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opening extract from

A Note of Madness

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CHAPTER ONE

It was nearly spring. The air was still raw and sharp and the sky an icy blue. The first leaves on the trees, fresh and pungent, sprinkled sequins of sunlight across the street.

Flynn let the heavy door slam as he left the Royal College of Music and headed across the road towards Hyde Park, bag slung over his shoulder. As he went in through the gates, he caught sight of a familiar back ahead and broke into a jog.

'Hey!' He elbowed Harry in the side as he drew level.

'Flynn. Don't tell me you're going running again.'

'Thinking about it.' Flynn jogged backwards along the wide path. 'Want to join me?'

'Christ, no. Did you hear what Myers said in HS? Two weeks, just two weeks to hand the bloody thing in.'

'Yes, loads of time.'

'Ha ha.' Harry didn't smile. 'I still haven't finished the last one. He's given me an extension but a fat lot of good that does me now we've got another one.'

'You worry too much, Harry, that's your problem.'

'Not everyone reels them off like you do. I'm going

to get myself a sandwich. I've got a lecture in twenty minutes. Coming?'

'No, I'm going for a run.'

Harry rolled his eyes. 'See you later.' He returned to the path, shoulders hunched against the chill air.

Flynn set off at a fast jog. No lectures for him this afternoon; he was as free as the chill, swirling wind, and the quiet, empty park before him spread itself out, enticing and desolate.

Flynn had come to England with his family when he was four. He remembered little of Helsinki now except for building snowmen in the dark and his brother, Rami, pulling him along in a sledge made out of a tray and a length of rope. He had missed his bike and the wide-open spaces and remembered hating England for a very long time.

But one day he had discovered a piano, a dusty upright at the back of the local church hall. Two notes in the bottom octave stuck and the keys were a dirty yellow. While his mother ran Sunday bake-sales, Flynn would tentatively work out nursery rhymes with two fingers. Sometimes an older child would come along and dazzle him with 'The Entertainer' or 'Für Elise'. And when they had wandered off again, Flynn would painstakingly try to find the notes himself. For his fifth birthday, his parents had given him a toy piano. It was made out of plastic, ran on batteries and could be made to play as eight different instruments which all sounded

the same. And Flynn had cried because it wasn't real. After that they had let him have piano lessons.

At school in Sussex he had been a big fish in a small pond. He had been the star of every school concert, the one that other kids' parents talked about. Whenever there had been an important school event, they had brought him out to play the piano. It had been a shock to arrive at the Royal College of Music here in London and find himself surrounded by students who practised as hard as he did, if not harder. Students who had spent their childhood at music school, sometimes hundreds of miles away from their families, just in order to play their instrument. Students destined to become professional musicians since they were born, starting on the Suzuki method at two, playing in concerts and winning competitions around the country when still at primary school. Sons and daughters of famous parents who toured the world and played at the Royal Festival Hall. There were even students here who had already begun to make a name for themselves, who had won prestigious competitions and had been written about in the press. Here things were very different. You had to fight to stay on top and there was always, always, someone just that bit better than you.

Still, London life suited Flynn. He liked the grey skyline, the huge parks, the bustling streets, the overfull buses and the endless traffic. He liked the way no one knew each other, no one really mattered. In a sprawling and impersonal city like this, there was such a mixture

of backgrounds, races and nationalities that everyone just blended in and nothing and no one could look out of place.

Flynn ran out of the park, cut across the main road and headed home. Harry's flat in Bayswater, loaned to him by his parents who were living in Brussels, had been home to Flynn for almost six months now. It was on the fourth floor of a tall, white house on a long tree-lined street behind the tube station. When you came in the front door, the first thing you did was trip over the collection of trainers and a massive accumulation of junk mail in the narrow hallway. The kitchen was white and fitted, although one of the cupboard doors was held together with masking tape, and the small wooden table against the wall was covered with university papers, half-opened envelopes, dog-eared textbooks and bills. Above the table, a small, hopelessly cluttered noticeboard held a collection of papers almost an inch thick, bearing notices such as 'Your mum phoned' and 'Your mum phoned again' and 'PHONE YOUR MUM!' On the fridge door, a magnet in the form of a treble clef held a photo of Harry, Jennah and Flynn during their inter-railing holiday last summer, all white smiles, burned noses and blue sky.

