

Chapter 1

WHAM!

I don't see it coming and she T-bones me like a semi slicing into a Chevy. I was ready to scoop and shoot, but instead I'm almost put out of commission.

I've got revenge on my mind.

I swing around, wait for my prey to turn, and take off at full throttle. I'm bearing down on my eldest daughter like a U-boat on a destroyer, about to teach her a lesson she won't forget, when I'm rear-ended by Rita Roper, my younger daughter Care's latest best buddy from middle school, who definitely has an issue with aggressive behavior.

WHAM again.

I go left, then right, bounce off another car, and get hit head-on, which spins me in the opposite direction of the action. I have to make a U-ee and find myself with a clear path to Kelly, who's a sitting duck, just waiting to be plucked. I rev up, put the pedal to the metal, bear down, see the whites of her eyes, and slam my front bumper into her like a minivan into a crash-test dummy.

Kelly breaks out laughing and so do I.

I look up after the smash and see Care wide open, shooting down the middle like Wayne Gretsky on a breakaway. The ball somehow comes my way. I reach over, scoop it up, and about to make a perfect pass, when I'm blindsided again, and flail a pass down court, as willy-nilly as a devil-may-care devil.

Care somehow manages to scoop up my errant pass, continue down the court, and toss one into the net for the score. The horn goes off. Cheers from our team. Put a point on the board!

Whirlyball is more fun than a slip-n-slide in the summer, a sledding hill in the winter, and a leaf fight in fall. A cross between basketball, handball, and lacrosse, and played on an electrified court by two teams of four players in individual bumper cars. The object of the game is to score goals, but most players are more apt to spend the time smashing each other into oblivion. And why not? It's a kick.

Whirlyball is where you go when your kids' birthdays are too old for Chucky Cheese and too young for smooch fests.

The game continues as we go up and down the court, chasing loose balls, making terrible shots, and slamming into each with reckless abandon.

The clock is ticking down to the last minute. The score is tied 1-1. It's do-or-die time. There's a big tie-up in the corner; two players smash into the pile, freeing the ball. I scoop it up and head down court, being chased by my adversaries like a Walmart shoplifter.

Care's screaming, "Go, Dad, go."

Kelly's screaming, "Stop him. Stop him."

Twelve seconds left on the clock. At half-court, I dodge the last car in my way and have a clear path to the net, when, out of nowhere, I hear my three most hated words in my personal vocabulary.

"Oh, Mr. Sherlock."

It must be my imagination or my own mind trying to throw me off. I won't let it happen. I look back to see the other players trying to catch me and stomp the pedal for maximum speed.

And I hear it again, "Oh, Mr. Sherlock."

It's the same tone, from the same voice, which has thwarted my life, even more than my ex-wife.

Refuse to listen. Block it out. Pretend it isn't happening. The game is on the line.

"Oh, Mr. Sherlock."

I pull my scooper up, get ready to fling in the winning shot, and just before the final buzzer goes off, from out of nowhere, I get super bumped by an illegal bumper car with a rich white woman driving. I spin around like a whirling dervish, my equilibrium whirling along with it. My arm goes spastic as I jai-alai heave the ball with all my might, down court . . .

. . . right into the opposing net. I can't believe it. I score for the other team.

The horn sounds, the lights go off, the electrons on the floor shut down, and all the bumper cars go deader than my apartment during a power outage.

Game over.

Kelly and her team cheer their victory.

I stare at my nemesis in the car that crunched me. "Tiffany, what are you doing here?"

"It's a crisis, Mr. Sherlock. I need your help. My whole life is going to end if you don't come to my aid."

"How'd you find me?"

"What difference does that make? The most important night of my life is about to be ruined!"

Care and Kelly exit their cars and run up to their best buddy.

"Tiffany," Care screams out, "you came to my birthday party!"

"That's correct little dudette."

The next Whirly group is ready to take the court, so I shoo all the girls over to our pre-reserved space.

