



RAPID READS

ORCHESTRATED MURDER

RICK
BLECHTA



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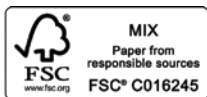
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Summary: The murder of the symphony's star conductor leaves Detective Lieutenant Pratt and his young sidekick with an orchestra full of suspects. (RL 5.4)



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*Dedicated to my uncle, George Blechta, with
great fondness and with gratitude for his help
and support over the years.*

CHAPTER ONE

Pratt felt like pounding his head on his desk. Why couldn't McDonnell just leave him alone today?

He felt every one of his fifty-four years as he walked past all the empty desks to the office of the man who ran the Homicide Division. His desk was as far away from the office as he could get it.

"What can I do for you?" Pratt asked.

Captain McDonnell looked up from the papers on his desk. "There's a problem at Symphony Hall. A big problem."

"What?"

“I’ve just had a call from upstairs. Appears someone’s murdered the damn conductor.”

“Luigi Spadafini?”

“Yes—if he’s the conductor. I thought it would be right up your alley. You like this kind of music so much.”

“Thanks,” Pratt answered glumly.

What he wanted at the moment was a good nap, not another job. The previous night he’d been wrapping up a tricky case and got exactly three hours’ sleep on a sofa in an empty office he’d found. He had the stiff neck to prove it too.

“The chief wants you to tread lightly. That’s the other reason I’m sending you. You know how to act around the symphony set.”

“Anything else?”

McDonnell shook his head. “Nope. Just hustle down there. Once the press gets hold of the news, all hell’s going to break loose.”

As Pratt turned to go, his boss added, “Take Ellis with you. Show him the ropes. This promises to be a little out of the ordinary.”

Just great. Saddled with the greenest member of the squad. Pratt didn’t even know the kid’s first name and didn’t care to. Hopefully the young pup wouldn’t screw anything up.

As he went back to his desk, the captain called, “Good job last night, Pratt. You did us proud.”

Pratt bit his tongue. Then why not let someone else handle this job and let him go home?

Pratt let Ellis drive across town to the city’s latest municipal wonder. Built four years earlier to a lot of taxpayer squawking, Symphony Hall was beautiful outside but cold and sterile. Inside, though, it was all wood, and the sound quality was lovely. He’d heard Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony there the previous month, and it had been

a concert he'd remember for a long time. Spadafini had been very impressive.

Now Pratt's head felt as if it was stuffed with sawdust. Great way to begin an investigation.

Ellis was a good-looking lad. Tall and still lanky, a lot like Pratt when he'd been that age. Thirty years later, he'd lost most of his hair and put on a good fifty pounds. At least he didn't need glasses—yet.

Making conversation, he asked, "How long have you been in Homicide?"

"Two weeks, sir," Ellis answered.

"Seen any action yet?"

"Only that domestic murder last Friday. Terrible situation. Mostly I've been pushing papers."

"So I heard."

"I wanted to say that it's an honor to be working with you."

"I don't need buttering up, Ellis. You're here to make my life easier. Keep your

eyes and ears open and try to stay out of my way.”

“My pleasure, sir.”

“And another thing: stop calling me ‘sir.’ Pratt will do.”

The coast was still clear as they pulled up at the backstage entrance. Surprisingly, the media hadn’t arrived yet. A beat cop Pratt recognized was standing next to the door, looking bored.

“Glad to have you aboard, sir,” he said. “It’s a madhouse in there, I hear.”

“It’s going to be a madhouse out here too. Don’t let anyone in, and don’t tell them anything.”

“Right.”

Later on Pratt was sorry that he had just rushed by. He might have retired on the spot if he’d known about the unholy mess he was walking into.

At the vacant security desk just inside, a sergeant Pratt knew was waiting.

Next to him stood a man wearing a suit and tie, even though it was Saturday morning. He looked to be in his late thirties, medium height, slightly overweight.

“Glad they sent you, Pratt,” the sergeant said as they shook hands. “This is Michael Browne. He’s the symphony’s manager. He’s the one who called the murder in.”

Pratt knew Browne had to be competent to have this sort of job. At the moment, he looked pretty rattled and on edge.

More handshaking as Pratt introduced Ellis.

“The situation is a real mess,” the sergeant added.

“Blood?” the detective asked. He hated the bloody ones.

“No, no. It’s the suspect list.”

“What about it?”

“The entire orchestra has confessed.”