Chuck reported to Castle to go through the daily classified intelligence reports to see if he flashed on anything.

He looked different. Not physically. Lighter. He smiled more easily. His shoulders weren't as tense. Even his posture had changed. Chuck had spent years carrying the weight of the Intersect, the missions, and the fear that one mistake could hurt someone he cared about. Around Lou, some of that weight seemed to disappear.

Casey noticed immediately, "So..."

Chuck looked up. "So?"

"... How's the civilian?"

Chuck smiled without thinking, "She's great."

Sarah kept her eyes on the monitor she was looking at. She concentrated on the screen because looking directly at Chuck would have made the reaction on her face too obvious.

Casey continued, "Still seeing her?"

"Yeah. We had dinner on Friday. Miniature golf Saturday. Yesterday we spent the afternoon making sandwiches."

Sarah couldn't help herself. She wanted to hear about Chuck's life with Lou even though every ordinary detail made the situation more difficult for her.

Chuck laughed, "Mostly making a mess. Lou says I'm better at eating than cooking."

Sarah watched him laugh. There was no guardedness in his expression. No hesitation. Chuck wasn't trying to convince anyone that he was happy. He simply was. That realization made Sarah's chest tighten.

Sarah smiled despite herself. "I can believe that." For a moment, she remembered all the times Chuck had tried to impress her with something as simple as dinner or a movie. The memory hurt because she knew how much those moments had once meant to her.

Chuck looked at her, "I'm getting better. I made grilled cheese."

Casey deadpanned, "Congratulations."

Chuck laughed, "It didn't even burn."

Sarah looked at him. His excitement wasn't about sandwiches. It was about having someone to share ordinary moments with. Someone who knew him as Chuck Bartowski instead of the Intersect.

Moments she'd once dreamed might belong to them someday.

XXXX

After Chuck left Castle, Casey waited until the door to the Orange Orange closed.

Then he looked at Sarah, "You smiled."

Sarah replied, "I was being polite."

Casey shook his head. "No, you smiled because he was happy."

Sarah quietly replied, "I am happy for him."

Casey believed her. "That isn't the problem; the problem is you're miserable." He didn't say it cruelly. He said it because someone needed to stop allowing Sarah to pretend that the pain would disappear on its own.

Sarah looked away. "I'll be fine." She had said those words so many times that they had stopped sounding like reassurance and started sounding like a warning.

Casey grunted, "Walker... I've spent over twenty years watching soldiers lie, and you've spent ten years watching spies lie. We're both pretty good at spotting it..."

Sarah didn't answer.

Casey continued, "... And, Walker, you're lying to yourself."

Sarah finally looked at him. Casey wasn't judging her. That almost made it worse. He was telling her what she already knew. Sarah had spent years surviving by controlling what she felt. Now the feelings were refusing to be controlled.

XXXX

General Beckman reviewed the latest mission performance reports. Most looked exactly as expected. One did not. Chuck's improvement was striking enough that Beckman immediately suspected the civilian relationship was having an effect on the Intersect's host.

She picked up Chuck's file first:

Mission Readiness: Improved.

Stress Indicators: Reduced.

Training Scores: Increased.

Decision Making: Excellent.

Intersect Recall Accuracy: Up twelve percent.

Beckman nodded with quiet satisfaction. The numbers confirmed what field observations had already suggested: Chuck was becoming more stable, more confident, and more effective.

Then she opened Sarah's report:

Mission Readiness: Acceptable.

Reaction Time: Slightly slower.

Target Recognition: Normal.

Concentration During Briefings: Decreased.

Recommendation: Continued observation.

Beckman frowned. Agent Walker rarely showed a decline in any measurable category. If Chuck was improving while Sarah was deteriorating, the connection between the two

reports was becoming impossible to ignore.

She pressed the secure communications button, "Agent Casey."

Seconds later, Casey appeared on the monitor, "You wanted to see me, General?"

Beckman held up the two reports, "Explain."

Casey looked at them, "Chuck's doing better."

"I can see that."

"He sleeps now. He smiles even more. He isn't constantly worried about hurting somebody or going on missions. He's happy."

Beckman nodded, "And Agent Walker?"

Casey remained silent for several seconds. Finally, "I think she's emotionally compromised." He chose the words carefully because he knew how serious the allegation was.

Beckman's expression hardened, "That's a serious allegation."

"I know, ma'am."

"What evidence do you have?"

Casey chose his words carefully, "Nothing disciplinary. Nothing operational. Just she's distracted."

Beckman asked, "By Mr. Bartowski? Seriously?"

"Yes."

Beckman asked another question, "Has she acted inappropriately?"

"No."

And another, "Violated protocol?"

Casey again replied, "No."

And finally, another, "Neglected the Asset?"

"No."

Casey shook his head, "If anything, she's protecting him even more."

Beckman folded her hands. "Then why are we having this conversation?"

Casey answered quietly, "Because she's in love with him. I wasn't there, but I suspect she's been in love with him since the first time they met. You can feel the electricity between the two of them every time they are in the same room."

Beckman remained alone for several moments after Casey's assessment. Silence filled her office. She looked back at Sarah's performance reports. Every statistic suddenly made sense.

The cover relationship had ended. Chuck had moved on. Sarah had not. CIA and NSA rules and regulations had interfered with their personal lives to the detriment of the intelligence community.

The difference was beginning to affect them in opposite ways: Chuck was becoming healthier because he had something real in his life, while Sarah was struggling because she had lost something she had never admitted she wanted.

She had known Chuck and Sarah were close. She had not realized how deeply the relationship had affected both of them. Now the performance reports had made the contrast impossible to ignore. Chuck was thriving. Sarah was hurting, and neither result could be separated from the other.

XXXX

That evening, Sarah remained alone in Castle after everyone else had gone home. She could have left with the others. Instead, she stayed because going home meant being alone with thoughts she had been successfully avoiding at work.

She wasn't working. The reports on her desk had been finished hours ago. Instead, she found herself staring at an old surveillance photograph.

It showed Chuck and Sarah leaving the Buy More during the early days of their cover. They were laughing. She couldn't even remember why, but their smiles had been real.

She opened another folder. A recent surveillance photograph. Chuck and Lou leaving a movie theater. They were laughing in exactly the same way. She knew she was repeating the same pattern, but the photographs gave her something concrete to examine when the real problem was entirely inside her.

Sarah placed the two photographs side by side. One had been a carefully constructed cover. The other was completely genuine.

Sarah traced the edge of the older photograph with one finger. She remembered that day. She remembered Chuck's smile. She remembered how easy it had been to pretend the relationship was only a cover. She hadn't known then that she was creating memories she would one day desperately wish were real.

For the first time, Sarah asked herself the question she had spent months avoiding. She knew the answer would change how she understood everything that had happened between her and Chuck.

"When did pretending stop being pretending?" she asked herself.

She already knew the answer. Long before she admitted it. Long before Chuck started dating Lou. Long before had broken off their cover dating.

The tragedy wasn't that she loved Chuck. The tragedy was that she had loved him while believing she had to protect herself from wanting him.

And now, someone else was living the future she had quietly imagined but never dared to reach for. Lou wasn't taking anything from Sarah. Sarah had waited too long to admit what she wanted.

Outside Castle, the lights of Burbank shimmered against the night sky. Inside, Sarah sat alone with two photographs.

One represented the life she had. The other represented the life she had let slip away.

XXXX

At Castle, the following week began like every other week.

Chuck, Sarah, and Casey assembled in Castle for their weekly tactical training.

General Beckman's face appeared on the main screen. "I'll be observing today's exercise."

Neither Chuck nor Sarah found that unusual. But Beckman wasn't watching the exercise as a routine training session. She was watching for evidence that Casey's assessment was correct.

The exercise was straightforward. Casey played the role of an arms broker.

Chuck's objective was to identify three hidden intelligence couriers using only brief flashes from the Intersect.

Sarah's assignment was to provide tactical support while evaluating potential threats.

But the exercise wasn't really about the three couriers. Beckman wanted to observe Chuck. She wanted to observe Sarah. Most importantly, she wanted to see whether their current emotional circumstances were affecting operational performance. The answer was already becoming clear.

XXXX

Casey told Chuck, "Begin."

Chuck stepped into the mock marketplace that had been assembled inside Castle.

A flash. Images exploded across his vision.

Faces. License plates. Passport photographs. A shipping manifest.

Chuck blinked once. "There."

He pointed toward one of the role players, "Courier."

Another flash, "The woman near the newspaper stand."

A third flash, "The man carrying the briefcase."

Casey checked the answer sheet, "Three for three."

Chuck smiled. "I guess dinner with Lou is helping." He wasn't embarrassed by the admission. For once, he understood that happiness was not a weakness. It was helping

him function better.

Casey looked up, "What?"

Chuck replied, "I've actually been sleeping much better; the headaches I was having after flashing on something have completely stopped, and I'm not constantly stressed out about missions and people trying to harm any of us. My head's much clearer now, so I'm able to think better." He said, without realizing how significant the statement was to the people listening.

General Beckman quietly made a note, "Improved cognitive performance."

XXXX

Sarah entered the exercise.

Normally, she anticipated Casey's ambushes before they happened. This time, she reacted a fraction of a second late. Sarah had trained herself to anticipate danger before it arrived. Today, the distraction wasn't external. It was emotional, and she couldn't shoot it or outmaneuver it.

Casey tagged her shoulder with a training knife, "Dead."

Sarah immediately recovered.

Again.

And a third time.

And a fourth.

The exercise continued. Sarah still outperformed nearly every field agent in the Agency, but not herself. She was nowhere near her past performances. The distinction mattered to Beckman because Sarah had built her career on being better than everyone else.

Beckman noticed. Agent Walker rarely made the same mistake twice. Today, she made it three times. Beckman made another note to herself and began considering what intervention, if any, would actually help.

XXXX

Training ended thirty minutes later.

Chuck looked genuinely excited. He was proud of the improvement, but he was also proud of the reason behind it. Lou had become something he could point to when someone asked what had changed.

Casey nodded, "You did."

Chuck smiled. "I didn't even get a headache." The small victory mattered to him because for once his progress wasn't only about becoming a better spy. It was about becoming healthier as a person.

Casey looked toward Sarah, "You okay?"

"I'm fine," she answered too quickly.

Chuck noticed. "You sure?" He genuinely worried about Sarah. Even with Lou in his life, some part of him still wanted to make sure Sarah was okay.

Sarah smiled. "Congratulations, Chuck, you've been working hard." The compliment was sincere. That was what made it difficult. She wanted him to be happy, even when his happiness hurt.

Chuck laughed, "I guess I have."

He looked at the mission board, "I should get back upstairs and put in my shift at the Buy More. See you tomorrow."

Sarah watched him disappear up the stairs to the Orange Orange.

Sarah remained still after Chuck left. He had looked back once before the doors closed. She wondered if he had seen something in her face. She hoped he hadn't. The last thing she wanted was for Chuck to feel responsible for her pain.

