

The Case of Tiffany's Epiphany

(A Richard Sherlock Whodunit book 3)

CHAPTER 1

“Shoot! Shoot! Now! You got a clean shot. Shoot!”

BANG. She shoots.

DAMN. She misses.

“Again! Shoot.” I’m jumping around like a maniac. “Don’t wait! Pull the trigger. Shoot!”

Behind me, I hear voices shouting: “Hit it.” “Nail it.” “Come on, put it down.” “Now!”

My lungs ache, I’m screaming so loud. “Shoot!”

And another misfire.

We’re dying out there.

The tide turns. They take control. They’re setting us up for the kill. They’re ready to fire. I scream a different tune, “Get down. Hurry. Run. Stop ‘em.”

I’m wailing so loud my throat is as dry as sandpaper. “Get your hands up.”

Nobody listens.

They shoot. They hit. We’re getting murdered.

This is the worst basketball game we’ve played so far, and up to now, we’ve played some real stinkers.

Time is running out. If they score one more point and we don’t score, the first half ends, and we lose by the Slaughter Rule, which would make it six games in a row where we’re down by 20 points at the end of the half, and the ref calls the game to alleviate further embarrassment and humiliation. Although the team is so used to getting slaughtered, embarrassment and humiliation are the least of our problems.

“Come on, girls. We got to stop ‘em!”

We have the ball, down nineteen, less than twenty seconds on the clock. If we hold the ball for ten seconds we can get to the second half for the first time this season. “Go into a stall,” I scream out, knowing full well the team has no clue on how to go into a stall. “Fifteen seconds, just burn fifteen seconds!”

There’s only one phrase in the entire world that can break my concentration from the game before my very eyes and unfortunately I hear it loud and clear.

“Oh, Mister Sherlock.”

From the opposite side of the gym, Tiffany walks right onto the court in the midst of the action, “I need you.”

“Tiffany, get off the court. You’re not supposed to be out there. You’re in the middle of the game!”

The players run around Tiffany like she’s the slow driver in the middle lane on the expressway.

The whistle blows.

Cease fire. Everything stops.

Dead silence, until, “Technical foul.”

“What?”

“Unauthorized player on the court,” the referee shouts.
“You can’t call that,” I argue, running onto the court. “I didn’t tell her to be out there.”
“I’m the ref; I can do whatever I want.”
“No, you can’t,” I argue my case.
“You want another technical?”
“You can’t do that either.”

The ref points a finger at my nose. “Back on the bench, buddy.”

I back up, but I refuse to sit. That’ll show him.

“Oh, Mr. Sherlock.” Tiffany stumbles across the court on her four-inch heels and heads my way. “It’s really important.” She’s decked out in a micro-miniskirt, black knitted hose, an ivory-colored blouse with a plunging neckline, and an array of gold, equal to a Pizarro find, around her neck. Hardly a Saturday morning gymnasium outfit.

Care, my youngest daughter, calls out to her teammates. “Hey, everybody, that’s Tiffany. She’s like totally cool.” The five ten and eleven year old girls leave the court and surround my self-styled protégé, as our opposition line up for the free throw.

Kelly, my obsessed with fashion, middle schooler, who was sitting at the end of the bench, actually quits texting on her cell phone, jumps up and runs to Tiffany, “I love those shoes.”

Behind me, I hear disgruntled parents admonish me in extremely harsh tones. “What the heck is going on, Sherlock?”

“Who is that person?”

“Can’t you control the team?”

“They really need help with their transition game.” That last unsolicited piece of advice came from Mrs. Whiner, whose kid, Wilma, has the distinction of being the worst player on the team, which is no small accomplishment. Actually, I like Wilma; she fits in with my motley, ragtag crew. Her mother, on the other hand, wouldn’t fit into a round hole even if she were a round peg.

“Transition game? The kids are eleven,” I say to the woman.

“I put Wilma on the team to learn basketball, not excuses,” Mrs. Whiner informs me.

“Any lesson learned is a good lesson,” I respond taking the high road.

While I’m dealing with Wilma’s mother, my whole team stands in front of our bench, instead of out on the court where they belong. They surround Tiffany as if she were Katy Perry, and chat her up like a bundle of baboons.

I turn around and redirect my attention to the team. “Girls, we’re in the middle of a game here.”

Nobody listens.

“Time out,” I call out, using the appropriate T signal with my hands.

“You can’t call time out,” the ref informs me. “You don’t have the ball.”

