

Book Club

Bibliomysteries

by Loren D. Estleman, 1952–

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CHIEF DOCKERTY knew the shadiest spot in New Mexico wasn't the Santa Rita copper mine in Silver City. It was right there in the town of Good Advice, and it belonged to Avery Sharecross' bookshop.

Sharecross had established it, years before many of the residents were born, in a three-hundred-year-old mission that had been by turns a community theater, a Salvation Army shelter, a home for armadillos, and a place for juvenile delinquents to smoke cigarettes and listen to rock and roll. Its walls were adobe, three feet thick, its few windows just large enough to shoot Indians from inside without attracting too many arrows from outside. During its empty period, it had been as dark and mossy—feeling as a cave. Sharecross had managed to make it darker still by installing towering bookcases and stocking them with volumes, some the same vintage as the building, with narrow passages between the cases. Generations of children had dared one another to approach the place after dark, when the ghosts of William Shakespeare and Mark Twain prowled among the stacks (or during the day, when the proprietor did the haunting); none accepted. Even at high noon, a visitor needed a flashlight to explore the place without running into Thackeray or Gibbon and cracking a tooth.

Fortunately for the chief's new bridge, the bookseller had suspended trough lights from the distant ceiling, with chain switches for the convenience of browsers, who were requested by hand-lettered cardboard signs posted throughout the store to turn them off when they moved from one aisle to the next. The fluorescent tubes flickered and buzzed when activated and spilled watery illumination onto many centuries of literature, but not quite as far as the plank floor, which was heaped with books on both sides of the passages, narrowing the avenues even further. Dockerty groped his way forward with his feet to avoid kicking them over.

The cases were ancient, built of old-growth oak from the East, and gray with the accumulation of dust that had worked its way deep into the grain. Although the proprietor was scrupulous with a duster so that none of his patrons would shun the place to keep from smearing his best suit or her new dress, the pulverized bones of prehistoric buffalo and extinct Indian tribes that made up the Santa Fe Trail would not be prevented entrance, either to the shop or Chief Dockerty's nostrils.

Sneeze. Blow nose. Creep forward. Repeat.

A reader of bulletins and arrest reports exclusively, he hadn't visited the place often, and not in months. He had only a vague memory of the layout, and Sharecross' regard for his customers did not extend to sparing them the annoyance of the occasional dead end: Aisles that were open at both ends alternated with those whose exits were sealed with perpendicular bookcases, and as the bookseller was constantly rearranging his stock and changing how it was displayed, even a Daniel Boone would find himself retracing his footsteps and muttering all the way.

But it was a Tuesday, and therefore a lucky one for the chief of the Good Advice Police Department (five officers, three of them part-timers). That was the day the book club gathered to drink iced tea, eat lemon cookies, and talk about Plot, Theme, and Character. All he had to do was follow the murmur of voices.

"Well, I hated it. Six hundred pages about dancing bears and a boy biting a dog."

This was "Uncle Ned" Scoffield, whose ninety-nine-year-old voice cracked as air whistled through his dentures.

“It isn’t just about that, Ned. Garp’s a tragic hero.”

Birdie Flatt: retired after forty years when the phone company yanked out the old switchboard. Dockerty knew her shrill tones from every call he’d placed when he was a patrolman new to the force.

Someone else snorted. That would be Carl Lathrop, head of the town council, who overrode hecklers at meetings by way of his expressive nasal passages. “He’s a cartoon character. Not every book is *Wuthering Heights*.”

“The dancing bear’s a symbol, folks,” said another man whose voice the chief couldn’t peg right away. “Irving’s making a point about the folly of human nature.”

Ned put in another two cents’ worth. “Symbols, shmymbols. Leave it to a newspaperman to like a book about a boy biting a dog.”

That made the other man Gordon Tolliver, the publisher of *The Good Adviser*, a weekly, popularly believed to have been founded by Horace Greeley. At fifty, he’d be the youngest member of the club.

There followed a lively exchange of views, simultaneous and pierced through by Birdie’s stridor.

