
Chapter 1

Minutes from richness.

Mr. Berry of Berry and Hayes, Solicitors, walked to a filing cabinet and pulled out another document. The drone of his voice cut through the stuffy air. If only he would get on with it. Get to the important stuff.

She looked around the room, trying to take her mind off the butterflies in her stomach. Dust danced in a single shaft of light spearing through the window. How could he work in this gloom? A bit oppressive to work all your life here, she mused, steeped in... heaviness. That was the word. The room was heavy. There were no walls, only bookshelves. Wonder if he had read any of those books? Bet the books are just for show. Probably boring, all of them.

Anyway, this Mr. Berry was her Granny's appointed legal man, so she ought to listen to him. But he was taking forever. Impatience always made her wriggle and her hands throbbed from sitting on them for the last hour. The old, hard leather chairs stopped your blood.

Mr. Berry sat down at his desk. He pushed up his glasses, shuffled his notes and began to read. Not *just* notes. It was her

grandmother's will. Very. Important. He rambled on but, at last, he uttered her name. Her numb fingers were forgotten and she slid to the edge of the chair. This was why she was here. To see—you know—how much she was going to get. How much her wealthy Granny had left her. Her life was about to change and her heart raced. “And to my granddaughter, Britt Berkeley, I leave my Northern estate, in its entirety and in exclusion of all else.

What? Hang on! Nothing more? In a heart-stopping moment all her hopes and dreams—her future—came crashing down. After all this time, *nothing more?* That was *it?*

She jumped up and pushed back her chair, leaning her clenched fists on the lawyer's desk.

“No!” she cried, her face hot. “Why would she do that? She knows... knew... I hate the place! I hate it up there. I don't want useless, barren land. I-I need money. I want to travel, live my life.”

“Miss Berkeley, please calm yourself and sit...”

“Do you even know where this ‘Northern estate’ is?” she spluttered. “Well, I'll tell you. It's just about as far north as you can go. Just about where the land stops. What use is that to me? I've spent my life trying to avoid it!”

She could cry. She was broke, just got out of a relationship, and needed money to set herself up again. Money from Granny had always been in the cards. But she had not left her a penny. Only useless land somewhere in the godforsaken Arctic. Tundra. Scrubby trees, stunted by the cold. Stands of dark, threatening forests. Deep impenetrable snow half the year. No use to any man. Wilderness for wild animals. She glared at the lawyer. Tears burned her eyes and she was too choked up to speak.

“Miss Berkeley, please sit down. Allow me to continue.” His disdain for her was undisguised.

So what the heck? He was nothing to her, apart from the

deliverer of... this. Her throat tightened and her thoughts were all over the place. What could she do? She sat down, abruptly, clinging to the arms of the chair.

He looked down at the documents again. "Your grandmother was keenly aware of your contempt for the estate."

Britt threw her arms upwards. "So why the hell has she done it? How come she's left a pile of everything to some distant relatives and left me a useless bit of inaccessible land? Can I appeal the will?"

He paused and gave her a withering look. "It will be to no avail, I can assure you. Your grandmother was a very astute woman and the will is watertight. To continue, she has documented that she was also aware that you knew how much this estate meant to her and it was always a point of sadness that you, her only grandchild, did not share this love but she accepted your indifference. In the light of this understanding, she anticipated that you would want to sell the estate."

"Too right, I will." Relief. Problems solved.

"That will, of course, give you the money you so desperately seek."

He thinks I'm shallow and money-grabbing, she thought. Perhaps she was but she had needs.

"So? What is it to you?" she challenged. "The estate is mine, apparently. So I can sell it."

"That being your wish will also be your prerogative. However—"

Her breath caught in her throat. What now?

"Your grandmother stipulates that, before the estate becomes fully yours to dispose of as you see fit, and honourably..." he added, glancing up at her. "It is a requirement of the inheritance that you travel to the estate and experience it one last time. She adds that she fervently hopes you will come to terms with your inheritance and retain the estate

to pass on in its entirety, culturally and geographically, to your future offspring.”

