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# **The Madness of July**

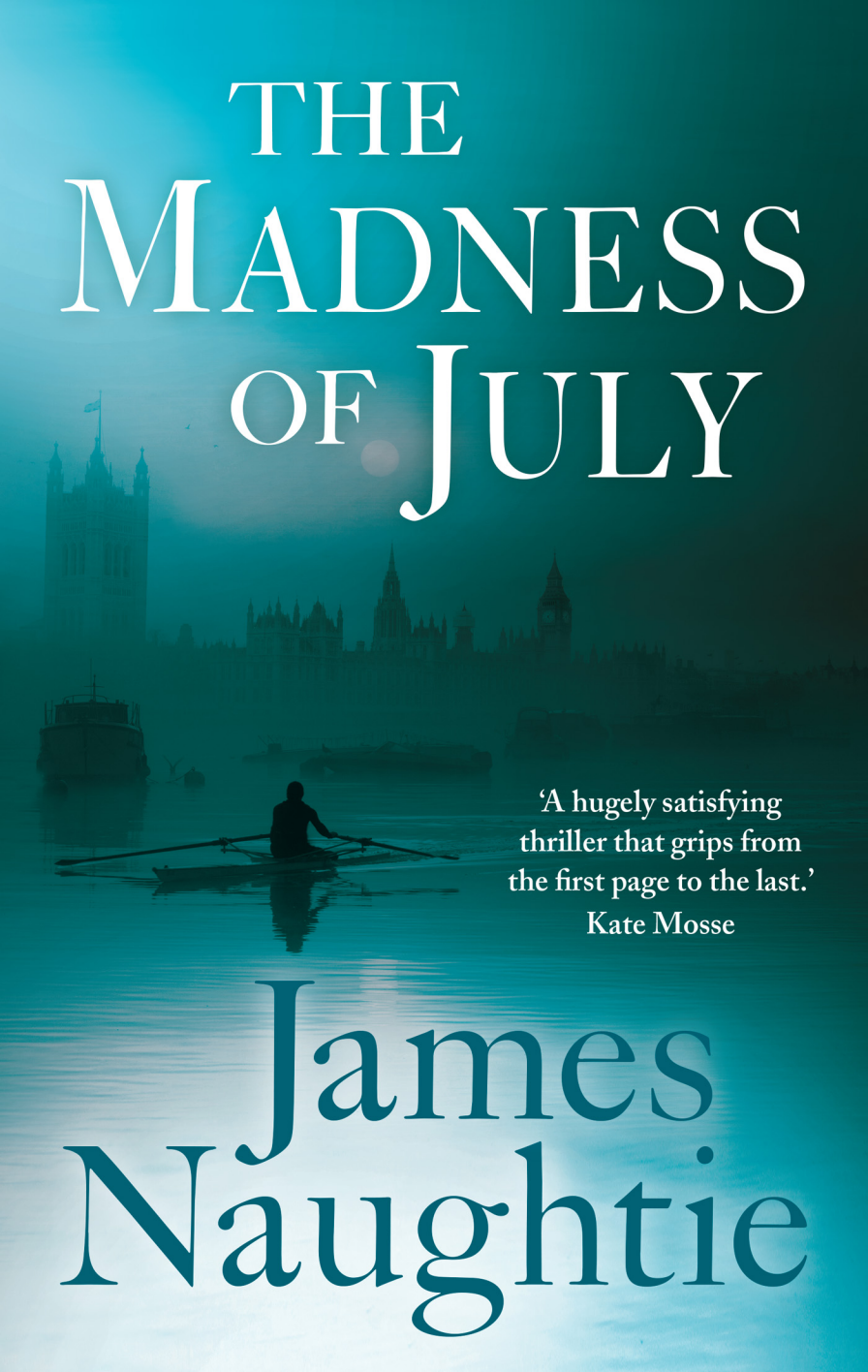
Written by James Naughtie

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THE  
MADNESS  
OF JULY

'A hugely satisfying  
thriller that grips from  
the first page to the last.'

