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Inheritance Tracks

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CHAPTER ONE

The first person to arrive at the solicitors' office that particular morning was a trim, grey-haired woman with a neat hairdo.

'If you would come this way, please, Mrs Port,' said Miss Florence Fennel, leading the way to the waiting room of Puckle, Puckle and Nunnery, Solicitors and Notaries Public, of Berebury in the County of Calleshire, 'and I'll tell Mr Puckle that you've arrived.'

'I'm a little early, I'm afraid,' the woman said diffidently, looking round the empty waiting room, 'but I didn't want to be late.'

'Of course not,' murmured Miss Fennel, who was never late herself.

Mrs Port sighed. ‘And getting into Berebury here from out Bishop’s Marbourne way can be very difficult on market day. The traffic is really awful first thing in the morning.’

Miss Fennel, who didn’t own a car herself, nodded as sympathetically as if she did.

‘So,’ the woman went on, ‘I thought I’d rather be early than late. Especially since I’m not really sure what all this is about.’ Sue Port took a letter out of her handbag and held it up in front of the secretary.

Florence Fennel made no reply to this. She did not normally act as the firm’s receptionist as she was in fact the personal confidential secretary of Mr Simon Puckle, the senior partner in the firm, but today was different.

Very different.

The next client to arrive already had his letter in his hand as he came through the door. He announced himself in a businesslike manner as he approached Miss Fennel, waving the letter in front of him. ‘Clive Culshaw of Culshaw’s Bakery, Berebury,’ he said importantly. ‘I have an appointment to see a Mr Simon Puckle here at ten o’clock this morning.’

‘Yes, of course, Mr Culshaw. If you would just follow me . . .’

He continued to hold the letter in front of her. ‘And he hasn’t said what this is all about. Just that it’s a matter that might be of some potential interest to me, which isn’t exactly specific.’

Miss Fennel, who had in fact written the letter and

knew exactly what it was all about, said nothing to this either. She simply ushered him into the waiting room. Mrs Sue Port, its only other occupant, glanced incuriously at the newcomer, showing no sign of recognition. Instead she returned her gaze almost immediately to the glossy magazine she had been studying.

‘I do hope Mr Puckle won’t keep me waiting long,’ said Clive Culshaw. ‘I’m a very busy man.’

‘I’m sure you are,’ said Miss Fennel soothingly. As it happened she knew a great deal more about Clive Culshaw and his business than the man realised – including that he was also a very impatient man. ‘I’ll tell Mr Puckle you’re here,’ she promised, closing the door behind her.

The two in the waiting room had been sitting in silence for some five minutes when the door opened again, and a flustered youngish woman hurried in, talking over her shoulder to Miss Fennel as she did so. ‘So sorry to be late,’ she said. ‘I am late, aren’t I? I nearly forgot and then I remembered and thought I would come along and see what’s up.’

Giving a polite nod in the direction of Sue Port and Clive Culshaw, she settled herself into a chair. ‘Morning, everybody, I’m Samantha Peters,’ she introduced herself cheerfully, plonking herself down on one of the hard chairs and looking round. ‘Oh, what lovely magazines!’ she exclaimed. ‘They don’t have these posh ones at my hairdresser’s.’

Neither of the others in the room spoke and so she buried herself in the colourful pages of a well-known

weekly devoted to the antics of the newly very rich and therefore famous.

The next person to arrive was definitely late and totally laid-back about it. ‘Don’t know what this is all about,’ the young man said casually to Miss Fennel, pulling a crumpled letter out of his jacket pocket, ‘but I thought I’d better come along and see, just in case there’s anything in it for me. I’m Martin Pickford, if you need to know.’

‘Of course,’ murmured Miss Fennel, who didn’t need to know and, in any case, had documented a great deal more about young Mr Pickford than he could ever have supposed.

‘You never know with solicitors,’ he went on, suggesting that he had already had some unfavourable interaction with them. He sniffed. ‘Slippery fellows, if you ask me, and never on the side of the innocent motorist.’

Since Miss Fennel, loyal member of Berebury’s longest-standing legal firm, could not possibly agree with this sentiment, she again said nothing.

