
Chapter 1

She cut a solitary figure and stood tall and proud, perfectly groomed in the middle of the grand reception of Sir Clive Tebbit's home in Oxford.

Belinda Waltham had a drink in her hand. A classic wide bowl, long stem glass containing her third potent martini cocktail. She twirled it around in her palms with a weary expression.

The old man was a family friend. The Foreign Office had appointed Sir Clive as the new British Ambassador to Italy. That night, they were celebrating his nomination and impending departure. He was to take office in Rome the following week.

The problem was Belinda was fresh out of a three-month stint in prison, swiftly followed by a compulsory six-month stay at Dr. Stewart's clinic, to learn to moderate her explosive temper. The temperamental disposition that had so often landed her in trouble with the law. For this reason, she had been out of her circuit of friends for a year, but it didn't stop their tongues from wagging on her well-known shenanigans.

Friends and acquaintances looked upon her as notorious, the outrageous member of her family.

The younger sister of Fergus Waltham, the Earl of Buckley, Belinda was of note for her antics in their social circle. Some would say shameful for it.

Upon her discharge from the clinic, Belinda had taken a three-month "refuge" as she called it, in the Scottish highlands. She stayed at one of Fergus' estates. She'd longed to forget the vibes of the clinic and to eradicate the prison from her mind. The peaceful spot went a long way to urge her to consider what she aspired to do next in her life.

She became uncomfortable at the party, jaded. She'd been away from home and Oxford for too long. Belinda felt like a fish out of water.

On her release from the clinic, she had helped manage two orphanages. She dealt with the financial aspects of them. She was talented at obtaining hefty contributions for them, handling tradespeople to get the best for the children at the cheapest price. She made their budgets stretch. These were the children's homes her father, the old earl, God rest his soul, had refurbished at a high cost to pull her out of prison, the reason the judge had commuted her jail sentence at Dr. Stewart's clinic instead.

She felt empathy for the children, with their cause. Despite her wealth, she too had grown up without a mother and had a solitary childhood. She became the patron of the orphanages. She was skilful at making money for them out of donations from her wealthy family friends.

Perhaps I could dedicate myself to it fully. She had managed their finances for the last three months from the Highlands. She had spent a lot of time at the orphanages since she was back in Oxford, continuing her work. The children worshipped her. They were fun and she liked them all. Her

mind drifted in and out of these matters as she sipped her drink, bored with the party, engrossed with herself.

Oxford had always given her a buzz, but she was not enjoying it anymore. It brought her to a recurrent drilling question instead. *And now what?* She had to change. She couldn't behave wildly anymore; she didn't want to. This question twirled in her mind the moment she left Dr. Stewart's clinic. Three months in the depths of the Scottish Highlands hadn't given her a full answer yet.

Fergus had asked her to work for him. She had agreed. Though, lately, she only felt happy when doing things for the orphanages, so maybe that was her answer. She didn't know. She sighed. She had too many matters to sort out.

She glanced at two of her brothers, both at the party. The oldest, Fergus, was talking to an acquaintance. The other, Sebastian, was deep in conversation with the ambassador. He was joining Sir Clive in Rome next week. Sebastian was used to the eternal city, where he'd lived for the past two years as attaché under the previous diplomat, now returning to his work with the new ambassador.

She looked around the room.

Belinda had taken her sister-in-law's place for this party, Fergus' wife. She had agreed to Marguerite's request as a favour and attended the party on her behalf. Her brothers, too wary of her erratic behaviour, had kept a close eye upon her.

I'm almost twenty-two, for God's sake. Still... they have a point!

The girl talked to her godmother for a while, Trini, Sir Clive's wife. Then she mingled but to no satisfaction. Belinda strolled the length of the reception room, weary and absorbed with herself, with another martini in her hand.

