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JACOBS

Short and Sweet

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SHORT AND SWEET

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SHORT AND SWEET

A Collection of Short Romantic Stories

Anna Jacobs



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Kissing Emily Baker

Anna's Notes

This is an updated version of one of the first short stories I ever wrote. I was so thrilled when it was accepted for publication by a major Australian women's magazine. I liked the main character so much, I wrote two other short stories about Emily later.

It was inspired by going to a dance in a tiny country town the year after we came to Australia. I had never been to a dance where everyone took along a plate of something to eat and their own drinks and it went so well.

When I was a teenager, we used to go to the local dance hall, a paid professional place. There were only two of them in my town in those days.

But whatever the venue was like, it didn't stop people having a good time, and it certainly didn't stop the younger ones from meeting people. As my heroine does . . .

Part One

The imaginary town of Beenilup, Western Australia (population 1,533). Quite a few years ago, when Emily was seventeen.

One hot summer night Emily Baker strolled through town with her best friend Vera, on their way to the church hall. 'I don't feel at all like dancing,' she muttered.

'Well, you didn't want to stay home with your father and his new lady friend, either, so you might as well just as well make the most of it.'

'It'll be the same old crowd. And Bill Nutting will want to dance with you all night.'

Vera smiled. 'I like dancing with Bill.'

Emily sighed. It was clear to everyone that Vera was getting serious about Bill and that he too was rather smitten. Only two years ago, he'd been spotty and thin. Now, suddenly, he was a man, not a boy, and that good looking, but kind and with a lovely nature.

She didn't fancy any of the lads in town, which didn't matter because she didn't fancy marriage either, not after seeing what her mother had gone through. She was going to make a career for herself, be a top secretary, and later she'd go to England to work for a while. She'd got family there: her mother's brother and his two daughters. They'd come out for a visit once, but it hadn't been a success. Her uncle and dad hadn't got on at all. But she'd got on well with her cousin Diana, who was the same age as her, and they still wrote to one another every month, sharing their lives and thoughts.

At the brightly lit hall she and Vera left their plates of food on the supper table, nodded to the married couples sitting at the tables near the entrance and walked past the clusters of younger folk, the girls on one side of the room, boys on the other. They always sat in the far corner, near the scratchy three-piece band.

As soon as they took their seats, Vera nudged her friend. 'Hey! There's a new fellow here tonight.'

wonder who he is?’

Emily didn't bother to turn round. 'Who cares?'

Vera giggled. 'Go on, have a look. He isn't very good looking, is he? He looks older than the other lads. Wonder why he isn't married?'

Emily turned for a brief glance. The young men were standing in groups, heads together, chattering. Their hair was neatly parted and shiny with brilliantine, their skin showed the ruddy aftermath of a thorough application of soap and water, and their shirts gleamed white against suntanned necks.

The curly ginger hair of the stranger stood out a mile and his skin was covered in freckles. Definitely not worth a second glance.

'How's it going with your father?' Vera asked once they were seated.

Emily scowled. 'It's awful. He's all over that Megs and she spends more time at our house than she does at her own. I don't know where to look sometimes, the way they go on.'

Vera pursed her lips. 'She's not bad looking, for a woman her age, you've got to give her that.'

The music started but Emily ignored it, still thinking about the latest quarrel with her father. There would be two or three married couples dancing, the ones who really fancied themselves. The young men would take their time about choosing partners, studying them as if they didn't already know the girls they'd been through school with!

A shadow fell across her and a man's voice said, 'May I have the pleasure of this dance?'

Emily looked up to see the new fellow standing beside her and stifled a sigh as she stood up. When she heard his relieved whoosh of breath, she smiled at him briefly and saw his colour start to subside. He had even more freckles when you got close.

'My name's Tom. Tom Norris. What's yours?'

'Mmm? What? Oh, Emily. Emily Baker.'

She walked on to the floor and allowed herself to be pulled against a strong young body that smelled of peppermint and soap.

They stood poised for a moment on the edge of the floor, then set off in time to the music. Slippery Dusty's 'Pub With No Beer' again. She was sick of that song. Waltzes should be romantic, not comic. She looked up into gentle green eyes. He still looked a bit nervous, so she said, 'You're new to town, aren't you?'

'Yes. I've come to work for Sanford's. I'm a brickie.'

'Oh, yes?'

Tom began to tell her about the job he was working on but she couldn't keep her mind focused on what he was saying. Well, if truth be told, she hadn't the slightest interest in him or his bricklaying. She was too worried about whether her father would go as far as marrying the barmaid.

Tom had to stop speaking while he counted aloud the steps in a turn, 'Two *and* three,' then set off on the straight again, mostly keeping time to the music.

He definitely wasn't a good dancer. But then, not many boys in Beeniupe were good at these old-fashioned dances the Social Committee insisted on.

'So what do you do to earn a crust, Emily?'

'I work at the Co-op in the fabrics and haberdashery section.'

'Nice job?'

'No.'

Two more fruitless attempts at conversation, four carefully counted corners, then Tom stopped dead in the middle of the floor and scowled at her.

Emily gasped and looked around. Everyone was staring at them! 'Keep moving!' she hissed.

His lips set in a firm line and he kept his feet where they were.

She tugged at his arm. 'What've you stopped for?'

‘It’s not much fun dancing with a girl who can’t be bothered to talk to you.’

~~She could feel her face growing hot with guilt. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude. I – I’ve got~~
few problems at home. It’s nothing to do with you, honest.’

She sighed with relief as he took her in his arms and started moving again. From then on she made appropriate responses as he led the discussion carefully through the weather and the latest pop songs to the lack of rain in the district.

She wished she was anywhere else but here. She’d only come out to get away from the sight of her father and the barmaid cuddling and giggling on the sofa. At their age! Her head was aching and her new shoes were killing her. She should never have bought them, but they’d have to do for best for the next year now, because she couldn’t afford another pair.

