

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

Part I

By Krystal Lawrence

What Elizabeth McGwire Did

For Love

When a man loves a woman he'll sleep out in the
rain

-Percy Sledge, 1966

When a woman loves a man she'll kill for him

-Elizabeth McGwire, 2002

CHAPTER 1

The building was old and drafty. The stench of decaying wood and mold clung to the building with a tentacle-like grip. Thick layers of cobwebs festooning the rafters was graphic evidence of generations of spiders that lived and died in this antiquated, moldering relic of years gone by. What one noticed upon entering the store was the multitude of well-worn books lining the dusty shelves and piled haphazardly along the walls.

Belda walked down the creaking staircase to open up for business. She locked her small apartment on the upper floor and carefully negotiated the staircase, her black cat at her heels. Her swollen, red-knuckled hands clenched a steaming mug of tea. She was old certainly, but it was impossible to tell exactly how old she might be. Her gray hair was pulled back severely from her brow and coiled atop her head in a tight knot which was held together with a large, ornate silver clip. She wore a wildly patterned flowing dress that fell just below her thick ankles and flat black moccasins. A large silver

medallion hung around her neck, several bangles dangled from her wrists and earlobes. Her olive skin was smooth and nearly unlined, her eyes a disturbing pale gray. Her clients, who paid well for her special talents, often wondered why she did not cure her own terrible arthritis. They knew Belda most certainly had the power. If they had asked her, she would have told them that some things were better left in the hands of God.

Belda had been in that same corner shop on Magnolia Boulevard for decades. She rented the gloomy building with the living quarters above when she arrived from Romania. When the building's owner died sixteen years ago, his son inherited the dusty old edifice. The son wanted to sell it. He lived in another state and didn't wish to be anyone's landlord. He put the building up for sale, then abruptly changed his mind and pulled it off the market the following week. No one ever knew why, not even his wife. But Belda knew.

Shortly after listing the building for sale the new owner met a fellow named Nick at a bar. Nick bought him a drink. After he finished that libation, he had a sudden and inexplicable urge to keep the building and allow the tenant to remain. He received a rent check on the 3rd of

every month. The same amount his father received, on the exact same day, and business continued as usual.

The weather-beaten sign held by rusted chains read "Bella Luna Bookstore and Metaphysical Shop." But books and psychic paraphernalia were not the primary business that brought desperate people from all walks of life to Belda seeking her services. She was far more than just the proprietor of a bookshop. She earned her true income from her other talents. She never advertised, but her business thrived. There were always those who needed her services and were willing to pay for it. Some paid dearly.

There were times when things didn't turn out very well for those who enlisted Belda's services. Such as the case of Elizabeth McGwire, a woman currently standing trial for first degree murder. But still they came, and still they paid whatever the asking price.

Once, long ago, a particularly annoying policeman started asking too many questions, looking into areas that Belda felt were none of his business. He vanished one cold November day, leaving a wife and two young daughters. He was never seen again.

The sound of the bell above the door alerted Belda to someone coming into the shop.

Gabriella Cruz entered the store carrying a large canvas tote-bag filled with school books. She was a beautiful, raven-haired girl of seventeen and a senior in high school. She had been one of Belda's assistants for four years. Ever since her stepfather encountered a rather nasty accident, courtesy of Belda.

Before the "accident" Gabriella used to spend long afternoons hidden between the rows of dusty shelves reading book after book, waiting until evening when her mother would be home from work and it would be safe for her to go home. Shortly after the girl confided in Belda about the abuse she was subjected to at the hands of her stepfather, the man fell victim to an explosion at the paper mill where he worked.

Though Belda never told her, Gabriella knew the old woman had somehow caused the accident. Knowing this didn't cause the girl any shock or fear, only gratitude. Her life was a living hell until that explosion. The woman rescued her from a hellish life of rape and abuse at the hands of her mother's second husband.

Belda's other assistant, Nicholas, was on an errand this morning.

Belda glanced at the cuckoo clock hanging above the sales desk and nodded to the girl as she came in.

"Nicholas should be concluding his errand now," she said.

The girl breezed by the woman, planting a quick kiss on her cheek and bent down to pet Eros, the black cat.

"Yes, I saw on the news that the trial is starting this morning. You don't think the woman will say anything, do you?" Gabriella asked, a worried frown creasing her lovely brow.

"It would be quite unfortunate for her if she did, my dear," Belda answered.

Gabriella unlocked a drawer below the ancient cash register and withdrew an equally ancient leather-bound appointment book.

"You have Martin Reynolds, that businessman from New York at ten."

A ghost of a smile crossed the woman's face. "Ah, yes, Mr. Reynolds. His purchase is not quite completed. I just have a few things to add and it will be ready. I best go upstairs and get it finished before he arrives." Belda turned and headed toward the staircase. "Come along, Eros, help me with Mr. Reynolds's brew," she said

to the black cat sitting on the sales counter grooming his face.

The cat looked up at her, meowed briefly at Gabriella, and trotted off to follow his mistress up the stairs.

CHAPTER 2

A lone figure in a Polo shirt and khakis sat on a brick retaining wall apart from the crowd clustered in front of the King County courthouse. He was a clean-cut man in his late twenties, unremarkable except for a twisted scar that ran from just under the left side of his jawline and disappeared into the hair at his temple. He smoked a cigarette and observed the chaos before him with little interest. He was here to deliver a message to Elizabeth McGwire, sole heir of well known, well respected, unfathomably wealthy, and now deceased art collector Theodore McGwire. Anyone else might have thought the task impossible given the media swarm, the police, and the extra security sure to be surrounding the woman when she arrived, but Nicholas Aguilar was not concerned with the task before him. His past was filled with far more dangerous and difficult errands than this one. Nicholas possessed an amazing ability to enter a crowd unobserved, and disappear like a wisp of smoke in the wind. He flipped the butt of his cigarette into the nearby bushes and rose to his feet as a sleek black limousine rolled to a stop at the curb.

A sea of reporters, cameras, microphones and onlookers blanketed the courthouse steps. The curb was lined with news vans from all the major networks, cable and local TV stations. The police were there for crowd control. Everyone waited impatiently for a glimpse of the pretty and petite redhead accused of such an unspeakable crime.

A blonde TV reporter looked intently into the handheld camera perched on her assistant's shoulder and said, "The tension at the King County courthouse is mounting as the most sensational murder trial of the decade gets underway. Murder suspect, Elizabeth McGwire, is expected to arrive any moment with her attorney Richard Cohen. Followers of this scandalous case were stunned when McGwire met an astronomical bail amount and was released on bond two weeks ago. There was speculation she was a flight risk. Her trial begins in just over an hour and Channel 5 Eyewitness News will be live in the courtroom to bring you up to the minute details of this disturbing case. From Seattle, Fawn Turner, Channel 5 Eyewitness News."

Similar reports were being broadcast on other networks as this long, hot morning dragged on.

The reporters rushed forward engulfing the rear door of the limo as it opened. Dozens of questions were shouted at the small huddle of men in dark suits that

surrounded the pale but composed woman in the powder blue skirt and cream colored silk blouse with the Chantilly lace collar. She wore her auburn hair loose to her shoulders and large dark glasses hid her cat-green eyes. Two of the men draped protective arms about her narrow shoulders, as the others held off the crowd with outstretched hands, and hustled her quickly up the steps into the courthouse. The media frenzy followed them down the long corridor toward the courtroom where Elizabeth McGwire's fate would be decided. They continued to pepper her with questions.

She looked back over her shoulder at the crowd to see if she could spot Darrin among the thick horde of people following her. A barrage of flashbulbs exploded in her eyes as she turned, momentarily blinding her. She remained silent and in control as she allowed her defenders to lead her away from the pack of wolves nipping at her heels.

As they pushed the courtroom doors open and ushered the woman inside she stopped and scanned the crowd again for any sign of Darrin. He promised he'd be here.

Elizabeth had been out of jail on bond for the last few weeks, and though she spent little time with her lover since her release, she was confident Darrin still cared for her and would support her through this nightmare. Elizabeth

was not sure she would be able to endure this hellish experience without him, and she wished she could have caught a glimpse of him somewhere in the crowd of people that mobbed the halls. Because of the public interest and the media frenzy the case created, the courtroom would be packed and there would be few seats available, so she told him to be there early. Also, his failure to phone her last night as he'd promised only increased her anxiety.

She was temporarily distracted by someone thrusting a folded scrap of paper into her hand. As she looked up she saw the back of a retreating figure in a green Polo shirt disappearing into the mass of people that huddled outside the door. Liz looked to her attorney, but he was deep in conversation with Olin, one of the other lawyers assigned to her case.

They took their seats at the large, well-worn wooden table and she unfolded the small piece of paper the man pushed into her palm. When she read it, an involuntary shudder ran through her and she gasped.

Cohen looked at her questioningly and placed a reassuring hand on her arm. "What is it?" he whispered.

She quickly refolded the note before he could see it and dropped it into her handbag. "Nothing. Just nerves,"

she responded, attempting a smile that felt forced and insincere.

He patted her arm again then turned back to the notes for his opening statement.



While Elizabeth McGwire was scanning the crowd for her boyfriend Darrin Perkins, he was nudging the girl that lay in bed next to him awake. She began to stir and slowly awaken. He couldn't exactly remember her name. What the hell was it?--- Debra or Deirdre or something like that. He wasn't sure. They met last night while bar-hopping with some of his buddies and the bimbo ended up at his place. She finally opened one groggy eye, and he was reminded of the words from an old Willie Nelson song: "At two I came home with a ten and at ten I woke up with a two."

"Come on, darlin'," Darrin said as he lit a cigarette and threw the blankets off the bed. "The party is over, and I gotta get down to the courthouse."

"What time is it?" she yawned.

Darrin grimaced as stale breath smelling of old tequila was blown into his face.

Startled by the sudden chill of having the blankets removed from her naked body, the girl grabbed for the covers and Darrin yanked them out of her grasp.

"It's show time, that's what time it is, now get your ass up, will you?" Darrin climbed from the bed and zipped into a pair of Levi's ignoring the girl's insolent stare as she padded naked into the bathroom.

CHAPTER 3

The courtroom was called to order with the Honorable Judge Rudolph Westerfield presiding. Elizabeth glanced at the jury. She looked nervously at the packed courtroom.

Olin squeezed her arm and whispered out of the corner of his mouth, "Liz, pay attention to the proceedings and stop looking around."

She shot him an ill-tempered look but kept her eyes in front of her. *Damn Darrin anyway, I should have known,* she fumed to herself.

Patricia Camden, the county's deputy prosecutor and media darling, rose from her seat to face the jury. She wore a no-nonsense beige suit and her short brown hair framed a plain but pretty face, nearly devoid of makeup.

"Good morning," she began, a small, polite smile on her lips. On behalf of King County I appreciate your time and willingness to help bring justice in the wake of an atrocious crime that was committed by the defendant, Elizabeth Gwendolyn McGwire."

She paused briefly to make eye contact with each juror individually before continuing. "The prosecution intends to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that on the

night of August 22nd, Theodore McGwire was murdered in cold blood by his only living relative."

She paused once again for effect, standing directly in front of Elizabeth, boring holes into her with her eyes. Elizabeth returned her stare without flinching.

When the silence that followed became rather awkward, Patricia Camden, realizing this ploy was ineffective, turned and walked back toward the jury.

"We have motive, ladies and gentlemen," she went on unperturbed. "The oldest motive in the book. Greed and lust for money. Money that Miss McGwire couldn't touch until her grandfather was dead. We have means. Because of Theodore McGwire's concern for the welfare of his granddaughter Elizabeth, he invited her to live in his house until she could get back on her feet financially. And we also have opportunity. A dark hallway, and a strong young woman lying in wait. He was an elderly man, but in reasonably good health and he could have lived for many more years. But Elizabeth McGwire couldn't wait that long. Elizabeth McGwire was out of time. She had just lost her job. She had been evicted from her apartment. She had creditors hounding her, trying to collect the thousands of dollars she had amassed in credit card debt. Her leased Mercedes was in the process of being

repossessed. Elizabeth McGwire needed money and she needed it fast. It wasn't enough that her grandfather allowed her to live in his home after she was evicted from her apartment. It wasn't enough that he offered food and shelter. Elizabeth McGwire wanted more. She wanted her grandfather to pay the mountain of debt she had accumulated and to all intents and purposes, subsidize her rather loose life style. Theodore McGwire refused to do this, wanting his adult granddaughter to take some responsibility for her own life. So, on the night of August 22nd, believing she was above the law, Elizabeth McGwire coldly stood in the dimly lit hall until her grandfather rose from his bed. In the dark she brutally pushed him down the long wooden staircase, ending his life and ending her wait for his fortune. How many nights had she crouched waiting in that darkened hallway for her grandfather to rise in the middle of the night? How many days did she plot this horrendous crime before the opportunity arose to finally rid herself of her hated grandfather, Theodore McGwire, and to gain access to his wealth?"

Patricia Camden shook her head in disgust. "These are questions that we may never be able to answer. But one thing you will know by the end of this trial, ladies and

gentlemen, is that regardless of how long she waited, Elizabeth McGwire realized her wish and ruthlessly ended an innocent man's life. Elizabeth McGwire is not above the law because she comes from a family of means. Being born into wealth and privilege does not give one the right to believe they are above the law. The laws of this state, and indeed, of this country are equitable to both rich and poor alike. No one, I may remind you, is a law unto themselves. Elizabeth McGwire must pay for her heinous crime. She must be found guilty. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen."

With that abrupt conclusion, Patricia Camden walked briskly back to her seat at the prosecutor's table and busied herself looking at papers, as if the defending attorney's opening statement didn't warrant her attention.

"Thank you, Ms. Camden. Mr. Cohen, your opening remarks." Judge Westerfield gestured to Richard Cohen with his hand and Cohen rose from the defense table, buttoning the bottom button of his jacket.

Just as Cohen rose, a disheveled Darrin Perkins slunk in the rear doors of the courtroom. He was stopped by a guard turning away late coming gawkers from the already overflowing courtroom. Darrin fished a crumpled piece of

paper from his jeans, handed it to the guard, who read it and allowed him to enter. Seeing no chairs available, Darrin leaned against a side wall trying to get Elizabeth's attention by a loud, obnoxious whisper of, "Psssst, Hey, Lizzie."

