

The Book Case

by Nelson DeMille, 1943-

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Otis Parker was dead. Killed by a falling bookcase whose shelves were crammed with very heavy reading. Total weight about a thousand pounds, which flattened Mr. Parker's slight, 160-pound body. A tragic accident. Or so it seemed.

To back up a bit, I'm Detective John Corey, working out of the First Precinct Detective Squad, which is located—if you ever need me—on Ericsson Place in Lower Manhattan, New York City.

It was a cold, blustery March morning, a Tuesday, and I was sitting in a coffee shop on Hudson Street, a few blocks from my precinct, trying to translate ham and eggs over easy into Spanish for my English-challenged waiter. "*Huevos flippo. Hambo and blanco toasto. Okay?*"

My cell phone rang at 8:34, and it was my boss, Lieutenant Ed Ruiz, who said, "I notice you're not at your desk."

"Are you sure?"

"Where are you?"

I told him and he said, "Good. You're up. We have a body at the Dead End Bookstore on North Moore. Discovered by a clerk reporting for work."

I knew the bookstore, which specialized in crime and mystery novels, and I'd actually been a customer a few times. I love murder mysteries. I can always guess the killer—without peeking at the end. Well... hardly ever. My job should be so easy.

Ruiz continued, "The deceased is the store owner, a Mr. Otis Parker."

"Oh... hey, I know him. Met him a few times."

"Yeah? How?"

"I bought a book."

"Really? Why?"

I ignored that and inquired, "Robbery?"

"No. Who robs a bookstore? You rob places that have money or goods you can sell."

"Right. So? What?"

"Well," replied Lieutenant Ruiz, "it looks like a ground ball," cop talk for something easy. He explained about the falling bookcase, then added, "Appears to be an accident, but the responding officer, Rourke, says it might need another look before they clean up the mess."

"Okay. Hey, how do you say fried egg on a roll to go in Spanish?"

"You say *hasta la vista* and get over to the bookstore."

"Right." I hung up and went out into the cold March morning. Lower Manhattan at this hour is jammed with people and vehicles, everyone on their way to work, and all thrilled to be doing that. Me too.

It was quicker to walk than to get my squad car at the precinct, so I began the four-block trek up Hudson, bucking into a strong north wind that roared down the avenue. A flasher on the corner opened his trench coat and got lifted into a holding pattern over the Western Union building. Just kidding.

I turned onto North Moore, a quiet cobblestoned street that runs west toward the river. Up ahead on the right I saw two RMPs and a bus, which if you read NYPD detective novels you'll know is two radio cars and an ambulance. One car would be the sector car that responded and the other the patrol sergeant's car.

As I approached the Dead End Bookstore I saw there was no crime scene tape, and the police activity hadn't drawn much attention on the street; it hardly ever does in New York unless it's something interesting or culturally significant like a mob hit. Even then, it's not worth more than a minute of your time. Also, this was not a lively street—mostly older apartment and loft buildings with lots of vacancy signs. Mr. Otis Parker had located his bookstore badly, but named it well.

I clipped my shield on my trench coat and approached a cop whose name tag said Conner. I asked him, "Is the ME here?"

"Yeah. Dr. Hines. I think he's waiting for you."

Hines was an okay guy. Looked like an undertaker and didn't try to play detective. I glanced at my cell phone clock. It was now 8:51 a.m. On the off chance

that this was something more than an unfortunate example of Newton's law of gravity, I'd need to fill out a DD-5 and begin a homicide file. Otherwise I was just stopping by.

I looked at the front of the bookstore, which took up the whole ground floor of an old five-story brick building, sandwiched between two equally old buildings. The glass door had a CLOSED sign hanging on it, along with a notice of store hours—open every day except Sundays, nine a.m. to six p.m. Basically banking hours that ensured the minimum number of customers. There were two display windows, one on each side of the door, and in the windows were... well, books. What this street really needed was a bar.

Anyway, in the left window were mostly classic crime novels—Chandler, Dorothy Sayers, Agatha Christie, Conan Doyle, and so forth. The window on the right featured contemporary bestselling authors like Brad Meltzer, James Patterson, David Baldacci, Nelson DeMille, and others who make more money writing about what I do than I make doing what I do.

I asked Officer Conner, "Who's the boss?"

He replied, "Sergeant Tripani." He added, "I'm his driver."

You want to get the lay of the land before you burst on the scene, so I also asked, "Who else is in there?"

He replied, "The two paramedics, and the responding officers, Rourke and Simmons, and an employee named Scott who discovered the body when he came to work."

"And Otis Parker," I reminded him.

"Yeah. He's still there."

"Did you see the body?"

"Yeah."

"What do you think?"

Officer Conner replied, "My boss thinks it's an accident."

"And *you* think?"

"Whatever he thinks."

"Right." I advised him, "If anyone comes by and identifies themselves as a customer or a friend, show them in."

"Will do."

I entered the bookstore, which looked like it did the last time I was here—no customers, no staff, cobwebs on the cash register, and unfortunately no coffee bar. Lots of books.

The store had a two-story-high ceiling, and there was a wrought-iron spiral staircase toward the rear that led up to an open loft area where I could see Sergeant Tripani, whom I knew, standing near the railing. He saw me and said, "Up here."

I walked to the staircase, which had a sign saying PRIVATE, and began the corkscrew climb. On the way, I tried to recall the two or three times I'd interacted with Mr. Otis Parker here in his store. He was a bearded guy in his early sixties, but could have looked younger if he'd bought a bottle of Grecian Formula. He dressed well, and I remember thinking—the way cops do—that he must have had another source of income. Maybe this store was a front for something. Or maybe I read too many crime novels.

I also recalled that Mr. Parker was a bit churlish—though I’d heard him once talking enthusiastically to a customer about collector’s editions, which he sold in the back of the store. I’d sized him up as a man who liked his books more than he liked the people who bought them. In short, a typical bookstore owner.

I reached the top of the stairs and stepped up into the open loft, which was a large, wood-paneled office. In the office were Officer Rourke, the two paramedics, Dr. Hines—wearing the same black suit he’d worn for twenty years—and Sergeant Tripani, who greeted me, “Good morning, Detective.”

“Good morning, Sergeant.”

There’s always a pecking order, and Sergeant Tripani, the patrol supervisor, was the head pecker until Detective Corey from the squad showed up. Of course Mr. Parker’s death was not a suspected homicide—at least not by Sergeant Tripani—but here I was to check it out, and Sergeant Tripani was happy to turn it over to me. In fact, he said, “It’s all yours, John.”

“Ruiz just asked me to stop by.” I pointed out, “I still have my coat on.”

He didn’t reply.

I snagged a pair of latex gloves from a paramedic, and then I surveyed the scene of the crime or the accident: It was a nice office, and there was an Oriental rug on the floor, strewn with lots of leather-bound books around a big mahogany writing desk. The legs of the desk had collapsed under the weight of the falling bookcase behind it, as had the legs and arms of the desk chair and side chair. The tipsy bookcase in question had been uprighted and leaned back against the wall, revealing Mr. Otis Parker, whose sprawled, splayed, and flattened body lay half on the collapsed desk and half on the floor. The desk items—telephone, Rolodex, pencil holder, and so forth—had miraculously remained on the desk as had the blotter, which was soaking up some fresh blood on and around the deceased’s head and face. Fortunately Mr. Parker’s brains had remained where they belonged. I don’t like to see brains.

Also on the desk was a framed black-and-white photo. The glass was cracked, but I could see a dark-haired woman, maybe in her late thirties. If this was his wife, it would be an old photo. But if it wasn’t old, then Mr. Parker had a young wife. Or maybe it was his daughter. In any case, the lady was not bad looking.

Otis Parker, I noted, was wearing good shoes and good slacks and a nice white shirt. His snappy sports jacket hung on a coat tree nearby. I couldn’t tell if he was wearing a tie because he was facedown. So obviously he’d been sitting at his desk when the bookcase behind him had somehow tipped away from the wall and silently fallen on him, his desk, and his chair. He may have seen or felt a few books landing around him, but basically he never knew what hit him. Indeed, it looked like an accident. Except, why did a thousand-pound bookcase fall forward? Well, shit happens. Ironic, too, that Otis Parker was killed by the books he loved. Okay, the *bookcase* killed him. But that’s not what the *New York Post* would say. They’d say, “Killed by the books he loved.”

I greeted Officer Rourke and inquired as to the whereabouts of his partner, Simmons.

Rourke replied, “He’s in the stockroom downstairs with Scott Bixby, the clerk who found the body.” He added, “Bixby is writing a statement.”

“Good.” Everyone seemed to be accounted for, so I greeted Dr. Hines and we shook hands. I asked him, “Do you think he’s dead?”

Dr. Hines replied to my silly question. “The responding officers”—he motioned to Officer Rourke—“pulled the bookcase off the victim with the assistance of the clerk, and they found no signs of life at that time.” He further briefed me, “The EMTs”—he indicated the two paramedics—“arrived three minutes later and also found no signs of life.” He informed me, “I have pronounced him dead.”

“Assuming Mr. Parker did not object, that makes it official.”

Dr. Hines doesn’t appreciate the dark humor that is a necessary part of tragic situations, and he made a dismissive sound.

I asked him, “Cause of death?”

“I don’t know.” He elaborated, “Crushed.”

“Instantaneous?”

“Probably. No sign of struggle.” He speculated, “A bigger man might have survived the impact.”

I looked at Otis Parker and nodded. If he’d eaten right and lifted weights...

Dr. Hines continued, “I suspect his neck or vertebrae were broken, or he died of a massive cranial trauma. Or maybe cardiac trauma.” He added, “I’ll do the autopsy this afternoon and let you know.”

“Okay.” When someone dies alone, with no witnesses, even if it’s an obvious accident, the taxpayers pay for an autopsy. Why? Because the ME has to list a cause of death before he signs the certificate, and “crushed” is not a medical term. Also, you do the autopsy because things are not always what they seem to be. That’s why I’m here.

I asked him, “Time of death?”

“Recent.”

I glanced back at the body and said, “His watch stopped at seven thirty-two. That’s your time of death.”

