

An exclusive excerpt from...

Holiday Grind
A Coffeehouse Mystery
by Cleo Coyle

*Coming
November 3rd*

A NOTE FROM CLEO

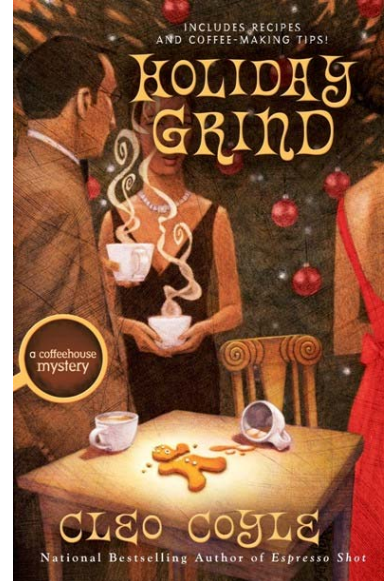
Holiday Grind is the eighth book in my Coffeehouse Mystery series and the first to have a holiday theme, which makes it a very special story for Clare Cosi and her intrepid crew of baristas.

Here's the set up: As the book's flap copy explains, Clare Cosi, manager and head barista at the Village Blend, is drawn into the case of a murdered charity Santa who was using her coffeehouse as a place to warm up between bell-ringing rounds. In the following excerpt, Clare begins to get a clue that her new friend's death may be more than a random mugging. I hope you enjoy this exclusive first look at *Holiday Grind*, and may this coming holiday season bring you peace, joy, memorable meals, and a lifetime of laughter.

*Cheers,
Cleo Coyle*

www.CoffeehouseMystery.com

"Where coffee and crime are always brewing..."



from...
Chapter Three

Outside the heavy snowfall was tapering off into light flurries. The occasional icy flake pelted the hood of my white parka, then fell to the ground to join its brethren, but for the most part the storm appeared to be over. The glistening blanket it left behind, however, now draped every inch of the historic district—the cobblestone streets and narrow sidewalks, the parked cars and town house roofs.

There was nothing like walking through the Village on a snowy winter night. The few vehicles on the slippery street crept along no faster than horse-drawn carriages. Every surface appeared flocked with white; the pungent smell of active old fireplaces floated through the air; and bundled couples hurried past dark storefronts, eager to get back to their warm apartments or inside a cozy pub for a glass of mulled wine or mug of Irish coffee.

As I passed by St. Luke's churchyard, the whole world seemed to go silent, save the icy flurries that still pecked at my parka and the *crunch, crunch, crunching* of my winter boots. At one intersection I stood alone, watching a traffic light provide a signal for crossroads that had no traffic. Hands in pockets, I waited half amused as the bright red light flipped to green in an unintentional Christmas display just for me.

Suddenly I was a little girl again, back in Pennsylvania, slipping away from my grandmother's house and carrying my cheap little red plastic toboggan to the dead end of her street. The

other kids were tucked in for the night, but the snowfall was fresh, not a mark on it, and the vast, empty hillside was all mine.

That kind of exhilarating privacy was rare in Manhattan. Snow almost always melted to rain upon entering the heat and intensity of this crowded island. But tonight—for a little while, anyway—the world was mine again, a blank canvas, fresh and clean for me to mark as I pleased. And block after block, I did make my mark, each footfall breaking through the frozen crust to leave its momentary print in the soft powder.

When I finally reached the corner of Bank and Hudson, I sighed, stamped the snow off my boots, and reluctantly rejoined civilization. The White Horse Tavern was crowded despite the weather, and I knew Alf often stopped here for a burger or Coke. (Being an ex-alcoholic, he told me he no longer drank alcohol, but he still loved the atmosphere of pubs.) Unfortunately, I didn't see him inside.

I chatted with the bartender, who told me he'd served Santa a cranberry juice. "He came in to get warm, wait for the snow to ease up, you know? And we were just hanging out, shooting the breeze when he jumped up all of a sudden and left in a big hurry."

"Which way did he go?" I asked.

"West," said the man, pointing. "Toward the river."

That sounded wrong on a night like this, but I didn't say so. I simply thanked the bartender, left the tavern, and returned to the chilly sidewalk. Moving off the bright main drag, I headed purposefully down the side street. Within two blocks, however, my firmness faltered.

