

Chapter 1

It was dark, so dark, yet somewhere far away, deep in the night a bird was chirping. Fiona Range's eyes fluttered and closed, then shot open into blackness. She couldn't breathe. Every nerve throbbed with the blind acuity of fear. Hot at her neck was the foul, ragged snore of a naked man. She gasped, stiffening as he stirred. The musky reek of sweating loins rose up from the sheets. He grunted, then rolled onto his belly, his hairy arm falling like a club across her bare chest. She struggled to sit up, but his arm shifted, pinning her shoulders. His snore grew sluggish. All she could see was the back of his head. "Hey! Hey, wake up!" she whispered, chin rigid against his arm. Her mind raced with blurred images.

She remembered leaving the party, then cold hands stuffing her legs into a car so he could close the door. It must have been him, this nameless, faceless man in her bed. He had helped her up to her apartment, because she kept stumbling on the stairs. She hadn't been able to find her key so he had dumped out her purse on the hallway floor, but then he kept trying to unlock the wrong door, and all she could do was laugh. And then—oh, God—her prissy neighbor, Mr. Clinch, peered out and pointed across the hall. "That door," he hissed. "That's where she belongs." In there. Here—on this bed where he took off her clothes, and begged her to please, please stop laughing while they made love, then afterwards, when it was over and she wanted to hold him he buried his face in the pillow and sobbed.

What in God's name had she done? Only her eyes moved. The darkness began to take shape now with the faint glow of dawn swelling behind the window shade. The room was the same shambles of boxes and magazines, books for her course, her uniform, a Coke can on the windowsill, clothes piled everywhere, scarves on the doorknob, bras on the floor. Shoes, boots, socks. Scattered price tags. She'd buy things, makeup, sweaters, CDs, wear them, play them, let the bags drift to the floor. What the hell did it matter? Her life was a mess, out of control. There was a stranger in her bed.

"Hey! Hey, you!" She was going to be sick. "C'mon, wake up! Wake up!" She jostled his arm until he curled onto his side. On her feet now she reeled dizzily, then groped her way to the bathroom. She sat on the toilet and groaned, her throbbing head heavy in her hands.

It had been a birthday party for her friend Terry's husband, Tim; a double celebration because the previous day, Brad and Krissy Glidden's first baby had been born after years of trying. Brad Glidden and Tim had been best buddies since high school. It had been Fiona's first night out in months. All she'd wanted was to feel a little happy for a little while, but oh God, what had she done? She had danced with everyone, even with poor, brain-damaged Larry Belleau, who kept slobbering her with kisses, then the next thing she knew they were both in the pool. God, she'd even danced with Goldie, the stinking collie, until Tim said she was disgusting and told her to leave. Brad Glidden insisted she have coffee first, so she was drinking coffee and eating stuffed grape leaves on Terry's kitchen stool. Then the dog jumped up on his hind legs, his fur prickly against her chest while she fed him grape leaves. She shuddered remembering the feel of Goldie's slimy yellow teeth as she kissed his mouth. She had no idea who was curled up in her bed.

She took deep breaths, trying to calm her stomach enough so she could stand up. She had to brush her teeth, had to scrub away this disgusting taste: dog breath and him, whoever the hell that was out there. She scrubbed until her gums bled. His smell was still on her.

Larry Belleau. She froze with her hand on the doorknob, suddenly afraid it was him. Larry had never been right since his diving accident at the quarry years ago. Most people avoided him, because he was such a nuisance, but she had always gone out of her way to be nice to him. My God, she hadn't gone that far out of her way, had she? No, the guy in her bed was thin, and Larry was huge. And besides, Larry didn't drive. Maybe it was someone she didn't even know, a total stranger, someone she'd met on the way into the building last night.

When she came out of the bathroom, he was gone. The blanket lay heaped on the floor. The front door was ajar. Across the hallway Mr. Clinch's door opened as he reached out for his newspaper. Their eyes met, and he looked away. She darted back inside and yanked up the shade to see her lover running barefoot down the walk to his car. His shirt was unbuttoned, and he carried his shoes. He glanced up as he fumbled his key into the door lock. She saw the panic on his face, the terror, the same revulsion she was feeling. It was Brad Glidden. Krissy and their new baby were coming home from the hospital in the morning. This morning. Today—in that car, the car she had left the party in, the very same white Volvo station wagon that was squealing out of the parking lot now.

