

# JUST MY LUCK

ADELE PARKS



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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For Jim and Conrad.

I won the lottery.

# THE BUCKINGHAMSHIRE GAZETTE

9<sup>th</sup> November, 2015

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**E**laine Winterdale, 37, a property manager, has been handed a suspended prison sentence for failing to maintain a faulty gas boiler that caused the death of two tenants from carbon-monoxide poisoning.

Reveka Albu, 29, was found dead with her son Benke, 2, by her husband Mr Toma Albu, 32, at a property they rented in Reading, on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2014.

Following an investigation by the Health and Safety Executive, Ms Winterdale was today sentenced at Reading Crown Court for breaches of gas safety laws after she failed to arrange gas safety checks to be carried out at the property over a three-year period, despite assuring her employer, the owner of the property, that she had done so.

In June 2011, an employee of National Grid Gas visited the property to replace the gas meter. The boiler was labelled as 'immediately dangerous' due to 'fumes at open flue' and was disconnected. A report was left with Mrs Albu and subsequently a letter was sent to Ms Winterdale, which she failed to respond to or pass to the owner of the property.

The boiler was not repaired. For two and a half years the only heating in the home was from one borrowed electric fire.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2014, Mr Toma Albu was away from home overnight and returned to find the flat warm; his wife informed him that after repeated petitions Ms Winterdale had finally arranged for the boiler to be reconnected.

On the evening of 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2014, Mr Albu returned home after a double shift to find his wife and son dead. Tests showed Mrs Albu's blood contained 61 per cent carbon monoxide. A level of 50 per cent is enough to be fatal.

Ms Winterdale pleaded guilty to seven breaches of the Gas Safety Regulations and was given a 16-month prison sentence, suspended for two years. She was also given 200 hours community service, was fined £4,000 and was ordered to pay costs of £17,500.

## I

# *Lexi*

*Saturday, 20<sup>th</sup> April*

I can't face going straight home to Jake. I'm not ready to deal with this. I need to try to process it first. But how? Where do I start? I have no idea. The blankness in my mind terrifies me. I always know what to do. I always have a solution, a way of tackling something, giving it a happy spin. I'm Lexi Greenwood, the woman everyone knows of as the fixer, the smiler (some might even slightly snidely call me a do-gooder). Lexi Greenwood, wife, mother, friend.

You think you know someone. But you don't know anyone, not really. You never can.

I *need* a drink. I drive to our local. Sod it, I'll leave the car at the pub and walk home, pick it up in the morning. I order a glass of red wine, a large one, then I look for a seat tucked away in the corner where I can down my drink alone. It's Easter weekend, and a rare hot one. The place is packed. As I thread my way through the heaving bar, a number of neighbours raise a glass, gesturing to me to join them; they ask after the kids and Jake. Everyone else in the pub seems celebratory, buoyant. I feel detached. Lost. That's the thing about living in a small village, you recognise everyone. Sometimes that reassures me, sometimes it's

inconvenient. I politely and apologetically deflect their friendly overtures and continue in my search for a solitary spot. Saturday vibes are all around me, but I feel nothing other than stunned, stressed, isolated.

You think you know someone.

What does this mean for our group? Our family. Friends that are like family. What a joke. Blatantly, we're not friends anymore. I've been trying to hide from the facts for some time, hoping there was a misunderstanding, an explanation; nothing can explain away this.

I told Jake I'd only be a short while; I should text him to say I'll be longer. I reach for my phone and realise in my haste to leave the house, I haven't brought it with me. Jake will be wondering where I am; I don't care. I down my wine. The acidity hits my throat, a shock and a relief at once. Then I go to the bar to order a second.

The local pub is only a ten-minute walk away from our home but by the time I attempt the walk back, the red wine had taken effect. Unfortunately, I am feeling the sort of drunk that nurtures paranoia and fury, rather than a light head or heart. What can I do to right this wrong? I have to do something. I can't carry on as normal, pretending I know nothing of it. Can I?

As I approach home, I see Jake at the window, peering out. I barely recognise him. He looks taut, tense. On spotting me, he runs to fling open the front door.

'Lexi, Lexi, quickly come in here,' he hiss-whispers, clearly agitated. 'Where have you been? Why didn't you take your phone? I've been calling you. I needed to get hold of you.'

