



CHAPTER ONE

“Damn it.”

Sage Hawkins angrily wiped at her eyes. Snow fell over the world outside, a sight she'd waited so long to see. From her second floor vantage point, she stared at the trees and fences glistening with the fallen flakes and the corn fields turned into lush blankets of white. The Iowa countryside looked like a Currier and Ives print, silver and peaceful and magical.

She let out a heavy sigh as more tears stung. If it was all so damn magical, why was she so miserable?

She and Garrett had deliberately waited until the break between Thanksgiving and Christmas to come for a visit with his parents, as well as his beloved Uncle Wyatt and Aunt Josie. Garrett had been adamant that Racer, their baby boy, experience part of his first winter on earth in Iowa, wanting to pass along the joy of a boyhood that included many traditions of the season, especially the snow.

She beheld that youthful joy on her husband's face as he and Wyatt trudged into the yard, returning from their quarter-mile trek to retrieve the mail. After dropping off the pile at Wyatt's house, they headed for the barn situated between the two Hawkins houses. Thanks to Racer being bundled in a baby carrier on his chest, Garrett looked like a reverse hunchback. That didn't stop the man's eyes from gleaming like fresh-cut blue quartz or the tawny stubble on his jaw from giving way to his charismatic grin. Yeah, the one that made her heart tumble over itself, even in her present condition.

Her present condition. Egghh. She longed to scratch her skin off and start all over again in another body. She didn't do “conditions.” She'd been in disaster zones. Skydived with soldiers. Survived a year on the run from white slave traders. Had her wedding crashed by a lunatic on a revenge campaign.

But none of that had mattered to fate.

It was determined to give her a “condition.”

The logic in the decision shouldn't have been a huge shock. Just when she thought the cosmic dues had been paid and her pregnancy would end in a day of stress-free joy and love, a vacation to Los Angeles had turned into a nightmare that brought Racer to them a month early. The “break” that Garrett's Special Forces Group was expecting on that trip? Never happened. They'd ended up assisting the CIA on a terrorist plot to bury the West Coast under a nuclear cloud, with her husband as the first casualty of that feat. Even now, she shuddered at the memory of Garrett's face, so strong yet still, lost to the huge hit of sleeping gas he'd endured to save her. She'd kissed him with so many desperate pleas to wake up as Racer Joseph put the pedal to the damn medal in her belly...

She gasped as the helplessness pulled at her all over again. Clawed her soul like a monster on grief's playground, cackling at her to abandon hope and jump on its merry-go-round

of desperate fear.

“Go. Away.” She seethed the words, a luxury she hadn’t been given the day Racer was born. Once they’d escaped from Ephraim Lor and Cameron Stock, Racer had lived up to his name, clamoring for his grand entrance despite her pleas otherwise. With her best friend at her side as cheerleader, Sage had given birth to her son without knowing if his daddy would ever wake to hold him.

It’s over now. Done. Lor is dead, and Stock is at the top of the FBI Wanted list. They’ll find him and lock his ass away forever.

Which meant she only had to worry about the next lunatic who wanted to go at her husband with a bomb, knife, gun, rocket or chemical canister. And the one after that. And the one after that.

Over?

It was never going to be over.

She bolted off the seat, straight to her well-used pacing path on the carpet of her in-laws’ guest room. “Get a grip. You fell in love with an SF guy. You love him for what he is. You love him for all of it. You knew this drill before you accepted his ring.”

That was all before she’d laid next to him for hours, her head on his chest, wondering if his next heartbeat would be his last.

The tears came again. She pulled in a shaky breath, mentally kicking at the asshole on the merry-go-round. She couldn’t let him win. She wouldn’t.

Why did it get harder to believe that every day?

Why did the battle worsen when she heard Garrett call to her from outside, his baritone filled with oblivious happiness?

“Sage.” His laugh mixed with Wyatt’s from the yard below. “Sugar, you in there? Go to the window. You have to see this!”

After grabbing a tissue and mopping up the new tears, she commanded her self-composure back to the emotional battlefield. “Fake it ‘till you make it,” she whispered, forcing a smile.

She curled a knee back onto the window seat and looked out, searching for her husband. It was the world’s easiest feat. The man consumed over six feet of the frosty air, melting it into an obedient glow for his golden-haired, broad-shouldered, utterly virile presence. The effect was hit by an extra injection of sexy thanks to the bulk of his parka, the thick stubble that now populated his jawline, and the longer line of his legs due to his boots. He was hot farm boy mashed with hot soldier, officially turning him into mouthwatering man, a concoction that literally made her thirsty with longing for him.

Every muscle in her body yearned to jump him.

Right before she swore to kill him.

The idiot stood there grinning down at Racer, who was on the ground in the mud and snow. Correction: rolling around in that muck and squealing with laughter, his drool dirty, his hair dripping. God only knew where his Thomas the Train snow cap had gone, though Garrett had managed to keep the little mittens on his hands. That didn’t help the man’s cause very much.

“Hey!” he yelled. “Look. He wants to make snow angels already!”

She made sure he got a good look at her beyond-pissed glower before whirling to snatch her jacket and heading downstairs.