

## Chapter One

*London, October 1821*

Thom woke with a sob, his chest so tight he could hardly take a breath as he scrambled back in bed, his legs tangled in the sheets. He grabbed his throat with one hand and stuck the other arm out straight, as if he could ward off the dreams. He could still hear Gideon North's screams when he'd woken to find most of his leg missing and his face burned all to hell. He'd grabbed Thom by the throat and begged him to kill him. Every time Thom had the dream he woke up like this.

But it wasn't a dream. It was a memory. They were all memories.

He struggled out of the sheets and swung his legs over the side of the bed. His feet landed on the cold floor with a thump. He rubbed his face with both hands only to discover he was sweating profusely. The discovery made him shiver, suddenly chilled to the bone. The room was pitch black. *Not morning yet, then.* Another night with almost no sleep. His blurry mind superimposed the musty, dimly lit medical tent on the edge of the battlefield at Badajoz around him, and blindly he reached for the whiskey on the bedside table. It still sat where he'd left it last night, thank God. He lifted it and drank straight from the bottle, ignoring the glass sitting beside it. This memory didn't require a glass.

God, how Gideon would hate it if he knew he was a recurring nightmare for Thom. He'd be good and angry. Thom chuckled aloud around the whiskey bottle and coughed a little. He wiped the whiskey that escaped off his chin with the back of his hand.

There was a quiet knock on the bedroom door. "Doctor Peters, are you all right?" Mrs. Whimsey, his landlady, called softly through the door. "We heard a noise. Did you fall again?"

"I'm fine, Mrs. Whimsey," he called out quietly, his voice a rough rasp from the whiskey and lack of sleep. "Just my feet hitting the floor as I got out of bed." There were many good things about renting a room in a boarding house. Thin walls and nosy landladies, however, were not on the list.

"So early?" she said in disbelief. "Have you a patient?"

Had he a patient? He certainly hoped so, and the income that came with them, or else his kindly landlady would put him out on the street. "Yes," he lied. "I've got to get to my office early this morning."

"It's the middle of the night," she said with a bit of hesitation in her voice.

"Of course it is," he said politely, standing unsteadily. "I must shave and dress and arrive before my patient, Mrs. Whimsey."

"Of course," she agreed, but he could hear the suspicion in her voice. "Shall I get breakfast for you then?"

His stomach churned at the thought of food. "No thank you," he said quickly. "You must go back to bed. I didn't mean to disturb you."

"All right," she said. "Good morning then, Doctor."

"Good morning, Mrs. Whimsey," he replied out of habit. He stood there until he heard her footsteps fading away. Only then did he move carefully in the dark to the table with the unlit taper on it. He stubbed his toe on the table leg and grit his teeth to keep from cursing aloud. It took five minutes to light a damn candle, or at least it felt that way.

Since he was up and had told Mrs. Whimsey he was going to dress and leave, he figured he might as well actually do it. He couldn't see himself very well in the mirror, which suited his current mood. He probably looked like hell. He usually did these days. No sense making it worse by shining a light on it.

He nicked himself only three times as he was shaving. Considering he was still more than slightly drunk he deemed himself lucky he didn't slit his own throat. The thought had occurred to him more than once over the last few years on mornings such as this one, but he had yet to let the blade slip with purpose.

When he ventured outside it was still dark and quite cool. He pulled the collar of his rather battered blue superfine jacket up around his neck and rubbed his hands together. He'd forgotten his scarf and coat again. *Damn.* Well, a brisk, cold walk might sober him up a bit before he had to see patients. He might not know who had an appointment today, but he was quite sure someone would show up. Not many of his patients these days were sick. They came for something else and he gladly supplied it. Far better to scratch an itch than to actually have to patch up the dying. He'd done enough of that during the war. He purposefully veered away from that train of thought.

His office sat off Baker Street. Not fashionable, but not unfashionable, either. Just right. He saw patients from both sides of that divide, which made his days interesting at least. And he could show up looking like he did this morning without being as out of place as a whore at church.

