

**THE
SYMPHONY
HEIST
A TALE OF MUSIC
AND DESIRE
KAMEEL NASR**



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ISBN 978-0-9961753-7-1

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The Symphony Heist: A Tale of Music and Desire

Fiction. 1. Mystery--Cozy

Fiction. 2. Boston

Fiction. 3. Music—Classical

Fiction. 4. Music—Orchestral

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016903498

Printed in the United States of America

Curiosity Books is the imprint of the Curiosity Foundation which promotes tolerance, sustainability, and the arts. All proceeds from book sales go directly to the Curiosity Foundation. For more information visit

www.curiosityfoundation.com

It is cruel, you know, that music should be so beautiful. It has the beauty of loneliness of pain: of strength and freedom. The beauty of disappointment and never-satisfied love. The cruel beauty of nature and everlasting beauty of monotony.

Benjamin Britten

Counterpoint: Two or three melodies combined to create harmonies of thirds, fifths, and octaves. It is the most mathematical form of composing, common in early music.

Prelude

Twenty-two minutes before the heist, a lone woman waits in a stolen blue Toyota in front of the National Braille Press. Her two accomplices take their positions on St. Stephen Street.

Two Boston blocks away, a man in a black parka stands near the Christian Science Mother Church across from Symphony Hall. Two Peter Pan busses are parked outside its Mass. Ave. entrance, ready to take the musicians to Logan Airport for a concert in Rio de Janeiro.

Another two blocks away, forming an equilateral triangle with the Toyota, the Boston Symphony Orchestra principal cellist locks her apartment and walks down Westland Street, her white fiberglass cello case strapped to her back.

On this quiet Sunday morning in January, when the air should be still and empty, everything sounds staccato to her. A car accelerates sharply and brakes. A lone robin chirps up the scale and stops. A dog barks in short yelps.

She feels music like other people feel hot or cold. Her perfect pitch transposes every sound into notes. She converts people's voices into musical rhythms. She knows by resonance when the wind shifts directions. All she needs is a couple of bars, and she pins the composition. Long before she developed her revolutionary bowing and fingering technique, she could listen to a new piece of music and then go home and play it, as the fourteen-year-old Mozart had done when he had heard Allegri's *Miserere* in the Sistine Chapel, a work that was forbidden to be played outside the Chapel.

She pauses at the corner of Mass. Ave., where two dozen protesters are holding a banner that reads, "DON'T GO BSO." She inches up to them, her face covered against the cold—or so she thinks.

One month ago, the BSO shocked the musical world by announcing that the Rio concert would be connected to the signing of the Advancement of the Arts Agreement, an international treaty for copyright, royalties, and subsidies, an agreement she and almost all musicians had protested against, but it got rammed through Congress after mountains of campaign donations from Internet providers. Now the BSO will give it legitimacy.

She has to play for the signing of a treaty she had campaigned against. Conflict of interest—the interests of corporations versus artists. Guess who won?

"Melody Cavatina!" one of the protesters calls out to her in the high register of childish surprise.

How embarrassing. She recognizes the voice from when she helped with a banner drop on a Storrow Drive overpass.

"You want a royalty clearing house run by the entertainment giants?" he says.

So much for being incognito. What can she say? Your heart's in the right place, or some other banality?

She closes her eyes.

The protesters are from For Art's Sake (FAS), the coalition against the Advancement of the Arts Agreement. The government has a remarkable way with words, screwing artists and musicians and calling it advancement.

A woman from the middle of the protesters steps forward. "Mel has to play."

Tasa's mezzo voice, come to the rescue.

"She's doing something special for all of us," Tasa says.

The guy backs off.

Tasa comes up to Mel, and the two women hug through their insulated coats.

"Go," Tasa says. "Look straight at the audience and play with your eyes wide open."

Mel isn't just going to play. She's the main act, sitting in front of the orchestra, her Carletti between her legs, playing before presidents and CEOs, the world watching. Even though she is principal of the country's leading orchestra, this will be her first ever solo, and all the musicians know that she's going to blow it, as she has blown every concert for the last six weeks.

The protesters start chanting couplets rhyming with BSO.

"Ho-ho, just say no!"

"Oh no, stop the show!"

The cold air keeps their chanting voices near the ground.

