

Dance With Me

Anna's Notes

I've enjoyed visits to many small country towns in Australia, including a couple in the outback. I do admire the way country people get together and do things for their communities. That's why I like to set my stories there.

I haven't experienced a Bachelors and Spinsters Ball first-hand because I was happily married before we came to Australia, but it seems a great idea for getting unmarried people together.

After I'd watched a documentary about one on TV, the old 'what ifs' started popping up in my imagination, and here's the result.

Dance With Me

Jodie hummed as she drove along the highway. Her friend Marissa had moved to the Outback the previous year, and though they'd kept in touch by email and phone, they'd not managed a get-together for a while. But this weekend she was going to stay with Marissa, who was eight months pregnant. And when the baby was born, she was going to be its godmother. How cool was that?

The road was almost hypnotic, tugging her on past farms, horse studs and occasionally through a tiny cluster of twenty or so buildings. Jodie smiled. Country towns were sometimes tiny, but they were still called towns, not villages, in Western Australia.

She didn't stop anywhere as she was in a hurry to get there and catch up with Marissa's news.

As she got close, she could see how different everything looked from her last visit. She'd read about the drought, but this trip really brought it home to her. The grass was bleached beige and cars were dusty, apart from the windscreens. Well, who would waste precious water washing a car?

Feast or famine, that was Australia.

As she turned on to the sandy track that led to the farm, a plume of dust rose into the air behind her car, signalling her arrival. Marissa must have been watching, because she rushed out to hug her and show her to her bedroom. It was the same little sleepout as last time; an enclosed corner of the veranda which they used as a guest bedroom.

In the evening Pete left the two of them to chat and went into town to have a beer with his mates.

After they'd caught up on all the news, Marissa began fiddling with the arm of her chair.

Jodie knew the signs. Well, they'd been flatmates for three years, hadn't they? 'Spit it out, Marissa. What's the matter?'

'I – do you mind going to the dance tomorrow?'

'A dance? I've not brought anything but jeans. Why didn't you tell me about it before I left?'

'We weren't sure about it. You can borrow my blue dress. I don't fit into it any more. I was wearing it when I met Pete. It's a lucky dress, that one is.'

It wasn't till they were driving into town for the dance that Marissa blurted out suddenly, 'I didn't explain everything about tonight.'

'Oh?'

'It's a Bachelors and Spinsters Ball.'

Jodie looked at her in puzzlement.

'The dance – it's only for singles. Happens every year. People come from miles around. It's very popular. Half the town met their husband or wife there.'

‘But you two are married, so you can’t go now and . . .’ Jodie’s voice tailed off and she looked accusingly at her friend.

Marissa avoided her eyes.

‘You haven’t!’

Silence.

Jodie’s heart sank. ‘No way am I going to this ball on my own. Anyway, I’m a city girl. What would I want with a husband who’s a farmer?’

‘I told you not to do it,’ Pete said to his wife.

Marissa began to cry.

Jodie wasn’t going to fall for that. ‘I’m sorry to upset your plans, but I’m definitely not going.’

‘Why not? You always said you wanted to get married one day. If someone hadn’t pushed me into going, I’d not have met Pete.’

Jodie heard Marissa’s breath catch on a sob and felt mean.

‘You don’t have to go, Jodie,’ Pete said. ‘I told Marissa not to do it. We’ll take you to the hotel for a meal instead. They can easily fit another place at our table.’

‘We were going to wait at our friends’ house and pick you up again at midnight – well, unless you phoned to say you’d met someone.’

‘How kind of you!’

‘And you won’t be on your own because I’ve arranged for you to sit with some friends of mine,’ Marissa added. ‘You’ll really enjoy chatting to Kate and Pam, even if you never dance a single dance.’

‘What part of “no” don’t you understand?’

They reached the town and the conversation ended for the moment. The place was a bit bigger than some of the towns she'd driven through, with one wide main street, a few shops with verandas and a couple of hotels – one did meals, the other only sold drinks.

'Oh, look!' Marissa waved wildly. 'Kate and Pam are waiting for you outside the Country Women's Association hall.'

Muttering something, Pete pulled up outside.

The two young women were dressed in shimmering black and vivid red, all glammed up for a night out, with hair and make-up perfect. They rushed over to the car, bubbling with high spirits, and Jodie had to admit they seemed fun.

Marissa sent her a pleading glance, one hand on her stomach, tears in her eyes.

Jodie tried to hold out and failed. 'Oh, all right. I'll go. But don't expect me to come back with a man. I'm a career woman. And make sure you keep your mobile switched on. I'll phone you when I'm ready to leave.'

The hall was a wooden structure at the end of the main street, quite large and overflowing with people. It was surrounded by a sea of vehicles, mainly four-wheel drives. People were strolling across a nearby field from their cars, talking and laughing.

Jodie followed her new friends inside the big double doors. Their progress was slowed by stops to greet friends and introduce her. Her companions seemed to know just about everyone.

She chose a seat at the rear of their table, feeling overwhelmed by the noise. The guys were eyeing the girls as if they were on a shopping spree. Though actually, the girls on her table were eyeing the guys just as openly.

A meat market, that's what it was.

And is a night club in the city any different? a voice inside her head asked. She didn't answer that question. She was here for three hours maximum. She could do it.

And she'd kill Marissa tomorrow!

The lights dimmed a little and a group of musicians began to play. They were good and soon had people up dancing. One by one her companions were claimed and taken on to the central floor.

When she was left alone, Jodie held her head up and tried to keep a pleasant expression on her face. It was a bit embarrassing to be the only one left sitting at the table.

She was so busy watching the dancers and tapping her fingers on the table in time to the easy-going country music that she didn't realise someone was standing next to her till a deep voice asked, 'Would you like to dance?'

