

CHAPTER 1

Elizabeth Chase didn't know what was more offensive about her client, his constant pawing at her legs under the counsel table or his bad breath. He was like so many of her clients in the public defender's office, repeat offenders who were the poorest imaginable specimens of the human race. Joe Rizzo was even more despicable because he had been indicted for selling cocaine. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts was about halfway through its case on this June day in 1978, and Elizabeth hoped that her client would stick to his earlier decision not to testify. He had no witnesses to support his murky alibi, so the case would not last much longer if he didn't take the stand.

"Your Honor, I object," Elizabeth said as she rose from her chair. "The officer is referring to this white substance as cocaine. The Commonwealth has offered no expert testimony establishing that this substance is in fact cocaine."

"Sustained," Judge Hobgood replied gruffly, glaring at the assistant district attorney and then at the vice sergeant. "You know the rules, Sergeant. Don't forget them again."

"Yes sir, Your Honor," the sergeant replied, sitting up straighter in the witness chair.

Elizabeth looked at her client and the smirk on his face. Why is it they always think they can beat every charge? she wondered. Rizzo had sold the dope to an undercover agent, and the police recovered some of the marked money from him when he was arrested the next day.

The assistant DA had the officer correct his statement and the witness soon finished his testimony. Elizabeth tried to hammer him and the Commonwealth's other witnesses on cross-examination, but she could only bring out minor inconsistencies in their case. Each time she sat down, Rizzo would grab her arm and

whisper encouragement, but he was the only person in the courtroom who was optimistic about his chances for an acquittal. The blue-collar jurors occasionally gave both of them contemptuous looks throughout the presentation of the Commonwealth's case.

Thankfully, the Commonwealth rested at quarter to five, and after Judge Hobgood denied Elizabeth's motion for a directed verdict, he recessed for the day. As Elizabeth began gathering her file together, she felt a hand grip her forearm. A deputy had Rizzo's other arm, ready to lead him back to his jail cell for the night.

"You're doing real good, pretty lady. After you get me out of this mess, me and you might just have to have ourselves a party."

"I'll see you in the morning, Mr. Rizzo," Elizabeth replied, looking at the deputy. The officer caught her signal, and with a tug, Rizzo headed back to his cell.

Upon her return, the public defender's office was vacant except for several overworked lawyers. Just about everyone else left at five. Elizabeth had recently been promoted to deputy chief public defender, and she was proud of what she had accomplished in her six years with the office. She had tried over a hundred cases, involving every conceivable offense from petit larceny to murder, and had won several high-profile felony cases. The burnout that always comes with the job was accelerating now, but she wanted to stay on as deputy for at least another year before she went into private practice.

Elizabeth grabbed her phone messages from her secretary and looked through them as she walked to her office. She recognized all of the names except one as either clients or ADAs calling about files. Slumping into her desk chair, she started massaging her temples and decided to wait until the next morning to return her calls. No matter how many cases she tried, she always felt numb at the end of a day in court.

Elizabeth felt better the next morning, knowing this would be the last day she would have to deal with Joe Rizzo. If convicted, he would go to prison for a long time, and if acquitted, he would be out of her hair.

"There's a Robert Hamilton on line three," her secretary shouted as Elizabeth passed her doorway.

"Hello?"

"Miss Chase?"

"Yes, this is Elizabeth Chase."

"Elizabeth, this is Robert Hamilton." The thick Southern accent was faintly familiar, and she was silent as she tried to place the name. "You don't remember me, do you?"

"No, I am sorry. I don't."

"I'm calling from Weenee, South Carolina. I'm your grandfather's law partner. I mean, I was. I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but your grandfather passed away yesterday. I've been trying to reach you."

"Yes, I was in court. I didn't get back to the office until late." Elizabeth felt a surge of guilt. She hadn't seen her grandfather in years although he was faithful in writing to her and calling on holidays. She hadn't been as faithful, and she could feel a certain emptiness now. Her mother, an only child, had died years ago, and Elizabeth had drifted away from her South Carolina roots.

"I'm sorry," Hamilton said softly. "He went quietly in his sleep. Rebecca found him when she went in yesterday morning."

"Thank you for calling, Mr. Hamilton."

"Do you want me to make the funeral arrangements, or wait until you get down here?"

"No, you make the arrangements, please." Then she stopped, trying to think of the right words so she wouldn't sound callous. "Mr. Hamilton, I'm afraid I'm in the middle of a trial, and I don't know if I'm going to be able to attend the funeral."

