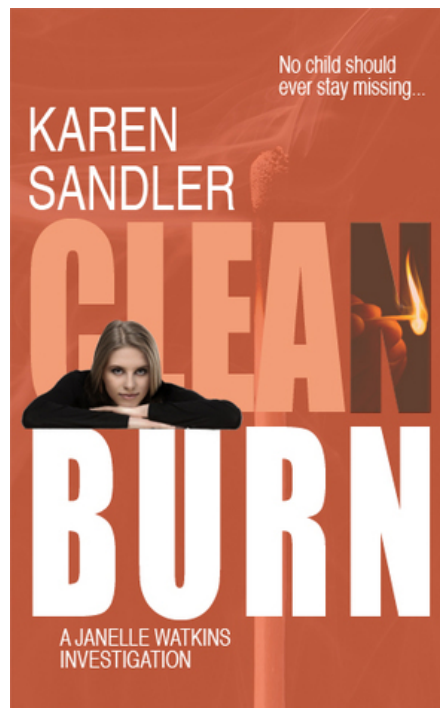




Clean Burn

Karen Sandler

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Clean Burn Karen Sandler

Private investigator Janelle Watkins swore off investigating child abductions four years ago, when she left the San Francisco PD.

But when two clients beg for her help, one to find her missing 11-year-old son and the other to find a toddler who's vanished, Janelle can't say no. Even though it means returning to the scene of her nightmares – her hometown of Greenville.

Janelle enlists the aid of her ex-partner and ex-lover, Greenville County Sheriff Ken Heinz – but in the midst of their investigation, two other children are discovered missing and connected to Greenville.

Then Ken's niece disappears on her way to school.

Janelle and Ken find themselves in a race against the clock. Will they find the missing children in time, or will history repeat itself?

Clean Burn Details

Date : Published August 18th 2015 (first published January 1st 2013)

ISBN :

Author : Karen Sandler

Format : Kindle Edition 304 pages

Genre : Mystery, Romance, Fiction, Crime

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From Reader Review Clean Burn for online ebook

Vanessa Delamare says

An excellent first crime fiction - because Sandler is a prolix author in other kind of book - with a heroine with multiple injuries and flaws, but very endearing.

About the characters: Janelle Watkins, ex-cop, private detective, tortured (in every sense of the word) by his past. A heroin not too girly nor too tomboy, a nice mix - which is not always the case for female detectives or cops, I must say. There is also Ken Heinz, ex-partner (in every sense of the word), honest, straightforward and sincere. Two characters very sympathetic to follow. Then there is a lot of secondary characters, well thought out, which gives the impression of being part of the town and to know its inhabitants.

The narrative. Two parallel investigations, one on fire and the other on child abductions bring two former partners together again. The pace does not falter, either because a new lead opens to find the children or because another fire raged. We are taken by the adventures to a burning final (in every sense of the word!)

The author knows how to transcribe Janelle's demons and her worries. We are really feeling her emotions - and they are not all pleasant! - which leads us to understand her reactions - and they are not all pleasant either! I suspected several different people and many times the right way, but I was never really sure until the end. Latter (but not the least in my case), the humor - often cynical - is very well distilled through the story, which makes it more enjoyable to read.

In a nutshell

A very good first crime fiction by Karen Sandler. A heroine to love, despite her shortcomings (or perhaps because of them, I do not know). A story whose rhythm does not slow down. I gave it 4/5!

My thought on closing the book: some great characters!
(Originally posted at vanessa-s-bookshelves.blogspot.ca)

Dan Schwent says

P.I. Janelle Watkins left finding missing children behind after a failure that led to her leaving the San Francisco PD. Or so she thought. Now she's back in the town where she grew up, on the trail of two missing boys. Can she overcome her personal demons long enough to find the boys and bring their abductor(s) to justice?

I got this courtesy of Angry Robot/Exhibit A and Netgalley.

Karen Sandler has been around for a while but this is her first detective novel. I hope she sticks to writing detective novels from now on.

Janelle Watkins won me over right away, from her injured leg, to her dysfunctional childhood and subsequent psychological issues, to her sassy black secretary. About halfway through the first chapter, I started measuring Janelle Watkins and Clean Burn against Carol Starkey and Demolition Angel. Janelle held her own.

