

Crime thriller with intriguing links to the music of Sibelius.

The Seven Symphonies: A Finnish Murder Mystery

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I

Andante, ma non troppo—Allegro energico

* * *

[8.54 pm; Friday, 24th March]

***M**en are so weak. It doesn't mean a thing. Most of the time they can't help themselves. But how could I have been so stupid — to try and change your mind like that? It's only left me more humiliated. Damn you! Damn all men! Why do I keep getting myself in situations like this? And why did I have to threaten you? It was so cheap! I'd never follow through anyway. Oh, I know I did something of the sort once... but that time was completely different.*

The big question's 'What next?' I can't give you up! You have to give me another chance. What if I come back and apologize for being such a bitch? No, you've probably already left. And why do I always end up losing my temper? It hardly does me any favours. If I'd kept my head, you might've taken me with you... though I doubt it! Ashamed of what your precious friends would think.

And how ridiculous to play the diva — refusing to let you walk me home. Perhaps I could've persuaded you to come in for a while... made it hard for you to leave again. Then I wouldn't be wandering round here alone in the dark — alone in this freezing, miserable park. But I can't face an empty flat feeling like this... Though I suppose the cats are some kind of company. At least they'd pretend to listen. And the poor things need feeding. I should never've taken them on. I'm so damn irresponsible. I can't even look after myself.

Preoccupied with her own thoughts, she was unaware of the one

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who'd been watching and had now followed her here. Only at the last moment did she experience a subliminal warning, a primordial flash of insight that someone or something was close behind. But, as so often in her less than twenty years of life — and now at the point of death — she had her timing wrong. The wire was slipping over her head and there could be no escape.

Such a level of fear was unknown to her. She was immobilized, outstretched toes grasping at the ground, back arched and frozen; in terror of making any movement that would pull the noose tighter. Only her fingers were active, tearing at her throat, trying to prise beneath the wire, to release the deadly pressure. With an enormous act of will she overcame the panic and pain, wriggling her body round in an attempt to reach the gloved hands that were making such a brutal assault on her future.

Thus it was, in the cool impersonal floodlighting which illuminated this small hallowed space beneath the trees, that she came face to face with her attacker. The shock of recognition was fleeting. Certainly the outward features were familiar. But that familiarity was contradicted by eyes unlike any she'd earlier seen or imagined: devoid of compassion, reptilian in their self-containment and single-mindedness — holes into a dark and empty place that surely no human soul could inhabit. With the last conscious moments allowed her, she recognized in those unblinking, unflinching eyes her imminent death... and abandoned all hope.

* * *

Hours passed. The natural silence was complete. There were no leaves on the trees to answer the chill, almost windless air. The only sound, muffled by the cold and distance, was man-made and came from the occasional passing car on one or other of the two roads which, west and east, flanked this modest area of unfenced urban parkland. Often crowded by day, especially in the summer months, it now stood empty... shunned by any living, breathing human presence. But this place, created to celebrate human excellence, must sooner or later draw to itself some other aspiring or despairing human spirit and, with one of time's gentle little ironies, the next to pass this

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way would be another in preoccupied self-torment.

He'd told himself so often over the last weeks that it couldn't go on. He had to put a stop to it. Of course, it would take a certain courage... though he persuaded himself that, looking back on his earlier life, he hadn't often been lacking in nerve, or even daring. He could surely summon up what was necessary. It was a problem that had to be faced and the sooner the better.

He nearly missed her. She was out of his immediate line of sight as he walked towards the shoreline. But, once his eyes locked onto that solitary and lifeless figure, set in an almost staged tableau before him, he was unable to turn away. He drew closer, responding with a tumult of emotions and thoughts: some irrelevant, others of an intensity that threatened to overwhelm him and seemed to be drawing him in surprising directions.

His normally reliable sense of time abandoned him. He would afterwards have no concept of how long he stood transfixed by this unexpected and cruelly compelling sight... But then he shook himself — physically and mentally. He couldn't stand here staring. He had to act.

"You're late, Miranda," said Tero as she passed his desk en route to her own.

