

LOTTO TROUBLE

Chapter ONE

Pankaj

Pankaj was frustrated. He hated his job as a mini-market clerk at Castaways Gas Station. Working on Route 9 in Sayreville, New Jersey, was not his life-long ambition. Pankaj knew he would do a lot better than this. This was temporary. Like other Indian immigrants he knew, he was glad to be in America, but hitting lottery buttons and selling Ring Dings was beneath him.

Yesterday had been a real pain in the ass. The lottery jackpot was twenty million, which meant he had to spend more time at the Lotto machine. This took time away from his studying. Today was Wednesday, and he didn't have to spend the day hitting buttons because when he came in at 5:30 that morning to open up, the machine had been down.

Ajig, the night clerk, had left a note that the machine jammed at eight o'clock and he had no idea how to fix it. The word "jammed" was spelled as "jaymed." He was working with a bunch of idiots. Most of the other attendants were intellectually bankrupt and practically illiterate. At least his cousin Raj could read, work the credit card machine, and make change. He also had enough of a personality to say "thank you."

Pankaj never said thank you because he didn't want to engage in conversation with customers. He wanted to get back to studying. He was an engineering student, attending college in the evenings at Rutgers University. It was taking longer than normal going to school at night, but he was determined to get his degree.

He considered himself bright, maybe too bright for his own good. Talking to customers would just slow him down, and besides he really didn't like most people. The students at school thought that he was arrogant, and he thought they were spoiled rich kids. The only person he spoke to was his cousin Raj, and

that was because he lived in a small apartment in Perth Amboy with Raj and his Aunt Raashi.

His finances were in disarray. Despite having borrowed the maximum through student loan programs and receiving a partial scholarship, he was still delinquent on his fall semester's tuition. The bursar's office had given him an extension but had threatened him with a forced leave of absence, and his fall semester's credits not counting towards graduation. He feared that he would have similar problems next semester as well, which would jeopardize his ability to graduate on time and secure an engineering position.

His bank account had five hundred dollars, which served as a cushion. There was no sense giving that to the University since he still owed in excess of three thousand.

He had worked so hard and come so far that the thought of not being able to earn his degree was making Pankaj very anxious.

He skimped on as many expenses as he could. He delayed minor repairs on his beat up 1986 Plymouth. He desperately needed the car to get to work, his classes at Rutgers, and his study sessions in the library.

Pankaj couldn't afford to seek medical treatment on the severe stomach pains he was experiencing lately. He feared he was developing an ulcer from worrying about his financial shortfall. Other stomach problems had caused him to soil his pants twice in the last month when he was unable to reach the bathroom on time.

Raashi's apartment was too cramped and noisy for him to get any serious work done. The fat fuck watched television all the time. She always had the damn thing on too loud. When Pankaj wasn't referring to her as the fat fuck, he sometimes called her a fat four-eyed bitch because of her thick glasses, her nasty disposition and the rolls of offending blubber that seemed to endlessly cascade off her body.

Pankaj knew he wasn't a particularly nice person, but then again no one but his older brother Naresh had ever been nice to him. He'd had a very close relationship with his brother. After their parents died, Naresh took care of Pankaj, acting as his father, brother, and best friend. He could tell him anything. They would have done anything for each other.

About a year ago, a penniless drunk driver had senselessly ended Naresh's life, running him down as he was crossing the street. Naresh had been working a double shift, giving every extra dollar to Pankaj to help with his college costs. With Pankaj also working, college was affordable, but with Naresh gone, the financial burden had caught up with him. He applied for additional scholarships and loans, but despite his good grades, funding was not granted.

After Naresh's death Pankaj moved in with Raashi. He deeply missed his brother. When Naresh died, a part of him died also. It turned Pankaj bitter. Things would have been different if Naresh were still here.

Raashi was his dead mother's sister, but he felt nothing towards her, and the feeling was mutual. If Pankaj didn't fork over one hundred seventy-five dollars each month for rent and give her an extra fifty dollars for food, Raashi would throw him out on his ass. Pankaj suspected that most of this extra money went for booze. Raashi went through periodic bouts of depression and turned to alcohol over the slightest upset.

