

## CHAPTER 1

George Coggrill was uneasy. It was a bright sunny day in June and it was his birthday, but he had received a summons from his aunt. No matter what the weather, or the occasion, his aunt always made him feel uneasy and a summons from her could not be ignored.

As he trudged along the drive towards Gleefield Manor, the sense of foreboding intensified. But he was determined to put on a brave face. After all, she might simply want to give him a present and wish him happy birthday. But nothing ever seemed simple or straightforward where his aunt was concerned.

The Manor towered in front of him like a medieval castle. Poplar trees lined the driveway and a spacious lawn stretched out either side. He reached the great house, rang the bell and the heavy oak door was opened by a bent old man in black suit and dark grey waistcoat.

A long dark shape rocketed out from behind the old man and up at George's chest. It was a black Labrador, who then proceeded to dance about George on its hind legs, trying to lick his face.

"Good afternoon, Master George," creaked the old man in a broken voice. "Many happy returns of the day."

"Thank you, Gumage," said George. He rubbed the dog affectionately behind its ears. "Hello, Winchester!" Then without taking his eyes from the dog he asked, "Is my aunt at home?"

"She is in the withdrawing room, sir. I'll show you straight in."

George followed him across black and white checked tiles into a vaulted room with faded flower-patterned wallpaper, Winchester trailing at his heels. Glossy photographs adorned the walls, not of landscapes or hunting scenes, but sepia pictures

of racing motorcycles, their leather-clad riders hanging from saddles as they rounded corners or crouched across dark fuel tanks. His aunt was sitting in a high-backed armchair. She was wearing a grey woollen pullover and green corduroy trousers. Iron-grey hair fell down to her shoulders. A book was on her lap. She looked up as they entered.

"Master George, My lady," croaked Gumage gravely. "Shall I bring some tea?"

She regarded both of them seriously. A pair of wire-framed spectacles hung from a chain around her neck. "No thank you, Gumage. Master George won't be staying long."

Gumage's face remained impassive. "Very good, My lady," he said and left closing the door behind him.

Winchester stalked over to the empty fireplace and lay down on the purple rug. A signed smiling photograph of Geoff Duke, in flat cap with goggles pushed above the peak from his 1950s racing heyday, stood in pride of position on the mantelpiece.

"Well, Aunt Jane," said George, "you wanted to see me."

"Yes, I did." She looked at him sternly and made no move to bid him to be seated. George hovered by the door feeling uncomfortable.

"You have been a great disappointment to me, George. Today you are thirty years old and have achieved absolutely nothing with your life. You have not married and have never had a job. Your father left you property, a large amount of money, and you have achieved precisely nothing with it. You lounge about that broken-down mill. Just precisely what do you do all day?"

"Well, Aunt. I look after my orchard, I do some gardening, I go fishing ..."

"Gardening and fishing!" His aunt snorted, shaking her head vigorously. "Those are hobbies not occupations. And watching apples grow is hardly work. You are just wasting your life."

George protested. "But I don't need any occupations. I have enough money and live quite comfortably."

His aunt sighed. "There's more to life than simply living comfortably," she said. She looked at him sternly. "Now what you don't know is that although your father left you all his money, the cottage and that confounded mill, there are certain conditions attached. And I, as his executor, mean to make sure that they are carried out." She paused for dramatic effect and then said, "It was a condition that you should have achieved something worthwhile in your life by the time you were thirty or you would forfeit your inheritance."

"I don't understand, Aunt," said George, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"I'll spell it out for you, George. There was a clause in your father's will that you should have achieved something worthwhile by the time you were thirty. And by worthwhile it is stated that you should be earning a decent living and perhaps have got married and were raising a family.

"But that's not fair!" cried George. "I was never told!"

"That was also a condition. Your father wished that any achievements you made would not be motivated by greed. Since I consider that you have not made any worthwhile achievements, or got married, you stand to forfeit the remainder of your inheritance."

George started to protest again but she held up her right palm, silencing him. "However," she said, "all is not completely lost. Your father, himself, was on occasions not always motivated by good intentions. Indeed before you were born he succeeded in cheating his then business partner, a one Victor Gloam, out of a considerable amount of money which, shamefully, your father unscrupulously used to establish the basis of his own wealth. I have therefore taken it upon myself to propose that you find Victor Gloam and bestow on him half of what your father left you. You can then perhaps claim that you

have after all achieved something worthwhile. You may then at least be able to keep the other half."

