

SIX MAGIC NUMBERS

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By

Six Magic Numbers Ltd

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Author's note

Reports surrounding my encounter with a missing lottery ticket are documented in the media. *Six Magic Numbers* is fictional and *inspired* by events in my life, it is not a literal account and similarity to persons either living or deceased or organisations is coincidental.

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PART ONE – ENGLAND

'Someone said to me once, life is just a game. Couldn't find the rule book but I played it all the same.'

-Jules Landau,
'Grand Nimbus' by Omega Minus 1988.

CHAPTER ONE

Are our lives governed by luck or belief? Does it matter which path you think you've chosen if it's predestined for you? Do chance encounters with strangers change the entire course of your life in a moment without you realising? Mark often thought that people made their own luck in life but his philosophy was about to be challenged as he stared into the spinning wheel.

A summer bike ride to the pub had started out as a good idea until reaching the meadow with the thistles. It had looked so innocent from the wooden gate, an ocean of tall golden grass in the Warwickshire countryside waving in the gentle breeze but once inside it was like barbed wire in places. He inspected the punctured inner tube as it whistled out a final jet of thin air that felt cooling to his face under the blazing sun.

His friend Will had disappeared into the woods oblivious to Mark's calls for him to wait, with his iPod on he was in a race to get a beer and drown out the summer heat. Mark sat back in the tall grass and unwittingly wiped a line of chain grease across his face.

A noise from the top of the field distracted him. He thought it might be Will coming back to see where he was, instead a woman on horseback appeared cantering towards him. As she drew nearer he couldn't help but notice how pretty she was and somehow familiar. Maybe the puncture wasn't such a bad thing after all, he thought to himself.

The horse slowed down and stopped right next to him.

'Hey, you got a flat?' She said in an American accent.

'I've got it under control.' He lied.

Mark thought that she was beautiful. With her dark hair poking out in wisps from under her riding hat and soft brown eyes she reminded him of his favourite actress, that was why she looked familiar.

'Well if you're sure you don't need help I'll leave you to it.' She said and began to ride on. Mark didn't want her to go, he had to say something quick, anything.

'I love Stallions.' He blurted out, regretting it as soon as the words left his lips.

She stopped again and turned. 'Really? He's actually a Gelding.'

'Oh. I'm sorry.' Mark said, clueless as to what that word even meant. For some reason his brain was blank and his tongue was twice its normal size.

'You really don't know much about the equine world do you?' She said.

'I do. I know loads about fish.'

'Fish huh?' She was obviously unimpressed but he was making her smile. He just needed to keep her there a little longer, build a rapport.

'Has anyone ever told you that you look like that famous actress?'

'Which one?'

'Oh you know, erm.' He rummaged for the name. Mark had suddenly forgotten the actress's name. He had seen her films so many times and even had pictures of her on his wall yet now he just could not put his finger on it.

'You know the one. *Aliens*.'

'Are you suggesting I look like an Alien?' She said, dropping her jaw.

'No. Oh wow no. I mean the actress.'

'Sigourney Weaver?'

'No the other one, the heroine.'

'Sigourney Weaver played the heroine in *Aliens*.'

'Not in the last film.' Mark said.

'Yes she did.'

'Sure?'

She nodded. 'I have the DVD set.'

'Oh.' Mark said, picking at a handful of long grass. His legs trembled when he looked at her. He hadn't had that before either, maybe he was allergic to the thistles or the horse.

'I must be thinking of another film.' He scratched his head wiping a bit more grease across the side of it.

'Did you mean Winona Ryder?' She smiled putting him out of his misery and wondering if she should say something about his messy face.

'Are you winding me up here?' He smiled up at her and she raised her eyebrow. He liked it when she did that.

'Maybe I would have got it if you'd said *Alien Resurrection*.'

Mark patted the horse. 'I see, well I can tell you're not from round here.'

'Very observant, I'm from Sweden.'

'Really? I would have said America.'

She raised her eyebrow again.

'Oh right, you're still winding me up.'

'Sorry, it seems to be easy and yes I'm from the States.'

'Cool!' He stuck his thumbs up like the Fonz from Happy Days and wondered what he was doing. He'd have to think of something better than that to impress her fast.

'Have you ever been?' She asked.

'I've been to McDonalds.'

'Did you really just say that?' She said, indignantly.

Mark twisted the grass in his hand like a naughty schoolboy and grasped for something else to say. He tried his best Homer Simpson impression and the horse made a weird snorting noise and reared up. He could have sworn the animal shook its head at him.

'I'd love to stay and be insulted a bit more,' the young woman said, 'but I have to get going. I think my shake and fries are waiting.'

'You thought it was okay to tease me though?' He said, confused.

'The operative word there being *tease* and not *offend*. Try looking those up in the dictionary.'

She gave a fleeting glance and shook her head. As quickly as she had ridden into his life she was gone and he stood there bewildered by the encounter.

