



## Chapter One

Brighton, England  
July, 1823

Belinda stared across the meeting table toward Maxwell Thorpe and bit out, “You’re a heartless monster.”

The monster himself said nothing. He silently continued to gaze at her through brown eyes that had always reminded her of melted chocolate, with a face that most women would have said was handsome enough to give sweet dreams but which had brought her nightmares.

Around them, the other members of the board of the Royal Hospital who had arrived in time for this meeting shifted awkwardly in their chairs. The tips of Mr. Peterson’s ears turned red, and Lord Daubney was downright shocked. But when had she ever cared what society gentlemen thought of her?

And she certainly couldn’t care less what the monster at the head of the table thought. Maxwell Thorpe had lost that right a very long time ago.

Colonel Woodhouse leaned forward. “Your Grace, if you would consider—”

She slid a narrowed gaze at him, silencing him with a look. Nor did she care what opinions the colonel—or any actively commissioned officer, especially the one leading the meeting—held about this matter. Those same officers were now conspiring to shut down the Royal Hospital, home to over sixty military pensioners, and she refused to let that happen.

“Of course *you* support him, Colonel.” Her calm words belied her anger. “I’m certain the orders came down from the highest level in the War Office, and a good soldier never questions his orders. Not even when it upends the lives of elderly men who lost the best years of their lives—and several dozen eyes and limbs between them—protecting England.”

That silenced the colonel. He leaned back in his chair and busied himself by shuffling through the papers in front of him.

It silenced all protests from the other board members, as well. Good. They needed to know that she was resolute in carrying out the remaining few months of her late husband’s three-year tenure on the board. Once a new board was seated, she’d lose the influence she held as a voting member. But until then, she planned to fight to keep those men in the only home they had left. And the one they deserved.

“As I explained,” Maxwell interjected, “the army needs another training facility in the south of England, and because the garrison barracks are already located here, Brighton is the most logical choice.”

“Very well.” She kept her hands folded demurely in her lap, not once reaching for the tea tray that the flustered aide-de-camp hurried to ready and bring into the room, once his surprise wore off at a woman arriving unannounced for the meeting. And the widow of a duke, no less. One who spoke her mind on military matters and held her own against peers and His Majesty’s officers. “Then by all means, you should build one.”

*And leave the Royal Hospital and its pensioners alone.* The unspoken challenge hung on the air between them.

She’d received word only yesterday about this called meeting of the board and the War Office’s plans. Although she’d intended on coming to Brighton anyway, to spend the summer with two of her dearest friends and escape unwanted attentions in London, she hadn’t expected to leave for at least another fortnight. And she certainly hadn’t expected that the man who was leading the meeting, as special War Office liaison to the board, was the same one who had once shattered her heart.

Now, apparently, he was also set on turning pensioners out of their home, just so officers could learn to more effectively wage war.

But he had another think coming if he thought he could come sweeping in and so easily close the hospital.

She flashed a saccharine smile. “Other properties are available where the academy can be constructed.”

“Unfortunately, that’s not feasible.” Maxwell’s answer was calm, although she was certain he wanted to throttle her for raising objections to his plans. “We need the academy to be operational within six months, which means we need these existing buildings.”

“Without regard to the men whom the army no longer has any use for?” She held up the list of names of the pensioners. “What’s to become of them?”

“They’re not being kicked out into the cold, Your Grace.” His forced smile proved that she was wearing on his patience. *Good.* “They’ll be relocated to other hospitals, including Chelsea.”

“But their home isn’t Chelsea. It’s Brighton.”

“They will adapt to their new home, wherever it is.” His hard expression told her that he was through attempting to win her over by persuasion. So did the way he leaned back in his chair, reminding her of a tiger studying his prey. Right before he pounced. “His Majesty’s soldiers are all loyal men who are used to doing what’s needed of them.”

“Are they? My experience tells me differently.”

His eyes glinted at that private cut, the only outward reaction that her arrow hit home. But she’d noticed. After all, there was a time when she’d noticed everything about this man.

“With respect, Your Grace,” Mr. Peterson interjected, perhaps fearing the two of them would come to blows if someone didn’t intercede, “your experience with the military is limited. I’m certain Brigadier Thorpe is doing what’s best for both the pensioners and the cadets.”

