

Honesty

by Anonymouse

Rated: T · Genre: Humor, Romance

Note: Just a little fun.

Chapter 1: The Drop-Off

Ellie Bartowski knew what love looked like on her brother's face.

She'd been studying it for twenty-six years. First on their mother, before. Then on Morgan, a different species of devotion but devotion nonetheless. On computer hardware, which honestly might have been the purest form. On Ellie herself, steady and uncomplicated, the one relationship in Chuck's life that had never required bravery.

And now on Sarah.

Ellie had been watching Chuck fall for Sarah Walker since the day he'd walked into the kitchen and said, with the studied casualness of a man defusing a bomb, "So I met someone." She'd watched him light up when Sarah texted. She'd watched him get nervous before their dates in a way he never had with Jill, a full-body nervousness that started in his hands and worked its way up to his voice. She'd watched him try, and fail, and try again to be cool about the whole thing, and she'd loved every second of it because her brother deserved someone who made him forget how to be cool.

What she hadn't seen, until tonight, was what love looked like on Sarah's face.

She'd suspected it was there. You don't date someone for months and show up to family dinners and remember how everyone takes their coffee without caring at least a little. But Sarah was careful. Sarah was composed. Sarah held herself with a precision that Ellie, as a doctor, recognized as practiced control. The smiles were real but measured. The touches were affectionate but timed. There was always a half-beat of calculation before Sarah reached for Chuck's hand, as if she were checking with some internal

authority before granting herself permission.

Ellie had filed this under private person and left it alone.

Tonight, Sarah Walker walked through their front door and the file caught fire.

Casey brought her. Which was unusual but not alarming. Casey did things without explanation and Ellie had learned not to ask. He stood in the doorway for approximately four seconds, said something about a work debrief, and left with the brisk efficiency of a man evacuating a building.

Sarah barely registered his departure. She was already looking at Chuck.

No. Not looking. Looking was what Sarah usually did. Controlled glances with plausible deniability. A gaze that landed on Chuck and then moved to something neutral before anyone could catch her at it. Ellie had noticed. Ellie always noticed.

This was different. Sarah's eyes found Chuck and stayed. Fixed on him with an intensity that Ellie felt from across the room, a focus so direct and so undisguised that it changed the temperature of the apartment. There was want in that look. That was obvious. Sarah Walker wanted Chuck Bartowski with a clarity that made Ellie's breath catch. But underneath the want, braided through it, was a longing so naked that Ellie almost turned away from it. Like she was seeing something private. Something Sarah had been keeping locked in a vault and the door had swung open and everything was spilling out at once.

Chuck was in the kitchen. He'd been making a sandwich. He looked up when Sarah walked in and Ellie watched him register the look, watched the greeting die on his lips, watched his face do the quick, complicated thing it always did when Sarah caught him off guard.

"Hey," he said. The sandwich was forgotten. His hands were just holding bread.

Sarah crossed the room. Not walked. Crossed. There was a roll in her hips that Ellie had never seen from her, a looseness in her stride that was almost feline. She moved like a woman who knew exactly what she looked like and had decided, tonight, to stop pretending she didn't.

She walked straight up to Chuck, put her hand on his jaw, and kissed him.

Not a hello kiss. Not the sweet, appropriate pecks Ellie had seen them exchange at the door, the kind that said we're a couple without saying much else. This kiss had a thesis. Sarah tilted his head down with her hand, rose onto her toes, and kissed him like she was making him a promise she intended to keep before the night was over. It lasted three seconds. Maybe four. Long enough that Ellie looked at Devon, who was on the couch, and Devon looked back at her with his eyebrows halfway up his forehead.

Chuck made a sound. A small, strangled sound, like someone had stepped on a squeeze toy. His ears went red. The bread was still in his hands.

Sarah pulled back. Smiled at him. Let her thumb drag across his jaw as her hand dropped.

"Hi," she said.

"Guh," Chuck said.

Ellie pressed her lips together. Hard. Because laughing right now would break whatever spell had turned Sarah Walker into a woman who kissed like that in front of witnesses, and Ellie did not want this spell to break. This spell was her new favorite thing.

Sarah drifted into the kitchen like she lived there. She poured herself a glass of water, leaning against the counter with a comfort that Ellie had never seen her display in this apartment. Usually Sarah occupied space politely, like a guest conscious of overstaying. Tonight she leaned. She settled. She planted herself next to Chuck with her hip cocked and one hand resting on the counter and looked at him with that look, the one that Ellie was beginning to think might be Sarah's actual face, the face underneath all the composure.

Chuck was trying to finish making his sandwich. His coordination had suffered. He put mustard on his hand.

"You okay there, bro?" Devon called from the couch.

"Fine! Great. Just, uh, condiment malfunction. Standard kitchen hazard." Chuck wiped his hand on a towel. Sarah took the towel from him, wiped a spot he'd missed on his thumb, and didn't give it back. She just stood there, holding his towel, looking at him.

Then she reached up and fixed his hair.

It was the most intimate thing Ellie had ever seen in her kitchen. Not the gesture itself, which was small. Sarah's fingers pushed a curl off Chuck's forehead, lingered at his temple, and traced down to the hinge of his jaw. It was the ease of it. The absence of hesitation. Sarah touched him like she'd been doing it for years instead of wanting to for months, and Ellie felt her eyes sting because she recognized that ease. She felt it every time she reached for Devon without thinking. It was the muscle memory of love, and Sarah was running on it tonight with the safety off.

Chuck stood very still. His ears were crimson. His mouth was slightly open. He looked like a man trying to solve a complex equation while being electrocuted.

"Sarah, do you want some dinner?" Ellie asked, mostly to give her brother a chance to recover. "We've got leftover pasta."

"I'm fine." Sarah smiled at her. A real smile, full and unguarded, the kind that reached her eyes and stayed there. "Thank you, Ellie."

Two words. Thank you. But Sarah said them with a warmth that made them sound like something larger, and Ellie felt it land in her chest.

Devon was putting on his shoes for the night shift. Ellie needed to change into scrubs. They had maybe ten minutes before they had to leave, and she wanted to spend every one of them watching this version of Sarah, this open, luminous, unhidden version who was currently straightening Chuck's collar with her fingertips while he stood there vibrating like a tuning fork.

"Come sit," Devon said, patting the couch. "We've got a few minutes."

Sarah took Chuck's hand and pulled him to the couch. He followed, because Chuck always followed Sarah, and Ellie had long ago stopped pretending she didn't find that hopelessly romantic. They sat. Or rather, Chuck sat, and Sarah sat next to him, and then

Sarah made a decision.

She pushed him back into the cushions. Gently but firmly, one hand on his chest, and before he could recalibrate she was in his lap. Sideways. Legs over the armrest. One arm around his shoulders. Settled in like she'd claimed this seat and the man in it and was not accepting counteroffers.

"Oh," Chuck said. "Okay. This is. We're doing this. In the living room. With people."

His face was the color of a stop sign. His hands were hovering at his sides like he wasn't sure where to put them, because the options were all parts of Sarah and his sister was right there.

