

AN EASY RAWLINS MYSTERY

walter MOSLEY

DEVIL IN A BLUE DRESS

'A brilliant novel. Period' *Jonathan Lethbridge*

Devil in a Blue Dress

The time is 1948. The town is Los Angeles. The hero is Easy Rawlins, an out of work black war veteran. The mortgage payment's coming due, so Easy accepts the assignment of finding Daphne Monet, a blonde torch singer with a penchant for jazz and criminal black consorts. In his search through a sleazy, fearful city, he is lucky to be under the protection of the murderous Mouse who wants a piece of the action.

Easy Rawlins is a fascinating creation driving a plot that carries a fine and bitter sting. With this first novel, Walter Mosley made a distinctly confident start to his career as a great and inspirational writer.

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***DEVIL IN
A BLUE DRESS***



Walter Mosley

Easy Rawlins Series, Book 1

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Dedication:

*FOR JOY KELLMAN,
FREDERIC TUTEN,
AND LEROY MOSLEY*

Chapter 1

I WAS SURPRISED TO SEE A WHITE MAN walk into Joppy's bar. It's not just that he was white but he wore an off-white linen suit and shirt with a Panama straw hat and bone shoes over flashing white silk socks. His skin was smooth and pale with just a few freckles. One lick of strawberry-blond hair escaped the band of his hat. He stopped in the doorway, filling it with his large frame, and surveyed the room with pale eyes; not a color I'd ever seen in a man's eyes. When he looked at me I felt a thrill of fear, but that went away quickly because I was used to white people by 1948.

I had spent five years with white men, and women, from Africa to Italy, through Paris, and into the Fatherland itself. I ate with them and slept with them, and I killed enough blue-eyed young men to know that they were just as afraid to die as I was.

The white man smiled at me, then he walked to the bar where Joppy was running a filthy rag over the marble top. They shook hands and exchanged greetings like old friends.

The second thing that surprised me was that he made Joppy nervous. Joppy was a tough ex-heavyweight who was comfortable brawling in the ring or in the street, but he ducked his head and smiled at that white man just like a salesman whose luck had gone bad.

I put a dollar down on the bar and made to leave, but before I was off the stool Joppy turned my way and waved me toward them.

"Com'on over here, Easy. This here's somebody I want ya t'meet."

I could feel those pale eyes on me.

“This here’s a ole friend’a mines, Easy. Mr. Albright.”

“You can call me DeWitt, Easy,” the white man said. His grip was strong but slithery, like a snake coiling around my hand.

“Hello,” I said.

“Yeah, Easy,” Joppy went on, bowing and grinning. “Mr. Albright and me go way back. You know he prob’ly my oldest friend from L.A. Yeah, we go ways back.”

“That’s right,” Albright smiled. “It must’ve been 1935 when I met Jop. What is it now? Must be thirteen years. That was back before the war, before every farmer, and his brother’s wife, wanted to come to L.A.”

Joppy guffawed at the joke; I smiled politely. I was wondering what kind of business Joppy had with that man and, along with that, I wondered what kind of business that man could have with me.

“Where you from, Easy?” Mr. Albright asked.

“Houston.”

“Houston, now that’s a nice town. I go down there sometimes, on business.” He smiled for a moment. He had all the time in the world.

“What kind of work you do up here?”

Up close his eyes were the color of robins’ eggs; matte and dull.

“He worked at Champion Aircraft up to two days ago,” Joppy said when I didn’t answer. “They laid him off.”

Mr. Albright twisted his pink lips, showing his distaste. “That’s too bad. You know these big companies don’t give a damn about you. The budget doesn’t balance just right and they let ten family men go. You have a family, Easy?” He had a light drawl like a well-to-do Southern gentleman.

“No, just me, that’s all,” I said.

“But they don’t know that. For all they know you could have ten kids and one on the way but they let you go just the same.”

“That’s right!” Joppy shouted. His voice sounded like a regiment of men marching through a gravel pit. “Them people own them big companies don’t never even come in to work, they just get on the telephone to find out how they money is. And you know they better get a good answer or some heads gonna roll.”