Only after the doors closed did Beckman's voice come over the main room's speakers: "Agent Walker, conference room, now!"

XXXX

For Chuck, Friday was now the best night of the week. For Sarah, it had quietly become the hardest.

It had become a small ritual he could depend on, and in Chuck's unpredictable life, dependable happiness had become precious.

Chuck waited outside Lou's Deli, carrying a small bouquet of yellow Gerbera daisies. He had stood in the flower shop for almost fifteen minutes trying to decide what to buy, and eventually realized that Lou would probably appreciate anything chosen because he thought of her.

Chuck handed them to her. "I wasn't sure what your favorite flowers were."

"They're beautiful, and now daisies are my favorite."

She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. Chuck's smile broadened, and for a moment he forgot that Castle, the CIA, and the Intersect existed.

"What?" Lou asked.

"I still can't believe you said yes the first time I asked you out."

"I've said yes every Friday since then, too."

"I know, but I'm still surprised."

Lou slipped her arm through his. "Come on, I've got reservations."

XXXX

Across town, Sarah sat alone in her apartment. She knew exactly where Chuck was tonight. That knowledge had become another quiet burden she carried without telling anyone.

The television was on, but she wasn't watching it. An untouched bowl of soup rested on the coffee table.

She picked up a novel and read the same paragraph four times. She set it down again.

She walked onto the balcony. The evening air was cool. From somewhere below came laughter. Friends leaving a restaurant. Couples walking together. Ordinary people living

ordinary lives.

She wondered what that felt like. Not being watched. Not being assigned. Not having every relationship measured against operational risk. Just being a woman sitting beside someone she loved.

Her phone vibrated. Casey. She answered.

Casey asked, "You working?"

"No."

"Liar."

Sarah smiled faintly. "What do you want?"

"Let's get some dinner."

"I'm not hungry."

"You haven't been hungry all week."

Sarah sighed, "Casey, I'm fine."

There was a pause, then Casey said something unexpected, "I wasn't..."

Sarah frowned, "What?"

Casey continued, "... When I enlisted and left Kathleen..."

Sarah had almost forgotten Casey had once been engaged.

"...It gets easier, but only after you stop pretending it doesn't hurt."

The line went quiet. Sarah sat with Casey's words for several seconds before ending the call. They were simple words, but they had found the one place in her defenses she had been unable to protect.

Sarah whispered, "Good night, Casey."

She ended the call, but his words lingered long after the apartment became silent again.

XXXX

Meanwhile, Chuck and Lou wandered slowly through Hollywood Way/Clark Community Garden after dinner. The evening was quiet, and Chuck found himself enjoying the simple luxury of walking beside someone without checking for exits or wondering when the next mission would interrupt them.

"So..." Lou smiled as she asked, "... What's your dream job?"

Chuck laughed, "You mean besides fixing broken electronics?"

She nudged him playfully, "I'm serious."

Chuck thought about it. "I've always wanted to help people with computers. Maybe training people or security. Just helping people solve problems. Not like the Buy More, but something better." For perhaps the first time, Chuck was talking about a future without automatically imagining the Intersect at the center of it.

Lou nodded, "I can see you doing that."

Chuck asked, "What about you?"

She looked toward the city lights. "My parents started the deli. I grew up there. I always thought I'd do something else."

She smiled, "But somewhere along the way it became home."

Chuck looked at her. "You make people happy." He meant more than the deli. He meant the way Lou made ordinary moments feel worthwhile.

"It's sandwiches."

Chuck shook his head, "No. It's more than sandwiches. I've watched people leave your deli. They all smile."

Lou looked at him quietly, "You notice things."

Chuck smiled at her. There were so many things he couldn't tell her, but in that moment, he realized he could tell her one thing that mattered. He was happy, and for once, saying it didn't feel dangerous.

Chuck laughed, "I guess I do."

She reached for his hand, "I'm glad."

XXXX

End Chapter 5

Chapter 6: Chapter 6 - The Truth Within

Song Recommendation – Can't Smile Without You - Barry Manilow

Disclaimer – Unfortunately, I don't own Chuck.

Chapter 6 – The Truth Within

Burbank, CA

Monday morning. Castle.

Sarah entered the conference room expecting another routine briefing, unaware that General Beckman had called the meeting for a reason that had nothing to do with tactics.

The room felt unusually quiet, the kind of silence Sarah had learned to recognize before difficult conversations.

Beckman commanded, "Sit down, Agent Walker."

Sarah obeyed.

Beckman closed the file in front of her. "I've reviewed the last month's performance reports."

Sarah remained composed. "My scores have declined." She kept her voice even, refusing to let the question become personal.

Beckman nodded. "Slightly, but still well above Agency standards."

Sarah nodded. "I'll correct it."

Beckman studied her. "I don't believe this is a training issue."

Sarah replied, "No, General."

"A tactical issue?"

"No."

"A confidence issue?"

Sarah hesitated, "No."

Beckman folded her hands. "Then what is it?"

Silence settled over the room. Sarah searched for an answer that would satisfy both her commanding officer and herself, but she couldn't find one.

Beckman spoke quietly, "When did it stop being just a cover?"

Sarah looked up sharply, "General?"

"I asked you a question."

Sarah lowered her eyes. "I don't know, ma'am."

Sarah heard her own admission and felt the last of her defenses begin to crack. For months, she had been able to describe her feelings as concern for Chuck's safety. That explanation had been convenient because it sounded professional and gave her something she could control. Love was different. Love meant wanting something for herself. And Sarah Walker had spent most of her adult life learning not to want things for herself.

Beckman responded, "Yes, you do."

The room became impossibly still.

Finally, Sarah answered, "I think I finally admitted to it myself somewhere between pretending to care and realizing I actually did."

Beckman listened without interrupting.

"I told myself it was the mission. The cover. The Asset. The handler. I kept believing that even when it wasn't true anymore."

Beckman nodded slowly, "And now?"

Sarah took a long breath. "Now another woman gets to love the man I never admitted I already fell in love with."

Saying it aloud made the loss feel more real than it had in all the months she had tried to ignore it.

For the first time in years, Sarah's voice cracked, only slightly. "Because I love Chuck Bartowski, and I don't know what to do about it."

Beckman heard it. She remained silent for several moments, allowing Sarah to compose herself.

When she finally spoke, her voice was no longer that of a commanding officer. It sounded almost maternal.

Beckman finally asked, "You know why I approved Lou Palone?"

Sarah nodded, "Because she passed."

Beckman shook her head. "No, I approved her because you told me she passed."

Sarah looked confused.

Beckman continued, "You conducted the investigation. You recommended approval. I trusted your judgment, just as I trust Major Casey's judgment."

Beckman leaned forward. "You did exactly what a CIA officer is supposed to do."

Sarah looked away. "It doesn't feel that way."

"No, it feels like you lost something."

Sarah quietly whispered, "I did."

Beckman closed the file. "Then my advice is no longer as your commanding officer."

Sarah looked up. "I'm listening."

"If you ever have the opportunity to tell Mr. Bartowski how you feel, then don't make the mistake of assuming he'll always know."

Sarah's eyes glistened. "I won't."

Sarah nodded, but the advice stayed with her. She had faced armed enemies with less uncertainty than she felt now. Telling Chuck the truth would not require a weapon, a

cover identity, or a tactical plan. It would require trust, and the person she needed to trust most was Chuck.

XXXX

Outside Beckman's temporary office in Castle, the door opened.

Chuck stepped into Castle carrying a box of breakfast sandwiches from Lou's Deli.

He grinned when he saw Sarah. "Morning."

For a second, Sarah watched him. Chuck had no idea what had just happened behind the closed office door. He had no idea that Sarah had finally admitted the truth about him. He only knew that it was Monday morning and he had brought breakfast to Castle. That was Chuck. He could walk into the middle of an emotional crisis carrying sandwiches and somehow make the room feel lighter.

Sarah smiled back. A real smile, "Good morning, Chuck."

He held up the box. "Lou made extras. She said nobody should have to start Monday morning hungry."

Sarah accepted one. "Tell her, thank you." The simple kindness of the gesture made the conversation with Beckman feel even closer to the surface.

Chuck smiled, "I will."

As he walked toward the briefing room, Sarah watched him go.

General Beckman sat in her office watching everything unfold on the monitor. She had spent decades commanding agents around the world. She knew courage when she saw it.

Walking into enemy territory required courage. So did telling someone you loved them. Beckman suspected Agent Walker would eventually have to do both.

XXXX

Early morning, Chuck helped Lou open the deli.

She taught him how to bake fresh bread before sunrise.

Chuck was terrible at kneading dough.

Lou laughed every time he got flour on his face.

Meanwhile, Sarah is conducting a planned counter-surveillance sweep of the shopping center.

She saw Chuck through the bakery window. He's smiling. He's covered in flour. Lou wiped a streak of flour off his cheek.

She knew she should leave immediately. Instead, she allowed herself one extra second at the window. Chuck laughed when Lou brushed the flour from his face. Sarah's expression softened. Whatever happened next, she wanted Chuck to keep having moments like this. Even if she wasn't the person standing beside him.

Sarah smiled despite herself. She told herself, "No threats detected," but the words sounded almost like a confession. There was no threat in the window, only Chuck, happy and completely at ease.

For once, she left as soon as the assignment was finished.

XXXX

Several weeks had passed, and Chuck had changed in ways that were impossible to miss. The change was not dramatic; it showed up in the small things first.

He still slept better, sometimes at his apartment, but most of the time now he stayed at Lou's apartment. His Intersect flashes were more controlled. His confidence had grown when they went on missions.

Beckman noticed. Casey noticed. Sarah noticed.

Chuck was becoming a better spy because he was happier. Despite everything that the CIA and NSA had been teaching agents for decades, the two were connected.

Casey and Sarah sat alone in Castle after another successful mission.

Casey asked, "Remember when Bartowski couldn't order coffee on a mission without panicking?"

Sarah laughed, "Now?"

Casey nodded, "Now he walks into danger like he belongs there."

The words stayed between them. Casey understood what Sarah wasn't saying. Chuck had spent years being afraid that the Intersect would destroy his life. Lou had given him a reason to believe that his life could still belong to him. Sarah had helped Chuck survive. Lou was helping him live. Sarah wasn't sure which realization hurt more.

Sarah replied, "Lou gave him something we never could." She paused, knowing exactly what she meant before she said it.

Casey asked, "What's that?"

Sarah smiled sadly, and as difficult as it is to think, she replied, "A reason to stop being afraid."

XXXX

Saturday night, Chuck and Lou went to a Humphrey Bogart classic movie marathon at the theater. The Maltese Falcon, The Big Sleep, and Casablanca were playing.

Sarah was assigned nearby because another operation was taking place downtown. The assignment put her in the area.

During a break in the operation, she saw Chuck and Lou exiting the theater. They weren't doing anything dramatic. They were arguing about which movie was better.

Chuck insisted it was 'The Maltese Falcon', while Lou insisted it was 'Casablanca.'

Chuck lost the debate, as usual.

