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The Magician's Legacy

Peter Sharp Legal Adventure #7

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FOREWORD

If this is the first Peter Sharp Legal Mystery that 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, who railroaded them to conviction.

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-year old step-daughter Suzi, a Chinese computer genius) and her huge St. Bernard. Pete was

appointed legal guardian, and through 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.

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 happens to be the most entrepreneurial person in all of 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 are at www.LegalMystery.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, so she survived but 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 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 the present Peter Sharp Legal Mystery in this book.

The above-mentioned stories of Futrelle and Carr, along with E.A. Poe's ***the Gold Bug*** (which is included as an 'extra' at the end of this book) 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, inescapable 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 murderer disappeared into thin air, before their eyes.

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.

Gene Grossman

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Several years ago a network television station aired some shows that featured a masked magician who dared to reveal secrets about how the most popular magic tricks and illusions are performed. He wore the mask as protection from alleged physical threats from fellow magicians who felt betrayed. I watched part of the first show, but skipped the rest of it and its several sequels because I just don't want to know how it's done.

I love magic. Every time I watch a magician perform I turn into a little kid, with my mouth and eyes wide open. I enjoy being fooled, and the more I'm tricked, the more I like it. Knowing how it's done would spoil the fun for me, and I don't want that to happen.

It looks like not everyone is like me. They're nosy. They want to know how the magicians do it. People like that suffer from a personality disorder that prevents them from believing someone is smarter than they are. They refuse to accept the fact that they can be fooled by another mere mortal... they selfishly push to find out what the 'trick' that confused them was, so they can then regain their fragile confidence and once again believe that they are superior beings, only having been temporarily fooled by some unfair gimmick that they now know about.

And as for the people who do the tricks, whenever I encounter some guy with the adjective 'great' preceding his name, one that invariably ends in a vowel, I want to be entertained. I want to be fooled. I want to see that rabbit come out of a hat, the colored silks, the self-repairing rope and the three rings that come apart and go back together again. I love it. And of course at my age, it's even better if the magician has some long-legged female assistant in high heels that helps in the misdirection. It certainly works every time with me, but I'm a normal forty-three-year-old male lawyer. It doesn't work for Suzi, the little Chinese cupie-doll I live with.

She's a computer genius and the brains behind our law firm... the one that was started by her stepfather and is now headed up by me, due to a fatal airplane accident that not only left me in charge of the law practice, but also as her legal guardian. We both live aboard a 50-foot Grand Banks trawler yacht here in Marina del Rey California, along with Suzi's huge Saint Bernard that I call Bernie, because he's got some Chinese name that I can't pronounce.

The kid doesn't have many friends her age, but she does see another little girl named Lotus Chang, whose mother Michelle is a customer at Murray's Chinese restaurant, around the corner on Washington Boulevard, where Suzi's mother Jasmine was the manager. Jasmine was having trouble with her citizenship status, so a customer at the restaurant, and old law school classmate of mine named Melvin Braunstein, helped out by marrying her. When Jasmine was killed in an automobile accident about a year later, Melvin did the legal work for his stepdaughter and succeeded in settling it for quite a bit. As a result, Suzi is the richest little girl in the Marina.

When Melvin perished in a private plane crash, his Will appointed me as Suzi's

legal guardian. A year later, I succeeded in getting a huge settlement for her from the distributor of faulty counterfeit airplane parts: that enriched the kid's trust fund by another couple of million dollars. As official administrator of her bank accounts I get paid a whopping CEO salary of one dollar per year, and our little law practice seems to be thriving, so we're living on a beautiful yacht named the 'Suzi B' that I don't even know how to start the engine of. The fees keep coming in, I have my big Yellow Hummer to ride around in, and there's an alcoholic broad named Laverne living on a houseboat near us who is an altogether different kind of hummer that I ride occasionally. Life is good.

Michelle Chang invited Suzi to Lotus's surprise 11th birthday party, so I'm all alone on the boat tonight trying to get some research done, with a 200-pound Saint Bernard asleep across my feet. Unfortunately, I wasn't invited to the party, which is too bad, because I understand that Mrs. Chang hired a professional magician from the Magic Castle to come and entertain the kids. I tried to tell her that whenever a magician is around, I'm a kid too, but it didn't work.

When the kid's here, we often have some gourmet Chinese dinners delivered from Murray's, by a group of four young fellows nicknamed the 'Asian Boys' who work evenings at the restaurant, and varnish boats during the day. With no kid and no Asian Boys, my dinner tonight will consist of the usual pot of gruel that I've perfected over the years. The recipe involves eight ounces of elbow macaroni plus the addition of one or more of several flavoring items that can vary between non-fat cottage cheese, non-fat baked beans, non-fat butter, green peas, low-fat cream of mushroom soup, non-fat vegetarian chili, or whatever else I happen to find within reaching distance.

