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A Good Alibi

Peter Sharp Legal Adventure #11

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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

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I've never cared much for kids, but from what everyone sways, that's because I never had one of my own. The one I have now came to me as a complete package, housebroken, and not needing any particular rearing, and to be perfectly honest, she acts as the sergeant at arms of our modest law firm. I never tell her this, but she's really a good kid most of the time, and does one heck of a job helping out with my cases.

Maybe it's time I do something for her. This being Sunday, I'm taking my weekly exercise walk to the Marina del Rey Liquor store, so on the way back I'll save Suzi some time by stopping to pick up our office mail at the local UPS store. A note left in our box says that they're holding a package for us, but when I ask the clerk for it he refuses to release it to me.

“Excuse me, but if you will please note the name on our box, it says ‘Law Offices of Peter Sharp.’ And, if you will please note the name and picture on my driver’s license, I am that person. I am Peter Sharp, attorney at law, and I would appreciate very much your releasing my package to me.”

“I know who you are Mister Sharp, I’ve seen your picture in the papers... but you’re not on the list of persons authorized to pick things up that are delivered here for that box.”

“Okay, I give up. Who are the ‘persons’ authorized to pick things up from my box?”

He looks through his rolodex and gives me three names. “Suzi Braunstein, Jack Bibberman, and Bernie.”

“Bernie? Did you say Bernie? What pray tell is this Bernie’s last name.”

“The Dog. Bernie the Dog.”

Great. Three people authorized to pick things up from my box, and *I’m* not one of them. Suzi is, Jack B. is, and even the *dog* is, but I’m not authorized. I press the office’s number on my speed-dial, turn on the speaker-phone option and hand my cell

phone to the clerk. "Here. Please speak to Suzi and get permission to release that package to me."

After four rings, our office phone is picked up and we hear a voice-mail message: "Thank you for calling the law offices of Peter Sharp. Due to other commitments, this office will not be accepting any new criminal clients for the next 30 days. Please call back then. Click."

That's it. I've had it with her. Not only has she shut me out of picking up my own mail, but now she's gone ahead and closed the entire business down. I grab my cell phone back from the clerk and start a quick walk back to the boat, hoping she hasn't decided to move it to another slip without telling me.

Good. It's still there. I walk up the boarding steps, enter the pilot house, and find a note attached to the steering wheel.

Peter:

I've gone out on a business errand.

Dinner will be served promptly at seven PM this evening.

S.B.

Looking out towards the parking lot, I see that her electric cart is gone. She never goes more than a block or two on that thing, so she should be back soon. Nothing to do in the meantime, so I might as well take a little nap. These Saturday walks take a lot out of me. I must have done over a mile.

It's bad enough being woken up from a nap by a noise or someone calling your name, but on this boat, the normal wake-up signal is a gentle nudge of your forehead by something cold and damp – a huge dog's nose. Unfortunately, it will take a minute or two for my senses to get up to speed, so the kid beats me to the conversation.

“You have to buy me a car!”

“What are you talking about? You're only twelve years old. You can't even reach the pedals of a car, let alone drive one legally. You already have that electric cart to go around the neighborhood, and from what I've learned earlier today - that we'll be talking about later, you've even got the dog trained to pick up our mail at the UPS store. What on earth could you possibly need a car for, and why would you expect me to pay for it?”

“I don’t expect to drive it. Uncle Jack will drive it for me. Every time we send him out on an assignment I’m always worried that junk he drives will fall apart and he’ll get hurt, and not be able to finish up his assignment. And whenever he drives us somewhere, there’s no sunroof in his car for Bernie to stick his head up out of.

“And I don’t expect you to pay for it. I went to the used car dealer around the corner on Lincoln Boulevard and offered to pay cash out of my own funds for a car, but because I don’t have a driver’s license, they wouldn’t sell me the car. I need you to show them your license so that you can buy the car for me.”

“Well, I’d like to help you out kiddo, but according to the voicemail message I got from your answering machine this afternoon when I wasn’t allowed to pick up my own mail, I am currently out of business, so I don’t feel like buying a car. Do you have any good reason for shutting us down for the next few weeks?”

“Yes Peter. There’s a case I don’t want you to take, because it would conflict with something else I’m now working on. And, if you’ll trust me on this one, you may wind up with a nice fee for doing very little.”

Okay. She's got an answer for everything, and doing very little is my specialty. As I rinse off my forehead they disappear below into their private enclave in our yacht's foreward stateroom. Boy, do I pity any poor guy with a young daughter who has to actually raise her from scratch. This one's got plenty of her own money from previous settlements of suits that caused the death of her mother and step-father, and she's a computer genius, but she's still a handful.

I've got some time to kill before dinner, so perhaps now will be a good time to do the Sunday crossword puzzle. The newspaper is on the table, but when going through the section where the crossword puzzle usually is, I can't find it.

