

CHAPTER 1

The three-story building looked like any of a thousand small office buildings in a hundred cities, with its gray stucco exterior and its glass doors. It blended in so well with the retail shops that most of the customers of the strip mall in Bonita Beach didn't even realize it was there. And that made it a perfect location.

Tony had never been inside this building. All of the training sessions had been held in a local church. The students hadn't been told the location of the Hotline office until they graduated. It was confidential.

He rode the elevator to the third floor and found room 327. There was no name on the door. He took a deep breath and put a half smile on his face. He hesitated. This was much harder than going on a routine sales call. Finally, he tried the door handle. The door was unlocked.

He opened the door and walked into the office. Nobody was in sight. Minor relief. It gave him a moment to get his bearings. The best word for the place was utilitarian. About what you'd expect for the office of a struggling nonprofit organization. Tony assumed it was struggling. Didn't all nonprofits struggle?

A girl emerged from one of three doorways and immediately smiled.

"Hi, I bet you're Tony."

"Hi." Tony remembered to put a smile on his own face. She must be his mentor for this shift.

"I'm Shahla. Glad you're on time. The guys on the four to seven shift just left, and it's a little creepy here alone at night."

"Tony." She already knew that. Why was he so flustered? "Uh, how do you spell your name?" he asked, trying to hide it.

"S-h-a-h-l-a. Excuse the food. I haven't eaten dinner. Are you hungry? There're snacks in there."

She pointed her head back over her shoulder. She carried a paper plate full of chips and a coke. That was dinner? Maybe for a teenager. Tony tried to remember his eating habits when he was younger. He shook his head to signify that he wasn't hungry.

Shahla walked into a room with a sign that said "Listening Room" over the door, and set the food on one of the three tables. Tony followed her.

She turned back to him and said, "I understand that you let the class use your condo for one of the Saturday sessions and that you have a really neat pool. That was a nice thing to do." She gave him a thumbs-up sign.

"How did you hear about that?" Tony asked, caught off guard.

"Joy is my friend. She was one of the facilitators for the class. She swam in your pool."

"I remember Joy." That was an understatement. He was not likely to forget the blonde Joy, especially how she looked in a bikini.

"I'm supposed to show you around," Shahla said, after a sip of coke. "This is the listening room. We write the names of repeat callers on the board each day so that if they call a second time, we can tell them they've already called."

"Repeat callers get only fifteen minutes a day," Tony said, quoting from the class, where facilitators had done comical imitations of some of the chronic Hotline hunters. There were several names on the white board from earlier shifts, including Prince Pervert, Lovelorn Lucy, and Masturbating Fool. "Don't you hang up on the bad calls?"

“Yeah, if they start talking about sex in an explicit way or if we think they’re masturbating, we tell them it’s an inappropriate call and hang up.”

She spoke in a casual voice, but Tony felt uncomfortable. He wasn’t used to talking about masturbation with a teenage girl. He said, “And the books are for referrals?”

“Right. We have a couple of different telephone directories, including a local one, and these other books contain numbers we can give to callers, depending on their problem. They have names of counselors, drug and alcohol programs, shelters, that sort of thing.” She pointed out the books on one of the tables. “And this is the Green Book which tells about the repeat callers.”

Tony made a mental note to look through the books.

“I’ll show you how to sign in and also the rest of the office.” Shahla led the way out of the listening room.

She had long, dark hair and dark eyes—eyes that he knew he had no business gazing into. She wore jeans cut low across her hips and a midriff-baring top with spaghetti straps. Two other straps peeked out from beneath the outside ones. No navel ring, however. In fact, the only piercings he saw on her were one in each ear containing a stud. He couldn’t guess her nationality, offhand, but assumed her parents were from somewhere in the war-torn Middle East. He wasn’t surprised. The class had been composed of predominantly teenagers, belonging to a rainbow of races. But she spoke better English than he did.

“I guess most of the listeners are young,” Tony said as he signed in twice: on the daily time sheet and also the permanent record of hours worked by each listener.

“Yeah, we have to get our community service hours to graduate from high school.”

“A lot of the kids in the class were sixteen.”

“I’m seventeen.”

She said it with enough emphasis so he knew the difference was important. “Are you a senior at Bonita Beach High?”

“Yes. I’ve been on the Hotline for a year and a half.”

Shahla took him into what must be a supply room. Except that in addition to metal cabinets, it also contained a sink and some bags of chips and pretzels.

“Food,” she said, pointing. “There’s drinks and stuff in the refrigerator. And there’s water.”

A five-gallon Sparkletts bottle sat upside down on its metal stand. She led him out of that room and through the one remaining doorway. The room they entered was the largest one yet. It contained three desks, with all the appropriate office paraphernalia on top of them.

