Thriller

The Last Justice
Anthony J. Franze
Sterling & Ross Publishing
978-0-9821391-8-9
(January 31, 2012)

This mystery explodes with a bang. Actually, it's more like a fusillade, as six members of the US Supreme Court are gunned down within seconds of each other while the court is in session. In the confusion of the assault, the lone shooter escapes, leaving behind as the only clue to his identity a grainy security photo of a tattoo on his neck. Was this the act of a particularly slippery madman, investigators wonder, or might it have been prompted by either of two high-stakes economic cases before the court?

One of the victims who survives the slaughter is Solicitor General Jefferson McKenna. Six months after "Black Wednesday"—as the massacre has come to be called—he is in the process of helping vet the six nominees chosen to replace the fallen justices. But before that task gets started, McKenna's former law clerk is found murdered on a New York street with McKenna's phone number in his pocket. At that point, the Solicitor General is swept from the insulated and perquisite-filled comforts of his office into a desperate hunt to discover who is spilling all this blood and why he is being framed for it.

Before the hunt is over, an FBI agent and two New York detectives assigned to the law-clerk killing—and to the related ones that follow—will have chased clues from a Long Island Indian reservation to the inner recesses of the White House. And they will have discovered that the nation's highest court was not impervious to extra-judicial hanky panky.

Most of the narrative focus, though, is on McKenna and his principal deputy, Kate Porter, as they pursue their own circuitous investigation through the alleys, parks, and upscale law offices of Washington. Not surprisingly, a modest romance blooms between these two amateur but impassioned sleuths. A Washington-based lawyer himself, Franze weaves all manner of legal trivia and Supreme Court lore through this, his first mystery novel—not to the extent, however, that these details slow down the chase. There are more characters here to keep track of than the action requires, but that's a small defect in an otherwise absorbing drama.

Even when the several murders have all been solved and their perpetrators apprehended, Franze has one more big surprise left.

Edward Morris