

## Prologue

He found he was on Regent Street but couldn't actually remember getting there. He must have been walking for ten minutes already since leaving the restaurant, maybe longer; he'd lost track of time. Twice he'd looked round, with the flesh-creeping feeling that he was being followed, but he'd seen nothing to confirm his suspicions. It was autumn but the day was surprisingly warm and sunny, sultry even, the streets of London choked and sweaty with the multilingual cosmopolitan crush of tourists and shoppers: women in sleeveless tops and cotton dresses, men in t-shirts and cropped trousers, and office workers on late lunch breaks, their jackets abandoned and formal collars loosened. There were children too. Maybe it was half-term; he couldn't remember. But everyone, it seemed, wanted to make the most of this unwonted last farewell to summer.

Simon felt himself carried along by the press of people, unable to pin his thoughts down any more than he felt he could control where his feet led him. He moved with the flow of bodies - like a stick tossed into a river, he thought. The image brought back a rush of memories he'd tried hard to forget and he pushed them away. They wouldn't have come to mind in the first place if he hadn't had to meet that man for lunch and he was angry suddenly that they had been thrust back at him after all these years. Damn the man. Damn him to hell. Why did he have to surface now? Though if he were honest Simon knew he'd been waiting for it, that it had always only been a matter of time. And yet there was nothing he could do about it now. All the regrets in the world wouldn't change anything. The anger dissipated to be replaced by the stealthy heaviness which had become so familiar to him of late. Regrets. So many regrets. These last weeks had been a struggle. His life was starting to unravel and he felt as if he'd lost control.

He reached a large junction and stopped, hesitating a moment and trying to clear his mind, but someone collided with him from the rear and he felt himself moved forward and was swept along and then down, descending the steps into Oxford Circus tube station. Yes, he would get on a train and get away from the bustle of town. He'd purposely left the afternoon free; maybe he would go home, listen to some music, calm himself down and try to put it all away from him again. He queued for a ticket, passed through the barrier and headed for the platform, not really registering what he was doing. He knew the way well enough though he rarely used the tube these days, preferring to walk or take a cab.

The platform was surprisingly quiet; a train must just have left. Simon moved on. The crowd built up steadily behind him and he kept to the front - he'd never been the sort of person to hang back. Again he had the uncomfortable sensation of being watched and glanced round nervously, only to find himself looking into the indignant and challenging eyes of a young woman. He quickly looked away.

A snatch of a tune had come into his mind and he began to hum it. It wasn't his usual sort of music and he struggled to identify it. Then he realised what it was: *Moon River* from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. That was it. Alex had been singing it while she was packing just before she went away. Alex. She often sang it; it was one of her favourites. She'd sung it to him on their honeymoon he remembered now. How could he have forgotten that? His throat thickened with long suppressed emotion.

The rumble of the next train echoed distantly down the tunnel and he felt the first whisper of cold air flicking his hair. Everyone shuffled a little forward as more bodies weighed onto the platform and the rumble grew and swelled. Simon found himself looking down at the tracks, mesmerised by them as the sound echoed in his ears and the wind whipped against his face. His eyes swam with tears though he never cried. The tracks looked so close; all he had to do

was step out and it would be done. Over with. Just like that. No more regrets. No more half truths and covering up and trying to forget.

*Moon River* drifted into his head again. Alex.

He lifted his head, dragging his eyes away from the track. He should have talked to her, should have told her everything but he'd never found that sort of thing easy. And surely it was too late to do it now. He'd pushed her too far away. He thought of phoning her; he'd like to hear her voice. But what would he say on the phone? He had no idea. It was pointless.

He turned his head as the train roared into the station and suddenly he was falling forward, out into empty space. He heard the screeching of brakes, someone screaming, and then all was silent blackness.

## Chapter 1

Her sister was flirting again. Through a gap in the sea of bodies which straddled the room, Alex could see Erica talking to a young man of lean build and animated expression. The pose and mannerisms were unmistakable and Alex inwardly smiled. It was a familiar and comforting sight in a world which now felt suddenly quite unreal.

