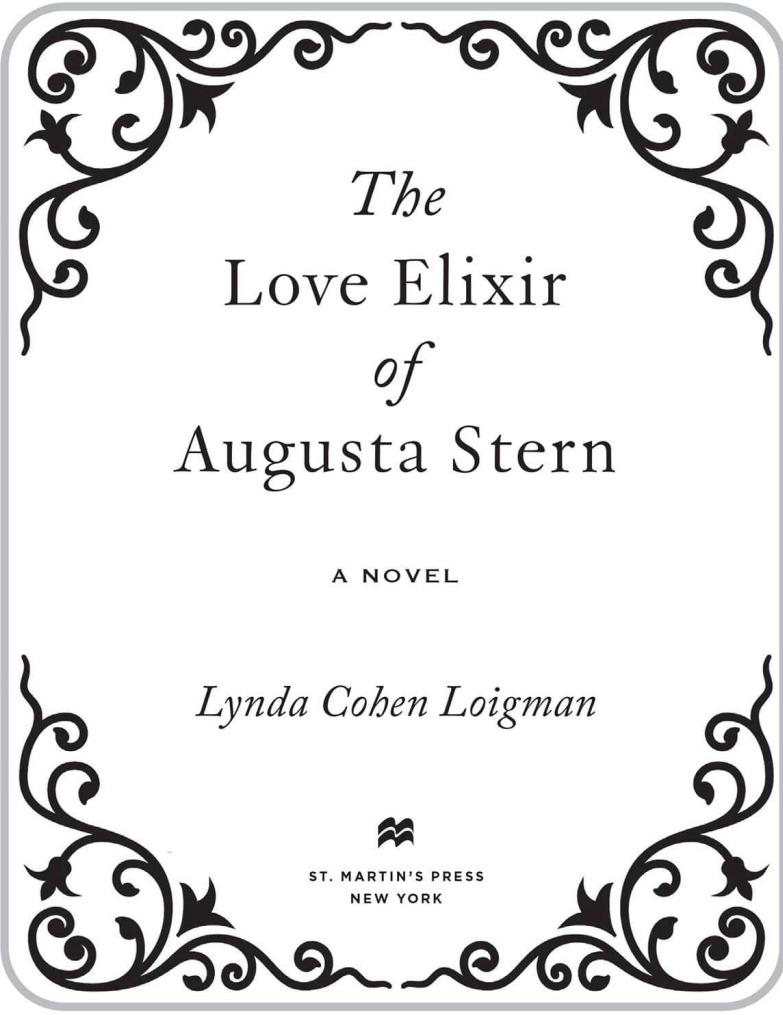


The
LOVE ELIXIR
of
AUGUSTA STERN



A Novel
**LYNDA COHEN
LOIGMAN**

Author of *The Matchmakers Gift*

A decorative border with intricate black scrollwork and floral motifs, framing the central text.

The
Love Elixir
of
Augusta Stern

A NOVEL

Lynda Cohen Loigman



ST. MARTIN'S PRESS
NEW YORK

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*In loving memory of my father, Harris Cohen, and
my father-in-law, Barry Loigman*

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face....

--William Butler Yeats, "When You Are Old"

ONE

JUNE 1987

Augusta Stern did not want to retire. She had no interest in learning to knit, studying a new language, or filling her plate at some overcrowded cruise ship buffet. She did not want to “slow down,” take “time for herself,” or surrender to any other nonsensical euphemism designed to make her feel better about being made to give up the work she’d been doing for most of her life.

The first mention of Augusta’s retirement had come from the hospital administration five years ago; the second, two years after that. But this time, it was more than a mention. This time, Augusta had been summoned directly by the hospital’s new director of human resources—a man far more competent and precise than his sluggish predecessor. Mr. Willard’s office was small but tidy and smelled pleasantly of Lemon Pledge. After gesturing to the hulking device on his desk that Augusta recognized as a computer, he explained how he had been tasked by the head of the hospital’s administration to modernize the workings of his department. “We’re putting all employee records on a new network. Soon our paperwork will be entirely electronic.”

Augusta stared at the computer between them, wondering what any of this had to do with her. “Fascinating,” she replied.

