

# Take a Chance on Greece

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## Chapter One

If I'm being completely honest, I think I was still a little drunk when we got on the airport shuttle bus, which could have been something to do with the Ouzo Kat had persuaded us to down as we rushed to get packed. She'd claimed it was pretty much the same as mouthwash and would help freshen our morning-after-the-night-before breath. I'm not sure the shot delivered on Kat's promise, but the aniseed-tasting liquid had certainly cleared my sinuses as it burned its way down my throat, leaving my lips feeling strangely numb.

"Hurry up, Lydia, you're keeping everyone waiting," Amira called across the bus as I stumbled my way down the aisle, feeling strangely queasy and floaty at the same time. Was this what a hangover felt like? If so, why did people subject themselves to it on a regular basis? It had been a big mistake to go beyond my usual personal limit of a glass of wine with a meal, but the girls had accused me of letting the side down, especially as I was the reason we'd flown to Kefalonia for this trip in the first place, and I'd allowed myself to be peer-pressured into becoming the life and soul of the party. At least, I think that's what happened, but my memory of last night was more than a little patchy. I read in the newspaper once that even after only a few drinks, the brain can stop forming new memories, so perhaps here I was demonstrating that scientific study in practice. I didn't feel great about it. I remembered getting ready at the hotel, the three of us playfully squabbling over mirror space in our cramped room and posing for pictures on the balcony before we went out. I remembered enjoying our meal in the little coastal town of Sami, especially the delicious honey-oozing pastries that the waiter presented us with when we'd paid the bill. And I also remembered Amira leading us along a seemingly-endless street between

tavernas, promising that there was an amazing bar at the end of it, while Kat and I tried to keep each other upright as our heels wobbled on the uneven surface. But after that, mostly nothing, until I was woken this morning by Amira chucking a glass of water on the back of my head as I lay face down on the bed, still clothed in last night's outfit. We'd been in too much of a packing rush to compare notes on the evening, but hopefully when it wasn't ridiculous o'clock in the morning, my brain would crank into gear and I'd be able to fill in the blanks.

The slight unease about not being able to account for every minute was adding to the booze-induced churning in my stomach and I was worried it might just tip me over the edge. Despite letting their hair down just as much as I had, this morning Kat and Amira looked healthy and put together, whereas I felt like acid was swirling around my insides while tiny creatures held band practice in my skull. But then again, as the girls kept on reminding me when they were nagging me about this holiday, they're far better at letting loose and going with the flow than I am, so maybe they'd built up a hangover immunity.

Even thinking about the word "hangover" made me feel queasy. A bubble of bile threatened to make its way up my oesophagus and I paused to take a few deep breaths, clutching the back of a complete stranger's seat so I didn't end up slumping onto their lap instead. This was mortifying. Why had I allowed myself to be talked into coming on this trip when I could have had a nice, quiet weekend at home instead, ticking things off my to-do list while bingeing episodes of "Bake Off" and secretly imagining what it would be like to be one of the contestants? Actually, thinking about "Bake Off" and all the creamy, sugary concoctions they create was a seriously bad idea. I gulped.

“Uh oh, she’s turning green,” Kat announced to the entire bus as she thrust a sunhat under my chin. “If you’re going to vom, aim for that. We’ll miss our flight if we get chucked off this thing.”

I forced myself to swallow as my cheeks glowed with embarrassment. I’m not sure what was worse, the effects of the hangover, or the humiliation of my fellow travellers judging me for my terrible state. We’d had to hustle hard to make the transfer bus, and I’d not even had time to change or check my appearance in the mirror before leaving, which was probably a good thing, because I had a horrible feeling that the remnants of last night’s mascara had gone full panda eyes on me. It was also horribly obvious that I was still dressed in last night’s going-out clothes, and while the girls would probably argue that my version of going-out garb was still pretty understated compared to their fabulous efforts, my attire of sparkly top, which was now rather crumpled, and too-tight-to-be-comfortable denim shorts made me feel like I was doing the walk of shame down the bus aisle. The one thing I had managed to achieve before setting off was dowsing myself in perfume, but such was my delicate state at the moment, the flowery scent was making my eyes water.

I wanted to assure the other passengers that despite appearances, normally I was a perfectly respectable human being who held down a proper job and everything, but I wasn’t sure I was capable of stringing the words together in the right order.

“All good,” I said, shakily, “I’m definitely not going to throw up.” I hoped that saying the words out loud would make them come true.

Kat shoved the hat back on her head. “Excellent. If you’d ruined my favourite hat, it would have sorely tested our friendship. Besides, I’m not sure it would have made a very good bucket, being made of straw and all. Smile for the camera.”

Before I could process her words, she'd whipped out her phone and snapped a shot which I knew was far too close up to be flattering.

"Jim is going to love this, his beautiful bride-to-be in all her hen-do glory."

"Give me that." I tried to grab the phone, hoping to delete the horrible picture, but also thinking that there might be some images on it which could fill in my memory blanks, but my dexterity and reaction speeds were not up to their usual standards. Yet another reason why I shouldn't have had those extra drinks last night. Kat slipped the phone out of my reach and winked at me. I silently prayed she wouldn't immediately upload the photo to Instagram. Jim didn't really bother posting to social media, but he always seemed to be amazingly across what was on there, and that picture would definitely not fit into the guidelines of acceptable professional behaviour at the firm which he ran and I worked for. He was so diligent about not being seen to give preferential treatment to me, that he would be bound to make a point of speaking to me about it, regardless of what his boyfriend perspective on the picture might be. Actually, his boyfriend perspective would probably be similarly unimpressed. He wasn't keen on either of us making a spectacle of ourselves in any context.

"And I'm not a bride-to-be," I added, for what felt like the hundredth time. I was beginning to think Kat was doing it deliberately to make a point. "I don't know why you keep insisting on calling this my hen-do. Jim and I are just moving in together, we're not getting married."

Kat pulled a face. "Oh yeah, I forgot. He's decided not to propose until he's done a full analysis to decide whether the costs of a wedding are offset by the tax benefits of marriage." Her tone made it very clear that she did not agree with his logic.

“It makes sense. There’s no point in being saddled with tons of debt for the rest of our lives.” I automatically defended Jim, even though I secretly still felt rather affronted by his pragmatic approach to our relationship. If there was one area to throw caution to the wind and go with the heart rather than the head, it was this. And then I felt disloyal for thinking that way. Jim had always been steady and dependable, I knew exactly where I was with him, and that was why he was so good for me, as he always reminded me.