Although the protesters lost their cause, Mel hears the meter of their chant—long, long, short-short-short—as an upbeat cadence of victory. "Mambo Number Five" starts playing in her head: one, two, three-four-five.

Concentrate. The fingering.

Two hundred and thirty-two treacherous bars. The most difficult parts are totally exposed. She's going to blow it big time.

She turns to the sound of the busses idling. Musicians are converging one by one, their boots hitting the subway steps as they climb, car doors opening and closing as spouses drop them off. Those who live nearby sound a crisp rhythm as they walk toward the busses, heads down against the cold, or perhaps against the agreement they're helping to establish.

Walter, the BSO general manager, stands on the sidewalk looking at his watch, his middle-age baritone shouting out minutes like finishing times in a road race.

The assistant principal cellist also sees through Mel's scarf and says good morning, another staccato but very upbeat, a wide smile, anticipating another chance at the principal chair.

"I see you're nervous."

Melody hears the rising tones of joy and revenge.

When anyone screws up in an orchestra, others keep looking at their score—only the maestro corrects—but Mel's playing became so atrocious that people turned and stared open-mouthed at the offending sound coming from her cello. She is principal, in charge of the entire cello section for an orchestra whose patrons have a lengthy reputation of severity. Half the audience walked out on the premier of Brahms's *Third Symphony*.

The BSO gave her a warning. She is still in the orchestra's one-year probation period. Walter sat her down in his office and told her directly, "Pull yourself together, or you'll be fired." Walter, an imposing man who walks as if marching to a John Phillip Souza refrain, almost cried in front of her. Once darling of music directors and audiences, now she faces an abrupt end to her short, fiery career.

Walter pleaded, prodded, pried her for an explanation.

Stumm. Nobody there.

Most musicians feel sorry for her because they heard the power and beauty that made the entire cello section lush, but no one can help a broken musician except the musician herself.



Instead of checking in with Walter and going to the busses, Melody walks around to the loading area behind Symphony Hall, where crates of instruments are being packed onto a silver, thirty-foot truck. The other musicians turned in their instruments after last night's concert, but Milton, the BSO transport officer, allowed Mel one last night to psych up for what he called "the mother-in-law of all solos."

Milton is waiting for her inside the loading door, his hands on a hydraulic jack. The transport officer is a bear of a man with a full brown beard. He wears a rounded leather hat and a plaid wool jacket that makes him look like a cross between a 1920s race car driver and a lumberjack. He is a burly-faced guy, the type Melody sees sleeping in vacant doorways or in church when she gazes at the stained glass.

"Walter gave me one chance," she says. "I have to play this solo like the world depends on it."

"It does depend on it."

She takes two truncated steps forward and hangs her head. The BSO made her trim her bangs so they no longer cover her eyes, making her feel even more exposed.

Milton stands right in front of her, looking up from a bent position to catch her eye. "Once you're on stage in front of the orchestra, lights on you, and the audience falls silent, you'll be transposed into a goddess bestowing wonders on the multitude. You'll be great."

She appreciates Milton's words, but his constrained pitch, which rises up and down two or three half-tones, expresses trepidation.

The loading area is empty except for a large black crate in the middle stenciled with the BSO logo and marked "Cellos." The truck driver and his partner sit on a cement stoop in the back of the room waiting for Milton to finish loading the crates.

Melody unstraps her cello and hands it to him.

"My beautiful Carletti," he says, his red face animated, his voice filling the concrete room.

He opens the case and lifts out her cello.

"Start by tenderly putting your fingers around her neck," which he does. "Caress her shoulders," which he does. "Smooth her curves with the soft of your right palm," which he does. "Listen to her whine and blush. But if you take her by the hips." He grabs the Carletti. "She squeaks and squawks like a French Horn."

Mel jumps back. He almost made her smile.

Milton loves music, feels it in his chest, and he loves instruments. He's a *quark*. That's what Mel calls oddballs who relate to the world through sound. Less than half of the orchestra members are quarks, according to her. Some talented soloists aren't quarks, while others who can't even read music are.

Milton's face becomes as pensive as a Mahler slow movement. "Some people never get beyond the first movement of their lives," he says, putting his free hand on her arm. "They keep everything superficial, afraid to delve into the melancholy of the adagio. But you've been trapped by it. Break free with all your might, Mel, and you'll find your life's allegro."

