

THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

JEFFREY
ARCHER

Best
Kept
Secret



PROLOGUE

BIG BEN STRUCK four times.

Although the Lord Chancellor was exhausted, and drained from what had taken place that night, enough adrenalin was still pumping through his body to ensure that he was quite unable to sleep. He had assured their lordships that he would deliver a ruling in the case of Barrington versus Clifton as to which of the young men should inherit the ancient title and the family's vast estates.

Once again he considered the facts, because he believed that the facts, and only the facts, should determine his final judgment.

When he'd begun his pupillage some forty years before, his pupilmaster had advised him to dismiss all personal feelings, sentiment or bias when it came to making a judgment on either your client or the case before you. The law was not a profession for the faint-hearted or the romantic, he stressed. However, after abiding by this mantra for four decades, the Lord Chancellor had to admit he'd never come across a case that was so finely balanced. He only wished F.E. Smith was still alive, so he could seek his advice.

On the one hand . . . how he hated those clichéd words. On the one hand, Harry Clifton had been born three weeks before his closest friend, Giles Barrington: fact. On the other hand, Giles Barrington was unquestionably the legitimate son of Sir Hugo Barrington and his lawfully wedded wife, Elizabeth: fact. But that didn't make him Sir Hugo's first born, and that was the relevant point of the will.

BEST KEPT SECRET

On the one hand, Maisie Tancock gave birth to Harry on the 28th day of the ninth month after she'd admitted having a dalliance with Sir Hugo Barrington while they were on a works outing to Weston-super-Mare. Fact. On the other hand, Maisie Tancock was married to Arthur Clifton when Harry was born, and the birth certificate stated unequivocally that Arthur was the father of the child. Fact.

On the one hand . . . the Lord Chancellor's thoughts returned to what had taken place in the chamber after the House had finally divided and the members had cast their votes as to whether Giles Barrington or Harry Clifton should inherit the title and *all that therein is*. He recalled the Chief Whip's exact words when he announced the result to a packed House.

'Contents to the right, two hundred and seventy-three votes. Non-contents to the left, two hundred and seventy-three votes.'

Uproar had broken out on the red benches. He accepted that the tied vote had left him with the unenviable task of having to decide who should inherit the Barrington family title, the renowned shipping line, as well as property, land and valuables. If only so much hadn't rested on his decision when it came to the future of these two young men. Should he be influenced by the fact that Giles Barrington wished to inherit the title and Harry Clifton didn't? No, he should not. As Lord Preston had pointed out in his persuasive speech from the opposition benches, that would create a bad precedent, even if it was convenient.

On the other hand, if he did come down in favour of Harry . . . he finally dozed off, only to be woken by a gentle tap on the door at the unusually late hour of seven o'clock. He groaned, and his eyes remained closed while he counted the chimes of Big Ben. Only three hours before he had to deliver his verdict, and he still hadn't made up his mind.

The Lord Chancellor groaned a second time as he placed his feet on the floor, put on his slippers and padded across to the bathroom. Even as he sat in the bath he continued to wrestle with the problem.

Fact. Harry Clifton and Giles Barrington were both colour

PROLOGUE

blind, as was Sir Hugo. Fact. Colour blindness can only be inherited through the female line, so it was nothing more than a coincidence, and should be dismissed as such.

He got out of the bath, dried himself and pulled on a dressing gown. He then slipped out of the bedroom and walked down the thickly carpeted corridor until he reached his study.

The Lord Chancellor picked up a fountain pen and wrote the names 'Barrington' and 'Clifton' on the top line of the page, under which he began to write the pros and cons of each man's case. By the time he'd covered three pages in his neat copperplate hand, Big Ben had struck eight times. But still he was none the wiser.

He put down his pen and reluctantly went in search of sustenance.