“Friends, friends,” Sharecross’ reedy tenor quieted the tumult. “This is a literary discussion, not professional wrestling. Ned: There’s a great deal more to *The World According to Garp* than a boy biting a dog, which you’d know if you’d read past the opening chapters instead of just counting the pages.

“Miss Flatt: He’s not quite a figure of tragedy, because the book is intended as a black comedy, and you can’t have both on the same stage at the same time. Neither is he a cartoon character, Carl; he’s too fleshed-out for that. Gordon, it pains me to tell you that the dancing bear is just a dancing bear. There’s one in nearly every book Irving’s written. It’s his trademark, like Poe’s gloomy tarn and Ayn Rand’s monologues.”

“Next time, let’s read Louis L’Amour,” said Uncle Ned. “His dogs don’t get bit and his bears don’t do the polka.”

“Let’s mix it up a bit. Each of you pick a book, and we’ll compare their various merits and shortcomings next week. Don’t forget to mark it in the ledger before you go.”

Dockerty emerged from the literary labyrinth just as the group was rising from its folding chairs. Sharecross, who’d been holding court from behind his massive desk, as old and gray as the bookshelves—*hell, as old as him*, thought the chief—got up from his wooden swivel to greet his visitor. The others nodded greetings, each preoccupied with his or her quest among the stock.

“A pleasant surprise, Chief. Have I persuaded you to join us at last? An experienced criminologist will be invaluable when we take up Ed McBain.”

The bookseller resembled a caricature of the trade: gaunt, with hair of a gray to match his shelves straggling to his collar, thick spectacles, and limbs like bent pipe cleaners, his knees and elbows trying to gnaw through the rusty black woolen suit he wore even when the temperature topped a hundred. Now that he thought about it, Dockerty had never seen the man sweat. If someone fetched him a hard blow, his pores would release only dry air and desiccated bindings.

“I’m a cop, not a detective,” the chief said. “That’s your specialty.”

“I’ve been a bookseller longer than I was a detective. Back then, DNA stood for Do Not Arrest. The captain had a blind spot where his son was concerned.”

In the beginning, Dockerty had had trouble picturing this elderly scarecrow collaring and interrogating suspects. Any Hollywood studio would have cast him as the absent-minded ascetic in some musty archive. Then he'd Googled Sharecross' name, and spent twenty minutes reading commendations and looking at pictures of him shaking hands with a U.S. attorney general, an FBI director, and the graduating class at the New York Police Academy. In one shot, with a chestful of medals and a police commissioner placing a ribbon around his neck ending in yet another decoration, his dress uniform appeared to be wearing him rather than the other way around. Even back then he'd looked like an assistant professor employed by a not-very-distinguished university. Twenty years into his own career, the chief had learned the first lesson of police work: Don't judge a man by his appearance.

"I'm not here to join your book club, Avery. It's official business."

Sharecross raised his voice a decibel. "I don't have that one in stock, but I'm attending an estate sale in Albuquerque next week. I'll look for it."

Dockerty was confused, then aware of Lathrup, the last book club member present, letting himself out the door. When it shut behind him, jangling the copper bell attached to it, the bookseller said, "The city council has a right to discuss police business, but I assume you'd rather keep it off the table this early in the investigation."

The chief nodded, embarrassed that he hadn't thought of it himself. "It's Lloyd Fister."

"Lloyd's my best customer. What's happened?"

"Accident, I hope, though it looks like murder."

"Dear me."

Not the usual response from an experienced detective. But then, Sharecross wasn't your usual detective.

Lloyd Fister had been born in Good Advice, the fifth generation in his family to first see the light in the rambling Victorian pile on the hill overlooking the town. His great-great-grandfather had brought the railroad and, with it, prosperity, to the town and himself. Rather than desert when the local economy went into decline a hundred years later, Lloyd had stayed on, using a great deal of his inheritance to build one of the finest book collections in private hands. His interest ran toward the history of the Southwest, and Sharecross had been instrumental in helping him stock his shelves. Their friendship had survived the onslaught of the Internet; rather than consign his search for rare and obscure titles to a soulless electronic machine, Fister preferred to continue a relationship that had outlasted his own marriage, which had ended in widowhood many years before.