Devon grinned. "Your girlfriend is awesome."

"She's, uh. She's very. Yes."

Ellie watched her brother malfunction with the tender amusement of a woman who'd spent a lifetime watching him malfunction around things he loved. This was Chuck. This was peak Chuck. A beautiful woman in his lap and he turned into a stammering mess, not because he didn't want her there but because wanting her there so much in front of people short-circuited every social skill he had.

Sarah, meanwhile, was playing with the hair at the back of his neck. Absently. Like her fingers had found their way there on autopilot and had no intention of leaving. She was looking at Ellie and Devon with an expression that Ellie needed a moment to place.

Wistful. Sarah Walker was looking at Ellie and Devon with open, unguarded wistfulness. The way you look at something you want so badly you've stopped trying to hide it.

Ellie changed into her scrubs. Devon grabbed his keys. The choreography of their departure was routine: jackets, badges, the quick check for phones and wallets. Sarah was still in Chuck's lap. Chuck had apparently decided that resistance was futile and had placed one tentative hand on her knee, which Sarah responded to by threading her fingers through his.

At the door, Ellie turned to say goodnight.

Sarah was looking at them. At Ellie and Devon, together, in the doorway. Shoulder to shoulder. Devon's arm going around Ellie's waist without thought. The easy, unconscious geometry of two people who'd built a life together.

"I want Chuck and I to be as happy as you two are," Sarah said.

She said it simply. Without performance. Without the careful framing Ellie had come to expect from a woman who measured her words the way other people measured ingredients. Just a sentence, delivered with the plainness of fact, as if she were observing the weather or stating the time.

Ellie's hand found Devon's arm. She squeezed. Not because she needed steadiness but because she needed to hold onto something while her heart did what it was doing, which was expanding to a size that her rib cage was not designed to accommodate.

"Oh, Sarah," Ellie said. Her voice came out thick.

Devon, who understood emotional moments the way he understood the ocean, which was completely and without complication, pulled Ellie a little closer and gave Sarah a nod that communicated a full paragraph of respect.

"You guys are gonna be great," he said. "You already are."

Ellie looked at Chuck. Her brother. Her sweet, too-tall, ridiculous brother, sitting on the couch with a woman in his lap and his ears still red and his eyes bright and his whole face open with a hope so raw it made Ellie want to cry.

He was looking at Sarah. And on his face was every single thing Ellie had spent twenty-six years learning to read: wonder, disbelief, gratitude, and a love so big he had no idea what to do with it except sit there and hold her hand and let it wreck him.

"Goodnight, guys," Ellie said.

She closed the door. She stood in the courtyard for a moment with Devon's arm around her shoulders and the warm Burbank night pressing in and Sarah's voice still ringing in her ears.

"Babe," Devon said. "You're crying."

"I'm not crying. I'm experiencing a physiological response to my brother's girlfriend finally admitting she's in love with him."

Devon kissed the top of her head. "That's crying."

"Shut up. Let's go save lives."

They walked to the car. Ellie didn't look back.

She was smiling too hard to see where she was going anyway.

The door closed.

The apartment was quiet.

Chuck Bartowski sat on the couch with Sarah Walker in his lap and waited for the reset.

He knew it was coming. He'd learned the rhythm. In public, Sarah was his girlfriend: warm, affectionate, convincing. In private, she was his handler: professional, measured, friendly but boundaried. The transition happened every time. A subtle withdrawal, a straightening of the spine, the return of the half-inch of space between them that she maintained like a DMZ. He'd made his peace with it months ago. The public version was a performance. The private version was real. He could live with that.

The reset didn't come.

Sarah shifted in his lap. Not away. In. She adjusted her weight, tucked herself more firmly against his chest, and continued playing with the hair at the back of his neck. Her fingers moved in slow circles just above his collar, a touch so casual and so continuous that it felt less like a decision and more like breathing.

"So," he said. "That was, uh. That was a lot. In front of Ellie."

"Was it?" Her voice was easy. Unconcerned. She didn't look at him when she said it. She was looking at his hand on her knee, specifically at his fingers, with an attention that felt almost clinical.

"The whole... lap thing. And the kiss. The kiss was very... thorough."

"You have a nice mouth." She said it the way she might comment on the weather. Looks like rain. You have a nice mouth. Equivalent significance. "I've been wanting to do that since Tuesday."

Chuck's brain produced a tone. A flat, continuous tone, like an EKG going to flatline. He was aware of it the way you're aware of a fire alarm: loud, insistent, demanding a response he was not equipped to provide.

"Since Tuesday," he repeated.

"Tuesday you were fixing the Blu-Ray player and you were concentrating. You get this look when you concentrate. Your jaw sets and your eyes go narrow and your hands..." She trailed off. Not because she'd decided to stop. The opposite. She'd decided to start looking at his hands, and the looking had temporarily displaced the talking. "I'll bet your fingers are magical."

The tone in Chuck's brain got louder.

"That's a. That's a very. Thank you?"

"I had a dream about them the other night." She picked up his right hand from her knee. Turned it over. Studied his palm with the focus of a woman reading a map. "I woke up at 2:33 and took a cold shower."

She kissed him.

Not the hello kiss. Not the statement-of-intent from the doorway that had already rewired significant portions of his nervous system. This was the 2:33 a.m. cold shower kiss. The I-just-told-you-my-secret-and-I'm-not-sorry kiss. It hit him like a power surge through a circuit already running hot.

Her hands went into his hair. Both of them. She shifted in his lap, adjusting the angle, and her mouth opened against his, and Chuck Bartowski stopped thinking.

Just... stopped. The questions, the confusion, the is-this-real calculus that had been spinning since she walked through the door, all of it went quiet. Because Sarah Walker was kissing him like he was the answer to a question she'd been asking herself for

months, and his body didn't need to understand it to respond.

His hands found her waist. Pulled her closer. She made a sound against his mouth, a small, satisfied hum, and he felt it vibrate through his teeth and down his spine. She tasted like the water she'd drunk in the kitchen. She smelled like gunpowder and something floral, her shampoo, and underneath both the warm clean scent that was just her, the one he caught in the car sometimes and spent the rest of the drive trying to breathe without being obvious about it.

He'd known. That was the thought that surfaced briefly before she pulled him deeper and dragged it back under. He'd known. Not the specifics, not the cold shower, not the timestamp. But the rest of it. He'd been noticing for months. Her eyes tracking his hands when he worked. The way she crossed her legs when he stood too close, a tight, controlled adjustment that happened too quickly to be casual. The way she licked her lower lip during their cover dates, a quick pass of tongue over lip that she always followed with a swallow, catching herself and trying to erase the evidence.

He'd told himself he was imagining it. For months. Because that's what Chuck Bartowski did with good things: assumed they were mirages. Stanford, Bryce, Jill. His track record had taught him that the better something looked, the more likely it was to disintegrate on contact.

