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An Element of Peril

Peter Sharp Legal Adventure #10

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FOREWORD

If this is the first Peter Sharp Legal Mystery you're reading, it might help you to know a little background information about the characters.

Peter Sharp's wife threw him out of their home (which she actually owned), due to a conflict of their philosophies about legal representation: Peter being a defender of those poor, unfortunate people 'wrongfully' accused of crimes, and his wife Myra a prosecutor with the District Attorney's office.

Peter ultimately wound up living on a dilapidated old boat in Marina del Rey, and when his former classmate/employer Melvin Braunstein died in a plane crash, Peter inherited a failing law practice, an

office manager (Melvin's twelve-and-a-half-year-old little step-daughter Suzi, a Chinese computer genius) and her 200-pound Saint Bernard, *Bernie*

Peter was appointed legal guardian, and after a series of misfortunes that miraculously worked out well, wound up living with Suzi and her dog on a beautiful 50-foot Grand Banks trawler-yacht, docked in the world's largest private yacht anchorage: Marina del Rey, California

When Peter isn't swilling Patrón margaritas at one of the marina's local watering holes, he's usually involved in some losing legal case that little Suzi will inevitably solve, leaving Peter with the impression that he's really as good as he thinks he is.

Along the way in each legal adventure, Peter usually winds up butting heads with his ex-wife, who Suzi adores and is constantly scheming to get back into the Sharp household. There's also Stuart Schwartzman, Peter's old friend and frequent client, who is the most entrepreneurial person in Southern California, and Jack Bibberman, the best private investigator Peter ever met.

All of the Peter Sharp Legal Mysteries are summarized at the end of this book, and if you're curious about them, more details (plus photos) are at

www.PeterSharpBooks.com

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INTRODUCTION

The sinking of the Titanic in 1912 affected me, because even though I hadn't been born yet, I lost a good friend... someone I respected, admired, and wanted to be just like in some ways.

His name was Jacques Futrelle, and at the age of 37, he was travelling with his wife in the Titanic's first-class cabin number C-123.

When the boat sank, Mr. Futrelle managed to get his wife into one of the lifeboats. She survived... he didn't.

Other than the fact that he was a human being and didn't deserve the fate that befell him, he was also a talented author, and wrote the story that influenced my life from the day in high school that I first read it: one of the most famous locked-room mysteries of all time, ***The Problem in Cell 13.***

If you're a fan of locked-room mysteries, then I strongly suggest that you read Futrelle's Cell 13 story as well as John Dickson Carr's ***The Hollow Man***, which was the main inspiration for one of the other Peter Sharp Legal Mysteries in this series.

The above-mentioned stories of Futrelle and Carr, along with E.A. Poe's ***the Gold Bug*** and all the *Sherlock Holmes*, *Nero Wolfe* and other detectives, got me hooked on mysteries - and to my delight there is no known cure for this addiction.

All of the locked-room mysteries I've encountered have involved a victim who either died in a room that was allegedly inaccessible, unescapable from, or with a misinterpreted timeline. That's why I decided to eliminate all the excuses: in this story, the crime was actually witnessed by observers... and then the both murderer and the victim disappeared into thin air.

Got you hooked? Good! Start reading now, and see if you can figure out the solution to this baffling locked-room Peter Sharp Legal mystery before little Suzi does.

1

I am the best telephone pitchman in the world. I know this because I've just made the deal of a lifetime: not to settle a million-dollar personal injury case, not to plea-bargain a murder charge down to trespassing, and not to get 'miss beautiful' to see my etchings. This deal is a true lifesaver: I've talked the Lahaina Yacht Club's bar into stocking a bottle of Patrón Tequila to use for making my margaritas.

I couldn't get them to spring for Patrón's new \$500-a-bottle *Burdeos*, but that's okay, because 80-proof Patrón *Silver* will get the job done very nicely.

Now that our little law firm has at least six figures in reserve, I've decided to take a week or so off – and for me, that means relaxation time over in Maui, where I can sit

in the Yacht Club and schmooze with other visiting members from all over the world.