"I'll print out these pictures at the station." Andy Barlow, the deputy chief, gestured with the digital camera in his hand. "I got every angle."

"Okay. Tolliver will be all over you for a print soon as he hears about it. I'll decide which he can put in the paper. I don't want this showing up on the front page."

As he spoke, Dockerty inclined his head toward the sheet-covered figure on the floor.

“He’ll turn that rag into a tabloid if he gets half a chance.” Barlow left.

Apart from the number and variety of volumes present, Fister’s private library bore no resemblance to the bookshop where he had acquired so many of its titles. Mahogany bookshelves, intricately carved by a long-dead Mexican artisan, walled its seven hundred square feet all the way to the twelve-foot ceiling, holding several thousand volumes bound in leather, buckram, and parchment, all upright and level, with spaces left here and there for future acquisitions which now would never be made. A ladder made of the same wood stood against one wall, fitted into a ceiling track that allowed it to be moved into position to retrieve books from the upper shelves. The collector’s desk, of mahogany also, contained a banker’s lamp and more books in stacks, and an armchair upholstered in maroon full-grain leather stood in each corner beside a tall reading lamp. The air smelled pleasantly of paper and leather in various stages of genteel decay.

In fact, the only thing untidy about the room was the corpse under the sheet.

Sharecross knelt and lifted the sheet with a half-hopeful expression, as if it might not be his old friend and fellow bibliophile lying there with a cracked skull. He let the sheet fall back into place and rose, his knees creaking and disappointment on his emaciated face.

“His housekeeper called us,” Dockerty said. “She found him about an hour ago when she came in to clean. It broke her up bad. Doc Simms has her under sedation.”

“Poor Greta. She doesn’t sleep here, does she?”

“She lives with her sister in town. She wasn’t here when it happened; the Doc swears to that. He figures Fister was dead at least two hours when he examined him. Blunt-instrument trauma’s probably cause of death, but he won’t swear to it till the autopsy. I wanted you to see the body before I had it taken away.”

“No need. I took your word for it—he’s dead.” Sharecross walked around the room, looking up toward the top of the shelves, where various objets d’art stood in the space between them and the ceiling.

“We thought of that,” Dockerty said. “Maybe one of those doodads fell off and hit him on the noggin. But there wasn’t any on the floor, and the angle’s all wrong. He was hit on the back of the head with something hard and heavy enough to cave in the skull. Whoever did it didn’t leave it behind.”

“I wasn’t looking for what killed him.”

“Then, what...?”

The bookseller stepped back to the body, placing the toes of his shoes in line with the soles of Fister’s. “He stood here, a few yards inside the door. Either someone was waiting, possibly hidden behind the door, or it was someone he knew and trusted, at least not to attack him. The blow was struck from behind and he fell forward onto his face. Tell me if you think I’m wrong. I’m a bit rusty, I’m afraid.”

Rusty as a brand-new Swiss watch, the chief thought. “Works for me. I sure hope it was someone hiding behind the door, a burglar passing through. I wouldn’t want to think we’ve got a murderer living here.”

“They have to live somewhere. What about that?” He pointed.

Dockerty followed the angle of his finger, but all he saw was a shelf about nine feet from the floor. He said so.

“There’s a space between those two books.”

“There’s spaces all over. I guess he didn’t want to have to rearrange the whole library to make room for a new book. I’ll be goldarned if I can figure out his system, but he must’ve had one. Mr. Fister was tidy about everything.”

“He arranged them chronologically, beginning with the earliest Spanish explorations all the way up to recent changes made by the state legislatures. But as you see, the spaces he left are wider, to accommodate several books at a time. This gap is approximately the width of two books of ordinary width, or perhaps one large one. It’s the only example in the room, and it suggests a book’s missing.”

“Maybe it belongs to one or two of the books on the desk.”

“No, I looked at those. They’re reference works, common to the book trade. I have them as well. They’re consulted so often it only makes sense to keep them handy rather than constantly be climbing the ladder to retrieve them; certainly not from a shelf so high up. I’m sure you know where I’m heading.”