Whatever the final mixture is, it all gets topped off with a generous sprinkling of imitation Parmesan cheese and some garlic salt, and most of it never makes it to the table because it gets eaten right near the stove. I've been told that single men are the only variety of humans that are known to eat standing up.

This time there's enough 'Pasta ala Peter' prepared to be finished up sitting down in the yacht's main saloon. Like so many other uninformed boaters, I used to call it the 'salon,' but some balding old jerk with a fifty-foot sailboat on our dock bawled

me out when he heard me call it that, and demanded that I use its correct designation. I try to show respect to my know-it-all elder, so now it's the main 'saloon.'

The dog is always alert whenever I'm eating, because he's on constant 'crumb patrol,' but I don't mind him around on evenings like this because he's an excellent listener. Tonight's seminar is on the double job that's usually required whenever a lawyer takes on certain types of cases, one of them being for legal malpractice. The extra work is because not only does the new lawyer have to prove that the original lawyer was guilty of screwing up, but he must also show that if the case was handled properly that the client could have actually won. This means that not only do you have to destroy the first lawyer, but you also have to go ahead and almost completely re-create the first trial, showing how it should have been won. And that's the reason I don't take cases like that.

Both the dinner and the dissertation have been completed and not one living thing in the room disagrees with me about either... another successful dinner lecture.

The birthday party must be over now because Mrs. Chang just called to let me know that she'll be bringing Suzi back to

the Marina. I was supposed to pick her up, but I like to think that this favor is motivated by a combination of her wanting to give Lotus more time with Suzi - and her desire to see me. Ego self-inflation has always been one of my strong suits.

When they all arrive at the boat and dump some party stuff on table I see that once again my thoughts were wrong, because it's Mrs. Chang who's the one spending more time with Suzi. Michelle is in the IRS's Intelligence and Enforcement Division, and is fascinated by all the crime-fighting software that the kid has 'collected' on her computer, as a result of being so closely associated with my ex-wife (who is now the elected District Attorney of Los Angeles County) and all the cops who consider her a mascot. This mascot status is because of the kid's daily noon appearances at the Murray's Chinese restaurant around the corner, where her mother used to work. It's also the place where squad cars from all the local police agencies converge for lunch, or as Suzi informs me, a 'Code 7,' which in police-speak means 'out of service, to eat.'

One remarkable feature about this Chinese restaurant is an official-looking sign posted in the men's room that I've been told commands 'employees to their wash

hands before returning to work.' Good idea, but in a Chinese restaurant with Chinese immigrant employees, you'd think they might have the sign in some language other than Spanish.

Word about Suzi's computer skills and searching abilities have gotten around and enabled our firm to pick up quite a few clients and gather some future favors from local law enforcement groups. Her popularity is also due to some of the missing forms from our file cabinet that were probably used to help many of those cops defend the divorce actions that police wives are wont to file.

Unlike Suzi, little Lotus Chang is quite talkative around me, so while her mother is busy with my boat-mate in the forward stateroom, I get a full narrative about how the birthday party went. Listening to this little girl rattle on and on makes me more appreciative of the fact that Suzi rarely talks to me, opting instead to make most communications by 'dog-mail,' which consists of tucking a message into the Saint Bernard's collar and sending him to me.

Most of Lotus' story is about the other kids that attended the party. Not interested. She goes on to provide me with

a detailed list of every present she received at the party, complete with a full description of each and every gift-giver. Still not interested. My eyelids are now getting heavy.

Among the party debris still defacing our beautiful expensive teak table are some Polaroid photos taken at the party, and one of them I find particularly interesting because it shows a strikingly attractive woman standing next to an older man. At first I thought that they must be the mother and grandfather of one of the kids attending the party, but as Lotus drones on, she informs me that the photo in my hand is Mister Robert Balscomb, previous owner of the Changs' house.

Lotus says that Balscomb stopped by with Marian, his housekeeper. The reason for their invitation to the party was that Marian is Michelle Chang's former porcelain-painting teacher, and the person who originally told Mrs. Chang about Balscomb's house being for sale. Michelle wanted to show off how her porcelain collection is displayed, so Mister Balscomb came along to do the driving and give Mrs. Chang some pointers on features of the 'safe room' where she keeps her collection. When Balscomb owned the house he paid big bucks to convert the den into what

security experts call a 'panic room,' complete with bulletproof walls and emergency communication devices. He's obviously either paranoid, or has a very checkered past he's afraid might catch up with him.

Lotus notices that I can't seem to stop looking at the picture of Balscomb and his companion, and surprises me.

"Gee, that's funny... Marian kept looking at your picture too."

"What are you talking about Lotus?"

