

Prologue

Fog hung low on the lonely hillside and the weak autumn sun tried hard to pierce the barrier of heavy grey clouds. James turned up the collar of his long black coat. His violet eyes were moist but he held back the tears, not from embarrassment, but from the fear that if he lost control, his stored emotions would drag him into a tunnel of despair from which there'd be no escape.

He stood motionless, the icy wind biting his face and whipping his hair in his eyes. He didn't feel the firm hand on his shoulder or the soft voice that asked "Is there anything I can do to help?" The woman waited for a reply and when none came she put her arm around his waist and led him through the crowd to the waiting mourning car. The usher opened the door and stood aside while the two settled in the back seat. The usher's expression was of total detachment; he was paid to be unobtrusive and reserved. He was not expected to become involved in the drama of other people's grief. He was a true professional, he liked his job, and he did it well.

"Where to Ma'am?" he asked as he pulled quietly from the curb, the driveway pebbles barely moved under the tyres. He drove with the same calm confidence that made him an expert in the business that dignified death and final farewells; he was a fourth generation practitioner; a specialist in the art of discretion and grief support. He repeated the question, "where to Ma'am?" These sad people, burying their dead, were nothing to him. He watched, but rarely felt moved by their grief.

He looked at her in the rear vision mirror; he'd never seen her before this morning and never expected to see her again. He knew nothing about her; yet he felt something he couldn't quite put a finger on. This had been just another funeral; nothing special. None of them varied much, just larger or smaller crowds, and apart from that, they were pretty much the same. His expressionless face softened as he studied the woman behind him. Death leaves people to cope as best they can, he thought. Time usually heals and lives rebuild. Their eyes met in the mirror and he knew her pain wasn't caused by death; time wouldn't bring peace; time would only increase the nightmares and loneliness for her. "The gentleman looks sick ma'am,' he said, "should I call for a doctor to meet us?"

A thin smile was all she could manage to show her gratitude. Right now she needed to know someone cared; anyone would do. The weight of the past ten years was crushing her; sapping her energy; killing her spirit. She moistened her lips, "No, he'll be fine. He just needs time; he's been through a lot.' She smiled again "thank you anyway, you're very kind."

The driver helped her take James in to the apartment and settle him on the couch. From a window she watched the car drive away; she felt a pang of panic, she was alone with James for the first time in ten years and didn't know what to say or how to interact with him.

Feeling awkward and unsure, she made coffee and distracted herself by making a pasta salad for their lunch. From time to time she glanced at the person sitting by the window; the sun had finally won its battle and flooded the room with a vibrant glow, changing his skin colour from marble grey to a more natural tone, but the sun did nothing to help her come to terms with David Bradcliff's death or his son's return.

She finished preparing the food and went over to where James was sitting, "Lunch is ready, would you like to sit at the table or would you rather have it on a tray?" A moment passed before he looked at her. His brow creased and he refocussed as he took in his surroundings for the first time. "Pardon?"

“Lunch. I’ve made a light meal, please try to eat James, you look so thin. I know you probably don’t feel like it, but you should try a few mouthfuls.” He stood and walked slowly to the chair she held out for him.

She chatted while he picked at his food. She talked about an exhibition she’d just seen and other safe things. He tried hard to focus on what she was saying, but found it impossible; his mind was swimming with images and his emotions were dulled by the events of the past few days.

He helped her clear the table and they did the dishes together, then he said he was exhausted and should go home. “Home? Tonight? Surely you won’t go back tonight, it’s a five hour drive James.” She paused, anxious to make him stay. They needed to talk. If they didn’t talk about it now, they never would, and their lives would be ruined forever.

Macauley filled the coffee pot and put it on the stove, she didn’t really want more coffee, but it gave her something to do while she cleared her thoughts. She knew James had been through hell, but so had she. The past ten years had left her with deep wounds that may never heal; she needed answers; she needed to understand what went wrong and the events that had caused their lives to be shattered.

The coffee hissed and bubbled and a rich aroma filled the apartment, “James” she said turning to him, “Please stay. I need to know what happened.” He simply nodded; he didn’t trust his voice enough to answer. Macauley took a deep breath, “Thank you. I know it won’t be easy, but we must talk about it or neither of us will ever be able to rebuild our lives.”

“I know,” he said hoarsely, “I want to tell you about it, I think I’ll go crazy if I don’t tell someone what happened.” Pain pinched his face, “I didn’t get the chance to talk to Dad” his voice trembled and his body was shaken by the sobs he’d been suppressing, “He died before I could ask him to forgive me. “

Macauley held him in her arms and rocked him like a child, allowing her own tears to escape from the icy prison she'd trapped them in for more than a decade.

Chapter 1

Macauley closed the door quietly and walked over to the nurse in the office across the hall. "She's sleeping," she said. "I need to call my office, may I use this phone?"

"Of course Ms. Gray. I'll just look in on her to make sure she's comfortable. Doctor Sandle's with another patient right now, do you mind waiting for a while, she'd like to talk to you about Miss Potter." Macauley looked at her watch, she was due at a meeting in half an hour; shit she thought; I don't need this in my life right now.

Seeing her frustration, the nurse said, "Doctor shouldn't be too long" and as a final reassurance she added, "it is very important or we wouldn't keep you."

"It's O.K. I can wait." The nurse left her to make her call.

She waited impatiently for James to answer, "Thank God you're still there." she said when he picked up, "I was worried I'd miss you."

James knew immediately that something was wrong. "What's up? What's happened?"

"I haven't much time and I can't explain too much right now, but I'm going to be late; you'll have to start without me."

