

## The Lucky Ones

### Prologue

As soon as she saw the van parked sideways, blocking the narrow lane ahead of her, Fiona knew she'd made a mistake.

She shouldn't have cycled home, should have accepted the lift. But she could imagine the curtain-twitching old guy next door, the one with all the Neighbourhood Watch stickers in his window, mentioning to Trevor that a strange younger man had dropped her off. Besides, she'd wanted to ride home, the wind against her body, legs pumping in time with her heart – *her new, beautiful heart* – gliding through these quiet country lanes, sun low in the just-spring sky, empty fields stretching to the horizon in every direction.

Fiona had felt like a girl again, a teenager riding home from her first boyfriend's house to sneak inside, past her parents' closed bedroom door, to lie on her bed and replay the events of the evening. She thrummed with rediscovered pleasure. Every nerve ending, every hair on her body buzzed with life. The world seemed like it was made for her: the evensong of the birds in the trees was the soundtrack to her second act. The faint, acrid scent of a distant bonfire signified the burning of her old, unhappy life.

Earlier, in his bed, the sheets half-ripped from the mattress, his handsome face on the pillow beside her, an old song playing on the radio, she had experienced a wave of pleasure unlike any she'd ever known.

'I want to run naked out into the street and dance across the lawn, let everyone see how happy I am,' she told him.

He laughed, tracing a line across her belly with his forefinger. 'Why don't you?'

'Because,' she said, kissing and pulling him on top of her again, 'I'm kind of busy right now. Doing . . . this.'

She knew it was crazy. She was forty-nine and he was nearly half that. Twenty years younger! When they met, when she realised he was flirting with her, she had thought he was just being a tease. But back home, a few hours later, she had surprised Trevor by suggesting sex for the first time in months. She had closed her eyes while Trevor made love to her in his mechanical way and thought about that face, those strong legs, the muscles in his arms. It was a delicious fantasy, that was all.

Except now it wasn't. Because he thought she was beautiful. He told her age meant nothing. In her most lucid moments, when they weren't in bed, when he wasn't looking at her in that way, she knew it wasn't serious. Just fun. An adventure. The most wonderful, thrilling adventure. And today it seemed like that adventure would last forever.

Didn't she deserve it?

Good luck comes in threes, everybody said, and her beautiful young lover was the third thing.

She'd been lost in these thoughts, keen to get home to her bath, reliving the afternoon with a glass of wine among scented bubbles, when she'd turned into the lane and seen the van ahead.

Fiona slowed down, suddenly aware that the birds had stopped singing. The sun was already setting, light bleeding from the sky, and the hedgerows crowding the lane had turned from bright green to dark grey. The lamp on her bicycle cast weak light on to the road ahead as she slowed down, straining to see through the dark windows of the van in front of her.

There wasn't enough room to cycle around it. She would have to get off and push.

Why would someone park across the middle of a country lane? Perhaps he had crashed, skidded to a halt and was stuck, needing help. The person inside could be injured or sick.

She took her phone out of her pocket, but she had no reception.

She was torn. She wanted to turn the bike around, get the hell out of there. But what if the driver *was* hurt? There was no sign of life from within. And it was getting darker by the minute.

She couldn't just leave without seeing if the driver needed her help. Somebody had helped her, hadn't they? The universe had bestowed gifts upon her. If she cycled away now, rejecting the chance to be a Good Samaritan, the karmic balance in the world might well shift, and all the good luck she'd experienced recently would drain away, sending her back to the darker days, the days *before*.

She wouldn't risk that.

Gently, she laid her bike on the ground and took a few steps closer to the van. 'Hello?' she called.

There was no response.

Breathing deeply, her strong new heart pounding inside her chest, Fiona strode up to the van and put her nose to the glass.

She jumped back as a man's face loomed up in the window.

He was shrouded by darkness, but she could see his teeth. He was smiling, an odd smile, the kind she'd seen on the faces of born-again Christians, people who knew they were bound for heaven. He didn't appear to be injured, or sick.

Confused, she backed away, and he opened the door, gesturing for her to come closer.

'Hello, Fiona,' he said.

She froze, peering closer. The pallid interior light inside the van had come on when the man opened the door, but his face was masked by shadows.

'Do I know you?' she asked.

With a sudden movement that startled her, he jumped down from the driver's seat and moved towards her. She took another step back.

**Commented [ME1]:** It went from dusk to pitch darkness too quickly so I have edited this paragraph.

**Commented [LM2]:** Good point! In the US this is called a dome light rather than a reading light. True in the UK? I couldn't confirm this nomenclature online.

**Commented [PR3R2]:** As far as I'm aware, it's usually just called the interior light. I haven't heard it called a reading light. You can't read when you're driving! I have changed accordingly.

**Commented [ME4]:** I AG AG

**Commented [ME5]:** AGREED

‘Don’t be frightened,’ he said, still smiling.

‘What are you—?’

Her mouth stopped working when she saw what he was holding. She tried to run, but he was too fast, overtaking her and blocking her way. The van was behind her. There was nowhere to go.

‘You really mustn’t be afraid, Fiona,’ he said, arms stretched wide like he wanted to give her a hug – except one hand gripped a shotgun with its barrel pointed to the darkening sky. ‘I’m a friend.’

‘I don’t know you,’ she said.

‘Does anyone truly know anyone else?’

The oily smile returned. And as he came towards her, lowering the gun in front of him and pointing it right at her beautiful new heart, Fiona realised that the happiest day of her life would also be her last.