

And One to Show 'Em How It's Done

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This story was inspired by the old "light bulb" joke, as well as by a Harry Potter story I read that put a spin on the joke itself. This story finds Mort and Seth asking the question "How many detectives does it take to change a light bulb." You'll laugh at the conclusion they come up with!

Light bulbs played a big role in Jessica Fletcher's life. They flickered to reveal the faces of murderers in her novels, lit her kitchen with glowing warmth while she hammered away at her typewriter, and went off over her head whenever the solution to a mystery became clear. But every now and then a light bulb would shatter or fizzle out. Today, it was the latter, literally – namely, the kitchen light, which burned out in a flash the second she threw the switch on the wall.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," she muttered, casting a rare glare up at the blackened bulb and eliciting amused grins from the two men seated at the kitchen table. "Well, I suppose I should count my blessings. At least it didn't shatter."

"I think we can all count our blessings there, Jess," Seth Hazlitt said wryly. "I'd hate for our misfortune to wind up as a method of murder in your next book."

Mort Metzger, Cabot Cove's sheriff, chuckled as he sipped his evening coffee. "That'd be a heckuva title: *The Bulb Broke At Twilight*."

"And the victim was killed when the murderer shattered a light bulb in his face," Seth continued, getting into the joke. "Talk about knocking someone's lights out."

Jessica pretended to be annoyed with them despite the smile on her face. "I'll thank you two to stop putting ideas into my head!"

"Us, put ideas in your head? Never!"

"Perish the thought, woman!"

"Yeah, Lord forbid anybody should put ideas into the head of the great J.B. Fletcher, who can solve a dozen mysteries and write a dozen books in one day and still have time for a cup of tea," Mort quipped, his eyes alight with mirth.

"Forget sheriff of Cabot Cove, you are the king of hyperbole!" Jessica fired at Mort through a bark of laughter.

"Oh, you're not doing her justice, Mort," said Seth, getting the ball rolling again. "Don't forget she's written, oh, ten books, give or take a couple, and all of them have hit the bestseller list for how many weeks at a time?"

"Ten."

"Twenty."

"A month."

"Six months."

"The whole stinkin' year."

Jessica was laughing so hard she was doubled over. "All right, that's it. No more coffee for the two of you, and from now on, the cookie jar is off-limits!"

"Aw, c'mon, Mrs. F," Mort protested through his own helpless chortles. "We're just teasin' you. No need to deprive us of those awesome cookies."

"And you, Seth?" Jessica asked, gazing pointedly at the doctor, whose broad face was turning red from holding the laughs in. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

Seth, who normally never found himself at a loss for words, opened his mouth to answer and found himself choking on the sentence. The expression on Jessica's face was so droll that the pent-up laughter surged forth and exploded from his mouth in a roar, which only set Mort off again.

Jessica shook her head at the two laughing hyenas shaking her kitchen table. "You two are nothing but a pair of little boys, do you know that?"

"Boys will be boys, Jess," Seth croaked between guffaws. "Or is that one mystery you haven't yet solved?"

She chuckled. "How I put up with the two of you is one mystery I haven't yet solved!" Still chuckling, she shook her head again and motioned them up from the table. "Now up and into the living room, both of you. This light and I have a score to settle."

"Jess, you're just changing the bulb, not taking it to the woodshed," Seth said dryly.

"Believe me, Seth, with this light, there isn't much difference between the two. Now *out*." Jessica shooed Mort and Seth from the kitchen and, once they were gone, placed her hands on her hips and gave the light a firm stare. "All right," she said to it, "it's you or me." With that challenge issued, she went off to fetch a stepladder and a fresh bulb, the tools of war for the day.

"Now what's got you so tickled?" Seth asked Mort, who began laughing yet again not two minutes after they sat down on the couch in the living room.

"You know that old joke about the light bulb?"

"Mort, for Pete's sake, that joke's about two years older than God. You ask how many *blanks* it takes to change a light bulb, fill in the blank with anything ranging from polecats to politicians to Papa Smurf, and come up with the corniest punch line possible. Believe me when I say I've heard every light bulb joke known to man, and the day you can come up with a fresh one will be the day pigs can fly."

Mort grinned. "Be on the lookout for low-flying oinkers, Doc, 'cause I got one you've never heard before: how many detectives does it take to change a light bulb?" The grin broadened when Seth glanced back at the kitchen. "What's the matter? You see a pork roast flying by?"

"No, I'm just making sure she can't hear us," Seth said. "But you're right, I've never heard that one before."

"Didn't think so, 'cause I just made it up."

The doctor folded his arms over his chest. "Okay, Smarty, how many detectives does it take to change a light bulb?"

"Well, I've got one to start us out. Let's see if you can follow along. It'll take John Watson to notice the bulb's broken in the first place..."

Seth grinned, catching on. "And then it'll take Sherlock Holmes to say the solution is elementary..."

"And old Poirot to translate the instructions from French to English..."

"And Sam Spade to say it's the stuff dreams are made of..."

A triumphant cry from the kitchen and warm light flooding out into the living room interrupted their conversation and caused a grin to crease Seth's face. Suddenly, he knew what the real punch line was, and one look at the sheriff's face told him that Mort was thinking the exact same thing. "And Jessica Fletcher to show them all how it's done," they concluded together.

"Show who how what's done? Are you two plotting behind my back?"

The guys turned their heads to see Jessica, flushed with success, entering the living room. "No, Mrs. F, we're not plotting. We just figured out how many detectives it takes to change a light bulb."

Jessica raised an eyebrow. Fortunately, the eye beneath it was sparkling with humor. "Really? And what conclusion did you arrive at?"

"Five." The guys recapped the joke one detective at a time, Jessica smiling at each one, but when they finally sprang the punch line on her, her reaction was something of a surprise. "So..." she said thoughtfully, "I'm a better detective than those of Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and Dashiell Hammett, I presume?" When they both nodded, she cracked a sly grin. "I'm flattered, but that's not the conclusion I reached."

Mort and Seth looked at each other and then back at Jessica. "Really? What'd you get out of it, Mrs. F?"

"Well, based on the fact that all of the detectives you named were men, and they did little more than sit around conjecturing about how to change it, and then I came along and showed them all how to do it by simply changing the bulb..." She smiled and spread her hands before her. "I'd say the moral of the story is that the best man – or detective – for the job is a woman!"

For once, the guys found themselves absolutely speechless. "Mort..." Seth finally said, "Did what I think happened just happen?"

"Yup," the sheriff chuckled. "We got whammied by J.B. Fletcher. Another mystery solved."

"And *that*, boys, is how it's done." The living room rang with the sound of laughter, nobody laughing louder or harder than Jessica.

The real moral of the story: Jessica Fletcher kicks other detectives' butts. Enough said.