The living room housed a large, sagging brown couch, a matching brown armchair and a coffee table. There was a dusty television sitting on top of a small cupboard stuffed full of DVDs, and an old side table

against the wall. Next to the window was a chipped, black upright that Harry's mum had bought for Harry's dad as an engagement present twenty-odd years ago. On top of the upright teetered several piles of music books, scores and manuscript pads as well as two metronomes and some kind of dying plant in a cracked pot. The music stand held several Rachmaninov scores, the top one opened at a well-thumbed page with a great many pencil scribblings between the staves. In the corner of the room was a dent in the yellow carpet where Harry's cello usually stood, more piles of music, a top-heavy music stand and a cello bow in need of rehairing.

At the end of the hallway were the two bedrooms. Flynn's contained a small, cluttered desk, his keyboard, a PC that only occasionally worked, his stereo, an unmade bed and a burgundy rug that Rami had brought back from Taiwan. Harry's contained a slightly larger desk, an executive-style chair, a complicated hi-fi system, Picasso prints on the walls and a cupboard with sliding doors. Flynn had grown fond of this flat. It was nice and comfortable, and it certainly beat university halls.

As he emerged from a steaming shower, the phone began to ring. Padding into the kitchen, stepping over a pile of washing in front of the machine, he answered, swearing mildly as his towel slipped off him.

'Hang on,' he said down the phone, and readjusted himself. 'Hello?'

It was Jennah. 'Flynn, don't tell me you've just woken up again!'

'I had lectures all morning, I'll have you know! Doctor Swift talking about subsidiary harmony notes, suspensions and appoggiaturas. I could practically see my whole life flash in front of my eyes.'

Laughter. 'I can imagine. Swifty's classes always make me lose the will to live. Is Harry in?'

'No, he doesn't finish till four.'

'Oh. Well I was only calling to remind the two of you about tonight.'

Flynn paused. 'Tonight?'

'The concert! At the Queen Elizabeth Hall?'

'Oh yes, of course.' *That* concert.

Jennah's muse, the elusive Professor Miguel, conducting Beethoven and Wagner. She had got them all tickets months ago. A concert was always exciting, although the prospect of this one in particular left Flynn with mixed feelings. One of his fellow students in keyboard, André Kolov, would be playing. Flynn never particularly relished listening to André play the piano – he was too good.

'You'd forgotten!'

'No, of course not!'

'Yeah right! Meet you in the foyer at seven. Ask Harry to wear something smart.'

'I can try.'

Harry and Jennah were Flynn's oldest friends. They had met at music camp seven years ago. Harry had been a tall, dark, mature-looking twelve-year-old, sauntering around the car park on the first day, hands in his

pockets, checking out the new arrivals. Flynn had been a small, blond, hyperactive eleven-year-old and the pair had found themselves sharing a room together. After the first few days they had adopted Jennah, a tomboy with dirty fingernails and messy hair who laughed at their jokes and knew some good ones herself. Together they climbed up scaffolding, played practical jokes on unsuspecting music teachers and generally caused chaos.

The following year they had got into so much trouble that Harry and Flynn weren't allowed to share a room. The year after that, Harry's voice had broken, Jennah no longer had messy hair and things had changed. The practical jokes stopped. Harry and Jennah continued to tease each other but Flynn only felt relaxed with Harry and hadn't been sure how to treat Jennah any more. Although she hadn't changed from her usual chatty, friendly self and they still got on well, deep down something seemed to have changed within Flynn. Things were somehow difficult, and very different.

'Jennah wants you to wear something smart.' Seated on the kitchen counter, Flynn greeted Harry with this the moment he stepped in. The last hour of practice had been particularly frustrating and as a result Flynn now felt bored and impatient, drumming his heels against the cupboard doors.

Harry's outraged expression was amusing. 'What on earth for?'

'Miguel's concert. Tonight.'

Harry swore. 'I forgot about that! I wanted to get my essay finished tonight and I'm knackered! She wants me to wear something smart? Forget it. No wonder Charlie's as henpecked as he is. What is it – Beethoven? Piano, isn't it? All right for you.' Still muttering to himself, Harry disappeared into his bedroom.