“Bastard, no-good bastard,” she muttered as she turned on the lights, wincing in the glare. What had she been thinking, sleeping with Brad Glidden? But as usual, she hadn't been thinking, hadn't cared or been careful. And now this mess. “Nothing but messes, nothing but goddamn messes, messes, messes,” she groaned as she kicked the scattered clothes into a heap. She staggered and had to catch herself on the table edge. She hated her life, hated her new apartment in this decrepit building. After six weeks she was still living out of boxes. It was too small and dark and more expensive than her old place where she'd still be if she hadn't taken pity on Todd Prescott last summer. Because of him, she'd been evicted and her family had washed their hands of her. And to top it all off she'd just slept with Krissy's husband. “Jesus Christ! What's wrong with me?” she moaned, pressing her fingers into her throbbing temples.

Too drained by the shower steam to even wash, she held on to the soap bar and let hot water run down her back. When she stepped out she barely had enough energy to towel herself off, much less dry her hair. She combed the dark waves straight and dripping wet against her neck, then put on her pink uniform, shuddering as the cool nylon clung to her damp skin. Her eyes stung so much she could barely keep them open as she tugged the sheets off the bed and threw them onto the pile of clothes, but she had to leave all the lights on and the radio playing and the window wide open to keep herself awake she thought as she curled up on the bare mattress for just a minute while the brisk September breeze rasped the crooked shade back and forth against the window frame.

She woke up at six forty-five. The coffee shop opened at six-thirty. Wincing, she lifted her head slowly from the pillow, then made her way to the door. She had been late often enough, but had never missed a day of work in any job.

Fiona Range's teeth had been filled without novocaine, her wounds stitched without anesthesia, her heart broken too many times to count. Once as a child she fell from a tree and broke her arm but didn't tell her aunt until hours later when her favorite show had ended. When she was fifteen her appendix burst before she realized the severity of her daylong belly pain. Hearing that the same thing had happened to her mother as a girl had pleased her, because it was another brushstroke in the hazy portrait of Natalie Range, the wild young woman who drove off weeping one rainy afternoon, never to return. In the ensuing thirty years her mother had not once called or written or cared. And Fiona was only the tougher for it.

She still bristled whenever anyone in the family referred to her high threshold for pain. It seemed to reduce her strength to a blankness, a numbness, a dead nerve, a deficit, one more congenital flaw bequeathed by an errant mother and rumored father, Patrick Grady, the town eccentric, who ignored her existence.

Two months ago when she'd been evicted, her cousins declared her an emotional burden, a bigger drain on their parents than any familial responsibility warranted. And so, like her mother, Fiona had also walked away without guilt or regret. They said they were tired of all her mishaps, tired of caring for someone who only cared about herself. But it had been precisely that, the caring, that always caused her so much trouble. The only reason she'd let Todd Prescott stay in her apartment over the Fourth of July weekend was because he had been so sick and depressed.

But didn't she know Todd was still using drugs? her uncle Charles had asked. What had she been thinking? My God, a drug raid in his own niece's apartment. Taken in and raised with his own children, she had been given every advantage, the same care and attention as her cousins, and yet there were always these messes, these fiascoes, these—
“Crimes!” her cousin Jack had sputtered, too incensed to notice or heed his father's cold stare. The judge was not used to being interrupted, certainly not in his own home, and never by his son. “Yes! Crimes!” Jack declared with the same disdain and relish with which he had always regarded her transgressions.

Well, call them what you will, her cousin Ginny had said; it was time to draw the line. They could at least listen to her side of it, Fiona had demanded. Of course she'd known Todd was using drugs; that's why she'd finally broken up with him a year ago, but she had no idea he was selling coke. She had been out of the apartment working or partying most of that long, hot weekend. And when she was there it hadn't occurred to her that his visitors were all buying from him.

“Well with such classic judgment we can only thank God the undercover cop knew who you both were,” Jack said.

“What he knew was that I didn't have a goddamn thing to do with any of it!”

“What he knew was that you were Judge Hollis's niece, and that this would probably destroy him if it got out,” Jack had said through clenched teeth with both sisters nodding; even Elizabeth, who had always been her staunchest defender.

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

“No!” cried Jack and Ginny, and Elizabeth had closed her eyes, sighing.