I hate when this happens. Whenever those idiots decide to start putting the puzzle in another section, it forces me to go through every page of every section, looking for it.

No luck. I've gone through every page of this huge Sunday paper. Wait a minute. In the section it usually appears, there seems to be a page missing. I can't believe she'd purposely tear out a page to stop me from doing the puzzle. Looking closer, I notice

that it's not just the puzzle that's gone – it's the entire four-page fold that the puzzle was on. She must have wanted to keep something that was printed there – probably an article that has something to do with why she closed us down for the month and told me to 'trust her.' No problem, I'll just call my friend Stuart and have him save those pages for me out of his paper. I'm curious to know what caught her interest, and it's been a while since I spent some time with Stuart, so I might as well drive over to his place.

Stuart Schwarzman is an old friend and client, and he is the most entrepreneurial person I've ever met. He has a commercial compound in the San Fernando Valley that consists of a large concrete tilt-up warehouse-type building that includes some windowed storefronts facing the street. Some of the many businesses he runs out of his place include the tattoo-removal parlor, a pawn shop, his private investigation business, a used car operation that sells recovered stolen vehicles he buys from some insurance company's dealer in New Jersey, and various other ventures.

He's out in front of his place waiting as I pull up, and as usual, he's all excited about his latest business idea. As soon as he gets into my Hummer and hands me the newspaper pages I asked him about, he starts in.

"Peter, I finally figured out how to make money without working. I'm going into the equipment rental business. Oh, by the way, do you mind riding by the police station? I want to drop something off there."

Okay, that sounds pretty normal for him. I really don't have to say anything to learn more, because if I know Stuart, he'll jump on the few seconds of silence as a request for more information.

"I know that sounds strange to you Peter, but this package I've got in my hand explains it all... and that's why I'm dropping it off for the cops to look it over. Do you know what BADCAT means?"

"I didn't think you did. it's an acronym for a special police unit they've got going. It stands for Burglary Auto Division, Commercial Auto Thefts. And that's who I'll be doing business with."

“All right Stuart, you’ve done it again. I’m hooked. What is this new business deal you’ve got going?”

“If you watch those police shows like I do, then you’ll know what a *bait car* is. That’s what the cops use to catch auto thieves. They have a specially rigged car equipped with GPS that has hidden cameras inside, and with remote controlled door locks and a kill switch. They’ll park the thing in an area with a high auto theft rate, and wait for someone to come along and steal it.

“Once the crooks are inside the car, the police command center tracks it using the GPS sending device, and when the chase cars are ready to make an arrest, the command center locks the doors, trapping the crooks inside, and then kills the engine.

“When the crooks discover they’re locked in the car and hear the police issuing instructions to them on a loud speaker, they know it’s over for them, and they usually follow instructions and surrender without any resistance.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen those things on television, Stu, but how do you fit into that picture?”

“Ah, there’s the rub, Peter. Not every police department has the budget to buy and

equip bait cars, set up a command center, and do all the rest that it takes to get the bait car program up and running... and that's where I come in.

“Remember my used car business? The one I have that sells those stolen and recovered Toyota Camrys I have trucked in from New Jersey? Well according to national statistics, the Camry is one of the most popular theft items, along with the Hondas. What I do is install the camera and some other little trick items, and rent the car out to police departments.”

“What about a command center? Who does the tracking, the door locking and the engine killing? Are you intending to do all of that for the police?”

“No need to, Peter. That's what makes my operation so attractive. We accomplish the same thing on a budget. First of all, we don't have GPS units. Instead, we have a hidden cell phone strapped under the car that is automatically turned on when the engine starts. With today's technology, any cell phone that's turned on can be tracked by triangulating the cells it can receive signals from. Besides, the bait car will be under surveillance at all times by an undercover BADCAT unit.

“And there’s no need for a command center, because the door locks are also connected to the ignition system, so they silently and automatically lock when the engine starts. And for a kill switch, we rigged up a portable system with a range of about two hundred feet, so the undercover unit can kill the engine from almost a half block away.”

“That might work Stu, but what happens if they lose sight of the bait car or get separated from it in traffic. By the time they triangulate and find it ten minutes later, there’s no telling where it might be. And if the engine’s turned off while the car’s hiding in a garage, they’ll never be able to find it.”

“Not to worry, my friend. First of all, there’s a governor on the speed control, so the car can’t do more than forty. And as far as distance is concerned, the car’s fuel indicator shows a full tank, but there’s really only about a gallon of gas in the car, so it can’t go more that about fifteen to twenty miles before dying on its own. And, if the car engine stops for lack of gas instead of being intentionally killed by a chase car, the burglar alarm goes off, to make it easier to find. It’s a complete

economy bait car, perfect for small police departments who only want to pay five hundred bucks per rental period.

“The money they save on command center personnel and electronics more than pays for the rental, and the cost can be added to the perps’ conditions of probation and/or parole. It’s a win-win deal, and I’ve already got a bunch of local departments interested in using it.”

