

An excerpt from *The Girl Who Has Everything*

Chapter One: Blonde Inheritance

~

“But why? I told you I want you to come in with me.” Even as I asked I knew the answer. I’ve lived with Henry as long as I can remember and I could read his poker face.

Just as he can read mine. “You know why, Miss Phoebe,” the butler answered. “It’s un—”

“—suitable, I know. And unacceptable, unallowable, unseemly...” Unfairly, I was running out of adjectives. I took a deep breath. “Unfortunately, I don’t care! I need you in there, Henry.”

Henry raised his eyebrows at me, but he’s always doing that. It’s his job. He bent down to whisper, “He’s only a lawyer. They don’t bite.”

Right. I stared at him with my X-ray vision. You can go without blinking for a long time if you practice.

Henry backpedaled. “Well, some do—if the occasion calls for it—but you’re his client. That makes you—”

“The boss?”

“Exactly. Now, I’ll run down and get a Tribune to keep me company. I promise faithfully not to do the crossword puzzle without you.” Awkwardly patting my shoulder, he abandoned me to my fate.

The lawyer’s hair had long since abandoned him, except for some stubborn high-altitude tufts clinging to his ears. He stood up creakily and introduced himself when I walked in. Mr. Grossbeak’s teeth gleamed sharp and yellow.

“We’ll get started as soon as your, er, stepmother arrives,” the lawyer informed me. “If you please, miss.” He gestured to a seat across the conference table.

I hate waiting. It’s not something I do well, but anyway I sat down. From the depths of the highly polished table my small face peered up at me like a phantom. Gold-rimmed glasses threatened to ski down my nose.

Waiting is boring. I got up and looked out the window.

Even in the late March drizzle, Chicago’s State Street bustled: limousines and town cars the size of matchbox toys jockeying to double-park, bug-sized pedestrians with umbrellas scurrying faster than the cars. From twenty-eight floors up, it was like watching television with the mute on—and about as interesting. I sat down again.

“Coffee, miss? Oh, forgive me, perhaps pop?” Mr. Grossbeak asked.

I shook my head. Clearly the lawyer wasn’t used to children.

There we had something in common. I’d spent most of my life around grown-ups— mainly my butler, Henry. He Who Is Never Unsuitable.

Mr. Grossbeak scratched notes with a fountain pen on a yellow pad. Catching my eye, he explained, “I can’t waste time at the rates I charge.”

“But aren’t I paying for your time now, Mr. Grossbeak?”

His eyebrows lifted like Henry’s, only bushier. “Yes, in a way, that’s true. Though you are a minor.”

“A miner?” I imagined heigh-hoing off to work behind the seven dwarfs.

“Underage. You won’t come fully into your inheritance until you are much older.”

“Oh.” I thought for a minute. “What’s my new, er, stepmother like?”

“I’ve never met her, but I presume she falls into the same category as your previous, er ... I mean, I would prefer not to speculate.” His mouth clamped shut.

Mr. Grossbeak’s evolutionary ancestor had to have been a crocodile. I wouldn’t get any more out of him, any more than I’d gotten out of Henry. When I read about orphans in books— leatherbound with color plates and raised letters you can feel on the page—they all have happy endings.

Not in real life. I understand I’m the leftover no one wants to touch, the kind you save long enough for it to get lost in the back of the refrigerator and grow fuzzy green mold. Thrown out in the end, because it isn’t needed or wanted.

As an experiment, I spun my chair. Well oiled, it rotated soundlessly, but Mr. Grossbeak’s frown sent my foot braking.

It wasn’t fair. Albert Marchant had been eighty-one, and I had just turned twelve when he died. Suddenly I remembered laughter, a creaky wheeze ending in a gasp, when Poppy introduced me to one of his factory managers as his “biological possibility.” Tears tried to leak out, and I shut my eyes tight against their wetness. You wouldn’t catch me crying in front of a crocodile.

My fingers worked over my dress pleats, smoothing them over my knees. Poppy had ordered the dress for my birthday. I wore matching shoes and carried a handbag with a clasp that snapped like a small dog’s jaws. The purse wasn’t strictly necessary, but I keep feminine protection in it, prepared to become a woman.

Another thing I’ve noticed about orphans in books: None of them have periods. To excuse their authors, most of the books I read were written over sixty years ago. Life’s messy bits got ignored then, according to Henry.

This is what Henry said about Poppy: “There was too much time lost between you and Mr. Albert, nearly seventy years, but you still shared a special bond.”

No one would replace Poppy. To be honest, though, sometimes when I saw my father, it felt like I was getting an audience with the king. That’s what Fortune magazine had called Albert Marchant: the Bean King. It said so all in capital letters right on the cover, where he had posed standing on a hill of navy beans with my stepmother Aimee.

That was two stepmothers ago.

No. Make that three stepmothers.

I, Phoebe Caroline LeBourget Marchant, am the Bean King’s daughter. His only child.

The door opened. “Ms. Vicki Marchant,” the secretary announced.

The Bean King’s widow, last and luckiest in my long string of stepmothers, strode in. She could have walked off the inside cover of a thick romance novel, only with updated clothes, not those silly falling-off ones. She had long legs, shown off by her short red skirt. Vicki wore a matching military-styled jacket with big gold buttons. Masses of blond hair grazed her shoulders. Based on looks alone, if Vicki were auditioning for the role of evil stepmother in a fairy tale, she wouldn’t get the part.

In the movies, though, she might.

She looked too young to be anybody’s mother.

“Sorry I’m late,” Vicki apologized. “Those reporters! And cameramen! They’ve been following me everywhere. Plus, I got lost and had to stop for directions. Even then, I had to guess. Where’s Bert’s lawyer gonna hang? I figured the tallest building around.”