The neighborhood sucked. It was a place where drug dealers were the kings of the streets, and people without a future hung their hats. He wanted to just get out, become someone, get a good job and live in a decent place. Pankaj wanted to own a house in a nice neighborhood and have a big screen TV with a satellite dish.

He was twenty-three and sixteen credits short of his degree. The only reason he liked the mini-market job was that he could put in a lot of reading time.

Pankaj worked very long hours. He had to be there at five-thirty in the morning, and stay until four in the afternoon. Raj pumped gas at the station and rode to and from work with Pankaj each day. Pankaj would rush home, take a shower, and go to Rutgers.

Raj worked hard because he needed the money too. Raashi would throw him out just as fast as Pankaj if he didn't give her his paycheck. She then gave Raj an allowance. Raashi would have demanded more money from Pankaj if he didn't give Raj the ride to work. If Pankaj took a day off, he still had to give Raj a ride.

Pankaj did not feel guilty when he made a little too much noise in the early morning hours. He loved waking up the fat

lazy bitch. Raj always put his fingers near his mouth to make a shush sound, but that only caused Pankaj to walk louder, and sometimes slam the door on the way out.

That Wednesday morning he opened the rollers of the lottery machine and painstakingly removed all the excess paper lodged in some of the deeper crevices. He noticed that one of the pieces of metal seemed a bit bent. The night clerk, Ajig, must have tried to clear the jam and bent the part. This machine was out of operation.

He called the hot-line number for the company that serviced the machines and was told to expect someone in the early afternoon. The technician had come, put in a new part and got it operational by 3:30.

That had made his day a disaster. He had to tell everyone who came in that the machine was down. He put an out of order sign on the machine but all the bozos kept asking:

“Is the machine out of order?”

He felt like replying, “No asshole, your brain is,” but he was polite and replied, “Yes.”

Then they asked when it would be fixed. He had to engage in the art of conversation. He couldn't get his work done. He would be slowed down further when they asked for scratch off tickets because they couldn't buy the ones from the machines.

Then they would stand at his counter and scratch them off. Then, if they won something they would cash in the ticket. The usual prize was more scratch-off tickets, and the process would begin again.

He was in a foul mood. He finally sold his first lottery ticket of the day at 3:40, and the idiot had only asked for one. He had to be interrupted for a lousy dollar. What made it worse was that the guy gave him a bent lottery card on which he had chosen his six numbers.

Once the ticket was printed, Pankaj noticed that the jerk-face had requested the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6. Even if that turned out to be the winning combination it wouldn't pay much because hundreds of other fools would have played the same combination and would have to share the multi-million dollar prize. It was almost time to leave.

The guy, who came in next, at 3:43, ordered twenty tickets. At least he knew what he was doing. He paid his money and said

exactly what he wanted. Pankaj liked the experienced lottery player as long as he didn't make chitchat.

At 3:45 a fat lady with glasses came in. "Can I have five, please," she asked with an obnoxious whine. She reminded Pankaj of Raashi, and he was not too pleased.

"Five of what?" Pankaj replied.

"Lotto," she said, "I want to win twenty million."

Pankaj hit the buttons and the machine jammed. Something was wrong.

"Sorry," he said, "we've had trouble all day, it isn't working."

"Oh, I really wanted to win. Oh well, give me five scratch-offs."

His day from hell was almost over. Pankaj put the out of order sign on the machine and when the lady had stopped invading his space, he called the hot-line number again. The company had a policy that when there were two outages in a twenty-four hour period, they would bring in a replacement machine. They promised a replacement to be delivered at eight the next morning. They would need it, because the drawing was every Monday and Thursday. With tomorrow being Thursday, there would be a lot of business especially with such a high jackpot.

When the night clerk, Ajig, came in, Pankaj explained the situation. He grabbed his things, walked outside, got Raj all set, and they were sitting in his car by 4:01. It was time to get out of this hellhole. At least he was going to school; Raj was going to spend the night with his mother.

