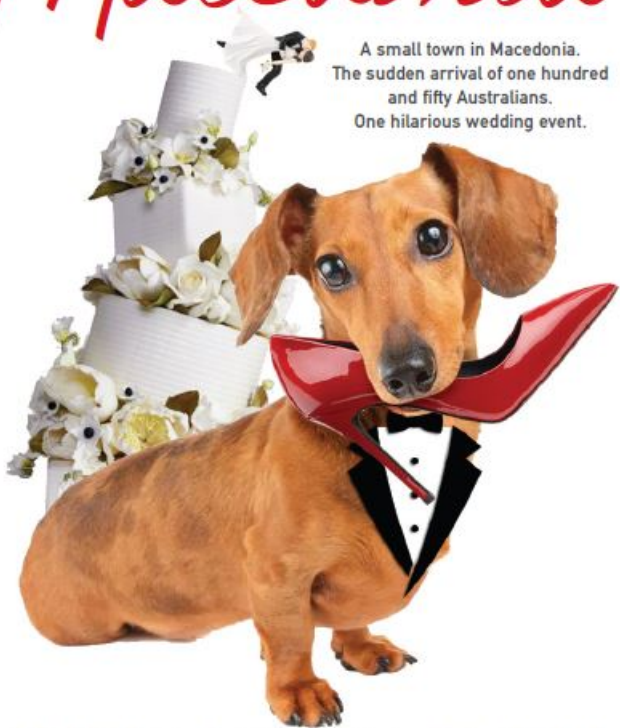


Married in Macedonia

A small town in Macedonia.
The sudden arrival of one hundred
and fifty Australians.
One hilarious wedding event.



CHRIS KIRBY-RYAN

Married in Macedonia

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*To Cathy, Darko and Cheryl
without whom this bit of hilarity
would never have eventuated.*

*If it wasn't for COVID-19
all of this would have happened for sure.*

PART ONE

The Cat In The Bag



Chapter One



The garden was glorious. The roses were breathtaking with their show of satiny white blooms opening especially for the engagement of Jacki and Sasa. The marquee had been erected the day before and the presentation was opulent and amazing. But then why wouldn't it be? Jacki was event director for one of the biggest catering companies in Melbourne. Nothing was too much trouble, no expense spared.

The people thronged around, all jostling for a bit of recognition amongst the more influential in the crowd. The outfits that were on show were a curious array of designer labels through to thrift shop treasures, the wearers of which not daring to confess their shopping sins and hoping to heaven they weren't wearing threads that had previously perhaps belonged to one of the more well-heeled guests.

The waiters dispensed French champagne and a selection of little tapas. The conversations went from how wonderful the lucky couple looked on this night of their engagement to who was winning in the AFL football league.

Sasa was still somewhat stunned. He knew Jacki had lots of friends and that the night promised to be huge, however the crowd was overwhelming him a little. His dazzling white Hugo Boss shirt clung

to his hard-won muscles, the lines of his masculine face tensing from the effort of pushing through the multitudes – it was a monumental feat, but Sasa was determined to reach his fiancé at the far end of the marquee. Nearly stumbling over the splayed-out legs of a seated guest, Sasa finally reached Jacki, ‘Who are all these people?’ he asked, whispering in the European accent Jacki loved, genuinely miffed at the amount of people who had arrived to help them celebrate their betrothal.

‘They’re my friends – our friends now darling,’ replied Jacki, thinking how self-effacing her husband-to-be was, ‘and family of course.’

‘Oh man, I cannot believe you know so many people. If this is the engagement – what will wedding be like?’

‘The wedding will be small. This is why I invited everyone to the engagement party – then we can just have a small, quiet wedding.’

‘In Macedonia.’

‘What?’ Jacki blurted out with surprise, her blue eyes widening at the announcement.

‘In Macedonia,’ Sasa reiterated. ‘You have all your friends here, we have wedding in Macedonia with my friends and family - about twenty-five people. Is enough.’

‘Okay, we’ll get married in Macedonia,’ said Jacki, looking at the cute and determined pout on Sasa’s lips. How she adored those lips. Macedonia was doable, in fact she quite liked the idea. Just then they were interrupted by Jacki’s mother, Shirley, who took Jacki’s hand and guided her over to join a group of women. Jacki was swept back into the throng of the celebrations, laughing and crowd-mixing, as Sasa’s eyes followed her every sensuous move.