‘Don’t usually get out and about as early as this either,’ he added unnecessarily. ‘I mostly work from home and I overslept. Flexible hours and all that.’

Miss Fennel had already realised this since the young man was unshaven and his hair tousled. Whether he was also unwashed was something about which she was keeping an open mind so far. There was a livid bruise down one side of his face and one of his front teeth was missing. ‘But needs must, I suppose,’

he said, shrugging his shoulders. 'I admit it doesn't happen often.'

'If you will just wait in here, Mr Pickford,' she said, opening the waiting-room door. 'I'll let Mr Puckle know that you've arrived.'

Whilst all of the existing occupants had looked up as the man entered the room, limping slightly, none of them spoke or appeared to recognise the new arrival, although Clive Culshaw, still making it quite obvious that he was a busy man, did look first at his watch in a meaningful manner and then at Miss Fennel as she closed the door behind her. Even so, it was a little while before Miss Fennel reappeared.

'Mr Puckle will see you now,' she announced. Since she had looked at none of them in particular when she spoke, all four people sitting there looked up expectantly. Clive Culshaw had even started to rise from his seat when she added, 'All of you.'

'All of us?' echoed Samantha Peters uncertainly, waving a hand round the room. 'I mean, I don't know any of these other people.'

'Me neither,' said Martin Pickford, the dishevelled young man who had been the latest to arrive. He peered blearily round at the others and then added uncertainly, 'At least, I don't think so.'

'I'm quite sure I don't,' said Clive Culshaw decisively. He brandished the letter he had brought with him again. 'And the writer of this didn't say anything about any other people being involved when he wrote.'

‘Nor to me, either,’ said Samantha Peters.

‘I’m sure Mr Puckle will be able to explain everything when he sees you all,’ said Miss Fennel.

‘The operative word being “all”, I suppose,’ mumbled Martin Pickford, clambering to his feet rather unsteadily, the fact that he had a limp becoming more apparent.

‘If you will please come this way,’ said Miss Fennel, not deigning to respond to this, ‘you will find Mr Puckle is waiting for you in his room.’

Mr Simon Puckle was indeed waiting for them in his room. He rose with an old-fashioned courtesy as they entered and shook hands rather formally with each of them in turn.

‘I expect,’ he began pleasantly, ‘you are all wondering why you have been asked to come this morning.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ said Clive Culshaw, nevertheless casting another furtive glance at his watch.

The solicitor indicated a large folder on the desk in front of him. ‘And how it comes to be that, although I can advise you all that you have a common interest in what I have to say, you don’t, as far as I am aware, know each other.’

‘We don’t,’ said Clive Culshaw flatly, looking round. ‘Not as far as I am concerned, anyway. I don’t think that I have ever seen any of these people here in my life before.’ He didn’t sound as if he regretted this.

‘Nor me,’ said Samantha Peters.

Mrs Sue Port looked round curiously at the other three and then shook her head. ‘I don’t think I have, either.’

‘Can we get on?’ asked Martin Pickford plaintively. He was holding his head in his hands now.

Simon Puckle gave a little cough and cleared his throat preliminary to saying, ‘You and one other person who has been delayed and another man who cannot for the time being be traced have all been invited here as a consequence of the recent death of an old lady called Clementina Henderson.’

‘Who?’ asked Samantha Peters.

‘Never heard of her,’ mumbled Martin Pickford. ‘Or, come to that, anyone else called Clementina.’

‘Me neither,’ said Samantha Peters, looking mystified.

‘Actually,’ admitted Martin Pickford, ‘I thought Clementina was an orange.’

‘That’s a clementine,’ the woman called Susan Port informed him kindly.

‘Perhaps he was thinking of a clementini,’ suggested Clive Culshaw, who had noted the other man’s bloodshot eyes and slight tremor. ‘Martini’s big brother,’ he explained. He had shaken his head at the first mention of the other man’s name and scribbled it now on the back of his letter.

‘Good heavens!’ exclaimed Mrs Sue Port, the older of the two women there, sitting up suddenly. ‘I’ve heard of her. I remember now. I came across the name when I was working on my family history. Clementina Henderson – I don’t believe it. I didn’t even know she was still alive.’