A man regarded her with interest from the other end of the room. She didn't notice him, but he hadn't taken his eyes off her. People staring at her was not a special occurrence. Belinda was used to the spotlight. When she entered a room, she was invariably at the centre of attention. Men and women found her attractive, irresistible. She was a stunning young woman, beautiful, like a goddess. No surprise, this fellow thought her gorgeous most of all.

She was a tall strawberry blonde. A real looker, with the family trait of pale blue eyes. In the past, every time those blue moons landed on him, they did something to his cock.

She was statuesque, but delicate. The face of an angel with a curvaceous body. He found her delightful, bewitching. Like admiring a fine painting, he couldn't take his eyes off her.

He struggled to imagine the things she did that had first brought her to his attention as a police officer. Her awful temper had landed her into trouble more than once. Oh boy, the curses that came out of that lovely mouth. Reconciling her character and personality with her looks was difficult. She was a handful, a little devil in an angel's body. Sometimes, he hadn't known how to deal with her. In his opinion, nothing a good spanking couldn't have cured, but that was not his place.

On the other hand if *she were mine...* Well, *good for her, she isn't. Or she would have learned the hard way!*

In his view, as beautiful as she was, when her temper flared, she was an ill-mannered, insolent, loutish girl, an immature young woman. She brought him to the edge once or twice, and if it wasn't for his self-restraint, she would have known how much she had displeased him.

Chief Inspector Wendell studied her. He had not seen her for about six months. She looked divine that night, in a figure-hugging, mermaid, red lace dress.

He observed how the frock smoothed over the round curves of her hips enticingly. It ended with an elegant, small

sweep train at the rear. The sleeveless, tight bodice with a deep V-neck at the front made her plump breasts stand out. He was sure, if a fellow stood close enough to her, he would count this a lucky night, thanks to her vertiginous décolletage. He scoffed. Wendell couldn't deny the thought of another man looking at her bosom annoyed him.

When she turned, her almost backless dress gave him an astonishing ample view of her creamy shoulders and back, down to just above her lavish, pert bottom. *God, I'd do anything to put my hands on that butt.*

He had a glimpse of her stylish stilettos, in the same colour and material as her frock, with glittering rhinestones.

Belinda sashayed back and forth in the room aimlessly, as if she was gliding on a catwalk. Echoing the seductive look, he was sure, she was trying to convey. As if to say to men, 'Fuck you, look at me, but you can't have me!' She was succeeding, too, if he had to judge by the expression on the faces of most men in the place. He muttered a curse under his breath.

He found high heel stilettos sexy. He had seen Belinda wear a few pairs over time since he arrested her almost two years ago. Wendell considered lace most attractive, and he loved a woman in it, and tonight she was wearing both.

It made her look dreamy, gorgeous, feminine, and so foxy. *An enchantress! A sorceress enticing men to their own destruction! Dangerous*, especially to him.

Another glimpse of her red stilettos and he calculated they must be at least four inches high. He was curious as to how she could walk on them with such grace. *Jesus, she is tall!* Almost as tall as him, but not quite; he was still a few inches taller, stilettos and all.

For heavens' sake, stop staring at her, you fool. Damn, those brothers of hers are too indulgent with the chit. Who would allow her to wear a dress like that! They have mollycoddled her. God Almighty!

No wonder the trouble she got up to. If she was his girl...
She would learn how to behave by hook or by crook!

Annoyed with himself for speculating about Belinda more than he should have, he spotted Delia, an acquaintance of his. The brunette had given him a certain sexy vibe all night.

Chief Inspector Wendell was a bachelor, a desirable hunk. A great catch, girls would say. A tall man, with a manly handsome face and a muscular, athletic body to whom most women would bat their eyelids to. A striking presence at thirty-four, he commanded more than his fair share of women, and he loved them all.

But Belinda, well, she was something else.

Better to stay away from her, he cautioned himself. So, he turned on his heels and moved towards Delia, to talk to her instead.

As the evening wore off, when she disappeared briefly on him, he could not resist and sauntered towards the Waltham girl.