"I'm going to do it!" She shakes her fingers to loosen them. "I've got to do it!" She breaks down in tears.

He takes the cello in both hands and digs into chest voice. "When you nest this Carletti between your legs and stoke her strings, up bow and down bow, you speak to me, dance with me. You tell me about myself. And then it all makes sense. Everything makes sense."

His speech generates a two-second silence between them.

“Mel, can you feel what your playing does to people? You’re the type who plays from feeling. Whether the feeling is anger or fear, get in touch with it. Straighten your spine, and let it roar out of you.”

She yanks her shoulders and stands Alexander Technique erect. She had even neglected posture.

“Handling your Carletti gets me all excited,” he says, putting it back into its case. “When you let me oil her, I rub her belly delicately, then faster and faster until she vibrates through her f-holes.” He winks at her. “Then I rosin up her bow hair.”

She can’t resist a smile, the first smile in two months. She adores this man. If she can’t clear away the fear, she has to use it.

She hears the heat blower turn on, looks at the drivers listening from the back of the room, and lowers her voice. “I’ll be alone in front of everyone.”

Milton’s voice turns *gravé*. “You have a great future, so fresh and full of heart. You know how thin the thread is. You go there and give them hell.”

Walter arrives and steps inside the loading door. Milton disses him with a tight jaw.

“Are you sure you haven’t left anything out?” Walter asks.

Milton raises his gloved hands in front of Walter’s chest. “Take a breath, Capo. You’ve been a bigger pain in the ass than a conceited soloist. What will the orchestra play next? Sonata for Coca Cola? Fanfare for Citi Corp?”

She hears Walter’s voice shift to minor. “Put yourself in my shoes. I have those protesters on one side, the government on the other, and big donors all over the place. I’ve had fistfights in front of the building, and even members of the orchestra scuffled.”

“You caved in for money.”

“No I did not,” Walter says, returning to major, his hand raised as if taking an oath. “I never bent a knee for a cent. I will never give in to anyone’s threats.”

“Horseshit,” Milton says. “Guys like you never change. You just get older and more hazardous.”

Milton packs Mel’s cello in the big crate. He raises his head as pianists do before pounding a declarative theme. “You’re on dangerous territory, having a stranger handle my instruments. A bass has slumped shoulders, and a violin is flat-chested, able to deflect the punches of a brutal world, but a cello is all woman, delicate and sensitive. If you disrespect her by making her play for money, she’ll turn melancholy, and she’ll speak only in laments and requiems.”

Walter checks his watch and snaps his fingers at the truck drivers. “It’s six fifty-five. Let’s get going.”

Melody leaves for the busses, her boots hitting cold concrete in a mournful cadence, the door hinge creaking behind her, rising in pitch from middle G to high B-flat. Beyond the streets and buildings, a silent, vacant city, the slow roll of a kettle drum in the sky, sounding both the glory of the winter sun and the shiver of its cold.

The maestro’s brother is waiting for her on the sidewalk. The hijackers on St. Stephen Street are waiting for their signal.



By the time Jules climbs into the red cab of his thirty-foot truck, a thin layer of ice has formed on his coffee under its plastic cover. He had set it on the dash while he and his partner waited in the back of the loading room. During those forty minutes, it formed a cone-shaped fog on his front windshield as it condensed from steam to miniature ice crystals without passing through liquid.

Jules is a dignified, churchgoing man, ebony black, who wears a charcoal suit too large for his fragile frame, a tie hanging loosely around the neck of his white shirt. He plans to drop off his Symphony Hall load at the cargo terminal, then hurry back and stand among the deacons in the front rows of the Roxbury Pillar of Fire Church shouting, "Amen!"

Milton hands him a shipping document through the open door.

"The BSO shouldn't go," Milton says. "Right is right. It's money that we have too much of."

"Their music does not speak to people anymore," Jules says, as if quoting scripture—or Fox News—his back straight, his first two fingers raised like an icon of Jesus exhorting piety. "A free market of entertainment."

"For the people here, music is not entertainment."

Jules' partner, Weber, climbs into the passenger side and puts his hands in his pockets, elbows and knees sticking out, eyelids uncomfortable with early Sunday morning.

