

# The Case of the Not-So-Fair Trader

(A Richard Sherlock Whodunit book 1)

## CHAPTER 1

*Hit me with your best shot*

Nine out of ten people will tell you that the trigger finger makes the difference. That's incorrect.

It's your feet. You line up your shot with your feet, not your finger, eyes, hands or body, but your feet. Plant them firmly on the ground, hip's distance apart, and that's where, and only where, you'll find perfect balance.

Face the target. Head up, shoulders square. If a level were laid across your shoulder blades, the bubble would rest clearly between the lines.

Then move.

Bend at the waist, twenty, thirty degrees at most. Pull your weapon up slowly, hold it in your hands gently as if it were a firstborn. Feel the smooth surface, the precision that went into its manufacture. Be proud, be respectful and be still, absolutely motionless.

Focus. On the target, the exact spot you want to hit. And don't, whatever you do, close one eye. Talk about a misconception, this is the granddaddy of them all. Do major league baseball players close one eye when the pitch is coming? Did Michael Jordan close one eye shooting three-pointers? Do you close one eye to watch the sun sink slowly in the West? No, no, and no. Keep both eyes open; two are better than one

Three seconds. This is crucial. Focus for three seconds. If you have to think, your only thought should be that there is nothing between you and the target except opportunity.

Don't squeeze. You want to be loose, free and fluid, muscles relaxed, not tense. Your shooting hand should take control with a slow, deliberate confidence. Let the smooth, rounded contour of your weapon rest in the palm of your hand, index and little fingers steady as your middle fingers carry the weight. All the while your eyes bore into that sweet spot envisioning a clean strike.

Last, but certainly not least, block out all distractions. No matter how much rain pelts on the roof, bad country music plays, or the resounding impact of other shots obliterate their intended targets, block it all out. You are an island. Nothing can invade your space. Allow any blip on your radar screen and you will fail. And failure is not an option.

Ready on the right, ready on the left, and ready on the firing line. Time to put it all to work.

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Today, it all comes down to one shot. Now or never, ducks on the pond, all the marbles.

I stand straight as a carpenter's plumb line, perfectly balanced, agent of destruction in hand, ready, untouchable and immutable. My fellow warriors are on their feet behind me. I block out their silent hopes and prayers. I can somehow hear. I bend, focus, wait, and take one step forward gliding in a practiced, precision motion. Everything is just right, only triumph waits.

Approaching the line, I take the final step forward and, at the exact millisecond the shot is about to leave my trigger finger, the piercing cry of the devil rings out. A blistering, dissonant, ear-splitting, resounding screech so shrill eyeglasses crack from the falsetto.

"Oh, Mister Sherlock."

My body spasms as if hit with a Taser. I am immobile, frozen in convulsion. All I can do is watch horrified as my shot spirals halfway to the target and takes an unprecedented spin, squirreling out of control until it falls unceremoniously into the trough and rolls hopelessly into the black abyss.

Gutter ball.

I turn to my team, Chico's Bailbondsmen, and each face is the same -- a countenance of disgust, disappointment, failure and heartache. The months, days, hours, bad food, cheap beer, and overpriced shoe rental were all for naught. My fellow keggers stand, their protruding stomachs hanging on oversized belt buckles. Not a word is spoken.

I regain some sense of equilibrium as the sounds of joy ring out to my left. The team from Johnnie's Pastrami leaps into the air, celebrating my failure. Their high-fives crackle against wrist protectors. Beer splashes onto the smooth wood floor. The electronic scoreboard above flashes a goose egg in my last frame, which guarantees with mathematical certainty that the Waveland Bowl Men's Summer League Championship trophy will reside where rye is a religion and Reuben is king.

I stumble to the plastic bench, collapse; my head falls into hands and dips between my knees. Not one Bailbondsmen comes to my side; we are all too devastated by the loss to express our discontent. My stomach ties into a Gordian Knot; flesh turns the color of psoriasis red, the mother of all headaches crashes inside my head like two bull goats battling for superiority. I am moved from one torment to another as the voice rings out again.

"I didn't think I was ever going to find you," she said. "Come on, Daddy says we have to get there while the body is still warm."

I rise to my feet, pulled along as a lamb to slaughter.

"And one other thing," she said in her incipient, suburban-raised, staccato voice, "I just love those shoes; they are so retro."

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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.

I am sitting in the passenger seat of a new Lexus 430 as we speed north along Lakeshore Drive. Seems pathetic that this car costs more than my first house and more pathetic that, at this time in my life, I cannot afford either.