“While my experience with the military might be limited—” She leveled her gaze on Maxwell, to make certain he understood that she’d neither forgotten nor forgiven how he’d used her for his own advancement all those years ago. “—my experience with *military officers* is not. In addition to serving on this board in my late husband’s stead and being the hospital’s leading patroness, I am also a patroness for the Royal Hospital Chelsea and the Greenwich Hospital.”

As the Duchess of Winchester, she wielded a great deal of influence, and her role here couldn’t be dismissed out of hand. That had been the greatest gift that her late husband George had ever given her—the power of a duchess, along with a dower that ensured she’d be able to give financially to whatever charities she favored. Winchester

had known since the day he married her that her heart lay with her charity work. He'd probably laugh to know that she was using his old position on the board to put a thorn in Maxwell Thorpe's side.

She straightened her shoulders, to become as imposing as her twenty-eight years could be. "Gentlemen, need I remind you that those pensioners are here because they have no money and no families to look after them? It is up to us to defend them."

"And it is up to His Majesty's active army and navy to defend all of England," Maxwell countered. "Sandhurst has proven a grand success, and the War Office believes—and I concur—that more academies are needed. Of course, we want to work with the board, not against it, to ensure a smooth transition."

In other words, the War Office was going ahead with the academy whether the board liked it or not.

"And if the board refuses?" she pressed.

The men all looked at her as if she'd sprouted a second head. After all, they'd have to be mad to go against the War Office's wishes.

Except for Maxwell, in whom she saw a flash of admiration for her tenacity.

Perhaps, though, it wasn't admiration at all but simply acknowledgment of an adversary. If so, he had no idea of how stalwart an opponent she could be.

Colonel Woodhouse gently cleared his throat. "I believe, Your Grace, that the board agrees with Brigadier Thorpe."

"Does it? By my count, only a third of the board is present." Eleven men—and one lone widow—sat on the board, but because of the rushed nature of this meeting, only four of them were present. "Do we really want to expose ourselves and the War Office to the hostilities that might ensue if sixty pensioners are expelled from their home based upon the agreement of only one-third of the board?"

The men exchanged troubled looks. Only Max's inscrutable expression remained unchanged. As if he'd expected a fight from her all along.

"What are your terms, Your Grace?" he asked. The same words, she noted, that generals used when negotiating surrender. The question was...which one of them did he think was surrendering?

"That we hold a formal vote by the entire board in a fortnight. Delaying the decision will give the others the opportunity to weigh in or send their proxies."

And give her time to sway them all to vote against the academy.

Woodhouse's patience snapped. "This is absurd!" He waved a hand dismissively at her. "To let this woman—"

"Colonel." The force of that reverberated through the room as Maxwell rose from his chair. "You forget yourself."

Woodhouse snapped his mouth shut, but his nostrils flared. "Yes, Brigadier."

"Apologize to Her Grace."

Woodhouse hesitated. "Sir?"

"Apologize."

Clenching his jaw, Woodhouse was anything but apologetic as he ground out, "My apologies, Your Grace."

Well, *that* was a surprise—Maxwell coming to her defense. Yet Belinda regally inclined her head to coolly accept his apology.

"Her Grace has a valid point."

That surprised her even more. Did Maxwell truly mean that, or was he simply flattering her in an attempt to appease? Especially since he remained standing at the head of the table, in a posture of pure command.

“Of course, the War Office can petition Parliament to claim the property outright if it likes,” he explained. “But the Secretary would prefer the cooperation of both the board and the town, and avoiding rancor will be more pleasant for everyone.”

*For everyone...For King George, he meant.*

While the War Office might very well have the power to seize the property, the soldiers—and King George himself—would find Brighton a very inhospitable place if the board voted against them. She’d use that to her advantage and personally appeal to His Majesty himself on behalf of the pensioners, if she had to.

“So we’ll adjourn for today and take up the discussion again when the other board members arrive.” He closed his leather portfolio. “But if they are not all here within the fortnight, we go on without them. Lord Bathurst wants a new academy established by Christmastide.”

Belinda forced her shoulders not to sink. A fortnight would barely be enough time for the others to travel to Brighton, let alone for her to sway them to her side.

But she would have to. Somehow.

“Gentlemen and Your Grace.” Maxwell nodded at the room at large, then at Belinda. “Thank you for your time.”