Kate Mosse

James  
Naughtie

# THE MADNESS OF JULY

James Naughtie presents *Today* on BBC Radio 4. His career as a journalist, in newspapers and then as a broadcaster, began in the era in which this story is set. He has written books on politics and music, but this is his first novel. He lives in Edinburgh and London.

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This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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‘... I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the griefs of wild, unknown men.’

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

THURSDAY

## ONE

Will Flemyng took cover. The falling willow branches shielded him from view and he watched Lucy weave through the encampments of deckchairs in the park, passing him unawares. He was close enough to hear her humming a tune as she steered a course towards the office, beyond the trees. But Flemyng stood rock-still in his hideaway and stayed calm. His life had so often involved the deception of friends.

When she had gone, he slipped from the fountain of greenery that protected him, and a few steps took him over the little bridge and away. No one stirred in the crowd around the lake and not a single duck rose from the water. He left them slumbering into the deep afternoon, turned his back on Whitehall and let London swallow him up.

Sam would be punctual, reaching their rendezvous at the appointed minute and moving on if Flemyng didn't appear. He had in mind the last scribbled words on the postcard he had destroyed in the early hours of the morning: 'Don't dawdle.' They were playing their old game.

That meant there was danger, and his second encounter came less than three minutes after Lucy disappeared.

He had crossed the Mall and climbed the steps at the other side, eagerness lengthening his stride and speeding him up. As he turned the corner, a government car slowed down alongside

him, pulled up and parked a few yards ahead. He couldn't turn back without risking a scramble. Knowing the back of that head and the cut of the spade beard, he prepared himself and felt a flicker of fear that surprised him. The passenger heaved his bulk out of the rear seat, spotting Flemyng as he straightened up, and pushed a government red box out of sight.

'Will!' Jay Forbes could always summon up cheeriness from the depths. He steadied himself on the pavement with one hand against the car, and boomed, 'Whither?'

'Hi, Jay. Lunching, I assume?' Flemyng smiled and raised a hand in greeting. He swung his jacket over one shoulder.

'Not going for a swim, that's for sure.' Forbes grinned. 'On patrol. You know me.'

He took a step forward and leaned closer. 'Ball-crushing cabinet committee. I was called in. Jonathan Ruskin chaired it – God knows why – but at least he gave your Foreign Office lot a bollocking. Defence sails on, thanks to the Russians playing around. Nothing like having a frisky enemy. Hardly had to say a word.'

He laughed and his eyes gave Flemyng a slinky scan from top to toe, unblinking. He seemed to balance his weight on one foot in an ugly pirouette, drops of sweat springing from his broad brow. His cream shirt was too heavy for the heat, and he wore a purple brocade tie. 'What brings you out in the sun?' he said, and didn't wait for an answer. Swinging round, he gave a merry wave and steadily climbed the steps to his club. There was a rattle of glass from the tall door as it closed behind him.

Flemyng took a moment to get back into his stride, caught between on-and-off affection for an old friend and alarm. He concentrated on breathing regularly, and crossed the street to stay his course without looking back. By the time he reached the next corner he had found a rhythm, and was a picture of



calm. His rich blue linen suit seemed to brighten with the sun and his polished black shoes caught the light. He was tanned and slim. A man of style and purpose, on the move.

Summer crowds swarmed and chattered around him, yet for Flemyng the winding down of the dog days brought claustrophobia, and the contrary suspicion that he was adrift on a wide sea with a spreading horizon, maybe lost. Despite the status he had achieved and the famous confidence that was his shadow, he felt creeping over him the fear that Sam had stirred up.

Striking across Soho, he wondered if he'd be recognized. Strangers were fine; friends worried him more. His route steered him away from places where they might be lunching, or spilling out from a familiar bar. He had plotted a course around obvious dangers, trying to turn the city's byways and surprising angles to his own purpose and safety. It had to be a walk. Government cars turned a few heads, and ministerial drivers were the princely chatters of Whitehall, alert to the slightest trembling in the web, and reading the political runes with a deadly eye. Their ears picked up in an instant the enticing beat of a private crisis. He thought of Forbes's man watching their encounter on the pavement from the car, his eyes turning to the mirror and away again.