The Lord Chancellor sat alone, eating his breakfast in silence. He refused even to glance at the morning newspapers so neatly laid out at the other end of the table, or to turn on the radio, as he didn't want some ill-informed commentator to influence his judgment. The broadsheets were pontificating on the future of the hereditary principle should the Lord Chancellor come down in favour of Harry, while the tabloids only seemed interested in whether or not Emma would be able to marry the man she loved.

By the time he returned to the bathroom to brush his teeth, the scales of Justice still hadn't come down on either side.

Just after Big Ben chimed nine, he slipped back into his study and went over his notes in the hope that the scales would finally tilt to one side or the other, but they remained perfectly balanced. He was going over his notes yet again when a tap on the door reminded him that, however powerful he imagined he was, he still couldn't hold up time. He let out a deep sigh, tore three sheets off the pad, stood up, and continued reading as he walked out of his study and down the corridor. When he entered the bedroom he found East, his valet, standing at the foot of the bed waiting to perform the morning ritual.

East began by deftly removing the silk dressing gown before

helping his master on with a white shirt that was still warm from ironing. Next, a starched collar, followed by a finely laced neckerchief. As the Lord Chancellor pulled on a pair of black breeches, he was reminded that he'd put on a few pounds since taking office. East then assisted him with his long black and gold gown before turning his attention to his master's head and feet. A full-bottomed wig was placed on his head before he stepped into a pair of buckled shoes. It was only when the gold chain of office that had been worn by thirty-nine previous Lord Chancellors was draped on his shoulders that he became transformed from a pantomime dame into the highest legal authority in the land. A glance in the mirror, and he felt ready to walk on stage and play his part in the unfolding drama. Just a pity he still didn't know his lines.

The timing of the Lord Chancellor's entrance and exit from the North Tower of the Palace of Westminster would have impressed a regimental sergeant major. At 9.47 a.m. there was a knock on the door and his secretary, David Bartholomew, entered the room.

'Good morning, my lord,' he ventured.

'Good morning, Mr Bartholomew,' the Lord Chancellor replied.

'I am sorry to have to report,' said Bartholomew, 'that Lord Harvey died last night, in an ambulance on his way to hospital.'

Both men knew this was not true. Lord Harvey – Giles and Emma Barrington's grandfather – had collapsed in the chamber, only moments before the division bell had sounded. However, they both accepted the age-old convention: if a member of either the Commons or the Lords died while the House was in session, a full inquiry as to the circumstances of his death had to be set up. In order to avoid this unpleasant and unnecessary charade, 'died on his way to hospital' was the accepted form of words that covered such eventualities. The custom dated back to the time of Oliver Cromwell, when members were allowed to wear swords in the chamber, and foul play was a distinct possibility whenever there was a death.

PROLOGUE

The Lord Chancellor was saddened by the death of Lord Harvey, a colleague he both liked and admired. He only wished that his secretary had not reminded him of one of the facts he had written in his neat copperplate hand below the name of Giles Barrington; namely, that Lord Harvey had been unable to cast his vote after he'd collapsed, and had he done so, it would have been in favour of Giles Barrington. That would have settled the matter once and for all, and he could have slept soundly that night. Now he was expected to settle the matter once and *for all*.

Below the name of Harry Clifton, he had entered another fact. When the original appeal had come before the Law Lords six months before, they had voted 4–3 in favour of Clifton inheriting the title and, to quote the will . . . *and all that therein is*.

A second tap on the door, and his train bearer appeared, wearing another Gilbert and Sullivan-esque outfit, to signal that the ancient ceremony was about to begin.

'Good morning, my lord.'

'Good morning, Mr Duncan.'

The moment the train bearer picked up the hem of the Lord Chancellor's long black gown, David Bartholomew stepped forward and thrust open the double doors of the stateroom so his master could set off on the seven-minute journey to the chamber of the House of Lords.

Members, badge messengers and house officials going about their daily business stepped quickly to one side when they spotted the Lord Chancellor approaching, making sure his progress to the chamber was unimpeded. As he passed by, they bowed low, not to him, but to the Sovereign he represented. He proceeded along the red-carpeted corridor at the same pace as he had done every day for the past six years, in order that he would enter the chamber on the first chime when Big Ben struck ten in the forenoon.

