

# Chapter One

My name is Charlie Hope. I'm seventeen years old. I am spending the summer babysitting a celebrity named Penny Price. Something tells me this could end up being the worst summer of my life.

Penny is the star of a hit television series called *Little Miss Murder*, filming here in Vancouver. Penny Price plays Trixie Tucker. A twelve-year-old amateur detective who is a crime-solving genius.

Penny Price is only fourteen. But she thinks she knows everything. She smokes French cigarettes and eats nothing but vegetables. She says meat is very unhealthy. I made the mistake of telling her I like hot dogs. "Hot dogs will kill you, Hopeless," she said, blowing French cigarette smoke right in my face.

Hopeless. That's Penny's nickname for me. I call her Her Royal Highness, because she orders me around like she's wearing an invisible crown. She would probably do that even if she hadn't broken her right arm.

I am also taking care of Baby, Penny's little dog. Baby is a Chihuahua, and she lives in Penny's purse. Unlike Penny, Baby refuses to eat anything but steak. Which I cut up into tiny pieces for her. According to Her Royal Highness, the pieces are never tiny enough.

Penny's parents died a long time ago. Penny's official guardian is her manager, Lou Gardino. Penny calls him Hollywood Lou. He phones long

distance from Los Angeles twice a day. I have to hold the phone to Penny's ear. While she uses her good arm to blow smoke in my direction. Did I mention she never says thank you?

How did I become her babysitter? Penny is hiding out at the Hotel Hope, which my mother owns. Penny calls it the Hotel Hopeless. Why? Because she cannot get a manicure or order scrambled eggs at three o'clock in the morning. Her favorite question? "Why do you not offer twenty-four-hour room service?"

Many of our tenants are pretty ancient and only watch old movies on TV. So nobody around here gets that Penny is a big star. This makes no difference to Her Royal Highness. Penny says you have to practice being famous at all times. Otherwise you forget how. And before you know it, you start acting like an ordinary person.

This is why Penny parades around the hotel lobby in her sunglasses every day. You can hear

her practicing being famous all the way down the hall. "I am too busy to sign autographs today," she will say. Even when there is no one else in the lobby. Sometimes she will shout, "Help! I'm being bored to death at the Hotel Hopeless!"

I've tried to explain that the Hotel Hope is my home. I know every leaky pipe and creaky floorboard. My mother and I work hard to keep up with repairs. But the building is very old. The problem with Penny? She never listens.

There are only two ways I can escape Penny Price. Number one? I play chess with my good friend Mr. Ignato.

Number two? I am taking driving lessons this summer. Learning how to drive makes me very nervous. But not as nervous as being around Penny. So I am driving every chance I get.

My best friend, Dexter, is teaching me how to drive. He is nineteen and has his chauffeur's license. My driving makes Dexter very nervous.

But his voice usually stays very calm. No matter how many cars I almost hit.

My problem? Penny Price. I am always thinking about Penny. Even at this very moment, when I am in the middle of a driving lesson.

Right now Dexter is telling me to switch lanes. "You will never believe what Her Royal Highness did yesterday," I said. "She made me tie her shoelace."

Dexter is Penny's number one fan. So naturally he asked, "How is her arm today?"

"Same as when you asked yesterday," I said. "Still broken."

"Do you think she'd let me sign her cast?" he asked.

Dexter's dream job? Being a celebrity limo driver for Penny Price. He has never missed an episode of *Little Miss Murder*.

"Did you see last week's show?" asked Dexter. "Trixie figured out who killed the town librarian

way before the police did. You know the best part? When she squints her eyes and says, 'You're the murderer! Aren't you?'"

Dexter interrupted himself to tell me to ease up on the brakes. "Relax, Charlie," he said. "You're making the tires squeal."

"You know what squealing tires remind me of?" I said. "The screeching voice of Penny Price when she is ordering me around."

We stopped at a red light. "Try to think of something nice," said Dexter. "Like getting your license and driving Lindsay Winthrop to the beach."

Lindsay Winthrop is a new tenant in our building. She is nineteen and wants to be an actress. Dexter says she is good-looking enough to be in a toothpaste commercial.

But even thinking about Lindsay's perfect teeth makes me nervous. So when the light turned green, I stepped a little too hard on the gas.

"Careful, Charlie," said Dexter. "Do you not see that old lady in the crosswalk?"

I stepped on the brake and made the tires squeal again. The old lady in the crosswalk smiled at me and waved. But Dexter said, "Driving is not bowling, Charlie. You do not get points for knocking pedestrians over."

When I said I understood, Dexter added, "That's good. Because you could scare an old lady like that to death. And my family does not need the extra business."

I should mention that Dexter's father owns the Helpful Haven Funeral Home. Dexter has been working there every summer since he was thirteen. In high school, Dexter tried to start a Future Morticians Club. I was the only guy who showed up. We've been best friends ever since.

I should also mention the kind of car I am learning to drive. It belongs to the Helpful Haven

Funeral Home. It is a hearse. Which is kind of like a limousine. Only for dead people.

Dexter's hearse is black and very long. Mostly because there has to be room for a coffin in the back. It is hard to steer around corners. Even when there is no coffin inside, it is very difficult to park.

Dexter calls his hearse "the pig." He is very fond of the pig. There is no eating or drinking allowed inside the car. Dexter knows I sweat when I get nervous. He is always afraid that I will sweat on the pig's genuine leather seats. "No sweating in the pig, Charlie!" he says. Which makes me sweat even more.

Dexter is giving me secret driving lessons. His father has no idea we are using the company car.

What would happen if I scratched or dented the pig? "My father would kill us," says Dexter. "But there is also good news. We would get a very nice funeral."

Right now a bunch of cars were honking their horns at us. Dexter made me pull over to the curb. "You're not paying attention," he said.

"Penny has ruined my concentration," I said. "Nothing has been the same since she moved into the hotel."

"No offense, Charlie," said Dexter, "but why did Penny pick your place? It is more like a rundown apartment house than a deluxe hotel. You have no fancy restaurant, and the elevator is always breaking down. Also, it is full of old people."

"Penny is hiding out," I explained. "She is avoiding reporters and photographers. They are looking for her in all the expensive hotels. But Penny says they would never bother with the Hotel Hopeless."

"I don't get why she's hiding," said Dexter.

"Her contract is up," I said. "Hollywood Lou is working out the terms of her new agreement."

Penny wants way more money from the show's producers. Lou says she has to keep hiding until they've finished negotiating. He wants her producers to think she might not come back."

"But I read somewhere that *Little Miss Murder* is still filming," said Dexter.

"They are shooting without Penny for a few days," I explained. "Because of her broken arm. But Penny says they can't last long without her."

"I still don't understand why she's hiding," said Dexter.

"If they can't find her, they can't try to make her come back," I said. "Plus she wants her producers to think she's getting other offers. You know, for movies and stuff."

"Show business sounds very complicated," said Dexter.

"Not as complicated as Penny," I said.

"Stop complaining," said Dexter. "Life could be a lot worse."

"How?" I asked. A bad question to ask anyone in the funeral business.

"Someone could die," said Dexter. "Or you could put a serious dent in the pig."