

The FINAL CASE

#9 in the Peter Sharp Legal Mystery Series

By Gene Grossman

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The FINAL CASE
Peter Sharp Legal Mystery #9

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If you don't feel like reading the books, you should at least read the reviews, and that's what I'm doing now. In Los Angeles, if you're not a compulsive shopper, there are very few reasons to buy the Sunday Times: One of them is the Book Review Section. Others may include the TV Guide and Sports Section. Some eggheads like the Opinion Section too, but for me it's the Book Reviews and Crossword Puzzle.

It seems that women are writing more books than in the past. I don't usually take the time to read any books written by women because the way they write, it looks like they care more about what their characters are wearing than what they're

doing. Their readers must be those people who watch the Oscars and other award shows just to see what celebrities on the red carpet are wearing. Who cares which gay dress designer lent a starlet one of his dresses? Don't these women know that they're wearing clothes designed by guys who don't love women? Include me out.

I've been called a lot of things during the past few decades, but 'clothes horse' was never one of them. Being a professional person, I own six suits. Four of them are right off the rack, from Sears. They are designated specifically for jury trials, along with the heave wing-tipped laced shoes, button-down shirts and cheap neckties. I never want to look too slick to a jury.

My other two suits are a different story: they were custom made for me by a Hong Kong tailor who took all my measurements and credit card number over the Internet and made the suits using my request from the sample swatches of material that he sent me. They fit fine, but because my arms are different lengths, this forced me to also order some custom made shirts, so that the requisite ½" of shirtsleeve extends past the end of each coat sleeve.

The shirts are all part of my standard uniform since high school: powder blue button-down. Juries seem to like the button-down look. My custom shirts have white collars with contrasting

dark bodies and cost over one hundred bucks each, but what the hell... I'm worth it.

The reason I'm now fixating on my wardrobe is because the Asian Boys are here sorting the laundry today, and I happen to notice that they are now folding the ironed items, which include two of my expensive custom shirts. This wouldn't be remarkable except for the fact that I haven't worn either of them for the past month or so.

My past life has just flashed before my eyes and I now see my ex-wife Myra working around our house in Brentwood Glen. She's on the floor painting the baseboard trim in the hall, and she's immaculately attired in one of my most expensive dress shirts, my favorite Cubs baseball cap, a pair of my new navy-blue Jockey shorts and a pair of my new fourteen-dollar rag socks. A quick calculation makes her painting uniform come to around a hundred and seventy dollars. What ever happened to those baggy white coveralls that painters used to wear? They probably cost at about five dollars each. Not enough for a princess to paint in.

From what I've been told, this type of occurrence is quite common in most households. Women like to lounge around in their husbands' clothes. Kids like to wear their dads' clothes. I wonder how women would feel if they came home one evening and found their husbands wearing their clothes.

It looks like Suzi is no different than Myra. It must be somewhere in the female genome. They seem to think they've got some God given right to wear our good clothes whenever they want to, like we're sharing a room in some college dorm.

What's the difference? There's nothing I could have done to stop it when I was married, and there's no sense even thinking about it now. Things just happen, and this is just one of them.

Another thing that looks like it's inevitable on this boat is that whenever I want to relax and do some reading, Suzi's huge Saint Bernard has already beat me to it and is in my favorite spot on the couch. There's nothing I can do about this either, because no matter what I say or do, he's not moving. I've even tried subterfuge: I went over to the cabinets and shook his box of dog biscuits. Nothing. He knows that Suzi isn't on the boat now, so there's no reason for me to want him to deliver a dog-mail to her. All that the shaking biscuits evoke is his raising of one eyelid in acknowledgment of my futile attempt.

A few minutes later, the only thing that seems to work getting him off the couch takes place. He hears Suzi returning, humming her favorite Chinese melody as she comes up the boarding steps and onto the boat. Bernie jumps off the couch and runs over to the door to greet her. The couch is now mine.

Being the brilliant lawyer that I am, a new plan has just come to me. I leave the boat and walk down the dock to Don Paige's boat. He's our resident technical wizard and we all turn to him for answers to questions about anything involving electricity or computers. My plan is quite simple: Using a DAT recording device, which means Digital Audio Tape to the uninitiated, like I was a before Don explained it to me, we figure out the best way to attach it under the railing of my boat so that its voice-activated controls will turn on automatically and capture any sound made on our boarding steps that's louder than the ambient surroundings.

Hopefully, next time Suzi leaves the boat without the dog, when she returns and hums that tune, the recorder will pick it up and I'll have something to use as a dog-removal device.

It took several days, but things finally lined up properly. Bernie was on the couch and Suzi was down the dock dumping a bag of garbage. When she returned, she hummed, the dog ran to the door to meet her, and I got her on digital audiotape, which is supposed to be almost CD sound quality and as close to the real thing as you can get.

Don fixed the recorder up with a remote control that I can operate inside the boat to turn on the device and play back Suzi humming. It will also reproduce the sound of her footsteps, and the sound level will duplicate the way it is as she comes up the boarding steps. This should fool anyone inside.