But you don't fabricate 2:33 a.m. You fabricate round numbers. You fabricate vague timeframes. You don't invent a timestamp for a cold shower unless the timestamp is real and precision is so deep in your DNA that you can't help reporting it, even when the report is a confession.

This was real. She was real. And she was kissing him like she intended to be thorough about everything tonight, and his hands tightened on her waist because the alternative was floating away entirely.

Minutes passed. He lost count. Her mouth moved to his jaw, his neck, the spot below his ear that made him inhale sharply and grip her harder. She registered the reaction instantly, filed it with the precision of a woman who'd found a vulnerability and intended to revisit it. Her knees pressed tighter against his hips. One hand left his hair and slid to

his chest, fingers spreading over his sternum, and his heart was hammering so hard she could feel it through his shirt. Her other hand stayed in his hair, gripping, just holding on. The possessiveness of it short-circuited something he hadn't known existed.

"Sarah," he managed. It came out rough. A version of his own voice he'd never heard.

"Mm." Against his neck. A placeholder while her mouth was occupied.

"We should probably—"

She kissed him again. On the mouth. Ending the discussion with a finality that he found, in the one corner of his brain still capable of finding things, unreasonably compelling.

Then she moved. One smooth, unhesitating motion: she swung her leg over and straddled him, knees on either side of his hips, hands on his face, and the geometry of the situation changed so completely that his brain just handed in its resignation and left the building. She settled her weight against him and kissed him deeper and he was aware, distantly, that he should have thoughts about this, professional thoughts, rational thoughts, but rational thought required blood flow to the brain and his blood had relocated to other jurisdictions.

More minutes. The couch cushions shifted beneath them. His hand had migrated from her waist to her back, fingers spread across the space between her shoulder blades, and she arched into the contact. The room had been a normal temperature when they'd started. It was equatorial now.

Then she pulled back. Abruptly. Breathing hard. Her lips were swollen and her eyes were bright and her hair was wrecked from his hands, and she looked at him with an expression that was equal parts want and decision.

"I need to change," she said.

The gear change was so sudden that his brain, which had been running in a purely sensory mode, stalled trying to shift back to language.

"What?"

"These clothes." She plucked at her blouse. "I want to wear your clothes. I want to smell like you." She said this as a logistical requirement. A statement of fact that did not require his input. "Where are your t-shirts?"

"My... second drawer. On the left."

She climbed off his lap. The absence of her weight was immediate and total, like stepping out of a warm building into January. She walked down the hallway toward his bedroom with that walk, the hip-forward stride that he was going to see every time he closed his eyes for the rest of his natural life.

She disappeared through his bedroom door.

He sat on the couch. Lips tingling. Hair pointing in four directions. Shirt untucked. Heart rate somewhere near a hummingbird's. The ghost-weight of her still in his lap, a phantom impression his body refused to release.

This is real. She's real. Everything she said is real and she just kissed me like that and she's in my bedroom right now putting on my clothes and—

His phone buzzed.

He pulled it from his pocket with fingers that weren't entirely steady. The screen lit up.

CASEY: Truth serum

Chuck stared at the text.

Read it again.

Read it a third time, as if the words might rearrange themselves into something that didn't just detonate the best fifteen minutes of his life.

From the bedroom, the sound of drawers opening and closing. Sarah, going through his clothes. Sarah, who had kissed him with months of stored want and told him about a dream and a cold shower and a timestamp too precise to be anything but true. Sarah, who meant every word and every kiss and every touch.

Sarah, who was on truth serum.

Two words on his phone screen. They split the evening cleanly in half.

Everything she'd said was true. Casey's text confirmed it: not a lie detector, a truth serum. The feelings were real. The want was real. The 2:33 a.m. cold shower was real.

But she hadn't chosen to tell him any of it.

He heard her laugh from the bedroom. Bright and unselfconscious. She'd found something in his drawers.

He looked at the text one more time. Locked his phone. Put it back in his pocket.

He didn't know what he was going to do yet. He knew what he wasn't going to do, and that list had just gotten longer and more painful than he could have imagined twenty seconds ago. But the specifics of surviving tonight, of being in the same apartment as a chemically uninhibited Sarah Walker who had no idea he knew, who still thought he was the man on the couch, the man who'd kissed her back because he believed she was choosing him—

He didn't have a plan for that.

From the bedroom: "Chuck, do you actually own a shirt that says 'I Know' on it?"

"It's a Star Wars reference."

"I know what it is." A pause. "I'm putting it on."

He stared at the hallway. At the light from his bedroom. At the shadow of a woman moving behind his door.

It was going to be a long night.

Chapter 2: The Evening

She walked out of his bedroom in the "I Know" shirt and nothing else.

Well. Not nothing else. There were underwear. He could tell because the shirt hit mid-thigh and when she moved, when she padded barefoot down the hallway with that walk, the hem shifted and he caught a flash of something that was categorically, definitively not the kind of underwear a government operative wore on a mission.

Light blue. Lace.

He looked at the ceiling. He looked at the floor. He looked at the kitchen counter with the intensity of a man who had just discovered a deep personal interest in laminate surfaces.

"I like this shirt," she said. She stopped in the living room and looked down at it, smoothing the fabric across her stomach. Han Solo's signature line stretched across her chest. "It's soft. It smells like you." She lifted the collar to her nose and inhaled, eyes closing, and the expression on her face was so unguarded and so happy that his stomach clenched.

The hem rose when she lifted the collar. The light blue lace was right there again, not a flash this time but a full, unhurried display, framed between the bottom of his Star Wars shirt and the tops of her thighs while she stood with her eyes closed and her nose in his collar and no awareness whatsoever that she was giving him a view that was going to be permanently burned into his visual cortex.

"It's, uh, it's a good shirt," he said. His voice had gone up half an octave. "Vintage. Got it at a convention in—you know what, the provenance of the shirt isn't really—"

"Chuck."

"Yeah?"

"You're rambling."

"I am aware."

She crossed the room and sat down on the couch next to him. Not at the other end. Not at a reasonable distance. She sat close enough that her bare thigh pressed against his jeans and her shoulder touched his arm and the scent of his own laundry detergent came off her skin mixed with whatever she smelled like underneath, and the combination of familiar and foreign was doing something to his respiratory system that he was going to need to address.

She reached behind her back through the shirt, unclasped her bra, and then performed the maneuver that every woman learns and no man fully understands: a sequence of shrugs and reaches and strap-sliding that took about four seconds and ended with her pulling the entire bra out through one sleeve. She tossed it on the arm of the couch.

The bra landed on the arm of the couch. Light blue. Lace. Matching the underwear. A set. She'd worn a set. A clasp and two straps and a piece of fabric that had been against her skin thirty seconds ago and was now draped across his sofa like it owned the place, and Chuck's visual field narrowed to a tunnel with the bra at the end of it.

"That's better," she said, settling back into the couch.

He tore his eyes away. Looked at the television. The television was off. It showed him his own reflection: a man with wrecked hair sitting next to a woman in his Star Wars shirt who had just removed her bra in his living room with the casual efficiency of someone taking off a watch.