After three unsuccessful attempts to gain her attention, he was told to keep it down by the uniformed guard, and Darrin sulked in his corner until the recess was called.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," Richard Cohen began in a polite, soft-spoken tone. He leaned his tall, thin frame against the railing separating the jurors from the court stenographer's table and tapped one long, slender finger repeatedly against his mouth, staring off as if lost in thought.

After a few moments, he said, "You know, it's interesting to me that the prosecution seems to have everything but proof." He raised his voice on the last word and looked at the jury. Shrugging his shoulders, and in his soft conversational tone, a tone much more suited to a friendly lunch than to a courtroom, he said, "Did you notice that? Ms. Camden says they have motive. Motive? A woman who was struggling financially and moved

in with her only living relative until she could find a job and get back on her feet? That's motive?"

Shaking his head, as if dismissing the idea as ridiculous, he continued, "Ms. Camden says that they have opportunity. Opportunity? Elizabeth happened to be in the house the night her elderly grandfather misjudged his step and fell down the stairs? That's opportunity?"

Shaking his head again, Cohen went on, "No, ladies and gentlemen, that's wishful thinking on the part of an overzealous prosecution with absolutely nothing concrete to back their accusations. I'm sorry, but it will take a lot more than just the fact that my client had the misfortune of being in the house on the same night Theodore McGwire had an accident and fell to his death."

Cohen walked behind Elizabeth and laid both hands on her slender shoulders. He was pleased to see Pat Camden glaring at him from the prosecution table, her papers now forgotten.

"The prosecution's case is based solely on smoke and mirrors. There is not a shred of hard evidence that points the finger of guilt at my client. The prosecution's argument is pure fantasy. They have no murder weapon, they have no motive, no opportunity". He glared at the jury for emphasis, and said, "My client did

not murder her grandfather. The death of Theodore McGwire was an unfortunate accident. The county lost a benefactor. I myself attended the Seattle Art Museum charity auction just last year when Mr. McGwire donated an original Edward Hopper painting from his prized collection. We all feel the loss of this great man. But none more than my client, who lost not a benefactor, but her beloved grandfather."

Cohen shook his head, and swiped at his eyes with the back of his hand, as if to wipe away imaginary tears. He inhaled a deep breath that could be heard all through the packed courtroom, "And now as if Elizabeth hasn't lost enough, the prosecution wants this innocent woman to be sentenced to a life within prison walls."

Cohen shook his head and looked earnestly at the jury. He concluded his opening statement with, "I know you good people won't let them do that. I know you won't let them turn a sad and unfortunate accident into a witch hunt. There can be no conviction of guilt, because there simply was no crime. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen."

He unbuttoned his jacket and sat down beside his client.

The judge, barely able to conceal his amusement at Richard Cohen's emotional opening statement, said, "Thank

you, counselor," and called for a fifteen minute recess. He loved Cohen's legendary opening remarks. Judges other than Westerfield had commented more than once that Cohen was wasting his talents as an attorney and should be writing movie scripts in Hollywood.

As the jury was led out, Elizabeth stood up and looked around for Darrin. She spotted him making his way through the rush of reporters that were charging into the hallway to record clips for the afternoon news.

"Hey, baby!" Perkins cried, as he deftly leapt over the wooden partition separating the defense table from the observers.

Elizabeth rose from her chair and threw her arms around his neck. He smacked a noisy kiss on her lips, neither one seeing the grimace of distaste on Richard Cohen's face.

"Where have you been?" Elizabeth asked, her face buried in his neck. "I didn't think you were going to show up."

"Of course I showed up. I mean it's not like I had much choice," Perkins laughed. He pulled the piece of paper that caused the guard to grant him entry into the courtroom from his pocket and waved it in front of Elizabeth.

She took it from his outstretched hand, and with dawning alarm cried, "What the hell is this?"

"A summons, Liz. Didn't Clarence Darrow here tell you the prosecution called me as a witness?" He shot a dirty look at Richard Cohen.

Elizabeth spun around and grabbed Cohen's arm, sending his Mark Cross pen skittering across the desk. "Richard, what's going on? Why didn't you tell me they called Darrin?" Her eyes were two huge saucers of fear.

"Calm down, Elizabeth. I just found out about it last night. He was on the list of potentials they gave us early on, but my office wasn't notified he'd been summoned until late yesterday," he said in a soothing tone, but averted eye contact. The truth was, he just didn't feel like dealing with another one of her outbursts this morning. He had hoped the scumball she was dating would have told her about it himself.

"And you couldn't tell me this earlier?" Elizabeth spat, her eyes blazing.

"Well, I assumed your boyfriend would have mentioned it to you," Cohen retorted, and immediately regretted his words, as he saw her emerald green eyes blazing with ever increasing fury.

Darrin was saved from any explanation to Elizabeth when the bailiff called the court to order. He beat a hasty retreat to the rear of the courtroom where he stole one of the chairs from a late returning member of the press.

CHAPTER 4

Gabriella was putting away a fresh shipment of books when the melodic little bell over the door jangled. She looked up just in time to catch a stereotypical yuppie eyeballing the heart-stopping few inches of smooth, tanned flesh that was revealed by her blouse riding up from her stretch to reach the top shelf of the bookcase. In no particular hurry, she lowered her arm and adjusted her top.

"Good Morning, Mr. Reynolds," Gabriella smiled.

He cast a nervous glance around the shop. Barely above a whisper, he said, "I have an appointment."

Just then Eros trotted down the staircase and began winding himself between Martin Reynolds's feet. The man kicked at the cat with a look of disgust and bent down to pick the few stray cat hairs that clung to the leg of his slacks.

Gabriella narrowed her eyes. With a look that would have made a man much stronger than Martin Reynolds crumble, she responded, "Yes, we've been expecting you."

She swooped down to pick up the offended Eros, never taking her murderous gaze from the quivering man's eyes.

"I...I'm sorry," he said, taking an involuntary step backwards, "I'm allergic to them."

"Really?" Gabriella replied in a voice cold enough to turn boiling water to ice, one eyebrow arched in appraisal. Stroking Eros with long fingers, and never dropping her gaze, she asked, "And have you ever wondered what creature might be allergic to you, Mr. Reynolds?"

The man opened his mouth to answer, but before he could say anything else Gabriella dismissed him with, "I will let Belda know you are here. Have a seat in the office." She offered a small chilly smile and pointed to a doorway nestled into the corner of the store.

Martin Reynolds, clearly relieved to be out from under Gabriella's torturous eyes, walked with quick steps into the small room and dropped heavily into one of the two chairs that dominated most of the room's cramped space. He took in the surroundings, and not for the first time wondered what the hell he was doing. There were the two chairs separated by a small, round claw-foot table adorned with burning candles. A high shelf on the wall held an incense burner and musky smoke made his eyes

water. The lighting was so dim that it took his eyes several minutes to adjust.

Martin was shaken by the eerie encounter with the striking shop girl, but even more so by the reason for his visit. If his wife hadn't insisted he go through with this when he told her about Belda and the unusual service she offered, he never would have been here in the first place. His hands were shaking as he extracted a handkerchief from his pocket. Mopping his sweating brow, he reminded himself that he could stop at anytime. Even after he purchased what he had come for. Taking the item didn't mean he would ever actually use it.

He was jerked from his thoughts as the old woman entered the cramped office. She smelled of cinnamon and some other bitter herb that Martin couldn't identify. Mixed with the smell of the incense and candles in the stifling room, he felt his stomach lurch when she leaned over him and set her bulk into the opposite chair.

With no preamble, Belda set a small vial on the table between them. "Are you sure you wish to complete our transaction, Mr. Reynolds?"

He nodded once, his gaze riveted to the cloudy glass bottle on the table.

"Very well then," she sighed. "And you understand the terms of your purchase?"

"Yes," he answered, his voice a dry, dusty croak.

"Repeat them to me and we shall conclude our dealings," Belda stated.

"I am to tell no one about this. You are not responsible for the outcome. And there is no refund," Martin replied like a child reciting a spelling bee answer.

"And what are the consequences should you not withhold your end of our transaction, Mr. Reynolds?" Belda queried, in her brusque, businesslike manner.

"I die," Martin Reynolds barked in a choked sob.

"One last time, Mr. Reynolds. Are you sure you wish to complete this sale?"

Once more, he nodded.

"Very well then," Belda sighed, "You have the cash?"

He withdrew an envelope from the inside pocket of his jacket and slid it across the small glass table. Belda didn't even glance at it. She lifted the small vial in one old, withered hand and placed it into Martin Reynolds's sweaty palm, then closed his fingers over the smooth glass.

He rose from his seat on shaking legs. "Do you want me to wait while you count it," he stuttered, and hastily added, "It's all there."

Belda looked at him with her disturbing pale eyes. "I know it is, Mr. Reynolds. You needn't wait."

He mumbled a quick thank you, and stuffing the little bottle deep into the pocket of his slacks, he bolted out the front door, nearly screaming from fright when the bell jingled overhead. He stumbled out into the harsh September sunlight and fought an urge to run as fast as he could from the peculiar bookstore. Stomach churning, he fumbled keys from his pocket and climbed into his rental car, a Lincoln Continental. With shaking hands he started the ignition and pulled away from the curb. As he disappeared around the corner in search of the freeway, he felt his upper thigh grow hot enough to burn. He felt the ominous weight of the small glass cylinder in his pocket resting against his leg. An unexpected, sharp cramp struck his lower belly. He pulled the searing vial from his pocket, slamming it into the glove compartment with a cry of pain and fright. His fingers immediately began to blister where they made contact with the glass bottle. The cramp passed almost as quickly as it had come. Gasping for breath, attorney Martin Reynolds drove

his big, fancy rental car to the airport a full three hours early for his flight back home.

CHAPTER 5

The first witness called by the prosecution was the medical examiner, Dr. Conrad Link, a weary, disheveled man in his late fifties.

Patricia Camden walked to the witness box. "Good morning, Doctor Link."

The doctor nodded and glanced at his notes.

"When did you first see the body of Theodore McGwire?"

"The night of August 22nd I was called to examine the body."

"And what were your initial findings?"

Cohen rose from his chair, "Objection! Initial findings are inconclusive and speculative. Doctor Link shouldn't offer testimony on any findings except those discovered during the post-mortem."

Camden smiled sweetly, "Well, counselor, you did stipulate that Doctor Link is an expert witness, so surely his initial findings at the scene must have some merit."

She arched an eyebrow at the judge, who grumbled,
"Overruled, I'll allow it."

"When I entered the house I found the deceased lying
on the floor at the bottom of the staircase."

Next to the witness box was an easel with a drawing of
an outline of a twisted body lying at the end of a
staircase. The medical examiner picked up a pointer
gesturing to the drawing, "I could tell from the angle of
the body that bones were broken, and from traces of blood
on his lips I was sure that internal injuries had been
sustained," he answered in a matter of fact tone.

"Did you immediately know the cause of death?" Camden
continued.

Glancing at Cohen, the doctor replied, "I had some
thoughts on the matter, but couldn't confirm it until the
autopsy the next morning."

"And what was the cause of death, Doctor Link?"

"Theodore McGwire died from internal injuries. The
spleen was crushed, one kidney lacerated, three ribs broken
and fragments of bone were lodged in both lungs, and he had
sustained a concussion."

Cohen glanced at the jury box, and winced at the twelve
identical horrified expressions he saw there.

The prosecution avoided the question of whether it was determined during the autopsy if Theodore McGwire's plunge down the staircase was accidental or intentional. Camden knew this was the one aspect of her case that was entirely speculative, and the doctor would not be able to answer with certainty. She had no doubt that the defense would point this out to the jury during the course of Doctor Link's cross examination.

On cross, Cohen opened with, "Doctor Link, the prosecution's argument is that my client - all 105 pounds of her - pushed or tripped Theodore McGwire down the stairs."

Cohen picked up the pointer beside the easel and pointed at the outline of the body. "Were you able to tell from the angle of the body whether he was pushed?"

"I was able to tell that he had fallen down the flight of stairs," the doctor snapped back.

"Is it possible he could have tripped, or lost his balance?" Cohen badgered.

"Yes, that's possible."

"So, you have no way of knowing how his body ended up at the base of those stairs. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that's correct," a resigned Link answered.

"It would take a great deal of strength to push a large man like that down a staircase wouldn't it? You'd need to be a pretty strong person to accomplish that, wouldn't you say, Doctor?" Cohen asked.

He knew instantly, even before the question was out of his mouth, he should have quit while he was ahead.

Camden's eyes flashed with victory as the medical examiner responded, "No, not necessarily. If someone came up behind him as he started to descend the stairs even a child could have pushed him. The element of surprise takes away any need for strength. I certainly saw no indication that there had been a struggle."

In a valiant effort to recover from his error, Cohen asked, "Well, could you tell from the position of his body if, in fact, he had been pushed from behind?"

"No, I could not." Doctor Link responded in an annoyed voice.

"Could you tell whether he had been pushed at all?"

"Objection! Asked and answered," Camden fumed.

"Sustained," Judge Westerfield replied, with a warning glance in Cohen's direction.

"Thank you, Doctor," Cohen finished, "Nothing further."

The conclusion of the first day of trial was not a good one for the defense. Cohen's sixth sense told him he had not convinced the jury of Elizabeth's innocence, nor of the fact that she was on trial only because of the prosecution's zeal to bring in a guilty verdict in the over-publicized murder of Theodore McGwire, a Seattle icon and pillar of the community. This wasn't about justice, it was about becoming heroes to a public obsessed by the case.

The testimony elicited so far by the prosecution focused on the scant amount of circumstantial evidence they had to offer linking Elizabeth to her grandfather's death. There wasn't much - just enough to paint a very ugly picture of Cohen's client in the eyes of the jury.

Even though the defense was able to extract from the medical examiner that the fatal injuries Theodore McGwire sustained could have been caused just as easily from an accidental fall as from being pushed down the staircase, on re-direct, the prosecution proved that he just as easily could have been tripped or pushed by his 105 pound granddaughter.

Dr. Link's graphic testimony seemed to mesmerize the jury, leaving them with the image of the dead man's broken and twisted body imprinted in their minds as court adjourned for the day.

