

**WINNERS**  
**by Sally Shivnan**

**Chapter 1**

She left the car running with the kids inside, and it was a hot day but it would only take her a minute. Besides, there was her neighbor Mrs. Okay in the next car, talking on her phone. She felt safe with her right there, near her grandkids. Couldn't remember her whole name—it was hard to pronounce so everybody called her Mrs. Okay. Anyway, she would only be a minute and she figured that from inside the store she could look back and see her car through the door.

As soon as she went in, she saw the line. Whatever, she thought. She took her place and then the line started moving, and the old black lady in front of her shuffled forward in mousy-steps and her hands moved a little at her sides, and they were trembling. Parkinsons, she thought. Like me. She wasn't as bad as that yet. She looked back to her car, the kids all jumping around frontseat and backseat but all accounted for and nobody hurt, although Mrs. Okay was gone. The A/C in her car was weak, it needed freon or something. She could go out there, pull the kids out one by one, unbuckle the baby, haul the squirming bunch of them into the store, stand in line with them *oh God no*. Lose her place in line, start all over again, stand there waiting. *Always waiting, it's all life is*. No, she would stay there, she would get her lottery ticket. First time she'd ever bought one. The jackpot was so big, everyone was doing it. It would only take a minute.

He wasn't going to use his lucky numbers this time. His lucky numbers never worked. He would let the machine pick the numbers. What difference did it make? People like him didn't win the lottery. There was just one guy in front of him, so that was good. Behind the counter,

the old dudes stared down at him from their high shelves, Mr. Beam and Mr. Daniels and Mr. Walker—red or black it didn't matter, he was color-blind when it came to liquor—and Mr. Cuervo and the seafaring Mr. Morgan. Thirteen years and thirteen days and it had been a Friday the thirteenth too when he quit, but he couldn't afford to be superstitious. If he won the lottery, he would definitely relapse. He knew himself. The temptation to celebrate but mostly all that frigging money. Bottomless money. But people like him didn't win. So nothing to worry about. "You know what I'm here for," he told the cashier. "Gimme one of those big tickets. This time, just gimme one out of your machine. Random like."

"That ain't like you!" said the cashier.

He pondered. "Yeah. I better go with my lucky numbers." His last girlfriend used to say his smile looked like a leer, so he tried now to quit grinning.

The lottery ticket in her hand had the smooth feel of paper that comes off a roll and is spit out of a machine. She stood at the counter rubbing it between her fingers, because it was taking her back to exactly one year before when she had stood doing the same thing in the same spot on the same sticky floor.

Maybe the guy on the other side of the counter wasn't the same guy—that part Tara couldn't remember—this Latino cashier, looking bored, looking like he was waiting for her to go away, but it could have been him, and it was the same wall of cigarettes behind him, the same dirty counter that she did not want to touch, with its same plastic display of buy-them-at-the-last-minute candy bars that got in the way if you had a big enough purchase to need some counter space. The same harsh lighting that made everything yellow, the same voice in her head which was her mother's voice saying *why do you waste your money like that* and her answering back

*you know why and it's only once a year* and her mother saying *you're just beating yourself up what's wrong with you it's pointless*.

And the same numbers on the ticket—almost the same. They were the only possible combination of numbers in the whole world that she could play, and her mother would get that if she thought about it, but the truth was her mother didn't even know she did this each year on this day, so the voice in Tara's head was make-believe. Did the bored cashier notice her numbers, did he notice they were the date—today's date—plus something else? Of course not, he never noticed anybody's numbers, she could tell from his droopy-lidded eyes which were now staring at her tits (she had on a tank top but this was July, this was Maryland in July which was fucking hot outside, it was a *swamp*, even if the A/C in here was like the North Pole).

She slipped the ticket in her jeans pocket, safer than the little bag that swung on a long strap from her shoulder. Someone was stepping up behind her in line, and he was huffing through his nose in a loud way. She thought: *hippo nostrils*. She didn't turn around to look at him but sensed his large round belly near her back and she started to move aside a little, but then she saw the cashier's eyes pop open and fix on the door, and the door went *bing-bong* and there was a thumping of feet and then a screaming voice, a man's voice but high like a child, and the cashier was waving his hands in the air and yelling *okay okay* and the other guy, the one behind her in line, was yelling something too while gripping his 12-pack of Bud Light tight against his big stomach; he pushed her out of the way but she was moving sideways anyway and she saw the man at the door with the gun, really all she saw was the gun, and the leather jacket that he was wearing which struck her as strange for the weather.