WHEN THE LAST of the guests had staggered into their Uber, Jacki and Sasa sighed with relief. ‘So, Macedonia hey?’ Jacki said, glad that the night had drawn to a close and they had a moment to themselves. Sasa had made her a hot chocolate and as they sat on the lounge chair sipping the welcome warmth of the drinks, two budgies, disgruntled

because it was long past their bedtime, shattered the new-found peace with their chattering. The blue budgie was the more talkative of the pair and blurted out, 'Party's over, party's over, *partay partay partay*.' Jacki rose to cover the cage for the night, scolding French as she went, 'Long past your bedtime French, you too Saunders.' Saunders wasn't saying a word, she just ruffled her green feathers and looked offended as the cage was covered over by Jacki, who was now becoming more and more excited at the prospect of a Macedonian wedding. Sasa rose to join her and they headed towards the stairs that led to the bedroom.

'I think getting married in Macedonia is a great idea. We don't want a lot of people there, not like tonight – we're exhausted,' she said, now standing by the bed and beginning to undress. 'Taking the wedding to Macedonia means we can have a quiet wedding. I doubt anyone will want to come. Of course, we'll take mum – and then we have your family and friends over there. It will be wonderful.'

'And quiet,' confirmed Sasa as he flopped into bed, clad only in his briefs.

'Yes, I mean who is going to come all the way to Macedonia just for our wedding?' agreed Jacki, climbing into bed beside him.



THE GLOW of the party had long since disappeared as Sasa sat nursing his head amid the debris and chaos left as a reminder of the previous night's revelry. Although never much of a drinker, Sasa had indulged in a few glasses of who knew what, it wasn't really a hangover that was causing him grief, it was the prospect of restoring their home to something similar to civilization.

Jacki approached him, offering a bright green, recovery smoothie which he looked at with the sort of disgust one would only beset on a slug. Sasa's European-ness shone through. Some scientists believe that half the population of European men has descended from the one man. This Bronze Age king was believed to be elitist, even back then, and projected a fulsome and confident air, which could certainly be said of Sasa. His vigorous demeanor, strong masculine good looks and self-assuredness was something that separated him out from his Aussie

counterparts. Even though he adored living in Australia, Macedonia ran deep in his blood and everyday Jacki was reminded of this.

And she loved him for it. It defined who he was, and she was enamored with every bit of him. She loved it when he spoke Macedonian, in fact it turned her on almost to the point of helplessness. She loved his charming European manners that were contrasted by his brash European temperament. She smiled at his grumpy face, tossing her head to displace the blonde locks falling over her face. The long golden hair she loved as a child was now perfectly coiffed into a more chin length, corporate style.

She managed to keep the smirk off her bowlike lips as she held forth the bright green offering. Sasa recoiled. He may have been madly in love with this fair beauty, but there was a limit. 'You want me to feel worse man? Giving me shit green smoothie?' On the table in front of him sat a large leftover piece of cream filled engagement cake. Sasa picked it up, pointing it directly in front of Jacki's face before beginning to devour it.

Jacki could do nothing but just shake her head. Why was it? This man with the perfect physique and the diet of a sumo wrestler, he could eat anything he liked and yet she only had to look at something all creamy and sugary and her hips widened yet another centimetre. Where's the justice? She knew as she headed towards that dreaded big four zero that she really had to watch her weight. She was mildly jealous of the thought that Sasa would breeze into his forties and beyond, without ever having to worry about what he consumed – never ever putting on an ounce.

'What?' Sasa looked at her as he hoed into the cake. 'I don't want to go through all this again. All these people come – they eat, they drink, they leave. Leave us in this big mess and we now have to clean.' Just then the doorbell rang, with his mouth bulging with cake Sasa tried to speak but his words were muffled by the spongy, creamy gâteau, 'Mo bud peep – wanow.'

'What now? Is that what you're trying to get out of your cake filled mouth? It's not more bloody people Sasa, it's just the cleaners.'

Having swallowed too soon and now nearly choking on the result, Sasa struggled to regain his composure, coughing and spluttering he

waved his hand in front of his mouth as he managed to say, 'Cleaners, of course you hired cleaners. It is good, this is why I marry you.' Jacki laughed at her fiancé's absurdity, of course she hired cleaners. As they entered, she instructed them to start in the marquee, leaving her with Sasa to recap on the previous night's decision. The budgies began one of their regular performances. French and Saunders had a huge cage near the window and loved to chatter to each other and to Jacki and Sasa. Jacki offered them a piece of celery, a leftover ingredient from her shit green smoothie.

'Look, I think we keep Macedonia wedding to just us right now,' Sasa asserted. 'The longer we keep our secret, the less chance of all of your two hundred friends coming to Macedonia.'

'One hundred and fifty. And come off it Sasa, nobody's going to go to Macedonia just for our wedding. They may all look like fine-feathered friends but most of them couldn't afford the money or the time to simply whizz over to Macedonia for a wedding. And I agree anyway, we have so much on the go at the moment with three big events coming up and your business expansion, let's just keep it in the box. We'll let everyone know what we're doing about six months before.'