Sarah laughed to herself. For the first time, the memories of what were supposed to be cover dates, but had become something much more to her, made her smile instead of hurt. The change surprised Sarah.

She was finally able to remember the good moments without wishing she could undo the present.

XXXX

Beckman reviewed another month's performance reports.

Chuck's scores continued climbing. Sarah's had returned almost completely to normal.

Beckman called Casey, "How is Agent Walker?"

Casey told her, "She's healing."

Beckman asked, "And Bartowski?"

Casey grunted, "Happy, and performing much better in the field."

Beckman quietly replied, "I guess despite what we're told, sometimes happiness is the best training program the Agency could ask for."

Beckman closed the report and sat back. There was an irony in the numbers she couldn't ignore. The Agency had spent years teaching agents to compartmentalize emotion, while Chuck's performance was improving because he had finally stopped trying to compartmentalize his entire life. Perhaps happiness was not a weakness. Perhaps, in Chuck's case, it was becoming an operational advantage.

XXXX

Sarah sat in an unmarked sedan outside Lou's Deli.

Routine security check.

Chuck and Lou had finished cleaning the deli. They locked the doors. Chuck took Lou's hand, and they walked down the sidewalk laughing.

Sarah started the engine. She could continue following, and protocol would allow it. But for once, she recognized that surveillance and protection were not always the same thing.

She looked once more towards Chuck and then put her car in drive. For the first time in a long time, she didn't watch them leave. Instead, she went home.

Casey heard the transmission. He quietly smiled. He knew exactly what Sarah just did. She finally trusted Chuck enough to let him live his own life.

XXXX

Fulcrum Black Site

Los Angeles, CA

Fulcrum had been watching Chuck for months.

Their intelligence files described him as a priority person of interest in the United States. Every intercepted NSA and CIA transmission, every failed operation, every missing operative eventually pointed back to one ordinary-looking computer technician who worked at the Buy More in Burbank.

Officially, Fulcrum knew almost nothing about him. Unofficially, they suspected something was going on.

Some reports claimed Chuck possessed the government's newest intelligence database. Others insisted he was merely the courier protecting it.

A few believed the NSA and CIA had hidden whatever it was somewhere inside the Buy More itself.

None of the theories explained why enemy agents kept disappearing after crossing paths with Chuck.

None explained why the NSA and CIA assigned two highly decorated field agents to remain constantly at his side, and none explained why every attempt to get close to him had ended in failure.

That uncertainty frustrated Fulcrum more than anything else.

If Chuck possessed something important, capturing him could shift the balance of power overnight. If he wasn't, then he knew exactly where to find it. Either possibility made him worth watching, so they watched.

Every morning he left his apartment. Every evening he returned. Every unexplained stop was logged. Every new face was photographed. Every deviation from his routine was analyzed.

Most days, the surveillance produced nothing. Today would be different, not because Chuck had suddenly become careless, but because someone at Fulcrum had finally

noticed the one variable they had previously dismissed.

XXXX

Fluorescent lights inside the Fulcrum operations center never dimmed. Rows of surveillance monitors cast a cold blue glow across the room while analysts worked in near silence, interrupted only by the occasional tapping of keyboards and the quiet hum of computer servers.

One entire wall displayed satellite images of the Los Angeles area. Another rotated through traffic cameras, security footage, and long-range surveillance photographs gathered over the past several weeks.

Most of it was routine.

A young analyst leaned back in his chair and rubbed his tired eyes before pressing another key. Yet another day's worth of surveillance of Chuck Bartowski appeared on the monitor.

The report was becoming painfully predictable. Leave home for work, stop at the Orange Orange next door before work, work at Buy More, then go to Lou's Deli at lunch, back to the Buy More, and home for the evening.

Occasional unexplained disappearances that were determined to be Chuck leaving to do home installs, computer repairs, and electronics. Nothing suspicious. Normal day-to-day activities.

The analyst sighed, "Another day, another dead end."

His supervisor walked past carrying a cup of stale coffee. "Anything?"

"Nothing."

The analyst advanced another day's footage. Chuck left the Buy More shortly after six, but instead of driving home, he turned west. The analyst frowned, "That's different."

He fast-forwarded the footage. Chuck parked outside an apartment. Several minutes later, a young woman locked the front door, smiled when she saw him, and together they walked toward his car.

The analyst zoomed in and asked himself, "Who the heck are you?"

He clipped the photograph and placed it beside Chuck's growing surveillance profile.

One isolated meeting meant nothing.

He continued reviewing the footage. Friday. Same woman. Saturday afternoon. Same woman. Sunday evening. Chuck helped carry boxes into Lou's Deli after closing.

The analyst slowed the footage and studied the woman's face again. He had expected Chuck's life to contain something unusual. He had not expected the answer to be so ordinary. That was what made it dangerous. Ordinary people did not usually attract repeated intelligence surveillance. Unless someone believed they mattered.

The analyst sat up straighter. Now he was interested. The woman was no longer an incidental detail in Chuck Bartowski's routine; she was a possible clue to the mystery Fulcrum had been trying to solve.

He opened a clean report on his computer: "UNKNOWN FEMALE - RECURRING CONTACT"

Three appearances. Same location. Same schedule. Same man. He circled her face with a digital marker, "Let's find out who you are."

Across the room, his supervisor looked over. "What've you got?"

"I'm not sure yet."

He enlarged the image once more. "But I don't think she's here by accident."

The analyst's search quickly identified the woman from the surveillance photographs. Lou Palone. Owner of a neighborhood deli. No military service. No government employment. No criminal record. No indication that she had ever attracted the attention of any intelligence agency.

One Fulcrum analyst leaned back in his chair with a grin, "Probably his girlfriend."

A few quiet laughs followed, but the analyst didn't join in. Instead, he continued studying the surveillance reports spread across his desk.

"If that's all she is," he asked, "then why have the NSA and CIA been observed near her business several times over the past month?"

The room quieted down.

The photographs were passed around the table. Different days. Different vehicles. Different personnel.

Yet the location remained the same. Someone in the CIA and NSA considered Lou Palone important enough to watch.

None of them knew the surveillance was part of Sarah's and Casey's routine security precautions around Chuck's civilian life. Viewed from the outside, however, the pattern suggested something far more significant.

The analyst finally closed the file. "I don't think she's the person they are protecting, but she may be connected to whoever we're really looking for."

Given the evidence in front of them, it was an understandable assumption.

The analyst saved the file under a new classification. He did not know about the Intersect. He did not know about Castle. He did not know that Chuck's apparent normality was the most carefully protected part of an intelligence operation, but he had found a connection. Fulcrum had finally begun asking the right question. Not what was unusual about Lou Palone, but why the CIA and NSA considered her worth protecting?

XXXX

End Chapter 6

E/N - You know it's AU when Casey and General Beckman come across as caring and having feelings.

Chapter 7: Chapter 7 - Shadows

Song Recommendation -Eye in the Sky - Alan Parsons Project

Disclaimer - Unfortunately, I don't own Chuck.

Chapter 7 - Shadows

Burbank, CA

Sarah almost missed the report. It arrived with a dozen other routine counter-intelligence updates near the end of her shift, buried between traffic camera summaries and a customs alert from San Diego. By the end of her shift, routine intelligence updates had become background noise, but something about this one made her stop before she could turn the page.

A surveillance vehicle had been observed near Lou's Deli on Friday evening.

Sarah frowned and turned the page. The same vehicle appeared again on Sunday. Same license plate. Different driver.

Her expression hardened. Amateurs reused drivers. Professionals reused vehicles. Sarah had spent years learning to recognize the difference between coincidence and preparation. This didn't look accidental.

She pulled the photographs closer. The sedan was parked half a block from Lou's Deli in both images, angled toward the entrance with a clear line of sight to the front door.

Sarah studied the photographs again. The first image had been taken Friday. The second Sunday. Different drivers. Same vehicle. Same angle. Whoever was watching Lou wasn't interested in making a mistake. Sarah felt the familiar tightening in her chest that always came before a mission. Except this time, the target wasn't an enemy. It was Chuck's happiness.

Not a coincidence.

Sarah stood and walked directly into the operations room. Casey looked up from his computer. "What's wrong?"

She dropped the photographs onto the desk. "Tell me what you see."

Casey studied them for only a few seconds. "Professional surveillance."

"Yeah."

He looked at the second photo, then the first. "Same plate."

"Different drivers," Sarah confirmed.

Casey's jaw tightened. Neither of them said the word. They didn't have to.

The word 'Fulcrum' hung in the silence between them like a threat neither wanted to acknowledge.

Casey leaned closer to the photographs. He didn't need to say what both of them were thinking. Fulcrum had spent years trying to find the Intersect. Now, without even knowing it, they might have found a much easier way to reach it. Through Chuck's heart.

XXXX

Castle's conference room felt colder than usual. The photographs were ordinary pictures of an ordinary civilian life, yet the pattern behind them was anything but ordinary.

General Beckman's image filled the large monitor as Sarah laid the surveillance photographs across the table in chronological order.

"Vehicle appears every Friday," she said.

She slid another photograph forward, "Again Saturday."

A third, "Again Sunday."

Beckman studied the images carefully. "Random?"

Casey shook his head immediately. "No."

Sarah folded her arms. "The drivers change. The position doesn't."

Beckman's eyes narrowed. "Assessment?"

Sarah hesitated just long enough for Casey to notice. Saying Chuck's name made the threat personal in a way that simply saying Lou's name did not.

Beckman finished the thought, "...or Lou."

For the first time, the investigation stopped being theoretical. If Fulcrum had started watching Lou, then Chuck's civilian life had become part of the battlefield.

The background check had cleared Lou, but now the very normal life they had approved was becoming a potential security vulnerability.

XXXX

Saturday morning dawned bright and clear. It was exactly the kind of morning Chuck and Lou had come to love—simple, unhurried, and completely disconnected from the world of spies.

Chuck and Lou went to the farmer's market just after nine, completely unaware that three different surveillance teams were already in position. Lou handed him a piece of warm sourdough bread. "Taste this."

Chuck smiled as he tasted the bread. For a few seconds, the world was exactly what he wanted it to be. A Saturday morning. Fresh bread. Nothing classified. Nothing dangerous. He didn't notice the camera across the street. He didn't know that the normal life he had fought so hard to preserve was already being watched.

Chuck took a bite and closed his eyes dramatically. "I think I just had a religious experience."

Lou laughed, the sound light and genuine.

They wandered from stall to stall, sampling strawberries, arguing over which tomatoes looked best, and debating whether Chuck was capable of cooking something more complicated than pasta.

"I can absolutely make dinner," he insisted.

"Last time you burned garlic bread," Lou replied.

"That was one time."

"It was charcoal."

Chuck grinned. "Artisanal charcoal."

Across the street, a man in a baseball cap lowered a camera after taking another photograph. Neither Chuck nor Lou noticed. They were too busy laughing over a basket of peaches.

Another operative watched from a parked car. A third stood near a coffee stand pretending to read a newspaper.

