

Melody for Murder  
First book in a series, The Spell of Vaugirard

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Melody for Murder

by

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Chapter One

Uncovering the Encryption

I – Village of Vaugirard

September, Anno Domini 1347

Everyone knew the child Mirabel – Mirabel of the curly red hair; Mirabel of the rosy cheeks and the guileless blue eyes; Mirabel of the soft hands, like a girl's, too sensuous for so young a boy. Mirabel of the song. Mirabel, who stood that day accused of murder.

“My husband was alive last twilight. He said he needed to hear Mirabel's song once more before he went to sleep. But he never said he did not plan to wake up today! He heard the song, and then he died. What more proof do you need before you stop this abomination?”

“Madame, calm yourself. Please. Songs do not kill.” The old priest, whose habit it was to nap between None and Vespers, had been awakened by the widow's cries.

“Fool! Of course songs can kill. Songs that come from the evil one are tuned for nothing else; and after *mon mari* heard Mirabel's song, he died. Is that not enough for you?”

“A single incident is hardly sufficient proof.”

“Do you need more evidence? Pick up your head, and walk through the village. Everyone here can tell you a story like mine. Where have you been hiding, that you do not know about this monstrous song?”

“Madame, control yourself. I am not God, neither omniscient nor perfect. I am but a village prefect, the shepherd of your immortal soul in this miserable world. Pray do not add to my burdens with your mischief. Songs that kill indeed”

“Idiot! You’ll ruin us all with your stupidity! I do not need second sight to see that everyone who is sung to sleep by Mirabel tonight will not rise to greet the morrow. As surely as I know God sits in heaven to judge, I know Mirabel’s is no ordinary song. You have heard it yourself, desecrating the church. You know what I mean.”

“Madame, s’il vous plait, the song, as you call it, was, perhaps, disruptive. But to call it evil – does that not go too far?”

“What, too far? For days *mon mari* had been ill. Each day he grew weaker and weaker, but he would sit up to listen whenever that accursed child sang. Then, yesterday, he was too weak to do the milking and the task fell to me. But ill as he was, he managed to slip away while I was milking. I saw his footprints in the mud, and they led toward Mirabel’s home.”

“Perhaps your husband was looking for one of your own cows that had strayed.”

“No! All of our stock was safe in the barn. He returned more than an hour later, and he went directly to prepare for bed. He would not speak to me.”

At this word some of the villagers laughed behind their hands. The speaker was a well-know harridan in the village.

“*Mon mari* came to the bedroom, blew out the candle, and then lay beside me, still but awake, for much of the night. I could not sleep, and he would not speak. Then he fell asleep, but not before singing a tune I had never heard before. It made me shiver, made me cold to my bones, because I had never heard him sing a note in his

life, not once. But his singing was not so chilling as the tune that answered it, floating through the window after it.”

“Who would have been singing outside your window in the middle of the night?”

“Who, indeed! It was that devil’s child. He and my husband sang to each other, and three hours later I became a widow.”

The sun set slowly, gilding the furrows of wheat nearly ripe for reaping. Out of the early evening the song once again drifted over the fields, fetching, mesmerizing, essential in its own way, as though by his song Mirabel marked the hours. Even the cows in their stalls responded, gentling to the touch of the milkmaids. The song insinuated itself into the very air, permeating every movement, every thought, but this music was no plainsong like those chanted daily in the parish church. This music was omnipresent, inescapable. Two of the villagers stood, enthralled. They conversed but dared not raise their voices above a whisper.

*‘Qu’est que c’est?’*

*“Je ne sais pas – une chanson?”*

*“Mais cette chanson, si c’est une chanson, qu’elle chanson!”*

*“La musique me prend!”*

*“J’en ai besoin.”*

*“Besoin??”*

*“La chanson. J’en ai besoin.”*

*“Oui, je comprends. Il me faut l’écouter si je veux m’endormir.”*

*“Vraiment. Cette chanson. J’en ai besoin, j’en ai absolument besoin.”*

In those years the Black Death had begun its clockwise sweep of Europe, decimating towns and villages; but in Vaugirard even the plague was no match for Mirabel's song. No one in the village could sleep without being wrapped in the plaintive, yet somehow soothing, melody Mirabel sang. Never mind that his parents were – well, they were well connected with the clergy. Never mind that his parents wanted for nothing even as the workers in the fields fell dead in the midst of their labors. Never mind that Mirabel caressed the dead and dying as the clergy refused to do, touching them gently with his delicate, unnaturally large hands, easing their way as they crossed over. Mirabel's song had its own power.

The tune refused to rest, and the villagers refuse to rest without it. And every day at dawn was heard shrill keening and wailing to terrify the hardest of hearts. All of the men, women, and children who had stayed awake to hear Mirabel's song – the one he sang in the cathedral, much to the consternation of the *Abbé* – died in the night, victims of the plague. If it were not Mirabel, then who was the guilty party? Who visited this evil upon the village?

At the next cock-crow, the sun was hidden by gray clouds, dampening the ripening fields. The rain delayed the harvest, as the disease laid waste the villagers. Close upon the cock's call, the bells of St. Germain chimed, sounding falsely merry on this grim-looking day. The river grumbling its way past the village added its own note of discord to the morning, strangely at odds with the sun shining brightly at the opposite end of the village.

There, beneath the brightening sun, a lone voice wove a counterpoint to the other sounds, plaiting them together, enfolding them until they became a seamless

whole, making lovely what had been merely bothersome noise. The villagers turned to listen, distracted from their chores by the haunting melody. The sound sent the widow to the *Abbé* again, but not before she had gathered as many of the villagers as would come with her.

"The child is singing again. It is the same evil tune that killed *mon mari*."

The *Abbé* asked the widow, "Can you sing this tune for me? The one that you believe killed your husband?"

"If I could, I would not."

"What do you mean, if you could?"

Hidden sniggers from the townsfolk met this response; everyone knew the widow could not carry a tune in a bushel.

"The song runs away even as I hear it in my memory. Even as it chills my heart and soul."

"The words, then, do you remember them?"

"Remember? I shall never forget those nonsense syllables. He said, '*Mon âme retournera à travers la porte du rayon*.' Nonsense, that's all he said. Nonsense!" She neglected to add that at those words, she had opened her tightly-shut eyes just a little, and had seen – or thought she had seen – the song move past her in the night air. Just a sliver of movement, it was, but enough to cause her to freeze as though she herself were dead. She could no more have spoken to her husband at that moment, even if she had wanted to, than she could have moved the earth.