The comparison to Demolition Angel proved to be an apt one. Watkins and Starkey are both damaged heroines, Watkins from her dysfunctional childhood and the accident that saw her get chained to a desk with a bum leg and Starkey from the bomb blast that killed her partner/lover and left her off the bomb squad. They both also have bad coping mechanisms: Starkey loves the sauce and Watkins burns herself with match heads. They're both strong ladies when the chips are down.

Watkins' cases take her to her old home town of Greenville and back into her past, confronting both memories of her childhood and the sheriff, her old partner on the SFPD with whom she had an affair. Ken, the sheriff, is working on arson cases. The two inevitably team up and find themselves up against a serial kidnapper/nutcase called Mama.

Things develop along the usual thriller-y lines, chasing down leads and moving closer to the inevitable hookup, a standard trope for the genre. It all came together at the end and the last 30% was nearly impossible to put down.

It was right on the line between three and four so I gave it a four, the same rating I gave Demolition Angel. When's the next Janelle Watkins book coming out?

Daniel says

This review originally published in Looking For a Good Book. Rated 3.5 of 5

This is the first book in the 'Janelle Watkins, Private Investigation' series, though I have already read and reviewed the second book, Hangtown. It is nice to see that, even reading these two books in reverse order, it doesn't ruin too much of the character development. And character development is what author Karen Sandler does extremely well.

Janelle Watkins is a former San Francisco police officer, now a private investigator. Though she thought she'd never do another missing child case after leaving the police force, two clients are both asking Janelle to look into missing children, and to make it worse, her investigation will bring her to her hometown of Greenville ... which holds many unpleasant memories.

In the course of her search for the missing children, Janelle is reunited with her ex-SFPD-partner and ex-lover Ken Heinz, who is now the sheriff for Greenville County. Ken is investigating a series of arson incidents. Arson brings some bad memories to Janelle.

As I mentioned, author Sandler does a masterful job with her characters. Janelle is a flawed and trouble protagonist. Abused as a child by her father, injured while working with the police, and haunted by a missing child case that ended poorly, Janelle has some destructive obsessions that she has to deal with.

In the midst of the mystery, Sandler explores the human side of Janelle and Ken, which is actually much more interesting than the mystery (but without the mystery there would have been no strong reason for the two to reunite). Knowing a few things about Janelle and Ken, because of my having read the second book, really didn't negatively impact my reading. If anything, it was good to get some new information.

This is not a feel-good mystery. The story is, at times, dark and disturbing. It is gritty, and it feels much more 'real' than the saccharine mysteries that wrap up so neatly, with detectives who lead remarkably pristine lives.

But it IS a good mystery with interesting characters.

Looking for a good book? *Clean Burn* by Karen Sandler is the beginning of a mystery series that you will want to read if you enjoy a good mystery, a book with interesting characters, or even just a well-written story.

I received an electronic copy of this book from the publisher, through Netgalley, in exchange for an honest review.

Shelleyrae at Book'd Out says

Clean Burn is a gripping crime fiction novel introducing Private Investigator Janelle Watkins. An injured ex-cop, Janelle mostly makes a living from exposing cheating spouses but a personal plea for help has her reluctantly agreeing to search for two missing children. The cases seem unconnected but both lead Janelle to her hometown of Greenville where she enlists the aid of her ex-partner, and ex-lover, Sheriff Ken Heinz. Heinz has his hands full with a series of arson attacks in the small town but when two more children go missing, and a fire is discovered at each scene, Janelle begins to suspect their cases are connected...

Psychologically and physically damaged heroines are increasingly common in crime fiction, and Janelle Watkins is no exception. Her personal history of abuse at the hands of her father has led to an unhealthy fascination with fire, she regularly burns herself with matches to, among other things, relieve stress. PTSD from a previous case involving a murdered boy is also a factor in Janelle's fragile emotional make-up and the reason she attempts to refuse her client's pleas for help. In addition an accidental firearm discharge by a rookie cop all but destroyed her leg, leaving her with a painful limp, and forced her resignation from the police force. Despite Janelle's self loathing and disturbing affinity for fire, I found her a likeable protagonist. She is both a sympathetic character and an admirable one, many would have buckled under the weight of dysfunction Janelle is forced to live with.

