

OZ

By Ann Warner
www.AnnWarner.net

"You're too nice for your own good," her sister said when Glenda told her she was going to the wedding with Steven. "He'll find someone to talk to. I heard two-hundred guests. You're the one who won't know anybody. Besides, when it's over, it's over."

All true. But when she told Steven she wasn't going to see him anymore, and he realized that meant no date for the wedding, he'd been so upset, she hadn't had the heart to go through with it. He'd begged, and she'd caved.

So here she was, with Steven walking toward her carrying two flutes of champagne. It was too bad, really. He was actually quite handsome, not to mention reasonably intelligent, and charming when he wanted to be. But, as far as she could tell, his passion was reserved for his favorite sports teams.

"Another bachelor bites the dust." Steven handed her one of the flutes and took a sip as he examined her. "You're looking good this evening."

She blinked in surprise. It wasn't just that the mint-green camisole and peacock blue skirt she was wearing were considerably less expensive than the other gowns; it was the colors. Steven had failed to mention this was a black tie and pastel event. She was as out of place as a parrot in a flock of egrets.

Steven's attention to her appearance was short-lived as he scanned the room. Then he touched her arm saying he'd spotted someone he wanted to talk to. She allowed herself to be led through the crowd toward, it turned out, the best man. She'd already noticed him during the ceremony and decided his relaxed, humorous expression made him considerably more appealing than the classically handsome groom with his deer-in-the-headlights stare.

"Flemmie, good to see you again." Steven flourished his almost empty flute in Glenda's general direction. "Meet Glennie."

That was Steven for you—hated being called Stevie, but if he were introduced to the Pope, he'd call him Bennie. She'd found it amusing at first, but anymore it grated on her. It was a relief to know that after tonight it would no longer be an issue.

The man Steven had introduced took Glenda's hand. "It's Geoff Flemington, actually. How're you going?"

"Glenda Lewellen." And she wished she were going home. Soon. By any means possible. Is that what he meant?

"Flemmie's an Aussie," Steven said.

Well, that explained the accent and the odd greeting.

She examined Geoff Flemington as he and Steven chatted. Though shorter and more compact than Steven, he gave an impression of quiet strength and commanding ease that Steven lacked. But the intelligent look in his eyes was his most attractive feature.

"So how're the Maggies doing this year?" Steven asked.

"You mean the Pies?" Geoff said. "They compete for the Premiership in a week."

"Pies? Premiership?" she looked from one man to the other. "You aren't talking about a culinary competition, right?"

Geoff grinned at her. "Pies, short for Magpies. Australian football, love. Premiership is like your Super Bowl."

Well, of course. It had to be sports if Steven was interested. Never date a man you meet at a ball game unless you're willing to change your life's focus to ... well, balls.

"Flemmie used to play for the Ma—the Pies," Steven said. "Now there's a

game for you. No protective gear, no time-outs. Just flat-out, non-stop action."

It sounded appalling. She glanced away, no longer interested in the conversation or either man.

"So what're you doing with yourself these days, Flemmie?" Steven said.

"Genetic research."

Glenda blinked in surprise, turned back to look at Geoff Flemington, and struggled to readjust her thinking. Football and genetics, now there was a combination for the ages.

"How about that," Steven said. "Glennie does research, too."

Geoff gave her a questioning look.

Finally, a topic other than sports. "Biochemistry," she said. "I'm studying the metabolism of—"

"Geoff, they want us for more pictures." The speaker was the blonde bridesmaid, the one cute as a bug's ear. She laid a proprietary hand on Geoff's arm and gave Glenda a smug glance.

"You'll excuse me." Geoff nodded to them before leaving with the bridesmaid.

Glenda watched the two walk away, feeling like a child who had started playing with a toy only to have it snatched away by another child. She wanted to stamp her foot in frustration, but she'd known when she agreed to come it was going to be a dull evening. Sighing in resignation, she looked at Steven to find he was watching Geoff walk away with as much regret as she was.

"Rotten luck he had that accident. On track to be one of the best players the Pies ever had." Steven finished his champagne and exchanged his empty flute for a full one from a passing tray.

