

*Accidental
Valentines*

A SUNRISE SHORT STORY

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Accidental Valentines – 2025 Edition.

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Date One

Beckman's heart sank as a familiar figure entered the café.

There was no point in looking away, burying his nose in the coffee cup, or whipping up a book to cover his face.

Note to self: always carry a book.

Tyler would notice him. It was a foregone conclusion because (1), like he, Tyler would be scouring the room for potential customers, (2) things always went right for Tyler, and (3) Beckman's personalised license plate would stand out in a small parking lot.

Of course, it wasn't impossible that Tyler would notice him and ignore him. Maybe even offer a courteous nod.

Courteous—Tyler? Ha!

At times like these, the Jaws theme wormed into Beckman's head. He spied the moment Tyler painted on a good-natured expression, bypassed the short register queue, and lasered in on his co-worker.

Beckman initiated a look of cheery humour, sipped his traditional beverage nonchalantly, and waited to feel the soft impression from multiple rows of sharky pearly whites.

‘Crossing boundaries now, Becky? Tsk tsk.’

Despite many years of enduring Tyler Quittle’s innocent yet offensive nickname, it never bounced off Beckman without an inner wince. He’d given up hope that the man would finally realise that the gently patronising jibe had no effect. Or would get bored with it. Or come up with something, if not better, at least *different*.

Ignoring the term of non-endorsement (as usual), Beckman focussed on the allegation of a territorial infraction. Tyler had made an error because he didn’t *get* it. Like he didn’t *get* women. Or Beckman’s vastly different persona. Or the concept of generally being pleasant.

‘Afternoon to you too, Tyler. I get where you’re coming from, so put away the wiseass. Yeah, so this branch is not inside my sales patch, but it’s not verboten. Neither is taking a damn holiday in the Rockies if I want. I’m drinking coffee, not trying to steal your *precious* customers.’

Tyler Quittle’s perfect blue eyes, set into his roguish face, narrowed as he sought bluff in Beckman’s defence. Then, eyeing his colleague warily, as if he’d throw a punch or morph into a unicorn, he eased into the moulded black plastic seat opposite. ‘Sure?’

Beckman merely sipped his brew. ‘Do I look that dumb to sneak onto your territory?’

Tyler nodded slowly, accepting this at face value. ‘Be a damn sight easier if you weren’t obsessed with this place. You know, coffee’s coffee.’

The nerve of the man.

‘I happen to like Coffee Planet, okay? So I’m about four miles over your border? Live and let live. I’ll be gone in two minutes.’

‘Cos if I catch you pitching to—’

‘Blow it out your ass, Tyler.’

‘Easy, Becky, easy.’

They mentally circled each other for a minute. They'd probably done a million laps, on and off, over the years they'd worked together at The Pegasus Corporation. Beckman slurped his soon-to-be-too-cold black americano.

Tyler drummed his fingers on the table. 'Any hot plans tonight? But why do I ask, huh?' He smirked.

Lesser men would have put their fists through the man's face. Luckily, the angel on Beckman's shoulder had long ago blinded the opposing devil, using searingly white starched robes, causing the little red guy to topple five feet to his death and impale himself on his trident for good measure.

'Just a regular Friday, wind up the working week. I won't ask about you.'

Nonetheless, Tyler grandstanded. 'Having Valentine's at home with Jennah.'

'Jennah? Wow. That's over a week now. Is that a record?'

'Can it, Becky.'

'Barely once a decade do we get a woman, besides Miss B, at the office, but you don't hang about. And she's sticking with you even after her two-week locum stretch? Kudos to you, Tyler. Kudos to you.'

Beckman always called the boss' PA "Miss", even though neither he nor anyone else at Pegasus had any clue about whether she was currently married, had ever been married, had been repeatedly married, abhorred marriage, dated the boss, hated the boss, was married to the job or married to the mob.

He also felt she had a soft spot for him, although she might have been faking it and had a soft spot for everybody, nobody, the job, the mob, the boss, the husband, the non-husband, the ex-husband, the future husband, or long evenings at home with a kilo tub of salted caramel ice cream.

One truism remained: she was Of Indeterminate Age and had remained so for the last eleven years. She managed to appear like she could *be* fifty and *look* thirty, and also *be* thirty and *look* fifty. Simultaneously. It was a hell of a trick.

Tyler—who would try it on with any female possessing a pulse—had wisely left Miss B alone. The same wasn't true of the unfortunate Jennah, who'd stepped in when the PA had to take emergency personal time.

Tyler's gaze again drilled into Beckman's soul, searching for the flannel, but Beckman was too good at fake pleasantries to be discovered. Ten years sparring with T. Quittle had oiled his battle armour nicely.

'Well, Jennah knows a good thing. Knows how to keep a guy happy too. We're getting take-out, and I'm watching some hoops with a few beers.'

'You old romantic.'

Tyler shrugged. 'If she's happy, fine.'

'Let's see if she's still curled up with you this time next year. Or even month.'