The District line was packed as usual. Flynn glanced across at Harry, hanging onto the rail opposite him. They made an unlikely pair. Harry was tall and lanky, unruly black curls hanging over a permanently tanned face. Flynn was almost a head shorter, with blond hair that tended to stick up at crazy angles and pale skin that betrayed his every emotion. Harry always wore the same half-amused expression and was down-to-earth and sensible, whereas Flynn had once been described as eccentric and was renowned at college for being very intense. Harry's family was posh, but although he entertained a liking for corduroys and velvet jackets, these usually looked as if they had been unearthed from Oxfam, adorned as they were with patches over the knees and elbows. Flynn couldn't knock Harry's dress sense too much, though – he was hardly a fashion statement himself, tending to live in checked shirts and holey jeans.

Flynn turned to Harry. 'Have you got the tickets?'

Harry jumped. 'No – what the hell? She gave them to you—'

Grinning, Flynn pulled them out of his pocket.

'Bastard! Although at least it would have got us off the hook.' Harry took his ticket and peered down at it short-sightedly. 'Ho, the lovely André, is it?'

'Shut up.'

'No wonder you're looking so excited. Going to learn a thing or two off the real maestro?'

Flynn pulled a face. 'I'll make sure I've got my sick bag.'

'That'll come in handy when you start turning green!' Harry almost choked with laughter at his own wit, and Flynn thumped him.

Jennah had dressed up, Flynn noticed. She was wearing a long black skirt and a peach-coloured top. She looked painfully pretty. And she actually had make-up on. That had to be a first. Jennah never normally wore make-up. She obviously had it pretty bad. Hard to understand really. Professor Miguel had to be in his forties, at least, and was short with a receding hairline. And Jennah's boyfriend, Charlie, was tall, fresh-faced, and an undergrad at the London School of Economics. Unfortunately, he wasn't into classical music. Very unfortunate, really, considering Jennah was a talented flautist and singer.

Outside the Queen Elizabeth Hall, Jennah kissed Flynn and Harry on the cheek, hopped up and down a couple of times saying how excited she was, and led them into the thick, warm fug of the foyer.

* * *

'So, what have you done with Charles?' Harry asked her as they took their seats.

'He's at home watching *Match of the Day*. One concert a term is about all I can drag him to.' Jennah glanced up and waved at some fellow students from their Stylistic Studies class who were looking for their places.

'God, has Miguel persuaded the whole of the department to come along?' Harry asked, noticing.

'Don't be mean. We were lucky to get tickets – the concert's sold out,' Jennah replied.

'I hope you realize that I'm sacrificing my Time and Transcendence essay to be here.'

Jennah laughed and elbowed him playfully. 'Oh, Harry, are you still on that one? That was due in weeks ago.'

'I know, that's why I'm so stressed out! I'm barely halfway through. I just can't find any more bloody examples of time and transcendence in twentieth-century music.'

'You can find examples of time and transcendence anywhere if you try,' Jennah said, smiling. 'Why don't I give you a copy of my essay for you to plagiarize – intelligently, mind you.'

'Really?' Harry was as eager as a puppy after a bone.

'If it means you'll shut up about it, then yes.'

Harry grabbed her shoulder and planted a big kiss on her cheek. 'You're a star.'

'Yes, I know.' Jennah took a deep breath and exhaled

slowly. 'Why is it always overheated in here? I'll come in a summer dress next time. Flynn's very quiet tonight.'

'What?' Flynn reluctantly pulled his eyes away from the gleaming Steinway on the stage.

Harry and Jennah laughed together. 'Flynn's preparing to give André the evil eye,' said Harry.

'What's wrong with André?' Jennah looked outraged, then caught Harry's eye. She caught her breath suddenly. 'Oh, I forgot.'

'Stop!' Flynn said to Harry. 'I have only praise and admiration for André.' He tried not to smile. 'I wish that he'd develop gangrene and his hands would drop off, but that's all.'

Jennah laughed and then pulled an apologetic face. 'Sorry.'

Flynn shrugged, smiling a little. 'Doesn't matter. I gather he's a *fairly* good pianist.'

They all laughed and started to clap as the orchestra filed onto the stage.

