

## The Pre-nuptial

Ben MacMillan sat in his smoky office sucking on a fat cigar. As recent heir and chairman he occupied the penthouse suite boardroom on the hundred and thirtieth floor. The MacMillan group was the largest company in the world not to be floated on the stock market. It owned interests in commerce, restaurants, chemicals, telecommunications and construction, and generating annual revenues in excess of forty billion dollars. As well as owning the business Ben also owned a hotel in Hawaii, three yachts, a small but profitable car hire firm and a castle in Norway. As boss he awarded himself an annual salary of £8,000,000 and 50 days holiday.

None of which brought him any lasting joy. What Ben loved more than anything in the world was tobacco. He smoked morning, noon and night; waking each day covered in fag ash, and dropping off with a lit cigarette in his mouth. He'd smoked since he was a small boy, and expected to depart his mortal coil coughing and spluttering in a glorious, tar-filled cloud.

Today however, even tobacco failed to raise his spirits. The previous evening he'd had the biggest argument of his life. It was bigger even than the time when he'd threatened to sack the entire board of directors. The argument had been with his wife, Trudy. It had lasted through the twilight hours and long past sunrise. They'd shouted at first, but in time they began hurling things at each other – vases, ashtrays, plates, chairs.

Ben had been the catalyst of course. He'd committed the cardinal sin of referring to his wife by the wrong name. Rather than apologizing he then went on the offensive, stating that it was an easy enough mistake to make.

Ben had been married six times.

Eventually, after many hours of screaming and cursing and wishing each other dead they had collapsed into two armchairs facing one another. They had lacked the strength to turn away. When Ben awoke she was gone. He arrived at work five hours late, not that anyone noticed.

The couple had met the previous autumn whilst attending an assertiveness course. Neither of them had any need to further expand their domineering egos. They towered over their fellow delegates, bullied the tutor, and marveled at each other's inability to back down over even the most marginal of disputes. At the time Ben had been in the process of being divorced by wife number five. Despite having just lost hundreds of thousands in painful litigation he was more than happy to allow the vultures to continue circling. He knew that money and power were the world's most potent aphrodisiacs, and used them as leverage to bed the latest in a long line of gold-diggers.

Trudy was a woman of considerable beauty and intellect. She moved in far higher social circles than Ben, (even with his executive status), and was the perfect trophy wife to dust off and take to parties. Trudy in turn saw beyond her initial revulsion to the bank balance that lurked beneath. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement; unashamedly parasitic.

Their wedding had been lavish and vacuous. Most of Trudy's friends declined as a protest against her choice of husband. Ben had no real friends. His side of the registry office was filled with vague business acquaintances. The registrar preached on the sanctity of marriage with tongue firmly in cheek, and when she spoke of, 'compatibility, mutual respect and love,' everybody looked at the floor.

It was only a matter of time, (three weeks to be precise), before they discovered that they hated each other.

On his desk, barely visible beneath piles of paper and discarded cigarette packets, a high-tech desk phone was flashing.

'Yes?'

'Sir, Matthew Monaghan is in the reception,' his secretary informed. 'He doesn't have an appointment.'

Matthew was his lawyer – A painfully thin, gaunt gentlemen with a dash of grey blond hair and a deeply condescending manner. He *never* gave anyone his full attention, and *never* went anywhere without an appointment.

*This doesn't bode well.*

Ben looked down at his attire, and then out at his office. Both looked like bombsites.

'Give me two minutes, and then show him in please.'

'Very good sir.'

Some of Ben's buttons had popped open around the girth of his belly. He re-fastened them, and put on his suit jacket so as to hide the various stains on his shirt. The content of his desk was swept into a bin. He then made a quick sweep of the office picking up various cellophane wrappers. Returning to the desk Ben reclined into his sweaty mock leather armchair and found that his cigar had gone out.

He lit a cigarette and took a deep drag.

'Ah,' he sighed as the nicotine fix took affect. A smoke snake coiled down his trachea, broke in two at the bronchioles, subdivided over and over again as it passed into his lungs and over the alveoli, causing the cilia hairs to arch as if winded.

A short while later Matthew Monaghan entered the room without knocking. He was dressed in a regal burgundy blazer, and walked as if he were a drill sergeant.

'Matthew!' Ben greeted like a brother, 'always a pleasure to see you.'