“Careful consideration of decisions leads to no unexpected surprises,” I recited our mantra.

“Typical accountants,” muttered Amira. She was one to talk. As a doctor who spent most of her life picking up the pieces from other people’s mistakes, she was nearly as risk-adverse as Jim and I, but perhaps the holiday spirit had got to her too.

The bus lurched forwards as the driver decided he’d had enough of waiting for me to sit down and turned the engine on. Hot, petrol-scented fumes started pumping from the air conditioning vents and the speakers crackled into life, blasting out a Greek pop song at full, painful, volume. It was a ridiculously cheesy tune, the kind of ditty which insinuates itself into your brain and remains playing on repeat for hours, even if you have no idea what the lyrics mean. It was definitely not hangover-appropriate. I fumbled in my handbag, trying to find my earplugs, but then the music changed key and the briefest flash of a memory sparked in my head as the singer crooned a high note. For a moment, the disgusting sensation of ickiness disappeared, to be replaced with something else altogether. It was more a recollection of a feeling of happiness and joy, rather than an image of an actual event, but that impression of utter contentment helped to make my insides settle down a bit. I knew it was silly to rely on intuition rather than cold, hard facts, but I suddenly had a

strong sense that last night's blank spaces had been filled with good experiences rather than bad.

That was enough to give me the strength to stagger the last few steps, reach up and stow my hand luggage in the overhead shelf. The girls had both bagged themselves window seats, so I was left with a choice of who to sit next to.

"Finally," Kat said, moving her handbag so there was room for me. "I thought you were going to spend the whole journey walking down the aisle. I suppose you've got to make the most of it for now until Jim pulls his finger out and puts a ring on it."

I refused to rise to the bait, knowing there was nothing Kat enjoyed more than teasing people. I turned my back on her, plonking myself down next to Amira instead. In fact, I must have plonked myself a bit too heavily because I got a sharp pain in the small of my back when I landed on the chair.

"Ouch," I winced, pulling the seat belt slack so I could turn around to see if there was something sticking out of the seat. I ran my hand over the worn fabric, but I couldn't feel anything sharp enough to have hurt me. Deciding I must have imagined it, I leaned back, but the pain started again.

I reached around and placed my hand against my back. Yes, it was definitely feeling tender and tight, as if I'd grazed it against something. I untucked my top and tried to feel my skin, but my fingers met with a layer of plastic which appeared to be stuck over the sore patch with some kind of tape.

"What the heck?" I muttered, trying to pick at the tape. I'd felt pretty grotty leaving the hotel without washing – "No time for showers", Kat had said – but now I felt even more grim knowing that I'd managed to come out with something stuck to me. This was not like me at all.

“Can you give me a hand?” I asked Amira, just as the bus went over a pothole on a hairpin bend, making my nails slip and land in the centre of the painful bit of my back. I winced and decided to leave picking at the plastic for a bit and instead try to find out how I managed to get an injury. I closed my eyes and concentrated hard, trying to visualise the little town we’d spent the evening in, focussing on different senses in case any of them ignited a memory. I could feel the rough stone of the buildings which I’d brushed my fingers along as we’d made our way down the road between the pools of light from the street lamps. I could hear the tinny sound of pop music mixed with the hubbub of different languages, voices raised over each other in a bid to be heard. And I could smell the scent of the sea in the air, and something else, something vaguely spicy, warm and comforting, closely followed by the sharp tang of antiseptic. But try as I might to sharpen these flashes of sensation into something more tangible, the memories remained frustratingly elusive.

“Did I scrape myself last night or fall over or something?” I lowered my voice in the hopes that Kat wouldn’t overhear my question. I’d never live it down if she realised that the previous evening was pretty much a blackout for me. It was mortifying enough to have to ask in the first place.

Thankfully Amira looked concerned rather than amused.

“Not when you were with us. Are you ok, babe?”

I turned to face her square on. “What do you mean, not when I was with you? Wasn’t I with you all night?”

It was as if my stomach had fallen out of my body, leaving a horrible sense of dread behind in its place. I knew that statistically Kefalonia had a very low crime rate – it was one of the reasons why I’d agreed to it as a destination – and I’d never felt anything but safe during our brief holiday here, but anything could have happened in my drunken state. I did

another quick body scan, but thankfully the soreness on my back was the only niggle. I checked my purse, but my cash and cards were still safely in place. I reminded myself of the flash of happiness memory. Surely if anything terrible had happened, it would have overridden that?

Amira shrugged. "I'll be honest, my memory is a tad patchy too, but there was definitely an hour or so in the bar when we weren't all dancing together. You said you wanted to chill out at the hotel for a bit because your feet were sore. Maybe you bashed your back then."

"But what about girl code? Never leave anyone behind," I said, indignantly. "You know I'm a lightweight compared to you guys."

"Sorry Lyds, but you did insist you'd be fine sitting out for a bit and the hotel was only over the road and we watched you walk across to make sure you'd got there ok. If a bruise on your back is your biggest concern, then nothing really bad happened, did it?"

Kat cleared her throat from across the aisle.

"I hate to interrupt the heart-to-heart, ladies, but I've got a very important question to ask." She paused, and looked me squarely in the face. "Lydia Evans, who is Andreas, what makes him awesome, and why do you now have his name tattooed on your lower back?"

## Chapter Two

“What the actual f...flip are you talking about?” I said, as an uncomfortable hollowness settled in the pit of my stomach and started slowly spreading to the rest of my body.

“Gosh, Lydia, I thought you were going to break the habit of a lifetime and swear,” laughed Kat.

“I do swear, but internally, I just choose not to vocalise it,” I retorted. “Jim doesn’t like women swearing. And that’s really not the point. Why are you trying to freak me out by saying I’ve got a tattoo? If this is your idea of a joke, it’s really not funny. You know I’m scared of needles, why on earth would I get a tattoo?”

Kat’s eyes were sparkling with amusement and I had a flashback to the time we were at school and she got me into trouble by concealing a plastic spider in my pencil case, knowing full well that it would make me shriek when I discovered it. In the subsequent disruption to class, the teacher had had to postpone our maths test. Kat had claimed that had been her intention all along, but I knew she’d really done it because she got a thrill from the drama. I couldn’t help feeling she was enjoying another of her dramatic moments right now. I wished she’d stop messing around and allow me to nurse my hangover in peace.