Then she was on the floor, on her hands and knees, she had lost a flip-flop and her purse was gone, and she was forcing herself to creep, a couple inches at a time, along the aisle. The

big round man was the one saying *okay* now—he had a loud voice—but the guy with the gun was yelling like crazy, high and squealy, and there was the racket of things falling off shelves and the sound of feet moving which was a sound both heavy and nervous, and Tara was creeping, creeping, keeping her head hunched down into her shoulders, keeping her eyes down, holding her breath as tight as she could and still keep breathing, and her thoughts were nothing, her mind was nothing, she was just moving in the tiniest slowest way, behind the towering shelves of chips and nuts and candy, along a dirt-filled seam in the tile, toward the far wall, away from the noise.

A second—two seconds—of silence, and she thought *what is going on?* This sudden stillness that made no sense.

She heard his breathing then, she could not tell how near or far but it filled all the space around her, in and out like slow panting.

And then, the loudest noise in the world like the building exploding like her head exploding it was the gun firing and she knew what it was although she didn't want to believe it. And just as the silence was beginning to come back it fired again—huge *again*—and *again*, and she thought this was never going to end and she was sure she was going to die and she flattened herself and lay with the floor against her cheek. Cold tile to her hot skin. Her ears ringing.

Lying there so still, she felt, after a while, as if she maybe wasn't really there. Her body did not seem solid, although she could still feel the cold tile at her cheek. In fact, the tile was growing warmer, which meant she was still alive, still there. She'd had this feeling once before, or something like it. That time, part of it had been feeling that she didn't deserve a body under the circumstances, didn't deserve a life, didn't want her body back, all for very good reasons which were still good now, nothing had changed about that, and she wondered, now, if this was

the final coming true of her wish, and she wondered how she felt about it. On the one hand, if she was shot dead on the floor of this store then that would put an end to her problem. On the other hand, there was a part of her that wanted to live, there was no question about it. It was hard to know how big that part was in relation to the other. Hard to get perspective on it all. In any case, she was aware at the edges of her mind that the way she was feeling, the way she was pondering all this at this moment, was not the way other people in her situation would react. Was not normal. But it was interesting to realize that the decision was out of her hands. Her problem was someone else's problem now. And if she died no one would ever have to know that she had not resisted it, and that would let them feel better about her. They would be sad, but they would never have to know that she had been okay with being killed if that's how it had to be. Still, there was the part of her that did want to survive this. No question that part existed, was bumping around inside her head against the other parts. She felt as if she was watching it all, from outside her mind. It didn't matter, though. It wasn't up to her. It was up to the man with the gun in his hands somewhere just a few feet away from her.

There was moaning. There was a man in the store moaning. He sounded like a small child. There was a scuffling sound, like mice. Then there was nothing, and then the *bing-bong* of the door as it opened. And then silence.

And then the sound, faraway at first, the mournful but urgent, desperate, angry sound of sirens, louder, louder, louder.

On a small barrier island in Florida, a man stepped up to the counter of a store that sold mostly bait and tackle, sunblock, beach accessories, and beer. The man was slim, middle-aged, lightly tanned, wearing a teeshirt and shorts and flip-flops, with sunglasses pushed up on his shaved

head. The clerk behind the counter was a college student who had worked there every summer since she turned sixteen. “What’ll it be, Mr. President?” she asked. She always called him Mr. President since seeing his name, Millard Fillmore, on his credit card that first summer. She wore a short skirt and a long teeshirt with a big loggerhead turtle on it, and every summer she had dyed her hair a different color; it was platinum blond this year, in a high bouncy ponytail. He had walked up to her counter empty-handed.

“What can I do ya for?” she said. She smacked gum and smiled at him.

“A Megaball ticket, please.”

“Yeah, everybody’s playing ‘cause the Megaball’s so big,” she said. “Oh, wait—you getting your annual ticket?”

He nodded.

“You always buy that on the same day?”

“Yup.”

“What a coincidence.”

“Hm?”

“What a coincidence, that it’s always the same day.”

“Not exactly—” But he didn’t want to get into it with her, so he just shook his head.

“Yeah, it is,” she said. “It’s a coincidence, like your name being the name of a president.” She beamed a big, toothy-white smile at him.

Did she think he had been named Millard Fillmore by accident?

“There’s a Chinese proverb,” he told her, “that says ‘No coincidence, no story.’”