She didn't need telling, thank you very much! Some forty minutes earlier, stepping onto the pavement outside the flat she shared with her younger sister, Rosie, Miranda had found her treasured, two-year-old Opel Corsa boxed in by a battered old van and a flashy red BMW. They'd left her no more than a few inches either end. And neither vehicle was even displaying a resident's parking permit! At first she'd tried to manoeuvre her way out by tacking back and forth. It was hopeless. Digging out her mobile, she phoned Leena in Registry. The van was from out of town — somewhere up north — and its owner didn't appear to have a cellphone. Fortunately, the BMW's owner did, and Miranda dialled the number. It rang for over a minute. She was wondering whether to give up and call a taxi, when an irritable male voice grunted something unintelligible. She didn't know what she was interrupting and didn't care. She threatened him with tow trucks, with swarms of traffic wardens crawling over him and his pretentious

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penis-substitute, with an eternity of police harassment. He'd better get down here pretty damn quick and let her out! Grudgingly he agreed, but kept her waiting another ten minutes... with full malevolent intent, Miranda was sure. Having sat in her car and ignored him — to avoid any risk of getting physical — she pulled out into the traffic stream and focused on reining in her emotions. No way would a creep like that affect the quality of her driving.

But now she'd arrived at Pasila HQ almost half an hour late.

"The boss already left," Tero went on, prompting Miranda to halt by his desk. "Wants you at the crime scene, soon as poss'. Tasty one this morning. A murder."

Much as Miranda sympathized with Tero's enthusiasm for a professional challenge, she wished he'd show more sensitivity towards what was probably another tragic and unnecessary death.

"Only been gone ten minutes," Tero added. "It's over at the Sibelius Monument."

Miranda's eyes widened. "Won't be hard to find then. How come *you're* still here?"

"Paperwork. Going to court first thing Monday. Might be along later."

Not bothering to visit her own desk, Detective Inspector Miranda Lewis hitched her bag more securely over her shoulder and walked back the way she'd come.

The Sibelius Monument, in Sibelius Park, is less than two miles from Pasila Police Headquarters. Miranda took her own car and parked in a quiet residential street along the park's northern edge.

With the benefit of her bi-cultural background, she realized how hard it might be for a non-Finn to grasp the full national significance of the composer Jean Sibelius. In the Finnish psyche he occupies a place which, for most countries, would be reserved for kings, military heroes or saints. It's true that modern times have seen other popular figures rise to prominence in the Finnish iconography: extraordinary Olympic athletes like Paavo Nurmi and Lasse Viren; more recently, in motor racing, Keke Rosberg and Mika Häkkinen. But Sibelius towers over them all as the grand old grandfather-figure of the nation. He was there at its birth, nurturing the struggle for independence with

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his *Kullervo Symphony*, his *Karelia Suite* and *Finlandia*. Later his art would transcend geographical and political boundaries and reach out to all humanity, placing Finland, with its small isolated population, on the world's cultural map for all time.

The sculptress Eila Hiltunen's memorial was unveiled in 1967, ten years after the composer's death, and it followed the fashion for later-twentieth-century civic sculptures by puzzling many who saw it. A large stainless-steel relief of the composer's head, reassuringly comprehensible, now greets the onlooker from the face of a natural granite outcropping. But that was an afterthought — a bowing to public pressure. The main structure, which still dominates the scene, is more esoteric. Steel pipes of varying lengths and diameters are bundled together in a broad vertical array, at its tallest reaching to fivetimes human height. Many of the pipe ends are frayed, with deep irregular gashes reaching far up into their coarsely textured bodies. Despite the creator's claims that the design represented music in the abstract, for most people a visual association with organ pipes was hard to avoid. Some critics pointed out that, as Sibelius had written very little organ music, a reference to the symphony orchestra would have been more appropriate. Miranda didn't subscribe to such nitpicking. Her fondness for the monument was based on childhood visits with her Welsh father. They'd indulged in much less sanctimonious pursuits, chasing each other around the pipes and sticking their heads up inside to hoot, scream and laugh at the resonant echoes.

Approaching the monument on this bitingly subzero, late-March morning, Miranda saw that the Scenes Of Crimes Officers (the SOCOs) had already established themselves and were hard at work. The focus of the crime was screened off from public view, and just outside the screen she spotted the imposing figure and head of close-cropped white hair that identified her superior officer, Detective Chief Inspector Aleksi Ylenius. A police photographer standing beside him, though not a small man, seemed almost dwarfed in comparison.

Apart from his exceptional height, Ylenius was powerfully built with little excess fat for someone of his fifty-four years. And, unlike many tall men, conditioned by years of banging heads on structures designed by those of lesser stature, Ylenius had no tendency to stoop.