"Mr. Sherlock, please, hear my plea."

"Not now."

"Why not?"

"Can't you see I'm in the middle of a birthday party, Tiffany?"

"No."

The girls line up, put their hands out like street people, and I pass out five dollars in quarters to each, which they will use to play the myriad of electronic games, which fill the place with flashing neon lights. After the girls run off to the pinball or Whack-a-mole game of choice, I turn to my so-called protégée.

"Okay, Tiffany, what's your problem?"

"It's horrible, frightening, worse than anything I've ever imagined."

"Hangnail or zit?"

"No. It's the night of the annual Paddington Dinner at the Art Institute, and guess who asked me to go?"

"Rembrandt."

"No, Cutler C. Paddington the Third."

"The third what?" I ask.

"The third. Third Paddington."

"Never heard of him."

"Only the most eligible bachelor in Chicago."

"No wonder I haven't heard of him."

"Of all the women in Chicago, Cutler C. Paddington the Third asked me to be his escort for the event."

"And that's your problem?"

"No, my daddy's chauffeur, Leon, came down with the flu and can't drive me."

Oh, my god. It's the end of the world, as we know it.

"Tiffany, there's other limos in town."

"Not tonight. This is the biggest event of the year. Every limo has been booked for months."

"Uber," I suggest. "Isn't that the preferred mode of transportation for millennials?"

"Uber? Everyone will be on the steps watching the beautiful people like me stepping out, wearing my Stella McCartney gown and George Winston jewels." Tiffany pauses for maximum effect. "Heaven forbid I step out of a Honda Civic driven by some part-time plumber trying to pay off his credit-card bill."

"So, what do you want me to do about it?"

"Drive me."

"In my Toyota Tercel?"

"No, in my daddy's limo."

"I can't drive a limo. You need a special license to drive a limo."

"It's the same as driving a car. It just takes up more room on the street."

"I could get a ticket, if I got stopped."

"Mr. Sherlock, then all you'd have to tell them is you're a cop or nurse."

She's right, but . . . "No, Tiffany."

"Mr. Sherlock, you have to help me. You're my last and only hope."

I'll bet any amount of money I'm her first and only hope.

"Forget it, Tiffany. My meter's off for the evening. It's Care's birthday."

"She'll have other birthdays. This is a one-time, lifetime opportunity. Young Cutler Paddington is the biggest catch in the Midwest. I miss this opportunity, I'll never have another chance to marry so well."

"I'm pretty sure it doesn't work that way."

"It works for me, Mr. Sherlock."

"I've never even heard of this dinner," I admit to her.

"Once a year Paddington brings in all the big wigs and movers and shakers in their company. They have this huge dinner meeting, where they tell everyone how much money they made and what's going down for next year. Then they hand out bonuses to the good people and let the others know they better get their butts in gear."

"Why would you want to go, Tiffany?"

"Paddington money makes Richmond money look like Monopoly money."

The five dollars in quarters go quicker than I expected. The girls come back for more, but find pizza waiting for them instead of change. They dig in like a pride of lions into an antelope.

“Sorry, Tiffany.”

“Mr. Sherlock—”

“No can do.”

Tiffany goes off to a corner to mope as the girls munch and suck down sugar-laden soft drinks.

My timing is perfect. Just as the pizzas are reduced to a stack of burnt, partially chewed crusts, the parents arrive to pick up their kids. It’s over, my birthday duties superbly completed.

“Dad, this was the best birthday party ever.” Care gushes her appreciation.

“Yeah, Dad, you did okay.” Kelly, her older sister, manages to eke out a compliment, as painful it may be for her.

“There’s only one thing that could make it perfect,” Care tells me.

Oh, no, here it comes.

“You have to help Tiffany.”

“No.”