He looked surprised, then walked to the body and peered at the watch on Mr. Parker’s wrist.

Dr. Hines looked at his own watch and announced, “I have another call.” He said to me, “If you discover anything that doesn’t look like an accident, let me know before I begin the autopsy.”

“I always do, Doc.” I added, “Hold off on the meat wagon until you hear from me.”

“I always do, Detective.” He added, “But let’s not take too long. I want the body in the cooler.”

“Right.” The drill is this: The ambulance can’t take a dead body away, so we needed the morgue van, affectionately known as the meat wagon. But if I, Detective John Corey, suspected foul play, then we actually needed the Crime Scene Unit, who would take charge of the stiff and the premises.

But maybe we didn’t need the CSU people at all. I needed to make a determination here, and I needed to do it in a relatively short amount of time. I mean, if you cry wolf and there is no wolf, you look like an idiot. Or worse, you look like a guy who has no regard for the budget. But if you say “accident,” and it turns out later that it was something else, then you got some explaining to do. I

could hear Ruiz now. “Do you know what the word detective means? It means detecting things, Detective.” And so on.

Dr. Hines had left during my mental exercises, and so had the two paramedics. Remaining now in the loft office with me was Sergeant Tripani and the responding officer, Rourke. And Mr. Parker, who, if he could talk might say, “How the hell do I know what happened? I’m just sitting here minding my own business and the next thing I know I’m pressed meat.”

I already knew what Sergeant Tripani thought, but in case he’d changed his mind, I asked him, “What do you think, Lou?”

He shrugged, looked at the body, and said, “I think it is what it looks like.” He explained more fully, “An accident waiting to happen.”

I nodded, but it wasn’t a real positive nod. I looked at the bookcase that had been leaned at a steep angle against the paneled wall to ensure that it didn’t repeat its strange forward motion away from the wall. “Objects in motion,” I said, quoting Sir Isaac Newton, “tend to stay in motion. Objects at rest tend to stay at rest.”

Sergeant Tripani had no comment on that and asked me, “Do you need me here while you’re deciding what this is?”

“No. But I need to speak to Officers Rourke and Simmons and the clerk who found the body.”

“Okay.”

I asked him, “Do we know next of kin? Any notifications made?”

He replied, “Wife. The clerk called her after he found the body and after he called us. He left a message on her cell phone and home phone saying there’s been an accident. Then when Rourke and Simmons arrived, Rourke did the same thing, and he asked Mrs. Parker to call his cell and/or to come immediately to the store.”

“Where does she live?”

“The clerk said East Twenty-Third.”

I asked, “Did you send a car around to her home?”

“We did. No reply to the buzzer and no doorman.”

“Does she have a place of business?”

“She works at home, according to the clerk.”

“Doing what?”

“I didn’t ask.”

I wondered why Mrs. Parker had not answered her home phone or even her cell phone and why she hadn’t returned those obviously urgent calls or answered her door. Sleeping? Long shower? Doesn’t pick up her messages? I’m not married, though I do date, and my experience with ladies and phone messages is mixed. I will say no more on that subject.

Sergeant Tripani started toward the spiral staircase, then turned and said to me, “If you find anything that doesn’t look like an accident—”

“Then you buy me breakfast.”

“You’re on.”

“Can your driver get me a ham and egg on a roll?”

“Sure. You want a Lipitor with that?”

“Coffee, black. Get a receipt.”

Lou Tripani made his way down the spiral staircase, and I asked Officer Rourke, “What do you think?”

He replied, “With all due respect for other opinions, I’m just not buying that this bookcase tipped over by itself.” He added, “Or that it tipped over at the exact time when this guy was at his desk—when the store was empty with no witnesses to see it and no one around who could’ve helped him.”

I informed him, “Shit happens.” I did concede, “Could be more than bad luck.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you interview the clerk?”

“Sure.” He informed me, “He seemed not quite right.”

“Meaning?”

“Something off there. Like he seemed more nervous than shocked.”

I don’t like to be prejudiced before I do an interview, but the clerk’s reaction, close to the time he discovered the body, was important and interesting. By now Scott had calmed down and I might see another emotion. I said to Rourke, “Stick around. Put the OPEN sign on the door, and if by some miracle there’s a customer, let them in and give me a holler.”

“Right.”

“And if and when Mrs. Parker shows up, let me handle the notification.”

He nodded.

“And let me know when my breakfast arrives.”

Officer Rourke went down the staircase. Not every uniformed cop wants to be a detective, but most of them have good instincts and experience, and a lot of cases have been solved or advanced because of the cop who first came on the scene. Rourke seemed smart, and he had a suspicious nature. I wouldn’t want to be Mrs. Rourke.

I looked at the bookcase again. It looked like an antique, like most of the expensive junk in this office. It was one of those... let’s say, ponderous Victorian pieces that decorators hate but men like.

I looked back at the deceased and mentally pictured the bookcase falling on top of him while he worked at his desk. The force of the object would be increased by its falling speed, like that apple that hit Sir Isaac on the head. But if this was murder, it was a risky way to do it. I mean, there was no guarantee that the bookcase would kill him. Score one against homicide.

But if it was murder, how was it done? It would take two people—or maybe one strong guy—to topple this bookcase. And obviously it would be someone he knew who was in his office at this hour. And the person or persons would say to him, “You just sit there, Otis, while we stand behind you and admire your books.” Then, “Okay, one, two, three—timber!”

Maybe. But without the one, two, three.

I noticed that the ten-foot-high bookcase was taller than it was wide, and the depth of the bookcase at the bottom was the same as the top, making it inherently unstable. Score another point against the bookcase being a murder weapon; it was, as Tripani said, an accident waiting to happen.

I looked at the spatter pattern of the books, the way you look at blood spatter, and I noticed that most of the books were lying near the front of the desk, with only a few toward the rear, indicating to me that the shelves had held more books

toward the top, adding to the instability. Mr. Parker, who seemed smart to me, was not too smart about the danger of top-heavy objects.

I looked at the wall behind the bookcase and at the solid back of the piece to see if there were any screws or bolts that had pulled loose from the wood paneling. But there was nothing securing this massive piece of furniture to the wall—though I did see some old holes in the bookcase, indicating that previous owners had screwed this monster to something solid.

Most accidents, I'm convinced, are God's way of getting rid of stupid people. Or if you believe in Darwinism, you wonder why there are any stupid people left in the world. Well, I guess they can reproduce before they remove themselves from the gene pool.

I also noticed that the oak floor had a slope to it, not uncommon in these creaky old buildings. The floor pitched a bit toward the desk and toward the edge of the loft. I've been in a thousand buildings like this, built in the last century, and the wooden rafters that hold up the floors are uneven, bowed, or warped, giving the floors some interesting tilts.

But *what* was it that caused this stationary object to suddenly topple away from the wall? Objects at rest, and all that. Well, if not human hands, then a few other things could have done it, the most obvious being the building settling. This can happen even after a hundred years. That's how these places collapse now and then. Also, you get some heavy truck rumbling by on the street, and that can cause a vibration that would topple an unstable object. Same with construction equipment and guys working underground. Vibrations are also caused by heating and air conditioning units starting up. Even badly vented plumbing or steam pipes could cause a bang in the pipes that could possibly topple something that was on the verge of toppling. That's exactly what happened in my old East Side tenement building to my mother's prized Waterford crystal vase that her rich aunt gave her. Actually, I broke it. But that's another story.

I was about to rule this a dumbicide, but then something caught my eye. I noticed on the oak floor that there was a faint outline where the bookcase had sat for some years, caused obviously by the fact that no one had washed or waxed the floor under the bookcase since it had been there. And I also noticed that there were outlines of two small objects that had sat on the floor and protruded from the front of the bookcase. You don't have to be a detective to determine that these two outlines were made by furniture chocks or wedges—wood or rubber—that tipped the tall, heavy piece back against the wall for safety. So Mr. Parker was not so stupid—though I would have also shot some big bolts into the wall.

Point was the bookcase was probably not on the verge of toppling forward by itself if those wedges were there. And they were there. But where were they now? Not on the floor. I looked around the room, but I couldn't find them.

I went to the rail and saw Officer Rourke sitting behind the counter reading a borrowed book. I called down to him, "Hey, did you see any furniture wedges on the floor when you got up here?"

"Any...? What?"

I explained and he replied, "No. Simmons and I ran up the stairs with the clerk, and we lifted the bookcase and leaned it back against the wall where you see it. I didn't notice any furniture wedges on the floor." He let me know, "Other than

feeling for a pulse and heartbeat, we didn't touch anything." He added, "EMS arrived about three minutes later."

"Okay." So this has become the Case of the Missing Furniture Wedges. Let's assume that no one who responded to the 911 call stole two furniture wedges. Let's assume instead that the killer took them. Right. This was no accident. Otis Parker was murdered.

I said to Rourke, "Mum's the word on furniture wedges."

I turned away from the rail and stared at Otis Parker and the bookcase. Someone was in this room with him, someone he probably knew, and that person—or persons—had previously removed the two wedges from under the bookcase. Right. Two people. One to tip the heavy bookcase back a bit and the other to slide the wedges out and pocket them. Now the bookcase is unstable, and maybe made more so if someone transferred some of the books from the lower shelves to the higher ones. Maybe this was done yesterday, or a few days ago. And unfortunately for Otis Parker, he hadn't noticed the slight lean of his bookcase away from the wall or that the wedges were missing.

So, early this morning, Otis Parker arrives and sits at his desk. Someone accompanied him, or met him here, probably by appointment. That person—or persons—goes to his bookcase to admire his leather-bound collection or maybe get a book. And while they're at it, he, she, or they cause—in a manner not yet known—the bookcase to topple away from the wall, and the expected trajectory of the falling bookcase intersects with the seated victim. Splat! No contest.

I looked around the room. Now that I suspected murder, everything looked different. And everything and anything could be a clue. Stuff in the wastebasket, the victim's datebook, his cell phone, the contents of his pockets and the contents of his stomach, and on and on. Hundreds of things that needed to be looked at, bagged, tagged, and parceled out to the forensic labs, the evidence storage room, and so forth, while Otis Parker himself was sliced and diced by Dr. Hines. What a difference a few minutes can make.