"We can wait a few days. When do you think your case will be over?"

"Soon, but this is a three-week term. This is a very bad time for me."

"I know what you mean. I used to be a criminal lawyer myself a while back. I do think it's very important for you to come down here, though. You are the executor and sole beneficiary of your grandfather's estate. Your grandfather owned a large amount of property, and it's going to take a considerable amount of work to settle the estate."

"How can I do that, even if I'm there for the funeral?"

"We just need to get you qualified as executor in the Probate Court and file the will. I'll be glad to help you with it. That's the least I can do for John. After that, I believe we can do almost everything else by mail."

"Let me talk to my boss. I'll get back to you this afternoon, Mr. Hamilton. I know it sounds as if I'm uncaring, but I did love my grandfather very much. It's just that this is so sudden, and it's a very bad time for me. I'll see what I can do."

As Elizabeth hung up the phone, she felt guilt seep through her body like an early-morning fog, and she knew she had to go.

Harry Hirsch leaned back in his chair and locked his hands behind his head. Elizabeth had just finished filling him in on the details of her phone conversation with her grandfather's law partner.

"What do you think I should do? I sent one of the clerks over to BU to do some research on South Carolina probate law. I can renounce my appointment as executor, and I'm sure Mr. Hamilton would consent to serve."

"But if it's a big estate, he can get some pretty sizable commissions, you know. Just how big is the estate?"

"I don't have any idea. But it's not the money."

"Oh, I am well aware of that, Miss Silver Spoon," Hirsch said with a grin. Everyone in the office was familiar with Elizabeth's Boston Brahmin background on her father's side of the family and the trust that went with it. She was so financially secure that she didn't have to work another day for the rest of her life, but that was not Elizabeth's nature. Her activist days started with the Vietnam War protests at Wellesley, and after graduation, she worked tirelessly for the McGovern campaign for almost a year. She had been strongly influenced by her father, who also enjoyed the privilege of not having to punch a clock. Unlike his daughter, however, he chose not to work but instead traveled from Johannesburg to Belfast to Saigon with various agencies, seeking an end to the world's problems.

Elizabeth gave her boss a contemptuous look.

Hirsch held up his hands, not wanting to take this particular discussion any further. "I think you need to go, Elizabeth. This is the last of your family down there, isn't it?"

Elizabeth nodded.

"You better go and check everything out. There's no telling what your grandfather's law partner may do if you don't. He'll probably clean out the estate—claim it was all partnership property or something like that. You'll be in pretty good shape after the Rizzo trial, won't you?"

"Yeah. They're going to call Woody's murder case next, and that'll take a week or ten days, according to him."

"Go on, then. We can cover for you for that long."

"I guess you're right. I was trying to use my caseload as an excuse, but my conscience kept getting the best of me. Thanks," she said as she stood up. "I'll check in with you once I get to South Carolina."

As Elizabeth looked at the New Jersey coastline from 20,000 feet up, she tried to get Joe Rizzo off her mind. He had been convicted, as she had expected, and sentenced to ten years. He would be out of Walpole in less than three, so she didn't feel too bad. He had angrily demanded an appeal, which he would get, but Hobgood had a clean record, and the conviction would more than likely stick.

She tried to focus on what she could remember about her mother's hometown in South Carolina. As a young girl, she had spent many summers there with her mother and had some fine, but hazy, memories. After her grandmother died, the trips became less frequent. She hadn't been back since her mother died during her sophomore year in college, and her father discouraged any contact with his ex-in-laws. He considered the Snowdens to be beneath him after the divorce.

There was one thing, however, she could remember vividly—the wide front porch of her grandparents' home. Even on the hottest South Carolina afternoons, it would be cool where she and her grandmother sat and sipped iced tea or lemonade. Slowly, events that had been stored in her mind's vault for decades came into focus, simple childhood experiences such as birthday parties and feeding the trout-sized goldfish in the lily-filled pool in the backyard.

Her reverie was broken by the pilot's announcement that the plane had been cleared for landing in Charleston. It was almost seven o'clock when she descended the steps to the tarmac. She was glad she had decided to stay in Charleston for the night, because she was bone tired. The jury had returned its verdict just before noon, and she had to race to make her flight at Logan.

Even though the sun was low now in the June sky, the heat hit her like a blast furnace. As she walked toward the World War II-era terminal, the tarmac felt like a skillet beneath her thin-soled shoes.

