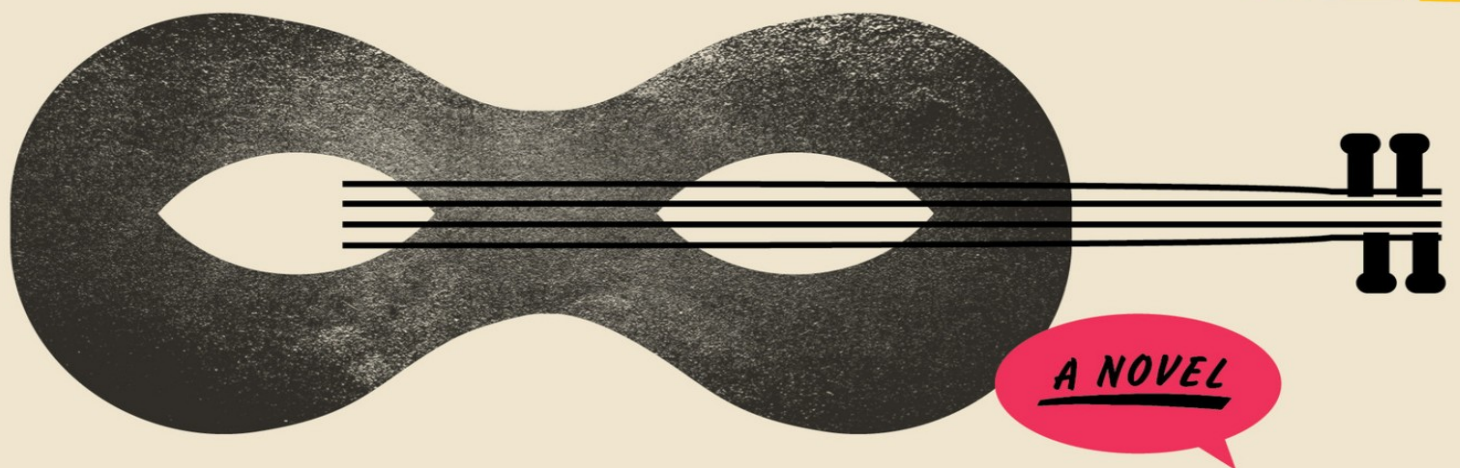


*The* **DARK  
MAESTRO**



**BRENDAN  
SLOCUMB**

*Author of THE VIOLIN CONSPIRACY*

ALSO BY BRENDAN SLOCUMB

*The Violin Conspiracy*

*Symphony of Secrets*

# THE DARK MAESTRO



*A Novel*

BRENDAN SLOCUMB



*Doubleday*  
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To Ian Hargis. I can only begin to express how grateful I am to have had you in my life for the past thirty-plus years. Everything we've been through—from convocation, to pulling all-nighters for Music History, to weddings, to marching band, to SMOOTHIES, to a night in the box...to, quite literally, saving my life. I thank God for you, brother. Love you.

## *Prologue*

---

# THE LAST CONCERT

THE FLASH of the FBI badge would wipe away, forever, his identity.

Until then, he'd been a musician, a cellist, a prodigy. Soon he'd be a fugitive, a faceless and nameless shadow.

But right now the musician known as “Curtis Wilson” focused on delivering—with all the passion and virtuosity he could muster—the infamous cadenza of Kabalevsky's Cello Concerto no. 2, op. 77. The Kabalevsky was all about passion: a sweet lament that builds, twists in on itself as the soloist breaks away from the orchestra, and explodes center stage to display his technical prowess and musicality. As much as Curtis loved the piece, it was a motherfucker, demanding flawless execution of complex fingerings and bowings, with rapid runs spanning multiple octaves. He'd spent months drilling each passage, day after day, before he could even manage to play it all the way through.

And now he would be onstage with the New York Philharmonic at Lincoln Center. *The New Yorker* promised that listeners would be “dazzled by this rising star's prodigious abilities.”

Still, the audience had no idea what musical euphoria was in store. He had to make them *feel* it.

Which was why, twenty minutes before the performance, he wasn't in the greenroom—where the FBI had expected to find him. He later learned that agents searched for him while he sawed away in the bowels of Lincoln Center where the acoustics were better, going over the Kabalevsky's multiple octave leaps.