'Six weeks, six weeks before. Six days, it is enough. Didgy-ridge.'

'Ridgy-didge,' said Jacki correcting Sasa's attempt at Aussie slang. He was always making her laugh with his interpretations of the only language she knew.

'Whatever, we keep secret.'

She looked at him slightly shaking her head. She was never sure whether he was being serious or attempting humour. The jangling voice of Michael Bublé singing *Sway* interrupted her thoughts. Jacki knew it was her mother calling. 'Hi Mum.' Sasa's penetrating glare was not lost on Jacki as he drew his right hand across his mouth as if to zip it closed, meaning she of course, should do the same. Jacki just smiled and waved off his male idiocy. French and Saunders's chattering rose to a squawk. Jacki tried to shush them before talking to her mother, but French gave his normal rant whenever Jacki was on the phone to her mother - 'Shut up Mum, shut up Mum, shut up Mum.'

‘You want to do something about those birds – they’re rude and ignorant and they’re going to drive you mad,’ Shirley got in before Jacki had a chance to speak.

‘French and Saunders? They’re all right Mum. We love our little budgies.’

‘Budgies indeed, they’re little buggers. I suppose I’ll have to look after them when you go to Macedonia.’ Jacki almost had a bit of a turn, thinking somehow that her mother had read her mind about getting married in Macedonia. It wouldn’t surprise her, but then she realised she was only talking about the holiday her and Sasa were taking in a few months’ time.

Shirley lived nearby and was chief budgie feeder when Sasa and Jacki went away. They liked to travel both domestically and overseas and tended to do this a lot. ‘Anyway, how did you enjoy your party?’

‘We had a great night,’ Jacki said as she signalled to Sasa to butt out, he was still glaring at her with lips of string. What was his problem? She was just chatting to her mother after all. ‘No, you don’t have to help, it’s all under control, the cleaners are here. Why don’t we just grab a coffee?’ Sasa glared at her again, once more performing the zipped mouth action – he knew all too well that she and her mother were as thick as thieves.

Jacki ignored her husband-to-be. Didn’t he trust her to keep her word? She was not about to tell her mother anything about the wedding plans just yet. Men! Europeans! What was she getting herself into? She picked up her purse, leaving Sasa to deal with the cleaning staff while she sashayed off to have coffee with her mother. They were his cleaning staff after all, although Jacki had been the one to ask them if they would like to earn some extra cash over the weekend, but Sasa should be able to instruct them equally well in their home, as he did at his warehouses.

Sasa ran a successful import/export business and supplied many of the major chains across the country with anything from felt pens to squeaky toys to scrubbing brushes to electronic gismos. He’d worked in his father’s business for many years in Macedonia and although he’d only been in Australia for eight years, he’d learned quickly. He may not fully understand the customs and the weird Aussie

expressions, but he knew their buying habits. He knew what people wanted, what was popular and what was about to become popular – and all of that insight had made him a very good businessman.

He had two warehouses in the western suburbs and spent his working hours travelling between both. He had built himself a strong and reliable management team and was now thinking of expanding into other areas. His European contacts helped immensely with his success. He would be happy if Jacki didn't work at all, but he knew how much she loved her career.

He watched her as she headed towards the front door. He often wondered how fortunate he was to have landed such a beautiful, intelligent and warm natured woman. 'Oh well, just lucky I guess,' he mumbled cheerfully to himself as one of the cleaning staff approached him, mop and bucket in hand.

Chapter Two

Shirley was gushing. The engagement party was such a roaring success she just couldn't wait for the wedding. 'When are you getting married? Where are you getting married?' The obvious questions Jacki had been dreading were now just rolling in.

'Calm down mum,' exclaimed Jacki, 'we've only just got engaged. We haven't even thought about the wedding yet.' They selected a table by the window. The café was a hive of activity as usual. The patrons were a mixture of funky hipsters to Asian affluent geeks to the well-established idle rich. It was just one of the many café-cum-bars on the peninsula that catered for the vast array of locals and visitors, looking for ways to meet up, chat, while away the hours and spend more of their money.

Shirley had been living on this popular peninsula for most of her adult life. She'd worked hard running a catering business pretty much single-handedly for over thirty years. She had reaped the benefits and now boasted a small portfolio of properties. She passed her time these days by managing Airbnb's – her own properties and those of others – and that was proving quite lucrative for her.

'Well you should be planning; these things take time.'

‘There’s no need to rush into it mum. We won’t be getting married for at least another year yet.’