While much of the novel is narrated in Janelle's first person voice, a third person perspective fills in the missing pieces of the story. In terms of the plot, the reader knows from the start of the link between the missing children and the fires, something which is not immediately obvious to Janelle. Janelle's painstaking investigation to identify the abductors is believable, and the tension remains consistent, especially as we are privy to 'Mama's' increasingly disordered behaviour and the circumstances in which the children are being kept.

Clean Burn is grim at times, delving into family dysfunction, child abuse, addiction and pyromania but there are lighter moments. Janelle's secretary isn't afraid to speak her mind and Ken's niece is as rebellious as all teen's are. There is also the relationship between Janelle and Ken which sizzles with unresolved attraction.

This is a promising debut series from an author better known for her Silhouette Romance novels. Despite its dysfunctional characters and dark themes, *Clean Burn* is an entertaining read. I was engrossed and I'm looking forward to Janelle's next case.

Alana says

This book had me hooked from the first page and kept me hooked till the very last. I really love the flawed main character and the relationship she has with her ex-partner. The plot was fast paced and intricate and deals with some very ugly subjects perfectly.

The only critique I might have is that it all seemed a little coincidental, the fact that the case takes her back to her hometown and her ex-partner just happens to have moved there and is now in charge, as well as the source of her demons and what is going on in the case. While this kind of thing would usually annoy me and put me off a book, or at least make me knock a star off, in this case it didn't. I thoroughly enjoyed every single page and could not put it down. I really hope that there will be a second book, if there is I will be buying it straight away.

If you like Detective stories, this is one you do not want to miss.

I give Clean Burn 5 out of 5 stars.

Disclaimer: I received a free copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

My Rating System:

1 star: I will never post a 1 star review because this means it was so bad I couldn't finish it, and I don't won't publicly rate a book I haven't read all the way through.

2 stars: I may have liked the story but it was badly written or it may have been a boring story well written. Something about it kept me reading but I didn't enjoy it.

3 stars: A good, enjoyable read. If the description appeals to you I'd recommend reading it.

4 stars: A really good book that I thoroughly enjoyed and may even read again. I will want to read other books by the same author. Highly recommend.

5 stars: Reserved for books that blew me away and whose characters I can't get out of my head. These are books that I will definitely read again, possibly several times. If I read an e-book version I may even have to go buy a hard copy for my shelves. Why are you still here? Go read this book right now.

Luciano says

Clean Burn is a difficult read, not because the prose is heavy handed or difficult to read, but because the characters are so burdened with personal issues. Janelle Watkins character in particular is a broken, emotionally destitute ex cop with more personal problems than Courtney Love. Burn does an excellent job fleshing out the characters in the story. The reader can understand what drives them to say and do the things they do. Although at times I wanted to stop reading because it was so painful to experience, Frequently I got sucked into the darkness of the psyche. The pains and hurts of adolescence at the hands of supposed caregivers that morphs into a tangle of self-hate and despair in adulthood. A walking dead girl. The characters in this story are hurt and twisted, and as a reader it's like watching a really bad train wreck. You want to look away, but it's almost impossible to do so. Thank fully there is enough good left inside the main characters, Janelle Watkins and her old partner/lover, to follow things up to the end; as painful as it is for us and them.

H.W. says

Well, for you VI Warshawsky fans, there is another woman walking in the noir aisle of your local bookstore. Sandler's Janelle Watkins is darker, more flawed (physically as well as emotionally) than VI, and Sandler milks the genre for all the grittiness and darkness such a character allows. The presentation of the story is interesting as Sandler mixes in first-person with third-person peeks at the antagonist, which she does with a flair that reminds me of early Stephen King (think Dead Zone). For most of he book, Sandler throws enough

dust in the readers eyes to keep us guessing, and I enjoyed the tension both in the buildup to climax as well as the romantic tension between a couple of characters (which she handles well, no cringing here). In the end the plot ties itself together a bit more niftily than I expected but there are twists enough to satisfy anyone (such as this reviewer) who has enjoyed Spade, Marlowe, and yes, even Poirot :-)