She looked up . . . and up. He was tall, dark, not exactly handsome but definitely nice looking. Anything was better than being a wallflower, so she pushed her chair back. 'Thank you. Yes.'

They circled the floor and he said almost nothing. Strong, silent type, obviously.

'So . . . what do you do for a living?' she asked brightly.

'Grow flowers.'

She blinked. 'I thought this was farming country.'

'Diversification.'

It was like drawing teeth getting him to speak. ‘What sort of flowers?’

‘All sorts. Lilies do well, chrysanthemums, whatever’s in season. Native flowers, too.’

They circled the floor three times more in silence and to her relief the dance ended. He had the good manners to escort her back to the table, then nodded and walked away.

They played one of her favourite songs next. Her foot started tapping almost of its own accord, so she turned to Pam. ‘Don’t you girls ever get up and dance together?’

‘Not at the B and S, we don’t,’ Pam replied. ‘We’re here to meet guys. Look, there’s that fellow I met at the last rodeo. He’s cute.’

Rodeo, for heaven’s sake, Jodie thought. It’s like the Wild West.

She danced with one guy after another. Shoes were kicked off, faces grew red, people loosened up. Some loosened up too much. She drew the line at dancing with drunks.

Some time later she found herself sitting alone again, after turning down a guy who was so drunk he was almost incoherent.

By now, all the girls on her table seemed to have picked up fellows and stayed with them. She sneaked a glance at the big, old-fashioned clock on the wall. It was only half past ten. It’d look bad to leave so early, and what would Marissa say if she didn’t give it a chance?

‘Would you like a drink?’

It was him again, Mr Flowers. Well, he might not say much but at least he wasn’t drunk. ‘Thank you. Just

something soft. I'm really thirsty. I'm Jodie, by the way.'

'John.' He came back with two lemonades and sat down beside her, looking glum.

'You don't have to sit here if you don't want.'

He blinked. 'What?'

'You look bored out of your tiny.'

'Oh, sorry. It's not you. I'm a bit tired. Had a bit of a problem with the water pump yesterday. Didn't get much sleep last night. Only I promised my sister I'd come and she'll kill me if I don't. I live an hour and a half's drive away.'

'My friend tricked me into coming. I live in Melbourne.'

A smile softened his face briefly. 'I know. My sister says Marissa's been telling everyone about you all week. My sister made me promise to dance with you.'

'I'll kill Marissa.'

'But you're not on the grab for a man, are you? That's what first attracted me to you tonight. You hadn't got *the look*. I'd have asked you to dance even if you weren't Marissa's friend.'

She could only gape at him. Of all the strange reasons for being attracted!

'I don't want to get married yet,' he explained. 'I'm working all hours of the day and night, and the business isn't bringing in much, though it will do once I get established. The figures are very promising.'

'I don't want to get married either. I'm in line for a promotion.'

He beamed at her. 'That's all right, then. Let's spend the rest of the evening together. We can protect each other.'

He was good company once he'd relaxed, but they made no attempt to exchange addresses when she left. Pity he didn't live in Melbourne, but there you were.

Marissa's baby was born, christened and life carried on. Jodie got her promotion – and with it, a new boss who was a rat.

When Marissa invited her to celebrate her godson's first birthday, Jodie accepted, rashly promising to take some leave and spend several days. Life had been hectic lately. And since it was two months past the date for this year's B&S ball, she felt quite safe from any more matchmaking.

The baby had turned into an almost-toddler. He crawled round, trying to stand up, clutching the nearest piece of furniture. When he was tired, he fell asleep on the nearest lap – even under the table once. He was so cuddly and warm, Jodie found herself softening inside as she held him. There was something very special about a child's smile.

It wasn't till the second morning that she found out the ball had been postponed due to flooding. Typical of Australia. Drought one minute, flooding the next.

'I've – um, bought you a ticket again,' Marissa said airily.

'You haven't!'

She shrugged. 'You enjoyed it last time, you know you did.'

'It didn't have any effect, though. I didn't meet a guy.'

'Second time lucky.'

'Don't you ever give up?'

'Nope.'

Well, Jodie had brought her favourite outfit for the christening party and she'd thought about the flower farmer a few times during the year. It might be nice to run into him again and catch up on how his new business was going.

She found herself sitting with Pam and two strangers. Kate had got married to the guy she'd met last year and moved to another small town two hundred miles away.

When the flower farmer turned up and asked Jodie for a dance, she felt relieved. She was safe with him.

They had a couple of dances, then, as the room was getting distinctly overheated, he suggested going outside for a walk. Behind the hall was the Memorial Garden, with the monument to fallen soldiers in the middle. It was full of flowers this year.

She realised she was holding John's hand and smiled. How had that happened?

As she looked sideways, their eyes met and he swung her into his arms for a kiss. She was so surprised she didn't protest, even more surprised to find herself enjoying his kiss, not wanting it to end.

He let her go and smiled down at her. Why had she ever thought he wasn't good looking? He was gorgeous. She pulled his head down and gave him another kiss out of sheer curiosity. Hmm. Definitely not a trace of frog in this one.

He pulled back a little. 'This wasn't meant to happen.'

'Nothing much has happened yet.'

His frown changed into a wry smile. 'It will if we don't watch out. I've thought about you all year. You're even prettier than I'd remembered.'

‘I’ve thought about you too,’ she admitted.

He set his hands on her shoulders and looked her straight in the eyes. ‘Either you run away now or we give this a chance . . .’

She didn’t run away.

John was not only attractive, he was fun, in a quiet understated way. And she didn’t want to die a childless spinster.

Of course Marissa didn’t stop crowing about it for years.

Jodie didn’t care. She loved growing flowers and three children seemed like just the right number, especially when they were John’s children.