I surveyed the office, noting its masculine, old clubby feel. There was a large leather couch to the right of the bookcase, a few book-themed prints on the walls, and a rolling bar near the spiral staircase. I pictured Mr. Parker in here, entertaining an author, or even a lady friend, after hours.

On the far side of the room was a long table stacked with books, and I realized that all the books were the same. Beneath the table were five open boxes that had obviously held the books. I walked to the table and saw that the book title was *Death Knocks Once*, and the author was Jay K. Lawrence, an author whom I'd read once or twice. I also noticed a box of Sharpies on the table, and I deduced that Jay K. Lawrence was going to be here today or in the very near future to sign his new book for the store. Or he'd already done so.

I snapped on my latex gloves and opened one of the books, but there was no autograph on the title page. Too bad. I would have liked to buy a signed copy. But maybe Jay Lawrence would be arriving shortly, and in anticipation of this I opened to the back flap where there was a bio and photo of Jay K. Lawrence. Most male crime writers look like they used their mug shots for the book jackets, but Mr. Lawrence was a bit of a pretty boy with well-coiffed hair, maybe a touch of makeup, and a little airbrushing. Jay Lawrence's main character, I recalled, was a

tough Los Angeles homicide detective named Rick Strong, and I wondered where in Mr. Lawrence's pretty head this tough guy lived.

I read the short bio under the photo and learned that Jay Lawrence lived in LA. There was no mention of a wife and family, so he probably lived with his mommy and ten cats, and he loved to cook.

The next thing I had to do was call Lieutenant Ruiz. But if I did that, then this place would get real crowded. I needed to talk to Scott the clerk and to Mrs. Parker before this was announced as a homicide investigation, because when you say "homicide," the whole game changes and people get weird or they get a lawyer. So, for the record, I didn't see anything suspicious, and this is still an accident investigation.

I heard the door open below, and I looked down to see if it was Mrs. Parker, or maybe Jay Lawrence. But it was Officer Conner with my egg sandwich, which made me just as happy. I asked Conner to leave the bag on the counter.

My tummy was growling, but I needed to get as much done here as I could before Ruiz called me to ask what the story was. I called down to Rourke, "There may be an author coming in to sign books. Jay Lawrence. Just say there's been an accident. I want to talk to him."

He nodded and I turned back to the office.

I'm not supposed to touch or move too many things, but I did eyeball everything while my mind was in overdrive.

There was a door to the left of the bookcase, and I opened it and walked into a small room filled with file cabinets. To the right was an open bathroom door, and I stepped inside. The lights were on, and the toilet seat was down, indicating that a lady had used it last or that Otis Parker had a bowel movement. I also noticed that the sink was wet, and there was a damp paper towel in the trash can, and that paper towel would have lots of someone's DNA on it. It's amazing how much evidence is left behind in a bathroom. I'd have the CSU people start here.

I also noticed a toilet plunger standing on the floor in the corner. In the back of my mind I'd been looking for something...I didn't know what it was, but I was sure I'd know it when I saw it. And this could be it.

Somebody—a Greek guy—once said, "Give me a lever long enough, and a place to stand, and I can move the world." Or a bookcase.

Still wearing my latex gloves, I picked up the plunger and examined the wooden handle. One side of the rounded tip was slightly discolored, and there was a small dent or crease about halfway up the handle, on the opposite side of the discoloration.

I carried the plunger into the office and stood on the left side of the bookcase. I now noticed two things—a small dimple in the wood paneling and a small crease in the back edge of the bookcase, both about chest high. These marks were barely noticeable in the hard, dark wood, but they would match perfectly with the marks on the lighter and softer wood of the plunger handle. So it was obvious to me, as it would be obvious to the CSU team, the DA, and hopefully a jury, that the killer, after excusing him or herself to use the bathroom, returned quietly to the office and quickly slipped the plunger handle between the bookcase and the wood-paneled wall. Then that person pulled on the handle, using it as a lever to tilt the

unbalanced bookcase an inch or so forward until gravity took over. For every action, said Sir Isaac Newton, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

I returned Part B of the murder weapon to the bathroom.

Now I knew two things: Otis Parker *was* murdered, and I also knew *how* he was murdered.

The only thing left to discover was *who* murdered him. And *why*. If you get the why, you usually get the who. As I've discovered in this business, when motive and opportunity coalesce, you get a crime. And when the crime is made to look like an accident, you look for someone close to the victim.

I needed a lot more time in this office, but the office wasn't going anywhere and someone close to the victim—Scott the clerk—was cooling his heels in the stockroom and needed to be interviewed.

I removed my gloves and went down the stairs. I asked Rourke, "Where's the stockroom?"

He indicated a closed door in the rear of the long bookstore. My ham and egg on a roll was calling my name, but it's not professional to interview a witness with your mouth full, so I just grabbed the coffee and went through the door into the stockroom.

It was a fluorescent-lit space lined with metal shelving that held hundreds of books. The deep shelves looked stable enough, but after seeing what happened to poor Mr. Parker, the place made me nervous.

There was a long table in the center of the room, also stacked with books and paperwork, and at the table sat a uniformed officer—Simmons—and a young gent who must be Scott. I thought I may have seen him once or twice in the store.

There was a metal security door that led out to the back, and I opened the door and looked out into a paved yard surrounded by a brick wall about ten feet high. There were no gates leading to the adjoining backyards, but the walls could be scaled if you had something to stand on—or if you had a cop hot on your tail. Been there, done that—on both sides of the law. There was also a fire escape leading up to the top floor.

I closed the door and turned to Scott. I identified myself, pointing to my shield—the way the lady cop did in *Fargo*. Funny scene.

Officer Simmons, who'd been babysitting the witness as per procedure, asked, "Do you need me?"

"No. But stick around."

He nodded, got up, and left.

I smiled at Scott, who did not return my smile. He still looked nervous and unhappy, maybe concerned about his future at the Dead End Bookstore.

My coffee was tepid, but I spotted a microwave sitting on a small table wedged between two bookcases, and I put my paper cup in the microwave. Twenty seconds? Maybe thirty.

There was a bulletin board above the table with a work schedule, and I saw that Scott was scheduled to come in at eight thirty a.m. today, and someone named Jennifer had a few afternoon hours scheduled this week. Not much of a staff, which meant not many people to interview. There was also a Post-it note saying, *J. Lawrence—10:00 a.m. Tuesday. Today.*

I retrieved my coffee from the microwave and sat across from Scott. He was a soft-looking guy in his midtwenties, short black hair, black T-shirt and pants, and a diamond stud in his left earlobe, which I think means he's a Republican. Maybe I got that wrong. Anyway, I did remember him now—more for his almost surly attitude than his helpfulness.

I flipped through the dozen or so pages of Scott's handwritten statement and saw he hadn't yet finished with his account of who, what, where, and when. In this business, short statements are made by people with nothing to hide; long statements are a little suspicious, and this was a long statement.

As I perused his tight, neat handwriting, I said to him, "This seems to be a very helpful account of what happened here."

"Thank you."

I asked him, "Do you think the police arrived promptly?"

He nodded.

"Good. And the EMS?"

"Yeah..."

"Good." And are you now thinking I'm here to evaluate the response to your 911 call? I'm not. I dropped his written statement on the table and asked him, "How you doin'?"

He seemed unsure about how he was doing, but then replied, "Not too good."

"Must have been a shock."

"Yeah."

"How long have you worked here?"

"Three years this June."

"Right after college?"

"Yeah."

"Good job?"

"It's okay." He volunteered, "Pays the bills while I'm writing my novel."

"Good luck." Every store clerk and waiter in this town wants you to know they're really a writer, an actor, a musician, or an artist. Just in case you thought they were a clerk or a waiter. I asked Scott, "What time did you get here this morning?"

He replied, "As I told the other policeman, I got here about seven thirty."

"Right. Why so early?"

"Early?"

"You're scheduled for eight thirty."

"Yeah... Mr. Parker asked me to get here early."

"Why?"

"To stock shelves."

"The shelves look stocked. When's the last time you sold a book?"

"I had some paperwork to do."

"Yeah? Okay, take me through it, Scott. You got here, opened the door—front door?"

"Yeah." He reminded me, "It's all in my statement."

"Good. And what time was that?"

"I opened the door a little before seven thirty."

"And it was locked?"

"Yeah."

“Did you know that Mr. Parker was here?”

“No. Well, not at first. I noticed the lights were on in his office up in the loft, so I called up to him.”

“I assume he didn’t answer.”

“No... he... so I thought maybe he was in here—in the stockroom—so I came in here to get to work.”

“And when you saw he wasn’t here, what did you think?”

“I... thought maybe he was in his bathroom upstairs.”

“Or maybe he ducked out for a ham and egg on a roll.”

“Uh... he... if he went out, he’d turn off the lights.” Scott informed me, “He’s strict about saving energy. Was.”

“Right.” Now he wasn’t using *any* energy. I said, “Please continue.”

“Well... as I said in my statement, after about twenty minutes I carried some books to the counter up front, and I called up to him again. He didn’t answer, but then I noticed something...I couldn’t see the top of his bookshelf.”

In fact, I’d noticed that bookshelf myself on my two or three visits here. You could see the top two or three shelves from the front of the store. But not this morning.

Scott continued, “I didn’t know what to make of that at first...and I kept staring up at the office...then I went halfway up the stairs and called out again, then I went all the way up and...”

Rourke said Scott looked nervous, but now Scott looked appropriately distraught as he relived that moment of horror when he found his boss flattened by a half ton of mahogany and books.

I didn’t say anything as he spoke, but I nodded sympathetically.

Scott continued, “I shouted his name, but... there was no answer and no movement...”

“How’d you know he was under there?”

“I could see... I wasn’t all the way up the stairs, so I could see under the bookcase...”

“Right. I thought you said you went *all* the way up the stairs.”

“I... I guess I didn’t. But then I did. I tried to move the bookcase, but I couldn’t. So I called 911 on my cell phone.”

“Good thinking.” I glanced at his statement and said, “Then you called Mrs. Parker.”

