



**A PETER
STRAND
MYSTERY**

**THE BLUE
DRAGON**

RONALD TIERNEY

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Summary: Forensic accountant Peter Strand investigates a suspicious death in San Francisco's Chinatown in this work of crime fiction. (RL 4.3)

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I went to the garden and looked out into the twinkling night. Something was changing. What I'd told Cheng Ye Zheng that afternoon in the bar...these were things I'd never told anyone. I'd told him about being four years old and standing outside the wrecked car and seeing my parents, remembering them not as humans but simply as masks. As pretend.

ONE

It wasn't my assignment, I was told, to find the murderer. The police were working on it. My job was to calm the tenants of the Blue Dragon apartment building—particularly a Mr. Emmerich.

My client, Mr. Lehr, owner of the small, oddly named piece of real estate, was a rich Caucasian who thought that because I was “Oriental,” I would have more credibility with his mostly Asian tenants than he would.

He was likely wrong on that matter. My parents were Chinese, but they died before

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I knew them in any meaningful way. I was raised by a wealthy white family in Phoenix and went to a school dominated by children of wealthy white parents in Scottsdale. Though I was now in San Francisco, a city one-third Asian, many of them “fresh off the boat,” as some would say, I could not speak Chinese in any dialect. Another problem with the situation was that while I was an investigator, I did so in high-finance and accounting circles. I had no experience on the tough, sometimes murderous streets of San Francisco, let alone in Chinatown, an area of the city about which I knew little.

It was twilight. The neon signs were just beginning to glow above the brick streets. There was a trading company, displaying goods in a yellowed, smoke-coated window. There was a flower shop with its door open. There was activity inside the narrow space—big-leafed plants in big ceramic pots were being moved. Workers were chatting

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in a language that was, of course, Chinese, but as foreign to me as Swahili.

Another narrow street. Also quiet. This one was a bit more residential. Above me were apartment windows where I could see the bluish, quivering light of television sets. Voices. From other buildings came the sounds of mahjong, plastic cubes being rolled and gathered and rolled again amid a chorus of excited shouts.

I found my building. Four stories of plain brick facade painted a smoky blue. There were eight built-in mailboxes on one side of the recessed entry and eight buzzers on the other. In the middle was a huge iron gate, which protected a wood-framed glass door with numbers printed in gold leaf.

My client said I should buzz 1A. Mr. Leu, the manager, would help me with whatever I needed. A balding man about sixty answered the door.

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Before I could say anything, he spoke. Sadly, for me it was all gibberish.

“You here about 3B?” he asked again, this time in choppy English.

“3B?”

“Rent?”

“Rent? No. I’m Peter Strand. Mr. Lehr sent me over to talk with your tenants, to calm them down.”

“Oh. Not expect you so soon, Mr. Strand.”

He spoke English like Chinese characters usually spoke in old American movies. At first I thought it was a joke. Was Mr. Leu mocking me? I was never able to settle that little debate in my mind.

He smiled.

“You expected a white man?” I asked.

He nodded, smiling. Then shrugged. He looked at me more closely. “Come in,” he said, moving to the open door near the entry. It was his apartment.

“You want tea? Beer?”

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“No. But thanks.” The place was small, a studio, I guessed. My client said Ray Leu got the apartment free and received a small sum for watching over the property. My client had also given me some background on all the other tenants—how long each had lived there, what they paid in rent, the level of difficulty they presented to management.

“Call me Ray,” the man said. A cheerful man, he was no taller than I, but he seemed larger. It was his head, perhaps, bigger than usual. He wore work clothes—a blue cotton shirt that matched his grubby blue trousers. As we shook hands, I could feel the calluses. It wasn’t difficult to imagine him wrestling water heaters and steam pipes.

“Ray is my American name,” he said. “So you call me Ray.”

“All right.” All I wanted was to get this over with. Have the interviews with the tenants.

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Tell them the owner was concerned. And that everything was all right.

“You are a private detective.” He smiled. “A Chinese detective. But you don’t speak Chinese?”