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Amiable and avuncular features moderated the effect of this potentially intimidating size. Children warmed to him. Miranda had several times witnessed his ability to win their trust with a few soft-spoken and uncondescending words. As a boss he couldn't be faulted: fair-minded, supportive in times of crisis, never failing to give credit where it was due. Not much concerned with formality, he encouraged his subordinates to work together on a first-name basis. He would have been totally at ease with younger colleagues calling him Aleksi, but for the most part, they preferred 'Chief Inspector', 'Chief' or simply 'boss'. Miranda held him in considerable respect, both as a person and as an experienced police officer. She was grateful for the last eighteen months under his command.

"Sorry I'm late, Chief."

"A rare event, Miranda. I'll tell you what we've got so far..."

The police photographer nodded to Miranda and disappeared behind the screen.

"...The call came in at 6.48 this morning. The victim was found by a man walking his dog. The duty officer alerted me at home, so I sent the SOCOs in first to do some of the preliminary work. The pathologist's been and gone. He estimates death occurred between eight and eleven yesterday evening. You'd better have a look."

Miranda wasn't squeamish, but such moments in her chosen career were always unpleasant. In a way, she hoped they would never become routine — preferring to keep her humanity unjaded and intact.

She followed Ylenius into the screened area and adjusted to the scene, letting professional training and experience take over. The victim was seated with her back propped against the rock face, little more than a yard to the left of the fourtimes-natural-size relief of Sibelius's head. Her legs were straight and splayed out at an angle of about thirty degrees. It was difficult to guess her age. Death had disfigured her youth, but she was clearly very young — somewhere between seventeen and twenty-five, Miranda supposed.

The girl's hair was thick and Nordic fair, gathered luxuriantly around her shoulders: beautiful, healthy hair which only accentuated the frightful distortion of the face it now framed. The eyes bulged; the tongue protruded slightly between pale, bluish lips. Cause of death

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was obvious. The girl's neck was tightly encircled by some kind of noose that bit viciously into the flesh of her throat and had entrapped large amounts of hair.

The victim's clothes had been interfered with. Her red and yellow quilted winter jacket was open and pushed back over her shoulders. A dark-red ribbed top and the bra beneath were pulled up to her armpits, exposing her breasts and stomach. Her jeans had been unzipped and tugged only part-way down her hips, as if the spread of her legs had prevented further removal. The fact that her pants were still more or less in place seemed to preclude outright rape, but the sexual implications were unavoidable.

"And there's this extra grisly little feature," said Ylenius, drawing Miranda's attention to the arm lying inert at the girl's right side. "Her fourth finger's been removed — severed from the right hand. Some kind of trophy, I suppose. The pathologist pointed out there's been very little bleeding, so she must've been dead when it was cut off. Let's be thankful for small mercies, shall we?"

"Any indication how it was amputated?"

"Nothing found yet that's suitable for the job. We'll be widening our search, of course."

"And the violin? Was it found like that?" She pointed to a violin case leaning against the rock just below Jean Sibelius's austere and impassive face.

"Yes, the SOCOs had a quick look inside, but I asked them to put it back in situ — so you could get an overall impression of the scene."

Both detectives now allowed themselves some greater distance from the victim, backing away to stand beside the monument's towering metal pipes.

"Any ID?" Miranda asked.

"Nothing useful on her. A solitary door key in her jeans pocket and a few coins in the jacket. No sign of a handbag."

"What about inside the violin case?"

"Address label, you mean? No, just the instrument and some printed music."

"A violin dealer might give us a lead on the instrument — suggest it's provenance, help us find its owner. But how about the music? Can I have a look?"

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"Forensics already bagged it. What've you got in mind, Miranda?"

"I'm not sure."

But the music was located and Miranda studied it through the clear plastic evidence sleeve.

"Debussy's Violin Sonata," she said.

"So?"

"On the whole it's a lyrical piece — not exactly virtuoso stuff. But it needs some technical skill to attempt. And she does seem to have been working on it. The music's covered in pencilled bowing marks. She could be a professional — though, judging by her age, I'd guess a music student. Perhaps at the Sibelius Academy."

"Worth looking into."

"But we've got a problem now it's Saturday. The Academy admin's closed for the weekend. A bit ghoulish to hawk a PM photo of her round random students in the corridors — the way she's looking now."

"You could at least try the porter on the door. Get the photographer to do a Polaroid of her face. Perhaps he can flatter her appearance a bit — keep the noose out of the picture. But, before you follow up on that, let's go and interview the man who found the body."