“Yeah.”

“How well do you know her?” He thought about that, then replied, “I’ve known her about three years. Since they started dating.”

“So they’re newlyweds.”

“Yeah.” He volunteered, “Married last June.”

“Previous marriage for him?”

“Yeah. Before my time.”

“How about her?”

“I think so.”

Recalling the photo on the deceased’s desk, I asked Scott, “How old is she?”

“I... guess about forty.”

Booksellers always get the young chicks.

I asked Scott, "Was she a nice lady?"

"I... guess. I didn't see her much. She hardly ever comes to the store."

By now Scott was wondering about my line of questioning, so I volunteered, "I like to get a feeling for the victim's next of kin before I break the news to them."

He seemed to buy that and nodded.

I asked Scott directly, "Did the Parkers have a happy marriage?"

He shrugged, then replied, "I don't know. I guess." He then asked me, "Why do you ask?"

"I just told you, Scott."

Recalling that Scott told Tripani that Mrs. Parker worked at home, I asked him, "What does she do for a living?"

"She's a decorator. Interior designer. Works at home."

"Do you have any idea where she is this morning?"

"No. Maybe on a job."

"Could she be out of town?"

"Could be." He informed me, "She's from LA. She has clients there."

"Yeah?" LA. Who else do I know from LA? Ah! Jay Lawrence. Small world. I asked him, "Did she decorate this place?"

He hesitated, then replied, "No. I mean, not the store."

"His office?"

"I don't know. Yeah. I guess."

"That's three different answers to the same question. Did she decorate his office? Yes or no?"

"Yes."

"How long ago was that?"

"Uh... I think about two years ago."

"When they were dating?"

"Yeah."

"So she put the bookcase up there?"

He didn't reply immediately, then said, "I guess."

Scott was a crappy witness. Typical of his generation, if I may be judgmental here. A little fuzzy in his thinking, his brain probably half-baked on controlled substances, educated far beyond his ambitions, marking time while he wrote the Great American Novel. But he did get to work early. So he had *some* ambition.

As for Mrs. Parker, I was concerned that she'd take it very badly if she was the person who bought that bookcase and failed to secure it to the wall. I mean, that would be hard to live with. Especially if she took those furniture wedges for another job... well, too early to speculate on that.

I asked Scott, "Was her business successful?"

"I don't know."

"Is this bookstore successful?"

"I don't know. I'm just a clerk."

"Answer the question."

"I... I think he makes ends meet." He let me know, "I get paid."

"Does the rent get paid?"

"He owns the building."

"Yeah? Who's on the top three floors?"

“Nothing. Nobody. Loft space. Unrented.”

“Why unrented?”

“Needs heat, a new fire escape, and the freight elevator doesn’t work.”

And there’s no money to do the work. I was wondering what Mr. Parker was thinking when he bought this building, but then Scott, reading my mind, volunteered, “He inherited the building.”

I nodded. And he should have sold it to a developer. But he wanted to own a bookstore. Otis Parker, bibliophile, was living his dream, which was actually a nightmare. And Mrs. Parker’s decorating career could be a hobby job—or she did okay and had to support her husband’s book habit.

Motive is tricky, and you can’t ascribe a motive and then try to make it fit the crime. I mean, even if Otis Parker was worth more dead than alive—this building, or at least the property, was worth a couple mil, even in this neighborhood—that didn’t mean that his young wife wanted him dead. She might just want him to sell the building and stop sinking time and money into this black hole—this Dead End Bookstore—and go get a real job. Or at least turn the place into a bar.

Maybe I *was* getting ahead of myself. For all I knew, the Parkers were deeply in love and his death—caused by her bookcase—would cause the grief-stricken widow to enter a nunnery.

Meanwhile I made a mental note to check for a mortgage on the building, plus Mr. Parker’s life insurance policies, and if there was a prenup agreement. Money is motive. In fact, statistically, it is the main motive in most crimes.

I returned to the subject at hand and said, “So, after you called nine one one, you called her.”

He nodded.

“From upstairs or downstairs?”

“Downstairs. I ran down to unlock the door.”

“And you used your cell phone.”

“Yeah.”

“Her home number is in your cell phone?”

“Yeah... I have their home number to call if there’s a problem here.”

“Right. And you have her cell phone number in your cell phone in case... what?”

“In case I can’t get Mr. Parker on his cell phone.”

“Right.” And when I look at everyone’s phone records, I might see some interesting calls made and received.

The thing is, if a murder actually does appear to be an accident, there’s not much digging beyond the cause and manner of death. But when a cop thinks it looks fishy, then the digging gets deeper, and sometimes something gets dug up that doesn’t jibe with people’s statements.

It had taken me less than fifteen minutes to determine that I was most probably investigating a homicide, so I was already into the digging stage while everyone else—except maybe Officer Rourke—thought we were talking about a bizarre and tragic accident.

Scott—baked brains aside—was getting the drift of some of my questions. In fact, he was looking a bit nervous again, so I asked him bluntly, “Do you think this was something more than an accident?”

He replied quickly and firmly, “No. But that other officer did.”

I suggested, "He reads too many detective novels. Do you?"

"No. I don't read this stuff."

He seemed to have a low opinion of detective novels, and that annoyed me. On that subject, I asked him, "Is Jay Lawrence scheduled to come in today?"

He nodded. "Yeah. To sign his new book. He's on a book tour. He's supposed to come in sometime around ten a.m."

I looked at my watch and said, "He's late."

"Yeah. Authors are usually late."

"Where's he staying in New York?"

"I don't know."

"Do you have his cell number?"

"Yeah... someplace."

"Have you met him?"

"Yeah. A few times."

"How well does he—did he—know Mr. Parker?"

"I guess they knew each other well. They see each other at publishing events."

"And Mrs. Parker?"

"Yeah... I guess he knew her too."

"From LA?"

"Yeah... I think so."

Out of curiosity, or maybe for some other reason, I asked Scott, "Is Jay Lawrence a big best seller?"

Scott replied with some professional authority, "He was. Not anymore." He added, "We can hardly give his books away."

"Yeah? But you bought five boxes of them for him to sign."

Scott sort of sneered and replied, "That's a courtesy. Like, a favor. Because they know each other and because he was coming to the store."

"Right." It could be awkward if there were only two books here for Jay Lawrence to sign.

Well, you learn something new every day on this job. Jay Lawrence, who I thought was a best-selling author, was not. Goes to show you. Maybe I make more money doing what I do than he makes writing about what I do.

I had more questions to ask Scott, but there was a knock on the door and Officer Simmons opened it and said, "There's a guy here—a writer named Jay Lawrence, to see the deceased." He added, "Rourke notified him that there had been an accident in the store, but not a fatality."

I looked at my watch. It was 10:26, for the record, and I said to Simmons, "Keep Scott company." I said to Scott, "Keep writing. You may have the beginning of a best seller."

I went out into the bookstore where Mr. Jay K. Lawrence was sitting in a wingback chair, wearing a black cashmere topcoat, his legs crossed, looking impatient. He should be looking concerned—cops, accident, and all that—and maybe he was, but he hid it with feigned impatience. On the other hand, authors are all ego, and if they're detained or inconvenienced by, say, an earthquake or a terrorist attack, they take it personally and get annoyed.

I identified myself to Mr. Lawrence and again pointed to my shield. I have to get that stupid movie scene out of my head or people will think I'm an idiot. Actually,

it's not a bad thing for a suspect to think that. Not that Jay Lawrence was a suspect. But he had some potential.

Before he could stand—if he intended to—I sat in the chair beside him.

He looked like his photo—coiffed and airbrushed—and I could see that under his open topcoat he wore a green suede sports jacket, a yellow silk shirt, and a gold-colored tie. His tan trousers were pressed and creased, and his brown loafers had tassels. I don't like tassels.

Anyway, I got to the point and informed him, "I'm sorry to have to say this, but Otis Parker is dead."

He seemed overly shocked—as though the police presence here gave him no clue that something bad had happened.

He composed himself, then asked me, "How did it happen?"

"How did what happen?"

"How did he die?"

"An accident. A bookcase fell on him."

Mr. Lawrence glanced up at the loft, then said softly, "Oh my God."

"Right. The bookcase in his office. Not the stockroom."

Mr. Lawrence didn't reply, so I continued, "Scott found the body."

He nodded, then asked me, "Who's Scott?"

"The clerk." I said to him. "We left a message on Mrs. Parker's cell phone and home phone, but we haven't heard from her." I asked, "Would you know where she is?"

"No... I don't."

"Were you close to the Parkers?"

"Yes..."

"Then it might be good if you stayed here until she arrives."

"Oh... yes. That might be a good idea." He added, "I can't believe this..."

I had to keep in mind that this guy wrote about what I do, so I needed to be careful with my questions. I mean, I wouldn't want him to get the idea that I suspected foul play. On that subject, there was no crime scene tape outside and no CSU team present, so he had no reason to believe that he'd walked into a homicide investigation. If he had nothing to do with that, it was a moot point. If he did have something to do with it, he was breathing easier than he'd been on his way here for his scheduled book signing. Also, I'd left my trench coat on, giving him, and anyone else, the impression that I wasn't staying long.

To make him feel a little better, I said to him, "I read two of your books."

He seemed to brighten a bit and asked, "Which ones?"

"The one about the writer who plotted to murder his literary agent."

He informed me, "That was a labor of love."

"Yeah? I guess that's what all writers dream about."

"Most. Some want to murder their editors."

I smiled, then continued, "And I read *Dead Marriage* about the young woman who kills her older husband. Great book."

He stayed silent a second, then said, "I didn't write a book with that theme."

"No? Oh... sorry. Sometimes I get the books confused."

He didn't reply, and in what may have been a Freudian slip, he asked me, "Does Mia know?"

“Who?”

“Mrs. Parker.”

“Oh, right. Mia. No. We never say that in a phone message.” I added, “We’ll wait another fifteen minutes or so, and then we have to get the body to the morgue.” I suggested, “Why don’t you call her?”

He hesitated, then said, “That’s not a call I want to make.”

“Right. I’ll call. Do you have her number?”

“Not with me.”

