

Chapter One

Toni groaned, barely able to focus, the lights and noises were so fuzzy. She felt like she was in a tunnel, and everything was echoing. The lights pierced her head. She tried to tell someone to turn them off, but the words wouldn't come out. She closed her eyes, but the noises got louder.

“Wake up! You need to wake up!”

Someone was shaking her. This was not helping the headache situation. She couldn't even remember where she was, or why people were trying to wake her up. She groaned again, and this time was able to get out a long low moan. “No... Go 'way.”

But whoever it was didn't heed her instructions.

The voices got clearer. “Antoinette. You need to open your eyes. Can you do that for us? Open your eyes, please.”

She struggled and was able to get them barely slitted. She saw a dude in a uniform of some sort. He was shining a flashlight right in her face.

She mumbled again, “Leave me 'lone. Go 'way.”

She tried again to close her eyes, but this time the man in the uniform forcibly opened her eyelids.

“Her pupils are responsive, but slow. Damn. She's lost a lot of blood. It's going take all we have in the rig to get her to the hospital.”

Feeling herself being lifted, she still couldn't figure out who these people were and what they wanted with her. Toni closed her eyes again and, this time, they let her sleep. She vaguely felt the prick of a needle, but it didn't register enough to cause her to open her eyes.

The next time she woke up, her head was still killing her but everything was much clearer. She looked around. It was a hospital room. A very white, clean looking hospital room. She tried to reach up to rub her temples and realized that her arms were bound to the sides of the bed.

She felt panicked.

No! No! Not again.

Glancing down at her arms, she saw that they were bandaged from wrist to elbow on both sides. She felt sick. She finally remembered what had happened. The despair she felt at the loss of her job. Downing the bottle of aspirin. The relief she felt as the razor blades released the pain in her soul. The sharp sting of the hot water of the bath against the fresh cuts and watching the water turn red. She remembered all of it and her throat closed up at the memories. But what she could not recall was anything between that and the man with the flashlight waking her up. She tried to swallow. Her throat was on fire and felt like it had cotton balls in it.

She tried again and was able to let out a low yell. “Someone? Is anyone there? Hello?”

Within moments, a cheery looking lady in scrubs walked in the door. She appeared to be in her late fifties. She had light brown hair and a kind smile on her face.

“Oh, dearie, you woke up! Very nice to see you.”

Toni blinked at the woman’s Irish brogue. It was rather comforting.

“You’ve been asleep for a good long time, but after the night you had, we were grateful for it. I know you probably have a lot of questions, so I’ll try to answer what I can. First, I’m Brigitte. I’ll be your nurse for the afternoon. Anything you need, dearie, you just ask. Unfortunately, I cannot take off your restraints just yet. You’ll need to speak to our resident psychologist before that can happen. But I am happy to get you some water, maybe some warm broth. I expect your throat is very sore, yes?”

Toni nodded.

“The doctors in the ER had to pump your stomach. There were some nasty pills down there. They were making you quite ill.”

Toni knew that Brigitte was fully aware that the “nasty pills” had not been accidental and that “quite ill” was a nice way of saying they had been killing her. But she appreciated the nurse’s efforts at being kind.

Brigitte poured a large cup of water and held the straw up to Toni’s lips. She sipped it, but scowled. She hated being waited on, and not being able to hold her own cup was killing her. Ha. “Killing her.” Toni swallowed the water gratefully and smiled ruefully at her own irony.

“Thank you,” she said simply and then leaned forward to get some more. When she had quenched her thirst enough, she asked dryly, “So, when is this shrink supposed to come in and let me go? I have things to do.”

Brigitte shook her head lightly. “I’m sorry, love, but you won’t be going anywhere for quite a while. Hopefully, the doctor can let you out of the restraints if she deems it appropriate, but you’re going to need to stay in the hospital for at least the next few days, and I am sure they will recommend a treatment facility for after.”

Brigitte gently laid a hand on Toni’s bandaged arm. “I don’t know what happened in your life to make you feel like you need to hurt yourself, or to end it all, but I promise you, love, that there is more hope and life in the world than you seem to be seeing.”

Toni closed her eyes.

Well-meaning people always said that kind of useless drivel. Social workers. Foster parents. Ministers. Always the same sunshiny “It’ll get better,” or “It’s not that bad.”

But it never got better, and it was worse than they even knew.

Brigitte patted her arm. “I’ll get the kitchen to fix you some soup. I’ll be back in a jiffy and will help you eat it. You just rest, dearie. I am sure the doctor will be in shortly to assess you.”

Toni didn’t move. She had learned that if you simply ignored people, eventually they went away.

Always.

