

Loving Night: Dream Catcher Series ~ Book 2

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CHAPTER 1

On a Monday morning, a very happy Chaz was sitting at his desk going over reports from an FBI sting operation in Cleveland. Only part of his mind was focused on the task. The other part of his mind was smiling about the way his wife had kept him in bed most of the weekend. If she wasn't already pregnant, someone might have come to the conclusion that they were trying to make a baby. He smiled brighter as he thought about how the previous weekend had started.

When he'd arrived home from the shooting range on Saturday morning, Stephanie had been standing in the upstairs hallway, leaning against the door to the room that would be their baby's nursery. They'd moved into their new home a couple of months ago and she'd had him paint the room a golden cream color that would look good whether they were having a boy or girl.

"Are you trying to picture the room filled with furniture?" Chaz had asked as he came down the hall and stopped beside Stephanie. He pulled her against him and covered her mouth with a passionate kiss. Mmm. Their kisses always left both of them breathless.

"Actually, I was trying to picture you sitting in a rocking glider feeding our son or daughter a bottle in the middle of the night." She wrapped her arms around his neck, her golden-brown eyes staring into his. Stephanie knew that her husband wanted a daughter, but she honestly didn't think the gender mattered. "I can't begin to imagine how spoiled our first child will be," she'd laughed.

"First child?" A huge grin had spread across his face and his deep brown eyes sparkled. "I like the sound of that. We should plan for them to be close enough in age to be each other's playmate."

"We'll see." She sighed happily and rested her head against his chest. The faint smell of gunpowder clung to his clothes. "I missed you this morning." Stephanie was usually awake long

before her husband went to the FBI headquarters for his weekend routine, but Chaz had left earlier than usual. “You do know that pregnant women crave sex, right?”

“So I’ve been told. I guess I’ll have to make it up to you.”

“Uhm hmm. Right now would be a good time to start.” When he chuckled, she leaned away and gave him a stern look. “I’m not playing with you, Mr. Big FBI Agent. You owe me and I intend to collect.”

“All right, baby; whatever you say.” He walked backward to their bedroom, pulling his wife along with him.

Yeah, their sex life was amazing.

Chaz sighed. He dragged his attention away from the memory and back to the mess on his desk. He was only halfway concentrating on the paperwork in front of him when he saw a name that caught him off guard and demanded his full attention.

Paul Watkins.

This was a very dangerous man. Watkins was connected to the gambling case Chaz had been undercover on while he was loaned to a multi-regional task force and sent to Erie, PA. The prosecution of the local criminals had been successful, but Watkins was the higher level boss who the FBI was still collecting data on. His activities spread over at least three states and was being watched by multiple FBI field offices. He was also the man who’d ordered someone to shoot Chaz as a way of intimidating him into selling the pool hall and, more importantly, the private gambling room beneath it. Watkins didn’t know that the businesses were secretly being run by undercover officers and agents. Chaz could still remember the evil vibes that poured off that man and the way his presence had shaken Stephanie because she’d dreamed of his encounter with Chaz shortly before it happened.

Stephanie’s gift of having dreams that came true had pulled her right into the middle of Chaz’s case. She saw things no one else could have and was a tremendous help in wrapping up that investigation; only Watkins hadn’t been their target. It was decided—mainly at Chaz’s request—to not extend the gambling case to include Watkins because it would have meant extending the investigation indefinitely. He’d been ready to walk away from being an undercover field agent so that he could pursue a relationship with Stephanie.

Now, here Watkins was, again. Although Chaz now analyzed reports generated by investigations and occasionally participated in the arrest of criminals his efforts helped bring to justice, he didn't like seeing this man's name.

Watkins' possible involvement in this prostitution case made Chaz nervous. From what he knew, prostitution wasn't a venture that would normally interest Watkins. Was he involved in even more types of crime than the FBI was previously aware? Nothing was clear from the report other than the fact that the name had been mentioned to the State Police officer's informant and was passed along. Chaz made a notation in the file for the task force's team leader to cross-reference it with the Erie case and entered notes into the computer that would flag both investigations. The Cleveland FBI office needed to be aware of the depth of Watkins' viciousness and to be given as many avenues for building their case against him as possible.

Just as he was emailing his notes to Steve McDaniels, the Team Leader on the gambling case, with copies to his supervisor and the Special Agent in charge of the Cleveland case, Chaz's boss poked his head into the cubicle and requested Chaz come into his office.

"What I'm going to say does not leave this room," Roy insisted as soon as Chaz had closed the office door and taken a seat. He waited for Chaz's agreement before continuing. "I know you've been getting pressure to return to undercover work and I also understand your hesitation on the matter. However, an opportunity has come up for which you would be more qualified than anyone else on my team. It would be a promotion.