Martti Hakala lived close to where Miranda had left her car, in a block of flats overlooking Sibelius Park from its northern perimeter. More or less contemporary with the 1952 Helsinki Olympic Games, the building looked in need of a major renovation. So did Martti Hakala. Although, according to his identity card, he was in his early forties, he could easily have passed for fifty. His face was colourless, drawn, conveying an impression of worry and fatigue. In his bearing there was a curious mixture of military preciseness and slouching indecision which gave Miranda the impression of an ex-soldier fallen on hard times. As he edged past her in the narrow hallway, she caught a whiff of stale vodka.

Hakala showed them into a living room cluttered with ugly furniture. An overweight golden Labrador was sprawled inside the door. Its only reaction to their arrival was a brief raising of one eyelid.

"Wife's at the shops," Hakala said vaguely. "Like some coffee?"

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Only take a moment."

"Not necessary, thank you," replied Ylenius.

They sat down and the Chief Inspector made a start: "Can you tell us, Mr Hakala, exactly how you found the body?"

"Okay, so I got up before dawn. Already been awake a couple of hours. Not sleeping too well lately. You know how it is... a lot on my mind. Anyway, I made some coffee and tried reading the paper. Couldn't concentrate. Looking at the words and nothing going in. So I went out for some fresh air. Took Saara with me, of course. She can't wait too long in the mornings. Her bladder isn't what it used to be."

Miranda assumed he was referring to the dog rather than his wife. Ylenius gave an encouraging nod.

"Usually we go for a slow stroll round Sibelius Park — seeing as it's so close — along the edge of the kiddies' playground, past the monument and down to the seashore. I almost didn't see her — the girl, I mean. Lost in my own thoughts probably."

"Was it the dog spotted her first?" Miranda asked.

"You must be joking," he said mildly. "Poor old Saara wouldn't spot a hare if it hopped up and bit her. Practically blind. Don't think her sense of smell's up to much either. Suppose I should have the vet put her to sleep. But she's still game for a walk, as long as I don't rush her. Difficult when you've been together so long. You get so attached. Just like a marriage. Better than a marriage, to be honest. The wife tells me I should just get on with it and have the poor thing put down. But there's not much me and her agree on nowadays."

Ylenius brought him back to the real issue. "Could you estimate the time when you found the body?"

"Must've been a bit after six-thirty. Can't be more precise than that, I'm afraid. Six-thirty-five or six-forty shouldn't be far from the truth."

"And did you go up to the girl when you saw her?"

"Not closer than a couple of yards. Obviously stone dead. No sense checking her pulse or anything. Not the first time I've seen a corpse, but it took me back a bit. Sort of rooted me to the spot. Her tongue sticking out and her eyes staring like that. There'd obviously been some funny business... With that thing round her neck and her clothes all pulled about. I came straight home and called the police."

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"You didn't touch her?"

"No, I just said that." Hakala was showing signs of irritation.

"Or anything else in the vicinity?"

"What kind of anything else?"

"You didn't pick anything up nearby? Or notice anything lying on the ground?"

"I came home, I made the call, and that's it... Well, there was a violin leaning against the rock. Is that what you're getting at?"

"No, I wondered if anything else caught your eye."

Hakala shook his head.

"And the dog didn't go anywhere near her?"

"Don't think she'd even noticed."

"Well, that seems clear enough," Ylenius said.

But Miranda had another question.

"You said you regularly walk the dog on the same route. Did you go that way yesterday evening?"

"Yes, I wanted to watch the ice-hockey on telly, so I took Saara out just before it started."

"And did you walk past the Sibelius Monument?"

"We came back that way — at about twenty to nine, I suppose."

"Did you see anybody in the park?"

"No, it was deserted for a Friday evening. Probably the cold. Not used to temperatures like this so close to April, are we?"

"And you're sure the girl wasn't already there by then?"

"No, we walked straight past the place. I'd've seen her, wouldn't I?"

Miranda and Ylenius exchanged glances. That narrowed down the time of the murder to later than eight forty.

Ylenius pushed himself up from the sagging sofa.

"Thanks for your cooperation, Mr Hakala. We'll send a constable round in a day or two to take a formal statement."

Hakala nodded... but then seemed to hesitate, as if he had something to add. Ylenius paused expectantly.

"There's one thing, Chief Inspector. I might not be here much longer. The wife and me, you see — we haven't been getting on too well recently... and I've found this little one-room-and-a-kitchen round the corner. It's up for rent. I thought I'd give it a try... and take

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Saara with me. Don't know if it'll work out. But things have got to such a head, I don't see as I can go on like this — not under the same roof."

When he appeared to have finished, Ylenius shifted position in the direction of the door.

"If you do decide to change address, Mr Hakala, you *will* inform us, won't you?"