Will Flemyng savoured his rivalry with Forbes, his opposite number at Defence, each of them climbing the ministerial ladder at the same pace, with a seat in cabinet the prize for the first to haul himself up to the next rung. Although he carried the weight of his name – Janus Forbes had borne the two-faced jokes on his back since schooldays – he could lighten a room with his high-octane bonhomie. And for Jonathan Ruskin, of an age with them in his mid-forties but already in cabinet and entrusted with the right to roam in the corridors of every

government department, he felt less jealousy than an outsider might have expected. The secret friendships of politics persisted, and it was helpful to be close to the minister who was the first to carry Ruskin's dread but enticing label, the Co-ordinator. 'I'm the pioneer,' Joanthan had said on the night he was appointed in a chaotic ministerial reshuffle the previous year, 'but I won't be the last to do this job.'

In the street, Flemyng checked his watch. He was now at the game he and Sam had learned together, when they walked the same frontier – checking faces, watching for the one that turned away too quickly, remembering the old rule that when you sensed the absence of the normal, there was trouble round the next corner. With an actor's ease he established a comfortable pace and pressed on. Lifting his head, for a moment he thought a woman coming towards him might have clocked him as her eyes came up to meet his. Elegant, distracted. He broke his step, and cursed silently. She slid past him with no more expression than a ghost's.

Then the touch of a dream, like a whisper of silk. The passer-by had a hint of his mother's spirit – something about the walk? For a moment or two, in the Soho steam enveloping him, Flemyng felt the whisper of a breeze from home, coming down from the hills and up from the burn that cascaded past the woods on its way towards the loch. A happy picture flashed in his mind's eye, of his mother in contentment, perched at her easel in the wide first-floor window on the southern gable of the house to catch the last of the sun, her shadow fading gradually into the dusk of an early-autumn day. Mungo and Abel were with him, and they walked three abreast up the rise from the loch towards Altnabuie, where a flicker on the bow window of the drawing room told them that Babble was lighting the fire. Soon they would be together in their favourite

room and could draw the evening around them. They would sit down at the old orrery, setting off its mechanism and watching the brass planets and moons weave their courses in perpetual peace.

The bright idyll faded as quickly as it had appeared.

‘Happy days,’ he said, and realized that he had spoken louder than he’d meant to. A barrow boy on the corner laughed, unbuttoning his shirt and scratching himself in the heat. Flemyng raised a hand in friendly farewell and hurried across Oxford Street, which he disliked more than any other in London, striking westwards for a few minutes. He looked at the sign on the corner. Harley Street, Sam’s choice. Just in case, Flemyng carried on to the next turning, where his discipline faltered for a moment. At the last, when he should be keeping on the move, he paused.

Fame and privacy clustered together at the door of every mansion block around him, each with its ladder of shining brass plates bearing a list of the doctors busy inside, the top men, whose names were whispered among the desperate rich and the lonely, and accorded by them an intimate celebrity. The greatest secrets were so often the greatest boasts.

‘Lost?’

A friendly voice, welcome in any other circumstances. No one he knew, and no one who knew him, because there was no giveaway smile. A guy on the street in helpful mood, no more. An innocent.

‘No, but thanks. On my way, that’s all. Just enjoying the warmth.’ Flemyng pulled a dark blue handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped his brow.

‘Aren’t we all? Ta-ta,’ came the reply.

The ships passed in the night and Flemyng watched him sail off towards the happy tables of the Cock and Lion on the

next corner, jacket slung off and trailing on the ground, unseasonal pin-stripes sliding dangerously down his rump, an arm waving high in the direction of a friend who had appeared through the doorway of the pub, two foaming glasses raised in silent salute. Flemyng envied them.

Nearly there. First, the phone box on the next corner. He made a pile of coins and dialled, thinking of Mungo making his way to the hall at Altnabuie, maybe having slipped down the iron spiral staircase from his library or come in from the garden with the dogs running ahead and capering at his feet. The line clicked, and his brother's soft voice said, 'Flemyng speaking.'

'Mungo, it's me. We're well, I hope.'