What now? My first thoughts turn to our son. 'Is it Logan? Has he hurt himself?' I ask anxiously. I'm already teetering on the edge; my head quickly goes to a dark place. Split skulls, broken bones. A dash to A&E isn't unheard of; thirteen-year-old Logan has daredevil tendencies and the sort of mentality that thinks

shimmying down a drainpipe is a reasonable way to exit his bedroom in order to go outside and kick a football about. My fifteen-year-old daughter, Emily, rarely causes me a moment's concern.

'No, no, he's fine. Both the kids are in their rooms. It's... Look, come inside, I can't tell you out here.' Jake is practically bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet. I can't read him. My head is too fuzzy with wine and full of rage and disgust. I resent Jake for causing more drama, although he has no idea what shit I'm dealing with. I've never seen him quite this way before. If I touched him, I might get an electric shock; he oozes a dangerous energy.

I follow my husband into the house. He is hurrying, urging me to speed up. I slow down, deliberately obtuse. In the hallway he turns to me, takes a deep breath, runs his hands through his hair but won't, can't, meet my eyes. For a crazy moment I think he is about to confess to having an affair. 'OK, just tell me, did you buy a lottery ticket this week?' he asks.

'Yes.' I have bought a lottery ticket every week of my life for the last fifteen years. Despite all the bother last week, I have stuck to my habit.

Jake takes in another deep breath, sucking all the oxygen from the hallway. 'OK, and did you—' he breaks off, finally drags his eyes to meet mine. I'm not sure what I see in his gaze, an almost painful longing, fear and panic. Yet at the same time there is hope there too. 'Did you pick the usual numbers?'

'Yes.'

His jaw is still set tight. 'You have the ticket?'

'Yes.'

'You're sure?'

'Yes, it's pinned on the noticeboard in the kitchen. Why? What's going on?'

'Fuck.' Jake lets out a breath that has the power of a storm. He falls back against the hall wall for a second and then he rallies,

grabs my hand and pulls me into the room that was designed to be a dining room but has ended up being a sort of study slash dumping ground. A place where the children sometimes do their homework, I tackle paying the household bills, and towering piles of ironing, punctured footballs and old trainers hide out. Jake sits down in front of the computer and starts to quickly open various tabs.

‘I wasn’t sure that we even had a ticket, but when you were late back and the film I was watching had finished, I couldn’t resist checking. I don’t know why. Habit, I suppose. And look.’

‘What?’ I can’t quite work out what he’s on about, it might be the wine, it might be because my head is still full of betrayal and deceit, but I can’t seem to climb into his moment. I turn to the screen. The lottery website. Brash and loud. A clash of bright colours and fonts.

1, 8, 20, 29, 49, 58. The numbers glare at me from the computer. Numbers I am so familiar with. Yet they seem peculiar and unbelievable.

‘I don’t understand. Is this a joke?’

‘No, Lexi. No! It’s for real. We’ve only gone and won the bloody lottery!’



## *Lexi*

£17.8 million.

£17.8 million.

£17.8 million.

No matter how often I say it, I can't make sense of it. In fact, the opposite is true. The more I say it, the less real it seems. I can't imagine what it means. Not really. Our numbers are on the screen. They are still there, I've checked a thousand times, just in case, but they are *there*. And the other numbers too. The numbers saying how much our winning ticket is worth – 17,870,896 pounds. So much money! I rush to the kitchen and grab the ticket off the noticeboard, suddenly terrified that a freak gust of wind has blown it away, or that one of the kids has knocked it off when they pinned up their letters from school. Although this makes no sense because in the entire history of our family life, neither of our two kids has ever pinned up a letter from school; I'm much more likely to find them crumpled up at the bottom of their rucksacks. I stare at the tiny hole made by the drawing pin; the ticket is slightly creased at the corner. How can this scrap of paper be worth 17.8 million pounds? It's unbelievable. It's incomprehensible. What does this mean for us? I turn to Jake to see if he is making any more sense of this. Jake beams at me.

It is the widest, most complete beam I have seen him wear for years. I'm reminded of our early days together. When we were nothing other than hope and happiness. It makes me splutter laughter through my nose.

'Are you sure this is right?'

'Absolutely. I've checked. I've watched the draw six times on YouTube. They've announced that there is a winner. Just one. Lexi, that's us! We are rich. Rich beyond our wildest dreams.'

