



HARLEM REDUX

a novel

PERSIA WALKER

Praise for Persia Walker's

HARLEM REDUX

"Harlem's fabled 1920s 'Renaissance' provides the dynamic backdrop for Persia Walker's entertaining debut novel. A murder mystery set among the black bourgeoisie, it is also the heady tale of a bygone era...What distinguishes this novel is Walker's attention to the workings and characters of the times, from the club stars to the numbers runners, to prickly class issues between Strivers' Row residents and their working-class neighbors. A Harlem native, Walker understands this community and its history, creating a compelling family intrigue and a full, vibrant portrait of that storied era when Harlem's pulse was the rhythm of black America."—*The Boston Globe*

"McKay emerges as a resolute yet flawed protagonist, trying to restore his family's honor while pursuing an elusive and perhaps nonexistent killer."—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

"As much a story of lies, deceit and murder as it is a commentary on race and class, Harlem Redux is filled with colorful characters."—*Chicago Tribune*

"Sexy."—*New York Daily News*

"Walker excels at creating characters that manage to be memorable without being likeable."—*The Washington Post*

"A notable debut. This intriguing page-turner, convincingly set in the heady era of 1920s Harlem, is atmospheric and smart and will keep readers guessing until the very end."—Tananarive Due, author of *The Living Blood* and *The Black Rose*

"A rich, thoroughly enjoyable tale of greed and deceit, passion and betrayal."—April Christofferson, author of *The Protocol* and *Clinical Trial*

Prologue

Sunday, February 21, 1926-10:30 P.M.

The room was dark, except for one silvery ray of moonlight. An icy wind slipped in through the open window, swept around the room, and caressed her with chilling fingertips. She came to with a start. The darkness shocked her. The silence told her she was alone. How long had she lain there?

Her hands had been folded across her chest. She felt throbbing spurts of warm liquid spilling onto her breasts, drenching the soft cotton of her nightgown. And she sensed the approach of that final darkness. The urge to close her eyes, to give in, was overwhelming. The room seemed to revolve. Slowly. Her eyelids drooped. An inner voice asked:

Are you really going to lie there...and bleed to death?

Her eyes snapped open.

No.

At first, her hands seemed mercifully numb. But within minutes, the pain had grown more pronounced. Soon, it was agonizingly refined. The tortured nerve endings in her slashed wrists screamed with voices that echoed inside her, quickening and clarifying her thoughts.

I have to get help.

She tried to move her legs, but they were like logs, heavy and inert.

Find another way.

Pressing her elbows to her side, she twisted her upper torso and rocked back and forth. Her body rolled once, twice, then over the edge. The bed was high; the fall was hard. She landed with a heavy thump and for a moment lay stunned. Her heart pounded; her thoughts struggled for clarity.

There was no way she could use her hands. They were half-dead clumps of flesh. But her legs had been jolted back to life. Elbows still pressed to her side, she rolled over onto her chest, drew her knees up under her, then pushed herself up with her elbows. Leaning on the mattress to brace herself, she could stand.

The effort cost her. She sagged against a bedpost. Trying to hold on, she threw her forearms around the carved wooden beam. Her limp hands dangled, dripping their warm liquid. Cold sweat slipped down from her forehead and upper lips.

The darkness crept nearer.

Time had played a trick on her. She wasn't in the house on Strivers' Row, but elsewhere. The air didn't smell of jasmine and tobacco, but of the sea. She was in the Hamptons, in Nella's house. There came the sound of a life-and-death struggle, a gunshot. She again saw a pair of dead, staring eyes.

"No," she whispered. "No. I won't let you do this."

She held on and the darkness receded. She knew where she was. She could make out the shapes of furniture by the moonlight -- could even see her own shadow as she clung to the bedpost. But she felt seasick, as if she were clinging to the mast of a swaying boat. Her stomach heaved and she bent over, vomiting on herself and the bed. She clung to the bedpost as another wave of dizziness passed over her, then straightened up with a moan. Wiping her mouth with the back of her forearm, she smeared her face with blood.

Time's running out.

She could make it to the bedroom door.

Fifteen steps. That's all it would take.

But she hesitated. She did not know what -- or more accurately, who - might be waiting for her on the other side. In a bizarre way, her bedroom meant safety. She heard a thump. Her heart lurched. Was it a footstep in the hallway -- or just the house settling on its foundation? She swallowed and took a deep breath. She would have to make it down the stairs, creeping along with the help of the banister, then make it into the parlor before she could reach the telephone. If she fainted along the way, on the steps or at the parlor entrance, then...

No, not the door.

What then?

An icy breeze stroked her cheek.

The open window. Get to it. Scream. Call out -- that's the way to go.

She counted backward from three, focusing her energy. At zero, she let go of the bedpost and took a step toward the window. Her legs were weak and shaky. Her knees trembled, but they didn't buckle. She took another

tottering step. And another. That window had never seemed so far away; her body never so unwilling.

She was nearly across the room when it happened.

She tripped over the hem of her gown and toppled forward. Her head hit the corner of an antique linen chest. A sharp pain lanced through her skull and the moonlight, dim as it was, grew dimmer.

No, not now. Please, not now.

