

A ROOTS & REMNANTS PREQUEL

A
PROMISE
YOU COULD
WEAR



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A Roots & Ruin Story

A prequel short story, set before A Grave in Cobh

*For subscribers to the A.J. Kelleher mailing list —
thank you for coming looking.*

The Tuesday that Molly Quinn quit Halloran, Voss & Pruitt began unremarkably, with a box of pastries left over from a client breakfast, and ended six hours later with a senior partner named Gerald Voss folding a single sheet of paper in half across a conference table, as though undoing the fold might undo the four years that had led up to it.

It hadn't started as a bad day. Molly had spent the morning exactly where she liked to be — buried, cheerfully, in a banker's box of shipping manifests and warehouse leases for the Petrakis estate, a case that had landed on her desk the way the good ones sometimes did, dressed up as tedious and secretly full of teeth. Old Nikos Petrakis had died the previous winter owning a warehouse on the Fort Point Channel that had been in the family since 1958, and two of his three children were suing the third over what the will did and didn't say about it. Molly's job, her actual job, the part of the work she'd never once managed to explain to anyone at a dinner party without their eyes going soft and polite, was to read four decades of boring paper until it stopped being boring. She was good at it. She had always been good at it, in the specific, patient way of someone who'd been taught as a child that the truth was usually sitting in plain sight, wearing a disguise made entirely out of other people's assumption that nobody would bother looking.

She found the letter on a Thursday, three weeks before the Tuesday that mattered, tucked inside a ledger of dock receipts that nobody had opened since a filing clerk closed it in 1974. It was from Nikos Petrakis himself, dated the year the warehouse was bought, addressed to a sister back in Piraeus he'd apparently stopped writing to sometime in the eighties over some falling-out nobody currently living remembered the shape of. The

letter said, in plain, un lawyerly Greek that took Molly and a very patient translator most of an afternoon to render properly, that one day the warehouse should belong to all of them equally — whatever stood between him and his sister then — because family lasted longer than any quarrel. His sister's daughter was now suing for that share, and Molly's firm represented the relatives trying to keep it from her. It wasn't a will. It had no legal force. It was just a man, now forty years dead, telling the truth to someone he loved in a letter he apparently never sent. Except the sister's daughter had a photograph of that same letter, water-stained, on a shelf in her own kitchen. Molly had seen it, once, on a video call meant for something else entirely, and hadn't been able to stop thinking about it since.

"It's not responsive to anything they've asked for," Gerald Voss told her, when she brought it to him, still faintly proud of herself the way she always was on the good days, the days the paper actually said something. He didn't look up from his own screen while he said it. "It predates the will by thirty years, it's not testamentary, and frankly, Molly, if you go looking hard enough in forty years of anybody's correspondence you'll find a letter where they meant to do something kinder than they ended up doing. That's not a legal fact. That's just being a person." He'd finally looked up then, not unkindly, the particular practiced patience of a man explaining a rule to someone he still hoped might learn it. "We're not obligated to hand the other side a sympathetic reading of ambiguous evidence that isn't even properly responsive. That's not our job. Our job is our client's interests, full stop. You did excellent work finding it. Now put it back exactly where you found it and move on to the shipping logs I actually asked for."

She had known, sitting there, that he wasn't wrong about the law. That was the part that had kept her up two nights running, turning it over the way she turned over anything that wouldn't leave her alone — he wasn't wrong, not technically, not in any way a bar exam would ever ask her to argue against. And she had put it back exactly where she'd found it, and finished the shipping logs, and told herself for three weeks that this was simply the job, that the job had never promised her the truth would win, only that she'd get paid well for finding it and handing it to someone else to decide what to do with. She had believed that, more or less, for four years. She stopped believing it on the Tuesday, in the conference room, when Voss folded the letter — her letter, the one she'd gone back for on her own time, translated properly, formatted into a clean two-page memo nobody had asked her to write — in half, and slid it back across the table, and said, not unkindly, that he admired her instincts and would be filing it, unread by anyone who mattered, in a drawer that existed for exactly this purpose.

"I quit," Molly said, and heard it land in the room with the particular finality of a sentence she hadn't planned to say until roughly four seconds before she said it, her own voice steadier than the rest of her currently felt entitled to be.

Voss looked at her for a long moment with something that might, in a kinder light, have been respect. "You'll want to think about that overnight."