~

Mark puffed and staggered up the field with the bike, through the woods and along the lane to the pub. He could see Will leaning against a wooden bench outside, he was over six feet tall and with his shaggy mop of hair and goatee beard he was always easy to spot. In front of him were two pints of beer, one of them almost empty.

'Blimey, what happened to you?' Will laughed.

Mark took the bike off his shoulder and propped it up on the side of the bench.

'I had a bloody puncture.'

'You should have said, I've got a spare inner tube in my bag.' Will sipped at the last of his beer.

'Yeah nice one except my phones' in your bag too.' Mark slumped down and reached for his pint. Before he could take a swig Will shook his empty glass in front of him. 'And it's your round.'

Mark took the empty glass and made his way to the entrance. Will called out after him.

'You might want to wash your face before you order.'

Mark walked into the pub as Will attended to the puncture. He kept thinking of the American woman on the horse. The dirty face probably didn't help make a good first

impression but it was more than that, Mark had never been so tongue tied in his life. He could usually think of lots of funny things to say, so what had come over him?

He rubbed his face with his T-shirt arm, got a beer then began weaving his way through the drinkers outside. He handed the pint to Will who was fiddling with the bike.

'That's the beauty of these quick release wheels you know, you can change a flat in minutes.'

Mark wasn't interested in the wheel though; he was too busy watching the two horses trotting past. Upon one rode the American woman from the meadow and this time she was with a man deep in conversation as they went along the lane. Mark felt an overwhelming compulsion to speak to her again. She was unlikely to cross his path a third time so it was now or never.

He watched them turning the corner.

'Will. I need to do something. That woman who just rode past on the horse, that's her.'

'Who?'

'On the horse, she's the one. I don't know why but that's her.' Mark said.

'But you said that about the last one?' Will called out as Mark sprinted off up the lane.

'Excuse me?' Mark called out as he approached them.

The two riders stopped and looked back, she seemed surprised to see him again.

'Hey Tom,' she said, turning to her friend, 'this is the Fonz. Or was it Homer Simpson?'

'It's actually Mark; nice to meet you.' He stood beside the huge horse and held his hand up. She hesitated then accepted it into hers, it felt soft and he didn't want to let go.

'I'm Jo. It's my pleasure to meet an English eccentric.'

'You two know each other?' Tom asked. He was also American.

Mark thought that perhaps it wasn't such a good idea to hit on her if it was his girlfriend. He seemed much more of a threat up close but as Mark looked back up at Jo there was something that compelled him to be bold. Or stupid.

'We've met briefly.' She said.

'Give me another chance?' He suggested desperately.

Tom looked at Jo.

'Jo, what's going on?'

'Look,' Mark said, his voice was speeding, 'I saw you ride up to me and you looked like Winona Ryder and I really like her and I had to think of something to say and I just made a tit of myself okay.'

'So what do you want then, you tit?' She laughed.

'I just wondered if you'd meet me for a drink later?'

He looked her in the eyes; it was as if the rest of the world had stopped.

'After you've cleaned up?' He added.

Jo did the eyebrow thing again.

'The compliments just roll out of your mouth don't they?'

'I don't mean you're dirty I mean once your finished riding your Goldwing?'

'Gelding.' She corrected him.

'He's a lovely beast whatever he is. The horse I mean.'

'And what is Tom going to do if we go out?' Jo winked over to her companion on the other horse. Mark had a moment of realisation; it *was* her boyfriend after all so he decided to hold his hands up in submission.

'Look I feel a right idiot and I'm going now. I just wanted to try and yeah anyway I'm sorry to bother you, again.'

Mark walked away. At least he knew he'd given it his best shot. As he turned the corner he could see Will and the other drinkers at the pub and needed that pint more than ever now his mouth was bone dry.

As he neared the pub he heard the sound of heavy hooves on the road behind him. Tom, the American who had been with Jo was following him, Mark thought he looked angry and began to speed up his walk.

'Hey wait.' Tom shouted, as the horse began to trot.

As Mark got closer to the pub he decided he didn't want to stop and find out what Tom had to say to him, instead he grabbed his bike from Will who was just finishing pumping up the wheel. He jumped on, pedalling as fast as he could up the lane until he made the mistake of pulling up to get more leverage. The wheel came away from the frame and as it went one-way Mark went the other, crashing through a hedge.

Tom caught up and tried to spot him but Mark was already legging it across the field. Will, who had followed them called out after his mate,

'I hadn't tightened the release nuts up yet you idiot!'

Tom looked down at him and pulled on the reins turning the huge horse around.

'You know that guy?'

Will looked nervous.

'I might do,' he puffed his chest out, 'I do martial arts you know.'

'That's nice,' Tom said, 'I just wanted to tell your friend that Jo's cool to meet up for a drink later. She thinks he's freaking hilarious.'

