

The rich bitch needs a good lawyer

The dog left \$12m by the 'Queen of Mean' may yet have its day in court. David Usborne reports Published: 09 September 2007

Trouble, the fluffy white dog left \$12m (£6m) by the billionaire hotel and property magnate Leona Helmsley, is living up to its name.

While the rich bitch unconcernedly pads around the 28-room mansion of its former mistress, the will is causing all kinds of trouble in the human world.

Helmsley's brother is refusing to abide by its terms. The cemetery where she rests says there is no way Trouble can be buried beside her. And a former maid who claims she was bitten by the eight-year-old Maltese is threatening to sue the dog. Trouble seemed set for life (and death) when the will of Helmsley, who died in August, leaked just over a week ago. While the dog got \$12m, she left just \$5m each to two of her grandchildren and nothing at all to two others.

This represented a lot of doggie treats. But Helmsley, better known by her tabloid nickname the "Queen of Mean" – having famously said "only the little people pay taxes", she was jailed for tax evasion in 1989 – stipulated further that the animal should be looked after by her surviving brother, Alvin Rosenthal, and, in time, be buried beside her in the family mausoleum north of Manhattan.

According to various reports, however, the 80-year-old Mr Rosenthal, who himself received \$10m of her fortune, has defied her orders, indicating that he doesn't have the slightest intention of bringing Trouble into his Manhattan household. As for the cemetery in Sleepy Hollow, New York, where the marble Helmsley mausoleum can be found – she left \$3m in her will just for it to be steam-cleaned annually and "maintained in mint condition" – it says state law forbids the interment of pet remains alongside humans.

More immediately, there is the growing threat of the former Helmsley housekeeper, who claims she was once bitten by Trouble so badly that she still suffers from nerve damage. The woman, identified as Zamfira Sfara, tried unsuccessfully to sue Helmsley a few years ago. Now she is manoeuvring to file suit against Trouble.

Lawyers have been appointed for dogs before. It happened in Tennessee just this year in the case of a dog whose owners died, after which their parents squabbled over custody. Rachel Hirschfeld, a friend of the family and specialist in legal protections for pets, says it is for Surrogate Judge Renee Roth, who is overseeing distribution of the estate, to appoint legal representation for Trouble now.

"What kind of estate lawyer doesn't know you can't bury a pet in a human cemetery?" she asked, complaining that the will was not drafted carefully enough. "Trouble deserves impeccable care because she's been left a large estate. The guardian needs to have the pet's best interests in mind."