People *always* went away.

Once she was sure that Brigitte was gone, she opened her eyes again and looked around. Yep, still a sterile hospital room with nothing much to focus on. Television was worse than a waste of time, but it would be better than this eerie silence. Unfortunately, with her arms still bound, she could not control it herself and did not want to bother anyone. She closed her eyes and waited for Brigitte to return.

Toni jolted awake when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She instinctively tried to curl her arms around her face to protect herself, but they were still bound to her sides. Taking a cleansing breath, she realized that it was just Brigitte. Toni was shocked that she had dozed off. This was

part of why she hated hospitals. Never knowing what drugs they were feeding her and never feeling able to take control of the situation.

Brigitte was standing there with a steaming mug. Next to her, was another lady in a white coat. She had a pinched face and looked like she would rather be anywhere else.

Toni looked warily at both of them.

“Dearie, this is Dr. Stanton. She is going to ask you some questions. Don’t be worried, she is very good at her job. While she asks you questions, let’s try to get some of this broth into you.” Without waiting for an answer, Brigitte held the mug of warm broth up to Toni’s lips and forced her to take a sip. It was surprisingly soothing as it went down her throat.

Dr. Stanton coughed impatiently. “Name? Age? Date of Birth? Employment? Living situation? Anyone we need to inform of your suicide attempt?” She had a thick New York accent which made her harsh words sound even harsher.

Toni spoke slowly and softly, as if she were trying to make up for the doctor’s brashness. “Antoinette Lilith Moreau. Nineteen...”

Yesterday. Great job on failing yourself once again. On your birthday no less. Antoinette, you’re a real keeper.

“...I worked at a diner until yesterday. I live with roommates in an apartment.”

Live. Right. More like lived. You were already late with this month’s rent, and now there is no way they are extending your deadline again. You don’t even have a job. There is no way to make it up now. Better enjoy your hospital stay. You’ll be back on the streets again once you leave here, genius.

“Oh. No. No one to inform.” She looked at the doctor deadpan, almost daring her to question further.

Dr. Stanton did not show any indication that she noticed or cared. She simply wrote on a notepad as Toni spoke. She never made eye contact with her. With her eyes still focused on her clipboard, she asked in a monotone, “Are you going to hurt yourself again?”

Toni made sure her voice was very genuine, the tone she had learned over the years gave those in authority what they needed to leave her alone. “Oh definitely not, ma’am. I had a moment of weakness. I feel significantly better now.”

The doctor gestured at the restraints. “Nurse, you can remove those now. I’ll be back tomorrow.” Without waiting for a reply, she left the room.

Brigitte rolled her eyes and huffed as she undid the restraints. “That woman is getting on my last nerve.” She looked apologetically at Toni. “Sorry, dearie, I shouldn’t speak ill of the doctors here. But seriously, you would think that someone in her line of work would offer more compassion.”

Once the restraints were undone, Toni stretched. They had not been tight or that constraining, but it was psychosomatic. She had felt trapped. Now she felt mildly less so.

Brigitte offered her the mug. “Try to finish this, dearie. Your water is on the table, and the remote for the television is right here.” She held the remote out to her.

Toni nodded as she patted herself down frantically searching for her pockets. Belatedly remembering that she was in a hospital gown, she asked, “Where’s my phone?”

Brigitte gave her a sympathetic look. “You didn’t have one when they brought you in. If you want to call anyone to let them know you’re all right, there’s a phone right here.” She pointed to the phone just in reach to the left.

Toni shook her head. “No. I’ll just get it when I leave.” *Or probably have to buy a new one.* She was sure that her roommates would have stolen the phone, and probably most of her other belongings, by now.

Brigitte hesitated. “Well, if there is nothing else you need right now, I’ll be going?”

Toni nodded and flipped the television on.

Brigitte left.

Seventy-two hours later...

Toni sat impatiently on the chair by the hospital bed. All she needed was to get through this final interview. Then she could leave.

Why do doctors always take so long to discharge you? It’s probably because they have a complex.

She looked up, relieved when the door opened, but it was just the nurse to let her know it was going to be a “bit longer.” She nodded and then flopped back into the chair again. This was getting ridiculous. Her stomach growled, but she ignored it. Except when Brigitte was on duty, she had been able to convince the nurses she had eaten during the last shift. Brigitte hadn’t bought it though. Toni smiled a little. As annoying and intrusive as Brigitte had been, Toni was a little disappointed she wasn’t the nurse on call today.

Finally, the door opened again and this time it was bitch doctor from the first day. Toni suppressed the urge to groan. She tried to give Dr. Stanton a smile. “If my paperwork is all in order, I’ll be out of your hair.”