Sweet Jesus! Not that damned police officer! At Sir Clive's party? What the devil is he doing here? He is a dish, though. The black tuxedo fits him like a glove! Lord, when did he turn so handsome? Oh my, my... Huh? Um... this sexy? How did I miss his good looks?

She hadn't... she would have known the man, gorgeous as he was, anywhere, if truth be told. Her pulse rising, she was suddenly hot. Her weariness vanished as if by magic.

But he infuriated her. That man had a talent for making her feel small and silly, an idiot. Nothing he said, oh, no! It was the way he looked at her, as if chastising her all the time. She would like to kick his ass. That's what!

Her friend, Erin, was right. *He looks like a model rather than a police officer, in that tux, without doubt!*

But he had the knack of making her cross, and her temper rose in a jiffy when he was around. He annoyed her. She wished to punch his smug, handsome face. She always reacted to him that way. She didn't even know why. So she kept looking straight ahead. Everywhere but at him. When men were concerned, it was an art for Belinda to look nonchalant and disinterested.

Dear God, he is coming my way! What the blast does he want?

"Good evening, Lady Waltham. Nice to see you. You look dazzling." He inspected her for a second and beamed. His large hazel eyes lit up.

Blast, such an attractive grin... Why am I confused? What's there to grin at when you arrest a person? No! She had never seen the damn man smile before, she was sure of it. *Boy! When he smiles, his eyes twinkle.* He was tempting. *The broody bastard!*

Those eyes flickered like stars. Her skin prickled.

Sweet Jesus! He has that commanding attitude... She loved he could be commanding without making an effort, with just a look, without a word. *A natural confidence that demands attention. Bloody hell... so handsome, the arrogant beast!*

She exhaled, rather annoyed at herself for having those lascivious thoughts about him. Belinda tried to dismiss him. She reckoned she felt this way because she'd not had a boyfriend for almost two years. So, she was easily susceptible to a masculine charm. That was all.

She glanced imperiously about her, like she hadn't recognised him or heard him, to lift the edge off her unwanted thoughts about him.

He took her behaviour in the wrong way instead, as if she was huffing at him.

When she kept staring ahead without acknowledging him or deigning to respond to him, he felt he should add something. "Lady Waltham, it has been some time, six months, I believe. You may recall, I am—" he said, still smiling, trying to

clarify who he was in case she had forgotten him. He was not some man trying to hit on her.

She knew, sometimes, she had that effect on him.

Belinda 1 - Wendell 0! She smirked to herself! Still, it didn't stop her from getting cross with him.

"I know who you are, inspector," she blurted out, irritated, tough, interrupting him, "And God knows, it has not been long enough since I last saw you." Not what she wished to say, but she couldn't restrain herself. *Oh, me and my big mouth*, she stressed. *Fergus is right when he says I should count to ten before I speak.*

"Lady Waltham—"

"I got rid of the 'lady' bit when you sent me to prison, inspector, remember? No one calls me 'Lady Waltham' anymore. 'Miss' thank you! Why do you think I've been standing alone for most of the evening? Ha? Because my friends don't wish to associate with a person who spent three months in prison. Or with one who spent six months in a clinic learning behavioural attitude, specifically mine. An idiotic discipline if you ask me, anyway."

"I beg your pardon?"

"All thanks to you, Inspector..." Why had she said that? It wasn't fair! She should stop talking. *Belinda, stop*, she told herself.

"It's Chief Inspector to you." He was calm, his tone even and clear, although he wasn't enjoying her arrogant temper tantrum and her voice was going up a notch with every word. He had to master his self-control to sound like this, but his eyebrows crunched and he stopped smiling.

"Chief?" For a moment, he annoyed her even more, and she forgot her best intentions to stop talking.

"Yes, Chief!"