'Like I'd listen to dating advice from you, Becky. About as much use as taking tips about the job. What are you, about half my total?'

'I don't watch other people's sales numbers. Waste of time.'

Tyler sneered. 'Yeah, too depressing, I guess.' He patted the table like a drum, then rose. 'Have a beautiful weekend. Say hello to your lizard.'

Then he left.

'It's a leopard gecko,' Beckman breathed to nobody.

Arizona's February twilight was falling as he reached his apartment building. It had been a pretty slow week—only 1212 miles of roads—but he was looking forward to getting inside and shutting

out the over-commercial wash of hearts and flowers which subsumed society.

A delivery guy stood at the door of the apartment opposite. Not the parcel or take-out kind—more individual. The only clue that he was a delivery guy was that he was delivering something. Something with a smell. A good smell.

‘Thanks,’ said EJ, the resident. Beckman sensed she meant gratitude but that her heart wasn’t in it—like she’d ordered a new wristwatch and, in the meantime, suffered a lower-arm amputation.

‘Have a good night,’ Delivery Guy chirped.

‘Yeah.’

Beckman nodded the customary *Never Going To See You Again* hello-goodbye to the guy as he passed, then returned his attention to EJ as she lifted the two bags inside her doorway.

‘Hi, EJ.’

He’d never been told what EJ stood for, asked, or expected to find out. EJ liked to be called EJ, and probably only her parents, close friends, or boyfriend knew the E and the J of it. She lived across the hall, was pleasant, took in his deliveries while he was out (he was usually out but ordered little), and they exchanged more passing conversation than he did with, for example, delivery guys.

‘Hey, Beckman. You’re home. Means it’s the weekend.’

He flashed a smile. ‘And Valentine’s, don’t forget. Although I see you didn’t. Or Jerome didn’t forget.’

She tried to respond with a smile, but it quickly turned upside down. ‘Thanks. My idea. Bad idea, as it turns out.’

He moved closer, curious. ‘You okay?’

She sighed a tornado. ‘We broke up.’

‘Today?’ he asked in disbelief.

'Yeah.' She shrugged. 'He took offence at me wearing the trousers and organising a romantic night in. Told me not to waste money on a fancy private chef home order.' She gave a maudlin chuckle. 'Final straw. So, here we are. Hundred bucks worth of overeating stomach-ache for me tomorrow.' She pushed a strand of long brown hair away from her eyes. 'He sure picked a day.'

'That sucks, EJ.' He offered the most sympathetic look in his arsenal.

Silence clanged in the short corridor.

'You got anything planned?'

He knew she'd asked out of politeness. It was impossible to live opposite Beckman Spiers and not notice that there was nothing to notice.

'You know, feet up, order a take-out. It's just a Friday.'

'What a pair, huh?'

'Yeah.'

Yet he hadn't moved his key towards the keyhole. Something hung in the air. An approaching unknown, but not like the spectre of Tyler. In fact, if there was a tune playing in his head, it was more like that of an ice cream truck turning into the street.

'Look, Beckman, this is crazy, but do you want to save yourself a phone call, and me guilt and indigestion, and give me a hand with this?' She gestured to the bags, whose mouth-watering scent was now as much a feature of the environment as the unexpected uncomfortableness of the situation.

'Er...'

'Not like a *date*,' she clarified with a smile.

'Just neighbours sharing a bite.'

'Sure. Ignore the "Fourteenth" part. Just... a Friday.'

What's there to lose? She's nice enough. And I am hungry.

Sure, she might stab me with a kitchen knife as in loco revenge for simply being a man—but that's pretty unlikely.

He smiled. 'Sure, EJ. Shame to waste good food.'

While EJ hustled up crockery, Beckman gazed around the living area.

She collected mice.

There were plastic ones, metal ones, enamel ones, glass ones, and woollen ones. Big, medium, small. Singly, in families. On the shelves and the window sill and the table and the floor. A hand-drawn sticker of a mouse poked its head out from a semi-circular black sticker on the skirting.

It was more... cutesy than he expected of her—certainly for a self-proclaimed trouser-wearer and dinner-orderer.

They sat.

She slid a Bud across the table and raised hers. 'Thanks, neighbour.'

He shrugged. 'I would only have sat across the hall and worried if you'd be okay.' He drank. 'You know, laid awake, waiting for the anguished wails of the unfairly dumped.'

'Oh, don't worry. I dumped *him*. Seems like the way to a man's heart *isn't* always through his stomach.'

'The problem is that the stomach is always receptive, but the brain isn't. Anyway, his loss.' He realised that could be misconstrued as A Pass. 'The food, I mean.'

'I did good, huh?'

He devoured another mouthful of perfect pork belly. 'Gourmet take-out may be my new favourite thing. If I ever get the occasion.'

'Maybe if we're both still single, your place same time next year?' Her wink showed the words were good-natured yet serious.

'Another Valentine's to remember for all the wrong reasons? Let's hope not.'

‘Another?’ Her brow furrowed.