'Likewise,' the lawyer replied, sounding anything but sincere.

'Won't you take a seat?'

Matthew already had.

'Can I get you a drink?'

'Coffee, white, no sugar.'

'Milk or cream?'

'Oh... cream...thank you.'

'Cup or mug?'

'Obviously a cup.'

'Caffeinated or Decaf?'

'Decaf,' the lawyer replied loathsomely.

Ben averted his eyes and relayed the order over the phone to his secretary. Legal matters always made him nervous. His fidgeting hands lit a second cigarette before the first was even half finished.

'So Matthew, what can I do for you?'

'What can *you* do for *me*? I would have thought it was the other way round. Given the circumstances I came over as quickly as I could.'

Ben had no idea what he was talking about, but had no wish to appear more foolish than he already did. 'You are right of course. Please continue.'

Matthew opened his briefcase and produced a document. 'Well Ben, as far as settlements go it's pretty steep. I'm not sure that you have much Leigh way.'

'Settlement? What do you mean by 'settlement?''

Matthew frowned, as if confused. 'Well...The divorce settlement of course.'

'DIVORCE?' Ben shrieked. 'SHE WANTS TO DIVORCE ME?'

'You mean to say that you didn't know?'

In a bizarre colourful display blood rushed into Ben's cheeks in a flurry of anger, and then drained out white again as shock set in.

'Well...Trudy and I haven't exactly been getting on recently.'

It was Matthew's turn to look embarrassed. 'I don't know what to say. I'm sorry.'

'Thanks,' Ben muttered. 'You would think I'd be used to it by now.'

'Quite,' Matthew replied. Having presided over his client's five previous divorces he was now finding the whole saga tedious.

'So, what does she want, about fifteen percent?'

'More like eighty.'

'EIGHTY? BUT WE'VE ONLY BEEN MARRIED FOR TWO YEARS!'

'She would have been entitled to claim fifty after only six months.'

'OK,' Ben braced himself, 'so what *exactly* does she want?'

'The exact percentage equates to seventy-seven point two, but...'

'But what?' Ben growled.

'...She wants the house.'

'Oh dear God please no.' Benjamin wept as he thought of his precious twelve-bedroom mansion. 'How strong a case does she have?'

'Well, in any normal situation a case like this would be extremely shaky with a great many holes in it. For a start the two of you haven't had any children, so she can't claim the house for maternal purposes. Secondly, as it's your income that has been used for living expenses and hers for extra spending, you could quite justifiably argue that seventy-seven point two percent is too great a slice of the pie. But unfortunately in her case it's all pretty airtight. Listen Ben, I think I should tell you that Trudy has some pretty powerful friends on the bar. Rumour has it that Colin Dean has offered his services to her at a substantially reduced fee.'

'It would have to be,' Ben interrupted. 'That guy charges eight grand a day!'

'Nine,' Matthew amended.

'Yeah well whatever,' Ben scorned. He took a huge drag on his cigarette, and then coughed up a large globule of phlegm. Matt looked horrified.

'What I'm saying is that with that kind of muscle behind her she's almost certain to win the case. At the very least she'll have it dragging out in red tape for years.'

'Yes but *seventy-seven point two percent and the house!* How can she ever, in any situation imaginable, be entitled to any more than fifty percent? This is ludicrous.'

'It's the nature of the beast Ben.'

'Don't give me that crap,' Ben snapped. 'You get what you pay for, and I pay you an awfully large amount of money.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'It means that I expect you to win for me. Not tell me to fall at the first hurdle.'

'Ben, as your lawyer it is my duty to inform you that she has gathered an arsenal against you. You either fork out for the same, or accept defeat and look at damage limitation. On the strength of the prenuptial agreement I'd go with the latter.'

'*Prenuptial agreement?* What are you talking about?'

Matthew failed to hide a look of complete astonishment. '*You didn't know she wanted a divorce, and you don't know about the prenuptial agreement?*'

'No,' Ben answered without thinking, confirming his stupidity.

'Well you signed it.'

'What?'

'It's all here in black and white.'