“It is,” the balding director agreed. “Though it requires a good deal of data entry work. Take, for example, the pharmacy department, of which you are an illustrious member. Even as we speak, the members of my staff are typing the personal information of every pharmacist into our new database.”

When Augusta failed to respond, Mr. Willard continued. “Tedious stuff,” he admitted. “Unfortunately, the process has necessitated a close review of the records—dates of licensure, birth dates, et cetera—for each and every employee. In cases where *irregularities* have been identified, my staff has been forced to make further inquiries to ensure accuracy going forward.”

Augusta forced herself to look him in the eye. “How admirable,” she said. She curved her lips into a smile, but she could feel her heart racing in the back of her throat.

“I’m glad you approve,” Mr. Willard said. “Of course this transition marks a significant shift from our past way of doing things.” He glanced at a folder on his desk that bore Augusta’s first and last name. “I see from your records that you’ve worked at this hospital for a little over fifteen years.”

“That’s correct,” Augusta said.

“And according to your employee questionnaire, you’ll be turning seventy this fall?”

Augusta willed her cheeks not to redden. “Yes,” she murmured. “Seventy years old. On October third.”

“You have been a very valuable member of this institution, Ms. Stern. It’s not my intention to coerce you in any way, but given your approaching milestone birthday, I was wondering whether you might be reconsidering retirement?”

For the briefest of moments, Augusta closed her eyes. The answer to the question came to her slowly, like a malted milk shake through a too-narrow straw. It pained her to say the words out loud, but she knew she did not have a choice. In the most respectful manner possible, Mr. Willard was telling her what she already knew: the dates in her paperwork did not add up.

With all the confidence she could muster, Augusta proffered her reply. “In fact, I am,” she announced. “I’ve decided to retire at the end of the month.”

If Augusta was to face the end of her career, she was determined to do so with her dignity intact.

★ ★ ★

On Augusta's last day of work, she dressed with even more care than usual. Thanks to a lifetime of healthy eating, daily exercise, and the diligent application of Pond's Cold Cream, her skin was still a wholesome pink. Her hair had been freshly colored for the occasion. From her closet, she chose a timeless white blouse, a blue cashmere cardigan, and a pair of low pumps that her niece had selected. "Frumpy shoes really age a person," Jackie always said. "That and the wrong color lipstick."

At the pharmacy department's farewell party, Augusta accepted a piece of cake and a glass of cheap sparkling wine. Several of the pharmacists made heartfelt toasts, along with a few of the nurses. When they asked about her future plans, she told them she was moving to Florida in September. Her niece had found her a two-bedroom condo in a small retirement community called Rallentando Springs.

"That sounds wonderful," they told her. "All that sunshine—you're going to love it!" Augusta pretended to agree, but inside, she was not convinced.

At the end of the party, Mr. Willard asked for her forwarding address. Several people swore to keep in touch, but it was only the director who made good on his promise.

★ ★ ★

At the beginning of September, when Augusta got to Florida, a small bundle of mail was waiting for her, including a statement from her new bank and a greeting card postmarked from New York. The inside of the card was inscribed with a message penned neatly in navy ink. "Dear Ms. Stern," the inscription read. "I wish you the best of luck in Florida. Please also accept my warmest wishes for a very happy *eightieth* birthday."

Augusta tossed the card in the trash. Her birthday wasn't for a month yet. Did he really have to rub it in?



The first night she spent in her new condo, Augusta felt an unfamiliar flutter of nerves. The move had exhausted her physically, but her mind was restless, and when sleep would not come, she searched through the cardboard boxes in her living room until she found her father's battered copy of the *U.S. Pharmacopeia*. There were several more recent editions, of course, but she liked the way the old book felt—thick and heavy in her hands. It was the book she had used in pharmacy college, and though she had committed much of it to memory, it soothed her to see the catalogue of drugs, their effects, descriptions, and dosages in print. She whispered their names like the names of old friends, and they kept her loneliness at bay.

After a quick bowl of cereal the next morning, she dug out the first swimsuit she could find and walked to the Rallentando pool. A glossy photograph of this azure oasis had featured prominently in the Rallentando Springs brochure—the one Augusta's niece, Jackie, had foisted upon her several months ago.