Shirley, an attractive woman who looked a lot younger than her sixty-something, seemed a little mortified. She flicked back her enviable red locks, a habit of hers when she was a bit anxious. She knew she must agree with her daughter, no sense upsetting her and getting into a quarrel. After all, what difference did it make whether they got married tomorrow or next year? They shared their lives together, tying the knot was really just a formality. ‘Well okay, I agree, it’s just that everyone has been asking when and where the wedding will be.’ At that moment Shirley noticed the cake trolley passing nearby, laden so deliciously with delectable treats it was too much to resist. ‘Are we going to have cake?’

‘Hell no mum, I have to watch everything I eat now, I don’t want to be a fat bride.’

‘One little piece of cake won’t hurt you, besides – you’re not getting married for a year.’

You wouldn’t be blamed for liking her to Susan Sarandon. At chin length, Shirley’s hair was shorter, but she had that energy, that vibrancy that always seemed to have her on the go. People were drawn to her - just as they were her daughter. She had an exceptional sense of humour and knew how to entertain. She loved to spin a yarn and her audience was always engrossed when she did. Her blue eyes were large, round and intelligent. Her smile was broad, nose straight and chin just ‘out-there’ enough to define the character that she was. She was tall and on the slender side, although like her daughter, indulgence could cause her grief - and so she didn’t - except maybe for a wine binge more often than she should – and of course, French champagne. The cake she really could resist, most of the time.

‘Yeah sure, but I don’t want to pile on the weight and then have to lose it. Oh, to have the metabolism of Sasa,’ Jacki pined, eyeing off the strawberry meringue roulade set heartlessly before her eyes. ‘I swear he eats anything and everything and look at him – drives me mad.’

‘Yes, men can be infuriating, and I’m sure you will be perfect for your wedding.’

Jacki was beginning to get a bit uncomfortable, pledging with Sasa

not to tell anyone about their plans was one thing, misleading her mother entirely another. Still, she persisted, she knew all too well that one slip about their plans to her mother and the whole of the peninsula would know all about it within a day. 'When we work it out, you'll be the first to know, I promise. In the meantime, just trust me, it will all be good.'

'Well of course darling, of course. But I did pick up a few brochures on my travels. We might as well have a look through them.' And with that Shirley pulled a stack of brochures and magazines out of her shopping bag. There had to be at least thirty of them – they reached nearly two-feet tall when she plonked them onto the table in front of Jacki. Jacki couldn't believe it – well, yes, she could. It was her mother. She picked up one brochure and opened it, holding it in front of her face to conceal the eye-roll from her mother. Knowing there would be no getting out of looking through the brochures she began the fruitless task of oohing and aaahing over all of the venues that consisted of wineries, function rooms, parks, gardens and beaches in the area. Some of the places were stunning, but Jacki could only keep thinking of Macedonia and started to wonder what her wedding venue would be like there on the beautiful Balkan Peninsula.



JACKI HAD NO SOONER ARRIVED home than the doorbell rang. The cleaning now all completed the house was back to its stylish self. Sasa was relaxing in the backyard, lazing on the outdoor lounge, sunglasses on, a plate of pork ribs on a table off to his side and a Coke in hand. Jacki glared at him. 'What, what is your problem?' he asked, querying her daggered look.

'What's with the pork? You're always eating pork – and the Coke – where do you put it all?'

'What is it you say? You cannot be a fat thoroughbred?'

'The saying is you can't fatten thoroughbreds.'

'Is right. That's me man. Thoroughbred. See?' And with that he picked up another pork rib, poking it forcefully in her direction before lazily guiding it into his mouth. 'There's someone at the door.'

‘Oh my God,’ she raised her open and outstretched palms towards Sasa, who was not making a single move. ‘It’s okay, I’ll get it,’ she blurted sarcastically but in good humour. They’d already built a great understanding and Sasa was no slouch when it came to sharing the load of domestic duties, but there was no sign of him moving off the lounge anytime soon.

Jacki opened the door to greet Sasa’s favourite cousin, Leonid, and his wife Liljana. They had been living in Australia for five years and were the only Macedonian family members living so far away from home, except for two other cousins living in New Zealand. They wandered through the house to Sasa’s relaxing outdoor area. Sasa made the effort and stood up to greet them. ‘How you shape up from night before?’ asked Leonid.

Liljana nodded in support of her husband, ‘Was good night, so many people.’

Sasa looked at Jacki, ‘This one here – she has way too many friends – two hundred.’ Exasperated, Jacki pulled on her left ear lobe, a habit she had formed when getting a little anxious, however she was used to being the topic of conversation when the Macedonians got together. She preferred it when they spoke in Macedonian, then no matter what they were saying she could just ignore it all, which she often did. ‘One hundred and fifty – there were only about one hundred and fifty here,’ she said in exasperation.