‘I mean remember for the whole non-Valentine’s, must-try-harder feeling.’

‘Oh, don’t worry, I’ve had a few.’

‘I hear you.’

Please don’t ask about them, EJ, okay? I’m enjoying a nice platonic face-stuffing here, trying to keep your emotional head above water. Let’s not go dredging up my scant dating history.

‘Sounds ominous, Beckman.’

‘Nope. Ominous implies a departure from the norm. It’s just another mid-February day.’ He drained his beer. ‘I certainly never got dumped on this day in history, so you’re one up on me there.’

She snorted. ‘Go me. Ring out the bells.’

‘Hey, I’m no expert, but you’re probably better off. It’s worse when you can’t see the warning signs and end up living a lie. If Jerome wasn’t Mister Right, then it’s better to find out sooner than later.’

‘That sounds like it comes from the heart.’

He shook his head. ‘Saw it on Oprah.’

She sniggered. ‘You, Oprah?’

‘What can I say? Ten years of motel TV and too much time.’

‘So, not at home most Valentine’s?’

‘Like I said, it’s a day. Some people are in the hearts-and-flowers, candlelit dinners camp. Those without the means, motive and opportunity aren’t.’

‘Well, I left the candles in the cupboard. That would have been too weird.’

‘Yeah.’

She held up a mollifying hand. ‘Not that you’re not a nice guy, Beckman. I’m sure you’d be the chocolates-and-kisses type... for the right girl.’

‘Thanks, EJ. Five years of taking in my oversized mail and saying howdy, and suddenly you’ll break bread on a momentous day and say sweet things? Jerome is an ass.’

‘Was.’

A worry lanced through his brain. ‘He is gone... right? Does he have a key? I mean—’ He looked around nervously.

‘What’s up? Chill out.’

‘If he catches me, I bruise easily.’

‘Catches you? We’re having a friendly dinner.’

‘*We* know that,’ he said.

‘He’s not a violent guy.’

‘To women, maybe.’

She shrugged. ‘You’d hold your own.’

‘Suddenly, I’m punching him on your behalf? After two beers and a bellyful you paid for?’

‘There are two kinds of men, Beckman. The white knights, and the ones the white knights save the maidens from. Which are you?’ She smiled knowingly.

Jeez. In that case, reckon I need to head down to Horses And Armour R Us.

‘Well, now you put it like that,’ he said.

‘Relax. I’d probably punch him first.’

Collecting mice and throwing punches. Interesting combo, EJ.

She collected the plates. ‘Men, huh?’

‘Yeah. Sorry for us.’

After dessert, he steadfastly remained at the table, hoping she wouldn’t want to retire to the sofa. That would be too cosy and risked the impromptu get-together crossing into another dimension—a more Valentine-y one.

Not that it wouldn't be welcome—very overdue, in fact—and EJ had many attractive qualities.

It simply wouldn't be right. Too opportunistic. Too *rebound*. Too not-white-knight.

But the nice guy approach has hardly reaped stellar rewards, has it, buddy? Time for a change? Maybe get down off that high horse, shed that armour, and take a chance once in a while?

Except those leopard spots are glued on pretty fast. Besides, nice guy approach implies an actual strategy—a mask. A plan, a front.

You're just Beckman, Beckman.

So they had coffee at the table, talked about mice and take-outs and his life on the road and her life behind a computer screen and noisy Mr Hubbish upstairs and little of consequence.

And he wondered if, should they be at his apartment this time next year—as she'd joked, he might go crazy and put a candle on the table. Get a box of chocolates as a surprise. Ask her about the E and the J. He might even tell her he had monochromatic vision. It didn't make a difference—she was a brunette with brown eyes, slim, and about a hand shorter than he.

And apparently doesn't take a single guy for a loser.

Ten o'clock chimed on a small, tinny, mouse-themed clock.

'Maybe this is one to remember for the right reasons?' she suggested.

He interpreted that as a gentle instruction to take his leave. 'It beat being alone, for sure.'

He stood.

She flashed a smile. 'Thanks for being my white knight.'

'As I recall, you whistled up the horse anyhow. Besides, what are neighbours for?'

Her face lit. ‘On that...’ She rose and went to the next room and returned with a box.

‘I remember now.’ He winked. ‘Being my PA.’

She waved it away and set the box down on the table. ‘What is it?’

He examined the label. ‘Some fancy new save-the-planet washing soda. Mom insisted on sending it.’ Then he regretted revealing that his maternal relationship was more like that of a teenager than a mid-thirtysomething. Except it wasn’t—they seldom spoke, and she certainly wasn’t his mollycoddling supplier of necessary household goods. This had been an “Okay, Mom” concession.

‘White knights gotta remain white, huh?’ he added, hoping she’d laugh and break the cringing embarrassment.

She did laugh.

Roll on February 14th next year. Hopefully, she’ll be a maiden but not in distress.