"Yes, yes, of course. At once." He seemed relieved, and Miranda wondered if they were the first to hear of his impending escape.

Outside on the pavement, Ylenius stopped beside Miranda's car.

"What about the Sibelius Academy?" he asked.

"It'll be time-consuming. They've got three main buildings scattered round the city. Two in the centre and one out in Pitäjänmäki. And there are so many departments nowadays:" — she counted them off on her fingers — "Theory and Composition, Church Music, Performing Arts, Opera, Music Education, Folk Music, Jazz, Music Technology... Nearly two thousand students, and no way of knowing which department she might've been in. My guess is she'll turn out to be a Performing Arts student. They're the ones aiming at a solo career or hoping to join a professional orchestra — just like my sister Rosie, in fact. Officially they're based in R-block — the one on Rautatiekatu. But the dead girl could've visited any of the buildings on a regular basis — going to different classes or looking for an empty practice room."

Twenty yards behind Ylenius, Miranda noticed a tight-faced woman with two plastic bags of shopping turn into the apartment block entrance they'd just themselves exited. *Mrs Hakala?* she wondered.

"Okay, Miranda, this lead's going to keep you busy for a while," Ylenius said. "But identifying the girl's a priority. Could your sister give us some help?"

"To be honest, boss, I wouldn't want to put her through it. She's so sensitive. A PM photo like this could give her nightmares for months. Anyway, she's in London right now — on a Royal Academy cello scholarship. She won't be back for another fortnight."

— * —

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The rest of Miranda's day proved to be a series of cul-de-sacs. Showing the victim's photo to the porters at the three Academy buildings drew a blank; although she did get a list of personal phone numbers for the various department secretaries and student affairs officers. Miranda visited some of them at their homes. But no one could identify the dead girl.

At one point during these meanderings across the city, Miranda passed through Pasila to check her in-tray and email. She found Sergeant Tero Toivonen in their open-plan office peering at a selection of Sibelius Monument crime-scene photos that he'd laid panoramically across his desk. At the same time he was chewing on an outsize burger needing both of his hands for successful control. The amount of junk food he ingested, Miranda often wondered how he could retain the same lean and wiry build — 'rat-like' she privately described it to herself, corresponding to his pointed, somewhat sneering features.

"A lot of people'll be screaming sacrilege when this gets in the papers," Tero said, through a mouthful of burger. "Committing such a dastardly deed under the eyes of our beloved Jean."

Miranda stared back coolly. "The sacrilege, Tero, was on that poor young girl — whoever she might be. Her whole life ahead. You probably find the idea trite, but I think it's an appalling waste. And Sibelius would've agreed. He had six daughters of his own and loved them dearly."

"So you haven't managed to ID her?" he asked, ignoring the lecture.

"Not yet. Any luck with missing persons?"

"No one matches the description."

"Well, I've still got a few Academy personnel to visit."

"How's about taking me along? Get me out of the office for a while?"

"No, you'd better stay and hold the fort."

"Ah, the trials of a subordinate officer," he said, though without any sign of rancour.

This gave Miranda pause for thought. At twenty-nine, Tero was exactly her own age, but Miranda's university degree and resultant accelerated promotion had left him one clear rank behind. Many men

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would have resented taking orders from a woman under such circumstances. For all his faults — and he had plenty — Miranda considered herself fortunate that Tero was in some ways so unambitious. He seemed content to just drift through life doing his job commendably enough from day to day; then, in his free time, playing endless computer games over the internet while listening to *Nirvana* on one of the largest, most expensive hi-fi systems Miranda had ever seen outside an arena rock concert.

"How did the press conference go?" she asked.

"Caused a bit of a stir. Of course, we suppressed most of the details: the missing finger, the tampering with the clothes, the ligature, the placing of the violin. They know she was strangled, but not how."

This was standard procedure. Knowledge of such facts by a later suspect could indicate guilt. Conversely, the police needed some way to eliminate false confessions that always attended a crime of this nature.

"When's the PM?" asked Miranda.

"Tomorrow morning. The boss wants us here by ten for a conference of war."

"So much for a quiet Sunday at home."

Tero nodded. "Yeah, I was looking forward to a relaxing one hundred decibels of Kurt Cobain."

Miranda went trekking off again in search of someone who could identify the dead girl. But, throughout this fruitless and frustrating day, her thoughts turned repeatedly to an altogether more private matter — to events in her own life over the last three days, and especially to the Wednesday evening Sibelius lecture where she and the Englishman had first met. . .

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