~

That evening Jo and Tom met up with Will and Mark in Warwick. Jo looked very different with her shoulder length hair worn down touching the top of her Ramones T-shirt. Mark had also spent more time preparing what to wear than usual, spiking up his hair and trying on loads of clothes. Will and Mark might have to work in an office during the week but they were still rebels at heart and often reminisced about escapades in their old rock band.

‘I played with them once.’ He said, pointing to Jo’s T-shirt.

‘What, my breasts?’

Mark nearly choked on his beer. Jo laughed. She was quick witted and it made her even more intriguing. Will challenged Tom to a game of pool leaving Mark and Jo alone and soon they were engrossed in conversation. Jo could play the guitar and had written some songs, Mark suggested a jam session but she didn’t have enough time, they were heading back via Oxford towards London after the weekend then flying home to the USA.

Neither of them wanted the evening to end and Mark began to realise that the symptoms he was experiencing whenever he looked at Jo were possibly connected to finding *the one*. The myth that he had heard about, seen in movies but never thought really existed at least not in his twenty-eight years.

As they walked back to Jo’s hotel Will insisted on introducing Tom to his favourite après beer snack from *Take Bap! VI*. He wasn’t sure where the other five restaurants were but this one did the best take out for miles. Mark and Jo walked on alone through a small park that ran alongside the main road.

‘Don’t you just love that?’ She said, looking up at the sky.

‘I’ve never really noticed it before, how did that get there?’

‘Ah, you joke but people really don’t notice it. This world is full of beauty that everyone misses. My favourite is right where I live, the lakes and the mountains in the fall; so many colours.’

‘I’ve always wanted to go to America. Maybe if I had someone to visit?’ Mark said. Jo smiled at him and looked up again. ‘So what do you think when you see all that up there?’ Jo said.

‘Aliens.’

‘Are we back on that now?’

‘Sometimes when I look at Will I think they’ve already landed.’

‘I can see where you’re coming from.’ She said. ‘How about God?’

‘I think it’s more about random chaos and luck. You?’

Jo was hesitant in her response.

‘Okay. If you laugh I’ll push you through that hedge over there.’

‘Two in one day? That’s not fair.’ Mark said.

She turned around and looked at him intently, deciding to let him into her world just a little for now.

'I think life's like a movie. You know when you watch a film and it's already there. We're just playing a part of it right now.'

Mark began to laugh. Jo punched him on the arm. 'You're going through that hedge.' She grabbed him around the neck and wrestled with him.

'I'm not laughing at you. I promise.' Mark gasped, trying to get free. 'I'm just so glad that we met.'

'You just don't want to be pushed through another hedge you liar.'

'I loved what you said, it was a nervous laugh, honestly.'

Jo let go and put her hands on her hips. 'Hmm.'

'I'm serious Jo I've never met anyone like you ever. This whole day has been like a dream. Like...'

'A movie?' Jo suggested.

Mark stepped closer to her and looked into her eyes, he reached forward and took her hand in his. 'Like a movie, exactly! And if it didn't sound so naff I'd tell you that I wish I had a pause button right now.'

'That would be kind of pushing the cliché,' she laughed, 'Mr B movie!'

'I'm just trying to be romantic.'

'There are other ways.' She winked at him.

He put his hand onto her face and lent in to kiss her, she tilted her mouth up to meet his. At last he would get to kiss her, he'd wanted to all night and it really was about to happen.

Unfortunately Will and Tom shattered the moment bursting through the park entrance.

'Oi! Oi!' Will shouted as he swerved towards them.

'Want some of thissergghhhh.' He tripped, skidding along the grass on his knees without spilling any of his food. He looked up, very proud of himself.

'Are you okay?' Jo asked.

'Don't worry I'm surprisingly bouncy.'

Tom swallowed a mouthful of chilli sauce. 'Oh shit, my mouth is on freaking fire.'

'Weren't interrupting anything were we?' Will said.

Mark helped his mate to his feet, smiling over at Jo.

'No, it's fine, just give me a chip you idiot.'

CHAPTER TWO

A year later Jo was strolling along the same Warwick streets that she had done on that memorable summer evening, not as a tourist this time but as the wife of the amusing man whom she had stumbled upon in the field. They had fallen in love and made a great start towards a life together. Despite living five thousand miles from her hometown, friends and family she was happier than she'd ever been. Jo had found a part time job in a trendy florist shop on Warwick High Street and as it was Friday she stopped at the newsagent to pick up their lottery ticket. She pushed her hands through her hair, padding along in her Converse boots and black jeans.

Walking into the shop she began her weekly routine. The lottery operator *Kabelson Industries* ran several games and she always entered *Six Magic Numbers* the main draw everyone wanted to win. She took a form from the stand and grabbed the chewed biro taped to a short piece of string. It was a challenge to get the nib onto the paper so she yanked the pen until it pinged off in her hand and filled in the same six magic numbers they chose every week.