She buried her face in her hands and groaned. “No, she cannot do this to me!”

“She expresses a wish that you spend some time there.”

“I can’t do that! I’ve got a job. I can’t just take off for weeks. I would lose my job and have no income!” Could this get any worse?

The searing unhappiness that seemed like a permanent knife in her guts these last few weeks, twisted a little more. The room and her life darkened.

“You have made it abundantly clear that your finances are in dire straits, Miss Berkeley.”

“I beg your pardon?” She would not tolerate his remarks, even if he was a lawyer. He probably thinks he can get away with it.

“Fortunately, your grandmother anticipated this and she has made available funds, payable to your account, to cover you for one year’s loss of earnings and all expenses relating to your trip. To this end, please be so kind as to leave your bank details with my secretary and I shall arrange the transfer forthwith.”

“Oh.” That took the wind out of her sails. “Right. Well...”

She hesitated and he hastened to draw things to a conclusion. “That completes the reading of your grandmother’s will in how it relates to you. I have no further information for you other than this – the name and details of a contact for you when you arrive at your destination. He holds the deeds to the estate.” He handed her an envelope. “I understand it has been some years since you were last there.”

Britt looked up from the envelope in her hands and nodded. Her churning stomach was confusing her thoughts..

He stood up and rounded the desk, extending his hand in

a handshake. "Please contact my secretary should you wish to discuss any matters further. Now, if you will excuse me, I have another engagement."

His limp, cold handshake told her everything. He did not care about her, and why should he? He had done his job for Berry and Hayes, Solicitors. Payment of his fee to follow.

He ushered her to the door. Deflated, challenging him further was beyond her. And, after all, he was just the highly paid messenger. There was no way she could afford any more minutes of his time – now or later. Stuffing the envelope in her bag, she managed a tight smile. Besides, she needed to escape the thick gloom of that office. The door was quickly closed behind her.

Sighing, she walked out of the building to find her car. The sun had gone but at least the air was fresh. She looked up at the sky to the gathering grey clouds and the first heavy drops of rain. The wind messed with her hair, blowing it into her eyes and she struggled to pull her hood up. The world's crying with me, she thought ruefully. At least, someone, or something understands. She tucked her hair away, held on to her hood as best she could and ran for it, yanking her bag up onto her shoulder.

The car was only a street away. She leapt over the swelling puddles. Reaching the car, her wet hands fumbled for the keys and she jumped in, slinging her bag angrily on the floor. Angry with what had happened. Lost hopes and dreams. Slamming the door, she threw back her head and groaned. She was wet and sad. Tears choked her but she pulled herself up short. Crying was not going to get her home. And there was too much to think about and to sort out. She needed to get home, or the only place she could call home right now. Hauling herself up, she started the engine and moved out into the traffic for the short journey back to her friend's flat.

Banging the door closed, everything bubbled up again. She had been thinking she was about to inherit a small fortune and... nothing. Worse, she was now saddled with another thing to deal with. The dull ache from losing Aaron—dumped by Aaron—thudded away inside her and she was still trying to untangle all the stuff they had built around them. If it wasn't for Joel, she'd be homeless, too. If only she had not spent all the money. The fun holidays and clothes had been great but she had no savings. No home of her own, no Aaron, no money, no more fun and holidays, an uninspiring job. And now this. The last thing she wanted to do was head up to the Arctic.

She winced with the pounding in her head. Joel was not home. Throwing her bag onto the bed, she pulled off her wet clothes and let them drop on the floor. Looking around, the room was as messy as her head but she did not care. She did not care about anything anymore, or was it that she could not cope with caring? The bed was unmade and old coffee mugs teetered on the bedside table, her expensive headphones winding amongst them. Her washing hung over the bedstead and her stuffed suitcase was shoved under the bed. She sighed. It was not fair or right but she could not be bothered with it all.