As I drive back to the marina, I can’t stop thinking what a business genius Stuart is. The only thing taking my mind off of Stuart is the dinner that will be waiting for me on the boat, because Suzi will be doing her thing. She’s too short to use the boat’s cooking appliances, but she doesn’t have to. Her late mother was the manager of a Szechwan restaurant around the corner on Washington Boulevard, and four of the young guys who work there have formed a group that we’ve nicknamed ‘the Asian Boys.’ In addition to their services as food delivery and catering set-up, they also have learned how to do really good varnishing, so they are quite popular here in the marina.

I’m sure that Suzi will be having them bring over something really good tonight, so when she says “dinner will be at seven,” I know

that it will be served promptly at that time, and I'll be sitting at the table with a fork in one hand, waiting for my plate. The kid has already given up on trying to teach me how to use chopsticks."

While waiting to take my place at the dinner table, I glance over the pages that Stuart gave me... the ones that were missing from our Sunday paper. The crossword puzzle is here, so my after-dinner relaxation is guaranteed. The only other things I notice are some articles about a recent unsolved murder case the District Attorney is looking into.

This isn't surprising. My ex-wife Myra is the District Attorney, and has really bonded with Suzi, who would like nothing more than to see the two of us back together again making a complete family for her. She probably has a scrap book somewhere and keeps clippings about her friend Myra.

Reading through the article, it looks like they don't have much to go on. The lady killed was someone named Gussie, who was taking care of her backyard gardening when someone bopped her quite hard on the

head, when into her house, and left with about two hundred in cash.

Dinner is served, and it's delicious as usual. The only guests we have this evening are Jack Bibberman, the best investigator in town, and Laverne, a lady who lives on one of the small houseboats that our anchorage rents out. Jack is probably here because he's meeting with Suzi about an assignment she'll no doubt be giving him, and Laverne's here because I want to stay on her good side because she's the only alternative I have this month to the *Happy Ending Massage Parlor* a mile away in Venice.

There's not very much conversation during dinner, except for everyone telling me how nice it would be if I would sign the papers so Suzi could by the used car she wants from the used car dealer around the corner on Lincoln Avenue. I'm putting up a pretty good argument for not signing the papers.

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.

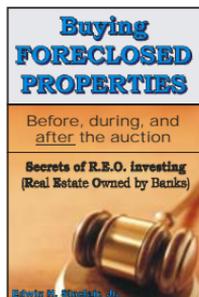
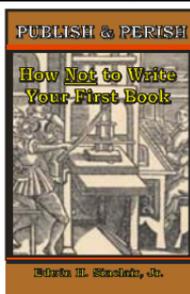
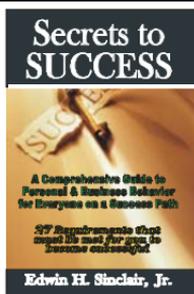
His film & video company produced over fifty special interest DVD titles on everything from boating, to bankruptcy. Now retired from the practice of law, Gene writes aboard his yacht in Marina del Rey.

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

www.PeterSharpBooks.com

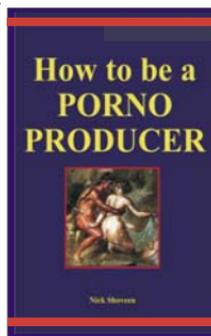
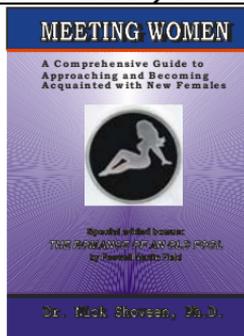
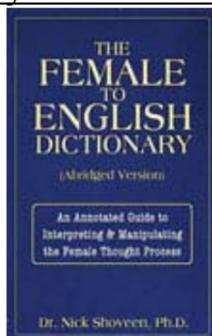
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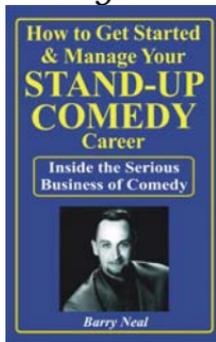
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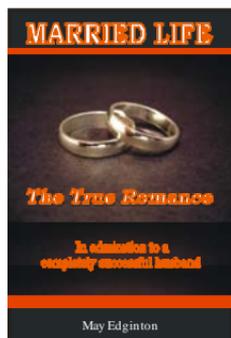
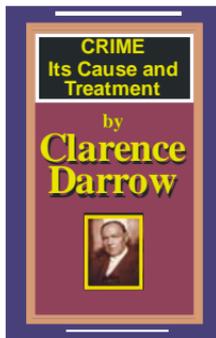
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Pictures on the next page are of the author working on another book – in his Marina del Rey dinghy, and in Avalon, on Catalina Island.

