

Chapter 1



A New Home

Elliott sat at his mother's bedside, holding her hand and watching as she slept. He was frightened at how thin and gaunt she had become these past few months. He longed for her to wake up, but she needed her rest. Although he had never had many friends, he had been especially lonely since they came to New Orleans.

"Get well, Mom," he said, dabbing her forehead with a damp cloth. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

To his relief, he caught the faint rise and fall of her chest, then suddenly felt a little silly for wanting to hold a mirror under her nose to see if she was still breathing. He surveyed the bottles of pills on the bedside table and wondered if she had taken a sedative. If she had, she might sleep for the next several hours.

He heard footsteps in the hall and turned to find his grandfather standing in the doorway. The old man was unusually tall and had a certain unkemptness about him: the mop of white hair flying wildly in all directions, the bushy white beard that grew almost to his chest. Elliott often wondered how he kept from getting food in it when he ate. As usual, the old man had on the same threadbare gray suit that he wore every day. Elliott noted the usual hint of a smile on his face, as if he knew a secret that no one else was privy to. And for the umpteenth time, the boy couldn't help thinking that the old man looked strangely regal, especially now, as he stood in the door frame with the sun streaming in behind him.

“Feel like taking a walk?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Elliott sighed, stealing another glance at his mother as he stood up. “We won’t be gone long, Mom,” he murmured, joining the old man in the doorway. Then, thinking better of it, he went back into the bedroom, to the old record player on the dresser. “Wait just a minute,” he said. He picked up a worn record and placed in on the turntable. Then, flicking the switch, he lowered the needle to the vinyl, waiting for the music to begin before turning to rejoin his grandfather. His mother’s favorite song, “The Girl from Ipanema,” rolled and swayed out of the tinny speakers. “Get some rest, Mom,” he said. “I love you.”

His grandfather nodded, and together they walked down the hallway to the grand wooden staircase.

Although slight for his fifteen years, Elliott was accustomed to feeling particularly small in the presence of this lanky old man. He was pleased to see the sun shining through the windows—a welcome change from the tropical storm systems that had dominated the weather since his arrival.

After going down the stairs, they walked out the front door into the sunlight, and Elliott paused to look at his surroundings. “The gardens are beautiful,” he said. “Thank goodness the rain finally quit. I haven’t been outside in days.”

The old man smiled.

“Maybe it won’t be so bad here after all,” Elliott mumbled, so softly that his grandfather didn’t hear.

They went out the gate and onto the street. “So how are you liking New Orleans?” his grandfather asked. “Is your bedroom agreeable?”

“I’m getting used to it,” he replied. He was still uncomfortable around this strange old man, whom he had just met when they arrived on his doorstep a few weeks ago. “I miss being home sometimes.”

“Well, I think you’ll find this place has a lot to offer,” the old man said.

The two of them continued down the street in silence. The glorious old homes of New Orleans’s Garden District were lovely in the sunlight.

“We sure didn’t have any neighborhoods like this back home,” Elliott said. “Mom says some of these houses are older than the United States.”

“It’s true; there’s a great deal of history here.” The old man looked at him as if gauging his interest. “Wealthy American settlers built the oldest of these houses in the seventeen hundreds.” He made a sweeping gesture with his arm, indicating the row of homes on the block ahead. “Back in those days, the French Quarter was the only civilized part of town, but it was filled with Europeans, and they didn’t much like the American settlers. So, to avoid persecution from the French and Spanish, the Americans built their homes out here, developing this part of town in the bargain.”

Not in the mood for a history lesson, Elliott changed the subject. “So how old is your house?”

His grandfather chuckled. “Our house is one of the oldest ones in the district. It was built in 1796, not long after the American Revolution. At the time it was built, there weren’t many homes in this part of town. By all accounts, it was the grandest one around.”

“Wow,” said Elliott, happy to be finally having a normal conversation with his grandfather. “So it’s more than two hundred years old? I never would’ve guessed.”

“And it has quite a colorful history,” the old man added.

Elliott was unsure whether to take the bait, but he was happy for the exchange. “So tell me,” he said.

