

FOUL PLAY

Erin Kaste



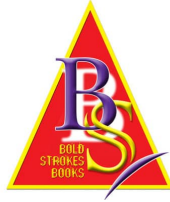
Foul Play

Kirsten Lindquist has enough on her hands juggling the demands of her work as an orchestral music librarian. Substitute horn player Shay Bradley has been hitting on her for years, but Shay is known for being an operator, so Kirsten avoids her advances, until she can't resist. She is just beginning to get to know the new personnel manager, Stephanie Wellford, when the orchestra is shocked by the sudden deaths of three musicians and a string of suspicious accidents.

Kirsten, Shay, and Stephanie believe that the events are related, but they aren't certain how to prove it. Things get more complicated when Shay backs off to hide her depression and Stephanie admits her crush on Kirsten, but they need to stick together to figure out who is responsible for murder—before they become the next victims.

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By the Author

I Know About You

Foul Play

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by

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2025

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ISBN 13: 978-1-63679-690-1

This Electronic Original Is Published By

Bold Strokes Books, Inc.

P.O. Box 249

Valley Falls, NY 12185

First Edition: February 2025

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Credits

Editor: Cindy Cresap

Production Design: Susan Ramundo

Cover Design by Inkspiral Design

eBook Design by Toni Whitaker

Dedication

For all of my MSO kittens, who scatter to the right places when I call “five minutes.”

CHAPTER ONE

There is no such thing as a musical emergency.

If something goes wrong on or backstage, nobody is going to bleed out. Nobody is going to lose their home or family. In the world of classical music, we don't have emergencies, but we do have situations.

I was in the midst of one of those situations, winding through traffic like a complete douche, trying to make it back to the concert hall before the downbeat. The folder of music an orchestra member had forgotten at home was on my passenger seat.

Cutting as close to a diagonal as I could, I sped through the University district, slowing to approximate the posted limit only when I saw pedestrians ahead. I made a right at my favorite coffee shop, then lunged across three lanes to catch a left-hand turn arrow by an abandoned fast-food restaurant. Barely eyeballing my phone, I asked it to text Stephanie, the new personnel manager: *Almost there.*

I hit the last traffic light red. I swore and glared at the dash clock as it counted off the seconds, then compared it to what my phone said. We always began concerts five minutes after their scheduled start time, but Flagler, the conductor, didn't like to delay any longer. I had four minutes left.

I clipped the curb making my last turn and knew I didn't have time for the parking garage. Heart pounding, I pulled into the loading dock and left

my Mazda unlocked and at a crazy angle, blocking three other cars in. I took the stairs by twos and let the door slam behind me as I ran backstage.

There in the darkness, Flagler was pacing, brow knit, eyes angry slits. Denice, our concertmaster, was waiting to enter the stage. She gave me a little smile, as though blustering in at the eleventh hour was sort of cute. I ignored it, took a second to gather myself, and slid through the gap between the shell and the curtain.

Stage lights were up, house lights dimmed. It was so bright that I couldn't see for a moment. The musicians had been noodling through all their usual warm-up routines, but the second I entered, they went silent. I made a desperate motion behind the folder, begging them to keep playing, but either nobody understood or they just weren't willing to bail me out. As everyone in the entire building watched, I crossed in front of the orchestra. Then, it happened: someone started clapping.

Oh my God. I had no idea what to do. Shake my head wildly and throw a stop sign with my hand like an overachieving crossing guard? Do a little dance? Run offstage and hide? Half the audience in addition to a few smug musicians had joined in the applause.

I did know one thing: I wanted to die. Still, I continued walking as calmly as possible toward the double bass section, face on fire. Brad, our principal bassist, was the one who had left his folder on his coffee table at home. He was in place, ready to begin the concert playing off of 8½ × 11 xeroxes if I didn't make it back in time. I expected some sort of acknowledgement, but his stand partner, Jenny, was the one who mouthed a wide-eyed "thank you." She opened the folder right away and took out the first piece on the program.

"I'll leave your keys on your case," I muttered under my breath and left

the stage the way I'd entered, taking just a second to make sure that Flagler's score and baton were on his music stand. By then, the audience had largely decided I wasn't going to do anything interesting and the applause was dying out. As I squeezed offstage, Denice made a little clapping motion with her thumb and forefinger. I wanted to kick her.

Flagler turned on me. "Where were you? Cello boy had to come get my scores."

"Yes," I said as politely as I could, ignoring his question. "I asked Oscar to bring them onstage for you." I made sure to use my assistant's name because I was certain Flagler didn't know it.

"Shut up." Remus, the stage manager, waved at us. "Voice of God in three...two..."

The welcome recording began to play, reminding everyone to silence their cell phones, and detailing emergency procedures. I moved out of the way, finally beginning to catch my breath. My whole body was sweaty, from my pits to my ankles. So much for wearing this outfit again tomorrow.