"That picture of you and Suzi. You know, the one you guys took at her birthday party last year. She gave it to me for my 'friends' collection, and when Marian, the lady in the picture with Mister Balscomb, saw it, she kept looking at it the same way you're looking at that picture of her."

This is interesting. It's almost like computer dating, because we seem to be interested in each other's pictures. Maybe I should call her. This might present a slight problem. Somewhere in the back of my mind I get the feeling that Lotus' mother Michelle might be interested in me. That's flattering, but I could never get involved with anyone connected with the IRS... but at the same time, I don't want to hurt her

feelings. I'm going to see this Marian, but it will have to be a covert operation at first.

Lotus says that Suzi didn't think much of Mister Robert Balscomb. If you're not a uniformed law enforcement officer it's tough to get her respect. She's a cop groupie, so it's not surprising to hear she didn't warm up to Balscomb. What does surprise me is hearing that Balscomb was so impressed by the magician entertaining the kids that he stayed for the whole performance and seemed to enjoy it as much as the kids did. He also made sure to get one of the magician's business cards before leaving.

The Changs are leaving the boat now and my phone is ringing. It's my close friend Stuart, who rarely calls just to say hello. He's the most entrepreneurial person I know, and now has at least five successful businesses going that I'm aware of. Whenever I see his familiar telephone number on my caller I.D. display I assume it's either because he needs some emergency legal advice or wants to tell me all about some new business he's going to start up.

“Hello Stuart, what's up?”

“Peter, I'm angry.”

“Okay Stu, why don’t you just calm down and tell me about it.”

“You’re going to think it’s too trivial and you’ll probably laugh at me.”

“Stuart, I promise I won’t laugh. I’ve been practicing law and listening to clients for almost twenty years now, and my legal bedside manner has developed to the point where I can control any urge to laugh at what I’m being told, so go ahead, let’s hear about it. Does it have anything to do with money?”

“Yes Pete, it does.”

“All right, now we’re getting to the heart of the matter. What’s the amount?”

There’s silence on the line as Stuart hesitates with his answer. This probably means that the amount he got screwed out of is so large that he’s embarrassed to tell me. “C’mon Stu. You called me, so if you won’t tell me the amount, then I’d like to get off the phone and go back to some things I’m doing around the boat.”

“Seventy cents.”

Stuart never fails to surprise me. “Stuart, I know in my heart that the amount can’t be bothering you, because next to Suzi you’re one of the richest people I know. There’s must be something else that’s bothering you about that trifling sum, so please, let me know what it is.”

"You're right Pete. It's not the amount, it's the principle of the thing. I picked up a chopped salad to-go at a restaurant. It was eight dollars and fifty cents."

"So?"

"So, they charged me sales tax on it!"

"What's the big deal? You pay sales tax on everything else you buy that's not for resale, so why complain this time?"

"Peter, you went to law school. Didn't they teach you that there's not supposed to be sales tax charged on food to-go?"

"Sorry Stu, I must have been absent that day. Are you sure about the law on that matter?"

"Not exactly, but I pick up a lot of carry-out food, and to the best of my recollection, this is the first time I've ever been charged sales tax on it. I should think that while the exact percentage amount might vary between jurisdictions, the main policy decision of whether or not it's due on food-to-go is a statewide decision and should be consistent."

"So what do you intend to do about it? Turn them in to the State Board of Equalization, or Franchise Tax Board, or whatever agency handles that stuff? Or are you planning some huge class action on behalf of all the taxpayers in the State?"

Either way, I don't think I'm with you on this one. At least not with the facts the way they are to this point."

"Oh yeah? Well what would you do if you were me?"

"First, I'd go back to that restaurant and show them two receipts: one from another nearby restaurant that didn't charge the tax on a similar item to-go, and also the receipt from their own register on which the tax was added. I'd also make sure that I talked to someone in the restaurant who was in charge, because there's always the possibility that the sale was rung up by a new employee or someone else there who just made a common mistake and pressed a wrong classification button on the cash register.

"If you handle it like a gentleman, I'm sure you'll get a happy conclusion. If a mistake was actually made, any competent manager should probably apologize to you and might even offer you a dinner on the house for pointing it out to them. But first and most important, please go to the State's local tax office and find out what the law really is. It's obvious that one of those restaurants made a mistake, and it's either the one that charged you, or the one that didn't. I think you owe it to them as a neighbor to point out the error to the

wrongdoer, and not just rush to turn them in or file a lawsuit.”

Stuart grudgingly agrees with me and says he'll check out the law. After hanging up I start going through several party favors spread around on the table, hoping there's some leftover birthday cake included, and happen upon a business card that announces "The Great Schwartzi." This is obviously the party magician's card. The surprising part is what's written on the blank back side of the card. It's a local address, with a scribbled note that says 'Suzi, I'll expect you at my house tomorrow at one P.M.'