"Do you want to watch something?" he asked. His voice sounded almost normal. Almost.

"Sure." She pulled her feet up onto the couch and leaned into him. Her head found the hollow of his shoulder. She fit there. She fit there perfectly, which seemed cosmically unfair, because the universe had apparently designed a woman-shaped socket in his body and then filled it with someone he couldn't touch. "You pick."

He picked up the remote. Turned on the TV. Selected the first thing that appeared, which turned out to be a nature documentary about deep sea creatures. Bioluminescent jellyfish pulsed across the screen. It was the least romantic programming he could have hoped for, and he was grateful to every jellyfish in the ocean.

"I always sit on this side of the table," Sarah said.

He looked at her. She wasn't looking at the jellyfish. She was looking at his kitchen table, visible through the archway, with the evaluative focus she usually reserved for tactical assessments.

"At dinner. When we all eat together. I always take the chair on the left side because from that angle I can watch your hands when you eat."

"You watch my hands when I eat."

"You hold your fork differently than most people. You grip it farther down the handle. Your fingers wrap around it and..." She trailed off. Her eyes had gone slightly unfocused. She was watching a memory. "It's distracting."

Chuck looked at the jellyfish. The jellyfish had no advice for him.

"And in the hallway," she continued, as if she were reading items from a grocery list. "I slow down when I walk through your hallway because you always walk behind me and I like knowing you're there. I can feel you. Not touching, just... the space you take up. The warmth. It's like standing near a fireplace."

"I'm a fireplace."

"You're a very good fireplace."

He should not have found that as affecting as he did. He was being compared to a household heating appliance and his throat was tightening.

She shifted against him. Her hand found his thigh. Not high. Just above the knee. Resting there with a comfortable weight that suggested it had no plans to leave. Her fingers drummed lightly on the denim, an idle rhythm, and each tap sent a pulse up his leg that the nature documentary was powerless to counteract.

On the screen, an anglerfish opened its mouth to reveal rows of needle teeth. Chuck had never related more to another living creature.

Twenty minutes passed. The documentary moved on to thermal vents. Sarah had not moved on from his thigh. Her hand was still there, warm and present, and she'd started drawing small circles on the inside of his knee with her index finger, and he was fairly certain she wasn't aware she was doing it, and he was extremely certain it was going to kill him.

"This is nice," she said.

"The documentary?"

"Being here. With you. Without having to—" She paused. Considered. "I'm always calculating. When I'm with you, I'm always running equations. How close is too close. How long to hold a look before it becomes obvious. Whether touching your arm will seem natural or whether you'll notice and I'll have to pretend I was adjusting your collar." She exhaled slowly. "I'm not calculating right now. I'm just here. I didn't know that could feel this good."

Chuck stared at the thermal vents. His jaw was tight.

She's on truth serum. She didn't choose to tell you this. She's not choosing any of this.

He knew. He kept knowing. And it kept not helping, because every true thing she said landed in his chest like a stone in water, sinking to the bottom, settling in, permanent.

She tilted her head up and kissed his jaw. Soft. Brief. Then settled back against his shoulder.

"Can we watch something else? These fish are depressing."

He changed the channel. A movie. He didn't register which one. He was busy not looking at the bra on the couch arm, which was sitting there with the quiet authority of a flag planted on conquered territory.

In the apartment next door, John Casey stared at the monitor for a long moment, then stared at the wall.

He'd been watching for forty-five minutes. He'd watched Walker remove her bra through her sleeve like she was field-stripping a weapon. He'd watched Bartowski's face go through seven distinct phases of psychological crisis. He'd watched them sit on a couch watching a documentary about fish while Walker narrated her surveillance habits regarding Bartowski's hands, and he'd listened to every word through a monitoring system that the NSA had installed for national security purposes and not, emphatically not, for this.

He opened the Johnnie Walker Black.

An hour in, Sarah announced she was hungry.

Chuck made popcorn because popcorn was safe. Popcorn was a snack that required no preparation more intimate than pressing a microwave button, and you ate it with your hands, individually, from a bowl, at whatever distance you chose.

Sarah ate it from his hand.

Not the bowl. His hand. She picked up a kernel from the bowl, put it in his palm, and then ate it from his palm, her lips brushing his skin, and when she looked up at him through her lashes and smiled he nearly put his fist through the microwave.

"You don't have to do that," he said. "The bowl is right there."

"I know." She took another kernel from the bowl. Placed it in his palm. Ate it. "I like this better."

He let her eat popcorn from his hand because the alternative was explaining why he couldn't let her eat popcorn from his hand, and that explanation would require disclosing Casey's text, and disclosing Casey's text would require having a conversation he was not prepared to have while a woman with no bra was eating snacks off his body.

The movie played. He watched none of it. He was watching Sarah instead, or rather, he was watching Sarah watch the movie while resting her head on his shoulder and periodically making observations that detonated inside his skull.

"You're warm. You're always warm. I run cold. I've been cold my entire life. Not temperature, just—" She pressed closer. "You fix it."

He breathed. In. Out. The respiration of a man maintaining consciousness through sheer mechanical effort.

"When you laugh at something Morgan says, I feel it here." She took his hand and pressed it against her left breast. Over her heart. His palm against her, her heartbeat under his fingers, and she held his hand there like this was the most natural thing in the world because to serum-Sarah it was. She was showing him where his laugh lived. The fact that she'd just placed his hand on her breast without a bra between them was not information she was currently processing. "Not in my ears. Here. Your laugh lives here, Chuck. That's where it goes. I've tried to figure out how to stop it and I can't."

He was not breathing. He had forgotten how breathing worked. His hand was where she'd put it and he could feel her heartbeat and the warmth of her and the softness of her and his brain had left the building and was not expected to return.

Breathe. In. Out.

She tried to kiss him.

She turned her face up and leaned in with the quiet confidence of a woman who had kissed him forty minutes ago and saw no reason the arrangement shouldn't continue, and he caught her shoulders gently and held her at arm's length and said, "Hey, how about more popcorn?"

She looked at him. Head tilted. Curious. Not hurt, which was something, but curious in a way that meant she was analyzing the deflection and would probably comment on it with devastating accuracy in approximately three seconds.

"You don't want to kiss me," she said.

"That is the opposite of the problem."

"Then what's the problem?"

The problem is that you're on truth serum and I know about it and you don't know I know and everything you're saying is true and I want to kiss you so badly my teeth hurt and I can't because you wouldn't be doing this if you had your walls and your walls exist for reasons I hate but respect and I am going to MURDER John Casey.

"No problem. Just... pacing. I'm a pacer. I like to pace things."

"You're a pacer," she repeated. Skeptical. The intelligence operative's ear for lies, still fully functional even when her own truth-telling was chemically deregulated.

"Absolutely. Very deliberate. Very measured. It's a whole philosophy."

She studied him for a long moment. Then she took a kernel of popcorn from the bowl, placed it in his palm, and ate it while maintaining eye contact.