'We are, I'm glad to say, little brother. And all the better for hearing you.' His voice was reassuring. The sun was on the hill, the bees in the lavender. All calm. They spoke for a minute about the heat, stifling London and the cooling shimmer on the loch at home, before Mungo said, 'You are still coming north, aren't you?' His change of tone betrayed a suspicion that something had gone wrong.

'It's why I rang. I may be delayed a little. The weekend should work out, but I can't be sure. You know what it's like here in summer. Politics goes haywire; a little daft. So I'm afraid I can't promise.'

'Please come. I've got all those papers and we do need to talk. They're ready for you.' Mungo was speaking more quickly.

'I will try. Be sure of it.' There was a brief silence, then Flemyng said, lightly, 'One thing... I wondered if you've heard from Abel.'

'Nothing back yet.' Flemyng could hear his brother moving, perhaps sitting down. He was conscious of the echo from the hall. 'I'm sure he'll be in touch.'

Flemyng said, 'Of course he will. And I'll be coming home... when I can.' The phone gave three beeps. He looked at his watch, slid another coin in the slot. 'Soon. Try not to worry.'

He spent a few seconds more in the box, oblivious to its rancid smells, before he pushed open the door and turned back along the street.

Just as the bells on two nearby churches began to sound a ragged sequence on the hour he reached the opening to Mansfield Mews and Sam appeared from behind him. He had the knack of materializing from nothingness. A hand on Flemyng's shoulder and they were moving towards the shadowy side of the street. Sam was broad and beefy these days, shorter than his old friend, his curled russet hair grown longer. He wore black jeans and carried a cracked leather jerkin that made him look as if he was on the run. At first sight he was threatening, but had soft liquid brown eyes. Flemyng believed that most secret servants came in two guises: the silk-smoothies who were quiet and always listening, or the unbuttoned wild boys who were always talking. Each to his own, but sometimes he wished he had been more like Sam.

'Trouble?' he said, without preliminary.

'Of course,' said Sam, giving his toothy smile. Flemyng absorbed his presence, rolling some scenes across his mind like the rerun of a favourite film with chance meetings and scrapes on the battlefield, remembered days of despair and the sound of the tunes of glory they'd sung, long into the night. He thought of Berlin and Helsinki, a freezing border post in the dark, chilly interrogation rooms, and nights on the street. The endless waiting.

He was touching the scar that ran from his neck across his chest.

‘The war wound?’ said Sam, who could remember when it hadn’t been there.

Flemyng had picked it up in Vienna, of all places, where the spies enjoyed opera and Sachertorte as well as thrills in the street. The Stygian darkness of an underground bar after midnight, a botched handover and a fight springing up from nowhere that left him bleeding and crawling back to the embassy with the thought that he might die before he’d got through his thirties.

‘Cherish it. We’ve all got our mementoes,’ said Sam. His were a broken marriage and a dry-out that had left him hollow for a year. With a touch of embarrassment, Flemyng took his hand away from his neck and leaned back against the railings behind him, looking directly at his friend. His own face was cast half in shadow, which emphasized his sharp profile and turned his longish dark hair to jet black. The deep hollow clefts on his cheeks were like two extra scars. The light cast the two friends differently – Flemyng’s sharp edges giving him a clear profile, Sam’s outline a construction of curves and wobbly lines.

‘So?’

‘First,’ said Sam, ‘I know my Will. Worried?’

Flemyng sighed. ‘I’ve found out something, old friend, and I wish I hadn’t. That’s all.’

Sam tried a joke. ‘That’s a change for you.’ But there was no response from Flemyng. Sam’s shoulders rose as he pressed on. ‘If you’re wondering why I summoned you to these parts, I have an appointment across the street with a quack of a certain kind. But I don’t think I’m going to be keeping it, do you?’ He pushed Flemyng’s shoulder to turn him slightly, and nodded up the street. He saw a government car. Not a numberplate he recognized, so a driver pulled from the ministerial pool with

an anonymous vehicle for a one-off run. No passenger inside. 'Who?'

Sam shook his head. 'I'd like to find out – I daresay I will – but we don't want to be seen, do we?' Flemyng dipped his head and Sam led the way quickly round the corner. Before he turned, Flemyng glanced back at the black door of number six in the mews, where the car was parked. No one to be seen. He thought there was a hint of movement at a net curtain on the second floor, then nothing.

