

CHAPTER 1

PROVENCE, FRANCE – 2009

It was October. There was a light chill in the air as the middle-aged man and a younger woman sat on a patio in the south of France sharing a bottle of wine. The large early nineteenth century stone farmhouse was located outside the quaint wine town of Châteauneuf-du-Pape in Provence. It sat back off a secondary road surrounded by trees with views of vineyards and olive groves spreading out in all directions. The Rhone River was two miles in the distance. The leaves on the grapevines had turned hues of yellows and reds.

“All right, Elliot, are you going to tell me why you insisted I fly here to see you?” Allison Kryszka said. She was an attractive woman probably not yet forty, dressed impeccably in a fashionable silk blouse, tailored slacks, and expensive heels. New York accent. She had arrived just a few hours ago by the high-speed train from Paris to Avignon after flying in from New York.

Elliot Gaston looked to be around sixty. Fit and tanned. Good head of gray hair. Average height and build. Dressed in casual attire of a blue cotton shirt and chinos, the sleeves of a sweater draped over his shoulders, he looked typically Provençal.

“Certainly, Allison. I’m sorry that I’ve been so cloak and dagger about why I wanted you to come here all the way from New York. Let me first say that you are more than my literary agent. You’re my most trusted friend. No, you’re more than a friend. More like family really.”

He reached over and took her hand. “Part of what I’m about to tell you will dismay you. As for the rest, you also will not believe me, at least at first. Hopefully I can convince you. That’s why I needed to talk to you here. Somewhat captive. But is it not magnificent?” He said sweeping his hand to the surrounding view.

“Yes it is, Elliot, but now you have me worried. Tell me what this is about.”

Still holding her hand he said, “Allison I’ve been diagnosed with terminal cancer, leukemia actually.”

She grabbed his hand with both of her hands and started to cry. “God, no. Are they sure? It’s not treatable?”

Gaston gently touched her cheek and attempted to wipe her tears with a handkerchief. “I’m afraid not, Allison. I’ve been to the best oncologists in Paris. It’s known as acute myelogenous leukemia. It has an 85% mortality rate. I’ve been receiving chemo-therapy for a couple of months. Unfortunately, the therapy has not put the cancer in remission, and the side effects are dreadful. It’s been a couple of weeks since my last treatment that’s why I look normal. But I didn’t bring you all this way just to tell you about my impending mortality. There’s something more I must explain.”

“Damn it, Elliot, you’re too talented to die. You’re too young. What are you, sixty?” Allison said.

Elliot Gaston paused for several moments and looked into her eyes. "No, I'm not sixty. That's what's at issue here. That's what I need to explain. I'm much older. You won't believe what I'm about to tell you, but that's why I wanted you here, so I can attempt to convince you."

"What do you mean? So you're sixty-five? More?"

Elliot sighed and answered, "Much more than that I'm afraid. Allison, I was born in 1873."

Allison Kryszka stared at him for several moments, before responding. "What the hell's that supposed to mean, Elliot?" She pulled her hands away from his.

"Well I don't know how to say it any other way. I assure you that I'm not deranged. I know it's not seemingly possible, but it is true, Allison. I've lived every minute of those years. Here, this will help with the details."

Elliot placed a three-inch thick manuscript on the table. "It's a first draft. Needs more work before it's ready for publication. It's the story of my life. I want it to be more than a just a journal or a memoir. I want anyone reading it to see my unusual journey. It's a hell of story, Allison. Considering my situation, I wanted you to see it and start the process of believing."

Allison shook her head slowly and stood up. "I don't know what you're trying to do, Elliot, but it's pretty shitty to drag me all this way to France to play whatever game this is."

She was angry and paced about with her hands on her hips.

"It's not a game, Allison. I would never do that to you."

"I don't know what to say, Elliot. I've always thought you to be this erudite man of the world. A Frenchman that writes in English. Now this comes out of the blue. You seem rational, but you're asking me to dispel common sense. First you tell me you have a terminal disease then you tell me you're over a hundred years old. What makes *you* think that you are not just imagining this?" There was still anger in her voice.

“Listen, Allison, all I ask is that you spend a couple of days here to let me try to convince you. Right now, let’s go inside and I’ll prepare us some dinner. I’ve become a passable cook these last years. Limited repertoire, but what I can do is pretty good.”

Elliot seated Allison at the kitchen table and refilled her wine glass. He then lit a fire in the massive fireplace in the adjacent family room. While Elliot busied himself preparing dinner, Allison moved the conversation away from talk of mortality and this disturbing assertion about his age.

The house was quite magnificent. The walls were of great stones. Twelve-inch thick exposed beams supported the weighty slate roof. The walls were decorated with paintings and old photographs. The effect added to the feeling that one had stepped back in time.

