

EXCERPT FROM

Manhattans & Murder

A MURDER, SHE WROTE MYSTERY

Bestselling mystery writer Jessica Fletcher's new book tour brings her to New York for Christmas, but she learns that Manhattan can be murder when she discovers a notorious Cabot Cove crook playing a sidewalk Santa. When Jessica witnesses a murder, she decides to do what she does best—do whatever it takes of stop a murderer from spoiling the season. Here is the complete first chapter.

It was his eyes. Not that his eyes caused me to stop and look at him. The red Santa Claus suit, shiny black boots and fake, grizzled white beard did that. But it was his eyes that sparked recognition in me.

He was one of a dozen solicitors of charitable contributions on Fifth Avenue that crisp, sunny day in December. Some employed loud musical accompaniment as they attempted to woo hordes of pedestrians passing each hour, a few hopefully imbued with the Christmas spirit of giving. The Santa Claus I stopped to observe had only a small, cheap bell, whose tintinnabulation could barely be heard over the blaring, out-of-tune brass ensemble of an adjacent Salvation Army unit.

He didn't seem to notice me as I stood in front of Saks Fifth Avenue's festive holiday windows. Why would he? I was only one of countless faces on the street at that hour.

Besides, it had been at least ten years since Waldo Morse and I had last seen each other. It probably wasn't even Waldo.

Still, I couldn't resist having a closer look. I pulled a dollar bill from my purse, navigated the stream of foot traffic at the risk of being bowled over, and dropped the money into a cardboard box decorated with shimmering red and green paper that sat at his feet.

"Thank you," he mumbled, his eyes looking beyond me.

"Merry Christmas," I said loud and clear. I didn't move, and my presence

compelled him to acknowledge me. He stopped ringing the bell and frowned. "Waldo?" I said.

The mention of his name seemed to rattle him. He glanced away, rang his bell one more time, then looked at me again. "Jessica Fletcher." He said it in a hoarse whisper as though trying to keep others from hearing.

"Yes, it's me, Waldo. What an incredible surprise. No, shock is more like it."

It suddenly occurred to me—too late, as is usually the case—that I'd been imprudent in openly approaching him. His expression confirmed it. He was overtly uncomfortable, and I wished I could reverse my actions of the past few minutes, run the movie backward.

I was now as awkward as he was uncomfortable. I said cheerily, "Well, Waldo, they say you always bump into someone you know in this big city. I guess they're right. Nice to have seen you."

I was about to rejoin the stream of pedestrians moving uptown when he said, "Mrs. Fletcher, Wait."

I turned. Was he smiling beneath the white beard? Hard to tell, but I felt better thinking he was. I moved closer as he said in that same whisper, "I'd like to talk to you."

He looked left and right; he seemed anxious to keep our conversation private. No need to worry about that, not with the Salvation Army brass orchestra groaning loudly through *Adeste Fideles*.

"Come back tomorrow" he said. "Meet me here at two."

"Two? Oh my, I'm afraid I—" I stopped myself. The plans I'd made for the next afternoon could be juggled, even shelved. I would not, could not, pass up the chance to talk to Waldo Morse. "I'll be here at two sharp," I said.

I walked to the corner of Fiftieth Street, stopped, and looked back over my shoulder. As I did, a priest who'd come from the direction of St. Patrick's Cathedral

approached Waldo. The transaction didn't go the way I assumed it would. Instead of the priest's putting money into the box at Waldo's feet, Santa Claus handed the priest something.

The priest quickly disappeared into the crowd, Waldo snapped his head in my direction and saw that I'd observed what had taken place. I rounded the corner and headed east. Somehow, I felt I should not have witnessed the exchange between them. Why? I wasn't sure. Maybe because of who Waldo Morse was, and the reason he'd departed Cabot Cove.

Tomorrow at two. I'd be there.