Mieneke says

Kay Scarpetta, Jane Rizolli, Maura Isles, Kate Beckett, Alex Cooper, Barbara Havers, Teresa Lisbon, these are all women cut from the same cloth as *Clean Burn*'s protagonist Janelle Watkins. They're tough, if not fearless then certainly able to ignore their fear, and they are tenacious in their pursuit of justice. They are also one and all flawed in some profound way, whether it's Rizolli's traumatic experiences at the hands of The Surgeon, Beckett's enduring search for her mother's murderer, or Havers' quick temper. For Janelle it's an unhealthy fascination with fire and a tendency to burn herself to deal with stress and emotional pain, thanks to an abusive childhood. I love a good whodunit, especially police procedurals or narratives on the edges of those and *Clean Burn* gives you exactly that. Watkins isn't a cop any longer, but she still thinks like one, while at the same time not being bound by the same narrow rules as her former colleagues. It makes for an exciting book, with some whirlwind twists and complications and one I enjoyed tremendously.

Janelle Watkins is a compelling character. She's dark and broken and sees herself as irreparable, unworthy and unlovable. Haunted by a miserable childhood and the memories of the children she couldn't save during her career as a police officer, she turns to self-harm to find relief, whether it's the aforementioned burning or by drinking herself into oblivion. She's a sympathetic character even if she's not always good. She is self-destructive and nowhere does Sandler bring this to the fore more than in her relationship with her ex-partner Ken. He's a decent, stand-up guy—apart from cheating on his wife with Janelle, before moving away to save his marriage and breaking Janelle's heart in the process. I like that Sandler showed us the aftermath of the 'partners falling in love and getting it on'-cliché so prevalent in today's crime TV shows – Booth and Bones, Beckett and Castle, and Mulder and Scully, to name a few – and not the happily ever after kind, but she shows us what happens when they don't make it. Spoiler alert: it isn't pretty. As Watkins herself says, there is a reason they always tell you not to get involved with your partner. The other important character that looks set to be a recurring one is Janelle's assistant Sheri. Part secretary, part friend, she's spunky and doesn't let Janelle get away with her bad behaviour and she's the one that occasionally challenges Janelle's conscience and makes her go back into the fray that burned her and to take cases that might hurt, but are truly worthwhile. These three make a solid core surrounded by some interesting secondary characters.

The plot is interesting. I liked the juxtaposition of this big city PI in a small-town community. Especially as it's her own community and everyone and their horse knows her or her daddy. The small town mind set was very convincing and I loved the fact that there were so many things hidden despite everyone supposedly knowing everything about each other. Sandler also manages to throw in a couple of huge loops which were awesome. A lot of the tension in the detecting strand of the narrative comes from the way the story is told. While the book is mainly told from Watkins' perspective, it's interspersed with chapters from the point of view of the abductor and one of the missing children, which was very effective. It not just served to up the tension, it also served to misdirect. Every time they visited a house, I was wondering whether the boy would later tell us he'd heard them. At one point I was convinced I knew who did it, only to have Sandler pull the wool over my eyes.

I really enjoyed *Clean Burn*; Janelle is interesting and the plotting clever and intelligent (no, those aren't the same thing) and the ending quite satisfying. There is even a dash of romance thrown in for good measure, without it taking over the plot. In all it made for a compelling read and I'm looking forward to seeing more of Janelle Watkins and friends.

This book was provided for review by the publisher.

Lisa says

Bravo to Karen Sandler for managing to create a brilliant leading character in Janelle Watkins. Dysfunctional, damaged, hard, cold, yet extremely likeable, Janelle is a tough cookie, with some serious issues, stemming from an abusive childhood, and a failed previous case that haunts her. Closed off, addicted to fire, and an affair with a married man are all the qualities of a female character that usually a reader would despise. But she is written so well that you can't help but warm to her, and will on her, not only to crack the case, but to get the man, too.