“Turn round and let me get a photo of that lovely inscription saying ‘Awesome Andreas’ which is now scrawled on your lower back and you can see it for yourself.”

She sounded so sure of herself that I did as instructed, despite the fact that her words made absolutely no sense to me. Kat rolled my top up and I heard the snap of the shutter before she handed her phone across to me. As she was doing so, the coach went over another bump in the road and the phone nearly fell out of her grasp. She juggled it

around in a rather showy way until she'd got hold of it again properly, another thing which made me suspect that this was one of her practical jokes. After making a great display of checking she hadn't broken it, she finally handed the phone across, by which time of course the screen had locked so I couldn't even see the picture.

"Nice try," I said, typing in her passcode with fingers which were rather trembly, whether from nerves or excess alcohol, I couldn't tell you.

The image was slightly blurry and distorted because of the reflection of the flash on the plastic covering, but beneath it there was definitely something there. I zoomed in to take a closer look. I couldn't swear to it saying "Awesome Andreas" but it did look like some kind of swirly writing, the kind of fancy cursive script you'd see on a wedding invitation. Only wedding invitations normally had a much smaller font. This writing must have been at least half an inch high. I stared at it, not wanting to believe what was in front of me. The photo was time-stamped from a minute ago, so I knew it wasn't one that she'd prepared earlier. I zoomed in, trying to detect how she'd worked the trick.

"Ok, very funny. I'm guessing this is some kind of non-hen-do mickey take. How did you do it? Did you stick a transfer on my back while I was asleep? Or draw it on in pen? Because you've been a bit heavy handed about it. I'm probably allergic to whatever it is you've used because my back is really sore."

"I remember that from my first tattoo," said Kat, sitting back in her seat as casually as if we were discussing the weather. "I don't know why I was so surprised by the pain. After all I had been repeatedly stabbed by a tiny sharp needle pricking ink deep enough into my dermis to make a permanent mark. Don't worry, hon, make sure you keep it clean, apply unscented moisturiser in a few days and it'll stop stinging soon. You won't even remember the pain. You'll probably go back for more. Maybe a 'Breathtaking Barry' or a 'Corr-blimey

Colin'. What would Jim be? 'Jolly Jim'? No that's not really right. 'Jobsworth Jim' is probably more accurate."

She started laughing at her own bad joke, gurgling away without a care in the world. I'd never been so close to wanting to lash out at my oldest friend. Her rude, rambling nonsense was totally infuriating. This prank had gone too far. Was I the only grown up around here?

"Kat, be serious, please. There's having a joke, and then there's just being mean. And drawing a fake tattoo on my back and then being offensive about my boyfriend is very much the latter. I've had enough. Tell me how you did it, or..."

My words faded as I saw the expression in Kat's eyes. Beneath the amusement, there was definitely a flash of something that looked like pity, and that made me nervous. Sure enough, a few seconds later, she'd managed to rein in the laughter and was looking properly sympathetic, head slightly tilted to one side, regarding me as if I was a fragile glass object that was teetering on the edge of a shelf. Amira meanwhile grabbed my shoulder and held on tight as if she expected me to make a run for it off the bus.

"No, no, no, please, Kat, tell me it's not true," I begged, my voice getting rather high-pitched with panic, "Amira, tell me, what's going on? You're more sensible than she is, I know you'll be honest with me and won't string this farce along." But I knew what her response would be before she even opened her mouth. However much I wanted to tell myself that my friends were playing a mean joke on me, I knew in my heart of hearts that they would never be so cruel and push things to this extreme when I was so obviously in distress about it. Which left the question, how had this crazy situation happened? How had I ended up with a tattoo and no memory of asking for it? What had possessed me to get a tattoo in the first place, let alone one of some random male name? Who the heck was

Andreas? And why did I think he was so amazing? I wanted to hide away with the utter shame and horror of it. I was never going to touch a drop of alcohol ever again. I cursed myself with all the names under the sun, feeling like a first-class fool. And then the guilt kicked in. Here I was, just about to move in with my long-term boyfriend, and I'd gone and got the name of some random guy etched into my skin. What would Jim think of me? Would he even still want to be with me after this? How could I have done something so hurtful?

I bit the inside of my mouth, trying to distract myself from the tears which were forming. I didn't have time to cry. I needed to think, to come up with a plan and sort out this nightmare situation, but my body had other ideas. I've never been one of those people who could cry delicately. The minute the waterworks start, my nose always wants to join in the party. I'd lost enough dignity without turning into a snotty mess on top of everything else. I sniffed hard, and tried through misty eyes to find a packet of tissues in my handbag, my movements clumsy with distress.

Amira reached over and squeezed my hand which didn't help me in my increasingly desperate search for the tissues. "Oh babe, what have you done?" she said, her voice so gentle and kind that it made me blub even more. Kat took my other hand and squeezed too. She quietly apologised for laughing at my predicament, explaining it was her startled reaction to the shock of spotting the inking. Normally I'd have taken strength from my two best friends, but their compassion made me feel even more alone in my misfortune.

I blubbed until my runny nose made it necessary for me to let go of Amira and Kat's hands and find that tissue. By this time, nearby fellow passengers were becoming aware of my distress, despite my best efforts to cry quietly.

"He's not worth it, darling," said one, assuming I was going through a break-up. Not yet, anyway. She passed me a bottle of water and a piece of chocolate. "It's good for shock,"

she promised. Although consuming anything was the last thing I felt like doing, I took a small sip from the bottle and swallowed the chocolate to be polite.

“You keep it,” she said, as I offered her the bottle back. “When it’s meant to be, you’ll find Mr Right. And until then, enjoy your freedom to be answerable only to yourself.”

Her words, while kindly meant, only made me feel worse, hammering home all over again that my actions had the power to hurt someone very dear to me. As if on cue, the “Doctor Who” theme tune started blaring from my handbag. Jim had changed my ringtone to it before we set off on holiday so I’d always know that it was him ringing me. Or at least, that’s what he claimed was the reason, but we both knew it was really a bid to get me to answer the phone more quickly because I was so embarrassed by the ringtone. “I know you’ll be having fun with the girls, but there’s no one who knows the filing system better than you,” he’d said, a glowing compliment, if not quite the one I’d have liked my boyfriend to give as his primary reason for needing to get hold of me during my vacation.