The odds of winning a jackpot were about one in fourteen million but someone had to win it so why not keep dreaming just in case your numbers came up? The shop owner inserted her form into a machine with a bright orange ball on top. This was the smiley-faced lottery logo and it was everywhere you went. She picked up some of Mark's favourite sweets, Jo liked to take him something home no matter how small and it showed that she was thinking of him. Collecting her ticket she began the short walk to their house, unaware that her life was changing with every step.

~

Mark was feeling happier than he had for years since Jo rode into his life. He was probably at his happiest since his old band *Castle Rox* had been in the indie download chart. Formed in bedrooms and garages in his college years with Mark on bass and vocals; Will, his best mate on guitar and Stevie, a huge Scottish guy on drums who could lift the kit up with one arm. They would dress up as Knights for performances in local pubs with their fans slam dancing wildly in front of them. They couldn't afford real armour and chain mail so they went down the local toyshop and purchased plastic armour kits for boys. They were on the small side but at least they didn't weigh as much as the real thing. They had songs

like *Marching on (and on and on)*, *Heavy Horse Thunder* and a comedy waltz for festive gigs *The Jester's Balls Are Clanging for Christmas*.

They had achieved a reasonable amount of success, playing alternative clubs and releasing an EP that sold a few thousand copies getting them into the bottom end of the indie charts. He still had the music paper review pinned up on his bedroom wall in a space between Bruce Lee and Rocky Balboa. They had met Marky Ramone from the *Ramones* once in Camden and this meeting had grown into an actual gig *with* the band according to folklore but it never really happened, it was used for kudos purposes when getting gigs. Despite living by the *Ramones* anthem *I don't wanna grow up*, sometimes you had to and when Stevie became a father Castle Rox was put on ice at least until they reformed in their forties like most bands, they joked. Stevie's son Jack was already showing interest in his father's drums however it was usually climbing inside the bass drum to hide with a packet of biscuits until he was sick.

Mark and Jo were expecting a new arrival too, it wasn't planned but it was about to surprise them; from their wedding night the clock had been ticking. As Jo walked home from the florist that evening Mark sat watching the news, his attention drawn to an urgent appeal.

'The mystery winner of a three million pound jackpot is still yet to come forward and claim. They have just one hour left!'

Mark strummed his guitar thinking how awful it would be for that person to miss out on a fortune and not know about it. The poor sod would probably be stuck in traffic struggling back through the rush hour after a day of stress and toil. He was so glad that they knew their own numbers and checked them regularly.

'We would appeal to everyone who might have purchased a ticket in the Warwickshire area to go and hunt for their tickets and double check for those six magic numbers. Fast!'

Mark wondered if he knew the unfortunate person who was about to miss out on that fortune, it was after all somebody in his county. He put his guitar down by the side of the sofa exchanging it for a TV magazine and a bag of crisps. He made a mental note of a few shows that he wanted to watch and put a huge handful of crisps in his mouth. The news reader began to wrap up the item announcing that the *six magic numbers* people should be checking for were on the screen.

He lowered the magazine curious to see the numbers that had beaten amazing odds. His life slowed down, the world stopped except for him and the six numbers now on the TV. The unlucky person who was unaware of the millions of pounds at stake was closer than he thought, much closer because they were Mark and Jo's numbers. Once the information had sank into his brain Mark spat the crisps out of his mouth in a jet across the room, slinging the magazine into the air. He stood up and bounded over to the TV checking the numbers again for a second and third time growing more ecstatic, he jumped up and down clapping his hands and whooping.

'This is it! No more work, no more suits, no more rush hours, I'm free.' He took his tie off and threw it on the floor. 'I won't need you mister tie.' He stamped on it and looked at the TV again charging over to kiss it, recoiling from the static shock. He laughed then spun round jumping onto the sofa yelling with excitement. Then, he stopped. There was one vital thing he would need to claim the fortune that they had won. The ticket.

He started to look through the draws beside the TV, turning out pieces of paper, tablemats and pens. As he did this, his mind was turning to a house, a big house with lots of land, a music studio and rehearsal room where he could invite Will and Stevie over for a jam. He hurried to the next drawer that was full of note pads and guitar magazines, yanking it out completely and tipping the contents onto the floor. A pile was forming quickly on the carpet but there was no time to tidy.

He ran upstairs into the bedroom throwing open wardrobes and plunging his hand into the first of many coat pockets, some of them fell to the floor but he didn't care there was only one mission, to find the three million pound ticket. He was so involved in the hunt that he never heard the key in the lock downstairs and the door opening.

Jo walked in and immediately saw the mess in the front room. The sound of banging came from above. Looking up the staircase she guessed that it was a burglar and decided to call for help. She slowly backed towards the door pulling her mobile phone from her bag, dialling the police, but before she pressed the last digit Mark appeared at the top of the stairs. She yelped and dropped the phone.