But her vision blurred and the light grew duskier. She lifted her head a wobbly inch or two, her eyelids drooped and her head sagged to the floor.

She might have drifted away permanently if it hadn't been for the wailing scream of a racing police siren. The sound expanded in the air, ballooned inside her head, until it seemed to explode inside her skull. She lay blinking in the dark, telling herself it was all a bad dream. But the cold floor under her face was real. So was the blood that had congealed and crusted on her face and arms and chest. She was awake and she had to get going. She didn't know how much blood she'd lost, but she assumed she'd lost a great deal. If she passed out again, she wouldn't wake up.

She was too weak to stand again, so she half-crawled, half-dragged herself across the floor. An eternity passed before she reached the base of that window. She rested, panting, and looked up.

The casement sill was little more than a yard above her head, but it might as well have been a mile. Her head throbbed. Her heart knocked. She wanted to sit and be still.

Get to that windowsill. Find the strength.

Curling up, she leaned one shoulder against the wall and inched her way up. It was taking forever. She was swimming up from way down deep. She held her breath, struggling against a vicious, relentless, downward pull. Clear droplets of agony slipped down from her temples. Would she ever reach the surface?

Then she was up. Fully upright. She leaned into a blast of frigid air. It cut to the bone, but it felt good. So very good! To be standing. To be at the window. To still be alive.

Pushing aside a porcelain vase on the windowsill, she flopped down on the narrow ledge and looked out. The small dark street seemed empty.

No! There has to be someone. Please, Lord, let there be someone. Help me this once, damn it. I'm begging you, begging you to help me. Now!

She noticed a light shining in a second-floor window across the way.

"Help! Help!" she screamed, but the wind, merry and malicious, kissed the words from her mouth and whipped them away. "Pleecease! Somebody! Anybody! HELP MEEEE!"

Again the wind, ever careless and cruel, swallowed the sounds of her pleading, took them so fast she barely heard them herself.

She pushed herself to hang out the window. Down the street to her left was a man walking his Doberman. He was stooped with age and bundled against the cold; his cap jammed down over his ears.

"Hey, mister! Mister, please! Up here! Send help! Please, mister, please!"

The man did not respond but the dog paused, perked up his ears, and howled. The wind that swept her words away served up the dog's mournful wails with mocking efficiency.

"Please! I don't wanna die! I DON'T WANNA DIE!"

The dog barked harder, louder, belting agitated yowls that rode the hellish gusts of wind up and down the street. Hope pulsed through her. The Doberman pulled on his leash, strained in her direction. The dog's owner yanked him back. He cuffed him on the nose. And dragged him off down the street. Away from her.

"NO!!!"

Her elbow touched the vase. She turned without thinking and gave it a shove that sent it plunging out the window. She watched it turn and tumble as if in slow motion, saw it crash and explode into minute pieces. She looked down. Had they heard?

They were gone. So quickly. Gone. As though they'd never been there.

Her legs gave out. She crumpled to the floor, her outstretched arms smearing trails of blood on the wall. Her head sagged.

"Oh, God...no," she wept. "Don't let this happen. This can't happen."

Then she felt the curtains. Made of lightweight silk, they billowed about her face, as familiar, as gentle, cool, and caressing as a loved one's touch. She closed her eyes. An eerie calm crept over her. Odd, how the pain was receding. If only she could rest. Sleep.

No! She wanted to live, to hold on. She loved life. She refused to let it slip away. Not like this. Not while she was young. Not when she finally...had nearly everything...

But the darkness was getting hard to fight. She had never felt so tired. Her inhalations grew fainter. Her eyes slid shut. From behind her closed eyelids, she saw her inner lights fade individually, felt herself float away, bit by precious bit, as her blood-starved organs shut down, one after another. She was about to die and she knew it. Summoning her strength, she raised her face to bathe it in the moonlight. She held it there with stubborn determination for several exquisite seconds. Then her last inner light faded and with a moan she slumped down, a bloody but still beautiful corpse gazing blindly at the bleak night sky.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

"Just the facts, ma'am. Just the facts."

In what seems like another world and was most definitely another century, Persia studied drama at the High School of Performing Arts and all kinds of good stuff at Swarthmore College. She also spent a year at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism to emerge with a master's degree.

She has worked for The Associated Press in Arkansas; Washington, DC; and New York. She has also written for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Inc., (RFE) in Munich, worked as a freelance book editor, done cultural reporting and voice work for European publications.

A native New Yorker, she's happily single, fluent in German, breathtakingly disorganized, and sporadically inspired to cook. She enjoys Indian and Thai food for dining, romantic thrillers and detective stories for reading, movies about superheroes, and television programs about desperate housewives and true crime. Her perfect Sunday morning includes a lengthy and lazy browse through the most frivolous parts of the *New York Times* online.

She loves afternoons at the Met and dreams of weekends in the Hamptons, but in fact is a real homebody. There's almost always some suitcase standing around half-packed in her home, but it's from her last trip and not in anticipation of any new one. As a writer, she's a monumentally undisciplined procrastinator who growls at her friends when they distract her, but then busily distracts herself.

For more damaging information, you'll have to visit her online at www.persiawalker.com or read her blog, *Criminal Musings*, at www.persiawalker.blogspot.com.