"Over the past few months, you've done an admirable job of making recommendations on ongoing cases, but I want you in the field. That's where you're best. You wouldn't be interacting directly with the criminal elements; instead, you'd be supervising all of the roles of the state and federal officials. You'd be able to stay in the background, but taking the position would mean being away from Stephanie for stretches of time—that's something you need to seriously consider. I can guarantee some cases that will come your way will require you to be temporarily assigned to other cities—maybe even as far away as Minneapolis. Even though that's unlikely, it's possible." He shook his head when Chaz opened his mouth to interrupt.

"Steve McDaniels is transferring here from the Erie office. He's going to take lead on the Granger case that you've been analyzing. As you know, our target is trying to set up a brothel just south of the river between Newport and Covington. We're jumping into the undercover portion of an investigation the Kentucky State Police already have going, so this operation

shouldn't take more than a couple of months and is local. You could make periodic trips home so that your personal life won't be seriously impacted. Steve agrees with me that this would make a great first assignment for you, and he wants to mentor you on it. In fact, he requested to work with you. He's not arriving for another couple of weeks; so, like I said before, take a few days to think about taking the promotion."

Chaz nodded his understanding before asking, "What happens if I decide to stay where I am?"

"Honestly, I don't know. Let me turn that back on you—where do you see your career in five years and how do you plan on getting there? I understand why you stopped working in the field, but it'll be different this time; you won't have to worry about getting shot." He sighed and Chaz could hear the resignation in it. They both knew that bullet wasn't the only reason Chaz no longer wanted to work undercover. "Talk to Stephanie about it. I'll support whatever you decide."

"Do you know why Steve is transferring?" Chaz had worked with the man on a couple of cases and knew that he'd been happy with his role in the Erie office.

"Yeah. There's been some restructuring in Pennsylvania, much like what we went through a while ago, and he's made it clear that there is a conflict of interest in working for his new supervisor." Roy gave an amused smirk. "From what I've heard, they used to be good friends until the guy slept with Steve's wife and spent three days in the hospital recovering from Steve's temper."

Both men chuckled and shook their heads. Chaz guessed that even analytical, even-tempered, insightful, and by-the-book Steve McDaniels had a breaking point.

"If you take the position," Roy continued, "you and Steve will both report to me. It would make my life a whole lot easier to have such a strong team. No pressure, though. Let me know what you decide by the end of the week."

With those words, Chaz was dismissed.

The only thing he could think about as he walked back to his cubicle was that his wife was pregnant, they were happy, and he wasn't sure he wanted to risk the calm life they were building. But, Roy had a point—where did he see his career going? Even Stephanie had said she'd understand if he went back undercover. Would she really?

Chaz decided to take a couple of days to figure out how much he was willing to sacrifice before telling her about this conversation with Roy.

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Stephanie woke up and stared at her husband. His face was inches from hers, his warm breath slid across her cheek, and his arm rested protectively around her waist. But her heart was pounding, thanks to the images that had floated through her mind while she slept.

The strangest thing about her dream was that it was clear, even though this was the first time she'd had it. Usually, the dreams were vague and she would have them more than once before all of the details were decipherable.

There was no ambiguity this time. History taught her that either the event had happened at the same time that she was dreaming it, or it was going to happen within the next day or two. Instinct told her that it would happen that day. She choked back a whisper of panic. Hadn't she promised to be tough? Hadn't she made a conscious decision that she would support Chaz in whatever he wanted to do with his career? Everyone thought he was happier as an undercover agent, and now the day had come when she would have to prove her fortitude.

She glanced at the bedside clock. The alarm would ring in half an hour. Carefully removing Chaz's arm, she slipped from beneath the covers and quietly made her way to the walk-in closet. She closed the door behind her before turning on the light. It only took a few minutes to decide what she would wear to work and set the outfit aside. During that time, she decided that she'd tell her husband about the dream over breakfast. They had agreed to handle her dreams that way—no delaying anything that involved him or his job. She nodded as if agreeing with herself, took a deep breath, forced down her anxiety, and went downstairs.

Cooking would relax her. They'd have a big breakfast today.

Chaz wanted to laugh when he walked into the kitchen an hour later and took a look at the counter. Bacon, sausage patties, potato pancakes, biscuits, fruit salad, and juice. The scent of coffee mingled with everything else and made his mouth water. Stephanie, who was standing in front of the stove with her back to him, was vigorously whisking eggs.

"Good morning, honey," she said a little too brightly. "How did you sleep?"

Chaz didn't answer right away. Instead, he poured himself a cup of coffee, leaned against the counter while he sipped it, and studied his wife until she turned to him with a puzzled expression on her face.

"You always cook when you're upset," he explained after kissing her forehead. "Do you want to tell me now or after we eat?"

"Eggs will be ready in a couple of minutes." She gave him a weak smile before turning her attention back to the stove. "I forgot to buy jelly, so there's only honey for the biscuits."