André made his entrance once the orchestra was seated, greeted by heavy applause. Although he was only eighteen like them, his stride was purposeful, his chin tilted upwards and everything about him exuded the kind of confidence that only touring five countries and winning the BBC Young Musician of the Year contest could bestow. Flynn knew him only from a distance, but had absorbed a fair bit about him from Professor Kaiser, who taught them both. Despite being head of the keyboard

department, Professor Kaiser had only two individual students. In Flynn's mind that was his tough luck because no one could ever measure up to André Kolov. If it weren't for André . . . But it was difficult to imagine what life would be like if it weren't for André. Realistically, although perhaps not very modestly, Flynn suspected that if it weren't for André he would be the Royal College's top pianist. He had no other real rival at the moment, although the competition in the strings department was fiercer. If only André played something else – that was another thought that frequently went through Flynn's mind.

The Royal College gave out a handful of scholarships each year, one for each instrumental category, which entitled its receiver to a weighty financial award, coupled with considerable prestige. Of course, with André competing in the same category as himself, Flynn hadn't stood a chance, although Professor Kaiser had gone a bit funny when Flynn had shared this thought with him. The professor had actually gone as far as insisting that this was not the case – probably just to try to get Flynn to work harder. Well, as it turned out, André got the award anyway, just as Flynn had expected. Ironic really, considering that André's family was loaded and the money meant nothing to him.

It hurt, though. Professor Kaiser actually seemed genuinely disappointed – presumably that Flynn hadn't risen to the challenge.

'You didn't try,' he told him. 'You gave up before

you even went on,' he continued, referring to the performance that each of the candidates had been required to give. 'You didn't believe in yourself. That's your biggest problem, Flynn. You don't understand your full potential.' Whatever that meant.

Six months later, Flynn still remembered the moment well. The audience had been made up almost entirely of students and music staff, the judges sitting in the front row. André had played just before him, with that self-assured, almost cocky manner with which he was playing now. The tilt of the head, the half-smile, the shoulders moving confidently with the music. Each little mannerism that screamed, *I know I'm damn good!* His playing looked effortless and what he lacked in emotion he certainly made up for in technical ability. Every piece, every note was precision perfect. Flynn knew he was out of the game before he even began. And, of course, he was right. He lost the flow in the first piece. The second piece sounded methodical and cold, even to his own ears. By the third, he was thinking about the notes, which obviously only spelled disaster.

Professor Kaiser was outraged. 'You never let yourself go!' he exclaimed heatedly the next day. 'You went through the whole audition like a robot, thinking only of the notes, never the feeling behind them! That was not the pianist I have in my study every day!'

All in all, the whole experience had not been particularly pleasant. Flynn had gone out of his way to avoid maestro André after that. And now, that swaying

head, that tilted chin, the packed concert hall reminded Flynn of everything that he was not. He pulled his eyes away and gazed dully at the back of the conductor's red neck instead. And, blissfully unaware, André played on.

Harry bought them drinks in the lobby during the interval. He was the only one who wasn't broke, so they let him. Jennah vanished into the throng to talk to a couple of friends. It was hot, too hot. Flynn found the atmosphere oppressive.

The second half was even longer than the first. André played Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto. Flynn knew it well. He had been learning it for the past year and still struggled with the third movement. There was a standing ovation at the end. Jennah looked across at Flynn and gave him a sympathetic grin as he reluctantly got to his feet.

'Wasn't Professor Miguel's conducting majestic?' Jennah's eyes were bright as they climbed up the steps of the Hungerford Bridge.

'Majestic? You've been reading too many reviews,' Harry said.

'Well, what did *you* think?'

'It was nice.'

'Nice?' Jennah snorted. 'You can't go round calling Beethoven nice, Harry.'

'How's soporific then?'

'*What?*'

'The last one was. I've always thought that piece was too long.'

Flynn thought that Jennah might explode. But she only gave Harry a playful shove. He launched into an exaggerated stagger and leaned over the side of the bridge, arms dangling. Flynn and Jennah flanked him as the stream of people thinned, heading towards the station entrance on the other side of the river.

Harry straightened up and leaned back, holding onto the rail and inhaling deeply. 'Wow, look at that. London really is a beautiful city.'

St Paul's, the Gherkin and Tate Modern were lit up in pink and orange against an inky black sky. Flynn loved this bridge. The bright white light, the smooth walkway, the tall crisscrossing white posts reaching up into the darkness, making you feel as if you were aboard some luxury yacht. He had lost count of the times he had just stood here and looked out, at night, across the multi-coloured city.

When he had first moved to London six months ago, standing here had overwhelmed him completely, had made him believe that anything was possible. He had turned to face the Royal Festival Hall and whispered, 'One day, one day I will play there. Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto with the Philharmonic. I will. Wait and see.'

