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## Blended family feud over large estate



By [Charles Ticker](#)

A recent [story](#) about a matter before the London High Court illustrates some of the estate planning difficulties a blended family may encounter. The dispute involves the estate of Richard Thornton, a successful investment manager with Thornton Investments. Mr. Thornton's estate is valued at an estimated £18 million. When he passed away in 2013 at the age of 81, he left half of his estate to his wife, Susie Thornton. The other half went to a trust for his family, including the three adult children he had with his first wife, Jennifer Thornton.

Mr. Thornton's daughter Lucy Torrington is challenging his 2009 will. Her goal is to remove Ms. Thornton as executor of the will. Lucy has the support of her sister Mary. Their brother, Henry, is also an executor of the estate with Ms. Thornton. Allegations have been made that Ms. Thornton exerted undue influence over Mr. Thornton and dominated him in private. Additionally, secret audio recordings have been submitted supporting the allegations that Ms. Thornton exerted influence over her late husband. Specifically, the recordings contain comments by Ms. Thornton that Lucy and Mary are two disobedient children who "need a spanking." Furthermore, Ms. Thornton allegedly says to her late husband that the daughters have done nothing but cause him pain in addition to making messes of their own lives.

Ms. Thornton's position is that the audio recordings are an unfair depiction of her life with her husband and that she did not influence him.

None of the allegations have been proved in court.

### Blended family situation may result in disputes and bitter fights

The above scenario is not uncommon. There is high potential for dispute when a person remarries and stepchildren must share in the estate with a stepparent. A testator in Mr. Thornton's position must ensure that he or she receives adequate legal advice when executing a late-life will. This is especially true if any of the beneficiaries have shown signs of hostility toward one another. The testator must make sure that his or her exact wishes are reflected in any estate plan.

On the other hand, if a beneficiary in Lucy Torrington's position suspects undue influence, steps must be taken to protect the elderly testator. As people are living longer, financial elder abuse is becoming more common. Undue influence is a serious matter and must be dealt with accordingly. Legal advice should be sought to determine an appropriate course of action. Failure to do so may result in a messy will challenge where hurtful and embarrassing information comes to light.

More on this story [here](#).

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