The picturesque charm of the officially designated historic district was gone now. This close to the river, there were no more legally protected Italianate and Federal-style town houses. The buildings here were mostly remnants of the nineteenth-century industries that once supported the working waterfront.

Protected or not, however, the location of these former factories, garages, and warehouses put them right next door to a real estate bonanza. With the West Village commanding some of the highest rents in all of New York City, developers had taken advantage over the years, converting these old white elephants into residences for new money.

To make matters worse, the flurries started changing back into serious snowfall again. The clouds had thickened once more, and the icy flakes were getting heavier and more frequent. Even the halogen streetlamps were straining to cut through the returning blizzard.

With a shiver, I flipped up my parka's hood. But my mood didn't get any warmer. Traffic was nonexistent on this stretch, and the few commercial businesses I'd passed were shuttered. Uneasy on this desolate street, I was about to throw in the towel and abandon my search when I spied a familiar sight a little farther up the block: Alf's bright green Traveling Santa sleigh!

For a moment, I was elated. Then I saw that the green sleigh was parked alone on the sidewalk, its red wheels propped against the curb, white powder piling up on its surface.

Okay, this makes no sense.

Under the weak glow of a streetlamp, I could see that the cash

box was still on Alf's little cart. The box was really a round plastic container about the size of a large soup pot. The top of the container was molded to look like a pile of presents, and it slid into a much larger plastic case on the sleigh that was shaped to look like Santa's big red bag. Pedestrians threw their cash donations through a small hole at the top of the "present" box; and because it was removable from the sleigh by a hidden handle, Alf always brought the cash box into the Blend with him. He never let it out of his sight. So there was no way he'd leave it unguarded on the street like this.

Alarmed now, I approached Alf's sleigh along the slippery sidewalk and finally saw that the cash box was broken open with only a few coins left inside. More coins were on the ground, making little round sinkholes in the snow. There were footprints in the powder—*two* sets of prints. Both led away from the sleigh, into a nearby alley. Only one set of footprints came out again. They continued down the sidewalk in the direction of the river.

Those can't be Alf's footprints, I decided. Why would he head toward the river and leave his sleigh behind?

I decided to follow the other tracks of footprints in the snow, the ones leading *into* the shadowy alley. I had to make sure Alf wasn't lying at the end of those prints, hurt, bleeding, even unconscious.

I couldn't see much as I moved toward the narrow passage between the buildings, just a gunmetal-gray garbage Dumpster. But as I moved farther in, I realized the alley eventually opened up into a snow-covered courtyard.

“Alf?” I called. A wind gust suddenly howled, swallowing my voice. I called out again, stronger this time, but there was no reply, no movement.

I dug into my pocket and pulled out my keychain flashlight. The beam was weak, but it was better than the dingy dark. I stepped forward, paralleling the two sets of snow prints that led into the alley. Both sets of tracks were larger than my own small boots, and I took care not to disturb either one.

As my flashlight beam glanced along the white surface, a flash of cheery red color made me stop. I pulled the light back and saw the Santa hat.

“Hello!” I shouted, more urgently than before. “Alf! Are you here?”

Again no one answered.

I stooped to pick up the hat, and that’s when I saw the shiny black boots. They were sticking out from behind the gray Dumpster.

For a moment, I stood still as a gravestone, staring at Alf’s boots, vaguely aware of St. Luke’s bells ringing the hour. The church wasn’t far—not physically—but in that frozen flicker of time those clear, innocent, beautifully pure peals sounded as if they were coming from another world.

A second later I was down, kneeling over my red-suited friend sprawled in the snow. “Alf, can you hear me? Alf!”

He couldn’t. Choking back a scream, I realized Alfred Glockner was dead.

Chapter Four

In the frigid air, my breath was still forming little pearl-colored clouds. No steam was coming from Alf's lips or nose because there was no surviving the gaping hole in his chest or the amount of lost blood pooled around his body.

Despite the clear evidence, I went through the motions, checking for any way to help him. I played the flashlight across his wide, unfocused eyes, looking for a reaction. There was none. His wrist had no pulse, neither did his neck.

I pulled out my cell and dialed 911. The call was answered immediately by a female operator who took down all the information. She told me to remain at the scene in order to speak with the investigating officers. Finally, the woman asked if I wanted to stay on the phone with her until the officers arrived.

"No," I said. "I need the line."