“Well, robbery’s a motive I can wrap my head around. You think he surprised somebody while he was stealing the book that belonged there?”

“If Lloyd came back unexpectedly, trapping the thief in the library, forcing him to hide behind the door and strike him just after he came in, that certainly suggests itself. It could just as easily be someone he knew; the moment he turned his back, the thief hit him, then stole the book.”

“I like the first theory, and not just because I don’t want the killer to be one of ours. It makes it an act of desperation, not planning. He might have wanted just to knock him out so he could make his escape.”

Sharecross took off his glasses to wipe them with a handkerchief. Unlike the case with most nearsighted men, his eyes looked sharper when they were naked; he resembled an old and seasoned eagle.

“The only thing that argues against it is: What became of the weapon? It wasn’t one of the objects in this room. I hardly think, having eliminated the threat to his freedom and acquired what he came for, he’d stop to put the weapon back. If, on the other hand, he brought it with him, it becomes a coldblooded act.”

“Fingerprints.”

“I was trained to think like a murderer. I’d wipe them off rather than take the chance of being seen on the street carrying a bronze vase or a marble bust.”

“DNA.”

“Possibly. As I said, I’m far from current.” He hooked on his spectacles. “Wasn’t Lloyd interviewed recently by a television crew?”

“Yeah. Big to-do when a network van rolls into a town this little. Some kind of reality show like *Hoarders*, only high-end: rich collectors. It was what you call a pilot, hoping to become a series.”

“Not an unlikely procession. In many cases, the only difference between a wealthy bibliomaniac and somebody’s mother-in-law living in an apartment full of old newspapers and empty pop bottles is the size of the investment.”

“Sort of a nutjob *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*.”

Sharecross looked pained.

“I’d hate to see that adjective applied to Lloyd. The reason I brought it up...”

“For once we’re neck-and-neck. I’ll see about getting that TV footage and we’ll compare it to the crime scene. If the picture’s sharp enough, we’ll see what was in that gap—if Mr. Fister didn’t overhaul the library in the meantime.”

“I doubt it. It looks the same as the last time I visited him, and as we’ve discussed, he had the foresight to prevent an extensive reorganization.” The bookseller’s tone was wistful.

“Cheer up, Avery. One morning you’ll hop out of bed, rarin’ to give your place a good old-fashioned spring cleaning.”

“That’s the pep-talk I’ve been giving myself for thirty years.”

“I can’t believe it. I can’t sleep nights thinking I’ll be murdered in my bed.”

“Don’t concern yourself, Birdie,” said Uncle Ned. “It ain’t as if everybody in town ain’t dreamt about it as long as they knew you.”

Carl Lathrup used his gavel. “That’s enough of that, Ned. Miss Flatt has the floor.”

“She ought to take a mop to it now and again. I been stepping in the same wad of Billy Fred Muster’s gum since I voted last.”

Billy Fred, chewing in the back row of chairs in the crowded town hall, shook his head. “That’s a lie, you old coot. Lincoln’s been dead since before gum was invented.”

“Pipe down, the both of you.” Birdie gave her girdle a mighty tug. “We used to have a nice safe town to raise our children in. The last week alone, the murder rate’s gone up a hundred percent.”

“That’s because last week it was zero,” Chief Dockerty pointed out. He stood near the door with his thumbs hooked inside his Sam Browne belt, his belly pushing out around them.

Lathrup pointed the gavel his way. “Since you feel like talking, Chief, maybe you can bring this special session up to date on the progress of your investigation.”

“Mr. Sharecross and me—”

“And *I*,” corrected Neil Bonn, principal of the elementary school and a substitute English teacher.

“Well, Mr. Bonn, I didn’t know you was putting your heads together when I wasn’t present.” Dockerty grinned. “Mr. Sharecross and I are expecting an express package from ZBC headquarters in New York City sometime today. The program director’s sending us a DVD of that TV pilot they shot in Mr. Fister’s library back in March. With any luck, it’ll tell us what book the killer stole.”