He unlocked the office door and stepped inside. It smelled of sweat and fear and lavender. The last was the contribution of his latest assistant, Clarence. Clarence had decided that the many ladies who had recently begun to cross the threshold would prefer a better stench than one normally found in a doctor's office. The truth was, Thom liked it. There'd been no lavender at Badajoz, or anywhere else on the Peninsula. It didn't carry any memories. Except for perhaps Kitty. She liked to wear lavender perfume. Maybe that was why he liked it so much.

At the thought of the dark-haired, diminutive and lovely Kitty Markham, Thom's chest constricted. She was relegated to "if only". If only he weren't so bloody tired. If only he didn't drink so much. If only he could sleep at night. If only he didn't hate himself so much for what he'd been doing lately. If only...well, then he might have approached her. Might have tried to make her his, to answer her inviting looks with longing ones of his own. To banter flirtatiously with her and kiss her with the passion he knew she wanted and so richly deserved. But he simply didn't have it in him anymore. He didn't have the capacity to feel much of anything anymore except bitter regret.

"Dr. Peters!" The locked door to his inner office rattled as someone shook the handle. "Dr. Peters, answer me!" Clarence called out.

Thom lifted his head from his desk and glanced about. He must have dozed off. He'd worn himself out with exercises, squatting and jumping and pulling himself up on the doorframe. He'd learned to do that from an old pugilist to whom he'd confided years ago about his trouble sleeping. "A tired body sleeps," he'd told Thom. Sometimes it worked. The sun was up now, not that it was sunny. It was an overcast, blustery day. He cleared his throat. "Yes, Clarence?"

"Oh, thank God," Clarence said from the other side of the door with obvious relief. "Open the door."

Thom stood and stumbled a bit as his foot caught the leg of his chair. He blew out a breath and straightened his jacket before running his hands through his hair. *Well*, he thought, *that's as good as it gets*. He looked ruefully at the bottle of whiskey on his desk. "Hold up," he said. He grabbed the bottle and shoved it in a drawer and then walked over and opened the door. "Hullo."

Clarence was furious. He was a small man, rather fastidious in his appearance and with a fussy demeanor. He'd been in the Army on the Peninsula too. When he'd answered Thom's advertisement for an assistant he'd told Thom he'd worked with him several times during the war. Thom had had to confess with a great deal of embarrassment that he didn't remember Clarence. "That's all right," Clarence had told him. "I remember you, and what you did there. I respect you for it, no matter what you're doing now." It had hardly been an auspicious beginning, but Thom had desperately needed an assistant after his last one had walked out in disgust.

"Do not do that again," Clarence said angrily. He pushed his way into the office and closed the door behind him. Thom had a glimpse of several people in the waiting area. "I thought you were dead."

Thom laughed, but his mirth faded as he realized Clarence was serious. "Why on earth would you think I was dead?"

"I thought you'd finally drunk yourself to death or hastened your demise with some artificial method."

Thom blinked at him in blurry disbelief. "Not yet. Sorry."

"You ought to be sorry." Clarence was tight lipped as he tidied up Thom's desk and yanked open his desk drawers until he found the bottle of whiskey Thom had stashed there. "Do I need to remove this?"

Thom narrowed his eyes and glared at the little man. "Not unless you'd like to be unemployed."

Clarence slammed the drawer shut. "Fine. Mrs. Butler is here."

"Again?" Thom said with a sigh. "Didn't I just see her?"

“Apparently she likes whatever you’re giving her for her nerves,” Clarence commented dryly. “And she’s been rather impatient.” He shoved a brush at Thom. “Here. Do something with yourself.” He fussed with Thom’s cravat while Thom ran the brush through his hair and tried unsuccessfully to smooth the wrinkles from his jacket.

He finally threw his hands up in disgust. “Enough. This is as good as it’s going to get today.”

“Better than yesterday,” Clarence muttered not quite under his breath.

“I heard that.”

“You were supposed to.” Clarence threw the office door open and gave Mrs. Butler a brittle smile. “Here he is!” he exclaimed. “Why don’t I show you into the visiting room?”

Thom snorted at Clarence’s term for the operatory. He thought the ladies would prefer that as well. This was becoming more bordello than doctor’s office.

He took a moment more in his office to prepare for Mrs. Butler. She liked to dance around her reasons for coming. It most likely assuaged her guilt and justified the fact she came here to get a better fuck than her husband could give her. He liked the ones who made no bones about why they came to see him far better.

