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BETH CARPENTER, under house arrest at her parents' home in Ledyard, goes on trial next month on a capital felony charge. She is accused of playing a role in the murder of her brother-in-law. "I feel a large injustice has been committed," Carpenter said during an interview last week. "I want vindication."

# THE TRIAL OF HER LIFE

Years After Arrest, Woman Accused In Tortuous Plot To Kill Brother-In-Law Eager For Day In Court

By LYNNE TUOHY  
COURANT STAFF WRITER

LEDYARD — Beth Carpenter studied to be a doctor as an undergraduate, but took the law school admission test on a whim. She scored an impressive 90th percentile, and her career path took a radical turn.

She earned her law degree from Catholic University in 1990, interned at the Securities and Exchange Commission and yearned to practice corporate law. She passed bar exams in New York, Connecticut and Washington, D.C.

Her biggest case begins Nov. 13, but she may invoke her right to remain silent.

Seven years ago, Beth Carpenter's life took yet another radical turn.

Carpenter, 37, is charged with capital felony and could spend the rest of her life behind bars if she is convicted of playing a role in the murder of her brother-in-law, Anson "Buzz" Clinton.

There is no forensic evidence — fingerprints, DNA, bloody clothing — linking Carpenter to Clinton's death. Instead, her trial will feature a web of bizarre relationships, obsessions and vengeance. It will turn on whom the jury believes, and disbelieves, after hearing testimony about whether Carpenter helped orchestrate the murder to protect a young niece from perceived abuse by the child's stepfather,

Clinton.

Who is this woman?

New London State's Attorney Kevin Kane would have a jury believe she is a manipulative mistress who begged her cocaine-addicted law partner, Haiman Clein, to have Clinton killed.

Carpenter, who greatly assisted police in apprehending Clein, begs to differ.

"I feel a large injustice has been committed," Carpenter said during a two-hour interview last week. "I want vindication."

Carpenter was sitting in the living room of the modest ranch house in which she grew up, nov

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# Eager For Trial Of Her Life

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a stone's throw from the entrance to the Mashantucket Pequot Museum. The Foxwoods Resort Casino and its towering hotels were built on the dunes and trails over which Carpenter and her friends used to ride horses and bicycles as children.

Now, Carpenter can no more visit that museum or casino than set foot on the grass outside her own door. Her right ankle is banded with an electronic monitoring "bracelet" that will sound an alarm if she steps outside the walls of the home she shares with her parents, sister and her sister's four children, aged 4 to 11. Another beloved family member is Renny, the deathly sick puppy she nursed back to health. He's now her constant companion.

But the electronic monitor represents the most freedom of movement she's had since her arrest in Dublin, Ireland, on Nov. 11, 1997, as she left a gym following a workout. She spent three years in prison, in Ireland and at the York Correctional Institution in Niantic, before her lawyers persuaded a judge to reduce her bond from \$1 million to \$150,000, conditioned on "house arrest."

That was almost a year ago. Probation officers now drive her to and from court and reactivate the monitoring device upon her return to the house.

Carpenter was born Nov. 23, 1963 — the day after President Kennedy was assassinated. She is the oldest of three children. Her sister, Kim, 35, works at a McDonald's. Her 31-year-old brother, Richard, is chief operating officer of New England Sash in Boston.

Ledyard seemed a logical place for the family to settle. Carpenter's father, Richard, spent 22 years with the Navy, as an engine man based in Groton. Now he runs his own landscaping company. Her mother, Cynthia, is a nurse practitioner who consults with local nursing homes.

Carpenter attended Ledyard public schools. Because there were three girls named Beth in her second-grade class, her middle name — Ann — was inked to distinguish her. "I hated Beth Ann," she said, but it haunts her still, in the warrant for her arrest

and in most of the stories written about her case.

One of her hobbies as a child was crocheting, and she would sell her projects at church fairs. She is Protestant, and her ancestry is a mix of English and German, although she often is mistaken for Irish because of her reddish-blond hair and how prominently Ireland figures in the case. In high school, her nickname was "Red."

She was an honors student throughout high school, and a member of the track, basketball and swim teams. She also worked on the school newspaper and yearbook. A guidance counselor urged her to consider George Washington University, and that's where she took pre-med courses. But her interest in becoming a doctor — the aspiration stated in her high school yearbook — had waned, and she did not apply to any medical schools.

After graduating from college, Carpenter attended several law school classes with a friend who was enrolled at the University of Connecticut School of Law, and decided to attend law school. She graduated from the Columbus School of Law at Catholic University in 1990, then traveled Europe with her brother for several months before casting about for a job in corporate law.

The economy was plummeting and it was a tough time to be looking for work, and Carpenter wound up volunteering in the Norwich public defender's office, working with attorney Edward O'Regan.

"She was a very nice person," O'Regan recalled Thursday. "Kind of bashful. Shy. I was shocked when I saw the charges. It didn't seem consistent with what I knew of her. The stories I see and the person I knew are two different people."

O'Regan introduced Carpenter to another young lawyer, Michael Hasse, and the two wound up sharing office space briefly as they entered private practice.

"That was my first paying job," Carpenter said. "I had clients, but it wasn't exactly what I wanted to do. I wanted more guidance. I was right out of law school and Hasse was even younger."

On Nov. 7, 1992, at age 28, Carpenter joined the Old Saybrook law firm of Clein and Frasure.

Carpenter's defense lawyers, Tara Knight and Hugh Keefe, agreed to let Carpenter be interviewed on the grounds that she not discuss certain subjects, including the allegations against her and her relationship with Clein, who will be the state's star witness against her. But certain facts are a matter of public record.