She turned as a woman to her right remarked on what a lovely service it had been and expressed her sympathy. Alex immediately thanked her and tried to place the woman's face but couldn't. A lovely service. Was it? She couldn't remember much about it, only the music.

'You'd think that they'd have gone to more trouble with the music, wouldn't you?' Simon had once complained, as they'd left the funeral of an elderly musician friend. 'I'm sure he'd have preferred to go out in a blaze of strings and brass. I know *I* would.'

'I'll bear that in mind,' Alex had responded flippantly. 'What would you like? Shostakovich? No, Beethoven? Or what about the *1812*?' She'd laughed at him then. They hadn't long been married and she didn't take the comment seriously. He was just thirty-one at the time and she was twenty-eight; she hadn't yet reached the stage of considering their mortality. Simon was a talented conductor and a rising star in the classical music world; she had a successful singing career. The future looked bright. 'Perhaps a little composition of your own?' she teased.

'Not a bad idea at that,' he said, grinning. 'If you can't get your music played at your own funeral, when can you?'

Now, here she was, barely ten years on, listening to a small chamber orchestra - friends and colleagues scratched together at short notice - playing a selection of Simon's pieces. She was standing in the function room of a large hotel in northwest London, still clasping the untouched plate of food Erica had pushed on her, feeling dislocated from the event as if she were trapped inside a transparent bubble.

'Alexandra,' said a booming voice to her left. She turned as a big man wearing a black bow-tie, his chin-length hair parted crisply down the centre of his scalp, put his arm round her shoulders. He was a violinist - pompous and difficult to work with, she remembered Simon saying - but she couldn't bring his name to mind. 'You poor girl,' he continued. 'What you must have been through. I've been reading the papers. Pure conjecture to sell copies. Don't pay any attention to it, that's my advice. I presume the police are happy that it was an accident?'

'They said they haven't closed the case yet. There's going to be an inquest.'

'Is there really? I suppose they have to. But of course it was an accident. He seemed happy enough to me. And he thought the world of you; always singing your praises - no pun intended of course. Speaking of singing though, I thought that last recording you made of those Bach cantatas was wonderful. Such vibrancy and yet such lightness of touch. So many sopranos make heavy weather of it. I suppose you'll be wanting a break from singing for a while but don't leave us for too long will you?' He released her shoulder, picked up her free hand and ostentatiously kissed the back of it before moving off.

Alex watched him go, his comments still echoing round her head.

'Mum says aren't-you-going-to-eat-any-of-that-you-haven't-eaten-anything-all-day,' intoned a young voice, the words tumbling out all on one breath. Alex looked down into the intelligent eyes of an auburn-haired boy beside her and smiled. It was Erica's ten-year-old son who looked not remotely like his mother.

'I'm afraid I'm not hungry Ben,' she said apologetically.

'Mum said you'd say that. And I'm supposed to say... ' He paused and screwed his eyes up in concentration. '...It doesn't matter whether you're hungry or not; you should eat.'

Alex grinned in spite of herself.

'I'll bet she did.'

'Please Aunt Alex,' Ben pleaded in a resigned voice. 'You know what mum's like. You'd better eat something or we'll both get into trouble.' Alex sometimes thought Ben was old for his years. Living with Erica would do that to you.

She glanced across the room again but her sister had disappeared. Erica had been a rock ever since Simon's accident. As Alex had frozen into numbed inactivity, Erica had taken charge, taken all the organisation on herself and done what she always did best: made herself indispensable. Alex had chosen the music and readings for the service and Erica had done everything else. It had been slick and grand. 'It should be a statement,' Erica had said. 'A celebration of his life and achievements.' Simon would have approved. Though often introspective at home, he was a natural performer; he liked occasions. Of course Erica had been right and Alex was immensely grateful to her sister for all the trouble she'd taken. But if she'd been free to organise it as she would have wanted, if Simon hadn't seemed in some way to be public property, Alex would have gone for something more intimate and casual, maybe even one of those natural, woodland burials. There were too many people here she barely knew and she didn't find polite conversation easy at the best of times. There again, if she'd had to do it herself, feeling as stupid as she did at the moment, the whole thing would probably have been a shambles.