"And what do I care? No! If you ask me, no matter how long it is since I last saw you... it's not long enough, I guar-

antee you. You robbed me of my freedom and my friends," she spat, and her beautiful mouth assumed a thin line. Her blue moons darted a dark scowl at him, as if he were her worst enemy.

He studied her for a moment. His face was serious and a glint in his eyes flashed at her. And there it was again. That look! Chastising her. As if to say, 'You silly girl! Brat!'

Then he came close to her, way too close, invading her personal space. She could sniff his scent, a manly, invigorating whiff, so fresh and exciting. He smelt divine.

Wendell leaned over to her. She gasped. His lips touched the curve of her ear.

"You did that all by yourself, sweetheart. You were the one who battered your ex-boyfriend's expensive Ferrari, not me. The criminal damage was all your doing. The judge had no choice. He had warned you, and he sent you to prison. Grow up, girl, and own up!"

"Fuck you! You are a bully and a beast," she cursed. She made to move away from him, but he grasped her arm, restraining her movement and jerking her back to him.

"At least you are aware now of who your real friends are. I don't know what sort of company you keep, Miss Waltham, but trust me, a genuine friend does not abandon one in need. If you ask me, you lost nothing. They were not your buddies to begin with."

"Get off me." She launched a fiery scowl at him, struggling to free herself.

People were starting to stare at them, and she could see Fergus' eyebrows knitting at her. *The man will get me in trouble!*

A curse as black as the night tumbled out of her mouth directed at him with all her vitriolic resentment, knowing full well he was right.

His grip on her got harder and tighter. He stood straight as

a pillar, towering over her in his full height. She could feel the pressure of his palm on her arm.

"You are lucky we are at a party, Miss Waltham. I was just saying a friendly hello to you, that's all. If you swear at me again... see this?" He paused for effect, raised his large hand an inch in front of her nose while she jerked her head back.

"Pfft!"

Leaning over, his lips brushed her cheek, then veered to her ear. "My firm hand will land on that pampered, beautiful ass of yours, I promise you. Am I clear?" he continued, undeterred, in an ambrosial tone, the one he used for women in his bed.

"Go away! You frigging idiot!"

"I'm warning you. I'll bet no man has spanked you before. Um? Am I right, Miss Waltham?"

Her head snapped up to him. Her breath hitched. Their eyes locked. He astonished her. He held her stare with an amused smile. She gulped, flushed, and lowered her eyes. "Leave me alone." She moved her arm, trying to get away, but he kept a strong grip on her.

"Have they, Belinda?" he purred. The sound of his voice was pure smoothness with her name on it, raising her temperature. His tone took a mellifluous, silvery murmur. She'd not heard him this way before. It was tantalising, alluring. It drew her to him, like a moth to a bright flame, chiding and teasing her. Her nipples got hard and pert in an instant. In that dress and that material, with her plunging neckline, he couldn't fail to notice.

His grin broadened. "Answer me, have they?" he insisted, nonchalant, steadyng his grip on her arm. She was sure he was marking her with his tight hold, and somehow, it pleased her.

Her stomach did a somersault as his hazel eyes roamed over her body, up and down. His silky, warm baritone and the

talk of a firm, large hand on her backside made her pussy clench. It did some warm-up exercises, and her sweet centre drenched in no time.

She gulped, and her skin prickled. "No," she whispered, to her own surprise. Somehow he'd forced out of her an answer to his question that she had no intention to reply to. It amazed her she had. She turned scarlet.

"I tell you, if those boyfriends of yours spanked you instead of indulging you when you were naughty, we wouldn't be here. You think about that. You take care, Miss Waltham," he said as his lips brushed the curve of her ear, overpronouncing the word 'miss.'

He let go of her arm and turned to go. He halted after two steps and did a U-turn back to her. "And you are right! With that mouth on you, as beautiful as it is, we cannot call you a lady. I agree." He turned and walked away from her.

Her jaw dropped. *What the fuck!* She stood there, barely breathing, still as a statue, as if a cyclone had just hit her. She released the breath she hadn't realised she was holding.