I giggle again because the phrase is crazy. Rich beyond our wildest dreams is something people only say in pretty dreadful plays or movies. My body is tingling. I can feel every nerve end. It is almost painful. 'Wow. I mean *wow*. What shall we do?' I ask.

'Well, we need to call it in.'

'How do we do that?' My fingers are cold, immobilised, but on the other hand I feel hot and no longer solid. I am melting. The two glasses of wine I downed now feel like six. Shock, I suppose.

'I don't know. It must be on the website or something.' Jake starts to dart around the screen, hitting buttons. I can't believe it. Don't dare to. It can't be true. It's too lucky. It's too wonderful. I am quivering, Jake might be able to hear my teeth chattering. I notice his hands are shaking too. 'Here it is. The National Lottery winners' line. We have to call them.' Jake pauses and stares at me. His eyes gleaming, bright but unfocused. He picks up the house phone and hits the buttons to dial the number on screen. We almost never use the landline, but the occasion demands gravitas and somehow the dusty neglected phone on the desk feels more serious than a mobile.

'I think we've won the lottery. The whole amount. The jackpot.' The person at the other end of the phone must ask Jake if he bought the ticket because he looks confused and a bit irritated when he replies, 'No. My wife actually bought it. Well, yes, she paid for it... Yes, yes, she's here with me now.' He offers the handset to me. 'They want to talk to you.'

I somehow manage to stumble through the security questions

that confirm where and when I bought the ticket. I suppose some people might find winning tickets or steal them. The lottery company has to be certain I bought ours fair and square.

‘Can you please write your name and address on the back of the ticket now, if you haven’t already done so,’ advises the woman on the end of the line. She sounds calm and measured, which I find comforting but bizarre. I wonder how many times this woman has spoken to winners, to people whose lives will never be the same again following this particular phone call. I wonder what it must be like to be her. I’m struggling to be me. I feel I’m having some sort of out of body experience. I can’t concentrate or reason when she says, ‘Well, congratulations, Mrs Greenwood. You are indeed a winner!’

‘The whole lot?’ I just can’t believe it.

‘Yes, Mrs Greenwood. The whole lot – 17,870,896 pounds sterling.’ The number, massive as it is, rolls fluently off her tongue. I start to giggle. It’s impossible. Earlier on I thought this was the worst night of my life, but now the night has turned around completely. What am I talking about? My life has! ‘Now, Mrs Greenwood, we have people here who’ll take you through the process and for us to do that most effectively we’ll need to know, will you be taking publicity?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’ I imagine the lottery company like it if you take publicity. A good luck story in the papers must mean more tickets are bought but my instinct is to keep this to ourselves.

‘You don’t have to decide now,’ she replies smoothly. ‘One of our winners’ advisors will be in contact with you shortly. They’ll send an email or call you, and then they’ll fix up a meeting. Probably for Tuesday next week. Usually it’s sooner but as it’s a bank holiday on Monday, Tuesday might be better for you?’

‘Yes, yes, whatever you think.’ I don’t want to cause any inconvenience, make someone work on their bank holiday.

‘You can talk through the matter of publicity with them and they will tell you everything about what happens next.’

Jake grabs the phone from me. ‘Will he bring the cheque?’

Even at this distance I can hear the amusement in the woman’s voice. ‘No, there is a tiny bit more paperwork to be done first. Bank account details etc.’

‘When will we get the money?’ I scowl at Jake. He is being crass. I am not sure what the elegant response to winning nearly eighteen million pounds is, but I doubt it is demanding the money like a highway robber.

‘Our advisor will be in touch but if everything runs smoothly, as I’m sure it will, you’ll most likely have the money in your account by Wednesday. Thursday at the latest.’

‘This Wednesday?’ asks Jake, beaming.

‘Yes.’

After the call finishes, we just stare at one another, amazed.

Then through some silent communication, developed after nearly twenty years of marriage, we simultaneously pounce on one another and kiss each other in a way that we haven’t since the first week we dated. Urgent and jubilant, grateful and eager. Pushing away all other thoughts and just staying in the moment, we have fast, intense sex on the desk. For the past ten years – possibly longer – sex has been limited to the bedroom. The exciting, novel nature of this hungry and triumphant sex naturally means it is soon over. I pull up my joggers and laugh, a little self-consciously, ‘Now you really have hit the jackpot.’