‘She isn’t,’ pointed out Martin Pickford. ‘Didn’t you hear what the gentleman said?’

‘I thought she must have died years ago,’ said Mrs Port, ignoring this. ‘She was so very old.’

‘She was indeed. I can tell you that she was nearly a hundred when she did die almost three months ago,’ said Simon Puckle. ‘In a nursing home in Calleford, as it happens.’ Calleford was the county town of Calleshire and some distance from the market town of Berebury.

‘But who was she?’ asked Clive Culshaw, who obviously prided himself on getting unerringly to the nub of any matter as quickly as possible.

Mrs Port turned to him and said slowly, ‘I suppose she would have been my great-aunt. I think,’ she added uncertainly, ‘that she was my late grandfather’s sister.’

‘But not my grandfather’s sister,’ said Clive Culshaw quickly. ‘I’ve never even heard of her.’

‘You are quite correct,’ Simon Puckle nodded gravely at the pair of them. ‘Both of you.’

‘What does that mean, may I ask?’ asked Martin Pickford truculently. ‘I’m not with you.’

‘It means,’ said Simon Puckle, ‘that she was Mrs Port’s great-aunt but not Mr Culshaw’s.’

‘How come?’ asked Martin Pickford, clearly puzzled.

Simon Puckle tapped the file on his desk. ‘The late Clementina Henderson was the cousin of Mr Culshaw’s great-grandmother who was called Horatia.’

‘Was she really?’ Clive Culshaw sat up and began to look quite interested. ‘I’m sure I’ve heard of her – Horatia, I mean. In fact,’ he frowned, ‘I think I must have seen the name on our family tree at some time. It’s

quite a strange name, isn't it? After Horatio Nelson, I suppose, and one that you wouldn't easily forget. My son got really interested in looking everyone up when he compiled the tree, but I'm afraid I was too busy to go into it all.'

'Quite so,' murmured Simon Puckle. He indicated the file on his desk. 'Horatia Culshaw predeceased Clementina Henderson many years ago . . .'

'I'm not surprised,' interjected Martin Pickford, 'if Clementina nearly hit a hundred. Not many people do that.'

'But it is a consequence of her death,' carried on the solicitor imperturbably, 'that all of you here have an interest in a residuary trust.'

Martin Pickford lifted his head at this and looked at the solicitor. 'Sounds good to me, but how come? I mean, if we've none of us heard of her.' He waved a hand in Sue Port's direction. 'Except this lady here, of course.'

Simon Puckle pointed to the file on his desk again. 'You are all, one way and another, descendants of the late Algernon George Culver Mayton.'

Samantha Peters, the young woman who had arrived late, sat up suddenly and said that that name rang a bell with her. 'Mayton, I mean. I don't know why, though,' she said, clearly puzzled. 'But it does.'

'Quite possibly,' said Simon Puckle.

Clive Culshaw sat up, too, and looked round at the others. 'Does that mean we all – we four here that is – are all in one way and another related to each other?'

‘Distantly,’ said Simon Puckle. ‘You four are, and also with another relative who, as I said, is on his way here now, and the missing man. The one we can’t trace.’

Martin Pickford gave a short laugh. It sounded like a seal barking. ‘It’s the six degrees of separation that you hear about, that’s what it is.’

‘In fact, there do happen to be six degrees of separation as far as your family descent is concerned,’ said Simon Puckle sedately. ‘Six generations from Algernon Mayton to you.’

Samantha Peters was still frowning. ‘I’m sure I’ve heard the name of Mayton before. My mother said my father used to mention it a lot, but I wouldn’t know. He died just before I was born, you see, and in any case it was all rather a long time ago.’

‘That is more than likely,’ said Simon Puckle, opening the folder on his desk. ‘I have your birth certificate here, Miss Peters. Let me see now, you are the daughter of William Charles Peters . . .’

She nodded. ‘That’s right, and my mother was Gladys Ivy.’

‘As it happens, Miss Peters, your mother’s name is irrelevant since the trustees are only concerned with the descendants of William Peters who are of full age.’

‘Men only, is it, then?’ said Martin Pickford.

‘By no means, Mr Pickford.’ The solicitor pointed to the file. ‘As it happens, your involvement comes through your mother – your late mother, that is. It is your father who doesn’t come into it.’

