

Excerpt from *A Death In Harlem*

Novel Synopsis: *A Death in Harlem is a mystery set in the midst of the 1920s Harlem elite with a perplexing death at its center and Harlem's first colored policeman poised to uncover the relationships between the help, the privileged members of secret and not-so-secret Negro clubs, and the enigmatic white man whose relationship to (and interests in) the Harlem folk is key to the mystery.*

Francesca Holloway

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In retrospect, I was always a shape-shifting ground. Dirt pressed without objection from farmland rows into ridged pathways save for a few stubborn stones that got used for garden walls or tossed into the lake by the place that would be a park. Even the cobblestones that took the place of dry, then muddied, then dry again dirt byways had a heft and necessary resilience that could have kept their place had it not been for the utility of asphalt that promised a ride without bruises. It poured and primed and streamed into roadways fully charmed into its work of making way for the carriages, automobiles, and the trolleys. Iron grids spiraling above and curving below to support trains’ mapping their way up and down into Manhattan seemed at first a compliment rather than a cage.

Walkway dust was diligently swept across then over slab sidewalks and concrete curbs and waited until the rains formed streetside gutters that washed all manner of refuse—every dropped toy and lost penny and more than its share of dusty southern red clay stomped off as soon as folks got off the trains at Grand Central and flowed into my waiting and always ready streets. Everything lost and a few things found then forgotten worked their way into the gutters, mixed together like so much pottage, and then whorled into eddies that wove silent circles beneath the waterworks until they finally spilled into the river.

In summers, twisted open hydrants gushed cool waters over laughing brown bodies. In winter, layers of snow like sediment held its detritus in iced suspension until a spring sun eventually and inevitably melted it down and everything that waited for warmth and sunlight—too quickly to enjoy the season’s change—joined the sloppy wash into the gutters. In the early downtown days, autumns would mean clogs of colored leaves. Uptown too, until somebody looked around at the people who matched the damp bark and late fall colors and decided these particular streets didn’t need that many trees anyway and concrete walkways were so much easier to contain than a spreading chestnut.

Sometimes really bad things happened. But the gutters took them too, like they were no different from an unspent penny or an ice cone dropped in a wail of loss and a tugged hand and a last longing look at the sweet sticky thing fallen upside down at the curb. Like the night the lady’s blood (and truth to tell, a bit of her bodily tissue) ran into icy rivulets that trickled into the street and then became just another bit of waste in the mix of things gone missing down into the gutters.

Part 1: The Fall**1. Mrs. Edgar (Earlene Giddings) Kinsdale**

For just a moment, just before the car door opened, it was as still and quiet as death. Almost as if the evening took in a breath and hadn't yet let it out. I think I even said, "Ernest, wait just a moment please." But he was already out of the front and was walking toward the side where I would exit. I watched the streetlamps flicker through the just-beginning snowfall. All up and down 125th and around the corner on 7th, they winked as if they knew something I didn't. I was still for a just a moment, in part waiting for Ernest to make his way around the car, and also because there was something that made me need to stay inside. As if it would be safer. But then the door opened and he was standing there offering me his arm in his new livery and gallant charm and the feeling passed. Or I let it pass. When I stepped out a breath of air briefly clouded my sight and I gasped; but it was just me who had exhaled, and not because I was nervous.

It's not as if I hadn't been to these affairs before. It's expected of our set. It's what we do by way of example for the bystanders. We all knew the lesser of the race would be lined up and watching us as we traipsed our fine selves into the Hotel Theresa. But it was not an inappropriate display. It was an opportunity for them to understand what they could aspire to. We were, after all, the talented tenth and it was our obligation to represent.

"Ma'am, your dresses is ready for you to have your inspection." LaVerne announced as she removed the tray with my breakfast toast and tea just as if it were an ordinary event. Nothing in her manner gave away; it would be the first time for what I had planned to become a ritual. "I got everything all laid out like you aksed."