That would be one in the eye for Tyler. I can’t think EJ would be the waiting-on-her-man-while-he-lounges-around type, but another evening like this—maybe with Cupid in the room—is much more “Beckman”.

Don’t get ahead of yourself, buddy.

‘I should go. I’d be kidding if I said I had things to do, but, you know? You jog early, right?’

‘Yeah. Did I not wake you?’

‘No. Besides, when am I here?’

‘Sometimes, just at the right moment, I guess. Thanks for the company.’

‘No sweat. Thanks for the invite, EJ.’ He scooped up the box and went to the door.

‘Beckman?’

He turned, his heart rattling at the prospect of another compliment or maybe even a goodbye peck. ‘Yeah?’

‘It’s “Ellie”.’

He nodded. ‘Then thanks, Ellie. Gimme a knock if you need a friend. Or if you over-order again.’ He risked a wink.

She winked back. ‘Sure.’

‘Happy Valentine’s, neighbour.’

‘You too, neighbour.’

He let himself out.

The tingle of warmth remained as he unpacked his trusty shoulder bag, checked the vivarium to top up Bogie’s food and water, kicked off his shoes and allowed the Tonight Show to murmur into the room.

Ellie?

I was thinking “Elizabeth”, so that’s a result. Wonder if it’s shortened or given like that?

And the J?

Maybe that’s for next year.

Again, don’t get ahead of yourself. It’s a non-solitary, non-sucky Valentine’s. Hang out the flags for that, at least.

His cell phone rang.

Hub? I didn’t give her my number. Or did I—before—for emergencies? I’ve seen this kind of thing in the movies. The unspoken connection. One of them makes the first move. The evening recommences. Valentine’s accidentally catapults proximate dwellers into a tender embrace...

Heart pulsing, he looked at the screen.

It was Tyler.

If he gloats, let him. We did alright here too.

He sighed and thumbed Accept.

‘Free advice, Becky. Steer clear of women.’

Thanks for the context.

‘Evening to you too, Tyler. Besides, you don’t mean “women”. You mean “commitment”. Even a whole week’s worth.’

‘She walked out.’

Couldn’t happen to a nicer guy.

‘Jennah? Can’t figure why,’ he lied.

‘The beer and hoops was a *test!* She thought it was a joke. Unbelievable.’

‘Yeah. Unbelievable’s a word.’

Tyler scoffed. ‘Women, huh?’

Beckman grunted noncommittally.

Dead air.

‘Thanks for the bulletin, Tyler.’

‘You get any?’ A snort. ‘Why do I ask?’

‘No. Like you, I didn’t *get any*. And now I’m hanging up.’

‘Steer clear, Becky. Steer clear.’

‘Thanks for the PSA.’ He hit the little red icon and tossed the phone onto the sofa. Glanced across at the front door.

Shook his head. ‘Men, huh?’

Date Two

Winter became spring became summer became fall became winter.

His white Caddy eased into six figures on the odo. He didn't make Salesman of the Year—again. Tyler Quittle didn't resign, get fired, or suffer an unerringly accurate meteor strike.

He and EJ passed like ships in the night—or ships in the day, at best. Her demeanour was undoubtedly more friendly, less purely neighbourly than it had been, and a tiny flicker of hope burned inside him.

After the landmark of New Years—purely in calendar terms (he spent it at home alone)—his mind rolled around to the next date which stood out from others. He was no different from the store owners, large and small, who snapped into hawking love-themed items, rather than Christmas-themed, the moment the festive season was past. Everyone had these high days and holidays subconsciously marked out—the next special day to temporarily raise their mood above the norm as the planet pelted around the sun.

He'd known well in advance that February 14th would be a Saturday night. It wasn't rocket science—last year, it had been a Friday.

Sadly, that made it unduly auspicious, and he'd been trying for weeks—no, months—not to make it A Big Thing. An offhand comment from an acquaintance seldom morphs into something more tangible. Last year's jokey proposition had been no more than a "We must catch up"—a phrase not known for its stellar follow-through record.

Hadn't it?

Why had he gently fixated on it? If his apartment kitchen had been decked with a wall calendar—a lame Christmas present or 7-Eleven impulse purchase—would the date have been circled? It would never have been marked out in past years—but now? During the past eleven months and change, he'd reflected on it with the same easy dismissal reserved for mock suicide pacts or laughable throw-aways like, "If we're both not married in twenty years, let's get hitched rather than being single forever".

When she'd said it—and he'd agreed—was it a sop, or was she genuinely interested?

In case she was interested, he remained hopeful... and vigilant.

Hell, who are you kidding, Beckman? You've been listening for clues that EJ has hooked up with someone new. Are you so desperate for a long shot at a romantic liaison that you'll spend a year on tenterhooks?

I think we both know the answer to that.

All the definitely-not-stalking tactics of seeking signs that she had company in her apartment—a change in demeanour when they passed occasional greetings, a new car parked outside, deliveries of flowers—had been mere curiosity, he'd told himself. But, recently, they'd come up trumps.

She was moving out.