“Look at her, Dad.” Kelly implores me to turn to the sad-sack, long-faced, angst-ridden mass of gorgeous human flesh, sitting alone next to the flashing Wonder Woman pinball machine. “If she doesn’t get to climb out of the limo and dazzle her people, she could suffer deep emotional wounds that could affect her for years to come.”

“Kelly, where do you come up with this stuff?”

“Reality TV.”

“You have to help her, Dad,” Care continues.

“No.”

“I tell you what,” Care says. “I’ll be more than happy to forego the present you’re buying me, if you help Tiffany.”

“If you remember, Care, I asked if you wanted a present or a party, and you opted for the party.”

“How about next year’s present?”

“No.”

“Listen, Dad,” Kelly kicks in, “I’ll make you a deal.”

This should be good.

“I’ll quit bugging you about getting me a car for my sixteenth birthday, if you do this one little thing for Tiffany.”

“You’re not getting a car for your birthday.”

“That’s not the point, Dad. It’s that I won’t be driving you crazy asking for one all the time.”

This might be worth it. My eldest can be as persistent as she can be obnoxious, which is overwhelming in both categories.

“What do you say, Dad?”

“I’m thinking it over.”

“How could you ever refuse to help her?” Care piles it on. “Just look at poor little Tiffany.”

If there is one adjective that doesn't apply to Tiffany, it's *poor*.

"Last chance, Dad," Kelly says. "Going once, going twice—"

"Deal. But if you break your end of this, no allowance for a month." My added caveat will make me money in the long run, I'm sure of it.

Kelly hesitates.

"Please, Kelly," Care says.

"Go ahead, Kelly, this is your chance to pay Tiffany back for all the spa treatments and mani-pedis, she's treated you to." My turn to pile it on.

"Do it, Kelly." Care pushes her sister. "Shake on it."

"Easy for you to say," Kelly remarks.

"Tsk, tsks for little Tiffany; tsks, tsks," I add to the mix.

Kelly peers over, sees a phony crocodile tear fall down Tiffany's cheek, turns back to me, and puts out her hand, and says, "Deal."

We shake on it.

The girls run over to give Tiffany the good news, who gushes appreciation on her way back to me.

"Tiffany, can we ride in the limo with you?" Care asks.

"Sure, as long as no one sees you."

"Well, Tiffany," I tell her as she comes closer, smiling like the Cheshire cat, "you win again."

"I always get my way, Mr. Sherlock. That's what makes me, me."

Unfortunately, she's right as rain.

"Mr. Sherlock, you wouldn't happen to have chauffeur's hat, would you?"

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 okay'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 gig. Not a lot of suburban Chicago police departments were in need of a guy with a right cross, aimed at his supervisor. I ended up as an on-call investigator for the Richmond Insurance Company, where I am forced to investigate settlement frauds or any other settlements that can be proved fraudulent.

I hate my job.

I am also a divorced dad of two girls, fourteen (today) and fifteen going on twenty-one. I have no savings and an ex-wife who hates me. I live in a crummy, and getting crummier, one-bedroom apartment. I'm a lousy dresser, can't find a steady girlfriend, and drive a 1992 Toyota Tercel.

Am I having fun?

No.

A big portion of my job with the insurance company 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 the latter, 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.

Each time I drive my Toyota into the circle of Tiffany's lakefront condo building, the doorman comes out and tells me, "Deliveries and workers go in the back door."

"We're here to see Tiffany Richmond," I tell the uniformed idiot.

"What are you, a scavenger hunt item?" he asks.

Give a guy a uniform with epaulets and he thinks he's General Patton. "Just give me a parking pass."

He hands over the visitor card key and we enter the underground garage, park in a guest spot, and pass a shiny black limo on our way to the elevator bank. I have a feeling this is my home for the night.

A maid opens the penthouse door, and Care and Kelly rush inside the spacious condo with spectacular lake views north, south, and east. I asked Tiffany once, "Why no west view of the city?"

"I really don't need to be reminded where all the little people live, Mr. Sherlock."