Elliot told her that it was built around 1820. He spent a couple of years renovating and modernizing the plumbing and kitchen. Between keeping an eye on dinner, he would guide her around the rooms explaining the house’s lineage and the details of its construction. The conversation was light as Elliot talked about living and writing in Provence, drawing in Allison to talk about the contrasts with her living in New York.

“This is an absolutely charming house, Elliot. Too clean for a bachelor. How do you manage?”

“I have a wonderful couple of housekeepers, two old-maid sisters, Antoinette and Pauline,” Elliot said. “They’ve adopted me. The day they come in to clean every other week, that evening they prepare dinner and the three of us enjoy a couple bottles of wine. I’m sure that it’s a special part of their social life. I tease them that there must be a local rumor about our being a threesome.”

Elliot opened another bottle of wine and sat down at the table. “Where to start?” he said as much to himself as to his long-time literary agent. “I don’t want to discuss the cancer. That’s secondary right now, Allison.”

Allison sat silently, disoriented by all that her favorite client had told her. She both admired his work and held a special affection for him. These bizarre assertions troubled her on a personal level. Her initial anger had abated but she still didn't know how to reconcile Elliot's wild claim to absurd longevity with the man she had known for many years.

Elliot said, "Have you ever wondered how I've been so successful with my novels of the early part of the twentieth century? Why the critics say that I am able to evoke an uncanny sense of feeling for the time?"

"You're talented," Allison said. "You have an astounding knowledge of history and an extraordinary gift for painting a feeling for those times. Others have had success writing fiction about previous periods."

"Not many. Any come to mind? The good literature was mostly written by those of that time. Most writings about earlier times are biographical or more historical in concept. Novels are even rarer. Mine are more about the people. What the times were like. What shaped the thoughts and aspirations of people. How they lived and felt. *Why* they felt the way they did. To show, not to tell the reader what it was like during those earlier times. To give them a sense of the complex factors effecting events, not the simplifications presented as history.

"My unusually long life spanned a special period. A time that has shaped so much of what is part of today's world. It was a time of such great change, great hope. Technology advances and social change exploded. The democratic process in the United States exerted its influence for the first time. Women's suffrage and the organized labor movement advanced to the forefront.

"Maybe because it was all so sudden, there was a counter reaction with the unleashing of mankind's ugly side. The old clashed with new philosophies. The early twentieth century was a time of warfare and exploitation. The ugliest type of warfare to

the extent that it transcended anything that came before. Conflicts of cultural ambitions inflicted horrors from the middle ages. Then as the World birthed itself into the modern age, once again it descended into chaos, seemingly bent on its own destruction."

"So you're saying it's because you lived those times you were able to write of them so powerfully? That you're somehow immortal?"

"Not immortal, Allison. Remember, I have a terminal disease. I've had broken bones. I bleed. I get sick. I just don't age at the same rate everyone else does."

"Every woman would hope for that," Allison said. She smiled and then said more seriously, "I'll admit that for the thirty years or so I have known you, you don't really look much older."

Elliot pulled his French passport from his pocket and handed it to her. "Take a look at the birth date, Allison."

She looked at the passport, and then looked back to Elliot with a puzzled look. "It says you were born in 1926. That makes you over eighty. Absurd enough since you look at least twenty years younger, but I thought you said you were born in 1873?"

"I was. But with my *problem* I had to acquire a new identity at some point. I'll expand on those details later. As you can imagine, even now I'm experiencing some problems of incredulity if anyone checks my date of birth when I need to show ID. Take a look at these." Elliot handed Allison an envelope.

She opened the envelope and spilled out a dozen photographs. All were black and white. Many were clearly of an older type of photography. They were cracked and dog-eared.

"Recognize me?" Elliot said as Allison looked at each photograph.

"Maybe. Hard to say with old pictures. I guess there's a resemblance. The young boy could be you. The others do appear to be you. They're old photos, or at least they look old."

“Come on, Allison. Do you think I’d fake these? Try to deceive you? That would make me raving mad or a charlatan. Look at them again. Look at the photographer’s imprints on the back of several of them.”

She turned the photographs over and stared at the dates. Somewhat subdued, she asked, “Why are you telling me this, Elliot? What is it you want me to do?”

“Just listen to my story. I want to tell you about the major events that shaped my life. And about times that shaped our world today. About a philosophical perspective that could only come from my unique longevity. Along the way, I hope to give you enough evidence for you to believe what I say is true. Enough for you to get this work published. And to publish it as non-fiction if that is possible.”

And so began the first part of Elliot Gaston’s story.