



Black and Blue in Harlem: A Ross Agency Mystery

Delia C. Pitts

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Black and Blue in Harlem is a character-driven mystery about a mistake that costs two people their lives and the detective determined to find out the truth.

A boozy private eye looks into the death of a child services worker while trying to keep his love life from crumbling in Delia C. Pitts's engaging mystery *Black and Blue in Harlem*.

Private investigator and borderline alcoholic Rook comes home from work to learn that one of his neighbors has fallen to her death. The ensuing investigation dredges up old ghosts and leads to another murder, this one much closer to home. Rook is still determined to get justice for both murder victims. But it might come at the cost of his romantic relationship with his boss, sharp-minded, sharp-tongued Sabrina.

The story jumps straight into the action with the first murder. Rook, distressed by the senseless violence, ends up on a path of depression and isolation that alienates Sabrina. Her attempts to help him can't penetrate Rook's defenses. He navigates the case's intriguing but deadly twists and turns with increasing disgust and alcohol consumption until he is forced to confront his weaknesses—a task at least as difficult as catching the murderer. Both plots are developed in ways that show the complexities of each character, whether they're an investigator or a suspect.

The characters are distinct, diverse, and fun. Even minor characters are memorable, well-realized individuals. Rook himself is a grim, sometimes abrasive figure in the tradition of classic, hard-boiled detectives, but his self-awareness and willingness to compromise make him a sympathetic personality. He narrates the story in colorful, emotional language that highlights his determined yet world-weary perspective. The scenes where he is drunk capture how off-kilter his thought process is while remaining comprehensible.

Rich descriptions make each location leap off the page: the nightclub where Rook's friend sings is a warm, atmospheric place, while the gym where he seeks refuge is hard and pungent. The story maintains a crisp pace with the exception of the gym scene, which goes on too long given how little it has to do with the plot. Dialogue conveys important information in a lively, brisk manner.

Both plots—the mystery and the romance—are gratifyingly concluded, the former in a way that is exciting and brutal, the latter in a manner that's tender and reflective of the personal progress Rook has made. A sample chapter from the next book in the series offers a tantalizing look at the future adventures of Rook and Sabrina.

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EILEEN GONZALEZ (January 23, 2020)

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