“Have you heard of Alvin J. Augustus?” she asks as we go by a line of high-rise condos built along the lakefront, known as the Gaza Strip due to the ethnic make-up of the occupants.

“Yes, Tiffany, but only in passing.”

Tiffany, who would name their kid Tiffany? Okay, maybe the guy who owns the store, but who else? You outgrow the name at six; the only contraction is Tiff, and that connotes a fight. The only thing worse than the name Tiffany is sitting next to a Tiffany with diamond studs in her ear lobes that are worth more than my IRA.

“Alvin makes my old man look like a pauper.”

“Tough to do.”

As we pass Loyola University, she says, “It’s a twelve-million-dollar policy. Daddy doesn’t want to pay out.”

I sit silent, not admitting that I don’t blame him.

Traffic is heavy as we proceed through Rogers Park, past Calvary Cemetery and into Evanston. A bit incongruous that the City of Chicago and the City of Evanston are divided by the dead.

“I met his granddaughter, Christina, at the opera once,” she says, driving way too fast past a strip of overpriced real estate. “She was weird.”

“You like opera?” I place a particular emphasis on the you.

“Ah, no. Opera’s enough to make anyone hate music.”

Our deep, intriguing conversation is interrupted as “Girls Just Want to Have Fun,” erupts from the dashboard cell phone speaker. Tiffany ignores the music and the printout of a name across a panel beneath the Lexus stereo system. “Opera, art openings, dinners where they want money for children with flies in their eyes; that’s what we have to do to be people like us.”

“The injustice of it all.”

Horns blare on three sides as Tiffany speeds through an intersection.

“You just ran a red light.”

She turns around, looking for patrol cars. “If I get stopped you tell them you’re a cop.”

“I don’t carry a badge anymore.”

“Then I’ll tell him I’m a nurse. Nurses don’t get tickets.”

Unfortunately, she’s correct. Nurses, politicians, firemen, other cops, and any city employee that wears a tie, are let off with a warning; an unwritten law.

“How did your father find out Alvin died?”

“He has ways.”

“He still monitors police bands?”

“Let’s just say he has ways.”

Tiffany’s father, Jamison Wentworth Richmond, CEO of Richmond Insurance, pays disabled guys less than minimum wage to sit in their basements and illegally eavesdrop on police communication systems.

And I complain that my life is pitiful.

“So, how did old Alvin die?”

“He didn’t die,” Tiffany corrected. “He was murdered. You have to think positive.”

The Lexus passes two stone pillars and we enter Kenilworth, Illinois. Historians have said these tall columns of precise bricks at one time supported a large gate to keep the Kenilworthians separate from undesirable, common folk such as me. Where the moat and drawbridge once stood is anyone's guess. The town is one of the most exclusive enclaves in America, let alone Chicagoland, with some of the homes filling a footprint larger than a city block. Mostly old money, with ex-senators, CEOs and trust-funders, existing mansion to mansion in the splendor only big, big money can bring. Yes, the rich are different.

Tiffany knows the town like the back of her moisturized and manicured hand. She zips through the twisting streets like an Andretti in a Formula One race. We head east, cut through an alley and end up on an old service road that leads to a private beach.

"Kids used to swim naked out here in the summer," Tiffany says, stopping the car at the edge of the sand.

"You?" I ask, getting out of the car.

"Well, not me; I wouldn't have dreamed of skinny-dipping before I had my breasts done."

I walk towards the lake.

"Mister Sherlock, this way," Tiffany informs me.

To my left is a patch of three-foot grass, bushes, and trees; the spot is littered with teenager trash: cigarette butts, fast-food wrappers, empty quart bottles of beer and malt liquor. Teenagers are the only people who drink beer out of quart bottles. Why, I do not know. There are many tire tracks, old and new, on the service road. Before the beach, mounds of dirt and sand roll gently along, topped with a summer growth of weeds and a few huge rocks here and there.

You couldn't tell if anything was disrupted or not; this fact is disappointing.

"Mister Sherlock, Alvin Augustus awaits us," Tiffany says, standing with her hands resting on her hips.

"Be right there," I say and walk to an indentation between two mounds of sand. I stop, look down and see an empty condom wrapper. If I dug deep, as a good detective should, I would find the condom. I pass. There is a slight, faint odor in the air, sour and unpleasant. I watch carefully where I walk. In the middle of the sand, where obviously the human coupling took place, there is a smooth, white rock about the size of a softball.