The research that has gone into writing this crime-fiction mystery are impeccable, and Karen Sandler should be saluted for the background work that has gone into this book, making it so realistic you can't help but wonder if this was based on an actual crime, (all the time praying that it wasn't). There were so many questionable characters written that it was almost impossible to figure out who the culprit was, and the detailing into all of them was great, making you work hard to try figure out which one of them it is. The downside to this is the reason for my lack of a fifth star. Without knowing if the town the majority of this story is based in is real or not, I had no idea on the size of the town, which led me to believe it wasn't really that big, which then led me to question the realism on how likely it would be to have so many of these questionable characters in one place that I got the feeling wasn't quite so big. If it had been stipulated more clearly the size of Greenville, and been pointed that it was a fairly big place, I may have not questioned this point at all. That said, if Greenville is a real place that people know of it may be something that goes unquestioned by some readers.

The case itself is compelling. It draws you in. Emotionally, being a mum of 3 made this pretty hard to read at times, having a child go missing is every parents worst nightmare. You can't help but whizz through the pages, hoping that Janelle and Ken can crack the case and find the missing children before it is too late. The added element of the fires and the detailing that goes into that side of the story adds to the intensity of the case.

I really enjoyed reading this book, and as this is only the 2nd crime/mystery book I have recently read after not picking one up for a few years, it has made me realise what I am missing, and I hope it won't be too long before I can read another Janelle Watkins story, especially as I felt like the author was just scratching the surface of Janelle's character and that there is so much more to Janelle the reader must be told.

Kelly says

A private investigator swears off searching for missing children after one of them dies during her search. Years later, two mothers find her and beg her to search for their missing children back in her hometown of Greenville. She partners up with her ex-SFPD partner who she once had an affair with and goes on a hunt for the missing children while also helping him with a string of arsons happening in Greenville this month.

This book was just ok for me, I enjoyed it through the end. My only issue is that from the first page EVERYONE is obsessed with fire, from the investigators, to unrelated people living in the town, to suspected kidnappers. I get it, the book is called Clean Burn, but it just made no sense at all in the first half of the book. The characters were well developed and the book flowed nicely though.

Nikki says

Clean Burn is a well written private investigator story, featuring a female heroine who makes mistakes and isn't perfect, but who gets what needs to be done *done*. I appreciated that she suffers from PTSD as well as having a disability (due to an injured leg). She was maybe a little too messed up for me to entirely enjoy -- given my own mental illness, I'm not that comfortable with books that show that of others in any detail! The prose doesn't sparkle, but it's solid and easy to follow, which is perhaps better in this genre.

I'm not sure the Exhibit A imprint is going to be for me, which makes me sad because I love Angry Robot so much. They're well-written enough for the genre, but they don't feel as fresh and experimental as Angry Robot's fantasy/SF publications.

Cheryl M-M says

This author is usually known for her romance novels and often when authors hop-skip genres they can't separate them.

I am very pleased to say that Sandler has hop-skipped with great skill and precision into the crime/thriller genre without skewing the lines.

This story is dark, compelling and gritty. It is realistic and disturbing.

It broaches upon many painful topics like child abduction, child abuse and paedophilia. The subject matter has obviously been well researched and gives a disturbing insight into some of the aspects of organised child abduction rings.

It also sheds light on the so-called low level risk children that disappear each year but because they are low level nobody realises they are missing. That dark and unknown number of children is never counted with the already horrifically high numbers of children who go missing. The author has managed to deliver the message without the use of gratuitous violence or scenes.

The main character is flawed aka human. She isn't a machete swinging ninja expert with the body of a goddess and the looks of an angel.

She is a walking billboard for the fractured and abused. Unfortunately she also has a penchant for fire. It just happens to be her addiction, her obsession and her sick safety blanket.

This was a gripping and enjoyable read and I look forward to reading the next in the series.

I received a copy of this book via Netgalley.

Andrew says

“With clean burn, the accelerant creates such an intense fire, the soot gets burned away. A fire so hot it would burn away all my sins.”

It is always tough to create a new private investigator, without resorting to over-used and well-worn clichés. Thankfully in this case, on the whole the author Karen Sandler has created a very unique PI in that sense, in detective Janelle Watkins. Private investigators in fiction are predominantly male, and have some form of reckless addiction, usually destructors like alcohol, tobacco, self-loathing or the arms of loose women.

“New red marks joined the dozens of others dotting my arms from wrist to elbow, one for each burnt

match.”