'Oh my God Mark. I thought it was a burglar.'

'Where do we keep the lottery tickets babe?' Mark puffed as he descended the stairs jumping the last few steps. He put his shaking hands on her shoulders.

'You scared the hell out of me you idiot.'

'The lottery, they've been waiting for a winner to come forward. I just saw it on the news it's us we're the mystery winners!'

'Are you sure?'

'It's the same numbers we always use. Where do we keep the tickets?'

'In the drawer by the TV or in my bag.' She said.

Mark snatched the bag off her shoulder tipping it upside down and emptying the contents. A ticket fell out and Mark studied it.

'That's the ticket for tomorrows draw.' Jo said.

He started pulling the bag inside out.

'Mark! It's my new bag be careful.'

'How many bags could you buy for three million pounds?'

Jo pulled the hair away from her face and stared at him.

'How much?'

Mark grinned. 'Three Million.'

Jo's eyes widened. After a moments thought she dived onto the floor and began rummaging through the contents with him, screaming with a mixture of adrenaline and panic.

~

Across town on the other side of Warwick the phones at Kabelson Industries were ringing much more than usual. The main receptionist was so overwhelmed that she had diverted all incoming calls to the claims hotline. The television appeal had ignited the nation's interest, it seemed that even without the ticket many wanted to have a go at pretending they were the winners. The stories ranged from the mundane like putting it into the washing machine; to the bizarre *it's in my Aunt's coffin*.

Two operators working for Kabelson Industries, Lisa and Emma felt as if it had been the longest shift ever. Lisa finished another call, removed her headset and puffed her cheeks out.

'That must be the fiftieth one saying their dog ate it. Unbelievable.'

She glanced down at her copy of *Glossipz* magazine and stroked Brad Pitt's face on the cover.

'I bet Brad and Angelina wouldn't even notice three million.' She sighed.

Her phone line buzzed and she put her headset back on.

'Here we go again,' she said, pushing Brad aside, 'Kabelson claim line...the three million jackpot, it's you is it?'

Lisa rolled her eyes at Emma, it wasn't the first time she'd heard this statement and it most likely wouldn't be the last before the night was over.

'Oh, you don't have the ticket?'

Emma shook her head. 'What a surprise.' She mumbled, picking up a post-it note and placing it between her teeth holding her hands up like dogs paws.

Lisa struggled to keep a straight face.

'Well you won't be able to claim without it.' She said to the caller.

At the other end of the phone line an anxious Mark was desperate to make his claim before the deadline. There was only ten minutes left, with or without the ticket he knew they were in with a chance and told Lisa it was just a matter of time until they found it and he wanted his call logged officially.

Mark and Jo continued searching for the ticket as if their lives depended on it tearing the place apart looking in pockets, bags, cupboards, and shoeboxes, behind the sofa, under the sofa, inside the sofa, in the washing machine, nowhere seemed too crazy to look when it was that amount of money. Three million pounds was within their reach, if only they could hunt down that tiny slip of paper that had once been in their hands. Without it they were just one of many hundred callers that night making a claim for the fortune.

Jo pulled a box full of scrunched up carrier bags from inside a kitchen unit, they liked to re-use them where possible after all it would be their children inheriting the planet. What a wonderful start if they could claim their winnings she thought, they would be able to get a bigger house with a long garden for the kids. Her thoughts turned to her family and friends in the US, she missed her homeland and they couldn't afford to visit just yet, not unless they found that ticket, it could change their lives in so many ways. She rummaged near the bottom of the box and spotted a white bag with a small square shadow inside. Rushing back to the front room she waved it at Mark.

'It was in with all the carrier bags, I can't look.'

Mark pulled the top of the bag open and hesitated.

'Go on then.' Jo said.

'Okay. Give me a moment I need to catch my breath. This could be three million pounds.' Mark put his hand in and picked out the piece of paper. It was a lottery ticket. He turned it over and they both examined it.

'Same numbers.' He said positively.

'How about the date?' Jo said.

'June.'

They looked at each other, unsure whether or not to celebrate. 'Is that it then, when was the winning draw?' She waited desperately for Mark to answer.

'I don't know I wasn't paying attention to the news item at first I just caught the numbers. Show me that ticket you got today, it must tell you the claim time on it somewhere.'

Jo located the ticket she had purchased on the way home from work and studied it.

'It says you have ninety days to claim.'

They looked at each other realising that it wasn't the ticket. Mark cursed and kicked a DVD across the floor.

'Mark, that's our wedding DVD, you idiot!'

She picked it up off the floor. Mark looked at her apologetically and walked over holding her tightly and kissing her neck. He breathed in her familiar scent that anchored him and always felt like home.

'Sorry babes. Look it's a sign we kept some old tickets right? I mean we just need to remember what we were doing on a Saturday three months ago.'