"Perhaps you did not understand."

"There is nothing wrong with my ears. Those are exactly the words he used."

“Well, there may be something to what you say. Give me some time to ponder and pray on this. I will consult the bishop, perhaps. We must move with caution in such cases.”

“Caution!” she screamed. “The word you call upon to hide you when you mean to do nothing! We are not fools, and you will not play with our lives! Consult your bishop, and we will consult the source of our ills. We must be rid of this evil child or we will all die!”

“Please, Madame, some compassion for an innocent.”

“Those in league with evil can never be innocent. I tell you, *Père Abbé*, Mirabel is in league with the evil one and he must be stopped!” To the crowd that had gathered, she flung a challenge: “Who will help me? Come forward, all of you; testify to the truth of what you know!”

The widow’s mounting hysteria had an unsettling effect on her hearers. They began to murmur among themselves.

“Perhaps she is right.”

“It is true that all the dead became ill after hearing Mirabel’s song.”

“My cousin sang the night he died. He had never sung before in his life.”

“The child is bewitching us. He must be stopped.”

Provoked by the widow’s hysteria and their own uneasiness, ready to do whatever they could to protect themselves and their homes, the villagers soon became an angry mob. Grabbing scythes, hoes, shovels, anything that might serve as a weapon, those who had survived the night made their way to Mirabel’s home. He was singing from somewhere as they approached, and at the sound of the song, the crowd

became incensed. Shouts of “Stop him!” and “Take him to the prefect!” -- even of “Kill him!” -- rang through the morning air. But when they reached the house, they could not make themselves try to find him.

Mirabel’s home was a grand affair compared to the homes of most of the villagers. It had a foundation of stone and the walls above were wooden, pierced by large, shuttered windows. Two coveted chimneys were placed, one at each end of the house. With two fireplaces to heat it, this house would be warm even on the coldest winter night. The shutters fit the windows snugly, and there were no gaps to let in unwanted air or rain. The front door was carved in a manner that mimicked some of the woodwork in the pilgrimage churches. The fine workmanship bespoke more than wealth; only the aristocracy paid for such embellishments, but Mirabel’s parents were commoners.

The garden was another thing. There were actually two gardens. One behind the house, near the animal shed, produced vegetables and fruit. There were also some fruit trees there. The garden in front of the house – such decadence – produced only flowers and some herbs – flowers of unique fragrance, and herbs that could be used for anything.

The villagers milled about the front garden, murmuring, threatening, some of them intentionally trampling the flowers. Eventually, someone sent a child to fetch the *Abbé*, who came in his own good time.

When he arrived, the widow shrieked, “I told you, but you would not listen! How many more will have to die before you force this monster to admit his unholy alliance?”

More shouts from the crowd greeted this outburst; and the *Abbé* waved his arms, trying to calm the people. The murmuring continued even as he spoke.

“Bring the boy and his parents to the church. I will question him there and determine whether we need call in the bishop.”

The mob rushed to Mirabel’s door, only to find him waiting for them in the garden. They had not seen him come outside, but there he was, singing, moving his hands as though to coax the very plants around him to sing. No one would touch him except to prod him with their farm tools, forcing him to walk toward the church. One of the farmers banged on the door to the house. There was no answer. He smashed the shutters to climb into the window and Mirabel turned.

“They are not at home, sir.” Then he turned back, walking toward the church as if on his way to his first Communion.

At the church, the *Abbé* insisted that the villagers leave their weapons on the outer steps. Entering, each person dipped two or three fingers into the holy water font, crossing forehead, chest, left shoulder, right shoulder, purification and protection for what might yet come today.

The *Abbé* sat in his chair beside the altar. The villagers herded Mirabel toward the *Abbé* while Mirabel sang bits of his song.

“Enough! Mirabel, why do you insist on singing this wicked song?”

“But it isn’t wicked. I know.”

“Where did you learn it?”

“I have always known this song. Ever since I could remember anything. *Maman* and Papa always smile so when I sing it.”

“Did they teach you the song?”

“No. I told you. I have always known this song.”

The questioning went on for hours. The *Abbé* grew tired. The villagers grew more and more tired and angry. The *Abbé* asked a last question.

“Mirabel, will you stop singing your song? It is clear that your song brings evil and so must be from the evil one. You must confess your sin and give up this abomination.”

“But how can I stop the thing that gives me life? Would you give up the sacraments? This is my sacrament, and I must have it if I am to live.”

Before the *Abbé* could speak again, the crowd went mad. Cries of "Heresy!" and "Sacrilege!" were heard as they surged forward. They had sat through the long testimony; they had seen their loved ones mesmerized by the song at night and then dead in the morning; they themselves had felt the pull of the song. It was not natural. It was not holy. This evil must be annihilated. As one they rushed to the altar; they ripped away Mirabel's clothes. Someone brought in the hoes and scythes. As they tore at his body, he whispered the last words he would ever say:

*“La première personne qui entend mon nom le matin est la dernière personne qui me parle la nuit.”*

Moments later Mirabel lay dead, dismembered, no longer a threat to anyone

In accordance with conventional wisdom, each piece of Mirabel's body was taken to a different location around Vaugirard and buried in unconsecrated ground so as to prevent his rising at the Last Judgment. Following a logic born of hysteria, the burial

sites mimicked the placement of the hours on the sundial in the churchyard, except for those places where the terrain forced modification. In accordance with something much older than conventional wisdom, the sundial was observed to bulge oddly, mapping the path the mob had followed.

The women stayed behind to clean the blood from the stone floor in the church. The children hid in the pews, terrified that they might have done something as bad as Mirabel's sin. By the time it was finished, the cock crowed again. The unholy work had taken a full twenty-four hours, and in that time none of them had laid eyes on Mirabel's parents, nor had they found any of the purported treasure hidden in their home – but not for lack of trying. The family's home was as fully dismembered as Mirabel by the time the cock crowed again.

When the bells of the church chimed, the villagers seemed to shake themselves awake, still dazed and disoriented by the events of the night. They went back to their farms, milked their cows, tended their crops, eventually went to bed. But no one slept. There was no lullaby this night. And in the morning, five more were dead.

