

Chapter One

I smash a load of jeans down into a washing machine at the Golden Coin Wash and Spin and vow I will not burst into tears. I take a deep breath and instead of crying, gently close the lid.

Thankfully, nobody else is in here. Then again, it's this same desolation that makes it creepy to be here at all, despite the morning sun blazing through the front windows, which only seems to accentuate how run down this place is.

My hands grip the edge of my machine as it fills with water. I close my eyes. I'm trying hard not to feel like a lunatic, almost shedding tears over a washing machine.

Please God, I think, please just let things get better. It feels like I'm asking for a miracle.

"You praying? Worshipping the Whirlpool?"

I nearly screw myself into the ceiling at the sound of her voice. How she got in here, so fast, without me hearing, I don't know. Maybe the rush of water filling up my four machines drowned out the sound of her arrival, but the door has one of those little bells that jingle when you walk through. When I came in ten minutes ago, I'd thought it was silly. Who were they trying to alert? The dryers? There's no attendant here. At the Golden Coin Wash and Spin, you're on your own.

She looks to be in her early twenties and, from what I know, totally Goth. Or maybe emo. Probably emo. Goth is out. Actually, both Goth and emo are out. I think. I'm not sure. I have three children, two of them teenagers, but they can't be bothered to explain these things to me anymore.

Short black hair falls long over her right eye and it has electric blue streaks down the front. She's a tiny little thing in a slightly too large white tank top. A wife-beater-T, is what we used to call them. A black bra strap has slipped out fashionably on one side. Even though it's ninety-five humid degrees outside, and not much better, if not worse, in here, she's wearing pencil thin black jeans and bulky Doc Martens. Her nose has a small piercing, one round diamond in one nostril. It's tasteful, like something I might have done in my twenties, if I'd thought any of the airlines I was just dying to work for at the time would have allowed it.

And she's already measuring out her detergent, which leads to another thing I find strange about her. This place is pretty big and all the rest of the machines are empty and she's chosen the one right next to mine.

Her Angelina lips are pursed in concentration as she stares at the measuring cup, holding it up at eye level. She pours a little detergent back into the bottle: *Trader Joe's Next to Godliness*, which has me guiltily looking at my *Tide with Bleach Alternative*. I watch her. It's like she's performing a science experiment, the way she's eyeing the little plastic cup.

I'm grateful for the distraction of her though, and to not be alone in here anymore. She catches me watching her and smiles before looking down to pour the detergent over her clothes.

I like her, I decide. The way she smiled. It was nice. "I was praying," I say. She gives me another smile, which I take for encouragement. "But I don't think my prayer is getting answered," I pause for what I hope is comedic effect, "because I'm still here."

"You could bounce," she offers.

Nice. I'd hoped for a chuckle, or at the very least, another one of her smiles. I try to hide my disappointment. "I'm aware of my own free-will," I tell her. "I was just trying to make a joke."

The conversation screeches to a very un-funny halt when she leans over to inspect the inside of her washing machine before closing the lid. She stands up straight, then looks me dead in the eye. "Maybe I'm the answer to your prayer."

My face compresses in confusion. Is she coming-on to me? Her eyes are dark, liquid brown and puppy-dog sincere. *Hardly*, I think.

"Maybe you are," I say, deciding to play along.

It would make sense, too, that she'd be the answer to my prayers. I've been asking for help, guidance. A sign. A big bag of money to drop out of the sky. Something. Anything to help pull me up out of the depressing muck into which my life has descended during these God-awful economic times, this Great Recession, which has caused me to wind up at this gross Laundromat instead of at home on the phone ordering a new washing machine from Abt Appliances. But a new washing machine isn't in the budget for this month, and probably not for next month or the month after that either. And to add insult to injury, I had to haul all of our laundry down here in our two-wheeled grocery cart, hoping none of the neighbors would see me wrestling with the tottering mess, because my husband needed the car. Our only car. Because my car is broken, too.

So it makes perfect sense to me, with my luck lately, that any answer to my prayers wouldn't sound like a loving voice inside my head telling me to go back to bed, or a four-leaf clover in my yard—but would come in the form of something that is exactly what I don't need; something that looks pretty damn close to one more smart-ass teenager.

I give her what I hope looks like a dismissive smirk, grab my bag and take a seat in one of the faded plastic chairs backing up to the windows at the end of our row of washing machines. She follows me. "You shouldn't be so sad to be here," she says. I watch helplessly as she sits down across from me on a table that's supposed to be used for folding clothes.

But there's something about her—an aura of calm—that contrasts with her outward quirkiness. It makes no sense to me, but I still find myself wanting to like her. Even so, I don't want a lecture or a life-lesson from some strange kid I just met at the Laundromat.

"Yeah? And why's that?" I say.

"There are plenty of worse places to chill."