“Girls, get back out on the court.”

“Do we have to?” Annie our point guard asks. “You know we’re going to lose.”

“Don’t say that,” I tell Annie. “We can’t bail out now.” This is probably a bad choice of words since the name of the team is the Bailouts, due to the fact that the only sponsor I could find, one of the last businesses on earth that owes me a favor, is Morrie’s Bail Bonds.

“We’re so far gone in this game we’ll never catch up.” Kaylyn, our forward, says in absolute desperation.

"We never got going to begin with," Annie adds.

"We got a chance to pull this one out." I say this in my best Never say die inflection.

"It's twenty-three to four," she reminds me.

"This is our big chance for a comeback in the second half," I point out.

"Even if we could, Mr. Sherlock, at the present rate of scoring, we would need forty-eight more points to win. That translates into one basket every twenty-four seconds," Shemika informs me. She's not only our best player; she's also the Bailout's math whiz.

"When the going gets tough, girls, the tough get going," I give it my best Knute Rockne impersonation.

"So, let's just get going home," Annie says. "This is dumb."

I feel Tiffany's hand reach over and hold my arm for support. I get my first good look at her. She's as pale as a bleached blonde bimbo's beehive. "Tiffany..."

"Oh. Mr. Sherl-l-l-l...."

I catch her before she hits the floor. Care screams.

I carry a limp Tiffany to the bench, set her down gently, "Somebody get me some water," I say.

Six water bottles come out of nowhere and are thrust at me.

"Kelly sit behind Tiffany and hold her head while I take her pulse," I tell my eldest.

I count beats, and thank God, there're plenty. "Care," I tell my youngest. "Soak one of those small towels with water and wring it out."

My entire team, the ref, the opposing team, and an assortment of parents are huddled around me and Tiffany, in morbid curiosity.

I place the wet towel on her forehead. "Drink some water," I say as I tilt a bottle to Tiffany's lips. She sips. A little color comes back into her cheeks. She tries to sit up, but I won't let her. "Just relax."

"Should I call an ambulance?" the ref asks.

"No," Tiffany protests.

"You sure?" I ask.

"Absolutely not. I'm not dressed to go to the hospital," she says.

After that comment, I know she's going to be okay.

"Tiffany, take some more of this." I keep trying to get some water into her.

The ref blows the whistle. "Play ball."

Our opponents return to the free throw line.

"Girls get back on the court," I tell my team. "Everything is going to be fine here."

Not one kid moves. Nobody listens to me, and I'm the coach.

The next sound I hear is the swish of the ball going through the net. 24 – 4. The Slaughter Rule kicks into effect. The Bailouts are locked out of the second half. This makes six games in a row. A new record.

The next two teams are coming on the floor for their game. "Girls, go shake the hands of the other team, find your parents, and I'll see you all Tuesday for practice." I say this half-heartedly as I help Tiffany to her feet.

Tiffany tries to walk, but her legs are like cooked spaghetti. I carry her around the bleachers and into the boys' locker room, which I know will be empty. Luckily there happens to be one of those canvas chairs there, the kind you can fold up and take along to sit anywhere. Unfortunately, it's right in front of the urinals. I sit her down without moving it and wonder who would ever want to sit in such a weird spot.

Care and Kelly are behind me. They're scared.

"I haven't felt like this since I overdosed on that mango juice diet I went on," Tiffany manages to say.

"Just relax, get some strength back," I tell her.

"Hey, you, lady, there you?" a voice comes from outside the door. This is no Midwest accent. It's not even a Southside Chicago accent. "How you, lady, how you?" It's coming closer.

A swarthy man enters. His body odor reaches us before he does. However, its unpleasant aroma has an unexpected side benefit since it acts like a vial of smelling salts on Tiffany, who is now going in and out of consciousness.

"Meter read sixty-three, and ten dollar charge for suburbia," he bellows loudly.

"Who are you?" Care asks.

"My name, Anwar. I come to America to study chemistry at university."

This guy might want to start with the chemical compound to make soap.

"I cab drive."

Kelly has no problem pulling my wallet out of my back pocket, opening the fold, and removing the last two fifties, leaving me twenty dollars of mad money for the weekend. She hands it to the cabbie. "Keep the change," she says like she's Bill Gates.

Anwar doesn't bother to say thanks. I hope he takes a course in manners in between his chemistry classes.