‘Alive and well and living in the south of Spain,’ said

the young man. ‘With my stepmother, as it happens. God help him.’

Simon Puckle, like a coachman gathering the reins of a four-in-hand, came back to his narrative. ‘Your father, Miss Peters, would have been Algernon Mayton’s great-great grandson.’

‘Really? I don’t remember my father, of course,’ said Samantha Peters, looking up, a little surprised. ‘He died very suddenly, asthma, I think it was – but before I was born. He was a bit older than my mother, too.’

‘That is so.’ Simon Puckle opened a file. ‘His death certificate, a copy of which I have here, has the cause of death down as status asthmaticus, with your mother recorded as present at his death.’

Samantha Peters nodded. ‘That would figure. That’s when my mother came back to live with her parents here in Calleshire and had me.’

‘Naturally,’ went on the solicitor, ‘in the circumstances, extensive enquiries have been made into all of your families . . .’

‘What circumstances?’ asked Clive Culshaw immediately.

‘Anything to ramp the bills up,’ muttered Martin Pickford, lisping through the gap in his front teeth.

‘The circumstances involved in the winding-up of Algernon Mayton’s family trust,’ said Simon Puckle.

‘And who, may I ask, was this Algernon Mayton?’ asked Clive Culshaw.

‘I’ve remembered who he was now,’ interrupted Mrs Port. ‘My father told me once. He was my great-

great-great-grandfather and he was the inventor of “Mayton’s Marvellous Mixture”. He made his fortune out of selling coloured water in vinegar. At least,’ she looked a bit abashed, ‘that’s what I was always told as a child. I don’t know if it was true or not.’

“What I tell you three times is true”,’ quoted Martin Pickford, lifting his head. ‘That’s what it says in *The Hunting of the Snark*, anyway. Lewis Carroll, if you want to know.’

‘I’m not sure that I do,’ said Clive Culshaw crisply. ‘Perhaps we could get on.’

‘I agree. This is getting interesting.’ Samantha Peters turned back to the solicitor. ‘Please do carry on, Mr Puckle.’

Martin Pickford, who had perked up at the mention of the word ‘fortune’, sunk his head back in his hands again.

‘Algernon Mayton left his money to his descendants,’ said Simon Puckle, tapping the file on his desk, ‘but he put it in a trust that was not to be wound up until the death of the last of his great-grandchildren.’

‘This lady’s great-aunt Clementina?’ divined Clive Culshaw swiftly.

‘Exactly,’ said Simon Puckle, adding ‘wound up *per stirpes*, of course.’

‘Sounds painful,’ said Martin Pickford.

‘That’s herpes – shingles,’ said Samantha. ‘I’m a nurse,’ she explained.

‘You know, I thought I’d seen your face before,’ said Martin Pickford with a certain satisfaction. ‘Berebury

Hospital? Accident and Emergency Department? Saturday nights?

‘Could be.’ She shrugged her shoulders. ‘Since it’s where I usually work.’

Simon Puckle saw Mrs Susan Port looking up at that, too, and nodding. He made a note.

‘But what does it mean?’ asked Clive Culshaw. ‘That’s what I want to know.’

‘*Per stirpes* means that the next generation inherits equally but their children inherit only in proportion to their parents’ share,’ explained the solicitor fluently.

Clive Culshaw lifted his head sharply at that, started to speak and then obviously thought better of it. Simon Puckle made a note of that, too.

Samantha Peters frowned. ‘So if one of them has four children and the other has only two, the four children have the same amount to divide between them as the other family’s two?’

‘That is so, Miss Peters,’ said Simon Puckle.

‘It doesn’t matter to me, as it happens,’ said Samantha. ‘I’m an only child and so was my father. His parents had been killed in a car crash when he was a little boy and so he didn’t have any brothers or sisters either.’

‘But naturally,’ said Simon Puckle, ‘the condition *per stirpes* could be highly relevant to some of you and to what I am about to tell you.’

‘I haven’t got any children,’ said Mrs Port, ‘so that bit doesn’t matter to me either.’