‘See, what I tell you? She doesn’t even know how many were here. Two hundred at least. Two hundred friends. Is too many.’ Jacki simply shook her head and let them just go off on their wild exaggerations.

‘Family, she has a lot of family too,’ commented Leonid.

‘Well you have a lot of family in Macedonia,’ Jacki couldn’t resist getting her bit in.

‘Oh yes maybe, but not so many friends,’ qualified Leonid.

‘Don’t you miss your family? You have been here what? Eight Years? You have never been back?’ asked Jacki of Leonid and Liljana.

‘Five years,’ corrected Leonid, ‘we not want to go back. Here is home now. Macedonia is full of bad politics and everyone know everyone else’s business.’

'The wages are low and there are not a lot of opportunities,' Liljana added to her husband's portrayal.

'So, you won't ever go back to Macedonia?'

'No, never in one million years. Our family can visit here – is much better.' Jacki looked over at Sasa and knew that he was thinking what she was thinking. It just reinforced their whole idea of getting married in Macedonia – no one would come.

Chapter Three



Time was flying by and work was flat-out for Jacki. She was grateful for it though – her work at Great Events and Picture Shows saw her managing many big events and the two months since their decision about getting married in Macedonia had flown. She had three functions to prepare for that evening. At the moment, she was in a large marquee which had been decked out in an African Safari theme. Realistic and colourful paper parrots hung from the ceiling while the entire interior was transformed into an African veld. Wild animals, or very good renditions thereof, lurked behind every potted shrub and bright South African lilies added a splash of red to keep the eye entertained.

The marquee was set up on the front lawns of the metropolitan zoo, and the idea was that the guests would tour through the zoo before reaching their final destination – the dinner. Jacki was adjusting the stance of a very large paper mâché lion when her mobile chimed out the dulcet tones of Michael Bublé. Her mother, of course.

She looked at her phone, ‘Don’t forget mum’s birthday displayed in capital letters across a photo of her mother’s smiling face. She couldn’t believe it was November already ... two months since the engagement

party. Sasa was very impressed that she hadn't told a soul about the Macedonian wedding. 'Mum, what's happening?'

'Well, you know what Saturday is.'

'It's November 15, Mum.'

'Yes ...' her mother replied with anticipation.

'Yes Mum,' Jacki said, rolling her eyes slightly. 'You know I never forget your birthday.'

'Well yes, but I know how busy you are, so I have gone ahead and organised a get together with some of the girls.'

'That's great Mum – I'll be there.'

'They've all been asking me, you know.'

'What, asking you what?'

'You know, about your wedding plans.' Silence reigned. 'Come on, you must have thought about it by now. Why not just put us out of our misery and tell us what is going on?'

'There is nothing going on Mum.'

'At least tell me. I'm your mother. I have every right to know.'

'Look really, we haven't even thought about it, we won't be doing anything for at least a year.'

'A year? Always a year. Two months ago you said it would be a year. Now it must be ten months - you should be looking at places now – they'll all be booked out.'

'Mum, take it easy, relax, enjoy your birthday. I don't know when the wedding will be yet or where it will be – just relax. I'll see you on Saturday.'

Jacki hung up the phone and got back to her tasks of preparing for the event. How long could she keep this from her mother? She loathed lying to her, if only her mother would stop asking. But it was only natural of course, any mother would want to know when her only daughter was getting married. Any mother would want to be involved in the planning. And the thing was, this wasn't just any mother, this was Shirley, and Jacki knew that she couldn't keep this from her mother forever. She and Sasa talked about their wedding in Macedonia constantly. Sasa's parents were very excited at the prospect and were already making plans. It seems everyone wanted to be involved in their wedding. If they wanted a quiet wedding maybe they should just

elope. Jacki knew they'd never do that. Still, no time to think about it now, she had a heap of work to do.



THE RESTAURANT WAS abuzz with gossip, chatter and the usual mixture of peninsula society. It was right on the waterfront and one of Shirley's favourites. She loved to look out over the islands as she dined and surrounded by all her friends on a perfect spring day it could not have been more sublime. Jacki entered to find Nikki, Sondra and Marion already seated at the table. There were five other empty chairs and Jacki could easily guess at who else her mother had invited.

Nikki was Shirley's best friend and the wife of Jacki's godfather, Rob. Nikki was always tuned into what was going on and her bright and bubbly personality endeared her to everyone. Like Shirley, she was sixty-something, but clever dress and perfect grooming of her gorgeous blond hair, always had her looking years younger.