So it is refreshing – if somewhat uncomfortable at times - to read of a female in the trade with a more unusual dependence. Janelle’s addiction is fire, specifically burning her own skin with spent matches, and obsessively watching, researching and reading about fires. The odd compulsion stems from an abusive relationship with her father, who would regularly burn her with cigarettes for no reason at all. Her father was also burned badly himself, an event Janelle was witness to and one which clearly left a disturbing imprint on her. Her body is covered in scars from past burns, setting the early tone of a PI fighting her past, but also unable to cope with the memories without resorting to self-harm.

Formerly a police officer for the San Francisco Police Department, a serious leg injury resulted in Janelle leaving the force and setting out on her own. She used to specialise in child abduction cases, with a string of successful cases under her belt. However she is always haunted by the one case which didn’t go well, and has regular flashbacks to one particular young boy Tommy Phillips she was unable to save. The boy haunts her dreams, which is why now she deals mainly in divorce work.

Janelle is approached by two clients who beg her to help them find their children, citing her excellent reputation in that field. Reluctantly Janelle agrees to look into the cases, however this means a return to her hometown of Greenville, where she must exorcise a few ghosts, notably that of the now county sheriff, Ken Heinz. Former partners in the SFPD, Janelle was also the paramour which eventually led to Heinz’s marriage breakdown. There is some real animosity between the two now, though Janelle offers an olive branch, which Ken hesitantly accepts.

The child abductions point to Greenville, and Janelle thinks there may be a link between the abductions and a serial arsonist on the loose in the county. The fires appear to be random, but utilising a computer application called ProSpy, where various fields and parameters are input and analysed to create possible suspects, a pattern appears to emerge. Janelle and Heinz must work to piece the clues together and locate the children, before it’s too late.

“A chill burned down my spine, roiled my stomach.”

Returning to Greenville is clearly painful for Janelle, as not only is Ken here, but it also stirs up memories of her father and what he did to her. Her family home sits abandoned, left as it was after her father’s death, and Janelle cannot help but revisit the place in spite of what this does for her mental health.

The plot itself is quite clever; the link between the fires and the children very smartly tied up to form a satisfying conclusion to the case. The fact that Greenville houses a few very undesirable people adds to the tension along the way, as both Janelle and Ken understandably struggle to hide their repulsion for the type of person who might want to abduct a child. Janelle’s personal demons make for a compelling character, one we never truly understand, though we care enough to hope she gets help after the case. You cannot help but wince every time Janelle talks about burning herself.

There is also an amusing power struggle between Ken and his diabetic niece Cassie, who is a typical teenager insistent on getting her own way. There is another, between Janelle and her assistant Sheri, who destined for better things, sees her current role as merely a stepping stone to a successful law career. These add some lighter aspects to what is quite a dark tale.

The only negative, which for me detracted from the tight plot, was the over-charged eroticism between Janelle and Ken; these parts had all the hallmarks of a cheesy romance novel. Further research into the author online has revealed that Sandler writes for Mills & Boone. This in some way explains but in no way excuses the mistakes she made in trying to blur the romance and crime genres with this novel. I don’t feel that

crime/thriller books ever really need a romance sub-plot, and with such a steady narrative it really killed the pace of the book for me.

Janelle is painted as a tough-as-nails private investigator, but in some scenes becomes more a teenage girl, a contrast with which I struggled to tolerate. During these scenes, I felt like they had been written by a different author, such was the drop in quality of writing from the rest of the novel:

“He’d burrowed deep enough into the shell of my heart. Another night of intimacy, he might have taken up permanent residence.”

“Physically he was everything a woman could have wanted in one boffo package.”

Karen Sandler is a female writing from the perspective of a female, so there is every chance that this is how females think; I will never know. However I felt that there was no need for this relationship at all in terms of the storyline; a simple stand-off leading to mutual respect throughout the investigation, would have been adequate. It has made me cautious about reading more Janelle Watkins stories unfortunately, and knocks a star off my overall rating for the book.

I received this book for free, for taking part in the Goodreads First Reads program. Incidentally, I was actually supposed to receive Hangtown, the second book in the Janelle Watkins series, but the publication of that book was cancelled, which is unfortunate for the author.

