



An exclusive excerpt from...

ROAST MORTEM

A Coffeehouse Mystery

by Cleo Coyle

On Sale in Hardcover

August 3, 2010

★ **“SUPERB...INTELLIGENT...HIGHLY RECOMMENDED...”**

—Library Journal on Espresso Shot (starred review)

Clare Cosi, manager and head barista of the landmark Village Blend coffeehouse, has perfected the pulling of steaming hot espressos. But can she keep New York’s Bravest from getting burned?

After the firefighters of Ladder Company 189 pull Clare’s friends out of a blazing café, she happily comes to their rescue. As a favor to the men, Clare visits their firehouse kitchen to teach them the finer points of operating their newly donated espresso machine. But as she gets to know these fearless few, more than their coffee turns out to be hot. Somebody’s torching cafés around the city, and firefighters are beginning to die in suspicious ways.

Believing the two events are related, Clare investigates, staking out a five-borough bake sale and sniffing out clues in the pizza joints of Brooklyn. Then her detective boyfriend, Mike Quinn, is pulled into the fire of a false accusation and Clare is desperate to put out the flames. But will she be able to come to Mike’s rescue before someone tries to extinguish her?

“FUN AND GRIPPING...”

—The Huffington Post on Holiday Grind



A Note from Cleo

Although Roast Mortem is the ninth book in my amateur sleuth series, any newcomer should be able to read the book as a stand-alone experience. To my longtime readers, I thank you from the heart for your very kind support over the years. To my new readers, welcome! I hope you enjoy your first visit to Clare Cosi's Village Blend, where coffee and crime are always brewing...



Love is a fire. But whether it is going to warm your hearth or burn down your house, you can never tell.

—Joan Crawford

Prologue

Cold here in the alley, but things will get hotter soon...

The Arsonist moved deeper into the shadows, orange shopping bag in hand. Back on the busy Queens sidewalk, the day felt bright and balmy. Just a few steps away from humanity, all warmth fled and nearly all light.

Weak shafts of sun barely penetrated the crisscrossing maze of phone wires and fire escapes, coaxial cables and clothing lines. With certain strides, the Arsonist bypassed iron grates and grimy windows, broken crates and dented

trash cans. Finally the destination—one particular back door.

Down went the glossy tangerine sack, squatting on the cold concrete. Cloying scents of soy and garlic still haunted its boxy interior, ghosts of last night's Korean takeout. The reinforced bottom and laminated sides made it sturdy enough to carry the necessary items.

Feeling sweaty despite the chill, the Arsonist bent over the shopping bag, grasped two wires from the battery, and fixed them to circuits on the bleach bottle with no bleach inside.

Now it's ready...

The Arsonist rose, lifting the bag's handles of nylon rope.

Heavier now, or my imagination?

Nervous fingers tested the shiny brass knob. Unlocked, as promised, the back door swung open on a small utility room. A sink, shelves, supplies neatly stacked.

Male laughter seeped through the brocade curtain. The Arsonist crossed the tight space, teased apart the muffling fabric. An archway framed the caffè's main room. Up front, the elderly owner gabbed with a customer about the rush hour pedestrian parade, mostly about the women.

Stepping back, the Arsonist searched out a spot for the bag. Under the shelf, behind the cleaning products...

Perfect.

A stifled sneeze, a few more steps, and the Arsonist was back on the sidewalk. Warmth, pedestrians, unobstructed light. It felt as if nothing had happened—or more like something good had happened.

At 9:25 pm, the caffè would be closed, the old Italian off playing bocce in the park. No one would be in the building. No one would be hurt.

Unless something goes wrong...

That prick of a thought had vexed the Arsonist multiple times. This would be the last.

After all, *thought the Arsonist*, it's out of my hands now. The schedule was set for me, and I held up my end. Tonight Caffè Lucia will burn. If people get in the way, it's their own stupid fault.

CHAPTER ONE

“Boss, I hate to leave you like this, but I have got to go.”

“Go,” I told Esther. “We’ll be okay...”