Clein, now 60, was 22 years older than Carpenter and on his fourth marriage when she joined the firm. The two began having an affair about a year later. Clein has testified that he was obsessed with her. He also was using a variety of drugs, principally cocaine. At one point in their relationship, she was pregnant with twins, but miscarried after the first trimester.

Carpenter's family, meanwhile, was embroiled in a custody battle over Kim's oldest child, now 11, who has lived at the Ledyard home most of her life. Beth's parents went to court to try to obtain custody of the child. Even the girl's biological father, John Gall, entered the dispute to seek custody. Kim retained custody of the child throughout.

Nobody much liked Kim's new husband, Buzz Clinton, a man known for his temper. Clein testified that Carpenter believed her niece was being abused by Clinton. Carpenter has never addressed the issue publicly.

Clinton was shot to death on March 10, 1994, by Mark Despres, a drug dealer and devil worshiper who took his 16-year-old son along for the ride. Despres has pleaded guilty to murder and conspiracy to commit murder and is awaiting sentencing. He said that Clein hired him to kill Clinton.

According to the arrest warrant application in Carpenter's case, Despres also told police Carpenter attended several of his meetings with Clein when the murder plot was discussed.

Keefe said during one court appearance that he has a letter from Despres recanting earlier statements he made implicating Carpenter. The letter is not a public document, and Keefe would not reveal its contents last week.

In October 1995 — 19 months after Clinton's murder and nearly two years before a warrant was issued for her arrest — Carpenter left Ledyard for London. She and her lawyers bristle over references that she was a fugitive from justice or "hiding out" in Europe.

"I had been looking for a job here for about 10 months, unsuccessfully," Carpenter said. "I was also looking for a job over there [England]. I got an offer and followed up."

When her visa in England expired early in 1997, Carpenter moved to Dublin. Still, no warrant had been issued for her arrest. While there, she worked at a restaurant, took international law and taxation courses at Dublin University, joined a gym and rented a flat.

Carpenter and her lawyers emphasize that she used her own name, not an alias, in both countries and was cooperating with authorities in Con-

Knight said Carpenter even hired a lawyer and filed a lawsuit against a drunken driver who had struck her as she walked home from the gym, causing serious injuries to her shoulder, back and foot.

"She sought out the authorities," Knight said.

Clein fled Connecticut in December 1995, when police obtained a warrant for his arrest on capital felony charges. He kept in touch with Carpenter, however, without realizing that she was keeping in touch with investigators in the case. It was Carpenter who supplied police the date, time and number of a pay phone in California where she was to call Clein. He was captured while talking on that phone, outside a convenience store, in February 1996. His last words to her reportedly were, "You set me up."

In late August 1997, Kane obtained a warrant for Carpenter's arrest on a charge of capital felony. Keefe said the prosecutor did not tell him about the warrant until two months later. He said he informed Carpenter and was making arrangements for her voluntary return when she was apprehended on Nov. 11.

Kane declined to be interviewed for this story. To secure Carpenter's extradition, Kane told Irish authorities he would not seek a death sentence. Ireland will not extradite prisoners in cases where a death sentence is a possibility. Carpenter ultimately waived extradition and returned to the United States voluntarily, in the company of the U.S. marshals.

"I was at the gym I'd been a member of since I got to Dublin," Carpenter said. "A guy came up to me and said, 'Are you Beth Carpenter?' I said yes." Another plainclothes officer appeared and they took her into custody. "I was in shock. They were reading me some papers, and I just didn't understand."

Carpenter remained at Mount Joy Prison in Ireland for more than 17 months. She praised its humanitarian approach, from allowing inmates to wear their own clothing to listening to and addressing inmates' complaints. She had a part in a play staged for charity, and the inmate actors were permitted to socialize with the guests afterward. The prison's Christmas service was broadcast nationwide, and she read a poem during the service. Rail thin and only 5 feet 3, she broke her nose and a rib playing rugby and several fingers playing volleyball.

Her experience at the Irish prison, where she says she never once was in handcuffs, contrasted sharply with

on her return to the United States on June 19, 1999. She was taken to York in shackles, her wrists secured to a belly chain.

Carpenter's charge is the most serious that can be brought against a criminal defendant in Connecticut. As a result, she was kept in the prison's administrative segregation unit, being fed through a slot in the door.

"You're supposed to get out for one hour every other day and three times a week for a shower," Carpenter said. "That doesn't mean it happens."

When her lawyers complained in court about her prison conditions, the guards at York would taunt her and further restrict her privileges, she said. The medication she was supposed to get for migraines often was withheld or delayed.

"You shut down when you're there," she said of prison life. "You show no emotion. If you're crying, they put you on suicide watch. If you get angry, you get disciplined. So you have to shut down everything."

"You don't really notice it at the time," she said. "But when I came home, I started getting emotional at things most people don't get emotional about."

While at York, she made a few complaints to the warden about a particular officer who would routinely "lock down" the unit rather than deal with the inmates. "I don't call that jailhouse lawyering," Carpenter said, when asked if she saw herself in that role. "I just call it sticking up for my rights."

Carpenter has set new goals for herself that have nothing to do with the white-collar world of corporate law. Now, if given the opportunity to pursue her career anew, Carpenter wants to go back to prison.

"I know it may sound weird, but because of everything I've been through and all the people I've met, I would like to work for some sort of prison reform in this country, to make it more like the Irish system, which is so much more humanitarian," Carpenter said.

First, though, she must place her faith in 12 strangers chosen to determine whether she will spend the rest of her life behind bars, at York, without possibility of parole. She said she is going to New London Superior Court seeking vindication, her freedom and a fresh start.

"I don't know how to describe all the emotions I feel," she said, her eyes welling. "A part of it is anger. I feel a large injustice has been committed." It's one she says no acquittal can erase.

"You tell me how, after seven years, how do you make that up to someone?"