As they exited the courthouse, the media followed Elizabeth and her entourage out to the big car with the tinted windows, firing a barrage of questions.

Cohen answered, "No comment," to the horde of reporters mobbing them as they entered the limo.

Elizabeth was sullen and silent in the back of the car, still angry that Richard hadn't told her Darrin was called as a witness.

"Are you hungry?" Cohen asked, as they pulled away from the curb,

Elizabeth shook her head. "No, I just want to go home."

"Liz, we should probably go over what Darrin's testimony might be," Cohen said. He was uncomfortable bringing it up, knowing how strong Liz's feelings were for this loser, but it had to be done. He couldn't, for the life of him, see why she was so head over heels for the guy. In Richard's opinion, Darrin Perkins was a scumbag and a barfly who'd done nothing to support Elizabeth through the nightmare she was embroiled in.

Richard Cohen had fallen pretty hard for his client, and it galled him that she shot him down because of the torch she carried for a low-life like Darrin Perkins. As is

usually the case, her rejection of him made Elizabeth that much more desirable.

"What's there to go over?" she snapped. "What can they possibly want from him anyway?"

"Liz, did you ever say anything to Darrin about wanting your grandfather out of the way? Ever make any jokes about killing him? Anything like that?" Richard persisted.

"N...no," she faltered.

"Are you sure?"

"Well, I don't know," she said, a piece of lint on her blouse becoming very interesting all of a sudden, as she began fidgeting.

Cohen placed a reassuring hand on her arm, "Liz, if there is anything you might have said that could incriminate you, I need to know about it."

She sighed. "We talked about a lot of things, and it may have been mentioned that things would be easier for us if the old man wasn't around. That's all."

"Easier how?"

"How do you think, Richard? I would have had money. Something neither Darrin or myself have much of these days."

Cohen shook his head. "That's what the prosecution is going to ask him, Liz."

"It's just that Darrin won't marry me while we are both broke, so I may have said something about us being able to get married if Grandfather died. I didn't mean anything by it. It was just, you know, pillow talk."

Richard winced as an uninvited image of a naked and lovely Elizabeth, flushed and rosy from sex, lying beside Darrin Perkins, flashed across his mind.

"Any other pillow talk along those lines, Liz? Did you ever tell him you thought about killing your grandfather?"

Again, the imaginary lint on her blouse consumed her attention, as she thought of the folded note that was stuffed into her palm that morning.

She remembered with vivid clarity the night she told Darrin that her grandfather's money was going to be hers much sooner than he thought. With a puzzled expression, Darrin asked her what she meant. The pact she had entered into with the old witch-like woman in the eerie bookstore kept her from saying anything. She desperately wanted to tell him about the woman and what was in the little glass bottle she bought from her, but the price that Liz would have paid for disclosing this, would have been her own life.

"No. I didn't say I was going to do anything like that myself," she replied to her attorney firmly.

They spent the remainder of the ride in silence.

"Get some rest," Richard advised when the driver pulled into the mansion's circular driveway.

"Will they call Darrin tomorrow?" Liz asked.

Cohen shrugged, "It depends on how long Mrs. Renfrew's testimony takes."

An annoyed frown furrowed Liz's brow. "Well, I'm sure she will try to put as many nails in my coffin as she can, so that should take awhile."

Gertrude Renfrew was her grandfather's housekeeper and companion for the last thirty years of his life. She was the only other person in the house on the night he fell to his death, and she was a key witness for the prosecution. She was also no great fan of Elizabeth McGwire.

When Elizabeth let herself into the big lonely house, Mrs. Renfrew and her dog were nowhere to be seen. This wasn't unusual. The old woman avoided Elizabeth as much as possible.

Liz would have seen to it that the housekeeper and her mutt were out of the house by now, had it not been for the eccentric old bastard's will. Her grandfather willed the

house, its contents and the bulk of his substantial fortune to Liz, with the stipulation that she not only remain living in the house, but that Mrs. Renfrew and the dog be given lifelong residency there as well.

Should Elizabeth try to sell the house, the estate would revert to Mrs. Renfrew, and Liz would be left with nothing. Elizabeth believed this was her senile grandfather's way of maintaining control of her life, even after his death.

The truth was the man was in no way senile, or even all that eccentric. The worst thing he could be accused of was being overly sentimental. The stipulation that Liz remain in the house was born of Theodore McGwire's desire that his cherished home remain in the family. He hoped someday Elizabeth would settle down and marry, and future generations of the McGwire clan would be raised in the house he so adored.

Elizabeth dropped her handbag on a chair in the living room and poured a glass of wine. She plopped down on the velvet sofa and glanced longingly at the telephone. She thought about calling Darrin, but the truth was, she was as pissed off at him as she was at her lawyer, for not telling her that Darrin had been summoned to testify against her.

Tears of frustration filled Elizabeth's eyes as she looked up at the paintings that lined the wall of the room. A Picasso, called "Seated Woman," seemed to stare back at her with hauntingly real, yet distorted eyes. Paintings, valued at millions to collectors, protected by an intricate security system, hung in dusty frames all around the spacious house.

Elizabeth wasn't allowed to sell a single one, yet another condition of her grandfather's will. All the artwork in the house was to remain as is. She could redecorate, she could do anything she chose with the furniture or the rooms, except Mrs. Renfrew's quarters. But the damn paintings, every last one, must remain untouched.

With bitterness Liz thought, *Just one of the paintings would cover all my legal fees and support Darrin and I for a hell of a long time.*

She drained her wine glass, then reached over and picked up the phone. She dialed Darrin's number and slammed down the receiver when she got his answering machine. "Bastard," she said to the empty room, and got up to refill her wineglass

~

Gertrude Renfrew sat finishing a lonely supper in her small kitchen. She lived in a private apartment which Theodore McGwire added to the west wing of the house for her occupancy over twenty years ago.

She was a homely, overweight woman, who's adoration of Theodore McGwire was due not only to his kindness, but because he was the only man to ever tell her she was beautiful.

With Elizabeth now living in the mansion, she rarely ventured into the main house, except to dust and tidy up. She felt closest to Theodore in her own private quarters. She missed him terribly, and spent much of her time grieving over his death.

Throughout the small apartment were gifts he had given her over the years. A silver hairbrush and comb set engraved with her initials, the framed print by her favorite artist Andrew Wyeth, entitled "Master Bedroom." Theodore somehow managed to have the print personally signed by Wyeth. On her coffee table sat the book "Christina's World," given on Valentine's Day five years before.

When Gertrude finished her meal, she washed the dishes then donned a sweater. She put the leash on Rembrandt, her Boston Terrier, and possibly the best present of all.

Theodore gave her Rembrandt for her birthday four years before. She took him out the back way to avoid seeing Elizabeth.

It made Mrs. Renfrew nervous, knowing that woman was in the house after being released from jail on bond. She hadn't had a restful night's sleep since her return. Mrs. Renfrew was as convinced of Liz's guilt as the prosecution was. She hoped with all her heart Elizabeth McGwire would be found guilty and made to pay for what she had done to her beloved Theodore.

Rembrandt and Mrs. Renfrew cut across the back lawn of the grounds and circled the pool. They walked along the tall flowering shrubs and made their way toward the front of the house.

Elizabeth was standing looking out the front window as they walked by. The woman and her dog walked the same route, at the same time every night, and ended their outing crossing in front of the living room windows at exactly 7:30 PM. The routine never changed and was never off by even a minute. Liz checked her watch--7:30 on the money--she was as accurate as the Greenwich Observatory!

Elizabeth, drunk, and with a sneer on her lips, knew the routine--*Now the dog takes a dump, and the old bat picks it up in her fancy pooper-scooper that my Grandfather*

gave her. He gave Renfrew, the goddamn maid, the best of everything. Me? It was take care of yourself, baby. You old bastard, I hope you are rotting in hell!

She shook her head in disgust and turned from the window to pour another glass of wine. She tried Darrin's number again and cursed his answering machine, hanging up before she could leave a message.

She grabbed the wine bottle from the bar and took it upstairs to her bedroom.

CHAPTER 6

The alarm clock began its shrill braying at 5:30 Tuesday morning. Richard Cohen, with a curse, silenced it with his fist.

He had been up until 1:30 in the morning trying to figure out how to offset the damage Elizabeth's boyfriend was surely going to do to their case.

With a yawn and a stretch he climbed from his bed and went into the kitchen to brew a pot of coffee. He threw on a pair of gray sweatpants and a t-shirt for his two mile jog around Lake Washington. No matter how late he stayed up working on a case, Richard never missed his run. It cleared his head and gave him his best perspective on his defense.

At forty-two, Richard Cohen looked like he was in his early thirties. He was tall and trim, with just the first hint of gray peppering his temples. He had never married. Women found him attractive. He was listed among Seattle's most eligible bachelors.

He had seen a therapist after one particularly bad break up. The analyst threw the word "co-dependent" around a lot. Cohen wasn't entirely sure what that meant, but one

day over beers with a lawyer friend, she told him he had a "Rapunzel Complex." When he asked what the hell that meant, she told him he was only attracted to women he could rescue from high towers. The higher the tower the more attracted Richard was.

Cohen found the idea ludicrous and told her so, but in the privacy of his own mind, he thought his lawyer friend may be right.

In a brief reflection on his past relationships, he couldn't think of one woman he had ever fallen for that wasn't in some kind of trouble.

When Cohen returned from his jog, he sat on the deck overlooking the lake, munching toast and thinking about his client Elizabeth McGwire.

Cohen rarely lost a case. He was somewhat of a local celebrity who lived in the pricey Seattle suburb of Medina. Bill Gates was a neighbor.

Richard was the first lawyer called for every high profile murder case that took place in Western Washington. There were some cases he accepted pro bono because he liked the publicity. His set fee was two-hundred-fifty dollars an hour for trial prep, and three-hundred-fifty dollars for each hour actually spent in the courtroom.

It was a well-kept secret he used his own money to post Elizabeth McGwire's bond. She couldn't touch a dime of her grandfather's estate until the trial was over, and then, only if the verdict was not guilty.

Richard convinced himself he would have done the same for any client. Well, any female client. He didn't like to think of women in jail, least of all one as lovely or fragile as Liz. In fifteen years of practice Cohen had never fallen in love with a client. Elizabeth insisted on her innocence. Cohen believed she did not murder her grandfather, but he felt in his gut that she knew more than she was saying, and even if the old man did accidentally fall to his death, Liz definitely was covering up something. This made him uncomfortable. Not because he might be defending someone guilty, it wasn't the first time he'd done that, but because the torch he carried for his client seemed to grow brighter every day.

Guilt or innocence was of little consequence to Cohen when he tried a case. All that mattered was winning. The track record mattered, staying in the spotlight mattered. His last twelve cases all returned not guilty verdicts. It did not escape him that thirteen was an unlucky number.



When her alarm clock sounded at 7:15, Elizabeth McGwire, suffering from a miserable hangover, and head pounding, tottered to the bathroom and threw up last night's wine supper. Pale and shaky, she took a shower and brewed a pot of strong coffee.

While getting dressed, her phone rang. "Hello," she answered in an anxious voice, expecting to hear Darrin's voice on the other end.

"Good morning, Elizabeth, how did you sleep?" her lawyer asked.

She sighed, "Oh hello, Richard."

He couldn't mistake the disappointment in her voice and knew she was hoping it was Darrin calling. "I'm calling from the car. Just wanted to let you know I'm on my way over to pick you up."

"Okay. Do you think Darrin will be there this morning," she asked, her voice forlorn.

"I have no idea Liz. Didn't you talk to him last night?" His irritation was evident.

"No."

"He must show up until called to testify," Cohen answered.

"Will I have a chance to talk to him before the trial starts?" she asked.

"If he's there early you can probably talk for a couple of minutes," he said.

He knew the scum-bag would not show up early. Darrin hadn't rolled into the courtroom before 11:00 yet. He would stake his reputation on the fact that today would be no exception.



The ringing of the telephone woke Darrin just after 9:30a.m. He fumbled for the phone, and mumbled, "H'lo."

The female on the other end of the line said, "Hi, it's Darla."

"Who?"

"Darla," she answered, annoyed. "Remember me? I fucked you night before last."

Darrin cringed. "Right. Hey sorry, I was asleep. So, uh, how are you?"

"I left an earring at your apartment. It's a little gold heart. If you find it will you let me know," she said, still offended.

"Yeah, sure." Darrin hung up the phone and glanced at the bedside clock. Seeing how late it was, he bolted from the bed. Not bothering to take a shower, he combed his hair and sped to the courthouse.



When the chime above the door of Bella Luna bookshop sounded, Gabriella put away the biology book she was studying and smiled as Nicholas Aguilar came through the door.

He handed her a Starbucks cup and grinned. "Good morning, sunshine. Tall nonfat latte, half shot of vanilla."

"Thanks, honey."

"Where is the grand dame?" Nicholas asked, not seeing Belda.

A worried frown creased Gabriella's brow. "Laying down. She isn't feeling very well today."

"Oh? The McGwire thing?" Nicholas asked.

"She says not, but I think so," Gabriella said. "I'm worried too. That McGwire woman is too emotional for her own good. She could let something slip."

Nicholas shook his head. "No, hon. No way. She's been warned, and she knows what happens if she talks. They never talk, you know that."

"Well, we've never had a client on trial for murder before either. Things don't usually go quite this wrong."

Nicholas looked at her for a long moment, then replied in a quiet voice, "Gabby, things always go wrong. But rarely does it make the front page of the newspapers or the eleven o'clock news. Most of the time it just makes a small headline lost somewhere on page eight of a local paper, and forgotten the next day."

"What do you mean?" she gasped, disturbed.

"Gabby, don't you get it?" he answered quietly, gesturing upstairs, "She plays with people's lives. The natural order of things is disturbed and life is rewritten. You can't do that without there being consequences, you just can't".

"Well when she played with my life, she saved me from years of being raped by my stepfather. When she played with yours, she stopped you from going to prison for the rest of your life for something you didn't even do," Gabriella said, her voice rising. "Things do not always go wrong, Nicholas. She helps people. She certainly helped us."

"Yes. Some get help, but others die. Your stepfather died, the bastard that cut the deal with the prosecution to send me up the river also died."