The evening after the murder, the Mother Abbess tried to sleep, but her mind would not rest. Never before had her cot felt so uncomfortable. Rising, she dressed and walked silently through the convent. Quietly unlocking the door, she walked down the stone steps and out into the convent garden, hoping to find some peace. The events of yesterday weighed on her heart as she recalled the sweet demeanor of the child called Mirabel. Was there nothing that she might have done to help? She could see the church below and shivered to think of the blood that had desecrated it. She thought she

caught something of Mirabel's scent on the cool night air. Impossible! It was merely the sleeping scent of the flowers. For some time she tried to meditate to rid herself of this delusion.

Deeply engrossed in her self-examination, she was startled by a fragment of melody that seemed to float through the air. It sounded strangely like Mirabel's song; but she was no believer in ghosts, this abbess. Turning first left, then right, she tried to locate where the air, inseparable from the music, originated. At every turn, she felt herself losing her way, even though she had known this garden for more than twenty years. The tune kept changing, and with it came scents the abbess did not understand. They did not smell like the plants in the convent garden, and they seemed to change along with the tune.

Stopping to get her bearings, the woman looked back at the path she had trod. The pattern it traced, outlining the different beds of fruits and vegetables in the garden, somehow echoed the melody she still heard. Superstitious or not, this abbess could feel her heart pounding in her breast. Backing toward the convent door, she stumbled, almost falling backwards. She imagined that she smelled the sickly sweet odor of the abattoir the villagers had made of the church. She thought about the retribution that must surely come upon the village after what they had done to a child still too young to have made his first Communion. Innocents should never be made to pay for the sins of their elders – but so it was, and so it would continue to be, world without end.

. The glimmer of the stars caught her eyes, constellations that might have been glittering in rhythm with the song. The sight chilled her to the heart. Later, In her chamber, before first light, she would write: "I have recorded everything that happened

that night and day, and I have made a map of Mirabel's burial places. If he is innocent, he must be allowed his rightful place at the resurrection of the dead. Perhaps someone in a day to come will find my testament, and right the wrong that was done here. I can but provide the facts as I saw and heard them. This is a true and faithful record of the events, I so swear before God." \*\*\* [Insert here a hand-drawn map of the village with the burial places marked.]

II – Washington, D.C., Library of Congress

December, 2008

Lily Barrington loved any excuse to visit the Library of Congress. Every time she approached the building with its two-tiered façade, she found herself standing about a block away just to look at it. The three arches at the top of the stairs of the Jefferson Building reminded her of a cathedral, while the columns that stretched across the second level of the façade might have been from an ancient temple. She imagined the fountain, with its water-spouting statuary, bathing a garden of exotic plants that bloomed under a gracious, warm sun. Today's clear, winter sun, however, was of a different sort: reflecting from the building's white exterior and the vehicles in the street, it simply made spots dance in front of her eyes.

Still, she paused again near the fountain. The previous night's dreams came back to her mind briefly – the way Rachel's tune had entered her sleep, and the shapeless foreboding with which she had awakened. "Sunlight is supposed to disclose

everything”, she mused, “but this light accentuates the shadows. Light and shadow – Henry and Charles. Love and – I don’t know – spite, I guess.” She shook her shoulders lightly as though to discard a covering, and walked toward the steps.

“Damn!” She grabbed the handrail just in time to stop herself from falling up the stairs. The library had a street level entrance, but Lily preferred climbing. Despite a slight unevenness of gait that she managed, usually, to hide, she never took the easy way in. Part of the experience for her was this almost ritualistic climbing of the stairs. Once inside the building, she spent a few minutes craning her neck to look around the Great Hall as her eyes adjusted to the change in light. The walls and ceiling rising two floors above her were spectacular, no matter how many times she came upon them. After a moment, she headed straight for the archives where her friend Richard was already waiting with the materials she had requested.

“Lily, it’s always good to see you -- and on a Thursday! You must be planning to stay at least two days.”

“Right you are. Richard, thanks so much for getting these things for me. I can’t wait to get started. But then, I’ve always been a sucker for moldy paper – the older the better.” Especially now, her thoughts added – now that the search is my own.

As Lily relaxed into her chair, it came to Richard again that she seemed to bring light into the place with her. Tall and slender, she carried herself as her convent schooling had taught her – erect and graceful, somehow self-effacing, unaware of her beauty. Today she had dressed for warmth and comfort in a creamy twin set and wool trousers, with flat shoes. Her radiant golden hair was pulled back so as not to interfere with her work, revealing her fair, fine-boned face to which, now, she had added the

round tortoise-shell glasses she needed for close work. Those same deep blue eyes often managed to look dreamy and focused at the same time, disconcerting to those meeting her. They were never sure whether she was paying attention to them or not – though she always was. Lily Barrington looked at once out of place and completely at home in the archives of the Library of Congress.

“Lily, you may be the only person I know who prefers dead trees to live people.”

“Richard, please, don’t hyperbolize. I like live people just fine – provided they are my kind of people.”

“Oh, so now with the fancy words. Let me remind you that I am both a librarian and an English major. You can’t lose me that easily.”

“Richard, I would never want to lose you. How would I find all these hidden treasures without you?”

“How, indeed?” Richard smiled ruefully as Lily turned back to her work. His work as librarian done, he would watch as Lily was lost in her own, private space, where she would remain until the library closed. Insatiable curiosity spurred her to research things some people considered pointless; but for Lily, the search had often been as important as the outcome. Richard would keep the building open late for her, never letting on that she had stayed well past closing every time she had come to the archives. By the time he left the room, Lily was fully engrossed in the manuscript before her.

“Interesting. And odd.” She carefully unfolded the fragile pages, revealing more a puzzle than a comprehensible document. Interspersed between what appeared to be phrases of musical notation were crude drawings of a church, some hut-like buildings, sketches of paths or trails, and what might have been a stream or river. And, finally,

there were pages of what appeared to be illuminated script, but without the vibrant colors that should have been there. Lily summoned Richard on the intercom phone.

“Can you come down here for a minute? I’ve found something really strange, and I could use an expert opinion.”

“I’ll be right there.”

While she waited for Richard, Lily stood and walked around the table, looking at the manuscript from different angles. She couldn’t be sure, yet, whether she would need her MEND interface. What she was reading appeared to be written in medieval French, but she wanted Richard’s opinion before she went too far down that road.

“Oh! Richard. I didn’t hear you come in.”