The old man grinned. “As the story goes, our house was built by a very odd character—odd enough that people still

talked about him years after he died. His name was Darius Orion—not that it matters, I suppose.” He pronounced it *Dairy-us O’Ryan*. “Rumors about him have endured almost to this day.”

Elliott looked up at him, urging him to continue.

The old man gave a slow nod. “As far as anyone can tell, Mr. Orion arrived in New Orleans in the early 1790s. When he first showed up, the locals thought he was a vagrant: only one set of clothes, unshaven and unwashed, no wagon or even a horse.”

Elliott nodded.

“But he had sacks and sacks of gold,” said his grandfather. There was a gleam in his eye, and Elliott could tell he was enjoying himself. “Mr. Orion wasn’t a merchant, and as far as anyone knew, he didn’t have any trade skills. He never worked a day in his life after moving here, yet he always had lots of money.”

Elliott tried to form a mental image of Darius Orion.

“And he never made friends,” his grandfather continued. “No matter how hard people tried, he never warmed up to anyone. He didn’t have family, either, except for a son that arrived to claim the house when he was on his deathbed.” A knowing smile crossed the old man’s face. “In spite of his appearance, the locals eventually assumed he must be from an aristocratic family up north, because he was so rich and obviously not from the South. When his son showed up, it was a bit scandalous, as one of the few things known about him was that he never married. Those sorts of things were important back then.”

“How do *you* know so much about him?” Elliott asked. “I mean, that was such a long time ago.”

The old man pointed across the street. “There’s a bookstore right over there that has books with the histories of these old homes. Because of Mr. Orion, the history of our house is well known.”

“He does sound like an odd fellow,” said Elliott.

“Indeed,” said his grandfather, raising an eyebrow. “Though many thought Mr. Orion was from a wealthy Yankee family, others thought he might be a criminal—perhaps even a pirate from one of the old ships that sailed in and out of the port in those days. Some said he might have been in league with the most famous pirate of the times: Jean Lafitte.”

Elliott soaked it all up eagerly. Although he had been in New Orleans only a few weeks, he had heard some of the local lore about the notorious pirate Lafitte. There were many things in town named after him. Elliott’s young mind marveled at the idea that he might be living in a house bought with pirate loot.

“Also,” his grandfather continued, “the location where he built the house was strange, though you wouldn’t know it now. Back then the Americans in New Orleans lived up that way, along St. Charles Street.” He pointed north. “That would have been the natural place for him to build a house. But he insisted on building it closer to the river, farther away from the community. It was controversial back then because there were agreements with some of the local Indians, and the place where he built his house was in the middle of an area that the Choctaws claimed as sacred ground. There were a lot of cultural nuances back then, you see, what with European settlers, American settlers and frontiersmen, African slaves, and the Indians. It wasn’t easy keeping things harmonious between all the different groups, and the Americans, not wanting to stir up any animosity among the Indians, lobbied the governor to stop Mr. Orion from building where he did. But he was bound and determined to build on that spot and nowhere else.” The old man grinned. “Obviously, he eventually won out. Some say he bribed the governor to get approval.” He dropped his voice to a whisper. “A lot of that goes on around here, you know.” He winked at Elliott.

“In any event, after building the house, he lived there for many years and later willed it to his son. Eventually other

people built their houses around him. The Indian community grew smaller and smaller, and the outcry to stay off their land was eventually forgotten. Now the house is just one of many here in the district, but with one of the most colorful histories. It has passed from generation to generation within the same family, father to son, until it ended up with me.”

Entranced in the tale, Elliott walked with his grandfather past the old Lafayette Cemetery’s rusty iron gates, draped in bell-shaped white flowers. The air was so thick and humid and sweet with wet honeysuckle, he felt he could almost drink it. Looking up at the old man, he said, “So how did *you* get the house?”

“I inherited it from my father, the great-grandson of Darius Orion.”

“You mean to tell me you’re the great, great-grandson of the man who built the house?”

“That’s right. And you’re his great, great, great, great-grandson.”