At least I hoped we would. I was standing behind my espresso machine, facing a line out my door. The usual Village Blend regulars were here along with a swell of caffeine-deprived commuters grabbing a java hit before heading home. Nothing out of the ordinary, really, and in most respects the day felt like any other. Except it wasn't. This was the day the fires began. When the smoke finally cleared, the fatalities would number two, and they would not be accidents. The deaths would turn out to be murders and I, Clare Cosi, would be the one to prove it.

At this particular moment, however, I wasn't thinking about killers or arsonists; lovesick Italian women; or bluster-y FDNY captains; and I certainly wasn't thinking about a bomb. Mostly what I was thinking about was traffic.

Tucker Burton, my lanky, floppy-haired assistant manager, arrived on time for his shift and was just tying on his Village Blend apron. A part-time actor-playwright and occasional cabaret director, Tuck loved being a barista in the Italian tradition, which (like a good bartender) had as much

to do with convivial customer interaction as it did with temperature and pressure.

“Excuse me, Clare,” he said, “but where is Gardner again?”

“Trapped in his car,” I replied, “on the New Jersey side of the Holland Tunnel.”

Tuck pointed to Esther. “And why can’t our resident slam poetess stay and work another hour until he shows? I’ll bet my Actors’ Equity card she’s been late to more than a few of her classes.”

Esther’s wine-dark fingertips went to her Botticelli waist. “Excuse me, Broadway Boy, but I am not simply taking this class. I am a TA and need to be there on time.”

“For what? Introduction to Baggy Pants and Bling 101?”

“Urban Rap’s Influence on Mainstream America!”

“Who’s the professor? Eminem?”

Esther smirked. “The man has a PhD from Brown in Linguistics and is heading my program in the semiotics of urban expression.”

“Yeah? And I know what seat he holds: The Snoop Dog Chair.”

“Okay, you two, enough!” I said then turned to Tucker. “Let her off the hook.”

“But it’s not very fair to you, Clare. You’ve been here since eight am.”

“And I can’t leave you here alone, can I? Traffic is traffic and Esther is a teaching assistant now. Her shift’s over and she has to go.”

“Thank you!” she said.

I caught her eye. “Just call Vicki Glockner, okay? Tell her I’ll give her double time until Gardner can get through that tunnel.”

“Will do, boss,” Esther promised, and she was gone.

Now my focus was back on that customer line. As Tuck manned the register and the single-cup Clover machine, I turned out the espresso drink orders: one Skinny Lat (latte with skim milk); one Breve Cap (cappuccino with half-and-half); 3 *doppios* (double espressos); one Cortado (a single shot caressed with steamed milk); two Flat Whites (cappuccinos without foam); one Americano (espresso diluted with hot water); two Thunder Thighs (double-tall mocha lattes with whole milk and extra whipped cream); and a Why Bother (decaf espresso).

When the crush finally eased, I turned to the octogenarian sitting on the other side of my counter. Madame Dreyfus Allegro Dubois was looking as stylish as ever in a springy apricot pantsuit, her silver-gray hair coiffed into a supernaturally smooth twist.

“I’m so sorry,” I told her, sliding a *crema*-rich espresso across the blueberry marble.

“Why should you be sorry, dear?”

“Because we’re going to be *very* late.”

“*C’est dommage*,” Madame said, lifting the demitasse to her peach-glossed lips. “But Enzo will understand. Managerial setbacks are an inescapable aspect of New York’s *mise-en-scène*.”

“You mean like bureaucratic bribes and obscene levels of sales tax?”

Madame’s reply was an amused little shrug. The woman’s Gallic aplomb was admirable, I had to admit, but then what was a minor traffic delay to someone who’d seen Nazi tanks roll down the Champs-Élysées?

Given that I was half her age—with duskier skin, Italian hips, and a preference for discount store jeans—Madame and I made an incongruous pair. At our core, however, we weren’t so different, which was why our relationship had survived my late teen pregnancy and hasty marriage to her

wayward son, his drug addiction and recovery, our rocky divorce, and my decade spent in New Jersey exile before returning to Manhattan to run her beloved coffeehouse again.