To move in with someone? It was moot. She'd no longer be a neighbour, and the chances of a friendly—possibly more than that—reunion looked wafer-thin.

By February 8th, she'd not said a word, not knocked on his door to explain, and he convinced himself of what he'd suspected all along—it wasn't meant to be. So, the next day, Monday, he shipped out for his usual week on the road, determined to focus on what he could control, not what he couldn't.

So EJ—Ellie—is moving? People move.

Look on the bright side—it could be to find a bigger place a few streets across. It's bound to have kept her busy either way. Perhaps she's forgotten our most good-natured and spontaneous suggestion. If you had any sense, you would too.

Friday 12th rolled around, 1656 miles later, and he'd done well not to waste too many hours gazing into the bottom of cups at Coffee Planet. Back at apartment 12, he busied himself making dinner and checking a week's worth of mail, sorting the real from the junk. There wasn't a restaurant in town that hadn't festooned their flyers with hearts, flowers and special dinner-for-two offers.

It's like trying to avoid the Christmas Coke ad.

At just after eight, there was a knock on the door. As he seldom received visitors, a tiny spark lit in his stomach.

The look on EJ's face was undoubtedly apologetic, perhaps down-beat. 'Hey, Beckman.'

'Hey, EJ.' He brushed nacho crumbs from his rumpled tee.

There was a silence.

'Look, I can explain.'

He held up a hand. 'No need.'

‘Yeah, Beckman. Need. I guess you figured out I’m moving.’

An ironic smile tweaked his lips. ‘I know some about travelling, upping sticks.’

‘I should have said earlier, but it’s been crazy.’

‘I understand. Hell, most neighbours would just leave.’

‘I thought because of...’ She bit her lip. ‘...what we said, and because we get along...’

‘And you’re my postal overflow service...’

She smiled. ‘Yeah. So... I wanted to say goodbye, and that the timing sucks.’ She sighed. ‘It happened real quick. Work wanted me to move to Sacramento. It’s a promotion. Short notice, but what’re you gonna do, huh?’ She shrugged.

He worked hard to internalise the kick in the stomach.

Serves you right for building it up, buddy. You latch onto enough certainties in this world, anchor to as much as is predictable and controllable, and roll with the punches the rest of the time. This is a punch to roll with—no different from a lost sale in any of a thousand towns on any of a thousand days.

‘I’m pleased for you, EJ.’

‘I ship out tomorrow.’

‘Sure.’

She glanced over her shoulder. ‘It’s all boxes in there. Guys are loading in the morning, and then it’s adios...’

‘Well, happy trails.’

She stepped a little closer. Her earrings twirled. They were silver mice. He recalled the diverse collection of mouse-related ornaments in her apartment and hoped the removal guys had packed carefully.

‘So, I can’t make our... date,’ she said.

‘Not sure it was a *date*.’

‘Okay. I can’t make *the* date.’ Her eyes searched his.

‘Well, I’d invite you in, or out, but it’s not technically Valentine’s yet. Plus, I’m sure you’re last-minute packing. Mice, or whatever. Plus, you know, EJ, don’t feel guilty. I’m the guy across the hall. Getting a life makeover is more important than a friendly soiree designed to stick two fingers up to the hearts-and-flowers tsunami.’

‘Yeah. I guess. All the same, it would have been nice. Instead, I have this lame office “goodbye” thing to go out to.’ She gestured to her evening attire.

‘You look nice.’

Because she does, and that makes the rain check—which is probably not even that—that bit tougher.

‘Thanks.’

Silence washed the corridor.

‘You have a good evening, EJ. And a good life.’

Her brow furrowed in what he imagined—hoped?—was a tinge of sorrow. ‘You too, Beckman.’

A presumptuous, ridiculous, opportunistic part of him willed her to peck him on the cheek as a parting gift. It wasn’t beyond the realm of possibility. True—he wasn’t overly proficient in the art of spotting a nascent attraction, but he was a people watcher (it came with the job), and the notion didn’t feel like straw-clutching.

Instead, she painted on a smile, gave a nervous wave, turned and left.

He held the door open, watched her go for longer than was strictly wise or necessary, and then returned to another evening of bachelorhood.

During Saturday, EJ flitted in and out of his mind, much as he tried to busy himself mentally and physically. He deliberately went out mid-morning, trawling the food shops for stuff he needed and other

shops for things he didn't need. He visited both Coffee Planet places at either end of town.

Some would call it "pining", but you couldn't pine for what you'd never had and thus never lost.

He might as well have dredged up past failures—the time Tyler stole away his chance of a date with Glenda was a real lowlight. Except this time, it wasn't a failure, not of his actions or inaction. It was merely circumstance. It was the universe saying that it wasn't meant to be—not this time, not with EJ... Ellie.

I still wonder what the J is.

Besides, they might not have hit it off. It could have been a non-starter, a platonic hook-up that never got past misplaced notions of mutual attraction.