A few minutes later, she dumped half of the eggs onto each plate and joined Chaz at the table where he was already munching on a slice of bacon. She could feel him staring at her as he chewed and she took her time spreading butter on the fluffy bread. How she phrased her next words would be very important.

"I dreamed about your job. Steve is in town, even though you didn't expect to see him yet. He's a great guy, Chaz. I'm glad he'll be the person helping with your transition. You'll make a wonderful team leader." She looked directly into his eyes now and was very sincere. "I don't know how your going undercover again will affect our marriage, so I'm a little concerned. But, it's our destiny to be together, Chaz, so we'll be all right." She paused briefly and let out a sigh. "You should take the job."

He nodded and took a sip of juice. His eyes never left hers.

"What if I don't want the job? Your dream told you what's going to be discussed, but did it tell you how I feel?"

"Conflicted," she answered.

"That's right. This might be a good decision for my career, but honestly, I don't want to be away from you," he admitted. "I also don't want to miss celebrating one single special moment with our child. I want to be on the floor teaching her to roll a ball and holding her hands while she's learning to balance and taking her first steps. She'll need to hear my voice reading goodnight stories from the moment she comes home from the hospital and feel my hands cuddling her when she's grouchy from teething. She needs to know how much love is in my heart just for her. She deserves that; I deserve it." He reached across the table and linked his fingers with his wife's. "Besides, I don't want you being a single parent for months at a time—and that's what it might be. We're building this life together, Stephanie. Together." He stood and pulled her into his arms.

“When you were in Pennsylvania and I was here without you, part of my soul was missing, sweetheart. We were both miserable.” He kissed her very lightly. “I don’t want us to go through that again.” Another kiss. “And I don’t want you to be afraid, or lonely, or overwhelmed. I’ll figure out my career; there has to be another way. Leaving you isn’t worth it.”

Stephanie tightened her arms around him. What he said sounded wonderful. But she knew what she had seen, and her gift was rarely wrong. She returned his kisses and kept quiet.

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Despite the confident words, Chaz knew that his decision was far from being made the moment Roy invited Chaz to join him and Steve McDaniels for lunch. They talked nearly the entire hour about Chaz’s future. Roy had promised to respect Chaz’s decision; so much for the promise of “no pressure.” Steve made assurances that Chaz was perfect for the job and complimented him on his natural ability to focus on the big picture. He’d proven that in his undercover roles as well as in his current position as a senior analyst. The conversation irritated Chaz. Regardless of this meeting, Roy had given him the entire week to consider his answer. He was determined to take every minute of it.

He was seriously tempted to tell them to forget the idea; but, as everyone kept pointing out, being the leader of an undercover team could only benefit him later in his career. His best friend, and fellow FBI agent, Sylvia was constantly saying that he wasn’t paying enough attention to professional opportunities. Chaz had never given the future much consideration. He hadn’t thought beyond being an undercover agent until he met Stephanie. She was the first person to make him feel like his life was incomplete.

Did she really think it was okay for their relationship for him to be away from home whenever the FBI needed him? The assignment to Erie had lasted for almost a year; Chaz couldn’t imagine being without his wife and child for that long. That wouldn’t be fair to anyone.

That evening, when Chaz stepped through the garage door into his house, he held a single long-stem yellow rose and a thank you card. Stephanie wouldn’t be home for at least another hour. He put the rose in a bud vase on the kitchen table, propped the card against it, and set candles on either side. Next, he pulled out the good china they used when entertaining and set the table. With that done, he washed his hands, put water on to boil for pasta, and pulled out

vegetables he would add to the cream sauce: mushrooms, artichokes, and black olives. Somewhere in the freezer were strips of grilled chicken that were left over from a meal he'd prepared a week or so ago. When he heard the garage door lifting, he poured two glasses of sparkling cider and leaned against the counter to greet his wife as she stepped from the mud room into the kitchen. Her bright smile as she glanced around the room made his heart skip a beat. He would never get used to the way her smile lit up a room or her eyes shined with love for him.

Without a word, she dropped her purse and briefcase on the floor and slowly walked toward him. She stopped mere inches away and gave a half smile before thoroughly kissing his lips. He only had to bend slightly since her 5'8" height matched nicely against his 6'2" frame.

"Dinner smells great. I hope you're the dessert," she whispered against his mouth. The next kiss was another taste of what they would share later.

"Do you know what I would do to you if I wasn't holding these glasses?"

"Don't get my imagination going," she laughed. "I skipped lunch, so I'm starving." She took a glass of cider from him and swallowed a healthy amount before sighing and licking her lips suggestively. A giggle escaped when her husband groaned. "On second thought, I'll be thinking of all the ways to finish this discussion later," she informed him as she deliberately sashayed towards the half bath in the nearby hall to freshen up before eating.