Sondra had met Shirley sixteen years previously through their daughters attending the same school. She was Ukrainian but had been living in Australia for twenty years. Her two children, a son and a daughter, had long since flown the coop, married and were now each living in different countries. Her ex-husband was very ex, Sondra never heard from him and that suited her fine. She was short in stature but big on personality. She was really scraping by for a living, surviving on a pension and living in the apartment she had bought herself after the break-up. Her kids would shout her the occasional overseas trip for a visit. These trips meant everything to her. Shirley was a very important person in her life but sometimes Sondra just couldn't help herself and loved to give advice to all and sundry on how you can do things better. This can and definitely did, get a bit old.

Marion stood to give Jacki a hug – it was air kisses all round. 'Where are the others?' Jacki directed to no-one in particular.

'Oh, they'll be along,' answered Shirley.

'Mia had a meeting,' Marion contributed, 'but she should be here any minute now.'

Mia was Marion's daughter and another school chum of Jacki's.

Marion was super proud of her daughter. She had recently sat the bar exam and was now a fully-fledged barrister. She was perpetually busy, however she always made the effort to catch up with her mother – and that often included her mother’s friends. Mia was tall and brunette, more handsome than pretty, she had the type of tall, slender body that most of her friends envied, and like her mother – she was a very likeable person.

You could see where Mia got her grace and elegance from, Marion was the type that walked into a room and all eyes followed. A model in her younger days, she still looked as though she was on a catwalk. She liked to pile her dark hair atop her head, letting some soft tendrils alluringly escape, flattering her smooth olive complexion and dangerously dark, almost plum-coloured eyes.

Yasmine, Kim and Camila arrived in a group. Jacki thought that it was just like her mother to always include her friends in what they were doing. Generous of spirit and giving in nature, Jacki suddenly felt a pang of guilt at keeping her wedding plans secret, but her thoughts were then waylaid with greetings and gossip. As the waiter arrived with the champagne, the last two guests appeared to complete the gathering. Mia sat across from her mother and Lana, a long-time friend of Shirley’s, took the last seat at the head of the table.

‘So tell us all,’ said Mia, directly at Jacki and kick-starting the conversation that everyone wanted to have.

‘Tell you all what?’ asked Jacki innocently, knowing full well what she was hinting at.

‘When are you getting married, and where, and how?’

‘Yes, we all want to know,’ piped in Kim, one of the more demure members of the group, speaking up was a little out of character for her.

‘What’s to know,’ answered Jacki, ‘we haven’t made any decisions yet.’

‘You must have some idea,’ said Camila, a recent friend of Jacki’s and a bit of a go-getter. ‘You’ve got your man – gees, I’d have married him by now.’

Jacki tried to laugh along with the others, but keeping this secret was really beginning to weigh on her. She tried to lightly brush it aside. ‘Who knows, we may just elope or something. Save all the fuss.’

The faces around the table portrayed a collective horror. Eyes wide, champagne flutes frozen mid-route to the agape mouths. Slowly all eyes went to Shirley, who was too dumbstruck to react. Jacki waited precariously for someone to speak. It was Yasmine who broke the silence. 'Elope? You can't elope. I'm counting on being bridesmaid.'

'Yes, me too,' contributed Mia.

'There's no show without me,' added Camila.

'We all want to be bridesmaids,' confirmed Kim. Shirley was looking at her daughter like a bomb had just exploded, tight lipped, eyes bulging. It was that motherly look that simply said, 'You've gone and done it now.' Jacki wondered how she was going to back-pedal her way out of this one. Sasa would have a fit if he knew she now had four bridesmaids to add to the very small wedding party in Macedonia.

'Honestly guys, I don't know yet,' Jacki said, trying to subdue the situation. 'Look, it's Mum's birthday. She's who we should be talking about. Not about my wedding which hasn't even been planned yet. So, here's to Mum,' Jacki said, raising her glass and encouraging the others to do the same. 'Happy birthday and enjoy Shirley – you deserve it.' Just then plates of food arrived. Sumptuous choices of lamb cutlets, chicken skewers, samosas, wedges and a variety of vegetarian options. 'Phew, extra run for me this afternoon, don't want to pile on the pounds for the wedding.'

All faces turned to Jacki again, she laughed and told them to get on with the pleasant task of eating, they'd know what her plans were when she knew herself what they were. She tucked into some wedges. Sasa had no idea how difficult it was to keep everyone in the dark. She'd lay money on the fact that he didn't have friends and family nagging him to know when, where and how they were getting married.