"They were evil people, not worth living. Who cares that they died," Gabriella spat, her eyes shining with tears. "Don't ever speak against Belda. I won't stand for it."

"I'm sorry, baby. I didn't mean to upset you," Nicholas soothed.

They heard Belda's creaking, slow progress coming down the stairs as Eros bounded down in front of her and jumped on the counter. Nicholas petted the cat's head and went to assist Belda.

She smiled a warm greeting as he took the tea from her gnarled hand and placed one arm around her shoulders to guide her down the stairs.

"Thank you, Nicholas dear," Belda said, "My arthritis is acting up today."

"Can I get you anything?" he asked, concerned.

"No. I just need to rest a bit today. Will you be able to watch the store when Gabriella attends her classes this afternoon?"

Nicholas nodded, "Yes, of course."

"Thank you, dear." She saw the troubled look on Gabriella's face, and turned to Nicholas. "You haven't upset Gabriella have you?"

Before he could answer, Gabriella shook her head, "Of course not, Belda."

The old woman peered into the girl's eyes, then nodded, and turned her attention back to Nicholas. "Mr. Reynolds was here yesterday for his purchase," she said, pulling an envelope from the pocket of her dress and handing it to him.

He took it without opening it. "Thanks. I'm surprised he went through with it."

"Are you?" Belda asked. "I am not. He does whatever his wife says," she smiled.

Nicholas looked at her alarmed. "He told his wife about this? He told you that?"

"Oh, no, he didn't tell me he confided this to her, but he did."

Gabriella looked terrified, "But, Belda what if she..."

"Shhhh, girl. Hush now," Belda interrupted. "The wife won't say anything."

"How can you be so sure?" Nicholas asked. "Maybe I should go to New York and..."

Again, Belda cut in, "Stop it both of you. I said there is nothing to worry about. Leave it be." Her tone stifled any further argument from her assistants. They trusted her, and were well compensated for their work.

"Now then," Belda said, "Gabriella, do I have any appointments today?"

Gabriella shook her head, "No, Belda. You had that actress scheduled for tomorrow, but she cancelled again."

"Very well. I'm going to go back upstairs and rest a bit more. Have a good day at school, Gabriella dear."

"I will. If you need me for anything call me later, okay, Belda?"

"Thank you, dear. That won't be necessary, I'm sure. I will have Nicholas with me."

He nodded, and took her elbow to help lead her back up the stairs. Eros trotted behind them.

CHAPTER 7

As the morning of day two of the trial drew to a close, Elizabeth was pale and shaking. The first half of Mrs. Renfrew's testimony had been grueling, and portrayed Elizabeth McGwire as a thoroughly unsavory character with absolutely no conscience.

When the lunch break was called she asked Richard to take her out a side door and get her something to eat. She felt faint. Cohen took her arm and they both ignored Darrin's frantic waving as he tried to get their attention.

Liz couldn't bear the public scrutiny any longer. Cohen had the driver pick up hamburgers from a drive-thru, and they sat in the back of the air-conditioned car eating in silence.

When they finished their lunch and were headed back to the courthouse, Cohen asked, "Is there some reason you didn't want to talk to Darrin? He was trying to get your attention when we left the courthouse. Surely you saw him."

Liz nodded her head and looked out the window. "I was too tired to listen to his excuses about why he was late... Or why he didn't call me last night," she said in a soft voice.

Cohen suppressed a smile and gave her a nod of understanding. He wisely didn't say anything negative about the bum to her. *Let him dig his own grave*, Richard thought to himself.



"The prosecution recalls Gertrude Renfrew to the stand," Patricia Camden said.

The plump, elderly woman wore a simple white blouse over black slacks and flat-heeled sensible shoes. She settled her wide rear-end into the witness chair and the judge advised her she was still under oath. Gertrude nodded, and looked expectantly at the prosecutor.

"Mrs. Renfrew, were you aware of any animosity between the defendant and Theodore McGwire?" The DA asked.

Before the question was out of her mouth, Cohen shot to his feet yelling, "Objection! Calls for speculation."

Camden shot an exasperated look at Cohen. "I'm not asking the witness to speculate. I'm asking her if she *knew* of any arguments between them."

Judge Westerfield looked at both attorneys for a long moment. "Why don't you rephrase that question, counselor."

Richard sat down, and Camden asked in a pointed tone, "Mrs. Renfrew, did you ever witness an argument between the defendant and the deceased?"

Again, Richard was on his feet shouting, "Objection! Relevance, your honor. Family members argue all the time."

Camden turned red with fury. Through gritted teeth she spat, "Goes to motive."

The judge cast a level gaze at Cohen admonishing him for not allowing the prosecutor to follow through with her line of questioning. "Overruled, I'll allow it." He then turned a friendly eye to the witness, "You may answer the question."

Mrs. Renfrew nodded her head, "Yes, they argued all the time during those last few weeks."

"And what were they arguing about?" Camden asked.

Richard started to rise. The judge shot him a look that dropped him back into his seat without uttering a word.

"Well, mostly about money. She was in a mountain of debt and she wanted Theo to bail her out."

"And he didn't want to help her?" Camden continued.

Mrs. Renfrew laced her fingers together over her thick middle and thought about her answer. After a moment, she replied, "It isn't that he didn't want to. He loved

Elizabeth dearly, and he had already paid the back payments on her car so she wouldn't lose it, but he wanted her to get a job, and try to take some responsibility for the mess she had gotten herself into. Theo thought it would be better for Elizabeth in the long run, if she got back on her feet on her own."

"Did Ms. McGwire try to find work?"

"No. At least not that I'm aware of."

"Did you ever hear the defendant threaten Mr. McGwire?" Camden asked, bracing for an objection from Cohen.

Mrs. Renfrew hesitated also, expecting another outburst. When none came, she answered, "Not in so many words, but she was acting awful strange during that last week."

Mrs. Renfrew cringed as Cohen roared, "OBJECTION!"

The judge bent down toward Mrs. Renfrew, "Madam, please confine your answers to the questions asked. Your observations of the defendant's behavior have nothing to do with whether or not you heard her threaten Theodore McGwire. So, for the record, your answer to that question is no, you did not hear the defendant make any threats. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir," the witness answered humbly, and lowered her eyes in embarrassment.

Pat Camden gave her an encouraging smile, "Mrs. Renfrew, when you say the defendant was acting strangely, what did you witness that you found out of the ordinary?"

"Objection! Calls for speculation," Richard yelled.

"No! Calls for observation, which goes to state of mind, which goes to motive," Camden said in a weary voice.

It was obvious, the last half of this witness's questioning was going to be as brutal as the first half had been, and she was going to have to put up with Cohen's never ending objections.

She hoped he would let up a little when the questioning of Mrs. Renfrew resumed after the lunch break, but no such luck.

"I'll allow it," the judge said, also resigned to Cohen's tactics.

"She was whispering on the phone and kind of slinking around the house," Mrs. Renfrew said. "I mean it wasn't one specific thing, she...she was just acting nervous, like she was waiting for something to happen. It's very hard to explain."

She glanced at Elizabeth and saw the look of naked hatred on her face, and she quickly looked away.

Camden studied the notes before her. "Mrs. Renfrew, let's talk about the night Theodore McGwire died. Tell us what you saw or heard that night."

"Well, I was asleep, and I was woken up by Rembrandt. That's my dog. He was barking and carrying on, so I got up, and when I came into the main part of the house I heard Elizabeth screaming and...and..." her voice broke and she couldn't go on for a moment.

The judge bent over, and said not unkindly, "Take your time."

Gertrude dabbed at her eyes with a tissue from a box produced by the bailiff. "Thank you." She drew in a hitching breath and continued, "He...Theo... was on the floor at the bottom of the steps."

"And where was Elizabeth McGwire standing?" the DA asked.

"She was on the stairs. About five or six steps up."

"And what did you do?"

"I tried to ask Elizabeth if she called 911, but she was screaming and I couldn't get her to listen to me. So I ran to the phone and I called, but it was too late. He...he was gone."

"Did you ask the defendant if she saw what happened?" Camden prodded.

"I tried, but she kept repeating 'it was an accident.' Every time I tried to ask her what happened, she just would repeat the same thing - 'it was an accident.'"

"Did she say anything else?"

"Well, only one thing...I didn't know what she meant," Gertrude said, and plucked nervously at the wadded tissue in her fist.

"And what was that, Mrs. Renfrew?"

"She said, 'It wasn't supposed to happen this way.'"

Elizabeth clutched the defense table.

Camden's eyes shot up from her notes, and her lips thinned to a line, "She said 'It wasn't supposed to happen this way?' 'What did she mean?'"

"I...I don't know. I asked her what she was talking about and she just started screaming that it was an accident."

Camden shuffled her notes again. After a long moment, she finally said, "I have no further questions of this witness."

Cohen rose for his cross-examination and buttoned his jacket.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Renfrew," he began.

She nodded indifferently and looked at him with wary eyes.

"Mrs. Renfrew, you said that Ms. McGwire was screaming. She was clearly upset, is that correct?"

"She appeared to be upset, yes," Gertrude nodded.

"Did she seem surprised?"

"She was hysterical."

"If she had just carried out a well planned and well thought out murder, why would she be hysterical? Why would she be screaming like that?"

"Objection. Calls for speculation," Camden half rose from her seat.

"Sustained," replied Judge Westerfield.

Cohen continued, without missing a beat---"Did you think, Mrs. Renfrew, my client pushed Mr. McGwire down the staircase when you first arrived and saw him lying there?"

"I didn't know what to think," Gertrude shrugged. "I..."

Cohen cut her off with, "You never actually saw Ms. McGwire push him did you?"

"No. I told you he was lying at the foot of the stairs when I got there."

"Was there anyone else in the house at the time?"

Cohen queried.

"No, just me and my dog."

"So, no one actually saw my client push her grandfather."

"No, but she was standing halfway up the staircase," the housekeeper blurted out.

Cohen looked thoughtful for a moment. "I see. Well, where is her bedroom located? Isn't it upstairs?"

"Y...yes," Gertrude faltered.

"So, isn't it possible that my client was coming downstairs for a drink of water or a nightcap and saw her grandfather lying at the bottom of the stairs and started screaming?"

Pat Camden threw a ballpoint pen across the table and snorted in derision. She couldn't call for an objection when the witness had walked right into this line of questioning.

Mrs. Renfrew glared at Cohen through narrowed eyes and said, "Yes. I guess that could have been what happened." It was clear she wanted to say more, but she didn't want Judge Westerfield to admonish her again.

"Isn't it also possible she heard Mr. McGwire fall, and rushed out of her room to find out what happened, but did not see him until she was half way down the staircase, where you saw her standing and screaming when you came in?"

"I guess anything's possible, Mr. Cohen," the witness answered, her voice turning to ice.

Cohen smiled politely, "Thank you, Mrs. Renfrew. I have nothing further."

Day two of the sensational trial closed. Television screens that evening across America, were filled with commentary, pro and con, regarding the innocence or guilt of Elizabeth McGwire.

Larry King had a heated conversation with Greta Van Susteren and Johnny Cochran regarding the trial, each offering their opinions, but arriving at no definite conclusions.

A weary Richard Cohen, felt his gorge rise, and with a particularly foul oath, hurled the remote control at the set.

Elizabeth lay in bed reading a book, a bodice-ripper she valiantly plunged into to forget about the trial for awhile.

Though she had little appetite, she forced herself to eat dinner and stay away from the wine. She didn't call Darrin, and doubted that he would call her after the cold shoulder she turned in his direction that morning.

It was after ten o'clock and she was just dozing off when she heard a motorcycle pull into the circular drive that fronted the house. She rose from her bed and pulled the curtain aside just as Darrin was jumping from his bike and pulling off his helmet. She ran down the staircase and opened the front door.

"Hi, babe," he cooed as he walked in, squeezing her waist through the thin cotton of her nightgown.

Liz didn't reply. She offered him a cheek to kiss and closed the door behind him.

"Aren't you happy to see me?" Darrin asked, his face crestfallen at her less than enthusiastic greeting.

"I guess that depends on why you came." She turned and walked into the living room and sat on the couch.

Darrin plopped down next to her. Running his hand up her slender thigh he purred, "I missed you."

Elizabeth softened instantly. "Really? Did you really miss me?"

Darrin took her hand and kissed the palm, "Yeah, baby, of course I did."

She sighed, and allowed him to take her into his arms. His hands went immediately to her breasts and began caressing them.

"I missed you too," she moaned, as he pushed her back on the couch. Elizabeth tried to stop him long enough to get them upstairs to the privacy of her bedroom, but Darrin was not to be denied. She allowed him to make love to her on her grandfather's ancient velvet sofa, under the watchful and distorted eyes of Seated Woman, and hoped Mrs. Renfrew would not decide, at that moment, to come into the main house. Pablo Picasso might have approved of this tryst, but Gertrude Renfrew definitely would not.

When they both lay panting and bathed in sweat, Elizabeth murmured, "Let's go upstairs and go to sleep."

Darrin disentangled himself from her and rose from the sofa. "No, babe. You need your sleep and we both have to be up early tomorrow, so I am going home."

"No, Darrin. Please stay with me tonight. I don't want to be alone."

He sat down on the corner of the couch and took her hand, "I know, Liz, but I can't tonight. I'm sorry."

"Why?" she cried, tears springing to her eyes.

He shook her hand away. "Oh don't start, Liz. I hate it when you get all whiny and clingy. You know that. We had a good time, and I'll see you tomorrow, okay? Just don't hassle me about sleeping here tonight."

She turned her head away and pouted. Darrin reached under her chin and turned her face toward him. With a leering grin, and a tweak of her left breast, he said, "You should sleep good tonight, right, hon?"

She couldn't keep the smile off her face. She never could stay mad at him. Liz put her arms around his neck and hugged him hard. "Yeah, I will sleep good tonight, Darrin."

"That's my girl," he said, handing her the nightgown he had carelessly thrown behind the couch.

She walked him to the door, and watched with forlorn and miserable eyes, as his motorcycle disappeared down the street.

CHAPTER 8

"The prosecution calls Darrin Perkins to the stand."

Darrin sauntered from the rear of the courtroom and took his seat in the witness box. He wore his leather Harley Davidson vest for the occasion. The vest had been a gift from Elizabeth.

