

Book Review: The Reckoning (Renata Drake Book #1)
By Kelli Stanley

Thanks to NetGalley and Severn House for this advance reader's copy, in exchange for an honest review. "The Reckoning" is scheduled for release on January 6, 2026.

The promo for "The Reckoning" (also billed as Renata Drake Book #1) states how Drake, the main character, "steps off a Greyhound bus and into small-town Garberville, hoping to disappear."

Well, meeting with the publisher of the town newspaper the first day she arrives, then agreeing to be his "eyes and ears" for a story he's working on, then agreeing to take photos at the high school football game the next night doesn't exactly lend itself to the goal of disappearing.

Drake, we quickly learn, is on the run from the FBI for the execution-style murder of her sister's killer. Her problem is that the place she chooses to disappear in, Garberville, in Southern Humboldt County, California in 1985, is the center of a cannabis-producing enterprise. Many of the residents are corrupt, and now a missing teenage girl turns up dead. It's the third such incident in three years.

So much for disappearing into a quiet northern California town.

The narrative's pacing is very good. The book is a page-turner, with enough wrinkles thrown in that, even though it's not a complete shock when all the reveals occur, the story still holds your interest.

My main issue with the story is that things go a bit too smoothly for Renata. Landing a job her first day in town? Quickly gaining the trust of the local teenage girls? Uncovering the cannabis-producing enterprise's hidden secrets without even coming close to getting caught?

It's just a bit too unrealistic.

So is how she uncovers the operation. But I won't spill the beans here.

Renata is certainly an interesting character, driven by the recurring image of her deceased sister, Josie. And the fact that she has blacked out – literally cannot remember aspects of the execution she believes she committed – provide sufficient intrigue to warrant following Renata in subsequent books in the series.

Which I will do.

Three-and-one-half stars for “The Reckoning”, which I will round up to 4 on the strength of the narrative’s pacing and ability to generate future reader interest. Check it out in January.