*Once more and then I'll call it quits*, he vowed, tightening his grip on the cello.

Ten minutes to go. Maybe he could run through the beginning of the third movement, right before the saxophone solo. Then again, he had to wind his way up through the labyrinth of stairways and corridors to get to the stage. And he should probably find a bathroom on the way. Pee and check his tie in the mirror.

A knock on the door, and it opened. "Mr. Wilson?" A tousled head with a microphone and a headset poked in. "Dude, you're impossible to find. You have like five minutes."

"I needed to go through this one more time," Curtis said, more defensively than he meant to.

"We need to get going." The stage manager pushed the door open, gestured with her head for Curtis to follow. "You need anything?"

"I think I'm okay." He followed her out into the corridor. "Although a pit stop would be a good idea."

"Okay, let's hustle then." She was wearing a Batman T-shirt. "There's a bathroom on the next level up. I'll take you the back way. It's shorter."

"You into superheroes?" Curtis asked as their footsteps rang in the stairwell. "Looks like you're more DC than Marvel."

She laughed. "I heard you were into comic books, but I didn't believe it. Yeah, you got me. DC all the way. But Marvel is cool." She hesitated like she wanted to say something further.

"Spiderman or Nightwing?"

"Nightwing," she said. "Better costume and not nearly the baggage."

"Check this out." Curtis paused on the steps and lifted a custom-made tuxedoed pant leg to reveal his Captain America socks. The red, white, and blue shield above his ankles would be front and center for the audience.

"Those," she said, looking back, "are seriously dope."

"You read the new issue of *Nightwing* yet?" he asked her. In minutes, he'd be center stage in front of a sold-out crowd, with the New York Phil, in Lincoln Center. This was an opportunity of a lifetime, and he should have been thinking about the intentions and emotions of Kabalevsky instead of Nightwing's costume. But there it was.

“No, haven’t had time. I haven’t checked my pull box. You?”

“Got it yesterday,” Curtis said. “I ain’t going to ruin it for you. It’s good. I’m about halfway through.” The latest issue of *Nightwing* slept half read on his hotel bedside table, a sheet torn from the hotel notepad marking his place. He was looking forward to finishing it tonight. Before Nightwing fought Blockbuster by the Bludhaven central library, Blockbuster had planted a bomb at the hospital. No way Nightwing could make it uptown before the bomb went off.

The next level up, she pushed open the door and gestured to a bathroom on the other side of the hall. He took the cello with him, laid it down next to the sink as he peed and checked his tie.

“What’s your name?” he asked her when he shouldered open the door.

She was slouched against the wall, one hand cupping her ear. “Ellen,” she said. “And we’ve really got to hurry.”

He followed her up a narrow stairway, faintly lit, that wrapped irregularly up the wall. The higher he climbed, the more he could hear the music. The orchestra was in the final strains of Borodin’s Overture to *Prince Igor*.

“Yo, so when I’m done we need to finish that Marvel/DC comparison,” he said. The orchestra finished, and the applause began.

“Sure,” Ellen said, opening a gray door marked “3.” “Follow me, it’s right around the corner.” She shouldered open another door, and they were directly backstage. “You know,” she was saying, “I heard you were cool, but dang. Yeah, I’m down. My roommate is a bigger dork than I am. She knows every character from DC, Marvel, and Image.”

“I found my people,” Curtis joked. It seemed unusually crowded with stagehands and other people, he thought vaguely.

From the shadows behind them, a man in a suit—looking more like a bureaucrat than a stagehand—was heading his way, eyes focused on Curtis. He had one hand in his lapel, and seemed like he wanted to speak to him, but right then Maestro Kastenmeier, hand outstretched, strode into the wings to escort Curtis to the stage.

Then the lights were dazzling, and new applause rose up.

He set up the cello, placed his calloused index finger on the string, and waited for the maestro’s cue.

The orchestra thrummed to life.

Curtis would remember, with startling clarity, this last concert. There on center stage, with one of the great orchestras at his back, one of the greatest conductors cuing him in, and one of the most elite and extraordinary audiences on the planet at his feet, he burst the Kabalevsky open with a meaty pizzicato. He was in it.