"Do you swear to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help you God?" The bailiff asked.

"You bet," Darrin smiled and took his hand off the bible.

No one looked very convinced.

"Good morning, Mr. Perkins," Camden said with a small smile. She was nervous putting Darrin on the stand. He was too unpredictable.

"How long have you been acquainted with the defendant?" she began.

"I don't know, a year or so."

"And what is the nature of your relationship?"

Darrin looked at Liz and winked, "We are friends... Uh, close friends."

"Are you lovers?" Camden pressed.

"Yeah, you could say that," he answered with a smirk.

Patricia Camden closed her eyes for a moment and decided to change her line of questioning.

"Were you aware of any..." she began, then remembering yesterday's barrage of objections, she quickly said, "Strike that," and with a brisk shake of her head she started over, "Did you ever hear Elizabeth McGwire express any anger toward her grandfather?"

Cohen shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

Darrin looked at the judge and whispered, "Do I have to answer that?"

Judge Westerfield glared at Darrin with incredulous eyes. In a tone that barely masked his annoyance, he answered, "Yes, Mr. Perkins, you do."

Darrin shrugged. "Well, yeah, she was kind of pissed off at him after she lost her job."

"I see," the prosecutor responded, "And what was she angry about?"

"He wouldn't help her out," Darrin mumbled.

"She wanted money?"

"Well, she got fired and lost her apartment. Then they were gonna repossess the Benz. The dude had more money than God. Why wouldn't she ask him for help?"

"And what was Ms. McGwire's reaction when her grandfather refused to help her?"

"Objection!" Cohen thundered, "Asked and answered, the witness already said she was angry."

"Sustained. Ask another question, Ms. Camden," the judge sighed.

Camden nodded, "So, Mr. Perkins, did the defendant ever imply she was going to harm her grandfather?"

"No, she never said nothing like that. I think she just said, 'The problem is gonna go away,' or something like that. I don't remember exactly."

Both Elizabeth and Cohen shut their eyes and lowered their heads. Their faces bore identical pained expressions. There was an audible gasp, and a faint undercurrent of whispering ran through the courtroom.

Judge Westerfield rapped his gavel sharply.

Camden latched onto Darrin's answer with pit bull tenacity, "What do you think Elizabeth McGwire meant by saying the problem will go away, Mr. Perkins?"

"Objection. Calls for speculation," Cohen called out.

"Sustained," the Judge answered wearily.

"Did you question her about what she meant by that statement, Mr. Perkins?" Camden continued.

"Naw... Liz always talked. She was so mad at the old man by then, that I figured she was just, you know, spewing shi... stuff."

"Did she ever indicate that she had some type of a plan in mind to make the problem go away?"

Cohen knew Camden was going to milk that damning statement for everything she could. He wished he could strangle Darrin Perkins.

"A plan? No. She just thought he wasn't going to be a problem much longer. That's all Liz said."

Richard Cohen shook his head as Olin muttered, "Christ! He's crucifying us."

Liz was staring at Darrin openmouthed, unable to believe what she was hearing.

"And do you know what she meant by that?" Camden purred.

"Objection! Speculation again, your honor," Richard grumbled.

"Of course," Judge Westerfield soothed, "Counselor, confine your questions to those that do not call for the witness to guess or surmise.

"Yes, your honor."

"Mr. Perkins," she resumed, "Did you ask Ms. McGwire what she meant when she said her grandfather wouldn't be a problem much longer?"

"Objection. Asked and answered," Cohen cried, slamming his hand on the defense table.

Camden smiled sweetly, "No, actually it wasn't. Care to check the steno tape?"

"Overruled," Westerfield ordered. He was counting the minutes until he could call a recess. His head was pounding.

"So, am I supposed to answer, or what?" Darrin looked confused.

"Yes, Mr. Perkins, answer the question," the judge snapped.

"What was it again?" Darrin asked, his brow furrowed in confusion.

Cohen closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. The judge wasn't the only one with a headache.

The prosecutor told the court reporter to read back the question. Darrin admitted he had not asked Elizabeth what she meant by the comment, and she never told him.

The long morning's questioning dragged on. Camden forced Perkins to admit that Elizabeth's grandfather had taken her in, and after much badgering on Liz's part, he did pay the back payments on her Mercedes, and received very little in the way of gratitude for his generosity. Perkins said Liz became angry and surly when her

grandfather refused to pay any of her other debts. Having elicited this information from the witness, Camden said, "I have nothing further."

Seeing Liz's pale face and her lawyer's stony stare, Darrin sensed the irreparable harm he had done. He turned to the prosecutor and hissed, "You had nothing to start with, lady." The courtroom tittered.

That remark would be aired on the evening news by practically every television station across America.

By the time Judge Westerfield called the lunch break Darrin was sweating, Elizabeth was sobbing openly, and Pat Camden's suit had lost its crispness.

Westerfield called for a two-hour break instead of the customary one hour taken at lunchtime. Everyone needed the extra time to regroup.

It had been a painful morning for the defense and a nerve-racking one for the prosecution, having to question a live-wire like Darrin Perkins. The media was in a frenzy of live reports and telephone calls to editors, as Elizabeth McGwire and Richard Cohen made a swift and silent exit through the side door.

The next morning's newspaper headlines would scream:

MCGWIRE'S LOVER ADMITS SHE PLANNED IT

Cohen tried to talk to Liz about what should be done to repair the damage caused by Perkins incriminating testimony. She told him to do what he had to do, but to go as easy on Darrin as he could.

Richard slammed his palm against his forehead and hollered, "Liz, he just dug your grave! Why the hell do you want me to go easy on him?"

Liz lowered her eyes. "Because I love him. He didn't do that on purpose, Richard. He really just doesn't know any better."

Cohen's jaw dropped in disbelief. *Go easy, hell, he thought, I'm gonna rip the guy a new one, that's what I'm gonna do.*

"No promises, Liz," he muttered, and turned away in disgust.

The courtroom was still buzzing as everyone filed back in after the long lunch. Judge Westerfield pounded his gavel several times to restore order.

Cohen stormed to the witness stand and began his cross-examination of Darrin Perkins with no preamble and no pleasantries.

"Mr. Perkins, are you currently employed?"

"I'm between jobs right now," Darrin replied, his expression turning insolent.

"When you aren't between jobs what do you do to earn a living?"

"Construction." Perkins couldn't keep a defensive tone from creeping into his voice.

"I see. And what's the highest grade you completed in school?"

"Objection," Camden called. "Relevance?"

"Background," is all Cohen responded.

The judge shrugged, "I'll allow it."

"I dropped out in the ninth grade," Perkins growled.

"Who usually paid for dates when you and Ms. McGwire went out?"

Camden rose--"Your honor, I object to this whole line of questioning. What does it have to do with this case?" she cried in disgust.

"Yes, counselor, we are all wondering that?" the judge queried.

Richard sighed, "I will withdraw the question." He created the image of an uneducated, unemployed buffoon in the minds of the jurors, and that was all he intended to do with that line of questioning. He knew he was lucky to get away with it as long as he did.

"Mr. Perkins, your testimony was that my client made a statement to the effect that 'he won't be a problem much longer,' referring to her grandfather, is that correct?"

"Yeah."

"Is it possible you were complaining about her grandfather having all that money, and not helping *both* of you out? Is it possible Ms. McGwire made that statement because she was trying to appease you?"

"Me? What do you mean appease me?" Perkins asked, honestly puzzled.

"I'm sorry, I guess appease is kind of a big word for a ninth grade dropout. Let me rephrase that," Richard snapped, dripping sarcasm.

Everyone in the packed courtroom gasped, and before the DA could rise to her feet to object to Cohen's badgering, Darrin retorted, "Hey, I got the word okay. I just don't know what you're implying."

"Did you ever complain about Theodore McGwire's attitude to Liz?"

"Well, I agreed with her that the old man should have helped her out."

"Did you ever tell her, 'Hey, maybe we should knock the old guy off?' Even in jest?"

"Objection! This witness is not on trial, your honor," Camden yelled.

"Withdrawn," Cohen muttered, his bitterness toward the witness far too evident.

The judge thought, *Cohen really has it bad for his client.*

Cohen became aware he was losing control of his emotions, and immediately changed the line of questioning. He cleared his throat, "Mr. Perkins, when Elizabeth McGwire told you her grandfather was not going to be a problem much longer, isn't it possible she could have been implying, that due to his advanced age, she didn't expect him to live many more years?"

"Objection. Calls for speculation," Camden called, a smug look on her face.

"Your honor, the prosecution brought up this line of questioning. Surely, I should be allowed to explore what my client's intent might have been when she made that statement. It wasn't necessarily as sinister as the prosecution would have us believe."

The judge considered it for a moment, then nodded, "Overruled. Go ahead and answer, Mr. Perkins."

Darrin's retention skills had not improved since lunch, and the court reporter had to repeat the question.

"Yeah," he nodded his head eagerly, "I'm sure that's what she meant. Absolutely. No question. The guy was old. Real old. "

Camden suppressed her smile behind a cough. In Perkins' enthusiasm to undo the damage his damning testimony had caused, he was just making matters worse for Elizabeth by overcompensating.

The jury sat stone-faced, a few looking at Elizabeth McGwire with open contempt.

Cohen wrapped up his questioning in a hurry, fearing even more damage from Darrin's runaway mouth, and day three adjourned early.



Richard drove Liz home, neither speaking. He made a few vain attempts at conversation, but Liz only grunted responses to his questions.

Later that evening, when Darrin stood pounding at the front door calling her name, Liz was sprawled on her bed—oblivious to Perkins' pounding and yelling—oblivious to her surroundings—oblivious to her troubles. Elizabeth McGwire

was in a drunken stupor, which at least temporarily, brought her forgetfulness.

An irate Mrs. Renfrew stormed downstairs, warning Perkins if he did not leave immediately, she would call the police.

He decided to console himself with his new friend Darla, but when he called her Debra by mistake, she hung up on him. He felt a little better after flushing her recovered earring down the toilet.

CHAPTER 9

"Why do you hate that woman so much?" Mark Camden asked his wife as they washed the dinner dishes.

Pat looked up at him, startled. "I don't hate her. I just think she is guilty as sin."

"Well, you sure seem to be taking a lot of joy from the fact that her boyfriend tore apart her case today," Mark said. He'd listened to his wife gloat all through dinner.

Pat dropped the pan she was scrubbing back into the sink, sending warm soapy water sloshing onto the floor, and turned on her husband. "The hell I am," she yelled, "What I am taking satisfaction from is the fact that he didn't ruin *my* case, Mark. He very easily could have. What's wrong with you? That woman is a cold-blooded killer, don't you want to see her punished for what she did to that poor old man?"

Mark Camden, well accustomed to his wife's outbursts, shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not sure she's a killer, Pat, the whole case is circumstantial. No one knows for sure she did it. What if you are prosecuting an innocent woman?"

"What is this, Mark? Why are you defending her? You don't even know her!"

Mark sighed. "I listen to you give me a blow by blow description of what happens in that courtroom every day. And like everybody else in America, I read the headlines. I watched a little of the trial on Court TV today. That lady sure doesn't look like a killer. Hell, she looks like a strong wind would knock her over."

Pat turned her back on her husband. With stubborn finality, she said, "She did it."

Pat spent a restless night wondering if the male jurors were echoing her husband's thoughts. She secretly wished Elizabeth McGwire was a little less pretty and a little less petite. It would help her get a conviction.



Belda was closing for the night, when the bell above the door of Bella Luna jingled.

Though she had just come off of a darkened street, the woman who entered the deserted shop wore large sunglasses

and a big floppy hat. Belda looked appraisingly at her from behind the counter. "May I help you?"

The woman removed her sunglasses. "Good evening, Belda." Her eyes were bloodshot and her words a bit slurred.

"Good evening, Elizabeth," Belda answered, her calm gray eyes looking kindly at her visitor. "I understand today wasn't a very good day for you in court."

Tears brimmed over Liz's eyes, as she sobbed, "No, not a very good day at all."

Belda came around the counter with Eros at her heels and led Elizabeth into the shop. She bolted the door behind her and turned the sign to Closed. "Come, let's sit down," the old woman said, leading Liz by the elbow to the small room in the corner of the store. She settled her into a chair, then went to make tea.

When she returned with two steaming mugs, Liz had removed her hat and appeared to have gotten her tears under control.

Liz took a sip from the brimming cup. "This is good. What kind of tea is it?"

Belda smiled, "Oh, just my personal blend. It will help to clear your mind a little tonight, and I think you

will find in the morning, you will be lacking the usual symptoms that follow a night of imbibing spirits."

Elizabeth nodded and slowly sipped the tea. She wasn't surprised that Belda knew she had been drinking. When she entered the shop, it seemed as if the old woman had been expecting her.

After a few minutes Belda said mildly, "Dear, why don't you tell me what happened the night your grandfather died. That's why you're here, isn't it?"

Elizabeth sighed and continued drinking from the steaming mug for a moment longer. She wiped her lips with a trembling hand. "I did just what you said. I made him a drink- a hot toddy, and I poured the potion in there. I brought it up to his room. I made sure he was in bed for the night, just like you told me. I... I didn't think he would get up in the night. He never does. He takes pills to help him sleep, and once he's in bed that's it, he doesn't usually get up. Not even to use the bathroom." Liz inhaled a shaking breath and gulped down the rest of the tea.

Belda waited patiently for her to go on.

"Can I have some more tea please?" Elizabeth asked, holding out her cup in unsteady fingers.

"Of course," Belda answered warmly, and left the room.