Her hair was the palest color he had ever seen, not a color that occurred in nature, but attractive in a weird way. He filled out the numbers he wanted, and waited for his ticket. One

thing the girl had not noticed was that the numbers he chose were always the same—or almost the same. Only the last number, the so-called Megaball, changed.

“How long do you have left in college?” he asked.

“I just graduated. This is my last summer here, what do you think of that? I have to get a real job now.”

The machine was having some sort of problem, and he watched her tapping keys and mumbling at it. She had one of those effortlessly beautiful bodies that some young women were blessed with. It was kind of flirtatious but not exactly flirting, all that Mr. President stuff, but his policy about dating was he crossed the bridge—he never dated women on the island. She was too young for him anyway—if she had just graduated, that made her around twenty-two, and he had just turned fifty. He dated mostly young women, but not that young, plus he knew something about twenty-two and what he knew wasn’t good. He turned and studied the inflatable rafts, the foam pool noodles, the flip-flop rack.

“Mr. President?”

He looked up. The machine was printing out his lottery ticket. He reached for it.

“Good luck, Mr. President.”

“I don’t believe in luck.”

“Then why are you buying a Megaball ticket!”

He laughed. “Good luck to you too,” he said, “with your job search and everything.”

“You said you don’t believe in luck!”

“Well, not for me. For you, maybe.”

“Thanks!” By now, he was thinking his comments were disingenuous—everything that had happened to him good or bad, especially bad, had been luck. Well, almost everything. There were some things he’d brought on himself.

The cashier turned to a short, sunburned man approaching with an armload of soda and beer. “How about you? You want a Megaball ticket? You never know, you might get lucky. A guy like you—any guy, really, can get lucky—” She smiled, and winked at him. “Like *him*—like President Fillmore.”

He always introduced himself to people as Mill Fillmore, wanting to stay away from the Millard thing, and there was only one person it hadn’t worked on, Dolores Moreau, when he met her a long time ago. He said to her, “Mill Fillmore,” and she said, “Like Millard? Millard Fillmore?”

Standing in the convenience store, turning to leave, he remembered her, and how it had been—the gangly, lost kid of twenty-two that he was then, same age as the store clerk. Barely able to tie a knot in a tie, unrecognizable to him now, a different person. He and Dolores had met at the airport, that first time. They found a deserted gate area, so they could spread the papers out and go over them, and she led him all the way over by the window, with a view of the planes on the tarmac in the sun, and he unloaded his briefcase, laying out everything on the black leather seat between the one where she sat and the one where he sat. The light from the window was harsh on her face. Her makeup was slightly too dark for her skin; her lipstick was bleeding into the tiny lines above her lip, and he sat trying not to look at her. Her eyes were deep, and very dark; he would figure out later, the darkest brown. Her hair, too, was near-black, long and thick and wavy. She was a big woman, not heavy, just wide-shouldered, wide-hipped. Even then, young and stupid as he was, he knew what she was agreeing to was a bad idea. Just *how*



bad, though, he couldn't know—too young, too stupid. Or maybe some part of him did know. Her hands shook, picking up the papers. She threw the contracts down, clasped her hands together to stop them shaking, cut him off from talking, said she was ready to sign, and the look in her eyes was terrified and determined. If he had walked away—or never shown up—she might still be alive.

She was the first woman he gave flowers to. She was the only woman who ever bought him a car. She was not the reason he purchased a lottery ticket once a year. Not exactly.

Millard walked out of the store, dropped his sunglasses down from their perch on his head, settled them on his nose, and headed into the sunlight.

## **Chapter 2**

The busboy was pinching her ass again. “Cut it the fuck out, I told you. Hijo de puta! Qué asshole!” She took the tray she was carrying under her arm and threw it at him but he was way too fast and it just clattered to the greasy floor. He grabbed it up and ran off with it laughing, toward the walk-in. Now she would have to go back and get another tray. She looked down the end of the kitchen to the line, the girls moving through, picking up their food, the cooks yelling and slamming plates around. The food was starting to crowd up bad, and so were the tickets, hanging above the plates. Fucking Sunday brunch. Fucking coupons.

She headed back for a serving tray but stepped around the corner just before she got there. The supply closet was open and she went in, stopped inside the door, and pulled out her

phone. “Querida,” she said when her girlfriend answered. “You check my numbers?” The voice on the other end sounded sleepy, saying yeah but no, she didn’t win, neither of them had, but what did they expect? “Okay bueno, thanks for checking.” She thought: *Cariña*. She closed her eyes and imagined her girlfriend’s body. And then a clamor in the kitchen, and someone shouting, someone laughing, and she said goodbye and went to find a tray.