To Chuck, it was a perfect Saturday. To Lou, it felt wonderfully normal. To everyone watching them, it was intelligence gathering. He had no idea that every laugh, every stop at a market stall, and every ordinary moment was being recorded and catalogued by people who were trying to understand why Lou mattered.

XXXX

Fulcrum Black Site

Los Angeles, CA

Back at the Fulcrum safe house, the analyst presented his findings. The conclusion was frustrating precisely because Lou appeared to be exactly what she claimed to be: an ordinary woman with an increasingly important connection to Chuck Bartowski.

"The woman is just an ordinary citizen; she's not important," he reported.

One of the operatives frowned. "Then why is the CIA and NSA protecting her?"

The team leader leaned back in his chair. "Maybe she doesn't know she has what we are looking for."

The leader studied the photographs again. There was no obvious intelligence value in Lou. That was what made the connection interesting. People did not receive protection from two intelligence agencies for no reason. If Lou mattered to the CIA, then the person she was dating probably mattered even more, and Fulcrum was patient.

Another operative tapped a photograph of Lou. "Take her."

The leader's answer was immediate, "No, if she's under CIA and NSA observation, then someone important is connected to her. We watch her."

He pointed to a photograph of Chuck leaving the deli, "Eventually, she'll lead us to whatever the NSA and CIA are protecting."

XXXX

The observation van sat half a block from the deli.

Sarah watched through binoculars as Chuck and Lou left together, carrying grocery bags. They looked happy. The sight should have been comforting; instead, it reminded her how quickly something ordinary could become dangerous when Chuck was involved.

Then she saw the dark sedan pull away from the curb, and her stomach dropped because she had seen that vehicle before.

Then she realized something that made her blood run cold. She wasn't the only one watching Chuck anymore.

The surveillance pattern was no longer about establishing whether Lou was a threat. Fulcrum was trying to determine why the CIA and NSA cared about her.

"No," she whispered.

Casey looked over. "What?"

Sarah never lowered the binoculars. "They're not interested in Lou."

Sarah kept watching. Chuck reached for another grocery bag. Lou laughed. They looked like any other couple. That was exactly the problem. Sarah had spent months telling herself that Chuck deserved this. Now she was watching the consequences of that happiness arrive in a dark sedan.

Casey grabbed his own binoculars and tracked the sedan. His expression darkened. "They're interested in whoever Lou keeps company with."

Both of them understood the implication at the same moment.

Fulcrum had begun connecting Chuck to Lou, and the clock had started ticking.

XXXX

Castle

Burbank, CA

In Castle, General Beckman authorized full-time protective surveillance before midnight. Additional teams were assigned. Routes were changed. Emergency extraction plans were drafted.

Upstairs, Chuck was working in the Buy More, and Lou was at home for the evening. Neither of them knew what was happening.

Sarah stood alone in Castle after the briefing ended, staring at the surveillance photographs spread across the table. Only days earlier, she had been trying to convince herself that Lou was safe for Chuck. Now she was looking at the same photographs and wondering whether approving the relationship had helped put a target on Lou's back.

"This is exactly what I was afraid would happen," she said quietly.

On the main operations screen, Beckman looked at her for a long moment. "No..."

Sarah looked up.

"...You were afraid Chuck would fall in love."

General Beckman paused. Beckman had known for some time that Sarah's feelings for Chuck were becoming difficult to separate from her professional judgment. Now the external threat had made that distinction irrelevant. Sarah could still be the 'Ice Queen' when it was needed, but something had changed her.

Sarah lowered her eyes to the photographs again because Beckman was right, and somehow, that made the danger feel even more real.

Sarah remembered the background investigation. Lou had been clean. Completely clean. Sarah had fought herself through every stage of that investigation and eventually recommended Lou. Now the same woman was sitting at the center of a Fulcrum

surveillance operation. Sarah couldn't stop thinking about the irony. She had approved Lou, and now she might have to help save her.

XXXX

Castle was quieter than Chuck had ever remembered.

No one spoke.

General Beckman was on the main screen, while Sarah and Casey waited nearby. The surveillance photographs from the previous week were spread across the table.

Every photograph told the same story. Chuck and Lou were happy together, and someone was carefully documenting every place they went.

Beckman finally broke the silence, "Mr. Bartowski."

Chuck looked up, "Yes, General."

Casey slid a photograph across the table. A grainy image showed Chuck and Lou leaving the deli together.

A second photograph. Miniature golf.

A third. A movie theater.

A fourth. The farmer's market.

Chuck frowned. "Who's taking these?"

Sarah answered quietly, "Fulcrum."

Chuck picked up another photograph. Seeing his private life reduced to surveillance images made his stomach tighten. The photographs showed happy moments, but in Fulcrum's hands those moments were evidence. "They've been following us?"

Casey nodded, "For weeks."

Chuck's expression changed, "Lou..?"

Sarah could already see where his thoughts had gone.

"...They don't know she's connected to the Intersect."

Sarah replied, "Not yet, but they know she's connected to you, so they're digging."

Chuck slowly lowered the photograph. "So it's only a matter of time until they connect the two."

He understood the danger immediately. Fulcrum didn't need to know the entire truth yet. They only needed to know that Lou was important.

No one answered. They didn't have to.

Finally, Beckman said, "We've increased surveillance. We've assigned additional agents. We've changed your travel routes."

Chuck looked toward Sarah, "Will that keep her safe?"

Sarah hesitated, "I don't know."

It was the hardest, most honest answer she had ever given him, and it was breaking her heart. Sarah wanted to promise him that Lou would be safe. After seeing the photographs, she couldn't make a promise she couldn't guarantee.

XXXX

Chuck stood and slowly walked toward the large monitor overlooking Castle. He stared at the map of Los Angeles. "So, if Fulcrum keeps watching, they'll eventually decide she's important?"

Casey nodded. "I think they already have. That's how they operate."

Chuck closed his eyes. "They'll use her to get to me." He had spent years accepting danger as the price of being the Intersect. What he couldn't accept was making Lou pay that price simply because she had fallen in love with him.

No one responded to Chuck's question. Finally, Chuck turned around. "I can't let that happen."

Sarah's heart sank. She knew exactly what Chuck was preparing to sacrifice, and she also knew that once he made the decision, he would carry the pain alone if he thought it would keep Lou safe.

"No," she replied.

Chuck looked at her. "I have to."

"There may be another way."

Chuck smiled sadly. "You don't believe that."

Sarah wanted to. More than anything, but she couldn't. She knew Chuck was right.

XXXX

General Beckman quietly spoke, "The decision is yours, Mr. Bartowski."

Chuck looked around Castle. The room had become his second home. Sarah, Casey, and even General Beckman. The people who had become his second family.

Chuck looked at Sarah. For a moment, he wanted her to tell him he was wrong. He wanted Casey to produce another plan. He wanted Beckman to order everyone to protect Lou and somehow make the danger disappear. But no one spoke. The silence told him everything.

He finally nodded. "I'll end it."

The words sounded calm, but Sarah could hear the strain underneath them. Chuck wasn't choosing between two easy options. He was choosing to hurt the woman he loved in order to keep her alive.

Sarah lowered her eyes. She couldn't bear to watch.

XXXX

Chuck called Lou that afternoon, "Would you like to have dinner tonight?"

She laughed, "You don't usually sound so nervous."

"I was hoping we could talk."

"Everything okay?"

Chuck forced himself to smile even though she couldn't see it. "Yeah, I just wanted to see you." He knew that if he let his voice break, Lou would hear something was wrong

before they even met.

"I'd like that."

XXXX

Sarah and Casey were doing surveillance on them to make sure they weren't in danger.

Chuck and Lou returned to the little Italian restaurant where they had shared their very first date.

Neither mentioned the coincidence. Neither wanted to.

Dinner was pleasant. That was what made it unbearable. Nothing went wrong. No one interrupted them. Lou was happy to be there, and Chuck found himself wishing desperately that he could stop time.

They laughed. Shared dessert. They talked about ordinary things. The weather. A new sandwich that Lou wanted to make the sandwich of the day next week. A new science-fiction movie that Chuck wanted them to see the following weekend.

Unfortunately, Chuck knew there wouldn't be a following weekend.

Every laugh hurt. Every smile made what he had to do even harder. Chuck memorized the smallest details. The way Lou smiled, the way she reached for her glass, the stories she told—because some part of him already knew he was saying goodbye.

XXXX

After dinner, they walked slowly through the quiet mall near the Buy More.

Most of the stores had already closed.

Lou slipped her hand into his. "You've been quiet tonight." Chuck felt the warmth of her fingers and nearly stopped walking. For one selfish second, he wanted to forget the photographs and the threat and keep walking beside her.

Chuck smiled, "I've just been thinking."

"About what?"

How do you explain that dangerous people are watching you without explaining why? How do you tell someone that loving you has become dangerous without telling them the truth? Chuck had spent years protecting secrets, but this was the first time the secret itself was breaking someone's heart.

You can't.

XXXX

Lou's Deli

Burbank, CA

They returned to Lou's Deli.

Chuck slowed as they approached the deli. He had memorized this place. The first time Lou had smiled at him. The first sandwich she had made for him. The beginning of the relationship that had become the most normal part of his extraordinary life. Tonight, every familiar detail felt like a goodbye waiting to happen.

Neither moved.

Lou looked at him. "Chuck, what is it?"

He looked down. "I've been lying to you."

Lou looked at him carefully. She had always known there were parts of Chuck's life he couldn't explain. She had accepted the background check. She had accepted the strange rules. She had even accepted the occasional unexplained absence. This was different. This time, Chuck wasn't asking her to accept another mystery. He was asking her to leave.

"I figured there were things you weren't telling me since you told me that you needed a background check on me before we could go out." Chuck nodded, "There are; I wish I could explain."

"I know," she gently squeezed his hand, "You've said that before."

"I meant it then, and I mean it now."

Chuck struggled to find the words. Chuck struggled to find the words. He had faced armed men, explosions, and impossible missions with more confidence than he felt now. None of those things had required him to deliberately break the heart of someone who trusted him and cared about him.

Finally, "They're not little lies. They're my whole life..."

Lou quietly listened.

"... I care about you too much to keep asking you to live inside those lies."

A tear formed in her eye, and her voice caught, "Chuck..."

He took a slow breath, "I think...we need to stop seeing each other."

The words hung in the night air.

Chuck felt something inside him break. He had known this was coming. Knowing didn't make it easier. He wanted to reach for Lou. Instead, he forced himself to keep his hands at his sides. If he touched her again, he wasn't sure he would be able to let go.

Lou stared at him. Several seconds passed. She looked confused. Then realization slowly appeared in her eyes, "NO!"

Chuck looked away, "I'm sorry."

She shook her head, "NO! This isn't what you want."

Chuck couldn't answer because she was right.

Lou stepped closer, "Is there someone else?"

Chuck immediately answered, "No."

"Did I do something?"

"No."

"Then tell me."

"I can't."

Her voice trembled. "Why?"

Chuck felt his own eyes begin to fill. "Because if I tell you, I'll be asking you to carry something that was never yours to carry."

