



SYMPHONY OF SECRETS

a novel

BRENDAN SLOCUMB

Author of [The Violin Conspiracy](#)

"A fascinating page-turner that slips back and forth in time and seamlessly blends a heart-pounding thriller and a heartfelt look at family and quiet heroism." —Jeffery Deaver, *New York Times* bestselling author

ALSO BY BRENDAN SLOCUMB

The Violin Conspiracy

Symphony of Secrets



Brendan Slocumb



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Author's Note

Acknowledgments

About the Author

This is for anyone whose voice was muted; for those who didn't have the chance to be heard—or for those who, like my brother Kevin, had their voices taken far too soon.

OVERTURE

1936

SIXTEEN HOURS BEFORE HIS DEATH, Frederic Delaney realized that he'd left his Hutchinson champagne stopper at home. It had always accompanied him to a debut performance. Always. What would its absence, now, mean on this night of all nights?

The rumble of the crowd beat against his dressing room door. A moment ago, he'd welcomed it like a quilt tucked around his shoulders, but now he felt the pressure of the audience's expectations enshrouding him, a white torrent against his chest.

He tried to convince himself that all would be well. He'd order a second bottle of champagne. It would be on hand by the end of the performance.

Besides, this was a brand-new moment in his life, a fresh start. Maybe it was time for a new ritual anyway. A second bottle to symbolize his second chance.

Tonight was, without question, that chance. Finishing this last opera had been an arduous journey (he imagined telling Edward Kastenmeier, the *Times's* head music critic, "Be sure to use the word *arduous*."), but now, looking back with perspective and distance, he could admit that the writing, and the rewriting, was well worth the agony. This, he told himself again, was his greatest creation, and it was, in a word, *glorious*. He knew it in his bones.

He mouthed the word to himself: *glorious*. He imagined how the word would look in print.

This was the music—this magnificent opera—that would relaunch his career. He would bestow a sardonic smile upon Kastenmeier when they next saw each other. "Has-been," Kastenmeier had called him, along with

“washed-up” and “ridiculous.” Tomorrow Kastenmeier would be whistling a tune replete with remorse, apology, and just a tiny bit of envy. Frederic only wished he could be there to watch Kastenmeier eat crow.

Frederic patted his trouser pockets again, still hunting for that errant stopper.

Until tonight, the ritual had always been the same: Pour out two glasses of champagne. The toast. Cork the bottle. The performance itself. The applause. The return to his dressing room. Then: Emptying out the final two glasses. The second toast. That was how it had gone for years now, years beyond counting. Beyond what he wanted to count.

He'd always brought a champagne stopper with him; a few years ago, in those heady days that would soon be his again, he used to leave it in his tuxedo pocket, because he'd have premieres several nights of the week, all in different theaters. Tonight a ballet uptown, tomorrow a Broadway musical, the next night a medley in a vaudeville house, and then the premiere for a film score. Champagne every night of the week: pour out two glasses before the performance, two glasses after, and the rest of the bottle—if any drops were left—a sacrifice to the gods.

No stopper in the little basket next to the refrigerator. He patted down his pockets a final time, as if a cork would magically manifest inside one.

So he'd throw away the rest of the champagne. For a moment he considered drinking it—that would be one way of making it gone—but of course that was absurd. He needed to have his wits about him during the performance.

Time to begin the ritual. The beginning of a new life.

He retrieved the two glasses from where they glowed upon a shelf, their wide bowls open to the night.

Then he slid the photograph out of his breast pocket. He propped it on a stack of books.

Uncorking the champagne, he poured out the two glasses, lifted one in a toast. The warmth of the liquor smashed against the back of his throat like a wave of joy, unexpected and familiar.

“Here we go, kiddo,” he said, tilting the glass toward the photograph before taking a second sip. He sat back, closed his eyes briefly, and then opened them. If only he could cork up the champagne again, hold the trapped air in its bubbles tight inside the bottle for just a little longer.

The knock came at the door. “Mr. Delaney? Five minutes.”

It was time.

He gulped down the rest of the glass’s contents, barely tasting it, and set it down empty next to its still-full twin. He stood for a moment, resting the full weight of his palms on the desk, looking down at the glasses and the bottle and the photograph. Then he tucked the photograph back in his breast pocket.

When he opened the door, the crowd’s murmur instantly expanded, nearly swallowing him in its roar.

With fewer than sixteen hours to live, Frederic Delaney stepped into the backstage corridor on his way to the lights and the applause and the accolades that he was certain would soon be his.

He passed a colored custodian. “Hattie,” he told her, “have a fresh bottle of champagne waiting for me when I come back. And that half bottle on my desk—get rid of it. But leave the champagne in the glass.”

