

## Chapter 1

Halcyon stared at the blank laptop screen.

Chapter Twelve. That was what she had written.

And then nothing.

The cursor jumped rhythmically. Mockingly.

Halcyon leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. She hit a wall! How long had she been on the twelfth chapter? A week? And it didn't matter which way she came at it either. The story just wouldn't move. Her story was stuck in the middle, just like her life.

Her editor Frannie, wasn't going to be happy. She had been leaving messages in town for days now. Halcyon was procrastinating getting back to her.

How long until Halcyon had to deliver? A month? Less. She counted on her fingers. Twenty thousand words to go, eighteen days to do it in. Just over a thousand words a day. It wasn't so farfetched when the words were flowing.

Hell, when she was on a roll, she could write five thousand words a day. Maybe more if she didn't bother to edit at all.

But the words weren't flowing. The story had stopped dead, and the eighteen days she had left to get her manuscript into her editor, gnawed away at her, making her sweat.

Frannie needed a finished manuscript. She was already marketing the damn thing. She trusted Halcyon to produce book five as quickly as she churned out books one through four.

But it just wasn't happening.

"Aaahh!" Halcyon shouted. "What am I going to do? Write! Write! Write! It's just a book!" She pulled her curly red hair into a messy bun, pinned it down and scooped back in her chair ready to focus.

Fussing. Not writing.

She sighed and drummed her fingers on the desk, leaned back in her chair again.

"Get it together, Halc!"

There was no one around to hear her. Not for miles. The upside of being alone was that Halcyon could shout and scream and talk as much as she wanted with no neighbors to complain. Her little cabin was nestled between the pines in the foothills of the Sierra-Nevada mountains, and being away from people was her favorite thing these days. She moved here three years ago, after she obtained a literary degree and gotten a job as a journalist for one of those gossip magazines, she realized that a career in the fast-paced city was going to push her too far. At twenty-five, she knew what she wanted, and she didn't let anyone stop her.

The pipes groaned, and Halcyon glanced up at the ceiling. She had been watching a leak coming from her ceiling for the past couple of weeks.

It was something she had to get repaired, but during the summer months there had been no reason to get it done immediately. Now that winter was creeping in; it was a different story. The temperatures could drop below freezing soon, and a leak could lead to a burst pipe.

When the snow comes, no one would be able to get up the mountain to fix it. The thought of a winter without hot water made her shiver.

“Get the pipes checked out,” Halcyon said out loud to herself, writing it down on her to-do list. She ticked everything else off on the agenda for the week – washing, dishes, a grocery run, weeding the vegetable patch. The writing was the only item that wasn’t crossed off.

But she would get around to that. She had to.

Maybe, as soon as she had someone fix those pipes. They shouldn’t be groaning.

Halcyon left her desk and padded across the floorboards a few steps to her bedroom. The two-bedroom cabin was perfect for her – an open plan kitchen, a snug living room where she ate in front of the television. And two bedrooms, one of which had been turned into an office. It was warm and cozy in winter, cool and breezy in summer and she could live out here in the forest. Alone. To be herself without consequence.

It wasn’t always like this. There was a time when Halcyon had been a social butterfly. Her dad, Sergeant Louis Beck, had been a big shot in the military. Her mom died when she was still in grade school – Halcyon didn’t even remember her – and she ended up moving from one base to the next with her dad. She usually knew everyone, from the staff that cooked and cleaned to the soldiers that had to answer to her father.

But that was all over now. Halcyon had grown up and settled down far away from her military father. She had realized after she hit puberty that she was different than the life the army expected. She was a laid-back soul and believed in being free to make your own choices, to live your life without routine. She didn’t like all the rules and regulations.

Out here, Halcyon could sing or paint or write whenever the inspiration struck her. She could be silly or loud or quiet, and she could walk around in a dress or underwear or nothing at all if she wanted to.

She liked being free.

In her bedroom, Halcyon climbed onto her dresser to push open the hatch that led into the roof. She frowned when she saw drops of water on the ceiling, hanging as if they were about to fall, but never falling. She touched one, and it ran over her finger and down her arm.

When Halcyon pressed against another, the ceiling sagged a little.

Oh, no.

Another groan and the ceiling tore open, a hole opening up the size of her fist and water spilled down through the hatch and into the room. It wasn’t was like a tap had been opened in the ceiling. Halcyon didn’t need to inspect it to know that it was the same pipe that had been leaking.

She jumped off the dresser and ran to the faucet outside and around the back of the cabin, pulling open the lid of the box and turning off the water. She looked at the dirt and rust that left brown marks on her hand.

Maybe it was time to call someone. She wouldn't be able to turn the water back on until it was fixed. Winter was fast approaching, and it would be impossible to live here without any water at all in winter.