He was sixty-eight years old with a birthday coming up, and his wife did not like seeing him out there mowing the lawn, but she stood at the front door and watched anyway.

His instrument of choice was a self-propelled push mower with a 19-inch deck, nimble enough to let him avoid simple back-and-forth patterns. He liked to begin by carving ideas in the center of the lawn. Today his first idea was  $E=mc^2$ . A lawn-mowing dance—twisting, reversing, tight-spiraling. *Old my ass*, he told himself. People walking their dogs stopped and stared, briefly. Joggers passing by lost their rhythm for a step or two.

He was in the middle of some phrasing that was too long to pull off—*I think that I shall never see a poem lovely as a tree*—when he heard his wife yelling something from the front step and he had to cut the mower. “Hey, all those lottery tickets you bought yesterday,” she said. “None of them came in, pal. None of them worked. Not a one.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” he said, laughing, and started up the mower again. He blew her a kiss, and she blew one back. *Mowing and knowing*, he thought. *And still going*.

Tara sat at her kitchen table, trying to fork apart a defective English muffin. Any other day she would have stood at the counter, by the toaster, with the English muffin, but it was the morning after the shooting and she didn’t feel too good and needed to sit.

Store brand muffins were the problem. She looked down upon a litter of white bread bits on the tabletop—she had not had the presence of mind to work over a plate. There were more crumbs than muffin at this point. And the toaster was way over there.

The night before, she had managed to drive herself home somehow, after everything. It seemed miraculous now but at the time she'd still been running on the last glowing ember of her adrenaline, and she could feel it coming down to ash and didn't want to still be at her mother's house when that happened, when she would be spent and unable to move. So she'd gotten into her car over her mother's protests and driven the six miles to her apartment. Don't go, don't go, her mom said, following her out the door, down the short sidewalk to the curb, neighbors hanging around the doors of the other townhouses, and hanging around their cars—it was late at night but it was Saturday—they were watching all this, not trying to hide it. Her mother stopped at the curb and clasped her hands as if she were praying, stood there with her limp dark hair hanging down and her mascara smeared under her eyes from crying—she looked like a vampire, a puffy pasty vampire—and she was still talking, she would not shut up, and the last thing she wailed out at her daughter was *you shouldn't be alone right now!*

Tara didn't remember the drive but she remembered reaching her apartment, making the turn into Lakewood—no lake, no wood, just like her mother's complex Regatta Bay had no boats, no water—and sitting in her car below the pink cast of the streetlight that turned everything cold and unreal. Afraid to get out and not sure why; sensing for the first time her mother's absence.

She had the car window down, and rested her arm there, and listened to the up-and-down hum of the freeway behind its big concrete wall on the other side of the buildings. She looked up

at where she needed to go, her apartment on the second floor. Up the concrete stairs to her door. She didn't want to get out of the car.

Back at her mother's house her mom had said, "We gotta tell your stepfather." Tara got a weird feeling that her mother didn't want to say his name. She had been married and divorced three times but there was only one *stepfather*. Tara had sat cross-legged on the carpet at her mother's feet; her mom was in one of her velvet armchairs, which Tara found too prissy to sit in at that moment.

Then her mother reversed herself and said, "No, no, we gotta *not* tell your stepfather." She thought about it and added, "Shit, he'll find out anyway."

Before her mother's, Tara had been at the police station—a noisy, brightly lit place just like on TV—sitting on a metal folding chair while the detective asked her questions. Her mom wanted to hold her hand and Tara kept pulling it away, feeling as if her skin was electric and anything touching it shocked. She kept trying to talk to her mom about getting her car but the detective kept interrupting. She wanted her car so she could get home later, she couldn't imagine any way of getting home without her car. The detective smelled like cigarettes and his office smelled like greasy food. She could see the fast-food bags in his gray steel trash can. He had big red pudgy hands, and he spoke to her in a slow, matter-of-fact way that made him seem both tired and sad although his face showed nothing. He gave up at one point and let her talk about her car, and her mother explained to her that they had already got the car, because Tara had gone on and on about it at the hospital.