What the hell is that supposed to mean! Does he mean... or... uh, what the fuck!

What had just happened! She was damp down below and humiliated. Her insides clenched, her nipples were pert, and she had goosebumps. How had this man aroused her with a few words... that included "ass" and "hand" while treating her like a damn fool.

The worst part was she would literally roll over for him and lie with her legs open in a blink of an eye if he asked her. *Would I? No, that's wrong! Lord, what a shambles! Give me strength. I'm an idiot!* Perhaps she deserved his chastisement. *To offend the fellow like this. Cursing at him. Blast!* What possessed her to behave so insolently? All he wished to say was hello. She felt ashamed of herself and she was soaked, her skin tingling.

And when did he become a Chief Inspector?

Belinda sighed and told herself she would never grow up. He was right about her so-called friends, too. She knew that better than anyone. Those daddy and mommy's boys and girls were too afraid to consort with *the scandalous Waltham girl*.

Sweet Jesus! He was right on so many levels that she wished to burst into tears. Her lips trembled, but she would not give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry. She couldn't forget the silky voice that raised her temperature, though. He had never used that tone with her before. He had always been professional. The vivid image he planted in her mind, that of his hand on her backside, spanking her, made her hot and giddy. Her heart beat violently against her ribcage. Well... the vision sent her pussy into overdrive.

Bloody hell! Suddenly, she felt so ashamed of her behaviour towards him, she wished to say 'sorry' to him, she resolved. Belinda had been an outspoken brat with the man. Her brothers were accurate. She should count to ten before speaking.

She would plead insanity and apologise to Wendell. *Chief Inspector, no less. How old is the fellow?*

She didn't wish him to go with the idea she was an idiot. Belinda was certain he deemed her a stupid girl, anyway, for the things she had done in the past. Now, she had confirmed his belief. She longed to be a different woman, a mature person, to put her silly behaviours behind her and turn a new leaf. She had promised her dad on his deathbed, God bless his soul.

Her father even extracted a promise from her to marry a good man. Great job, there weren't any! Besides, she wasn't the marrying kind. No, no! *No husband will lord over me, thank you!* But she needed to act grown up. It was about time she did. The police officer was correct on that point, too.

Something about Wendell turned her on, aroused her. She could still feel her damp pussy. She hadn't had that tingle for

ages. So, she marched towards him with a strong desire to apologise to him and to be forgiven. The moment he glanced at her, he went the other way to talk to someone. *Is he trying to avoid me?*

She tried again a little later, but the same thing happened. Yes. He wouldn't speak to her! And she couldn't blame him, either. He wasn't happy with her. *Why would he be?* After the horrible things she said to him, she would run in the opposite direction, too, if she were him. She was a resolute girl, and so, she resolved to apologise to him by hook or by crook, to show him she wasn't the jerk or the brat he assumed she was.

The same thing occurred a third time, and as he dodged her again, she realised it. He would not talk to her anymore, ever.

She hated the idea of him leaving the party like this, thinking she was a silly girl. He didn't deserve her bitter remarks; he was doing his job when he arrested her. She had caused all of her problems herself; he was correct about that, too. She needed to speak to him, say 'sorry' to him.

Her friend Erin, at the clinic, teased her, telling her the inspector had the hots for her. Erin was mistaken. It didn't look that way. The man despised her now. He had no intention to talk to her. Besides, the brunette he was speaking to was all over him. He seemed to enjoy the woman's attention.

No doubt after the horrible scene with me, he is revelling in the advances of a rational, beautiful girl. Not a fool like me! Should I forget about this? Ignore him? Get on with the party? She chewed her lower lip, struggling to decide what she should do.

Forget about Wendell, Belinda, if you know what's good for you. Her inner voice told her... *Oh, bother!* When on earth had she ever listened to her inner side? Never! She was a creature of impulse!

