

A Fool's Journey
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Chapter 1

I stared at Leith Hampton, déjà vu enveloping me. It had been fifteen months since the first time I'd sat in the law office of Hampton & Associates. An unexpected connection had brought me back to learn of another inheritance. And once again, there were strings attached. What can I say? In my life, nothing is ever as simple as it seems on the surface.

This time, I'd inherited \$365,000 from my great-grandmother, Olivia Marie Rosemount Osgoode. I'd met her for the first time a few weeks earlier while attempting to sift through the life and times of Anneliese Prei.

I liked Olivia, though I'm not sure I knew her long enough or well enough to claim the emotion I felt for her was love. It was hard to forgive someone who, along with her son, Corbin, and his wife, Yvette—I prefer not to think of them as my grandparents—had disowned my seventeen-year-old mother when she became pregnant with me. My father went to his grave despising anyone who bore the Osgoode name, and a lot of his bitterness had been passed on to me. I wondered what he'd think, now that I was the primary beneficiary of her last will and testament. I suspect his personal code of ethics might have led him to refuse the money. I'm not quite as principled.

"You said there was a condition," I said, and waited for one of Leith's well-practiced courtroom sighs.

He nodded, the theatrical sigh coming on the heels of the nod. "Olivia was fascinated by Past & Present Investigations. Fascinated and proud. She began to worry that a significant sum of money might decrease your need, and ultimately your desire, to find another case."

"So she found one for me?"

Leith nodded again. "I'll admit I wasn't completely on board with the idea, but Olivia was a stubborn woman, and no amount of discussion was going to dissuade her."

Stubborn I could understand. I'd inherited the same trait from my father, apparently burrowed deep into my DNA. I turned my attention back to Leith, who was still talking.

“Of course, you’re free to decline, in which case your inheritance will revert to Corbin Osgoode.”

I thought about my grandfather’s fury at the reading of the will and suppressed a smile. “I wouldn’t dream of declining, and not just because of the money. Tell me about the case.”

* * *

The case, Leith informed me, was the story of Brandon Colbeck, a twenty-year-old college student who left home in March 2000 to “find himself.” He was never heard from again.

“The family is, understandably, still looking for answers,” Leith said. “Did Brandon come into harm’s way? Or did he simply decide to disappear and start a new life? His mother, a woman by the name of Lorna Colbeck-Westlake, admits, albeit reluctantly, that there had been some harsh words spoken by her husband, Michael Westlake, after Brandon dropped out of college. However, both insist that they never wanted Brandon to leave home. Rather, he’d been given some ‘tough love’ choices in the hope that it would provide motivation. It was a popular strategy, back in the day. It may still be, in some circles.”

He slid a thin leather briefcase across the mahogany boardroom table. “The little that Olivia accumulated is in here. I will warn you, there’s not much to go on. A couple of newspaper clippings, one that is dated four years ago, another quite recent. Barely enough to bother with, and yet...” Leith spread his arms out, palms upward, and shrugged.

I was getting used to going on not much. What I wasn’t used to was having my great-grandmother getting involved, especially from the grave. “I’ll admit I don’t know a lot about our family, but the name Brandon Colbeck means nothing to me. Are we related?”

“Brandon’s great-grandmother is Eleanor Colbeck, a friend of Olivia’s at the Cedar County Retirement Residence. A year ago, Eleanor was diagnosed with Mild Cognitive Impairment or MCI. I’m told it’s a condition that doesn’t get better, only worse, and the decline can be rapid. Eleanor was close to her grandson and six weeks ago, she received a telephone call from a man claiming to be Brandon Colbeck. He said he missed her and wanted to come home, but didn’t have the funds available to travel.”

“Let me guess, he asked her for money.”

“Not in so many words, though he did mention a friend in a similar situation whose father had used a wire service like Western Union. The family reported the call to the police, who determined it was a scam, one of many that targets the elderly. Nonetheless, Eleanor remains

convinced that the call came from her grandson, based on the fact that he'd called her Nana Ellie."

Eleanor Colbeck. Now *that* name rang a bell, though I wasn't sure why. "The name sounds familiar."

"Eleanor contributed to several community-based charitable initiatives, long before you moved to Marketville. Cedar County Retirement is far from inexpensive and Eleanor has been living there for the past decade. As her condition worsens, medical expenses increase."

"Where I know her name from probably isn't important," I said, knowing that I'd keep digging until I remembered or discovered the truth. I tapped my fingers against the briefcase. "You say there's not much in here. Am I expected to find out where Brandon went and what happened to him? Or am I to determine the call was a fake? Does the family approve of my getting involved? What's the bottom line?"

Leith leaned back and smiled for the first time. "Olivia may have been old, but when it came to legalities, she was on top of her game. The family is willing to assist you in whatever way possible. I have signed affidavits from Lorna Colbeck-Westlake, her husband, Michael Westlake, Brandon's stepsister, Jeanine Westlake, as well as Eleanor Colbeck, granting Past & Present Investigations carte blanche to do whatever is necessary to find Brandon. They are also willing to sit down with you at any time, though from what I gather, they know little, if anything, beyond what's already been reported."

"What about written permission to post relevant material on the Past & Present website or on social media sites like Facebook and Instagram?"

"Inside the briefcase you'll find a notarized document to cover exactly that concern, signed by each member of the family. As for the bottom line, in order to inherit you must make a reasonable investigative effort over the next three months. After that, you're free to walk away without further obligation."

Three months. I wanted to solve it in two.

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