THAT EVENING JACKI did put in the extra effort. She ran along the seaside and as she did so she thought about the wedding. Were they right in making things so difficult that none of her friends could

attend? The after-effects of the engagement party had long since worn off and Jacki was wondering about the wisdom of a small wedding. But she had promised Sasa and she knew she needed to respect his wishes. He was such a generous man, not just of material things, but with his love and kindness. The last thing she wanted to do was upset him. No, they would stick to the plan. They would have a small wedding in Macedonia. Perhaps they could have a gathering of her closest friends when they arrived back in Australia.

Reaching home, she stepped into the front hallway. Looking straight through to the living area she could see Sasa lounging on the couch, he was watching the soccer and once again her love for him caught her breath, her lungs swelled and she smiled as she spied on him reveling in his personal space. Food was never far from him during these self-indulgent moments. He grabbed a piece of pork crackling as he cursed the Vadar football team, rising to a sitting position to abuse the player further. Jacki was removing her running shoes and, unbeknownst to Sasa, watching him intently.

His phone rang.

Picking up the remote to turn the soccer down, he lay back on the couch talking to his phone companion in Macedonian. 'Zdravo kako si?' He indulged in a little honey-coated popcorn as he spoke. 'Što praviš?' It was too much for Jacki, she just loved it when he talked Macedonian.

Still in her active-wear and slightly sweaty, she walked into the living area. Sasa, while talking to his friend, noticed her and raised his eyebrows suggestively at the sight of her. She straddled him on the couch. He purposely ignored her, playing a game with her whilst he continued to talk to his friend on the other side of the world. 'Kako e rabotata?' Jacki loosened her hair – pulling off her scrunchy and letting her golden locks fall across her face and then Sasa's, as she started to rain staccato kisses all over his face and neck.

Sasa was trying his best to resist, he pointed a warning finger at her but she was not to be deterred. 'Me napadnaa,' he bumbled into the phone, almost giggling, *I am being attacked*. Of course, the more Macedonian he spoke the more enamoured Jacki became. She licked him, long and smooth from neck to forehead. The warning finger rose

again as he babbled some more in Macedonian. 'Ovaa žena so koja živeam - taa poluduva.' *This woman I live with – she is going crazy.*

His open neck shirt was too tempting to resist. She undid some more buttons and proceeded to distract him with her tongue. It was too much for Sasa, 'Ke ti se javam podocna.' Jacki knew those words - *I'll call you later.* She grabbed the phone from him before he could hang up and in a playful spirit she jumped away from Sasa. She saw it was Malik, Sasa's best mate, calling from Skopje. 'Malik, zdravo!' She had mastered the basics – *hullo* wasn't too hard, but she had no idea what he was saying back to her and Sasa wanted the phone back.

His arms enveloped her waist from behind, she squealed and Malik's voice came through the phone loud and clear, 'Što se slučuva?' *What is happening?* Sasa yelled into the phone as he wrestled it from her clutches, 'Mora da odam čovek.' *Gotta go man.* With that the call ended, but the fun had only just started for Sasa. Jacki squealed and raced around to the other side of the kitchen bench, Sasa in hot pursuit. Of course, she wanted to be caught, but the game was worth stringing out a little longer.

Sasa knew all the moves, 'Ne možete da izbegate.' *You cannot escape.* Jacki had a fair idea of what he was saying and turned to run. Sasa was quick, hours spent cycling and working out in his home gym ate up all those calories and kept him in top physical condition, his arms encircled her waist again and this time he lifted her off her feet. 'Te imam sega,' *I have you now.* Of course, she gave in, succumbing to his charms – naturally that was what she wanted all along. He wrestled her to the couch and they both sank into it, she couldn't think of a better way to finish off her day's exercise regime.



SASA WAS PREPARING a salad when Jacki emerged, freshly showered and hungry as ten men would be after a heavy day's labouring. He had cooked her favourite, French lamb cutlets in honey, mint and garlic. Jacki's mouth watered, she smacked her lips together as she saw to setting the table. 'It was so funny today hon,' she said to him as he

served the cutlets onto plates, 'you should have heard all of the girls vying for the honour of bridesmaid.'

Sasa glared at her, 'What you mean? Bridesmaid? What have you told them already?'

Jacki spoke soothingly to subdue his quick Macedonian temper, 'Don't worry, I have said nothing. They just think they are going to be bridesmaids – all of them. Yasmine, Kim, Mia and Camila.'

'You don't need any bridesmaids, we have small Macedonian wedding.'

'I know, I know – but the thing is they don't know that yet do they?'

'It is good, but then what if they want to come?'

'They won't come Sasa. Kim couldn't afford to come, she is flat out raising two kids. Camila has a business to run and I doubt very much whether she could take the time off work. Mia's the same, she's a barrister for heaven's sake. She'll be overrun with cases as usual. I don't think she'd have the time. And Yasmine hates flying and has never left Australia, I can't see her suddenly hopping on a plane just to be my bridesmaid.'

