

ART OF MURDER

Written by Ehrich S. Wise

Jessica Fletcher knew that something was wrong as soon as the elevator doors opened.

There was no one at the reception desk, and the chairs beside the desk were empty. She walked straight through the tall glass doors marked, "Edward J. Osborne Industries," and directly into the office labeled, "Chairman of the Board." A man she did not know was sitting on the desk, leafing through papers. She appraised him in a second - the well worn suit, the tired expression, the air of authority. He was a police detective.

"Excuse me. Where is everyone?"

"They're being interrogated down on the 98th floor. Say, don't I know you?" said the detective.

"Has something happened to Mr. Osborne?" asked Jessica.

"He's not hurt or anything," replied the detective. "He's just being asked if he knew the victim. Are you a reporter?"

"Victim!" exclaimed Jessica. "Has someone been hurt?"

"Someone's dead! An attractive young woman who worked as an artist for the ad agency downstairs. She was found lying under her art table this morning. It looks like murder," the policeman said matter-of-factly. Then suddenly he burst out, "Hey, that's who you are! You're Jessica Fletcher, the murder mystery writer. Are you doing research?"

"Not at all," Jessica replied. "I came here to meet Ed Osborne for lunch. He's an old friend of mine. May I go down and see him now?"

"I guess so," shrugged the detective. "It won't hurt the investigation. Who knows, maybe you can help out."

He escorted her to the 98th floor. The small advertising agency on the 98th floor was filled with detectives standing in a circle around three people. One, a young man in a leather jacket, was sitting, sobbing quietly into a handkerchief. A second man, wearing a sweatshirt, stood by visibly shaken. The third was an older gentleman who nodded to Jessica Fletcher as she entered the room. Jessica walked over to the older man and took his hand.

"Ed, how are you involved in all of this?" she asked.

"I think I'm a suspect, Jess," . "You know about these kinds of things, what should I do?"

"Now Ed, just tell the truth, and I'm sure everything will be all right."

The detective said "Listen to her, Osborne. That's good advice. Tell us how you knew Barbra Monk."

"Well, I first met Barbra in the elevator. My company is on the 101st floor and she, of course, worked here on the 98th. It's a long ride up and we'd often talk. I found out that she was an artist with this agency. One day we had lunch together and she spoke of how she and her partner had won several advertising awards. That's her partner over there."

Osborne pointed to the man in the sweatshirt, Barry Barlow.

"Barlow wrote the copy and Barbra did the artwork. She convinced me to hire them to handle my company's advertising. They were working on a new campaign this week. It was for my 'Rust Buster-Rust-Proofing Spray.' I told her that the work had to be ready by 8 A.M. this morning for a very important meeting. She said she was willing to work on it all night. I left here at about 8 P.M. last night and arrived home at about 9. My wife can attest to that. When I returned in the morning to pick up the work, I found her dead," Osborne said, his voice cracking.

"Liar! You killed her!" the man in the leather jacket yelled. "You wealthy Americans are all alike. You think you can own anything you want - even people. Why don't you tell us what really happened between you and Barbra? She had an affair with you, and you wanted her to be your full-time mistress. You even offered to keep her in a cozy little flat nearby. But Barbra wasn't like that. She had brains. She had independence. And she had a career she loved. It's obvious to me what happened this morning. Barbra told you once and for all that you couldn't treat her like a little tart for hire. That made you mad enough to kill her."

For a moment it looked as if the two men would come to blows. Then Jessica stepped between them.

"Is any of that true, Ed?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes, Barbra and I were in love, Jess. I know it seems strange - I'm nearly 25 years older than she was. But we had something special, something that had always been missing from my marriage. I told Barbra that I'd leave my wife for her. But she said she had to get away for awhile to think things through, and left for a vacation in England. After a few days she called me to say that she had met someone at a museum in London,"

He glared over Jessica's shoulder at the man in the leather jacket.

"She said he was a young painter named Samuel Reed, and that she now regretted giving into the temptation to have one last fling before she settled down with me."

Jessica turned around and asked, "Mr. Reed, could you explain your relationship with Ms. Monk?"

"Love at first sight. I told her to go back to the States for a few weeks to settle her affairs, and that I would come here as soon as she was ready and take her back to England to live with me."

"And when exactly did you arrive here, Mr. Reed?" asked Jessica.

"I flew in very late last night, and decided to catch up on my sleep at the airport motel before motoring here. But these fine gentlemen from the police department arrived at my motel before I could rent a car."

Jessica Fletcher shot a quizzical glance at the detective.

"That's right," the detective volunteered. "We did a check of the phone records and found a call made to this phone from the airport motel. So we drove over to check it out and found Mr. Reed."

Barry Barlow spoke up for the first time.

"Wait, now I get it! This must be the guy Barbra told me about. She had a brief encounter with him which meant nothing to her - but for him it became an obsession. Why, it's clear to me what happened here last night, Reed shows up in town and calls her without any kind of warning. He tells her how much he loves her and she freaks out. She probably told him to get lost and leave her alone. So he comes over here in the evening all worked up - they argue, and he kills her."

"Why, you inept little worm!" shouted Reed. "Barbra told me all about you. She did the copywriting

as well as the artwork on all of your most successful campaigns. You did nothing to deserve the accolades, but Barbra allowed you to share the awards with her. She was loyal and too sentimental about you because you were college sweet hearts, but"

"That's true," Osborne chimed in. "I managed to finally convince her that business is business. She was about to kick you out and start an agency by herself. That would have ended your career - and that's why you killed her!"

"Why you dirty old son-of-a...."

"You no talent bum..."

"Shut up, you crazy Americans...."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, please! We don't need any shouting," said Jessica holding up her hands. I think I can get to the bottom of this. One look around this room tells me what happened here last night. Barbra Monk was murdered by YOU!"

Who was Jessica Fletcher pointing at as the murderer, and what tipped her off? Assemble the jigsaw puzzle, then reread the story. Can you deduce what happened to Barbra Monk last night?