“And what good will *that* do, I’d like to know?” asked Birdie. “While I’m at it, what’s the purpose of inviting a shopkeeper into a homicide investigation? My nephew Roy, the Eagle Scout”—she stared around the room over the tops of her half-glasses, while the title sank in—“has a badge in tracking, and would seem to me the more appropriate choice, this incident being apparently beyond the talents of the police force we all pay taxes to support.”

Dockerty untucked one of his thumbs to rest that hand on his sidearm; not that he had any intention of blowing Birdie Flatt out from under her Dolly Parton wig. “Apart from his background, which we all seem to keep forgetting, Mr. Sharecross knows books. Once we’ve established which book Mr. Fister was killed for, he’ll be

able to narrow down the suspects to those collectors who specialize in that particular area. Even if the killer wasn't one of them, they'd be the ones he'd approach to sell the item. I'll be talking to them all."

"I hope you're right, Chief." Gordon Tolliver, publisher of *The Good Adviser*, rose to his considerable height. "I'd like to feature some good news for a change; something more diverting than Sherm McDonough's quest for pre-Colombian Indian arrowheads."

"As opposed to pre-Colombian *European* arrowheads," put in Neil Bonn, who taught American History in a pinch.

"Go ahead, make fun." Sherm McDonough left off plucking cockleburs from his socks to address the congregation. "I've got an offer of a thousand bucks from the Smithsonian for a Clovis point I found up on Superstition Overlook."

Lathrup rapped the podium. "We're drifting away from the reason for this gathering. Where is Avery Sharecross?"

"Oh, he's busy," Dockerty said. "Nobody ever accused Avery of laziness and sloth."

"Busy doing what?" pressed the head of the council. "Sifting through clues, analyzing evidence, interrogating suspects? The citizens of Good Advice have a right to know how their trust is being invested."

The chief returned his thumb to his belt, shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "I can't answer for him right this minute, but when I talked to him this morning he was rearranging his inventory according to the Dewey Decimal System, whatever that is."

"There!" Sharecross gripped Andy Barlow's shoulder, making the deputy chief wince. He hadn't much more flesh in that area than the bookseller had in his whole body—which Chief Dockerty could lose from his middle without anyone noticing.

Andy hit PAUSE. The picture on the computer monitor in Dockerty's office froze.

"Can you zoom in?" Sharecross asked.

"Sure." Andy played an adagio on the keys. The shelf in question filled the screen.

"We lucked out there." Andy reached back to knead his bruised flesh. "Not all of the TV networks have gone over to Blu-Ray. Ten years ago this would've been on videotape, and good luck identifying the printing on the spine from Mrs. O'Leary's cow."

Sharecross shushed him, sliding his thick spectacles down to the tip of his long nose, back up to the bridge, and back down halfway, like a Chinese cleric manipulating beads on an abacus. At length he straightened, returning them to their customary place.

"Something?" Chief Dockerty was a patient man, but he and the bookseller seemed to live in parallel universes where the value of time fluctuated like foreign currency.

"*L'Exploration d'Descubrimientos en Nuevo Espano.* Gentlemen, I'm dumbfounded."

"Me, too," Dockerty said. "I don't know if you're speaking Latin or Swahili."

“Castilian Spanish; in which I assure you I am no expert. Roughly translated, it’s *The Exploration of Discoveries in New Spain*; published, if memory serves, in Madrid in 1545.”

Dockerty whistled. “Anything that old’s got to be worth something.”

“Not necessarily. Age is not a factor in evaluating a book; if it were, every ancient family Bible in North America would be worth thousands; but no one ever throws them away so they’re common as clothespins.

“Nor is rarity, although this particular item certainly qualifies. I doubt more than ten copies were issued, handset in wooden type for the court of Philip II of Spain. Condition is of ten a factor, but not in this case: Missing its covers, and even significant pages from the text, would hardly affect its value. Demand, gentlemen; that thing that drives capitalism tips the balance in this circumstance. I know of ten billionaires who would bid energetically against one another to lay hold of *L’Exploration* in any condition and, from what I see here, this copy is complete, and as close to pristine as you’re ever likely to find.”

“This is a murder investigation, not a meeting of your book club. Come to the point this side of when they invented gunpowder.”