“Not in your cell phone?”

“Uh... I’m not sure.” He asked, “Don’t you have her number?”

“Not with me.” I suggested, “Take a look in your directory. I really want to get her here. That’s better than her having to go to the morgue.”

“All right...” He retrieved his cell phone, scrolled through his directory, and said, “Here’s their home phone... Otis’s cell phone... and yes, here’s Mia’s cell phone.”

“Good.” I put my hand out, and he reluctantly gave me his cell phone. If I was brazen, I’d have checked his call log, but I could do that later, if necessary. I speed-dialed Mia Parker’s cell phone, and she answered, “Jay, where are you?”

Sitting next to a detective at the Dead End Bookstore. She had a nice voice. I said to her, “This is Detective Corey, Mrs. Parker.”

“Who...?”

“Detective Corey. NYPD. I’m using Mr. Lawrence’s cell phone.”

Silence.

I continued, “I’m at the Dead End Bookstore, ma’am. I’m afraid there’s been an accident.”

“Accident?”

“Did you get the messages that were left on your cell phone?”

“No... what messages?”

“About the accident.”

“Where’s Jay?”

Who’s on first? I replied, “He’s here with me.”

“Why do you have his cell phone? Let me speak to him.”

She didn’t seem that interested in the accident, or who had the accident, so I handed the phone to Jay.

He said to her, “It’s me.”

Me, Mia. Mama mia, Mia. Otis is rigor mortis.

He informed her, again, “There’s been an accident at the bookstore. Otis is...” He looked at me and I shook my head. He said, “Badly hurt.”

She said something, and then he asked her, “Where are you? Can you get here quickly?” He listened, nodded to me, and then said to her, “I’ll be here.”

He hung up and said to me, “She’s in her apartment. She’ll be here in about ten or fifteen minutes.”

Thinking out loud, I said, “I wonder why we couldn’t reach her earlier?”

He explained, “She said she was writing a proposal. She has an office in the apartment, and she blots out the world when she’s working on a project.”

“Yeah? Do you do that?”

“I do.”

“I need a room like that.” Actually, I drink scotch whiskey to blot out the world, and any room will do. I said to him, “She took your call.”

“She just finished.”

“I see.” Again, thinking out loud, I said, “Most accident victims who are badly hurt wind up in the hospital. Not the bookstore.”

He didn’t reply.

“And yet Mrs. Parker saw nothing odd about coming to the bookstore.”

We made eye contact, and he said to me, “I think she knows it’s more than an accident, Detective. I think, like most people who get a call like that, she’s very distraught and partly in denial.” He asked me, “You follow?”

“I do. Thank you.”

Two things here. First, I didn’t like Jay Lawrence and he didn’t like me. Loathing at first sight. And to think he glamorized the police in his novels. Rick Strong, LAPD. This was really a disappointment. But maybe he did like cops. It was *me* he didn’t like. I have that effect on pompous asses.

Which brought me to my second point. He was a smooth customer, and he had a quick reply to my somewhat leading questions. I’ve seen lots of guys like this—and they’re mostly guys—egotistical, self-absorbed, usually charming, and great liars, i.e., sociopaths. Not to mention narcissistic. Also, as a fiction writer, he bullshitted for a living.

But maybe I was judging Mr. Jay K. Lawrence too quickly and too harshly. And it didn’t matter what I thought of him. I’d never see him again—unless I locked him up for murder.

For sure, I wouldn’t read any more of his books. Well, maybe I’d take them out of the library to screw him out of the royalty.

I said to Jay Lawrence, “I noticed a pile of your books in Mr. Parker’s office.” I asked him, “Would you like to sign them while you’re waiting?”

He didn’t reply, perhaps actually considering this. I mean, a signed book is a sold book. And he needed the sales. Right? I assured him, “You don’t have to go upstairs. Unless you want to. I can have Scott bring the books down here.”

He replied, a bit coolly, “I don’t think it would be appropriate for me to sign books at this time, Detective.”

“Maybe you’re right. But... I hate to ask, but could you personalize one for me?” And leave your DNA and fingerprints on the book?

“Maybe later.”

“Okay.” I remained seated beside him and asked, “Where are you staying?”

“The Carlyle.”

“Nice hotel.”

“My publisher pays for it.”

“When did you get to New York?”

“Last night.”

“How long are you staying?”

“I leave tonight for Atlanta.”

“Do you think you can make it back for the funeral?”

He thought about that, then said, “I’ll have to check with my publicist.” He explained, “These tours are scheduled months in advance. I know it sounds callous, but...”

"I understand. A busy life is scheduled—a sudden death is not." I offered, "You can use that line in your next book."

He ignored my offer and said, "If you'll excuse me, I have some phone calls to make." He explained, "I need to let my publicist know I can't make my other bookstore appointments today, or my media interviews."

"Right." I stood and said, "When Mrs. Parker arrives, I'll let you break the news to her."

He didn't reply.

Well, Mr. Lawrence was sitting in the bookstore with Officer Rourke keeping him company, Scott was in the stockroom with Officer Simmons, writing his bestseller, and Otis Parker was alone in his office, reaching room temperature by now. Time for breakfast.

I retrieved the brown paper bag from the counter and went outside. It was still cold and windy, and there weren't many people on North Moore Street. I noticed now that in the store window was a copy of *Death Knocks Once*, by Jay K. Lawrence, and a small sign under the book announced, AUTOGRAPHED. Well, not yet.

I got in the passenger seat of Rourke's patrol car, unwrapped my ham and egg sandwich, and took a bite. Room temperature.

I called Lieutenant Ruiz before he could call me. He answered, and I said, "I'm still at the Dead End Bookstore."

"What's the story?"

"Well..." I'm about to lie to you. No. Not a good idea. Ruiz, like me, is more interested in results and arrests than silly technicalities, so I said to him, "I have some reason to believe this was a homicide."

"Yeah?"

"But I don't want to announce that at this time."

No reply.

I took another bite and said, "I think the bookcase was tipped over by a person or persons unknown."

"Are you eating?"

"No. I'm chewing on my tie."

He ignored that and asked, "You need assistance?"

"No. I need about thirty or forty minutes."

"Where's the body?"

"Where it was found."

"Suspects?"

"Looks like an inside job."

"I heard from Sergeant Tripani. He says it looks like an accident."

"No. It looks like he owes me breakfast."

Rule number one between cops who are making shit up is Get Your Stories Straight, and Lieutenant Ruiz said to me, "So you're saying you believe it was an accident."

I replied, "At this time, I believe it was an accident."

"Call me in half an hour."

I hung up and got out of the car. I went back into the store and saw that Mr. Lawrence was on his cell phone at the back of the store, out of earshot of Rourke. I

didn't know who he was calling, but I'd know when I subpoenaed his phone records.

I stood near the door and looked into the street as a taxi pulled up and discharged a lady who, based on the photo I saw, looked like Mrs. Parker.

She glanced at the police car and strode quickly toward the door. The expression on her face showed some concern, but not exactly sick with worry over her husband's accident. I mean, I've seen it all by now, and Mrs. Parker looked to me like someone who needed to get through some slightly unpleasant business.

She opened the door, glanced at me, then at Officer Rourke, and then spotted Jay Lawrence in the rear of the store as he spotted her. They hurried toward one another and met at the Bargain Book table.

It was an awkward moment as they vacillated between embracing, grasping each other's hands, or high-fiving.

He took both her hands in his, and I heard him say, "Mia, I am so sorry... Otis is..."

Dead. Come on, Jay. I've got thirty minutes before I have to announce a suspected homicide.

She got the drift and they embraced. He looked over her shoulder at me and caught me looking at my watch while I took another bite of my sandwich. I really felt like a turd.

I mean, what if neither of them had anything to do with Otis Parker's murder? I knew it had to be an inside job, but it could have been Scott or Otis's ex-wife, or Jennifer the part-time clerk, or other persons not yet known who had off-hour access to the store and to Otis Parker. Right?

On the subject of motive, there are, generally speaking, six major motives for murder. Ready? They are profit, revenge, jealousy, concealment of a crime, avoidance of humiliation or disgrace, and homicidal mania. There are variations, of course, and combinations, but if you focus on those and try to match them to a suspect—even to an unlikely suspect—then you can conduct an intelligent investigation.

Sometimes, of course, you don't need to go that route. Sometimes you have lots of forensic evidence—like someone's fingerprints on the murder weapon. But that's not my job. I'm a detective and I deal with the human condition first, then the clues I can see with my own eyes and the statements people make or don't make. If I'm smart and lucky, I can wrap it up before the CSU people and the medical examiner are done.

While I was thinking about all this, I was observing Mr. Lawrence and Mrs. Parker. They were sitting side by side in the reading chairs now, he with his hand on her shoulder, she dabbing her eyes with his handkerchief.

For the record, she was easy to look at. A little younger than Scott thought—maybe late thirties, long raven-black hair, Morticia makeup, and I'm sure a good figure under her black lambskin coat, which was open now revealing a dark gray knit dress that looked expensive. She also wore long black boots, a cashmere scarf, and gloves, which she'd taken off. A well-dressed lady, complete with a gold watch, wedding band, and a nice rock.

I tried to picture her plodding away at her paperwork in her apartment in this outfit. Well, maybe she had an appointment later.

I had let a respectable amount of time elapse, so I ditched my sandwich on the counter, and then I walked over to the grieving widow and her friend. I introduced myself to her without pointing to my shield.

She looked up at me but did not respond.

I said, "I'm very sorry about your husband."

She nodded.

I spoke to her, in a soft and gentle voice, "Sometimes the bereaved wants to see the body. Sometimes it helps bring closure. Sometimes it's too painful." And sometimes the bereaved totally loses it and confesses on the spot. I assured her, "It's your choice."

She didn't think too long before replying, "I don't want to...see him."

"I understand." I said to her. "I'd like you to stay here until the body is removed." I explained, "You may have to sign paperwork."

She replied in a weak voice, "I want to go home."

"All right. I'll call for a police car to take you home." Later.

Jay Lawrence, without consulting the bereaved widow, said, "I will accompany her."

