

CHAPTER ONE

Portugal

September 28, 1810

“Are you all right, Lieutenant?” Jason stopped beside Bertie Thorne. The young man had seen his first action yesterday at Busaco, and he’d looked green around the gills when Jason had seen him not long after the battle was over. He’d say they won if the victory hadn’t been steeped in carnage.

Thorne stood and saluted. “I’m all right, sir,” he said. His voice was rough. Either crying or throwing up had produced that. Jason himself had thrown up after his first battle. Fear and excitement could both upset a man’s constitution.

“Good.” Jason patted him on the back and made eye contact with Thorne’s friend, Lieutenant Haversham, who was sitting next to the boy before the fire. Both still wore their dirty uniforms, but not an inch of either uniform was out of place. Order was of the utmost importance in war. When a man was steeped in chaos, the very things that seemed so onerous at home—a well-maintained wardrobe, punctuality, decorum—were the very things that soothed his soul and kept him sane at war. Say what you will about the army—it was a well-dressed, well-oiled machine.

Haversham looked unflappable, as usual. “Captain Randal,” he said by way of a greeting. He gave Jason a nod to indicate he’d take care of the other lad, though he wasn’t much older. He’d been well on his way to mad when Thorne had shown up. The two made quite an odd pair, Thorne so wild and a jokester and Haversham so staid and solemn. Haversham had been with the Fourteenth Light Dragoons since before Talavera, over a year now.

Jason shook his head as he turned away. Time seemed to be slipping through his fingers. Each day he felt the constriction of it, as if each passing minute were a noose tightening around his neck, choking the life out of him. There was so much he wanted to do, so much he wanted to see, yet he was chained to this bloody war like Prometheus on the rock, the bastard French eating away at his heart as the mythical eagle ate away at that poor Greek’s liver.

As he trudged through the camp Jason tried to feel the horror, the outrage that had filled him in the beginning after a battle. Now he felt...nothing. No anger, no sorrow, no relief, even. Survival just meant one more day of wading through the muck of an army camp, checking uniforms and filling out forms until the next orders came through, and then it was riding, endless riding, across

hostile terrain until he ran into the enemy, almost as if by mistake. They tried to kill each other, and then he moved on to the next army camp and started the entire process over. It was mind-numbing monotony broken by heartbreaking carnage, if he still had a heart to break.

He had to stop and lean against the corner support of a nearby tent as another wave of that foolish breathlessness struck him. It had been happening more and more lately. Not during a battle, thank God, but at times like this, when he had nowhere to go and nothing to do and he let his morose thoughts swamp him. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't catch his breath, and panic began to overtake him as spots danced before his eyes. He leaned down and rested his hands on his knees, his head hanging low, and stayed like that until the feeling passed and he could breathe again.

He straightened and then yanked on his jacket to set it to rights. After adjusting his shako so it sat firmly on his head again, he looked around with a glare, ready to address anyone who had seen his weakness. Thankfully there was no one about. He was frustrated and hungry and wondering where in the hell Tony was, so he stalked off in search of his best friend. Tony could usually talk him out of his blue devils. He was really the only thing that could get any reaction from him these days. More often than not the reaction was a good throat-clearing bout of angry words, but it was better than nothing. He hated the nothingness. Hated it.

As he approached their tent he was surprised to see it was dark. He'd expected Tony to be back from his meeting with His Lordship by now. He was good and pissed about not finding him here. He was ready for a good row.

Just as he reached for the tent flap he heard the unmistakable sound of a woman moaning from inside. He smiled grimly. Tony's method of battling the nothingness involved fucking morning, noon and night. Some uncontrollable impulse grabbed Jason then. Some devil inside him that made him want to open the flap and enter the tent, intending something, though he wasn't sure what. He stopped thinking and gave in to the impulse.