

The Case of Mr. Wonderful
(A Richard Sherlock Whodunit book 4)

CHAPTER 1

“Kill or be killed.” He pauses. “It’s that simple.”

This guy is serious.

“Look around you. To your left, to your right, forward and back, these are your enemies. They want what you want. They want what you have. They want to see you destroyed.

“Strike first. Strike fast. Destroy them before they destroy you. You are at war, and the war never ends. A new battle is waged each day. You must stay mean. Stay hungry. Stay in the fight until you achieve your ultimate victory.”

He takes a breather, walking back and forth, staring into the eyes of the assembled—not merely looking at them, but looking through them. I certainly hope he doesn’t get to me.

“You may already be, or are about to become, commissioned officers in the art of war. You must learn to study the landscape, consider the construction, and be creative in the design of your particular battle plan, which will lead you to success.

You must see what others do not see. You must find positives where others see faults. You must do more than your competitors.

“Fellow warriors, be cunning in your plan of attack. Be clear and forthright in leading your troops, the people behind you, to carry out the orders you have given. You are the general, so act like the general.”

He stops in front of this little guy in the front row. The guy’s name badge might as well read: Caspar Milquetoast.

“You!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Are you strong?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you capable?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you going to rise above the mediocre competition, flex your muscles, and reveal you are a force to be reckoned with, and no one will stand in the way of you achieving your goal?”

“Yes, sir!”

People stand stock still, at attention, hanging on every word. And I’m one of them. This guy is amazing.

He moves on and stops right in front of me. We’re nose to nose. Every eye in the room is upon us.

“You!”

“Yes, sir,” I answer.

“I can’t hear you.”

“Yes, sir,” I scream.

“Are you willing to do what it takes?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you willing to go the extra mile?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What is your name?” he asks.

“Richard Sherlock.”

“Are you, Richard Sherlock, willing to sell your soul to the devil if he is willing to pay your price?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And it is not just about winning and losing, is it Mr. Sherlock?”

“No, sir.”

“It is about mentally breaking your adversary, so that the next time you come up against him in battle, in a bidding war, or negotiating a settlement, your opponent will be so overwhelmed by your force of absolute power, he will wither and crumble beneath you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I have one last question for you, Mr. Richard Sherlock.”

There is not a sound in the room. No one moves. Not one twitch, sneeze or sniffle. There is nothing in the world that can disrupt this man’s total mastery over the people before him.

Except...

“Oh, Mr. Sherlock.”

The words ring out like the final buzzer at a basketball game. These three words are the bane of my existence, the shackles to my soul, and the albatross around my neck.

Our guru is stunned into silence.

I turn to see my protégée coming down the aisle. “Tiffany, not now,” I plead to no avail.

Tiffany comes right between the two of us. “Oh, Mr. Sherlock. You got to come right away! Daddy’s got a big case for us to investigate.”

“Who are you?” the leader of our session bellows out like the Man Behind the Curtain.

“Tiffany Richmond, detective in training. Who are you?”

“Charles B. Closer, the king of the real estate seminar. I am to real estate what Patton was to the infantry, Attila to the Huns, and Buddha to the Buddhists.”

“Well, no offense, Mister, but I don’t know them, I don’t know you, and we got to go,” Tiffany tells him. “It was nice meeting you.”

“Tiffany, please, can’t it wait?”

“No. When Daddy says ‘jump’ Mr. Sherlock, you got to say ‘which way?’ You know the drill.”

Unfortunately, she’s right. I have no choice.

Tiffany waves to all in the auditorium and says, “Ta-ta,” as she pulls me up the aisle like a second grader on his way to the principal’s office.

My name is Richard Sherlock. I spent nineteen years in the Chicago Police Department, sixteen as a detective. I got kicked off the force due to a very uncharacteristic temper tantrum. I took a swing at my superior’s face and made a solid connection. I lost my position and my pension, and couldn’t find another job. I ended up

as an on-call investigator for the Richmond Insurance Company, where I'm forced to investigate settlement frauds, suspected frauds, or any settlements that can be proven fraudulent.

I hate my job.

I'm also a divorced dad of two girls, twelve and fourteen. I have a bad back, no savings, and an ex-wife who hates me. I live in a crummy, one-bedroom apartment. I'm a lousy dresser, can't find a steady girlfriend, and I drive a 1992 Toyota Tercel. Could life get any more pathetic? Yes, my new career in real estate has hardly gotten off on the right foot.

A major portion of my job with the insurance agency is mentoring (aka babysitting) the twenty-something, spoiled heiress of the Richmond fortune, Tiffany Richmond. On the surface Tiffany is a vapid, spoiled-rotten, rich, self-centered, egotistical girl who will never experience an "I can't afford it" moment in her life. Deep down, Tiffany is a vapid, spoiled-rotten, rich, self-centered, egotistical girl 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. I really can't blame them.