"But that won't leave enough for me to live on!" George protested.

"I realise that," said Aunt Jane raising her hand again to silence him, "which means that you will also have to get a job." She pointed a finger at him and added, "If you succeed in all these things you may then inherit my money when I die. Otherwise, your father's money and mine will all go to providing a comfortable home for Winchester." She nodded her head to indicate the large black Labrador asleep on the rug. "I promised my dear sister when she died shortly after your birth that I would see that you would be brought up properly. I also mean to see that some of your despicable father's deeds are repaid."

"But how will I find Victor Gloam? My father died years ago. Gloam might also be dead."

Aunt Jane nodded her head sadly. "Don't remind me. I remember your father drowning in a vat of Buzzbee's gin while undergoing negotiations to buy the distillery. Such a disgrace." She shook her head and said, "However, I digress. Shortly after he was swindled Victor Gloam disappeared and was never heard of again. But! Two months ago I noticed an advertisement in the Mucklesbury Gazette for V. Gloam, Photographer, Weddings and Portraits, Tidburn. I could hardly believe it. All these years and he's living in a neighbouring town just twelve miles away."

She took a newspaper cutting out of the book and handed it to George who stared at it dumbly. "Well off you go now," she snapped, "and I don't want to hear from you again until you have found Victor Gloam and given him half of all you own and half your income."

George was dumbfounded. He was still in a daze after Gumage had shown him out and closed the great door behind

him. He stood for a while on the gravel drive and then slowly made his way back the way he had come. As he walked, he determined to resolve the matter as soon as possible. His aunt was very wealthy and if she kept her word, which she always did, it was probable he would stand to lose much more in the longer term than if he failed to carry out her instructions.

He set off quickly towards the village of Mucklesbury and there caught the quarter past nine bus to Tidburn. The journey across the country lanes took approximately three quarters of an hour and then all too quickly he arrived at his destination. He had already decided not to search too hard for 'V. Gloam Photographer'. He would briefly scan the main streets and then return to his aunt's with the news that the establishment could not be found. It was therefore with great dismay on stepping down from the bus in Tidburn high street that the first shop sign to confront his eyes was that of V. Gloam.

He stood glumly on the pavement and stared at the shop window. It contained prominently displayed photographs of weddings as well as portraits of an assortment of people, children and domestic animals. He agonised for ten minutes and then with great determination strode to the door, opened it and walked inside.

A bell sounded as it swung shut behind him. The shop was deserted. In front of him was a small counter, behind which was a stack of filing cabinets. He approached the counter and looked around him. More photographs, similar to those in the window, adorned the walls. To the left of the counter a small door led to a back room and to its right, a wooden flight of stairs led upwards. There was a clatter of feet on the stairs and a very pretty golden-haired girl descended. She stepped behind the counter. "Can I help you?" she asked in a polite soft voice. Her eyes were bright blue and her smile sparkled.

George was mesmerised by her beauty but he managed to summon up some words. "I ... I wish to speak to Mr Gloam," he stammered.

"There is no Mr Gloam," she replied.

George was confused but he blustered on. "The sign says V. Gloam."

She nodded, still smiling. "That's me ... Victoria Gloam."

"I was looking for Victor Gloam," George continued.

"Victor Gloam was my father. He died two years ago."

George felt a surge of relief. "Oh really," he breathed. Fate was on his side again.

The girl's smile changed to a frown. "Well there's no need to look so pleased about it," she said.

George's face reddened. "I'm extremely sorry, I didn't mean ..."

"What did you wish to see my father about, Mr ... er ... um? What did you say your name was?"

"Oh, er ... um ... Smith," replied George and added hastily, "I was asked to look your father up. I'm sorry to have troubled you, good-bye!" He turned quickly for the door.

"Good-bye, Mr Smith!" Victoria Gloam called after him.

Once outside, George hurried across the road to a telephone box. Life was pleasant once more. He could hardly contain himself. He snatched open the door, grabbed the telephone receiver and quickly dialled his aunt's number. His call was answered by the butler. "Hello, Gumage," said George, "is my aunt there?"

"I will see if I can find her, Master George."