Matthew took a single sheet of paper from his leather folder and handed it to Ben. It read as follows:

*I the hereby stated Benjamin Macmillan do promise that in the event of divorce 77.2% of my net assets at that time plus the mansion at Beckencourt will be awarded to my wife, Mrs. Trudy Macmillan.*

*I am of sound body and mind, and do undertake this action of my own free will.*

*Signed: Benjamin Macmillan*

Witnesses: 1) Trudy Macmillan 2) Sid Smith.

'Sid Smith? Who the hell is Sid Smith?'

'Apparently he was the limousine driver who took you and Trudy from the church to your wedding reception.'

'She got me to sign a pre-nuptial on my wedding night, *while I was drunk?*'

Matthew shrugged. 'I guess she figured that as wife number six she couldn't afford to be too careful.'

'Yes, but *while I was drunk?*'

'A signature is a signature I'm afraid. It's all here in the small print, small print that you signed.'

Ben took several large drags of both cigarettes as he considered his options carefully. On one hand he had signed an apparently irrefutable agreement. On the other hand he knew for a fact that his total liquid assets came nowhere near seventy-seven point two percent of the total holdings. To find that kind of money he would need to sell off a vast part of the company. He doubted that the venture would survive. Then again, a lengthy court battle would probably waste yet more money before he invariably lost and had to fork out anyway.

Either way it didn't look good. There was another deep inhalation followed by a rattling cough.

Matthew was shuffling uncomfortably in his seat. He was clearly holding something back.

'What is it?' Ben bellowed.

Matthew adjusted his tie and took a deep breath. 'As your lawyer it is my responsibility to outline every option available to you.'

'Yes?'

'Well, Trudy has stipulated *extenuating circumstances* whereby all claims in the matter of divorce would be relinquished.'

Ben eyed his lawyer suspiciously. 'What do you mean, *extenuating circumstances?*'

'There is a certain, shall we say *condition*, whereby she would withdraw her application for divorce. Trudy would then stay married to you, and would only be entitled to an inheritance as a widow in the event of your death.'

Ben lit yet another cigarette while he thought for a moment. The smoke spiraled up to the ceiling and became so thick that Matthew could barely see him.

*OK, so I have to stay married to her, which isn't so great, but neither will I have to give her any money.*

*It sounds too good to be true. There must be a catch.*

'What is this *'condition?'*'

Matthew unbuttoned his waistcoat. Matthew *never* unbuttoned his waistcoat.

'What does she want?'

Matthew didn't seem to know how to answer.

'What?' Ben repeated.

'A lung.'

'A *lung?*'

'A lung.'

'What kind of lung?'

'One of yours.'

'One of mine? How does she want it?'

'On a plate.'

The penny finally dropped.

'*That clever bitch.*'

A sinister sense of admiration passed between the two men. As awful as Ben's predicament was, they both had to respect the simple genius with which Trudy had ensnared him. She had secured a checkmate before the game had even started.

'What are my chances?'

Matthew stared at his client in disbelief. 'Are you kidding? You're not *actually* considering it as an option?'

'Well why ever not?'

'You'd die!'

'That's certainly one possibility.'

'An *extremely likely* possibility.'

'Look Matthew, I'm not going to spend the rest of my life being laughed at – the tycoon who was utterly defeated *by a woman!*'

'Better that than having no life at all.'

'How about something minor like my appendix?'

'Now you're taking a wild stab in the dark. The letter clearly stipulates that the organ must be one of your lungs.'

Something occurred to Ben. 'Hang on! No, this is great. We'll have her on blackmail charges. You can't ask someone to dice with death or pay a fine. It's amoral and illegal.'

Matthew shook his head. 'The document *would've* opened up a can of worms if it was either signed or dated. Nothing connects Trudy with this statement.'

'Then how did you get it?'

'They slipped it under my door – Old lawyer's trick.'

'Damn it.'

'For crying out loud Ben, pay her the money, take the dive. This is your life we're talking about.'

'No, this is *her* life we're talking about, every day for now till the end of time, staring down at me from her palace, a palace that she's stolen from me, and me, ruined, and knowing that she got the best of me. No, I can't let that happen. I'll get the best doctor, the best advice, and I'll stitch her up good and proper.'

Once the decision had solidified in his mind Ben committed himself to finding the best possible surgeon. Those who came highly recommended had a price tag to match their reputation. Cost however no longer seemed an issue in light of how much he would be saving in the long run. This was just as well given the man he eventually chose.