The latter development was the reason I'd agreed to drive Madame to Queens today. A valuable piece of Village Blend history was waiting for us at Astoria's Caffè Lucia, and we were both determined to reclaim it. Just then my thigh vibrated—actually the cell phone in my pocket next to my thigh. I answered without checking the screen.

"Gardner?" I asked, hoping my jazz musician barista was calling to say he'd finally blown through the Holland Tunnel.

"It's Mike."

As in Mike Quinn, my boyfriend (for lack of a better word). He certainly wasn't a *boy* and he was much more than a *friend*, although that's the way we'd started out. The phrase "Mike is my lover" would have been accurate, but it sounded absurdly decadent to the ears of a girl who was raised by a strict Italian grandmother.

"I'm sorry, Mike, I can't talk—"

"Yes, you can, dear." A hand touched my shoulder. I turned to find Madame behind me, tying on a Blend apron. "Take a break, Clare."

"But—"

"No buts. My hands are clean." With a wink, Madame showed me. "And as you know, I've done this a few times before."

I would have argued, but I really did need to take five, so I pulled off my apron and grabbed her seat on the customer side of the bar.

"Are you still driving to Queens?" Mike asked.

"Slight delay but yes," I said. "Why?"

“I’ve got another meeting on the undercover operation,” he said. “It may run late, but I was still hoping to see you tonight.”

“Just come by the duplex,” I said, happily accepting the freshly pulled double from my employer. “Use your key. You still have it, right?”

“I still have it.” He paused. “So how’s your head?”

“Better,” I lied, and took a reviving sip of the *doppio*.

In fact, I was still recovering from the Quinn family’s St. Patrick’s Day bash the night before—“*The annual event*,” or so I was told by Mike’s clan. He was the only cop among a family of firefighters so he didn’t always attend (cops had their own gatherings), but this year Mike wanted to introduce me around.

While the beer flowed like Trevi, I was regaled with heroic stories about the “Mighty Quinn,” Mike’s late fire captain father. Then Mike’s mother asked me if I’d be willing to contribute some coffeehouse specialties to the FDNY’s upcoming Five-Borough Bake Sale, and she promptly introduced me to the head of the coordinating committee—a lovely (and very sharp) woman named Valerie Noonan.

“And have you made your decision yet?” Mike asked.

I could almost hear him smiling over the cellular line, but I couldn’t blame him. I’d called the man three times today, obsessing over what would impress his family more: My cinnamon-sugar doughnut muffins; blueberries ’n’ cream coffee cake pie; or honey-glazed peach crostata with fresh ginger-infused whipped cream.

There were always my pastry case standbys: caramelized banana bread; almond-roca scones; and mini Italian coffeehouse cakes. (Ricotta cheese was my secret ingredient to making those tasty little loaves tender and delicious.) They were absolutely perfect with coffee, and I

topped each with a different glaze inspired by the gourmet syrups of my coffeehouse: chocolate-hazelnut; buttery toffee; candied orange-cinnamon; raspberry-white chocolate; and sugar-kissed lemon, like my espresso Romano “sweet”—an espresso served in a cup with its rim rubbed by a lemon twist, then dipped in granulated cane, the way the old Italians drank it in the Pennsylvania factory town where I’d grown up.

“I think I should make them all,” I said.

“All?”

Am I trying too hard? I thought. *Probably.* Then I remembered tomorrow was March 19, the feast day of St. Joseph (patron saint of pastry chefs). Every year my *nonna* would fry up crunchy sweet bow tie cookies and set them out with hot, fresh, doughy zeppolins in her little Italian grocery. *That’s it!*

“I’ll make champagne cream puffs!”

“Champagne cream puffs?”

“Zeppole dough baked in the oven and filled with Asti Spumante-based zabaglione!”

“It’s a bake sale, sweetheart, not a four-star dessert cart.”