He imagined a vast landscape, where rolling hills gave way to towering mountains. His cello painted the shadows circling behind the trees, a few faint beams of light glimmering in the twilight. Then the terrain turned treacherous. *All is not easy: there are obstacles to overcome, but we will do this together*, Curtis told the audience.

His bow played a long and sweeping open string. He milked every bit of the next note to give his trademark Curtis Wilson vibrato—the vibrato that the *New York Times* called an “eloquent tremor”—its full breath. He was in the zone.

When the allegro started, his head was down, shoulders raised, and he dug into the strings. The orchestra was right with him. He set the pace. He was in control, despite the music’s borderline violence. He’d joked with someone during rehearsal that he devoured anarchy with his cereal every morning. After all, he was a product of Southeast D.C.

Then his cello’s voice became an elegy, capturing the depths of human sorrow and yearning. It circled around the sound and taste of the word *loss*.

In the ache of unfulfilled dreams, the melody transformed again, burst forth with exuberance, and the orchestra swelled behind him as he led it to embrace his triumph.

All too soon, the music thundered to its glorious and terrible conclusion. In the final strains, he kicked one leg up, fully exposing his Captain America socks. The audience roared as they jumped to their feet.

Minutes passed as he bowed. A standing ovation. He took a breath—he didn’t know how long it had been since he’d even breathed—and inhaled the audience’s wild energy. They were feeding him oxygen, and life. He closed his eyes and bowed again.

Afterward, he searched his memory to try to find any indication of the FBI agents even then waiting for him. He remembered the man in the suit, eyes narrowed, coming toward him; and he mentally cataloged each aisle, hunting for some sign of a plainclothes policeman, arms crossed, staring malevolently down at him. As if this

were *The Sound of Music*, and he were Captain von Trapp moments before the Nazis would descend on him and attempt to carry him off.

Out front he saw nothing. Just the glittering audience, hands raised in applause. A few ushers leaned against the back wall. Security guards manned the fire doors on both sides of the house.

Maestro Kastenmeier gestured for him to come forward and take a bow. The maestro clasped his hands warmly. “A triumph,” he told Curtis. “Truly a triumph. I’m so glad they recorded this. I think it’s going to go down in history as one of the best performances of the Kabalevsky. Ever. Daniil Shafran would be proud.”

“Thank you,” Curtis mumbled. No matter how many times people praised him, it still made him uncomfortable. He bowed again to the audience, thinking incongruously of the *Nightwing* comic book, half read by his bed. What quip would Nightwing spout off after a victory?

And then, finally, his final performance as Curtis Wilson drew to a close. The house lights came up. He shook hands with most of the orchestra.

He hugged the first oboist, a diminutive lady with still-flaming red hair. “You killed it, man,” he told her. Elisabeth von Hohenberg was legendary, in her late seventies, and one of the greatest performers in the world. Curtis had watched her on YouTube hundreds of times, and had played with her three times before tonight. She’d told him after the last performance that they needed to have dinner sometime, but they hadn’t set a date yet.

Now, still glowing with triumph, he threaded his way backstage. Ellen, the stage manager, clapped him on the back. Curtis meant to get her number so they could talk comic books, but didn’t have a chance. He’d ask someone tomorrow, he figured. Meanwhile people milled around him, talking about his phrasing and the vibrato, and when the recording would release. At last he found himself at the door to his dressing room, opened it.

For an instant, he thought that the room was crowded with more fans in search of an autograph or a selfie.

But there were only two of them. A man and a woman. The man, in a dark business suit with a forgettable tie and polished shoes, was standing up, coming toward



him. The woman, with Asian features, hung back in a gray suit, a string of pearls gleaming against her blouse.

“Mr. Wilson,” said the man. It wasn’t a question. He was tall, with old-fashioned seventies glasses perched on a fleshy face. The broken capillaries of a heavy drinker starred his nose and cheeks.

“Can I help you?” Curtis asked.

“I’m Agent Mitchell,” the man said. “I’m with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.” He flashed a badge that Curtis didn’t read. Later, after those first blurred moments, he’d remember other details: The way the woman peered around Curtis to look down the hall. The shine of Mitchell’s glasses, and how he’d said “Federal Bureau of Investigation,” rather than “FBI.”