Denice went onstage next, and as the audience appropriately applauded for her, I caught Stephanie's eye. She'd only been personnel manager for two months and I didn't know her very well, but I could tell that she was trying not to laugh at me. I wondered if my shirt was unbuttoned or something. It wasn't *that* funny. While the orchestra tuned, I went behind the shell in the darkness to the opposite side of the stage, found Brad's abominable bright yellow bass case slumped on the floor, and, as the crowd clapped again, this time for Flagler, tossed Brad's keys at it with a satisfying splat.

I did wait until the overture began to creep back to stage right so my footfalls wouldn't be heard. Remus had exchanged his headset for earbuds

and was watching a soccer game on his laptop. Another stagehand was scrolling on his phone, and the audio engineer who was broadcasting the concert live had settled back in his chair. I wondered if Remus telling us to shut up had made it on the radio.

Stephanie moved her purse off of the chair next to her so I could sit down. “Did Brad even apologize?”

I shook my head. “He’s a dick.”

“Tell me he at least lives close.”

“Nope. Past the highway.”

“How did you even do that? I’m never, ever riding with you.”

“For the record, Brad’s dog hates me. And I have to go move my car.”

Stephanie smiled. “Thirty-eight weeks left of the season. Don’t burn out on me now.”

Bowings are the markings that string players use on their sheet music to dictate whether to move their bows up or down on any given note. An up-bow symbol looks like a letter V, and a down-bow symbol looks like a square that is missing its bottom line. In order for orchestral musicians to play together as a section with their bows going in the same direction, these symbols need to be copied in pencil into every player’s sheet music. That’s my job.

The process begins with the first-chair first violinist, the concertmaster,

Denice. She chooses bowings for every piece of music we play and marks them into her part, creating a master. I xerox that to share with the first-chair principals of the other string sections, who then determine when their bow directions need to match the first violinists' and mark their own set of bowings.

Then, I take my favorite pencil and eraser (because I'm a geek and actually have a favorite pencil and eraser), pour either a cup of coffee or a glass of wine, and sit down to make the other parts match their section's master. Fortunately, string players sit with two musicians looking off each copy so I only have to mark "real" parts for half the players. Still, violin parts to major symphonies can run upwards of twenty-five pages, so it takes a while. I sometimes pawn off this job on my assistant, Oscar, a wispy thirty-something ginger who sits in the middle of the cello section, but I dislike making xeroxes more, so that's usually his job on the two days a week he comes into the office.

I had planned to mark bowings into the first violin parts for Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony the next Friday morning. I'd been in the office since nine and had spent my first cup of coffee returning emails and phone calls. My cup was empty and I was still yawning, so I headed to the lounge to make more.

The public relations coven had that morning's copy of *Magnolia*, the biweekly high society magazine, open on the table. They were weighing in on shots from some fundraiser, hating on people's dresses and hair as usual.

"Can you believe Katherine Walton?" Boobs asked.

"That color isn't good on anybody," Teeth said.

Buttocks was wearing that color. She looked down self-consciously and

jumped in before the others could take that into consideration. “And Maeve Brown wore a pantsuit? What is that about?”

I said hello and walked past, straight to the Keurig, and got no response. I added water and a pod of some generic awfulness and pressed the button, right in front of them. As my very own fresh cup of coffee brewed, I wondered if I was invisible that morning. I wasn't sure they actually knew my name, which was fair because the entire operations department referred to them by the body parts they'd had enhanced.

“There's your boyfriend.” Boobs pawed at Buttocks coyly.

Buttocks waved one hand and headed out the door. “Oh, my councilman Bobby. Mmm, he is fine.”

“...Thinks she's going to marry him or some shit.” Teeth was laughing as I went past them, back to my office where nobody was eating their own.

I'd just settled down again and picked up my pencil when I heard voices down the hall. They were both female and one was saying something about picking up music. Most people picked up their music for upcoming concerts at rehearsals, so that caught my attention. If it was a substitute, I knew that I'd probably have to go out and help.

Before I could get up, Shay Bradley appeared in the middle of my office. She'd somehow managed to bypass the whole linger-at-the-door thing and had fairly erupted into my personal space. I hadn't seen her for a while, so it really took me by surprise.

“Hey. Long time no see. How've you been?” Shay parked herself on my table, her ass just centimeters from the master copy of Shostakovich.

Shay was a butch thing, with short, strategically messy dark hair, clear blue eyes, a sprinkling of freckles across her face, and a reputation for having dated every lesbian in town with the exception of me. She ran the repair department in a local music store, subbed in the horn section from time to time, and had a knack for being extremely gay in the exact in-your-face kind of way that made me tick.

She had a nice butt, but I did not want it on my desk. “Okay. How’re you?” I asked briskly, like it was merely a nicety and the answer really didn’t matter.

