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Clarion Review ★★★★½ **THRILLER**

Secondhand Smoke

M. Louis
Palisades Publishing (Oct 21, 2015)
Softcover $14.99 (320pp)
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Witty PI Jake Brand is an easy hero to root for in this intriguing and entertaining thriller.

In this second installment of M. Louis's Jake Brand PI series, the witty investigator gets much more than he bargained for when he agrees to search for the missing boyfriend of the attractive weepy woman waving a large wad of cash in his humble offices. *Secondhand Smoke* leads Jake and his devoted assistant, Sarah, down a rabbit hole that turns out to be much deeper than they imagined, and far more dangerous.

Though at first the search for the vanished boyfriend seems to be a basic missing person case, Jake soon finds connections to everything from organized crime and major drug operations to shady escort services, dirty cops, and FBI involvement in money-laundering schemes. Jake and Sarah, along with Jake's former Special Forces colleague Carl, enlist the help of a couple of new acquaintances: computer hacker Finn and a pharmaceutical salesperson named Abby Dicer, with whom Jake soon finds a bit of a romance brewing. The group bands together to outsmart the multitude of bad guys on their trail, hoping to bring them all to justice.

Secondhand Smoke is intriguing and entertaining, with enough narrative tension and action to keep the pages turning. Situations and characters are credible, and the structure and flow of the storyline is smooth.

Characterization is well done, and characters' relationships ring true—particularly the still-evolving one between Jake and Sarah, who is not only his assistant, but also his best friend and roommate. Protagonist Jake is well-rounded and likable, even if his clever remarks are occasionally heavy-handed. The humor sometimes seems slightly forced or even misplaced, as when he answers a phone call from a kidnapper with "Jake's Diner, come check out our specials. Would you like to book a reservation?" Most of the humor works, however, as when he describes his short, stocky yoga instructor as "kind of like a fire hydrant meets Gumby." Regardless of the occasionally faltering wit—or perhaps because of it—Jake's personality has depth and credibility, and his streak of romantic idealism makes him even more sympathetic. Overall, he proves an easy hero to root for.

The author may want to reconsider giving three different incidental characters the same name (Sally). This minor issue is easily addressed, and definitely worth the slight revision needed.

Secondhand Smoke is an engaging novel with an intriguing plot and relatable characters. The conclusion satisfies, even as it paves the way for the next book in the series. This is a great rainy day weekend read that's sure to find a wide and appreciative audience.

JEANNINE CHARTIER HANSCOM (August 31, 2015)

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