

# **The Case of the Missing Milk Money**

(A Richard Sherlock Whodunit book 6)

## **CHAPTER 1**

I'm on a roll.

I've never played most of these games, but I can't seem to do anything wrong. On the roulette table, instead of playing red or black like most of the players, I put my chips on the intersection of four numbers, and in three successive spins, one of my four numbers comes up each time. Better yet, I let each bet ride, and when I do my money piles up faster than drifting snow in a Chicago blizzard. When I pull my winnings off the green felt, I have a pile of chips, which dwarfs the other players'.

At the blackjack table, I hit twenty-one three times in the first five deals. And during one hand, some guy behind me shows me how to double down, and I make two blackjacks instead of one. I'm not only rolling, I'm steamrolling. While the others at the table are getting dealt sixes, sevens, and eights, aces are coming my way like manna from heaven.

"Are you counting cards?" the lady on my left asks, obviously amazed at my good luck.

"The only cards I'm counting are those adding up to twenty-one," I tell her.

"You should do this for a living," she tells me as I beat the dealer's sixteen with a pair of queens.

"Maybe I should," I tell her. "If there is one person in the world who needs a new career, it's me."

I hit another blackjack with the next hand. Ring that jackpot bell!

I can't remember having so much fun.

The hundred bucks I paid to get into the *casino* has been the best money I've spent in years. Not only did I get two drinks, dinner, and a chance at some yearly grand prize, I got a bag of chips to play any game I want. I could care less about the tacky decorations, the cheap linoleum floor, or the dealers wearing silly visors. I'm having a blast. I realize my fellow gamblers aren't real gamblers, and are here for an entirely different reason, but if you're gambling, you're a gambler, and in this group, there's no doubt that I'm the best.

I'm winning so often, the croupier keeps exchanging my white chips for reds and my red chips for blues. They even give me a plastic tray to hold my winnings. Yes, my cup hath overflowed. I don't bother counting or figuring out what my stash may be worth. When you're on a streak like this, you got to play it out, keep it hot, and let the good times roll.

Now it's time for the big Kahuna, Mohammed to climb the mountain, and gentlemen to start their engines. I'm heading for the craps table. This is where the real gamblers play, where you win it or lose it all, where you break the bank or the bank breaks you. There's no room for the weak-kneed, half-hearted, namby-pamby, or dithering decision-maker. This is the craps table where men do, boys lose, and cowards watch. If luck is riding with you at the craps table, get ready for the ride of your life.

It's crowded. I have to squeeze in between two players, whose faces tell me they're not happy campers. The guy with the dice throws a three and the entire table

explodes in painful anguish. There is a short explanation of the game posted behind the guy running the table and I take a quick read of the rules. I understand about a third of it. I watch a couple of tosses. The guy with the dice places bets on the pass line, throws a six, and adds a number of bets on the table. Others do the same. The table is filling up with chips. The guy throws an eight. "Ohh's" and "Ahh's" from the crowd. The guy throws a nine, and the tension and expectation rise. More bets go down. I'm getting the hang of it. The guy throws a six, and the people explode. The croupier stacks chips all around the winning numbers. Everyone is ecstatic, except the guy who had his money on the Don't Pass line.

It's time for me to get in the game. I put my tray of chips on the edge in front of me. Players immediately notice as I stack four piles: two blue, one red, and one white. I make sure each of my stacks is taller than any others on the table. I want everyone to know I've arrived, I'm here to play, and I'm here to win.

I can feel it. The wind is at my back, four-leaf clovers are sprouting, rabbit's feet are dancing, and lady luck is in my corner, smiling down on me like a proud mom watching her baby's first steps.

The guy who made the pass tosses again and snake eyes come up. The stick comes out and bets are swept into the house. It goes to show just how fast luck can change. The dice passes to a woman. I can tell she has no clue what's she's doing. She thinks it's funny to give the dice a quick kiss before she tosses. She rolls a two. Nobody wins. When I roll, the last thing I'd do is kiss the dice, especially during the cold and flu season.

There's only two other players before the dice are in my hands. I can't wait. I can feel it. It's gonna happen. I'm going to go all out. The guy rolls. Boxcars come up. The board is cleared. The dice pass. A three is thrown. The table is now cold as ice.

The dice comes to me. I look up to see the players imploring me with their eyes to turn up the heat. I place a stack of blues on the pass line, the biggest bet on the table. Other money goes down. People can feel my good vibes. I give the dice a few shakes and send them cascading down the table. A four. I can feel it. I double my pass line bet with another stack of blues right behind my first. Other gamblers do the same. A few guys put their money on the numbers. I give 'em a shake, toss, and the dice bounce off the back wall before coming up... a six. Cheers all around. More people gather to watch a real pro in action. They're all rooting for me. I can see it in their eyes, "Beat the house. Beat the house." I play a stack on the numbers, and an even bigger stack on the hard way four at the end of the table. A few people gasp as I make the bet. More money goes on the table. The dealer calls for "all bets down," and pushes the dice to me.

