Clarion Review

Mystery

Murder in Friendship Heights
Veronica J. Brand
CreateSpace
978-1-4791-8122-3
Five Stars (out of Five)

Enigmatic hit man John Garrett merely wants to locate his target, accomplish his objective, and make it home in time for Christmas. His careful plans go awry when he is attacked and subsequently trapped in the village of Friendship Heights during a record-setting blizzard.

In the compelling *Murder in Friendship Heights*, Veronica Brand crafts a captivating and clever tale in which no one can be judged at face value. It all begins when Garrett reaches his destination and things take an abrupt turn: “It wasn’t the chill down his spine or the strange sensation of being watched by someone in the black. It was the gut feeling that this assignment had changed and he was winging it.” With his plan soon blown off course by a vicious assault and by the snow storm, Garrett gains the assistance of Cat Tracey, a pretty and intelligent young woman with secrets of her own. Stranded together by circumstances beyond their control, the two begin to forge an unexpected bond even as the danger around them grows.

Brand introduces readers to an intriguing cast of characters, most notably the colorful and opinionated retirees of Friendship Heights. Also worth mentioning is Cat’s protective rottweiler, Leo, whose name is a clever acronym and whose existence often serves to subtly emphasize the theme of not judging a book by its cover.

While all characters—human or canine—are treated with equally meticulous attention, Garrett is revealed particularly well. Each layer of his personality is peeled back little by little until readers come to understand his motivations and true nature. Cat, whose reasons for crossing paths with Garrett are more complicated than they first appear, is developed just as gradually and successfully. A compassionate veterinarian with a penchant for taking in strays, her decision to take in Garrett proves both dangerous and life changing. The evolution of their relationship is credible without taking too sharp a turn into the romance realm.

Murder in Friendship Heights is a character-driven tale, and Brand does not rely on a

great deal of graphic violence to create its gripping atmosphere. Instead, there is a measured build of narrative tension and character development that proves effective and gives the story a certain noir appeal. The atmospheric tone never detracts from the escalating suspense, and the pacing fits the story line. Brand has a definite talent for setting a scene.

Having served with both the FBI and CIA, Brand has a unique perspective that serves her well in crafting the story. Although this book is rather short (132 pages), readers will be pleased that Brand has plans for more mysteries to come in Friendship Heights. This first installment is an impressive beginning to what is sure to be an engaging and enjoyable series.

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