“You can’t be sure of that, can you?”

He laughed deeply. He was proud of himself.

“No accent. The way you walk. You look uncomfortable outside waiting at the door. Clothes...” He shook his head. “Armani?”

“Not this one,” I said. “Maybe you should be the detective.”

“I would be a good detective, Mr. Strand.” He looked around his small room, but he was pretending to see outside the walls. “This is one crazy house, you know?”

“Not yet.”

He laughed again, pounding his thigh. “Mr. Strand, private eye.” He laughed at what was apparent foolishness to him.

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It seemed good-natured nonetheless. I took no offense. “You want me to show you where I found the body?”

“Please.” The idea that I was looking at the scene of a murder was absolutely new and still unfathomable. I was a white-collar investigator, employed by CEOs and venture capitalists. I worked for anyone who wanted to invest in other people’s businesses and other people’s ideas. I did background checks in a process known as due diligence. My card did not say *private investigator*. It said *consultant*.

Even so, I did know a little about the crime. Mr. Lehr told me that a blow to the head had killed Ted Zheng, a tenant. The apartment manager had found the young man’s body in the cellar at 5:45 AM about two weeks ago.

The police investigated and determined that the death was gang related. Drugs had been found in Ted Zheng’s system.

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Police assumed he was a “player.” If they were right, finding the murderer would not be easy for the police. For me, it would be impossible. Yet the tenants were concerned.

This was to be a short assignment—drop in a few times, ask some questions. From my client’s point of view, it was public relations. As Ray and I went down the uneven stone steps into the darkness, the broad beam of his flashlight lit only the immediate space before us. I noticed his dusty boots and my comparatively dainty Italian loafers.

“These steps were here before the earthquake. All of Chinatown was on fire. Everything gone but these steps,” Ray exaggerated as we descended. “Nothing but rubble.”

“Why is there no light?”

“Electrician come to work. Spend two hours. Screw up, then say he will be back. That was a month ago.”

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“Was the electricity out when Ted was killed?”

“Yes. Big problem. Wait long time. Elevator. Apartment? Ted was supposed to paint. He died. Problems.”

“Death is a pretty decent excuse,” I said.

“Cannot rent 3B until we find someone to finish the painting.”

“You don’t do that?”

“Not part of deal. Boss say I am not a painter. Touch up, maybe.”

We crossed a stone floor.

“You carry a gun?” he asked.

“No.”

There was silence for a moment. And I suddenly felt uneasy. I was in an absolutely foreign place within a foreign place. We were in total darkness. He controlled the only light. And why was he asking whether I had a gun?

The circle of golden light preceded us in sudden jerks of illumination. When the

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light splashed over a form in the corner, it went out as suddenly as the body appeared.

I must have made a sound.

Ray laughed.

“I put that there to show everyone where body was.”

He flashed on the light. The form was a pile of clothes, loosely formed to suggest a body. I was beginning not to like Ray.

“Don’t do that, Ray,” I said.

“Private eye. Dangerous job,” he said, still laughing. “Tough guy.”

“The way we came in...is there any other way in or out?”

“You know what we say in China?”

“Give me the flashlight,” I said, ignoring his question. What I wanted to do was bounce it off the top of his large laughing head. Instead, I slowly examined the walls and floor. No windows. No other way out.

Not much to examine. That was a good thing. I had no idea what I was looking for.

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In a far corner there were paint cans, a ladder, brushes and roller trays. There were old doors and a ladder stacked against one wall, some pieces of molding, a dusty commode and some plumbing pipe. There was a table. Nothing was on it. A beat-up chair was near but facing away from the table. The tabletop was dusty. The seat of the chair wasn't.

“Anyone clean up after the murder?”

“Police, medical examiner, some guy with camera. But they didn't take anything. Body only.”

“No blood?” I kept the flashlight and started back up the stairway.

“No.” He followed me quietly. When we were at the top of the stairs, he paused in the entryway. “Very sad. I don't like to think about it. I try to make it funny, you know?”