When most people hear that I'll be spending some time at my 'yacht club,' they envision luxurious, posh surroundings, complete with butlers who bring your drink and Wall Street Journal to you on a silver platter. Well, if that's what you're looking for, then don't come to the Lahaina Yacht Club, because all we have there at 835 Front Street is a store-front operation with a great kitchen, a great bar, and a great rear balcony that hangs out over the Pacific Ocean, to view the sunset from... and a lot of great members to swap cruising stories with. And while I'm there, I can take some time to relax and mull over what I saw earlier this week that must be ranked as the most amazing things I never thought could be possible: two sightings that completely baffled me.

I travel between my office in Marina del Rey to Beverly Hills once or twice a month to visit a client, and my hopefully traffic-free route includes Overland and Washington Boulevards in Los Angeles and Culver City, respectively.

The first sighting was on Overland, and it happened as I was driving past a Muslim Mosque. Ordinarily, I wouldn't have even looked towards that building, but on this particular day there happened to have been some protest going on, and the combination of a small crowd, plus a few news vans from a local TV station, attracted my attention... and caused me to notice one particular person exiting the Mosque.

When you drive one of the first huge commercialized Hummers, you have to keep your eyes on the road, because whatever you bump into usually gets demolished. Because of this danger, negotiating my beast of a car through a protest area complete with news crews means slowing down and trying not to flatten anything. This task left only a fraction of a second for my glance towards the Mosque entrance, but that brief opportunity shocked me because the person I saw was a perfect double of a close friend and client; someone who I would never believe could be going inside a Mosque. The exiting man and my friend looked exactly the same, with one exception: my friend doesn't wear a cap or have a moustache and short beard.

There are two popular options when being confronted by a situation like this: first, you stare in disbelief, and then follow up by telling everyone you know about what you saw. Second, is to shake your head in disbelief, and tell yourself that what you saw couldn't really be what you think it was, and then go on with your life. I opted for the latter of the two, and didn't think about it again... until the following week.

The second sighting was on Washington Boulevard in Culver City, while driving by an attractive building that stands out like a sore thumb in the neighborhood. This is the King Fahd Mosque, and its beautiful architecture draws my attention every time I drive by it... and to my amazement, I see a gentleman entering the Mosque: the same guy I saw last week, leaving the Mosque on Overland.

Fortunately, there was no protest going on, no news crew, and no traffic, so I slowed down a bit and used my new camera-cellphone to snap a picture of the Mosque visitor. I then stopped my Hummer, and using my newly-learned technological expertise, I emailed the photo to my office.

I've heard that everyone has a double: sort of a doppelganger, but not necessarily an evil twin. That statement defies logic because if true, it would mean that out of the approximate six billion people on this earth, half would be exact twins of the other half. I don't think so. However, logic or not, it's always possible that there are people who look amazingly like others. When I was a teenager back in Chicago, attending Von Steuben High School, a lot of the students mistook a friend of mine named Byron for me, and visa versa. We both used to laugh this off. I was especially amused because he was nowhere near as good looking as I was.

I started to drive back to the marina, but my curiosity got the best of me, so I turned the Hummer around and drove back to the Mosque. If that was really my friend going into the Mosque, then his car must be parked nearby, so I drove around, making a two-block radius and finally saw it: a black Lincoln Towncar with the special license plate *JEWBOY*.

There can only be one 'vanity' license plate in the state of California with that name on it, and it is reserved for my Jewish friend Stuart Schwartzman.

To be perfectly fair, the mere fact that his car is parked two blocks away from that Mosque, along with the fact that there are many parking spaces much closer, doesn't mean that the bearded, mustached, hat-wearing doppelganger of my friend Stuart is in that Mosque, but I wouldn't lay odds against it.

Getting back to the office, instead of the immediate series of questions about the mosque picture I emailed earlier I see that it must be 'trim' day, because my efficient little office manager is outside on the dock, using her vacuum-assisted Flowbee to give her Saint Bernard a haircut.

This monthly ritual usually draws a crowd of onlookers who not only enjoy seeing the dog get clipped, but who also line up for trimmings of their own.