Equally, it would be nice to come home from weekdays of empty motel rooms to find a non-empty apartment. One furnished with a five-foot-seven brunette with a penchant for rodent-related bric-a-brac.

When the endless storefronts hawking romantic staples became too much—as if their laughter towards his single-man status was louder this year—he took the Caddy for gas and an automated car wash, then headed home.

All was quiet. There wasn't even a call from Tyler—gloating or otherwise—all day.

Sometimes, it's the little victories.

He began wondering who the new neighbour across the hall would be, trying to concentrate on the future rather than the past. Who was to say that the next inhabitant of 13 wouldn't be equally likeable?

At six-thirty, he ordered pizza. It was about the only thing guaranteed not to come in a heart-shaped box or be flavoured with chocolate and/or champagne.

At six-fifty, there was a knock at the door.

See—it could be worse, Beckman—you could be this guy, having to work on Valentine’s evening. At least you get to chill out, fill your face with carbs, and try not to think of

‘EJ?’ His mouth hung open.

This time, her face and posture were easy to read—awkwardness and embarrassment. Her right hand clasped the handle of a small roller case. She wore jeans, a hoodie, no makeup and—quickly—raised eyebrows.

What the...?

Don’t even begin to think she’s changed her mind and given up a new life to be with you. Don’t even begin to begin to think that.

‘Yeah, er... hi. Again.’

His brow knit. ‘You okay? What gives?’

She forced a chuckle. ‘This is a peach. The truck broke down. About five miles out of town. With all my stuff.’

‘Shoot.’

‘Yeah. They’re sending a guy with a spare part. Tomorrow. They won’t offload onto a new truck, of course not. So, I have an empty apartment and no key, and this.’ She tugged her case.

Some guys—maybe those without an inner monologue or a soft spot for bright, sweet brunettes—would have pointed out the existence of such things as motels, either in town or in Sacramento.

But Beckman, possessing both those attributes, said, ‘Come in.’

‘I couldn’t.’

That short-circuited his brain for a second. ‘So why knock?’

Her shoulders fell. ‘I don’t know. Panic?’

‘Or needing a friend to lean on?’

She pursed her lips. ‘Yeah.’

‘Then come in.’

She did, and as he closed the door behind her, it nearly smacked into the face of a pony-tailed youth bearing a twelve-inch cardboard box. He relieved the guy of his cargo and followed EJ into the living room.

‘Oh god, I’m interrupting,’ she said.

‘I’m not sure it’s technically possible to interrupt a white knight? They’re sworn to be ready at a moment’s notice.’

That made her smile. ‘At least don’t let your pizza get cold.’

He held it up. ‘The Valentine’s meal of champions.’

‘And knights.’

‘Did the maiden eat yet, or was she getting a burger en route to her glorious future?’

‘She didn’t eat yet, no.’

‘Take a seat, EJ. There’s enough for two champions here.’ He gestured to the table.

She hesitated, then conceded. He dumped the box down, retrieved two beers from the fridge, and re-joined her.

They tucked in, the atmosphere tingling with things he wanted to ask or say, and things he imagined she wanted to explain.

‘You’re a good guy, Beckman.’

‘So I’m told.’

‘You *are* a white knight, two years in a row.’ She smiled with her eyes. ‘Thanks.’

‘Sure.’ He raised his beer in a toast. ‘Happy Valentine’s again... ex-neighbour.’

‘I think it’s just “Ellie” now.’

‘Sure.’

Wow, real verbose tonight, aren’t you, buddy? What’s up—nervous? Careful—she’ll bear the armour chinking when you shake.

She sighed. ‘Look, I know the situation’s not ideal.’

‘Which? You leaving forever, or you being here now?’

Her eyes narrowed—but in query, not anger. ‘What do you think?’

‘I have no clue, Ellie. I like you, and I can’t say I hadn’t been looking forward to what we planned until...’ He trailed off.

‘Which? Until I left unexpectedly, or until I returned unexpectedly?’ She smiled.

He considered her face, then made an uncharacteristically bold and swift decision. He rose, went to the kitchen, dug out his quarry and returned to the table. He set the candle down in the centre, flicked the Zippo, and lit it.

She laughed. ‘Definitely the meal of champions now.’

They polished off the pizza, and he refreshed their empty bottles. She talked a little about the new job, the packing and the temporarily delayed relocation, and asked how his recent weeks had been. She even admitted that her ex, Jerome, had tried to win her back since the breakup last Valentine’s.

It was all amicable, skilfully skirting the elephant in the room.

She shifted in her seat as if uncomfortable.

He was being less than a good host. ‘Let’s go sit down.’

He led her to the sofa, and she sank gratefully into it. Then she leant forwards and pulled off her hoodie—she’d been so preoccupied with the food, and being bailed out of a situation, that she’d spent the whole time looking like she was loitering in the Departures hall.

The elephant trumpeted.

Was their conversational lull a reflection of the situation or an indication that they had little in common? More than that—was it an elephant that she imagined too, or merely his romance-starved, over-hopeful misinterpretation of a friendly but odd situation?