“Good. Busy, but you know how that goes. Shosty five.” To my great annoyance, she placed her hand in the middle of the music. “Is that next month?”

“Four weeks from now. Are you playing next week?”

“Yeah. Here to pick up my music.”

I nodded but had nothing more to say. She looked at me, I looked at her. She smiled a little, in that easy, self-confident way she had. Some days it pissed me off, but today it just made me feel off-kilter. I guessed that had something to do with the fact that I hadn’t even had a chance to settle in before she appeared out of thin air and put an end to everything else in the universe.

I felt my neck going hot. Before Shay could notice, I got up and went out the door to the shelf where the folders lived. “Do you know who you’re subbing for?”

“Martin,” she said, right behind me. “Cool. Thanks. Do I have to sign for that?”

I found the roster for the right concert and held it while Shay scribbled initials in the proper blank. I thought for sure our encounter would be over, but when I moved to return to my office, she was still there, looking at me, her forehead a little furrowed. “Have you been working out?”

I glanced in both directions, noting that the hallway was unusually silent. “Not any more than usual.”

“You look good,” she said, and swatted me gently on the backside with her folder. “Take care, okay? I’ll see you next week.”

I was right to be leery of the silence. The moment I got back behind my desk, Jeremy, my boss, was hanging on the doorframe. “You okay? If I’d noticed quick enough—”

“Really, it’s okay,” I said. “I can take care of myself.”

Stephanie joined Jeremy in the doorway. “What’s going on?”

“I know you haven’t been here very long,” Jeremy said to her, “but you’re supposed to warn Lindquist when you hire that one.”

Stephanie looked toward me helplessly. “I’m supposed to what?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said.

“The old personnel manager always used to warn Lindquist when Shay was coming in,” Jeremy continued in a slow, deliberate tone that made me feel like I was six, and I wasn’t even the one he was talking to. “I thought that was common knowledge.”

“Well, nobody told me about it. What’s wrong with her? She seems really

nice.”

Jeremy raised his eyebrows suggestively. “Shay hits on her.”

“Shamelessly.” Boobs laughed from across the hallway. “It’s really quite embarrassing to watch.”

“So don’t watch it,” I said.

“So date her already,” Boobs called back.

I do a lot of things pretty well, it’s just that none of those things are particularly lucrative. My grades were decent and I was driven enough to delve into law or med school, but as my mother likes to explain while wearing a delicate look of distaste, my passions led me in other directions.

One of them led me to the Tennessee Symphony during the fall of 2005. Her name was Helena, a lovely, doe-eyed oboist I’d come across three years earlier when she was in grad school and I was freelancing in the Chicago area. We weathered another two years together, then she won a bigger gig and decided she’d outgrown me, too. I hear about her from time to time, and she’s apparently quite happy with her great job in a great city. It surely doesn’t hurt that she’s got a great girlfriend, too, but I try to let bygones be bygones.

I do play. My parents paid top dollar for my conservatory education, a statistic I am reminded of at least once each time I visit them, and I really do hold a contract enabling me to sit in the back of the violin section for the big concerts if I want to. I’ve declined that opportunity more and more as of late, though. My real job, the one that reaps the benefits and pays the bills, wastes

most of the time and energy I should use practicing, so as far as the rest of the world is concerned, I'm not really a musician. I'm their librarian.

As if music librarian isn't quirky enough of a title, I fell into the job in a rather indelicate fashion. When I sensed that my relationship was going sour, I jumped at the chance to earn a few extra dollars running xeroxes and marking bowings for the previous librarian. The arrangement started out beautifully, but exactly three days after Helena disappeared into the proverbial sunset, my library boss went on a crack binge, hooked up with a record producer named Stinky, and turned in a concise, exceptionally grammatically incorrect letter of resignation with no notice. Instead of weeping inconsolably amid a pile of empty beer bottles, I pulled sixteen-hour days in the library, learning the job. Upper management was gracious enough to ignore my work and hold a national search for a new librarian, but apparently nobody else in the country had any desire to clean up this particular mess, because I kept the job. Every so often, when Flagler programs a piece we haven't performed in years, I still open the folder to find a baggie full of mystery pills stashed amid Mozart or Strauss, but the library has been mine for sixteen years now, and most days, I feel like a few people have learned to respect what I do.

My department is okay. Jeremy is the director of operations, our boss. He's a small, balding white man with shifty little eyes and a rather sour demeanor, but he usually does what he's supposed to and mostly stays in his own lane. Pearl, his assistant, is about ninety and still comes to work every day because she hates her husband, and, as she says, he refuses to die. Remus, the stage manager, avoids the office at all costs and skulks exclusively around the concert hall portion of the building. Finally, there's Stephanie Wellford.

She'd taken over as the orchestra's personnel manager in July, and although I'd probably spoken more to her than any other person in the office