“Well then, I guess I’m out of here,” she’d said, slamming the door behind her. She was tired of their disapproval, the silent censure, their eagerness always to assume the worst. If they wanted her back they knew where she was.

It must have been the same for her mother all those years ago when Patrick Grady came home from Vietnam, one side of his handsome face bunched up in rippling scars from napalm burns. He denied Fiona was his child and refused to marry Natalie, who had then just slammed the door and left her misery behind. In steely tribute to her mother, Fiona still passed Grady on the street without blinking an eye or slowing her pace.

Most people in town tolerated Grady, attributing his strangeness to a war no one would admit to having supported, but she had never felt any pity for the man and certainly no sense of obligation. He was an outsider because he wanted to be, and she was an outsider because he hadn’t wanted the responsibility of fatherhood.

Fiona Range had learned long ago to take what life dealt and make the best of it. She might be hurt, but no one would see her bleed. She would be in control, in complete control, and right now as she drove to work the trick was to think it all through. As long as she got everything straight in her own head, then it didn’t matter what anyone else thought. Brad Glidden wasn’t about to tell anyone, and neither was she. She had brought this on herself and she would plow through it. Pain was just another level of consciousness, and working against it now seemed as desirable an ache as grinding sore teeth. That’s just the way things went in a place like Dearborn. You could find a ghost on every street corner if you looked hard enough. But she never had to look because the past was with her every day and everywhere. Even her job was a daily reminder now that Chester had recently married Maxine, who used to go out with Patrick Grady. Fiona might be able to change what she became, but nothing could change what she came from. And to tell the truth, most days she didn’t give a damn. But then, most days didn’t start off the way this one had.

She pulled down the narrow alley and parked behind Chester’s Coffee Shop. In the kitchen Chester Adenio was frying eggs and turning bacon on the grill. The smell of sputtering grease turned her stomach. She had to open the back door again and take a deep breath of fresh air.

“Hurry up and get out front!” Chester called. Sandy Rudman, the other waitress, wasn’t there yet. “Come on! Come on! Maxine’s having a bird out there,” Chester said.

By his own admission, Maxine had been the worst waitress he’d ever had. After two months of tearful breakdowns every time she dropped a tray or made a mistake on an order, Chester had put her on the register. The coffee shop certainly didn’t need a full time cashier-hostess, but Chester had fallen in love. Counting back correct change and seating parties during rush hours soon proved as stressful as waitressing, but with Chester’s encouragement and increasing devotion, Maxine persevered.

He and Maxine had been married only a few months. Chester would have preferred that she stay home, but the coffee shop had endowed Maxine with a status she'd never had living in the town housing project. This drab, worn little place had become her dream, her showcase.

Fiona tied her apron, then opened the door into the dimly lit dining room. Maxine's bright red suit and orangey hair darted like flames through the hunched shadows as she poured coffee and passed out menus. Fiona groaned. George Grimshaw was sitting right there in the booth by the door. He was the last person on earth she felt like talking to right now. Looking up from his open paper, he nodded politely at Maxine's mindless prattle. His dark blue van was parked out front. "Grimshaw and Son, plumbing co" said the gold-leafed letters on the door, though his father had died recently, leaving George alone in both the business and their little bungalow on Elm Street.

George had been only eight when his mother died. It was then that Fiona's cousin Elizabeth began to look out for him. He and Elizabeth had been a couple from third grade all the way through high school, before drifting apart in the last few years. He still asked about her, and last Christmas when Elizabeth was home they'd gone out for coffee a few times. Fiona had known George all her life, but little more than small talk ever passed between them. He had never been able to hide his disapproval of Elizabeth's wild cousin.

Chester's bell rang and Fiona wheeled gratefully around back into the kitchen. With the whoosh of the closing door the bright row of funnels, ladles, and spoons swayed over the workbench, and she felt dizzy. She watched Chester place a sprig of curly parsley between the shimmering yolks, then rip the completed order slip from the nail. Fresh parsley and lemon slices, like Maxine's growing wardrobe, proof that he and his wife ran a first-class operation here.

"For your funeral, I'm going to send a wreath of fresh parsley. I promise," she said as he dabbed grease from the plate rim with a towel. "Maybe even spell out Chester with lemon wedges." Her hoarse laughter exploded into a coughing spasm that made her sore eyes water and nose run. She leaned on the counter. Her chest ached. She only smoked when she drank. Last night must have been a two-packer.