She wondered if the accident was the reason Geoff Flemington walked with a limp. "So how did the two of you meet?" She took a sip of her own champagne. It was light and crisp, obviously expensive, and the bubbles tickled her lips, but it was still inadequate compensation for a lost evening.

"We were apartment mates at the University of Chicago. I thought he went back to Australia." Steven shrugged before finishing off his second glass of champagne. "Couldn't have though. Way too far to come for a wedding."

By the time dinner had been cleared and the cake cut, Steven was slurring his words and talking to anyone who would listen about the lousy refereeing at the last Bears' game. And Glenda was suffering the full effects of her sister's parting prediction on the subject of her attending the wedding with Steven. "No good deed goes unpunished."

Well, she'd been punished enough. Further, she'd more than fulfilled her role as date-for-the-wedding. Likely Steven wouldn't even notice she was

gone.

She slipped out of the ballroom into the hall to find it was deserted except for Geoff Flemington, who was pacing and talking on his phone. As she approached the coat check, he ended the call, snapped the phone shut, and smiled at her. "Are you willing to take a word of advice from a bloke who has nothing to gain from giving it?"

Intrigued, she nodded.

"Give Steven a pass."

She cocked her head. "You mean forgive him for the way he's acting this evening? Or dump him?"

He grinned. "Isn't English brilliant?" His expression turned serious. "The latter, actually."

"A done deal, actually." And given Steven's behavior, it was both a relief to say it and a relief to know it was true.

"In that case, would you like to dance?"

He had to be joking. Maybe he was making fun of her. There was certainly a glint in his eyes.

"What about your date?"

He shook his head, smiling. "The best woman, as you may have noticed, has a husband and incipient child and is in no need of my escort services."

Incipient child, indeed. Glenda smiled. The poor woman looked like she could give birth at any moment. "What about her?" She nodded toward the blonde bridesmaid who had stuck her head out the door, and seeing Glenda with Geoff, was morphing from cute to petulant.

Geoff glanced over his shoulder, turned back to Glenda, and held out his hand. "Glenda Lewellen. A fellow scientist needs you. Please. You will save me, won't you?"

His sincerity and desperation were obvious. But it was the fact he had remembered her name, although he did pronounce it oddly, that made her place her hand in his. Besides, one dance wouldn't hurt. It would delay her departure by only five minutes. She could manage another five minutes.

He led her back to the ballroom and took her in his arms. "Lucky they're playing something slow."

Glenda wondered if he was referring to his limp or to his dancing ability, then decided, as he guided her around the floor, the limp didn't seem to hinder his dancing at all.

She liked to dance, especially with a partner as competent as this man. She liked his voice as well, especially the way he pronounced her name—Glynda. Making it sound more musical than Glenda.

She leaned back slightly to look at him. "So how did a jock end up in genetics?"

"I'm more interested in how a beautiful woman ended up in biochemistry."

It was just a line. And she was not falling for it. "I asked first."

He nodded in peaceful agreement. "A few years ago I had a car smash. It forced me to rethink my life, and I decided to have a go at university."

"Your limp. Is it because of the accident?"

"Yeah. Lost my right foot."

Surprised, she mis-stepped. His hand pulled her gently but firmly back into position.

"It gives a whole new meaning to that saying about dancing as if you have two left feet." She bit her lip. Sometimes she let her sense of the absurd get away from her. "Not that you do," she added, looking to see how he'd taken it.

He grinned a slow, lazy, wonderful grin that made her heart do an odd little flip.

He pulled her closer to maneuver around another couple. His cheek brushed hers, smooth and soft, smelling of soap and aftershave—something light and pleasant like a pine forest on a warm day.

"Your turn, Glenda Lewellen."

She tried to boil it down like he had. "I had a bad case of ugly duckling syndrome, so books were my best friends. I loved school. So much, I couldn't stop going."

"And the ugly duckling grew into a colorful swan."

He had to be commenting on her outfit. She felt the quick surge of heat that meant she was blushing. "Steven forgot to mention it was a pastel wedding."

He grinned at her. "You make the rest look drab."

"They seem to be coping with it well." She tried to sound nonchalant, but it was becoming increasingly difficult. The longer they danced, the more she was enjoying it. And him.

Time to bring everything back to earth. "So, why did you pick genetics?"

