

## ***LOST AND ALONE***

### Chapter 1

GUNNERY SERGEANT KUTSCH WALKS alongside the head of his steed – a magnificent, black stallion. His dense, curly, rain-soaked mane, usually seen bouncing with every movement, is stuck to his thick muscular neck. Trails of it hang well below the lowest part of his neck with water dripping from the ends. His tail just misses the ground and the feathery hair growing around his lower legs is caked with mud. His natural high stepping action makes moving through the muck almost easy. The stallion is the leading partner in one of the few two-horse teams pulling a cannon. His partner to his right is a substantial young black gelding with rough lines and a dull expression. The four and six horse teams are also having trouble sticking in the mud and the going is slow.

The downpour started just after dawn as they moved through the last city, and it has not let up. Now, midday, the sun should be overhead but it is still dark from the thick heavy clouds. The soldiers and horses sweat from the heat and humidity, a normal August day just inside the Belgian border.

The rain does not give much relief to the toiling soldiers in full uniform and carrying firearms. Progress is slow over the muddy sticky roads, and the overheated horses are struggling with the weight of the cannons they pull.

Every few kilometers they pass through a small village with people staring from behind curtains and shutters as the German soldiers march along. No welcome here. The men and older boys are absent from the onlookers, having volunteered to help defend Liège only a few kilometers away.

The army's destination is a defensive fort protecting Liège this sixth day of August, 1914. Only an hour's march separates them from war. Cannons firing in the distance sound like thunder.

As these German soldiers draw nearer the front lines, the increasing resonance of battle weighs heavy on them. The sounds of the cannons are heard even in the neighboring country of The Netherlands many kilometers away. The horses with this battalion are accustomed to the noise from practice battles, but this is different. They can feel the tension in the air and the dread present in their handlers.

The sergeant and the stallion have been together over two years and have developed a deep trust in each other. Each has his own job to do and can depend on the other to take care of business. The sergeant bought the horse for himself and then decided to train him for pulling cannons so they

could always be together. This horse is the most stable and easy going of all the horses the sergeant has known and he is a natural for pulling the cannons. Sergeant Kutsch is also proud to have the only horse in his battalion pulling cannons without a military brand. It is his way of giving more than just himself to the service of his country.

The sound of gunfire becomes louder as they travel down the small road covered with mud, puddles and little streams crossing over to the other side. Within a kilometer the road turns but the soldiers march on, following a well trodden path toward the battle sounds. The procession travels over the soggy ground, grinding more grass into the mud. The soldiers' feet and the horses' hooves sink into the sticky mud.

The stallion snorts and shakes his head as the sergeant pats his arched neck. It is as if the stallion is saying, "I'm ready for the work ahead." The stallion remembers the day he left his home as a two year old to be with his sergeant. It was a scary time, yet, something about the sergeant was so comforting. Maybe it was his sergeant's gentle ways while remaining fully in control. It was easy to learn from him. His sergeant taught the stallion all he knew about pulling and to have excellent manners around people. His life revolves around his sergeant. Never has the stallion seen the sergeant with people other than soldiers. It is just the horse and his loving owner, Sergeant Kutsch.

The battle has been waged for a day already, and more troops are coming. The sounds of the battle are clear as the troops enter a valley filled with soldiers, tents and horses. The air is thick with smoke and confusion. The battle is just to the other side of the low hill on the right.

It is now late afternoon and the commanding general is shouting orders to disperse the men and cannons along the crest of the hill. He is intent on gaining position on the hill before nightfall, then push through the fort below in the morning. The fort is the main obstacle in the way of this division's advance to Liège.

Many of the cannon horses are refusing to climb. They are scared and confused by the scene around them. Men are being carried off the field screaming in pain to tents with flaps blowing in the wind. Officers are running around yelling orders. Further down the valley, a dozen horses are pawing, snorting, and pulling against their ties. The sound of the battle is menacing with gunfire echoing off the opposite hill.

