

## Chapter 3

# Toni

Toni was fairly sure that whisky wasn't the answer, and she wasn't about to get excited about a *maybe* book deal. It was a pie-in-the-sky plan, as her mother used to call such things.

*Wouldn't Lilian have loved it if it worked? If I did something so like him, and it panned out?*

A bitter sting hit Toni then, the odd feeling of mourning someone who wasn't dead. The Lilian Darbyshire Toni knew and argued with made fewer and fewer appearances these days. There were moments when Toni saw her mother, and they knew each other, and everything felt normal—or as normal as it could be. They'd never been close, but that didn't change the sense that Toni wanted them to be.

*And it's too late, now.*

As much as Toni had longed for the sense of friendship she saw people build with their parents, she'd never have that. Her grifter father was dead, and her mother was lost to an illness that made her disconnected from reality. Knowing the impossibility didn't undo that gnawing desire to be that kind of connected. Aunt Patty was the only one who had ever accepted Toni, and she was long gone, too.

*Leaving me in this mess all alone.* Although in fairness, Patty had cleaned up after her brother for so long that it was probably a blessing that she wasn't here to see the mess he'd left for Toni—or to see how lost Toni's mother was.

Lilian Darbyshire was a woman whose dreams of fame were cut short by an accidental pregnancy in her mid-thirties and a quick marriage to a man who traded on cons his whole life. She'd had a career about to blossom, until him, until the pregnancy. And she'd been fool enough to love him so much that she surrendered her own dreams.

*Like so many women throughout history.*

He'd loved her in his way. Toni could see that now. It was just that his way of loving was no good for anyone. Not his wife. Not his daughter. Not his sister. Not even the countless mistresses he took. He was a charmer, but charm wasn't the same as substance or hard work.

If there was a racetrack in the afterlife, Anthony Darbyshire was sidling up to some gullible mark with a plan.

Or he was still being conned out of his last set of winnings.

And back here in the land of the living, his widow was likely yelling at someone for letting him know where she'd stashed her money. That was the peculiarity of Lilian's memory slips. They weren't always the sort that made her fall into her bad years with her husband, but most of the times with him were so similar in the yo-yo of their fortunes that Lilian's sense of what she thought was "now" were good moments in a range of bad to worse to decent years.

And all of them were with her con man husband exasperating her.

*And people wonder why I avoid relationships.*

The curious part of her parents' marriage, to Toni, at least, was that no matter what the timeline was in Lilian's reality, she always had an underlying fond exasperation, as if she found her husband's haplessness with money endearing. No matter that she'd had to surrender dreams of a singing career, and then later drop out of college as an older adult.

All because of him.

No matter what plan Lil had had to turn her life around, to build something stable, Anthony Darbyshire found a way to ruin it.

Growing up in the mess of his mistakes hadn't felt "endearing" to Toni, and her years with her Aunt Patty—when her parents were too broke to look after their only child—were really the only ones that had offered any semblance of stability. Now? Now Patty was gone, and Toni's dad was gone, and the adult version of Toni had to figure out how to fix the latest catastrophe on hand.

Honestly, the fact that she was more inclined to academia and workaholic tendencies than addiction and destruction felt like it was a victory—even if more than a few therapists called her workaholic path another kind of addiction. She never gambled. She didn't smoke or use drugs. She strictly limited shopping, drinking, or excess.

There was one exception to her rules.

Just the one.

From her teen years until recently, Toni had coped with feeling lost or overwhelmed by bed-hopping like it was an Olympic sport. Her therapist spent more than a few sessions trying to get Toni to address her commitment fears, but it wasn't a huge mystery. Her mom trusted her dad, and look where she was now. That was a fate Toni would never endorse.

Better to count on herself—and find a bit of comfort in willing women.

Her gaze drifted over the people here again, hunting for the one she'd bed and forget next. Her gaze jumped right past the desperate-eyed ones with visions of U-Hauls dancing in their minds.

Toni wasn't interested in *forever*. She was only interested in *for tonight*.