“Actually, the *Conquistadors* were well-equipped in that—”

“Avery!”

“Sorry. If I were the murdering kind, I would certainly give it proper consideration in this case. This book was written by Hernando Cortez, conqueror of Mexico. Considering the paucity of copies and the stature of the individuals to whom it was presented, it’s more than likely Cortez delivered them in person. He would have held this book in his hands.”

Dockerty slid his Stetson to the back of his balding head.

“I don’t see it myself, but I can understand where some folks might covet it at whatever the cost. Give me a list of those folks and I’m on the way.”

“I’ll get right on it. Verne Platt knows his way around the computer at the library. He can Goggle—”

“Google,” corrected Andy.

“He can Google the title and find out who’s most interested. This could make your career, Chief. The suspects must have access to millions in cash.”

“I like my career as it is. Nice town, decent wages, four acres I can grow sunflowers and entertain my grandchildren, when we have ’em. Be a nicer place with one less murderer in it.”

“You’re a good man, Chief.”

“You sell him this book?”

“I wish I had; I could have retired, if I hadn’t already from the police department. He must have found it on the Net, despite his distrust of it, or on one of his buying trips. I’m surprised he didn’t share the discovery with me. Half the fun of collecting is rubbing other collectors’ noses in your best acquisitions.”

“Maybe he’d just got it.”

“Which may narrow the field further, to others who were interested at the same time. How about the autopsy?”

“Busted skull, extensive brain damage, death close to instant as I guess it ever comes. Doc Simms has the Latin, for the record. Leather fibers in the cavity—left

by the weapon, most like; if Fister was wearing a leather cap at the time, it hasn't turned up."

"I doubt Lloyd owned anything as casual as a cap. His taste ran to three-piece suits and a freshly blocked felt fedora. Sap?"

"I hate to think it. It means the killer came prepared."

"I never put it aside. Lloyd was sane as a carpenter's level, but he'd do anything to guard his collection."

"Including fight to the death?"

"Including that. Love is the strongest motive of all."

"Well, it's a big book and he was killed in broad daylight. Maybe someone saw whoever it was lugging it away."

"At almost a thousand pages, each of them thick parchment, it would be heavy as well. Those clasps are solid iron, to reinforce the binding." He pointed at the thick horizontal ridges on the top and bottom of the spine of the book onscreen. "If he left on foot, he'd be one tired man—or woman, if she's built for it—by the time he got where he was going. Perhaps someone saw somebody who looked worn-out so early in the day."

"Could be. Andy took pictures of the driveway, but the only tread marks there belonged to Fister's Land Rover, which is still in the garage. If it was a sneak thief, he wouldn't want to advertise his coming with the sound of a motor."

"If it was a sneak thief," Sharecross said. "Call it an old cop's hunch, but I've got a sinking feeling it was someone we know."

Deputy Chief Barlow rapped on the frame of Dockerty's door, which had remained open as long as he'd had the office. "We got a ping on that door-to-door," Barlow said. "Gordon Tolliver saw something."

Dockerty dumped his half-eaten Big Mac back into the sack and wiped his hands. "Go ahead, Andy. Keep me in suspense. I'm just the guy who fights the council for your annual pay raise."

"I was wondering who to thank for that extra dime an hour. If you let me finish, I would've told you he's waiting outside."

"Prod him in. I don't know why we even had this conversation."

Tolliver entered, ducking his head from instinct. The top of the doorway gave him two inches' clearance, but it was a tall doorway. At the half-century point he looked in good shape, no extra fat, and a fine head of brown hair.

"I didn't think anything of it until Andy told me you were looking for a man who looked tired and might have been carrying a large object," said Tolliver, folding himself into a captain's chair. "I was taking down last week's front page from the window. A smalltown newspaper tradition, Chief. The point is to tease people into paying to read the stuff you jump to an inside page."

"I wondered about that. It always seemed to me the opposite, plastering your wares out in full sight for free."

"No danger of that, Chief. Ever since I left my old newspaper job, it's been my dream to publish my own. It's a challenge, especially today, with the Internet and all. I struggle to keep myself in paper and ink."