Lou searched his face. She could see that whatever Chuck was hiding wasn't casual or selfish. It frightened him. That realization made the truth she was hearing even more painful.

She had never seen him look like this before.

Finally, she asked one simple question, "Are you breaking up with me because you don't love me?"

Chuck closed his eyes. "No." It came out almost as a whisper, "No."

Lou's heart broke because she already knew what his answer meant. He wasn't leaving because he had stopped caring. He was leaving because he cared too much.

A tear rolled down her cheek. "I don't understand."

"I know," Chuck replied.

"I wish I could."

"I know."

She gently touched his face. "I've never met anyone like you."

Chuck laughed softly through the tears. "I hope someday you meet someone better." He wanted to tell her that she had been exactly what he needed. He wanted to tell her that she had shown him that an ordinary life was still possible.

She shook her head. "I wasn't looking for someone better. I was looking for someone exactly like you."

Neither of them spoke. The silence stretched between them because both knew that any additional words would only make the goodbye harder.

Finally, Lou nodded, "I've been trying to figure you out since the day you fixed my phone. I kept thinking there had to be some incredible story."

Chuck smiled sadly, "There is."

Lou asked, "You'll never tell me?"

"No."

XXXX

Lou took one step backward. "I love you enough to know that whatever you're protecting must be important."

Chuck's composure finally broke, and he choked out the words, "It is, I'm sorry." For once, Chuck couldn't hide behind humor or awkwardness. He let himself grieve the relationship he had chosen to give up.

"I know," she smiled through her tears, "And whatever it is, I hope it never takes away the good man I met at the Nerd Herd."

"It won't."

"I hope not."

XXXX

She leaned forward one last time and kissed him. It wasn't passionate. It wasn't desperate. It was gentle, and that gentleness made the goodbye feel more final.

It was goodbye.

When they separated, neither tried to stop the other.

Chuck watched as Lou unlocked the deli. He wanted to follow her. Every instinct told him to stop this. The part of him trained by years of danger told him that letting her walk away was the only way to keep her alive.

She paused at the door, turned around one last time, and said, "Thank you for every honest moment you could give me."

Chuck nodded, "Thank you for reminding me what a normal life feels like."

Lou smiled through her tears, then she disappeared inside, and the door quietly closed behind her.

XXXX

From across the street, an unmarked sedan sat beneath a streetlight.

Sarah watched from the shadows. She had seen people say goodbye before. Agents said goodbye all the time. Sometimes it was temporary. Sometimes it wasn't. But this goodbye felt different because Chuck wasn't walking away from Lou because he wanted to. He was walking away because he believed loving her had put her in danger.

Sarah lowered the binoculars. She hadn't heard the conversation, but she didn't need to. She had watched Chuck's face, Lou's tears, and the distance that had appeared between them. She had watched enough farewell scenes during her career to recognize one, but this one was different, and it broke her heart.

Casey quietly closed his notebook. "It's over."

Sarah nodded.

Neither celebrated. Neither spoke. There was nothing to celebrate.

Casey looked at Sarah. She was still watching Chuck. He could see how much she wanted to go to him, but Sarah stayed where she was. For once, there was nothing a spy could do. No weapon. No extraction. No clever plan. Just the consequences of loving someone in a dangerous world.

Chuck sat alone on the sidewalk with his head down for nearly five minutes. He never looked up.

The city moved around him as if nothing had happened. Cars passed. Lights changed. Somewhere nearby, people laughed. Chuck remained completely still.

Eventually, he got up and walked toward his car. His shoulders seemed heavier than Sarah had ever seen.

She whispered almost to herself, "I'm so sorry."

Casey looked over. "For which one?"

Sarah watched Chuck drive away and softly said, "Both of them." She meant Lou, who had lost the man she loved, and Chuck, who had just given up the woman who had made him feel normal.

XXXX

End Chapter 7

Chapter 8: Chapter 8 - The Hardest Goodbye

Song Recommendation – Someone Like You - Adele

A/N1 - For those of you that are wondering about the angst in the story, know that my pre-reader, Kookykrumbs, told me that this is an 8.5 out of 10 on the angst scale and a 12 out of 10 on the Charah scale, so I promise it will get better... soon.

So just like a pineapple, you have to get through the sharp, spiky, and tough outer skin with a crown of pointy leaves to get to the wonderful yellow, sweet, and juicy fruit inside.

A/N2 – I post updates on the Chuck Fan Fiction Facebook group when I post each chapter, along with an image(s) related to each chapter. If you're interested, join the Chuck FF group.

Disclaimer – Unfortunately, I don't own Chuck.

Chapter 8 – The Hardest Goodbye

Lou's Deli

Burbank, CA

The bell above the deli door chimed, "Morning, Lou!"

Lou looked up automatically, forcing the smile that had become harder to produce over the last week.

"Morning, Mr. Henderson. The usual?"

"Yes, please."

Her hands moved almost entirely by memory. Roast beef. Swiss. Rye bread. Mustard. Pickle. Wrap. Smile.

She handed him the sandwich. "There you go."

"Thanks, sweetheart."

Mr. Henderson walked toward the dining area, leaving Lou alone behind the counter once again.

She glanced instinctively toward the front window. For weeks, every weekday around noon, Chuck would appear walking across the parking lot from the Buy More.

He was always smiling before he even opened the door. He would wave. She would pretend not to notice until he reached the counter.

Today. Nothing.

Lou glanced at the clock. Noon. She had caught herself doing it again. Chuck usually came in around this time. She knew he wasn't coming. Knowing didn't stop her from hoping.

Just strangers walking past. She looked away before anyone noticed the disappointment on her face.

XXXX

The lunch rush began. The familiar rhythm of the deli continued around Lou, but she felt as though she were moving through it from a great distance. She could remember every order and every customer's name; what she couldn't stop remembering was the empty place where Chuck used to sit.

Today, it only reminded her of what was missing.

Jenny, one of her younger employees, quietly watched her boss.

Lou wasn't making mistakes. That almost made it worse. She wasn't forgetting orders. She just wasn't herself. She barely laughed. She barely smiled. She was functioning perfectly while feeling anything but normal, and every time the bell above the door chimed, she had to prepare herself for the possibility that it might be Chuck.

Always waiting.

XXXX

The bell chimed again. Lou looked up too quickly. Her heart sank. Not Chuck.

Just another customer, "Hi, Lou."

"Hi."

The woman smiled, "So..."

Lou already knew what was coming.

"...where's your computer guy?"

Lou forced another smile, "Oh... Chuck's been busy."

The customer laughed, "I haven't seen him all week."

"No..." Lou quietly replied, "Neither have I."

XXXX

Ten minutes later. Another regular, "Hey, Lou!"

"Hi, Frank."

"No Chuck today?"

Lou felt her chest tighten, "No."

"You two have a fight?"

She laughed weakly, "Something like that."

Frank immediately realized he'd stepped somewhere that was painful. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

He wasn't convinced. Neither was she.

The questions never stopped all day.

"Where's Chuck?" "Is he sick?" "Doesn't he always eat lunch here?" "I thought you two were dating." "I miss seeing you kids together."

Every innocent question reopened the wound. Every answer became harder to give.

Just after one o'clock, the door opened again. Lou looked up. For one impossible second, she thought it was him. Same height. Same dark hair. Same Buy More uniform. Her

heart leapt.

Then the young employee stepped fully inside. Not Chuck. Someone else. Lou turned away before anyone saw the tears beginning to form.

Jenny quietly approached. "Lou?"

"I'm okay."

"You don't look okay."

Lou took a shaky breath. "I'm fine." The words sounded automatic even to her. She had spent a lifetime taking care of other people, and admitting that she was the one who needed help felt almost impossible.

Jenny had worked for Lou for almost two years. She knew better.

"No...You're not," she said softly.

Lou nodded once. Barely.

By the end of the afternoon, Lou had developed a standard answer. He's been busy. It was easier than saying: He left me. I don't know why. I still love him. She wasn't ready to make those truths public, even if everyone could already see them.

XXXX

The bell rang again. Another customer, "Hi, Lou."

She smiled automatically, "Welcome."

The older woman looked around, "I don't see Chuck."

Lou swallowed, "No."

"I always liked watching you two together."

Lou couldn't answer.

"The two of you looked," The woman smiled warmly, "Happy."

That single word, "Happy," ... shattered what little composure Lou had left. Happy was exactly what they had been. That was why the breakup made no sense to her. Nothing

about their time together had felt false from her side.

She loved him. She still loved him.

Her eyes filled before she could stop them. Her voice cracked, "I'm...I'm sorry."

The room went silent.

Lou covered her mouth, "I...I...I..."

Another tear escaped. She couldn't breathe.

"I just..."

She turned away, "I'm sorry..."

Before anyone could respond, she hurried through the kitchen doors into the storage room, and the door closed behind her.

XXXX

The moment she was alone, everything collapsed. She crumbled and slid down the wall until she was sitting on the floor between shelves of canned vegetables and boxes of bread.

She buried her face in her hands. The sobs came all at once. Raw. Uncontrolled. She had spent days pretending she was fine. Pretending she'd move on. Pretending she understood.

She understood nothing. If Chuck had stopped loving her, she could have accepted that eventually. But he had looked her in the eyes and told her he still loved her, then walked away anyway. No explanation. No argument. No chance to fix whatever had gone wrong.

Just, "Goodbye, I love you."

She whispered through tears, "So why?"

There was no answer. Only the hum of the refrigerator in the kitchen and the distant sound of traffic outside.

Lou pressed her hands against her face. She had always believed that if two people loved each other, they could work through anything. Chuck had just shown her that sometimes love was not enough to overcome a secret she wasn't allowed to know.

XXXX

Outside, the deli had gone unusually quiet. The customers who had witnessed Lou's breakdown understood without being told that this was not a moment for questions or gossip.

Jenny stepped behind the counter. "I'm sorry, everyone, Lou isn't feeling well."

An elderly customer nodded sympathetically, "Tell her to take her time."

Another customer quietly said, "Heartbreak hurts."

No one argued. Several sat silently with their lunches.

Nearly fifteen minutes later, Lou emerged. She had washed her face, but her eyes remained red. "I'm sorry," she told everyone.

One customer smiled kindly, "No apologies necessary."

Another reached across the counter and gently squeezed her hand. "We've all been there."

That simple act of kindness nearly started the tears again.

She nodded, "Thank you."

XXXX

Closing time finally arrived. Lou moved through the closing routine one step at a time, touching familiar objects that suddenly seemed connected to memories of Chuck.

Lou locked the front door. The silence inside the deli felt enormous. Every evening, Chuck used to help wipe tables. Sweep the floor. Carry trash and Taste-test whatever new sandwich she was inventing.

Now every empty chair reminded her he wasn't coming back.

She picked up the broom. Then set it back down. She didn't have the energy.

Jenny approached. "We can finish."

"No," Lou answered quietly, "It's my deli."

Jenny gently took the broom anyway. "It's also okay to let someone help."