Chapter TWO

Kuldeep

Kuldeep was hanging out on his front stoop. He was a big ugly man, weighing two hundred thirty pounds and standing about six-foot-three. His very large head made him look extremely scary. He was twenty-nine-years old and was always in trouble. He took drugs and was known to sell them.

Kuldeep lived five doors away from Pankaj and Raj. He used to hassle the two skinny kids, but respected the fact that they worked so hard. One time, Pankaj actually offered to help find him work at the gas station, or one of the other stations in the chain.

In his own mind Pankaj knew Kuldeep would never take him up on the offer. Frankly, he wouldn't have felt comfortable getting Kuldeep a job, because Kuldeep was not honest, couldn't be trusted, and would get fired anyway. That would be a bad reflection on Pankaj.

Kuldeep had little use for real work, preferring to hang in the street, sell some drugs, score some drugs and just get by. He would talk to Pankaj sometimes. He enjoyed talking to Pankaj because Pankaj was smart. Not only was Pankaj book smart, Kuldeep thought Pankaj had street smarts also.

He also knew that Pankaj had a real nasty streak in him. If he didn't keep his head in the books all the time he might have made a pretty good crook. He actually would be a good leader. Kuldeep might even have been willing to take orders from the skinny kid.

Kuldeep felt no such affinity for Raj but left him alone because he liked Pankaj, and because fat Raashi serviced his sexual needs from time to time. Many days when Raj and Pankaj were at work, Raashi would motion him to her front door and invite him in for sex. She liked the big, strong but ugly Kuldeep. He would go into her bedroom, into her unmade bed and do the dirty deed.

Raashi always had the television on, but Kuldeep insisted that she turn down the sound when he was there. Kuldeep was the only man Raashi had had in the last five years, as she got fatter and fatter.

Whenever Kuldeep scored drugs, he would use some to entice the young girls in the neighborhood to give him some action. During those periods, he would pretend he didn't see Raashi motioning him to her front door, and he ignored her calling out to him from her window. Sometimes he would ignore Raashi for weeks at a time, while other weeks he was in her house almost every day, sometimes twice a day.

Raashi paid more attention to the television than to him when he was inside her. He really didn't care. She was a warm body, and there was plenty of blubber to keep him occupied.

Nevertheless, he didn't want anyone to know he did Raashi, because he was afraid it would ruin his reputation. Whenever he could get that fresh lean pussy, he would go for it.

Kuldeep had done Raashi twice yesterday and once around lunchtime today. She offered him lunch afterward, but he didn't much care for her food.

He was looking forward to the evening. He expected to score some drugs, enough to last him two weeks, get him some young chicks every night for a week, and still leave him plenty to sell on the street. He smiled when he thought of not having to see Raashi for a while. He smiled a wicked smile. Tonight he would be back in the groove.

Pankaj and Raj pulled up in front of their apartment and saw Kuldeep outside.

"Hey, hard-working men. Want to spend some of your cash on some good stuff? Getting it tonight, man."

"You know I don't do drugs," said Pankaj.

"Raj, what about you?" asked Kuldeep. Raj didn't say anything, but approached his front door.

Pankaj and Raj walked through the front door of Raashi's apartment. Pankaj noticed the smell in the hallway outside Raashi's room. It smelled of sex. He wondered if Raashi was doing it to herself, or if the fat bitch actually had company. "Who would do her?" thought Pankaj. He suspected it might have been Kuldeep, but he didn't know for sure.

He never discussed it with Raj. Raj never said anything about the smell in Raashi's room. Pankaj wasn't sure he was even aware of it. He probably grew up with that disgusting smell all of his life and didn't even know what it was.

Chapter THREE

Big Bob Shaw

Detective Robert "Big Bob" Shaw of the Marlboro Police Department sat at his desk. His shift had ended an hour ago, but he had a lot of paper work to attend to. He hated paper work. He

liked the action. He liked using his head. Shaw had a very high opinion of himself. He had a “good head” he thought, “a very good head” if one told the truth. His good head was being wasted in this small town.