"And doing laundry is just the same thing as chilling." I roll my eyes. I feel all my pent-up frustration swell. Even though she's not the root of it, I decide to let her have it. "I know there are places in this world, horrible places, awful situations that I would never, ever want to be in. And you know what, on the grand scale of things...well on the grand scale of things, I think the Golden Coin counts as one of them." I gesture around the room to make my point.

The front windows are filthy, covered with greasy fingerprints and St. Patrick's Day leprechauns, dusty and curled with age. A Vote Chicago! campaign poster for some Alderman who didn't get elected hangs crookedly in one corner. There's a gang-tag spray-painted on the Coke machine that looks like someone at one time tried to scrub off, but just gave up. A cobweb dangles from an actual payphone that still stands by the door. Two fans wobble on their mounts in the middle of the ceiling's water-stained acoustic panels, having no affect whatsoever on the stagnant air in the room. I imagine they

probably squeak, too, if we could hear them over the rumble of the washing machines and the Coke machine's aging compressor. The light grey squares on the linoleum floor are so dirty they're almost the same color as the dark grey ones. A broken clock, its hands perpetually stuck on eleven o'four, has a faded yellow face with an even more faded sign below it that says, "Thank you for doing your laundry with us!"

"What I've learned in my forty-odd years on this planet," I continue, "is that I've grown very tired of trying to make myself feel better about my situation by thinking about how much worse it could be. I know it could be worse. I just want things to be better for me. Now. Is that too much to ask? To be happy? To have happiness in its own right?" "Then be happy," she says it with a shrug, before reaching into her laundry bag and pulling out a People Magazine.

I roll my eyes again. *Then be happy*. As if it were that simple. *Be happy*. Like life is just the same as some dumb Bobby McFerrin song.

"It really is just that simple." She's looking up from her magazine now, staring into me with those dark eyes.

And now I'm a little freaked out, because I think she just read my mind. I shift in my chair under her gaze, not knowing if I want to like her that much anymore. "Listen," I say. "I read *The Secret*, too. Hell, I even *tried The Secret*. Do you know what happened? I sat there loving my car, loving my eight-year old Subaru Outback Forester, imagining my brand new Lexus RX350, silver and gorgeous, parked in my garage and you know what happened? Do you know what I got? I got a nine-year-old Subaru Outback Forester with a cracked engine block and a big empty space in my garage where a Lexus should be. All I want, all I ever wanted, is a little happiness. A little security. I worked so hard to get somewhere in this life and now I'm watching everything, all of it, slip right out from under me and there's not one thing I can do about it." I pause, wave my hand around the inside of The Golden Coin again. "This was not supposed to be my life!"

She's still watching me, her expression inscrutable. After a very long moment, she looks down at her magazine and releases a single page with her thumb. "If you say so," she says as the new page floats down. She starts scanning it while it's still in mid-air.

"Happiness is *not* a choice. Don't you think if it were a choice, *everyone* would choose it?"

"Not everyone knows *how* to choose it," she says, her eyes still focused on her *People*.

"Mmm, yeah. Well. *If you say so*."

We sit in silence again, with only our washing machines churning, the hum of the Coke machine's struggling compressor, and the occasional flip as she pages through her magazine. When she turns yet another page, I notice the tattoo on the inside of her wrist. It's an infinity symbol, and again I'm struck by how much I like it. It's neat. Like something I might have tatted on my wrist if I'd ever felt so inclined.

"It's a mobius strip," she says, catching me staring at it. "Most people think it's an infinity symbol, which I guess it kind of looks like, but it's actually a mobius strip."

Oh great. I get it now. She's some University student home on summer vacation, slumming it up at the Golden Coin. Her simple plan: to enlighten the unwashed masses that inhabit the coin Laundromat world.

"Ah, yes. A mobius strip. Never ending. Non-orientable. It would be deep, if you could render a mobius strip in two-dimensional space." I'm showing off. I minored in

math. And I also firmly believe that twenty-year old college students should not be led to believe they have the market cornered on academic esoterica.

She nods once, as if mildly impressed with me, then goes back to her magazine.

"I don't think Kesha and this new boyfriend of hers are going to last very long," she offers up and I'm relieved she's dropped the subjects of happiness and mobius strips. "Juicy Fruit?"

For a moment I'm perplexed as to what Juicy Fruit might have to do with Kesha until she holds out the pack of gum, sliding one stick partially out.

"Umm, yeah. Sure." I take the gum, unwrap it and fold it into my mouth. She takes out a piece for herself and does the same.

"I love this gum," she says. "The smell, the taste. It's one of my favorite things in this physical world."

Personally, I could think of a lot better things to love in this *physical world*, like a brand new Lexus RX350, but I've always liked the idea of basking in simple pleasures, so I agree with her and say, "Yeah, me too."

"It's, like, Kesha is totally fly and she's going out with this loser. I just can't see them making it."

Apparently, we're back to talking about People Magazine again.

"Please do tell me how, in your short time on this fine planet, you've become such an expert on mobius strips, happiness and the intricacies of modern romance?"

"I'm a Messiah," she says.