I really wanted to question Mia Parker, but I couldn't keep her here. I also wanted to question Jay Lawrence, but he was latched onto the grieving widow, and you want to question suspects separately so that you can pick up inconsistencies in their stories. Also, the courts have ruled that a cop is allowed to lie to a suspect in order to draw out some information. Like, "Okay, Mr. Lawrence, you say A, but Mrs. Parker and Scott told me B. Who's lying, Mr. Lawrence?" Actually, it would be me who was lying. But you can't play one against the other if both suspects are sitting together. I did, however, have some info from Scott, though not a lot.

Also, of course, this was not a homicide investigation, and therefore there were no suspects, and therefore I couldn't pull these two off separately for questioning.

I mean, I knew beyond a doubt that Otis Parker had been murdered, and I was fairly sure there were two people involved, and it was an inside job, and it was premeditated. And the two people sitting in front of me filled the bill as potential suspects. But I had to tread lightly and treat them as a bereaved widow and a very upset friend who was also a crime writer with some savvy. Basically I was at a dead end at the Dead End Bookstore, and the clock was ticking.

So maybe I should just say it. "Sorry to inform you, but I believe Otis Parker was murdered, and I'd like you both to come to the precinct with me to see if you can help the police with this investigation."

I was about to do that, but I had some time to kill before I had to call Ruiz, so I pulled up a chair, put on my sympathetic face, and asked Mrs. Parker, "Can I get you some water? Coffee?"

"No, thank you."

I offered, "I can see if there's something stronger in Mr. Parker's office."

She shook her head.

I said, conversationally, "I understand you decorated his office. It's very nice."

Our eyes met, and she hesitated, then said to me, "I *told* him... I told him to have it fastened to the wall... and he said he'd done that."

"You mean the bookcase?"

She nodded.

“Well, unfortunately he didn’t.”

“Oh...” She sobbed, “Oh, if only he’d listened to me.”

Right. If men listened to their wives, they’d live longer and better lives. But married men, I think, have a death wish. That’s why they die before their wives. They want to. Okay, I’m getting off the subject.

I said to her, “Please don’t blame yourself.” Let me do that.

She put her hands over her face, sobbed again, and said, “I should have checked when I was in his office...but I always believed what Otis said to me.”

Making you the first wife in the history of the world to do that. Sorry, I digress again.

Actually, I could imagine that she did like her husband. Maybe he was a father figure. Despite her Morticia look, she seemed pleasant and she had a sweet voice. Maybe I was on the wrong track. But...my instincts said otherwise.

Under the category of asking questions that you already know the answer to, I asked her, “Do you and Mr. Lawrence know each other from LA?”

It was Mr. Lawrence who replied, “Yes, we do. But I don’t see what difference that makes.”

Of course you do, Jay. This is the stuff you write about. Anyway, I winged a response and said, “I need to say in my accident report what your relationship is to the widow.”

He didn’t say, “Bullshit!” but his face did. Good. Sweat, you pompous ass.

Mia Parker, who seemed clueless from Los Angeles, said to me, “Jay and I have been friends for years. We saw each other socially with our former spouses.”

I nodded, then said to her, “Scott tells me you were married last June.”

At the mention of her June wedding, her eyes welled with tears, and she nodded and covered her face again.

I let a few seconds pass, and then I said, “I’ve spoken to Scott and I think I have enough details for my accident report, but if not I’ll speak to him again and bother you as little as possible.”

She nodded and blew her nose into her friend’s handkerchief.

Her friend understood that I had a statement from the clerk and that I was, perhaps, a tiny bit suspicious.

There wasn’t much more I could do or say to these two at this time, but I had at least hinted to Jay Lawrence that he probably wasn’t getting on that flight to Atlanta. I could see he was a bit concerned. I mean, if he’d plotted this—like one of his novels—he had fully expected it to be ruled an accident, and he’d hoped that the body would be gone when he got here half an hour late, and the sign on the door would say CLOSED. Or, if the cops were still here, they’d say, “Sorry, there’s been an accident. The store is closed.”

Right. But Mr. Jay K. Lawrence did not imagine a Detective John Corey, called on the scene because a patrolman was suspicious. The ironic thing was that Jay Lawrence’s cop character, Rick Strong, was smarter than his creator. But neither Jay Lawrence nor Rick Strong were as smart as John Corey. I was, however, out of bright ideas.

I stood and said to Mrs. Parker, “To let you know, the city requires an autopsy in cases...like this. So it may be two days before the body is released.” I added, “You should make plans accordingly.” I also added, “In the unlikely event that the

medical examiner feels that he needs to...well, do further tests, then someone will notify you.”

Mr. Lawrence stood and asked, “What do you mean by that?”

I looked him in the eye and replied, “You understand what I mean.”

He didn’t reply, but clearly he was getting a bit jumpy.

I was now going to call Ruiz and advise him that I was officially making this a homicide investigation. I had two suspects, but no evidence to hold them. In fact, not enough evidence to even advise them that they were persons of interest—though I’d ask them to meet me later at the station house, to help in the investigation.

But just when you think you’ve played your last card, you remember the card up your sleeve. The Joker.

I said, “The medical examiner should be arriving shortly. Please remain here until then.” I assured them, “I’ll call for a police car to take you home after the ME arrives.”

Mr. Lawrence reminded me, “You said we could leave now. And we can find our own transportation.”

“I changed my mind. Remain on the premises until the ME arrives.”

“Why?” asked Mr. Lawrence.

I replied a bit curtly, “Because, Mr. Lawrence, the medical examiner may want a positive identification. Or he may need some information as to date of birth, place of residence, and so forth.” I said to him, “Actually, *you* may leave. Mrs. Parker cannot.”

He didn’t reply, but sat again and took her hand. A real gentleman. Or maybe he didn’t want her alone with me.

I went to Officer Rourke, who was still sitting behind the counter, apparently engrossed in his book, but undoubtedly listening to every word. I made eye contact with him and said, “Let me know when the ME arrives and send him up.” Wink.

He nodded, and I could see his brain in high gear wondering what the brilliant detective was up to.

I climbed the spiral staircase into Otis Parker’s office and looked at his body. Right. He could have survived. Then he could have told me what happened.

But I already knew what happened. I needed Otis Parker to tell me who did it.

Cops, as I said, are allowed to lie. Half the confessions you get are a result of lying to a suspect.

I let a few more seconds pass, and then I shouted, “Get an ambulance!” I ran to the rail and shouted to Rourke, “He’s alive! He’s moving! Get an ambulance!”

Rourke, thank God, didn’t shout back, “He’s dead as a doornail!” Instead he got on his hand radio and pretended—I hope—to call for an ambulance.

I glanced at Mia Parker and Jay Lawrence. They didn’t seem overjoyed at this news. I shouted to them, “We’ll have an ambulance here in three or four minutes!” Great news. Right? Try to contain your feelings of hope and joy. I resisted shouting, “It’s a miracle!” I did say, “Mrs. Parker can ride in the ambulance.”

They looked... well, stunned. And that wasn’t playacting. Also, I didn’t see Mrs. Parker running up the stairs to smother her awakening husband with kisses. If she did come upstairs, it might be to smack him in the head with a book. Well... that’s just me being cynical and suspicious again.

I disappeared from the rail and let a minute pass, and then I walked slowly and deliberately down the spiral staircase and headed toward two worried-looking people. The expression on my face told them they were in deep doo-doo. Actually, if this didn't work, *I* was in deep, deep doo-doo.

I stopped in front of them and said, "He's speaking."

No response.

I looked them both in the eye and said, "He spoke to me."

Very smart people would have shouted in unison, "Bullshit!" But they were so unstrung—actually shaking—that all they could do was stare at me. Also, I'm a good liar. Ask the last guy I tricked into a confession.

I let a few seconds pass, then said, "I saw that someone had removed the furniture wedges from under the bookcase. I also saw that someone had used the toilet plunger to lever the bookcase away from the wall." I paused for dramatic effect, then said, "And now I know who that was." Actually, I didn't. But they did.

I would have bet money that it would be Mia Parker who cracked—but it was Jay Lawrence. He said, "Then you know I had nothing to do with it. I was in my hotel all morning, and I can prove it."

When someone says that, you assume they're telling the truth, i.e., they've established their alibi for the time of death. Or they think they have. Meanwhile, Mia Parker was staring at her friend, who continued, "I had room service at six thirty, and then I had it cleared at seven thirty."

"All that proves is that you had breakfast." And I didn't.

I looked at Mia Parker and said to her, "Mrs. Parker, based on the statement your husband just made, I am charging you with attempted murder."

I was about to go into my right-to-remain-silent spiel, but she fainted. Just like that. Crumpled to the floor. Ideally, a suspect should be awake when you read them Miranda, so I turned my attention to Jay Lawrence.

He was just standing there, looking not too well himself. Hello? Jay? Your friend just fainted.

I would have come to Mrs. Parker's assistance, but Rourke was already coming toward us.

I looked at Jay Lawrence, and I said, "I have reason to believe that you were an accomplice. That it was you who assisted Mrs. Parker in removing the two furniture wedges from under the bookcase. Probably last night after you arrived from LA." I informed him, "So your alibi for this morning, even if it proves to be true, does not exclude you as an accessory to attempted murder." He didn't faint, but he did go pale.

Rourke had run out to his squad car and returned with a first aid kit. He was now reviving Mrs. Parker with an ammonium nitrate capsule. This was good because now I only had to give the Miranda warning once. A small point, I know, but...anyway, I asked Jay Lawrence, "Do you have anything to say?"

He did. He said, "You're out of your mind." He added, "I had nothing to do with this."

"That's for a jury to decide."

Rourke had gotten Mrs. Parker into the wingback chair, and she looked awake enough, so I began, "You both have the right to remain silent—"

Jay Lawrence chose not to remain silent and interrupted, "I can prove conclusively that I came directly to the hotel from the airport and that I was in the Carlyle all evening and until ten this morning."

That wasn't what I wanted to hear, but I needed to hear more, so I asked, "How can you prove that?"

He hesitated, then said, "I was with a woman. All night."

Apparently he did better than I did last night. I watched *Bonanza*.