When she returned, Elizabeth took a sip, then set the mug on the table and looked off in the distance. She spoke like a woman in a trance. "I stayed awake. I know you said he wouldn't feel any pain, and he would just... just pass away in his sleep. I couldn't fall asleep, I was too nervous. About a half hour later I heard his bedroom door open. My room is just across the hall. It scared the hell out of me! I ran out of my room and saw him standing on the stairs. He was only two or three steps down when I came out. He was just standing there holding on to the railing. I... I said, 'Grandfather what's wrong?' He didn't answer... didn't even look at me. He just stood there for a couple of seconds and then fell down the stairs. It was like his legs just went out from under him. I think he was dead before he hit the ground. I started screaming, and then that old bat Mrs. Renfrew and her mutt showed up. The next thing I knew, the police and the ambulance were there. They put Grandfather onto a stretcher, then covered him with a sheet and took him away. The police asked me what happened, I told them I got up to get something to drink and found him at the bottom of the staircase. They didn't believe me, I could tell they didn't." Her voice cracked and she grabbed the mug gulping greedily at the tea. "They kept asking me the same questions over and over. They called the next day

and told me to come down to the police station. I was there for hours. They wanted me to take a lie detector test. I called my lawyer, and he told me I didn't have to because they aren't admissible. When I left, I saw Mrs. Renfrew walking into an office with one of the detectives that had been asking me all the questions. They arrested me three days later, after an autopsy showed Grandfather had all these internal injuries. That staircase is really long and the steps are all wood, there isn't any carpeting to break a fall. But I think... I think he was dead before he fell down." She paused for a few seconds, biting her lip, and then looked at Belda with haunted eyes, and in a soft, scared voice she asked, "He WAS dead before he fell, wasn't he?"

Belda took Elizabeth's cold hand in her own gnarled fist. "Yes, he was. It was just very bad luck for you that he got up before your potion completed its work. It sounds like it was just seconds before the end."

My potion, Liz thought ruefully, not *the* potion. *My potion. All mine.* Elizabeth raised the mug to her lips. Suddenly, a disturbing thought forced its way into her mind. *What the hell have I been drinking here? How do I know she isn't trying to get rid of me with one of her potions?*

Belda, seeming to read her thoughts, said in a dreamy voice, "I wouldn't harm you, Liz, unless I had a very good reason to. And even then, I would think twice about it. I really do like you. You remind me of myself in my youth," she squeezed Elizabeth's hand. "You know, Elizabeth, they are really nothing but plant leaves. Some of them are rather hard to come by. Individually, they are quite harmless. It's when you know the right combinations, that you can get almost any desired effect on a human body. And, sometimes any desired effect on a circumstance." Here she chuckled, as if at a private joke, and said, "Although, I must admit it takes a little more than plant leaves to change circumstances," she dropped a secretive wink. "You can make people love, make them leave, and yes, even make them die, Elizabeth. You know, your grandfather was quite lucky. Many people that seek my services to have someone eliminated don't always choose the most painless and humane route as you did, my dear. Sometimes they want them to suffer. Sometimes they want them to bleed. It is fortunate for your grandfather that your choice was as gentle as it was."

Elizabeth thought the woman was utterly insane, and she shuddered. She thought, *Dear God, I made a pact with the devil when I bought whatever was stuffed in that vial.*

Wanting to change the subject, and needing some answers to questions that plagued her, she asked, "So, why didn't his autopsy show a heart attack. That's what it was, wasn't it?"

"Not at all," Belda replied, "The herbs you purchased simply make the heart beat slower and slower until it stops completely. There is nothing so forceful to the body as what the word *attack* implies. A heart attack is accompanied by symptoms. Left arm or chest pain, nausea or dizziness. Your grandfather experienced none of these things. The only discomfort I believe he encountered, was a parched tongue. Unfortunately, that one minor side-effect caused you disastrous consequences, I'm afraid," Belda said, with a small, sad sigh.

They sat quietly for a few minutes. Liz asked, "Did you send that guy to give me a note the first day of my trial?"

Belda nodded. "Yes, Elizabeth, that was Nicholas, one of my assistants. Sometimes when a person is under great duress they are moved to say things, admit things. Perhaps shift the blame somewhere else. I just wanted to remind you that wouldn't be a good idea."

"I wouldn't have! You already told me when I paid for the potion that I would die if I told anybody. I didn't think that rule had changed just because I got arrested."

"No, it didn't," Belda agreed in a bland, but somehow eerily menacing tone of voice.

"So, what's going to happen to me? What if they find me guilty?" Liz agonized.

"I believe all will turn out okay for you, Elizabeth. You just need to keep your head together, and always think before you speak," Belda smiled. "Sometimes you have a little trouble in that department. A bit of a runaway tongue, no?"

"My lawyer doesn't want me to take the stand in my own defense. He's afraid I won't appear sympathetic enough to the jury."

Belda said, "You should tell your lawyer that you wish to testify, Elizabeth. Insist on it, if you must."

Producing a small vial from her pocket, she folded it into Liz's palm, "Put this in your coffee the day you are to take the stand. It will make your testimony a little softer, a little more moving perhaps."

Elizabeth looked at the tiny vial with frightened eyes, "What is it?"

Belda's tone sharpened. "Yours is not to ask questions, Elizabeth. I am trying to help you because I feel, in some small part, responsible that things didn't work out exactly as you planned them. And as I mentioned, I like you. I can't say that about many of my clients unfortunately. You can take this or not, it's entirely up to you. Remember, Elizabeth, we always have free will. Just as you did when you chose to pour the potion you purchased into your grandfather's drink the night he died."

"I... I'm sorry," Elizabeth stammered. "It won't hurt me will it?"

Belda's tone softened again. "Quite the contrary, my dear." The old woman rose, signaling that their meeting was over.

Elizabeth put the vial in her handbag. "How much do I owe you for this? I don't have much. Until the trial is over they won't let me..."

Belda interrupted, "No charge, dear. This one is on the house."

As Belda ushered her out the door, she sounded amused, as she said, "Elizabeth, dear, I am not insane, nor am I the devil. Not at all."

Liz stared at her open-mouthed for a second, feeling gooseflesh prickle her arms. She stammered her thanks and slunk out the door.

Once outside, she thought with bitter irony, as she donned the big floppy hat and sunglasses again, *I just said thank you to the woman that got me into the mess that ruined my life.*

Belda's voice exploded next to her, "You have no one to blame for this mess but yourself, Elizabeth McGwire!"

Elizabeth jumped, and turned around, expecting to see the old woman standing right behind her. She was surprised to see she was alone on the empty street. She looked at the shop and saw all the windows dark. With an involuntary shudder, she climbed into the waiting taxi that stood idling at the curb.

CHAPTER 10

True to Belda's word, Elizabeth awoke the next morning without a hangover. No headache, no nausea. In fact, she felt well rested and refreshed. She was pleasantly surprised when she looked in the mirror and saw her complexion looking rosy, her eyes clear and bright. Last night was the first good night's sleep she had all week. She wondered if Belda would be willing to sell her some of her personal blend.

Liz had gone to see the old woman on impulse, partly because she was drunk, and partly from desperation. Who else was she going to talk to? She needed some reassurance that she wasn't going to spend the rest of her life in a prison cell. If things continued to go as badly as they had gone yesterday, surely, that's where she was headed.

She wondered if Darrin was going to show up in the courtroom today, or if he would go off to sulk until she forgave him for his damaging testimony on the witness stand. She knew he didn't have anywhere else to be today. He was, after all, unemployed. She didn't believe his

wounded pride would allow him to show his face in court today and offer support, but she really wanted him there. Liz's anger over his testimony was already beginning to fade. Her love for Darrin was not easily shaken, no matter what he did.

She sat down on the edge of the bed and dialed his number. The machine picked up, "Hi, honey, it's me. I'm not mad anymore, so please come to the courthouse today, okay? I... I really need you. And Darrin, I love you. Bye."

Having no access to Belda's personal blend, Richard did wake up with a hangover. His client wasn't the only one so depressed over the day's proceedings to turn to a bottle the night before. He skipped his run and downed four aspirin with half a pot of coffee. Bleary eyed and exhausted, he called Elizabeth. He was worried about her after her boyfriend's performance in court yesterday. He had never seen Elizabeth as despondent as she was last night when he took her home. He secretly hoped that Darrin's testimony yesterday would be enough to open Liz's eyes to what a complete moron the guy was, and maybe she would dump him.

When she answered the phone in a somewhat cheerful voice, Richard felt an answering smile on his own lips,

until he identified himself, and she said, "Oh, it's you," and exhaled a disappointed sigh.

"Yeah, only me, the guy defending your life. Who were you expecting?" he asked, annoyed.

"Never mind," she answered. "Are you on your way?"

"Liz, who were you expecting to call?" he demanded. When she didn't answer, Richard barked, "Don't tell me you were hoping it was Darrin calling. Don't tell me you are even speaking to that bastard after what he did to you yesterday. Hell, after what he did to both of us!"

"I said never mind, Richard. Are you on your way over to get me now or not?"

Now she was angry and the morning was off to a miserable start. Richard pinched the bridge of his nose and bit back a nasty retort. "Yeah. I'll be there soon." He sincerely hoped that Darrin Perkins wouldn't have the guts to attend the trial proceedings today. He couldn't stand the sight of that son of a bitch.

When Cohen swung his Lexus into the circular driveway of the mansion, Liz was standing outside waiting for him. He was surprised how good she looked. He wondered if she had gone to a doctor and was given sleeping pills. He

wondered if she truly understood the magnitude of the damage that Darrin's testimony had caused their case.

Elizabeth climbed into the car. "Good morning, Richard. Are you sick? You look pale."

"I didn't sleep very well. What about you? You look fresh as a daisy."

Liz shrugged, "I slept fine. Great, in fact. So who's Camden calling to the stand to crucify me today?"

"Fortunately, no one that can do nearly as much damage as your boyfriend did," Cohen answered, his loathing of Darrin evident.

"Richard, don't blame Darrin, he really didn't mean to do any harm. He just doesn't think before he speaks. You say the same thing about me, you know, so don't be so hard on him. Besides, he told the truth. What other choice did he have?"

Richard shook his head in frustration, "You know, Liz, if I live to be a hundred, I will never understand what it is you see in a loser like Darrin Perkins. You have no idea how badly his big mouth damaged your chances at freedom yesterday."

Elizabeth, losing her temper, shouted, "Shut up, Richard. You were hired to defend me, not to offer your unsolicited advice on my love life."

Cohen said no more. He drove on in silence, fuming at the stupidity of this woman.

After awhile, Liz said in a softer voice, "If you knew him better you would understand what I see in him. I don't know why everyone hates him so much. Hell, they don't even know him. He tries to do his best, just like we all do. Why can't anyone see that?"

"Elizabeth, have you ever heard the saying `love is blind`?" he asked.

She shot him a dirty look and replied in an icy tone, "You don't know him. I do."

Richard didn't answer. There was nothing to say. He had fallen in love with Elizabeth McGwire and he knew he would do well to quit wearing his heart on his sleeve. He suspected, after his cross-examination of Darrin yesterday, that his feelings for his client were probably evident to everyone in the courtroom, and anyone in the country that caught the trial on CNN or Court TV.

Court had already been in session for two and a half hours when Darrin Perkins finally rolled out of bed and lit a cigarette. He saw the message lamp blinking on his answering machine and replayed Liz's apology on his recorder. He laughed, "That's my girl. Never could stay mad

at me." A half hour later he wedged himself into the packed courtroom.

Liz spent the morning stealing glances at the sea of faces in the overcrowded courtroom. Her lawyers scolded her about not paying attention to the proceedings, in her never-ending search for Darrin each morning.

At the first recess, Richard snapped, "He's not here, Liz. Probably for once in his life he had the good sense to stay away, so quit looking around the courtroom like you are bored. It doesn't sit well with the jury when they think you don't even care enough to pay attention."

Liz glared at him for a moment, clearly irritated, but kept her eyes on the proceedings for the rest of the morning. She would have missed Darrin's late arrival had her attorney not bristled as he caught sight of Darrin's entrance out of the corner of his eye.

When Liz saw him, her face lit up in a glowing smile. She raised her hand in a wave. This glaring interruption came as the paramedic was describing his evaluation of her grandfather's twisted body lying at the base of the stairs to the jury. One of the jurors, an elderly woman who looked like everyone's favorite grandma, gave the defendant a look

of shocked disgust. Liz's cheeks reddened in embarrassment and she hastily turned around.

She felt Richard's hot breath against her ear as he whispered, "Knock it off, Liz. You are doing more damage to your own case than lover boy over there did."

With the completion of the cross-examination of the paramedic, the prosecution rested their long and drawn out case. It was a flimsy case at best, based entirely on circumstantial evidence. Cohen knew his real challenge was to persuade the jury to feel sympathy for his client. If he could convince them to regard Elizabeth as a fragile young woman, completely incapable of the hideous crime that she was accused of, he would win this case. His biggest obstacle in this challenge was Elizabeth herself, and of course Darrin Perkins, and the moony-eyed look she had on her face every time the jerk entered the courtroom. Darrin, with the prodding of the prosecutor, had single handedly made Liz look like a cold, selfish opportunist, a temperamental shrew who would happily knock off her grandfather without a second thought, if she could gain ownership of his fortune.

The fact that Liz lit up like a Christmas tree when she saw Darrin wasn't lost on the jury. The obvious conclusion was, if she wasn't mad at him for saying what

he did on the stand yesterday, it must have all been true, and that didn't seem to phase Elizabeth McGwire at all.

Cohen didn't know how to make her understand she must ignore Darrin if he continued to have the stupidity and the bad taste to show up in court everyday. When Cohen tried to tell her that Perkins should stay away, she accused him of being jealous and insisted she needed Darrin for moral support.

Finally, in complete exasperation, during the lunch break, he told her, "Then, I hope you will find his support helpful during visiting hours at Purdy. Because if you keep this up, that's the only place you will be seeing him, Liz."

Her face visibly paled and she pushed her plate away, her lunch only half eaten. "I'm not going to Purdy, Richard. If you let me testify, I can make the jury see that I am not the murderer that Camden bitch has led them to believe I am."

Cohen shook his head, "Bad idea, Liz. I'm not worried about what you might say on direct examination. I think I can definitely evoke some sympathy from the jury for you. What I worry about, is how you will react when Camden starts ripping into you on cross."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes, "Geez, Richard, what are you afraid of? You think I will jump from the witness chair and throw her down the courthouse steps?"

"Let's face it, Liz, you stare daggers at the woman every time you look at her. Your hatred for her is very apparent, and I think it might seal your fate.

"You really have no faith in me at all, Richard. Don't you think I can control myself?"

"To be honest, no. I'm not sure you can."

"I want to testify. You are my lawyer, don't you have to do what I ask?"

"You want to testify even if it hurts our case?" he asked her, frustrated.