I was still kneeling, the cold, wet snow soaking through the legs of my jeans. I didn't care. I hit speed dial. When I heard the reassuring timbre of Detective Mike Quinn's gravelly voice, I started ranting—only to realize I was talking to his prerecorded message telling me to leave my name and number. When the tone sounded, I took a breath.

"It's Clare. Call me back as soon as you have the chance..."

I was tempted to say more, but Mike was on the job now. If he wasn't picking up, there was a good reason. He could very well

be at a crime scene of his own. He was overseeing an operation in Queens tonight, which meant, even if he had picked up, he would still be an hour's drive away.

I wasn't the one who'd been shot in this alley; I was perfectly okay, and the police were on their way. A hysterical message from me wouldn't do either of us any good. So I ended the call, closed my eyes to gain some objectivity, and shifted the beam to illuminate Alf's wound.

Judging from the scorch marks on the breast of the velvet Santa suit, Alf had been shot at point-blank range. The lapel pocket was turned inside out—no doubt when the mugger rifled Alf's pockets. The killer had ripped open Alf's costume, too, using so much force that one of the big, white Traveling Santa suit's signature buttons was ripped off.

I passed my flashlight over the nearby snow, but I didn't see the button. I did, however, see Alf's blood. There was so much of it pooled around him, it was impossible to miss. Its warmth had even melted the surrounding snow.

I stilled, realizing something for the first time: Alf's blood hasn't frozen solid yet. In weather like this, that could only mean one thing. He was shot very recently.

About then I noticed my hands were shaking. I was upset about Alf, of course, and beginning to feel very cold, but I knew something else was making me shiver.

I reminded myself that the perpetrator of this horrible crime was gone. I'd called out to Alf enough times that anyone lurking in the shadows would have been scared away. And that single trail of

footprints I'd noticed coming out of the alley was heading away from the scene and toward the river. That had to be a trail of the killer's prints, I thought.

But what if they aren't?

There was a slim possibility that Alf's murderer was demented enough to hang around the crime scene. The shooter could be lurking in the shadows, watching me right now. I swallowed hard and hit another button on my speed dial.

Matt answered on the first ring. "Clare! Where are you? You left without me—"

"It's Alf. I found him lying in the snow. Someone shot him. He's dead."

Matt's breath caught.

"I'm not hurt," I quickly added. "I'm just waiting for the police."

"Where, Clare? What street?"

I told him.

"I'm on my way!"

I closed the phone and glanced down at Alf's body. Still kneeling in the snow, I collapsed back on my calves. The tears came then. Hearing myself tell Matt what had happened made it all personal again. My new friend was dead.

Someone had mugged and murdered Santa Claus!

For a flashing moment something far less serious but just as ugly rose out of my memories...

After Matt and I had divorced, I'd raised my daughter in a modest home in the Jersey suburbs. Matt's mother always came to

join us for the first and last nights of Chanukah as well as Christmas dinner, and Matt always made it, too. For most of the season, however, Joy and I were on our own doing the baking, decorating, and holiday card writing.

By the time Joy was twelve, we'd developed our own little girls' club traditions, like buying a tree the first week in December. We put up our front yard lights and decorations together on the same day, too, and one of my favorite displays was a plastic Santa.

He was four feet tall and had a big red light for a nose. Chipped and fading, he was nevertheless a beloved piece of sentimental kitsch from my childhood front yard—and not just the yard of my late grandmother's. My four-foot Santa with the glowing nose had started out his life in my family's yard when it had still been a family, before my mother had left my dad and me to run away with some passing salesman to Florida (all the explanation I'd ever gotten).

Joy had grown fond of that funny little Santa, too. She loved the red glow of his nose, strong enough to cast a bit of festive color through her bedroom window during the dark December nights.

Unfortunately, on one of those nights—the longest of the year—a foursome of local punks got drunk enough and mean enough to want to kill Christmas. They set about smashing holiday decorations all over town. One of their victims was our much-beloved Santa. I can still recall the morning I had to comfort my tearful daughter, while trying to explain the unexplainable to a little girl.

A decade later, kneeling in the snow, I was the one who felt like a little girl, needing the unexplainable explained to me. I said a prayer for Alf, but it answered nothing. In fact, talking to God only turned my feelings of grief and shock into an onslaught of other emotions.

How could this happen to a good man like Alf?! Do you hear me, God?! What are you going to do about it?!