"What's that?" Tiffany asks.

"Most people call it a rock."

"I know that."

"Then why did you ask?"

"Mister Sherlock, I want to see the body."

"Don't we all?" I drop the rock.

She follows me up to the sandy path leading to the Augustus property, each step torturous in her six-hundred-dollar Gucci pumps. "Do you have to walk so fast?"

"I get that scent of rotting flesh in my nostrils and I just can't hold myself back."

"Really?"

Tiffany does not have an ear for sarcasm.

We come to a strand of yellow, crime scene tape stretched between the pine trees.

This is dumb.

Who in his right mind would ever consider a thin strip of plastic as a deterrent to anyone? The stuff is flimsy, snaps in two easily, and people walk right into it all the time; but for some reason, whenever a crime is discovered, some genius strings it up as if it were an impenetrable force. Hell, if it works, why don't they put it at the borders to keep out illegal aliens?

I duck under the tape. Tiffany raises it over her head and passes underneath. The difference in our actions speaks volumes.

I raise my hand as if I were the squad leader of the YWCA Indian Guides. "Stop." Tiffany looks up the rock-lined path, sees a number of people gathered round. "Why?" "Get behind me."

"A little demeaning," Tiffany says.

"Follow me. Stay close; don't move off the line I set."

Tiffany points to the left, up the path a couple hundred yards from where we stand. "I think the body is over there, Mister Sherlock."

"I doubt if he's going anywhere."

I walk perpendicular to the crime scene tape. Tiffany follows. I move slowly, my eyes never rise from the ground directly beneath me. The rocks are lined up like little soldiers, perfect except for one missing. I consider the one found at the sex scene. I debate whether to go back and get it, put it back in place and return the path to perfection. I don't; too lazy.

"Are we looking for something?" Tiffany asks.

"Yes."

"What?"

"I don't know."

We reach the end of the yellow tape. I take one step to my right and make a close-order drill turn and start back in the direction I came.

"If you don't know what you are looking for," Tiffany says from a foot or two behind me, "How are you going to know when you find it?"

"Trust me; I'll know." I continue to pace across the back lawn of the estate.

After two or three more passes, Tiffany grows even more restless. "This is boring."

"Life is boring," I tell her. "Days, weeks, months, years of one mundane task after another, punctuated intermittently with disappointment, failed expectations, and negative fates; that's what life is all about."

"Not my life."

"Oh, please, do tell your secret."

"Shopping, Mister Sherlock, lots of shopping."

I see a metallic item in the grass, I stop, bend over, reach down to retrieve it, and Tiffany rear-ends me. I catch myself before I hit the ground.

"Sorry about that," she says, "I didn't see your brake lights."

"Don't worry." Hardly the first time I've been kicked in the ass by a woman, and likely won't be the last.

The item is worthless. We continue on my switchback path.

"May I remind you, this is boring," Tiffany says.

"No."

No matter how many cities or episodes of CSI end up on TV, no crime scene will ever be as pure as the ones they portray. The second after a crime is committed, the scene is always compromised. The wind blows, rain falls, dust settles, bowels move, blood spurts; or some kid happens by on his bike, stops, and turns the victim over for a closer view. I heard of one instance where two tourists found a body in a downtown alley and preceded to pose for pictures with their discovery. They even asked another tourist to use their camera so all three could be in the picture together. There's a vacation slide show the neighbors will never forget.

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As we traipse through the Augustus back forty, we come upon a garden. Walking alongside, I, and hopefully Tiffany who stays close behind, remain careful not to disturb the rocks lining the walkway. Dirt on the path is as smooth as a baby's bottom and not a bedding plant in the adjacent gardens has been disturbed. If I ever meet the landscaper who did the design on pansies, roses, and phlox, I will certainly give him my compliments.

I stop, think. We are less than twenty-five feet from the actual crime scene.

"What?" Tiffany says impatiently.

I look left, right, up, down, pausing at each as if taking a photo.

"You found something?" Tiffany asks.

"No."

"Then what? Tiffany pleads, "Tell me."

"Can you keep a secret?"

"No, I'm real bad at that."

"Well, then..."

"Tell me anyway."

I pause and look down the way at a tarp covering a huge pile, which undoubtedly includes Alvin. "They might have found him here, but that wasn't where he was killed."

"How do you know that? You haven't even seen the body."

"I don't know," I say, "I just do."