As the couple settled at the table, Stephanie began talking about her work day. She'd only been employed at Renito Investments Solutions for a few weeks but was already in love with her job. Not only was she still working as an investments advisor, she would be deconstructing portfolios established by other companies, updating them, and offering new suggestions more in line with the clients' current objectives. It was a dream job that she couldn't imagine getting bored with in the foreseeable future.

"Unless a dream tells you otherwise," Chaz joked.

"Very funny." She moved a mushroom around in the cream sauce on her plate. "You do realize that I have tons of dreams about me, you, us, my friends, right? I mean, all of them aren't significant—just snatches of disconnected scenes—but they happen all the time. I don't remember many of them, but I wake up with residual impressions. I think that's what drives my instincts." She speared the mushroom and lifted it to her mouth.

Silence filled the space between them for a while. Chaz understood that his wife was giving him a chance to bring up the subject of the decision he needed to make about his career. He wasn't ready. He needed more time to find a way to express his feelings so that everyone would accept that his choice was final.

"Déjà vu," he heard her whisper as she raised the goblet of cider to her lips. It was her way of putting him at ease.

Whatever was going on, life was playing out the way it was meant to.

CHAPTER 2

When Chaz was ready to reveal his decision, he sent a formal email to Roy expressing his appreciation for being considered for the promotion but explaining that, at this point in his life, his career desire was to gain additional experience in his current role as an analyst. After careful consideration, this determination is the one that most accurately reflected the balance between the many significant areas of his life. He also stated that he had given much thought to the trajectory of his career and was hopeful that there would continue to be some way in which he could serve the FBI's motto of Fidelity, Bravery, and Integrity.

His phone rang within five minutes of clicking the send button on that message.

"You do realize that you're passing on a much-coveted opportunity, right?" his boss stated without preamble.

"Yes." Chaz sighed. "I honestly am grateful that you and Steve have so much faith in me, but undercover work isn't what I want to do any longer—not in any capacity."

"I don't have any choice but to accept your decision; but for the record, this feels like you're threatening to leave my team altogether. That's not what I want."

"Me, either," he admitted with a smile. "I kinda like it here."

“Steve will be disappointed.” Roy let out a long dramatic sigh. “Other people will be disappointed also. Expect some fallout as soon as word travels up.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

Chaz’s supervisor ended the call without another word. As he returned the phone to its cradle, Chaz thought about a conversation he’d had a couple of months earlier where he was not so nicely pressured. It was a scene Stephanie had dreamed about right before he returned to Erie to testify against Evan Moseley. It seems that he had an aggressive fan club of colleagues determined to pull him back into a role he no longer planned on playing. Despite what he’d said to his boss, he would consider leaving the Bureau rather than be forced to take a job he didn’t want.

There was no way he would willingly leave his family or unnecessarily risk Stephanie’s psychic well-being. There was no way he wanted her to experience the horror and helplessness of seeing him shot and not knowing whether he would make it home alive. The time she did, she had physically felt the pain and emotions of what was happening to him—so strong was the psychic link between them. It would kill him to put her through any more trauma.

When he’d told her the night before that he was going to turn down the promotion, he had seen the flicker of relief in her eyes. While she would never ask him to decline a job because of her, she didn’t want them to be apart any more than he did. He lifted the photo of her that he kept on his desk and ran a finger across her cheek and down her neck. He would do anything to keep that happy glow on her face and look of love in her eyes.

Chaz knew immediately when the gossip mill had churned his decision out to other areas. The day was filled with people making random stops by his cubicle to ask whether he’d lost his mind. Some noticed the photograph on his desk and speculated and teased about the great undercover agent being roped by a beautiful smile. He didn’t expect anyone to understand and didn’t bother to explain beyond saying that he wanted something different for his career.

Of course, that led to speculation that maybe he had inside knowledge of something coming that none of his peers would know. Maybe he was being groomed for a new position being created. It was possible, the rumors said, since he had such an impressive reputation and was seemingly well-liked by everyone. After all, the success of his undercover work made him the golden boy.

Chaz let it all roll off his back with a cryptic smile and a shrug. Let them think what they wanted. There were very few people whose opinions mattered.

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All afternoon, he wondered when the boom was going to come down from Sylvia. He knew his good friend was at work today. When she didn't call or come by his desk, he realized that she was going to wait until they got home so that she could scream as loudly as she felt he deserved.

With a sigh, he drove home hoping that she would make her appearance sooner rather than later. Maybe she would even be waiting when he pulled into his garage and they could get the confrontation over before Stephanie came home from work. No such luck. His wife came into the house with a smile and a warm hug and asked about his day. They talked about everything from their jobs to the pregnancy, ate dinner and cleaned the kitchen, and were finally relaxing in the livingroom before the dreaded knock on the door came. Or maybe, it was more like pounding.