On a normal day, and this was not a normal day, whenever he entered the chamber he would be met by a handful of members who would rise politely from the red benches, bow to the Lord Chancellor and remain standing while the bishop on duty

conducted morning prayers, after which the business of the day could commence.

But not today, because long before he reached the chamber, he could hear the murmur of chattering voices. Even the Lord Chancellor was surprised by the sight that greeted him when he entered their lordships' house. The red benches were so packed that some members had migrated to the steps in front of the throne, while others stood at the bar of the House, unable to find a seat. The only other occasion on which he remembered the House being so full was when His Majesty delivered the King's Speech, in which he informed members of both Houses of the legislation his government proposed to enact during the next session of Parliament.

As the Lord Chancellor walked into the chamber, their lordships immediately stopped talking, rose as one and bowed when he took his place in front of the Woolsack.

The senior law officer in the land looked slowly around the chamber to be met by over a thousand impatient eyes. His gaze finally settled on three young people who were seated at the far end of the chamber, directly above him in the Distinguished Strangers' Gallery. Giles Barrington, his sister Emma and Harry Clifton wore funereal black in respect for a beloved grandfather and, in Harry's case, a mentor and dear friend. He felt for all three of them, aware that the judgment he was about to make would change their whole lives. He prayed it would be for the better.

When the Right Reverend Peter Watts, Bishop of Bristol – how appropriate, the Lord Chancellor thought – opened his prayer book, their lordships bowed their heads, and didn't lift them again until he'd uttered the words, 'In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.'

The assembled gathering resumed their places, to leave the Lord Chancellor the only person still on his feet. Once they'd settled, their lordships sat back and waited to hear his verdict.

'My lords,' he began, 'I cannot pretend that the judgment you have entrusted me with has proved easy. On the contrary, I confess it to be one of the most difficult decisions I've had to

PROLOGUE

make in my long career at the bar. But then it was Thomas More who reminded us that when you don these robes you must be willing to make decisions that will rarely please all men. And indeed, my lords, on three such occasions in the past, the Lord Chancellor, having delivered his judgment, was later that day beheaded.'

The laughter that followed broke the tension, but only for a moment.

'However, it remains my duty to remember,' he added after the laughter had died down, 'that I am answerable only to the Almighty. With that in mind, my lords, in the case of Barrington versus Clifton, as to who should succeed Sir Hugo Barrington as his rightful heir and be granted the family title, the lands and all that therein is . . .'

The Lord Chancellor once again glanced up towards the gallery, and hesitated. His eyes settled on the three innocent young people in the dock, who continued to stare down at him. He prayed for the Wisdom of Solomon before he added, 'Having considered all the facts, I come down in favour of . . . Giles Barrington.'

A buzz of murmuring voices immediately erupted from the floor of the House. Journalists quickly left the press gallery to report the Lord Chancellor's ruling to their waiting editors that the hereditary principle remained intact and Harry Clifton could now ask Emma Barrington to be his lawfully wedded wife, while the public in the visitors' gallery leant over the balcony railings to see how their lordships would react to his judgment. But this was not a football match, and he was not a referee. There would be no need to blow a whistle, as each member of their lordships' house would accept and abide by the Lord Chancellor's ruling without division or dissent. As the Lord Chancellor waited for the clamour to subside, he once again glanced up at the three people in the gallery most affected by his decision to see how they had reacted. Harry, Emma and Giles still stared expressionlessly down at him, as if the full significance of his judgment had not yet sunk in.