Dr. Stanton propped the door open and two burly men followed her into the room. “You’re not ready to be discharged. I have concluded that you are still a harm to yourself, and possibly to others. You’re going to need to go into a program for further treatment. I’ve looked into your Medicaid. The only treatment center covered is a public facility a couple of hours away in West Virginia.”

Toni’s eyes widened. “You can’t do that. I know my rights.” She had been down this road before as a minor. She had researched it a lot after that. She knew that once she passed eighteen, the state could no longer force treatment on her.

Dr. Stanton gestured at the two men. They started towards Toni.

She began speaking forcefully in a loud tone. “This goes against my constitutional rights and my beliefs! You can’t do this legally! I do *not* consent to treatment!”

The men lifted her off of the ground as if she weighed nothing and started carrying her towards the door. They didn’t make it out.

Blocking the doorway was a giant. A Thor-like creature. Or Paul Bunyan. He resembled a lumberjack more than an Avenger. He was so large he filled the frame of the door almost completely from side to side and top to bottom. He had fiery red hair and a full beard. His arms were crossed, and he did not look pleased. His voice, however, was calm and gentle when he spoke. “Excuse me, I couldn’t help but overhear. Perhaps I could be of assistance.”

The men glanced at Dr. Stanton, and she squinted her eyes. “Put her down.”

The men placed Toni’s feet back on the ground. She backed away from them until she was up against the wall. Her body was shaking. She tried to hide her fear and panic, but she couldn’t stop the involuntary movements of her body.

The man stepped further into the room and towards Dr. Stanton. “Catherine.”

Dr. Stanton rolled her eyes, showing more emotion than she had in the three days Toni had been here. “What do you want, Judah? No one called you or any of your crazy family. Your input is not needed or wanted here.”

The man, Judah, gave her a cool stare. “Actually, someone did, in fact, call my ‘crazy family.’ We were asked to stop by and see if this young lady was looking for a treatment facility.

And, it looks like my input is very needed. Unless you have a court order, then she is perfectly within her rights to deny consent for treatment.”

Dr. Stanton glared at him with a death stare, and he looked right back unyielding.

“Fine. She is your problem then. If she throws herself off a bridge, or decides to do a better job of slitting her wrists this time, then that’s on you.” She grabbed the papers from the end of Toni’s bed and scribbled on them.

Turning to speak to Toni, looking at her for the first time since Toni had arrived, she said spitefully, “If you know what’s good for you you’ll walk out the doors and not give this pyscho a second of your time. He and his family are vile, misogynistic, assholes.” With that, she stormed out of the room. The men followed her.

Toni stayed pressed up against the wall. She stared at the large man and processed what had just occurred.

He walked towards her slowly, taking small steps one at a time, until he was standing in front of her. He held out his hand, an incredibly large hand. Her eyes widened. She looked from his hand to his face, and back again.

His hand is bigger than my entire head. He could break me in two pieces without even bulging his muscles too much. I hope he is a gentle giant.

The man spoke even more softly than he had before. “Hey, lil’ bit. I’m Judah Jackson. It’s nice to meet you.”

His hand reached towards her, and for a moment, terror filled her soul. Then, she realized he was just wanting to introduce himself. Hers still shaking, she reached out and placed her hand in his. She was surprised at how warm and gentle his grasp was.

When he let go of her hand, she felt a little sad at the sudden loss of physical contact. Which was odd because she hated being touched. At all. Ever. Standing next to him, she could truly take in his height for the first time. She almost came up to his chest. Her breath quickened. Even though he had done nothing to scare her, his stature caused bile to rise in her throat. She closed her eyes and tried to get a grip on her involuntary response. She knew it was illogical to be afraid, but she couldn’t control the anxiety flooding her soul.

Judah immediately backed up and sat down on a chair. In the same gentle tone he had been using since Dr. Stanton had left the room, he spoke slowly. “I am not here to hurt you, or to force you into anything you do not want to do. Like I said, my name is Judah. I am a pastor of a

local church. My family runs a ranch that is set up to help people. It is a treatment center of sorts, but that is a very cold word for what they do. Their mission is to help people who need a little extra love and care. Brigitte Duncan is a member of my church, and she called my mama yesterday asking if they had any space for a very special young woman. They most certainly do.”

Toni felt immense relief when he sat down. It was as if the air came back into the room. She blinked when he said Brigitte had called his mother about her.

In a very quiet tone she replied, not quite able to meet his eyes, “That was kind of Brigitte, but I don’t have any money for something like that.”