This time, the mild humiliation of the ringtone making the other bus passengers laugh was much more preferable to speaking to Jim. I knew he’d be able to tell the second I answered that something was wrong, and I wasn’t ready to have that conversation yet. To be fair, I wasn’t sure I would ever be ready to have that conversation. I waited for the phone to ring out – he’d be bound to notice if I rejected the call and ask me about it – then I switched it off, hoping that Jim would assume there was a bad signal rather than that I was deliberately avoiding him, and then I turned my attention back to the matter in hand. Time to assess the damage properly and come up with a plan of action. I fixed my friends with as stern a look as I could muster.

“I need to know exactly what I’m dealing with. Tell me honestly, how bad is it? And does it really say ‘Awesome Andreas’? I mean, it sounds like something I’d say if I actually

knew someone called Andreas who I thought highly of, but I really hope you've made a mistake. I think I could deal with a surprise tattoo of almost anything else, just so long as it didn't say a random man's name."

Kat opened her mouth, clearly about to suggest a load of other inappropriate tattoos which I could have got, but I shot her a steely glare and she wisely decided that this was not the time to try out a new stand-up routine.

This time it was Amira who examined my back. She squirted some anti-bac gel on her hands, then carefully peeled off the plastic covering with clinical efficiency.

The hubbub of our fellow tourists faded into noisy nothingness as I waited for Amira's verdict. After what seemed like a lifetime of scrutiny, I felt her carefully putting the plastic covering back in place and pressing on the tape to make sure it stuck to my skin properly.

"Well, Lydia, the good news is that it's cleanly done. The skin doesn't look irritated, and there's no sign of infection or anything bad around the area." It was a relief, even though the thought of getting an infection hadn't even occurred to me. "And the script is really quite beautiful," she continued. "Trust me, I've seen much worse. Whoever did it was obviously talented and took care to do a proper job."

What did I care how beautifully the words were written? What mattered was that they were words which it was no exaggeration to say had the capacity to ruin my entire life. Now that I was no longer able to deny the existence of the tattoo, the anger took over.

"Yep, definitely showing great care and diligence in agreeing to give a tattoo to someone who was clearly quite drunk. How could the tattooist be so irresponsible? It's a form of assault to ink someone when they are unable to give proper consent. Can't they get banned for this kind of thing? I'll write to the mayor," I said wildly, having no idea whether

there was even a mayor in Sami, and even less clue if policing tattoo parlours was within their remit.

Kat and Amira exchanged glances.

“What?” I snapped, then immediately regretted it. “Sorry, I shouldn’t take it out on you guys. I just don’t understand how this could have happened.”

What I really meant was I couldn’t understand how this could have happened to me. It was just the kind of impulsive thing Kat would end up doing on a night out, but I normally never made any decisions without thinking at least five steps ahead to assess the consequences and calculate whether it was worth taking the risk. Since I was a little girl, I’d always been regarded as the sensible one, the friend parents trusted to keep everyone else in line. Boring it may sound, but that kind of careful consideration of circumstances had always kept me on the straight and narrow and prevented any disasters happening. Until now.

Amira knew exactly what I was really getting at. She smiled sympathetically.

“The thing is, babe, you are the most sober-seeming drunk person we know. Yes, you don’t get wasted that often, but even when you do, you’re still you – sensible, grown up, perfectly capable of holding quite complex conversations and seeming stone cold sober. To be fair to whoever it was who did this, you probably appeared to be pretty normal.”

“But surely turning up at a tattoo studio in the middle of the night dressed up in going-out clothes should ring some alarm bells?”

Amira shrugged. “I wouldn’t have thought so. Lots of shops in Greece close in the middle of the day and stay open into the evening instead to take advantage of the cooler temperatures. Getting inked after dark is probably standard behaviour, especially for holidaymakers wanting something special to commemorate their trip.”

“But I don’t want a tattoo as a souvenir,” I wailed, feeling thoroughly sorry for myself. “I don’t want a tattoo full stop. Especially not one with the name of someone who isn’t my fiancé.”

Kat cleared her throat. I glared at her. “If you dare be a complete pedant at this crisis moment in my life and point out that Jim isn’t yet my fiancé, I will never speak to you again. You know exactly what I’m getting at.”

Kat held her hands up in surrender, although I could tell from the sparkle in her eyes that it was precisely what she had been about to do. “I didn’t say a thing and I’d never be so insensitive.” Her voice grew more serious. “But speaking of Jim, what are you going to tell him?”

That of course had been one of the first questions which had come to my mind when I’d realised I now had a tattoo. What on earth could I tell him? Where would I even start? In self-help books, the experts always say that the foundation of a good relationship is honesty. But how could I sit down and have an open and honest conversation with Jim about how I’d somehow acquired a tattoo when I wouldn’t be able to answer the first question he’d inevitably ask? Who was the mysterious Andreas, and what was it about him that had inspired Drunk Me to get his name tattooed on my skin for the rest of eternity? Having the name of another man on my back was just not a good look for a woman in a committed relationship, and certainly not something I could easily explain to Jim when I couldn’t even explain it to myself. I could protest until the cows came home that it didn’t mean anything, but if I were in Jim’s position, would I believe me? No, in this situation I felt strongly that honesty was not the best policy.

“I’ll get it covered up before he can see it,” I said determinedly. There were loads of programmes on television which featured people getting cover-ups for dodgy tattoos, and

while I'd never thought I'd require that kind of service, it was reassuring to know that there was generally a solution for even the biggest, most misguided of tattoo errors. Perhaps I could get a bunch of flowers inked there instead, I thought wildly. Or a cute dog. Frankly, I'd even accept the option of a plain rectangle of ink if it concealed the dreadful phrase.

This time it was Amira who cleared her throat to signal another obstacle to my crazy plans.

"Oh, just say it, before our fellow passengers feel obliged to offer cough sweets to the pair of you with all the throat clearing you're doing," I sighed. "Let me guess, you're about to dash my last hopes? In which case, please can you get on with it. I'm not sure I can cope with any more horrible revelations."

"I'm sorry to be the bearer of even more bad news, but you can't get it covered up just like that, Lyds. It's got to heal properly first. You don't want to end up with an infection or scarring. Trust me, I've seen some real nasties in A&E. You don't want to become one of those stories that doctors use as a terrible warning to others."