"What are you doing here, Mr. Sherlock?" Tiffany asks on the way to her car.

"I'm learning how to sell real estate."

"King Kong Closer looked like a real weirdo to me."

"He's famous for instilling salesmanship and confidence in new real estate salespeople."

"It sounded like he was giving a pep talk before a game of Mortal Kombat."

"Tiffany, I'm getting into a business where I can make some real money."

"Oh, Mr. Sherlock..."

"I took the real estate exam last week, and once I get my license I'm off to the races."

"Mr. Sherlock, we don't have time for the turf club right now," Tiffany tells me. "One of Daddy's biggest clients has put in a claim for six million dollars. And you know how Daddy hates that."

Oh, jeesh.

"Daddy says the guy got swindled, and we have to find the swindler doing the swindling."

"Do I have to?"

"Of course you do. It'll be fun."

Tiffany's new Lexus 450 is parked at a meter blinking Expired, but there's no ticket on her windshield. As we approach the car, I see a blue, plastic hanger with a white wheelchair symbol, hooked onto her rear-view mirror.

"When did you become crippled, Tiffany?"

"I'm not crippled; I'm perfect."

"Then why do you have a handicap sticker?"

We climb in the car. She's driving.

"Daddy got tired of paying my parking tickets, so he got me one of these."

"That's not fair, Tiffany."

“What’s not fair is they don’t work if you park in somebody’s driveway,” Tiffany says. “You would think the parking gods would have the common sense to allow people who can’t walk to park in a driveway.”

“But you’re not crippled.”

“That’s not the point, Mr. Sherlock.”

Why do I bother?

Tiffany fires the Lexus up and zips into traffic like a cop heading out to catch a speeder.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“To see the victim. You always told me ‘the longest journey starts with the first source.’”

“I never said that.”

“Well, you said something like it.”

Ten minutes later, Tiffany parks in a handicapped space in the basement parking lot of the Willis Tower in the South Loop. The Willis Tower was once the Sears Tower when Sears was known as the “World’s Biggest Store,” but Sears got their retailing butt kicked by K-Mart—who later got their retail butt kicked by Walmart—and had to move to the suburbs. The building became the Willis Tower. Willis is an insurance company based in London. The Sears/Willis Tower was billed for years as “The World’s Tallest Building,” but has fallen to a lousy tenth in the category, just like Sears has fallen in the retail rankings. Talk about similar falls from grace, nobody ever brags about being the “Tenth Tallest Building in the World” or the “Tenth Biggest Store.”

We take the elevator up 104 of the 108 stories and step out into the offices of the SSS Financial Corporation. I can almost taste the money when my feet hit the plush carpeting. The place exudes wealth. Original oils on the walls, sculptures on the glass tables, and furniture so perfect I’m afraid to sit down.

“You like this, Tiffany?”

“Not too shabby,” Tiffany remarks at the lobby area, “but if it were me, I’d feng my shui a little more.”

As we approach the mahogany reception desk, I ask, “Who are we here to see?”

“Sterling S. Sheckle, who else?” Tiffany says.

I suddenly feel like a swine in a sea of pearls.

Sterling S. Sheckle is one of the richest men in the universe. He owns hundreds of companies, millions of acres of land, and enough buildings to populate his own metropolis. His yearly gross is greater than the GNP of Finland. In the 1990s, he cornered the copper market and made billions. In 2006, everyone thought he was crazy when he cashed out of his real estate holdings, but the same experts changed their minds when the crash hit in 2007. A year later, Sterling bought the properties back at reduced prices and has made mucho more millions during the current real estate revival. I hope I can do the same, although on a much smaller scale. I’ll be thrilled if I can make enough real estate commissions to get out of my crummy apartment.

Sterling, the businessman, is somewhat of a man of mystery. He’s not a Howard Hughes recluse, but he keeps his business life to himself. He never gives interviews, has only a handful of friends, and seldom has his picture taken. You never hear the Sheckle name when his company is making a play for another company who might not want to be played. Sterling S. Sheckle is recognized as one of the biggest wheels when it comes to

wheeling and dealing. He keeps his family under a veil of security, probably for their own safety. He lives in a two-story penthouse atop a forty-story building on “The Block” portion of Lake Shore Drive. He doesn’t drive his own car; he has people for that. His employees must sign a stack of release forms before joining his firm, everything from non-compete to “I’ll never tell.” I wouldn’t be surprised if they are asked to sign the forms with their own blood.