It seemed ages until the music stopped. ‘Thanks for the dance.’ Emily made a beeline for Vera without a backward glance at her partner.

Tom watched her cross the floor, wishing he could have kept her by his side. Then he realized with horror that he was standing alone in the middle of the floor, and hurried over to join the group of young men he’d come with.

‘What did you stop dancing for?’ Bill asked.

Tom shrugged. ‘We got talking. I forgot to move my feet.’

Stan, who had been listening unashamedly to their conversation, sniggered. ‘Talking’s all you’ll do with that one, believe me.’

‘She’s real pretty.’ Tom stared across at Emily wistfully. ‘I’ve always liked dark wavy hair. And her eyes are lovely too. Blue’s my favourite colour for eyes.’

Stan snorted. ‘Well, let me give you some advice, mate: don’t waste your time on her.’

‘She seemed friendly enough.’ Tom’s pride was stung. He had never been a ladies’ man, but he wasn’t starting off in a new town with a public failure on his record. Besides – he stole another glance across the dance floor – Emily was far and away the prettiest girl here tonight. There was something really special about her.

Stan, who considered himself a bit of a goer with women, spent several minutes explaining the futility of trying to get anywhere at all with Emily Baker. ‘And if you think you can do any better, think again.’

‘Oh?’

‘Yeah. She won’t even give a bloke a kiss under the mistletoe, that one.’

‘Who says she won’t?’ demanded Tom, full of Dutch courage from the two beers he’d poured down before the dance.

Stan set his hands on his hips, jaw jutting out dangerously. ‘I say she won’t!’

Tom squared his shoulders. ‘Care to put your money where your mouth is? Or is this just sour grapes because she doesn’t fancy you?’

Stan glared at him. ‘Sour grapes? About *her*? There’s enough trouble in this world without going looking for it. And Emily Baker’s trouble with a capital “T”. Even at school, when she was in the junior class and we were seniors, she’d snap your nose off as soon as look at you. Too smart for her own good, that one.’

‘I don’t blame her for snapping *your* nose off,’ said Tom. Most of the young blokes in the town were friendly sorts, but Stan was full of spiteful remarks about anything and everything. Tom had taken an instant dislike to him.

‘Oh, don’t you? Let’s see how well *you* do with her, then.’ He pulled a banknote out and brandished it in the air. ‘Five dollars says you don’t get a kiss out of her.’

Tom looked across at Emily, nodded and said quietly, ‘You’re on. Five dollars it is.’

Stan looked surprised by this ready acceptance, then said with a sneer, 'You don't look like ladykiller, but you're on. I'll need to see the kiss myself before I pay up, mind.' He folded his arms.

'No trouble,' said Tom airily. 'I'll get her to kiss me right here in this hall.'

Stan pounced. 'Get *her* to kiss you?'

Realizing his error, Tom nearly choked but hid it with a cough. He wasn't going to back down from a challenge. 'Yeah. Make it a bit more interesting, eh?'

Stan's expression said he felt the money was as good as his. 'You're on, mate.'

Tom tried to smile but there was a sinking feeling in his stomach.

'When by?' Stan pressed.

Tom thought rapidly. 'Dunno. Couple of months. Got to get to know her first, haven't I?'

'One month.'

'Two or the bet's off.'

'Oh, all right.'

By this time, all the unattached young men had gathered around them. There was a chorus of guffaws from the group.

'Get to know her!'

'Old Tight-knickers!'

'You'll be lucky.'

Bill Nutting took charge. 'Now, let's get the terms of this bet straight. Tom, you're going to get Emily Baker to kiss you on the lips here in the hall, in front of everyone?'

'Yeah.'

'By the end of two months.'

'Yeah.'

A few dances later, Tom saw Emily sitting in a corner on her own. He took a deep breath and marched across the floor. 'May I have the pleasure again?'

She shrugged and stood up.

He realized suddenly that there were tears in her eyes. She'd been upset earlier on, too. 'Something wrong?'

'No.' Her voice was tight and false. 'I'm fine really, just a bit tired.' A tear spilled out of one eye and slid down her cheek before she could stop it.

He ached to hold her in his arms and comfort her, but didn't dare touch her. 'How ...' Nervousness made Tom's voice come out a bit high, so he cleared his throat and started again. 'How about taking a walk outside on the veranda? Bit of fresh air will do us both good. It's far too hot in here. It's the top of the roof.'

She stared at the ground, trying to hide her tears. 'Yeah, why not?'

He shepherded her out of the hall, staying between her and the gawking heads in the corner.

'I'm not going past the end of the veranda,' she warned as they walked out into the warm dusk of the night. 'I don't go down by the creek, not with anyone.'

'Who asked you to?' He made a great play of blowing his nose, while she wiped her eyes surreptitiously.

'Bit childish, that lot.' He jerked his head back at the hall to indicate the group of young men, who were all gawking in their direction.

She looked back listlessly. 'They're about the same age as you.'

'I'm a year or two older, and anyway, I've been on my own since I was sixteen. My parents died in a car crash. I had to go and live in a hostel.'

'Oh. I'm sorry.' Bad enough to lose your mum, as she had. Fancy losing both your parents at once.

She frowned, not knowing what to make of him. 'So you're working in Beeniup now?'

He nodded. 'Mmm. Like I said, I'm a brickie. Good trade.'

'I'd have gone to work in Perth.'

'I've worked there. I fancied a stay in the country. Easier to get to know people. I'm going back to Perth in a year or so, though. You can find some interesting jobs there if you're a good brickie, and I am.'

She sighed. 'I wish girls could have a trade like boys do. After Mum died, my dad found me a job at the Co-op and I had to leave school early. He didn't care whether I wanted to work there or not. Any old job would have done as long as I was bringing in money. I wish I could be a carpenter or a bricklayer.'

Tom guffawed. 'Girls couldn't lay bricks. They're too heavy!'