Richard had been standing in the doorway just watching Lily work. If she had been less engrossed in the manuscript, she might have recognized that the way he looked at her was the look of a man who would like to be more than a friend. He had a protective streak, always picking up strays and finding them homes, and he was convinced that Lily should be protected. Lily jumped when the door slapped shut.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. What do you want me to see?”

“This. It looks like medieval French to me, but I want an expert opinion before I spend too much time finding out if it’s just some monk’s idea of a bad joke.”

“What do you mean by ‘bad joke’?”

“Well, I’m finding things that look like musical notation, but music wasn’t notated this way until the sixteenth century. But the weirdest thing is this map. Or clock. Or – I don’t know what. There are sketches of body parts laid out over what looks like a map of a town or a village.”

“What? Body parts?”

“Exactly. That’s why I need someone who is expert in medieval French. This could be a really gross joke of some sort or it could be a really gross real life story.”

“So, what else are you finding here?”

“Not much except that the word “or” keeps showing up – French for gold. This could be a treasure map or it could be, well, I don’t know what else. But an expert would be a real treasure to me right now.”

“Lily, you are in luck. Professor Yves Hubert teaches at Georgetown, and his ‘specialité’ is medieval French language and history. If he can’t help you, I don’t know who can.”

“Wonderful! How soon can I talk to him?”

“Give me an hour or so to track him down, and I’ll see if I can set up an appointment with him while you are in D.C.”

“Thanks so much, Richard. Now, how much more time do I have here?”

“As long as you want, Lily. I happen to have an “in” with the guy in charge.”

“Maybe because you are the guy in charge?”

“Maybe so. Let me know if you need anything else.”

“Thanks, I will.”

Lily bent over the manuscript again, then turned to show Richard a particularly odd notation. But Richard was gone.

“Why,” Lily thought to herself, “can’t I ever seem to get involved with men as nice as Richard? What is my problem?”

Shaking her head and sighing, Lily went back to the manuscript. Gruesome as it was, she couldn't pull her attention away from the 'map' of body parts on the central page. The arrangement formed a shape that reminded her of something, but she couldn't quite place it. And then there was the musical notation – so far out of time and place. It didn't make sense. Nor did the eerie familiarity of the tune.

“I must have heard Rachel sing or play this some time. Nothing else makes sense.”

Lily made several entries in her MEND interface, and then added the musical notation. One of the MEND keys began to glow, and when she tapped it, the device played back the bit of tune she had entered as well as a couple of other musical phrases.

“Ooh, that gives me goose bumps. How could music from fourteenth century France have a counterpart in my twenty-first century MEND? It's almost as if – oh that can't be right. No one in the fourteenth century notated music this way. This has to be some kind of weird joke. But . . . if it is, it is getting more and more interesting. The sooner I can meet with Richard's expert, the better.”

Lily carefully returned the manuscript to its protective sleeve before saving her computer files. Just before she closed the MEND interface, another of the special keys began to glow. Apparently, MEND had more to tell her. When she touched the key, she heard a tune that MEND should not have in its memory banks – Rachel's current work-in-progress. So far as Lily knew, she and Rachel were the only ones who had ever heard it. Lily shivered as she shut down her computer.

Richard came into the archives, obviously in a hurry. “Lily, I’m sorry to interrupt your work, but we have to close down the archives. There is a wicked storm headed this way, and we need to secure the building.”

“And wouldn’t you know it, I don’t have my umbrella with me.”

“Not to worry. In addition to being an English major and a librarian, I was also a Boy Scout as a lad. I am prepared with, not one, but two umbrellas suitable for fending off the rain.”

“Richard, you are a marvel! Just let me collect my electronics.”

Outside the building, wind was gusting. When Lily looked up at the sky, all she could see were roiling clouds so dark they looked black. As menacing as the storm looked, its arrival somehow quieted the fears Lily had been unable to put to rest.

“Normally I’d walk the few blocks to my hotel, but I think this occasion warrants a taxi. Can I drop you anywhere, Richard?”

“No, thanks. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

By the time she got back to her room in the Mayflower Hotel, the rain had begun to coat the windows. Lily couldn’t wait to share her find with someone. She called her mother-in-law in New York.

“Allo.” Rose had never lost her French accent, despite her long sojourn in the US.

“Rose, I’m so glad you are home. It’s Lily.”

It would have been impossible for Rose to mistake Lily’s voice, regardless of the medium. For Rose, listening to Lily speak was something like hearing herself in an

aural mirror; the ebb and flow of Lily's speech, the intonation, the pitch, all reminded Rose of how her own voice had sounded when she was Lily's age. Sometimes, when they spoke at the same time, anyone listening might have thought they were singing.

"Lily, how good to hear from you. "

"Rose, you won't believe what I've stumbled on in the archives. It is the most amazing manuscript!"

"Really." Rose pushed the "record" button on her answering machine. She then settled herself into a comfortable wingback chair upholstered in pale green silk damask.

"Tell me about it."

"Well, it's from the fourteenth century, or at least it's supposed to be, but it has this phrase of musical notation that couldn't have been written before the sixteenth century. It's really odd. And the oddest thing is that the tune on the staff – the staff that shouldn't be there, I mean, sounds like something I am sure that I have heard Rachel sing or play. It's weird, but sort of exciting"

"It does sound strange, my dear. Are you sure that you aren't making too much of this? The family has a long history; but, really, Rachel's music in the fourteenth century seems something of a stretch. Your daughter – my granddaughter – is not that old, regardless of what she would like us to think."

Lily laughed. "It is funny how anxious our children are to grow old beyond their years. No, it's that Rachel's composition is so similar to the notation in this manuscript. The more I look at it, the stranger it becomes. 16<sup>th</sup> century musical notation in the 14<sup>th</sup> century that seems to be the same as a 21<sup>st</sup> century composition. So odd."

"Are you suggesting that Rachel's composition is not original?"

“Of course not! It’s just awfully strange – eerie, really. Why would Rachel’s music sound so much like what’s on this old manuscript? I’ll send it to you, and you tell me what you think.”

Lily’s excitement was reflected in the pitch and timbre of her voice; Rose had to catch herself from being caught in that excitement. Clutching the arm of the chair, she forced herself to speak calmly, almost disinterestedly, to her daughter-in-law.

“Lily, what else can you tell me about this melody?”

