

## The Winner

David stared at the screen and then down at the slip of paper in his hand. Three. Fourteen. Fifteen. Twenty-seven. Forty-two. All five numbers the same. Five and nine. Also the same. All seven numbers shown on the screen matched those held between his oil-stained fingers. He had won. Twenty-seven point three five million pounds. Even the second decimal place represented more than twice his annual salary at the garage. He felt numbed, unable to move, unable to speak, unable to think even. He could do nothing but sit and stare at the screen - at the numbers he had randomly chosen and the numbers that followed the pound sign. He had won.

He had only ever won anything once before, and that had been at a village fete near his home when he had just turned eighteen. He had only gone along because he was hoping to catch a glimpse of Melanie Parker, an attractive and popular girl who sat in front of him during his maths class at college. Melanie had failed to put in an appearance at the fete, and it was only months later that he found out she had spent the afternoon with his best friend, Stephen Armitage. Stephen was also supposed to have been at the fete, but in the end David had given up waiting and wandered around on his own. He had tried his hand at the coconut shy, but people had been watching and the pressure had thrown off his aim to such an extent that he had not only failed to miss both the coconuts and their posts, but one ball had sailed right over the netting and into the beer tent. After that, the only other stall he had dared to risk was the tombola - a waste of money as far as he was concerned, but at least he was taking part. All you had to do was pull out a ticket ending in a zero or a five. His first three tickets, as he had expected, produced neither, but his fourth was a winner. He had won.

‘Four sixty is that, dear?’ Asked the lady behind the stall as he handed her the ticket, and she began hunting around for its twin. He had spotted it almost immediately, but felt it would be wrong to point it out, as though it would spoil the fun for her. Eventually, after what seemed an

unfeasible length of time, she discovered it taped to a bottle of Scotch whisky. For a panicked moment David had thought the lady was going to ask him for proof that he was old enough, but she handed him the bottle without the slightest hesitation.

‘Thank you.’ he said, taking the bottle. ‘Thank you very much.’

He had never tried whisky before, assuming it was more of an old man’s drink, but he was pleased with his prize all the same and, with an extra spring in his step, he made his way from the village green towards the car park. It was as he emerged through a gap in the hedge that it had happened. Two lads suddenly appeared on either side of him. He knew them both from college and even now he could remember their names: Justin Blake and Tyler Scott. He could no longer remember their faces, however - in his mind they had become twisted and evil, more like the faces of gargoyles than boys. They were trouble. And David was scared of them.

‘What you got there, Davey?’ asked Tyler with mock friendliness. ‘A little treat for me and Justin? How kind. Isn’t that kind, Justin?’

In response, Justin had made a grab for the bottle, but David managed to pull it away before he caught it. Unfortunately, it was then easy prey for Tyler, who snatched it out of his grasp before pushing him roughly back into the hedge. They had run off then, laughing, as he picked himself up, angry and ashamed. Even to this day, seventeen years later, David had never tasted whisky - he couldn’t bring himself to do so.

And now here he was with another winning ticket and the promise of twenty-seven million pounds plus a couple of decimal places. Just think of all the things he could do with that money! He would buy a new car for a start and get rid of that embarrassingly ancient Nissan he’d bought from his mother seven years ago. He would pay off his mortgage too. In fact, forget that, he would simply buy a new house. A big house. A country mansion, with a swimming pool, a banqueting hall and a helipad. And a helicopter too, why not? Obviously he would not spend all his winnings on himself. Yes, he had won, but there were his parents to think about. He would be

able to provide for them and ensure their final years were the best that money could buy. Hell, he'd pay off his sister's mortgage too, and maybe even give her some extra for her children. That would be the right thing to do - after all, he could hardly hide it from them when he was living in his new house and driving around in his new sports car. And wearing a proper, Italian suit - he had always fancied one of them. His family would soon realise he had money. So would his friends, too, he guessed, although he wouldn't have to worry about his work colleagues, since he could give up his job at the garage. No more spending his days covered in engine oil and grease. No more belligerent customers wanting to know exactly how their bills had ended up being so much higher than the estimates. No more putting up with the bullying from Mike, his boss. No more work.

But what would be his excuse for leaving? Suddenly feeling worried, David reached out for his cigarettes and hurriedly lit one. The guys at the garage would know. They would all know. It didn't matter what reason he gave, they would sniff it out, and the moment they realised he had come into all this money, they would be after him. Maybe they wouldn't demand it or try to force him to give it to them, but they would come all the same, hassling him with their sob stories and financial crises, with their eyes glistening and their grubby hands begging.

He would have to make a rule of some sort - he needed a rule. Only give money to family members, maybe, or just to family and close friends. Maybe he could create some kind of upper limit for each category - a million pounds for close family, his parents and his sister, and a hundred thousand for other relatives, like Auntie Janet, who did at least send him a card on his birthday every year. Then, say, fifty thousand for his closest friends, Pete, James and Anne, and maybe five thousand for other not-quite-so-close friends. That could work.

David stubbed out his cigarette in the ash tray and looked at the ticket still clutched in his hand. Twenty-seven point three five million. It was such a lot of money - more money than he could really get his head around. It was the sort of money people would kill for.

He didn't know where that thought had come from, but it filled him with fear. Suddenly he was eighteen again, trapped beyond the hedge by Justin and Tyler. The panic, the humiliation, the futile anger - all those horrible, helpless feelings came flooding back as he pictured their gargoyle faces and their cruel, spiteful laughter. Yes, people would kill for this sort of money. People would kill him, David, specifically. Even if he did nothing with the money, even if he stayed here in this grotty, little flat and stuck with his grotty, little car and his grotty, little job, even if he did not change anything, people would know. Someone would find out. And then his life would be over.

Instinctively David reached out again for his cigarettes and lighter, an instinctive reaction in times of panic and fear. Even as he did so, he suddenly realised what he had to do - the only solution to his life-threatening problem. The cigarettes remained unmoved, leaning against the chipped, glass ashtray, as he picked up the lighter and flicked open the top. He pulled his thumb back on the wheel. It sparked and lit, a steady yellow flame. David held the ticket, still pinned between fingers and thumb, with a corner in the top of the flame. It caught easily and began to burn, the flame moving quickly across the bottom and up the side of the ticket.

Three. Gone was the new, flash sports car. Fourteen. Gone was the big house in the country. Fifteen. Twenty-seven. That was the swimming pool and the banqueting hall. Forty-two. The helipad and helicopter. Five. His parents' final years of comfort. And nine. The money for his sister and her children. Each number flared and died, turning from black to grey and white ash in his hand. He dropped the ticket into the ashtray. The problem had been dealt with, the bullies and the murderers turned aside. It was over. He had won.

'Next week,' thought David, as, in the ashtray, the embers glowed orange and died, 'Maybe next week, if play the same numbers again, maybe then I'll have more luck.'