He was going to die on this couch. They would find his body and determine that the cause of death was Sarah Walker eating popcorn.

Casey poured a second glass of Johnnie Walker. On the monitor, Walker was feeding herself from Bartowski's hand like he was a Roman emperor and she was choosing the grapes.

His phone sat on the table. He considered texting Bartowski again. Something more specific. Something like "keep it in your pants" or "she'll thank you tomorrow" or "I swear to God if you touch her I will end you."

He didn't text. Bartowski was handling it. Against all reasonable expectations, the kid was holding the line.

Casey drank his scotch and respected Chuck Bartowski for the first time in their professional relationship.

He would never, ever tell him.

By hour two, she'd migrated to the bedroom.

"Your bed is more comfortable than the couch," she announced, standing up and walking down the hall with the confidence of a woman who owned the apartment and everything in it. "Come on."

"I'm fine on the couch."

"I'm not asking you to come to bed." She turned in the hallway. The shirt shifted. The light blue lace caught the hallway light. "I'm asking you to come be comfortable while we hang out. The couch is too small for both of us."

This was technically true. The couch was too small. He was six-four. She'd been pressed against him for two hours and his left arm had been falling asleep for the last thirty minutes. The bed was a more practical option for two people who were just hanging out.

He went to the bedroom because the alternative was explaining why he couldn't go to the bedroom, and every explanation led back to the text.

She was already on the bed. Cross-legged. His bed. The "I Know" shirt pooled around her thighs. She looked comfortable and happy and completely devastating, and he stood in the doorway and committed the image to a memory he would keep for the rest of his life.

"I'm very flexible," she said.

The sentence arrived without preamble or context, which was becoming a pattern with serum-Sarah. Thoughts formed and exited her mouth in a single unbroken motion, skipping every checkpoint that normal Sarah maintained between impulse and speech.

"That's... good? Flexibility is, uh, good for... health."

"I can do a full split."

"Congratulations."

"Want to see?"

"I really don't think—"

She did a full split. On his bed. In the "I Know" shirt and light blue lace underwear. She dropped into it with the easy grace of someone who'd been trained in hand-to-hand combat since adolescence and maintained a stretching routine that apparently qualified as a weapon of mass destruction.

The shirt rode up.

He looked at the ceiling. He looked at the doorframe. He looked at his own hands, which were gripping the doorframe with enough force to leave marks.

"See?" she said from the split. "I told you."

"I see. I see that. That's very. You're very. I'm going to go get water."

"I'm not thirsty."

"I am."

He went to the kitchen. He drank water. He drank more water. He put his head under the faucet and let cold water run over the back of his neck and thought about baseball

statistics and tax law and the lifecycle of the Norwegian lemming.

When he came back, she'd gotten off the split and was sitting on the bed normally. The shirt had ridden up on one side. The light blue lace was visible against her thigh. He tried not to look. He failed. She noticed.

She didn't pull the shirt down.

She smiled.

"Those used to be tactical," she said. "The underwear. Standard issue. Cotton. Beige. Functional." She smoothed the lace edge with her fingertip, a casual gesture that he tracked with helpless attention. "I stopped wearing those a few months ago."

"A few months ago."

"Around the same time I started sleeping nude." She looked up at him. "I know light blue is your favorite color."

The room tilted. Not literally. Literally, the room was stationary. But the information that Sarah Walker had been selecting her underwear based on his color preferences for months caused a shift in his understanding of the universe that manifested as a distinct sensation of the floor moving.

"You've been—" He stopped. Started. Stopped again. "How do you know my favorite color?"

"You told Ellie in September. You were picking napkins for Thanksgiving. I was in the hallway."

She'd been in the hallway. Months ago. And she'd stored the information. And she'd used it. On underwear. Underwear he was never supposed to see. Underwear she wore under her mission clothes and her cover outfits and her jeans, a private signal broadcasting on a frequency only she could hear, and the frequency was light blue, for Chuck.

"Are they making you uncomfortable?" she asked.

The smirk was back. The one from the couch. The one that said she could see his suffering and found it delightful. Even under truth serum, even without filters, Sarah Walker was capable of enjoying the effect she had on him. The serum hadn't changed that. It had just removed the part of her that pretended not to notice.

"They're not making me—I'm not—you're fine. Everything is fine."

"I can fix that."

She hooked her thumbs under the waistband. Lifted her hips. Pulled them off in one smooth motion and dropped them on the floor beside the bed.

Then she got up, crossed the room, and sat back down in his lap.

On the bed. In just the "I Know" shirt. In his lap. Where she'd been all evening, because his lap was apparently where Sarah Walker lived now, it was her primary residence and she had no intention of relocating.

He felt every inch of the new reality. The absence of the lace barrier, the warmth of her through his jeans, the weight of her settling against him with the satisfied ease of a woman who'd solved a logistical problem and could move on. His hands hovered at his sides. He didn't know where to put them. Every available surface was her.

She shifted to get comfortable.

His body responded. Involuntarily, immediately, with a specificity that no amount of willpower could override, because he was a human male and she was Sarah Walker in his lap in nothing but a t-shirt and the laws of physiology did not care about his moral crisis.

She noticed.

Of course she noticed. She was a trained operative who could detect a concealed weapon through three layers of clothing. She was not going to miss this.

She went very still for a moment. Then she looked at him with an expression of calm, clinical interest. The expression of a woman noting a data point.

"That's because of me," she said.

He closed his eyes. "Please don't."

"I'm just observing."

"I am begging you not to observe."

"It's flattering." She said this without mockery. Without teasing. Genuine. Like the physical evidence of his attraction was a compliment she'd been waiting to receive. "I've wondered. Whether you... I mean, I hoped. But you're very controlled. You don't look at me below the neck in public. Ever. I've tested it."

"You've tested it?"

"Twice. Once in the red dress at the Callahan reception. I stood at an angle that should have drawn your eyes down and you looked at the ceiling. The ceiling, Chuck. I was wearing a dress that cost the CIA four thousand dollars and you looked at a ceiling tile."

"There was a water stain. I was concerned about structural—"

"And once in the orange bikini at the beach. You handed me a towel without looking. You aimed the towel by memory so you wouldn't have to look down."

He had done that. He remembered doing that. He remembered the extreme athletic precision required to hand a beach towel to a woman in a bikini while maintaining eye contact with the horizon, and the fact that she'd noticed and catalogued it as data was making him want to sink through the mattress and into the earth's core.

"I thought it meant you weren't attracted to me," she said. Quieter now. "For a while. Then I realized it meant the opposite. You don't look because you can't look a little. You'd look too much. You'd give it away."

He didn't open his eyes. He couldn't look at her right now. If he looked at her right now, sitting in his lap in his shirt with her analytical voice saying the truest thing anyone had ever said about him, his face would give away everything Casey's text was telling him to protect.

She didn't push. She settled against him, leaned her head on his shoulder, and let the silence hold for a few breaths.

"I know we're not going to do anything tonight," she said.

His eyes opened. She was looking across the room, not at him. Thoughtful. Calm.