Care and Kelly, and finally I, find Tiffany seated in her *get-ready* room, which has more lights than a movie set and more mirrors than a carnival attraction. The room is also as big as my entire apartment. Tiffany sits center stage. One woman does her hair, another her nails, and a third her makeup.

"What, your masseuse couldn't make it?"

"She came earlier," Tiffany explains. "Your uniform is on the bed in the second bedroom, Mr. Sherlock."

"Who said anything about me wearing a uniform?" I ask.

"Dad," Kelly says. "How is anyone going to know you're her chauffeur if you don't wear the uniform?"

"Cause I'll be the one driving the limo."

"Not good enough, Mr. Sherlock. You got to look the part to play the part."

Why bother arguing. I traipse off to find my duds. It's a black suit, white shirt, black tie, shiny black shoes, and black hat.

"I look like a funeral director in this get-up," I say, returning to the group morbidly dressed.

Tiffany takes one look, turns to the makeup lady and says, "I think he could use a little bronzer, don't you?"

"Couldn't hurt."

The event starts at seven, so we leave at ten after. Tiffany makes me and the girls get the limo and drive it up to the building's front door, where she waits. "So you can practice being subservient to me, Mr. Sherlock."

Like I need practice.

On our eight-minute trip to the Art Institute, Tiffany gives me my marching orders. "Now keep your cell phone on, Mr. Sherlock. When the event's over, and there's a lot of people outside to see my exit, I'll call, and you come around and pick me up."

"Pick you up?" I question. "You expect us to wait around for this to be over?"

"Of course. That's what chauffeurs do."

"And what are we supposed to do in all that time?"

"Well, there's a special lot you park in. Order whatever dinner you want, have it delivered to the limo. The limo has movies you can watch, computer games, fashion magazines. But I don't want you touching the liquor cabinet, Mr. Sherlock. No drinking and driving."

The limo is better equipped than an alcoholic's Winnebago.

I drive the back way south alongside the Drive, and pull up on Michigan Avenue, facing north in front of the Art Institute, right between the two lions. The red carpet awaits, as do photographers, press people, and looky-loos, who dream of such a life. I straighten my hat, climb out, make my way to the other side of the limo, and open the rear door.

Tiffany steps out and she does look radiant. Dressed in a long, form-fitting, flowing gown of gold and glitter, with a diamond necklace sparkling on her neck. Her hair and makeup are perfect. Flashbulbs go off, filling the sky like the Aurora Borealis on a clear night. Tiffany could be the most beautiful piece of art in the Art Institute. I watch in awe as she makes her way up the red-carpeted steps.

"Come on, move it buddy," the cop on traffic duty orders.

I hop back into the driver's seat and pull out. My girls are in the back with their faces pressed against the window in total awe.

"Dad, do think something like this will ever happen to me?" Kelly asks.

"Drive a limo?"

"No, be a princess like Tiffany."

"Only if you listen to your father and do exactly what I say, Kelly."

"How would you know? You're a chauffeur."

"I do happen to know, Kelly, 'All that glitters is not gold.' "

"What is it then, diamonds?"

"No, cubic zirconium."

"What's that, Dad?" Care asks.

"The stuff that bad dreams are made of."

"Well, whatever it is," Kelly sums up, "I sure wouldn't mind giving it a go."

The limo lot is an area blocked off on Columbus Street, which is a street east of the Art Institute. I park, turn off the engine, and ask, "What do you want for dinner?"

"Pizza."

"You had pizza for lunch."

"What difference does that make?"

I call Giordano's. I'm a bit surprised they have no problem delivering to a parked limo. "You see our car coming, blink your lights," I'm instructed.

During the wait, I climb in the back. Kelly figures out how to turn on the entertainment system, and Care picks out some movie with a whole bunch of superheroes saving the world from destruction. Talk about intellectually stimulating.