In the bathroom, she closed the shower doors against the world. The steamy water plunged out of the shower head. She was in a warm tropical storm deep in the jungle as it cascaded down through her hair and over her body. Well, that's what she imagined, trying to wash her problems away. Not working. Maybe one day she would have a luxury shower like this, a luxury flat like this. Maybe, once she had sold that land, she would be able to start afresh. But who buys wasteland where no one wants to be? And at what price? Land in London may

be worth millions but on the cold edge of the world? Practically zilch. This was not going to be easy. Couldn't imagine people queuing up to buy.

And then there was her job to sort out. Well, she would not miss it, but it was a job. Maybe they would hold it for her, at least so she had something to come back to.

The smell of the citrus oils as she soaped her hair and body was delicious and she was reluctant to leave the watery sanctuary. A few more minutes before she stepped out and wrapped herself in a huge towel. Joel lived so well.

Once it was dry, the dark waves of her hair bounced around her face and shoulders. Smelling heavenly, she pulled on her soft, loose night slip and knickers. No point getting dressed again, it was almost evening. All she needed now was Aaron. With a jolt, the hurt came back. He would not be coming. No comforting strong arms to surround her. Where did it go wrong? She dropped onto the edge of the bed and the tears fell. Everything was crushing – the past, the struggles, the unknown ahead.

How was she going to turn things around? She groaned, burying her head in her hands. Maybe, if she admitted it, what she had had was not *too* great but it was a sort of stability. She had rolled with it. She had not given her life much thought beyond Aaron and working. Things were just as they were. Stupid really, not to plan and move forward. Aaron obviously had – he was doing new things. Without her. Why hadn't he talked to her instead of silently planning in his own head and falling out of love with her?

The front door banged. "Britt? Are you home?"

Joel was back. His head poked around the door and Britt looked up, her face smudged with tears trailing down her cheeks. Instantly, Joel rushed over and kneeled beside her.

"Britt, what's wrong? What happened?" He pushed Britt's hair back away from her face. "What did he say?"

Britt shook her head, miserably. “Nothing. I mean... no money. She left me no money.”

“What? Nothing at all?”

“Not a penny.”

“But, I thought she was—”

“She was. She was loaded!”

Joel was shocked. “Well, that’s mean. She could have left you something. What happened to all her stuff? All the money?” He grabbed a box of tissues and gave them to Britt.

She wiped her eyes and her face. “Oh, she did leave me something. Just not money. All that went to everybody else.”

Joel was puzzled. “Did she leave you the house, then?”

She shook her head. “No. The big house went to someone else, as well.”

“I don’t understand, what else was there?”

“She left me her ‘beloved Northern estate.’” She almost spat out the words.

“What northern estate? I didn’t know she had one. You’ve never mentioned it.”

“I hate it, that’s why.”

“Where is it, this estate?”

“Well, it’s north all right. It’s right up in the Arctic. I was forced to spend summers there – so many times – until I threatened to run away if they made me go anymore.”

“It actually sounds lovely.”

“No, it’s not! It’s endlessly boring. Nothing to do. And now I’m stuck with it.” She began to sob again. “On top of losing Aaron, and the flat, and no money. I was banking on her leaving me some money.”

Joel jumped up and sat beside her, putting his arm around her shoulders and pulling her towards him, his other arm around her waist.

“Hey, come here,” he said soothingly, stroking her hair. He rocked her gently as she sobbed and nestled his hand close to

her skin. "You've had a rotten time. And Aaron wasn't worth it. You know that."

"Yes, but..."

"Shh. Don't think about it. You're just tired. It's been a long day. Just relax for now. We'll sort it out tomorrow."

Britt rested her head against her friend. His soft voice calmed her. She was so tired. Joel's arm rubbed up and down her own, soothingly, his hand caressing her waist, tucked under her slip, warm against her skin. It was so comforting to rest in someone's arms. Sleepy.