She glanced down at the delicate, cordon bleu finger food on her plate, caught Ben's eye watching her, his young forehead puckered into a frown, and forced herself to pick a rolled salmon canapé up and pop it in her mouth. She crinkled her eyes up into a smile for his benefit.

'Just keep chewing and swallowing,' Ben said. 'Like I do with mum's steak and kidney pie. It goes down in the end. Trust me.' Alex tried to oblige but her mouth was dry and it took a while to swallow. 'I'm thinking of becoming a vegetarian,' he confided. 'Lots of naturalists are vegetarian. It makes sense really.'

'Oh?' Alex looked at the remaining food on her plate. Under Ben's watchful gaze she picked up a frighteningly orange-filled vol au vent. 'Have you told your mum?'

'I mentioned it. She said it wasn't healthy while you're still growing but then she doesn't know anything about it. She'll come round with time. I'll work on her.'

Ben slipped away again and Alex replaced the vol au vent on her plate as another succession of people came up to pay their respects.

It was the back end of November and already more than four weeks since Simon had died. Alex had been in Vienna, doing a series of concerts at the Kursalon when Erica rang her late one afternoon to tell her that Simon had fallen under a tube train on the Victoria line in London. 'He's alive,' Erica had said, 'but badly hurt. You should come quickly Alex.' She'd left Vienna on the first available flight.

But Simon had never regained consciousness and was dead long before she could get to the hospital. Then there'd been the official identification of the body and a brief interview with the police. It had been a few days later when the police had asked to see her again. There were 'inconsistencies in the witness statements' the Inspector said. They needed to 'clarify a few things'.

'Were you happy together Mrs Brook?' was his opening gambit.

'Of course.' She frowned. 'Why?'

He grunted and then glanced at his notes before raising questioning eyes to her face. 'Or should I call you Miss Munroe?'

'I use my maiden name for performing...well, for most things really. It's easier.'

'I see.' He said everything as if it had some significance but she failed to see what it was. 'You spent a lot of time apart I understand?'

‘It was the nature of our jobs. We have...did...occasionally work together – that’s how we met in the first place – but inevitably not that often. You have to go where the work is.’

‘I see. And you have no children?’

‘No. We were...no.’

He paused and lifted his eyes slowly to her face. ‘And there wasn’t anyone else involved?’ The question took her completely off guard.

‘No. No...of course not.’

He raised his eyebrows and sighed.

‘I’m afraid, Miss Munroe,’ he said in a gentler voice, ‘there’s reason to believe that your husband may have committed suicide.’

‘Suicide? I thought it was an accident?’

‘Some witnesses said it looked as if your husband stepped out purposely as the tube train came into the station. Of course the platform was very crowded and it was difficult to see but they said it seemed very sudden. Did your husband have any problems Mrs. Brook? Was there anything the matter in his work? Were there any money worries perhaps?’

Dazed, she shook her head. She and Simon were blessed with money, a nice home in Hampstead and a comfortable, albeit hectic, life.

‘You’ll forgive me for pressing the point,’ the Inspector persisted. ‘But in the circumstances I have to ask: you don’t have a lover? It isn’t possible your husband recently found out about it?’

‘No, for God’s sake, no.’

He nodded, slowly.

‘And you haven’t found a note?’

‘If I had, I’d have told you,’ she said crisply.

‘Good... Well, if you do, you will inform us, won’t you?’

She stood up to go, angry and upset, but he hadn’t quite finished.

‘And do you think your husband had any enemies, Miss Munroe?’

‘Enemies?’ Alex frowned, genuinely confused. ‘No. Not as far as I know. Why?’

‘There was one witness who said she thought he’d been pushed. I understand you were out of the country when it happened?’

‘Yes. I was in Vienna. Why? What are you suggesting?’

‘I’m not suggesting anything. But it’s important we check everything. I’m sure that’s what you would want us to do as well. Thank you for your co-operation. We’ll be able to reach you at this number in London I assume?’