Some moments passed and then Aunt Jane's harsh voice sounded at the end of the line. "Hello, George," she said.

"Hello, Aunt Jane!" George said breezily. She would be pleased that he had acted so speedily and successfully. "I'm calling from Tidburn!"

"Oh yes."

"Yes." Then George remembered to lower his voice and tried to sound not so joyful. "I'm afraid Victor Gloam is dead."

There was silence at the other end of the telephone.

"Did you hear me, Aunt Jane?" asked George

"I heard you, George."

"So I can't give him half my inheritance."

"I realise that, George."

"Well, I thought I ought to let you know as soon as possible. Now I had better be going as I am phoning from a call box and I haven't much change. Good-bye, Aunt Jane."

"George!"

"Yes, Aunt Jane?"

"Did he leave any family?"

George felt his heart sink. "Family, Aunt Jane?"

"Yes, George, a wife, children."

George began to stammer. "I'm ... I'm not sure."

"What do you mean, you're not sure?"

"I'll ... I'll have to check."

"Well make sure that you do, because if there are any relatives then they're entitled to get what should have gone to Victor Gloam. Is that clear, George?"

"Yes, Aunt Jane," said George sadly. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye, George."

George slowly put the receiver down. Well that was that. He would have to see the girl again. It was now clear that his quiet comfortable life would definitely change. Well, it could not be helped. He crossed the road and entered the shop once more.

The interior was empty but, as the doorbell tinkled behind him, Victoria Gloam's voice sounded from behind the closed door of the back room. "Can you wait a few moments?" she called. "I'm in the dark room!"

George stood and once more peered about him. Then, as he waited he thought it might be a good idea to find out more about

her and so he decided to take a quick look upstairs. If she came out while he was up there he could claim that he had misheard her. Anyway he had not much else to lose. He had already lost half his inheritance. He quickly tiptoed up the wooden staircase.

The landing was closed off by a mauve curtain which he pulled back to reveal a long spacious studio. At the end of the studio was an area surrounded by photographic lights, reflectors and tripods. In front of these stood a slim dark-haired handsome young man smoking a strong-smelling French cigarette. He was completely naked.

"Oh ... I'm ... um extremely sorry," said George.

The young man seemed unconcerned. "Hello," he said, "are you looking for Vicky?"

George nodded glumly.

"Well she's in the dark room. The film jammed in the camera. She won't be long."

"I'll wait downstairs," said George. He hastily retraced his steps and arrived at the foot of the stairs just in time to see Victoria Gloam emerge from the back room with a camera in her hand.

"Oh, hello, Mr Smith!" she exclaimed.

George looked behind him. "Mr Who?" he asked.

"Mr Smith," she repeated.

George swallowed hard. "Actually, my name's not Smith."

She raised her eyebrows. "It's not?"

"No. It's Cogrigill."

"Cogrigill?"

"Yes. Did your father ever mention it?"

She shook her head.

"Do you have any other relatives?" he asked

"No. My mother died when I was very young."

George sympathised. "So did mine. I was brought up by my aunt."



Victoria Gloam grew impatient. "Look, Mr Coggrill, what's this all about?"

"I've been told to give you some money."

"What money?"

George took a deep breath. "Rather a lot of money," he said. "About five hundred thousand pounds."

The young man's voice called from upstairs. "Hurry up, Vicky!" he shouted. "I'm getting cold!"

"Be quiet, Justin!" she called, "I won't be long." She turned to George. "Did you say five hundred thousand pounds? Are you serious?"

"Yes. That's right."

"But why?"

"Because I've been told to by my Aunt Jane," said George.

"Your Aunt Jane?" she asked.

"You're also entitled to some property."

"What property?"

A half share of an old water mill. There's a cottage as well."

"I don't understand."

"Vicky!" came the call from upstairs.

"Look," said George, "it would probably be best if I came back later or better still if you contact Aunt Jane."

"Yes, all right," she said feeling rather stunned

"I'll write down her address and telephone number for you. Do you have a pencil and paper?"

She pushed a ballpoint pen and a pad across the counter towards him. George took the pen and hastily scrawled on the paper. Then he put the pen down and looked up at her. "I'd better be going now," he said. "Good-bye, Miss Gloam."

She looked at him blankly. "Good-bye, Mr Coggrill," she said.

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