

...Until Proven Innocent

Gene Grossman

Chapter 1

...Until Proven Innocent

#5 in the Peter Sharp Legal Mystery Series

By Gene Grossman

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"If aliens are watching us through telescopes, they must think that dogs are the leaders of this planet. If you see two life forms, with one of them making a poop, and the other one carrying it for him, who would you assume is in charge?"

Comedian Jerry Seinfeld

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Given the choice, I prefer to ride in the rear seat of any nice full-sized four-door sedan. Most people don't think there's much of a difference between the front and rear seats, but in a police car, people riding in back usually don't have the option of getting out whenever they feel like it. Take it from me... I've been there.

This evening I'm riding in the front seat of an unmarked police cruiser that's being driven by 'Tony the cop,' a boat neighbor of ours who lives aboard his old wood 40-foot Newporter Pilothouse

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ketch. I don't know his last name or much about him, but from what I've heard, he's a not too bad of a guy, except for maybe one shortcoming: he likes to kill people.

Tony's a twenty year veteran of the police department and is now a detective sergeant. The local newspapers liken him to Clint Eastwood's *Dirty Harry* of motion picture infamy, which is probably why the police brass is urging him to 'put in his papers' and retire. Their decision is also driven by the fact that the City Council is tired of the wrongful death lawsuits he causes. His problems also extend into the local African-American community because according to some of its most vocal members, they would like to see him publicly lynched.

Aside from being a racist, fascist, bigoted killer, he seems like a pretty nice guy. A little on the silent side, but that works for me. I estimate his height to be at least six-four, because he's a couple of inches taller than me. In addition to the height, he's obviously been a bodybuilder for many years, because his bulging muscles look like they're ready to pop right through that cheap sport coat he always wears to cover up his shoulder holster. The combination of his height, muscles, sunglasses, moustache and serious grimace work very well for him on the street, and all add up to a menacing presence.

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Ordinarily I wouldn't be associating with a person of his reputation, but today I don't have a choice because the senior managing partner in our law firm promised that I'd be his guest for a Mexican dinner while he explains some problem he's having with ex-wife about the child support he's paying her.

I always seem to be getting involved in strange cases at the request of my boss, but she helps out quite a bit. Being a computer whiz, she occasionally acts in an unofficial capacity to help the local police out with some hi-tech snooping. In return, they provide her with helpful information on some of our criminal cases. From what I understand, we owe Tony a favor or two for some things he did for us on a past case, so that's why I'm now on the way to his favorite Mexican dive in Culver City, where he'll probably pour his heart out to me about the mean ex-wife. So far he hasn't said anything, but that'll probably change once we get to the restaurant.

It's seven on a Wednesday evening and the place is almost empty. There's a long bar on the left side of the room, some tables in the middle, and six booths along the right side. Tony heads for the last booth and sits down with his back to the wall, so he can see the whole place. That's a paranoid habit most cops develop. I sit down

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opposite him, but can still see most of the place in the mirrored wall behind Tony.

The waitress finally breaks away from the two or three bar patrons and slinks over to our table.

“Hi Tony. I had the cook start a Mexican Pizza when I saw you pull into the parking lot. It’ll be ready any time now.” She places two cold bottles of beer on the table. I can tell this is a real neighborhood joint because she doesn’t bring any glasses.

We pick up our respective bottles, clink them together as a macho toast, and take a refreshing swig while the waitress sets our smoking hot appetizer down on the table between us. Unlike the pizzas prepared at Shakey’s, this one is a large flat plate of beans and rice heaped on top of large chips, all smothered in melted cheeses. I don’t know what the cholesterol and fat count of this deadly dish is, but I think Doctor Kevorkian could successfully use it on some of his patients.

Waiting for Tony to speak to me, I break off a mouthful-sized chunk of this suicide platter. While looking toward the bar, Tony seems to be reaching down to scratch his leg. Just as I put the chunk into my mouth, he decides to finally speak. It’s almost a whisper.

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“When I say ‘now,’ I want you dive down in the booth. It might even be better if you made it all the way under the table.”

This is a first. I’ve been out to dinner with a lot of people, but no one has ever said that to me. I then realize that he wasn’t reaching down to scratch his leg. He was removing a snub-nosed revolver from an ankle holster. I can see in the mirror that there’s a black man standing near the bar and cautiously looking around the room.

Suddenly it happens. The standing black man reaches under his jacket and removes not one, but two large handguns that were tucked into his belt. He points one towards the bar and the other towards our booth and shouts out.

“Nobody move. Anybody move, and they’re dead!”

I’m now sitting here nervously trying to make a decision. Should I dive under the table immediately, or wait for Tony’s command?

Unfortunately the decision is made for me, because when the bartender notices that the robber is glancing over in our direction, he pulls out his own gun and takes a shot at the black man. At that instant, three things happen simultaneously. The robber fires back at the bartender, Tony shouts ‘now’ at me, fires two quick shots at the robber, and I sit here frozen in place, watching the whole show in the mirror. After firing at the robber and hitting him, Tony jumps out of the booth, runs

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over to the guy lying on the ground and kicks the guns out of his reach. I don't think the dead criminal was in any condition to reach for them, but I guess that's what cops are trained to do.

When Tony returns to the booth, he seems upset.

"I thought I told you to get down in the booth. You didn't move. You just sat there."

"Well yeah, I didn't want to miss the show."

I hear some sirens in the distance, so the cavalry must be on the way. Tony must think I'm either completely crazy, or the coolest character on the planet. He calms down a bit and lets me know that I'm on my own for a ride home.

"You might as well finish the pizza... it'll be on the house. When the uniforms get here, I'll be busy for the rest of the night. That's the big problem with shootings – there's too much paperwork involved. You better plan on taking a cab back to the Marina."

When the men in blue come in through the front door, Tony stands up and displays his badge. They take his weapon and escort him outside. For some strange reason, the whole incident has made me hungry, so I'm now pigging out on the pizza while waiting for them to come and take my statement. I'm sure that the police brass and the City Council will be unhappy with tonight's event.

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Too bad they won't even take into consideration the fact that Tony stopped an armed robbery and probably saved the lives of several people, one of them being especially important - me.