"But how long is that going to take?" I asked, the panic rising still further.

Kat pursed her lips. "Longer than you want it to. Put it this way, it's not an option that's going to be possible before you next see Jim, unless you pretend you've got some contagious disease and have to go into quarantine for a prolonged period."

I mentally crossed the cover-up option off the list. But before I could vocalise my next suggestion, the bus pulled up at the airport, and all the other passengers stood up in a hurry to be the first ones at the check-in desks. I didn't even bother undoing my seat belt.

Amira and Kat watched me closely, a look of surprise on their faces.

"Aren't you going to join the masses charging for the departure lounge?" asked Amira.

“We’re all getting on the same plane. I don’t mind letting them go first,” I said.

“Who are you and what have you done with our friend Lydia? Getting a tattoo was out of character, but not caring about potentially being late, that’s even more unlike you. Are you unwell?”

Kat touched the back of her hand to my forehead in mock concern.

“Stop teasing me. Why would I be in a hurry to get on a plane back home and face the disaster that will be trying to explain this tattoo to Jim? I can’t tell him, I just can’t. What if he thinks I’ve cheated on him? We’re moving in together. Like literally moving in as soon as I get back from this trip. This is meant to be the start of our happy ever after, and I’ve completely messed everything up.” I was actually wailing by now. A couple of stragglers who were still making their way off the bus turned to stare at me, which made me feel even more like wanting to curl up in a ball and die.

Kat put on her best bracing voice. “Everything’s going to be fine. Let’s get into the airport, grab a drink, and we’ll come up with a plan.”

I shrank against my seat, which once again set my back stinging.

“Oh no, I am never drinking again. This whole situation happened because you two talked me into having more than my limit. Jim’s right. You are a bad influence on me. I wish we’d never come on this holiday. I think I prefer the option of staying on the bus and hoping this will all turn out to be a horrible nightmare.”

I actually pinched myself in a last-ditch hope that I really was asleep and dreaming this whole bizarre situation.

“I meant a coffee, not booze,” said Kat. “And I’m afraid you are very much awake. We didn’t hold you down and force the liquid down your throat. Whatever Jim thinks, you are a grown woman and perfectly capable of making your own choices and decisions.” Her

tone softened. "Look, I know you don't mean it and you're really upset right now, but this isn't the best way of handling it. While we'd all love to check out of reality and continue our Greek holiday, we have lives we need to get back to. Besides, I don't think the driver would take too kindly to you living on his bus for the rest of time." She laughed. "Bloody hell, it's a sorry state of affairs when I'm turning into the voice of reason. Come on now, things will look better once you've had a proper breakfast."

Begrudgingly I allowed myself to be led off the bus and into the terminal building which didn't feel big enough for the number of people bustling around in it. I felt vulnerable among the crowds, wary of someone bumping into me and making my back hurt. Everyone seemed to be talking at once, no, not talking, shouting, which set my head throbbing again. I'd have been grateful for the noise if it had distracted me from my tattoo-induced terror, but it just made me feel even worse. Even though my newly-acquired skin art was hidden beneath my clothing, I was so conscious of its presence that I feared everyone around me must be aware of it too, as if there was a giant arrow pointing at it. Every time someone smiled, I cringed, convinced that they were laughing at my situation.

I could barely concentrate as we went through the process of going through security, and my dazed manner must have made me appear to be suspicious because I got selected for an extra pat down by a guard who ignored my pleas to be gentle when she reached my back. I supposed I should be grateful that it didn't extend into a strip search. The fewer people who saw my stupid new tattoo, the better.

### Chapter Three

Despite Kat's promise that breakfast would solve everything, funnily enough, the spinach and feta miniature pie which I managed to force down did not bring with it the answer to all my problems, although it did make me feel slightly more human. We spent the time waiting for our flight brainstorming ideas. Amira and Kat tried a few times to help me remember the inspiration behind the inking, but I still drew a blank. For all I knew, the "Andreas" could be the name of the tattooist himself. Or perhaps it could be nobody in particular at all. Maybe I had just pointed at a stock image in my drunken state. I still couldn't understand why I would have done such a thing.

We managed to switch seats on the aircraft and sit together so we could continue our discussions all the way home, but despite our collective brainpower, the best solution for my predicament which we could come up with was covering the tattoo with a large plaster and hoping for the best. It didn't exactly fill me with confidence. My face must have said as much because Kat offered another of her nuggets of wisdom.

"Don't overthink it, Lydia. Tell him you caught your back on the swimming pool wall, and if he asks more questions, just distract him with some sexy lingerie and he'll forget he ever noticed the plaster," she said. "You'd be amazed at the number of times a good pair of pants have got me out of a pickle, trust me. Besides, you're moving in with him. Sexy knickers will help keep the magic alive when you've been bickering over whose turn it is to put the bins out."

Privately, I thought Jim would be more startled by me suddenly starting to wear sexy lingerie than he would by the appearance of a large plaster on my back. But at this stage I was willing to give anything a try, so when we landed back in the UK, I did a detour to the duty-free shop on my way to the baggage collection and picked out a couple of sets of

extremely uncomfortable-looking lacy concoctions. I felt like a massive imposter in the shop, as if the staff could tell that I was more of a comfy pants kind of girl, but I told myself that if I could get a spontaneous tattoo, then surely I had the gumption to style out a red push-up bra and French knickers.

Amira utilised her many years of medical training to make sure the giant plaster was firmly fixed over the offending inking, and then I stood in the baggage hall and listened to a pep talk from my friends in which they promised over and over again that everything would be absolutely fine, while having absolutely no basis for their assertions.

I was starting to wonder whether I could be like the Tom Hanks character in *The Terminal* and live out the rest of my days in baggage reclaim when my phone beeped. My stomach flipped over as I read the message.

“Oh my goodness, Jim’s here. He’s come to pick us up so we don’t have to find a taxi or get the bus back.”

Normally I would have been touched by his thoughtful gesture and relieved to avoid the immediate post-holiday low of having to scabble for transport home, but I had been relying on the journey to give me a bit of extra thinking time.

“He can be a sweetie sometimes,” said Kat, which was a rare compliment for Jim from her.

I felt even more guilty at the secret I was nursing.

The phone beeped again.

“Oh, he’s not gone into the short stay carpark because they’ve started charging for it, and he’s in a layby over the road, so he says we need to get a wiggle on, or he might get a fine.”