He walked into the operatory and gave her a perfunctory smile as he closed the door behind him. She didn’t like him to act as if they were intimate. Though the truth was, they weren’t. Sexual relations with Mrs. Butler were all business. She wanted him to pretend it was all very proper, a doctor treating a patient. As if any doctor worth his salt would fuck a patient to cure her ills. Lucky for her Thom wasn’t worth anyone’s salt these days. A good fuck was about the only thing he could help with.

“Mrs. Butler,” he said in greeting, nodding politely at the plump, blonde, middle-aged woman. “I’m a little concerned to see you so soon after your last visit. Is everything all right?” He adopted a suitably concerned look.

“Oh, Doctor,” she said with an affected little sob, holding her handkerchief to the corner of her eye. “My nerves. This past week has been horrible. Just horrible.”

“There, there,” Thom said briskly. He walked over to where she sat on the exam table and patted her awkwardly on the back. She took it as a signal to lie back, which she did so rapidly Thom stumbled back a step in alarm.

Mrs. Butler immediately put her feet on the table, her knees bent. She unceremoniously yanked her skirts up. She was bare underneath them. “My husband has been complaining again that I can’t satisfy him. There must be something wrong with me!”

Thom rolled his eyes, his head turned aside as he took off his jacket. They went through this routine every time she came to see him. “I’m sorry, I’ll have to examine you to be sure there’s nothing wrong. You’ll have to forgive me if I offend.”

“No, no, Doctor. I understand. I’ll just close my eyes.” She made a great show of covering her eyes with her hand.

Thom sidled over and saw she was wet with desire. She'd had more time to prepare for this than he had. He was flaccid and useless, too tired and drunk and cold to fuck an irritating woman. He reached over and inserted a finger in her cunt, hoping he could use his hand today. But it wasn't to be.

"No, Doctor," she said firmly. "I need you to make sure there's nothing wrong very deep inside."

Thom bit off a sigh. "Of course."

He reached down and unbuttoned his trousers, trying to get in the mood. He thought of Kitty Markham, with her lustrous dark hair and full breasts and felt a stirring in his cock. He hated himself for it, but all the same he closed his eyes and imagined it was her before him, beckoning him with a smile, her legs splayed, her sex wet and ready, her dark hair spread out around her shoulders. The chill that raced down his back wasn't from the cold. Arousal raced through him as his imaginary Kitty licked her lips and pulled him close. He fucked his cock into his fist at the fantasy, hard and ready at just the thought of her like that. He turned to the table, refusing to look at Mrs. Butler directly. He shoved his cock in her and her gasp was Kitty's gasp in his mind. His dream Kitty had bared her breasts for him and she had them cupped in her dainty hands, the pale bounty spilling from her grasp as he fucked in and out of her.

Mrs. Butler's legs wrapped tightly around his waist and she fucked him hard and fast, but he blocked her from his thoughts, instead imagining it was Kitty's legs imprisoning his hips, her sex holding his so tightly. With a gasp he grabbed the edge of the exam table and slammed into the willing woman beneath him, over and over, Kitty's image in his mind, her name trying to burst from his lips with each thrust.

Mrs. Butler came, thrashing and moaning on the table. She immediately pushed him away and Thom pulled out with a strangled moan. He spun around and jerked on his damp cock a few times and then he came with a harsh groan, imagining filling Kitty with his release.

"Ahem." Mrs. Butler cleared her throat behind him. "Well, Doctor?" She sounded irritated. She always was when he had to take his own pleasure after she was done. As if she truly thought it was some sort of exam as opposed to an illicit fuck.

"All seems to be as it should be, Mrs. Butler," he said, shoving his cock in his drawers and hastily buttoning his pants. He turned back to find her smoothing her hair back in place. "You are performing normally for a married woman. You can assure your husband I have examined you thoroughly."

She smiled smugly. "Thank you, Doctor. I'm relieved to hear it." She held out her hand for assistance and he helped her down from the table. "I've recommended you to my dear sister and cousin, who also suffer from nervous conditions. I hope you'll treat them as well as you treat me."

"Of course," Thom said with a slight bow. "Thank you."

She left and Thom retreated to his office for a drink. He always needed one after servicing patients like Mrs. Butler. At least, that was the excuse he used.