Head down, he fell into step with Sam, gesturing towards a pub in a side street that looked at first glance like a dead end, but had a narrow lane at the far end if it was needed for a fast exit. He had used it before. 'Let's have a quick one.'

Flemyng was alert for signs of fear in Sam but he seemed unrattled, relieved to see his old colleague. 'I'll fill you in quickly. Sorry for pulling you out, but I had to. Walls have ears.' He spoke in a rich northern voice that had never picked up the speech of the south, of any class. The tone was flat, but in compensation Sam's language always danced. 'What's the buzz on the Rialto? In the salons. Hear anything intriguing, anything odd?' He paused. 'Because I do.'

They sat down by a window without drinks, but the barman took no notice. Flemyng shook his head. 'About whom?'

Sam's smile flashed at him. 'Can't say. But somebody's in trouble.' Our kind of trouble, he might have said. His sunny expression disappeared.

'Out with it,' said Flemyng.

'Something unusual, strange – a watch on somebody, and here's the thing. It's on your side of the fence and not mine, just for once. There's a minister in the middle of this. Breaks all the rules, of course.' He laughed. 'Will, I can't get a handle on it. I'm not sure why, and that's the truth.'

Flemyng kept his voice low. 'Leaks? Dirty work?'

Sam's head was almost touching his. 'I haven't a clue, old cock. The place is tight as a drum. Hardly a whisper. Scary.'

As so often when they had walked the line together, wrestling the Great Bear as Sam used to put it, Flemyng's mind cleared as if it had been cooled and refreshed by a passing shower. Concentrating hard, he gave Sam the question he wanted. 'Why me? What can I do?'

Sam's voice was almost inaudible now, and Flemyng could feel his breath. 'This time, for once, I'm not taking from you. I'm giving. OK?'

Flemyng waited.

'I heard something yesterday. Just a word muttered in the undergrowth. That's why I scrambled you overnight; got you here fast. Sorry about that.'

'Give it to me, Sam.'

'It could be you.' His hand was on Flemyng's arm. 'The one they're after.'



## TWO

Lucy Padstowe, twenty-nine and a woman of steely confidence, was shaking as she put down the phone. Melancholy visited her from time to time; but genuine alarm, the kind that penetrated to the core, was rare. Her habitual calm had been strengthened by two years in charge of the private office, riding the excitements and ploughing through the weary troughs, so the cabinet secretary's words had brought on a tremor of unease that was unfamiliar to her. She closed the door to the inner office and sat behind Flemyng's desk.

The window was shut despite the heat, and long white net drapes kept out the glare of the sun. She arranged his papers, embarrassed herself by trying the top drawer of his desk and finding it locked, and started trying to track him down. She'd turn to his network, which was hers as well as Flemyng's, the gift of her ministerial patron to his closest civil servant which shaped her days and coloured both their lives. She took to its byways to try to find him.

Ringling Jonathan Ruskin's office on the other side of Downing Street was a natural start. The Co-ordinator sat in an island mid-stream and events flowed towards him. Colleagues thronged at his door, with favours to trade. Although he was a graceful bird of passage in government and a master of the soothing phone call, the barons of Whitehall had a natural

resistance to his existence. With the power to break the territorial rules by which officials lived, Ruskin was a constant irritant. For gossip, however, he was always reliable. And around the watering holes of Westminster, he was fun.

She rang his office first: ‘Lucy in Will Flemyng’s office. Has my man dropped in?’ – but she got nothing, tried Jay Forbes’s private secretary next and felt the tinge of frost that came with Defence, even gave Sparger’s people at the Home Office a call despite their minister’s serpentine ways, and talked to Harry Sorley’s bag-carrier at Education, although she was sure Flemyng would avoid that quarter for the moment. There were two or three others, and a disingenuous call to the press people downstairs just in case. No news. His constituency secretary knew nothing, but begged for a quick word in the afternoon; Flemyng’s chairman was agitated.

Lucy was lost.

She considered her options and after a few moments rang the cabinet secretary’s office, aware of her nerves. ‘Is Paul around? Lucy Padstowe again. Sorry to come back so quickly, but I need him if he’s there.’