'And how heavy do you think the rolls of material are in the drapery section, then?' Her eyes glittered at him and she tossed her head. 'You fellows are all alike. Think you're the only ones who can do anything.'

Silence fell. Moths fluttered around them, attracted by the lights. She didn't even seem to notice.

Emily saw Tom open his mouth then shut it again. He was watching her out of the corner of his eye. She didn't want to talk about her problems, least of all to a stranger, wished she could go home now. But she had to wait for her friend Vera. Her dad didn't like her to walk home alone and Vera's parents were the same. As if there was anything to be feared in a sleepy little town like Beeniup.

She turned back towards the hall. 'I've cooled down now.'

He put one hand on her arm to stop her. 'What were you crying for?'

'I wasn't crying.'

'Yes, you were.'

She glared at him, daring him to contradict her. 'I was just hot and tired. That was sweat I was wiping away.'

'Oh, yeah? You'd swear that on a Bible, would you?'

'It's none of your business what I do,' she repeated, tossing her head. 'Now, are we going inside together or do I go back on my own?'

He gave up the struggle and followed her in, admiring her slender figure in the flowery skirt and pale-pink top. Prettiest girl he'd ever met. Never mind the bet, he wanted to get to know her. And he would, too. 'Will you have the next dance with me, then? *Please?*'

She relented. 'Yeah, OK.' At least this one didn't try to paw you or press against you when you danced with him. She hid a smile. Well, he wouldn't. He was too busy counting his steps.

They danced together three more times, but she wouldn't allow him to take her home afterwards. 'No, thank you. I always walk back with my friend Vera. She lives in the next street.' Besides, her dad would kill her if she came home with a strange man.

As the two girls strolled along, enjoying the coolness of the night air after the hot little church hall, Vera chuckled and nudged Emily. 'He's nice, isn't he?'

'Who is?'

'That new lad. Whatisname.'

'Tom Norris, you mean?'

'Yes, him. I think he fancies you. He kept watching you all night. And he didn't ask anyone else to dance.'

Emily shrugged. 'So?'

'Don't you like him? I think he's got a real nice smile. He can't help the freckles.'

'He's all right. Politer than some others I could mention, anyway.' And he'd helped her to hide her

tears. That had been kind. It still hit her badly sometimes, the longing to confide in her mother, the feeling of grief.

‘We’ll have you courting yet, Emily Baker.’

Emily stopped dead in her tracks and glared at her best friend. ‘Look, how many times do I have to tell you, Vera Morton: I’m *not* interested in boys. And I’m never, *ever* going to get married. I’m moving to the city as soon as I’ve enough money saved. In Perth I can train as a secretary and find myself an interesting job.’

‘Well, I can’t wait to get married, have my own house and start a family. I intend to be well and truly married by the time I’m twenty, and I want to live in Beenilup near my family.’

‘If I had a family like yours, I’d want to live near them, too.’

There was silence. They both knew what Emily’s dad was like.

As they reached her gate, Vera said, ‘Well, I reckon you’ll be married by then, too. We’ll be able to bring up our children together and we’ll stay friends all our lives.’

‘I’d like to stay friends and I’ll come and visit you often, but I’m still moving to Perth.’ Emily was quite determined about that.

The next day her father announced that he was marrying Megs as soon as it could be arranged. ‘No reason to wait. She doesn’t like where she’s living and—’

Emily stared at him in horror. ‘How *can* you, so soon after Mum?’

‘Your mother’s dead and a man needs a wife. Now, I don’t want any trouble from you about this young lady.’

‘You’ll do what you want to anyway. You don’t care about me.’

‘I care enough to give you a home.’

‘Give me a home! Who had to pay the electricity bill last month?’

‘I was a bit short. I’ll pay you back after the wedding.’

She knew he wouldn’t. Oh, what did it matter? She was moving to Perth as soon as she had enough money. This news only made her more determined. She wasn’t buying any new clothes, or spending money on make-up from now on, she would save even harder.

Emily was a bit nervous about going to live on her own in the capital city, which she’d only visited two or three times in her whole life, but if she had some money behind her, she’d be all right. She had to be.

Apart from her father’s sister, whom she didn’t like, the only relatives she had left that she knew about were her uncle and cousins in England. It had been up to Emily to phone and tell them that her mother had died. Her uncle’s wife was ill and he couldn’t come to the funeral, but he’d sent a lovely condolences card and letter saying he hoped Emily would come and visit them one day.

Diana had also written to say how sorry she was and to tell her cousin about the lad she was going steady with, who sounded very nice. But Emily wasn’t going down that path.

Marriage was not for her.

Part Two

The wedding wasn’t a fancy affair. Emily attended but didn’t join the happy couple and their friends

at the pub afterwards. And when they got back home, clearly the worse for wear, she stayed in her bedroom.

Megs was friendly enough, but she wasn't good around the house.

Two weeks later, Emily came home after a frustrating day at work, when everything had gone wrong, and lost her temper at the sight of the unwashed breakfast dishes in the kitchen. 'It's not fair, Dad, expecting me to skivvy for you two as well as go out to work. Why can't *she* help clear up? Other people's mothers look after the house.'

Her father smelled of beer already and was unsteady on his feet. 'Don't call your stepmother silly like that! She has a name, and a pretty one too. Anyway, she didn't marry the house, she married me. He sniggered at his own joke, he always did.

In fact, Megs had scorned the idea of stopping work. Emily had heard them arguing about the wages she let Arthur pay all the bills while keeping her own wages for herself. Every now and then she treated him at the pub to keep him sweet. She was good at managing him, you had to give her that.

Emily sighed. 'All right, then. Why can't *Megs* help more around the house?'

'Because she needs more rest than a young 'un like you, so shut up an' get on with it!'