She skipped the coupled-up women, including the one with the body language that spoke of discontent. Rebounds were fine, but only after they were single. The tall woman in overalls was a maybe. So was the primly dressed one shooting bold looks her way. Women in all their shapes and sizes were amazing. Toni had only a few simple rules: No hookups with colleagues. No "I'm bi-curious and can my husband join" women. No students. No one already in a relationship.

What Toni needed was a simple, no strings, no complications temporary connection with a woman who wouldn't walk away thinking that one night meant anything, and she'd had to put that urge on hold too often during her dissertation and job hunt. She was well overdue for . . .

*Well, hello, there.*

A real-life Lady Godiva, complete with both the near-nakedness and the waterfall of hair, stood in the doorway to the bar. She wore a thick braid of golden-brown hair that reached clear down to her hip. She was shivering, probably because she was wearing what looked like a Victorian nightdress and not much else. Pristine white cotton with a ruffle at the ankles, it was a shapeless sort of thing—but it was illuminated by the fire in the pub, and Toni was far from the only woman noticing the stranger's hourglass figure . . . and obvious lack of a bra. She could also see that the stranger had Victorian drawers under her nightdress, and those were made of thicker fabric, enough that Toni couldn't tell if they were historically accurate.

*Is she actually wearing historic drawers?*

The Victorians were thought to be prudish, but historic drawers were akin to modern lingerie. *Crotchless*. It was practical, of course. Their dresses were heavy things, and being able to use the toilet was a challenge in such dresses.

That didn't explain why a modern woman would wear such drawers, though.

*Is this woman wearing crotchless Victorian drawers? Surely not.*

Toni wanted to know, wanted to investigate the matter. Lesbian in historical garb? Yes, please. She looked like Toni's fantasy come to life.

The woman's gaze zeroed in on Toni like an invitation, and Toni was on her feet and across the pub before the thought fully settled. If the stranger was going to turn her gaze toward Toni, there was zero reason to ignore her. The woman was one of Toni's favorite types—slightly shorter than her, fit enough that she'd be willing to go hiking or to the gym, and obviously possessing at least a passing interest

in history, according to her attire. And the fact that she was busty wasn't exactly a deterrent. Toni was always a little extra pleased when her lovers possessed a sort of pin-up girl set of curves.

More than a few people were looking at the new woman like she was a lost damsel, but Toni was certain that they were thinking more villainous than heroic thoughts.

*Not that I wasn't looking at her like a dessert in convincingly historical boots.*

The stranger shivered.

And though Toni wasn't sure if it was a chill or nerves, she slipped her blazer off and held it out. "Here."

The woman stared at her.

"You shivered." Toni's gaze dropped to the woman's chest, despite her best efforts. It was a chest that deserved extra looks, and up close, the dark areolas around pert inviting nipples were making Toni extra sure that she deserved an award for not staring. The stranger had glorious breasts.

The woman clutched the blazer to her chest like a shield but didn't put it on. "Who are you?" she whispered.

"Antonia. *Toni*." Toni took her blazer back and helped the woman into it. The sleeves hung over her hands, covering the large fire opal ring on her right middle finger.

When she pulled the front of the blazer closed and buttoned it, the woman stared up at her. "I'm Lady Adelaine Stewart."

"Lady? Is there a costume ball nearby, Miss Stewart?" Toni teased. "You seem to have missed the evening gown. . . ."

"I was rehearsing," Adelaine said, sounding more serious for a moment. "Stage production."

"Ah." Toni glanced around the pub. No one was watching them now, likely presuming that the not-quite-dressed woman was here to meet Toni, since Miss Stewart had stared directly at her upon arrival—and Toni had gone to her side like she'd been summoned.

*I don't think I know her.*

Surely it was a coincidence. Her table was likely just the first

place the stranger's glance had fallen. *I wouldn't forget someone like her!* Toni might have bedded the occasional woman whose name she couldn't recall, but she didn't forget the shape of a woman's body—especially a shape like this.

“Did you mean to wander into *this* bar, Miss Stewart?”

“I did.” She looked around, wide-eyed. “But . . .”

Miss Stewart looked as if she were on the verge of a swoon. She was obviously quite committed to her persona.

“Do you need an escort to a car? Or train?” Toni offered.

