

Prologue

Virginia Beach
March 2015

Scarlett Juliandra Laurent looked at the ultrasound screen again. It was a big mass. Her breast cancer had come back.

She'd first been diagnosed nearly eight years ago when she found out she was pregnant. She went in for a simple pregnancy test and came out with a cancer diagnosis. The doctor gave her the option of aborting her baby so that she could begin chemo treatment immediately, since it was an aggressive type. She had refused, deciding instead to wait until after her baby boy was born before having the mass excised and starting chemotherapy and radiation treatment. She'd lost all her hair and her mom helped her take care of Tyler during that awful ordeal. It should have been the happiest time of her life, enjoying her newborn baby, but instead she was throwing up, losing her hair, and getting weaker by the minute. She finally made it through and had been in remission for many years. Until now.

She was sitting in her surgical oncologist's office looking at the ultrasound monitor with the doctor, who'd just shown her where the mass was. She'd gone in for a routine mammogram two weeks prior when they'd found one very large mass in the same place the original one had been. She'd been referred back to the surgeon who had excised the first one, and an ultrasound confirmed that the mass had returned. Dr. Gary Mitchell had done a biopsy, and sure enough, it came back positive. She was back at his office a second time to discuss treatment and to do another ultrasound.

"I'm sorry to say it doesn't look good, Scarlett." Dr. Mitchell looked at her gravely. "This is a totally different kind of cancer than what you had before. This one is HER2-positive and is a fast-growing aggressive cancer."

She was barely listening and didn't understand what he was saying in that medical language. "What..." she coughed to clear her suddenly scratchy throat. "What does that mean?"

"It means we have to act quickly. There is a medicine we can try called Herceptin, which may slow or even stop the growth of the cancer in addition to chemotherapy and radiation therapy as before. But I strongly

recommend a mastectomy since the cancer came back and because it's so aggressive.”

Mastectomy?

“A double one, just to be sure. Otherwise, Scarlett, without that, you might live a year, even with the chemo.”

Her eyebrows rose. “A year?” she squeaked.

“Without the mastectomies.” He put a reassuring hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “It won't be so bad. You can have reconstruction surgery after all the other treatments.”

Scarlett tried to absorb what he was saying.

“I'll send the nurse back in here, and she can explain in more detail what needs to be done. Decisions need to be made quickly.”

He turned off the ultrasound machine and quietly walked towards the door, pausing to give her a sympathetic yet reassuring smile, and left the room, closing the door behind him.

A year. She was devastated. She'd have to have the mastectomies, of course. It was her only chance of survival. *Damn it!* She would lose her boobies. She could have reconstructive surgery like her mother did.

Her mother had also had breast cancer and died from it last year. She'd had the surgeries, but it came back in her lungs. She and Tyler had moved into her mother's big five thousand square foot home on ten acres of land in south Pungo to help take care of her for the last year of her life. At a certain point, her mother made the decision that she didn't want any more chemo. She wanted to enjoy her last days.

Scarlett wiped the goo off of her breast and put her clothes back on. Soon the nurse lightly pecked on the door and came back into the room. She handed Scarlett pamphlets, paperwork to be filled out, prescriptions to start taking, an organic diet to follow and other precautions, and a business card for a psychologist. She spoke in a quiet voice, trying to reassure Scarlett, but she felt numb. Her life was about to change. Again. And this time, she wouldn't have her mother to help her through it.

She made an appointment to come back in for blood work and then left the office, the door closing with a resounding thud behind her. She walked down the hallway towards the main glass doors of the building and stepped out into the cool, blustery air. As she stepped out onto the sidewalk and headed towards her car, her dark green scarf blew across her

face, momentarily blocking her view. She stumbled, but a pair of hands reached out to catch her.

“Oh, mon Dieu!” she exclaimed in her French accent. Her father was French and her mother was of English descent. She’d been born and raised in the U.S., but her father spoke French, having been born in Toulon, France, and he taught her French at a young age.

She found herself in the arms of a tall, muscular man with brown hair and eyes the color of dark chocolate. Her hands rested against his chest and she looked up into his handsome face.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She found her senses and backed away from him. “Yes, I...I wasn’t watching where I was going. Thank you for your help...”

He smiled and said, “Call me Jackson.”

“That’s a lovely accent you have,” Jackson said. “Are you French?”

She eyed him curiously. “Half-French, half-American.”

“Ah. It’s pleasing to the ears.”

“Thank you.”

She started walking towards her car again, and halfway across the parking lot, his voice called out to her. “You’re not going to make it through this time.”

She whirled around and faced him. “What are you talking about?”

“Your condition.” He pointed to her breasts. “You need to prepare yourself.”

“What do you know about my condition? Are you a doctor?” Who did this guy think he was?