Just then our shop bell rang and a young woman with fluffy, crumpet-colored curls walked across our main floor. “Hey, everyone!” Vicki Glockner waved at me.

“Mike, I’ve got to go. My relief is here.”

“Okay,” he said, “but that’s why I called. It’s my turn to relieve you. Don’t worry about cooking tonight. I’ll get us takeout.”

By the time I drove down the Queensboro Bridge ramp, dusk had fully descended and streetlights were flickering on, their halogen bulbs pouring pools of blue-tinged light into an ocean of deepening darkness. Madame and I had been late getting started. Then a pileup on the bridge left

me inching and lurching my way across the mile-long span. Now we were more than an hour behind schedule.

“Do you want to try calling again?” I asked, swinging my old Honda beneath the subway’s elevated tracks.

“It’s all right, dear,” Madame replied. “I left a message apologizing for our tardiness. Let’s hope Enzo picks it up.”

Enzo was “Lorenzo” Testa, the owner of Caffè Lucia. He’d called Madame that morning, telling her he’d been cleaning out his basement and came across an old Blend roaster and a photo album with pictures of Madame and her late first husband, Antonio Allegro. While Madame was thrilled about the photos, I was itching to get my paws on the old Probat, a small-batch German coffee roaster, circa 1921. Enzo had bought it used from the Blend in the sixties.

“So this man worked for you and Matt’s father,” I asked.

Madame nodded. “He came to us fresh off the boat from Italy. An eager, aspiring artist.”

“Marlon Brando-ish? Isn’t that how you described him?”

“More Victor Mature, dear. The young female customers absolutely swooned when they saw him in our shop or Washington Square Park—that’s where he liked to set up his painter’s easel.”

“So he was hot stuff?”

“Oh yes. Smoldering male charisma, liquid bedroom gaze . . . *Oo-la-la* . . .”

Oo-la-la? I suppressed a smile. “Is that why I’m the one driving you to Astoria to meet with him instead of Otto?”

“My. Don’t *you* have a suspicious mind?”

“I think we’ve already established that.”

“Well, the answer to your question is *no*. My Otto would have taken me but he has a very important business dinner lined up this evening so I’m a free agent.”

“Uh-huh.” The last time Madame characterized herself as a “free agent” she was in East Hampton, enjoying a fling with a septuagenarian expert on Jackson Pollock.

“And, besides,” she added. “I’ve wanted you to meet Enzo for ages. Given your background, I thought it was about time.”

“Whatever became of Enzo’s art career, anyway?” (Myself an art school dropout, I couldn’t help wondering.) “Did his work ever sell?”

“Oh, yes. Enzo’s female admirers bought many of his paintings. Restaurants and caffès hired him, too. At one time, you could see his trompe l’oeil frescos in dozens of pizzerias around town. But most of them are gone now. Irreplaceable because Enzo stopped selling his work.”

“Why? What happened?”

Madame shrugged. “Life.”

“Life?”

“His lover became pregnant,” she said, glancing at the fast-passing rows of storefronts. “The same year her father died. Angela asked Enzo to marry her and take over her family’s caffè in Queens, save them from financial ruin.” Madame shrugged. “Enzo adored her...”

I nodded at Enzo’s story (half of it, anyway) because I knew just how many hours it took to run a successful business, and just how much love it took to give up on a dream. Suddenly, without having ever met the man, I liked him very much.

“Caffè Lucia is a pretty name,” I said.

“He renamed the place for his daughter. A lively, outspoken child, as I recall; all grown up by now. And sadly, last year, Angela passed away during their annual visit to Italy...”

As I turned onto Steinway Street, I noticed Madame glancing at her watch.

“This trip isn’t over yet,” I warned.

“I know, dear. I’m looking.”

Parking is what we were looking for; and I didn’t see a single open spot. Eyes peeled, I rolled by cell phone shops, clothing stores, and restaurants with Greek, Italian, Cyrillic, and Naskh signage. Finally I turned onto the tree-lined block where Caffè Lucia was located and Madame began waving frantically (because attempting to find parking in this town could turn even the most urbane cosmopolitan into a raving maniac).

