

# The Case of the Woebegone Widow

(A Richard Sherlock Whodunit book 5)

## CHAPTER 1

It's freezing in here. To make matters worse, I'm sitting on a cold slab of marble. The only thing that could make this more uncomfortable is to have my tongue stuck to a flagpole. I'm wearing long underwear, two pairs of socks, an additional T-shirt, muffler, gloves, and a pair of lace-up duck boots. I'm wearing so many layers underneath my suit I can't button my coat. To top off my frigid wardrobe, I've donned my Russian Ushanka trooper hat. I look like an overdressed Siberian Gulag commandant on his day off. And even with all the clothes I'm wearing, my knees are still knocking to the beat of "Nearer, My God, to Thee."

Chicago is in the middle of a cold snap that could freeze the life out of a woolly mammoth. When I was a kid, the TV weathermen called these cold weather calamities "Canadian Clippers;" now they refer to them as polar vortexes. Call it what you want, but when it's nineteen below, I call it unbearable. And to add more injury to the insult of subzero temperatures, toss in the Chicago wind, which chills the air to minus forty, and suddenly minus nineteen feels downright balmy. There should be a law forbidding air to get this cold.

The twelve or so people sitting in front of me look as if they're in a competition to become the next Michelin Man. They're all wearing so many layers of clothing I can't tell if they're grossly obese or skinny as a rail. Everyone has their heads covered; a few even wear ski masks. I can't say I blame them. Nobody, except the one lady in the front row, looks familiar. She lives in my building, and she's the one who asked me to do this. Why can't I learn to say no to people?

The audience is so old they're shivering in slow motion. The average age must be close to eighty. It would be ninety, but there's one guy who looks about my age—or at least his face looks middle-aged since that's all the skin I can see. Everyone's sniffing, not because they're sad or feel bad, but because their noses are running faster than the thousands of busted water pipes in town this week. A couple of the old guys are as bald as billiard balls, and I swear I can see steam rising from their slick skulls. The assembled sit on wood benches with weird grins on their faces as they listen to the emcee of the event go on and on about valleys, flowers, dust, and more dust. I came all this way to hear a speech about dirt? For the assembled, this show is a rerun of a rerun of a rerun. They've all been here before, and they'll all be here again, if only in spirit. Maybe the only reason they've come is to get ideas on how best to throw one of these parties for themselves.

The guy playing the tunes in the way, way back of the room must have frostbitten fingers because he's missing more notes than he's hitting. I can only hope he's making hazard pay. I stomp my feet to his beat, not to keep the rhythm but to keep the blood flowing to my toes. The music is muffled because I have the flaps of my hat covering my ears, putting my face in furry parentheses. After the end of the depressing dirge, the main man starts up again and goes on and on about the everlasting. The only thing everlasting is this shindig lasting forever.

You'd think a place that has more gold trim in its walls than Fort Knox could afford a little heat, but they probably don't turn it on until Sunday when they get you nice and comfortable to hit you up for big bucks. Obviously, this group has no money, and the powers that be know it, so "No tickety, no heaty," as my buddy Detective Lester Oland would say.

It's so cold my teeth knock together in a staccato equal to a tap dancer on pep pills. I wonder if the fluid in my eyes has frozen because I think I'm hallucinating. I look to the back of the room and see heads pop up over the rows of benches like gophers coming out of their holes to see the sun, then descend downward as fast as they arose. If I had a big mallet, I could go back there and play "Whack a Frozen Mole."

I ask myself the same question over and over, "What am I doing here?"

I should get up and move around. If I don't, I may become an ice sculpture.

The only guy who seems to be enjoying all of this is the man of the hour, Mr. Roscoe Jarbeaux. There he is, as comfortable as a cat in a cradle, looking better than he has in years. He's got a smirk on his face. It's as if he's laughing at the suckers who've showed up for his frigid festivities. I used to see Roscoe walking around in the neighborhood, poking his cane at mothers pushing strollers who got in his way, teaching youngsters his favorite swear words, and puffing on big, thick cancer sticks illegally imported from Cuba. I did my best to avoid him. And now he's the center of attention, literally resting in the center of the big, cold room without a care in the world. The speaker speaks of him as if he didn't have a mean bone in his body, "He wasn't blessed with a family, but he made all of you his family. Down deep, he felt so much for all of the people around him."

What? Who is this guy trying to kid? This is hardly the setting to be telling whoppers. Roscoe's bones are so far past mean they're in the cruel category. And he didn't have a family because they couldn't stand to be around the old coot. His one second cousin twice removed in the front row must be cashing in later, or I'm sure she wouldn't be here either.