The pizza and my salad arrive. We eat as one giant explosion or near-apocalypse fills the screen. We're about finished as the Hulk, Thor, Wonder Woman, and the Iron Man are about to be pulverized by a gamma-ray gun in the hands of some Doctor Evil dude, when my cell phone rings.

"Mr. Sherlock, help!" Tiffany's scream almost blows out my eardrum. "You have to get in here right away."

"Show's over already and you're ready for your last close-up?"

"No."

"Why then?"

"My date's dying!"

"What?"

"Hurry!"

I hop out, run to the driver's door, get in, start it up, and peel out like a funny car at a drag strip. The food must be flying every which way in the back, but I don't care. The picture in my mind is some nut with a gun, mowing down the best dressed in the city. Reaching the front of the Institute, I slam on the brakes, turn to my girls, and order, "You stay here, lock the doors, get on the floor, and don't move."

For once I don't get an argument.

I hightail it up the stairs faster than Usain Bolt, go through the lobby, and follow the signs to the Stock Exchange room where the event is taking place. One look to the dais, and I see Tiffany standing in a crowd of people, hovering over a man lying face down.

Pushing through the crowd, who are pushing to get out, I get to the dais and Tiffany. "Has he been shot?"

"No. He was giving his speech and dropped like the value of a Bitcoin."

Tiffany is past frantic, as are the rest of the guests. Nobody seems to know what to do. I lean down beside the body and see why no one else has done anything. There is a thick blot of gelatinous smutch, resembling barfed baby food, oozing out of the guy's mouth. The gunk has landed on his tuxedo, which will have zero resale value after tonight's event.

"Total gross out," as my daughters would say.

The guy's not breathing. I sit him up, get behind him, wrap my arms around his torso, measure my hands just under the bottom of his rib cage, and yank. Nothing happens. Again. Nothing. Dr. Heimlick, where are you when I need you? I pull again, yanking even harder, and this time the gunk picks up speed and shoots out of his mouth like water out of a super-soaker.

Tiffany grabs the hat off my head, jumps back, and uses the chapeau as a shield to avoid the projectile vomit and resulting splash. Others aren't so lucky.

I hear calls for an ambulance, critiques on the sudden odor, and complaints about future dry-cleaning bills as I continue to pump the gunk out of his guts.

"Is he a doctor?" one person pointing to me asks Tiffany.

"No, he's a cop."

“He looks like a chauffeur to me,” the questioner says. “Is he undercover for the evening?”

I give it one more yank, but my efforts can't seem to clear his windpipe.

“Give him artificial respiration,” one voice yells out.

“Yeah, mouth to mouth,” another voice agrees.

“Not with that gunk on his face,” says one guy, who knows where to draw the line.

I roll him onto his back and start chest compressions. His eyes roll back into his skull. Bad sign. I'm pumping away like a butter churner, when he jerks upward like a jack-in-the-box, coughs, and finds enough strength to take in one gulp of air.

I hear the sirens outside, people scatter, and the EMTs rush in.

“Come on, breathe,” I scream and shake him in my arms. “Breathe!”

In seconds, I give up my efforts, move to the side, and let the pros to take over.

I push back the people watching to give the EMTs room, and find Care and Kelly are standing beside me. “I told you to stay in the car!”

“We couldn't, Dad,” Care says.

“Why not?”

“We had to go to the bathroom.”

Fifteen minutes go by. Most of the guests have exited the room. So much for the flaming Baked Alaska.

The EMTs hook up oxygen to his mouth, a drip line into his arm, and shoot needle after needle into him. I have this odd feeling they're using everything in their bag of medical tricks because they have no clue what they're doing.

“Is he dead?” Tiffany asks incredulously.

“I hope not,” I tell her. “Was he your date?”

“Yes.”

“Tiffany, what happened?” I ask.

“I promised him I'd be 'drop-dead gorgeous' tonight,” Tiffany says. “But I didn't think he'd take me up on it.”