Mr. Albright laughed and slapped Joppy on the arm. “Why don’t you get us some drinks, Joppy? I’ll have scotch. What’s your pleasure, Easy?”

“Usual?” Joppy asked me.

“Sure.”

When Joppy moved away from us Mr. Albright turned to look around the room. He did that every few minutes, turning slightly, checking to see if anything had changed. There wasn’t much to see though. Joppy’s was a small bar on the second floor of a butchers’ warehouse. His only usual customers were the Negro butchers and it was early enough in the afternoon that they were still hard at work.

The odor of rotted meat filled every corner of the building; there were few people, other than butchers, who could stomach sitting in Joppy’s bar.

Joppy brought Mr. Albright’s scotch and a bourbon on the rocks for me. He put them both down and said, “Mr. Albright lookin’ for a man to do a li’l job, Easy. I told him you outta work an’ got a mortgage t’pay too.”

“That’s hard.” Mr. Albright shook his head again. “Men in big business don’t even notice or care when a workingman wants to try to make something out of himself.”

“And you know Easy always tryin’ t’be better. He just got his high school papers from night school and he been threatenin’ on some

college.” Joppy wiped the marble bar as he spoke. “And he’s a war hero, Mr. Albright. Easy went in with Patton. Volunteered! You know he seen him some blood.”

“That a fact?” Albright said. He wasn’t impressed. “Why don’t we go have a chair, Easy? Over there by the window.”

JOPPY’S WINDOWS WERE SO DINGY that you couldn’t see out onto 103rd Street. But if you sat at a small cherry table next to them, at least you had the benefit of the dull glow of daylight.

“You got a mortgage to meet, eh, Easy? The only thing that’s worse than a big company is the bank. They want their money on the first and if you miss the payment, they will have the marshal knocking down your door on the second.”

“What’s my business got to do with you, Mr. Albright? I don’t wanna be rude, but I just met you five minutes ago and now you want to know all my business.”

“Well, I thought that Joppy said you needed to get work or you were going to lose your house.”

“What’s that got to do with you?”

“I just might need a bright pair of eyes and ears to do a little job for me, Easy.”

“And what kind of work is it that you do?” I asked. I should have gotten up and walked out of there, but he was right about my mortgage. He was right about the banks too.

“I used to be a lawyer when I lived in Georgia. But now I’m just another fella who does favors for friends, and for friends of friends.”

“What kind of favors?”

“I don’t know, Easy.” He shrugged his great white shoulders. “Whatever somebody might need. Let’s say that you need to get a

message to someone but it's not, um, convenient for you to do it in person; well, then you call me and I take the job. You see I always do the job I'm asked to do, everybody knows that, so I always have lots of work. And sometimes I need a little helper to get the job done. That's where you come in."

"And how's that?" I asked. While he talked it dawned on me that Albright was a lot like a friend I had back in Texas—Raymond Alexander was his name but we called him Mouse. Just thinking about Mouse set my teeth on edge.

"I need to find somebody and I might need a little help looking."

"And who is it you want to—"

"Easy," he interrupted. "I can see that you're a smart man with a lot of very good questions. And I'd like to talk more about it, but not here." From his shirt pocket he produced a white card and a white enameled fountain pen. He scrawled on the card and then handed it to me.

"Talk to Joppy about me and then, if you want to try it out, come to my office any time after seven tonight."

He downed the shot, smiled at me again, and stood up, straightening his cuffs. He tilted the Panama hat on his head and saluted Joppy, who grinned and waved from behind the bar. Then Mr. DeWitt Albright strolled out of Joppy's place like a regular customer going home after his afternoon snort.

The card had his name printed on it in flourished letters. Below that was the address he'd scribbled. It was a downtown address; a long drive from Watts.

I NOTED THAT MR. DEWITT ALBRIGHT didn't pay for the drinks he ordered. Joppy didn't seem in a hurry to ask for his money though.