“No. I am here.” She straightened her shoulders, and Toni briefly cursed her decision to button the blazer. “With you, in fact.”

At a guess, Toni would say Adelaine was only a number of years younger than her own thirty-two years. *Mid to late twenties?* She had soft hands, the sort that looked like she'd never seen hard work, and impeccable posture. She was shorter than Toni, softer in some indefinably vulnerable way, and had the sort of mouth that was made for gasps of surprise.

In all, she was a Victorian historian's perfect thirst trap.

A flicker of familiarity hit Toni. Had they met before? Toni hadn't spent much time in Scotland. This was only her second trip. Maybe Miss Stewart was a type? Maybe she was a conference attendee? Toni tried to recall all the people she'd spoken to that day, the faces in the seats, and she couldn't place Miss Stewart there.

“Do you live here?” Toni asked. “In Scotland?”

“Yes,” Miss Stewart said. “Why?”

“I was wondering if we'd met before,” Toni admitted. She didn't exactly phrase it as a question, but she pointed out, “You seemed to be looking at me when you walked in.”

“Who wouldn't be looking at you?” Adelaine's response was a non-answer, but then she stepped closer and stared up at Toni through her lashes. “Can I trust you? You look like I can trust you.”

“I'll protect you, Miss Stewart.” Toni offered her an elbow this time. Her anti-relationship stance might be tested by Adelaine if they

lived nearer one another. *Thank goodness for an ocean between us!* She smiled at Adelaine and prompted, “So, this is a local play . . . ?”

Adelaine paused. “Maybe. Would you find me a convincing Victorian damsel?”

“I’m not your average judge, I fear,” Toni said with a small smile. “I’m a Victorianist by trade.”

“So I would have to be *perfect* to convince you, wouldn’t I?” Adelaine’s character slipped slightly then, and Toni liked her a touch more.

“Indeed,” Toni murmured.

“Shall I be perfect for you, Miss Darbyshire?”

Toni ignored the unfamiliar flutter in her stomach and challenged, “Impress me, Miss Stewart. Maybe you’ll earn a reward.”

Adelaine’s answering trill of laughter made Toni suspect for the first time that the younger woman was not quite as innocent as the character she’d adopted, but then she fluttered her eyes and that flicker of wickedness vanished.

Adelaine held Toni’s gaze and asked, “Would *you* like to play pretend with me, Lady Victorianist?”

In answer, Toni pulled out a chair for her. “I fear that your virtue could be imperiled. . . .”

“If I’m convincing enough,” Adelaine murmured as she pulled the incredibly thick braid of hair over her shoulder. If it were loosened, she could hide the fact that she had no bra under her thin nightie. “That could be a risk coming here, I suppose.”

“It could.” Toni itched to reach out and use that braid as leverage to pull Adelaine nearer. She wondered briefly if the hair had been loose on her trip here. If not, Adelaine had been vulnerable as she traveled. Toni felt a wave of anxiety at the thought of such risks. Hopefully, Adelaine had braided it just before she entered the pub.

Adelaine unbuttoned the jacket as she leaned forward. It gapped enough to see the curve of her cleavage but no more. “Surely, you can keep me safe.”

“From everyone but me,” Toni assured her. “I fear I’m not a great supporter of any plans to preserve your innocence.”

Adelaine's wicked smile returned in a flash. "Oh, thank goodness, I wasn't sure when you covered me up so quickly."

And Toni decided that her evening—hell, her entire month—suddenly looked a lot better. It had been a long minute since she had a woman in her bed. In her teens and twenties, a steady stream of women had been the norm, but as she passed thirty, her dissertation, job apps, and family drama had been all-consuming.

"Are you unattached then?" Toni asked.

"Does that matter?"

"It *does*," Toni admitted. That was a trait she wouldn't share with her namesake. Unlike her father, Toni had a strict "no catting around with other people's wives or girlfriends" stance.

If Adelaine wanted to role-play, Toni was willing to go along with it, but she had rules that had to be addressed first. *No married women* was number one.

"I am, regrettably, single," Adelaine began, holding up the hand with the antique fire opal ring. "I have my future engagement ring, but for now, I wear it on the opposite hand. And you?"