"You're being careful with me. I can feel it. I don't completely understand why, but I can feel it, and it's—" She paused. "It's the most attractive thing anyone has ever done."

His throat tightened.

"The first time should be in my bed," she said. "Not yours. I've thought about it. Your bed is fine but it's against the wrong wall and the light comes from the wrong side. My room faces west. In the late afternoon the light comes through the window at this angle—" She held her hand up, tilting it, mapping a sunbeam that existed only in a scenario she'd been building in private for months. "Golden. Warm. It hits the bed around four or five o'clock and everything turns amber."

She dropped her hand. Laced her fingers through his.

"I want that light. I want to be able to see you. Your face, when we... I want to see your face in that light. I've imagined it. More than once." A pause. "More than a hundred times, if I'm being accurate, which apparently I have to be."

He sat very still and let her describe the future she'd been carrying in secret, and something inside him cracked along a fault line he didn't know he had. Not desire. Something quieter. The understanding that Sarah Walker, who planned extractions and combat operations and covert infiltrations, had been planning him. Planning a sunbeam. Planning which side of the bed. Planning the light on his face.

"I want it to be a Tuesday," she said. "An ordinary day. Not after a mission, not because something happened, not because we almost died. I want it to be boring and normal and the only reason is that we want to. I've never had that. Everything in my life happens because of adrenaline or necessity. I want to choose you on a Tuesday for no reason."

She leaned back against his chest. His arms were around her now. He didn't remember putting them there. They'd just gone, the way her fingers went to his hair, the way her head went to his shoulder. Automatic. The body knowing what the mind was still arguing about.

"You're going to make a sound," she said. "When we're together. I've heard you groan. When you stretch in the morning, this low sound from your chest. I think about that sound a lot. I think about what it would sound like if I was the reason for it." She breathed out slowly. "I'm going to find out. Not tonight. But I'm going to find out."

He held her. In his lap, on his bed, the "I Know" shirt warm against his arms. The light blue lace on the floor. The bra on the couch. Her fantasies in the air between them, specific and fragile and devastating.

"We should sleep," he said. His voice was rough.

"Okay." Simple. Easy. She climbed off his lap and stretched out on his bed with the proprietary comfort of a cat claiming a sunbeam. "I should tell you, I started sleeping nude about three months ago. I know that's operationally inefficient. If there's a breach I'd have to take time to dress, which could cost critical seconds. But I wanted to feel like a person. Not an agent. A person in a bed." She pulled the shirt over her head and dropped it on the floor. "It started around the time I met you."

He was already facing the wall. His survival instincts had rotated his body at the first sound of fabric.

"I'm under the covers," she said. He could hear the smile. "You can look."

He looked. She was under the covers. Sheet to her collarbone. Bare shoulders. Her hair on his pillow. She looked settled in a way that made his bed look like it had been waiting for her.

"Come to bed, Chuck."

He went to the bathroom. Changed into pajamas. Full pajamas. Long pants, long sleeves. He considered adding socks. He brushed his teeth. He looked at himself in the mirror and saw a man who was about to get into bed with a naked Sarah Walker and not touch her, and the mirror offered no strategy for this beyond basic oxygen intake.

He got into bed. His side. Maximum distance.

She closed the gap in two seconds. Back against his chest. His arm pulled across her waist. Skin against cotton.

"Put your hand on my hip," she said.

He put his hand on her hip. Bare skin. Warm.

She adjusted, pressed closer, and made a sound of satisfaction that traveled through his body like a current. Then her hand drifted to the waistband of his pajama bottoms and slipped underneath. Just her fingers. Just past the elastic. Resting against his hip bone with a possessive weight that said mine.

"This is the best night of my life," she murmured. Her voice was already thick with sleep. "You should know that."

"Goodnight, Sarah."

She was asleep in thirty seconds. He could tell by the breathing, by the way her body went heavy against him, by the way her fingers relaxed against his hip but didn't retreat. She held on even in sleep.

He stared at the ceiling.

His hand on her bare hip. Her fingers inside his waistband. The shirt on the floor. The lace on the floor. The bra on the couch. Her fantasies about a Tuesday afternoon and amber light and the sound he made when he stretched, all of it still hanging in the dark like smoke.

Truth serum.

Everything she'd said was true. Every touch was real. Every confession was something she'd been carrying for months.

And she hadn't chosen to share any of it.

She'd said this was the best night of her life. And it was his too. And the tragedy of that, the comedy of it, was so enormous he couldn't hold it all at once. The best night of both their lives, spent in the same bed, with the same feelings, separated by two words on a phone screen.

Her breath was slow and even against his chest.

He stared at the ceiling and didn't sleep.

Casey turned off the monitor at 11:42 p.m.

The kid hadn't moved. Hadn't touched her. Was lying there, awake, holding her, fully dressed, staring at the ceiling with the thousand-yard stare of a man who'd won a war and lost something in the winning.

Casey looked at the dark screen for a long time.

Then he finished his scotch, washed the glass, and went to bed.

He set his alarm for 0600. He had a door to knock on.

Chapter 3: The Morning After

Sarah Walker woke up holding someone.

Not next to someone. Not in proximity to someone. Holding. Her body was wrapped around another body with a possessive thoroughness that suggested her unconscious self had strong opinions about personal space and had decided to eliminate it entirely. Her leg was hooked over his thigh. Her arm was across his chest. Her face was pressed into the curve of his neck, and her fingers were—

She went still.

Her fingers were inside the waistband of his pajama bottoms. Not deep. Just past the elastic, resting against the ridge of his hip bone. Skin on skin. Warm.

He was wearing pajamas. Full pajamas. Long pants, long sleeves. He was wearing more clothing than a man on a ski lift.

She was wearing nothing.

These two facts assembled themselves in her brain with the slow, grinding precision of tectonic plates shifting, and the landscape they created was unfamiliar and alarming.

Don't move. Assess.

Training. Thank God for training. She could do this. She could lie perfectly still against a man she was naked-spooning in full-body octopus configuration and assess.

His bed. That was his ceiling, his window, his nightstand. His bedroom. She was in Chuck Bartowski's bed. The sheets smelled like his laundry detergent. The pillow under her head smelled like his shampoo.

Fragments surfaced. Not a full record. Flashes, bright and disconnected, like photographs thrown from a moving car.

His face when she walked in. The kiss at the door. Her hand on his jaw, tilting him down.

Ellie's eyes going wide. Devon grinning.

I want Chuck and I to be as happy as you two are.

Her stomach dropped. She'd said that. Out loud. In front of Ellie. She could feel the truth of it in her body, the phantom weight of words that had exited her mouth without clearance from any checkpoint she maintained between impulse and speech.

More fragments. The couch. His lap. Her hands in his hair. Kissing him with a thoroughness that made her face heat just remembering the edges of it. His hands on her waist. The sound he made against her mouth.

I'll bet your fingers are magical.

Oh no.

I woke up at 2:33 and took a cold shower.

Oh no.

