

## Prologue

A last will and testament has no legal effect until the death of the person who signed it, and its provisions often remain a secret until the loved ones gather round after the funeral for the reading. Only then do they learn who will get what.

Wills and their consequences, which involve not only death and money but also love, control, grief, and greed, play a central role in many famous works of fiction. How those contemplating death choose to dispose of their assets discloses a great deal about them, and the attitudes and actions of those they leave behind are even more revealing. Disputes over inheritances bring out the worst in families. Blood relatives become sworn enemies and commit four of the seven deadly sins—pride, greed, envy, and wrath. Fights over what would appear to an outsider to be mere trinkets damage relationships beyond repair.

*Jarndyce and Jarndyce*, an interminable dispute over a large inheritance, serves as the backdrop for the intricate plot of *Bleak House*, regarded by many as Dickens' finest novel if not his most famous. The case in chancery court drags on for generations and comes to a merciful end only when legal costs exhaust the entire estate and the matter is abandoned for lack of anything to fight over. Dickens described the lengthy proceeding in a single sentence: "The little plaintiff

or defendant, who was promised a new rocking-horse when *Jarndyce and Jarndyce* should be settled, has grown up, possessed himself of a real horse, and trotted away into the other world."

The book I have written is a memoir, not a novel. The story also spans generations and also involves a dispute over a large inheritance, though the dispute itself was brief and no enemies were made.

Two wills, one executed by a rich man and the other by his granddaughter, are central to the story. The first, signed in 1962, contained a clause that was likely an afterthought, was never intended to take effect, and never did. And yet, more than four decades later, the clause almost made me a wealthy man, a result the man who signed the will never could have foreseen. Indeed, he may have gone to his grave in 1969 without even knowing I existed. Nor did his granddaughter intend to make me an heir. To the contrary, she sought to disinherit me. But, as fate would have it, she nearly achieved the opposite. Her will, which she signed in 1978, led not only to my being found more than a quarter of a century later but also to the possibility that I would inherit a fortune from her grandfather.

Ultimately, however, the fortune I got was not in the form of material wealth. Instead it was this: Without the two wills signed by the man and his granddaughter, I never would have learned the true story you're about to read.



## Chapter 1

**I**t was a Tuesday morning in June 2004. The day had started like any other. I walked the dogs, ate breakfast while reading the paper, then drove downtown to work. I was in my office on the 14th floor of the Trustmark Bank Building when my phone rang. It was my father, Paul Eason. He rarely called me at work but had just listened to an intriguing voice-mail. He was calling to tell me about it.

Daddy was 82 and lived by himself in Tupelo, Mississippi, in the home where I grew up. It was the only home he and my mother Margaret ever owned. She had died five years earlier in the bedroom they shared for more than 40 years. I lived three hours south of Tupelo in Jackson, where I had practiced law for two decades.

The message was from a woman in New Orleans, also a lawyer. She said her firm was conducting a nationwide, court-ordered search for Paul Eason, age 46. I go by my middle name, but my first name is Paul and I was about to turn 47. I told Daddy I would return the call.

Why a court in New Orleans would order someone to search the entire country for me was a mystery. A theory occurred to me, but after all these years it didn't seem possible. Because I didn't know the reason for the call, I decided not to identify myself as the Paul Eason the lawyer was trying to find. I would just say I was Brooks Eason and was returning the call she had placed to my father. But when she came to the phone, she already knew who I was.

"I can't believe we found you."

"What is this about?"

"An inheritance."

"Tell me more."



THAT WAS THE DAY I began to learn the story that had been a mystery to me all my life, the story of my birth and second family. In the days that followed, I found out that my name was Scott Francis—or rather that it had been—for the first year of my life. I was nearly 50 years old, but until then I didn't know I had started life with a different name, much less what it was. My name, as well as the rest of the story, had been a secret. This is the story of how I learned the secret. But this story is about more than that. It is also about the wonderful life my parents gave me, about my exceptional daughter and granddaughter, who was born just days after

**EXCERPT · FORTUNATE SON: THE STORY OF BABY BOY FRANCIS**

Daddy received the voicemail, and about how times and attitudes changed from when I was born until she was born.

The story continues. Buy your copy today online.

**BROOKSEASON.COM**