Judah smiled. “Well, that’s one of the cool things about my parents’ place, it’s called Redemption Ranch, by the way. They run on a ‘pay as you can’ scale, and receive generous donations. They do not require any payment. They just want to help. Now, because you’re over eighteen, you’d need to enter willingly and sign some extra paperwork, but you’re more than welcome. You’re wanted.”

Toni gave him a blank stare.

Nothing in life is free. That doctor said his family was messed up. What if they are sex traffickers?

“What kind of program is it?” she asked shortly.

“There is daily one-on-one and group counseling; they employ therapy using animals and working around the ranch. There is a religious component, but you do not need to be affiliated with any church or even be a Christian to attend. Attendance and respect for the various services is required, but participation is not. Based on the little bit that Brigitte shared with my mother, your specific treatment plan would likely include adherence to a diet plan and strict monitoring at the start to assure you were not carrying out any suicidal ideologies. But mostly, Toni, my parents and the counselors at the ranch would be concerned with making sure that you feel safe and cared for. Their goal for anyone coming in or out of the ranch is to know that they are loved, cherished, important individuals. That you have inherent worth and dignity. And, to learn how to retrain your brain and habits to reflect that truth.” As Judah talked he remained seated, but never took his eyes off of Toni.

She listened intently, and then, trying to maintain her monotone, asked cautiously, “How long is the program, and how do I know that this is a legitimate facility?”

Judah nodded, as he pulled out his phone and started typing, and answered cheerfully. “Good questions. The second is easier to answer than the first. I am happy to show you their website, and several reviews online from reputable sources. As for how long, I can’t tell you. A lot of it depends on your needs and how quickly you adapt and grow. We have had residents stay everywhere from six weeks to six months. I know that our policy is not to start the program with anyone who is not willing to put in at least six weeks. It usually takes that long at a minimum just to settle in. Do you have a job or family that you need to consult?”

Toni was pretty sure that if Brigitte had told him about the suicide attempt, then she had probably also told him she had no family or job, but she shook her head. “No. It’s just me.”

Judah smiled. “Well, if you decide to come to the ranch I can assure you that you will not be alone or lonely again for a long time. My family, and everyone there, is very warm and welcoming.”

He held out his phone. “Here is the website, and I also opened a second tab with some personal stories of kids who have come through.”

Toni cautiously walked over, took the phone, and sat down on the opposite side of the room.

Judah watched her, as she intently scrolled through his phone.

From the moment he had seen her when he stepped into the doorway, he had felt an intense need to protect her. Her waist length black hair with purple streaks, intense blue eyes, and short stature made her look like a small helpless child. He guessed her to be just under five feet, and sorely underweight, even for her tiny frame. But when she spoke, her gentle tone and firm words let him know her soul was much older than her appearance or even her biological age. He sensed that she had seen, and experienced, more in her almost two decades than most people twice her age. He was grateful that his parents had space at the ranch. They had spent their entire lives helping people just like Toni. He knew they would help her out of her shell.

She looked up at him, her eyes seeming to look into his soul. Doubt, or was it hope, flickered across her face for a moment. Then, her expression went deadpan again. Standing up, she handed him the phone. In a quiet tone, she finally spoke. “I would like to enroll in your parents’ program. But, I have some requirements. One, is that I will need receipts of how much the treatment costs, and I will set up a payment plan after I leave.”

Judah started to say something, and she held up her hand.

“Mr. Jackson, please let me finish. I appreciate your parents’ generosity and willingness to take me in. However, I will not attend their program if they don’t sign a repayment agreement with me. It is non-negotiable. Also, it appears from the website, that they mostly assist children. I have read the rules and requirements, and they are all things I feel that I can submit to. But, it is necessary to state that I am, in fact, *not* a minor. I have no interest in going back and reliving my teen years. My personal autonomy is very important to me. Therefore, I will need one concession from the rules. It is imperative that I have access to my own personal cell phone. I can keep it in my room and only use it in the evenings and during free time. But, I will not willingly give up my cell phone. The last thing I need to say is that I will attend the religious services and show the proper reverence, but my relationship with a higher power is my own business. And I refuse to do anything publicly.”

Judah was surprised at her eloquence. He realized that he had misjudged her quiet nature and curt answers to be lack of ability. He was impressed by how boldly and clearly she made her needs known. And maturely. Her words had been strong and clear, but there had been nothing disrespectful in her tone or requests. She immediately jumped from little girl to mature young woman in a span of seconds.

