



## No Pity in Death: An Annie Collins Mystery

**Helen Starbuck**

Routt Street Press

(249pp)

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*No Pity in Death is a satisfying blend of medical mystery and romance, with good local color.*

Annie Collins, a Denver operating room nurse, is the main sleuth in Helen Starbuck's blend of hard-boiled medical mystery and romantic suspense, *No Pity in Death*.

Authentic, behind-the-scenes details about hospital care and references to its Colorado setting are included as Annie and others investigate an unsettling spike in deaths among some of the hospital's most vulnerable patients. When people in Annie's personal life are made the targets of vandalism and harassment, and after she herself receives threats, Annie wonders whether all of the crimes might be connected.

Roused from her torpor by the need to probe these hospital deaths, Annie is joined in her investigations by a no-nonsense homicide detective, Alex Frost; a close friend and nurse, Chip Elliott; and a heartthrob assistant district attorney, Angel Cisneros. Frequent, histrionic scenes between Annie and Angel become tiresome. Conversely, lively family celebrations are enjoyable respites from the text's drama and violence.

This book is the second in the Annie Collins series, and it neatly summarizes past actions and can be read as a stand-alone novel. Annie suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, and the text records her flashbacks to her near-death experience and friends' murders a year ago. She works through her psychological trauma; this becomes an interesting side story.

Though she is the lead, Annie is less relatable than many of the novel's secondary characters. Some of the subordinate characters are better fleshed out, like Alex, with his world-weariness, vulnerabilities, and paternal affection for Annie, which are hidden under a polished policeman's veneer. Chip's and Angel's family members are some of the quirkiest and most likable characters in the book, including Chip's down-to-earth dads, who overcome Annie's trepidation about attending their Thanksgiving feast in their multiple-million-dollar mansion. Angel's grandmother is an interesting character study of grace during adversity; she helps Annie with her recovery even as she faces her own failing health.

The dialogue sounds realistic, especially when characters discuss hospital protocols and operations. Fascinating conversations explore issues like mercy killings by health-care workers and the psychological reasons that prison inmates have groupies.

Poignant scenes with a homeless couple that Annie assists ring true. Lovemaking scenes are convincing and steamy. Still, the story takes a long time to get rolling, and its ending has to work to tie up all the subplots of murder and vandalism at the district attorney's office, the hospital deaths, and threatening notes and gifts laid at Annie's door.

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RACHEL JAGARESKI (September 28, 2018)

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