He moved toward the door, where he spoke to each man in turn as they left. But when Belinda rose from her seat, the devil closed the door instead of following the men from the room, shutting them inside together.

With his curly black hair highlighted against the red of his uniform and his broad shoulders accentuated by the cut of his jacket, he leaned a hip against the door frame in a posture so rakishly alluring that her belly knotted. That was one undeniable facet of Maxwell Thorpe—the sight of him had always taken her breath away.

Apparently, some things never changed.

“It’s been a long time, Belinda,” he said quietly.

She trembled at his audacity to use her given name. When she’d stepped into this room, she’d thought she was seeing a ghost. But she wasn’t fortunate enough to simply be haunted. Oh, no. He was blood and flesh...and oh, what flesh. Even now her fingertips ached with the sudden memory of how it had felt to touch him, the soft warmth of his skin, the hardness of his muscles. Only the faint lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth gave proof that he’d aged beyond the image of him she still carried in her mind from the last time she saw him.

“How have you been?”

Ha! As if he cared. “I was perfectly fine until you came along.”

His eyes gleamed at the sharpness of her comment. As if he’d also expected that.

He commented sincerely, “It’s good to know that you’re still dedicated to helping the pensioners. Your kind heart has always been your very best trait.”

At that unexpected compliment, she fought to keep her well-studied composure in place. The very last thing she’d allow was for him to see how much he still affected her. And most likely always would. “It’s easy to be kind...to those who deserve it.”

Instead of rising to the bait, he returned to the table and reached to pour a cup of tea from the tray, putting in milk and sugar. Then he held it out to her. A peace offering.

Her irritation spiked that he would remember how she took her tea. But then, didn’t she remember every detail about him, right down to the small scar at his right brow?

He murmured, “You’re also just as beautiful as I remember.”

Damn her heart for stuttering! And double-damn the dark emotion that squeezed her chest around it like an iron fist, because she knew better than to be affected by his charms. She’d learned the hard way how little his word was worth.

Ignoring the offered tea, she stepped past him to a buffet cabinet in the corner, to withdraw a bottle of port which was kept there for after the board meetings when the men finished their business. She filled a teacup and offered it to him.

For a moment, they held each other's gaze. Two adversaries now on even ground, both filled with such determination that tension pulsed between them.

"If you're attempting to flatter me into conceding," she warned, "it won't work."

He accepted the glass, then sniffed the port to draw in the sweet scent. "I would never dare to presume such a thing."

And she was certain that he'd dared to presume a great deal more about her in the past. A presumption that made her beg her father to ask favors from his friends in order to give Maxwell a high-profile post in India where he could more easily distinguish himself.

Oh, she'd been so naïve!

He offered the tea again. This time, she accepted it...only to set it down, unwanted.

"Why are you doing this?" She folded her arms over her chest. There was no need for pleasantries between the two of them.

The small teacup in his hand only served to remind her of how large and solid he was. Ten years ago he'd been a young man only beginning to fill out his frame. Now he was a man in his prime. Every inch of him displayed the powerful officer he'd become. "As I told you, your cooperation makes establishing the academy easier."

"I mean the orders from the War Office that brought you here." *And back into my life.* "Why are you closing the hospital and putting those men out of their home?"

"Because we need another training academy."

"You already have Sandhurst."

"It isn't enough."

He set down the cup and stepped up to the large map of the world that decorated the wall. Red push-pin flags were scattered across it. One flag for each place one of the pensioners had served.

A frown creased his brow as he studied it. "Do you have any idea how limited training was during the wars? The army needed men on the battlefield immediately, with no time for training except for a cursory overview on how to use their guns and bayonets. Our men were little more than cannon fodder. We won only because of sheer numbers and our cavalry. We had good generals with solid battle plans, but the lower ranking officers and foot soldiers didn't know enough to carry them out. Two years." His voice grew distant as he touched one of the flags in the mass of those pressed into the Iberian Peninsula. "Two years of the worst bloodshed in British military history..." He flicked the flag with the tip of his finger. "How much of that carnage could have been avoided? How many wives and children could we have kept from mourning their dead?"

His hand dropped to his side.

In the silence between them, Belinda shivered. He'd been wounded himself in the fighting in Spain, before her father arranged for him to be posted in India. The summer she met him.