Lou looked at her employee. Then unexpectedly hugged her, "Thank you."

XXXX

Lou's Apartment

Burbank, CA

Later that evening, Lou sat alone in her apartment. Chuck's favorite science-fiction movie still lay on her coffee table. A Stanford sweatshirt he'd forgotten weeks earlier hung over the back of a chair.

She picked it up. Held it tightly against herself. It still smelled faintly like him. Fresh laundry. Coffee. Just a hint of solder and electronics from the Nerd Herd.

For several seconds she stood there, remembering Chuck wearing the shirt, laughing about some ridiculous computer problem, and making her feel as though the world was a little less complicated.

She closed her eyes and whispered, "I miss you." The apartment answered with silence.

Her phone rested on the table. She stared at Chuck's contact. She had promised herself she wouldn't call again. She had already sent two texts. Neither had been answered. Maybe he'd changed his number. Maybe he'd blocked her.

She knew she was inventing explanations because the real one was too painful. Chuck wasn't cruel. He wasn't careless. He had never ignored her before.

Something had happened. Something big enough to make the man who loved her decide that disappearing was kinder than staying.

Her phone rested on the table. She stared at Chuck's name until the screen dimmed, then touched it again so she could see it.

No. That wasn't Chuck. He wasn't cruel. Something else had to be wrong. There had to be. With trembling fingers, she pressed **Call**. The phone rang. Once. Twice. Three times. Voicemail. The familiar recording made her chest ache, "Hi, you've reached Chuck. Leave a message, and I'll call you back."

She waited until the beep, "Hi..." She stopped, started over, "Chuck..." her voice trembled. "I don't know what happened. I keep replaying every conversation we ever had. If I hurt you...I'm sorry. If I did something wrong, please tell me."

Another long pause. "I love you."

The words came out almost as a whisper, "I don't need everything to go back to the way it was. I just..." She wiped away another tear, "...I just want to understand. If there's any part of you that still loves me, please call. I'll wait. Goodnight"

Her thumb hovered over the screen after the call ended. For nearly a minute.

Then she typed one final text. "**I still love you. If there's anything left between us, please let me try to fix it. I'll always answer if you call. —Lou**"

She stared at the message.

Closed her eyes.

Pressed **Send**.

The screen showed only one word. **Delivered**. Lou stared at it as though the word might somehow become an answer if she waited long enough.

Lou set the phone beside her and curled up on the couch, unable to stop looking at it, hoping that at any moment it would light up with Chuck's name.

It never did.

Outside, the lights of Burbank slowly disappeared one by one as the city settled into sleep.

Inside a quiet apartment, Lou waited beside a silent phone, still believing that somehow the man she loved would find his way back to her.

XXXX

Buy More

Burbank, CA

Chuck had become remarkably good at pretending. The Buy More was an easy place to hide because everyone there expected him to be slightly awkward, slightly distracted, and occasionally ridiculous.

He smiled at customers. He fixed computers. He laughed at Morgan's latest Star Wars theory. He even managed to tease Jeff and Lester about accidentally setting another display television to Spanish.

To everyone in the Buy More, Chuck looked the same. Only four people knew better. Sarah could see the difference immediately because she knew how Chuck looked when he was genuinely happy, and how he looked when he was trying to convince everyone that he was.

Castle, Sarah watched Chuck through the security cameras.

He smiled, but she noticed something no one else would. The smile never reached his eyes. It disappeared the instant nobody was looking.

Sarah had become an expert at watching Chuck without letting him know. She could read the tiny pauses. The forced jokes. The way his shoulders dropped when he thought no one was looking. She had seen Chuck frightened before.

This was different. This was grief.

Sarah quietly whispered, "You're hurting."

She wasn't sure whether she was speaking to Chuck or to herself. Because she was hurting too. For the first time, Sarah wondered whether the pain she felt over Lou wasn't really about Lou at all.

It was about Chuck.

Casey stood beside her. "He is."

Sarah looked toward him. "You noticed."

Casey grunted.

XXXX

Later that morning, Chuck repaired another customer's laptop.

"You're always so cheerful," the woman smiled.

Chuck forced another grin. "I try."

"You've got one of those faces that makes people feel better."

"Thanks."

The moment the customer left, the expression disappeared. He turned back to the computer and focused on the repair because concentrating on a problem was easier than thinking about Lou.

Sarah had watched the entire exchange. She wished she hadn't.

XXXX

Castle

Burbank, CA

General Beckman reviewed another set of reports from Major Casey and Agent Walker on Chuck.

Mission readiness: Excellent.

Intersect accuracy: Excellent.

Operational awareness: Excellent.

Then she opened Agent Walker's supplemental notes.

Subject displays increasing emotional suppression.

No operational degradation observed.

Personal stress appears very significant.

Beckman slowly removed her glasses. She had commanded soldiers for decades. She knew the difference between someone recovering and someone refusing to fall apart. Chuck was functioning. Sarah was functioning. But ... neither was actually recovering.

XXXX

That afternoon, Chuck's phone vibrated. He didn't even need to look.

He knew Lou was calling. Again.

Chuck closed his eyes. He remembered the deli. The first date. The farmer's market. The little jokes.

The way Lou had looked at him when he said he loved her. Answering the phone would bring all of it back. Not answering felt like betraying her all over again.

He stared at the screen. Part of him wanted to answer because hearing Lou's voice would make the pain stop for a few minutes. The other part knew that a few minutes of comfort could undo the sacrifice he had convinced himself was necessary.

"Lou Calling"

"Sarah noticed immediately, "So", she asked quietly, "Are you going to answer?"

Chuck never took his eyes off the phone. "I can't."

"It might help."

He slowly shook his head. "No. I know what she's going to say."

The ringing stopped. Voicemail. Chuck quietly slipped the phone back into his pocket. He looked as though someone had punched him in the gut.

XXXX

Casa Bartowski/Woodcomb

Burbank, CA

Ellie noticed next at Sunday dinner. Chuck barely touched his food.

Ellie didn't push him for details. She sat beside her brother and let him decide how much he could say. That was what Chuck needed. Someone who didn't need an explanation before offering comfort.

"Chuck?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you sick?"

"No."

"You've eaten three bites."

"I'm just not hungry."

Ellie frowned. Chuck had never turned down her lasagna without a very good reason, and she knew her brother well enough to recognize when he was trying to hide something.

Devon tried to lighten the mood. "So," he smiled, "relationship stuff?"

Chuck looked down at his plate. "Yeah." He couldn't bring himself to explain the details, but saying the word relationship somehow made the loss more real.

Devon's smile faded. "I'm sorry."

Chuck nodded, "So am I."

XXXX

After dinner, Ellie followed her brother onto the apartment balcony with a beer in one hand for him and a glass of wine for her.

"You loved her."

Chuck looked out over Burbank. "I did."

Ellie waited. "You still do." It wasn't really a question. She knew the answer from the way Chuck avoided looking at her.

He didn't answer. He didn't have to. Ellie had spent her entire life learning Chuck's silences, and this was one she understood immediately.

Ellie quietly stepped beside him. "I've known you your whole life."

She gently squeezed his arm. "I know what you look like when your heart's broken."

Chuck finally spoke. "I feel just like I did when Jill broke up with me, only this time I broke Lou's heart." He rubbed his hands together, struggling to keep his voice steady. "With Jill, I was the one who got hurt. This time I was the person doing the hurting."

His voice barely rose above a whisper, "I did that."

Ellie looked at him. "Chuck, sometimes relationships end."

Chuck shook his head. "No, this wasn't that."

He swallowed hard. "She didn't do anything wrong." That was the part he couldn't escape. If Lou had betrayed him, as Jill had, the decision would have been easier. Instead, she had been kind, honest, patient, and completely in love with him.

"Then why?"

Chuck closed his eyes. "I can't tell you."

Ellie wanted to ask more. Instead, she hugged him. "I'm here if you need me."

For several seconds, Chuck simply stood there. "Thanks, sis." Then he hugged his sister back. Tightly.

XXXX

Castle

Burbank, CA

Castle, the following morning, Sarah found Chuck sitting alone before work. He hadn't noticed her. He was staring at his phone. Lou's voicemail remained unopened.

Sarah sat beside him. "You haven't listened to it yet?"

Chuck quietly replied, "If I hear her voice..."

Chuck swallowed. He could already hear Lou saying his name. He could hear the hurt in her voice. He knew exactly what would happen if he listened. He would want to go back, and if he went back, he would eventually put her in danger again.

He stopped. Sarah waited.

"...I'll go back."

"You could."

Chuck looked at her and then, a bit frustrated, said. "And then what? She deserves birthdays. Christmas. Growing old. A family. Not..."

He looked around Castle, "...this."

Sarah didn't answer.

Chuck continued. "I thought if I ended it quickly, it would hurt less." He looked down at the floor. "I thought if she hated me, maybe she'd move on faster."

Sarah looked at him sadly. "Did it?"

Chuck laughed once. A broken laugh. "No, it hurts every damn second."

Sarah finally asked the question she'd been carrying for days. "Did you stop loving her?" She already knew the answer, but she needed to hear Chuck say it.

Chuck looked genuinely surprised. "No, not really."

The answer came instantly. "So why did you leave?" Sarah's voice remained gentle. She wasn't asking as an agent anymore. She was asking as someone who finally understood the cost of Chuck's decision.

Chuck leaned back in his chair. "You know why. I finally realized loving someone normal isn't enough with what's going on in my life."

Sarah frowned.

Chuck continued, "If someone like Fulcrum comes after me again, they'll come after everyone I love, and..."

His voice cracked, "... I couldn't live with myself if my family or friends died because of me."

Sarah looked down. She suddenly understood. This wasn't Chuck choosing one woman over another. This was Chuck sacrificing the future he always wanted because he believed it was the only way to keep Lou alive.

The realization broke something deep inside her. Sarah had spent months thinking Chuck had chosen Lou because Lou offered something Sarah could not. Now she understood that Chuck had chosen Lou, and then sacrificed her, because he believed loving someone was dangerous.

XXXX

A few days later, Casey entered quietly, and he placed a cup of coffee beside Chuck. He had heard enough to understand that this wasn't a conversation that needed an intelligence briefing. Chuck didn't need an agent in that moment. He needed someone who understood what it meant to carry a burden alone.

Chuck looked up.

Casey shrugged, "You forgot breakfast."

Chuck smiled weakly, "Thanks."

Casey remained standing. "You know, I've seen soldiers do what you did."

Chuck looked confused.

"They leave people behind. They end marriages and engagements. They just walk away. Not because they stop loving them."

Casey looked directly into Chuck's eyes. "Because they think it's the only way to keep them alive."

Chuck looked down. "It doesn't feel noble." He wasn't looking for praise. He didn't want anyone telling him he had made a heroic sacrifice. He wanted the pain to stop.

Casey snorted, "It isn't. It just sucks."

Despite everything, Chuck actually laughed, but only a little. It wasn't happiness, but it was the first genuine sound of relief Sarah had heard from him in days.