Start without her; that was impossible. "We can't start without you Macauley." he almost yelled.

"James you'll have to. Please it's important; I'm at Riley House."

"What the hell are you doing at a psych hospital?" he said, with a hard edge to his voice.

“Waiting to see a doctor.” She paused, “Please James; make any excuse you can, but don’t hold the meeting up for me.” she pleaded.

She gave him a quick account of the events leading up to her hospital visit. Her day had started quite early; after a quick breakfast, she’d showered, and was dressing when Lord Butler, her life long friend, adopted uncle, and owner of the apartment she had been leasing for the past five years, called from London. He’d asked her to check on his niece Susannah; who was living in the unit across the hall from hers. Lord Butler explained Susannah had been receiving psychiatric care from a team of leading doctors at Riley House; a small private hospital, considered one of the best in the world, for the treatment of trauma related cases. When Susannah had started her treatment she’d been a live-in patient, but for the last three months she’d been living independently with weekly support visits to the hospital. Lord Butler phoned the apartment each day to check on his niece, but for the past three days there’d been no answer and he was anxious. Susannah suffered from severe depression and her uncle knew she was capable of anything. Macauley had tried to put the old man’s mind at rest by saying she’d look in on Susannah and call him back as soon as possible.

She explained to James how she had knocked on the unit door many times without success, and finally she’d gone onto the balcony, climbed onto the balustrade, carefully picked her way across to the next apartment and entered it by the French doors. At first she’d thought the flat was empty; God knows why she opened the robe. Susannah was crouched in a corner; there was no blood; no sign of a struggle, yet Macauley thought the young woman was dead. She stood staring at the crouched form, listening, but not knowing what to do. When her eyes adjusted to the dimness she saw the young woman’s fingers move slightly and heard a thin groan escape from her tight, white lips.

Macauley had phoned Riley House. Thank God an ambulance came within minutes, and although she didn’t want to go to the hospital, she knew she’d have to talk to the doctors before contacting the Butlers. Besides Susannah begged her

to go with her; she kept screaming the doctors wanted to hurt her, so to keep her quite, Macauley sat beside her throughout the short ride to the hospital.

“Shit James I had to do something; I couldn’t just leave her there.” she said into the phone.

James’s normally strong voice was flattened by a heavy sigh, “How long will it take?” he asked, glancing at his watch and noting the meeting was due to start in ten minutes. Macauley’s news irritated him; it wouldn’t have mattered if it was just a regular meeting, but the shareholders were voting on the Prescott takeover bid; he needed her at this meeting. Her research paper was important to its outcome; if anything had the power to persuade them not to sell, it would be Macauley’s findings. She’s got to be there, he thought. She’s the researcher and no one else can present the paper with her level of expertise and conviction. He felt a moment of panic that quickly changed to anger.

He hated being dependent on others, it made him vulnerable and that was something he detested. He was a planner and normally didn’t let the unexpected throw him. “I’ve got to stay calm”, he told himself, “Today’s the most important day of my whole life, and this meeting’s going to shape the rest of it.”

“James I’m really sorry about this, but the truth is, I’ve no idea how long I’ll be.” Macauley took a short breath, “James, I know how important my report is to the meeting, but you can deliver it without me.” Her warm, sincere voice made him relax a little. Macauley was his greatest ally. He knew she’d never let him down. She needed his support right now, and regardless of what happened today, he resolved to give it.

“It’s O.K.” he said firmly, “Don’t you worry about the presentation, we can rearrange a few things to help you out.”

Thinking quickly he said, “We had you scheduled for about 11.30; I’ll juggle the lunch break; if we close the first session thirty minutes early and extend the break by ten or fifteen minutes that should give you nearly an hour to get something sorted out there.”

He paused as an image of her came into his mind: tall and slim, with long dark hair, pulled into a soft bun at the back of her neck; a few rogue strands always refused to be captured by those weird snapping clips she used. How many times, he wondered, had he watched her snap the spring metal open and closed? Their soft click was the most erotic sound James knew. It was the one he associated with lovemaking and Macauley's soft silken skin; shaking the images away he continued, "I'm sorry for being such an arse, I guess I'm a bit edgy today. Look, don't you go worrying about us. We'll be fine. Just get on down here whenever you can."

"Thanks James. This shouldn't take too much longer. Ask Noni to make lots of notes on all the stuff I miss."

"Shall do, and remember, don't you worry about anything here; we can handle things until you arrive." He reassured her "and Macauley" he said holding her picture in his mind, he could see her dressed in a navy linen jacket, matching long straight skirt, and a cream silk blouse that perfectly matched her rich, pearl skin, "I think you're wonderful for helping that young woman. Most people wouldn't give a damn." His voice was warm and caring.

"Thanks James. Maybe I'm crazy, but I wouldn't be able to get her out of my mind if I hadn't helped her get proper care. I'll be there as soon as I can. Good luck"

Luck was the last thing he needed. Luck was not in his vocabulary.

He knew that the shareholders would want answers today, and he intended to give them. Luck, he said to himself, I don't think so. Bradcliff Enterprises had not been founded on luck, and it played no part in its operation.

Luck was not something his management people factored into their calculations. It never had, and it never would, play a part in his life.

David William Bradcliff had founded Bradcliff Energy, fifty-five years ago, to this very day. David Bradcliff had been a thoroughly professional business operator, who left nothing to chance. Everyone who knew them both, agreed James was an exact replica of his visionary father who had been first to discover a financially

viable method of recycling motor vehicle tyres to produce an environmentally safe, power generation fuel. Although David had started the company and taken all the research and development risks, it was his son who had established it as one of the largest alternative power generation businesses in the world.