"I am single, not even a ring in waiting. In fact, I have—" Toni was going to add that she was permanently single, but she was saved from answering by the bartender stopping at the table. The table service that had seemed sweet earlier, now felt awkward.

"Quite the revolving door," the bartender teased.

Adelaine frowned slightly and looked down to her lap where her hands were politely folded, and Toni muffled a terse word at her reaction. Maybe the bartender was trying to look out for Adelaine, but it wasn't like Toni had been there with a date earlier.

"Not that it's anyone's business, but the woman who was here was a childhood friend, not a date," Toni said, sounding sharp enough that the bartender flinched.

"Would you like a drink, love?" the bartender asked, whisking away Emily's wineglass and Toni's empty highball glass.

"Lemonade?" Adelaine asked in a shaky voice, not quite looking up.

“No actual lemonade here. Lemon drop? Or hard lemonade?” the bartender asked.

Adelaine looked at Toni, who was oddly charmed by the gesture.

Toni sized her up and decided she looked more like the sort of woman who preferred a fussy umbrella drink than swilling something out of a longneck bottle. “Lemon drop sounds good. Another Talisker for me, too.”

Once the bartender left, Toni tucked her foot under the bottom rung of Adelaine’s chair and pulled the chair closer.

Startled, Adelaine put a hand on Toni’s knee and let out a squeak of sound that shouldn’t be as adorable as it was.

Toni took a breath before reminding herself that whatever else was happening, Adelaine would be here in Scotland next week, and Toni would be back in her condo in Northern Virginia.

“So, first time here?”

“Yes.” Adelaine’s voice was quiet. “Is it obvious?”

Toni reached forward and put a finger under her chin, tilting her head upward so she was looking at Toni again. “Hey? Everyone was a baby gay once. First time going out like this can be scary as fuck. . . .”

Adelaine gasped, hand covering her mouth.

Toni had a flicker of a suspicion that there was a part of this persona that was actually true. Gently, she said, “You’re safe with me. Unless you’re looking for something unsafe, but if that’s the case, you need to tell me that, Adelaine.”

“Addie. You may call me Addie.”

“Addie.” Toni smiled. “Tell me about you.”

“American in Scotland. I’m working on a local stage production. . . .” She shrugged. “Terrible impulse control. You?”

“American in Scotland for the week. I teach.” Toni caught her eye before adding, “I’m a fan of beautiful women with bad impulse control.”

Addie giggled.

“Your drinks,” said the voice behind Toni.

Without hesitation, Addie smiled up at the returning bartender. She lifted her drink as soon as it was released and drained half the glass.

The teal-haired bartender exchanged a surprised look with Toni before shaking her head and walking away. Either Addie was a heavy drinker or would be soon on her way to tipsy. Toni wasn't sure which was worse.

Toni shook her head at what she was about to say. She wasn't in the business of policing other people's bad habits, but she wasn't interested in either leaving a vulnerable woman alone or handling a drunk. All she said was, "If you need liquid courage for whatever you're thinking . . . maybe you should reconsider doing it."

"Did you ever want something so badly that you wanted to ignore reason?" Addie asked. "Sometimes it's easier to play a role or toss back a drink. . . ."

Toni took a swallow of her single malt and eyed her companion. "So play a role, Miss Stewart. I'm game. Tell me about your *character*. Married? Job?"

Addie visibly straightened, lowered her gaze demurely, and slipped into her role again. "I live with a relative. He is my chaperone, but I stole away while he was indisposed." Addie took another drink. "No job, obviously. I'm not that sort of woman. Do *you* work?"

Toni nodded. "I teach."

"And your employer lets you dress so . . ."

Toni quirked her brow. "So?"

"Provocatively," Addie whispered.

Whatever else Addie was, she was bolder than she looked.

Toni took another look at the curves outlined by thin cotton. "No more so than a damsel in her nightdress."

When Addie said nothing, Toni asked, "So, Miss Stewart, what are looking for tonight? You're in your nightdress in a pub. That's a dangerous move."

Toni watched her, wondering exactly how committed she was to her playacting and deciding after a brief moment that she needed to know that answer.