I set off at the quickest pace I could muster while dragging my rather heavy suitcase. I'd gone a little overboard in buying presents for Jim at Kefalonia airport in a bid to assuage my conscience.

Kat and Amira scurried in my wake, grumbling between themselves as if I was out of hearing.

"And lo, normality returns, a classic Jim move," muttered Kat to Amira. "How does he think we're going to get our suitcases across the dual carriageway? And I bet you the short stay carpark will only be about three quid, and he wouldn't think twice about paying that for a coffee, so why can't he pay out now? Typical stingy so-and-so."

"Come on Kat, it'll be easier than fighting for public transport," replied Amira, quietly, also thinking that I couldn't hear her. "And we can give Lydia some moral support. Knowing her, she'll blurt out about the tattoo the second she sees him. You know how she is with him. At least we can be on hand to pick up the pieces."

Determined to prove my friends wrong, I started rehearsing my greeting to Jim in my head so that I didn't fall into the trap which they thought I would. Jim and I had been together long enough to know each other's quirks, and just like I could tell from the way he rang my doorbell that he'd stopped for a pint with his mates on his way to see me, he would probably know the instant I walked up to him that I was trying to keep something from him. And although it went against my every instinct to even consider lying to my partner, I told myself it was out of consideration for his feelings, and therefore for the greater good.

It was only later that I wondered what exactly Amira had meant when she'd talked about the way I behave around Jim.

“Alright love, good holiday?” Jim was waiting by the open boot of his car, ready to take hold of our luggage. “You look like you caught the sun. Was that factor 50 I got you not up to scratch?”

He kissed my cheek and I cringed as his hand rested on my back, mere millimetres from where the offending tattoo was lurking beneath its plaster cover. I only just managed to stop myself from flinching.

“It was very good, but I probably wasn’t as diligent about applying the sunscreen as I should have been,” I confessed.

Jim shook his head. “That’s a shame. You should be careful, Lydia.” His concern for my wellbeing made me feel even worse. “The sun can be terribly ageing for women,” he added.

I caught Kat rolling her eyes. “But let me guess, as a bloke, you’re miraculously untouched by such concerns?” she said. I shot her a glance. Now was not the time to go on a feminist rant to Jim, even if I agreed with the sentiment.

Jim laughed. “Duly noted. Right, hurry up girls. I think that might be a police car on the other carriageway, and I don’t fancy getting a talking to from some jumped up plod because I’ve parked here for all of five minutes.”

As if to emphasise his point, he jumped into the driver’s seat leaving us to finish packing the car. Naturally I sat in the front passenger seat, but I half wished I was in the back with my friends, because my guilt and anxiety were growing every moment I was spending next to Jim. How I was going to keep this up long term, I had no idea.

Amira and Kat played their parts well, keeping up a stream of merry chatter about the holiday, which Jim pretended to listen to, although I knew he was really wondering if the

guy in the Fiat Punto in front of us was going to hurry up and drive at the speed limit any time soon.

We dropped Amira off at her place first, then it was round to Kat's new house share which she had spent all of a day in before we'd headed off on holiday. I'd never seen it in the light, and when we drew up outside, I had serious misgivings about whether it was safe to leave her there.

"Are you sure you'll be alright?" I asked, looking at the boarded-up front window and noting the rather offensive graffiti on the side of the building. Kat, of course, misinterpreted my genuine concern as a ploy to put off the moment of being alone with Jim.

"Best get it over and done with," she hissed in my ear as I helped pull her suitcase out of the boot. "Like ripping off a plaster. Only for God's sake, don't rip off that plaster on your back. Or at least, don't do it unless Amira or I are around to intervene...or to watch the fallout."

She winked at me, and went merrily into the house, leaving me alone with Jim. I sat back in the passenger seat and stared out of the window wondering what to say next. Even if I didn't have the sword of Damocles hanging over my head in the form of a dodgy tattoo, I think this journey would still have felt a bit strange. Jim and I had been together for yonks, and of course we'd spent lots of time at each other's places, but this was the first time I was heading to his for an extended period. In fact, I really should stop thinking of it as his place, and start referring to it as ours. It was going to be my home now, and once I'd got my own key and my things unpacked there, it would be bound to feel more like I belonged. Jim was obviously thinking along the same lines too.

"What shall we have for tea, love?" was his first comment after I'd got back in the car. "I thought we could swing by Tesco for a few bits on our way back to mine." He paused.

“Sorry, I should say back to ours of course, even though you haven’t got round to signing that tenancy agreement with the landlord yet. You need to hurry up and do that. Got to get things off on a proper legal footing.”

“You and your paperwork,” I sighed, then kicked myself for saying something which could start a disagreement. “You’re right of course. I’ll make it a priority.”

Before the tattoo drama had taken over my mind, I’d been half harbouring tender dreams of Jim picking me up and carrying me over the threshold into the house the first time we arrived back there as an officially co-habiting couple. Yes, I knew that was what you were meant to do when you’d actually got married, but moving in together was the first step in that process, and it would have been a romantic gesture to make, a symbol of our commitment to each other and our hopes for the future. But now that I had a fresh, slight sore, tattoo to consider, I was rather glad that Jim wasn’t one for romantic gestures. Besides, the sight of Jim trying to lift me after all the ice cream I’d consumed on holiday would probably have provided far too much of a spectacle for the neighbours.

“Isn’t there anything in the house we can eat?” I said. The late night and the emotional stress of the last few hours were starting to catch up with me and I wanted nothing more than to go straight home and crash out on the sofa.

“Ah, well the lads came round last night and you know what they’re like. They’ve eaten me out of house and home. We could probably do with a complete restock. Tell you what, I’ll let you finish work a bit earlier tomorrow and you can do it on your way home, and we’ll just get the basics today. Plus it’s a good time to pop in. They’ll have put the discount items out by now.”

Stopping off at Tesco to pick up a bargain pizza and salad felt like a pleasingly normal thing to be doing with Jim.

“The usual?” I asked. “Don’t worry, I’ll zip round extra fast, it’s hardly worth you coming in.”

It would give me the perfect opportunity to pick up some extra plasters. I might also have a quick look at the cosmetics aisle to see if they had any makeup which might be suitable for using as a coverup once the tattoo had healed.