Once Suzi finishes with Bernie, she brings out her milk crate, hops up onto it, and the human shearings begin.

You'd be right if you thought that the more upscale boat owners in our area would be a

little happier with a professional hair salon, but the group that Suzi works her magic on are the local children, who enjoy having the haircuts done while they hold on to the dog for encouragement.

Shortly after the dog returns to our boat, he approaches me with a message – a note tucked under his collar. Around here, we call that dogmail, because it’s Suzi’s preferred way of communicating with me. She feels that email is too impersonal, and that I should have some interaction with a living thing. She’s partly right, but I prefer that the living thing be human, female, blonde, and attractive – none of which apply to this beast.

The note is a print of my emailed photo, with a hand-written message: “stick to practicing law.” The photo is a blurry shot of my car’s steering wheel. So much for evidence of my sightings – and my technical prowess. Now, I’m on my own to find out if what I saw is what I think it was, so I call Jack Bibberman, my investigator. He sounds like his usual jolly self. “What’s up boss?”

“Jack, I need you to see someone for me. It’s someone you know... here’s his address.”

“Okay, I recognize the address. What should I see him about?”

“Nothing... just see him, without letting him know you’re seeing him.”

“Okay, then what?”

“Let me know if his facial appearance is unusual in any way.”

I can tell that Jack is a little confused by this assignment, but he’s a good soldier: he takes orders and follows instructions without asking any questions. He knows that sooner or later everything will be cleared up for him, and while he’s working on this assignment, I can work on some Patrón margaritas while the sun and I both set over the yacht club’s ocean balcony.

About the Author

Gene Grossman worked his way through high school, college, and law school as a shoe salesman, welder, process server, bail bondsman, tire changer, saloon piano player and 'extra,' appearing in seven motion pictures. He then spent 20 years as a trial lawyer, during which time he served as Dean of a small local law school, where he also taught several classes.

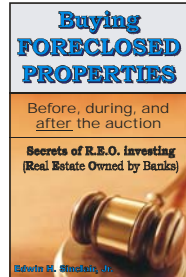
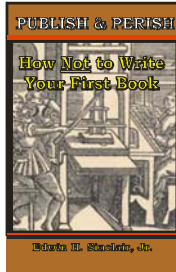
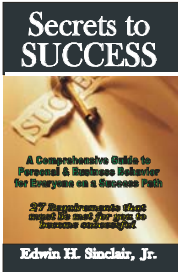
His film & video company produced over fifty special interest DVD titles on everything from boating, to bankruptcy. Now retired from the practice of law, Gene writes aboard his yacht in Marina del Rey.

You can see pictures of Peter Sharp's boats, yellow Hummer, Suzi's e-cart, and Laverne's houseboat at

www.PeterSharpBooks.com

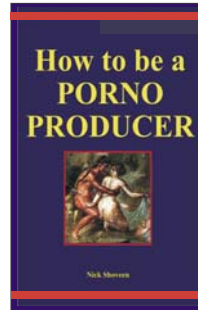
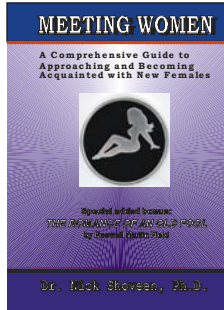
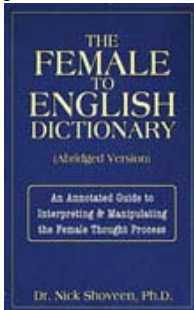
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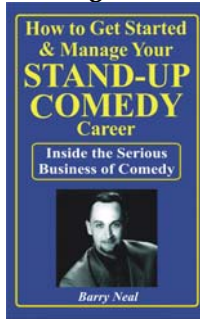
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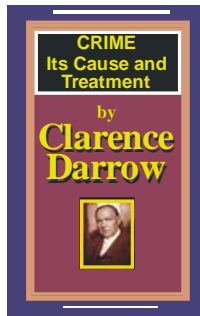
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Pictures on the next page are of the author working on another book – in his Marina del Rey dinghy, and in Avalon, on Catalina Island.