Allison Campbell says

<http://noranydroptoread.com/2013/11/0...>

This novel introduces Janelle Wallace, former San Francisco cop who is still traumatized, physically and emotionally, but a missing-child case gone badly. She has given up searching for missing children...until now. She ends up pursuing leads in her hometown of Greenville where her former partner/lover, Ken Heinz, is sheriff. Janelle is perhaps more damaged than your usual damaged heroine, with childhood abuse, physical injury, PTSD, and an unhealthy fascination with fire, but she was surprisingly likable. Her issues are thorny and the book is often dark, but her own sardonic wit and her secretary's observations add desperately needed comic relief. "She kept that smile fixed on her face. 'I'm not at liberty to divulge Sheriff Heinz's current location. But I'd be glad to take a message,' she told me cheerily. I rarely let myself be thwarted by cheer." She's fully aware of her flaws, and she knows she doesn't have them under control, but she tries. There's a lot of metaphorical fire talk that could easily be tedious or cliché, but I liked Janelle enough that it seemed to fit right in. The Ken/Janelle tension was blah to me, but fans of romantic suspense will expect it. Janelle is the strength of this story, so passages from the point of view of a psycho weren't really interesting to me, but again, thrillers are expected to include psycho point of view, and I was invested enough in the mystery to slog through those passages.

A promising start to a private detective/thriller/damaged heroine series. I liked Janelle, and I'll follow where she goes next.

Source disclosure: I received an e-galley of this title courtesy of the publisher.

Kemper says

(I received a free copy of this via NetGalley.)

Janelle Watkins sure is a **HOT** mess!

Get it? Because this book is called *Clean BURN* and it's about fire and arson?

Oh, never mind. I don't know why I even bother trying to entertain you people.

Anyhow, Janelle used to be a cop in San Francisco who had a knack for finding abducted children, but a freak injury ended her career and left her with a bad leg. She also has personal issues like being haunted by visions of a boy she failed to save and an unhealthy fascination with fire that includes a habit of burning herself with matches for funsies.

Janelle now works as a private investigator who gimps around handing cases involving cheating spouses, and she wants nothing to do with missing kids until a personal plea leads her back to her old hometown of Greenville where her former partner and lover Ken is now the sheriff. Being in Greenville triggers a lot of unpleasant memories of her childhood as well as the awkwardness of dealing with Ken. At first Janelle just wants to leave as soon as possible, but a series of fires and several missing kids draw her into an investigation that has her working with Ken again.

Since this is a crime novel featuring a damaged main character, it's going to work or fail depending on how much you sympathize with Janelle. Overall, I found her pretty compelling. She's messed up, but she doesn't wallow in self-pity and generally she's still trying to do something worthwhile even though her own life is a disaster.

However, giving Janelle the quadruple whammy of being an abused kid, having an old case that haunts her, dealing with a painful physical injury and an unhealthy obsession with fire was a little over the top. Her level of self-loathing and insistence that something is wrong with her seemed a bit much at times considering that the worst thing she does is burn herself with matches, but self-hatred often doesn't need a logical reason so this didn't hurt the book much.

The rest of the story is a pretty standard thriller, but it's competently done. The crazy character Mama makes for a decent enough villain, and the kids in jeopardy angle adds tension to it.

The plot contained a few elements that had me nitpicking. Despite being a small town with a near constant string of arsons and a missing kid, Ken seems to be able to just deal with all of this via a few radio calls and able to knock off work or chauffeur Janelle around whenever he feels like it when it seems like a county sheriff would be living at the office and crime scenes.

There was also an odd scene where Ken takes Janelle to a dance that is being done to raise money for the funeral expenses of a kid who drowned in a river. I've seen small town fund raising for tragedies that have included pancake breakfasts, auctions, bake sales and just donation cans placed around local businesses. However, I've never heard of a having a dance where the people going into drink and party drop a couple of bucks on the parents of a dead kid sitting at a table by the door. Maybe someone would do a concert of some kind to raise money, but the idea of having a full-on dance in front of the parents who just lost their son the day before seemed insane to me.

Aside from the minor gripes, this was a solid thriller with a main character I'd be interested in reading more about.

Also posted at Kemper's Book Blog.