She knew by the gleam in his eye what kept tiring Megs out. Honestly, the pair of them were worse than Mrs Brown's old tom cat. 'It's not fair,' Emily persisted, determined to make a stand. 'She doesn't leave the house until ten and she hasn't even washed the breakfast things. And she comes home for a rest in the afternoons. I've been working hard all day and there's still the tea to cook for you and me. We were rushed off our feet with the sale and I'm tired out.'

He growled ominously, and when she opened her mouth to continue the argument, he thumped her with something he'd never done before. She stood there willing herself not to cry, but she wanted to. How could he think so little of her? He was her father, he should love her.

He stood there staring, his mouth open, then looked down at his hand and backed away. 'Sorry. I didn't mean to . . . You shouldn't answer me back, though.'

She walked along to her bedroom and slammed the door.

That evening she went round to Vera's and borrowed some make-up to cover the bruise on her cheek.

The following morning over breakfast Arthur took one look at her and complained, 'You're too young to wear that much make-up.'

'I'll wash it off, then.'

When she came back into the room, he swung her round to the light. 'What's that?'

'It's a bruise. *You* gave it to me last night.'

A pause, then he said sulkily, 'You shouldn't be so bloody cheeky. You'd – er – better put that make-up on again.'

'No. I'm too young. You said so.'

Anger rumbled in his throat, but Megs, who had just come yawning in, leaned against him and jerked her head at her stepdaughter to indicate she should get out quickly.

Emily could hear them arguing as she got ready for work.

'You shouldn't have hit her!' Megs said.

'I didn't mean to, but she's always answering me back.'

'That's because she's grown up now, not a child. Did you tell her you were sorry?'

'Yes.'

'Well, don't do it again. I don't like men who bash young girls.'

Megs came along to Emily's bedroom. 'You all right, darl?'

'Yes.'

'I can lend you some make-up to hide that bruise.'

‘No, thank you. I’ve got to go to work now.’

~~When her workmates asked her how she’d got the bruise, she told them, ‘My dad hit me.’ Which caused a sensation.~~

Later that night, after the hotel closed, Arthur came and threw open her bedroom door without knocking. ‘What did you tell people I hit you for?’

‘Because you did.’

‘Once! I’ve never laid a finger on you before. And lately, you’d try the patience of a saint.’

She pulled the covers up to her chin and listened to him ranting. At last he went away. There were no embarrassing sounds from the next bedroom that night. She heard him trying to coax Megs and smiled at the sharp refusal.

Bill seemed to have made friends with the newcomer, so Emily had found herself walking behind him and Vera with Tom. He didn’t say much, but he smiled a lot. He had a nice, gentle smile, which lit up his face. She didn’t mind being with him, not in a group anyway. But she wasn’t going steady with anyone and she hoped she’d made that plain to him.

Her heart sank when she found Tom Norris waiting for her outside the Co-op after work. His face lit up at the sight of her and two of her workmates made comments about ‘young love’.

Emily hesitated. She could hardly walk past him when it was clear he’d come there specially to meet her, but she hated him to see her with a big ugly bruise on her face. In the end she took a deep breath and moved forward. ‘Hello!’

Joan and Connie – both married women – walked on, smiling broadly, which left Emily and Tom standing there together looking like a couple.

‘I’ll walk home with you,’ he said, without so much as a by-your-leave.

‘I can get home my own way, thank you very much.’ No young man had ever met her after work. The other women would tease her about this for weeks and the whole town would consider her to be going out with Tom. She could feel herself blushing. What must that look like with the bruise?

He ignored her unenthusiastic response, fell into place beside her and said, ‘Who hit you?’

‘Mind your own business!’ She walked on more quickly.

‘Tell me who did it!’

‘What’s it got to do with you?’

‘I’m going to thump him, that’s what.’

She stopped dead in her tracks. ‘Why would you do that?’

He looked sideways at her and she could see anger sparkling in his eyes. ‘Because it’s not right hitting girls. Men who hit girls should be taken out and shot, like the mongrels they are.’

She stared at him in amazement. ‘But you hardly know me. Why should it bother you whether someone hits me or not?’

He turned bright red, swallowed hard and began walking again, hands thrust deep into his pockets. ‘I don’t like bullies.’

Emily looked sideways at him. He smelled strongly of soap and had a clean shirt on, so he must have gone home from work to wash and change before meeting her. She could feel herself softening towards him. He wasn’t much taller than she was, but he looked strong and healthy. He seemed honest too, and gentle, in spite of the scowl presently decorating his face.

She patted his arm. ‘Look, Tom, it’s kind of you to worry about me, but there’s no need, really. He won’t do it again. Megs saw to that.’

‘So it was your dad!’ Tom digested this for the length of a street. ‘What did he hit you for?’

‘I cheeked him. I’m fed up of doing all the housework for him and Megs. It isn’t fair.’

‘He still shouldn’t have hit you. And why do you have to do all the housework? Your stepmother

should be doing some of it, surely?’ He didn’t wait for an answer, but shook his head and repeated ‘And anyway, men shouldn’t thump women like that!’

She shook her head in exasperation. Once again, Tom Norris was proving more stubborn than she expected. ‘Look, it’s only happened this once and he said he was sorry, so it doesn’t matter. Right?’

‘It does matter to me.’

‘Well, I’m getting away from home next April. I’ve been saving up – I’ll go the minute I’ve enough money – so just leave things alone.’

Tom stopped walking so she had to stop, too. When he reached out towards her bruised face, the gentle butterfly touch of his fingertips made her feel funny inside. They started walking again, but neither spoke. She was sure people were peeping out of windows at them, sure word would be a round town by the next day that she was going steady with Tom Norris.

She sighed with relief as they reached her gate. ‘This is where I live. I have to go in and get Dad tea.’

‘Will you be all right?’

‘Yes, of course.’

He swallowed hard and said in a rush, ‘Would you come to the pictures with me on Saturday night?’

‘Pictures?’ She was going to say no, but he was looking so pink and agonized that somehow she couldn’t bear to hurt him.