"It won't. Trust me."

Cohen sighed in exasperation and drummed his fingers restlessly on the table. "Fine, Liz. You want to testify, then go ahead and testify, but just remember that I advised you not to. I'll begin preparing your appeal tonight."

Liz reached across the table and squeezed Cohen's arm. "You won't think it's a bad idea after the jury hears my testimony. I promise."

"We will need to run through what you are going to say. Practice your testimony, so you will be prepared for

whatever Pat Camden throws at you," he said, accepting his defeat.

"Oh, brother. Is that really necessary?"

"Of course it is! Don't you want to be ready for what she might ask you up there. Liz, have you forgotten this is your life we are fighting for? I cannot believe how cavalier you have become about this. You would do well to remember you are not out of the woods by a long shot. The jury doesn't like you, in case you haven't noticed," Richard cried out.

Liz took a deep breath, "Oh, calm down, Richard. Fine, we'll practice. How about tonight?"

Richard nodded, "Okay, we'll see how it goes. If you are ready to testify by tomorrow then I will call you to the stand. If we still think your testimony needs work then I can just fill the day with your character witnesses."

"I'll be ready by tomorrow, don't worry. I really want to get this over with."

"I wish I felt as confident as you do about this, Liz," Cohen grumbled.

"Trust me," she said, a knowing little ghost of a smile crossing her lips.

CHAPTER 11

In Cohen's opinion the practice session which took place in his office that evening was a complete disaster. It only served to further his conviction that putting Elizabeth on the stand was a mistake of colossal proportions.

He and Olin spent several hours patiently trying to coach her in demeanor, the proper tone of voice, as well as prepare her for the thrashing Patricia Camden would subject her to. Through it all Liz remained bored and uninterested. Every fifteen minutes she insisted on interrupting what they were doing and checking her voice mail messages. Cohen knew she was hoping for a message from that scumbag boyfriend of hers.

When they finally quit for the night it was well after eleven o'clock. Cohen was packing his briefcase while Liz again dialed her voice mail from the phone in the lobby.

Olin slapped Cohen on the back. "Looks like your winning streak is over, buddy. In fact, we might have to go back to chasing ambulances after this one," he laughed.

Cohen bristled and thought again of unlucky number thirteen.

The next morning Richard Cohen sat at his kitchen table feeling sick. He knew that taking more time to coach Liz on her testimony wasn't going to change anything. What needed fixing was her attitude, and try as he may, she wasn't going to take things any more seriously or heed his advice.

He made one final attempt to dissuade her from testifying in her own defense, stating the countless reasons he thought it would be a dangerous idea. His protests were futile and fell on deaf ears. She refused to budge. So, with a heavy heart and a churning stomach Cohen cancelled the numerous character witnesses he had scheduled to appear on Liz's behalf, except for the two most vital to his case. He planned to call his client to the stand later that day as his final witness. The defense would wrap up its case and turn Elizabeth's life over to the jury for deliberation.



Elizabeth's sleep was restless and fitful, punctuated by nightmares of her being led away in handcuffs while Darrin looked on smiling and waving at her.

She awoke with a start at 2:30 in the morning and climbed out of bed to rummage through her handbag. She found the vial the old woman gave her during her last visit to the bookstore. She carried it with her downstairs to the living room and sat on the couch with a snifter of Courvoisier VSOP, a leftover from the days her grandfather stocked a small but select bar.

She held the little bottle of herbs clenched in her left hand, while she sipped the expensive amber liquid. Her stomach was soon warmed by the cognac, and her hand by the old woman's weird concoction. She opened her fist and looked at the small cylinder of glass. It appeared to have come alive in her grasp. It glowed with a dull ruby color. The herbs packed in the glass appeared to be moving. This didn't frighten Elizabeth. In fact, she felt oddly comforted by the glowing red herbs that stirred restlessly in the vial as she watched.

She fell into a dreamless sleep holding the bottle loosely in one hand.

When she awoke to the alarm at 7:15 AM, the vial was beside her on the coverlet. On her palm were two small blisters, and beside her on the sheet where the bottle came to rest was a round hole, no larger than a cigarette burn.

Liz looked at it thoughtfully while running her finger over the singed cloth.

After showering, she made coffee and sat eating a piece of dry toast at the kitchen table. When the phone rang she ignored it. The potion sat on the table next to her coffee cup. The contents had returned to its original green color.

Liz wondered if her overtaxed mind, in the predawn hours, hadn't played tricks on her when she saw it turn to a glowing scarlet, or was it a fantasy brought about by the cognac. She knew the burned sheet and her blistered palm were no illusion, so the contents of the bottle changing color surely must have happened.

Glancing at the clock and seeing how late it had become while she was lost in her thoughts, she knew Richard must be rushing through traffic, worried when she didn't answer her phone.

Elizabeth pried the cork out of the tiny bottle with her fingernail, and watched mesmerized as a slender plume of smoke escaped and drifted from the narrow opening in a graceful arc. A faint bitter odor enveloped the thin tendril of smoke.

With no further thought, she picked up the vial and poured the contents into the remainder of her cream laced

coffee. The coffee instantly began to bubble and turn an obscene, repellent scarlet. It lasted only a few seconds, and the coffee returned to its creamy toffee color. Without allowing herself to think about what she was doing, Liz quickly swallowed the liquid and gagged. Her throat burned and she doubled over in a coughing jag. She grew lightheaded and grabbed the edge of the table to keep from falling to the floor. Eyes stinging, her throat feeling as if it was on fire, she heard through spasms of pain, the sound of Cohen's car pulling into the driveway.

Cohen knocked on the door for a full five minutes before turning back to his car to use his cell phone to call Liz. She opened the door just as he was going down the steps to his car for the phone. When she threw open the door, the relief on his face was unmistakable.

"Where have you been? You had me worried sick," Richard exclaimed as he rushed back up the steps.

Elizabeth could no longer feel the effects of the potion except for a searing heat in her chest and belly that was gradually subsiding. Her cheeks were rosier than usual, and her brow moist with perspiration.

"Sorry, I was running late this morning," she smiled.

"I tried to call you, why didn't you answer?" Cohen looked at her closely to make sure she was really okay.

"I must have been in the shower. I didn't hear the phone." Liz replied, her eyes averting his.

He took her by the elbow and led her to the passenger side of his car. When they were on their way to the courthouse Richard made one more attempt to talk Elizabeth out of testifying.

Instead of the vehement argument he expected, she said in a soft voice, "You know, Richard, I love you for worrying about me so much. I really do. Why can't all men be as wonderful and protective as you are? If I hadn't met Darrin first, I really think you and I could have had something. Maybe someday we still can, who knows." She gazed at him, eyes shining.

Cohen was rendered speechless by this completely uncharacteristic display of affection from the object of his unrequited love. His cheeks turned a dull brick color and he fought back tears as Liz stroked his cheek with a gentle hand. Not another word was spoken during the remainder of the ride to the courthouse.

Once they were seated, and the noisy courtroom had been called to order, Olin leaned over and whispered a reminder to Liz not to look around. "Just pay attention to the proceedings and don't worry if your boyfriend is here

or not. Today is especially important, Liz. We have to look good."

She smiled warmly at him and whispered back, "Don't worry, Olin. I don't care if Darrin shows up or not."

He leaned back in his chair not believing her, but satisfied she would behave.

Elizabeth took his arm and leaned toward him. "Olin, I never thanked you for what you have done for me. I just want to tell you how much it has meant to me. You know, I will never forget you no matter how this turns out."

Olin stammered a thank you, his eyes betraying his surprise at her words. At that moment he would have gladly traded places with her to spare her even one more second of this hellacious trial. Strangely, he felt sudden affection toward this woman who he secretly had held in contempt since the day she walked into their office and retained them to represent her.

Up until that very second, as the last day of trial was just about to begin, Olin knew in his heart that Elizabeth McGwire was guilty. The only person he had ever told this heartfelt truth to was his wife. He worked diligently for Liz because she was their client, and when Richard Cohen won a case, so did he. He was successful by association, and he wanted it to stay that way. But, in

those few moments, with Liz whispering those kind words to him, he completely changed his mind about her guilt and wanted to scream at the jury to find this poor, frail woman not guilty and set her free.

CHAPTER 12

Elizabeth's two character witnesses were questioned, cross-examined and then questioned on redirect before the lunch break. The women jurors looked doubtfully at Elizabeth's friend Tiffany Sims, a woman with model good looks, as she spoke in glowing terms of Elizabeth McGwire's virtues. The male jurors just gawked.

Pat Camden could barely keep the smirk off her face as this Barbie Doll of a woman, with the bright red lip gloss, spoke of the extensive charity work she and Elizabeth had been involved in over the years. Camden's cross examination was cursory, as she was convinced that none of the men in the courtroom heard the woman's testimony, so lost were they in their fantasies of this beautiful creature. The women present, obviously green with jealousy, did not seem to absorb a word either.

Pat Camden, however, did manage to extract from the divine Ms. Sims, that she could not remember the cause or name of a single one of the alleged charities she and Elizabeth had so tirelessly worked side by side to support over the years.

The testimony of Tiffany Sims was the most uninteresting of the entire trial, but that night on the TV news, it was her face, her huge mane of honey-blond hair, and her ample bosom that graced most of the major networks.

Richard Cohen's stomach churned as he announced, "The defense calls Elizabeth McGwire to the stand." He had spent his lunch hour chomping on Roloids and going over his questions while Olin took Elizabeth to a nearby coffee shop.

When Elizabeth rose to take the stand a hush fell over the courtroom. She looked radiant. Wearing a demure high-collared dress of pale yellow silk, she appeared the epitome of innocence, Cohen thought.

As Elizabeth McGwire gave her testimony, there was not a dry eye in the courtroom. The only person who was unmoved by the waves of despair pouring from Elizabeth's tortured soul, was the prosecutor.

Pat Camden sensing defeat, and stunned that Cohen was able to elicit such moving testimony from his callous client, tried relentlessly to portray Elizabeth as a cold, calculating killer on cross-examination.

Every barb-sharp question she volleyed at Elizabeth was responded to with quiet and sorrowful dignity. A

dignity and sorrow that no one, least of all Pat Camden, would have ever suspected this indifferent woman was capable of. The more she tried to bait Elizabeth and provoke a violent reaction, the more she enraged the jury who felt she was badgering what now appeared to be a frail, helpless orphan.

Camden knew her case was hopeless when Elizabeth McGwire, with tears streaming down her pale cheeks said, "Ms. Camden, I know you are just doing your job, and I know that we all wish there was someone to blame for my grandfather's death. You will never know how many nights I have lain awake asking God if I was to blame because I didn't wake up soon enough that night to stop him from falling. Asking God why he took the only family I had left. I don't blame you for wanting to see someone pay. I want to blame someone too. But, if anyone should be standing trial because my grandfather is gone, it isn't me. It's God. I didn't push him. I loved him." And then, between tear-choked sobs she wailed, "I still love him, and not a moment passes that I don't miss him."

~

Closing arguments were brief, and then began the long hours of waiting while the jury deliberated and tried to reach a verdict regarding Elizabeth McGwire's fate.

Pat Camden bit her fingernails to the quick, and told her husband repeatedly it seemed the jury was under some kind of a spell when Elizabeth testified.

"It was like the whole damn courthouse was mesmerized!" she hollered during dinner, "The bitch turned into a Rebecca of fucking Sunnybrook Farm right before everyone's eyes."

"Who was her friend?" Mark Camden asked around a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

Pat threw a loaf of French bread at him.

Cohen spent the evening with Olin and his family munching popcorn and watching videos. Nothing, not even Clint Eastwood's classic Dirty Harry, could keep his mind from wandering to Liz, and wondering what she was doing and how she was feeling.

Liz and Darrin ate dinner at a Mexican restaurant, where they ignored the stares and whispers of the other diners. Later that evening, while Cohen speculated about

where she was and what she was doing, Liz lay thrashing in ecstasy beneath Darrin's sweating body, in his cramped, dirty apartment.

The jury gave up trying to reach a verdict after 11:00 PM and retired for the night. They were six to acquit, four to convict and two undecided. They would reconvene at 8:00 AM the next morning.

The following night the jurors were seven to acquit, two to convict and three undecided.

Two days later, after grave concern the trial would end in a hung jury, a unanimous decision was finally reached.

CHAPTER 13

"Have you reached a verdict in the matter of King County versus Elizabeth McGwire, Madam Forewoman?" The judge asked.

"We have, your honor," the bespectacled woman that looked like everyone's favorite grandmother answered.

"Please hand your verdict to the clerk."

She did so.

"Will the defendant please rise."

Looking anxious, and gripping Cohen's hand, Elizabeth rose from her seat and faced the jury.

"How say you?" Westerfield asked.

"We, the jury, find the defendant, Elizabeth McGwire, not guilty."

The courtroom erupted in bedlam. Reporters elbowed one another out of the way to run to record live reports and call the news into their editors, television stations interrupted their regularly scheduled programming to bring the jury's verdict into every home and business in America within moments of it being announced. Then they replayed clips from the highlights of the trial.

Cohen, Olin and Liz hugged each other and cried. Elizabeth pulled herself from Richard's embrace and turned,

expecting to find Darrin's waiting arms behind her. True to his I-couldn't-care-less nature, Darrin wasn't even in the courtroom. He had once again overslept, and had no idea that the jury had even reached a verdict. Liz left him countless messages on his recorder that morning telling him the jury was back in and would be announcing her fate shortly.

Pat Camden in an uncharacteristic display of emotion, yelled as the forewoman read the verdict, "WHAT?? ARE YOU PEOPLE OUT OF YOUR MIND? SHE'S GUILTY DAMMIT, GUILTY!" She was lead from the courtroom by red-faced coworkers.

The District Attorney held a press conference that night stressing King County's commitment to justice, so one shouldn't blame Ms. Camden for her passionate reaction. The prosecutor's outburst would be splashed across newspapers and magazines for the next month. Late show hosts Letterman and Leno would find a rich source of material for their opening monologues.

An embarrassed Pat Camden, for months, avoided public scrutiny. As a final slap in the face, the District Attorney transferred her to white collar crimes.