Back inside, Halcyon picked up her car keys and climbed into the old Mazda she picked up from a second-hand dealer five years ago. It sputtered to life, and she pulled out, driving down the winding dirt road that led to her cabin. The nearest little town was about twenty minutes' drive from her cottage.

Colfax was nothing more than a main road with few stores that survived in the old mining town. They didn't have plumbers or electricians in town, but there was cell service, an internet connection, and Halcyon often stocked up on food from the one grocery store that overpriced everything.

Since she didn't have a cell phone, she used a payphone and a telephone book at the hotel's front desk.

"Bailey's Hardware and Repair, Reggie speaking," a gruff voice answered.

"I'm looking for someone who can repair a burst pipe and fix my ceiling," Halcyon said. "Do you cover both?"

After Reggie confirmed that they did, Halcyon blew out a sigh of relief and smiled into the phone.

"I'll put you down for this weekend," Reggie said.

"I can't be without water for that long," Halcyon said, shaking her head even though this Reggie character couldn't see her. "That's three days."

"If we have a cancellation, I'll send someone out sooner, ma'am, but I can't make any promises. You're almost an hour's drive outside of the city."

"Please, that would be very helpful," Halcyon said. When things like this happened, it was the only time she didn't like being so isolated from civilization. "Do you have a number we can contact you on?"

Halcyon gave the number to the receptionist at the hotel. Marina always took messages for her.

"I check them once every couple of days, but I'll check in daily until I hear from you," Halcyon said.

Reggie grumbled, but there was nothing else that could be done. Halcyon thanked him for his time and hung up. At least, something was going to happen.

When she stepped out of the hotel on their wooden porch, she looked up. Clouds stretched across the sky, hanging low like a blanket ready to be pulled over the mountain tops. The clouds had a strange pink hue to them.

Snow?

Halcyon inhaled a deep breath. The crisp oxygenated air sure smelled like it, though. But it was far too soon in the year. Usually, snow only appeared around Christmas, and it wasn't even Halloween yet. She took another deep breath.

She drove back to her cabin.

That book wasn't going to write itself.

## Chapter 2

The thing about routine was you only missed it when it was gone. And Jack missed it. His sorry ass couldn't think for himself anymore. He woke up at the crack of dawn, still hearing the drill sergeant's whistles even though he'd been out now for almost a year.

Ha. Think for himself? After everything, the army had done to him? What a joke.

He would have loved to sleep in a while longer. His nerves wouldn't allow it.

Just one. Fucking. Time.

He made his bed perfectly, the edges trim, the top flat. If a commanding officer ever walked into his apartment, Jack would be commended for being an outstanding soldier. Maybe he should have become a fucking maid, rather than a handyman: same humiliation, same lack of reward.

No one came to check up on his duties, because he wasn't in the military anymore.

After college, he had gotten married, decided to enlist and served three Tours of Duty. It had been the ideal life. Now? His contract was over, and he was forced to start from scratch again as a civilian. Like all those years had meant nothing.

Thank you for your service, we don't care what you do, now.

Ten months since his discharge and Jack was still just a product of the U.S. Military. He had no reason to get up in the morning other than the fact that he couldn't fall back asleep.

His wife, Leanne had left him. The bitch had held out for four and a half years. And then, six months before his discharge, she'd sent him a Dear John. She'd fucked up his life, found the proverbial greener pastures, and she'd left him for a skinny corporate guy.

He had no plan and no girlfriend for two months now, which meant he was wired, too — no one to take the edge off.

Without uncle Reggie, he might have lost his shit months ago.

His uncle's family had opened a hardware store back when Sacramento was the main road West to San Francisco. Back in the day, Bailey's Hardware got rich off of selling shovels, and as the gold rush died out, they opened the repair service to keep the business going. It was Jack's new routine to be there every day for his family.

Fucking A.

He worked there during the day, putting in exactly eight hours and not a minute more because Reggie wouldn't allow him to drown himself in work. Yeah, the old man didn't even trust him. As if he was a danger with a hacksaw just because pulling a trigger was second nature.

God knew Jack would have carried on working until he fell over. Purely because he couldn't stop moving, his fingers itched, and he ached to have someone around to answer to. He struggled to conform to normal life.

"Normal," they said as if it meant something. Normal, as if missing the mark was an abomination. But anything other than the military life he was used to was not normal.

Maybe Jack was just ruined for life. A shadow of the man he used to be before he enlisted.

On the way to work from his rundown apartment – the one he'd had to get after Leanne sold off the house they'd owned – Jack sat in city traffic behind a car that coughed and sputtered black smoke, doing the atmosphere a damn disservice. At a traffic light, it died.

"Fucker," Jack said under his breath, his hands gripping the steering wheels until his knuckles turned white because it was better than wrapping them around the driver's throat.

