

EXCERPT FROM

A Fatal Feast

A MURDER, SHE WROTE MYSTERY

Thanksgiving is fast approaching and, as usual, Jessica Fletcher is juggling too many responsibilities. She's hosting a crowd for the holiday, is helping to write the community pageant, and has agreed to serve at the senior center's charity dinner. Add to that, the deadline for her next book is looming, and she's got writer's block. And, oh yes, Scotland Yard Inspector George Sutherland is expected any day now. Here is the complete first chapter of A Fatal Feast.

"Mornin', Mrs. Fletcher."

"Good morning, Newt. Lovely day."

"That it is. Pleasure to be out on a day like this."

He pulled a sheaf of mail from his bag and handed it to me. "Seems like you got quite a lot today."

"I'm not certain that's a good thing," I said sifting through the envelopes. "Depends on what's in them."

"S'pose that's true. Mebbe somethin's there can help uncatch that there typewriter of yours."

My face reflected my surprise. "You know about that, Newt?"

He looked contrite. "Didn't know it was a secret," he said, "the way folks are talkin' in town. Well, better keep to m'rounds. You have yourself a good day, Mrs. Fletcher, and good luck finishin' that book."

As he turned to walk away, we both looked across the street to where a man stood.

"Do you know him Newt?" I asked.

"No, I wouldn't say I know him, but I know who he is. Name's Billups. Hubert Billups."

"He must be new in town," I said. "I'd never seen him before last week."

Hubert Billups had a long, scraggly red beard. He was like a statue, arms crossed over his chest, eyes focused down the road, although I'd caught him staring at me several times. It was an unseasonably warm day for mid-November, yet he was dressed in a red-and-black wool mackinaw, scarf, black wool cap, and heavy boots, the same outfit I'd seen him in on most days the past week as he stationed himself on the side of the road across from my house.

"You okay, Mrs. Fletcher?" Newt asked, taking note of my concerned expression.

"What? Oh, yes, Newt, I'm fine."

"He's from away, come up heah about a month ago, or so I'm told," my mailman said. "He's livin' in that rooming house over behind the industrial plant. Somebody said he was a cook once, only you can't prove it by me. Strange lookin' fella, doncha think? I see him around town now and then, just sittin' on a bench or inside one of the buildings when it rains. Just sits and stares. Probably tetched or mebbe a rumdum, if you ask me. Well, you take care, Mrs. Fletcher. I hear that friend o' yours from overseas is comin' for Thanksgiving. That must give you somethin' t'look forward to."

The Cabot Cove rumor mill was operating in high-gear.

I sighed. "Yes. I am looking forward to it. Thanks for the mail, Newt. Best to your family."

I returned inside the house where I settled in my study and plopped the letters, catalogues and other mail on my desk. I swiveled in my chair and looked at words on my computer screen. Those same words had been there for two days; seeing them caused a knot in my stomach.

Newt had been right. I'd recently suffered a rare case of writer's block on my latest mystery novel, whose deadline was coming up fast, December 15 to be precise. I've always prided myself on meeting publishing deadlines. I know

other writers who consider deadlines set by their publishers to be arbitrary, at best. I've never felt that way. For me, meeting deadlines is a sign of professionalism in any line of work, and above all I like to consider myself exactly that, a professional.

But unless I broke through this bout of inertia, my track record of always delivering on time was about to be broken. While I readily took responsibility for having lagged behind in my writing, other external forces had also played a part.

It was a little more than a week until Thanksgiving, which naturally meant a flurry of activity having nothing to do with mystery novels or any other form of professional writing. I'd agreed to host Thanksgiving dinner at my house this year, although Sheriff Mort Metzger's wife, Maureen, an enthusiastic if unseasoned cook, offered to help me with meal preparation. There would be nine of us at the dinner table, including—as the town obviously knew based upon Newt's comment—my dear Scottish friend from London, Scotland Yard Inspector George Sutherland. I didn't harbor any illusions that the number of guests would remain at nine. In past years, there were always a few last-minute additions to the dinner table, which was fine with me. With a few extra leaves, my table can squeeze fourteen.

George and I hadn't seen each other in many months and I was delighted when he accepted, albeit at the last minute, my invitation to experience a traditional American Thanksgiving holiday in Cabot Cove. I wanted it to be special for him and intended to go all-out in serving up a splendid meal, along with the requisite warm feelings that always accompany it.

I looked at the computer screen again and winced.

When would I find time to finish the book?

There were other distractions that kept me from my writing.

Each year, a Thanksgiving pageant is held in town to recreate the holiday's earliest celebrations in America. I'd written much of this year's script, and had devoted far too much time to collaborating with my pageant co-writers, not to mention attending rehearsals, and watching our joint effort blossom into a full-fledged production. In addition, I was also doing what I did every year at this time, helping out at the local senior center where we serve a Thanksgiving spread for the town's less fortunate.

No wonder I was blocked. I've often been accused of biting off more than I can chew, no pun intended, and this year gave validity to that charge.

I went to my front window and parted the curtains. Mr. Billups was still there, his pose never changing. When he spotted me, he turned his head, gazing off in the distance down the road. I had the same unsettled feeling I'd suffered for the past week, ever since he'd begun loitering there, not every day but often enough to make it obvious that it wasn't by chance that he'd chosen that spot. I'd waved to him a few times when leaving the house but received nothing in return, just a hard stare.

My guess was that he suffered from some form of dementia rather than drinking as Newt had suggested—I'd never seen him stumble—but I assumed he was harmless enough, and was glad that he was at least able to afford a room. My heart goes out to those who've fallen out of life's mainstream, often through no fault of their own. Of course, some end up in that situation through their use of drugs or alcohol, and Cabot Cove has a few individuals like that, the natural consequence of the town's growth. Fortunately, our mayor, Jim Shevlin, and the town council have instituted programs to help them abandon the street as a place to live.

I took a final glance at the computer screen and decided to open mail instead of continuing my struggle with the novel. One envelope, a classic

number ten size, caught my eye. My address had been meticulously hand printed. There was no indication who the sender was. Strange, I thought as I opened it. Inside was a single sheet of 8 ½ by 11 white paper folded in thirds. I unfolded it. A large, red letter **G** that had obviously been cut from a magazine was pasted in the center of the page. I stared at it for a long time. What could it possibly mean? Who'd sent it? *Why* had someone sent it?

I pulled a magnifying glass from my desk drawer and closely examined the paper and envelope. There was nothing I could see to provide a clue to the person behind this strange piece of mail. There was, however, the canceled stamp, which was smudged and almost impossible to read. I squinted through the glass in an attempt to decipher the post office of origin. The best I could make out was that it had been mailed from Ohio.

Ohio?

The doorbell rang. I laid the envelope and paper on the pile of other mail and went to the door, where a driver from the local cab company I use all the time stood. "I beeped a few times, Mrs. Fletcher," he said.

"Oh goodness, Nick," I said. "I didn't hear you. I'm sorry. Just give me a minute."

"That's what I figured. Take your time. No rush."

I'd forgotten that I'd called for a taxi to take me to a meeting of the Thanksgiving pageant committee. I grabbed my purse and a folder containing the script, cast a final, fleeting glance at my mysterious piece of mail, and joined the driver outside. Before climbing into his car, I looked across the street. Hubert Billups was gone.

"Everything good with you, Mrs. Fletcher?" Nick asked as he pulled out of my driveway.

“Yes, everything is fine. Thank you for asking.”

Had I been honest, I would have said, “*I’m not sure.*”