“These desks belong to Gail and Patty.”

Tony had met them at the class sessions. Patty was the Administrative Assistant and Gail was the Volunteer Coordinator.

“What about the third desk?”

“Several people have left. Patty’s only been here for three months. Here’s Nancy’s office.”

Shahla went through a doorway to an interior office containing just one desk. Nancy was the Executive Director. Tony had met her, too. She appeared to him to be very competent. He glanced at a couple of framed certificates and some photographs of the local beach on the walls of her office, and then they walked back to the listening room.

“Can you help me with something until the phone rings?” Shahla asked. She pulled a sheet of paper out of a folder she had brought with her. “I’m trying to put together a resume so I can get a part-time job. Can you take a look at it for me?”

“Do you really need a resume to work at McDonald’s?” Tony asked. “Or do you aspire to something grander?”

“I’m not really qualified for anything grander yet. I figured a resume would give me an advantage over the competition.”

Tony was impressed, not only by the resume, but by Shahla’s thinking. With a shock, it occurred to him that perhaps she was qualified to do more than work at McDonald’s. She had done two things when she met him that would do credit to a top salesperson. She had complimented him and asked for his advice, which had immediately endeared her to him. This was no airheaded teenager.

The telephone rang. Shahla said, “Okay, you’re on the air.”

Tony’s nervousness returned. He took a breath to calm himself and picked up the phone. “Central Hotline. This is Tony.”

There was an audible click at the other end of the line and then silence.

Shahla, who had pushed the speaker button, smiled. “You’ve just had your first hang up.” She walked over to a sheet of paper pinned to one of the bulletin boards and put a mark beside August 16.

“Do you think it was one of the obscene callers?”

Shahla shrugged. “Who knows? We all get hang ups.”

For some reason Tony felt marginally better about taking the calls. There were some people who didn’t want to talk to him even more than he didn’t want to talk to them.

Five minutes later the phone rang again. He answered it with slightly more confidence.

“Tony?” a female voice said in response to his greeting. “Have I talked to you before?”

“I don’t know,” Tony said. “Who’s this?”

“This is Julie.”

“Hi, Julie.”

Shahla placed the call on the speaker. There was no echo so callers didn’t know they were on a speaker. She reached for the Green Book and riffled through its pages. She set the book in front of Tony so he could read about Julie. Meanwhile, Julie, who had apparently figured out that Tony didn’t know her story, had taken off like a windup toy, talking about her ex-husband who had run away with his secretary, and a number of other men with whom she had apparently had affairs, but who had screwed her in one way or another. This wasn’t just a bad joke; she was crying on the line.

Tony barely had an opportunity to get in an occasional verbal nod, consisting of “Uh huh,” and no opportunity to practice other skills he had learned in the class. He belatedly wrote the time down on a call-report form and scanned the written information about Julie. She had been calling for several years. She complained about men and almost everything else, and her nickname was Motormouth. About all the listener could do was to give an occasional verbal nod and hang on for fifteen minutes.

After a while, Tony realized that some of the incidents Julie was talking about had happened years earlier. He felt like telling her to get over it and get a life. Perhaps it was a good thing he couldn’t get a word in edgewise.

At the end of fifteen minutes, Shahla swept her hand across her throat in the classic “cut” gesture. However, that was easier said than done. Tony tried to interrupt Julie several times; she

talked right over him. Finally, she stopped for a moment to take a breath, the first time Tony remembered her doing so, and he told her he had to answer other calls.

“Oh,” Julie said, and then, “If you hang up just like that, I’ll be depressed for the rest of the day. Can I just tell you one more thing?”

“Okay,” Tony said, feeling helpless. He avoided Shahla’s eyes.

She told him about a time a man had sent her flowers.

“That must have made you feel special,” Tony said, congratulating himself on introducing feelings into the conversation.

“Very special. But what I wanted to say was I got some of that same feeling just now because you listened to me, and you didn’t judge me.”

When he was at last able to end the call, he figured he had been on the line for twenty minutes. “Can you get fired for giving a repeat caller more than fifteen minutes?” he asked.

Shahla smiled and said, “Julie is one of the hardest ones to get rid of. Don’t feel bad. I have trouble with her too. And you ended the call on an upbeat note, which is a miracle for her.”

The phone rang again. Tony, who was still thinking about the previous call, tried to mentally brace himself. He answered the phone. Nobody spoke, but he was quite sure the line was open. He said, “Hello,” as he pressed the button to place the call on the speaker.

A male voice said, “I don’t want to go on.”

Startled, Tony looked at Shahla. She mouthed the word, “Suicide.” He thought, my God, this is a real call. I’m not playing a role in a class, anymore.