I grabbed the first pizzas I could find so I had more time to seek out my other necessities. I’d tell Jim they were from the bargain section and he’d be happy at that. Then I caught myself. Just because I was telling one lie by omission, it didn’t mean I should start adding other untruths to it.

When I got back to the car, Jim was deep in conversation on the phone. He gestured an apology to me and rolled his eyes as if exasperated by the other caller, but I could tell from the way he was chuckling that he was really enjoying the conversation.

I sat and stared out of the window for the rest of his call, in that slightly awkward way when the other person knows you’re eavesdropping but you’re both pretending you’re not.

“Sorry love, that was Dan, as you probably guessed,” said Jim as he eventually hung up. “He was wondering if I was going to watch the match tonight.”

What he really meant was Dan was wondering if Jim fancied watching the match with him.

“It’s our first evening in as a proper couple,” I said, unable to conceal my disappointment. This couldn’t be further from the dreamy night I’m imagined, where we’d had a candlelit dinner and he’d gazed lovingly into my eyes and been most un-Jim like by starting to talk about ring shopping then and there. But then I remembered that I was in no position to be upset about something so trivial. In fact, wouldn’t it be better if Jim did go out

to see Dan? It would at least delay the dreaded moment when he'd spot the plaster on my back and start asking awkward questions.

"How about a compromise? We'll enjoy the pizzas together, and then you head out to watch the match down the pub with Dan," I suggested.

"Compromise, the secret to all good relationships," said Jim. "And you can get on with unpacking your bits and bobs without me getting in your way. I've cleared out a couple of drawers for you, and there are a few spare hangers. I thought maybe we could pop to B&Q at the weekend and pick up some extra storage. I don't think I realised quite how much stuff you were bringing with you. Do you really need quite so many books? I've no idea where we're going to find room for them."

Before setting off on my fateful Kefalonian trip, I'd hired a van to take my belongings round to my new home. Jim's face when I'd turned up had been an absolute picture, but he'd taken it in his stride and not objected too much at his pristine living room being cluttered up with all my worldly possessions. I'd intended to have a clear out before the big move, but somehow I'd never got around to it.

"Ha ha, very funny. It's not all junk. So that's how you entertained yourself in my absence? Going through my things. I hope you'll return the favour."

Jim grinned. "I am an open book. What you see is what you get. In fact, that's what I've always liked about you, love. Nice and straightforward, aside from the tendency to get carried away by silly romance novels which have no bearing on real life, of course."

Yep, that was me, nice and straightforward, with no terrible skeletons in the closet. I was so guilt-ridden that I didn't even pick him up on his insult of my favourite books. The silence stretched out between us. Jim turned the car into the drive. As we came to a halt, he leaned across and lightly patted me on the knee.

“Are you sure you’re ok after that holiday, love? Normally you jump on me for insulting your precious books.”

I pulled myself together. “As I should have done. Don’t worry, now we’re practically married, I’ll bring you round to my way of thinking sooner or later.” I forced a laugh.

“We’ll see,” said Jim. I couldn’t decide whether he was referring to the marriage comment or my threat to get him reading romances.

“Anyway, now that we’re back at our home,” despite everything, I still got a small thrill out of saying that, “where’s that key which you’ve been promising me for ages?”

Jim looked a bit shifty.

“Sorry, I knew there was something I’d forgotten. I haven’t got round to getting yours cut yet. We’ll have to manage with this one until I get it sorted.”

I told myself the tattoo meant I had no right to feel the disappointment I did. But I couldn’t help feeling hurt that he’d not bothered. A key was such a little thing, but it meant everything. I took a deep breath and tried to keep my voice level.

“That’s a shame. Perhaps you could ask Dan, doesn’t he have a spare key?”

It had always felt rather unfair that Jim’s best mate had been given a privilege which had so far been withheld from me, but then again, they had been friends as long as Kat and I had.

“But what if we get locked out? We’d be in trouble then,” said Jim, as if it was the most sensible, logical thing in the world.

“But we wouldn’t be locked out, because I’d have a key.”

“Maybe,” he replied distractedly, glancing down at his phone. I got out of the car before I said something I regretted. As I heaved my suitcase out of the boot and struggled

indoors with it and the shopping, I decided not to pursue the issue. It was probably better not to get wound up about silly things for the moment.

We were both studiously polite to each other as we prepared the meal. It wasn't like it was the first time we'd been in this position, but somehow knowing that us being in the same house together wasn't a finite thing made us act a bit differently. Or maybe I was imagining it because the tattoo spectre was clouding my judgement. I really wanted to enjoy every moment of this new stage, savouring our living together firsts, establishing the patterns which would become our routines. But instead, I found myself over-thinking my every move and worrying that Jim was about to find out my secret. At one point, I couldn't stop myself wincing when he accidentally brushed my back as he was reaching past me to get a drink out of the fridge, but I managed to turn it into a sneeze.

"I hope you've not picked up something from the flight," said Jim. "I've always thought aeroplane cabins were full of nasties, just circulating around everybody on board."

"It's nothing, maybe it was some dust," I said the first thing that came to mind.

"I'll have to show you where the vacuum cleaner is then," he retorted, and I knew I'd offended him by my inadvertent suggestion that the house wasn't clean. Why was I making things worse?

Thankfully we both started to relax as we ate the pizzas, and Jim more than filled the conversational gaps that I left, telling me about a new project he needed me to start at work, and speculating how quickly the council tax would go up now he no longer qualified for the single resident discount.

"You'll have to show me your holiday snaps when I get back from Dan's," said Jim, casually. "Kat's Instagram only gives part of the story, I'm sure."

I nearly choked on a mouthful of salad.

“Kat’s pictures?” It came out as more of a squeak. She hadn’t put up the awful photo of me on the bus, had she? And what if the snap of the tattoo had somehow wound its way onto her feed through some automatic uploading function? Was this his way of trying to get a confession out of me? Was it a test?

I watched Jim’s features carefully but his expression was as open as always.

“Yes, it was nice to see you girls having fun.”

The tension in my shoulders eased slightly, but I felt like the skin on my back was starting to throb in a psychosomatic reaction to my nerves.

“Maybe we should take a trip away somewhere,” he suggested.

“I’d love to go back to Greece, it was gorgeous,” I said, rapidly considering how I could get away with wearing a one-piece swimsuit to conceal the tattoo. “You’ve not taken any holiday for ages, and I know I’ve still got some leave left.”

