

Chapter 1

The first Monday evening in February meant snowless ice and fog outside the wide windows of the laundromat. Within, fluorescent tubes buzzed. The air smelled of mildew and bleach. Sophia slumped in a hard plastic chair, clutching her midsection, but nothing helped the cramps. And it was laundry night like it was every Monday.

“Fuck,” she murmured, at everything - the sallow light, the rumbling washers nearby, the cold, and the pain in her gut. And, of course, at the cowardly asshole Jake, who had pushed her to get an abortion, who was the same asshole that had knocked her up to begin with. “Fuck.”

Last night had been spent in tears, gulping water and analgesics to little consequence while she was alone in the apartment. This morning had been spent in tears again, after the most innocuous of text messages to Jake bounced back, “This user permits text messages only from contacts.” Jake had blocked her. He received no texts, took no calls. A brief pregnancy, and an abortion, and that was the end of Jake and Sophie.

Sophie's gaze fixed on the swirling clothes in the washer, staring at the chaotic spin. Her tears had dried, and she could not shed another to save her life. But the day was not done. Truth be told, weekly chores had been an escape for her, a reason to be gone from home when her sister Demi returned from work. She could not face Demi yet, not until she had a plan, a way to explain everything. But the emptiness inside her seemed to swallow any hope she tried to muster.

She couldn't shake the feeling that everyone in the laundromat could see right through her, that they knew what she had done. Abortions were supposed to be just another medical procedure, like having a cavity filled. Right? She had been brave enough to enter the clinic in front of a trio of placard-waving protesters, bored

and anemic as they were. But now, with the deed done and the light so bright and revealing... How could she have been so stupid, so naive? She felt like a child playing dress-up in the adult world, and now she was paying the price.

A sudden tap on her shoulder startled Sophie out of her thoughts. A young woman stood near the adjacent washing machine, clutching a pile of denim. "Hey there. Sorry, are these jeans yours? They were on the floor between the machines."

Sophie frowned. She hurriedly tried to ease her face to be one of boredom and nonchalance, as might be expected on laundry day. "Oh, yes. Yes. Those are mine. Thank you." She took the garment, but as she did so, the wrapper of a pregnancy test fell to the floor. Ah, yes. These were the jeans she had worn a week ago, when after 10 anxious days wondering she decided to spring for a test to put her worries to rest. Only, the worries didn't end, and she had called Jake in a panic. She hurriedly snatched it up and put it in her pocket again.

It was clear to Sophia that the woman noticed. She smiled at her, kindly, though Sophia struggled to meet the look in her eye. "Oh, dear, you look like you could use a friend."

Sophia considered shrugging off the woman's approach, considered denying that there was anything wrong with her, considered snapping at this lady to mind her own business. But what came out of her mouth was silence. And then, though it seemed impossible, tears flowed again.

"Hey, shh," the stranger cooed, and she pulled up another plastic chair to sit next to her. "Hey, come here girl, it's all right, I understand, I've been there. Shh..." To Sophia's surprise she found herself suddenly bawling on the woman's shoulder. The other patrons of the laundromat turned to stare a bit, then went back to their own tasks. Sophia tried, hard, not to make a

spectacle of herself, but it seemed the more she tried to clamp down, the more earnest her wailing became.

Slowly Sophia mastered herself once more. “Sorry... I’m sorry...” She was suddenly hotly aware of the mess she must look, tear-streaked and her nose runny. The woman offered her a tissue from her purse.

“No sorries needed,” the lady said, gently. “I’m Izzy by the way.”

“Sophia. Or Sophie.” She took a minute to staunch the snot and tears, sniffing in a way that she hoped would look dignified.

“Sophia, that’s a pretty name. Means ‘wisdom’.”

Sophie didn’t know what to say to that. “Ma’am, Izzy, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to... I’ve just... I’ve just had a really bad couple of days.”

Izzy smiled. “I’m sure dear. Most women really have a rough go when they get back from the clinic.”

Sophie felt suddenly defensive. As she finally got control of herself, she looked over Izzy in a more appraising manner. She was pretty, Asian, early thirties, which would have put her about Demi’s age. She was dressed in unassuming leggings and a T-shirt, which was the standard uniform for women doing laundry at the laundromat, it seemed. Oddly, the lady wore open sandals even though the building was cold. They were stylish sandals, though.

“Clinic? I... uh...” Sophia considered playing dumb, before realizing that she was probably an easy read at this moment. “How did you know?”

“You look like you’re in pain, and I spotted the pregnancy test. I just inferred. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.”

Internally, Sophia lambasted herself. Stupid girl. Even failing at maintaining some veneer of privacy and decorum. Some adult you are. "I'm sorry," she ventured weakly. Whether she was apologizing for her outburst or something else, she could not say.

"No, no sorries needed. Are you doing all right now? Do you have someone we can call to help you out?"

"I'm... I'm okay. There's my sister, Demi, but..." Her voice choked off as another traitorous sob threatened to erupt.

Izzy noticed. "Shh, it's okay, we don't have to call anybody. Do you... do you want to talk about it?"

Sophie shook her head silently, worked hard at swallowing back any more bawling. Moments passed, and Izzy didn't move away or anything, and somehow Sophia felt strangely comforted that this stranger was not abandoning her at the earliest opportunity. Moments became minutes. "You're right," she finally said in a whisper. "About the clinic, I mean."

"And let me guess, the father isn't in the picture?" Izzy asked, her expression still kindly.

Sophia shook her head.

"What was his excuse?"

"I don't even know. He said he couldn't be a father, but then when it was done... at the clinic... He just blocked me."

"Oh, poor thing." Izzy patted Sophia's hand. "He's probably not any older than you? Twenty-five, I should think?"

"Twenty-two. Same as me."

“Well that explains it. He’s young, and young men are stupid. Some spectacularly so. They don’t grow out of it till they are 30 or more, I think. Sometimes they never do. Don’t you worry, it’s not your fault.”

The possibility that Sophia herself had driven Jake away had not occurred to her, but now that she chewed on it, she had no doubt it was the sort of thing she would punish herself with later on. “He’s... yeah, he’s an asshole.”

Izzy chuckled softly. “You know, I’ve often thought ‘asshole’ was too kind a word for some men. How about ‘dickweasel’ or ‘douchecanoe’?”

Sophia smiled in spite of herself. Demi had so often reproved her for her crass language. She half-expected Izzy would chastise her as well. Hearing this lady swear like a sailor was comforting, somehow. “‘Dickweasel’,” she agreed.