In New York, Augusta swam three times a week at an indoor swimming pool run by the city's Department of Parks and Recreation. She did not much like the chemical smell, the chilly locker room, or the thin, scratchy towels provided by the sour-faced attendant. Still, she enjoyed the activity itself—the propelling of her arms and legs through the water, the peace that came to her when her body was busy and her mind was free to wander at will. It was good for her; it kept her strong. She reasoned that the towels and the stench of chlorine were a small price to pay for such obvious benefits.

Augusta's niece knew that her aunt always dreamed of having a swimming pool of her own. Of course the Rallentando pool wouldn't be *hers*—it was for all of the residents to enjoy. But it was only a brief walk from Augusta's apartment, and she could use it whenever she liked. She could swim or read or order her lunch from the cute little snack bar set off to the side. These were a few of the features her niece had used to argue for Rallentando's appeal. But when Augusta arrived at the pool that morning,

she discovered what was perhaps the best feature of all: piles of neatly folded towels—thick, sweet-smelling, and marvelously soft.

Although the pool looked slightly smaller than in the photo, the water was clear, the patio well-kept, and the perimeter peppered with comfortable lounge chairs, wrought-iron café tables, and cheerfully striped yellow-and-white umbrellas.

There were only six people in the pool area when Augusta arrived—two men and a quartet of women playing canasta in the shade. When Augusta walked by, the men didn't bother to look up from the books they were reading. The women were too engrossed in their game to notice the new resident among them. Augusta did not mind in the least. After leaving her towel and her tote bag on one of the chairs, she tucked her hair up into her swim cap, pulled on her goggles, and slipped quietly into the water.

Back in New York, the pool teemed with swimmers, but here, she had every lane to herself. Here, there were no splashing toddlers, no shouting mothers, no other distractions. Lap by lap, Augusta swam forward, her heart pumping contentedly in her chest. Thirty minutes later, when she emerged, her face was flushed with satisfaction. She removed her goggles, pulled off her swim cap, and let the morning sun warm her skin. In the time it had taken to complete her workout, several of the empty lounge chairs had been filled. She walked the perimeter of the pool, trying to remember where she'd left her towel.

She had just spotted her sandals and bag on a chair when she heard a man calling to her from behind. "Goldie!" said the voice. "Is that you?"

Augusta froze solidly in place. Despite the heat and the sunshine, she shivered visibly in her swimsuit. *Goldie?* She hadn't allowed anyone to call her that for more than sixty years.

Impossible, she told herself.

When she didn't answer, the man spoke again. "Goldie? Goldie Stern?"

The voice was rough and much too loud, causing the other pool-goers to stare. Augusta felt all their eyes upon her as they looked up from their books and magazines. Even the women in the shade paused their card game to

squint at the newcomer. There was nowhere now for Augusta to hide, nothing to do but turn around. Half-naked and on display, she felt like a cheap music box ballerina, forced into a clumsy spin.

“It is you, Goldie!” the man bellowed. “I’d know that *tuchus* anywhere!”

He stood in the same direction as the sun, so it took a moment for her eyes to adjust. Bit by bit, he came into focus: gray-haired and shirtless, still broad-shouldered, but now with a prominent potbelly that was slick with sunscreen and impossibly tan.

Before she could protest, he embraced her, pressing his naked, oily torso against her thinly covered flesh. She tried to extricate herself, to put some physical distance between them, but his arms were stronger than she remembered. While keeping one hand around her waist, he removed his sunglasses with the other.

However much the rest of him had aged, his eyes, at least, were the same—heavy-lidded, naproxen blue, full of timeless boyish mischief.

“It’s *me*,” he said, as if she didn’t know. “Irving Rivkin. Remember?”

The last time she’d seen him, she was eighteen years old—young and trusting and deeply in love. She was none of those things now. She removed his hand, took two steps back, and crossed her arms over her damp chest.

“Of course I remember,” she snapped.

“I thought you said you’d never leave New York.”

“And I thought you’d be dead by now.”

He threw his head back and barked out a laugh. “Still as sharp as ever,” he said. “What brings you to Rallentando Springs?”