Once Elizabeth found the historic district in which her hotel was located, it took another twenty minutes of wrong turns to find the hotel. She was pleasantly surprised when she finally walked into the lobby that was as stately as any hotel in Boston. After a couple of scotches in her room, she ordered dinner from room service and was asleep before ten.

Elizabeth awoke at her customary 6:30 the next morning, and it took her a few seconds to realize where she was. When she opened the draperies, however, she was not prepared for the view. Her room was on the eighth floor, and for an instant she felt as if she were a twentieth-century Gulliver, looking down on a miniature city. Except for several tall buildings and a number of spectacular church steeples, all the other structures, many of which were dwellings, were not more than three stories high. She could see clear down to the Battery, where proud mansions oversaw the confluence of the Ashley and Cooper rivers. The sky was cloudless and cobalt, and the sun's rays were already filtering through the live oaks in the park across the street, creating a kaleidoscope of light on the weathered brick walks. Far out in the harbor, Fort Sumter held its ground defiantly, a grim reminder of one of the nation's darkest hours.

I've got to take some time to see this city some day, she said to herself as she surveyed the peninsula one final time. She made that promise again over shrimp and grits in the hotel dining room that overlooked a magnificent courtyard garden through Palladian windows. She remembered grits from her grandmother's kitchen, and her waiter cajoled her into ordering it when she mentioned that she hadn't had this Southern staple since she was a teenager.

Elizabeth allowed herself a thirty-minute drive through the historic district. Several times she was tempted to stop and walk so she could take in the beauty of the magnificent homes. Finally, from the seat beside her, she picked up the concierge's directions to the highway that would take her to Weenee.

She had to stop and ask for directions before she found the ramp to the Cooper River Bridge that would lead her north to Weenee. Once she reached the bridge's zenith, she stole a final glance over her shoulder at the old city, once again in miniature, like some architect's scale model of a proposed city. She followed

the coast for about ten miles and then turned northwest, and the strip malls and fast-food restaurants disappeared immediately. They were replaced by forests of pines, palmettos, and winding salt creeks rimmed by brownish-green marsh grass. Once Elizabeth crossed the Wando River, the salt creeks and palmettos soon disappeared, and she now passed only foreboding pines and an occasional swamp.

About thirty miles from Charleston, she realized that she hadn't passed a car or a house for some time. All the landmarks on her directions had been correct, but she still couldn't suppress the fear that she might be lost. She gripped the wheel tightly when she remembered what had happened to those white freedom riders in Mississippi just a few years ago. After a few more miles, she passed through a small crossroads community, and her fears disappeared as quickly as they had appeared.

After crossing the wide and swiftly moving Santee River, she turned west and saw fields of tobacco, corn, and soybeans sharing the countryside with the pine forests and cypress swamps. After another twenty miles, she was relieved to notice the houses getting much closer together, and in another ten minutes she saw the Weenee town-limits sign. Elizabeth quickly got her bearings when she saw a street sign that indicated she was on Lee Street.

Elizabeth saw the courthouse on her left and remembered Hamilton telling her that his office backed up to the courthouse yard, so she took a left and immediately spotted the office down the street on the right. She pulled up to the curb and looked at the old office, once a private home. It had been built before the Civil War, and, like every residence built in Weenee during that period, it had a porch running the width of the house. It was well maintained and had recently been painted.

Walking up the wooden steps, she couldn't decide if she should knock or just enter. When she couldn't locate a doorbell, she turned the handle on the box lock and pushed the door open. There was a receptionist's desk in the entrance hall, but no one was in sight.

"Hello," a voice called out from one of the back offices. In a few seconds, Robert Hamilton himself stepped into the hall and walked briskly toward her. He was a tall man, and what hair he had left was combed straight back in a gray mane. He was impeccably dressed

in a charcoal suit, white shirt, and burgundy-striped tie. Elizabeth started to extend her hand when Hamilton reached out both arms and hugged her.

"It's wonderful to see you again, even under these circumstances," he said as he took a step back to look at her. "You have grown into a lovely young lady. Did you have a good trip down?"

"Yes, I did, thank you. Charleston was interesting," she replied, taking a good look around the office for the first time. The walls were paneled in wide pine boards that had never been painted, giving the office a dreary, depressing appearance.

"I think I have everything worked out with the funeral home. The service will be tomorrow at three at the Methodist Church."

"Thank you. I appreciate your handling that for me. I really do."

"We have made arrangements for you to receive everybody from seven to nine tonight at your grandfather's house."

"What are you talking about, Mr. Hamilton?"

"You are the only family left. People will want to come by and pay their respects. Your grandfather left specific instructions."