“There! There! A spot on the right! Get it! Get it!”

“Fire hydrant,” I said. “I’ll circle again—”

“Look! Look! That car is leaving! Go! Go!”

I zoomed into the spot, right behind a mammoth SUV. As I climbed out from behind the wheel, I could almost feel the adrenaline ebbing from my bloodstream. (Not quite as stressful as driving a golf cart through a war zone, but close.) Unfortunately, I wasn’t off the battlefield yet. More trouble was heading our way—in size-twelve Air Jordans.

“Hey, lady!” (The greeting was quintessential Jerry Lewis but the accent was definitely foreign.) “You can’t park here!”

A scowling man barreled toward us, gesturing wildly.

“Excuse me?” I said.

“You have to move your car!”

Stone black eyes under tight curls the color of Sicilian licorice; a slate gray leisure suit (sans tie) over incongruous white tube socks. I couldn’t place the guy’s accent, but that was no surprise. While this area used to be primarily Greek and Italian, more recent arrivals included Brazilians, Bosnians, and natives of Egypt, Yemen, and Morocco.

The guy stopped right in front of us, hands outstretched to keep us from moving down the sidewalk. For a moment, I stared at his day-old jaw stubble. *Another blind follower of Hollywood's derelict chic trend? Or simply a misplaced razor?*

"You have to move that junk heap! I can't have it in front of my club!"

Junk heap? I frowned, scanning the area around my admittedly *non*-late-model Honda. I saw no fire hydrant, construction cones, or city signage.

Madame glanced at me, then back at our human road block. "I don't understand, young man. Are you saying this isn't a legal parking spot?"

"I'm saying you can't park here unless you're going to my club."

"Your club?" I said.

He jerked his head at the shadowy doorway behind him. Under a scarlet neon *Red Mirage* banner, a sign announced: *Happy Hour 5–8 pm. Monday thru Thursday.*

Madame's large, expressive eyes—so intensely blue that tricks of light turned them lavender—displayed gentle crow's feet when she smiled. She wasn't smiling now.

"Listen up, friend—" (Her voice dropped to a serious octave.) "Our parking spot is legal. Your attempt at extortion is not."

Given the level of society to which Madame's late second husband (a French importer) had elevated her, not to mention her Fifth Avenue address, even I sometimes failed to remember that the doyenne of polite society was no cream-filled profiterole. The woman had come to this country as a motherless, penniless refugee. Not long after, she'd found herself alone, a widow in her prime, with a boy to raise and a coffeehouse to run—no mean feat in a city that challenged its shop owners with difficult

regulations, sky-high overhead, and a demanding (and occasionally dangerous) customer base.

Of course, Club Guy here didn't know any of that. And when Madame actually took a step *closer* to the man, he froze. A moment later, he began muttering in another language, obviously befuddled by a dignified older lady's willingness to go toe-to-toe with him. Finally, he waved his arms and cried, "I'm a businessman, Lady! I'm just trying to keep this spot open for taxis to drop off paying customers!"

Score one for Madame. He was on the defensive. But his Air Jordans had yet to budge. That's when I noticed a flash of headlights. The driver in that mammoth SUV had started his engine.

"There," I said, "why don't you keep *that* spot open for your customers!"

Our road block raced off to reserve the vacated space. Madame tapped my shoulder. "Shall we, dear?"

"We shall," I said then looped my arm through hers and we started down the sidewalk, toward our hard won destination: Caffè Lucia.

Roast Mortem
On Sale August 3, 2010

"Clare and company are some of the most vibrant characters I've ever read. Coyle also is a master of misdirection and red herrings. I challenge any reader to figure out whodunit before Coyle reveals all." —***Mystery Scene on Holiday Grind***

*Find out more about Cleo Coyle
and her books at her *virtual* coffeehouse
www.CoffeehouseMystery.com*

★ *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 on Espresso Shot*



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