"Perhaps I should leave you two alone," Stephanie offered with a laugh. Sylvia was someone she tried not to spend any more time around than was absolutely necessary.

"Don't you dare!"

He kissed his wife's forehead and went to answer the door.

"Are you totally insane?!" Sylvia nearly shrieked as she followed Chaz through the foyer and into the livingroom. "How can you pass up an opportunity like that? Do you know how incredible it is to be offered a Team Leader position at only 34 years old? Do you understand the depth of experience this will give you for a future management position? I get it—you don't want to leave your lovely lady." She rolled her eyes in Stephanie's direction as Chaz returned to his seat beside her. "But there is plenty of time for whatever life the two of you want to build." She looks fully at Stephanie now. "How old are you—twenty-seven, twenty-eight?" She didn't wait for a response. Instead she plopped onto the loveseat touching the right corner of the sofa. "Did you think this through, Chaz? Why didn't you talk to anyone about it before you made such a stupid decision?" Sylvia slumped against the back of the loveseat with an exasperated growl.

Stephanie ducked her head slightly in an attempt to hide her tiny smile. Sylvia didn't think that Stephanie, as a civilian, was smart enough or strong enough to be the person he should have consulted about this opportunity.

Chaz leaned forward with his elbows on his knees but his head lifted so that he could look his friend in the eyes.

"I know what I'm doing, Syl."

"Do you?" She crossed her arms and leaned toward him. Her long black ponytail swung as she shook her head. "It doesn't look like that way. You've been in law enforcement for a long time—a decade, Chaz! Now, all of a sudden, you stop going undercover as a field agent and won't even take a supervisory role where you won't be in any danger? That's not smart. That's career suicide!"

"Quit being so dramatic." Chaz chuckled before leaning back and reaching for Stephanie's hand in a gesture designed to reassure her that Sylvia wouldn't cause him to change his mind. The move didn't go unnoticed.

Sylvia closed her eyes and shook her head as if she was silently counting to give herself a chance to calm down. But, when she opened her eyes, they held more fire than previously.

"DO NOT do this, Chaz," she said in a warning tone. "You're so in love that you aren't looking at the long-term implications. Law enforcement is your only career. It's what you've done since finishing college and you worked hard to become a Special Agent." She paused when she realized she was not getting through to her former partner.

"Chaz, I get that you want the whole suburban family lifestyle. Hell, I wanted it too; I simply found a way to have it without damaging my professional reputation. Just take the job for a couple of years and you'll be able to write your own ticket. You don't have to give anything up. You want a career and a family—fine. She's young enough that you can get married and she can have kids in three or four years without any trouble. You'll have it all."

Chaz turned his head to look at his wife, who only a few people knew he had already married, with such tenderness that Stephanie couldn't help but smile. Her fingers closed more tightly around his as his thumb softly stroked her wrist. He didn't miss the way Sylvia's brows scrunched before her eyes widened.

"Are you serious?!" Sylvia screamed as realization hit her and she jumped to her feet. She threw her hands in the air before linking her fingers together on top of her head and staring at

Chaz with a look of horror. “She’s pregnant? You have to be kidding me!” She turned her eyes to Stephanie and scanned her from head to toe: slightly fuller face, rounder breasts, thickening middle.

“What did you do?” she challenged viciously. “Did you get pregnant on purpose so that you could manipulate him into doing anything you want? You planned this so that he would choose you over his job? Hasn’t he already given up enough for you?” By the time her tirade ended she was shouting and Chaz was standing protectively between the two women.

“You know what, Syl? It seems like you’re the only woman who’s trying to tell me what to do. And I’ve warned you about talking to Stephanie like this.”

She took a step back at his barely controlled anger. Her hands dropped to her sides and curled into fists. She defiantly narrowed her eyes and calmly asked, “What are you saying, partner?”

“I’m saying ...” he hesitated and took a deep breath before letting it out slowly. “I’m saying that this is the very last time you will disrespect my wife. What we do with planning our family is none of your business. But if you want to be a part of my life with Stephanie—because yes, I am choosing her over everything else in this world—you won’t ever raise your voice at her, criticize her, gossip about her, or disrespect her in any way. I’ve told you before, no one is more important than Stephanie.” His voice softened with sympathy. “Not even you, Syl.”

“Chaz—”

He shook his head to cut her off.

“Wife?” she asked quietly, obviously hurt that this man who was her friend had left her out of such an important event. She swallowed a lump in her throat and nodded.

“No one knows, so I’d appreciate you not telling anyone.”

“Sure.” She glanced at the woman still seated on the sofa and bit back whatever she was going to say. “I guess I’ll see you at work.” Without saying goodbye, she turned and walked to the front door. It closed with a solid thunk.

