

*The Ticket* (Chapter 1)

Channing Booker's hand trembled as he held the slip of paper. Bleary-eyed from a Friday night of drinking and revelry, he wasn't sure if what he saw was real. In the darkness of his study, he stared at the Virginia Lottery's website in the pale glow of a smartphone screen. Slowly he read the six winning Mega Millions numbers one more time. He had been playing the lottery for at least a decade but had little to show for it—until now.

Glancing back and forth between the winning numbers on his smartphone and a row of digits on the slip of paper, he confirmed that his ticket was a winner. Tonight's projected jackpot was \$239 million, but with a flurry of last-minute ticket buying it may have inched up another million or so.

Knowing he had beaten odds of 303 million to one, Channing hoped his luck would hold when the final results were announced. Surely no one deserved a windfall more than he did, and he pondered the injustice that would befall him if someone else held a lucky ticket. His elation began to ebb as he considered the possibility that he might have to share his jackpot with another player. It ebbed even further as he realized that his new fortune, in whatever amount, would have to be divided between him and the woman who was sleeping upstairs.

Channing began to contemplate the radical changes that his sudden stroke of luck would bring. He was almost certain that Susan's lawyer would be filing divorce papers soon, and until tonight he had dreaded the monetary implications of being single again. His few remaining assets would be snatched away by an irate wife, a greedy divorce lawyer, and a hostile judge. But they can only take what they can find.

He would wait until the divorce was final before cashing in the ticket, speeding the litigation along with magnanimous concessions and generous settlement offers. At least they would seem generous coming from a man whose apparent wealth had dwindled. Without children, there would be no protracted fight over custody or child support. He could wrap up the whole sorry process in a couple of months, grab his lottery winnings, reclaim his Mercedes, and retire with his favorite girlfriend to an island in the Caribbean.

As he leaned back on the couch, his pulse rate gradually returned to normal, and the shock of seeing the winning numbers on his ticket subsided. Minutes passed as he reveled in his vision of a carefree future. The house was silent, except for the gentle purr of Tony, the resident Siamese cat, who was curled up in a ball at the other end of the couch. Unfazed by the silent drama that was unfolding before him, Tony watched placidly as his master stared at the ceiling. A sliver of moonlight peeked through the curtains and cast faint shadows around the room. Channing set the winning ticket on the small mahogany table at the end of the couch and gazed at it for several minutes.

His thoughts turned to the practical implications of his plan. He knew that when he cashed in the lottery ticket his win would be a matter of public record. Virginia's lottery rules required jackpot winners to appear at a press conference, shake hands with an official, and accept an oversized replica of a check. Although he had no expertise in family law, he suspected that Susan's lawyer could reopen the divorce case and seize much of his new fortune. His precarious legal position called for a more sophisticated plan to preserve the money until it could be secretly deposited in an offshore bank account.

He assumed that he could count on help from one of his drinking buddies, Sully Pendleton. A local attorney who practiced out of a small office downtown, Sully was Channing's

closest confidant. The two of them had collaborated on a commercial fraud case some years ago, and a friendship developed and grew over time. In addition to drinking and pursuing women, they shared an interest in professional football and often attended Carolina Panthers games together.

In fact, Channing was planning to leave with Sully the following Sunday morning to see the Panthers play the Falcons. On the way to the game he would ask Sully to safeguard the ticket until his divorce was final, and then wait a decent interval before cashing it in, as if Sully were the lucky winner. Sully could take a percentage off the top, plus enough to pay the taxes that would accrue, and then quietly wire the balance to an account that Channing would open at a bank in the Cayman Islands.

Channing hoped his friend would accept a share of eight to ten percent for his trouble, but if he wanted more, the additional expense would be worth it. A matter of this delicacy required the sensitivity and discretion that only Sully could bring to the task.

Having spent years perfecting the art of calculating odds, point spreads, and payoffs, Channing was able to do the math in his head. Taking the lump sum payout would reduce the \$239 million pot by about half. Federal and state income taxes, which would be assessed to Sully, would eat up a portion of the balance. He guessed that Sully's fee, plus a deduction for taxes, might siphon off about 45 percent. Assuming there was only one winning ticket, Channing would be left with roughly \$66 million. He was confident that this would buy a nice piece of real estate where he could park his Mercedes and girlfriend du jour, even at the inflated prices that prevailed in the Caymans.

Although he thought he could trust Sully, it occurred to Channing that his friend might develop amnesia and claim the ticket as his own. Perhaps in Sully's mind a lottery jackpot would be fair compensation for the loss of Channing's friendship. Channing would need some insurance in case the plan went awry—some proof that Sully was simply holding his ticket for safekeeping.

On the shelves behind the couch was a row of rare books that Susan had collected over the years. Channing picked up the ticket and carefully placed it on one of the shelves, letting it rest upright against a row of rare, limited edition Charles Dickens novels. He quietly slipped into an adjoining room and groped in a closet until he found a camera, thinking that its picture quality would be superior to what his smartphone could produce. He returned and pointed the lens at the ticket, leaning over the couch until he was about a foot away from it. The flash blinded him for a moment, but as he looked at the camera's display screen he could see that the image was clear. All the numbers on the ticket were in sharp focus, and now he could prove that the ticket was his, without having to sign his name on the back.

He set the camera in the mahogany table's open drawer and eased it shut. Picking up the winning ticket, he pulled one of the Dickens novels from the shelf. Its ornate leather jacket protected a fragile binding, and the title was printed in elaborate gold lettering. He opened the back cover and slipped the ticket behind the jacket, pushing it all the way in for a snug fit. He turned the book over in his hands and read its title several times until he was certain he would remember it. Placing the book back in position, he turned around and silently crept upstairs to the bedroom.

Susan was under the covers, facing away from him and apparently in a deep sleep. He slipped into bed without disturbing her, smiling as he thought about his incredible luck. He had

often dreamed of winning a lottery jackpot, but, in the past, the big money had always gone to some undeserving factory worker or senior citizen. He decided to delay his celebration, as he had already arranged a date with a recent acquaintance, Melissa Sorensen, for tomorrow's Baltimore Ravens game. It was a Saturday game near the end of the season, and he recalled that the Ravens were favored by six points over the Bengals.

As Channing drifted off to sleep, Susan opened her eyes and glanced at her bedside clock. It was 1:35 a.m.

Channing woke up six hours later and crawled slowly out of bed. Susan was still curled up under a thick blanket, her head buried in a pillow. Showering and dressing quickly, he headed downstairs to check point spreads in the morning's *Washington Post*.

Walking with a newfound swagger to his Volvo, he nestled into the driver's seat. The palm of his right hand slid across the fabric upholstery that covered the passenger seat. Soon he would be sitting on fine leather seats, the kind he had grown accustomed to before a creditor repossessed his Mercedes. With an air of satisfaction, he started the engine.

As the car headed down the driveway, Susan sat up in bed. She reached for the phone and placed the call that would change her life forever.

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