The line went quiet, a red light winking every two seconds on Flemyng’s phone as she waited. Then Paul Jenner himself. ‘Have you spoken to Will?’

‘I’m sorry, no. I’m sure he’ll be here soon. But I’m afraid I have to confess something that I didn’t say earlier. I don’t know where he’s been, or why.’ She added, by way of defence, ‘Does this sound odd?’

‘Not in the least,’ said Paul. ‘What are you suggesting?’

‘Nothing. I’m just saying.’

She found herself continuing without waiting for an answer. ‘It’s natural that I’m a bit worried, given what you said a few minutes ago. Unusual things have been happening.’ Her voice

was speeding up. ‘He’s been distracted. Off-kilter. No fun around the office, and you know what he’s like.’ She rushed on. ‘I’m sorry, I know this is a little embarrassing. Private secretaries shouldn’t blab.’

‘I wish more of them did. Let me know when Will’s back. I’ll need him here. He’s just away from his phone. Some day we’ll find a way of tracking them everywhere – can’t come soon enough for me – but there’s nothing we can do for now. Try not to worry.’

The conversation was over. Having wound herself up, the words tumbling out, Lucy felt a heaviness in the room as if time was slowing down around her, forcing her to think. She’d suspected from his voice that Paul Jenner, spider at the centre of her web, was trying to suppress a tremor of his own, which surprised her because his command appeared effortless and the power of his writ was unquestioned, running through every channel of government, from its sacred places to the last secret corner. Nothing bypassed Paul. She pictured him at his vast desk, looking to the high bow window that gave on to the park, his perfectly round grey eyes unblinking while he concentrated. Flemyng said that when he was in that mood it looked like the onset of *petit mal*; but Paul never lost control.

Back to her minister. One of her assistants had seen Flemyng leave the office about an hour earlier, and told Lucy that nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Jacket over his shoulder, he had traded smiles with her in the corridor as he turned towards the broad staircase to take him down, gesturing to the sunshine outside. His tie was loose, the collar of his pink shirt open.

He had told the office that he would need no driver, so Lawrence could have a quiet lunchtime with no fear of a summons. The weather was up and there were personal errands to run, no more than that. The word was a welcome breeze in the

private office. 'He'll be buying a birthday present,' someone said. 'No,' said Lucy. 'Covent Garden for lunch, I'd say.' But she wondered why he hadn't told her.

In his absence, a lazy air settled on the three rooms that protected Flemyng's own; the tea trolley squeaked to a stop in the corridor, and a little queue formed; leisurely gossip flowed through ministerial offices, each protecting its own oasis. Everyone was trying to enforce the calm, driven on by the heat. Meetings were cancelled across Whitehall, as if to hurry summer along.

Little Simon, than whom no one was more junior, was putting together pen portraits of backbenchers due for end-of-term drinks on Monday, writing in loopy longhand because the new electric typewriters ran away with him – and because it was a shirt-sleeve day and lunchtime, with the minister not at his desk, he pushed the boat out, rowing with schoolboy gusto, stripping the guests of their last shreds of dignity. Wife trouble, new boyfriend, money worries, love affairs with the booze... all the chatter he'd heard. It would be filleted and cleaned up in the afternoon, the list rendered acceptable for Flemyng's overnight red box, but no one took Simon aside for a heavy word of advice, which was a symptom of the season, because in sharper, cooler times he'd have been pressed against the wall and filleted himself for his foolishness. But it was hot, and rules were suspended.

Summer had come and parliament would rise in a few days. Relief, and everyone felt the beguiling touch of an unexpectedly balmy time. From the office they could sniff the atmosphere beyond the long windows, see the greenery through the scaffolding that had gripped the building for a year and more. Layers of soot and grime were being scraped away and carted off in processions of wagons that left black

trails along Whitehall; the inner courtyard held a ring of iron skips filled with decades of pigeon droppings from the roof, and an acrid reminder lingered in every hallway. Some day, they were told, their Victorian palace would shine again, a painting with its bloodless colours restored and cracks healed. But not yet.