"Asked" I said in a too hasty response, emphasizing the order of the consonants. It was one of the few southernisms that bothered me enough to interrupt the speaker and correct it. But sometimes it is more appropriate to concentrate on the occasion rather than admit to my too-easy annoyances.

"Yes'm. Aks-sed." Only the emphasis and additional syllable were different. I sighed and said that after she removed the tray and returned from consulting with the kitchen staff—that would be Zula—we would go in together to see how she had done.

It was right after the second Sunday in November that LaVerne laid out a choice of garments from which I might select my attire for the winter banquet. It was the kind of ritual I wanted to have in my household now that it had finally achieved a near-perfect replica of my childhood dream of orderliness and a bit of abundance. I just didn't know I would be alone as well. Edgar was supposed to be here to enjoy these refinements with me. His death was sudden and neither designed nor desired as a sacrifice for my interest in our achieving this rather polished lifestyle.

"Darling, why are you slapping your foot? This is not the place to trip the light fantastic." I joked and hugged his arm tighter. We were walking home from a tea house that had just opened, and would shortly close, at 328 Lenox.

"Why I hadn't noticed. It must be these new shoes." Edgar was such a dandy, and in part that's why I loved him. He dressed well. He wore spats and natty suits with pin stripes

and pleats, and there was always a fancy watch chain dangling from a carefully chosen vest. But he was not given to displaying his panache with a step and slide and that's exactly what his foot was doing now. Flapping against the sidewalk and then sliding forward to keep up with the other.

"Could they be too tight?" I asked him. "Your foot, it's so"—I tried to say something like "sloppy." But it came out "slappy." And he immediately looked hurt. He took considerable pride in his appearance. The coordination and careful fit of his shoes, suit, tie and hat were too carefully executed for anything to be awry. But here he was with a dangling foot and it was just a slip and slide from there to Harlem Hospital, all with a worrisome breathlessness; then to barely conscious, and then to gone. They said it was an aneurysm. On the way to the hospital I tried to tell him it was probably just a neuritis; I'd learned the word from Vera Scott's husband, who offered a bit too much detail regarding the intimacies of his profession. He's a physician. But the vocabulary gave me a chance to suggest something that sounded rather bland and likely a temporary affliction. It didn't matter and wasn't true. He was here and then gone.

The shadow of his death and his absence settled over me like a winding sheet until I woke from my stupor and decided I would have no more of it. Which was why, I think now, that I hesitated before I took Ernest's arm that night. It was a grim familiarity that gripped the night air like it was just waiting for someone vulnerable enough to take it in. I refused the opportunity.

At our home, the curious gathered and for much of the time I could not tell the difference between them and those who mourned. Some attended to and comforted me, and others were just plain nosy.

"I hear he left her very well situated" a dark-skinned lady said from the other side of the parlour as if I couldn't hear behind my veil of mourning. She'd opened a black lace fan and placed it lightly against her cheek to share the intimate observation; but I heard her perfectly exaggerated speech.

"Quite well, indeed." Her companion replied. It could have been Millicent Henderson, but frankly they all looked alike to me in their black hats and gloves—as if they were the ones who had lost something.

Our Earlene will be able to manage nicely." One of them said. "He was almost like a Jew with his money." This last thing was whispered as if the comparison was a notion she could share only intimately. The other woman, whom I was certain had come only to partake in the ritual refreshments of mourning, nodded in agreement and bit into a cucumber sandwich. This was the food of Northern funerals. I had a brief longing for pound cake and fried chicken. But it passed. I simply could not allow any of the home-made nonsense people brought from kitchens prepared by hands I had not seen to be included in the repast. I left instructions that Zula should send any such deliveries to the soup kitchens down in Harlem. The first woman, the one with the fan, was still whispering between bites to her companion.

"Oh, he was indeed very well-to-do. Just look around you." They both did, turning their heads in tandem taking in the décor of the front parlor. With their ridiculously large hats, they looked like a pair of birds, necks craning, surveying the park.

"I agree, his affluence is somewhat evident in the more elegant appointments and in the art work—although I doubt they are originals." Her friend nodded and sipped