‘I might. I’d have to bring my friend, Vera. We always go out together on Saturdays.’ Maybe that would stop people getting ideas about her and Tom being a couple.

‘Is Vera the girl you were with at the dance?’

‘Yes. She’s my best friend.’

‘All right, then. She can come too. But I’m not paying for her. Only for you.’

Emily jerked back to the present. ‘We can pay for ourselves, thank you very much!’

‘Not if you come out with me, you can’t!’ He thrust his hands deep into his trouser pockets and scowled at her. ‘If I take you out, I’m the one who’s paying.’

‘It doesn’t matter who pays.’

‘It matters to me. I like to do things properly.’

His face was all scrunched up, he was frowning so hard. She suppressed a sudden urge to giggle. He was such a serious fellow. But nice. ‘Oh, very well!’ She’d go halves with Vera afterwards on the ticket.

Her dad hadn’t come home yet, thank goodness. She changed into an old skirt to keep her work on nice and got on with the housework.

That Tom Norris! What had got into him? She’d have to ask Vera to tell people she wasn’t going steady with him.

But would they believe that after seeing her at the pictures with him?

The sooner she got away from here the better.

Beeniup, being the main town of the district, had a proper cinema, not just film showings in the church hall. The programme at the Odeon ran from Tuesdays to Saturdays, with a new film each week although occasionally a film was brought back a second time – ‘by popular demand’ it always said in the newspaper. Sometimes plays were put on there, too, by the amateur theatrical group or the school.

Jim Hodson had built the rough little cinema himself on a bit of spare land his family had owned for years and he was there every session, taking the money and rubbing his hands together with pleasure over the clinking coins. His wife ran the refreshment kiosk and his daughter carried round a tray of ice creams in the interval. They were fond of money, the Hodsons.

The young of Beeniup and districts patronized the cinema regularly, whatever the film showing.

because there wasn't even a café to sit around in. The only café did meals – mostly roast of the da and two veg – and closed at seven thirty sharp in the evening, and that was that. During the h summer months, the Memorial Gardens were often full of young folk taking the air and from the they could go and walk along by the creek, where Rotary had put in a nature trail. The creek w reduced to a mere trickle during the hot, dry summer weather but it never stopped flowing, at least.

On the Saturday night Tom escorted Emily into the cinema with a proprietorial air and Vera followed. Bill met them in the foyer, pairing off with Vera straight away.

Tom bought Emily a box of chocolates, which left her speechless. No one had ever bought her a bo of chocolates before and it felt – nice. But she couldn't help being aware that they were once again th focus of considerable interest, so she kept her distance from Tom, not giving him a chance even to hold her hand.

During the interval between the shorts and the feature film, Vera stayed inside the cinema, talking and laughing with Bill. So Emily found herself walking outside alone with Tom, who claimed he needed to stretch his legs.

'What's wrong with Stan?' she demanded. 'He kept twisting round to stare at us while the shor were on and now he's followed us outside, and he's *still* staring.'

'I don't know.'

Tom's face was flaming again. There was something fishy going on here, Emily decided. Perhaps the other lads had dared him to invite her out. He didn't seem the sort to take the initiative without push. 'Just why did you invite me out tonight, Tom?'

He had to swallow several times before he managed to say hoarsely, 'Because I wanted to.'

'Why? You hardly know me.'

His face was lit up like a packet of Redhead matches. 'Because you – you're pretty.'

She giggled suddenly. He looked so embarrassed, poor thing. He grinned back and the tensio eased.

'Sorry.' She patted his hand. 'I shouldn't tease you.'

He beamed at her again.

Vera was right, she decided. He did have a nice smile.

'You can tease me any time you like, Emily,' he managed after much swallowing and wriggling.

Honestly, what could you do with a fellow like him? It'd be like treading on a kitten if you spok sharply to him.

When they went back inside after the interval, Vera and Bill were cuddled up together, his arm round her shoulders, her head resting against him.

As the film began Tom fidgeted so much that in the end Emily dug him in the ribs and hisse 'What's the matter?'

'Er – this seat's a bit narrow. Me arm keeps goin' to sleep.'

She grinned in the darkness. Who did he think he was kidding? Why didn't he just put his arm round her like the other lads did? She wouldn't mind that, not with him.

He cleared his throat and opened his mouth, then shut it again and continued to fidget.

She couldn't stand it any longer. 'Oh, put your arm round my shoulders, Tom Norris. You know that's what you're after. But no monkey business!'

His arm crept around her, though he had some trouble deciding what to do with his hand. She near giggled aloud as it twitched to and fro, before settling chastely on her shoulder. But it would hav upset him if she'd laughed and she didn't want to do that. He was a nice bloke, Tom Norris. Much nicer than the other lads.

As the film continued, she eyed him sideways. There was no mistaking the happy expression on h face. When he saw her looking at him, he beamed at her. He didn't try anything on, either. Ah, he wa

just an old softie, this one. She relaxed against him, feeling safe and happy for once.

Afterwards, ~~they all four walked home together.~~ Vera and Bill stopped outside her house, said goodbye and before the others could move off, were clinging to one another in a passionate goodnight kiss. Tom averted his eyes and continued walking along the street with Emily. At her gate, however, he pulled her into his arms before she'd realized what he was doing and gave her a kiss.

And she found herself kissing him back, liking the gentleness of his lips, the way his hand caressed her hair.

As they drew apart she turned and gasped. Oh no! Her father was sitting on the front veranda! And he'd seen them! 'I have to go in!' she gabbled at Tom, fumbling with the gate catch. 'Thanks for taking me out. You'd better go now.'

'Will you let me walk you home after work on Monday?'

'Just go, will you!'

He leaned against the gate post. 'I'll have to have a rest first. It's a long walk back for a disappointed man.' He folded his arms with the air of one prepared to wait until the last trump.