"And Roscoe's professional life, spending over fifty years in the credit department of the Illinois Financial Retrieval Company," the big, burly main man continues, "his work touched so many, many people." Oh, yeah, Roscoe touched a lot of people with his slimy and sneaky methods of collecting past-due bills. I heard stories where Roscoe would turn off people's water while they were in the shower, call them on the hour, every hour, starting at 2 o'clock in the morning, and follow unsuspecting debtors to their bank on payday to see if he could scoop some of their hard-earned cash. I wouldn't be at all surprised if he had my number on his list a few times. This fact alone makes it all the more absurd that I'm up here doing what I'm doing.

After another song is butchered beyond even God's recognition, I get the nod from the emcee. They have saved the best for last. I stand up, and my knees buckle. The fluid inside me must be frozen. I find my balance and stumble to the podium. I look out over the scattered people in attendance. If they were smart, or better friends, they'd be huddled together to keep warm. Nobody looks sad. They all look totally miserable. And I can't blame them. On the side aisles, their walkers and wheelchairs are parked haphazardly, resembling the abandoned cars on Lake Shore Drive earlier this week when a lake-effect blizzard added a thirty-minute whiteout to the lives of the already agonized North Side citizens. The traffic that day backed up all the way to the parking lots underneath Grant

Park, where so many motionless cars were idling noxious fumes if you cracked your window an inch, you'd be asphyxiated in moments.

I take one more look at Roscoe, and I swear his smile has widened. Somewhere, somehow he's enjoying every minute of this.

I remove my Ushanka hat out of reverence. The cold air hits my head like a blast of liquid nitrogen. My hair freezes in place. Thank God I don't use mousse, or it would freeze and shatter like a wine glass dropped on a tile floor. I begin, "Good morn—" My vocal chords lock up like brakes on black ice. I try to swallow but only swallow air. I can see my breath; it hangs in the air like gas coming off dry ice. I take my gloves off and blow into my fists. I put my hands to my face and rub around my nose to break up the frozen mucus inside. I exercise my jaw, moving it back and forth. I begin again, "Good morning."

The faces in front of me don't move. They are either freeze-dried or don't agree with my assessment. I might as well continue. "Roscoe Jarbeaux, what can you say about Roscoe Jarbeaux?" I pause. I'm not waiting for a reply, but if one came out of the peanut gallery seated before me, it would be welcome. I do see one man lift the middle finger of his right glove and hold it up to answer my question. I pretend to ignore his silent comment. I continue from my notes, "I remember once asking Roscoe, 'In your more than nine decades in Chicago, what wisdom have you learned that you would like to pass along?'"

"'Not a damn thing,' he replied."

"'In ninety-three years, you didn't pick up anything?'"

"'Naw,' he said as he spit his cigar butt into the street. 'Except maybe pay your bills, so you won't have to deal with a mean old cuss like me.' And if that doesn't say it all, I don't know what does."

There is not one reaction in the bunch. Maybe these people have become ice cubes; the human body is 98% water.

I try another tack. "Roscoe did list a few requests. He said he didn't want any moving tributes. So, I hope all of you who purchased decals for the back windows of your pickup trucks are able to get your money back." I wait for the laughter, but none comes. They should have scheduled a warm-up man to go on before me.

One more attempt to thaw this crowd. "This day reminds me of the time the famous choreographer, Mr. John Hoki, was in the same place as Roscoe Jarbeaux is today. John Hoki, as he was carried in, was dropped by his buddies, fell out of his box and onto the floor, and no one knew how to get him back into his place. His friends and family gathered around him in a circle, perplexed on what to do, until finally, someone sang out 'You put his right foot in, and his left foot out ...'"

I even sing the last line, but the only reaction I get is a loud rumbling from the mass of a dozen. Their senses of humor must also be frozen. I hear growls. The natives are getting restless. They are squirming in their seats to show their impatience or trying to shake off the ice pellets that have formed on their extremities. I decide to toss the notes I scribbled on the back of a Walgreen's receipt and wing it from this point on. "Is there anything anyone in attendance would like to add; a thought, memory, or anecdote about Roscoe Jarbeaux?"

"Can we poke him to see if he moves, just to make sure?" one woman shouts out.

"He borrowed my snow shovel years ago, and I want it back," another yells out.

“The only thing I can say is I wish we coulda done this years ago.”

“Wouldn’t you know it, he’s in hell nice and warm, and we’re up here freezing to death.”

I interrupt to quell the irreverent comments. “Please, we should all show some respect.”

“Why?” one voice yells out. “He didn’t show us no respect. He once busted my kid’s piggy bank open.”

“I’ve been picking up his cigar butts off my lawn for twenty years.”

“He smelled bad.”

This is getting out of hand.

“The invitation said ‘lunch will be served.’ When does it start?”

“I’m hungry,” another yells out.

“Only reason I came is to make sure he’s really dead.”

Just as the audience is about to become a mob and desecrate the life and corpse of dearly departed Roscoe Jarbeaux, I hear the words that will no doubt be the cause of my untimely death: “Oh, Mr. Sherlock.”