Dockerty nodded sympathy, resisting the urge to strangle the rest of the story out of him. You had to be a diplomat in Good Advice, where you kept running into the same people day after day. "Tell me what you told Andy."

"I'd just peeled off the tape when I saw a man hurrying past the window. He was red and panting, as if he'd run a long way, and carrying something under one arm."

"What was it?"

"I didn't see. It was on the side opposite the window."

"Anything else? A sap?"

"What's a sap?"

"A blackjack, but not that necessarily. Some kind of blunt object that might be used to crack open a man's skull."

"I saw nothing like that."

"Sure?"

"Someone running around town swinging a bludgeon would leave an impression, don't you think?"

"You'd be surprised what folks don't notice. They can't all be eagle-eyed journalists. Recognize him?"

"I'd never seen him before, and I like to think I know everyone in town. It's part of my job."

"Know him again?"

"I think so."

Officer Floyd Debner, a part-timer, had studied art at the University of New Mexico. He listened to Tolliver's description and sketched a rat-faced man with bulging eyes, his mouth hanging open to show a set of teeth only an orthodontist could love. Dockerty had copies made for distribution. He showed Avery Sharecross the original.

The bookseller climbed down from a wobbly stepladder to accept the drawing. His corduroy jacket was smeared with sooty dust; he'd been reorganizing the shop for a week but the chief couldn't see that he'd made a dent in the chaos.

"The story checks," Dockerty said, as Sharecross studied the sketch. "The newspaper's halfway between Fister's house and the bus station. The killer wouldn't hang around town a minute longer than he had to."

"That's logical. This man would attract notice." He slid his glasses back up to the bridge of his nose. "Does he look familiar?"

"He does, but I'll be goldarn if I can place him."

"Was it at the Gaiety Theater, possibly?"

"Why the Gaiety?"

"Orville Potts, the manager, has a weakness for crime films. Many of them feature Steve Buscemi."

He snatched back the picture and stared. "I'll be—"

"Have you heard back on fingerprints?"

"Got the results from the state police lab this morning. I'm glad we took yours. I was able to eliminate those, and a couple of other sets belonging to folks who knew Fister well enough to visit. We're working on the rest."

"You dusted the library ladder?"

“First thing, seeing as how high up that book was shelved. All we got was Fister’s.”

“Gloves?”

“They leave marks, too, not that they’re unique, like fingerprints.” He shook his head. “And he didn’t wipe it down, neither, or we wouldn’t have found Fister’s.”

Sharecross looked at a wall calendar featuring a cartoon caterpillar wearing spectacles. He might have been peering into a mirror. “This is Wednesday, isn’t it?”

“Comes around every week about this time. Why?”

“*The Good Adviser* comes out today. I think I’ll go down and buy a copy.”

“Why? It’ll just be full of this case, with that picture on the front page. You won’t learn anything there you don’t already know.”

“I agree.”

The rodent features he’d just been looking at stared at him through the tall window beside the door to the newspaper office, on the ground floor of a false-front building as old as statehood: PUBLISHER IDENTIFIES KILLER read the headline on the front page taped to the plate glass.

“Avery! What brings the owl out of his barn?” The publisher got up from his desk to shake the visitor’s hand. He towered over the bookseller.

“The quest for information; an experienced journalist like yourself shouldn’t find that unusual, and you know more than most. Didn’t you mention once you wrote a book column before you came here?”

“*The El Paso Times*. The feature was discontinued. I was told there weren’t enough readers interested in books. Does that sound oxymoronic?”

“Stupid’s more appropriate. Did you ever visit Lloyd Fister’s mansion?”

“Quite recently. He was kind enough to grant me an interview about his TV appearance. Tragically, he was killed before I could run the article.”

“Have you ever been fingerprinted?”

“Odd question. As a matter of fact—no, I haven’t. I wasn’t in the military and I don’t own a firearm. I’m happy to say I’ve never been arrested.”

“Well, never’s a long time. It eliminates one of the sets of prints the police couldn’t identify. Did you discuss Fister’s collection?”

“Am I a suspect?”

