

THE UNCONVENTIONAL MURDER

"Jessica Fletcher!" screamed the desk clerk.

Startled, Jessica dropped the pen on the hotel register.

"Please, I would expect someone in your profession to have a bit more discretion," said Jessica.

"You're that famous murder-mystery writer, aren't you?" continued the desk clerk in a whisper almost as loud as his scream.

"I can't deny that. But I am here for my avocation, not my vocation," Jessica explained.

"Oh. You mean the antique convention."

"Yes. I'm ready for four splendid days of Tiffany lamps, Chippendale furniture, and antique jewelry. So I'd prefer it if you ignore the name on the register and just think of me as room 803."

The clerk nodded dumbly as Jessica took her key and slipped into the elevator. As the doors shut her off from the lobby she heard his scream once more.

"Do you know who that was? JESSICA FLETCHER!"

Jessica was lying in bed half awakened by the morning sun when she heard the voices outside her room. She was already at the door when the knock came. She opened it to reveal the desk clerk.

"Mrs. Fletcher, I hate to bother you, but...well, there's been an accident. Actually, it could be a murder. I mean...could you take a look in room 807? We really need your help."

Jessica looked up from the body on the carpet.

"The police have already been here", she said. "What can I do for you?"

The answer came from a man wearing a white carnation in the lapel of his pinstriped jacket.

"The police spent all evening and solved nothing," said the stranger. He bowed slightly and continued. "It's my great pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Fletcher. My name is Jonathan Wadsworth, and I am the director of the antique convention. Believe me, I am as distressed about this death as anyone else. But I can't let it interfere with the business of the weekend. I've made quite a large investment in preparing this convention, and these rumors that are spreading of a murderer at large could scare off all the buyers."

"Then let's get down to cases," began Jessica. "Who was this man?" she asked Wadsworth.

"His name was Malcolm Penner, a jewelry dealer from Springfield."

"Exactly what type of jewelry did Mr. Penner deal in?", asked Jessica.

"Very fine items," said Wadsworth. "Nouveau One-Stones, Wallingford brooches, gold coins, pre-war watches, and gold bracelets like the one on the floor near the jeweler's loupe."

"I see. And those two items on the floor led you to believe his death was an accident?"

"They most certainly did, Mrs. Fletcher. As you can see, there is no bulb in the table lamp. The

only working light in this room is the fixture on the ceiling. So when poor Malcolm wanted to examine that bracelet, he was forced to climb onto the chair and hold it up to the light. Malcolm was a great collector, but he was no acrobat. Obviously, he lost his balance and fell, knocking over the vase and the table lamp, and landing head first on the table. It's a terrible loss. He was the second most respected authority in the field."

"And who would be the most respected authority be?" asked Jessica.

Mr. Wadsworth smiled. "That would be me, Mrs. Fletcher."

Jessica turned to the desk clerk.

"What do we know about how Mr. Penner spent last night?"

"Well, he checked in about an hour before you did," began the clerk. "There's not much more, except for the coffee he ordered about dinner time. He asked room service to leave it outside the door."

Jessica wandered into the bathroom. She felt the inside of the bathtub, and noted that it was bone dry. She then went to the sink, which was a little moist, and glanced at the bar of hotel soap. It was unused, and still neatly wrapped.

Jessica returned to the room.

"So the last person Mr. Penner spoke to -"

"Would probably have been me," a woman's voice replied. "My name is Naomi Penner. That's right, Mrs. Fletcher, I am Mrs. Malcolm Penner. Currently estranged, soon to be divorced. But I guess all that is moot now."

"And you say that you visited Mr. Penner last night?" asked Jessica.

"No, I said I talked to him last night," replied Mrs. Penner. "I called his room hoping to have dinner with him, but he said he wanted to be alone. And when I called again later in the night there was no answer. I guess he was destined to spend his last evening alone."

"If you don't mind, Mrs. Penner, would you tell me if you felt your marriage was unsalvageable?" questioned Jessica.

"Actually, Mrs. Fletcher, I thought it might still have had a chance. Malcolm might have thought so too, but he was too preoccupied with this damned convention to see me last night!"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Penner. I can't change what has happened, but perhaps I can find the guilty party."

Jessica pointed to the desk clerk.

"Have you or anyone who is not in the room stepped into the area where the body fell?"

"No," the desk clerk answered. "The maid who found the body didn't go near it, and the police roped it off as soon as they arrived."

"Seems strange, doesn't it..." Jessica said.

Jessica scanned the faces of the people in the room for any reaction.

"What? What's strange?" asked the clerk.

"A dealer. On an important sales trip. With only one sample?" Jessica replied.

"Maybe he was just buying," Wadsworth suggested.

"No, I don't think so," responded Jessica. "I think he had many valuable things to sell. Things that one of you felt were worth enough to kill him for."

"One of **us!**" Naomi Penner gasped.

"Yes, someone came up to this room last night to have coffee with Mr. Penner. I can only speculate on what happened next, but I know how it all ended."

Jessica Fletcher turned to the policeman guarding the room.

"Officer, arrest this person for murder!"

(1) How did Jessica Fletcher know that Mr. Penner had not been alone? (2) How did Jessica know which suspect had been near the body? The answers to these two questions are both contained in the puzzle picture. After you have put the puzzle together, look it over carefully, and reread the story before you decide on your answers.