Oh, hell! she thought now. *Oh, why!* Why had she listened to her sister-in-law.

"Oh, please say yes!" Marguerite had pleaded earlier on in the evening, Belinda recalled. The thought flashed through her mind as she stood there like a statue after the debacle with Wendell.

"I've hardly slept for the last three days. The baby kept me up for half of the night," her sister-in-law went on and slumped in an armchair in the blue room. She was exhausted and closed her eyes for a moment.

Belinda's expression softened, her face lit up at Marguerite, and she smiled. "Why can't Fergus help you with sweet Gus? Don't pamper my brother too much."

"He does! He had the baby the other half of the night," Marguerite said and chuckled. "I'm exhausting my husband, and not in the way I would like to. Gus is teething... I know Olivia is happy to help at any time, but I cannot run her ragged. Fergus doesn't mind having Gus to let me sleep. He is such a good father. Tonight, I've given him the night off for the party. Please, say yes, Belinda, you'll go for me? Trini would love to see you."

"I have nothing to wear!" she argued, lifting her brows, not fancying going to it.

"Bella, you own a wardrobe that is the envy of half the fashion houses in Europe. Get dressed in something lovely and sexy. Who knows, you may find yourself a new boyfriend. While I'll relish an early night. I'll tell your brothers you'll go for me. Besides, it is nice for you to go out with them. You'll enjoy it."

"Only because I love you, Marguerite. I don't fancy going to those celebrations anymore, and you know it. Besides, I can have the baby any time you want, I told you."

"Thank you, darling. I may take you up on it. So it's a 'yes' then?"

"You do realise, since I've been back from the Highlands, people have shunned me. At the last two parties, hardly anyone talked to me. It was as if I was an infectious leper. They don't wish to mix with a woman who's been to prison."

"Oh, don't worry about them, Bella. You are a lovely girl. It's their loss! You know men. Well, they don't like to have their cars battered," Marguerite teased her. She was referring to Belinda destroying her last boyfriend's car to smithereens with a baseball bat. The fellow had cheated on her. So, his car had been unrecognisable as a Ferrari when Belinda had finished with it, hence the criminal charges that sent her down to prison.

"You laugh all you want! But I tell you, it's true, they are avoiding me. You know they call me the '*scandalous Waltham girl!*' Some of them are afraid to be seen with me."

"Oh, ignore them, Bella. They are silly people. They'll soon get over it. You'll see."

"Who's silly?" Fergus asked, darting his eyes from his sister to his wife as he entered the room.

"Oh, darling, Bella will go with you and Sebastian to the party. Olivia has Gus for the night, and I'm off to bed."

"Is Lucy with her, too?"

Fergus also had a daughter, Lucy, from a previous relationship. Olivia was the children's nanny, she would look after them that night.

Belinda adored her brother's children. She was so close to Lucy, and now baby Gus enthralled her.

"Yes, she has both of them, the sweet girl. So, tonight, nothing will separate me from my sleep. I have a date with my bed," Marguerite stated with a satisfied smile on her face.

"Not even I?" Fergus brushed his wife's lips with his, then thought better of it and gave her a full on, delicious kiss.

She put her arms around his collar, and he murmured an endearment in her ear.

"Not even you, darling!" Marguerite said, caressing his cheek.

"Sir Clive won't need both of us. Trini will be happy to see her. As long as Sebastian and Bella attend, I could stay and we—"

"Oh, gross! Get a room!" Belinda rolled her eyes at her brother.

They laughed.

"You must go to the party, handsome, you know that. But I'll make it up to you, I promise." Marguerite winked with a mischievous smile at her husband.

She wasn't a party animal. So she was glad she had dropped out of the festivities and asked her sister-in-law to attend the celebrations instead.

Belinda was at the party as a favour for her with all her good intentions. Instead, the evening was turning out to be trouble now!

Fuck, fuck, fuck... She wasn't sure who she was silently swearing at, herself or the damn police officer!