He continued, "I will give you her name and cell phone number and you can speak to her, and she will confirm that."

Okay... so we have the nearly airtight in-bed-with-a-lady alibi. But sometimes this is not so airtight. Still, this was a problem.

I was about to ask him for the lady's name and number, but Mrs. Parker, fully awake now, shouted, "You were *where*?" She stood and shouted again, "You said you had interviews to do. You bastard!"

I've been here, and so has Rourke, apparently, because we both stepped between Mrs. Parker and Mr. Lawrence to head off a physical assault.

Mrs. Parker was releasing a string of obscenities and expletives, which Jay Lawrence took well, knowing he deserved them. And knowing too that his lover's wrath was a lot better than being charged with accessory to attempted murder—which was actually a successful attempt. But that was my secret.

Mia Parker was still screaming, and I had the thought that I should have left her on the floor. But my main concern was that I'd gotten this wrong. About Jay Lawrence, I mean. But not about Mia Parker, who confirmed my charge of attempted murder by shouting, "I did this for *you*, you cheating bastard! So we could be together! You *knew* what I was going to—"

Jay Lawrence jumped right in there and shouted back, "I did *not* know what you—"

"You did!"

"Did not!"

And so forth. Rourke was nodding, letting me know he was a witness to this, while at the same time he kept repositioning himself so that the wronged lady could not get at her two-timing lover. I kind of hoped that she got around Rourke and dug her nails into Jay's pretty face. I certainly wasn't going to get between them. Hell hath no fury and all that.

Well, I was sure that the Dead End Bookstore hadn't seen so much excitement since the upstairs toilet backed up.

Meanwhile, neither of the now ex-lovers seemed to notice that over five minutes had passed and there was no ambulance pulling up to rush Otis Parker to the hospital.

By now I should have had Rourke slap the cuffs on Mia Parker, but, well... I was enjoying this. She was really pissed, and she shouted to her fellow Angelino, "We could have bought that house in Malibu... we could have been together again..."

Where's Malibu? California? Why did she want to go back there? No one wants to leave New York. This annoyed me.

She broke down again, sobbing and wailing, then collapsed in the chair. She was babbling now. "I hate it here... I hate this store... I hate him... I hate the cold... I want to go home..."

Well, sorry, lady, but you're going to be a guest of the State of New York for a while.

As much as I wanted to cuff Jay Lawrence, I wasn't certain what his role, if any, was in this murder. Well, he *knew* about it, according to Mia Parker. But did he actually *conspire* in the murder? And assuming she had help, who helped her? Not Jay, who was in the sack with his alibi witness.

I motioned for him to follow me, and he did so without protest. I led him to the rear of the store, away from his pissed-off girlfriend, and I said to him, "You get one chance to assist in this investigation. After that, you get charged with conspiracy to commit murder and/or as an accessory. Understand?"

He didn't respond verbally, and I didn't even get a nod. Instead he just stood there with a blank expression on his face.

I glanced at my watch to indicate the clock was ticking. Then I said, "Okay, you're under arrest as an accessory—"

"Wait! I... okay, I knew she wanted him... out of the way... and she asked me... like, how would you do this in a novel... but I didn't think she was serious. So I just made a joke of it."

I informed him, "I think Otis Parker will live, and he can tell us what happened up there and who was in the room at that time."

"Good. Then you'll know that I'm telling the truth."

And he probably was. Mia Parker committed the actual murder herself. But, with all due respect to her apparent intelligence, she didn't think of that bookcase and that plunger and those furniture wedges by herself. That was Jay Lawrence. And that's what she'd say, and he would deny it. She said, he said. Not good in court.

I said to him, "She seemed to think she was going to be with you in..." Where was that place? "Malibu."

He replied, "She's... let's say, mistaken. Actually, delusional. I made no such promise." He made sure I understood: "It was just an affair. A long-distance affair."

He was desperately trying to save his ass, and not doing a bad job of it. He was clever, but I am John Corey. Arrogant? No. Just a fact.

I said to him in a tone suggesting he was my cooperating witness, "That bookcase has been sitting there for over two years. Do you think she put it there—right behind his desk—knowing what she was going to do with it?"

He hesitated, then replied, "I don't know. How would I know that?"

He was smart, and he didn't want to admit to any preknowledge of premeditated murder—not even as speculation. But he *was* willing to throw his girlfriend under the bus if it kept him out of jail. He was walking the old tightrope without a balancing bar.

By now Jay Lawrence was thinking about exercising his right to remain silent and his right to an attorney. So I had to be careful I didn't push him too far. On the other hand, time was ticking by and I needed to go in for the kill. I said, "Look, Jay—can I call you Jay? Look, *someone* removed those wedges from under the bookcase, and it wasn't little Mia all by herself. Hell, I don't think *I* could do that without help. Are you telling me there was someone *else* involved?"

He seemed to think about that, then said, "I haven't been to New York in several months. And I can account for every minute of my time since my plane landed at five thirty-six last night." He informed me, "I have a taxi receipt, a check-in time at the Carlyle, dinner in the hotel... with my lady friend, the hotel bar—"

"All right, I get it." I didn't want to hear about the adult movie he'd rented from his room. Basically Jay Lawrence had covered his ass, and he had the receipts to prove it. And he'd done this because he knew, in advance, what was going to happen early this morning. But maybe he didn't know about an accomplice.

I asked him for the name and phone number of his lady friend, which he gave me. It was, in fact, his publicist in New York; the lady who booked his publicity tour and who could also provide an alibi for his free evening. *Bang publicist: 7:00 p.m.-10:00 a.m. Dinner and breakfast in hotel.*

Jay Lawrence was, as Mia Parker said, a two-timing bastard. And also a conniving coward who let his lover do the dirty work while he was establishing an alibi for the crime. He totally bullshitted her. And if it had gone right, he was onboard for the payoff, which I guess was his share of all the worldly possessions of the deceased Otis Parker—including his wife. The wife, I'm sure, thought it was all about love and being together. In Malibu. Wherever that was. And none of this would have happened, I'm sure, if Jay Lawrence had sold more books.

Meanwhile there was still the question of the furniture wedges. Who helped her with that? Jay didn't seem to know, or he wasn't saying. But Mia knew.

I said to him, "Stay right here."

I walked to where Mia Parker was sitting in the wingback chair, looking a bit more composed, and without any preamble I asked her, "Who helped you remove the furniture wedges?"

She replied, "Jay."

I was fairly certain that was not true and not possible.

"When?"

"Last... early this morning."

"Are you telling me the truth?"

"Why would I lie?"

Well, because Jay was screwing a babe all night, and you are very pissed off.

Mrs. Parker needed less sympathy and understanding and more shock treatment, so I said to Rourke, "Cuff her." But softie that I am, I instructed front cuffs instead of back—so she could dab her eyes and blow her nose.

Rourke told her to stand, gave her a quick but thorough pat down, and then cuffed her wrists in the front.

I said to Rourke, "Call for a car." I added, "I'll be riding with her to the precinct."

Mia Parker, now cuffed, under arrest, and about to be taken to the station house for booking, was undergoing a transformation. Early this morning, she was a married lady with a boyfriend and an inconvenient husband. Now she had no boyfriend and no husband. And no future. I've seen this too many times, and if I said it didn't get to me, I'd be lying.

The person I felt most sorry for, of course, was Otis Parker. He ran a crappy bookstore and he didn't give service with a smile, but he didn't deserve to die.

I asked Mrs. Parker, "If he dies, is all this yours?"

She looked around, then replied, "I hate this store."

“Right. Answer the question.”

She nodded, then informed me, “We had a prenup... I didn’t get much in a divorce... but...”

“You got a lot under his will.” I asked, “Life insurance?”

She nodded again, then continued, “I also got the building and the...business.” She laughed and said, “The stupid business... he owes the publishers a fortune. The business is worth nothing.”

“Don’t forget the fixtures and the good will.”

She laughed again. “Good will? His customers *hate* him. *I hate him.*”

“Right.”

She continued, “This store was draining us dry...he was going to mortgage the building... I had to do something...”

“Of course.” I’ve heard every justification possible for spousal murder, and most of them are amazingly trivial. Like, “My wife thought cooking and fucking were two cities in China.” Or, “My husband watched sports all weekend, drank beer, and farted.” Sometimes I think being a cop is less dangerous than being married.

Anyway, Mrs. Parker forgot to mention that she’d planned this long before the marriage or that she had a boyfriend. But I never nitpick a confession.

I inquired, “Do you have a buyer for the building?”

She nodded.

I guessed, “Two million?”

“Two and a half.”

Not bad. Good motive.

She also let me know, “His stupid collector books are worth about fifty thousand.” She added, “He buys them, but can’t seem to sell them.”

“Has he tried the Internet?”

“That’s where he buys them.” She confided to me, “He’s an idiot.”

“Put that in your statement,” I suggested.

She seemed to notice that she was cuffed, and I guess it hit her all at once that the morning had not gone well, and she knew why. She let me know, “All men are idiots. And liars.”

“What’s your point?”

She also let me know, “Those books in his office are worth about ten thousand.”

“Really?” Poetic justice?

As I said, I’m not married, but I have considered it, so to learn something about that I asked her, “Why’d you marry him?”

She didn’t think the question was out of line, or too personal, and she replied, “I was divorced... lonely...”

“Broke?”

She nodded and said, “I met him at a party in LA... he said he was well off... he painted a rosy picture of life in New York...” She thought a moment, then said, “Men are deceitful.”

“Right. And when did you think about whacking him?”

She totally ignored my question and went off into space awhile. Then she looked at Jay in the back of the store and asked me, “Why isn’t he under arrest?”

I don't normally answer questions like that, but I replied, "He has an alibi." I reminded her, "The lady he spent the night with." I shared with her, "His publicist, Samantha—"

"That whore!"

The plot thickens. But that might be irrelevant. More to the point, Mrs. Parker was getting worked up again, and I said to her, "If you can convince me—with facts—that he conspired with you in this attempt on your husband's life, then I'll arrest him."

She replied, "We planned this together for over two years. And I can prove it." She added, "It was *his* idea." She let me know, "He's nearly broke."