The public Sterling Sheckle is a much different persona. Sterling is known to bequeath portions of his fortune to some very lucky charities. A chunk of his charitable change goes to big established charities, but nobody cares about these because lots of rich people give to these charities. What gets the play, and makes Sheckle different, is his unique manner of dropping cash into the hands of the needy nonprofits, new research labs, and the latest potential medical breakthroughs. Without any warning or prior contact, a number of individuals, do-gooder groups, and charitable organizations have gone to their mailboxes to find an envelope with a sizable check inside. Boom, there it is—money from heaven, theirs to keep with few, if any, strings attached.

It is little wonder why Sterling S. Sheckle is better known around Chicagoland as Mr. Wonderful.

His charity, known as the SSS Fund, has no address, phone number, email, or perch for a carrier pigeon to land. He probably does this to keep every Tom, Dick, and Harry from hounding him relentlessly for a hundred grand of his mad money. It is rumored that he has given away millions upon millions of dollars to needy charities near and far. Maybe, when I’m in his office, it would be a good time to ask if the Richard Sherlock Charity for the Eradication of Richard Sherlock’s Credit Card Debt can be added to his giveaway list.

Tiffany introduces us to the receptionist, and we’re told to take a seat.

“Alpaca,” Tiffany says.

“Al, who?”

“Alpaca, Mr. Sherlock,” Tiffany says. “You’re sitting on alpaca.”

I thought I was on a couch. “How do you know its alpaca, Tiffany?”

“I’ve been blessed with sensors all over my body that can detect fine fabric.”

“Lucky you.”

“You’d be surprised how often it comes in handy.”

“Yes, I would be.”

A gorgeous woman, impeccably dressed, comes down the hall and greets us. “Miss Richmond, Mr. Sherlock?”

We stand. Tiffany moves to the woman, ogles her like a fashion critic, and asks, “Vera Wang?”

“Yes,” the woman answers proudly.

“May I?” Tiffany asks, and before waiting for her answer, gently squeezes the sleeve material on the woman’s dress. “Thai silk from Bangkok.”

The woman nods, as if to say, “Correct.”

“That’s what I would have said, too,” I say in mock modesty.

The woman smiles; she has perfect teeth.

We are escorted through hallways of offices and cubicles to the far corner of the floor. It’s about a two-block walk. Another woman, as gorgeous and as well dressed as the first, meets us. Tiffany doesn’t press test her outfit.

“One minute, please,” she says, removing the phone headset she’s wearing.

We wait patiently.

The woman rises, opens one of two massive double doors, steps inside, closes the door behind her, and comes right back out. "He'll see you now."

This should be interesting.

The door opens. Tiffany goes first. I follow. The door behind us closes automatically. I look up, and about forty feet away, across Persian rugs on a teak floor, is a man sitting behind a massive desk, almost empty, except for a phone console with enough lines blinking to light up the White House Christmas tree. The instant he lays his eyes upon us, he stands up, slams his fist down hard on his desk, and screams out his question of the day, "Where's my money?"

This is hardly the Mr. Wonderful I expected.

The office is quite spectacular. Two couches, high-back chairs, a conference table that seats twelve, and floor-to-ceiling windows on two sides of the room. The view on a clear day must be all the way to Detroit, but who'd ever want to look at Detroit? As I quickly take it all in, I notice something missing.

No wonder Sterling S. Sheckle is camera shy; the guy's a shrimp. Standing, he's my size when I'm sitting down.

"I want my money. You tell that no good, tighter than a miser-on-a-budget Richmond, whose been sticking me for years with inflated premiums, it's his turn to shell out the gelt."

"That's what we're here to discuss, Mr. Sheckle," Tiffany tells the man as we approach his desk.

"Who are you?"

"Tiffany Richmond; that no good miser is my daddy."

"Good, then you can write me a check. Make it out to Cash for six million."

I don't have fabric sensors built into my DNA, but my eyesight is still pretty good. Sterling wears a blue suit with wide stripes, the kind Al Capone wore before he was shipped off to Alcatraz. His belt tightens a few inches above his navel, and his white shirt with a frayed collar billows out at the belt line like frosting hanging over the edge of a cupcake. The tie he's wearing makes my ties look fashionable. I notice a hearing aid in one ear. He wears a pair of thick, half-frame reading glasses low on the bridge of his bulbous nose. Another pair of regular-sized eyeglasses rests on the desk blotter. He's at least seventy years old, although he looks a day or two past eighty. He has more hair in his ears and nose than on his head. If this guy weighs more than 125 pounds soaking wet, I'd be surprised.

"Oh, Mr. Sheckle," Tiffany says to the man. "Nobody writes checks anymore. We use smartphones."

"I want my money, and I don't care how I get it."

"This is Mr. Sherlock, he's going to find your money," Tiffany tells him.

I am?