“Well, this is going to sound really strange, but I think that the melody is related to a particular sentence in the manuscript: *‘Mon âme retournera à travers la porte du rayon.’* It’s just so odd. ‘My soul will return through the door of the ray.’ Hardly makes sense, unless it’s a reference to the whole sol/fege music tonality, as in soul/sol, door/do, ray/re. But that still makes no sense in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It’s so confusing and so intriguing.

“But, Rose, the eerie thing about this phrase is that when Rachel was young I used to call her *mon rayon* – my sunbeam.

“There’s another phrase, though, that is, well, I don’t know what. *‘La première personne qui entend mon nom le matin est la dernière personne qui me parle la nuit’* ‘The first person who hears my name in the morning is the last person who speaks to me at night.’ Who is the first and who is the last? And, oh, I don’t know exactly. It’s a puzzle, and every puzzle has a solution. I’ll find it.”

Rose struggled to keep her voice steady. “Lily, you must be sure to let me know everything that you find in the archives. There are so many things about the family that

have been buried in the past. Your research could help me solve some of these mysteries.”

“Rose, of course, I will let you know whatever I find.”

The phone line crackled. “Rose, the storm here seems to be kicking up. I think I should get off the line for now. But please look at what I’ll send you. I really want your insight on this.”

“My dear, of course, I will look at this information. After all, it was I who encouraged you to delve into the archives for certain details of the family history. I will read what you send most carefully.” What Rose did not say was that Lily had found too much, and sooner than Rose would have preferred.

At her home in New York, Rose paced for some minutes, while she worked out a strategy suited to the situation. She sat down at her Louis Quinze desk, sketching notes about the next steps she should take. The information Lily had shared could only have come from one source, Odette Rae. True, the manuscript showed some of the coded tune, but the insights Lily had shared with Rose could only have come from Odette, who was in Paris with her father. The women in the family had always been especially attuned to each other. Telepathy was not necessarily too strong a word to describe the way they related – even half a world away.

She knew clearly what she had to do. The Paris operation had become insecure, and would eventually endanger the whole. It would have to be cleaned up. The drain on company – no, family – resources had been going on for too long. The timing was not to Rose’s liking, but with Lily’s discovery of the manuscript and her knowledge of the tune, the timetable had to be changed. It was risky, but there was no choice.

Rose summoned her maid. “Thérèse, telephone Charles. I must speak with him at once.”

The connection made, Rose spoke to her cousin. “Charles, it is imperative that you come to my apartment immediately. Bring Marie with you.”

“What is this about, Rose?”

“This is not something that can be discussed on the telephone. Come at once.”

“As you wish, Rose. I will see whether I can elicit Marie’s cooperation.”

“Exercise your considerable charm, Charles. See that she comes.”

Lily’s lover Charles and her sister-in-law Marie did not arrive immediately. It was fully dark, and the rain had slackened somewhat, before they came to Solange Rose Barrington’s Upper West Side New York apartment. They waited for Rose in her living room, a room bespeaking the elegance of an earlier time, much like Rose herself. Charles walked the length of the wall that served as a pictorial family tree. Portraits in oil hung there, alongside professional photographs of Rose and her family, all in gilt frames suited to the room’s Francophile furnishings. Charles looked toward Rose as she made her entrance. Dressed in pale mauve silk. Rose seemed the epitome of the *grande dame*, elegant, self-contained, in control, unsmiling at her two guests.

Charles bowed as she entered. Aware that women found him attractive, he unconsciously smoothed his sleek black hair.

“Hello, Rose. I was just admiring the family portrait gallery. The layout is admirable. It so neatly displays a certain truth about the Barringtons. On this side of the Atlantic we have the artistic branch of our family headed by Henry. And on the other side we have Jack, heading up the corporate branch of the family tree.”

“Charles, I do not have time for your analysis.” Rose’s rich voice, still accented by her native French, sounded beautiful and aggravated at the same time.

“But I have only begun. Look at this. Both have beautiful, talented daughters – prodigies, in fact. Rachel and Odette Rae have such a strong family resemblance you’d think they were sisters. And they share such a strong resemblance to their grandmother.”

“Why should they not?”

“Why, indeed. From what Jack tells me, Odette’s musical genius rivals Rachel’s, amazing in one so young. Sometimes the things Jack says make me wonder whether there is not some sort of psychic bond – perhaps even telepathy – between them. And, naturally, they each have particular roles to play in the family enterprise.”

At the mention of telepathy, Rose looked sharply at Charles and then looked away. She was losing patience, but she knew that interrupting him would do nothing but prolong the distasteful meeting.

Charles continued his examination. “So nice, too, that both of your sons have such beautiful, talented wives. Makes the wall so much more attractive. There’s a funny thing about portraits, though. So often they conceal more than they reveal. I can think of another grouping, but it would be Byzantine, to say the least. So many marriages. So many intermarriages. So many tangled relationships. Under so many names, even assumed ones.”

Rose responded sharply, “And what of you, Charles? Where do you fit into this scheme?”

“Me? Merely a minor representative of the English branch of the family – the poor stepchild to the French branch. But now, you have become Barringtons as well as Americans. And now that you have, old family squabbles have only historical interest, wouldn’t you say?”

“Enough of your malicious chatter, Charles. I have business to discuss with you. And with your cousin’s wife.

“I have learned of irregularities in the European offices of Global Arcade Associates. The auditing firm I hired tells me that funds from Russian banks have been channeled through our accounts to various banks in the Caribbean. The process is called, I believe, ‘money laundering,’ a term I imagine you are familiar with. Jack has failed to exercise proper oversight, and the situation will be corrected.”

Charles’ voice remained unctuous, practiced. “I can understand your discussing this issue with Marie. As Jack’s wife, she would naturally be concerned. But why should it concern me?”

“It concerns you and Marie equally because you have both influenced him – no, you have dominated him – for years. For all those years you have manipulated him and everyone in the family.”

At this Marie leaped to her feet. Except for her perpetual frown and her preference for black, she might have been considered beautiful. As it was, she was merely an interesting woman with a sharp tongue.

“Stop this! I will not be treated as if I were not present. I have never ‘manipulated’ *mon mari*.”

Rose's voice kept its cultured calm. "Please, Marie, this is not the time for your histrionics."

"*Cochon*. That is what you are, a pig. A pig who wants everything for herself and would leave nothing for the rest of us."

"Enough, Marie! Were we not related by my son's marriage to you, old as I am, I would throw you to the floor for speaking to me like that. We have business to discuss, much more important business than the niggling and wrangling for position, prestige, and power that seem to give you a reason to live.