"You look like shit warmed over," Chester said through a grin of sharp little teeth as he picked up the plate.

"Aren't you the sweet guy?"

"Jesus, your hands're shaking." He peered out at her. "Don't tell me you're back with Prescott, that loser, again, that asshole."

"Chester, how many times do I have to tell you? I am footloose and fancy-free. I do what I want; go where I want." She tried to laugh, but the boozy rasp clotted in her throat. She turned quickly to cough it away.

"It's not so funny anymore," he called as she headed into the dining room with the plate of eggs. "You'll see. One of these mornings you're going to wake up and wonder what the hell happened. Where did it all go? Your good looks, your friends, your whole life!"

She stopped dead, then turned around and kicked open the door so hard it banged back on the wall. “Look, Adenio,” she growled, advancing on him. “I don’t go around giving my unwanted opinion about you watering down the milk and the soup and the juice and even the goddamn ketchup bottles every night, do I?”

“Well I hate seeing such a beautiful woman as you just giving it away to every—”

“What? What’d you just say?” She dropped the plate wobbling onto the counter.

He stared back. “You heard what I said.”

“Look, just keep it to yourself, okay?”

The door flew open. “Shh, shh, shh!” Maxine pleaded, finger at her mouth as she wiggled into the kitchen on spiked heels, her snug skirt binding her knees in a geisha-like gait.

“There’s customers out there!” She pointed back at the still swinging doors. “Customers!” she gasped.

“Well maybe you don’t want to hear it,” Chester continued, his whiskery chin out over the shelf, “but you work for me so I’m gonna say it. You’re no cute little party girl anymore. It’s way past that now, so who the hell do you think you are, dragging in here like that? You look like crap, you stink like booze and whatever the hell else you do!” He threw down his greasy towel.

“Chester!” Maxine ran around the bench and grabbed his arm. “Please, please stop! The customers!”

“So? What? Am I fired? You want me to quit?” Fiona demanded, her raw voice confirming every accusation. Her head trembled as she reached back and untied her apron. “Fine! I’ve got no problem with that!”

“No!” Maxine gasped from behind as she tried to retie the apron strings. “He just wants you to settle down a little bit. Tell her!” she implored her husband.

He reached into the large tin egg bowl, taking two eggs in one hand which he cracked neatly on the stove edge then opened onto the sizzling grill.

“Tell her!” Maxine demanded.

“She knows,” Chester said. He scraped the unserved cold eggs from the plate into the trash, but saved the bacon.

“Chester!” Maxine warned in a rising teary whisper. “Don’t you do this to me, Chester! Don’t!”

“It’s okay,” Fiona said, watching him reheat the bacon. If he said one more word Maxine would storm out again in tears and she’d be all alone out front. “Chester means well. He’s just not used to a woman having as good a time as a guy, that’s all.”

“It’s not the same thing, and it never will be!” Chester growled as he garnished the new plate with parsley before passing it to her. “A man doesn’t get a reputation like a woman does!”

“Chester, I was born with a reputation. You know that!” she called back.

“No, not a reputation! With that big, fat chip on your shoulder! That’s your trouble!” he shouted after her.

Heads turned when she entered the dining room. Her regulars smiled, relieved she was back. Maxine's fussing could jangle early-morning nerves.

“Fiona!” George Grimshaw said as she served him. It was obvious he had heard the raised voices, as had her party of grinning landscapers in the next booth. His earnest face mirrored every emotion, and right now it was red. “You’re looking good. As usual,” he added with a stiff smile.

“Thanks, and the same to you too, George.”

Muscular in his dark blue shirt and work pants, he looked better than good with his buzz cut and his clear bright eyes, his square solid body and flat healthy stomach this Saturday morning. Probably lifted weights at night when everyone else was out having a good time. Probably hadn’t had a good— She caught herself with a bawdy chuckle that seemed to make him squirm. She glanced back at the landscapers and flipped the page on her order pad. One man was drumming his fingers on the table. “We’ve been waiting for you, beautiful,” he said with a wink.

“Guess who I just ran into,” George said as she started toward them. “Brad Glidden!” He grinned.

“Yah. So?” Her heart began to race.

“He told me about the baby. That’s so great. I know they’ve been trying a long time.”