Sasa bit into his cutlet, 'Good, it is good.'

'What? Poor Yasmine. I couldn't stand it if I was too afraid to get on a plane.'

'Some people don't care so much for travel, but you right. I could not stand it either. Let's hope many people can't stand to get on plane, no wedding in Macedonia for them. Bloody oats.'

'Bloody oats?' Hiding a smirk, Jacki looked at her fiancé, she knew he'd mucked up yet another Aussie expression – *bloody oath* – but sometimes she found his screw-ups of Aussie-isms just to cute to correct. She took another bit of her lamb cutlet.

Chapter Four



With summer approaching the sky was vividly blue, brightening the view to spectacular. The apartment was large and spacious, taking full advantage of its seaside location with one wall facing the bay. Its floor to ceiling panel of windows and sliding glass doors allowed the most magnificent views to the west across the peninsula, drinking in stunning sunsets that were often enjoyed with a few friends and a champers or two.

This morning Shirley was grateful to be on her own, enjoying a little peace along with a cup of Bushells Extra Strong tea. Quiet times like this gave her a chance to read and she was very happy to be catching up on her romance novel when her reverie was suddenly broken by the shrilling of her phone.

It was Nikki.

'Well, so what do you make of all that? You must really be getting worried by now. What if you wake up one day and they're gone. Flown the coop. Taken off in a secret tryst. Married without a single soul they know to bear witness. Maybe they'll get married in Macedonia. Aren't they planning a trip there?'

Nikki's outburst was annoying, not only had it broken Shirley's perfect morning, the whole Macedonian thing had been niggling at

Shirley. 'Don't be so dramatic,' she scolded her friend, Jacki has promised me that they are not planning to elope.'

'Well she can't tell you, that's what eloping is – running off without telling a soul and getting hitched.'

'Yes, but usually it's between couples who, for whatever reason, are not allowed to get married, like people from different cultures and feuding families – you know what I mean?'

'You read too many books,' responded Nikki.

Shirley looked down at the title of the novel she was reading, *Too Young to Be Married*, and flinched. 'Look, I know my daughter, they are just taking their time.'

'Well I think you should up the pressure. They have plans, I am sure of it. You don't want to be left out in the lurch, do you? Tell her it's time she revealed all.'

'She'll tell me when she is good and ready, until then I don't want to be nagging her.' As the two ladies continued to chat, Shirley walked over to the fridge and stared at the calendar magnetized to the door. She stared at the November page, Christmas was fast approaching. She turned the leaf to February where she had written, *Jacki and Sasa to Macedonia*. The writing became huge in her mind and she suddenly dismissed the call from Nikki telling her she'd call her back later. She hung up and dialled her daughter.



LANA WAS RELAXING by the pool when the phone rang. The long windows of the expansive architecturally designed home glinting in the background as she lay on her sun lounge. The gleaming sapphire water of the thirty-metre pool shimmering in the foreground. Lana was a few years younger than her friends, Shirley and Nikki. She was allergic to work and had therefore scored a rich husband who provided for her every whim. Her long dark hair shone in the sunlight as she picked up her mobile to see who could be bothering her this lazy afternoon. Nikki, of course.

'I've figured it out,' came the voice through the speaker as Lana switched the phone to the mode she preferred.

'What? Figured what out?'

'The wedding. The plans. The elopement. Jacki and Sasa.'

Lana rolled her chestnut eyes, Nikki was renowned for her probing and was usually the starting point for any of their bush telegraph gossip. Her olive skin was turning darker in the hot afternoon sun and she lazily began applying more sun lotion. 'So, what's your theory?'

'They're getting married in Macedonia.'

'Why on earth would they do that?'

'Well it makes sense,' Nikki went on. 'Sasa's family is there and they're off on a trip there in February.'

'Hmmm.' Lana was not convinced.

'They had the big engagement party here and now they're running off to Macedonia for a small intimate wedding without any of us.'

'They can't do that can they? It would break Shirley's heart.'

'Well all the ducks line up. I'm sure they're getting married in Macedonia.'

'It does make sense, does Shirley have wind of your theory?'

'Well if she didn't before she does now ... I just got off the phone to her. I mean in the end she had to agree, it does seem weird that they have never even hinted at what they are planning and the trip to Macedonia just seems a little too convenient. It would be so easy for them to just get married there, I am sure Sasa's family would love to throw a celebration for them.'

'Oh god, poor Shirley. She must be beside herself, she's going to need back-up, better phone the girls.' With that Lana hopped off her sun lounge and busied herself into the house. Now was the time to swing into action, come to the aid of a friend.