"I've been thinking about it for four years. I only just noticed." She stood, smoothed nothing in particular on the front of a blazer she would never, she understood with sudden and complete certainty, wear to this building again, and left the folded letter exactly where he'd put it, because it wasn't hers to take and she had learned that lesson,

if nothing else, properly. "I'll have my things out by Friday. Thank you for four years. I mean that. I learned a great deal here, most of it useful, some of it just now."

She packed her desk into a single banker's box — four years, and it fit in one box, which struck her, walking it out through the lobby past the elevator bank and the firm's brass nameplate and the security guard who wished her a good evening with no idea it was the last one she'd ever have there, as either a very sad fact or an enormously freeing one, and she hadn't yet decided which by the time she reached the sidewalk on Franklin Street with October coming down grey and fine around her and nowhere, for the first time in four years, that she was required to be.

She did not go home. She stood on the sidewalk with the box on her hip and understood, the way she understood most important things about herself, a beat later than everyone who actually knew her would have predicted, that there was only one place she wanted to be standing at the end of this particular day, and it wasn't her own apartment with its silent phone and its half-unpacked life since the engagement had ended eight months before. She got on the Red Line instead, box on her lap, and rode it out to Fields Corner, and walked the ten familiar minutes to the house on Dorchester Ave with its narrow front porch and its blue door that needed painting and had needed painting for as long as Molly could remember anyone mentioning it.

Peggy Quinn was seventy-three that year, silver-haired and ramrod straight, two years retired from a job she still discussed in the present tense more often than the past, and she opened the door before Molly had finished climbing the porch steps, the particular uncanny timing of a woman who'd spent thirty-eight years learning to read a street before anyone on it had decided to be readable. She took one look at the banker's

box, and at Molly's face, and didn't ask a single question before she'd already turned back into the house, calling over her shoulder, "Kettle's already on. Sit."

The kitchen smelled the way it always had — coffee gone slightly bitter on the burner, the particular dry warmth of a radiator that had been fighting the same battle with a Boston October for forty years and never quite winning it — and Molly sat at the same scarred table she'd done her homework at as a girl, Danny's old chair across from her still bearing the faint gouge he'd put in the leg with a butter knife at age nine for reasons nobody had ever gotten out of him, and set the banker's box down on the floor like something she wanted to stop being able to see.

"I quit today," she said, before Peggy had even finished setting two mugs down. "Voss buried a letter that would've actually helped somebody — an old man's own words, telling his family the truth, and it just — it wasn't going to matter to anybody, legally, and I understood that, and I still couldn't make myself care that I understood it. I told him I quit. I don't have another job. I don't have a plan. I have a box of desk plants and four years of discovery requests and a great deal of feeling like I've just done something either very brave or very stupid, and I honestly cannot tell you which yet."

Peggy didn't look surprised. That was the thing Molly would remember longest about that particular afternoon, turning it over in later years the way she turned over anything that had mattered — her grandmother had simply pulled out the chair across from her, Danny's old dented one, and sat down into it like a woman who had been waiting for this exact conversation for rather longer than the four years Molly had actually been at the firm.

"Do you remember," Peggy said, "when I called you, not long after you started that job? You were maybe six months in. Full of yourself about a subpoena you'd gotten some bank to actually honor."

Molly remembered the call, though it took her a moment to retrieve it, the way you might recall a photograph you'd forgotten was in an album. Near the end, her grandmother's voice had gone quieter than usual as she mentioned, almost in passing, a case from early in her career that had never quite let her go. Peggy hadn't dwelt on it, and Molly — twenty-four and still pleased with herself over the subpoena — hadn't thought to ask what had happened.

"I remember," Molly said now, at the kitchen table, four years and one resignation later. "I didn't understand why you were telling me that instead of just saying congratulations."

"I wasn't in the mood for congratulations that night. It had nothing to do with you." Peggy wrapped both hands around her mug. "I've watched you your whole life, Molly Ann. Your mother's earrings. Every missing cat in the neighborhood. Even after we lost your parents, you kept looking for things when any sensible child would've stayed under the covers."

Molly looked down at the table.

"You've been doing this work since before anyone paid you for it," Peggy continued. "I called because I wanted you to understand something before that firm talked you out of it. Finding the truth and making it matter are two different skills. A law firm like that was only ever going to need you for the first."

"And today I finally noticed the difference."