She lay frozen against Chuck's sleeping body and let the fragments come, each one arriving like a small, precise detonation.

She'd told him about the dream. She'd told him about the cold shower. She'd told him with a timestamp. She'd sat in his lap and studied his palm and said things about his fingers that she would rather be waterboarded than repeat in daylight.

And she'd kissed him. Not a cover kiss. Not a strategic maneuver. She'd kissed him like she'd been starving for months, because she had been, and her mouth had just... gone. Without consulting her. Without filing the appropriate paperwork.

He'd kissed her back.

That fragment was sharp. Clear. Not blurred like the others. His hands pulling her closer. The hum of his breathing changing against her mouth. He'd kissed her back.

She needed to get out of this bed.

The extraction took ninety seconds. An eternity. She worked in millimeters, easing her leg off his thigh, sliding her fingers from his waistband with the delicacy of a woman disarming an explosive, shifting her weight off his chest one ounce at a time. He stirred once. She froze. He settled.

She stood beside the bed and looked down at him. He was on his back, one arm still extended across the space where she'd been, the other at his side. Fully dressed. Fully clothed in cotton armor from collar to ankle. His face was drawn, even in sleep. The face of a man who'd been awake for a long time before his body finally gave out.

The "I Know" shirt was on the floor. She picked it up. Pulled it on. It fell to mid-thigh and smelled like him and she stood there in the gray morning light of his bedroom wearing Han Solo's answer to a love confession and tried to assemble something that felt like a plan.

She went to the bathroom. The mirror confirmed what she expected: hair that looked like it had been styled by a fight, pillow creases on her cheek, mascara she hadn't removed smudged under her left eye. She looked like a woman who'd been taken apart and put back together with some of the pieces in different positions.

She washed her face. Finger-combed her hair. Stared at herself.

More fragments. The couch, later. His lap. A nature documentary about fish that neither of them watched. She'd fed him popcorn from her hand. No. She'd fed herself from his hand. She could feel the ghost of his palm against her lips and her face went hot.

The splits. She'd done the splits on his bed. In his shirt and her underwear. She'd demonstrated her flexibility like it was a field skill she was auditioning with.

Her underwear. Light blue. Lace. She'd told him about the light blue. She'd told him it was his favorite color. She'd told him she'd been buying underwear with him in mind for months, and he'd looked at her like the floor was moving under him, and then she'd—
She'd taken them off.

She'd asked if they were making him uncomfortable and then removed them in front of him and sat back down in his lap wearing nothing but a t-shirt.

She gripped the edge of the sink.

She'd been in his lap. In just the shirt. And she'd noticed that he was... that his body was... she'd commented on it. Clinically. Like she was noting weather conditions. She could feel the shape of the words she'd said even if the exact phrasing was mercifully blurred.

Something about a red dress. About a bikini. About him looking at the ceiling.

She pressed her forehead against the mirror and closed her eyes.

There were gaps. She knew she'd said more. She could feel the empty spaces where memories should be, the way you feel a missing tooth with your tongue. She'd said things about his apartment. About her bed. About a Tuesday. The details were fog.

She'd taken off the shirt. She'd gotten into his bed naked. She'd arranged him where she wanted him, put his hand on her hip, slipped her fingers inside his pajamas, and fallen asleep on him like a woman who had every right to be there.

And he'd let her. In full pajamas. Holding her all night.

She didn't know how long she stood at the sink. Long enough that the light through the frosted window shifted from gray to pale gold. Long enough that the horror cycled through several times and began, against her will, to transform into something else. Something adjacent to horror but warmer. Because underneath every mortifying fragment was the same substrate: she'd meant it. All of it. The dreams, the cold shower,

the underwear, the wanting. None of it had been fabricated. The serum hadn't put anything in her head. It had just opened a door she'd spent months holding shut.

From the bedroom: the creak of the bed. Footsteps. The slow shuffle of a man who hadn't slept, rising from a mattress that had contained a naked woman he hadn't touched.

A soft knock on the bathroom door.

"Sarah? You okay?"

His voice was rough. Sandpaper and exhaustion. The voice of a man who'd been awake for most of the night and had spent the hours staring at a ceiling and clenching his jaw.

"I'm fine," she said. Her voice sounded almost normal. "Just waking up."

A pause. She could feel him on the other side of the door, deciding what to say.

"Take your time," he said. And then his footsteps moved away, toward the kitchen. Giving her space. Being Chuck.

She waited another minute. Splashed water on her face one more time. Opened the door.

He was in the kitchen, filling the coffeemaker. His back was to her. Pajamas wrinkled, hair worse than hers. He didn't turn around. He was giving her the room to cross from bathroom to living room without having to perform a face for him yet, and the small kindness of that made her throat ache.

She sat on the couch. Pulled her knees up. Waited.

He finished with the coffeemaker, walked back down the hall without looking at her, and closed the bathroom door behind him.

Water running. She listened. No steam crept under the door when she passed it. Cold. He was taking a cold shower.

At 6 a.m. After spending the night holding a naked woman he didn't touch.

She almost laughed. 2:33 a.m., cold shower, her confession. And now the mirror image: him, the next morning, cold shower, for the same reason.

In the living room, her bra sat on the arm of the couch with the insouciant calm of an uninvited guest who'd made itself comfortable. Her blouse from last night was draped over a chair. Her shoes by the door. The apartment was a scatter map of everywhere she'd been and everything she'd dropped, a breadcrumb trail of lost inhibitions.

A knock at the door.

She opened it.

Casey.

He stood in the courtyard in a dark t-shirt and tactical pants, the fountain gurgling behind him, looking like a man who'd been up since before the sun and had already completed several activities that involved discipline and self-punishment. His eyes took in the scene with the rapid, comprehensive sweep of a trained operative: Sarah in the "I Know" shirt, bare legs, hair still half-wrecked. The bra on the couch visible behind her. The general condition of the apartment.

His expression didn't change. Not one muscle.

"You need to review the footage," he said.

He turned and walked back to his apartment. She watched him go. No elaboration. No follow-up. Casey had delivered a piece of operational intelligence and considered the interaction complete.

She closed the door. Stood in the living room. The shower was still running.

She found Chuck's laptop on the kitchen counter. Opened it. She knew Casey's surveillance access codes because she'd set up half the system herself, a fact that was now working against her with brutal irony.

She logged in. Pulled up last night's feeds. Timestamp 19:42. The front door.

She watched herself walk in.

It was like watching another woman. A woman who moved differently, stood differently, occupied space with a confidence that Sarah recognized as her own but had never seen deployed this way. She watched herself cross the room to Chuck. Watched her hand go to his jaw. Watched the kiss, the real one, the one with a thesis, and felt her own mouth tingle with the memory of it.

She watched Ellie's face light up. Watched Devon's grin. Watched herself push Chuck onto the couch and climb into his lap in front of his sister like it was the most natural thing in the world.

She watched herself say it. At the door. To Ellie. She couldn't hear the audio, Casey had the feeds on visual only, but she could read her own lips. I want Chuck and I to be as happy as you two are. She watched Ellie's hand find Devon's arm. Watched the door close.