She could see her father scowling at them. 'Oh, very well! Meet me after work, then.' She hurried through the gate.

Her father stood up as she climbed the veranda steps. 'I thought you were going out with Vera!'

'I did!'

'Well, who was that, then?'

'Who was what?'

'None of your cheek. Who was that fellow you were with, the fellow who was kissing you?'

She could smell the beer on his breath, see him swaying from side to side. She hated it when he got drunk. She wondered where Megs was. Her stepmother was usually back from work by now. For the first time, Emily wished Megs was there to distract him.

'Well?' roared Arthur. 'Who the hell is he?'

'His name's Tom. I met him at the church social.'

'You're too young to be walking out with boys. And don't think I didn't see him kissing you.'

'Too young! I'm nearly eighteen! Mum was only eighteen when she married you! You didn't think *she* was too young when you met her in England!'

Her father waggled one finger at her, so close to her face she thought he was going to hit her again. 'Don't answer me back, young lady! No respect nowadays, that's what's wrong with the world!'

From nowhere, it seemed, Tom materialized. He pushed himself between Emily and her father. 'You leave her alone, you bully!'

'What the hell . . .?' It took a minute for what had happened to sink into Arthur Baker's beer-clouded brain, then he began to sputter with rage. 'Who do you think you are, you young tyke? Get off my veranda before I push you off!'

Emily tugged at Tom's arm. 'Come away! He wasn't going to hit me, honest.' But Tom only unclasped her fingers and turned back to face her father. He had that stubborn look on his face again and her heart sank when she saw it.

'Grown men shouldn't thump young girls,' Tom said slowly and distinctly. 'It's not right.'

Arthur gaped at him. 'It was just the once and she bloody well deserved it, the impudent young madam.'

'Well, if you hit her while I'm around, I'll make you regret it.' Tom squared up to Arthur, fists clenched, jaw jutting out.

The flyscreen door crashed back on its hinges, making everyone jump, and Megs stormed out onto the veranda, all thirteen stones of her. She was wrapped in that dreadful flowery dressing gown, her feet were clacking loudly in high-heeled fluffy pink mules and she had curlers in her hair.

Emily closed her eyes and prayed fervently for lightning to strike her dead on the spot.

Megs shoved Arthur and Tom apart. 'What's the hell's going on here? Can't a lady have a bit of peace in her own home? An' who the hell are *you*?'

'This is Tom Norris,' said Emily hurriedly. 'He walked home from the cinema with me and Vera.'

Tom let his fists drop and nodded politely, holding his hand out. 'Pleased to meet you, Mrs Baker.'

You had to give it to him, thought Emily. He had excellent manners, much better than Bill or the dope Stan. Tom was right: they were only boys while he was a man.

Megs shook Tom's hand and studied him carefully. 'Pleased to meet you, too, Mr Norris.'

'Now, look here—' Arthur began. But the beer had got to his legs and he staggered suddenly backwards, sitting down with a thump on the old veranda couch, burping loudly and looking surprised.

'No, you look here,' said Tom, hands on hips, scowling down at him. 'I'm not having you hitting Emily again, not ever. You hear me?'

Megs looked from one to the other, then nodded her head slowly as her mouth formed an 'Oh' of comprehension. She winked at her stepdaughter. 'Is that what this is about? Nice of you to care, I'm sure, Mr Norris.'

Emily felt impelled to explain Tom's presence. 'I met Tom at the last church social. He's new to town.'

'I think I've seen you in the hotel, but *you* don't stay there all night like some I could mention.' She inclined her head graciously to Tom, magnificently disregarding her curlers and the smear of cosmetic cream on her nose. 'You'll have to excuse my husband, Mr Norris. He's had too much to drink.'

'Well, he still shouldn't hit her.'

'You're quite right there.' Arthur had sworn at Megs a few days previously and demanded a share of her wages, even going so far as to snatch her handbag. She had immediately set about him with the rolling pin, chasing him around the kitchen like an avenging fury and threatening to kick him in a vulnerable place if he so much as wagged a fingertip at her again, let alone touched her money.

'It's the drink,' she murmured confidentially to Tom. 'He can't hold it like he used to.'

'Who're you—' began Arthur. He tried to get up, failed and fell back with a loud trumpeting noise. 'Pardon me for farting!' He gave a snort of laughter and let out another blast.

Megs didn't even look at him. 'Shut up, you old sot, and mind your manners when ladies are present!' She patted Tom's arm and her voice changed into a gentle coo. 'Look, don't worry about Emily, Mr Norris. I'll see that her father leaves her alone from now on.' She shot a vicious glance at her husband and added, in a voice like a squirt of acid, 'Her *and* the beer.'

She led a bemused Tom gently to the gate, inviting him to come to tea on the Sunday of the following week. When he had disappeared down the street, she hugged Emily. 'You sly little sausage! Why didn't you tell me you'd got yourself a young man?'

'I haven't! He's just a friend.'

Megs patted her shoulder and nodded understanding. 'In the early stages, is it? I'll tread carefully when he comes round, then.'

'But—'

'He seems a nice young fellow. What does he do for a living?'

'He's a brickie.'

Megs nodded. 'Good trade, that. People will always need houses built.'

'It doesn't matter what he does. He *isn't* my boyfriend!'

Megs had already turned away and was staring down at Arthur. 'Look, Emily, you run along to bed. I'll deal with your father and then lock up.'

Emily walked numbly to her bedroom, horrified by the idea of Tom coming to take tea with them. Just as she was falling asleep, however, she remembered how he had stood up to her father and a smile

crept over her face. Funny sort of knight, wasn't he, to rescue her from her dragon of a father? A
those freckles. Not to mention the blushes.

Arthur Baker remained outside on the veranda all that night. When he banged on the locked door
the house and threatened to break it down if they didn't let him in, Megs banged on the other side with
her rolling pin, threatening his manhood if he set one toe over the threshold before he'd sobered up.