Conrad Fiennes cost an absolute fortune. Ben incurred further expense when he realised that he would also have to bribe his surgeon in order to keep the reason for the ludicrously pointless operation to himself. More bribes followed in pursuit of altering medical records to give him a condition that actually warranted removing a lung, and to secure the light lips of record clerks.

After much financial and emotional wrangling the date of the operation was set for one week's time.

The next day Trudy's army of lawyers met with Matthew to agree terms. Colin Dean led the assault. From the permanent smirk he wore Matthew got the distinct impression that his counterpoint was in on the whole thing. Both men were their usual domineering selves, but the whole matter was so clear-cut that neither side made an inch. Secretly taping each other's conversations they retired to comb over every syllable for ammunition.

It wasn't until Sunday that Ben suddenly became aware of his own mortality, and started to question whether or not it was such a good idea. From the conservatory of his immense mansion he could hear church bells ringing. Over the years he had become so accustomed to their sound that he no longer noticed them, but he noticed them today. They brought on a strange duality in the way that he felt. On one hand they made him feel serene and even *spiritual*, but on the other they summoned a picture in mind of the bells at his funeral after he died due to complications.

*It's only money Ben.*

*'This is your life we're talking about!'*

*Isn't that what Matthew told you?*

*Yeah, well it's all well and good for him to get Zen about it. He's not the one facing financial ruin.*

*It's akin to placing a large sum of money on a roulette wheel and shouting 'All on black,' only instead of black and red the options are 'life and death.'*

As the church bells continued to ring Ben imagined Trudy at the roulette wheel. She wore the uniform of a croupier and held what appeared to be a blood and mucus covered lung.

'Mwaaahahahaha,' she cackled, 'black or red *loser*, black or red?'

'You think you've beaten me?' Ben shouted into the empty room. 'You think I'm going to let you waltz in and take what's not yours? Well, I'll show you who's boss. You just wait and see.'

He waddled to the lounge and phoned Matthew. An hour later they were drinking cognac together in the conservatory. Ben wolfed his down without thought for either texture or taste. Matthew on the other hand took his time, and savoured the liquor. As he did so he perused a series of documents. The look on his face suggested to Ben that he had committed another faux pas

'I'm not sure that you want to be showing me these Benjamin,' Matthew finally commented.

In his hands he held enough evidence of negligence and libel to burn the Macmillan group to the ground several time over.

'Why ever not?' Ben asked, trying to make light of his disclosure.

'Take this article for example; an analysis that links chemicals produced by the Macmillan group with skin cancer. If this got out you'd be ruined.'

'That's exactly what I'm getting at. Don't you see?'

'No, I'm afraid I don't.'

'If I die during this operation I want you to release all of these articles to the press simultaneously.'

Matthew was appalled. 'But it would destroy everything *your father* built.'

'I know. The stock price would go through the floor. Trudy's share of the assets would be worthless. That'd teach her to mess with Ben Macmillan!'

Matthew laughed in sheer bewilderment. 'How in God's name would it teach her anything? *You'd be dead*, and all she would have to do is wait for the share price to recover, or sell them, in which case she still makes a healthy profit, either way she wins and you lose. Give her the money Ben and get on with your life.'

'No way,' Ben argued defiantly. 'I couldn't live with the shame.'

'You probably couldn't live at all with one tar filled lung. Get a grip and realise the gravity of your actions.'

'Look Matthew, are you my lawyer or not?'

Matthew thought of his remunerations. 'Yes I am.'

'Then for crying out loud help me. All I want you to do is financially shaft the bitch in the event of my death! I mean is that too much to ask?'

Matthew put on the sombre look he'd perfected for just such occasions. 'OK Ben...OK.'

Conrad Fiennes may well have been the best surgeon in the entire world, but he certainly didn't earn the money for his bedside manner. He was an Austrian, and outside of his grasp of complex medical commands, his English was pretty poor. This gave him an unnecessary brashness due to a limited vocabulary.

'Good,' he announced as he entered the room. 'Is no problem, you sleep, we cut open, fix, closing you up, goings home. Good.'

Ben wisely decided that it was best to get under the anesthetic before he died of a heart attack. He asked for the ugliest nurses they had so that he could be sure of having people who had been employed solely on the basis of skill.