"I know that you are the ones with the Russian connections, not Jack. The two of you are the ones with a history of questionable financial affairs.

"Whatever your arrangements, whatever Jack's complicity, it stops now! I am instituting more rigorous controls on corporate communications and financial transactions. I will be paying particular attention to cash flow through the European branches."

Marie, prodded by Rose's ultimatum, shouted, "*Putain!* Whore! You accuse us? We will expose your disgusting secrets. We will destroy you!"

"As you wish. But be mindful. If you destroy me – or try to – you will only succeed in destroying yourselves as well. And, perhaps, this is the time for the truth to be revealed."

Rising herself, Rose once again summoned the maid. "Show these two OUT."

Once Charles and Marie were gone, Rose paced back and forth in front of the family portrait gallery for some minutes, considering how to proceed. Killing the Paris-St. Petersburg connection required some delicacy and diplomacy. And with so little

time left, she could not afford to be wrong. She walked the length of the hallway/portrait arcade to the balcony where she could look out over Central Park. The view usually calmed her, but on this night no view of nature could offer her peace.

“Madame, Monsieur Henry is here to see you.”

“Send him in, Thérèse.”

Henry strode into the room. The family resemblance between Henry and his mother was unmistakable. Except for a certain nervousness of manner, he would have been just as patrician in his carriage as Rose.

“You just missed your cousin and your sister-in-law.”

Henry, too agitated to really listen, launched directly into the reason for his visit. “Rose, someone has been trying to get into my private files. I have evidence that someone has been in my office and that someone has tried to get into my MEND.”

“I cannot say that I am surprised; I would not look too far from the family circle for the culprits.

“Lily called today, *Henri*.” Rose could not help but fall into her native tongue when she spoke with her son. “She found the Mirabel manuscript in the archives.”

“Mother, I do not understand your reason for sending Lily to the archives at this critical juncture. And with this attempted theft of information – it could too easily compromise what we have been working on. No! There are so many things she might learn – and learn before she should – once she tries to unravel the archives and the manuscript.”

“*Henri*, do not lecture me about how to manage family affairs. I have been doing it for longer than either of us would want to recall, and I have managed quite well until now.”

“I suppose, but I have never seen you so agitated in all my life.”

“Perhaps it is Rachel’s concert and the fact that she wants me – a singer of opera – to appear at her ‘rock’ concert.”

“*Maman*, do not try to pretend that performing on stage anywhere would make you this anxious. If anything, performance relaxes you. No, this is a much larger concern than a single concert. You behave as if we had a Manhattan Project on our hands that had suddenly reached cosmic proportions.”

“Then perhaps it is the cosmos that concerns me. This family of ours is not like any other, as you well know. And *quelle difference!* Coupled with wealth of the sort we have managed to accrue, it invites interlopers, competitors, slackers who would reap where others have sown.”

“But . . .”

“Truly. Who but Charles and Marie would, or should, concern us at this point? They are family in name and, at least in part, genetically. But they are not true family, if by “true” we mean full and honest family members. They are concerned only for themselves, what they can gain, and damn the rest of us.”

“And what of Jacques?”

“I spoke with him this morning. Some part of him is true family, despite his dancing on the edge of destruction. If he refuses to keep his distance from the Russian

mob, I will take the necessary measures. I told him that I suspected some irregularities in the Paris operation and that I was planning a full audit quite soon.”

“How soon? If you wait too long, he will have time to cover his tracks, assuming that he has anything to hide.”

“*Henri*, we all have something to hide, and I am not concerned with what he might try to hide. My sole concern is with keeping the family interests within the family. If that means disinheriting Charles and Marie, so be it.”

“Did Jacques have anything to say about Odette Rae?”

“He did. In fact, he had much more to say about her than about business.”

“Well, what did he say?”

“As you expected, Odette Rae has begun to keep a notebook. And she goes to the arcade every day to listen to the dolls sing in the window.”

“Did Jacques say whether she sings back?”

“No, but she draws maps on the sidewalk and plays some kind of hopscotch while the dolls sing. It will not be long now.”

“Regardless of how long it may take, we still have to use caution with Lily.”

“Caution, yes, but we still have control. And you have access to everything she puts through the MEND interface. It is possible that she will find the answer before Odette does, but she will not know what the answer means. We will.”

“I’m not sure. She may not have the family genes, but she is certainly smart enough to follow the logic of her research.”

“Let me worry about that. You worry about Charles and Marie.”

“You truly chose *le bon mot* saying ‘worry.’ I do little else about them.”

“Keep your head. We are closer than they could possibly be.”

“I hope you are right.”

“Henry, you must have faith.”

“Very well, *maman*.” Henry left as hastily as he had come, walking rapidly into the damp, windy night.

Lily had an early dinner in the Mayflower Hotel dining room, and then went to her room, deep in thought. “I know I should let my research rest until morning, but I also know I won’t be able to sleep on it. So, here goes.”

Slipping into pale rose satin lounging pajamas and soft slippers, she settled herself in bed with her Apple and her MEND. There was something about the map that she just had to sort out. What was the shape outlined by the body parts? Loading the image, she rotated it a few degrees at a time. At one point it looked like a warped clock face, at another like a sundial, and at another like a constellation, Vela, perhaps. There had to be a reason for the placement of the body parts, but what?

What, indeed. Rose sat in her Manhattan apartment, contemplating the possible repercussions of Lily’s exploration of the family archives. If Lily found out too much — well, best, perhaps, not to think about what Lily might find out or what she might do with the knowledge. But like her daughter-in-law, Rose was not practiced in not thinking about it; she looked forward to a restless night, at best.

Later, in Charles Hobbes’ Upper East Side apartment, Marie was working on her third double scotch. Charles’ personal space resembled nothing quite so much as a ’60’s bachelor pad, but with lots of money to take the edge off of what might otherwise

have been considered tacky. The bar was well stocked, and the glassware was all crystal. In keeping with improvements to home bars, his had its own small refrigerator with built in icemaker. Marie served herself like one who has made herself at home

“My dear, that is not the best way to prepare for battle, and battle it will be.”

“Screw you. I’ll drink what I want and when I want.”

“Fine. Just don’t blither when I’m trying to save our necks. Penkovsky is getting impatient, and there is no margin for error built into the program.”

“All this fuss over a stupid Fabergé egg.”