Mr. Grossbeak waited while Vicki settled herself. Wasting little of his hourly fee on introductions, he tented his fingers together and began. “My lifelong client, Mr. Marchant, your father,” he nodded at me, “and your husband,” he sniffed at Vicki, “made a habit of revising his will about as often as he married. In a nutshell, all the proceeds of his estate—the bean processing plants, his stocks, his investments, the mansion, the hotel where you’ve been staying—”

“He owned the hotel suite?” Vicki asked.

“He owned the hotel.” Mr. Grossbeak looked down at his notes, but his train of thought appeared to have been derailed.

“Etcetera,” I prompted.

“Yes, etcetera.”

“He apparently had a lot of etceteras,” put in Vicki. “Get on with it.”

Mr. Grossbeak sent her a quelling look. “He left everything in trust to Phoebe. As for you, Ms. Marchant—”

“Vicki.”

“Er ... Ms. Vicki... There is a lifelong annuity—as long as you don’t remarry—per the prenuptial agreement of three hundred thousand dollars per year.” He looked at me and explained, “What she signed so that when she and Mr. Marchant divorced—”

“Hey, who says we would have?” Vicki exclaimed.

Oh, statistics. Probability. And five ex-stepmothers before her. It was easy to peg Icky Vicki into the never-going-to-be-a-rocket-scientist-in- a-million-billion-years category.

Mr. Grossbeak closed his eyes. “My apologies, madam. What Mr. Marchant also

decided was that you, madam, myself, and one other person, who prefers to remain anonymous at this point, are to be the trustees. Mr. Marchant entrusted me to take care of the financial management. He had a more, uh, personal role in mind for you, Ms. Vicki.”

“Wait a sec—just how big was Bert’s estate, Mr. Grossbeak?”

“In the neighborhood of three hundred sixty-five million.”

My stepmother appeared stunned, as though a vet had zapped her with a tranquilizer gun. Her voice shook when she said, “Ten days ago, I knew my bank account to the penny, Mr. Grossbeak, and today, you’re rounding to the nearest million. I can’t even count that high.” She closed her eyes, and slowly, very slowly, a smile spread across her face, almost to her ears. “But, I’ll have a lot of fun trying!”

She dug into her purse. Holding a hairbrush up like a microphone, she deepened her voice. “Vicki, if someone gave you three hundred sixty-five million dollars, what would you do with it?” She wrinkled her forehead, as if thinking, then switched to a breathy voice. “I would, um, use it to promote world peace, make sure all kids can read, feed the homeless, and uh...save all the endangered species of the world!”

Mr. Grossbeak cut her off. “If you’re quite finished?” The ice behind his tone would have caused frostbite in anyone else.

The young woman slipped the hairbrush back into her purse. She turned to me. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. I’m sorry Bert’s dead and all. Your father and I were just getting to be good friends. I knew he had money, but I had no idea. No idea at all.” Then she asked the lawyer, “So, do I, like, get any more, if I take on Phoebe?”

Cautiously Mr. Grossbeak nodded. “If you share a household, all common expenses will be picked up. And an additional sum will be settled on you.” He consulted

his notes. “Ten million dollars. Additional funds would require approval, but any reasonable request would be met. In view of the fact that you are, er...I mean, were his wife, rather than his ex...”

I stared at the woman as she fussed with her hair. I felt dazed. Now I understood I wasn't exactly a leftover, unless it was a very big pile of beans. Certainly I'd inherited a problem.

Vicki's smile couldn't get any broader. She quit playing with her hair and swiveled back to me. “How old are you, Phoebe? Ten, eleven?”

“Didn't my father tell you? I'm twelve.” So that Vicki wouldn't have to do the math, I added, “It will be nearly six years before I'm eighteen.”

Vicki locked eyes with me, and just for an instant I wasn't sure if she fit the stupid stepmother stereotype I'd gotten used to—it looked like more than air space between those greedy green eyes.

Mr. Grossbeak cleared his throat. “Phoebe, your father wished for you to give this relationship with your stepmother a chance. Yet, he had arranged—if it doesn't work out—for you to attend boarding school in Switzerland.”

Switzerland? “But—” I started to protest.

Vicki interrupted me. “Looks like we're happily ever after stuck with each other, kid,” she drawled. Rising, she extended her hand. “Come on, Phoebe. Let's go.”

I let her hand hang there in the air. A diamond encircled by emeralds sparkled on her ring finger, showy as the rest of her. My last stepmother had worn its twin. Or maybe not? Poppy had never wasted money. He hadn't even believed in giving to charity.

“I'll prepare the paperwork for legal guardianship,” Mr. Grossbeak was saying.

“Let’s meet in six weeks’ time? In view of Phoebe’s age, she’ll have a lot of say in the decision.”

“You mean if it doesn’t work out?” Vicki stopped in her tracks. “What’s not to work out? I’m her stepmother.”

“Mr. Marchant did have someone else in mind. The other trustee I spoke of...a child can be a heavy responsibility—”

“Oh, don’t worry about us. I’m sure we’ll get on. We have so much in common!”

“Three hundred sixty-five million dollars,” I said, before I could stop myself.

Again, Vicki surprised me. She laughed long and hard.

Poppy, how could you have done this to me?

“Miss Phoebe,” Mr. Grossbeak said, “you are to call me with any problems or concerns. Here is my card. I’ll check in with you next week, as your father would have wished.”

That left me with no choice but to tail Vicki’s sassy chassis out the door. Where it would lead, I didn’t have a clue. But then, who cared? Vicki wouldn’t stick around.

None of my other stepmothers had. Why should she be any different?

As long as I didn’t get sent away, I would be all right. Henry would know what to do. I held that thought close.