Taking the phone from her, Judah looked her clearly in the eyes. “I will talk it over with my parents, but I do not think any of your requests are unreasonable. There really is no need to pay them back for your treatment. However, since you have stated it is important to you, we can work something out. Perhaps it can be entered as charitable giving on your part when you leave. We can worry about that when the time comes. I am certain that the phone will not be an issue. As long as you are not using it in ways that are damaging your healing or infringing on the time you are supposed to be doing other things, I believe we can make that accommodation. And religious freedom is very important to my parents. And to me. I am a pastor, but I believe everyone deserves the right to practice their beliefs in their choice of timing and their own way. Your wishes will be strictly adhered to in that department.”

Toni gave a quick nod and stood up. “I need to go by my old apartment and get my belongings.”

Judah gave her a mild look. “Yes, Toni. I would be happy to take you to pick up your things.”

She had the good grace to look ashamed. “I am sorry. That was rude. Would you *please* take me by my apartment on the way? If that wouldn’t be too much trouble?”

Judah chuckled. “I would be happy to, Toni. If you have anything here, please grab it.”

Toni was already wearing some scrubs that the nurse had given her so she could change out of the hospital gown. She did not have any personal items with her.

He led her down the halls of the hospital ward, past the scowling Dr. Stanton, and outside to a black SUV. Climbing in, she almost had to get a running start to get up into the high seat. Once situated, she gave Judah the address of the apartment. It was not far from the hospital.

Upon arrival at the complex, she turned to him and stated plainly, “Just stay in the car. I’ll be right back.”

In order to climb down, she had to hold onto the handle on the inside and her feet dangled in the air. Before they could even hit the ground though, Judah was standing next to her offering her his hand.

“I will be coming with you. I can stand outside of the door of the apartment if you need your privacy, but I *am* coming with you.” His tone allowed for no argument. “I’ve had a lot of experience with volatile situations, and from the little you have shared, it doesn’t sound like your roommates are going to be very agreeable.”

Toni stared at him for a moment, but decided it wasn’t worth the fight. Without waiting for him, she walked quickly into the building.

They walked up several flights of stairs and came to the door that stated #405. Toni knocked, timidly at first, and then harder.

A girl in a pleather mini skirt and several piercings opened the door. “Oh my god, I can’t believe you’re showing your face here. You totally left us in a lurch. You’re done. Finished. Goodbye.”

She started to close the door, but Judah stuck his hand out.

The girl looked up, and then up even more until she was staring into Judah’s eyes in a little bit of shock. “Damn.”

In a calm tone, Judah said, “Miss Moreau is simply here to collect her belongings and then she will not be needing her space in the apartment any longer.”

The girl looked at him, defiantly this time. “Um, no. She didn’t pay her rent. We took all her stuff. It’s the rules. Not that she had much anyways, but this iPhone will be worth something. Even if it is a five instead of a six.”

She waved a phone in a solid purple case.

Toni reacted immediately. “Give that to me! You can have everything else, but that’s mine!”

The girl shook it with a mean smile. “No way. You stiffed me on \$250 in rent. This should just about cover that.”

Toni lunged at the girl. “I said that’s mine! How did you even get it?”

Judah grabbed Toni around the waist before she could actually make contact with the girl. He physically lifted her off of the ground. “Whoa, whoa. Calm down, sweetie. Hitting her is not going to solve anything.”

Toni immediately stiffened and froze.

Still keeping one arm around Toni, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a few hundred dollar bills, glad he’d made a withdrawal earlier that day to pay the church landscaping crew. “There is \$300 there. Give her the phone. I’ll give you the cash. And you’ll come out on the top in this one. Okay?”

The girl practically threw the phone at him and grabbed the money. Then, before they could stop her, she slammed the door.

Judah set Toni down, and handed her the phone tenderly. “Is there anything else you needed?”

Toni shook her head almost imperceptibly, holding the phone to her chest. Her entire body was shaking from Judah’s abrupt contact. Even though she mentally was telling herself she wasn’t in danger, her fight or flight instincts were on high alert.

Judah went down on one knee and was practically eye to eye with her. “Are you sure darlin’? I doubt this phone was the only thing you had in there. And you’re going to need clothing and such. It’s not right for them to treat you this way.”

Toni shook her head again. “It’s not wor—”

The door swung open and a garbage bag was shoved at them. Then, the door closed again.

Judah opened the bag. It held a couple pairs of jeans and long sleeve solid colored shirts. There were a few ratty pairs of underwear and a bra.

“Is anything important missing?” he asked, looking up at her face.

She shook her head.

Judah stood. “I’ll take the bag, you take your phone, and let’s get out to the ranch, okay?”

Toni didn’t acknowledge what he said, but started walking. She was able to calm herself enough that she wasn’t visibly shaking anymore.

They walked out to the car, and drove silently to Redemption Ranch.