Now, as she looked across the room and saw the last of the funeral guests speak to Erica before leaving, Alex found the policeman’s questions circulating in her head once more. She dismissed the idea that Simon might have any enemies who wished him dead as unthinkable. But what had taken him down to the station that day? He hated the underground. She was incessantly haunted by the implication, barely disguised in the policeman’s remarks, that she was responsible in some way for his death.

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With the funeral reception over, Alex returned to Erica’s house in Ealing, reluctant to go home. She had stayed with Erica and Ben since her return from Vienna. Her own home was frighteningly quiet and empty on the inside while, by her gate, a crowd of journalists waited expectantly for news or comment. She couldn’t face them.

She stood inside the patio doors at the back of Erica’s terraced house and watched Ben pottering round his newly dug pond. The long strip of garden had been the deciding factor in Erica’s choice of the otherwise unremarkable property some two years before; Erica knew how much pleasure the garden would give Ben though it had pushed her to the upper limit of her

budget. But, in an effort to satisfy Ben's interest in wildlife, the pond was an even more generous move on her sister's part. As a three-year-old child, Erica had fallen in a child-minder's pond and nearly drowned. Alex, two and a half years older, had pulled her baby sister out covered in slime, insects and beetles. Alex had often attributed her own fastidiousness to that event. Certainly Erica's fear of water could be blamed on it; she'd had nightmares about it for months afterwards.

'It seemed to go well,' said an impersonal voice behind her. 'Very smooth.' There was a pause. 'Didn't you think?'

Alex came out of her reverie and turned. Her mother, Victoria, was sitting on the sofa, legs elegantly crossed, hands resting in her lap. Like Erica, she tended to plump rather than slim; unlike Erica, it never seemed to bother her. As a successful barrister she had always worn smart, fitted suits which expressed, as did everything else about her, her determination to be business-like and get the job done. Recently retired, little had changed. Her energy had simply been diverted into writing and the support of a number of good causes. Her clothes still suggested her gritty determination to win whatever project she chose to espouse, however long it took and whatever the cost. A driven woman with a greater dedication to professional success than family life, she was looking at Alex with the expectant expression her daughter knew well. Alex had spent her whole life, she thought, failing to live up to that expectation.

'I suppose so,' said Alex. 'Very smooth. I'll go and see if Erica needs any help in the kitchen.' And she left the living room, carefully closing the door behind her.

Erica was just pouring tea into china mugs. A plate of biscuits had already been put on a tray and she was half way through eating one, her short fair hair neatly styled into place.

'Why did you invite her back here?' muttered Alex, coming up beside her. 'She hardly knew Simon and didn't like him. I was amazed she even came to the crematorium.'

Erica finished pouring and put down the teapot with a thump on the stand.

'I thought she quite liked Simon,' she said, popping the rest of the biscuit in her mouth.

'No, she didn't. She *tolerated* him because he was successful. When she first found out he was a musician she thought he was a loser and a 'bad prospect', the same as all musicians. She didn't want to know.'

'Once bitten, twice shy,' chanted Erica and then, with a glance towards the living room door, dropped her voice. 'Well, whatever, I thought I ought to ask her. I thought she should be there. It's about time the two of you buried the hatchet.'

'It's already buried. We just don't talk much. We've nothing in common. Anyway she makes me feel so...' Alex shrugged. '...inadequate. She always has.'

'I know.' Erica laid three mugs on the tray and looked at them doubtfully before raising her eyes to meet Alex's. 'She'll think they ought to be china cups.'

'Does it matter? Mugs are fine.'

'I suppose. Anyway, try and be nice to her will you? I think she's trying to be supportive. Well, you know, in her own way.'

Alex gave her sister a brittle smile.

'You're right. I know. You always did try to bring us together. I'll try.' The smile dwindled into nothing. 'You've been great Ricky. Thanks for everything. What would I have done without you?' Tears threatened and Alex gave her sister a quick, fierce hug.