ACT 1

Bern

The Extra K

Bern

PROFESSOR BERN HENDRICKS WAS LATE to class when the sound of an incoming email pinged in his inbox. He'd put on his favorite blue pinstripe, short-sleeve, but nobody would notice under his jacket and, wouldn't you know, there was a wrinkle right under the pocket. The jacket didn't completely cover it. So he'd had to haul out the ironing board and heat up the iron, and that took longer than it should have. Now he was running a good ten minutes late. But with the *Quicksilver* symphony flooding his earbuds, how could he hurry? The students could wait a few more minutes.

Maybe he should just skip class altogether, he thought. The *Quicksilver* was the obvious excuse. Delaney's *Quicksilver*—so-called because of the extraordinary melding of alto and tenor saxes layered over French horns—was one of Bern's absolute favorites. Bizet had effectively used an alto sax in his *L'Arlésienne* Suite, but Delaney's *Quicksilver* took it to an entirely different level. Every time Bern listened to the allegro moderato movement, it was as if a hole suddenly opened up in his chest and music cascaded in. No matter how many times he heard it, the melody rippled across his spine and he shivered under its impact. "That was double good," he mumbled to himself.

No wonder Frederic Delaney was the hands-down best composer—not just in America, Bern would argue, but in the entire world.

So there he was, seriously considering missing a class in only his second week of teaching just to listen to a symphony he'd heard hundreds of times before—when his email chimed.

He stared at his phone, hit PAUSE on the music.

Even without Delaney's music playing, it seemed as if Frederic Delaney were, right then, communicating directly with Bern from beyond the grave. The email was from the executive director of the Delaney Foundation. What were the odds that he'd get a message right when he was listening to—

He opened the email.

Dear Bern:

I hope you have been well since we last met.

I'm reaching out with a time-sensitive matter regarding Frederick Delaney.

I know that the school year has just started and you must be quite busy, but would you contact me as soon as you get this? Please call the number below, no matter the hour, from a location where you can speak freely. Someone will always be monitoring this line.

Sincerely,
Mallory Delaney Roberts
Executive Director
The Delaney Foundation

Right then he was halfway across the grounds of the University of Virginia, minutes from class. In the shadow of the ancient oak trees, the lushness of the early autumn grass glowed around him. He took a breath, and then another. Students played Frisbee on the terraces.

He wasn't aware of any of them, even when a Frisbee sailed past his left cheek, so close that he felt its breeze.

The email was some kind of scam. It had to be. Mallory Delaney Roberts wouldn't be writing to *him*. He doubted she even remembered who he was. She'd met him only a handful of times. Last month he'd seen an article in *Time* announcing a partnership between the Delaney Foundation and the Vatican for new musical outreach to Eastern Europe. And this woman was calling him Bern? The words glowed on the screen.

I'm reaching out with a time-sensitive matter regarding Frederick Delaney.

He'd paused right before his favorite section in the *Quicksilver*: the French horns' epic battle with the trombones, when the horns fought for supremacy but the trombones would, in just a second, kick their asses. "Sorry, horns," he mumbled as he logged out of his playlist. He googled the Foundation and clicked the link to the website, where Mallory's thumbnail photo smiled serenely at him. A bouffant helmet of too-dark dyed hair, pearl earrings, and a pearl choker.

The most memorable and last time they'd met, she had clasped his hands with both of hers and said, "Congratulations" and "I'm so sorry for your loss." He'd shaken her hands and said, "Thank you," and when he'd met her eyes, he had seen the gleam of tears to match his own.

By then, a month after their adviser, Jacques Simon, had passed away, there had been just two PhD students left in the program: Julie Ertl, who was already making plans to quit academia and go into advertising, and Bern. The ceremony—the unveiling, the signing of the books, the presentation of the first printed copy to the Delaney Foundation—had seemed empty and all too silent without Jacques, who'd revered Frederic Delaney almost as much as Bern did. Almost.

He was about to be fifteen minutes late—the cutoff for how long students had to wait for a professor. They'd probably already be packing up. They might as well get a head start on the weekend, he decided. And this matter was *time sensitive*.

He'd explain and apologize to the kids next time.

Instead of heading up to the lecture hall, he dashed down to his office in the bowels of Old Cabell Hall. It had been built at the turn of the century,

with typical Greek Revival architecture of red brick behind white columns—nothing like Columbia’s chaos of golden stone and modern glass. Here the hallways and classrooms smelled musty and of distant mice.

Bern locked the door to his tiny broom closet of an office, sat down, and dialed Mallory’s number.

The phone rang only once before a brisk woman’s voice answered. “Delaney Foundation. Hello, Professor Hendricks. Hold, please, and let me put you through.”

The phone clicked, and then another woman’s voice, smoother, slipped through the phone line. “Bern. I’m so glad you reached out as quickly as you did.”

He recognized her voice: old money, the most expensive prep schools in Connecticut or Rhode Island. “Of course,” he said. “It’s a pleasure to speak with you, Ms. Delaney.”

“Bern, please. We’ve been through this before. It’s Mallory, remember?”