"If I have the chance to save men's lives—even if just a handful—I'm going to take it." Then he turned away from the map, and the vulnerability she saw in him fled. He was once more a brigadier, straight-spined and impassive. Once more the man sent to close the hospital. "No respectable officer would refuse that."

Her chest tightened with empathy, but the pensioners needed to be defended. "At the cost of men in their golden years who have sacrificed all for their country, including the loss of limbs?"

He picked up his port and swirled it gently. "Wouldn't it be better to have an academy to train those men so that they don't lose limbs in the first place?"

Damn him! He was twisting everything around, refusing to see the situation from the perspective of the pensioners. But then, hadn't he always gotten his way? Hadn't what he wanted always come first, no matter whom he hurt in the process?

She arched an imperious brow. "What do you gain from this?"

"The knowledge that there will be fewer widows and orphans." A haunted expression came over him. One as dark as the port in the white bone cup.

She was no fool and refused to let that arrow pierce her. His answer was meant solely to pull at her heartstrings...and dodge her question. "What do *you* gain from this, Maxwell?"

He took a slow sip of port before answering, "The War Office thought I would be the best officer to present the plans to the board. They knew I'd been at the hospital once myself."

Her belly knotted. The very last thing she needed was that reminder of how they'd met. He'd been wounded and was recuperating at the hospital...She was doing charity work there as a way to fill the long, dull days that summer. Her father had insisted that the family spend their season here, where there was nothing for a young lady her age to do. Only later did she discover that her father was on the verge of being thrust into debtor's prison and needed to ask favors of men who had followed the Prince Regent down from London to keep the creditors at bay. She wouldn't discover until season's end that Papa was already ill. Or until the following year how much the medical expenses added to the debt, sending her family into financial ruin.

She pushed away the flood of memories. *All* in the past. She had to focus on the present. "And a promotion, perhaps? I imagine it would be advantageous for your career to found a school that rivals Sandhurst."

"Perhaps." He set down the port. "But that's not my prime motivation."

"Forgive me if I don't believe you." She reached a hand down to the table to steady herself as ten years of hurt and anger rose inside her. The old bitterness returned in force. "I have first-hand knowledge of how you advance your career."

She felt him stiffen, as surely as she felt the tension filling the air around them.

With the ghosts of the past rising between them, she expected him to deny it. To defend himself and claim that he'd not used her all those years ago, only to abandon her once he no longer needed her. To strike out and attack—

Instead, his eyes softened as he took a slow step toward her.

Her heart skipped, the foolish thing momentarily forgetting what he'd done to her. But then, hadn't it always loved him, even when he didn't deserve it? Didn't it even now remember the kind and caring man he'd been before he left for India, and how they'd healed each other that summer...her with his physical wound, him with her heartbreak over her father?

Oh, he'd changed, certainly, both in appearance and in demeanor. But she could still see in him the only man she'd ever loved. Which was why she didn't slap his hand away when he raised it to caress his knuckles across her cheek.

She inhaled sharply at the touch, pained by it.

"And what do you gain from this, Belinda?" His deep voice seeped into her, warming her as thoroughly as his hand against her cheek. "Why fight so hard for the pensioners when you know they'll be taken care of?"

"Split up and shipped off to other hospitals, you mean?" She'd wanted to sound determined and strong. Instead, her voice emerged as a whisper. "This place is their home, and those men have no other family but the men living with them. To force them apart..."

The knot of emotion in her throat choked her.

He reached for her hand on the table and gave her fingers a soothing squeeze.

“Why?”

She trembled, then cursed herself that he might be able to feel it. That he might dare to believe he still possessed even an ounce of influence over her. It certainly wasn't a yearning for the old days. It was anger and pain...memories of how she'd placed her trust in him, only to have it destroyed. She'd *never* make that mistake again.

“An act of decency.” Her answer was a blatant challenge. “In your world of war, surely you can appreciate that.”

Then she stepped out of his reach. He didn't deserve to know the real reason, or to ease his guilt over the past by attempting to console her now. They had a long fight ahead of them over the hospital, and she had no intention of making a second of that any easier on him.

“I won't give up this fight.” She snatched up his teacup of port and finished it one swallow.

Something unreadable sparked in his eyes, and he quietly confessed, “I'd be disappointed if you did.”