“I don’t have the authority to judge; but I am helping out Chief Dockerty. I’m interviewing everyone who had contact with Fister just before his death.”

“I see. Yes, he did show me some of his prize acquisitions.”

“Was one of them *L’Exploration d’Descrubrimiento en Nuevo Espano*?”

“I couldn’t say offhand. He had some Spanish titles, but I don’t understand the language. It may be in my notes.”

“Don’t trouble yourself to look for them. It’s a large book, bound in morocco leather, with iron clasps on the spine. You’d remember it if he showed it to you, I’m sure.”

“It doesn’t ring a bell.”

“It’s missing. The police are operating on the theory it was stolen.”

“That would explain why I didn’t see it. Perhaps he sold it.”

“Doubtful. Lloyd spent his life building that collection. He wouldn’t be likely to break it up. How tall are you, Gordon?”

“That’s rather a personal question.”

“And yet not an unusual one for you, I imagine. You stand out in a crowd.”

“I’m six-foot-seven.”

“As tall as that. No wonder Fister’s prints were the only marks on the ladder in his library. You wouldn’t even have to stand on tiptoe to take down the book.”

The publisher stiffened, adding to his height. “Please leave. I won’t have my character assassinated in a building I pay rent on.”

“One of your many expenses. They must have been on your mind when he showed you the latest addition to his library. The book being so old and rare, naturally he wouldn’t let you handle it; but being familiar with the book trade, you knew it was valuable.

“The nearest telephone was downstairs. Perhaps it rang and he went down to answer it, leaving you alone in the room. Whatever the interruption was, it wasn’t long enough for you to stash the book where you could retrieve it on your way out. Did you hear him coming and duck behind the door?”

“I’m warning you, Sharecross. I’ll throw you out.”

“Violence would be an option in your case. It was when you panicked and struck Fister on the back of the head, with the book you were holding.”

“Okay.” Tolliver reached down, gathered the bookseller’s lapels in both fists, and lifted him off his feet.

“Put him down!”

The voice was Chief Dockerty’s. He stood in the doorway with his feet spread and his revolver clasped in both hands, the barrel pointed at the publisher’s sternum.

Tolliver hesitated. All the tension went out of him then. He lowered Sharecross to the floor.

“Dear me.” Sharecross brushed at his wrinkled lapels.

“Hands on your head, Tolliver!”

“No need for that,” said the bookseller. “He doesn’t own a gun. I think he told the truth about that. His weapon of choice is the very thing he committed murder to own.”

Dockerty shook his head and laid Sharecross’ signed statement on his desk. “I never heard anything like it, the stolen property doubling as the weapon in a homicide.”

“It was pure impulse. Had he been thinking, he wouldn’t have risked damaging it. It’s tragic, but fortunate for posterity, that those clasps were harder than Lloyd’s head.” He nodded toward the evidence on the desk, a volume as big as a hefty dictionary, clamped in iron.

“How’d you know Tolliver was lying about the stranger?”

“It was a hunch, as I said. He lacked imagination—people who look for symbols in books like Garp often do—or he’d have come up with a description that didn’t belong to a well-known actor. The unused ladder started me thinking the thief had to be tall enough to reach a shelf nine feet from the floor.”

“He might’ve gotten away with it if he weren’t so interested in throwing us off the track.”

“Not really. The only other copy of *L’Exploration* known to exist is in the Library of Congress. He couldn’t try to sell Fister’s without implicating himself. No imagination, and too volatile for reason.”

“They’ll cure him of that in prison. Meanwhile, what do we do with the book?”

Sharecross looked uneasy. “It mustn’t languish in a non-climate-controlled evidence room through the trial and inevitable appeals. I keep my rarer stock in a properly maintained storage room in Santa Fe. I’m offering it to the justice system indefinitely, without charge.”

“You’re a civilian. That would constitute ownership. No judge would allow it.”

Sharecross’ face fell.

Dockerty stood. “Get up and raise your right hand.”

“Whatever for?”

“I’m swearing you in as an officer with the Good Advice Police Department and putting you in charge of homicide evidence.”

The bookseller rose with a smile. “All of it?”

“Every last volume.”

