

Requiem for a Gypsy: A Commander Jana Matinova Investigation

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When police commander Jana Matinova arrives at a lavish birthday party for financier Oto Bogan she glimpses a notorious killer exiting only moments before gunfire erupts. Jana's boss dismisses her sighting of Makine, mostly because the thought of hunting him is so daunting, but Jana is undeterred. Characteristically dissatisfied with hasty conclusions and her colleagues' lack of initiative in post-Soviet Slovakia, Jana locates the murder weapons that the "official" investigation missed and gains permission to conduct her own off-the-record pursuit.

Jana learns that Bogan, the ostensible target of the shooting, has disappeared. On excursions into Germany, Hungary, Austria, and France, she uncovers a satisfying abundance of clues, corpses, and collaborators that will seduce readers into ignoring weeknight bedtimes. A dead Turk, an unidentified hit-and-run victim in Paris, and a prize more valuable than jewels or currency prove irresistible teasers in this intricately developed plot.

Jana's instinctive humanity wars with her hard-boiled professional cynicism when Em, a frozen waif of a girl, appears on Jana's doorstep during a ferocious snowstorm. Em's duplicity meets its match when Jana forces her to barter the safe harbor she wants for elusive information Jana needs. More than just a foil for Jana's steel, however, Em showcases the quirks of human relationships when she convinces Jana's staff to redecorate her "aunt's" office because it lacks color. Exasperated, Jana sends her home with her inept subordinate, Seges, and the dryly humorous results of Em's machinations mock his incompetence while also rendering him more likable.

The ongoing legacy of the Soviet Union forms the backdrop of Jana's life. Her mother was a fanatically devout Communist Party official, and her willful blindness to brutality and corruption spurs her daughter, in an ostensibly minor subplot, to yield to the desperate pleas of a Roma couple who do not believe that their son's death was accidental. Jana's sensitivity to the contrast between the gypsies' dehumanization as ethnic minorities and the anguish felt by those who lose loved ones is the basis for the book's title. The tragedy Jana uncovers here is more viscerally human than the complex Nazi-era blood feud that motivates the main plot.

This fourth installation in the Commander Jana Matinova series is an engaging read, full of deftly drawn characters who must somehow see through a mazy reality that conceals the contrast of light and dark in shadows, behind screens, and in the rooted passions of the human heart.

ELIZABETH BREAU (July / August 2011)

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