"Today you finally got angry enough about it to do something other than notice it." Peggy's mouth did something that wasn't quite a smile, the particular dry, approving almost-smile she'd always kept in careful reserve, spent only on the things she actually thought had earned it. "I'll tell you what I told myself the year I made detective, when half the department was still telling me plainly I didn't belong in that squad room. You don't need permission to be the kind of person who goes looking. You only need somewhere to put it once you've found it." She reached across the table, briefly, and covered Molly's hand with her own, dry and warm and entirely certain. "You've a gift for reading what people have left behind them, on paper and off it, and you've spent four years handing that gift to men like Gerald Voss to decide what to do with. I'd like to see what you do with it yourself, for once, before you're too old and too talked-out-of-it to try."

"Doing what, exactly? I don't have a client list. I don't have an office. I have a banker's box and a very specific set of skills for reading dock receipts nobody but me currently wants read."

"Everybody's got someone in the family nobody quite finished the sentence about, Molly Ann." Peggy said it plainly, without drama, the way she said most of the things that mattered most. "Some paper trail that ran cold two generations before anyone living was born to chase it themselves. You've spent four years being told that kind of question isn't billable. I'm telling you it's the only kind of question I ever actually cared about answering, in thirty-eight years of answering considerably worse ones, and I'd bet

the last of my pension you feel exactly the same, whether or not you've let yourself say so out loud yet."

Molly sat with that for longer than she meant to, the radiator ticking, Danny's gouged chair leg catching the last of the afternoon light coming grey and low through the kitchen window, and felt something settle into place that had been circling, unnamed, for most of the four years she'd just walked away from. "I'd have no income for months. Maybe longer. I'd be starting from absolutely nothing."

"You'd be starting from a law degree, four years of discovery work most private investigators would kill for, and a grandmother two miles away who still remembers how to cook for more than one person whether you ask her to or not." Peggy stood, collecting the mugs with the brisk, unhurried finality of a woman who considered the conversation's important part concluded and the rest merely logistics. "You'll not starve, Molly Ann. And if by some tragedy you do, you'll starve two miles from a woman with a full larder and absolutely no intention of watching it happen. Go home. Sleep on it properly, the way you should have slept on quitting before you did it, though I'll say I'm glad you didn't. Come Sunday for dinner and tell me what you've decided. I suspect you already know."

She did know, it turned out, by Thursday — a small office above a dry cleaner's on a quiet stretch of Somerville, four hundred square feet and a window that looked out over a parking lot rather than a harbor, rent she could cover for exactly five months on what remained of her savings if she was careful, which she fully intended to be. She spent the better part of a weekend scrubbing a linoleum floor that had clearly not been scrubbed since the previous decade, and a Tuesday night at her kitchen table designing a business

card at midnight with a free template and considerably more hope than design sense, and by the following Monday there was a secondhand desk, a laptop, four archive database subscriptions she'd charged to a credit card with only a small twinge of guilt, and a hand-lettered sign taped inside the glass of the street door — THE ROOTS DETECTIVE, GENEALOGY & DOCUMENT RESEARCH, BY APPOINTMENT — that she had written out three times before a version came out straight enough to satisfy her.

Peggy arrived on the Monday morning without calling ahead, the way she arrived at most things that mattered, climbing the narrow stairs above the dry cleaner's a little slower than she once would have and pretending, when Molly noticed, not to notice her noticing. She was carrying something under one arm, wrapped in a dish towel like a loaf of bread, and she set it down on the desk without ceremony — no card, no wrapping paper, nothing but Peggy standing in the doorway of the empty new office with her arms crossed, watching Molly's face for a reaction she had clearly already rehearsed the giving of.

It was a satchel. Battered leather, gone dark and soft with age, a long strap worn smooth in one particular groove where it had sat against the same shoulder for decades, and on the flap, worked in brass gone dull with handling, a small emblem Molly recognized without quite being able to name — two hands, cupping a heart, a crown set above it.

"Every detective needs a proper bag," Peggy said. "And you're not carrying one of those laptop cases that makes you look as if you've come to fix the printer."

She set the satchel on Molly's desk. The leather had gone soft at the corners, and the brass fittings were scratched nearly dull.

"That was mine for thirty years. It outlasted two partners, three department chiefs, and a better coat than the one you've got on now."

"My coat is fine."

"Your coat is an argument for another day."

Peggy turned the flap toward the desk lamp. A small emblem had been worked into the leather: two hands holding a crowned heart. She traced it with one finger.