After pleading for entry more humbly, but still in vain, Arthur threw himself back down on the
couch in a huff. Later, when it grew chilly, he pinched the dog's blanket and huddled down under that.

Emily couldn't hide her annoyance when Tom met her on the Monday after work. 'What did you
accept the invitation to tea for?' she demanded before they had gone ten yards.

'I thought you'd like it.'

'Like it? *Like it?*' She snorted indignantly. 'It'll be awful! They'll ask you how much you earn and
what your prospects are. They'll ask about your family. They'll have us *courting* before we know
where we are.'

He avoided her eyes. 'I don't mind.'

She stopped dead in her tracks and sucked in her breath. 'Tom Norris, you'd better understand now
that I'm never going to get married! Never, ever!'

'Why not?'

Oh no! He had that stubborn look on his face again.

'What's wrong with marriage?' he demanded when she didn't answer.

'Everything! I've seen what happens to women who get married. I'm not getting lumbered with
a husband who spends his life down at the hotel getting drunk while I stay at home and look after the
kids. What's more, I'm leaving this one-eyed dump and going up to Perth soon. I can type already and
I'll carry on studying at night school till I've learned the other things I need. I'm going to be
secretary in a posh office one day and have my own flat. I'm—'

'Not all men get drunk and spend their evenings at the hotel, Emily. My dad didn't and—'

'Well, he was one in a million, then!'

'And I won't, either. I'll look after my wife properly. She won't have to go out to work. I don't
believe in wives working. And she'll have all my wages. Unopened packet every week. That's only
fair.'

Emily tried desperately to turn it into a joke. 'You sound almost as if you're proposing. Only there
aren't any violins playing.'

'When I propose,' Tom's voice was louder than usual and carried quite clearly to Vera's parents
who were walking past just then, 'I'll do it properly, with flowers and on my knees.' He reached out
and grabbed Emily's hand, holding it tightly as if he thought she might try to pull away.

Shock held her motionless, her mouth agape. Mr and Mrs Morton slowed down and when she
glanced sideways she saw them watching her.

Tom took full advantage of his moment. 'At present, Emily Baker, we're just going out with each
other. And we'll do that properly, too, which is why I'm coming to tea to meet your family.'

'But Tom – we haven't ... we don't ... Tom, we hardly know one another.' Her voice wobbled and
a little shiver ran down her spine at the determination emanating from him.

'No. We don't. Not yet. But we will.'

'But Tom, I really don't want to get ...'

Her voice tailed away as the masterful air dropped from him. He put his hands on her shoulders and
stared into her eyes with the air of a puppy pleading not to be kicked. 'Won't you even give me
a chance, Emily?' His voice was full of raw longing.

'B—but I—'

‘I like you, Emily.’ Tom swallowed hard and added in a funny gruff voice, ‘A lot.’

~~She could sense how hard it was for a shy man to say those words. And how could she be cruel to someone who had come to her defence against her father?~~

‘It wouldn’t hurt to give a bloke a chance,’ Tom pleaded softly. ‘That’s all I’m asking for. Just a chance.’

‘Oh, well, I – you see . . .’

He beamed at her, pulled her arm inside his and set off walking again, absolutely radiating happiness.

Oh crikey, he’d thought she meant ‘yes’! Stunned, bewildered, Emily allowed him to escort her along the street, convinced everyone was staring at them.

At the corner they met Stan Bowler. The expression of shock on his face was more than she could deal with in her present state. She could feel herself blushing and clung for dear life to her only support in a bewildering world – Tom’s arm.

Stan stopped dead in his tracks, mouth open. She watched as Tom grinned triumphantly at him and slowed down to give her a quick hug. Then he started walking again, whistling cheerfully. She was about to ask what was going on between him and Stan when they arrived at her house.

At the gate they stopped, and Tom’s hand tightened on hers as he raised it to his chest and pulled her closer. He had to swallow twice before he could get the words out, and even then his voice was rough and choky-sounding. ‘You’re the prettiest girl I’ve ever met, Emily Baker. Ever.’

‘I—I bet you say that to all the girls, Tom Norris,’ she quavered, making a last-ditch attempt to lighten the atmosphere.

‘No, I don’t. I couldn’t. Just to you, Em.’

His eyes were a clear green and his expression was serious and loving. She gulped and looked down at his hand. Square-tipped fingers, scrubbed nails, little scratches. It felt strong and warm and comforting. She felt a funny little ache start in her chest; to think that a man should be so gone on her.

He released her hand and smiled. ‘You’d better go inside now, Em. We don’t want your father getting upset at me again.’

‘Yes.’ She couldn’t even voice her usual protest at the shortening of her name, she felt so strange and wobbly.

She watched Tom stride away. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to give this bloke a chance. It’d be nice to have someone to go out with. Most of the other girls her age were paired off. That didn’t mean she was courting, or intending to get married. No way. But she did like him. They could just be friends. No harm in that.

Part Three

Three weeks later, however, Emily found out about the bet. She had never been so furious in her whole life, not even when her father hit her.

Vera, who had told her about it over a shared lunch in the Memorial Gardens, looked at her anxiously. ‘I thought you ought to know.’

‘I’ll kill him!’ Emily raged. ‘How dare he bet on me like that? Just wait till I see that Tom Norris!’

‘Keep your voice down. Mrs Lukas is coming.’

Emily bit down on her fury and tried to smile.

~~Mrs Lukas, who had probably been coming to ask for their help at the church fête, as usual, took~~ one look at Emily's flushed angry face, made a smart left turn and walked away.

Vera patted her friend's arm. 'You shouldn't get mad at him. He only did it because he fell for you. Bill told me Tom took one look at you at the social and he was gone.' She sighed enviously.

'One look and he was ready to make a laughing stock of me. I *will* kill him!'

'Bill says Stan was making all sorts of nasty remarks about you that night, an' Tom stuck up for you.'