“What—who—” Curtis began.

“You need to come with us. Right now. Please gather your—”

“What do you mean? I can’t just walk out,” Curtis said. “I’ve got a reception to go to. Who did you say you were again?”

“We’re with the Federal Bureau of Investigation,” the man repeated. And then, when Curtis must have just been staring stupidly at him, he said impatiently, “The FBI. Look, you’re going to have to skip your reception. We’re taking you into protective custody. Effective immediately.”

“What—why did—”

“It’s about your dad.”

“What? What about my dad? Is he okay?”

“This is not up for discussion. You can’t stay here. Grab your stuff. Let’s go.”

*Part 1*

**IN THE TIME BEFORE**



## CURTIS

MISS JACKSON'S NOTE, folded into quarters, had been firmly attached with a safety pin to Curtis's navy-blue polo shirt. Five-year-old Curtis tapped it anxiously, peering down to make sure it had survived the trip.

His mama, who had picked up Curtis from school, leaned around him and pushed open the apartment door. Shouts poured out. Daddy's voice. Something shattered.

On the way out of kindergarten, Miss Jackson had tried to hand the note to Mama, but Mama put both her hands in the air like she was a bad guy surrendering to a policeman. She backed away from the note as if it had teeth. "Nuh-uh," she told Miss Jackson. "You need to talk to Curtis's daddy."

Miss Jackson had looked down at Curtis, and then at Mama, who was wearing a torn hoodie with her blue and purple gang necklaces. She was already edging down the block toward the bus.

"I'll pin it to you," Miss Jackson had told Curtis. "That way you won't lose it. You give it to your father and get his signature, okay?" Curtis didn't want to be pinned like a baby in a diaper. Miss Jackson didn't believe him when he told her he wouldn't lose it.

Now, as Mama let him into the apartment, the sounds of Daddy's and Larissa's latest fight battered at him. He just wanted to give the note to Larissa, so she could give it to Daddy, so Daddy could *get a signature*. Curtis wasn't sure what *signature* meant, except that nothing was as important as having one. Just thinking of the *signature* not happening made his heart hammer, and he thought he might cry.

Larissa and Daddy didn't notice that Curtis was back. Daddy was home early, and Daddy was mad and was walking around, yelling and throwing things—a fork, a Tupperware container, a dinner plate that exploded against the kitchen wall—and Daddy was saying to Larissa, “Dammit! I don't know what I'm gonna do!” and Larissa—who usually called Curtis and Daddy “baby” or “*papi*,” smiling with those big white teeth of hers—was scowling right back at Daddy and saying, “Breaking everything in the house ain't gonna make it any better.”

Daddy didn't usually act like this. Daddy was quiet and didn't talk that much. Usually, as soon as he saw Curtis, he'd do a big goofy grin and then they'd “thumbtouch”: right thumb to their own forehead, and then tap thumbs with a “Hey man.”

But today there was no thumbtouch, no “Hey man.”

“He's gonna kill me,” Daddy was saying. “That's it. That's gonna be it.”

“You just have to explain it,” Larissa told him.

Curtis turned to walk himself back into his mama's legs, hold on tight, but Mama pushed him forward. “Go on now,” she said to him. “Go on.” She patted his head and gave him a little shove. He was distracted, looking at Daddy, who had his head in his hands and didn't notice that Mama had shut the door without even giving him a goodbye kiss or a hug.

“Ain't no way of explaining that he'd understand,” Daddy said.

Curtis checked the pinned note again, slipped off the backpack that Larissa had bought him special from the Dollar General, and went through the living room and down the hall without Daddy or Larissa noticing. He carefully closed the door to his room, to shut them out.

For a long time, Daddy and Larissa shouted and broke things.

He'd been hungry, but nobody came to check on him and ask him if he wanted vanilla wafers and a glass of milk, although that morning Larissa had promised them if he was good. His stomach rumbled. But the excitement of the day had worn him out, so despite the yelling and the smashing, he fell asleep.

Later, Larissa woke him up. The evening had turned blue and shadowed. “Hey, *papito*.” She smoothed his hair off his forehead. “How was your day?”