“Not so stupid when it is worth more than a few measly million dollars. For Penkovsky, it also has national importance. This is a piece of his country’s history that he wants to take back home, especially when it will be in his own private collection. He’ll be a national hero and thief at one and the same time.”

“Charming.”

“No need for sarcasm, my dear. Oh, there’s my cell phone. Perhaps our Russian friend is calling back.

“Hello? Ah, Mr. Penkovsky, thank you for returning my call. It seems that my aunt Rose Barrington has discovered our little arrangement.” He added quickly, “But she cannot trace anything to us, much less to you.”

Penkovsky’s English was clear, although thickly accented. “Mr. Hobbes, this is most inopportune. My operation will be greatly disrupted.”

“I understand, but we have to move with caution.”

“If by ‘caution’ you mean that you need time to make other arrangements, consider that my colleagues are much less patient than I. This is a serious business.”

“I have never doubted your seriousness.”

“Good. This is not the time to start. I would hate to see anything unfortunate happen before we have ‘cooked’ this little egg. However, I will not wait indefinitely. I hope my meaning is clear.”

“Quite clear, Mr. Penkovsky. I will be in touch with you again soon.”

“Let us hope it is soon enough.” With that, Penkovsky broke the connection.

Charles put down his phone and went to the bar to pour himself a drink. His usually placid demeanor showed stress in the twitch of his eyebrows, a bad habit he had never been able to break.

“My, my, Charles. Did bad old Mr. Penkovsky frighten you?”

“Shut up, Marie. This is nothing to joke about. He’s furious, and he threatened me. Once a Soviet KGB officer, now a gangster – there’s no real difference.”

“God, I despise him.”

“Fear and loathe him, you mean. But this storm should pass over quickly. Rose will protect her beloved son, Jack, and she will not be able to trace anything to us or, God forbid, Penkovsky.”

Charles’ cell phone rang again. Right on time, Charles thought; Jack is so reliable.

“Hello, Jack. What do you have for me today?”

Jack’s voice was placid, soothing. “I’ve uploaded some photos I took of Odette Rae’s hopscotch pattern, and I’ve also scanned some of her notebook entries into MEND so you can access them. They should be quite helpful.”

“I’m sure they will be. Would like to speak with your wife? She’s here with me now.”

“Certainly.”

Marie made a face at Charles and ungraciously snatched the phone from him.

“Jack, dear, I trust that you and Odette are well.” Her voice was not entirely devoid of the displeasure that showed on her face.

“Very well, indeed. You would be amazed at what she can create. Her notebook is full of astonishing sketches and even lines of music.”

“She is indeed extraordinary. They do say that breeding counts, you know. With her family, how could she be anything but exceptional? I must go now, dear. I’ll call you when I have made my flight arrangements for the trip home.”

“Very well. Good bye, Marie.”

Marie stabbed the “off” button on the phone, and then dropped it on the couch.

“What is the point of bringing up breeding? You know that it bothers Jack, and we need him working with us for the time being.”

“It is not Jack who has problems with breeding, Charlie dear, it’s you.”

“I seem to recall that you had some problems with it yourself.”

“If you mean carrying Odette Rae in my body for nine miserable months, yes, it bothered me then, and it bothers me every time I look at the child. I never intended to have children at all, and carrying a child who was only partly mine – don’t remind me.”

During Marie’s short rant, Charles had opened his MEND laptop.

“MEND! The fucking oracle. We use it like superstitious peasants.”

“Science and technology, Marie, not all that different from any of our other fabulous electronic toys. Do you understand them?”

“Henry understands MEND.”

“Some of it, but not all – he will tell you that. But that limited understanding gives him a power that he neither deserves nor knows how to use. I could use it, though, if I had the chance. I could make very good use of it.”

Charles clicked a few more keys. “Hmm, I see that Lily has been uploading quite a bit of information into her MEND. Let’s see what she has been dabbling in.”

Charles opened several files in separate windows on his machine. His eyes fairly bounced from one window to the next as he tried to comprehend the information in front of him. The map seemed puzzlingly familiar; but his French was not as good as it might be, and he couldn’t decipher the text. The musical score, however, was a different matter. It contained a few notes of a tune that he played on the piano.

“Oh, shit, shit, shit.”

“What?” Marie still sounded bored.

“Come and look.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Lily has found the origin of the melody, and if I can read it so can Henry. That means that Henry, if he is paying attention, will realize the melody’s significance. His MEND is much more evolved than mine, and that’s what will give him the edge – if he is paying attention. Meanwhile . . .”

“Meanwhile, he has cut you out.”

“Not just Henry. The rest of the family, especially Rose, treats me like a pariah. But never mind; we aren’t playing from the same score, as it were. At least I know what I want and how to get it.”

“Charles, don’t talk musical metaphors with me. Music, always fucking music. This whole family overflows with it. They’re like the fucking von Trapps – if the von Trapps had been raised by werewolves. No, make that vampires, feeding off each other the way they do.”

“Don’t you mean the way “we” do? And Rose would greatly dislike either comparison. Remember, too, that it is the family song, hundreds of years old, that is the key to finding the egg. Of course, we have to find the right sequences and that most important final cadence before MEND will be able to decrypt the music and give us the answer we need.”

“How much do you think Rose knows?”

“About MEND? As much as she bothered to learn from Henry. About the egg? Well, she doesn’t know that Villars brought the egg out of Russia. After all, she doesn’t have Penkovsky to open the relevant KGB records. But if Henry realizes that the egg exists and can be found, he will, without a doubt, tell Rose. We have to move, and quickly, or our Russian friend will be without his egg and we will be, well, without.

“Fortunately, we have Rachel. I am certain that her concert will give us the rest of the music we need for MEND. Then our ‘fucking oracle’ will give us the location of the egg, which we will give to Penkovsky, who will be utterly delighted, and we will become truly wealthy.”

Marie took a long pull on her scotch. “And he probably won’t kill us.”

“Unless we make a mistake along the way.”

III

The Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D.C.

At her hotel, Lily stepped from a hot shower, toweled off, and then slipped into lavender silk pajamas. After calling room service for a light meal of tea, toast, and grapefruit, she settled herself on the bed and opened her MEND, intent on deciphering more of the mysterious manuscript. She made little progress before her order arrived.

“You can put it over there,” she said a little absently, indicating the desk near the bed. Fishing in her purse, she produced a five-dollar bill which she gave to the waiter after signing for the food.