He sucked in a deep breath, held them for three seconds, let it out slowly. If he needed to be late because of traffic, his Uncle said it was better than losing his shit and being arrested for road rage or speeding.

Jack was used to settling things with violence.

He shook his head. He shouldn't think like this.

The car backfired a loud pop, and Jack was suddenly back in the field. Guns rattled on both sides of him, the soundtrack of his life was still being played out.

A bomb blew up in front of him, shooting clumps of dirt into the air, spraying sand into his eyes, singeing his eyebrows and cooking the meat on his very bones. He lay on his back, staring up at a patch of blue sky through the black smoke, wondering if this was it. His ears rang; he couldn't breathe.

Cars honking their horns and swerving in front of him yanked Jack back to reality. He was holding up the traffic now.

Fuck.

The smoking jalopy that had been in front of him was now a hundred feet down the road.

His hands trembled, and he tasted his heart in his throat.

This happened too often.

"What happened to you?" Reggie asked when Jack arrived at the hardware store. He walked into the office where Reggie was busy with paperwork. The old man's hair was graying at the temples, and his skin looked like it had been in the sun for years, turning into leather.

“Nothing. Rough night,” Jack lied. He wasn’t going to admit what had happened on the road. Reggie had already threatened to take the truck back. These flashbacks were happening more often. Jack refused to be classified as a danger on the road, categorized with senile old folk and drunken teenagers. If Reggie took away his wheels, Jack would have to get on the bus or some shit and being in between all the commuters made him hyperventilate on principle.

“I don’t know how we’re going to get Kevin out to this place,” Reggie said, looking down at this notepad. “It’s up in the mountains. It will take him a whole damn day to do one job.”

“What’s the job?” Jack asked, sitting down on the other side of the desk, happy to talk about something else.

“A burst pipe, damaged ceiling. I don’t know what else will need work. It’s close to Colfax.”

Jack hadn’t heard of the town before, but he knew the mountains were littered with small towns.

“I’ll go.”

Reggie looked up at him. “I don’t think so,” he said.

“Why not? You can’t spare Kevin. And I have the time.”

A shit ton of time.

Jack worked for his uncle. He did the heavy lifting at the store, delivery and pickups, odd jobs that kept him busy. No one trusted him with power tools. Hell, he didn’t even trust himself with power tools at this point. He was edgy as fuck with a temper that turned ugly fast.

“Come on, a simple pipe fix and a ceiling patch job, you know I can do it,” Jack said.

He willed his uncle to say yes. He didn’t just need to do something that would be worthwhile. He needed the validation.

He desperately needed to get the hell out of Dodge. He wasn’t cut out for living in the city, not since he’d had the pleasure of camping for the government for years. The city was filled with people that were happy dealing with everyday life, but he couldn’t do it: the people, the traffic, the noise.

He just wanted to get away.

“It’s not about the work,” Reggie said. “It’s about the drive. An hour in the car, the first half in traffic. Can you manage that?”

Jack rolled his eyes. He didn’t need to be treated like a charity case. So, he struggled with PTSD. But it didn’t have to define him, and he hated that it did. He was an ex-soldier. Why did no one see a man who had served his country? Instead, everyone seemed to look at him like he was a ticking time bomb, just waiting to go off.

He smiled bitterly at the irony.

“I guess it’s up to you to decide if I can do it,” Jack said.

He couldn't argue with Reggie. He wasn't going to try. He saw how they all looked at him when he froze when someone's crazy cell phone buzzer went off too loud.

There was a reason he didn't even bother staying with family anymore. The therapist had said it would help him to have his own space. He was sick of the pity that filled everyone when they looked at him like he was a victim.

The truth was, he would rather be back in the military. Institutionalized. Wasn't that the word they used? Maybe not in a case like this. But it sure as shit felt like it. He didn't know how to function in normal society anymore.

Maybe, eventually, he would figure it out.

"Yeah, okay," Reggie finally said. "I guess I can trust you with something bigger for a change. And it's an urgent job, too. You should get out there asap."

"I can leave now?"

Reggie nodded. "Fine. I'll organize your equipment."

Jack grinned. "Thank you," he said. He didn't add anything as tacky as "I won't let you down." Because this wasn't about letting his uncle down, this wasn't for Reggie at all.

A few minutes later, Jack was on the road. He was stuck in traffic as expected, but it didn't take long before he broke free of it and could already feel the ease in the air as he headed into the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains.

A chill in the air like this one was strange for this time of year. It was only halfway through Fall. But in the mountains, it was often colder. Jack hadn't been to the mountains since he was a kid. He rolled down his window and took in a lung full of the crisp, intensely fresh smell of snow that he had grown to love when he was younger. It couldn't be snow – it was far too early for that. But the smell was sweet in his nose and it reminded him of a time when he wasn't scared to live outside of the constraints that had held him upright like a mold.