Last week his major case was determining which teenagers had vandalized a bunch of mailboxes. The week before, there was a drug bust, and the week before that they had arrested a local bookie.

The month before he'd had his best case of the year. Two young Russians were shopping in a local strip mall and passing off counterfeit money. They were nabbed with ten thousand dollars of the counterfeit cash, and Shaw had to coordinate the situation with the Secret Service. Although the Secret Service protects the President, it is an arm of the Department of Treasury and responsible for the federal investigation of all counterfeiting.

Shaw began his career at the age of nineteen walking a beat in Philadelphia. During his last four years, he worked homicide. He saw too many senseless killings and lost the stomach for it. He left Philadelphia after eight years with the rank of sergeant.

He would have advanced higher but he was not a political person and stepped on many toes along the way. Shaw realized that his personality sometimes got the best of him, but he knew he was a good cop.

He'd joined the Marlboro Police Department twenty-two years ago, and now at the age of forty-nine found himself going through the motions. The casework was not very interesting or challenging. Very few bad things happened in this small, affluent community of about thirty-seven thousand people.

During the second year of his twenty-two years in Marlboro, there had been a homicide, which was ultimately ruled a suicide. Although the Blassy case was officially closed, Shaw kept his mind open, since he still believed it was a murder.

He could retire and collect a pension, having put in his years of service, but what would he do? He could start a business or a new career, but at forty-nine he didn't have the desire to change his life. Besides, no matter how boring things had become, he still liked police work, and he liked the power that went with it. He just wished Marlboro had a little more action from time to time.

His only child, a daughter, had died of a drug overdose while living in Boston five years before. Her death devastated him. Adding to the irony was the fact that he was Marlboro's chief detective dealing with narcotics, and had spent six years running the Marlboro chapter of DARE. DARE was an anti-drug program set up in the public schools to encourage positive teen and pre-teen behavior rather than the negative drug scene. For a while he thought that this couldn't have happened to his little girl.

Surely someone had shot her up with drugs and her death was the result of foul play. After taking a month off and spending some time in Boston and asking lots of questions, he realized he didn't really know his little girl. She had turned into a different person. The reality was that she had turned to drugs.

He and his wife of twenty-four years, Mary, had divorced three years ago. They couldn't live with themselves or each other after their Jenny had died. Mary blamed him for being too strict with Jenny, driving her away from home.

Shaw thought he was a good father. His little girl had simply grown up and wanted to live away from home for a while. He didn't blame himself at all. It was just one of those things. There were constant arguments, and two years after Jenny's death they went their separate ways. Mary moved back to Baltimore, where she grew up, and moved in with her sister. Bob stayed in their modest home in Marlboro and pursued his mundane police matters.

It was 5:15, there were no pressing matters, and the paperwork could wait. Shaw decided to go home. It was a Wednesday night, and he had a date. He'd met this waitress named Gina at a local Italian restaurant who had flirted mercilessly with him. She was only twenty-seven and she had a great body.

Bob thought himself handsome and rugged. He went to the gym and kept himself in good shape. He was going to show this waitress tonight. He never thought of Mary anymore. There had been a parade of women throwing themselves at him. He could probably have dated five a week if he'd had the time and the money.

Man, if he only had more money. The house was almost paid for, but he was paying alimony to Mary. If he had more money he could wine and dine these women and afford the wardrobe he

deserved. Clothes made the man, and he figured that with more expensive threads he could get even better quality women. They would take him even more seriously. These young girls were something. This Gina tonight was going to be something. He couldn't wait.

When he was married to Mary he really didn't act that way. All those years he had fooled around plenty of times. They were all, however, situations that had simply fallen into his lap. He wasn't looking for it. He wasn't out on the make. His affairs were always short flings. Now the game of getting women was exhilarating. If only his bankroll could keep up with his libido, life would be perfect.

He tossed an envelope addressed to him by a detective in Perth Amboy at the top of his "to do" stack. He had opened it and taken a brief look. The details would wait till Thursday. Gina, that sexy waitress with the full lips, was waiting. He would not keep her waiting long.