“Thank you, ma’am. Good night.”

“Good night.” To herself she added, “I hope it will be a good night.”

Between bites of toast and squirts of grapefruit, Lily played with the notes and words of the manuscript she had scanned into her machine. Despite her best efforts, the sense of the thing continued to elude her. It still seemed that what she had in her hands was a coded musical score, but it was written in a code that could not have been designed in the context of the fourteenth century manuscript she saw before her. And the arrangement of the body parts – the more she looked at it, the more it reminded her of the constellation Vela -- another thing that made no sense in the context. Finally, too tired to concentrate, she saved and closed all her files. Putting her machine on the desk beside the bed, she turned out the light and fell into a restless sleep.

In her dreams, Lily saw herself as a child playing hopscotch with a boy somewhat younger than she. She was winning. The boy was not upset, but he kept trying to imitate every move Lily made. Despite his best efforts, he never quite succeeded in matching her competence. Behind them in the dream scene was an arcade; with all the signs in the windows in French. One read "Parfumerie". Its door opened, and a woman who resembled Rose, only much younger, stepped out and called to the children.

"Lily, Jack, it's time to come in. Dinner is ready."

"*Maman*, we want to play some more."

"Lily, dear, there will be time to play tomorrow."

"But, *maman*, I have almost solved the puzzle."

"No, my dear, you won't solve that for a long time."

"But I don't have a long time. I need to finish it."

"Later. Come. Recite your poem for me."

"I only know a little of it. 'La rue de vaugirard / the longest street / in Paris, it winds / through the fifth, sixth, seventh, and fifteenth / arrondissements many, many / change discreetly' That's all I remember, *maman*."

"Here, set the table for dinner. While you do, try your poem again, but be careful that you do not swallow your words. Keep them up front."

Lily tossed fitfully in her sleep, not quite waking up but managing to tangle herself in the sheets. Trapped, she dropped back into sleep, back to setting the dinner table. But the table was all wrong. The dishes were set in odd places, and they looked like the map / constellation from the archives. In typical dream fashion Lily was aware of herself

as an adult, watching the action. It bothered her that she saw her younger self doing and saying things that only the dream Lily understood.

“*Maman*, you smell so good. Are you creating a something special for someone?”

“Yes, Lily. Something special for you.”

Snatches of melody that sound like the music from the manuscript – and from Rachel’s composition – emanated from an antique radio on the sideboard. Rose lit candles set in crystal candlesticks, and Lily clapped her hands, laughing.

“Oh, I do so love when you light the candles.”

“Be careful, dear. Candles are beautiful but dangerous.”

Jack, who was slow to come inside, passed Lily on his scooter. Too late Rose called to him to stop. Losing control, he crashed into the sideboard and the candles fell into the draperies, setting them on fire. In a matter of seconds, the dining room was engulfed in flame, consuming the table, the chairs, the all-wrong table setting in a single, terrifying instant. In the timeless logic of dreams, the three seemed at once to be in the flames and out of them. The adult Lily watched helplessly as somehow, Rose bustled her children out to the street, where she called for help. The dream Lily pulled on her mother’s hand.

“*Maman*, I must go back. My poem, my notebook. I need them or I’ll never be able to solve the puzzle.”

“Lily, they are gone.”

In the hotel, Lily jerked awake and sat up in bed, still smelling Rose’s new scent all around her, still hearing Rachel’s song, still feeling the heat of the fire, coughing from

the dream smoke, wiping real tears from her eyes. The clock showed 5:45 a.m.

Shaking from the strength of the emotions left over from the dream, Lily decided to make the most of Friday. Research had always been her shield against distress.

## **Future Books in the Series**

### **Marie's Scroll**

The scroll found in the Fabergé egg which Lily discovers in *Melody for Murder* is also hidden in the crypt where the egg was found. The verse on the scroll is updated every century by one of the prime carriers of the Barrington's musical code. The code is their unique genetic heritage, passed on from generation to generation.. In order to update the verse, the current heir to the family legacy must recognize his or her own internal genius. That person then becomes responsible for managing the family fortune, arranging appropriate marriages in order to maintain the family's genius, and for keeping the family's secrets. During World War Two, the Nazi's learn enough to recruit two family members to carry out espionage on the Barringtons in hopes of acquiring the egg, the family fortune, and the code that might help them control the world itself.

### **The STAR-CHILD Legacy**

The Barrington family has been using a carefully-crafted plan of genetic management to keep their musical genius within the family. That genius has the potential, eventually, to allow the Barringtons to control the entire world. In every century, a member of the family is designated, by means of an intermarriage code, to carry the musical legacy forward to the next century. Some family members believe that Odette Rae is the twenty-first century's chosen carrier of the code, and that she is therefore the custodian of the family's awesome secrets. The greatest secret the Barringtons hold is their origin

beyond earth in the fifth century BC. The Empress, the family matriarch of the fifth century, is the source not only of the family's special abilities, but also of their genetically coded capacity to use music as a source of power. While some wish to see Odette Rae elevated to her destined position in this century, others would prefer to control her gifts for their own purposes. To do so, they are not above revealing and exploiting the Barrington family heritage.

### **Henry and Rose: The Epic**

Henry and Rose are mother and son – and so much more. They have learned many unsavory ancestral secrets during their time in Europe. Leaving the continent covertly, they go to the United States, where they continue to control the family business, Global Arcade Associates. Henry uncovers some of the skeletons in the Barrington family closet, and learns about the part he has played in the breeding plan. The discovery shocks him, just as it makes the family's potential for unbridled power obvious to him. Abandoning his musical career, he develops MEND (Music Encoding/Decoding Device), in order to share Barrington knowledge with the world, while still retaining control as the system's creator.

### **MEND**

Henry works with his cousin Charles to develop MEND. Charles, however, has an agenda of his own. He envies Rose and Henry their wealth, far greater than his own, and he determines to do something about it. Believing that the family knowledge base is a property of incalculable value, he sets about to sell portions of it to the highest

bidder. But neither Henry nor Charles recognizes what they have created in MEND.

The machine is an electronic/mechanical model of the way the Barrington family functions. What no one has realized is that MEND is capable of updating itself in much the same way that the family's genetic musical code is updated. Needing only the appropriate musical clue from a given century's code carrier, MEND's artificial intelligence can develop the capacity to control the global empire in its own virtual reality, raising the question of who – or what – will end up running things.