The sergeant leads the stallion up the hill. His hooves dig deep into the wet grass and soil. The wheels sink deep and drag as much as turn. The pair of black horses lurches forward in unison to break the heavy load from the miry grip over and over again up the rounded hill. On the other side lies the battle. Sergeant Kutsch's training keeps him intent on getting the horses and the cannon

into position. They are all doing the job they were trained to do.

At the top of the hill, a chill runs through Sergeant Kutsch when he sees the reality of war. It is more graphic than he ever imagined. He is horrified, but his training is stronger. He immediately controls the fear and begins concentrating again on his job.

The stallion, feeling the Sergeant's fear, begins to panic and starts to rear up. His sergeant grabs his head firmly and speaks reassuringly to him, giving the stallion the calmness necessary to pay attention to commands and finish moving the cannon into place. Soldiers are on each side firing their rifles and there is an occasional whistle of a bullet passing nearby.

After making a circle, Sergeant Kutsch's cannon is finally in place at the top of the hill. "Take my horses back down the hill!" he orders to the private assigned to move the horses off the battlefield to safety.

The team of soldiers begins preparing the cannon for firing while Kutsch unhitches the stallion and the private unhitches the other horse. As the private tries to lead the horses, the black gelding is frozen in fear and refuses to move. Not even a slap on the neck or rump moves him.

"Cut them apart!" The Sergeant directs the private to help cut the harness between the two horses, so the stallion can be led away quickly. The

private starts to trot the stallion away to the left and downhill. The other horse, seeing his teammate move, follows almost as if still tied together.

There is an explosion. The noise is deafening and comes from the spot where they just left the cannon. Without a chance to react, Sergeant Kutsch and his team are gone. The private is hit and falls to the ground dropping the reins.

The cannon is blown from its position with pieces of it flying everywhere. Part of a wheel spoke hits the stallion just behind his left hip and tears a long gash before embedding itself in the panicking animal. Other smaller pieces of the cannon and wood pepper his left rear quarter and side. A sharp piece of metal cuts part of the harness so it hangs down precariously, but it saves him from another deep cut.

The stallion, startled and wounded, squeals madly and takes off running along the top of the hill knocking a soldier head-over-heels down the hill. Another soldier waves his arms, trying to slow down the wide-eyed black horse. The stallion spins around and heads downhill past all the people and other horses. He can only think to escape the pain and the noise, which feel like one now. It is hard to separate the two until he gets far enough away that the battle sounds are faint, but the pain is still overwhelming.

He runs past the hills, across roads and between trees in a small forest. Fields of grass and flowers

pass beneath his feathered legs. Anything moving frightens him, causing him to change direction to avoid contact.

Finally the stallion begins to slow down, feeling that he has put enough distance between that frightful place and himself.

He stops to look at a stream swollen with the heavy rains. One more obstacle he can put behind him and be farther from danger. He limps through the swollen stream that swirls halfway up his legs. It is hard to keep his balance against the water rushing around him.

The stallion heads up the opposite bank and slips on the mud. Trying to recover, he steps on a leather strap that is dangling to the ground. Pain! Searing pain shoots through his hip throwing him even more off balance and he falls on his right side.

As the stallion struggles to get up, his left hind foot gets caught in the dangling part of the harness. He kicks sharply to free his leg and rips off the part of the harness that is hanging down, leaving it on the muddy bank. He squeals as the sharp pain in his hip is deepened further and his fear renewed. He scrambles to get up and starts running again. I'm not safe! It's still with me! I must get away! he thinks to himself.

He runs until the only sounds he hears is the ringing in his ears and his hooves pounding on the ground. The rain has ended and now he is covered with sweat which stings his wounds. White sweaty

lather shows around the remains of the harness, under his mane and between his hind legs.

Again, he slows as the panic starts to leave him. Exhaustion sets in while he pushes himself to walk further, establishing as much distance as possible between himself and that horrid place. The pain seems to surround him. Limping badly, it is hard to breathe and he aches everywhere.

With the faint sounds of the battle behind him and the red sky of the waning sunset above him, he stops. His black mud and blood encrusted body appears as a shadow in the darkness of night. He is lost and alone. He collapses under a tree next to the road with the sliver of a rising moon peeking along the edge of a cloud watching over him.