"How about if you pay me the six million, then whatever he finds, you can keep?" Sheckle asks.

"No," Tiffany says. "I don't think my daddy would be too wild about that idea."

I put out my hand. "Hi."

We shake. His hand is the size of Tom Thumb's.

“Do you have any idea of where the money you lost went?” I ask a standard question from the list of the most popular detective questions.

“If I knew where I lost it, I’d have already found it.”

“Was it stolen?”

“Of course it was stolen.”

“Who stole it?”

“A thief.”

This is going well.

“When?”

“I don’t know.”

“How?”

“I don’t know that either.”

I’m down to the bottom on the detective question list. “Why?”

“Why do you think? It’s six million dollars!” he wails at me.

Good answer.

“You must have a head of security for your firm?” I continue doing my job.

“Of course I have a head of security.”

“What’s his name?”

“Head of Security. The woman outside will give you his name and extension.”

Interesting nomenclatures for his employees.

“But the money didn’t come out of the company,” he tells me.

“Then where did it come out of?”

“My checking account.”

“You have six million dollars in your checking account?” I ask, wondering if I heard this wrong.

“I used to,” he yells back at me.

“Six million bucks?” I’m stunned.

Tiffany notices my absolute disbelief. “What’s so weird about that?”

“Last time I looked, I had sixty-two dollars in mine, Tiffany.”

“Tsk, tsk, Mr. Sherlock.”

“I want my money!”

“Yes, Mr. Sheckle.” I try to calm him down.

Sterling probably realized the six mil was missing when his statement was “off a bit” at the end of the month.

“You don’t mind if I talk to your accounting people or anybody else at the firm?”

“Talk to anybody you want, as long as I get my money!”

“No problem, Mr. Sheckle,” Tiffany assures him. “When Mr. Sherlock’s on the case, the case gets it on.”

Yet another phrase I never uttered.

“I don’t care what you have to do, or how you got to do it, but get my money back or pull out your checkbook and start writing.” Sterling slams his fist down on the desk to make his point clear.

“Yes, sir, Mr. Sheckle, we’re on it like salt on a margarita,” Tiffany assures him.

Sheckle points to the door. “Now, get out of here so I can make some more money.”

We walk to the elevators without assistance. Tiffany is itching to start talking, but I won’t let her within the confines of the company. When we get to the elevator lobby

area, we wait with three other people. Tiffany can't hold out any longer. "I can't believe it; Sterling dresses worse than you."

Two of our fellow waiting riders laugh.

"Tiffany, shush!"

We step into the elevator with the other people. Tiffany can't stop. "I can hardly imagine what he wears to the company Christmas party."

I cut her off. "Tiffany, do you realize we're going down faster in this elevator than we would if we were falling off the top of the building?"

"What does that have to do with the case?"

"Nothing. That's why I brought it up."

I allow our fellow riders to exit first after the car lands gently on Mother Earth.

"Tiffany, never talk in an elevator."

"Why not?"

"Because you never know who's listening," I inform her. "Loose lips sink ships."

"What difference could it make? We're not at the yacht club, Mr. Sherlock."

Why do I bother?

We take another elevator down to Tiffany's car.

"Okay, Tiffany, what did you learn?"

"Learn about what?"

"The case, the crime, the victim, everything?" I ask, as we get into her car.

"Well, I don't think Mr. Sheckle got rich by being fashionable."

Not what I expected, but it's at least something. "Did you notice anything odd about the office?"

She thinks it over. "No."

"You didn't notice anything missing?"

"Missing from where?"

"His desk."

"On the top of his desk?" Tiffany attempts to narrow down the search.

I shake my head in frustration.

"Am I getting warm?"

"Tiffany..."

"The game isn't as much fun if you don't tell me when I'm getting warmer."

"Okay, you're getting warmer."

She thinks it over and says, "Would I be getting warmer if I said what was missing was on the left or right side of the desk?"

"You want me to just tell you?"

"Yes."

"There was no computer screen or terminal anywhere in the room."

"You're right. That's what I would have said, if I would have thought of it."

"There's not a CEO in America without at least two monitors staring at him all day. Sterling has none." I pause for her to, hopefully, take this fact in. "And did you notice how every phone line he had never quit blinking?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Well, once you mentioned it," Tiffany says, "I remember it distinctly."

"What does that tell you?"

“He’d rather talk than Twitter.”

“Close enough.”

Tiffany beams after scoring so well on the test, at least in her mind.

“Let’s go.”

“Where to first, Mr. Sherlock?”

“My apartment.”

“I hate your apartment. Why are we going there?”

“So I can get my car.”

“I hate your car even worse,” Tiffany says. “Why do you need your car?”

“Because I got to pick up the girls. Tuesday is my kid day.”