

The Case of Moomah's Moolah

(A Richard Sherlock Whodunit book 2)

CHAPTER 1

Never shoot a man sitting down. It's pointless. Worthless. Doesn't prove a thing. Shoot him standing up. Better yet, get him in motion, moving from one place to another. There's absolutely nothing better than nailing a guy moving furniture.

My job is to shoot him dead to rights. Leave him no way out. End this madness right here and right now.

I'm in a back alley between a pair of dumpsters. I'm alone. Not a witness in sight. There's a wall with razor wire right above me. I'm not going to get any closer. The angle I have into the first floor motel window isn't the best. If I was up a few more feet it would help, but do I really want to try to balance myself on top of these two dumpsters? What happens if my weight pushes the wheels outward and I end up doing pavement splits like a bad break dancer? Yeah, that would be great for my bad back.

I've been on this guy's tail for two days. He's good. He knows he's got to be careful — and how to be careful. He limps around with a cane, never dropping his guard, constantly looking for someone trying to spoil his free ride into the future. I've got less than a week before he goes in front of the judge. No time to miss. My boss' instructions were simple. Shoot him so he doesn't have a leg to stand on.

I've been here for almost a half-hour. It must be a hundred degrees, with the humidity at ninety-nine. I couldn't be sweating any more than if I was one of those idiots in a sweat lodge attempting to find the meaning of life. People talk about Chicago's winters. Well, the summers aren't too pleasant either. My dry cleaning bill goes up six-fold starting Memorial Day.

As I peer through the telescopic sight, I can see the heat rising up from the walkway that leads to my quarry's room. The smell from the trash curls my nose. I consider breathing through my mouth, but the chance of ingesting some fatal organism stops me. Luckily, the motel room curtain remains open, but it will be tough getting a good shot. Glare, I hate glare.

My prey is inside, lying on the bed. Really dumb to shoot him now. The angle still sucks. I've got to get a better shot. I close the lid on the left dumpster. The one on the right doesn't have a lid. I can hear rats scurrying around inside. I must be disrupting their lunch. I skoogle up the sides of trash bins and balance myself with one foot on each. Standing on top, I twist my body to face the motel, lift my arms, and aim through the razor wire. There he is. I got him in my sights. I freeze. I wait.

From the left a woman enters the frame. A little dumpy, cherry-red lipstick, with platinum blonde hair wrapped high in a '50's beehive. You'd think a guy paying for it would find a better looking woman, but since he hasn't received his payout yet he's obviously still shopping the discount racks. I got her perfectly in my sight. Maybe when he opens the door to let her in I can get him.

She knocks. I see movement from the man. The door opens slightly, closes, and then opens all the way. Damn! He's behind the door. Come on, buddy, stand up. Say hello. Welcome her with open arms. Dance a jig. The woman enters. The door closes. She pulls the curtains shut. Double damn! Now I got to wait until they're done.

Why can't anything go right in my life?

I'm balancing on top of two dumpsters, in an alley behind a seedy motel, in a lousy Westside Chicago neighborhood, on a hot, humid, miserable scorcher of a summer day. I'm not religious, but I pray for a quickie. I take my eye from the viewfinder, rest my hands and arms, and wipe the sweat from my face. The stench from the trash makes me nauseous. The realization that I am actually here, in this position, doing this, makes me depressed beyond belief. I ask myself what has happened to my life, how did it ever come to this?

And from out of nowhere, this guy, whom I instantly recognize, walks hurriedly down the aisle to the motel door, like he's going to drop in and surprise them with a check from the Publisher's Clearing House. He's a shooter, too. He carries the same weapon as me. I got competition. I watch closely. He's doing what I'm doing, but doing it with a hell of a lot more panache than me. I hate this guy. He knocks on the door, waits, and then pounds on the door. I can almost hear him count to three. He takes one step back, lowers his shoulder, and crashes inside like a disturbed linebacker. I hear him scream, "That's my wife," and he starts firing off shots faster than Wyatt Earp at the O.K. Corral — exactly what I should be doing.

I pull my arms and hands forward, reset, take careful aim, and just as I'm ready to shoot, I hear the three little words that have become the bane of my pathetic existence.

"Oh, Mr. Sherlock!"

My quarry comes running out of the motel. I try to ignore the voice. This is my last chance to get him. I try to focus and take careful aim. I quickly squeeze my finger, but my balance is thrown off by my nemeses below me who slightly pushes the dumpster to get my attention.

"Oh, Mr. Sherlock."

The bins wobble and separate. I do an impromptu version of the splits and fall backwards into a week's worth of enough filth to start an impetigo epidemic.

"What are you doing, Mr. Sherlock?"

I rise up to see my prey running out of the room, dressed only in striped boxer shorts, and a wife-beater t-shirt, his pants and shoes clutched in his hands. He takes off down the outer corridor as if he's an Olympic sprinter pursued by a track official with an empty urine cup. I aim and squeeze, blindly shooting shot after shot. I finally get my eye back into the sight, but it's all black. I got no shot. Why? A piece of moldy cheese pizza stuck to the viewfinder.

I look around. The man is gone, high-tailed it to parts unknown.

"Mr. Sherlock, you have to come quick."

"Tiffany..."

"It's an emergency." She sounds like a third grader in need of a rest room.

"I'm working right now."

"This is more important."

My name is Richard Sherlock. I spent nineteen years on the Chicago Police Force, sixteen as a detective. I've shot at seven men. Hit four and killed two.