He shrugged. "Well it started as a lark. Some of the guys bet me I couldn't hack science. I had to show them, didn't I?" He gave her a self-deprecating grin. "In the process I got hooked by the idea of knowing exactly who I am down to the last base pair."

"So is that what you're working on? The human genome?"

"Actually, our group is studying stromatolites. They're the first life-form on

the planet—responsible for starting everything off by releasing oxygen into the prehistoric atmosphere."

Glenda blinked in surprise. "So how do you get the DNA to study?"

"Oh, the little bugger's still alive and kicking. Looks like a rock. Likely why it was overlooked for so long."

"That's hopeful, don't you think? That they're still alive after so many billions of years."

"A bloody miracle," he agreed, looking solemn. Then he asked her what she was working on, and she told him—without interruption this time.

When the band took a break, instead of releasing her, Geoff held onto her hand and led her outside to the terrace. As he closed the door behind them, quiet replaced the clamor of the reception. Glenda sighed with relief and walked over to the short wall edging the terrace. She sat and eased her feet out of her shoes, and wiggled her toes. In the distance, Lake Michigan glimmered in the cool darkness.

Geoff leaned against the wall next to her. "So was your favorite book as a little girl *The Wizard of Oz*?"

"Oh, I see," she said, after a moment. "The witch's name was Glinda with an i. My name is Glenda with an e. Besides, she was blonde." Growing up with straight dark hair, brown eyes, and a stick thin body, Glenda had always felt she looked more like the wicked stepmothers than the

princesses. She still felt that way sometimes.

"Don't care much for blondes myself," Geoff said. "Too delicate. Can't handle sun."

"That's a peculiar reason."

"Not when you're from Oz, love."

"Oz?" Was he still talking about the book?

"Australia. One thing we have plenty of, no worries, is sunshine."

Glenda shivered as a cool breeze sprang up. Geoff took off his coat and draped it on her shoulders. It was warm from his body, making her feel like she was still in his arms.

"You'll get cold."

"No worries."

She pulled the coat tighter, enjoying its warmth and the pleasure of being here with this man, close enough to touch. "So why did you tell me to dump Steven?"

He gave her a rueful smile. "Not much point in knocking a bloke who's already down."

"And not having anything to gain from telling me. What's that about?"

He gave her a considering look. "I go back to Australia in two days."

Her heart sank. Just her luck. Meet a man she felt drawn to, find he was, in fact, intelligent and interesting, and then discover he lived on the other side of the planet.

Deciding, she held out her hand. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Australia. Thanks for the dance and the advice."

"The pleasure was all mine, Chicago."

She pulled on her hand, but he held on to it, giving her an intent look.

"Please don't go."

"Why not?"

"The obvious answer is I can use you to fend off Marissa."

"Marissa?"

"You know. Short, blonde, yellow dress."

"The monochromatic bridesmaid."

"Indeed."

"And the not so obvious one?"

"I would very much like to know you better."

"You live half-way round the world. What's the point?" Glenda felt herself blush, and was glad the dim light kept him from seeing it. She'd practically spelled out how she felt—that spending more time together would just make it more difficult to tell him goodbye.

Actually, she couldn't remember ever reacting quite this way to a man before—a mix of exhilaration and quiet delight. A well-spring of regret overwhelmed her at the realization she'd never see him again after tonight.

He peered at her. "Perhaps you might share some of those interesting thoughts."

She shook her head, biting her lip.

"Maybe I can help." He reached out a finger and gently traced the curve of her cheek. "Here you are, Flemington. After all these years, you finally meet a woman who's as smart as she is beautiful. And you may be as mad as a gum tree full of galahs, but you already know you'll regret it if you let her walk away."

His words warmed her and made her shiver at the same time. Her heart tripped along, and excitement fizzed for a moment before she quenched it. It was absurd of course. There was no such thing as love at first sight. Attraction at first sight, maybe. And even that was due to a biochemical

reaction.

"What's a galah?" she said, to give herself time.

"Large, extremely noisy bird."

Glenda swallowed, trying to assess the look on his face. This was either the best pick-up line she'd ever heard, or ... could he possibly feel the way he said he did? But what did it matter, after all? In two days he was going back to Australia. And that would be that.

"You believe in serendipity?" he asked.