XXXX

General Beckman watched both conversations through Castle's surveillance cameras. She had ordered the monitoring for security, but what she was seeing had become something much more human and much harder to solve with orders.

She remained silent long after the room emptied.

She looked again at Chuck's personnel file and said to herself, "We ask young men and women to risk their lives every day. Sometimes, we ask them to sacrifice something even harder..."

She closed the file, "...The chance to live a normal life."

XXXX

That evening, Sarah drove Chuck home. Neither spoke for several minutes. The streets of Burbank passed quietly outside the windows while both of them sat with thoughts neither knew how to put into words.

Finally, Sarah asked, "If she called right now, what would you say to her?" She wasn't sure why she needed to know. Perhaps she needed to understand whether there was any part of Chuck that had truly let Lou go.

Chuck stared through the passenger window. "I'd tell her..."

He stopped. His voice trembled.

"...that every day I was with her was the happiest I'd been since receiving the Intersect."

Sarah quietly listened.

"I'd tell her none of this was her fault. I'd tell her she deserved someone who could love her without lying."

"And then?"

Chuck looked out at the city lights. "I'd tell her goodbye." The answer was quiet, but there was no hesitation. He had made the decision because he believed it was necessary, even though every part of him wished it wasn't.

Sarah felt tears gathering in her own eyes. Not because Chuck had stopped loving Lou, but because he hadn't. He loved her enough to walk away from the life he wanted. She had spent years being trained not to cry in front of anyone. Tonight, she wasn't sure the training mattered anymore.

As Chuck climbed out of the car, Sarah remained behind the wheel, watching him disappear into his apartment.

Only after he had gone inside did she whisper to the empty car, "I finally understand."

For the first time since she'd met Chuck, Sarah understood the terrible burden he carried because of the Intersect. It wasn't that Chuck was in danger. It was that everyone he loved could become a target because of him.

It wasn't the Intersect. It wasn't the CIA. It wasn't the NSA. It wasn't even the missions. It was loving people enough to let them go if he believed it would keep them safe.

Sarah sat alone for several minutes after Chuck disappeared inside. The city lights reflected across the windshield. She thought about every mission they had survived. Every time Chuck had flashed. Every time he had put himself between danger and someone else.

She finally understood that the hardest part of being the Intersect wasn't surviving the missions. It was deciding who had to be left behind.

And as she drove away into the quiet Burbank night, Sarah found herself grieving not only for Lou, but for Chuck as well. She had once believed that protecting Chuck meant keeping him alive. Now she understood that protecting him also meant recognizing how much of his ordinary life he had already sacrificed.

XXXX

End Chapter 8

E/N1 - Thanks to everyone for all of their reviews and PMs so far...keep them coming. I do try to reply to them all. It's interesting to hear your thoughts on which way everyone thinks the story is going to go.

Chapter 9: Chapter 9 - Moving Forward - Part 1

Song Recommendation - Boys Don't Cry - The Cure

Disclaimer - Unfortunately, I don't own Chuck.

Chapter 9 - Moving Forward - Part 1

Burbank, CA

The Buy More was exactly as loud and chaotic as always. Jeff and Lester argued over whether aliens had secretly invented Blu-ray technology. Big Mike yelled at them because someone had once again plugged a microwave into the same circuit as the display televisions.

Customers wandered aimlessly through the aisles, asking questions that made absolutely no sense.

Normally, Chuck would have smiled. Today, he barely looked up from the laptop he was repairing. The Buy More was usually the easiest place in the world for Chuck to hide behind humor, but even here the loss of Lou had followed him.

Morgan watched him from the Home Theater department.

For nearly an hour. Chuck hadn't made a single joke. Hadn't corrected Jeff's conspiracy theories. Hadn't laughed when Lester accidentally knocked over an entire display of headphones. He just worked.

Quietly.

Morgan frowned. "Uh-oh." He had known Chuck long enough to recognize the quiet withdrawal that had followed the breakup with Jill.

Later, Morgan waited until Chuck finished closing the Nerd Herd counter. "So...", Chuck looked up, "So?"

Morgan leaned against the counter. "You want to get together tonight?"

Chuck shrugged, "I don't know."

Morgan blinked. "You don't know?"

"Yeah."

"I was thinking maybe Call of Duty."

Chuck shook his head. "I'm kind of tired."

Morgan stared. Chuck had very seldom been too tired for Call of Duty.

Morgan forced a grin, "Pizza?"

"No thanks."

"Wings?"

"I'm okay."

"Star Wars marathon?"

Chuck smiled politely, "Maybe another time."

Morgan watched him gather his backpack. Then Chuck just walked away.

Morgan didn't move. He whispered to himself, "Crap, it's happening again."

XXXX

Casa Bartowski/Woodcomb

Burbank, CA

Ellie was putting leftovers into the refrigerator when Morgan let himself inside.

"You have that face," Ellie said.

Morgan frowned, "What face?"

"The something-is-wrong-with-Chuck face."

Morgan sighed, "It's happening again."

Ellie immediately stopped what she was doing. "What is?"

Morgan knew that expression. He lowered his voice, "The Jill thing."

He had seen it once before, years ago, when Chuck came home from Stanford. The difference this time was that Morgan knew exactly what was at stake. Chuck hadn't just lost a girlfriend. He had lost someone he genuinely loved.

Devon looked up from the dining room table. "What Jill thing?"

Morgan and Ellie exchanged a glance. Devon hadn't known Chuck back then.

Ellie quietly answered, "You weren't there right after Jill broke up with Chuck at Stanford."

Devon looked confused. "I know they broke up."

Morgan shook his head. "You know they broke up. You've only known the five years afterward. You never saw what happened to Chuck immediately after Jill broke up with him."

Devon slowly sat down. "What happened?"

Morgan didn't answer immediately. Instead, he looked toward Chuck's bedroom. The door was closed. Just like it had been back then.

Morgan spoke quietly, "He stopped living."

Devon frowned, "What do you mean?"

Morgan sighed, "I mean, now he goes to work. Comes home. Plays video games. Works on his computer. Goes to bed. He's been doing that every day for years since then. You've seen this part of Chuck, but at the beginning it was even worse."

Ellie's eyes softened. "When he came home after Stanford, he stopped dating. He stopped eating. He stopped taking care of himself. He stopped believing anybody could actually love him. He withdrew into himself. He smiled, but not really. He wouldn't let anyone in for the first couple months, and then it was just Morgan and me. It was the most horrible thing I've seen someone do. It was my little brother doing it, and I couldn't help him."

The memory still frightened her because she could see the same warning signs now.

Devon leaned back. "So what do we do?"

Morgan answered immediately, "We don't let it happen again."

XXXX

The following evening, Chuck was in his bedroom with the door closed. The room was dark except for the glow of his computer monitor, and even that small light seemed to emphasize how completely he had withdrawn.

Morgan barged in and sat on his bed, carrying pizza boxes. A twelve-pack of grape soda and a twelve-pack of Mountain Dew. Controllers. Three game consoles and a stack of science-fiction movies.

Chuck blinked. "What are you doing?"

Morgan smiled. "Intervention." He deliberately made the moment ridiculous because he knew that too much seriousness would make Chuck retreat behind another joke.

Chuck laughed weakly, "I don't think interventions usually involve pepperoni and grape soda."

"They should."

"Morgan..."

"No."

Morgan pointed at the television, "We're playing."

"I'm really not in the mood."

"I know."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

Chuck looked tired. "I just want to go to bed."

Morgan shook his head. "No."

Chuck frowned. "Morgan..."

His best friend stood. For once, Morgan wasn't smiling.

"I already watched you disappear once."

Chuck froze.

Morgan continued quietly, "I'm not doing it again." He paused. "I watched you disappear once. I'm not standing by while it happens again."

Chuck looked away. "I'd rather not remember."

"Well, I do. I remember every damn day."

Chuck slowly looked back at him.

"You stopped calling. You stopped laughing. You stopped asking me to hang out. You acted like everything was fine... It wasn't."

Chuck swallowed. "I'll be okay." He wanted to believe the words. He wasn't sure whether he actually did.

Morgan immediately answered, "No. You'll survive. That's different. I don't want 'surviving' Chuck. I want my best friend back."

Neither of them spoke.

Finally, Chuck quietly admitted, "I really thought she was it." Saying it aloud made the loss feel different. He hadn't lost a girlfriend; he had lost a future he had started imagining.

Morgan nodded, "I know."

Several long seconds passed. Then Morgan picked up a controller, "So..."

Chuck looked at it, "So?"

"We can either shoot zombies, or you can sit here feeling miserable."

Chuck stared.

Morgan shrugged, "I'm cool either way."

Chuck couldn't help it. The corner of his mouth twitched.

Morgan pointed, "There."

Chuck frowned, "What?"

"I saw it."

"What?"

"A smile."

Chuck rolled his eyes, "It wasn't."

"It totally was."

Chuck sighed dramatically, "You are unbelievably annoying."

Morgan grinned, "I know, that's why I'm your best friend."

Chuck reached for the second controller.

Morgan thought to himself, "Good."

XXXX

Three hours later, "I TOTALLY SHOT THAT GUY!" Morgan yelled.

The laughter came easily now. It wasn't the same happiness Chuck had known with Lou. It didn't have to be. It was a different kind of healing, the kind that came from remembering he still belonged somewhere.

Chuck laughed, "No, you absolutely did not."

"He was mine!"

"You threw a grenade at your own feet!"

"It was tactical!"

"It was stupid!"

Morgan burst out laughing, "So was your driving!"

"I wasn't driving!"

"You stole my jeep!"

"You were using it wrong!"

Pizza boxes covered the coffee table. Grape soda and Mountain Dew cans were everywhere.

For the first time in days, Chuck laughed. A real laugh. For a few minutes, he wasn't the Intersect or the man who had sacrificed a relationship. He was just Morgan's best friend.

Around two in the morning, the game finally ended.

Morgan pretended to yawn, "You know"

Chuck looked over, "What?"

"I was kind of worried."

Chuck looked down, "I know."

Morgan shrugged, "You don't have to talk. You don't even have to be okay."

Chuck nodded.

"But...", Morgan smiled, "...you don't get to disappear."

Chuck looked at his best friend. "I'll try."

Morgan shook his head. "No. You'll call. You'll text. You'll come over, or I'll come over here. I'll drag you out if I have to."

"You probably would."

"Oh, I absolutely would."

XXXX

Morgan left just before sunrise. As he reached the front door, he looked back. Chuck was standing in the kitchen making coffee. Not staring blankly into space. Not hiding in his room. Morgan realized that sometimes helping someone heal began with something as simple as making sure they weren't alone.

Just making coffee, but now with a smile on his face.

Morgan said, "There's the Chuck I know."

Chuck looked confused. "What?"

"My best friend is smiling for the first time in a long time."

Chuck smiled again. A little bigger this time.

Morgan walked out the door knowing it wasn't over. Not even close. Chuck still had a long way to go. But for the first time since Chuck broke up with Lou, he wasn't walking that road alone.