Elizabeth swallowed hard. She had been trying not to think about the funeral, which she dreaded, but this was an unexpected and unwelcome chore. What could she say to these people she didn't know and with whom she had absolutely nothing in common?

"What sort of instructions?" she asked.

"He wanted his wake to be a happy occasion."

"What exactly do you mean, Mr. Hamilton?"

"Your grandfather wanted to make sure there was plenty of Craven County barbeque on hand, with plenty of liquor to wash it down with."

"Barbeque? Liquor? Sounds more like a party than a wake."

"It's a pretty good combination. I've got to go to the bank for a meeting. I'm sorry, but I'm chairman of the board, and I can't miss it. I'll be back after lunch sometime. Can I get you anything?"

"No, I'm fine. Could I see my grandfather's office?"

"Certainly, follow me." Hamilton led her to the first office on the left and turned on the light. "Inez, your grandfather's secretary, took the day off. She's really taking it hard," he added.

Elizabeth surveyed the room and looked back at Hamilton. "You go to your meeting. I'll be fine. I'll see you at seven."

"You sure you're okay?" Hamilton asked over his shoulder as he headed down the hall toward the front door.

"I'm sure," she said, almost to herself.

Looking around, Elizabeth could feel her grandfather in the room where he'd spent years counseling his clients about murder, mayhem, and much less serious disputes.

He had a fondness for old maps, and they covered the walls, some accompanied by early eighteenth-century land grants. The huge desk was walnut and appeared to have been locally made. She eased into the brown leather chair, creased by decades of wear, and gazed out the same window she knew her grandfather had looked out of thousands of times. After a few minutes, Elizabeth decided to leave a note for Hamilton and headed for her grandfather's house to get settled before the wake.

The house was only four blocks away on Beauregard Street, and she found it easily. As the two-story white house came into focus, she could almost see her grandparents sitting on the front porch. She slowly got out of her car and headed up the walk, noticing for the first time that the bricks were laid in a beautiful herringbone pattern. Several trips abroad and an architectural course at Wellesley had refined her eye considerably since her last visit. As she climbed the front steps, she noticed that the door was open, the entrance blocked only by a screen door. She rapped three times loudly and, after hearing nothing, called out a hello. Once again, there was only silence. Carefully she pulled on the screen until it opened. She stepped into the wide entrance hall bisecting the house and looked into the living room to her right. Not one thing had been moved in the years since she had last visited. Only the draperies had faded a little more, and the Serapi rug was wearing a little thin.

"May I help you, miss?"

Elizabeth jumped, turning quickly. She had not heard the person come up behind her. The question came from a tall, bony black woman in her sixties. She had on a blue cotton uniform, and her gray hair was pulled back in a bun.

As Elizabeth looked at her, the inquisitive look drained from the woman's face. Her mouth dropped open, and she quickly

covered it with her hand. "Miss Elizabeth!" she screamed, throwing her arms around Elizabeth's neck. When Elizabeth didn't return the embrace, she pulled back, surveying Elizabeth's face.

"It's me—Rebecca. You haven't forgotten your old Rebecca, have you?"

"Rebecca?" Elizabeth asked, placing her hands on the woman's shoulders. Quickly she pulled the woman back to her, and the hug was mutual this time as hundreds of memories seemed to pour from the recesses of Elizabeth's mind.

"Oh, Rebecca, how many years has it been?"

"Too many, child," she replied, pulling away to get a better look at Elizabeth. "My, look at you. You are a beautiful woman now," she said, stroking Elizabeth's cheek with the back of her hand.

"How have you been, Rebecca?"

"Fine, just fine."

"No, really. I know the last few years have been tough on you and your people." Elizabeth had spent many summer afternoons playing with Rebecca's daughter out behind the house while Rebecca worked inside. She hadn't realized what the segregated South was all about until she went off to college. "How is Princess? Where is she now?"

"She's in Rochester, New York. She's got three children, and her husband has a good job in the Kodak plant up there. Alfreda and Cleve are up there, too. It gets kinda lonely in my old house now since I lost Henry."

"I'm so sorry, Rebecca. I hadn't heard."

"That's all right, child. He was a good man, and he lived a good life. When he died, he was senior deacon in the church. I ain't worried about him, not one bit, 'cause I know he's up in heaven."

Elizabeth smiled and nodded.

"Come on, Miss Elizabeth, let me take you to your room," Rebecca said, grabbing her hand as she headed up the wide staircase. "I already got your bed made up."