Lucy wondered how she would explain to Flemyng why Paul wanted to see him. Peering through her window, streaked with dust, she sensed the warmth outside.

Taking to the corridor to steady herself, she set off on a clockwise circumnavigation of the building. It echoed to scraping and banging from the courtyard. They were carrying off the skips again.

It would have been no reassurance to her as she walked out of the office if she had known that at that moment Flemyng had been lost to the world for a minute or two in the fetid heat of a phone box near Oxford Circus. A hand banged on the door. 'Get on with it!' Then banged again. Flemyng, who had not entirely lost his capacity for embarrassment, burst from the box without ringing Lucy as he'd meant to, and walked quickly to a bus stop with his head down. She would have to wait. He ignored a taxi rank, climbed on the platform of a bus that was crawling towards the traffic lights, and swung through a crowd of Dutch schoolchildren on the bottom deck. It would be a slow haul down Regent Street, and the more welcome for that.

The man next to him leaned across.

'I know who you are.'

Flemyng's head snapped back.

'Sorry, but I saw you on TV the other night. You weren't bad. Better than the bird in the red dress anyway. A bimbo, that one.'

Flemyng said, 'Well, we try our best.'

‘Mind you, I can’t remember your name. Sorry about that.’

‘Flemyng.’

‘That’s it. I’ve always had you down as one of the posh ones. Top drawer. I’m surprised to see you on the bus, Mr Flemyng. Nice, though. You working today?’

‘There you are, you see. Taking the bus, taxpayers’ interests at heart. Just out for a few minutes.’ Flemyng smiled and leaned towards his companion. ‘Good to meet you.’ They had reached Pall Mall. He took his leave, crossed the street and headed for the park. From the top of the Wellington steps he could see the window of his own office through the trees, three along from the foreign secretary’s corner lair. Five minutes away at a gentle pace.

Behind the window, Lucy was back at her desk and making another call. ‘Francesca, it’s me.’

‘Hi. What’s up?’

‘Have you got my wandering minister with you?’

‘Wandering?’

‘I need him.’

‘No. Don’t you know where he is?’ Flemyng’s wife laughed. ‘That’s a change.’

‘Just out, that’s all.’

She knew Francesca would be alerted by the oddness of the word. Lucy was precise about where her man was, day and night, the dog who was never off his leash. ‘Out’ carried no conviction.

‘Any ideas?’

Francesca wondered aloud whether he might be present-hunting for her birthday the next month, then they shared their puzzlement in a moment of silence.

‘Probably a quick walk in the park,’ Lucy said, unconvincingly.

She could sense Francesca treading water. Her voice was deep and smooth. and Flemyng often spoke about its hypnotic effect, her style being elegant and unhurried. She was two years older than him, although she had looked the younger at their wedding the previous summer, and Lucy had concluded early in her time with him that it was from Francesca he absorbed some of the free spirit that enlivened their office. She often thought that in Flemyng's character, gaiety and darkness were always struggling with each other. Without Francesca there might have been more frenzy.

Now Francesca said, 'Well, he needs to be back for the opera,' changing the tempo. In her professional role as social manager at Covent Garden – queen bee of the opera party, Flemyng called her – she had become the famed impresario of the interval encounter, and a simple supper she had planned for the private room was getting bigger by the hour. 'The cabinet secretary's office has been on,' she said. 'There are two Americans coming from somewhere, and now it's going to be Paul Jenner himself and two other ministers on top of that. I still don't know who. His office have put it together. All of a sudden it's turned quite... political. They're laying on lobster – the works. Can you warn Will?'

'Americans?' said Lucy.

'Yup. But from where I don't know, if you see what I mean. I expect you've noticed he's been a bit distracted in the last week or two. I don't know how much he's told you.' No response from Lucy, so Francesca plunged on. 'There's a thing going on in his family that seems to be awkward. News to you?'

Lucy said that organizing his life in government was difficult enough without families getting in the way, and avoided the point.

The conversation made a quiet and quick gear change, without warning, as if they had pushed open a door together. 'Can I be frank?' said Francesca.

'Please.'

'Something else has knocked him sideways, and I'm not sure what it is. You know how much Will enjoys his politics. Now it all seems to be turning sour for him, and quickly. That's what troubles me.'