"Right." I confessed, "I didn't like his last book." I already knew the answer to my next question, but I asked for the record, "Why'd you wait so long?"

"Because," she replied with some impatience, "it took Otis two years to marry me."

"Right." Guys just can't commit. Meanwhile that bookcase is just waiting patiently to fall over. This was the most premeditation I'd ever seen. Cold, calculating, and creepy. I mean, when Otis Parker said, "I do," his blushing bride was saying, "You're done."

The good news is that property values have gone up in the last two or three years. I don't know about collectible books, though.

I tried to reconstruct the crime, to make sure I was getting it right. D-day for Otis Parker was the day after Jay Lawrence came to town to promote his new book. Today. Jay was supposed to help Mia last night to set up the bookcase for a tumble, then maybe a drink and a little boom-boom at the Carlyle, and some pillow talk about being together and psyching each other up for the actual murder. And this morning Jay would be here to comfort the widow.

But Jay, at some point, as the big day approached, got cold feet. All his Rick Strong books ended with the bad guy in jail, and Jay didn't want that ending for himself. So he made a date with his publicist and ditched Mia, leaving Mia to do it all by herself. She had the balls. He had the shakes.

One of the things that bothered me was that Otis Parker was in his office early on the morning that he was going to be whacked. That wasn't coincidence. Not if this was all planned in advance.

I went back to my original thought that Otis Parker had an appointment. And who was that appointment with? And why didn't Scott know about it?

Maybe he did.

I said to Rourke, "I'll be in the stockroom. Keep an eye on these two. Let me know when the car gets here."

That made Mia think of something, and she asked me, "Where's the ambulance?"

"I don't know. Stuck in traffic."

She stared at me and shouted, "You bastard! You lied to me!"

"You lied to me first."

"You... you..."

I was glad she was cuffed. Rourke put his hands on her shoulders and pushed her into the chair.

Meanwhile Jay heard some of this, or figured it out, and he walked quickly toward me and asked, “Why isn’t the ambulance here?”

I confessed, “Otis Parker doesn’t need an ambulance.”

Jay looked as stunned as when I had pronounced Otis alive.

People don’t like to be tricked, and Mia let loose again. Sweet voice aside, she swore like a New Yorker. Good girl.

Jay Lawrence recovered from his shock and informed me, “You... that was not... that’s not admissible...”

“Hey, he looked like he was trying to stand. I’m not a doctor.”

“You... you said he spoke to you...”

“Right. Then he died. Look, Jay, here’s a tip for your next book. I am allowed to lie. You are allowed to remain silent.”

“I’m calling my attorney.”

“That’s your right. Meanwhile you’re under arrest for conspiracy to commit murder.” I gave Rourke my cuffs and said, “Cuff him.”

I walked to the back of the store and into the stockroom.

Officer Simmons was talking on his cell phone, and Scott was still at the table, reading a book—*How to Get Published for Dummies*.

I sat opposite Scott and asked him, “Why was Mr. Parker here so early?”

He put down his book and said, “I don’t know. I guess to do paperwork.”

“Did he tell you he was coming in early?”

“No... I didn’t know he was going to be here.”

“But he asked you to come in early.”

“Yeah...”

“But never mentioned that he would be coming in early.”

“Uh... maybe he did.”

“That’s not what you said to me, or what you wrote in your statement.”

Officer Simmons was off the phone, and he took up a position behind Scott. This was getting interesting.

Scott, meanwhile, was unraveling fast, and he swallowed, then said in a weak voice, “I...guess I forgot.”

“Even after you saw the lights in his office?”

“Yeah... I mean... I remembered that he said he might be in.”

“Who put those five boxes of books in his office?”

“I did.”

“When?”

“Last night.”

“Why last night?”

“So... Jay Lawrence could sign them... Mr. Parker likes the authors to sign in his office.”

“Jay Lawrence wasn’t coming in until ten a.m.”

“Yeah... but... I don’t know. I do what I’m told.”

“What time did Mr. Parker think that Jay Lawrence would be in?”

“Ten—”

“No. Otis Parker thought that Jay Lawrence was coming in very early. About seven thirty or eight in the morning. That’s why he asked you to bring the books up last night, and that’s why he was here this morning.”

Scott didn't reply, and I asked him, "Who wrote that note on the bulletin board that said ten a.m.?"

"Me. That's when he was supposed to come in."

My turn to lie. I said, "Mrs. Parker just told me that her husband said he had to get to the store early to meet Jay Lawrence."

"Uh... I didn't know that."

"Mr. Parker never told you that when you carried the books upstairs last night?"

"Uh... I don't—"

"Cut the bullshit, Scott." I informed him, "Two people are going down for murder. The third person involved is the government witness." I asked him, "Which one do you want to be?"

He started to hyperventilate or something, and I said to Simmons, "Get him some water."

Simmons grabbed a bottled water off the counter and put it on the table in front of Scott. I said to him, "Drink."

He screwed the cap off with a trembling hand and drank, then took a deep breath.

I took a shot and said to him, "Mrs. Parker told me you met her here last night, after Mr. Parker left for the day."

He took another deep breath and replied, "I...she asked me to stay and meet her here."

"And she asked you to help her with some furniture in her husband's office."

He nodded.

"And you did that."

He nodded again.

"Did you know *why* you were doing that?"

"No."

"Try again. I need a truthful witness for the prosecution."

He drank more water, then said, "I told her... it wasn't safe to—"

"One more time."

"I... didn't know... she said don't ask questions..."

"What did she offer you?"

He closed his eyes, then replied, "Ten thousand. But I said no."

"Yeah? Did you want more?"

He didn't reply.

I thought a moment and asked, "Did you both have a drink in his office?"

He nodded.

"On the couch?"

"Yeah..."

What a deal. He gets ten thousand bucks, drinks the boss's liquor, and fucks the boss's wife on the boss's couch. And all he has to do in return is push the bookcase back a bit while Mia Parker slides the wedges out. How could you say no to that? Well, Jay Lawrence said no, but he was older and wiser, and he already fucked Mia Parker. Also, he got scared.

I made eye contact with Simmons, who was shaking his head in disbelief.

As I said, I've seen it all, but it's new and shocking every time.

Scott was staring blankly into space, maybe thinking about Mia Parker on the couch. Maybe thinking it seemed like a good idea at the time.

Well, aside from money, you have what I call dick crimes. Dicks get you in trouble.

I had another thought and asked Scott, “Did she say she’d get Jay Lawrence to help you get your book published?”

He seemed surprised that I knew this. I didn’t, but it all fit.

Scott was fidgeting with the empty bottle now, and then he said, “I didn’t know what she was going to do... I *swear* I didn’t.”

“Right. So this morning you let her in at about seven thirty.”

He nodded.

“Mr. Parker was already here.”

He nodded again.

“He told you his wife was coming by to say hello to Jay Lawrence, her friend from LA.”

“Yeah...”

“She went up to his office and they waited for Jay Lawrence.”

He nodded.

“And you went... where?”

“Out back.”

“Could you hear the crash?”

He closed his eyes again and said, “No...”

“What time did you come back to the stockroom?”

“About... seven forty-five...”

“Then you carried some books to the counter, just like you said in your statement, and you called up to him.”

He nodded.

“And there was no answer, so you knew she was already gone. And where did you think he was? In the bathroom? Or under the bookcase?”

No reply.

“Did you actually go up the stairs?”

“Yeah... I didn’t know... I swear I didn’t know what she—”

“Right. She needed the furniture wedges for another job. And she paid you ten thousand bucks and had sex with you for your help. And she gave you a script for this morning.”

He didn’t reply.

I looked at my watch: 11:29. Almost lunchtime. I stood and said to Scott, “I’m placing you under arrest as an accomplice to murder.”

I nodded to Officer Simmons, who already had his cuffs out, and he said to Scott, “Stand up.” Scott stood unsteadily, and Simmons cuffed his hands behind his back.

I said to Simmons, “Read him his rights.”

I walked toward the door, then turned and looked at Scott. I almost felt sorry for him. Young guy, bad job, lousy boss, maybe short on cash, and wishing he was back in college, or wishing he could be the guy autographing his books. Meanwhile other people’s unhappiness and money problems—Mia’s and Jay’s—were about to intersect with his life. Of course, he could have just said no to Mia and called the

police. Instead he made a bad choice, and one person was dead, two were going to jail for a long time, and Scott, if he was lucky and cooperative, would be out before his thirtieth birthday, a little older and wiser. I wanted to give him an enduring piece of advice, some wisdom that would guide him in the future. I thought of several things, then finally said to him, "Never have sex with a woman who has more problems than you do."

I walked back into the store as my cell phone rang. It was Lieutenant Ruiz, who said to me, "I'm waiting for your call, John."

"Sorry, boss."

"What's happening?"

"Three arrests. Wife for premeditated murder, her boyfriend for conspiracy to commit, the clerk who found the body as an accomplice."

"No shit?"

"Would I lie?"

"Confessions or suspicion?"

"Confessions."

"Good work."

"Thank you."

"You coming to work today?"

"After lunch."

We hung up, and I looked at Mia Parker and Jay Lawrence, both sitting now side by side in the wingback chairs, cuffed and quiet. They were together, finally, but they didn't seem to have much to say to each other. I had the thought that the marriage wouldn't have worked anyway.

I also thought about telling Jay that his girlfriend had banged the clerk to get the kid to do what Jay wouldn't do. But that would make him feel bad—and he felt bad enough—though it might shut her up about Jay banging his publicist. I resisted the temptation to stir the shit a little, and I let it go. They'd find all this out in the pretrial anyway.

Later, while we were waiting for the three squad cars to take the perps away, I asked Jay Lawrence to sign a book for me. He graciously agreed, and I took his book out of the display window.

He was able to hold a Sharpie with his cuffed hands, and I held the book open for him. "To John," I requested. "The greatest detective since Sherlock Holmes."

He scrawled something, and I said, "Thanks. No hard feelings."

I put thirty bucks in the cash register.

When all the perps were in the cars, I opened the book and read the inscription:

To John, Fuck You, Jay.

Well... maybe it will be worth something someday.