Jake holds me close and speaks into my neck, his breath tickling. ‘Actually, technically, *you* have hit the jackpot. You bought the ticket. This win is yours. That’s why they wanted to speak to you on the phone.’

I laugh. ‘What’s yours is mine, though, right?’ It has always been that way between us. It has for so long. We’re a team. Husband and wife. Your spouse is your teammate, right? I shake

my head, as a clouding thought enters it. It has to be addressed. 'Jake, what about the Heathcotes and the Pearsons?'

Jake instantly moves away from me; he concentrates on putting on his pants and jeans and won't meet my gaze. 'What about them?'

'I just went to Jennifer and Fred's tonight. That's where I was earlier.'

'Oh, so not delivering a book to Diane Roper like you said.'

'No.' Normally, I'd be mildly embarrassed that I lied to him about something so petty but in the grand scheme of things, it doesn't register. I hadn't wanted to tell him that I was checking up on Jennifer's story about them going away to Fred's sister's place this weekend. I thought he might have tried to stop me. I thought he'd gently tease me; insist I was getting into a state about nothing.

Although he'd have been wrong.

'They are not away. Like they said they were going to be,' I tell him.

'I see.'

'I drove past their house. What do you think is going on? Why would they lie to us?'

'I have no idea.'

'Don't you care that they've lied to us?'

'Not at all,' he snaps. His tone suggests he cares quite a good deal. I stare at him; his head is bent. He must feel the weight of my gaze because eventually he straightens up and his eyes meet mine. Breathing fast and shallow, he says, 'We've just won the lottery, Lexi.'

'But the Heathcotes, the Pearsons?'

His expression changes to one that is smug and victorious, but there is also something about the way he moves his mouth that reveals to me that he is smarting. Concerned? He draws me to him. 'Look, this is karma, after the way they behaved last week.'

‘It was just Patrick who was out of order.’

‘The others sided with him. It was humiliating. We don’t need them,’ he whispers.

I lay my head on his chest and breathe him in. ‘Are you sure?’ I ask. I want to believe him.

‘Not now we don’t, Lexi. We have everything.’ I try to heed his words. I want to feel absolutely safe, secure. I’d always thought being rich would make me feel invincible, but honestly, I feel apprehensive. I bury my face into his neck. He has always been my haven and I will the feeling of dauntless unassailability to overpower me.

‘We need to think how we are going to tell them.’

‘I’ll buy a Ferrari and drive past their houses,’ says Jake. ‘Fuck them, Lexi, we are rich!’

I start to giggle, because it is truly marvellous. ‘Rich beyond our wildest dreams,’ I quote his words back to him. Then I kiss him, my handsome husband, and I hold him tightly, putting all thoughts of our former friends – who I thought were the best people in the world but now realise I hardly knew – out of my head.

## *Lexi*

*Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> April*

I wake up and my heart is beating so fast and hard, I can hear it. Adrenalin and excitement yes, of course, but also a fairly clear conviction that someone is about to jump out on me and say, 'Just kidding!' I can't believe we are lottery winners. I don't understand the amount of wealth that is now apparently *ours*. It's madness! As if to confirm the miracle, sunshine floods through the windows. It's an unbelievably beautiful day. I can't remember an Easter Sunday being warm before; I swear we had snow one year! How is our life such a miracle?

We've barely slept. How could we? We lay side by side, hand in hand and whispered to one another about how this could possibly be happening. What it means. What we should do next. We made plans late into the night, or actually early into the morning. The illusory feel is accentuated by the fact we fell in and out of consciousness and each other's bodies throughout the night. Clinging to one another in a new entangled, intense way. I'm left unsure as to what is real, what is a dream. *The* dream. All night Jake whispered into my ear. He told me he loved me. That everything is going to be perfect from now on in. That we

have nothing to worry about. That we'll never have anything to worry about ever again. He repeated this over and over, like a hypnotist. And I want to believe him. I want that more than anything.

At seven o'clock we get up and go downstairs to make coffee. Jake takes the time to mess about with the old percolator, which he very rarely bothers with. In fact, I can't remember when it was used last; the ground coffee is probably well past its sell-by date. Still, I understand; the aroma drifts through the kitchen, declaring it is time to indulge. Cornflakes just won't cut it this morning. We're going to have French toast. I crack some eggs into a shallow, flat bowl and hum to myself. A butterfly fluttering of excitement ripples through my body; I recall Jake's urgent whispers delivered in the dark, oozing seductive possibility. What an opportunity. How lucky we are. I am.