“Yah, they have.” Her mouth was dry.

“He looked terrible. Course I didn’t tell him that. I think he was probably on his way home from the hospital or something.”

“Probably.” She stepped back.

“Oh, and I saw your uncle the other day at the courthouse,” he said before she could leave.

“The courthouse! Don’t tell me you’re in trouble, George!” She tapped the pad on his shoulder and turned.

“No!” he said with an urgency that made her look back. “Actually, I was working near there so I thought I’d stop in and say hello.” He stared up intently at her. “I think your uncle Charles was surprised to see me.”

“Well, no more than me, George. But, hey, you better start eating. I’ll catch you later.”
“But wait!” he said as she turned away again. “What do you think about Elizabeth’s big news?” he asked with a faltering smile.

“I don’t know, George, what do you think?” She tried to laugh. She hadn’t heard a word from anyone in the family since their July banishment of her. But he probably knew that too.

“I was really surprised.”

“Yah, me too.”

“But you must be glad to finally have her back now, huh?” He tugged at his open collar.
“Of course.” She took a deep breath.

“So I guess she’s home for good now,” he said almost as if it were a question, and, not knowing what else to do, she nodded. There was an odd pleading cast to his eyes as he continued to stare.

“Hey, you better eat your eggs while they’re still hot.” The thought of having her cousin back made her smile even though she’d had to hear it from George Grimshaw. Elizabeth taught in a boarding school in New York. In these last few years she’d seldom come home for any length of time.

“Well, will you give her my best then when you see her?” George said as she headed toward the next booth.

“Yah, sure,” she said, surprised he wouldn’t just call himself. Through the years Elizabeth wouldn’t be home an hour before the phone would start to ring with George’s dogged invitations for coffee, a drink, a movie, a ride, a walk, whatever Elizabeth wanted, though she had seemed uneasy with his company her last few times home. In the park there was a huge copper beech tree and into the bark of its elephantine trunk had years ago been carved “Geo + Liz 4ever.” Pathetic, she thought, as she took the men’s orders. Elizabeth had gone away and made a new life and here sat poor George hunched over greasy coffee shop eggs, still hoping, still yearning for his childhood love.

“And don’t forget, beautiful, extra homefries for Eddie, tell Chester,” called the oldest man in the crew as she started for the kitchen with their order.

“Yah, yah, yah,” she muttered, wondering suddenly if Elizabeth’s eating problem had returned, though last summer she’d looked great. She’d even put on enough weight so that they were

almost the same size again, an observation that had sent Ginny into a paroxysm of raised eyebrows and mimed warnings; as if Elizabeth had gotten so fragile over the years she couldn't take a little kidding. But then Ginny had always been jealous of the bond between her younger sister and her cousin. Inseparable as children, Fiona and Elizabeth were only four months apart in age, though poles apart in temperament. They'd grown up sharing secrets, the same bedroom, and a deep affection for one another. Their paths diverged eleven years ago when they went off to college; Elizabeth to Smith and Fiona, with Uncle Charles's pull, to Dearborn Community. As expected Elizabeth had graduated with honors, gone on for her master's, and had been teaching ever since. To no one's surprise Fiona had flunked out freshman year.

She pushed open the kitchen door to find Chester slumped over the counter, brow in hand.

"Jesus, not again," she groaned. Maxine had stormed out.

"Don't." His heavy eyes lifted. "Don't even start."

"Even if I wanted to, I couldn't." She sighed, passing the order slip. "Eddie said extra homefries." She leaned her brow against the cool metal shelf. Her head hurt.

"Eddie! Who the hell's Eddie?" He flung the slip at her. "Eddie who?"

"I don't know. Eddie. What's it matter?" She threw it back.

"The way you said it, like, Eddie: like it's some friend, Eddie, I'm supposed to know from God knows where. Jesus Christ! They're all the same, these people; they come in here, they think they're entitled, like I'm just some bum, some scag. Like I got nothing better to do than this!"

"Huh?" She shook her head in dull exasperation. "Look, it's just some guy named Eddie. One of the landscapers. From Greenbow, alright?"

"Yah, and what the fuck does he want from me?" he bellowed, pounding the counter with a force that sent all the funnels, ladles, and spoons clanging into one another.

"A few fucking extra homefries!" She glared at him.

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