The emergency room had been loud and bright too, although they had parked her in a wheelchair surrounded by hospital curtains that had been pulled around her like screens. It was a bay that was sized for a bed, so with just the wheelchair in it the space seemed large. There was

a lot of shiny gray floor to look at, and the curtains themselves, which seemed amazingly tall. They went from knee-height (she could see the lower legs and feet of the nurses moving around out there, in their scrubs and sneakers) all the way up to their slides in the tracks on the ceiling. The upper foot or so of fabric was a kind of netting—for ventilation, she supposed?—and the long curtains had a vague pastel pattern but were mostly beige. Her mother was off somewhere, Tara didn't know where but it was okay. She felt safe there, surrounded by her fabric walls. No one asking her things, touching her, bothering her. She wished they would turn the lights down but she wasn't about to ask, and as she thought about it she decided these probably weren't the kind of lights they could turn down.

Back at the store, the lights had been all red and blue and blinding white, pulsing and sweeping, and she had covered her eyes. People were helping her, carrying-pulling her, other people were shouting or maybe not shouting but talking loudly. There was a demanding sound to all the voices, even the ones helping her. The small lot outside the store—barely big enough for its gas island and a couple of parking spaces—was full of vehicles and lights. She was aware of small groups of people at the edges, a little ways off, looking on. They had no faces.

Here, in her hand, was the English muffin; there was the toaster. She had already managed the coffeemaker, her first priority, and this meant she could handle the toasting situation too. The small kitchen was full of the smell of coffee, and the sound of its gurgling as it finished brewing. She was sore, sitting there, at her tiny kitchen table. Her shoulder hurt, and her knees.

A few minutes later she was snuggled on her couch with her feet tucked under her. She had pulled the drapes across the door to the balcony, to keep out the light but also because it glared on the TV. The English muffin had burned but she had her coffee, the mug warm

between her hands. She closed her eyes, the better to feel that warmth, while the television, tuned to some morning show, chattered at her. Her ears opened to its sounds, just as her nose embraced the coffee smell and her hands embraced the mug, and the sofa embraced her. *It will be all right*, she thought. She remembered that feeling, face down on the floor of the store, of not feeling sure it was important to survive. But here she was, alive. Then she pictured the man's leg, lying on the floor, the pants-leg soaked in blood, the fabric all wrinkly as if he had been swimming in his clothes except swimming in blood not water.

On TV they talked about the weather (risk of strong storms in the East in the afternoon and evening). They showed video of a dog leading firefighters to a boy down a well. They talked about last night's Megaball jackpot, which—finally, after all these weeks!—got hit, with two winners, one in Maryland and one in Florida, “splitting the *awesome* mother lode” as the perky young anchorwoman ad-libbed to her male colleague. “These are two lucky, *lucky* people!”

Tara opened her eyes, looked into the eyes of the woman on TV, who was blond, with perfect hair, perfect makeup, a chunky purple necklace. The woman said that the winning Megaball number appeared to include the date, and there was speculation that it was a birthday or anniversary and that perhaps the world would find out when the winners came forward!

Tara blinked, and turned over a slow thought in her head. *Yes*, she thought, *it was a birthday*.

The television woman's face changed. As if a robot inside her head was going click-click-whirr. For an instant, the next facial expression seemed to elude her. She had to stop being giggly-happy, but she wasn't going to take a turn to being grave, either. She settled into fascinated. “In a bizarre twist,” she said, “the Maryland winner purchased their ticket yesterday

at a convenience store that was the scene of an attempted robbery that ended tragically in the shooting death of a customer.”

Oh, thought Tara. That place. She got up from the couch, feeling it in her shoulder. Her knees, as she began to step across the carpet, felt like an old lady’s knees, not a twenty-five-year-old’s. She had to move because the image of that man’s leg—and his other leg, and his stomach—was threatening again. The way the people had stood looking down at him—the way they did that, the particular way they looked at him, was what told her he was dead.

He had died, but she had not died. *Pinch me, I’m dreaming* was something her mother said sometimes.

She started to move out of the room, with no clear purpose in mind. Standing at the doorway to the kitchen, she saw the fluffy scattering of white bits on the table and for a second didn’t know what it was. Then the voices from the television caught her attention, and she looked back to them. They were sounding cheerful again, had returned to talking about the apparent date embedded in the winning number. “Do we have the number?” said the man. “Can we show that?”

It appeared on the screen. Tara looked at it. The TV voices were explaining how it worked as a birthday or anniversary.

That’s right, thought Tara, wanting to confirm it to the TV woman. It’s a birthday. Then she wondered how she’d come to be standing there, where she’d been trying to go, why she had gotten up from the couch.

She stared at the screen, then squinted at it, then shook her head quickly, trying to shake something loose that was stuck in it, then stared again, and kept staring.