“No, but I am aware of your situation, and I can help you through this.”

“I don’t need your help. I’ve done this before, and I’ll do it again. Thank you very much for your concern,” she finished, in a hateful manner.

He actually grinned at her. “I admire your determination. I’ll be seeing you soon, Scarlett.” He turned away from her.

He knew her name? “Wait. Do you work for my doctor? What do you know?”

“I’ve already told you that I’m aware of your situation. Your doctor won’t be able to help you this time. You might as well forget about the surgery.”

“How dare you tell me I can’t do something! I beat this once before and I’ll beat it again. I’ll have the surgery, take the chemo and radiation, and I’ll beat it. You wait and see.” She wiped a tear, rushed away to her car, and locked herself inside quickly. Before she started the engine, she looked for Jackson, but he was nowhere to be seen. She looked all around the parking lot and at the front of the building, but he had just vanished.

Chapter One

November 1, 2015

Scarlett pulled into the parking lot at BayBreeze Farms produce stand and quickly opened the door to throw up. During the past eight months, she'd undergone double mastectomies followed by chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and then removal of scar tissue and implant-reconstructive surgery. She was still in the healing stage from the last surgery and on antibiotics to prevent any infections, but they made her sick. She'd never been so tired of taking pills in her life. She was sick of it all. Sick and tired of being sick and tired.

She'd given it her best shot, but her body failed her. Her last visit at the oncologist revealed that despite all the surgeries and treatments, there was now cancer in the lymph nodes. She was so damned mad, she cursed in French at the doctor's office. She decided then and there that she didn't want any more treatments, pills, or surgeries.

She closed the door of her car, wiped her mouth with a nearby tissue, and then pulled back on the curvy road that led to Sandbridge Beach. It was an early Sunday morning, the day after Halloween. She had attended a big party at a neighbor's house the previous night and drank a little too much deep red wine, which could be adding to her nausea.

She'd been shocked to see Jackson at the party.

"Scarlett," he'd said in his deep rich voice. He was dressed like Dracula including a painted white face and ruby red lips, hair slicked back and wearing a very nice old-fashioned suit and cape. He picked up her

hand as if he meant to kiss it but turned her arm sideways and pretended to bite her on the wrist, revealing long fangs.

It made her laugh. She couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed.

"Jackson, what on earth are you doing here?" she'd asked. She was wearing a black and silver flapper dress with long fringe and black feathers tucked into a headband around her neck-length wig.

He ignored her question. "How are you?" he asked sincerely, like he knew the ordeal she'd been through. She had lost a lot of weight, so she probably looked anorexic compared to the last time he'd seen her.

"Not too good," she confessed. Since he worked for the oncologist, he probably knew what she'd been through anyway and was just asking to be polite.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Why don't we sit down in the parlor and catch up?"

Sitting down had sounded good to her, so they spent the next three hours sitting on an old Victorian couch that had been reupholstered in a beautifully decorated room, sipping wine. She told him everything she'd been through.

"I don't mean to bore you with all the details," she said later. "I'm sorry. You must hear this kind of thing all the time at work. It's the wine."

"It's not boring. I'm truly interested in you. I'm sorry that the cancer has spread. What are you going to do?"

"Nothing. I'm sick of it all. I'm so tired."

He nodded. "I understand."

She looked into his dark eyes and remembered that he'd told her that day back in March that she wouldn't make it this time. She'd been mad at the time, but now she realized he was probably right. She felt so defeated. She nearly spilled her wine in an effort to place it on the coffee table. Jackson helped her to steady the glass and then surprised her by pulling her into his arms and hugging her. She cried until her mascara ran.

"I was so determined. I did all the right things," she said through her tears. "I guess you were right, after all. How did you know?"

"I didn't want to be right, you know." He let go of her, and seeing her face, pulled out an old-fashioned handkerchief and wiped her eyes for her until the white cloth turned black. "You gave it your all, and you are to be commended. It's just your time, that's all."

She sniffed and studied him. “I don’t want it to be my time. Don’t I get a choice in this?”

He shook his head. “No, you really don’t. I’m sorry,” he said, as if her condition was his fault.

She took a deep breath and then picked up her wine glass again and took another long drink. He found a carafe nearby and filled both their glasses again.

“Who’s going to take care of my son?” she asked, bewildered.

“You should find his father.”

She looked at him, startled. How would he know that his father had not been in the picture?

“He deserves to know,” Jackson said.

“Are you a mind reader?”

He smiled, but then she realized he must have gotten the information from her records at the oncologist’s office.

“I don’t want to live in my big old house anymore,” she said suddenly, changing the subject. “I want to live someplace happy for the rest of my time, surrounded by my friends and family.”

“That sounds like a good idea. Where would you like to live?”