Today, I can't even shoot a guy with a camera.

I blew twenty-year's worth of pension benefits with one punch to the jaw of my commanding officer. Since then, I'm forced to work for the Richmond Insurance Company as their on-call detective, assigned to investigate any settlement fraud, or any suspected fraud, or any settlements which can be proven fraudulent in front of a judge.

I hate my job.

"Tiffany, I have to get pictures of that guy, on his feet, without a cane, for the judge next week." I pull myself up and out of the dumpster with my cheesy camera hanging from my neck. "Or, your daddy is going to shoot me."

"This is totally more important."

"I doubt if Jamison Wentworth Richmond will echo that sentiment."

I'm out of the bin. My shirt is covered in some greasy slop that would sicken a pig. I take it off and toss it back into the bin. I only wore it twice. The front of my jeans resemble a sloppy car mechanic's overalls after one too many lube jobs. The back has something yellow and brown running up the butt. I wish I could shuck the jeans too, but I'm way too modest.

"Tiffany, what are you doing here?"

She answers in a rap-like staccato. "Kinda Uncle Kenno's SO's been napped and Moomah's shelling out a mil for the switch-er-roo."

I stop wiping the pizza sauce off my camera's lens. "Could you translate that into English for me?"

"Not now, we have to hurry."

Tiffany heads out the alley towards the street and I have no choice but to follow. I must be upwind because she stops after a few paces. "You did drive, didn't you? Because you in my car, right now, would not be the hot tip. No amount of new car aroma could ever cover you up, Mr. Sherlock."

Tiffany drives a new Lexus 430. I drive an ancient Toyota Tercel.

"Where are we going?"

"Kenno's condo."

"Where?"

"Hurry."

My Toyota has been locked up in the sun for the past two hours and is now hotter than a Thanksgiving oven. I am hit by a sauna blast as I open the door to spread a stack of yesterday's newspapers on the front seat to protect the remaining faux leather upholstery not yet stained or split open, as if I could actually cause any more harm to a car that should have gone to the auto graveyard years ago when Toyota got smart and discontinued the model. I squish when I sit. The steering wheel is fresh, molten steel. Ouch! It takes me three tries to turn over the engine, and once it kicks over it sputters like

a hacking chain-smoker. I'm sure there's some engine part not working to full capacity, but why fix something when it's not totally broken?

Tiffany honks her horn, beckoning me to be quick about it.

Tiffany is the daughter of aforementioned Mr. Richmond, the president and CEO of Richmond Insurance, my boss. She has been assigned to me as a protégé for two reasons: 1. to try to teach her some other useful life skill beyond speaking housekeeper Spanish and figuring out ways of accumulating the optimum amount of points on her numerous gold and platinum credit cards. And 2: to get her out of her daddy's hair for as long as possible.

On the surface Tiffany is a vapid, spoiled-rotten, rich, self-centered, egotistical twenty-something who will never experience an "I can't afford it" moment in her life. Down deep Tiffany is a vapid, spoiled-rotten, rich, self-centered, egotistical twenty-something — but with a good heart. I've found in life if you have one of those, all other frailties diminish. Plus, my kids think the world of her. I suspect they like her more than they like me.

Although made by the same company, my Toyota has a hard time keeping up with Tiffany's Lexus. I'm surprised when the 430 pulls into a self-service car wash and parks in front of the middle bay. She's out of her car and waiting as I pull up.

"What are we doing here?" I ask.

Tiffany ignores my question and asks her own, "Do you know how one of these things work?"

"They work with quarters, Tiffany."

"I don't do change," she tells me. "Walking around jingling would diminish my aura." She pulls out one of the many credit cards in her purse. "I wonder if it takes Neiman-Marcus."

"I would doubt it."

She removes the entire stack of credit cards from her DKNY wallet, fans them out like a hand of gin rummy, and picks a favorite. She is about to swipe it through the reader on the instruction panel. "You're going to put a dollar, seventy-five on your credit card?" I ask.

"I'll get credit for one and three-quarters of a mile," Tiffany says and swipes an American Express Gold Card through the reader. "Stand over there, please."

As the light goes on, Tiffany grabs the sprayer mechanism, depresses the trigger, and water shoots out. It hits me like a Selma, Alabama fire hose, but actually feels pretty good. I'm a kid again, playing in a sprouting fire hydrant.

"Pirouette, please," Tiffany orders and I whirl my dervish.

As the spray turns soapy, I close my eyes, but I peek out to see my pants, undershirt, shoes and socks covered in thick, white foam. I could probably pass for a sudsy, Pillsbury Doughboy, if I were plump.

Before the spray returns to clean water, Tiffany reads the instructions. "Would you like to get jet-waxed?"

"Not today, thanks."

"I got waxed on Tuesday," Tiffany says. "But not like this."

"Thank you for sharing."

I spin around, as the sprayer rinses the soap and scum from my body and clothing. The sprayer shuts off with my feet sopping in soap. Tiffany returns it to its rightful place and

comes to my side to take a whiff. “You’re not Chanel No. 5, but you’re much better than Eau de Dumpster.”

“Tiffany, you’ve destroyed my surveillance of an insurance cheat, plunged me into a trash dumpster exposing me to untold filth and pestilence, ruined my second best shirt, and soaped and sprayed me like a dirty Buick, would you please tell me what’s going on.”

“My kinda uncle’s significant other has been kidnapped and held for ransom.”