“I’m sorry, Chaz,” Stephanie said softly as she rose and wrapped her arms around his waist. Likewise, his wrapped around her shoulders and pulled her snug against him.

“Why, sweetheart? You didn’t do anything wrong.” He kissed her forehead. “Let there be no doubt about where my loyalty lies. You have changed my life for the better and I would give

my life for you. I only want people around that will support what we're building. Sylvia is going to have to choose whether or not she is truly our friend. And this was her last warning."

They stood in the livingroom for a long time before Stephanie stepped away and held both of her husband's hands in hers and gave him a bold smile.

"I know a way to make you feel better," she teased as she started walking backward to the stairs, pulling him along.

"Oh yeah?"

"Mmm hmm. We haven't played Scrabble in a long time. I figured out a sexy little twist that you're going to love." At his raised eyebrow, she elaborated. "Have you ever played Strip Scrabble?"

His laughter echoed up the stairs and along the hallway.

"Only you would think of a way to make a word game sexy."

"Oh yeah, all of the words have to be sexual." She smiled as she reached the top step.

"Really?"

"Yep." She giggled. "I've got a few juicy words in mind. You're going to lose your clothes a lot faster than I will."

"Are you sure about that?" He started pulling her blouse out of the waistband of her slacks.

"No cheating, Chaz!"

"No ridiculous Scrabble game that you're making up as you go along." His lips brushed hers. "I don't need any help taking off your clothes and I'm pretty sure you won't resist." He undid the top three buttons and bent down to kiss the top of a breast.

"Fine," she pouted. "Despite what you think Strip Scrabble really is a game. But, if you don't want to play ..." Stephanie's hands moved to her husband's waist and began unbuckling his belt.

By the time they reached the bedroom door, Stephanie was stepping out of her pants and Chaz was dropping kisses across her neck and breasts, lightly nipping her flesh with his teeth. He laughed when she moaned. Both of them were wearing shirts fully unbuttoned and hanging off their shoulders by the time her legs bumped against the mattress. She gently pushed him away and began removing each piece of her clothing slowly: blouse, bra, panties. All the while, she watched him do the same.

She crawled backwards onto the bed, never taking her eyes off the beautiful man who owned her heart.

Chaz kissed an ankle and continued kissing and nibbling all the way up her leg and over her abdomen before closing his lips firmly around a puckered nipple. Stephanie's nails moving lightly over his shoulder and back made his nerves tingle. He thought about the night they had introduced whipped cream and caramel syrup into their foreplay. As great as that had been, nothing tasted as good as his woman, nothing set him on fire like she did. He supported himself on his elbows to keep his full weight from crushing her as he stared down into her eyes.

"Thank you," she said with a smile.

"For what?"

"For loving me as much as I love you. You're my life, Chaz." Her arms wrapped around his neck and pulled him on top of her. Her ankles crossed behind his back and she enjoyed the feel of his steel-hard erection pressing against her thigh and the entrance to her hot core. She kissed his chest and lightly licked his nipples and felt him shudder again.

A hand moved possessively across her shoulder, breast, side, hip, and thigh. In one slow, smooth thrust, Chaz slid into his wife. Moist heat surrounded him and made both of them breathe out soft moans. This is why he wouldn't leave her—this moment where they could escape the stresses of the day and find the complete, uninterrupted blending that always brought them back to the truth. They were made for each other and their life together was fated. It was in these moments in the night that the rest of the world ceased to exist.

"I am so in love with you," he whispered against her ear as they moved slowly, allowing her body to adjust to his presence inside of her. He waited for her to increase their pace before he took control and was both rough and tender in the way he possessed her body. She was his and he claimed every inch of her, night after night, completely.

She craved the way he pounded into her, varied his pace and his intensity, made every bit of her know that she belonged to him. And his body listened to hers, giving what she wanted, avoiding what she didn't—each night was different yet always fulfilling. When the final white hot explosion sucked the breath out of them both and left them exhausted, Stephanie curled tightly against her husband, his arms held her like every moment they shared together was precious and treasured, and his strong thighs covered her legs like he would never let her go.

No matter what was going on in the world, the night was theirs.

CHAPTER 3

“Wow,” Karen’s red-headed and freckled image said from the computer monitor. “I’m not surprised about Sylvia or Chaz’s reaction, but he really turned down a promotion?” The news seemed to trouble her. “It sounds so odd, considering how much he loves law enforcement. Does that match up with your dreams?”

“Yes and no. I’m having a lot of dreams—more than ever. When they’re about Chaz, some are with him here doing normal things. But in the ones about his job, some are in the office I’ve been to, and some are in a livingroom that I don’t recognize. Others are with him having some type of strategy meeting or handling phone calls with information I can only guess relates to a case.” Stephanie looked in the distance, as if she was recalling specific details. “What bothers me is that in many of the dreams, he seems to be tense or worried.”