Their gazes simultaneously came to rest on the wedding DVD in Jo's hand. It wasn't a surprise they'd forgotten to check the numbers, they were busy taking their vows and celebrating rather than seeing their magical jackpot win. Mark had got the ticket on the way to the Church as Jo had been off work that week; he had picked up the buttonholes for the wedding from Jo's shop then purchased it next door. He remembered it clearly because the other customers were wishing him well for his big day.

Jo sat back on the sofa as Mark opened the DVD case and put it into the player. They soon came to an early scene with him and Will, the best man waiting at the Church.

'I still don't know how he seduced her.' Will joked.

'Well actually you make your own luck in life Will.'

On screen Mark pushed his hand into his pocket and produced a lottery ticket momentarily waving it around. They paused the DVD. There it was, the ticket they were searching for. It was strange how they had never paid much attention to that tiny piece of footage before despite seeing the wedding DVD several times. 'It's got to be in my wedding suit.'

Mark had left the suit with his parents at the hotel wedding reception. They were supposed to take it home whilst he and Jo headed for the airport to go on honeymoon.

Full of excitement and renewed hope Mark called the Kabelson hotline again. He asked for Lisa's extension. 'Have you found the ticket yet?' She said.

'Well yes and no,' Mark said, his voice trembling with adrenaline, 'it's in my wedding suit but I need to get it from my parent's house.'

'There's nothing more we can do tonight anyway, the office is closing for the evening I'm sorry.'

'Lisa, we also know something nobody else does; the winning machine was the newsagent beside the Florist on the High Street. You must have had loads of calls tonight but they won't be able to tell you the things we know.'

'Well I can take the details but without the actual ticket it's not going to change anything.'

'It was the day of the draw, eleven in the morning; I was on the way to the Church on our wedding day. Jo usually gets it on a Friday around quarter past five so you'll see a pattern of the same ticket being purchased as well.'

Lisa looked up and noticed Philippa walking past her desk on her way out. Philippa was Chief of the Anti-Fraud Department, a sharply dressed woman in her early forties; she had joined Kabelson Industries with a solid background in loss prevention and investigating credit fraud for a retail chain. She loved her job and the buzz of unearthing people's attempts at false claims, some of them went to extraordinary lengths to convince her but it made it even sweeter to uncover.

Lisa motioned for her to wait so she paused at her desk, putting her briefcase down and listening. Since the appeal had been broadcast her job had been incredibly hectic. Mark and Jo's details were handed to Philippa; she put her glasses on and studied them.

'Well, well, well.' She said, a broad smile spreading across her face.

CHAPTER THREE

Mark couldn't get hold of his parents by phone. They sometimes went out to see a concert with their friends on a Friday night, not the kind that he would go to, usually some old middle of the road crooner from the seventies still doing the circuit. He left a garbled message about the suit on their answer service and resigned himself to the fact that it would have to wait until morning. He sat down on the sofa beside Jo and they watched more of the wedding DVD, on screen Mark was still talking to the camera.

'I love you Jo. Remember, as long as we have each other the rest will fall into place.'

It had been so perfect on their wedding day that nothing else mattered. That's why the lottery draw had seemed so irrelevant they had more important business, as most newlyweds did.

'So what now?' Jo said, hugging him.

'We keep looking I guess, but I'm sure it's in the suit.'

'So, let's assume it's still there; we drive over tomorrow and collect it from your folks, go to Kabelson and give it to them then...' She trailed off.

'Then we become multi-millionaires.' Mark said. He took her hand and slipped her slender fingers between his lifting it up to his cheek. Looking into her eyes he could see that this was going to be a tough ride for them, their first major test.

'Or we don't find it and we never speak of this again.'

~

Eventually Mark and Jo fell asleep on their bed in the early hours of the morning still clothed, their minds a mixture of hope and anxiety. Even in sleep Mark dreamt about the ticket, he was opening the front door expecting an entourage with champagne and a big cardboard cheque something he had seen lottery winners in the papers getting over the years. Then just as he reached the door he was sucked backwards like he was in a wind tunnel, the more he tried to move forwards the stronger it became.

Mark shuddered in the bed and realised the house phone was ringing. He opened his eyes and shut them again trying to adjust to the morning light. He slid onto the floor taking

the duvet with him, Jo moaned out and slapped the bed desperate to get some covers back. Mark rummaged for the handset picking up one of Jo's shoes at first, trying to find a button on it. He lobbed it across the room and located the proper handset. The voice on the end of the line was his mother's.

'Mum. Did you find the suit?'

'What's going on Mark?'

'The ticket for the six magic numbers jackpot.'

'You were hoping it was you I suppose?'

'We *know* it was us, it was on our wedding day.' He insisted.

'Oh Mark.' She laughed.

'I'm serious Mum.'

Jan was in her kitchen, serving his dad Roger breakfast. She cradled the phone with her neck and poured some tea whilst relaying the conversation to him over his newspaper. He shook his head and folded the paper onto to the sports page, the back sheet scraping across his fried egg.