XXXX

A month after Lou, Chuck had settled into a routine. It wasn't exciting. It wasn't particularly happy. But it was movement, and after the first weeks of grief, movement was enough.

Morgan still came over once a week for a video game marathon.

Ellie texted him every morning asking if he'd eaten breakfast. He usually lied. She usually knew. It was their quiet way of reminding him that he still had people who cared.

He usually lied.

She usually knew.

Life wasn't back to normal, but at least it was moving again.

XXXX

One morning, a loud knock echoed through Chuck's bedroom.

Another knock. Louder, "Chuck!"

He looked at the clock. 5:28 AM.

He knew only one person who was cheerful at five in the morning. Chuck shuffled to the door.

He had barely slept, and the last thing he wanted was to discover what kind of insane plan Devon had invented before sunrise.

Chuck stared at the coffee Devon had in his hand. For one second, he considered closing the door.

Then he remembered Morgan's warning. Don't disappear. He opened the door wider.

Devon stood outside wearing running shoes, athletic shorts, and a gray UCLA sweatshirt. He looked disgustingly awake.

"Morning, Chuck!"

Chuck squinted. "It's not."

Devon smiled. "It absolutely is."

Devon had already decided Chuck didn't need another lecture about heartbreak. He needed something physical, something outside his own head.

Chuck rubbed his eyes. "Awesome..."

"I brought coffee."

Chuck reached for it.

Devon pulled it back.

"After."

"After what?"

"Our run."

Chuck blinked. "Our what?"

Devon tossed a pair of running shoes into Chuck's hands. "We're going."

Chuck stared. "I don't run."

Devon grinned. "I know."

"I hate running."

"I know."

"I'm not built for running."

"Sure you are."

Chuck sighed. "So why are we doing this?" He wasn't really asking about running. He was asking why everyone around him seemed determined to keep pulling him back toward life.

Devon smiled, "Because you're built for something, and right now you've forgotten what."

XXXX

Twenty minutes later, "I hate you."

Devon laughed, "You've said that three times."

Chuck bent over with his hands on his knees. "I mean it more every time." His lungs burned, but underneath the discomfort he felt something he hadn't felt in weeks: present.

They hadn't even finished the first mile, and Chuck's lungs burned. His legs felt like concrete.

Devon looked perfectly comfortable. He hadn't even worked up a sweat yet.

"I don't understand how you're talking."

"I married your sister."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"I had to learn endurance with Ellie."

Chuck rolled his eyes. "That doesn't even make sense."

"You don't know your sister like I do. She had me in a supply closet an hour after we first met."

They started jogging again. Chuck lasted another two hundred yards. Then stopped. "I think...", he gasped, "...I'm dying."

Devon slowed to a walk. "No. It just feels like it."

Chuck pointed accusingly, "You're enjoying this."

"I am."

"You're a terrible person."

Devon laughed, "Probably."

XXXX

For breakfast, they ended up at a small diner.

Chuck was halfway through a stack of pancakes. "I've never been this hungry before at breakfast."

Devon was drinking some sort of green drink containing wheat grass and algae that he brought with him. It smelled horrible.

He smiled, "Good."

Chuck looked suspicious. "You're doing something."

Devon shrugged, "Maybe."

"What?"

Devon stirred his coffee. "I've been watching you. I know that sounds creepy. "

Chuck looked up, "It really does."

"I've watched you come home. You go to work. Come home. Sleep. And then do the same thing every day after that."

Chuck quietly returned to eating.

Devon continued, "You spend all day inside your own head." He paused. "Running gives your brain something else to do. You have to breathe, move, pay attention. For a little while, you can't replay the same conversation over and over."

Chuck nodded slightly.

"Running changes that."

Chuck looked down at his pancakes. Maybe Devon was right. Maybe he couldn't solve what had happened with Lou, but he could decide what happened next.

"How?"

"You can't think when your lungs are screaming."

Chuck laughed despite himself, "That's actually true."

XXXX

The next morning, Chuck considered pretending not to be home. Another knock, "Chuck!"

He sighed, "I'm coming."

Devon smiled, that same damn morning smile, "Ready?"

"No."

"Excellent."

XXXX

Buy More

Burbank, CA

Morgan wandered through the Buy More. He had been watching Chuck closely without making it obvious, and the change was small but unmistakable.

Chuck looked up, "What?"

Morgan narrowed his eyes, "Your shirt."

"What about it?"

"It's...", Morgan poked Chuck's shoulder, "...less squishy."

Chuck laughed. "I've been running." The admission was almost embarrassing, but it was also the first time he had talked about something new he was doing just because it made him feel better.

Morgan looked horrified. "Voluntarily?"

"No. Awesome keeps showing up."

Morgan nodded knowingly, "Oh, so you've been kidnapped."

"Basically."

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Castle

Burbank, CA

Casey waited inside the training room. He had noticed the change in Chuck's physical conditioning and wanted to know whether it would translate into something useful in the field.

Casey watched Chuck get back to his feet. There was no flash of brilliance. No Intersect download. No shortcut. Just repetition.

For Chuck, that might have been the most important lesson of all.

Casey told him. "Again."

Chuck sighed, "Seriously?"

Casey tossed him a padded training knife. "You wanted to learn some field training."

"I do."

"Then stop talking."

Chuck charged. Thirty seconds later... he was flat on his back.

Casey grunted, "Again."

The second attempt lasted longer. Forty-five seconds. Chuck still lost. But he got up immediately. Casey noticed that the important part wasn't how badly Chuck had lost. It

was how quickly he had decided to try again.

Casey noticed and grunted.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Again.

Chuck attacked.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Every time, he recovered a little faster.

Sarah watched from the training room door. She recognized something she hadn't seen in Chuck since before the breakup: determination that wasn't driven by fear.

Casey walked out. "You notice Bartowski?"

Sarah nodded, "He gets up quicker."

Casey folded his arms. "Has he been training?"

Sarah shook her head, "Not with us."

Another round. Chuck landed awkwardly. Rolled. Recovered.

Back on his feet before Casey expected.

Casey raised an eyebrow, "Again."

Chuck grinned, "I almost had you."

"No."

"It felt closer."

"You weren't."

Chuck laughed, almost a real laugh, "Worth a shot."

After training, Casey handed Chuck a bottle of water. "You've been working out."

Chuck unscrewed the cap. "Awesome, makes me run."

Casey nodded once. "Good." For Casey, the word carried more meaning than a speech ever could. Chuck was beginning to rebuild himself.

Chuck looked surprised. "That's it?"

"What?"

"I thought there'd be more yelling or mocking me."

Casey took a sip of coffee. "Running builds endurance."

"So?"

"So don't stop."

That was as close to praise as Casey usually gave. Chuck smiled all the way upstairs to the Buy More.

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Casa Bartowski/Woodcomb

Burbank, CA

Weeks later, Mornings with Devon had become routine. Chuck still complained, but the complaints had become part of the ritual rather than an attempt to escape it.

Mile one. Chuck still complained.

Mile two. Less complaining.

Mile three. Actual conversation.

Devon noticed, "You know, I haven't had to drag you out of bed this week."

Chuck thought about it, "Huh."

"You were waiting at the door."

"I was."

Devon smiled, "You know why?"

Chuck shrugged, "No."

"Because this stopped being about trying to get over Lou."

Chuck slowed.

Devon continued, "It's about you." He slowed beside Chuck. "Not Lou. Not anyone else. You're figuring out who you are, and who you want to be."

They reached a hill overlooking Burbank. The morning sun stretched across the city, and for several seconds Chuck stood there and looked. Chuck stood, catching his breath. "This is actually..."

He looked around, "...kind of beautiful."

Devon smiled, "I know."

"I've lived here for years. I've never seen this."

"It's awesome."

Chuck looked over. "You planned this."

Devon shrugged innocently. "Maybe."

"Thanks, Captain."

Devon smiled. Chuck had called him Captain before as a joke. This time, it sounded almost affectionate.

That was another sign that the old Chuck was returning.

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Sunday dinner. Ellie placed another helping of lasagna onto Chuck's plate. "Chuck, you look better."

Chuck smiled. "I feel better." He knew he wasn't completely healed. He still missed Lou. But the sadness no longer filled every empty space.

Morgan immediately interrupted, "Correction. You smell worse."

Chuck laughed, "I ran six miles this morning."

Morgan nearly choked on his drink. "Six?!"

Devon grinned proudly, "He wanted to do eight."

"I did not."

"You absolutely did."

Chuck pointed across the table. "That, Awesome, is slander."

Ellie laughed. "I haven't heard you joke like this in weeks."

Chuck looked around. At his sister. His brother-in-law. His best friend.

The people who had quietly refused to let him fall apart.

For Chuck, their persistence had become its own kind of safety. Nobody was asking him to pretend Lou hadn't mattered. They were reminding him that losing one part of his life didn't mean he had to lose everything else.

He smiled, "Thanks."

The table became quiet. Everyone understood that Chuck wasn't thanking them for fixing him. He was thanking them for refusing to let him disappear while he figured out how to fix himself.

Morgan looked confused, "For what?"

Chuck answered honestly, "For not giving up on me."

Ellie reached over and squeezed his hand. "As if that was ever an option."

Chuck looked around the table. For the first time, he understood that moving forward didn't mean leaving these people behind.

They were the reason he could move forward at all.

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Castle

Burbank, CA

General Beckman's face appeared on the main monitor. The training exercise was routine on paper, but Beckman had been following Chuck's progress closely.

"Agent Walker. Major Casey. Mr. Bartowski."

"Today's exercise will simulate an extended pursuit through an urban environment."

Chuck smiled to himself. For the first time, that didn't sound impossible. Months earlier, the idea of keeping pace with trained agents would have terrified him.

Now it sounded like a challenge.

Casey noticed, "So..."

Chuck looked over, "So?"

"You ready?"

Chuck nodded, "Yeah."

He surprised himself with the answer. He actually was.

Sarah watched Chuck prepare for the exercise. She didn't see a man who had forgotten Lou. She saw a man who was beginning to understand that grief and recovery could exist at the same time.

That was progress.

As the exercise began, Chuck found himself keeping pace far longer than he ever had before. The physical conditioning had changed more than his endurance. It had changed his confidence.

His breathing stayed steady. His legs didn't immediately tire. When the simulation ended, Casey looked down at the timer before looking back up at Chuck.

"You shaved almost three minutes off your previous time."

"Seriously?"

Casey gave a single approving nod. "Seriously."

Sarah smiled from across the room. "Looks like those early mornings with Devon are paying off."

Chuck laughed. "Don't tell him you said that. It'll go straight to his head."

As Chuck headed for the door up to the Orange Orange to begin another shift at the Buy More, neither he nor Devon realized what had really happened.

The morning runs had started as therapy. Without intending to, they had also become the first step toward transforming an ordinary computer nerd into someone who could keep up with spies. More importantly, Chuck was learning that moving forward didn't mean forgetting Lou. It meant learning how to carry the loss without letting it stop his life.

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End Chapter 9