"You know what a cello does to a woman's left tit?" Milton says. "It props it up and hardens the bottom where the cello sits, and eventually she walks around with a high left tit. Very provocative."

"I'll be praying for you when I get to church."

"You know why fundamentalists aren't allowed to have sex standing up?" Milton asks. "It might lead to dancing."

Jules tosses the shipping document next to his coffee and starts the engine.

Milton walks to St. Stephen Street and waves flamboyantly at the protesters. He turns and salutes Jules, who returns the gesture with an outstretched arm like a preacher giving a benediction. Jules looks to the right up the empty one-way street, blinded by the rising orange sun that is turning windows of tall buildings aglow.

Jules turns left. Within a block, they are surrounded by Northeastern University student housing, brick and brown-stone residences, sturdy, denuded maples and elms along the sidewalk. He passes Symphony Road, stops at the flashing light on Gainsborough Street, and shifts into first.

"I like that," Jules says. "Music is not entertainment. What is it then?"

"He was talking about that dead music they play. Rich, old white men listening with their fingers on their chins. What do you think it would take to get them dancing in the aisles?" Weber guffaws at his own wit. "They'd have to rise up out of their walkers first."

Jules lets out the clutch.

"Isn't it amazing that white people think they invented everything?" Weber says. "But even with eighty people sitting on a stage playing million-dollar instruments, they still can't make a beat, while some wild dude in the middle of the jungle bangs a zebra skin and has people moving."

Jules is concentrating on an old white Ford station wagon with faded plastic wood double-parked on one side of the street ahead, a blue Toyota double-parked on the opposite side.

"Look at how these kids park," he says tapping the steering wheel and pointing at the Ford sitting in front of the National Braille Press. There's barely room to squeeze through. Two bundled-up people are walking on opposite sides of the street. Jules maneuvers the truck around the Ford at five miles an hour, then swerves the other way around the Toyota. Halfway into the turn, the Toyota lurches forward. Jules jams his brakes, jolting the truck.

The two pedestrians rush the sides of the truck, their faces hidden by black ski masks. Each yanks open a door of the cab and points his gun at the men inside. Jules and Weber throw up their hands, even though the gunmen don't say anything.

"Easy," Jules says. "We don't want no trouble."

From each open door, a gloved hand reaches inside, unhooks a seat belt, and pulls a stunned man from the cab. Holding them from behind, the masked men force their hostages to each side of the Toyota. The woman sitting behind the wheel gets out and hops into the truck's driver's seat.

The gunmen snap plastic handcuffs onto their prisoners and silence their mouths with duct tape. Then they push them into the back seat of the Toyota.

The robbers leap into the front seat, and the driver moves the Toyota to the side, allowing the truck to pass.

The woman drives briskly, turning out of the residential neighborhood, then out past the buildings of Northeastern University. The Toyota follows, its side windows hazed to look frosty.

Two blocks later, the truck makes a left turn while the Toyota continues past the Museum of Fine Arts and the Harvard School of Public Health. They pass Brookline Village and the reservoir in Chestnut Hill, turning right into an empty lot behind a train station and coming to a stop.

The robbers stuff paper bags over their captives' heads and shuffle them out onto the ground.

"Sit still for five minutes and contemplate how lucky you are," the masked driver says. It is the only phrase the robbers speak before driving off into the deserted suburban streets.

The bound men sit on the sidewalk ready to obey the driver's orders, but after a long minute, Jules shakes his head as if rousing himself from a trance. He gets on his knees and uses Weber's body to slide the paper bag off his head. Then he puts his face next to his partner's hands so Weber can take off the tape. As soon as Jules' mouth has voice, he begins shouting.

"Help, police!"

A second floor window opens, and a man with a shaved head wearing an orange terrycloth bathrobe looks out.

"What's the hassle?"

"Call the cops," Jules yells.

"Why? What happened?"

"Just call them," Jules pleads on his knees. "They got everything."

Other neighbors look out.

"Why are you in handcuffs?" the shaved head asks.

"Jesus," Jules says, but he isn't praying. "Just call the police. They robbed the BSO."

"The what?"

"The sym-pho-ny," he enunciates as if to a child. "They got all their instruments. That girl Melody ain't going to have nothing between her legs."