Here we go again. Suzi is visiting someone on another boat and Bernie is on the couch. I walk casually over to the window and point my remote control at the recording device. It starts, and we hear Suzi humming her Chinese lullaby. Bernie opens one eyelid in acknowledgement and then closes it again, remaining on the couch. Another good plan goes down the toilet. I guess his hearing isn't as good as I thought it was.

Suzi is home-schooled. At least that's what she's got the Board of Education believing, but I've never seen a teacher come to the boat. Whatever she's doing seems to be working, because the test scores she submitted were so high that the Board now requires her to come downtown to their offices each quarter to take the tests in a monitored setting, so they can be sure that there's no hanky panky. She complies, and her grades are still off the charts. The only problem with this is that I have to drive her there because she's not allowed to drive her little e-cart farther than the restaurant around the corner on Washington Boulevard.

To make the test trips downtown easier to take, Suzi talks Myra into joining us. After the tests we all go to the Pantry, a restaurant on Ninth and Figueroa, from which Bernie can be brought a side order of their cole slaw to go. After we drop Myra off at her downtown office, Suzi asks me to stop by the Barnes and Noble bookstore in the marina so she can pick up a book she ordered on fingerprint analysis. Whatever.

The marina Barnes and Noble is just like all other Barnes and Noble bookstores: Big and without soul. It's a typical franchise operation where there is no owner present. I remember one time about ten years ago when Myra were still married and we went on vacation up to northern California. I not sure, but I think it was Sausalito, across from the harbor where we found an old three-story independent bookstore that not only had every book you would ever want to read, but a small sandwich and juice bar on the second floor and plenty of comfortable couches on all three levels.

We wound up spending most of the afternoon there. It was a totally enjoyable experience and we left the store with a shopping bag full of over a hundred and twenty dollars of books. Give me a privately owned independent bookstore any day of the week. The couches there are more comfortable.

While I'm upstairs in the mystery section of this sterile book establishment I notice a commotion outside in the parking lot. People are lining up down there for some reason. I ask an employee what's going on and am informed that the famous author Avery Lawson will be downstairs autographing books. How nice for him to do that. Once again I'm wrong. The clerk informs me that Avery Lawson is a woman. Well, seeing how I feel about female authors, I guess there's no need to go downstairs and have a book autographed, because I have no intention of reading anything that she's written.

Suzi is sitting on a couch reading some book, Bernie is in the car sleeping, and I've already picked out the three or four books I want to buy. An hour or two has passed by and the book signing is over, so I might as well go downstairs and pay for our books. I notice a blond female with her back to me. She's packing up some sales brochures. When she turns around, I'm stunned. This is one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen. I notice that on the table in front of her are some books with their back covers facing up. The photographs pear on the dust jackets are of her. This must be Avery Lawson. I'm in love. Without even thinking about, I find myself automatically walking over to her.

She looks at me with those big blue eyes and my knees weaken.

“Oh, did you want a book signed?”

No one has ever said that to me before. She’s got a beautiful British accent. I clumsily hand her one of the mystery books I’ve just brought down from upstairs.

“I’m sorry, but I’m only signing books that I’ve written. Did you buy one?”

She holds up one of her books and I see by the cover that it’s one of those dreadful romance novels that women read. The cover features a scantily clad nymphet hanging onto the arm of a muscular guy with long hair whose shirt has been partially ripped off of him. The wind is blowing their hair and his hair looks better than hers. I realize what a fool I’ve just made of myself and try to recover. I sheepishly grin and try an apology.

“I’m sorry. I’ve never been to a book signing before. Of course you’re only signing your own books. I should have known that. But you should appreciate the fact that being as attractive as you are, someone might want to get your autograph on something other than one of your books.”

Boy, that was lame. I think I’d better just turn around and run out of the store before I dig this hole I’m in any deeper. She’s now just looking at me and not saying anything, obviously stunned speechless by my stupidity.

“Wait a minute... I’ve seen you somewhere before... on television on the news. You’re an attorney aren’t you? Aren’t you Peter Sharp?”

Saved. She recognizes me. I’m no longer some schmuck in the bookstore with no identity. I’m now a schmuck with a name.

“Yes, I’m Peter Sharp. I hold a press conference every once in a while, whenever I win a big case.”

That’s it, the ice is now broken. I may never get another chance, so it’s now or never. I see that she’s not wearing a wedding ring, so I make my move.

“Listen, I’m sorry about my mistake before. Can I make it up to you with a cup of coffee?”

She doesn’t say anything, but seems to be looking past me and down towards the floor. I turn around and see that Suzi has been taking in this entire feeble attempt of mine. Avery looks back at me, and motioning down towards Suzi asks the sixty-four dollar question.

“A friend of yours?”

“That’s debatable. I’m her legal guardian and she’s my boss. It’s a long story.”

“Okay Mister Sharp, you’ve got my attention. I’ll be through here in a little while. Why don’t we meet over at the Cheesecake Factory in an hour and you can tell me your story. That is, if it’s okay with your boss.”

On the way back to the boat there is the usual absence of conversation. When I’m ready to leave the boat and walk over to the Cheesecake Factory, Suzi tosses me one of those going-away lines that she’s so well known for. The ones that say more than you want them to and leave you no chance to respond... and the amazing thing is that she’s never wrong.

“She’s a phony.”
