



RAPID READS

ADVANCE READING COPY

RICK BLECHTA

*A Detective Pratt Mystery*

THE  
BOOM  
ROOM

ADVANCE READING COPY

# THE BOOM ROOM

RICK BLECHTA



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**Summary:** When the prime suspect in a nightclub murder turns out to be his partner's half brother, Detective Mervin Pratt soon realizes that the case is not quite so open-and-shut as it first appears. (RL 4.2)



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ADVANCE READING COPY

*This one is dedicated to Ted Blechta  
for no other reason than  
you're the greatest brother  
in the world.*

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## CHAPTER ONE

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**P**ratt was digging in to a nice plate of pasta at his favorite Italian restaurant. He knew he shouldn't eat the stuff. But so what if a few extra pounds showed on his six-foot frame? He deserved a treat now and then.

He was about to shovel in his third mouthful when he got the call.

"We need help at a crime scene," dispatch told him.

The detective looked at his cell phone like it was a traitor. Why couldn't they have called him last night, when he'd just gone home after work?

With a sigh, he put the phone back to his ear. "Where?"

"Nightclub district. A stiff's turned up stabbed at The Boom Room. Heard of it?"

"Yes, but not in a way that makes me eager to visit."

"We sent Snow and Gordon down, but Snow has pulled up lame. Gordon is alone and could use help."

"Why me?" Pratt asked. Everyone knew there was bad blood between Gordon and him.

"You're the closest to the crime scene."

"How do you know that?"

The dispatcher chuckled. "We have our ways."

"You rat!"

"Hey, Pratt, I'm just doing my job. Just get a doggie bag for your dinner."

Signaling for the waiter, Pratt sighed again. "I'm on my way."

\* \* \*

It was true he wasn't far away. But it was Friday, and traffic was impossible. Kids were flooding downtown on this late-winter evening. Pratt could have walked there faster. Even with the magnetic bubblegum light on top of his car, no one gave him an inch.

Finally driving up to the yellow police tape, he got out. The patrolman on duty almost said something, but Pratt's glare shut him up. His cell phone rang again.

"Pratt here. What do you want?"

The person at the other end laughed. "Boy, are you in a crabby mood!"

It was Ellis, his still-wet-behind-the-ears partner. The lad had good "cop instincts," so Pratt had taken him on. Two months later, the fit was still good. He didn't make Pratt always feel like the old fart on the homicide squad.

"What do you want?"



“I hear you got called in to help Gordon,” the younger man said.

“Bad news travels fast.”

“Want some company? I have nothing on tonight.”

“Suit yourself. You know how Gordon can be.”

“That’s why I’m offering.”

“Well, in that case, sure. You might learn something about how not to interact with the public.”

“See you in half an hour.”

“The traffic is horrible,” Pratt warned him.

“It always is down there on Fridays. I’m taking transit.”

Police tape extended across the street from both corners of the building housing The Boom Room. A large crowd pressed forward against the flimsy plastic strips. Four uniformed cops kept it back.

The Boom Room stank of stale beer and sweat. Two distinct groups crowded

around a couple of tables at the back of the long room, looking uneasily at each other. Two more uniformed cops stood nearby, keeping an eye on them. Pratt also noticed three girls sitting in a corner by themselves. One was sobbing uncontrollably. The other two were comforting her.

The club must have been packed when the murder was discovered. Where the hell were all those people? Why hadn't Gordon made some attempt to keep them there?

Pratt knew one of the uniforms and went up to him. "Where's Gordon?"

The cop motioned with his head.

"In the basement. Manager's office. Crime scene guys are down there too. I have no idea what's going on, so don't ask."

Pratt headed for the door the cop had pointed to. Passing the club's small kitchen, he saw a uniform talking with the three-man cooking crew.

Sticking his head in, he asked, "Taking statements?"

This cop turned and rolled his eyes.

“Something like that. They’re hard to understand.”

“Gordon?”

“Downstairs. Stairway’s at the end of the corridor on the right.”

Back here, the reek of old cooking oil was added to the stench of beer. The steps to the basement were sticky and slimy at the same time. Pratt gripped the railing tightly.

At the bottom he found a small square room. Painted flat black some years ago, it was now a dusty dark gray. A door on the left stood open. Two white-suited crime techs were in there. Pratt could clearly see the body slumped over a desk. There wasn’t as much blood as he’d expected with a stabbing.

He didn’t need to ask where Gordon was. His loud voice could be heard behind a door marked Employees Only.

Gordon looked up as Pratt entered. His face wasn’t friendly, but then, it seldom was when Pratt was around.

The room was a locker room for employees that doubled as the dressing room for bands. Everything was low-rent and dirty: lockers, a few chairs, a table, a cheap metal coatrack. The full-length mirror on the back wall had a big crack through it. On a chair in front of it huddled a scared-looking twenty-something kid. Gordon motioned Pratt out of the room. He followed and shut the door.

“Do you think it’s wise leaving your suspect alone?” Pratt asked.

Gordon ignored him.

“So you got sent?”

Pratt nodded. “How come Snow isn’t here?”

“He got sick earlier this evening. Says he has the flu. It’s bullshit. He wanted a head start on his weekend. Well, the joke’s on him. You too, for that matter. This is an open-and-shut case.”

“That kid in the room?”

“Guilty as sin. I was about to take him downtown.”

Pratt raised his eyebrows. “He’s confessed?”

“Get real, Pratt. They all say they’re innocent. Here are the facts. The kid is the leader of the band playing here tonight. He had a screaming argument with Lewis, the owner, this afternoon when they were setting up. Everybody saw it. Then he went around telling everyone what a scumbag the guy was. Said he was going to get him. The club manager heard him. A few hours later, someone sticks a knife in Lewis’s back. And guess who was always flashing a knife—including earlier this evening? The one he claims has now gone missing.”

“That’s pretty compelling.”

“Damn straight it is! I had to laugh when the kid said he didn’t do it.”

“And what if he’s telling you the truth?”

Gordon stepped right into Pratt’s face.

“Know what your problem is, Pratt? You think you’re smarter than everyone else. Well, you’re not, and I’m going to prove it.

A couple hours' grilling downtown and this kid will fold like a cheap suitcase. You'll see."

As Gordon went back into the room, Pratt was thinking it was a good thing they had CCTV in the interview rooms now. In the bad old days, cops like Gordon would have beaten a confession out of the kid.

He sighed. Seldom was a case this easy. The problem wasn't that he thought he was smarter than anybody. The problem was Gordon's lack of imagination—and his laziness. If the kid got a good attorney, Gordon's case could wind up shredded. It did look bad for the suspect, but every aspect of a case should be carefully studied. That was the only proper way to investigate a murder.

He sometimes wished he could take the easy way out—like Gordon.

But then, he knew, he wouldn't be doing his job.