'Wow, Lexi, can you believe this?' asks Jake yet again.

'Nope, not really.'

'I'm a different man!'

'Are you? How exactly?' I challenge gently.

'OK, I'm the same man but you know, better. Richer. Definitely richer.' He laughs. 'I can't wait until the kids get up. Shall we go and wake them? It's like a massively exaggerated Christmas morning, isn't it?'

For the past couple of years, we have woken up earlier than the kids on Christmas morning. Something I see as a bit of a bonus – it gives me time to listen to the radio, prepare the sprouts. For me, Christmas is about food, family time and ideally, a little contemplation. Jake finds the kids' teenage lie-ins frustrating; he is always desperate for them to open their presents. He likes to spoil them and see their faces light up when they discover he has after all bought the latest must-have they've longed for, that we can barely afford. For him, Christmas is all about the giving and getting of stuff.



‘I’ve been thinking about it. Maybe we shouldn’t tell them straight away,’ I suggest carefully.

‘What?’

‘Let’s wait until we are sure.’

‘We are sure.’

‘But it’s complicated, isn’t it? Because Emily is best friends with Megan and dating Ridley. She won’t be able to keep her mouth shut. I thought we agreed the longer we can keep this from the Heathcotes and Pearsons, the better.’

‘How are you going to hide seventeen point eight million pounds, Lexi?’

‘I’m not trying to hide it.’

‘We’ll have to tell our families.’

‘Of course.’

‘They’ll expect a slice of the winnings. Well, maybe not *expect* but certainly they would *hope* for it, that is natural enough. How much is the right amount to give?’ He is like an excited kid. I know he can’t wait to start handing out bundles of cash.

I shake my head a fraction, trying to clear it. It is impossible to think straight after everything I discovered last night, after the poor night’s sleep. I lost so much, then won so much. Their betrayal, his loving. My head and heart are about to explode. ‘I just think that it would be best to wait until the money is in the account. Just in case.’

Jake stares at me. ‘I don’t know how we can keep this from the kids. They’ll be able to tell something is up. It’s happening, Lexi. This is real.’ Jake is grinning so widely; it looks like his face is about to split.

‘But it’s a big responsibility. This is going to change their lives forever. We need to think about what to tell them, give them ideas on how to adjust,’ I insist.

‘How to adjust to what?’ asks Logan.

I jump. Where did he come from? I want to kick myself; my excitement had made me careless. I know, and usually remember, that one or other of our kids is invariably lurking, especially if they can smell food.

‘We’ve won the lottery!’ yells Jake.

‘What?’ Logan looks sceptical.

‘Seventeen point eight million pounds. We’re bloody millionaires, my boy!’

‘Jake!’

‘Sorry, didn’t mean to swear.’

Actually, I was reproving him for his lack of discretion and caution more than his bad language.

‘For real?’ Logan asks. His eyes on me; he most likely thinks his dad is playing with him. ‘We’re millionaires?’

‘Several times over,’ I confirm, with a shrug and a smile. ‘Most probably. Our numbers match and we’ve phoned to confirm it, but I—’ My words are cut off because Logan starts to yell, actually squeal like a pig. He jumps up and down on the spot, he runs to his dad and launches himself, so their bodies smash into each other with a ferocious energy. A move that is somewhere between a hug and an attack. He doesn’t know how to contain himself. He is literally overflowing. Effervescent. It’s brilliant.

‘What’s going on?’ Emily is in the kitchen too now.

Logan announces, ‘We’ve won the lottery. We’re millionaires. We’ve won seventeen million and something pounds!’

Emily looks cynical. ‘Yeah right.’ Sluggishly, she reaches for the cornflakes.

‘It’s true, my princess,’ says Jake, picking her up and twirling her around, just the way he used to when she was much younger and less self-conscious.

‘Honestly?’ Emily asks, caution and disbelief swilling in her eyes.

‘Yes,’ I verify, with a beam.

Emily bursts into tears and then we all run to one another, and amalgamate into a big mass of cuddles, screeches and happy tears.

We’ve been saved.