Tiffany stirs. I hold the wet cloth across her forehead. In a few moments she comes to again, grips my arm, and pulls herself upright. She grabs the water bottle, puts it to her mouth, and chug-a-lugs the entire eight ounces like a frat boy at a kegger. "Whew," Tiffany says. "I needed that."

"Tiffany, what happened?" I ask.

She turns to me slightly, takes a breath, and says, "Mr. Sherlock, I got roofied."

My name is Richard Sherlock. I spent nineteen years on the Chicago Police Force, 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 job 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, almost eleven and almost thirteen. 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, I can't find a steady girlfriend, and I drive a 1992 Toyota Tercel. Could life get any more pathetic? Yes. I am also the coach of what is probably the worst basketball team since James Naismith hung up his first peach basket.

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. Down deep, 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.

"Tiffany, are you okay?" Care asks.

"You can't have anything wrong with you," Kelly says just as worried as her sister.
"Who's going to take me shopping if you're sick?"

My oldest is a bit more self-centered than her sister. She gets this from her mother, no doubt.

"Girls, leave her alone," I tell them. "Let her get her breath back."

"I'm in this club, sipping on a Cosmo," Tiffany says as best she can.

"Which one?" the detective in me immediately asks.

"Kumquat," she answers.

"There's a club called, Kumquat?" I again ask.

"No," Tiffany says. "A kumquat cosmo."

I stand corrected.

"All of a sudden, my head starts spinning faster than a strobe light in a disco." Tiffany takes another water bottle from Care and sips. "I try to get up and, let me tell you," she says. "It's tough enough to balance on four-inch Christian Louboutin's when you're sober, but doing it with your head spinning like a break dancer on speed, that's impossible."

"Tiffany, we should really get you to a hospital."

"No, Mr. Sherlock, the first thing we have to do is find out if anyone snapped my picture when I was down. If an Instagram of me sprawled out against a bar rail goes out, and shows up on somebody's Facebook Page, I'll never live it down."

"What's an Instagram?"

"Dad," Kelly says, "you are so lame."

I admit I'm a bit behind the times when it comes to technology. I still use a flip phone.

"Don't argue with me," I say in no uncertain terms. "You're going to get checked out and checked out right now."

Tiffany half-collapses back into the chair.

"You two stay here," I tell my kids. "I'm going to go get the car and bring it around. And don't let her get up."

Tiffany pops back up and uses what energy she has left to plead, "Oh, no. Please not that."

"Tiffany you're going to the hospital. That's final."

"Fine," she relents. "I'll go to the hospital, but do we have to go in your car? I hate that yucky car."

We're driving down Western Avenue. Tiffany is wearing my sunglasses and has a towel draped over her head like a burka in her effort not to be seen. "My head is, like, pounding," she complains. "All I can hear is, put, put, put, put."

Actually, the sound isn't inside her head. It's a stuttering from beneath the Toyota. I've got a bad muffler that I can't afford to fix. "It'll get better as soon as we get to the hospital," I tell her.

"Why don't you get a new car, Mr. Sherlock? An illegal immigrant wouldn't be caught dead driving over the border in this one."

"I can't get a new car."

"Why not? I get one every year," Tiffany says.

"Because I, unlike you, have children instead of money, Tiffany."

"You can't have both?" Tiffany asks.

"I certainly haven't been able to swing that."

We're about a block from Martha Washington Hospital, but I settle for a Doc in the box on Western Avenue. MWH is a major Northside treatment center, and that means the ER room will have at least a three-day wait.

At the Doc in the box, I get Tiffany and the girls seated before I approach the sour and surly-looking admittance person at the desk. She's dressed in scrubs, but I don't think she's a nurse. She immediately asks if Tiffany has insurance. I could tell her, "When it comes to insurance, not many have as much as Tiffany," but I don't. Instead, I sift through Tiffany's stack of credit cards until I find her insurance card and hand it over. She hands me a clipboard with a pen attached by a metal string. I take it to where the three are seated, which is between a broken arm and bleeding knee, behind a guy who can hardly breathe, and in front of a very bad case of pink eye. I begin to fill out the form. The top part is easy. The bottom part is a little more personal. "Tiffany, do you have any of these diseases?"

Tiffany gives me her "That is, like, totally gross" look.

I rattle off everything from asphyxia to shin splints and Tiffany responds with a resounding, "I better not."

I finish the form, take out my last twenty dollars and clip it under the first page on the clipboard. I return the form to the desk, am told to wait, and in less than ten seconds what I suspect is a real nurse comes out of an opposite door. Every eye in the waiting room, including the pink ones, looks up in hope. The nurse calls out "Miss Richmond."