I pause, increasing the tension, give a short shake, and let the dice fly. A six! I did it again. I'm still in the game and the table is so hot now, you could fry an egg on it.

People are laughing, backs are being slapped, and high-fives go all around. This is what gambling is all about. I'm feeling unbeatable. Nothing can stop me. No one can touch the master. I'm invincible!

I'm gonna go for it. I only have to roll a four, and if I roll it the hard way, they'll have to go into their vault to get enough chips to pay me. I lay down every bet

I can. I have stacks so high on the table, it looks like I'm designing skyscrapers. There must be ten people deep behind the players crowded around the edge of the table. They want to see me win as much as I want to blow the whole casino into bankruptcy. This is what it's all about. I'm in, almost every chip I have is bet somewhere on the table.

"All bets down."

I take the dice, rub them together a few times, give them one shake, and just as I am about to throw, I hear words I have come to detest more than any words in the English Language.

"Oh, Mr. Sherlock."

I stop dead in my roll.

"What are you doing here?" she asks as she wedges herself between my new fans at the edge of the table.

"Tiffany?"

"Daddy's got a case for us to investigate."

"Now?"

"Yes. We got to go."

"Can't you see I'm busy?"

"No."

The crowd is getting restless. "Come on, roll," a number of gamblers implore me.

"We gotta go."

“Forget it, Tiffany. I’m taking this one last toss, and if I win, maybe I won’t have to go with you at all.”

“Oh come on. Who are you kidding, Mr. Sherlock?”

“I’m serious.”

“Mr. Sherlock, you know when Daddy calls, you got to drop what you’re doing and hop right on top of it.”

I know she’s right, but I can’t leave now. I got my whole life sitting on the craps table. My fate has been cast to the wind and only I can make it blow.

“Mr. Sherlock, we got to go.”

No way. I rub the dice in my hands, look down the table, concentrate, and hear, “Drop ‘em, Mr. Sherlock.”

Instead of tossing the dice down the green felt to bounce off the back wall, come up a four, and relieve me of my wretched life, the dice fumble through my fingers and plop onto the table like a couple of spilled beans off a fork. They land as unceremoniously as a pair of shot-gunned mallards into a mucky duck blind pond.

There are three dots on one die, four on the other. Seven.

I crap out.

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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 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 settlement that can be proven fraudulent.

I hate my job.

I'm also a divorced dad of two girls, twelve and fourteen going on twenty. 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 drive a 1992 Toyota Tercel.

Am I a loser? I'm certainly one tonight.

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. I like her more than me.

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The dice pass to the next unlucky sucker.

"Tiffany, how do you always seem to find me?"

"Oh, Mr. Sherlock, I have ways."

"Are you going to tell me what they are?"

"No."

I leave the few chips I still have on the table as a gift for the next shooter. I hope he appreciates it.

As I make my way away from the table and through the throng of people who did cheer me on, I do get a couple of slaps on the back, two “better luck next time” comments, and one melodious, “You got to know when to walk away, know when to run.”

Gee thanks.

“If you want to waste all your money gambling, Mr. Sherlock, why didn’t you go to a real casino?” Tiffany asks. “This place is about as tacky as a trunk show at Target.”

“It’s a fundraiser for Care and Kelly’s school.”

We pass by the stainless steel food service line where the *hot lunch* kids scoop up wilted ptomaine Romaine, veggie vittles, and the mystery meat of the day; and the *bring their own lunch* kids, like mine, buy whole, two-percent, or chocolate milk to wash down the delicacies their parents, like me, have so lovingly brown-bagged for their culinary convenience.

“Isn’t it kinda dumb, Mr. Sherlock, that a school would have a fundraiser that does something that’s against the law to do?” Every so often but not often enough, Tiffany does come up with a salient point.

“The next fundraiser will probably be a marijuana tasting party.”

We head for the outside door.

“Tiffany, what possibly could have been so important that you had to show up tonight?”



“People are trying to rip off our insurance company, and you know how Daddy just hates that.”

I know, and I know it all too well.

“Do we have to start on the case now?” I ask. “It’s almost ten o’clock at night.”

“A lot of my days don’t start until ten o’clock at night, Mr. Sherlock.”

I know that all too well, too.

“And there’s no time like right now for getting a present.”

I don’t think she got that right.

We are just about out of the cafeteria casino when we are interrupted by a booming male voice on the school’s PA System. “Richard Sherlock, please report to the principal’s office.”

Tiffany stops dead in her tracks and peers up at me like I’m the devil in disguise. “Did you get caught cheating, ditching classes, or wearing a skirt that doesn’t hit the ground when you kneel down?” Tiffany accuses more than asks.

“No.”

The PA voice repeats with a little more boom, “Richard Sherlock, please report to the principal’s office immediately.”

“We better get in there, Mr. Sherlock. I can’t wait to see you get expelled.”