

ForeWord Reviews

MYSTERY

Hurt Machine

Reed Farrel Coleman

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When hard-boiled private investigator Moe Prager embarks on what seems a fool's quest to find the murderer of Alta Consecro, his ex-wife's sister, he has just received a dire prognosis from his oncologist. Welcoming the distraction from morosely contemplating his odds for survival, he dedicates himself to uncovering the motives behind the much-applauded murder of this female Emergency Medical Technician who, with her female partner, abandoned a man to die on the kitchen floor of a pricey Manhattan restaurant.

Investigating the death of Alta, Moe's insights into the intersections of race and gender politics prompt him to question the ethics of some of New York's finest. His short list of suspects are mostly minority male fire-fighters who live near the bar where Alta collapsed and whose misogyny is packaged in poorly-spelled profanity and problematic personal behavior. Interestingly, Moe's recollection of the difficulties once faced by minority men "on the job" sensitizes him to how those who fought for acceptance among whites can allow their own prejudices and insecurity to subject female co-workers to the hazing they recently endured.

Since the murdered woman's "crime" was her refusal to provide first aid to a prep cook, Moe visits the restaurant himself. Sticker shock at the bar reinforces his hunch that this was no everyday lunch stop for women on the public sector payroll, leading to a series of disturbing interviews that reveal a netherworld of online crime with which Moe is already sickeningly familiar.

Reed Farrell Coleman has written six other Moe Prager novels, creating a sincere, likable character despite a laborious dose of the clichéd soul-searching that echoes in the mind of every private eye since Sam Spade. The novel's spontaneity is also compromised by the stilted, overly grammatical English spoken by many of its secondary characters. Nevertheless, readers will find themselves hoping that Moe survives the surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation that await him long enough to achieve the spiritual redemption he seeks—and to solve just one more crime.

Elizabeth Breau