After months of uncertainty, Giles felt an immediate sense

BEST KEPT SECRET

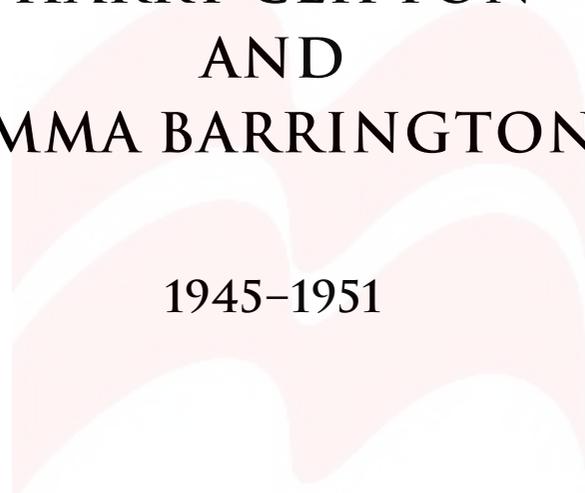
of relief, although the death of his beloved grandfather removed any feeling of victory.

Harry had only one thought on his mind as he gripped Emma firmly by the hand. He could now marry the woman he loved.

Emma remained uncertain. After all, the Lord Chancellor had created a whole new set of problems for the three of them to consider that he wouldn't be called on to solve.

The Lord Chancellor opened his gold-tasselled folder and studied the orders of the day. A debate on the proposed National Health Service was the second item on the agenda. Several of their lordships slipped out of the chamber, as business returned to normal.

The Lord Chancellor would never admit to anyone, even his closest confidant, that he had changed his mind at the last moment.



HARRY CLIFTON
AND
EMMA BARRINGTON

1945–1951

1

‘THEREFORE IF ANY MAN can show any just cause why these two people may not lawfully be joined together in holy matrimony, let him now speak, or else hereafter for ever hold his peace.’

Harry Clifton would never forget the first time he’d heard those words, and how moments later his whole life had been thrown into turmoil. Old Jack, who like George Washington could never tell a lie, had revealed in a hastily called meeting in the vestry that it was possible that Emma Barrington, the woman Harry adored, and who was about to become his wife, might be his half-sister.

All hell had broken loose when Harry’s mother admitted that on one occasion, and only one, she had had sexual intercourse with Emma’s father, Hugo Barrington. Therefore, there was a possibility that he and Emma could be the offspring of the same father.

At the time of her dalliance with Hugo Barrington, Harry’s mother had been walking out with Arthur Clifton, a stevedore who worked at Barrington’s Shipyard. Despite the fact that Maisie had married Arthur soon afterwards, the priest refused to proceed with Harry and Emma’s wedding while there was a possibility it might contravene the church’s ancient laws on consanguinity.

Moments later, Emma’s father Hugo had slipped out of the back of the church, like a coward leaving the battlefield. Emma and her mother had travelled up to Scotland, while Harry, a

desolate soul, remained at his college in Oxford, not knowing what to do next. Adolf Hitler had made that decision for him.

Harry left the university a few days later and exchanged his academic gown for an ordinary seaman's uniform. But he had been serving on the high seas for less than a fortnight when a German torpedo had scuppered his vessel, and the name of Harry Clifton appeared on the list of those reported lost at sea.

'Wilt thou take this woman to thy wedded wife, wilt thou keep thee only unto her, as long as you both shall live?'

'I will.'

It was not until after the end of hostilities, when Harry had returned from the battlefield scarred in glory, that he discovered Emma had given birth to their son, Sebastian Arthur Clifton. But Harry didn't find out until he had fully recovered that Hugo Barrington had been killed in the most dreadful circumstances, and bequeathed the Barrington family another problem, every bit as devastating to Harry as not being allowed to marry the woman he loved.

Harry had never considered it at all significant that he was a few weeks older than Giles Barrington, Emma's brother and his closest friend, until he learned that he could be first in line to inherit the family's title, its vast estates, numerous possessions, and, to quote the will, *all that therein is*. He quickly made it clear that he had no interest in the Barrington inheritance, and was only too willing to forfeit any birthright that might be considered his, in favour of Giles. The Garter King of Arms seemed willing to go along with this arrangement, and all might have progressed in good faith, had Lord Preston, a Labour backbencher in the Upper House, not taken it upon himself to champion Harry's claim to the title, without even consulting him.