“Even the ones where he’s at home?”

“Yes.” Stephanie shrugged at her best friend. The two women were silent as they each had their own thoughts about what that might mean. “There’s something else,” Stephanie admitted. “I had gotten to a point where I could faintly see auras surrounding his friends and coworkers. Lately, I haven’t been able to do that. In fact, other than Chaz, I’m not sensing personalities. Can you come up with a blend of teas that might unblock that? I have a feeling of anxiety about it that I haven’t been able to shake.”

“Sure Steph.” Karen frowned and seemed distracted for a moment. “You’re having more dreams about your husband doing everyday things. You’re having dreams about his job with details you don’t understand. Your ability to sense personalities is blocked. And you’re pregnant.” She looked down as if she was writing on a notepad. “I’ll figure out something and put a package in the mail this weekend. But there’s something else you should do.”

“What’s that?”

“Meditate—not to keep calm but to visualize your dreams better. You’re missing something, Stephanie, and I don’t know what it is. But, if you can hone that gift, maybe you’ll see details that will help you to relax.”

“Maybe.” It was Stephanie’s turn to look pensive. “Could this be caused by hormone shifts? Could the baby be throwing off my abilities?”

“It’s possible. I really can’t see your auras from here. When you meditate, don’t use aromatherapy unless you’re going to heat some of the special teas Phailin or I made for you. I’m not sure whether anything else is safe this early in your pregnancy.” She paused. “Maybe I should come down for a couple of days. A mini vacation would do me good, and I miss you so much.” That brought a huge smile to her friend’s face.

“The feeling is mutual.” Stephanie sighed and touched the computer screen as if that would bring them closer. “Chaz should be home in about an hour. I’m going to take advantage of the solitude by trying to meditate. Call me tomorrow, okay?”

“Sure, sweetie. That’ll give me plenty of time to discuss the visit with Victor. You know how protective he is toward you; don’t be surprised if he wants to tag along.”

“But then, you won’t get a vacation from being a wife and mother.”

Karen laughed and said, “Maybe having a break with my husband is what we need. There’s no shortage of family members to watch Little Victor, but spending time in a different environment might be good for us as a couple.”

Those words made Stephanie frown. Had she missed some change in their relationship? “What’s wrong, Karen?”

“Nothing specific. I just feel a little off and he’s been worrying about me.”

“Okay. You’d let me know if something was really wrong, right?”

“Of course I would.” She touched the screen in the same way Stephanie had earlier. “Maybe I’ll be back to normal after I get to spend some time with you.” She took a deep breath. “Now, you need to take advantage of the quiet atmosphere in your house and meditate.”

“Yeah, I should. We’ll talk tomorrow—and I expect to see both of my men. I miss them, too.”

“Agreed.”

After ending the video-call with her best friend, Stephanie collected her iPod, put some loose tea leaves in a small hot pot, set the pot to turn off in 20 minutes, and made herself

comfortable in one of the spare bedrooms. She stretched out on the bed with smells and sounds of nature around her and tried to focus on the pieces of dreams she remembered from the previous night.

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“Hey,” Chaz smiled at her when she emerged from the room more than an hour later. He’d done his usual Saturday morning routine—jogging and practicing at the firing range. Since his wife was behind a closed door when he returned home, he’d decided to make a sandwich for lunch and marinate steaks and wash broccoli for dinner. He loved that the kitchen in this new home had an indoor grill. But, he wasn’t in the kitchen when Stephanie found him. He was sitting in the family room scrolling through channels with the television muted. He patted the space beside him on the oversized sofa.

“How was your morning?” she asked as she made herself comfortable by straddling him with her knees snug against his thighs.

“Same as always.” He kissed her and wrapped an arm around her back before resting his chin on her shoulder. “How are you?”

“Better.”

“Better than what?” One hand rubbed slowly up and down her arm. Stephanie took her time answering and he didn’t rush her.

“I’ve almost figured out something that has been bothering me about my dreams.” She kissed his cheek. “I’ll be able to talk about it once everything is clearer. And, Karen is coming for a visit. She’ll let us know what day tomorrow.” She leaned away from him so that their bodies had to shift enough for her to see his face. “What’s on your mind, Chaz? Why are you sitting here like this?”

He shrugged, but when Stephanie didn’t stop staring at him, he admitted, “Sylvia and I had another fight—if you can call it that. She again voiced her opinions about my priorities. I ignored her. She continued, adding her criticisms of you. I said I was done with her. End of friendship.” He slowly shook his head. “It was inevitable since Syl has never been a person to back down. I’m not surprised, just disappointed.”

“And hurt.”

He nodded. Stephanie leaned her forehead against his until he held her tighter and dropped his chin to her shoulder. They sat like that for as long as he needed, him drawing calming strength from his wife.