'Did *you* enjoy it, Flynn?' Jennah asked him a touch tentatively, elbows resting on the rail.

He looked at her. The wind was whipping her hair

across her face and her eyes were very bright. 'Yes,' he said.

'Please don't tell me you thought it was nice.'

'No, it was—' He stopped. His true feelings would only sound fake. André's playing had been exquisite beyond words.

Harry and Jennah were both looking at him. The heat rose to his cheeks as he faltered.

'Tell me, why does André keep rolling his head around?' Harry stepped in effortlessly. 'Does that help him keep tempo or something? You don't play like that.'

Jennah grinned. 'No, Flynn just rolls his eyes.'

'That's at Professor Kaiser's barking, though, not at the music,' Harry said.

Flynn forced a smile.

'Let's go,' Harry said. 'I'm getting cold.'

At the other side of the ticket barriers Harry tried to tempt Jennah back to the flat with the offer of coffee.

'No, I really should have an early night.'

'Hot chocolate then? Ovaltine?'

Jennah shook her head, smiling, and gave them each a kiss before departing for her platform. 'Don't talk to any strange men!' Harry called after her.

'You mean stranger than you?'

They went down to their platform in companionable silence. Harry waved at Jennah, waiting alone on the other side. Her burgundy scarf was wrapped tightly

around her neck, and her arms were crossed against her black jacket. Even all dressed up, Jennah still had a childlike, windswept look about her, with her tousled brown hair and overgrown fringe. She was so petite, she looked a lot younger than eighteen and still got asked for ID in bars. She often appeared wide-eyed and innocent – big green eyes set against a pale complexion, a small up-turned nose and naturally dark red lips. And when she smiled . . . her nose did this little crinkly thing and her eyes grew really bright and her teeth were very white . . . Flynn was sure she used that smile to keep Charlie wrapped around her little finger, because it was a smile you couldn't say no to, a smile that made you feel really strange inside.

As she stood gazing up at the train information, Flynn watched her covertly until a train came hurtling through. He glanced away as she waved at Harry through the window. When he looked back, the platform was bare.

Flynn made coffee while Harry set up his battered laptop on the living-room carpet.

'You're not going to do that now, are you?' Flynn asked in disbelief.

'I'm going to try. I'm going to stress about it all night otherwise.'

'I thought Jennah was going to give you hers to copy.'

Harry glanced up as Flynn handed him his cup. 'Do you think she meant it?'

'Course she did. Jennah would do anything for you.' Flynn sat down against the wall on one of the carpet cushions and glanced surreptitiously at Harry, who showed little emotion as the computer bleeped and lit his bespectacled face with an eerie, pale blue glow.

For a moment, Flynn wondered if Harry had even heard, but then he said, 'Yes, she's very sweet.'

A long silence stretched out between them, and Harry fiddled with the mouse as Flynn sipped his too-hot coffee. He wasn't sure what had prompted his last comment and now felt more than a little embarrassed about it, but could hardly take it back. Jennah had been going out with Charlie since the summer holidays and in recent weeks Harry had started going out with Kate, a serious-looking violinist from their Musicianship class. But there had always been this thing between Jennah and Harry. It was hard to pinpoint. A gentle warmth. Shared jokes, joint secrets, an extremely similar sense of humour. They had an affinity, like brother and sister, that Flynn was unable to share, and it was only with varying degrees of success that he managed not to feel left out.

Harry always seemed so at ease around everyone, even girls. Especially girls. He was good-looking, but in an unusual sort of way, with the slow gait of a gentle giant. Yet he had a sophistication, a maturity in his demeanour that commanded a certain respect. He was Flynn's closest friend. Yet sometimes he hated him. Around Jennah, he made Flynn feel like a tongue-tied fool.

'Are you going to practise?' Harry's voice made him jump.

'No, I did enough this morning.' He stretched out his legs. 'Think I'll go to bed.'

He got as far as the doorway when Harry's voice stopped him. 'You OK?'

Flynn half turned, coffee cup still full in his hand.

Harry was regarding him placidly, his face still eerily glowing.

'Yeah, why?'

'You were kind of quiet again this evening.'

Flynn resented the 'again'. Just because Harry talked for England didn't mean that everyone found it so easy. He gave a small shrug. 'Just tired.'

'Sleep well then.'

'You too. Don't work too late.'