'Oh, I'm an absolute angel,' said Erica dryly, accepting the hug rather stiffly. She picked up the tray. 'Will you give Ben a shout before you come through and get him to come in? His drink's on the side there. He's got homework to do yet and he'll stay out till it's dark given half a chance. Anyway, mum'll want to see him before she goes.'

Alex walked down the garden instead to speak to Ben and to look at the embryonic pond. When they got back to the house, she sent him upstairs to wash and then paused outside the living room door which stood slightly ajar.

‘I don’t know who he was,’ Erica was saying. ‘I’ve been through all the pew cards. There are no names that ring any bells.’

‘Perhaps he didn’t fill a card in,’ said Victoria. ‘Not everyone does.’

‘I suppose not. Strange though.’

Alex pushed the door open and walked in.

‘What’s strange?’

Erica hesitated.

‘*There* you are,’ she said. ‘Your tea’s going cold.’

‘Erica said she saw someone at the funeral who looked like Simon,’ replied Victoria, apparently oblivious to Erica’s preference to drop the conversation. ‘She was wondering if he was a relation. Were you expecting anyone?’

‘He hasn’t got any relations...alive,’ said Alex in a flat voice. ‘Not close ones. He’s...he was...an only child. You know that. He never mentioned anyone anyway.’

‘What was this man like?’ Victoria asked Erica.

Erica glanced at Alex before replying. Her sister’s face, usually so expressive, was blank.

‘I’m not sure exactly,’ she said. ‘I didn’t speak to him. I saw him the other side of the room. Like I said he looked a bit like Simon. He had fair, wavy hair, short though. But he was tallish and perhaps a little broader. But then I got talking to someone and when I looked back, he’d gone.’ She looked up at Alex again. ‘Obviously you didn’t see him?’

Alex shook her head and took her tea to the armchair on the other side and sat down. Even had she seen him it would have meant nothing. Over the last few weeks it had happened to her regularly. She would see Simon in the street or driving a car; she’d hear the phone and assume it would be him; she’d even sometimes see him on television, in programmes she watched just to distract her mind. She had regularly projected Simon’s features onto strangers who, on closer inspection, bore scant resemblance to him. She’d feel the familiar rise in her heart before she remembered what had happened and the cold pall of reality settled on her again.

Victoria’s gaze came to rest on Alex and she considered her, much as she might have viewed a stubborn defence witness.

‘I know your taste in clothes is...individual,’ she remarked, as her eyes flicked over the long red and purple vividly patterned dress her elder daughter wore, ‘but I was surprised you wore that outfit for the funeral.’

‘Simon liked this dress,’ Alex said quietly.

‘Yes...well. You know you mustn’t  *dwell*  Alex,’ Victoria said sternly. ‘Keep yourself busy; get back to work.’ She paused and Alex wondered if she was musing on whether singing actually qualified as work. ‘Sitting around is the worst thing you can do.’

‘I know,’ said Alex grimly without looking up. ‘Work is the answer to everything.’

‘And Erica tells me you have no plan to bury the ashes. Is that wise? I mean, don’t you think burial would give you more closure?’

‘I’m not ready.’ Alex’s voice was small and tight. ‘I haven’t decided what I want to do with them yet.’

‘Well, keeping them seems rather macabre to me. It’s not healthy.’

There was the sound of running footsteps down the stairs and a minute later, having grabbed his drink from the kitchen, Ben came in to the room, looking excited.

‘There’s someone sitting in a car across the street,’ he said. ‘I think he’s watching the house.’

‘Oh God, it’s probably a reporter,’ groaned Erica, wandering to the window and gingerly pulling back the net curtain. ‘Where?’

Ben joined her and stared out.

‘He’s gone. He was over there.’ He pointed.

‘Thank God,’ said Alex gloomily. The adrenaline she’d needed to get her through the service and its aftermath was rapidly fading. She felt exhausted and indescribably bereft. Tears threatened again.

‘They’ll have found another more interesting story soon and you’ll be forgotten.’ Victoria put her mug down on the table and rose to her feet. ‘Don’t let them get you down.’ She glanced at her watch. She still gave the impression that her time was carefully apportioned and that it was imperative that she keep to her schedule. ‘I’d better be off.’ She looked down at Alex who was staring sightlessly at her mug. ‘Remember Alex, keep busy. And...if you need anything, well, you know where I am, don’t you?’