She wanted to assure him that everything would work out fine, but she wasn't certain about that. For some reason, Sylvia hated the fact that Chaz loved Stephanie. She wanted to say that she was sorry about the loss of a long-time friend, but that wouldn't have been true. From the day Stephanie had moved to Cincinnati, she had seen the way Sylvia's caustic comments and blatant rejection bothered Chaz. Like he'd said, today's culmination was inevitable. Maybe now there could be a period of mourning and Chaz would stop holding on to hope that the relationship between the two women would improve.

What worried her most was that Sylvia was in an administrative position above Chaz, although it wasn't in the same Division. She hoped the woman wasn't vindictive enough to cause problems on their job. Uneasiness settled in the pit of Stephanie's stomach.

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There didn't seem to be any repercussions from the situation between Chaz and Sylvia. In fact, all was reasonably calm in his area. Steve McDaniels officially transferred in and several meetings were held to bring him up to speed on the previous analyses for the case he would be taking on immediately. As an analyst, Chaz would be one of the people to pass along information to the new undercover operation. Even though he would remain in the Cincinnati office, he would work closely with Steve who would be on site in Kentucky.

Of course, the newcomer had already read the reports; he wanted to get a feel for the personalities of the people he'd be relying on to feed him credible intelligence. After a few meetings, Steve invited Chaz to lunch so that he could get the other man's impression of their coworkers. Their time together was both professional and personal.

"So, how is Stephanie?" Steve asked as the men settled into a booth at the burger joint.

"She's great. Beautifully pregnant—but that's not common knowledge." He took a sip from his glass of Pepsi.

"Hmm. That helps me to understand your decision. Congratulations." Steve's smile was sincere. "What about her gift?"

“She’s still having dreams. They just aren’t about life and death situations.”

Steve seemed to consider that answer as he slowly chewed a bite of his burger. Then, he asked a question that Chaz definitely could never have seen coming.

“If we gave her details about a case, do you think it would trigger her to dream about it?” Chaz’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “Listen,” Steve continued. “She was an invaluable asset for us in Erie. I trust her dreams more than I trust my new team. Maybe that’s because I don’t know them and can’t gauge their reliability, but your wife could be my secret weapon. I mean totally secret. I’m still not ready to write a report saying we’re getting tips from a psychic, and I can’t pay her as a Confidential Informant because that would require us to disclose information about her to Roy and our superiors. But, I would feel comfortable relying on whatever information she could provide.”

“Wow.” Chaz shrugged and rubbed the back of his neck. “She’s been able to connect to some of the cases I’ve been analyzing, but not in any detail. She only gets vague impressions of what’s going on. I’m not sure whether her gift can work in a way that would benefit you. I can ask what she thinks might happen, but you still need to understand that she can’t just call up a dream—the details come to her on their own.”

Steve nodded to indicate that he understood.

Chaz thought for a moment before bringing up a serious concern. “Did you read the notes I forwarded on this case—they went to Erie and Cleveland.”

“About Paul Watkins?”

“Have you figured out whether he’s going to become a part of this prostitution investigation? Because if there’s even a remote possibility that’s credible, Stephanie needs to know before she makes her decision. Watkins really shook her.”

“So far, there’s been nothing reliable. I’ll let you know the minute that changes, all right?”

“Yeah.” Chaz trusted Steve to keep his word.

The conversation stayed on Chaz’s mind all afternoon. Was his link to the case, by virtue of being an analyst, strong enough to provoke a connection that Stephanie could pick up on? Would she even be willing to try? He could still remember how traumatic her dreams had been when he was in danger—and not putting her through that again was his primary reason for not taking the promotion. It was his responsibility to protect her. Still, he had no choice except to pass along Steve’s request; the decision would have to be hers.

Stephanie listened carefully while her husband explained what was being asked of her as they sat on the sofa after dinner. She could sense his conflict. Had he made a huge career sacrifice for nothing if she decided to help his former team leader? And, if Paul Watkins was going to be an issue, how would Chaz feel about her psyche being exposed to that much evil again?

“What do you want me to do?” she asked quietly as she wove her fingers through his.

“I get the impression that Steve thought he would get a package deal if I had accepted this case as my first assignment; no one considered that I might say no. Listen sweetheart, I can’t tell you what your role should be, just as you didn’t make my decision for me.”

Stephanie studied her husband’s eyes for what seemed like minutes before she said, “I won’t do it. You gave up a promotion to keep me safe; I won’t put you in a position to worry about me.” She shook her head when he started to speak. “That’s my decision, Chaz. The answer is no.” She was almost positive that she saw a spark of relief in his expression of acceptance. She gave a slight smile and said, “We’re always going to be a team.”

He understood clearly what his wife was telling him: she would never choose anything over him.