Camden became obsessed with the fact that Elizabeth McGwire was not found guilty. Her husband, unable to stand her constant complaining, told her to get over it. The case

was closed, move on. When she still held on to her obsession, unwilling, or perhaps unable to part with it, her husband, finding living with her unbearable, left and filed for divorce. As if to rub salt in her wounds, to Camden's utter amazement, he married Liz's friend Tiffany Sims as soon as the divorce was final. To her chagrin, Pat found herself again the subject of check-stand tabloids. Their headlines, this time screaming, "Camden Dumped" and "Woman Scorned."

Patricia Camden never wavered in her belief that Elizabeth McGwire was guilty of murder. The trial haunted her for the rest of her life. After her marriage fell apart she moved to Michigan, where she teamed with a retired police lieutenant to open a successful private investigation office.

Throughout her life, Patricia Camden was scarred by the Elizabeth McGwire trial and its verdict of acquittal. The thin, red haired woman with the emerald green eyes haunted her dreams. She told her partner that someday she hoped to meet Theodore McGwire in heaven, and tell him she was sorry that his murderer went unpunished.

Richard Cohen's practice continued to grow, representing high profile clients in high profile cases. He had twenty-seven straight convictions before he and Olin finally lost a case.

A reputed mob boss on trial for money laundering was found guilty. There were threats made on Richard's life, but fortunately the verdict was overturned on appeal and the mob boss set free. Cohen and Olin breathed a sigh of relief, as they had visions of being taken for a one way ride if they didn't win that appeal.

Richard Cohen continued to date women with problems and continued to have the usual break-ups. Two years and four therapists later he married Olin's eldest daughter, Jenny. She was twenty-one, Cohen was forty-four. They had two children. Richard Cohen seemed to have finally recovered from his Rapunzel complex and found contentment.

CHAPTER 14

SIX MONTHS LATER

With her grandfather's estate finally probated and the money released to her, Elizabeth adjusted to her new life in the mansion.

She and Mrs. Renfrew avoided each other as much as possible, and life gradually settled into a routine. Elizabeth's face disappeared from the gossip magazines and she could once again go out in public without being stared at. Cohen called her numerous times after the trial ended. Liz never returned his phone calls, and Richard Cohen, a sadder but wiser man, finally realized he was out of her life forever.

Elizabeth McGwire's life was much the same as it had been during her trial. She and Darrin spent sporadic time together. She occupied her days buying lavish clothes and jewelry for herself and Darrin. She rearranged the furniture continuously, but seemed never satisfied with

their placement in the big lonely house. Only the paintings remained unmoved.

She still had a nightly glass of wine or cognac and watched Mrs. Renfrew, with robotic precision, pass in front of the living room window every evening at precisely 7:30, accompanied by Rembrandt.

She wished she could sell the old memory ridden house, and reside in a smaller and newer home away from its haunting aura, and escape the watchful eye of Mrs. Renfrew. She was a prisoner of her grandfather's will which stated, she must remain in the mansion and allow Mrs. Renfrew to reside there, undisturbed, until the housekeeper's death. In quiet desperation, she wondered how life could be so cold and empty, when seemingly one had everything they could ever need or want.

It was, of course, her relationship with Darrin that still plagued her. Now that she had money she could not understand why he refused to marry her. He would not move into the mansion with her. He insisted on keeping his own dingy quarters half way across town. Elizabeth paid his rent, and as usual, he was unemployed. She made no demands, and when she cautiously brought up the subject of marriage, he grew surly and withdrawn.

It was in desperation, and a state of utter hopelessness over their relationship, that Liz found herself at the door of the Bella Luna Bookstore on a gloomy and rain sodden afternoon.

The pretty shop girl with the long black hair greeted her warmly, and Liz bent down to pet the black cat she had seen on her previous visits.

"Hello, Ms. McGwire, it's nice to see you," Gabriella smiled from behind the ancient counter.

"Hi... I need to see Belda, if she is available," Liz stammered, looking nervously around the store.

"Are you able to wait a few moments? Belda is with a customer right now." Gabriella pointed to the tiny room in the corner. The door was closed, and Liz looked at it with frightened eyes.

"A customer? Like... Like me?" she asked.

"No, Ms. McGwire, not like yourself," Gabriella laughed, "We have many customers, each quite unique. Can you wait, or shall I have Belda phone you later?"

"No, I can wait. I will just have a look around."

Gabriella ushered her into a lofty, sepulchral book lined room. "There are many books for you to browse through," she said, "Also, there are items of interest in

the back of the store, such as candles, decks of Tarot cards and numerous metaphysical items. We have much to keep you occupied while you wait. Can I offer you some tea?"

"Yes, thanks. That would be nice," Elizabeth replied. She wondered if it would be the same tea Belda had given her on her previous visit. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

The girl disappeared, and Liz glanced up to see the black cat staring at her from atop a high shelf. She recoiled in horror from the cat's penetrating stare and felt swallowed up in the dark aisles of books.

Was it her imagination or did the light suddenly grow dim in this dusty book laden room? She wondered if this could be an omen of impending misfortune.

Liz shivered, as she turned and wandered to the back of the store where the girl had indicated other items of occult interest were to be found.

The first item she came across was an old battered tin box with faded lettering. She cautiously opened the box from which a fetid stench, evocative of a haunted graveyard arose. With a cry of revulsion she dropped the box and backed away.

Hideous and other-worldly items lined the walls, sinister eyes seemed to stare malevolently from the corners. Terrified, Elizabeth ran to the front of the

store. Just as she was about to lose her resolve and flee from the shop, she heard Belda's voice and saw a famous actress race from the tiny room that served as Belda's inner sanctum. The actress's skin was ashen, her eyes huge and frightened. Without so much as a glance at Elizabeth, she ran out the front door, causing the bell to peal wildly.

"Why, Elizabeth," Belda said, obviously pleased to see the thin woman standing nervously by the door.

"Hello, Belda," Liz replied, and put her hand out for the old woman to take.

Liz looked toward the front door and said, "Was that..."

The old woman cut her off, "Is Gabriella getting you something to drink?"

"Y... Yes."

"Excellent. Well, come into the office and tell me how things are going."

"Oh, okay." Elizabeth allowed herself to be ushered to a chair by the odd old woman who was the source of her freedom and wealth and yet was the cause of the horrendous hell she had been through.

The scent of the actress's perfume still lingered in the air. "That lady... Isn't she..."

"Elizabeth," Belda answered in an icy voice that frightened her. "Should one of my customers see you leaving the store, how would you wish me to respond if they asked, 'Isn't that the woman that was in the news just a few short months ago?' Would you wish me to gossip and tell them who you are... And why you came?"

Liz shook her head violently, "No, of course not.

"Then do not think I would be stupid enough to identify my clients." Belda looked at her with stern eyes, hard as flint. "You forget you saw that woman, or anyone else you happen to glimpse in my store. Is that understood?"

"Of course. I'm sorry, that was very rude of me."

Her momentary outburst forgotten, Belda handed a steaming mug of tea to Elizabeth from a tray Gabriella had placed on the claw-foot table.

"So what brings you to Bella Luna today, dear?"

Liz sipped the tea with a disquieting sense of déjà vu. It wasn't as soul satisfying as the cup of tea she had on her previous visit. She suspected it was nothing more magical than a Lipton teabag. But it did help to calm her nerves.

"I need to purchase another potion," Elizabeth said, clearly embarrassed.

"I see," Belda looked at her levelly, "Some would say you are a glutton for punishment."

"You said that there are potions that can make someone love you. Remember telling me that?"

"So, this is about your young man, am I right?"

Liz nodded and wouldn't meet the woman's eyes.

"And you are quite sure that you want this young man to love you, Elizabeth?"

Liz answered vehemently, "Oh yes. Very sure."

"Are you willing to accept whatever consequences occur as a result of your obsession with this man? Are you sure this is really what you want?"

"Yes, Belda. I've loved Darrin for a long time. There is no one else for me. There never will be," Liz answered, the conviction in her voice unmistakable.

Belda sighed, "Very well then, the cost will be the same as the first potion you purchased and the terms the same. Understood?"

Elizabeth nodded and rose from the chair. "Thank you, Belda. When shall I pick it up?"

"Tomorrow, around noon. We will need to meet for a few minutes. There are very specific instructions that must be followed to the letter or it could result in irreparable consequences," Belda said gravely, looking at her through

narrowed eyes. "Do you understand, Elizabeth? To the letter."

Liz impatiently replied, thinking the old woman was being far too melodramatic, "Yes, I understand. Thanks, I will see you tomorrow."

She ran from the building anxious to be rid of this demonic bookstore and its strange occupants.

Gabriella watched her leave, then turned to Belda. "Well, what does she want this time? Surely it's not more money?"

"No, dear. This time she wants one of the few things money can't buy. Love."

"I wonder if he is a good man?" Gabriella asked.

"No. I don't think he is," Belda replied in a tired voice.

Gabriella was silent for a few moments then she asked the old woman, "How many times do you think she can play Russian roulette before she gets shot?"

The old woman shook her head. "Sadly, I believe this purchase may prove to be the fatal bullet."

CHAPTER 15

When Elizabeth arrived at Bella Luna to purchase the love potion that would magically transform Darrin into an ardent suitor for her hand in marriage, her eyes were swollen from crying.

She could not reach Darrin by phone the previous night. She drove by his apartment after midnight, and saw his motorcycle and an unfamiliar car parked in the space reserved for his apartment. The next morning she called his apartment and a woman answered. When Liz asked to speak to Darrin, the woman yawned in Liz's ear and mumbled, "He's in the shower." Heartsick, Liz hung up the phone.

When Darrin emerged from the steamy bathroom, he glanced at the message light on his answering machine. It wasn't blinking. "I thought I heard the phone ring. They didn't leave a message?"

"No, she didn't," Darla answered.

"She? How the hell do you know it was a she?"

"Because it was a woman's voice that asked for you," the bimbo answered.

"Oh shit!"

"It rang, what was I supposed to do?" Darla responded, annoyed.

"Oh fuck! You stupid bitch! You should have let the machine pick up. It was probably my goddamn girlfriend," Darrin raved.

"What girlfriend? You never told me you had one."

"Shit! Just get dressed and get the hell outta here will you," he yelled.

"Fine. You know she's a real lucky chick, that girlfriend of yours," Darla retorted sarcastically as she gathered up her strewn clothing and headed into the bathroom.

~

Gabriella led Elizabeth to the cozy corner office and told her Belda would be down momentarily. Liz declined the girl's offer of tea and waited impatiently for the old woman to give her the potion she so desperately wanted.

When Belda entered the cramped little room, Liz shot up from her chair and cried, "Where is it? Please Belda, I need it right away!"

Belda put a soothing hand on Elizabeth's shoulder. "Relax, dear, I have the potion right here." She held up a small vial that contained what appeared to be cut flowers in a pale lavender color.

"Please let me have it. Here's the cash," Liz cried. She looked longingly at the vial as she desperately shoved a white envelope into the woman's arthritic fist.

"Just a moment, Elizabeth. Sit down and calm yourself. There are instructions that must be followed as I told you yesterday, so settle down and listen to me!"

Elizabeth took a deep breath and sat on the edge of the chair, "Alright, I'm calm. Now just tell me what the hell I have to do."

Belda sighed, "You are sure you want to go through with this?"

"Yes dammit. Quit asking me that," Liz snarled. "You have your money, just tell me what I have to do so I can get out of here."

Belda looked at her with ill concealed contempt, "It's very simple. You pour this into his drink. The drink should be a cold one. Make sure he finishes the drink to the last

drop. And when he does - and this is the most important part, so you better pay attention. Make sure you are the first person he looks at once the drink with the potion is consumed. Do you understand, Elizabeth? You must be the very first person he lays eyes on when he finishes the drink. The first woman he sees he will love unconditionally and completely for the rest of his life. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do," Elizabeth answered, feeling, at last Darrin was finally hers.

The old woman handed the vial to Liz, thinking, *you selfish, stupid woman.*

As Liz left the bookshop, Belda watched her through the dusty window with a feeling of abhorrence tinged with pity.

~

"Dinner was great, babe. Thanks for having me over," Darrin grinned.

"Let's go in the living room. I'll get you another beer," Liz smiled in return.

"You sure you ain't mad at me about the cleaning lady answering the phone this morning?"

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed to slits, "Cleaning lady, huh? She sure doesn't do a very good job."

Darrin laughed uncomfortably and said, "I'll take that beer."

Liz went into the kitchen and pulled a beer from the refrigerator and glanced around to make sure Darrin was still in the living room. She uncapped the bottle, then pulled Belda's vial from the pocket of her slacks. Prying the tiny cork out, she gagged at the putrid odor it released. "Oh, gross," she whispered, "What the hell is in there?," then hurriedly poured the contents into the opened beer bottle and watched in awe as the flowers disappeared and blended invisibly with the beer. She cautiously sniffed the beer bottle. No rank odor remained.

"Here," Liz said, handing Darrin the bottle.

"Cheers, babe," he replied and put the bottle to his lips.

Liz watched him closely. He saw her staring at him and said, "What's wrong? Is there something hanging from my nose?"

"No. What do you mean?" Liz asked, looking away.

"You're staring at me."

"Sorry," she mumbled.

He took a few more swallows from the bottle then offered it to Liz. "You want a drink?"

"No!"

He looked at her with a curious expression and said, "You sure are acting weird tonight. You sure this isn't about the cleaning woman that picked up the phone this morning?"

"It's nothing. Just drink up like a good boy, will you."

Darrin laughed, "You trying to get me drunk, so you can take advantage of me, sweetheart?"

"Right. You bet," Liz answered with a look that Darrin, from past experience, instantly recognized as an invitation to love making. She told him to close the drapes.

He rose from the couch holding the beer bottle in his hand. Only a few sips remained. He walked to the front windows and looked out at the lawn.

As he reached up to draw the drapes, he took the final swig from the bottle and looked at his watch, it was exactly 7:30 PM.

From around the corner of the house, looking pathetically weary and careworn, Mrs. Renfrew and her

faithful Rembrandt came into view. The aging housekeeper glanced at the window where Darrin, barely aware of a shrieking and hysterical Elizabeth McGwire calling his name, and screaming for him to turn around, stood mesmerized, staring at the elderly woman. As if by some hellish magic, their eyes met..