‘That is correct.’ Simon Puckle nodded. ‘But what

does matter to you, Mrs Port, is that you are an only child yourself and therefore you won't need to share your inheritance with any siblings or, failing them, their issue.'

Before he could say anything more, Clive Culshaw suddenly murmured, 'The Mayton money.' He rolled the words round his tongue as if he could taste them and said it again. 'The Mayton money. It's coming back to me now, too. I'd forgotten all about it.'

'What about it?' asked Samantha Peters.

'Something my mother mentioned once.' Clive Culshaw looked suddenly alert. 'She told me that there was money about in the family, but our particular branch wasn't likely ever to get its hands on it. I'm not sure as a child that I really believed her.'

'Sounds to me as if you should have done,' remarked Samantha Peters.

'I didn't believe in Father Christmas either,' put in Martin Pickford. He grinned, the gap in his front teeth now very evident. 'It sounds to me as if I should have done, too.'

'Yes,' went on Clive Culshaw, ignoring this, 'the phrase "the Mayton money" does ring a bell, Mr Puckle, but I just couldn't place the name at first.'

'The Mayton money,' echoed Martin Pickford, latching on to a word he understood even when patently not himself. 'How much money?'

The solicitor put his elbows on the desk and steepled his fingers in front of him. He said, deliberately imprecise, 'Quite a considerable sum.'

‘What does that mean?’ demanded Clive Culshaw. ‘Can’t you quantify it?’

‘Not at this stage,’ said Simon Puckle, ‘and certainly not until all the legatees have been found.’

‘And divided by four?’ asked Clive Culshaw instantly. ‘No, five. You said there was someone who was going to be late.’

‘Well, not five exactly,’ said the solicitor. ‘Therein lies the problem.’

‘Problem?’ Culshaw stiffened. ‘What problem?’

‘Not with Great Aunt Clementina’s death, I hope?’ said Sue Port anxiously. ‘She was so very old, and I’d heard a long time ago that she hadn’t been well. I’d always assumed that she’d died ages ago, but I’d lost touch with her family – I suppose they’d be my second cousins, wouldn’t they? They weren’t exactly local, either.’

‘Quite so,’ responded Puckle. ‘No, no. There was no problem with her cause of death. We checked, of course . . .’

‘Of course,’ muttered Martin Pickford, *sotto voce*. ‘More fees.’

Simon Puckle carried on. ‘And we established that she died of natural causes, duly certified by the registered medical practitioner in attendance at the nursing home where she died.’

‘Problem with what, then?’ demanded Culshaw.

‘With the rest of the legatees,’ said the solicitor.

‘The rest?’ Martin Pickford looked round at the other three. ‘Are there more of them, then?’

‘More of us,’ Sue Port pointed out.

‘There is, as I said, another of Algernon Mayton’s descendants who has been delayed by traffic problems on his way here, and yet another one whom we can’t trace, as of now.’ The solicitor gave another little cough. ‘I was rather hoping that perhaps one or other of you might know of him and thus be able to help us in finding him. We’ve tried all the usual channels, of course.’

‘Of course,’ echoed Martin Pickford sardonically. ‘Well, you would, wouldn’t you?’

‘But what I have to tell you,’ continued Simon Puckle, unfazed, ‘is that unfortunately we haven’t been able to trace him. Not at this point, but it was felt that, even so, the rest of you should all now be advised of the position.’

‘Does it matter?’ asked Samantha. ‘That you can’t find him, I mean.’

‘It certainly does,’ insisted the solicitor. ‘As far as the trustees are concerned, no distribution of the assets – the considerable assets, as I said – in the Mayton Trust can take place until all the legatees are found.’

‘Alive and well, I suppose?’ growled Culshaw.

‘As it happens,’ said Simon Puckle unexpectedly, ‘that is not so important.’

‘Dead or alive, then,’ said Martin Pickford, giving a hiccup.

‘As far as the winding up of the Mayton Trust is concerned,’ Simon Puckle answered him smoothly, ‘either will do.’

‘Fe, fi, fo, fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman,’
said Pickford, his speech a little slurred. ‘Or don’t I?’

‘His name,’ said the solicitor urbanely, ‘is Daniel
Elland, and we haven’t been able to find him anywhere.’