‘Look, Ellie, I may have this wrong, but it’s still just a regular day, like last year, and I don’t have any agenda here.’

‘You bought a candle.’

Busted.

‘Maybe for once, I was a hopeful romantic, not a hopeless one. The important thing is that you find a place to crash while the truck is fixed. If you want to have another beer, I’ll call you a cab later. I hear good things about the Twisted Pine Motel.’

Her face softened. Behind it, the dancing candlelight caught her cheekbone. He’d not dimmed the room light—that would have been a presumption too far—but there was still a sense of Eros in the air.

She laid a hand on his knee. ‘Okay, here’s a confession. I’m not a one-night stand kind of girl. And, though I don’t know you so well, I don’t think you’re a one-night-stand guy.’

He met her gaze. ‘I never presumed, EJ. That’s what this sofa is for. You have a long drive tomorrow. You take the bed. Hell, I bought this fold-out six years ago, and it’s never been used.’

‘Well, you wouldn’t need it if I hadn’t moved out, or at least if the truck hadn’t broken down.’

‘Yeah. Otherwise, we could have had dinner, maybe something with vegetables and everything, and then you could have walked across to your apartment.’

She smiled, then fixed on his face. ‘Or stayed.’

‘You said no one-night stands.’

‘Sure. But if I lived across the way, it could be two. Or more.’

He took her hand from his knee and gently held the tip of one finger. ‘If wishes were horses, huh? And if I hadn’t served you pizza on Valentine’s.’

‘The way to a girl’s heart is not through her stomach, unlike a guy’s. It’s through kindness, decency and not being too shabby-looking. Well, for this girl, anyway.’

He swallowed, trying to slow his heartbeat to normal.

Thirty-six and nervous like a teen? What is this—invitation to Prom?

‘I’m not sure that makes it easier, now I have nice comments like that in my brain, which might try to find their way here.’ He touched his chest.

‘Would they?’

‘I’d wonder what might be possible. But not as much as if we did something rash, and it went well. Doing that, and then you leaving?’ He shook his head. ‘That could be a recipe for long-distance heart-break. Or regret. Or both.’

‘Sure. I understand. Then we’d better do nothing.’ Yet her eyes belied the words, at least to some degree.

‘Yeah. Not a single thing.’

Then the elephant trumpeted so loudly that the only way he could make it shut up was to kiss her. So he did. Gently, briefly, and hopefully gallantly. It was received by a maiden no longer in distress, yet one who didn’t seem perturbed by the gesture.

He checked her face for an unspoken response. What he found was her seeking similar.

‘I figured it was only fair you should wonder too,’ he said. ‘You know, if making this crazy arrangement was dumb, whether it happening was fate or blind luck. And if acting on it was a good idea or not.’

She smiled. ‘It’s not the worst idea.’

He tested that hypothesis by kissing her again.

She took his hand and clasped it between hers. ‘I’m serious about the one-night stand thing. Same as the first date thing. It doesn’t happen.’

‘And I’m serious about the pull-out bed. If I can’t get my money’s worth tonight, when can I?’

‘So I’ll stay?’

He shrugged. ‘What are friends for?’

‘Hard not to like you, Beckman.’

‘Same, Ellie. Besides, it’s Valentine’s. Kick out a girl I just kissed?
Major asshole behaviour.’

She nodded. ‘So what do you want to do for the next three hours?
Netflix? Ice cream?’

‘I have both of those.’

‘Those sound like good alternatives for consenting, but restrained,
adults.’

‘On one condition.’

She cocked her head. ‘Oh yeah?’

‘Will you be my Valentine, Ellie?’

‘Hell yes.’

She gave him a kiss which delayed the arrival of ice cream and
Netflix by a half-hour.

The pull-out bed didn’t give him cramps, and his whirring mind
hadn’t kept him awake too long. Fortunately, it had majored in en-
joying what had happened, rather than regretting what hadn’t. When
he awoke, he congratulated it on a laudable sense of perspective.

There was no noise from the bedroom by eight o’clock, so he
grabbed coffee and had a shave and a shower.

When he emerged in his robe, the bedroom door was open, so he
tentatively approached, hoping to rescue some clean clothes.

The room was empty. Puzzled, he checked the living room, then
the kitchen. Oddly, both were vacant.

He spotted the folded piece of paper on the worktop, and his heart
sank.

Somewhat crestfallen, he read:

First off, this is the coward's way out, and I'm sorry. It's a crappy way to pay you back for your hospitality and delightfully close company. I'm hopeless at goodbyes. You saw how useless I was yesterday. Today would have been worse.

Thanks for being my Valentine and my white knight. I'd do it all again in a second.

Unless I write you before, come up and see me this time next year. Make sure you have a long weekend booked—if we make it a two-night stand, it gets past that silly rule I have. :-)

Take care, Ellie

X

After he'd stood there for a long minute, wondering if it was possible to make time pass more quickly—a year in five minutes would have been ideal—he stupidly rechecked that she had left, then, with heart flitting between disappointment and fond remembrance, got on with his day.