“Wow,” said Elliott. “Then you must know even more about him than what’s in the old books.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t,” his grandfather replied. “Our family didn’t pass down much lore from one generation to the next. But we still have many of his belongings in the house. Some of the things he left behind are . . . well, a mite unusual.”

Elliott had a hundred questions zipping through his head. He opened his mouth to speak when suddenly a pack of boys whizzed past them on bicycles.

“Hey, look! There goes Stripes and his crazy old grandpa,” one of the boys shouted. There was laughter from several of the boys, and one of them passed so close he almost knocked Elliott over. Seconds later, they were gone.

“Unbelievable,” said Elliott. “I haven’t been here two weeks, and already I’m an outcast.” He looked down at the

backs of his hands, seeing the familiar symmetrical birthmarks that ran from the webs between the fingers almost to the wrist. They looked like angry red welts, each forming a palpable cord just under the skin between the tendons. He had similar birthmarks between his toes as well. He hated them. His mother, who also had the strange marks, had urged him to ignore the taunts he had received all his life. But, of course, this was easier said than done.

“Don’t let them bother you, son” said his grandfather, who had similar birthmarks between his fingers. His were a deep purple. “Kids can be mean, but you shouldn’t listen to them. There are wonderful things in store for you if you’re willing to work hard and do something with your life.” And there was that gleam again in those gray eyes.

This seemed to Elliott the standard response adults offered to kids who got picked on. Having been the butt of cruel jokes for most of his fifteen years, he recovered quickly from the boys’ insults and continued with their earlier conversation.

“So did you grow up here?” he asked. “And what about your parents—my great-grandparents?”

“Yes,” replied the old man. “I was born in our house. So was your mother. My mother died in childbirth, and your grandmother died while giving birth to your mom. The women of our family haven’t been blessed with longevity, I’m afraid.” A frown darkened the corners of his mouth.

Elliott cringed, thinking about his own mother. “What do *you* think is the matter with Mom?” he said. “She’s been losing a lot of weight. She hardly ever gets out of bed. I guess the main reason we moved down here was so you could help take care of her.”

The old man stopped in the street and placed his hands on Elliott’s shoulders, bending to look him in the eye. He held the boy’s gaze for several seconds. “Your mother is very ill,” he

said, and paused, waiting for a reaction. When none came, he said, “She’s been diagnosed with breast cancer and has been afraid to tell you. The doctors aren’t sure, but they think it may have spread to other parts of her body.” He spoke slowly, all the while gazing into Elliott’s face. His smile was gone. “When they determine the extent of the disease—how far it has spread—she will begin treatment. In any case, her prognosis is very guarded. So there it is, son—we have been trying to figure the best way to tell you.”

Elliott stared into his grandfather’s face. Tears welled up in his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. *Cancer*. It was the last thing he was ready to hear, and for a moment he just stared at his grandfather, digesting the news.

“We have to do something,” he said finally. “We should take her somewhere they can help . . . to a university or something.”

Elliott’s grandfather was silent for a long moment. Finally, he said, “We’re doing all that can be done.”

Elliott turned and ran back toward the house. His grandfather called after him, but he kept running, wanting to be alone—wanting to be anywhere but in New Orleans, living with a weird old man he hardly knew.

Rounding the corner onto his block, he slipped and skinned his knee on the asphalt. Slowly, trying to collect himself, he got to his feet, just as the pack of boys whizzed past on their bikes again. Seeing him, they turned around and rode toward him.

“What’s the matter with little Stripes?” said the biggest one. “Did he fall and hurt his little knee? Aw, look at little Stripy, crying and running home to his mama.” All the boys laughed as if this were the funniest thing they had ever heard.

Elliott turned to face them. Blood rushed to his face.

The fat one circled and rode up to him and got off his bike.

Elliott stared at him for a few seconds before casting his eyes to the ground. He knew what was coming next.

The fat one dropped his bicycle and methodically closed the space between them. The other boys followed suit, closing in around him, working up their nerve.

Feeling panicked, Elliott looked from one boy to the next. They had made a tight circle around him. "Come on," he said, still staring at the asphalt. "I don't want to fight. I didn't do anything to you."

The fat one poked him in the chest, pushing him backward.