'I don't think we have that suit anyway Mark.' Jan said.

'I left it with you at the hotel I know the ticket's in there Mum, we saw it on the DVD.'

'He says it was on their wedding day.' Jan repeated to Roger, now inspecting his leaking fried egg.

'This is still runny.'

'Well stick it back on the grill yourself Roger, I'm not an octopus.'

Roger shrugged and attacked the soggy yellow middle with a folded piece of bread. Mark was becoming frustrated on the other end of the phone.

'Mum, please just tell me where my wedding suit is?'

'Of course I remember now, *Will* took it,' she said, 'he offered to as we had a load of stuff in our car. Nan was moaning about her lumbago she wanted to stick her leg up in the back seat where Dad had that old canvas bag, remember we got it in Cornwall in the little shop on the beach where you got your ducky hat? You loved that ducky hat, anyway we couldn't...'

'Are you sure he took it?' Mark interrupted.

'Yes. He said he was going to get it dry-cleaned, anyway Nan wanted to put her foot up and we tried to move everything around we had my bag behind the seat, hang on, no it was on the floor and the canvas bag was on the seat wasn't it Roger?'

The line went dead.

'Hello?' Jan said. 'Oh charming, *how are you mum? I'm fine son.*'

Roger looked at his cup of tea, took a sip and winced.

'What's that face for?' Jan said, putting the phone back in its cradle.

'Have you put Soya milk in this?'

Mark tried Will several times but his mobile number was ringing endlessly. Sometimes he worked Saturday mornings. Jo was pacing around wondering about what Mark's mum had said because if Will had taken the suit to be dry cleaned then it was going to be a ball of dried mush by now and not their passport to a three million pound jackpot. There was a tiny chance it survived maybe, just legible enough to prove their claim, she hoped.

Mark was about to hit redial when the phone rang.

'Will?'

'Mark?' A woman's voice. 'This is Philippa from Kabelson Industries. I think it would be a good idea if I came over and had a chat.'

~

The doorbell rang. Mark opened the door to a tall blonde woman in a sparkly red dress holding a huge cardboard cheque; behind her was an entourage of cheerleaders with champagne, photographers and neighbours cheering. Mark drank in the moment he'd seen so often on television and in the newspapers, now it was his turn. He called out to Jo who ran into the glorious sunshine and they embraced then held the huge cheque up, posing for the photographers as the flashlights popped in the sunshine that seemed so bright that morning, it was unreal. Jo suddenly stopped smiling and shouted at him, he didn't know why. Then she slapped his face and began to repeat his name.

Mark snapped out of his daydream as Jo shook him.

'Mark, wake up, they're here.'

He sat up on the sofa where he'd dozed off, the severe lack of sleep from the night before was catching up with him. Jo went to the door and opened it to find a woman and a man in suits looking more like CID than public relations from a lottery company.

The woman with the tightly scraped back hair held out her hand.

'You must be Jo? I'm Philippa and this is Nigel.' Jo forced a smile. Unlike Mark's dreams of a large cardboard cheque the woman simply held a black case that knocked Jo's knee as she ushered them inside. Mark sat perched on the sofa waiting anxiously.

'That was quick.'

'Well our offices are here in Warwick.' Philippa said.

'I never knew that, what a Coincidence.'

'That's what we thought.' She said, looking over at Nigel and pulling out a clipboard from her case.

'You didn't bring the cardboard cheque then?'

'No,' Philippa spotted the ticket on top of the TV, 'unless you've found the ticket of course?' She stared at Mark looking for signs of nerves. She could spot a fraudster easily.

'Sadly that's not it, that's for this week. Not that those numbers are likely to win twice, I mean it's fourteen million to one odds right? That must have gone up even more for us now.'

Philippa gave a fleeting smile as Nigel began scouring the room like a detective. Bags, clothes and most of the contents from the front room drawers were still scattered across the floor.

'Excuse the mess. We've been searching for that ticket like mad as you can imagine.' Jo said.

'Don't worry, it's hard being a housewife I expect?'

Jo went to correct her but she continued too quickly.

'Sorry to come mob handed but Nigel is with me for back up. Some people can get very cross you know, especially when you tell them they can't have lots of money,' she laughed to herself, 'who'd have my job, I ask you?'

She adjusted her pad. 'So lets go through the basics again shall we?'

Mark tried to calmly explain how they had worked out how it was their win, where the ticket was and that Will would be bringing it over as soon as he got hold of him. Nigel seemed to be more interested in the room and its contents than the conversation while Philippa began busily scratching notes onto her pad. She looked over at the wedding DVD. 'Married long?' She said.

'Three months, the draw was on our wedding day.'

'Congratulations.' Nigel said under his breath.

'That's why we never saw it.' Mark handed the DVD to Philippa.

'You have your marriage certificate?'

'Yes. Why?' He said.

'Just thinking ahead.'