“I know,” he said, “it’s just—” He didn’t know how to complete the sentence. He was speaking to royalty. This was a woman who probably had the president of the United States in her “favorite contacts” list. And she knew who he was: Bern Hendricks, a poor kid from Milwaukee who used to eat bologna three times a week because his family couldn’t afford anything else. Again—involuntarily—a wave of gratitude for Frederic Delaney, for all that Delaney had given him, washed over Bern.

“Are you someplace you can talk?” she was saying.

“I’m in my office.”

“Are you alone?”

“Yes,” he said, sitting up straighter. Had he done something wrong? Had the Foundation discovered some error or discrepancy with his work on the Quintet? He’d gone over those footnotes dozens of times. He, Jacques, and Julie had all triple-checked one another’s work. What was the problem? “Is there something I can help you with?”

“As a matter of fact, there is. Something urgent has come up.” She paused. “We found some original documentation from my uncle, and we wondered if you’d be interested in an opportunity to assess it.”

“Documentation? What kind of documentation? Music? Letters?” Adrenaline and relief shot through him, a cold rush of blood from the top of his head to his feet and back. She probably wanted him for something small and meaningless, he told himself. Frederic Delaney had been one of the twentieth century’s most prolific composers; he’d known everyone, so new letters often surfaced at auction houses or estate sales. Some letters—the ones with great signatures and substantive text—sold for tens of thousands of dollars.

“We found something that requires someone with a specific skill set. And of course I thought immediately of you.”

“Okay,” he said, thrilled to help. “Can you email it over? I can look right now. What is it?”

“I’d rather discuss this in person, if you have the inclination. There’s also a nondisclosure agreement that we’d need you to sign.”

“A nondisclosure agreement?” Bern repeated. His brain was churning. “What did you find?”

“Again, I’d—”

“Are you here?” he asked. “In Charlottesville?”

“No,” she said, “I was rather hoping I could lure you up to our offices.” He could hear her smile. “We’re on the top floor of the Foundation, as you may remember. Quite near Juilliard.”

She wasn’t going to tell him what they’d found, that much was clear. But he wanted more information. He tried a different tactic. “What kind of skill set are you looking for?”

“Partially it’s your work on the *Rings Quintet*,” she said slowly. “And you probably know more about Frederic Delaney than almost everyone. Including me, and I’m related to him.” Again, he could hear that smile through the telephone.

“Let me look at my schedule.” He checked his calendar. “I could possibly fly up Friday afternoon, if I can get a flight out. I’m teaching all this week. But this feels like quite a haul for some documentation. Are you sure you can’t just scan it and send it to me via email? I’m happy to sign your nondisclosure electronically.”

“We’d rather show you. We haven’t allowed scans yet of the—of the—documents.”

Something about the way she hesitated over that last word sent Bern’s head spinning. What kind of document would she be reluctant to scan? Was it so fragile?

“You must have found something really special,” he said. A diary? Delaney had kept no journals, although he did use an office calendar that he never fully updated. Could it be a letter discussing the genesis of the Quintet? That would be life changing—Delaney had rarely mentioned his inspirations for the opera cycle, which was why Jacques Simon had created the annotated Quintet in the first place: all those painstaking scholarly attributions for all of Delaney’s musical influences had taken them eight years to compile.

Another pause. “It is. It’s—” She didn’t finish the sentence.

“Did you find an undiscovered piece of music?”

One of Delaney’s compositions turned up now and then. The most recent time one was found and played—the *Domino Winds* overture—the New York Philharmonic had premiered to a packed auditorium and received a seven-minute standing ovation, and the audience had shouted, “Again! Again! Again!” until the Philharmonic encored the overture, in true Delaney fashion.

“I really can’t discuss it over the phone,” she said.

So it *was* an undiscovered piece of music. It had to be.

Of course.

He said slowly: “You found it, didn’t you?”

“I beg your pardon? We—”

“You found it. You found a piece of *RED*. You found the original. How much? The overture? An aria?”

A very long pause, during which Bern tried to assess what it would mean, finding even a page of the original *RED*. His head swam.

“Bern, please. I—I think this would be better discussed in person, in the proper setting,” she said, stumbling over her words, sounding on edge. “Can you be here once you’re done teaching for the week?”

“Just tell me this. How much did you find? Is it more than a page? Do you have a whole act?”

“Bern, I—”

Her hesitation was enough. “I’ll be there tonight,” he said. Before Mallory could respond, he was already on his laptop, emailing the head of the Music Department to say that due to an emergency he would need to cancel all his classes for the rest of the week—could a graduate student take over?

“That’s wonderful news,” Mallory said. “We’ll send our plane to pick you up. When can you be ready?”

It was actually happening. A piece of *RED*—the elusive, mysterious, impossible *RED*—had been found.

And out of everyone on the planet, Bern himself—a poor bologna-sandwich-eating kid with a beat-up French horn—was going to actually see it. Be one of the very first people to touch it, to decipher Frederic Delaney’s distinctive handwriting.

“Give me an hour,” he said.