Tears welled and spilled. I swiped them away; when my vision cleared, I saw something I hadn't noticed before. Right in front of me were more footprints in the snow.

I noted the size and shape of the prints and played my flashlight on the sole of Alf's slightly pointy boots. The prints in the snow were identical. Standing up, I used my little flashlight to illuminate this new trail of Alf's pointy boot prints. Oddly, they were coming out of the courtyard.

What in the world?

The killer's rounder-toed prints stopped in the snow next to Alf's body, then backtracked out to the street again. That meant Alf was coming out of this building's courtyard and through its side alley when the killer mugged and shot him.

But that made no sense for a street robbery. A mugger would have confronted Alf on the sidewalk, taken his donation box, and (God help me) forced Santa into the alley at gunpoint to prevent him from identifying the criminal in a lineup. But the marks left behind in the snow didn't tell a story like that. According to the boot prints, Alf came into this alley alone, went

back into the courtyard for some reason, and met his killer on his way out again.

Why would Alf go into this dark courtyard alone? Why was Alf even on this desolate street during a snowstorm?

I knew at once that the detectives assigned to this case needed to see these prints. But where were they?!

I glanced skyward. The fat white flakes were falling even harder now. If the police didn't arrive soon, this evidence would be completely covered. I listened for the sound of a siren but heard nothing. Worried the prints would be obliterated by the weather, I moved farther into the alley to track them myself.

Inside a minute, I'd followed Alf's footprints through the alley's shadows and all the way into the snow-covered courtyard. The prints appeared to pause in the middle of the small yard, and I got the impression Alf had stood here for a moment, shifting from left to right, as if studying something.

But what were you studying, Alf?

...Just then, I became aware of a high-pitched wail in the distance. An emergency siren! Finally! A police car was approaching from the street I'd left. I checked my watch and realized with a start that less than six minutes had passed since my 911 call. Given the state I was in, it only seemed like hours. Still, I was glad I'd had the time to investigate. Now I was more than ready to give my statement to the detectives, show them what I'd found.

That's when I heard the voices.

"Police!"

"Freeze!"

Men were shouting between buildings from the other side of the courtyard.

“NYPD!”

“Stop, police!”

Frost-crusted snow crunched behind me. As I turned to see who was coming, a hooded figure rocketed across the small, dark yard. I tried to make out the person’s face, but I didn’t have more than a nanosecond before the figure slammed into me.

The impact tore me off my feet. I flew through the air, and two seconds later I knew what a blitzed quarterback felt like when he hit Astroturf.

Chapter Five

“Ms. Cosi? You okay? Ms. Cosi?”

The voice sounded earnest, youthful, and familiar. I blinked against the flashlight’s glare. A silhouette formed in my blurred vision. Narrow shoulders blocked the falling snow. The young man bent down to the icy ground beside me, and that’s when I noticed the nickel-plated badge pinned to the dark blue uniform.

“Officer Langley?” I whispered. He and his partner, Demetrios, were regular customers at the Blend. (Langley was a latte man; Demetrios double espressos.)

“You really took a tumble,” Langley said.

Still flat on my back in the snow, I felt an icy clamminess creeping over me. Slush was trickling down the back of my parka, and I tried to sit up. Officer Langley gently restrained me.

“Don’t move, Ms. Cosi. An ambulance is on the way.”

“You’re kidding, right? ’Cause I’m freezing down here!” I sat up—then clutched my ribs. “Ouch.” I moaned.

“You shouldn’t move until the paramedics check you out,” Langley said. But I refused to remain on the frigid ground any longer, and the young cop gave up trying to fight me.

With a sigh of defeat, Langley helped me up. Loose strands of my shoulder-length hair were hanging in my face. As I brushed them away, a wind blast knifed through the courtyard. I groaned from the cold and noticed Langley shiver as he spoke into his police radio. Under his uniform’s hat, the man’s fair complexion blanched pastier than an albino thrown into a meat locker. After this long in the cold, I figured my own olive skin tone had gone nearly as pale.

Teeth close to chattering, I flipped up my hood and asked, “What happened?”

“We were chasing a suspect, Ms. Cosi. You got in the way.”

“Oh my God!” I cried, my chill suddenly forgotten. “You saw the killer? Did you catch him? Did he tell you why he shot poor Alf?”

The officer gave me a sidelong glance. “There’s no killer, Ms. Cosi. Just a mugger. We were chasing a purse snatcher, that’s all, and—”

“Langley!”