Moans all around. Money talks. Bullshit walks--or in this case, sits and suffers.

"The doctor will see you now."

The four of us rise.

"You're all Miss Richmond?" the nurse asks.

Three of us sit back down.

Tiffany, who did take off her shoes after my nagging, follows the nurse into the inner sanctum of medicinal repair. Once the door shuts and locks from the inside, Kelly immediately takes off her shoes and puts on Tiffany's. "These are, like, so totally rad."

Kelly gets up and tries to walk. "Watch me, Dad."

"Kelly, sit down," I say. "You're going to break an ankle."

"I was like born to wear Christian Louboutin's."

"Sit down. You don't belong in those shoes."

"What do you mean? They're perfect, they look great ... on ... me. Whoa-a-a-a ...!"

Kelly keels over to her left like a new felled tree, and crashes right into the guy with the broken arm, who screams out in his displeasure, "I think you broke my other arm."

"Sorry, mister," Kelly apologizes, "but at least you're in the right place to get that fixed."

I jump up, lift Kelly to her feet, give the guy a quick, "Kids, these days," and deposit my oldest back into her chair. "Take those shoes off right now."

"I will in a second, Dad." Kelly hands her cell phone to Care who snaps shoe shots of her sister for fashion posterity.

I use my cell to call Tiffany's dad, Jamison Wentworth Richmond III. And he, as usual, doesn't take my call. I leave a detailed message. I know he won't call back. His usual custom.

For the next fifteen minutes my kids play with their cell phones. I take a dog-eared magazine off the rack and read an article about President Bush's new tax plan, George H.W., not George W. The other patients continue to moan.

The nurse emerges again from the inner sanctum. The moans stop in anticipation of hearing their names, but only until the nurse says, "Mr. Sherlock." The moans return--louder than before.

"Dad, can we come with you?" Care asks.

"No." I hand Care the magazine I was reading. "Here, brush up on some history."

I hurry through the door held open by the nurse. One foot inside, she admonishes me, "Why didn't you tell us she was Tiffany Richmond?"

"I filled out the form."

"Her father owns this place. And if you don't think we're going to hear about this, you must be in the middle of a brain freeze, mister."

"Sorry."

I am led down a short hallway to an exam room. Tiffany sits on the exam table, one hand holding a mirror, the other one patting blush on her face. An IV line runs into the vein in the crook of her arm. It's dripping a clear liquid into her system.

"I'm Dr. Omagalla Nehru."

At the sound of the voice, I turn to my left and peer down at the balding head of a guy who couldn't be more than 5 foot 3; the perfect Doc for a Doc in the box. His hand is outstretched for me to shake. I take it. "Nice to meet you," he says.

"Is she okay?"

"She's fine."

"What happened?"

"Miss Richmond must have ingested some type of narcotic that had a decided effect on her system."

"What?" I ask.

"I have taken blood, urine, and DNA specimens. We have called the lab, they'll pick it up immediately and they'll have the tests done, STAT. As soon as possible." He raises his index finger to further make his point.

"Good."

The doc added the customary prescription, "Have her drink lots of fluids to allow system flush itself out, and make sure she gets plenty of rest."

"Will do, Doc."

As the nurse removes the IV from Tiffany's arm, Dr. Nehru pulls me toward him and speaks softly so that Tiffany can't hear him. "And please tell the owner of company what good care we take of patient."

"Next time we chat, I'll be sure to mention it."

Tiffany hops off the table, hands the mirror back to the nurse, smiles, and says to me, "They pumped my stomach, Mr. Sherlock."

"Did it hurt? Are you okay?"

"What I wouldn't have done for one of those machines when I was on a purge diet," she tells me.

Outside the clinic, a limo so big it could double as a troop transport vehicle awaits.

"It sure didn't take long for Daddy to go into action," Tiffany says.

"He called you?"

"Of course he called me, he's my daddy."

"I want you to go home, get some rest, and keep drinking fluids, Tiffany."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Sherlock."

"Bye, Tiffany," Care and Kelly say in unison.

"Ta-ta, little dudettes."

The driver holds the rear door waiting for Tiffany to climb inside.

"When do we start, Mr. Sherlock?" she asks me.

"Start what?"

"Finding out who did this to me."

I sigh. "Tiffany, just do what the doctor said."

"Mr. Sherlock, the best revenge is a cocktail served warm."