The year largely evaporated—as his years did—and his temptation to call her remained, though he didn't act on it. He doubled down on his sales effort and had the best year ever, finishing fourth in the annual Salesman of the Year rankings.

He didn't meet anyone quite like Ellie—and the fact that he could make the comparison proved that her nice comments had indeed spread beyond his brain. He wondered if she was thinking of him or whether life had taken over. She didn't call or write, but he made himself believe that no news was good news.

January came around, and the tingles of hope and expectation were again quietly forming in his heart and soul when he returned to the apartment one Friday to find a mailed envelope with the address written in a familiar hand.

He eased his shoulder bag to the floor and nervously opened the letter.

She was brief, and he quickly appreciated that the economy of words was probably disproportionate to the difficulty she'd had in writing them:

I'd hoped not to have to write before the 14th but it didn't work out like that.

I'm sorry, Beckman. His name is Brad, and I think he's the one.

Thanks for two Valentines to remember.

Take care and good luck. She's out there for you, somewhere.

Ellie

x

In the lower corner was the doodle of a mouse.

He was happy. Then he was sad. Then he was angry—at the world, not at her—for not running according to his selfish whims.

Whatever else he felt, he'd never find out what the "J" was for.

That gave him a wry smile, which he decided was the best way to summarise the whole episode, so he wore it for a while. And then, as always, it was time to move on.

However uncooperative the world was, it didn't have the power to erase those two memories.

THE END

Read More

“Accidental Valentines” is a short companion story to the Sunrise trilogy.

Read the quirky romantic comedy “Tow Away Zone” – Beckman’s first full-length adventure – in paperback or eBook;

<https://books2read.com/TowAwayZone>

Praise for Tow Away Zone

“A gripping yarn - quirky characters, a pacy plot and a setting like you’ve never read before. A fun ol’ read.” -*Paul Kerensa, Comedian & British Comedy Award-winning TV co-writer BBC’s Miranda, Not Going Out, Top Gear*

“First of all, Towndrow has an amazing grasp of his prose. It’s funny, it’s witty, It’s hilarious in places and it’s also quite serious if need be. I have to say I’m blown away by it.”

“I struggle to compare this book with others. The words ‘unique’ and ‘inventive’ come to mind. The dialogue is well-crafted and funny, the characters are wonderfully individual, and the narrative is a kaleidoscope of colourful drama. This book will stick with you.”

“Really good fun to read with more than a touch of darkness, so much neon, a very odd pet and the best breakdown service on the planet. Very enjoyable and highly recommended!”

“An original, inventive storyline and a variety of three-dimensional characters that you will genuinely care about. Dialogue sharp enough to shave with, well-paced and bubbling with humour.”

“In a surprising town, a salesman finds everything he ever wanted. This is such an incredibly interesting story. I couldn't put it down!”

“This is one of those books that will leave you with a smile on your face. Funny, relatable perfect characters, a story that kept me turning the pages and an ending that did not disappoint.”

“The narrative of the story keeps you gripped and there is drama and comedic moments a-plenty!”

About the author



Chris Towndrow has been a writer since 1991. He began with science fiction, inspired by Asimov, Iain M Banks, and numerous film and TV canons. After a few years spent creating screenplays across several genres, in 2004 he branched out into playwriting and had several productions professionally performed. This background is instrumental in his ability to produce realistic, compelling dialogue in his books.

His first published novel was 2012's space opera "Sacred Ground". He then changed focus to near-future sci-fi adventure novels, and the Enna Dacourt pentalogy was completed in 2023.

He has always drawn inspiration from the big screen, and 2019's quirky romantic black comedy "Tow Away Zone" owes much to the film canon of the Coen Brothers. This well-received title spawned two sequels in what became the "Sunrise trilogy".

His first historical fiction novel, "Signs Of Life", was published by Valericain Press in 2023.

Chris then returned to his passion for writing accessible humour and is devoting future efforts to romantic comedies and contemporary romance. Writing under the new pen name Chrissie Harrison, his rom-com debut, "Floored", published in April 2024 to great reviews, and outsold his entire back catalogue in just 6 months.

May 2025 sees the publication of a genre defining rom-com set in the world of women's cricket.

Chris lives on the outskirts of London with his family and works as a video producer. He is a member of the UK Society of Authors, Romantic Novelists Association, and Alliance of Independent Authors.

Also by the Author

Since 2024, I now write contemporary, UK-set romantic comedies under the pen name Chrissie Harrison.

The Cathedral City Comedies – a romantic comedy series of interconnected standalones

"Floored"

Book 2 – Coming October 2025

Book 3 – TBC

Touchline Girls – a sports rom-com series of interconnected standalones

"Match Daze"

Book 2 – TBC

Book 3 – TBC

Pavilion Girls – a women's cricket rom-com series

"Wicket Maiden" – May 2025

Book 2 – 2026

Book 3 – TBC