I look up to see a human snowflake prancing up the church’s center aisle. She wears knee-high leather boots, thick, pink leggings, and a white mink coat with a hoodie that makes her face look as if it’s encased inside a giant snowflake.

“What are you doing up there, Mr. Sherlock?” She stops to peer inside the coffin. “And who’s the stiff?”

“Tiffany!”

“Is he dead or just frozen?”

“Tiffany, we’re in the middle of the funeral right now.”

“I don’t think it’s going to bother him much,” Tiffany says, nodding towards Roscoe.

“Tiffany, could you wait until this is over?”

“No, Mr. Sherlock. My daddy needs you right there and now.”

“Why?”

“We got a big case to investigate. It’ll be a lot more fun than this.”

“I’m busy.”

“When Daddy says jump, Mr. Sherlock, you got to say, ‘Up or down?’”

“But I’m right in the middle of a eulogy.”

“You lo-gee, later, Mr. Sherlock.” She takes me by the arm, pulls me from the altar, and into the middle aisle. “Oh, come on, you know there’s no fun in funerals.”

I get dragged out of a church in the middle of a memorial service by a person who can’t spell.

Is it any wonder why I hate my life?

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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 an uncharacteristic temper tantrum. My fist collided with the face of my commanding officer after he OK’d a plea deal for a guy I spent ten years trying to put behind bars. I lost my job and my pension and couldn’t find another job. Not a lot of suburban, Chicago police departments were in need of a guy with a right cross aimed at his superior. I ended up as an on-call

investigator for the Richmond Insurance Company, where I am forced to investigate settlement frauds or any settlements that can be proven fraudulent.

I hate my job.

I am also a divorced dad of two girls, twelve and fourteen going on twenty. I have a bad back, no savings, and an ex-wife that hates me. I live in a crummy, currently freezing, one-bedroom apartment. I'm a lousy dresser. I can't find a steady girlfriend, and I drive a 1992 Toyota Tercel. To make matters worse, it's now dropped to twenty-one below with a wind chill of minus fifty.

Am I having fun?

No.

A big 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 have 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 because even I like her more than I like me.

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On the way out of the church, I see I wasn't hallucinating. Those heads I was seeing popping up over the pews were homeless guys trying to sleep through a loud, boring memorial service. Life's tough enough without being blasted out of bed by a pipe organ.

"Tiffany, what's this all about?"

"Daddy's getting sued. He says this is a case that could blow the lid off the insurance company can."

"I don't think you got that right."

"Whatever, Mr. Sherlock. All I know is we gotta hurry."

We stop in the vestibule of the church, and before we head outside, Tiffany pulls this Hazmat mask contraption out of nowhere. She puts it on as if it were a WWI gas mask and tucks its flaps in under her mink. She cinches the waist sash on her fur, flips the hoodie up, and speaks to me through the mask, sounding like E.T., "I can't let any freezing air hit my face because it will throw my skin emollients out of sync, and I could get a zit."

"Oh my God, perish that thought, Tiffany."

She opens the door, we step outside, and we get hit with an arctic blast straight from the North Pole. It's so bitterly cold I'll bet Santa let his elves off for the day.

My slightly used Navy bridge coat, which I bought from the Army/Navy Surplus store and was "guaranteed to keep you warm in the Aleutians," is failing on its promise. The wind goes through it like it was a piece of cheesecloth. The exposed skin on my face painfully stings from the cold air. I put my gloved hands against my face, opening my fingers slightly so I can see to follow Tiffany running ahead of me. Luckily, we don't have to go far since she parked half on the sidewalk and half on the church steps. Her Lexus is idling. There must be heat inside. I lunge for the passenger side but can't open the door because my fingers can't get underneath the latch. I have to take off one glove,

which freezes my hand immediately. In sheer agony, I grasp the cold metal door latch, pull up, and the door opens. I tumble inside because with so many clothes on, it's tough to maneuver a graceful entry. I pull on the door, but it won't close. The wind howls inside the car.

"Shut the door, Mr. Sherlock," Tiffany orders, now sounding like Roseanne Barr in the middle of a hissy fit.

I pull my coat up and out of the doorframe, squish my body to the left, and slam the door closed. I unbutton my coat and stuff my now almost frostbitten hand inside and under my armpit. Tiffany flips the heat control to the "hotter than Hades" setting, and a blast of hot air hits my face like a slap from an angry girlfriend. After the shock wears off, I breathe in the warm air and start to feel a thawing from my nostrils to my frontal lobe. In about three minutes, I'm breathing normally. "I hate winter," I tell Tiffany.

"I kinda like it. There are so many more fashion choices with cold weather."

We have to wait for the window defrosters to do their thing before we can move.

"Where are we going anyway?" I ask.

"See Mr. Twitchell."

"Who?"

"Mr. Houston Twitchell."

"Let me guess," I say to my protégée. "We're going to tell him, 'Houston, we have a problem'?"

"Wow, Mr. Sherlock, you are one smart detective."