She watched the make-out. It was worse from the outside, watching her own hands in his hair, watching her shift in his lap, watching his arms go around her and pull her in. She could see what she'd only felt: the moment he stopped hesitating and started meeting her. His hands on her waist. The way his head tilted back when she kissed his neck.

She watched herself disappear into the bedroom to change.

She watched Chuck. Alone on the couch. Wrecked hair. Untucked shirt. The face of a man living inside the best moment of his life.

She watched him pull out his phone.

She watched his face change.

It happened in stages. First the stillness, the absence of expression that meant the brain was processing faster than the face could follow. Then the comprehension. Then something that looked like pain, clean and immediate, the kind of pain you feel when you understand something you don't want to understand.

He read the text three times. She could count the eye movements.

He put the phone away.

She hadn't known. She hadn't known he knew. The entire evening, every confession, every touch, every moment she'd spent in his lap telling him things she'd never told anyone, he'd known it was truth serum. He'd known since before she came out of the bedroom in the "I Know" shirt.

And he hadn't said a word.

She kept watching. Fast-forwarding through the evening, stopping at the moments she remembered and the ones she didn't. The bra through the sleeve. The popcorn from his hand. The confessions about the kitchen table and the hallway. She watched his face during each one: attentive, present, in agony.

She watched herself do the splits and him grip the doorframe. She watched the underwear conversation. Watched herself strip them off and sit back in his lap and watched his jaw clench with the effort of not reacting to whatever she'd said about the obvious physical evidence of his attraction.

She watched the bedroom. The conversation she could only half-remember, the one about her bed, the window, the light. She watched his arms go around her while she talked, unconscious, automatic. She watched his face and saw what the fragments hadn't shown her: tenderness so acute it looked like it hurt. She was describing a future she'd built in her head and he was holding her while she did it, knowing he couldn't reach for any of it, and his face was breaking.

She watched herself take off the shirt. Watched him turn to the wall before the fabric cleared her shoulders. Watched him go to the bathroom and come out in full pajamas and get into bed and lie there, staring at the ceiling, while she closed the distance and arranged him to her specifications.

The timestamp in the corner of the screen advanced. Minutes. Hours. He didn't move. He held her and didn't move.

She closed the laptop.

She sat in the kitchen for a long time. The shower had stopped. She could hear him moving in the bathroom. Getting dressed. Being Chuck. Doing normal things on the other side of a door while she sat in his kitchen in his shirt with the full, unabridged record of the most honest night of her life playing behind her eyes.

He came out. Jeans. T-shirt. Wet hair. He saw her at the counter with the laptop and his step faltered for just a second before he kept walking. He knew what she'd been watching. She could see it in the set of his shoulders.

He didn't say anything. He went to the coffeemaker. Started a pot. Got two mugs down from the cabinet. Moved through his kitchen with the quiet competence of a man performing a morning routine, giving her time, giving her space, not asking for anything.

She watched him pour coffee. Add cream to hers. He knew she took cream even though she ordered it black. He'd known that for months too. Another piece of intelligence gathered and stored and never leveraged.

He set the mug in front of her. Sat down across the counter. Picked up his own mug. Looked at her over the rim with those brown eyes, steady and careful and kind, and waited.

"How long have you known?" she asked. "About the cream."

"Since the third week. You always steal sips of Ellie's."

She looked at the coffee. Cream swirling through it. The right color. He'd gotten the ratio right because he'd been paying attention for months, not to manage her or manipulate her or gain advantage, but because that's who Chuck Bartowski was. He paid attention to people he loved. He remembered what they needed. And he gave it to them without asking for credit.

"Thank you," she said. "For last night."

"You don't have to—"

"I do. I watched the footage, Chuck. All of it. I saw you get the text. I saw your face." She held his gaze. "You knew. The whole time. You knew it was truth serum and you didn't tell me and you didn't touch me and you held me all night in full pajamas and I need you to understand that I know what that cost you."

He looked at his coffee. His jaw worked. She could see the emotion moving through him, the effort of keeping it below the surface, and she recognized it because she did the same thing every day. They were the same. Both of them, holding things back, managing the distance, trying to protect each other from the size of what they felt.

"Everything you said was true," he said quietly. "That's what made it hard. If it had been lies, if it had been the drug talking, I could have—" He stopped. Started again. "But it was you. All of it was you. And I couldn't..."

He didn't finish. He didn't need to.

She stood up. Walked around the counter. Stood in front of him.

He looked up at her. Six-four in that chair and she was still looking down at him, barely, and the height difference from this angle was nothing, just inches, and she could see every line of the sleepless night in his face.

"I'm going to kiss you now," she said. "Not because of a compound. Not because of a cover. Because I want to."

She took his face in her hands. Gently. The way he'd been gentle with her all night. She leaned down and kissed him, and it was different from every kiss that had come before. The serum kisses had been urgent, pressurized, driven by months of compressed want. This one was slow. Deliberate. The kiss of a woman who was choosing this, right now, with every wall back in place and every trained instinct screaming at her to stop.

She didn't stop.

His hands came up to her waist. Carefully, like he was asking permission with his palms, and she answered by stepping closer, standing between his knees, letting him hold her.

When she pulled back, his eyes were bright.

"The things I said last night," she said. "About the couch. About the hallway. About your hands." She paused. "About the light in my room and which side of the bed."

"You remember that?"

"I watched it on the footage. I remember some of it." She brushed her thumb across his cheekbone. "I meant all of it. Every word. I'm not taking any of it back."

He exhaled. A long, unsteady breath. The sound of a man setting down something heavy he'd been carrying since 8 p.m. the night before.

"Even the thing about the splits?" he asked. The corner of his mouth twitched.

"I'm very flexible. That's just a fact."

He laughed. Short and surprised and real, the laugh that started in his chest and traveled outward, and she felt it in her hands where they rested on his face and thought: that sound. That's the sound I was talking about. That's the one I want.

She kissed him again. Shorter. A punctuation mark.

"I need to go home," she said. "I need to shower and change and have a conversation with my ceiling about the choices I made last night."

"Your ceiling is going to have opinions."

"My ceiling is going to be appalled."

She stepped back. He let her go. She gathered her things: the blouse, the shoes, the bra from the couch. She left the light blue lace on his bedroom floor. She didn't explain why. She didn't need to.

At the door, she paused. Turned back.

He was still sitting at the counter. Coffee in hand. Wet hair. The face of a man who'd been through something and come out the other side intact.

"Chuck."

"Yeah?"

"What day is it?"

He blinked. "Tuesday."

She smiled. The smile she'd described to him on the footage she'd watched, the one she'd been saving, the one that had nothing to do with covers or missions or strategic deployment. The one that was just hers.

"I know," she said. "I'll see you tonight."

She walked out in the "I Know" shirt and her mission slacks and a bra in her hand and a smile she couldn't have stopped if she'd wanted to.

She didn't want to.

THE END