“Maybe,” he said, “but I was thinking a bit closer to home so we could still keep an eye on things in the office. We’ll have to look into it one day.” He checked his watch.

“Goodness, is that the time? Better go, don’t want to miss kick off.”

I winced as he gave me a squeeze goodbye, but thankfully he didn’t notice.

I FaceTimed Kat almost as soon as I heard Jim’s car reverse off the drive and go around the corner. She picked up on the first ring.

“Is everything ok? What did he say? Hold right where you are, I’m coming over,” she said breathlessly, not even letting me say hello.

“It’s fine, Kat, I’ve managed to keep it from him, and he’s gone out to watch the footy.”

She rolled her eyes. “On your first night together as loved-up cohabiters? The man’s mad. You should be christening each room of the house and annoying the neighbours with your sexual antics. Tell me you at least flashed your sexy new knickers at him.”

I turned my phone around and gestured at my still unpacked luggage.

“I’m saving them for a special occasion.” My stomach flipped over. This was ludicrous. It wasn’t a matter of if he noticed the tattoo, it was when. “Oh Kat, I feel so terrible about this whole situation. Who am I kidding that I’ll be able to keep this from him? Maybe I am better off telling him after all.”

Kat settled back on her sofa.

“Have you worked out who Awesome Andreas was yet?” she asked. Her face slipped out of view for a second. “Sorry, just trying to prop this thing up on the cushions. My arm is going to start aching if I hold it at this angle for much longer.”

“Well, no, of course I haven’t.”

“Then if you’ll take my advice, you’ll keep quiet about it for as long as possible. I know you didn’t have a holiday fling, and you know that, but the tat is bound to make him suspicious, and you don’t want that coming between you at such a delicate stage in your relationship. Wait until you’ve at least unpacked your stuff properly, and then see how you feel.”

“You’re probably right.” I sighed. “I guess I should wait until I at least have my own key. I don’t want him to lock me out because of it.” I made a lame attempt at a joke, but I could tell from Kat’s expression that she was not taking it as one.

“The bastard’s not given you a key yet? Sorry, he’s not a bastard, he’s a very lovely man, I know. But why hasn’t he given you a key? It’s pretty selfish at best, and controlling at worse.”

“It’s not a big deal, he’s just been busy at work, especially as he’d have had to pick up my stuff while we were off on holiday. And work is another reason why I’d really rather he didn’t find out about the tattoo. If I damage his trust in our relationship setting, it’ll also damage his trust in the work environment. I know it’s way down on the priority list compared to our relationship, but I don’t want to spoil my promotion chances.”

“You’re sleeping with the boss. If he’s not given you a promotion yet, then I’m not sure what more you can do,” she retorted.

I stuck my tongue out at her and she laughed.

“Seriously though, you’re damn good at your job, Lydia. You’re overdue a promotion. I know you say he’s holding you to higher standards because he doesn’t want to be accused of favouritism, but it’s really holding you back. Have you thought about looking for a job at another firm? You guys are going to be spending a lot of time working together and living together now. It might do you good to spread your wings and let Jim see that you’re in demand elsewhere too.”

I shrugged my shoulders. She made it sound so easy, but to me it felt like a daunting prospect. I’d worked at Jim’s firm for years now, even before we started dating, and I couldn’t really imagine going anywhere else. It was comfortable and familiar and safe, and I didn’t fancy the upheaval which going to another company would involve. Besides, wasn’t there a danger that Jim would interpret any move to another firm as a personal affront? I knew how much it meant to him having my support in the professional domain as well as in his personal life.

“Promise me you’ll think about it,” said Kat, as we ended the call. “You can do far more than you let yourself believe.”

Trying as she was sometimes, at least Kat had faith in me and pushed me to want more for myself.

I went into the living room and stared at the pile of boxes in the corner. A few were lying open, and Jim had pointedly put a roll of bin bags in front of them. Clearly I was going to have to do some serious sorting out over the next few days. I yawned. But now was not the time. What I really wanted more than anything was to have a good long wallow in the bath and then go to sleep for a very long time, preferably waking up with the tattoo wiped clean from my back.

Jim had put out a set of towels for me, which was very thoughtful of him, but also made me feel like a guest in his house all over again. I was just starting to strip off when a worrying thought occurred to me. Was I even allowed to have a bath with this stupid fresh tattoo on my back? I picked up my phone to Google it, and at the last minute switched to the private browser setting just in case. It wouldn't do for Jim to inadvertently come across my search history and start asking awkward questions.

The search results soon put paid to my dreams of a good soak in the tub. In fact, for a while I disappeared down the internet rabbit hole of horror stories of people with new tattoos who'd picked up terrible infections from bath water, to the extent that I was so scared about getting water anywhere near my back that I wrapped my middle in cling film and then stuck a bin bag over it all for good measure. As I did a weird dance in the shower, trying to wash the rest of me as quickly as possible while avoiding any sensitive area, I prayed that Jim didn't come home from the football early. There was no way I could explain this craziness. And how was I going to manage this palaver over the next few days while the tattoo was still healing? Although we'd never been a couple for barging in and out of the bathroom while one of us was on the loo, the lock on Jim's...our... door was broken, and

there was nothing to stop him suddenly coming in and spotting me at an unguarded moment. And that wasn't even considering the obstacle of when we were in bed together. It was all well and good Kat joking about Jim and I doing the sexual Olympics now we'd moved in together, but the Karma Sutra would have to stay on the shelf until I'd found a decent way of covering up the tattoo, or come up with a convincing explanation for its presence on my back.

This called for diversionary tactics. Despite the fact that it was summer, I rummaged in my boxes until I found a thick pair of unflattering flannel pyjamas. The more skin that was covered the better. I got into bed, pulled the covers up to my chin and practised lying in different positions. Normally I would sleep on my front, but that would leave my back in an exposed position, and it would just take Jim deciding to put an exploratory hand underneath my pyjama top for him to come across the massive plaster and start asking questions. I flipped over onto my back, but that just made the tattoo sting. Which left sleeping on my side the only option, facing towards Jim's side of the bed so my back was as far away from him as possible. I was so concerned I might doze off and move position in my sleep that of course I couldn't have felt further from getting a good night's rest. There was only one thing for it, I'd have to pretend to be asleep by the time Jim got home, and blame my desire for an early night on jet lag. But how long could these ridiculous tactics put off the inevitable?