She nodded, surprised and puzzled by the change of topic.

"I think we're victims." He looked completely serious. "Consider all the adjustments the universe had to make in order for us to meet tonight." He gestured first at his foot, then toward the ballroom. "A car smash, a crazy bet, a wedding." He shook his head gently, smiling at her. "If you walk away from all that, you have to have a kangaroo loose in the upper paddock."

This time she didn't need to ask for a translation. She cocked her head at him. "It might put a real crimp in my career if it got out I had a kangaroo loose in my paddock."

"Upper paddock."

"Upper paddock," she agreed, smiling. "What do you suggest?"

"Spend the next two days with me." He waited, no longer touching her.

She felt as if he had picked her up and given her a good shake, and she was still waiting for everything to settle into its normal configuration, like snow inside one of those crystal globes.

Her heart beat rapidly, warring with her head as she clutched his coat closed and shivered with nerves. He couldn't be serious. But looking him in the eye, she couldn't believe he wasn't serious. "You're afraid." He spoke gently.

She gave him a direct look. "Yes."

"That's a good sign."

She shook her head. "I don't see why."

"If you're afraid you'll be hurt, it means you're feeling some of what I am."

She didn't have an answer to that.

"Give us our two days, Glenda. If this turns out the way I think it will, we'll work on the geography."

"You willing to come live in the States?"

"If it comes to that, I'd be willing to live in Antarctica."

"It doesn't get that cold in Chicago."

His smile made her heart do that flip again.

"Well, you never know. You visit Australia in February and you may be the one who wants to move."

The door to the ballroom opened abruptly, and light and sound spilled out. A tall figure stepped through the door and lurched toward them. "Is that you, Glennie?"

Steven. She'd forgotten all about him.

Although she didn't answer, he came closer anyway, swaying slightly. "Marissa said you were out here. Whose coat are you wearing? Oh, it's you, Flemmie. You two talking research are you?"

Glenda's stomach tightened. "Not exactly."

Steven blinked and moved closer. "S'time to go home."

He was too drunk to be driving. But, before she could respond, Geoff did. "I'll call you a cab, shall I?" Not waiting for an answer he pulled out his phone.

"Don't need a cab. Got a car."

"Easier to take a cab. Door-to-door service. My treat." Geoff's tone was calm but firm.

"Glennie, too?"

Glenda realized she was holding her breath.

"I'll take Glenda home when she's ready," Geoff said, speaking easily. The breath she held whooshed out.

"I brought Glennie. Means I take her home." Steven sounded determined in spite of his slurred words, but he had a puzzled look, as if he couldn't quite understand what was happening.

Before he figured it out, Geoff took Steven's arm, saying, "Actually, there should be cabs out front. We'll go see, shall we, mate? Did I tell you how the Pies season went? They're in the Premiership."

"That's good, isn't it," Steven mumbled. At a signal from Geoff, Glenda took Steven's other arm, and between them they steered him through the ballroom and to the entrance of the hotel with Geoff talking about the Pies and the Premiership the whole way. There was a final sticky moment after Steven was in the cab and Glenda stepped back to stand next to Geoff.

"What's going—"

"No worries, mate." Geoff closed the door, and the cab moved off.

Glenda sighed in relief and turned to meet Geoff Flemington's gaze.

"Thank you. You handled that beautifully. I owe you one."

"And I aim to collect." He cupped her face, his thumb caressing her chin. "I choose those two days with you."

It was crazy. To take a chance on falling in love with someone who might take her away from everything and everyone she held dear. It was like skiing full tilt toward the edge of a slope with no idea what was beyond...short drop or abyss.

She didn't take risks like that.

But if she walked away from Geoff Flemington tonight, she wouldn't forget him. And she'd be diminished somehow. And she might very well regret it the rest of her life.

She raised her eyes to his. They were standing in shadow, and his eyes gleamed like water touched with starlight.

She felt as if the earth was sliding from under her. But it was okay because Geoff took her hands and held them firmly.

"Give it a go, Glenda. What do you have to lose?"

She shook her head, beginning to smile at him. "Everything. Absolutely everything."

He met her eyes for a moment, nodded, then leaned forward and brushed her lips with his. "No worries, love. Me, too."

The End

©Ann Warner