The anaesthetist's needle went in and slowly but surely Ben left the realms of reality. He didn't feel himself going under, but decided that he must have done when all the nurses were suddenly naked and gorgeous beyond words.

'Hello Ben,' the nearest one purred, 'kiss me you bronzed Adonis.'

Ben sat up and rubbed his eyes. To his amazement the women were still there.

'Hello my dearssssss,' he hissed with laughter.

Slowly and with synchronized movement they approached him, swaying their hips, and wearing expressions that could only mean seduction. A brunette reached over him provocatively to read his chart whilst a blonde adjusted his pillow.

*Going private certainly has its benefits.*

'Cigarette?' they all asked in unison.

Ben smiled from ear to ear. 'But of course darlingsssssss.'

From nowhere they produced serpents, smoke billowing from their mouths, filling the room with their sweet aroma. Ben took one in his hands and pressed its venomous jaws to his lips.

The serpent's fangs sunk deep into his flesh. Ben felt such a rush – a hit, an aphrodisiac, a remedy.

'Ohhhhhh Babieeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.''

The naked nurses giggled making their breasts bounce. Down in the darkness of his lustful mind he was in his element, adored and worshipped by beautiful women, and free from the domineering evil that was Trudy. It was so perfect that he could have stayed there forever, but for the steam roller that crashed through the wall and drove over his chest.

'Ohhh, God,' Ben moaned; drool dripping from his chin.

*Surely the operation failed and I died?*

He opened a lazy, bloodshot eye and took in his surrounding.

*Even worse, I'm still alive!*

He felt the strangest sensation, an immensely unpleasant sluggishness coupled with euphoria. Conrad Fiennes had cracked open his sternum, wrenched open his ribs, taken away half a major organ, and then stitched him back up again. The amount of morphine required to stem that kind of pain meant that Ben was as incoherent as a filthy drunk.

He sniggered momentarily, but had no idea why, then he was confused, then he started to cry.

'He-low-ow,' he bumbled. His eyes rolled clumsily around taking in clinical curtains and flashing monitors. 'Is any bod-ee the-rrrrr-re?'

At some undefined point in time one of the highly skilled, repulsively ugly nurses entered his room and grimaced warmly.

'Oh good Mr. Macmillan, you're awake. How do you feel?'

'Like death.'

'Oh come now. It's not that bad.'

'I can assure you that it is.'

'Well cheer up. There's someone here to see you.'

'Is there?' Ben replied sluggishly.

His morphine-filled world found a little clarity as Trudy entered the cubicle followed by Colin Dean. Ben's observation weren't at their sharpest, but he could swear that she had been crying. Colin looked as imposing as ever, and was carrying a large leather satchel.

'Hello darling,' Trudy greeted tearfully.

'Hello dear,' he replied, smiling his drug-induced smile.

‘Oh what a brave man you are,’ she bolstered, sounding like the teacher of a reception class. Behind her Colin nodded in agreement.

‘Am I?’ Ben grinned, as pleased as punch. ‘Thank you very much.’

‘The doctors say that they caught the cancer in its early stages, and that it’s been completely removed.’

He didn’t understand. ‘I had cancer?’

Trudy fluttered her ample eyelashes. ‘I’m afraid so sweat-pea. It was looking a bit touch and go there for a while, but *thank God* you’re fine now.’

At the back of his mind something told Ben that he was supposed to be angry with Trudy, that there had been some kind of fight about something, but he was too battered and bruised to hold the thought. It slipped from his grasp and sailed serenely away.

Trudy looked fantastic.

*How could we have ever fallen out?*

*I am a successful business man with a beautiful wife and a clean bill of health.*

‘I love you *angel*.’

Trudy radiated. ‘I...love you too *muffin*.’

She very obviously nudged Colin. He stepped forward.

‘Mr. Macmillan. Your conduct over these last few months has been an inspiration to me...’

Try as he might Ben couldn’t remember any of the last few months.

‘...You’ve moved me in ways I cannot put into words...and I was just wondering...Can I have your autograph?’

Ben’s already foolish looking face became even more so. ‘Of course you can.’ He felt so honoured to be asked by a man of Colin Dean’s stature.

Colin opened his leather satchel and produced a thick wad of paper held together with a bulldog clip. Trudy placed a pen into Ben’s fumbling fingers.

‘Sign here please.’