“I moved here yesterday,” said Augusta. The whisper of panic in her head grew louder. “Don’t tell me you live here, too?”

The smile he gave transported her back to the first day they met in her father’s drugstore—back to a time when her heart was still soft, like overripe fruit left out in the sun. Back to when lines were still blurry, hope was abundant, and love did not seem so far out of reach.

Irving Rivkin winked at her slyly. “You’d better believe it,” he said.

TWO

JUNE 1922

Growing up in the apartment above her father's drugstore meant that Augusta Stern was bound from childhood to the world of the shop below. As a baby, she was mesmerized by the show globe in the window—an antique glass pendant filled with emerald-green liquid that hung from the ceiling on a shiny brass chain. Her favorite sound was the bell on the door that chimed whenever a customer entered. Not only did she take her very first steps in the aisle between the Listerine and the St. Joseph's Worm Syrup, but when, as a nearly mute eighteen-month-old, she slipped and fell headfirst into the display of McKesson & Robbins Cold and Grippe Tablets, family lore had it that the first word she spoke was not *Mama*, *Papa*, or *boo-boo*, but *aspirin*.

Every person within a half-mile radius of the corner of Sackman Street and Sutter Avenue knew Solomon Stern and Stern's Pharmacy. They sought his advice regarding every kind of ailment—from fevers, coughs, and constipation to insomnia and skin infections. They wandered into his shop from the delicatessen next door to ask what to take for their upset stomachs. They carried their screaming children to him directly from the playground down the block because he could disinfect a bloody knee with iodine faster than any doctor in town.

Not only was Augusta's father a skillful practitioner, he was also a thoughtful listener. To his customers, he was priest and rabbi, social worker and secret keeper. The precision with which he formulated his treatments—

whether pills or powders, creams or tinctures—was lauded by everyone in the neighborhood. His medicines made everyone well.

Everyone except for Augusta's mother.

Irene Stern developed diabetes at the age of thirty-seven, when Augusta was only twelve years old. She saw all the specialists there were to see, but there was no medication available to help. When the doctor first made his diagnosis, Irene knew what lay ahead. She did not rail against her fate but set about making the two years she had left as pleasant as possible for her daughters. Even in her final weeks—starved to a bony, fragile shell—Irene was a calm and easy light, devoid of any bitterness. In the end, she simply floated away, like a blue balloon in a cloudless sky that, once set free, rises up, up, up until it vanishes entirely into the ether.

Augusta did not inherit her mother's patience or her predilection for acceptance. Her early upbringing among the boxes and bottles of her father's windowless prescription room had led her to believe that for every ailment, there was a certain cure. All it took was the proper formula and the right ingredients to concoct what was needed. In the wake of her mother's death, however, Augusta was forced for the first time to consider that medicine had its limitations. Her fourteen-year-old body vibrated with ceaseless outrage. How could she have been so misled?

And then, not long after Irene Stern passed, the first injection of a new diabetes medication called insulin was successfully administered to a boy in Canada. Before her mother was diagnosed, Augusta had never heard of diabetes. And now—now that her mother was lost—the newspapers were suddenly full of stories of people who had the same disease. Except that *those* people were being saved—not because they were smarter or more worthy, but simply because they had better timing. As it turned out, Augusta had not been misled. The scientists and doctors had simply been slow.

Augusta was happy the boy lived, of course, but as a motherless adolescent girl, she ached at the unfairness of it all. Irene Stern had been funny and kind. She had sung her daughters lullabies before bed every night. She had drawn them silly pictures and braided their hair. She had taken

them to Coney Island to swim—instructing Bess, her elder daughter, to raise her arms high and reminding Augusta to lift her head and breathe. Irene continued to sing and braid and swim for as long as her body allowed, but in the end, she could not survive the storm her illness had become. Meanwhile, people like the Canadian boy skipped through the very same deluge as if it were barely a drizzle.

When Augusta fumed over the injustice, Bess reminded her of their mother's last moments. "Mama didn't want us to be angry," Bess said. "She would have been pleased that the drug was helping to make people well."