She thought of her father, who lived in France. Her parents had divorced when she was eight and he’d moved back to his homeland. He was in the French Navy when he met her mother while his ship was anchored in Norfolk, Virginia. They fell in love, got married, and she moved to France with him for a while, but she missed home. They found a big old house in Pungo, which her father paid to have remodeled just the way her mother wanted it, and they’d been happy for a while.

Their arguments started when her mother had a miscarriage. She never got over it. They eventually divorced and her father had moved back to France.

Scarlett would love to see him again, but she didn’t really know him anymore, and she didn’t want to spend the rest of her days in a foreign country.

That’s when she remembered that her friend, Catrina, whom she worked with at the State Farm Insurance office, had a beach house in Sandbridge. She’d been to her house before and remembered Catrina saying she had a neighbor who was real estate agent.

“The beach,” she told Jackson. “I’d love to live in a little house on the beach. To wake up and see the sunrise on the ocean every morning. That’s what I want to do.”

“Then you should do it,” he said.

So here she was, driving on the curvy country road to find the real estate agent’s house and see about getting a beach house. She’d texted her friend Catrina the night before and found out the agent’s name was Maggie Reynolds. Catrina gave her all of Maggie’s contact information, and Scarlett typed the address into her smart phone for directions. She didn’t know if Maggie was home or not, but she’d called her home phone number and left a message. She’d also called her cell phone number, but Maggie didn’t answer that either, so Scarlett decided to drive over and see if she was home. If she wasn’t, Scarlett thought she could at least drive around and look at the houses, maybe park somewhere and take a walk to the beach. She’d not been to the beach in quite a while.

She found Maggie’s blue and white house a few minutes later and pulled into the driveway. There was a black truck in the driveway, so hopefully she was home. She got out of her car and knocked on the downstairs door, but nobody answered. She looked at a steep staircase nearby and decided that she would try the door up there and see if she could get Maggie. If not, she’d just walk to the beach.

She was out of breath by the time she reached the top of the stairs. She took a moment to take in the view of the ocean over the top of the tall sand dunes and breathed in the salty air. *Yes.* This was where she wanted to be.

She walked to a screen door on a screened-in porch that stretched from the front of the house to the back, and she turned the handle. It was locked. She knocked and waited.

Finally another door opened and a pretty blonde woman came out to the screened porch.

“Can I help you?” she asked. She had a pleasant, friendly face, looked a little flushed, but mostly looked happy. Scarlett was immediately envious.

“Are you Maggie?”

“No, I’m afraid not. This is her house, but my husband and I…” she paused and smiled. “Well, we’re on our honeymoon. We just got married last night.”

“Oh, mon Dieu. Pardon me. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“It’s okay. We’re leaving today for Savannah. We just spent our wedding night here since we had the wedding out there on the beach.” She pointed behind her.

For the first time, Scarlett noticed that there were tables on a deck on the other side of the screened porch that had white tablecloths draped over them, and there were pumpkins and black lanterns on each table.

“It must have been a beautiful wedding,” she said.

“I’m Jen,” the lady said, unlocking the screen door. “Would you like to come in?”

“Oh, no. Thank you. I’ve intruded enough.”

“Maggie will be home sometime later this afternoon. She spent the night at my house with our kids.”

“Oh, I see. I’ll come back later then.”

Scarlett turned to go when she heard someone else coming to the door. She turned around and saw a very good-looking man with sandy blonde hair hanging down straight across his face. He wasn’t wearing a shirt and only a pair of dark blue loose shorts.

Luke? she wondered. It couldn’t be, could it? What were the chances of seeing him here?

“Hey, what’s up?” he asked, putting his hand around Jen’s waist and finally looking at Scarlett. When he did, he looked surprised, confused. Did he remember her?

“This lady…what was your name?” Jen asked.

“Scarlett. Excusez-moi. Forgive my manners.”

Jen smiled. “It’s fine.” She looked back at her husband. “Scarlett, this is my husband, Luke.”

So it *was* Luke!

He did not recognize her though, she could tell. That made her a little angry, but she couldn’t really blame him. They’d both been drunk, and it was only one night. They’d been strangers to each other who enjoyed drinks and then went back to his house for sex. She’d left in the middle of the night.

Jen looked at Luke. “She’s looking for Maggie. I’m guessing about a house?” She looked back at Scarlett.

She nodded, suddenly felt slightly dizzy. “Yes, but I can come back later.” She turned to go. “It was nice meeting you,” she said to Jen. She looked at Luke and then turned to leave.

“Nice to meet you, too. Good luck with your house-hunting,” Jen said.

Scarlett turned back at the top of the stairs before going down. “Have a nice honeymoon,” she said, forcing a smile.

She herself had never been married in her young thirty-one years. At this point, she never would be.