"A Claddagh," she said. "Friendship, love, and loyalty, if you believe the jewelers. My mother wore one on a ring, and her mother before her. The design comes from Galway, from an old fishing village called An Cladach."

"I know what a Claddagh is."

"You know what everything is. It's one of your less restful qualities."

Molly smiled despite herself.

"The story goes that a Galway goldsmith was captured by pirates and sold in Algiers," Peggy continued. "He learned his trade there, survived long enough to come home, and made the ring after he returned. Whether that's true or merely what people decided ought to be true, I couldn't tell you. But our family always liked the part about coming home."

Her finger remained on the emblem.

"Even Bridget?" Molly asked.

Something changed in Peggy's face. It was no more than a loosening around the mouth, but Molly had spent her life studying a woman who considered composure both a discipline and a public service.

"Bridget never came home," Peggy said.

The name belonged to one of the family stories that stopped whenever Molly entered a room. Bridget had been Peggy's own mother's older sister, which made her Molly's great-great-aunt, though nobody had ever spoken of her with the comfortable distance usually granted to the dead. At twenty-two, she had left Cork for Boston, where the rest of the family had already gone ahead of her. Or meant to. There was a passenger list with her name on it, a trunk that never left the house, and one photograph in the family Bible showing a young woman on a harbor wall with her hand closed around something the camera could not quite make out.

Beside the photograph, someone had written *Bridget, 1901*.

There was no date of death.

"You told me she missed the ship," Molly said.

Peggy lowered the flap.

"No. Your mother told you that. I said Bridget never reached Boston."

Molly waited.

Peggy had taught her to do that too.

Outside, a delivery truck rattled through the parking lot. From the dry cleaner's below came the faint mechanical rush of the pressing machine.

"That isn't the same thing," Molly said.

"No."

"Was she on the ship?"

Peggy looked at her then. For a moment she seemed not guarded but tired, which was rarer and therefore more alarming.

"There are questions a family can carry so long it mistakes the carrying for an answer."

"That doesn't answer mine."

"I know."

Peggy pushed the satchel across the desk.

"A promise you can wear will sometimes survive longer than the person who made it," she said. "A ring, a bag, a photograph, if someone is careful with it. The women in our family were always careful with the things they believed had to last."

"What was Bridget holding in the photograph?"

The guardedness returned so neatly that Molly almost admired it.

"Not every unanswered question is your first case."

"Is it a case?"

"Fill the bag with something worth carrying," Peggy said, already turning toward the door. "I'll expect you Sunday. Bring whoever your first client turns out to be, provided they enjoy good food and a great deal of unsolicited advice."

"Peggy."

"Most people do, once you get to know them properly."

She left without hurrying. Peggy never hurried. She merely moved at a pace that suggested the rest of the world had been given adequate notice.

Molly stood alone in the small office above the dry cleaner's. October light came thin and grey through the window over the parking lot. Behind her, the hand-lettered sign was still drying in the door glass. Before her sat four hundred square feet, one secondhand desk, and a thirty-year-old leather bag stamped with two hands, a heart, and a crown.

She ran her thumb across the emblem.

Peggy had spent Molly's whole life teaching her that words mattered, especially the words people substituted for the ones they did not want to say.

Bridget never reached Boston.

Not *Bridget missed the ship*.

Not *Bridget stayed in Galway*.

And not *Bridget died*.

Molly stood a while longer under the desk lamp, turning all three of those unsaid sentences over the way she'd once watched her grandmother turn over an ordinary object at a scene, looking for the thing that didn't quite belong. Then she switched off the lamp, and did what there was actually time to do that afternoon — answered the first email in a queue that would, eventually, become a business — and left the question exactly where Peggy had set it down: unopened, unresolved, and, for now, simply hers to carry rather than hers to solve.

There were clients to find, rent to pay, a new life to build out of whatever remained of the old one. Bridget had already waited a hundred and twenty-five years. She could wait a little longer, Molly decided, folding the thought away the same careful way her grandmother folded away everything she wasn't yet ready to hand over — until the day she was finally the one with time enough, and reason enough, to go looking properly.

If You Enjoyed This...

Four and a half years after the day in this story, Peggy Quinn will die having never closed the one file that mattered most to her — and leave it, along with the satchel, to Molly. What Molly finds when she finally carries that satchel to Cobh, Ireland, to keep her grandmother's last promise, is the beginning of A Grave in Cobh, Book One of the Roots & Ruin series.

Thank you for reading — and for joining Molly at the start of her search.