Emily opened her mouth to say something scathing, shut it and then asked hesitantly, 'He stuck up for me? Even before he knew me?'

'Mmm. Bill says he's never seen anything to beat it. Love at first sight. Don't be mad at Tom. He's absolutely crazy about you.'

It was nice to know someone was crazy about her, but still the bet rankled. 'Yes, well, we'll see what he has to say for himself.' It must be a mistake. Tom wouldn't bet on something like that. Bill had probably got it all wrong.

Tom could tell that there was something wrong the minute he saw Emily that evening. She was waiting for him at the corner near the Co-op, arms folded across her chest, foot tapping impatiently. Every line of her body looked tight and angry.

'You're late. And I can smell the beer on your breath from here, Tom Norris.'

'It was just the one. It's been a scorcher today. I was thirsty.'

'Well, you can flipping well go back to the hotel and stay there. I don't want to be taken home by a man who drinks.'

'I do not drink.'

'You've just had a beer. You admitted it.'

'That was one lousy beer.' He grabbed her arm and swung her round. 'What's really wrong, Emily? She breathed deeply, then the words burst out, 'I've heard about it.'

'About what?'

'About your bet.'

Her voice was so loud, her expression so furious that a group of women from the Co-op stopped to watch. Tom glanced around in panic, then dragged her across to the Memorial Gardens.

She let him pull her as far as the flower beds and then stopped to confront him, hands on hips. 'I don't want to see you again, Tom Norris. And I'll never, *ever* forgive you for that bet.'

He froze for one moment, then reached for her.

'Let go of me! I'll scream if you don't.'

But he didn't let go.

And she didn't scream.

Although she made a half-hearted attempt to struggle, he didn't even seem to notice and pulled her right into his arms, kissing her long and hard – not as a shy lad, but as a man kissing the woman he loves.

And when he stopped, she felt so dizzy, so bewildered, she let him hold her close and explain what had happened.

'I'm sorry about the bet, Em. Really sorry. I don't care two hoots about it. I'll give Stan his money and he can crow all he wants about winning. It's you I care about.'

She stared at him, bemused.

'I'm *not* letting you go. I'm not. I love you, Emily Baker. I want to marry you. I'm *going* to marry you.'

‘But—’

‘I know it’s a bit soon to be talking of marriage, but when you meet someone who’s so,’ for the first time his voice faltered, ‘so right in every way,’ his voice became firm again, ‘you don’t let them walk away.’

‘But Tom, I—’

He stopped her protest with another heart-stopping kiss, then he drew her over to one of the park benches. ‘Oh, Em, don’t finish with me! I couldn’t bear it if you did that.’

Her protest died unborn. The look in his eyes made something turn to jelly inside her. His hand seemed to have left a warm print on her arm. Not since her mother died had anyone shown such deep feeling about her. Vera was right. It was just like in films. Tom Norris really had fallen madly in love with her.

And she loved him, too!

She stared at him open-mouthed as that realization sank in. How had that happened when she had vowed never to get married? She saw how anxiously he was looking at her and shook her head at him. ‘Oh, you are a fool.’

It was as if he sensed the change in her, because he smiled as he leaned forward and left a trail of little kisses across her face.

‘An absolute fool,’ she breathed in his ear as she kissed him back, not caring now whether anyone saw them or not.

Vera, walking home with Bill, paused for a moment to watch her friend’s enthusiastic embrace. ‘I knew she was getting fond of him,’ she said softly, then hurried Bill past before he could call out and whistle and destroy the moment.

‘It’s so romantic!’ she sighed as she looked back over her shoulder to see them still sitting there with Emily’s head on Tom’s shoulder. ‘He was looking at her as if she was the sun in the sky.’

‘Other fellows can be just as romantic,’ Bill growled.

‘Oh?’ She looked at him challengingly.

But for the life of him, he couldn’t find the courage to kiss her right there on the main street with all his friends of his parents watching them from their shop doorway.

Vera set a cracking pace home, nose in the air.

Bill trailed along by her side, and when they got away from the main street, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. But he knew it wasn’t as good as the sizzling kisses Tom and Emily had been exchanging in full view of the whole town.

Tom Norris won his bet two weeks later, but only because Emily couldn’t bear to see that slimy Stan Bowler win five whole dollars off him.

At the next church social she hissed, ‘Now!’ and kissed him – on the lips – in front of everyone.

And only he heard the words she muttered afterwards, ‘Don’t you *dare* make such a bet again, Tom Norris!’

She was a bit huffy with him for days afterwards, in spite of the big bunch of flowers he bought her. It had taken a lot for her to kiss him like that in front of everyone. He understood that and bore her wrath meekly. She was a wonderful girl, his Em was. She still hadn’t agreed to marry him, but it was only a matter of time before she did.

They both knew that.

Dance With Me

Anna's Notes

I've enjoyed visits to small country towns so I like to set my stories there.

I didn't experience a Bachelors and Spinsters Ball at first hand, because I was happily married before we came to Australia, but it seems a great idea.

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.

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 only occasional buildings through a tiny cluster of twenty or so buildings. Jodie smiled. Country towns were sometimes tiny, but they were still called towns not villages.

She didn't stop anywhere, was in a hurry to get there.

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 out, 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.'

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 away 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.

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!'

'I've arranged for you to sit with some friends of mine,' Marissa said. 'You'll really like Kate and Pam, even if you never dance a single dance.'

'What part of "no" don't you understand?'

They reached the town then. It was a bit bigger than some of the ones she'd driven through, with one wide main street, a few shops with verandas and a couple of hotels – one did meals, the other one 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 there.

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 enthusiasm, 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.'

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 the 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. They 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 club in the city any different? a voice inside her head asked. She didn't answer the question. She was here for three hours maximum. She could do it. And she'd kill Marissa tomorrow!

The lights dimmed a little, 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.

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