Augusta knew her sister was right, but that didn't make the articles any easier to read. Their father explained that insulin wasn't exactly a drug, but some sort of biological substance that their mother's body had failed to produce. Whatever it was, it was saving people's lives. Pharmacies like her father's did not stock it yet, but Solomon Stern assured his daughters that one day, very soon, they would.

His pronouncement was made with hope and awe, braided with a bitterness that Augusta recognized as identical to her own.

★ ★ ★

Most days, immediately after school, both Augusta and Bess reported for work at their father's store. They navigated the crowds on the avenues—past the stores selling men's suits and women's hats; past the banks and the cobblers and the stationery shops; past the carcasses that hung like so many trophies in the kosher butcher's windows. Wherever they walked, the sidewalks were packed. The Sterns had moved to Brownsville from the Lower East Side immediately after Bess was born—a move made by those who were lucky enough to afford bigger homes, brighter light, and better air. But every year Brownsville grew shabbier and more crowded, more like the place they had left behind.

When the girls got to Stern's Pharmacy on the corner, with its window displays of bottles and brushes and its red-and-white Coca-Cola sign, they

remembered their mother's repeated instructions to neaten their hair and smooth their skirts before stepping even one foot inside. "Once you go through that door," she used to say, "the customers will look to you. I want them to know that your father and I raised polite, intelligent, and well-groomed young ladies."

Augusta was kept busy tidying shelves and dusting the displays in the storefront windows, while Bess was allowed to work behind the cosmetics counter, helping customers choose face powder and perfume. Augusta could not care less about makeup, but she resented the fact that Bess was given what was viewed as a more important task.

"I want more responsibility," Augusta told her father one night after they'd finished dinner. Dinners had become forgettable affairs—meat that Bess left in the oven too long or sandwiches they slapped together at the table. Gone were the days of their mother's roast chicken, with its golden-crisp skin, herbed carrots, and beans. Gone were the days of tangy meatloaf, whipped potatoes, and freshly baked rolls. Gone was the cheerful gathering at the table, their mother's laughter, their father's smiles. Meals were no longer something to be savored.

"A fourteen-year-old can't work behind the makeup counter," said Bess.

"I don't want to sell makeup," said Augusta. "But even if I did, age shouldn't matter. What *should* matter is intelligence and maturity." She turned to her father, who was busying himself with the evening newspaper. "Isn't that right, Papa?"

"Hmm?" said their father, his head buried deep within the pages, pretending he hadn't heard the question. Since their mother's death, Solomon Stern's jet-black hair had dulled to a wispy silver-gray, and the pillowy skin beneath his eyes sagged even more than the unstarched collar of his shirt or the pale green sofa on which the three of them sat. Since Augusta's mother's death, everything in the apartment drooped with grief.

Augusta knew that her father was still stuck in the quicksand of his sorrow. At the store, he managed to keep up with his duties. But at home, he had a more difficult time. There was a barrier between him and his

daughters now, as if he were standing behind a screen—one sheer enough so that they could see him, but opaque enough to blur all his edges.

“No woman wants a child’s opinion on lipstick,” interrupted Bess, who had recently grown confident in both her retail skills and her burgeoning feminine charms.

If their father took up less space now, Bess seemed intent on making up the difference. She was uncomfortable in the quiet their mother’s passing had created. If their father spoke less, she would speak more. If the shine on him dulled, Bess would become brighter.

“As if *you* know what looks best,” said Augusta. “You barely pay attention to the customers anyway. You’re too busy staring at the new soda jerk, batting your eyes, trying to get him to notice you.”

The new soda jerk had been hired as an assistant to the full-time clerk who’d been there for a decade. Fred, the old-timer, was a no-nonsense fellow who ran the soda fountain like a soldier on patrol. He kept the zinc counter polished to a shine at all times, piling soda glasses, ice cream dishes, and sundae spoons in perfectly symmetrical, tidy stacks. The new assistant, George, was not quite as precise, but he was a step up from the last one, who was always having to mop up his own spills. George never overfilled the glasses; he was not sloppy with the walnuts. After a week, George had mastered the lingo. A glass of milk was a “baby.” A scoop of vanilla ice cream was a “snowball.” If someone wanted a Coke with no ice, George shouted, “Hold the hail!”

“I do *not* bat my eyes at George,” Bess insisted. “Besides, even if I did, he’s too busy to notice.”

