

RECIPE FOR MURDER

Written by Ehrich S. Wise

The cab driver glanced at his rear view mirror, and his eyes followed the tall woman as she exited the airport door and entered his taxi.

She smiled pleasantly and confessed, "I'm not quite sure where I want to go, actually. I've missed my connecting flight home, and I have two hours to kill before the next one. Do you know a restaurant nearby that serves something a bit better than airline food?"

"Hey-aren't you that famous mystery writer? Jessica...?"

"... Fletcher," she finished.

"Yeah, I've seen your face in the paper. I don't waste my time reading mysteries."

Jessica detected a smirk in the man's voice as he continued.

"I work real hard," he began. "Ten, maybe fourteen hours a day. So when I read, it's a newspaper."

"I see," responded Jessica. "Newspapers have too much violence for me. I prefer to curl up with a good book when I get home."

"Yeah. Well, I do most of my reading during red lights."

"Really? I thought cab drivers did most of their *driving* during red lights," Jessica laughed.

The driver cackled uproariously at that comment. "Hey, you're all right. I'll take you to the best place in town - Hoffinger's. Hoffinger is a great French chef who came here about five years ago. He married Mary Byrd - she was one of those fancy society women- and they opened a big restaurant. She's a gourmet who fell in love with Hoffinger's cooking - and then Hoffinger himself. The reason I know all this is because it's been in the newspaper plenty this year. There's a restaurant critic named Franklin White, and he's got some sort of a thing against Hoffinger. He keeps giving him lousy reviews."

"Don't they spot him when he comes in?" asked Jessica.

"That's just it", said the cabbie. "He wears a different disguise each time he goes to the restaurant. There's also a silent partner in the restaurant. At least he was silent until all the hoopla began. His name is Arnie Fallon, and he's an old-time gangster. Fallon doesn't know anything about food, but he knows he's losing money on his investment. The word is he's ticked off at Hoffinger for not keeping up the reputation of the restaurant. And the word is that Hoffinger's wife has been fooling around and wants out of the marriage. And the word is that the restaurant..."

Jessica smiled and said, "You can learn an awful lot during red lights,"

Jessica sensed something was wrong as soon as she entered the restaurant. It appeared at first that she was the only one there. Then she noticed several police officers wandering around just inside the door to the kitchen. Walking toward the door, she heard a woman's tearful voice say,

"He called me to say he was preparing a dinner just for the two of us. A romantic, candlelight dinner like the one we had night he proposed to me."

Jessica peeked into the kitchen and took in the scene. A dozen police officers gathered around a woman sobbing into a handkerchief.

"This must be Mary Byrd, Hoffinger's estranged wife," thought Jessica. "And judging by the body line chalked on the floor, she is his widow."

A short, heavysset man stood next to the widow. His toupe did not quite match the hair on his head - restaurant critic Franklin White, no doubt. Jessica remained silent and watched the officers continue the interrogation. The police lab had determined that, judging by the way the fish had been cooked, Mr. Hoffinger was working until at least half past two.

Jessica said, "When exactly did you arrive here tonight, Mrs. Hoffinger?"

"I came over at three," began Mrs. Hoffinger. "We were going to eat before the restaurant opened. It was quite a shock when I found Hoffs next to his table. Dead. So I called 911. Then *he* came in before you arrived, and acted very suspicious."

She pointed to Franklin White.

"What are you implying? My editor is my witness - I worked with him from nine this morning until an hour ago. Then I came here a bit early because I wanted to have dinner before the maitre'd arrived at 7:30. He knows me well, and I was afraid he'd recognize me and throw me out. Sure, there's bad feelings between me and this place. But I'm a critic, not a murderer. If Mrs. Hoffinger wants to get to the truth, she should explain *this!*"

As White reached for the jar labeled "Mary's Dreamy Creamy", a policeman shouted,

"Hold it! That's evidence. Our preliminary investigation suggests Mr. Hoffinger was poisoned."

"Oh, my goodness! Was the poison in this? That's a low-calorie cream substitute I am marketing through my new food company. I had it delivered here last night so that Hoffs could try it out."

White sneered. "Looks like he tried it all right. Here's the recipe. Mix one half cup cream and one egg. Add salt to taste. Didn't I see a spoon in Hoffinger's hand before you took him away?"

At that moment Jessica was startled by a beefy hand that pulled her shoulder back roughly. She jumped back as a burly man barged past her into the kitchen.

"Out of my way, sister," he snarled. "Well, if it isn't my old buddies in blue. What are you guys doin' in my joint? And where's that bum Hoffinger? Ain't I losin' enough dough?"

"This must be Arnie Fallon," thought Jessica,

The man's reptilian eyes searched the room. The gangster appraised the situation faster than any detective.

"Hey, wait a minute. I see what's going on." "Somebody bumped off Hoffinger. And you guys waited around for me to show up so you could pin it on me. Well, this frame won't stick! I wanna call my lawyer right now. I can prove I was in meetings all day. I can..."

Jessica entered the kitchen.

"May I interrupt? Now I don't mean to intrude, but I think I can prove Mr. Hoffinger committed suicide. If I could just get a look inside the bottom of this food processor...."

There was a puzzled but obedient silence as Jessica turned the device on its side.

"Does anyone have something I can use to unscrew this panel?"

Mary Byrd rummaged through her purse for a second, and produced a small nailfile.

"Will this do?"

"HmMMM, maybe. But perhaps one of the gentlemen has something better."

Jessica raised an eyebrow in the direction of Franklin White.

"Not me, all I carry are my keys, credit cards, and... let's see... will this dime work?"

"Not quite good enough."

She turned to Fallon.

"You look like a resourceful man. Can you help?"

Fallon fumbled in his pocket and brought out a pocket knife.

"This'll do it," he said, handing it over.

Jessica fiddled with the knife until she found the screwdriver blade. She then re-examined the food processor for a moment and put it down right side up. All eyes followed her with rapt attention as she spun around dramatically.

"Forgive me for my little white lie. I never thought for a moment that this was a suicide. Hoffinger was killed, and I can name his murderer."

Can you name the murderer? Complete the jigsaw puzzle picture and examine it for the vital clues.