The deep, harsh call came from the side of the building where I’d found Alf’s body.

“Where the hell is he? Langley!”

We moved across the courtyard and up to the mouth of the alley. My eyes widened at the small army of police and crime-scene officers now gathering around Alf’s corpse. Two uniformed men began spooling out a roll of yellow police tape to cordon off the area around the metal Dumpster.

“Yo! Langley,” the man called again.

“Over here, Detective!” Langley waved.

A male figure broke away from the pack and moved toward us up the alley. I could hear his police radio chattering numerical codes.

“Give me the rundown,” he demanded from the shadows.

“Me and Demetrios heard a scream on Perry Street,” Langley explained. “A woman was being robbed. We pursued the perpetrator through that alley over there.” He gestured to the other side of the courtyard. “The perp fled through this yard, where he ran down Ms. Cosi here. I stopped to help her while Demetrios continued the chase with Officers Wu and Gomez, also from the Sixth—”

“Those guys are after a shooter, Langley,” the detective said, still veiled by the night. “We got a DOA by the Dumpster over there.”

Langley tensed and exchanged a glance with me.

That's when the detective finally stepped out of the shadows. Most detectives I'd met wore suits, ties, and overcoats. This guy wore cowboy boots and a Yankees jacket, and his head was covered by a red, white, and blue bandanna—an urban fashion statement my shaved-headed barista, Dante, once informed me was a “do-rag.”

“Some female called the dead guy in, then took a hike,” the detective said.

“Excuse me,” I interrupted, “but that female would be *me...*”

End of excerpt :)

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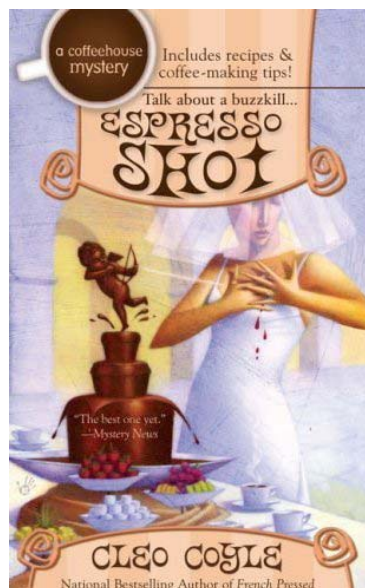
For more information on *Holiday Grind* or
the previous titles in my Coffeehouse Mystery series,
visit my Web site:

www.CoffeehouseMystery.com

Cleo's Final Note

To those of you who haven't yet read **Espresso Shot**, the
Coffeehouse Mystery that comes before *Holiday Grind*, I'm
very happy to announce that it will be available in mass
market paperback in just a few weeks!

Espresso Shot
paperback edition
on sale
October 6



Starred review. "Coyle's Coffeehouse books are superb examples of the cozy genre because of their intelligent cast of characters, their subtle wit, and their knowledge of the coffee industry used to add depth and flavor to the stories...Highly recommended for all mystery collections." —*Library Journal*

Holiday Grind

A Coffeehouse Mystery
by Cleo Coyle

There's nothing cozier than a winter evening in Greenwich Village. Streetlights shimmer through icy flakes, cafés glow with welcoming warmth, and a layer of snow dusts historic townhouses like powdered sugar on holiday confections. Murder has no place in such a pretty picture, until now...

Coffeehouse manager Clare Cosi has grown very fond of Alfred Glockner, the part-time comic and genuinely jolly charity Santa who's been using her Village Blend as a place to warm his mittens. When she finds him brutally gunned down in a nearby alley, a few subtle clues convince her that Alfred's death was something more than the tragic result of a random mugging--the conclusion of the police.

With Clare's boyfriend, NYPD Detective Mike Quinn, distracted by a cold case of his own, and ex-husband Matt investigating this year's holiday lingerie catalogs (an annual event), Clare charges ahead solo to solve her beloved Santa's slaying. Then someone tries to ice Clare, and she really gets steamed. But she'd better watch out, because if she fails to stop this stone cold killer, she may just get the biggest chill of her life.

This very special holiday entry in Cleo Coyle's nationally bestselling mystery series includes a bonus section of delicious holiday recipes as well as a glossary of coffeehouse terms, instructions on making espressos and lattes without an expensive machine, and tips for creating tasty coffeehouse syrups at home.