It was true that the soda fountain was packed every afternoon. Customers clamored for the red leather stools while calling out their orders for ice cream cones and egg creams. Since George’s arrival, business was even busier—pretty girls in dresses sat sweetly at the counter, sipping their sodas more slowly than usual. In between sips, they smiled at George, who seemed completely immune to their charms. Augusta had seen him sneaking glances at Bess whenever he thought she wasn’t looking.

“He notices,” said Augusta, but she would not elaborate. At sixteen, Bess was already more concerned with men than Augusta considered necessary—she didn’t need any additional encouragement. Augusta turned to her father again. “Papa, I want to learn more about your work. I want you to teach me about prescriptions.” When Solomon Stern did not reply, Augusta spoke up again. “I refuse to take no for an answer.”

This time her father looked up from his newspaper. He sat up a little straighter in his chair and blinked at Augusta from behind his glasses as if she’d suddenly appeared in the space before him. “You sound like your mother,” he said before escaping back into his pages.

* * *

The next day, after the school bell rang and the girls made their way to the pharmacy, Augusta carried her books to the narrow back room where her father filled prescriptions. Shelves filled with carefully labeled bottles lined the neat, well-lit space. A locked cabinet held the most dangerous substances—medicines Augusta knew had to be handled with special care. Her father hadn’t said she could be there, but he hadn’t sent her away, either.

When her homework was done, Augusta watched as her father measured powders on a set of gleaming brass scales. As usual, he wore a white cotton coat over a knit sweater vest and a striped bow tie. After a while, he grew tired of her gawking and put her to work dusting bottles and shelves. This continued for weeks on end; in this way, she began to learn the names of the drugs. Whenever Augusta asked a question, her father pointed to the books sitting on his counter. Then she would skim the pages of the *U.S. Pharmacopeia* and the thickly bound copy of the *National Formulary* until she found the answer.

From where Augusta sat reading in the prescription room, she was certain to overhear at least a portion of many of her father’s private consultations. Once Solomon Stern realized this fact, he gave his daughter an ultimatum. “In this store, people speak to me in confidence,” he said. “They

trust that whatever they disclose to me will not be revealed to anyone else. Whatever you hear, whatever you learn about a customer, is *never* ever to be repeated. If you break this rule, there will be no second chance.” As he spoke the words, his eyes bore no trace of their usual softness.

“I understand,” Augusta said.

“Being a pharmacist is more than powders and pills.” Her father glanced toward the locked cabinet behind her. “Sometimes it means keeping other people’s secrets.”

For the first time, Augusta had an inkling that her father was more than the melancholy man she knew. He was not only a father and a widower, but a confidant to people she had never even met. She wondered whether that was what helped to keep him going after his heart had been hammered by loss: the part he’d pledged to play—both professional and personal—in the constantly evolving stories of strangers.

★ ★ ★

When Augusta grew bored of dusting bottles, she tried convincing her father to assign her more substantive tasks. Eventually he set her to work making simple suppositories. Her father mixed the ingredients first, using cocoa butter as a base. Only then was Augusta allowed to take over, placing the material in a cast-iron machine bolted to the wooden counter. As she turned the crank, the medicated paste was forced into bullet-shaped molds. It was a decidedly unglamorous job, but Augusta was determined to prove herself capable.

She was there, leaning over the heavy machine, her braids half unraveled, her forehead dripping with sweat, when her father came into the stuffy room accompanied by a boy she had never seen before. He was a few years older than she, at most, with an untamable cowlick and chalk-blue eyes. His pants, she noticed, were a bit too short, as were the cuffs on his shirt. He looked as if he could use a hot meal—even one of Bess’s overcooked roasts would do.

“Augusta,” said her father, “this is my new delivery boy. He’ll be coming in on weekdays after school, like you. The two of you will be seeing a lot of each other.”

The boy stepped forward to shake her hand. “Nice to meet you,” he said. “Your pop’s got a terrific store.”

“Welcome,” said Augusta. “What’s your name?”

The boy ran one hand over the top of his head, but the spiky tuft of hair would not be subdued. “Irving,” he said. “Irving Rivkin.”