Lucy didn't hesitate, aware that a pause would produce awkwardness. 'I've noticed. Don't know anything about family matters, of course.' By unspoken agreement, as if the conversation needed to be wrapped up before it took on too many complications, they were quick to wind things up.

Francesca asked, 'Anything on your desk that might have caused all this, if you're allowed to tell me?'

'Nothing that comes to mind. Pretty routine right now.'

Then an offer from Francesca. 'Lunch next week, OK?'

'Please.'

Francesca said, 'I'm glad. I'll fix it.'

The two women spoke of a sultry weekend, and the unreliability of men who didn't say where they were going, and made cheerful farewells because neither wanted the conversation to drift. Lucy closed the outer door again to get some quiet, ignoring a thick file that she saw being placed on her desk. There was too much uncertainty. Americans turning up, names unknown, to sit with him and two other ministers for a whole evening, and at the bidding of the cabinet secretary. Paul should have told her. She shifted in her chair. Coincidences, Flemyng always said, were never what they seemed.



At the Royal Opera House, Francesca was feeling a ripple that disturbed the heaviness settling over everything with the rising heat. She didn't believe the birthday-present story that she'd concocted for reassurance, knowing Flemmyng to be a last-minute merchant, but she had needed to confide in Lucy. She leaned out of her window near the top of the building, put both elbows on the ledge, and found a faint stream of fresh air. The crowds of high summer were down below, around the old vegetable market, now empty and a place of bare stone since the last traders had been shunted south of the river to their new home. A place of memories and sweet echoes. Murmurs from the holidaymakers rose towards her. She looked over the rooftop landscape towards the river. It was just an unusual day. Her man had wanted to be out of the office, get some air, have a break. That was all.

But Lucy was off balance, which broke the pattern on which they all depended. Francesca let her eyes scan the heads of the crowd below, an anonymous throng, close and yet unaware of her gaze. A singer was practising in a dressing room one floor below, window open, and Francesca listened for a few minutes. The voice was Russian, melancholic, lonely.

The phone on her desk was just behind her, and its ringing shook her out of her mood. A secretary from Paul Jenner's office.

'I have the names. They're all looking forward to it. We're so glad Will can make it, and we're sorry to be in such a rush. You know how it goes.'

'That's just how we like it,' Francesca said. 'It's opening-night panic here.'

In Whitehall, the pavements were thick with gangs of visitors, the curious and the lost. Crackling commentaries spilled from the open-topped tour buses and a few words floated

through the window in Flemyng's inner office that Lucy had decided she must open at last.

She was still at the desk, fiddling with a heavy black pen but writing nothing. She didn't know he had arrived back until the door opened and he was standing in front of her. She noticed sweat stains on his pink shirt, and a hint of wildness in his hair. But he smiled.

'Where have you been?'

'I went for walk. I'm allowed to, don't you think?' He was still smiling, hanging his jacket on the coatstand, undoing another shirt button. Looking away as he spoke, he said, 'Anything up? An exciting telegram maybe?' He busied himself with an open red box on the corner of the desk, and she saw the nervousness in his shuffling with the files inside. He closed it and turned the lock with the tiny brass key that went back into his pocket.

Lucy was ready. Her tremble had gone, and she was alert to every change in his expression. He was relaxing, but she spotted the effort in masking the tiredness. Lucy said he should sit down, and even gestured to his chair as she stood up from it, in charge again.

She took his place in the doorway, turning away to close the door quietly. Spinning round, strands of light red hair sweeping across her face, she sensed that they were both reluctant to break the deep silence. His eyes were fixed on her, and she realized that his concentration had kicked in.

'You're going to have to get to Paul's office quickly,' she said.

'Paul? Quickly?'

She watched him lean back and slip one hand into his shirt, touching the scar.

'When you were out...' and she added with a deliberate hint of the cruelty that intimates understand '... wherever you were...'

He was utterly still.

‘... I heard some strange tidings from Paul. And bad, however you look at it.’

His hands were back on the desk and she saw that he was trying to hold them still.

‘There’s a dead American. And he has your phone number in his pocket.’