'It is a matter of principle,' Lord Preston had explained to any lobby correspondents who questioned him.

'Wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance, in the holy estate of matrimony?'

'I will.'

HARRY CLIFTON AND EMMA BARRINGTON

Harry and Giles had remained inseparable friends throughout the entire episode, despite the fact that they were officially set against each other in the highest court in the land, as well as on the front pages of the national press.

Harry and Giles would both have rejoiced at the Lord Chancellor's decision had Emma and Giles's grandfather Lord Harvey been in his seat on the front bench to hear the ruling, but he never learned of his triumph. The nation remained divided by the outcome, while the two families were left to pick up the pieces.

The other consequence of the Lord Chancellor's ruling was, as the press were quick to point out to their rapacious readers, that the highest court in the land had ordained that Harry and Emma were not of the same bloodline, and therefore he was free to invite her to be his lawfully wedded wife.

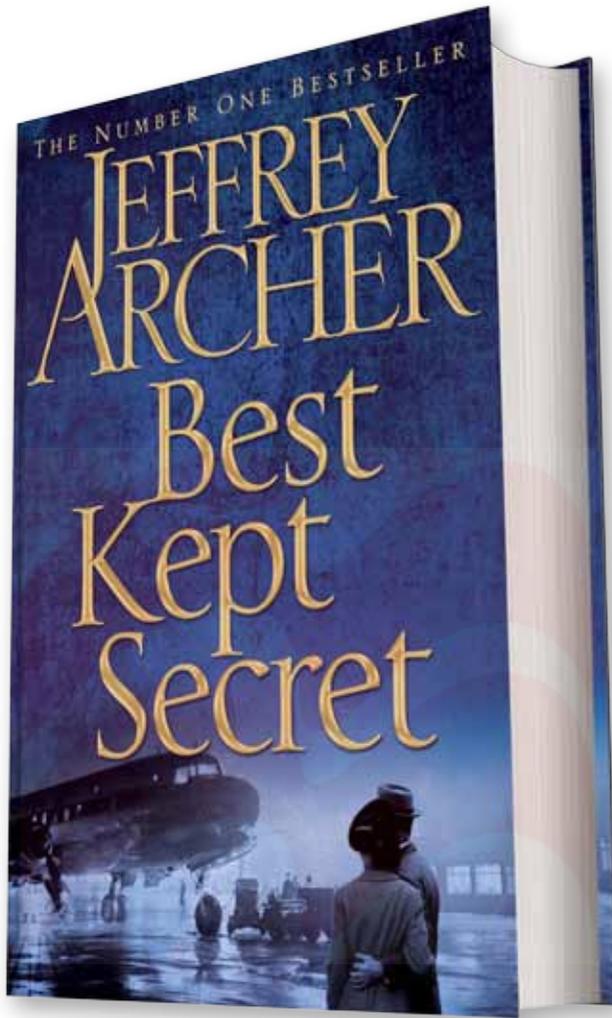
With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow.'

However, Harry and Emma both knew that a decision made by man did not prove beyond reasonable doubt that Hugo Barrington was not Harry's father, and as practising Christians, it worried them that they might be breaking God's law.

Their love for each other had not diminished in the face of all they had been through. If anything, it had grown stronger, and with the encouragement of her mother, Elizabeth, and the blessing of Harry's mother Maisie, Emma accepted Harry's proposal of marriage. It only saddened her that neither of her grandmothers had lived to attend the ceremony.

The nuptials did not take place in Oxford, as originally planned, with all the pomp and circumstance of a university wedding, and the inevitable glare of publicity that would accompany it, but at a simple, register office ceremony in Bristol, with only the family and a few close friends in attendance.

Perhaps the saddest decision that Harry and Emma reluctantly agreed on was that Sebastian Arthur Clifton would be their only child.



MARCH 2013

www.jeffreyarcher.co.uk