Philippa inspected the DVD and looked at the cover a collage made from stills of the day. 'Aw, how sweet.'

'Coffee?' Mark asked.

'No thank you.' She went to recline onto the sofa next to a pile of clothes stopping as a sharp coat hanger began digging into her backside. She stood up again holding it out.

'Oh my goodness I am sorry.' Jo said, trying not to laugh. Philippa handed the offending object to Nigel who inspected it.

'You can move the washing if you want to sit down as well Nigel?'

'He'll be fine standing thank you. So, have you lived in Warwick long?' She said tapping at her pad with polished nails.

'I came here in my teens for college. Grew up about half an hour away,' Mark said, 'I liked it so much I got a job here.'

'I take it y'all not from around here?' Philippa asked Jo, breaking into a mock American accent.

'I've been here since we married.' Jo said, not amused.

Philippa spotted Mark's guitar. 'Musical are we?'

'A bit yes,' Mark said, 'it relaxes me. We used to have a band going a few of us round here have you heard of Castle Rox?'

'I don't seem to recall the name.' She said.

'We played with the Ramones at the Marquee.'

Jo rolled her eyes as Philippa continued scribbling. Jo knew that it was all hype but she'd gone along with it because she loved him.

'R.A.M.?' Philippa stopped and looked up at Mark. 'The Ramones, how are you spelling that?'

'Oh no I wasn't in the Ramones.' Mark laughed. 'Blimey, I wish, well they're not around now but we supported them at a secret gig. We were in our first band at college and they were on their last tour, it was *Castle Rox* that I was in.'

Philippa scratched out what she was writing, looking slightly annoyed.

'Are you music fans then?' Mark said, hoping to establish some common ground.

'No, not really.' Philippa said, her eyes drilling into him, searching for signs that might give him away if he was trying to fool her.

'I'm partial to a bit of freestyle jazz funk myself.' Nigel said.

Philippa frowned, 'Let's keep to the business at hand shall we?' She placed her palms down on her clipboard like a makeshift lectern. 'Let me explain the reason why we're here. My role is with the Anti-Fraud Department at Kabelson Industries and I'm not here for any other reason than to investigate the claim you made last night. A formality so let's not get excited without the ticket, we had quite a few calls about the three million jackpot as you can imagine.'

'But it was us. The others don't have any proof and we do.' Mark said earnestly.

'Your information on the machine and time may have set you apart I agree however we're a long way from *fourth base* as you say in the States.' She looked at Jo with a tight-lipped grin.

'You wouldn't believe the things people say to claim, *'My dog ate it', 'it's in the washing machine'*, I'm used to those but then there are the other ones, the more serious attempts to claim. Some actually try to fake tickets.' Philippa looked across the room.

'You see that join in your wallpaper over there?'

'What join?' Mark said.

'Exactly,' she proclaimed, 'you can't see that from here but it stands out like a sore thumb to the trained eye.'

Mark and Jo both craned their necks trying to see the join.

'The two halves trick,' Philippa said in a secretive voice as if letting them in on a conspiracy, 'sometimes more than two spliced together. One chancer is doing eighteen months in prison as we speak.'

The couple looked at her. Did she think they were fraudsters, was that what she was insinuating?

'Why that machine and those numbers?' Philippa said, tapping her pad sharply.

'It's right next to where I work and we always use those numbers, you'll see tickets before and after that lucky draw. Mark's birthday is the twenty seventh of June and mine is the fifteenth of February, he's never got an excuse to forget unless he misses Valentines as well so his life just wouldn't be worth living,' she joked, 'then it's door numbers, ours is thirty-two as you can see and Mark's Nan's is forty-four. We noticed that forty-four also came up a lot in draws.'

'Will, my mate, says it's because it has greater ink coverage and weighs the ball down more than others.' Mark interjected.

Philippa gave a tight-lipped smile and asked for proof of identification to clear up the first four numbers and the full postal code of Mark's Nan's house. She told them that the press had been very keen to discover who the mystery-claim was from and warned them not to mention it to a soul, because if their identity leaked out the media would hound them and make their lives a misery.

Philippa stood up and paced to the hallway, turning to face them. Nigel, who had been looking through their CD collection turned and followed.

'We'll call you as soon as Will gets here with the suit.' Mark said.

'Here's my direct dial,' she handed Mark a card and winked at him, 'don't lose it.'

Jo couldn't believe what she was seeing, was this woman actually trying to hit on her husband whilst investigating them or just referring to their lack of ability with retaining small pieces of paper? Either way she was out of order.

'You don't have long to come up with the ticket and remember what I said, nobody wants to be known as the couple who let a three million pound jackpot slip through their hands.'

'We haven't lost it.' Jo said.

Philippa looked her up and down.

'You have until the end of the day.'

She opened the door and they walked down the path leaving Mark and Jo more anxious than ever.

Six Magic Numbers

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