Alex dragged her eyes up to her mother’s face and nodded. If you happen to be in, she thought, and it’s convenient.

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Alex didn’t need telling to get back to work; it was a relief to have something to do and she threw herself back into it like a thing possessed. She caught up with recordings she’d missed and travelled to fulfil concert dates, returning, between times, to her home in Hampstead. As Victoria had predicted, the press had lost interest and it was quiet once more. When she wasn’t working she repeatedly cleaned the already spotless house or went out walking till she was weak with exhaustion. Anything was better than sitting still and thinking.

Her usually spirited and lively personality tipped into extreme highs and lows. She would laugh exaggeratedly at programmes she’d never found funny before or weep uncontrollably at sad news stories. Where normally her temper would rise quickly and then rapidly dissipate leaving her contrite and apologetic, now a wave of anger came upon her which seemed to hover just beneath the surface, permanently waiting to erupt. She felt angry with everyone – sometimes for quite trivial reasons – and struggled to contain it, even when she knew she was being unreasonable. Even her sister and her friends came under fire when they tried to be helpful and the remorse and confusion she felt at her behaviour only added to her despair. Several times a week, usually late at night when she was alone, frayed nerves, frustration and utter hopelessness would overwhelm her and she’d sob with tears until she thought she had no tears left to give, nothing left to feed this unendingly greedy worm of grief.

The nature of Simon’s death troubled her deeply and she couldn’t forget it. It had been so sudden and completely unexpected. There had been no illness or injury, serious and intractable, which had warned of her forthcoming loss. She hadn’t even been there when he’d died and that upset her badly. And the worst thing of all was the thought that he had taken his own life when she had had no idea that he was so unhappy. What kind of person did that make her and what sort of relationship did that mean they had shared? Guilt was her constant companion, a heavy weight which she dragged round with her during the day and which nearly crushed her at night.

Christmas and New Year came and went and still she worked. Then, slowly, the anger burnt itself out and she struggled to get up in the morning. At the beginning of March, in the middle of a solo in Handel’s *Messiah* she shuddered and fell silent. She was aware of several hundred pairs of eyes fixed on her, waiting. The orchestra kept playing, glancing uneasily at each other and then across at her but she was frozen. The other soprano soloist came to her rescue and took up the part allowing Alex to feign a bad cough and retire from the stage, distraught and mortified. Afterwards she didn’t dare go back. She was terrified of doing the same thing again.

‘You don’t want to let it bother you,’ Erica said. ‘They probably all thought you’d got the flu. You’ll be fine next time. You’ve always been nervous before performing. It was just a bad night.’

‘No,’ said Alex, shaking her head. ‘You don’t understand. It wasn’t like normal. I was...was...’ Even thinking about it made her break out in a cold sweat. ‘God, it was awful. I

can't describe how terrible I felt...like I couldn't breathe and everything was crowding in on me. I could hardly move.'

She shut herself away. But as the days drew into weeks and her torpor and misery threatened to deepen into depression, Alex remembered an old house Simon had inherited from his wealthy widowed mother some six months before he died. An old ramshackle place, he'd said dismissively, which had been let out off and on over the years; a house which would eat money if you let it, near the sea in Devon. She wasn't sure what made her think of it in the first place but the idea grew in her mind: to get away from the oppressive memories of London and the press who hovered expectantly again outside her gate. The thought was too appealing to be ignored.

Hillen Hall, the house was called, and when probate came through she asked the solicitor all about it. It had been empty for months, he said, told her the little he knew and gave her the keys. She took them out from time to time and weighed them thoughtfully in her hands as if they might give a clue to the nature of the house whose doors they unlocked. Early on the morning after the inquest finished – an equivocal 'open' verdict was finally recorded - she crammed her estate car with clothes, linens, personal items, Simon's cello and the casket containing his ashes, grabbed a map, the keys to Hillen Hall and the solicitor's vague directions, and headed west.